Marlowe's *Faustus*, the greatest sin of despair, and lack of repentance: why salvation is impossible for Faustus

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Contents

1. Abstract

The issue at hand is how the religious mores at the time Christopher Marlowe wrote *Dr. Faustus* affected the presentation of the sin of despair. This requires thorough understanding of Renaissance values, and how they affected the consequent literature. Many other scholars have determined that despair is *a* central sin in this play, but I ask, why is it *the greatest* of all of Faustus's sins? Why can all his grievous sins (including, but not limited to, the denial of God and of hell, turning to illicit knowledge, and lechery) be forgiven *except* despair? What does this mean in the religious context of Marlowe's time, and how does that affect what was written? Finally, how does this affect what that audience saw, and what we see now?

We look to the Christian notion of sin as a way to understand life's ending and the afterlife. It is a useful way to view Faustus's behaviour simply because it is the only criteria which determines where he goes in the afterlife. It is important to identify the *greatest* sin, rather than several sins, because all sins can be forgiven (Matthew 12:30-32). But still the play ends unhappily and Faustus is unforgiven. Why? By looking at the greatest sin, which is presumably the sin that causes the unhappy ending, we can isolate the causes of damnation.

I find that the central sin of despair is the only unforgivable sin that Faustus commits, which damns him to hell without salvation. This further implies that there *is* an unforgivable sin; i.e. a sin that cannot be redeemed through the classification of venial nor mortal sin. To despair is to thus have, repeatedly, no faith in God's promise for salvation, in the macabre self-dooming way that Faustus sentences himself to failure. I look at the traces of the morality play in order to contextualize how Faustus's suns are presented; then I study despair specifically.

2. Introduction

2.1 Historical context

Renaissance humanism was the revived belief in the power of the individual. This idea had been proposed by Desiderius Erasmus and Thomas More, both of whom were early humanists. Throughout the Middle Ages, the understanding of Man's role in the universe was one of subservience; everyone was expected to live their lives to worship God, and to earn their way to heaven through the Sacraments and good works (World History Encyclopedia). By the 1300s, intellectuals began to question this purely religious view of life on Earth. They read the Greek and Latin classics to understand a new way of living. With the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans, many of the ancient texts passed to Italy, with Greek scholars fleeing Ottoman rule (Hudson). Suddenly, a new trove of classical texts became available for consumption in Italy. Thus, out of Renaissance Italy came the belief that the Greek and Latin classics, combined with Christian dogma, contained all the lessons one needed to lead a moral and effective life (History.com). The demand for lay education increased and wealthy families sent their children to these humanist schools, which operated separately from the Church (Szyliowicz).

Unsurprisingly, some of the ideas rising from humanism clashed with the Church's values. Humanism's central dogma focused on individualism and secularism. But humanists did not reject Christianity altogether; rather they wanted to take the ancient ideas and use education to better understand the world while retaining Christian beliefs. Undoubtedly Marlowe would have been familiar with the four fathers of early humanism: Petrarch, Lorenzo Valla, Marsilio Ficino, and Pico della Mirandola (Makdisi). All four were voracious readers of classic works. Valla especially dedicated his adult life to using humanist education to help the Church, proving that the two were not, in fact, incompatible. He also proved that the *Donation of Constantine,* a Roman document which presumably proved Constantine's granting of land to the Church, was a forgery (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). The Latin used in the document did not linguistically match the Latin of Constantine's time. Thus he proved that tradition was bettered by humanism, at least on this one occasion.

Marlowe himself attended Corpus Christi, at Cambridge University, rather than a seminary (Riggs, The World of Christopher Marlowe). This relatively humanist school, which arose of out the demand for lay education, was likely the foundation for his sympathy to humanistic thought. This paper will partially discuss humanist references (i.e. to Greco-Roman myths) as a way to garner audience sympathy for the plight of the central character. Thus, it is out of this school that Marlowe draws the numerous allusions to Greek myths, chiefly to illustrate each of Faustus's great flaws (i.e. pride, despair, lust, and the display of the Seven Deadly Sins). Describing Faust's plight in relation to a classical myth, such as Icarus, rather than to a Christian character (perhaps the harsh story of Adam, for whom temptation also led to a downfall), is a commentary on how we should view the Faust story (Prologue). It invites a humanistic lens which, while still living in a Christian framework, is also sympathetic to human weaknesses and less demanding of perfect obedience to God. Though Greek myths are not inherently always gentler in the treatment of its characters than Christian stories, by using sources from outside of Christian mythology, Marlowe invites an alternative perspective, which questions the typical harsh critique that a Christian lens induces.

Marlowe's *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus***,** (or commonly referred to as simply *Dr. Faustus*) is an early modern English play that begs questions of the origins of temptation in the human nature. Furthermore, it studies the outcomes of sin: how does a human being accept responsibility for their sin? How does this differ when considered from a medieval rather than a humanist perspective? For the purposes of this paper, I will use Thomas Aquinas's definition of sin: the "turning away from the immutable good" by breaking the moral principles set by God (*Summa Theologica*). By and large, Aquinas's principles set in motion a paradigm shift in how to think about human culpability. I choose to focus on these two perspectives rather than any other (for example, the Greek notion of *akrasia)* to situate us in the paradigm shift occurring in theology at the time of the play's conception. The pass from the middle ages to the renaissance was a turbulent one, with aftershocks still being felt in the time of Marlowe. Indeed, Marlowe's unique approach to the original German Faustus story (*Historia*

von D. Johann Fausten¸ with an anonymous author) brings alive the events with allusions to Biblical and classical myths, that is, the humanist approach which blends classic mythology and Christian stories. The origin of the character Faust (or, in Anglophonic translation, Faustus) likely started as a real person in Germany, a doctor by the name of Johann Georg Faust (British Library). Because of his work as an alchemist, astrologer and magician, it is easy to understand why the *Historia von D. Johann Fausten* was written as a damning autobiography of his life. In fact, the full title of *Historia von D. Johann Fausten* in English (and credited to P.F. Gent) is *Historye of the damnable life, and deserued death of Doctor Iohn Faustu*s, which clearly expressed the author's glee at Faustus' tortured life.

2.2 Central focus

This paper will consider: in *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Dr. Faustus*, why is the despair of God's salvation, and judgement his own worthiness, Faustus's *greatest* sin? How does the presentation of despair affect our judgement of Faustus's culpability? What does this imply for scholars and audiences? This paper fits into the previous scholarly conversation as a way to remove focus from the other sins (lechery, greed, and so on): the only sin that matters in terms of Faustus's fate, is despair. For example, I shift away from Robert Ornstein's focus on the sin of greed in Faustus's hunger for black magic, wealth, and honour. Instead, I focus on the question of salvation in the play, why it matters, and what its boundaries are. Indeed, to question the prospect of salvation for Faustus, in regard to any *other* sin than despair, is to question God's ability, through the sacrifice of His only son, to save humans from their sins. To consider any other sin as irreconcilable lies perilously close to heresy in the Christian framework (which is how the play was meant to be viewed). This view is heretical in the Judeo-Christian ethos and philosophical view of the world, within which this play is written. So the focus should only be on despair. Furthermore, since despair is the greatest sin, that implies that salvation is possible until the very end of Faustus's life; that all actions prior to the final rejection of salvation is forgivable. In other words, the Lutheran (and thus renaissance) concept of predestination, and of no autonomy, is not applicable. Despite allusions to Greco-Roman myths, rather than Christian mythology, in an attempt to increase our sympathy with Faustus's plight, the doctrines supported by the story remain orthodox. Any elements of the renaissance are tortured and bipolar; but the evidence conclusively points to a Catholic interpretation rather than a pro-Reformation one.

2.3 Scope

Because Renaissance theatre was, in part, a reaction to medieval play styles, including the morality play (among others, like the miracle play and the folk plays), I will outline the traces of the morality play that appear in *Dr. Faustus*. This informs the larger image of how sins are presented. When we understand how they are presented, then we can understand why despair rises to the forefront. It is also impossible to ignore the good and evil angel archetypes, or the personification of the Seven Deadly Sins, for example. Thus the chronological scope of this paper includes the 1400s to the end of the 1500s. I will consider *only* the English morality play,

though certainly there were other types (e.g. the French morality play, like *Condemnation des banquets* by Nicolas de la Chesnaye).

There is no one Faust story; rather, there are hundreds of variations on the archetype in theatre, music, film, poetry, art, and literature. In many of the iterations, Faustus's greatest sin is *not* of abjuring God, nor his dabbling in the dark arts. Rather, it is his *repeated* abjuration of God, and of denying himself God's grace and healing. Living in an increasingly lapsed mindset where he does not need God, Faust seems to both believe that God is not there, and that the God that *is* there is one he does not need. This uncertainty remains unsolved by the end of the play. Indeed, the irony is that he turns to the devil, who only exists because God exists (section 6). Comparing Marlowe's Faustus story with other iterations provides a varied understanding of the many sins Faustus commits: what boundaries are there in categorizing an unforgivable sin in each play? Why are some sins displayed but not others?

2.4 Methodology

The methodology to be used in this study is as follows. First, there must be a thorough analysis of post-medieval religious mores, and what we can assume Marlowe knew of these mores. Secondly, there will be a close textual analysis of *Dr. Faustus* to pick out all relevant citations for each argument. Thirdly, the arguments will follow in logical, incremental steps from the known to the speculative.

This includes a review of the precursor to Elizabethan drama, the morality play, and its effects on Elizabethan drama (Beadle and Fletcher). Then begins the study of Faustus's list of sins, followed by an analysis on the presentation of sin, then an identification of Faustus's *greatest* sin. Lastly there will be a discussion on autonomy, Christianity, and sin in Renaissance literature. Furthermore, how do the classical allusions affect the audiences' perception of Faustus's culpability? In the conclusion, I will explain what this means for the modern scholar.

3 Literature review

There is no shortage of literature on the causes and outcomes of Faustus's sins, nor is there a shortage of discussion about which of his many sins ultimately condemns him. Among the former topic, much has been written about Faustus's motivations, his psychiatric state, his disillusionment with faith, and the manifestation of his immoral desires. Among the latter topic, much has been written about the devilish pact as the final sin, or the despair as the final sin. What is missing from the conversation, however, is a study of the similarities and differences of this Renaissance play with those of the Medieval era, with an eye to how these qualities affect the presentation of sin to the audience. This presentation of sin also has specific implications to the final sin of despair. After all, as we will see later, this is a morality play of sorts, not a mere story to entertain. There is a spiritual purpose: to save the audiences' souls by allowing them to witness what should *not* be done.

In the first grouping of literature, i.e. the group that focuses on Faustus's motivations, there are many that look at the decision to sin, and the manifestations of that decision. Robert West, for example, argues that Faustus's motivations are not honorable. It is tempting, he says, to view Faustus as a man whose motivations are sympathetic, but who had an unfortunate end. West compares Faustus with other Elizabethan characters who came to a bad end, but had sympathetic motivations. "Faustus does not come to magic grandly [i.e. for grand purposes]. In his dismissal of the allowable arts and sciences is no such nihilistic greatness as shows through Macbeth's tomorrow-and-tomorrow speech, nor any existential anguish at a universe that Faustus' analysis has exposed as hostile to man's mind and spirit" (West). Faustus act for selfish reasons and rails against his mortality; he is not concerned with challenging the natural laws for the goodness of humanity. "What disturbs him is not mankind's plight but the fact that he is himself but a man," and he overreaches the bounds set upon him by divinity (West). But he compounds the sins of his prayer to devils and his pact with them by the further sins of presumption of both damnation and mercy. In the case of John Parker, he is less interested in the motivation than in the manifestation of the motivation. How does Faustus justify his decision? Parker argues that at the beginning of the play, Faustus had already made the decision to seek out devilish companionship; instead, the opening scene is a study of the inner thoughts of Faustus. He cycles "through various branches of knowledge, each more ambitious than the last, expressing contempt until he finally arrives at theology," all of which he bends to support his desire to sin (J. Parker).

In the second grouping of literature, i.e. the group that focuses on the condemning sin, academics have moved between the belief that the contract is the condemning sin, and that the continued despair is the condemning sin. Of the former belief are James MacDonald and Angus Fletcher. Of the latter belief are John McCloskey, Joseph Westlund, and Lily Campbell.

Many unsympathetic arguments state that his initial disillusionment with divinity and signing the devilish pact is the climatic sin. But if the devilish contract indeed is the final point, then why present us the rest of the play at all, save the ending? Why repeatedly place the Good Angel onstage, demanding that Faustus repent? Why do scholars appear before Faustus' death, asking him to pray for forgiveness? We must conclude that while the contract is the most dramatic onstage event which makes all Christian viewers' hearts leap, it is what happens after, in the lull of smaller events (like the summoning of Helen, and the conjuring of exotic grapes) that reveals to us the true flaw, which exists in Faustus' psyche: the stubborn commitment to despair. Joseph Westlund emphasizes that this stubbornness arises "because sin and damnation are far more real to Faustus than grace and salvation" (Westlund). One interesting exception to previous discourse is Gerard Cox, who instead lists three sins of equal weight: the rejection of a divinity, an obstinate devotion to dark arts, and despair. These three are sins against the Holy Ghost, he argues, and they all lead to each other, none weighing more than the other (Cox).

Furthermore, there is significant discourse on the Calvinist concept of predestination. Is Faustus doomed to be a reprobate from the beginning, or does he indeed have some agency in his own salvation? In other words, is he destined to reject God and the notion of hell because of his nature? Or is salvation and damnation still a choice until the point of death? Again, if he is predestined to failure, then why write this play as a warning to the audience? As Barbara Parker appropriately comments in a rejection of Paul Sellin's earlier argument of predestination, thus it is entirely probable that Faustus is not damned until he dies (B. L. Parker). The predestination argument is consequently sidelined.

John Parker acknowledges that Faustus is a victim of evil, being indecisive and two-faced. He posits that for "a stage villain to be shamelessly two-faced, he must show his real face—if only to some godlike watcher who sees in the dark and hears insidious thoughts whispered 'in solitude'" (J. Parker). After all, this is not a story without an observer. Marlowe is not writing simply to record a story, but to present a moral to the audience. He is hyper-aware of how he presents his characters; he grants a license to the audience to watch immoral acts unfold on stage without damning their own souls. This privilege "to discern evil at work where its victims are blinded, to bask in secret machinations whose unfolding they can witness without guilt, insofar as the pleasure of this voyeurism *supposedly* [my emphasis] arises from wanting ever so badly to see evil unmasked and punished" (J. Parker).

Campbell too states that we ought to view "Faustus as one whose fate is not determined by his *initial* sin but rather as one who until the fatal eleventh hour might have been redeemed" (Campbell). In other words, he was not truly damned throughout his sinful life, until he chose to reject salvation at the hour of his death. Campbell also acknowledges that the elements of the play (e.g. the hell-mouth ending, where Faustus is accompanied to hell by demons) that other scholars found "medieval" and out-of-place were rather "of the Reformation and that they constitute the essential dramatic unity of the play" (Campbell). We see this in Scene XIX, where "[h]ell is discovered" and the Good Angel proclaims, "The jaws of hell are open to receive thee" (XIX.15). I continue this conversation in this paper, particularly in section 4, looking at traces of medieval plays and how that affects the presentation of sin. This presentation ultimately leads to the irrefutable conclusion that despair *is* the greatest sin, not any of the deadly sins nor the devilish pact.

In my analysis of this problem, I support the argument that Faust, as an agent of his own soul's fate, had the greatest sin of repeated despair. My research rebuts MacDonald, Fletcher, and Sellin's research, and continues where B. Parker left off. The questions that still remain to be answered are: what characteristics are similar and different from medieval plays? How does this affect the presentation of sin, and how does it support the argument that despair is indeed the final sin, rather than predestination dooming Faustus from the start?

4. Traces of the morality play

4.1 The morality plays of the middle ages

The matters of *Dr. Faustus* were increasingly secular compared to English medieval plays; it was not focused on the story of a Biblical character. Compare it, for example, with the York Mystery Plays, which was a cycle of forty-eight distinct plays covering the whole of Christian history, from Creation to Judgement Day (Davidson). All the stories were from the Old and New Testaments; there was little deviance from the events and characters of the Christian canon. What *was* added to the stories was a bit of extra imagery, for stage drama. Thus Marlowe's deviating format provided a freedom to question traditional assumptions, such as the qualities of the afterlife (Mulryne and Shewring). These traditional qualities of the afterlife can be observed in the thirty-seventh play of the York Cycle, *The Harrowing of Hell*, where Jesus descends to Hell to grant salvation to souls. Images of fire, intensified with fireworks, and images of hell's gates falling down were largely popular (Davidson).

Presenting the story of a more common character, who they might not necessarily heard of in such mythic proportions, and one closer to the audience's lived experiences, brings to life the doubts and themes that the audience encountered on a daily basis, such as dealing with temptation. But the form of the play itself still echoed that of the traditional medieval morality play. The morality play, not to be confused with the cycle plays (also called mystery plays), provided the audience with a moral lesson, teaching them to become better Christians without mimicking the stories of the liturgy, as the cycle plays had (Petropoulous). Characters typically were personified virtues and vices, such as Purity, Hope, and Faith; and the stage itself had distinctive features like the hell-mouth (Beadle and Fletcher). In Marlowe, we do not have a specific reference to a hell-mouth feature at the scene of Faustus's descent into hell, but the imagery is very similar. "Ugly hell, gape not!" cries Faustus, invoking the image of a cavernous gap opening to receive his soul (XIX.189). The similarity between this hell and the hell-mouth of the cycle play places the audience's focus on the afterlife. All of the actions that Faustus takes in life has a direct effect on his afterlife, so any and all emphasis on hell is important.

Interestingly, as previously mentioned in the literature review, the image of hell in this play uniquely reinstates the mysteries of the afterlife, which Martin Luther felt the Catholic Church had removed. This quality, of course, is *not* seen in the Catholic mystery plays, which often described hell, and claimed to capture qualities of hell, such as the extremely decorative hell-mouth. In other medieval Catholic imagery, we see fire and demons as being an integral part of the understanding of hell (Schøsler). What Luther does is remove all these specific qualities of hell, replacing it with a mysterious place (Fletcher). A greater mystery is often more powerful in invoking fear and obedience than an imaginable hell. Indeed, "Faustus' wild mood-swings can be understood as a Lutheran response to the inaccessibility of death"(Fletcher). By never describing hell directly through Mephostophilis (who is directly acquainted with hell), we only receive metaphorical glimpses into what hell *might* be. Though Faustus himself guesses at hell, asking where it is specifically, still Mephostophilis evades a clear answer, answering that "[h]ell hath no limits, not is circumscrib'd / In one self-place; but where we are is hell" (V.122-124).

Upon hearing these vague answers, Faustus stubbornly declares, “I think hell’s a fable,” to which Mephostophilis replies, “Ay, think so still, till experience change thy mind” (V.129). This reminder that hell is real, and that consequences indeed exist, would have driven home the message for the audience that they should not need to experience hell to believe it – for Faustus has already provided the proof of what they should *not* do.

4.2 Good and Evil Angel archetypes

One common archetype in morality plays was the presence of the Good Angel and the Evil Angel, appearing at the side of the central character, who represented all Christians in the world (Beadle and Fletcher). These angels particularly appeared when the character faced a difficult moral decision. In *Everyman*, for example, the central character is advised by his angels on each step he takes towards heaven. The Evil Angel advises him to cling to worldly goods; the Good Angel encourages him to seek God above all. The central character was simply named Everyman, meant to represent all Christians seeking the path to heaven (Unknown).

These angels again appear at Faustus’s side (Scenes V, VI, and XIX) when he is faced with soul-wracking decisions: he must *choose* to repent. The larger part of Marlowe’s audience would have accepted the angels’ characters at face value: the supernatural walked and breathed on the same Earth as humans. Magic was a lived experience. As Malcolm Gaskill writes, “Ordinary people’s religions were practical rather than abstract, rooted in quotidian routines and hazards [; and] in most communities, certain individuals were respected (and feared) as specialists able to dispense helpful magic” (Gaskill). Demons tempted, witches performed magic, and souls were constantly at stake. Aside from the commoner’s belief in Satan’s direct interference in their daily lives, demonology was a legitimate science among literate circles. Indeed, King James VI of Scotland (later James I of England) himself published *Daemonologie, in forme of a dialogue* shortly after Marlowe’s *Faustus*. Marlowe himself had to have understood the “religious culture that shaped his audience” in order to write with such “dramatic effect,” triggering the very fears that his audience had in relation to their eternal souls (Anderson). This cultural phenomenon asks that scholars today immerse themselves in the beliefs that they study; Gaskill notes in *A brief introduction to witchcraft* that “demonology is deceptively hard to read without sensitivity to cultural context and a powerful leap of imagination” (Gaskill). It is the thin line between the titular character and the audience themselves that makes the play so powerful in its performance. Faustus’ “desperate hunger for the forgiveness that everyone in Christendom, whatever their soteriological frameworks, is told they have only to ask for in faith exposes the differences between Faustus and the members of the audience as superficial or even illusory. What alarms [the audience] about Faustus, in the end, is not that he is so far from us but so close” (Anderson).

The portrayal of the two angels themselves does not appear satirical; they are genuinely fighting for Faustus’s soul, guiding him in their own ways. “Repent, Faustus, and think upon thy soul,” implores the Good Angel. But “God cannot pity thee,” rejoins the Evil Angel; thus repentance appears futile (VI.12-13). They lack the irony or darker humour that might

characterize anti-Church sentiments, as other humanist writings might, such as Erasmus's essay, *In Praise of Folly*. Throughout *In Praise of Folly*, Erasmus sheds light on the issues of self-deception and contradictions in Church doctrine through the character of Folly. Indeed, the angels of Marlowe's play provide a much-needed commentary on the moral to be learned. The angels ascertain the relationship between knowledge, power, and corruption (Prologue.20). The Evil Angel urges him to think of honour and of wealth, while the Good Angel reminds him that the necromantic books would corrupt.

4.3 Personification of the deadly sins

One of the most revealing scenes in the play is the presentation of the deadly sins. If the audience needed confirmation of Faustus's guilt (rather than misguided innocence), it is at this scene that we are decided. The presentation of the deadly sins in Scene VI is a warning to Faustus that he will be possessed by them through the course of his contract with Lucifer. His willful ignorance of these sins within himself, despite the absurdist troupe of characters before him, is ironic. It is also impossible not to notice that the presentation of the seven deadly sins echo a similar tendency to exhibit such vices in Christian morality plays of that Marlowe would have seen in his younger years (such as in *The Castle of Perseverance*). Both Catholic and Protestant doctrines are presented in equal measure.

The largest ironies of all is that the audience can clearly see Faustus is hopelessly entangled with the pleasures of the deadly sins, even just from the opening scene. The clearest deadly sins we spot are pride, greed, lust, and envy. Faustus is envious of immortal beings and the powers they have; he despairs in his mortal plight. In the opening scene, where he details his motivations, he despairs, "Yet art thou still but Faustus, and a man" (I.23). He reaches for what he cannot have, wishing to break the natural order where humans must not seek out illicit knowledge. He wishes for magic, which is forbidden to humans, and proclaims, "But his dominion that exceeds in this / Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man: / A sound magician is a demi-god" (I.59-61). Faustus is also clearly guilty of excessive pride. Pride begins as self-respect and self-esteem, in understanding the power of the individual, but pride ends as arrogance and over-estimation of the individual capability. The overreach of power, the unwillingness to stay within the clearly-defined boundaries of humanity (i.e. to never aspire for magic) – this is what leads him astray. Greed and lust are natural companions of pride and envy. With his newfound power from the devilish contract, he demands more and more magic and illicit knowledge, and conjures up Helen to satisfy his base desires.

Furthermore, in the spirit of Protestantism, the Good Angel tells Faustus to read the Scriptures, rather than to perform acts of charity, or to perform rituals like praying the rosary and attending Mass. Martin Luther is recorded as having written, "Works are necessary for salvation but they do not cause salvation; for faith alone gives life," contradicting Christian morality of the

middle ages, where works were the central path to salvation (Moe-Lobeda). On the other hand, the Evil Angel is manipulates Faustus's desires by understanding his weakness for the cardinal sins. He promises worldly temptations, ("No, Faustus; think of honour and of wealth," says the Angel) and Faustus is bought (V.22).

In Faustus's interview with the seven deadly sins, which is equally a spectacle for the Elizabethan audience as it is for Faustus's own entertainment, we witness a conversation that mirrors his internal dialogue of denial and conceit. He asks no deeper questions, but presides over the presentation with glibness. He remains amused and aloof, curiously asking questions of some of the sins, but failing to recognize these characteristics in himself. He tells Mephostophilis, "[t]hat sight [of spectacle] will be as pleasant to me as paradise was to Adam the first day of his creation" (VI.108-109). A clearer example of the deadly sin of pride is never seen – here Faustus equates himself with the first man, the original man, who was created in God's image. Sadly, his convenient skill of removing references from context (e.g. *the wages of sin are death*¸ and failing to complete this statement) forgoes the fact that Adam, despite being in the image of God, was human, and thus committed sins. Faustus too, as a human, is condemned to commit sin. His interjections into the performance ridicule the vices themselves, and his comments reveals that he sees the performance as a simple spectacle to satisfy his visceral desires rather than as a learning experience. It is entirely likely that Mephostopheles intended this display to exhibit all the wonderful powers of hell, to seduce Faustus further in his infatuation for illicit knowledge. Faustus could have used this experience as an eye-opening experience that exposes him to his wrongful ways, but he does not. He falls into Mephostopheles' trap, utterly enthralled by the powers promised to him (e.g. conjuring). He is inherently unable to recognize these sins in himself as a result of being detached from *understanding* of what the sins are. This presentation of the sins simply demonstrates how blind Faustus is to his own flaws. Indeed, if he cannot recognize his sins, how can he repent and be saved?

5 The sins of which Faust is guilty, and the unorthodox presentation of sins

5.1 The sins of which Faust is guilty

Before the identification and examination of sins, let us first define the context in which we present the sins. Prior to the Reformation, generally, all of Christian Europe was Roman Catholic; it had been so since the fourth century (Oakley, Cunningham and Knowles). The Protestant Reformation cleaved western Christendom into two; it provided a way to oppose the views of the Catholic church while retaining Christian beliefs. The Reformation, born of humanistic values, became more of a political and social fight than a religious one. Indeed, there is little coincidence in the fact that *Faustus* is set in Wittenberg, where Martin Luther himself was sent as a monk. This is where Luther became the father of the Reformation, focusing on the idea that "[t]he just shall live through faith," rather than actions (*King James Version*, Romans 1:17). That is to say, actions do not matter – no charity work, no pilgrimage, no acts of penance

would ever be enough. Why Wittenberg for Faustus? If it was sympathy for the Protestant doctrine, and a commentary on how to view Faustus, then why give Faustus a chance to repent throughout? The rest of the play speaks in favor of repentance and penance (see section 6), so it appears that the setting of Wittenberg is instead merely the best place to place a scholar so learned in theology (there being few cities in Europe with large scholastic influence).

Note that our Faustus had *some* faith. He believed in Christian principles. He knew of God's existence and his capability to save souls, but *chose* to turn his back on divinity, crying, "Divinity, adieu!" (Marlowe I.47). He sometimes believed that God could save others, but not him. In his desperation, he even proclaims, " But Faustus' offence can ne'er be pardoned: the serpent / that tempted Eve may be saved, but not Faustus" (XIX.41-42). In more ways than one is it difficult to see where Marlowe's sympathy lies in terms of Catholicism or Protestantism. His Faustus seems to understand that people's souls could only saved through faith and the grace of God (but apparently not for himself). There is little mention of acts of charity, or the Holy Sacraments – not even Mass, confession, or even the Last Rites. These are acts of personal communion with God, i.e. receiving the body of Christ and absolution for sins committed against God. There is no denying that Faustus could especially use the latter. Instead we see him waste the last minutes of his life moaning and groaning about his terrible fate, rather than accepting the help of the scholars who pity him – and could have given him the Last Rites (which includes confession of sins). But also, nowhere does Faustus *reject* the Church or ritualistic approaches to faith (which Luther himself denied, saying that these did not increase the salvation of souls or spirituality) (Luther). This ambivalent approach, therefore, does not support either a Catholic nor a Protestant way of expressing faith or seeking redemption. Naturally, that makes it difficult for us to judge Faustus's struggle towards redemption. By which standards should we measure him? It can equally be said that he is a sympathetic character, or that he is despicable; if we only could choose one approach, the judgement would be clearer.

Putting that aside, Faustus wavers when deciding if Christian laws govern the universe. Even when Mephostophilis is in front of him, he is indecisive. He rejects the damnation and salvation of souls (Hargitai). Yet at other times he curses heaven, implying a belief in heaven, after all. But Faustus is a Christian, whether he likes it or not. If he abjures God, but keeps referring back to God, he is failing to turn his back on Christianity. And as a Christian of his time, he is supposed to live by the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed, as it would have been in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, confirms belief in several doctrines (Burn). Furthermore, each Easter, Christians would re-affirm their beliefs in a rephrased Nicene Creed. Those beliefs included renouncing Satan, all his works, and his empty show (The Easter Vigil in the Holy Night) (Apostolic Constitutions (Book VII)). We can get a closer look at how medieval masses were carried out through codices used at the time (Unknown.) That is, there was an intrinsic belief that Satan was a real being (i.e. the word 'his' implies a being) who interfered with daily human lives.

Sadly for Faustus, he has formally affirmed his beliefs by being a Christian, and his knowledge of the supernatural places him directly within their sphere of influence. Regardless of his belief system, he will still be judged by the ultimate authority of God because he is set in a literary world where that is known to be true. The audience has the dramatic irony of knowing that the Christian God is indeed real. Even when he rejects Christian theology, his soul lies in the hands of Christian supernaturalism. This too acts as a warning to the audience against atheism, or disbelief in Christian values; there is no escaping the Christian world (Iftikhar).

5.2 The unorthodox presentation of sin

As previously noted, by describing Faustus's plight in relation to a classical Greco-Roman myth rather than to a Christian character, Marlowe is gives us an alternative way to understand the story. It invites a humanistic lens, one sympathetic to human weaknesses and less demanding of perfect obedience to God.

Let us explore this in greater detail, with two specific examples of classical references: Icarus being the first (in the prologue), and Helen of Troy being the second (in Scene XVIII). They are, accordingly,

> Shortly he was grac'd with doctor's name,
>
> Excelling all, and sweetly can dispute
>
> In th' heavenly matters of theology;
>
> Till, swollen with cunning of a self-conceit,
>
> His waxen wings did mount above his reach
>
> And, melting, heavens conspir'd his overthrow
>
> (Prologue.17-22)

and

> Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.
>
> Her lips suck forth my soul: see where it flies!
>
> Come, Helen, come give me my soul again […]
>
> I will be Paris, and for love of thee
>
> Instead of Troy shall Wittenberg be sacked
>
> (XVIII.101-108).

The Icarus myth is more sympathetic than the Adam story, and the myth of Helen of Troy is more sympathetic than the stories of the cities of Sodom and Gomorra, or the story of David and

Uriah. Firstly, the Icarus story represents the pride of one man (or, at worst, two – Daedalus and Icarus), while the Adam story has more grave consequences. Icarus's behaviour only punishes himself, *not* the entirety of humanity. Faustus likewise damns only himself, rather than all humans who come after him. What is profoundly different, however, is that for Icarus he is present in a situation he does not fully comprehend for the first time, and it ends horribly. Icarus himself is escaping a prison island with Daedalus, and pushes his freedom too far. Meanwhile, Adam broke the rules with the knowledge that his Creator had forbidden it, and is severely punished as a result. On the other hand, for Faustus, there had already been 1500 years of Christianity to teach moral standards. There can be no naïveté or ignorance pleaded here. So by equating Faustus (who is incredibly guilty of willful sin) with the more pitiable Icarus, rather than someone worse (Adam, who also willfully ignored the teachings of God), the audience is inclined towards sympathy rather than outright harsh judgement.

Second, if we compare Faustus's lust for extra-marital alliances in the context of Helen of Troy, there is considerably more sympathy there than in any parallel Old Testament stories. Pick, for example, the story of Sodom and Gomorra, two cities which were entirely destroyed by the wrath of God for their immoral behaviour (Genesis 18:20). Or perhaps Marlowe might have used the story of David and Uriah to contextualize Faustus's temptation to fleshly desires. In this case, in the Euripides version of the Troy story, *The Women of Troy* and *Helen*, Helen is the victim, as are Menelaus and Paris, of the goddess Hera's jealousy. We use the Euripides' text because it is the earliest version of the Helen story, the basis for future iterations, and the version that humanists would have studied. Our Faustus, if we compare him to Paris, is a victim; we should be sympathetic. He is a victim simply of seduction and infatuation, rather than of abandoning God. Like Paris, he falls in love with an *illusion* of Helen. Faustus cries, "I will be Paris, and for love of thee / Instead of Troy shall Wittenberg be sack'd" (XVII.106-107). In other words, because of the fight over one woman's beauty, the birthplace of Protestantism is destroyed. Lust, greed, and idolatry destroy religion. Furthermore, he is enthralled by the idea not of bedding Helen – he conjures her because of a greed for power, a greed of ownership. He is pleased to own, to conjure up an illusion of such a historically weighted character. What satisfies him is not Helen herself, but the fact that he is able to produce such a powerful illusion that other men can only dream of. A Christian comparison might be hastier and harsher. "Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire," does not speak of mercy or compassion; but the misfortune of Helen of Troy and Paris does (Genesis 19:24). After all, Faustus did proclaim, "Marriage is but a ceremonial toy" (V.151). This blatant rejection of Church ceremony, of sanctifying a union before God, is also a rejection of faith. By denying the need for God's consent to a marriage, Faustus restructures the relationship between man and woman, redefining the rules that God had created with Adam and Eve. So using a harsh Christian comparison, rather than a forgiving classical comparison, would not have been out of line. Faustus is lucky that we are given the references to Paris; it sways our compassion to his benefit. The other Christian story that might have been used, instead of the Troy myth, was the David and Uriah story: David takes Uriah's wife as his own in a frenzy of greed and lust (2 Samuel 12:7-15). There is no

sympathetic ending; as punishment, David's first child is struck by the Lord and is made ill. Here, with the Helen story, we are tempted to forgive, because of the lightened comparison. Because Marlowe tends to use classical comparisons to evoke sympathetic responses, we know that Marlowe desires for the audience to view the character in a more sympathetic light.

Unfortunately for Faustus, this presentation in a favorable light still does not save him from a tormented fate, because he despairs and does not repent. However much we sympathize, he still committed these sins willingly, despite years of education in the Christian way. Because he lives in a Christian universe, and is bound by Christian laws (not Greco-Roman), he must answer to the Christian God. He can still be saved – if he repents. But he does not. Ultimately, despite any references to Helen of Troy, Jove, Icarus, or Penelope of Saba, Faustus's soul is measured according to the same laws that bound Sodom, Gomorra, and David. There is no escape possible, save for repentance, as evidenced in the momentous final scene. Since he refuses even to repent, through stubbornness and despair, even this final chance at salvation is gone.

6 The greatest sin

In an early scene, Mephostophilis tells Faustus that "by aspiring pride and insolence," God cast Lucifer and Mephostophilis down from heaven to suffer by being "deprived of everlasting bliss" (III.82). So Faustus really only has himself to blame for his Lucifer-esque traits of pride and insolence. In a sense, Faustus and Lucifer's sins appear to mirror each other; but Faustus is twice-damned, whereas Lucifer is once-damned. Not only is he guilty of pride and insolence, but he refuses to acknowledge that this can be forgiven. The Christian consensus is that God sent Jesus to relieve humans of their sins, and not Lucifer. Though all humans have sinned and some angels have sinned, humans can be forgiven; angels cannot. For humans, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). For the angels, God "will also say to those on the left, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the Devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41). Lucifer as an angel is exempt from salvation – and so his pride is different from Faustus's pride. Faustus undoubtedly has been taught that his crimes have been paid for by God's sacrifice, yet he still despairs. This is not the case for Lucifer. What this implies is that even Lucifer is not a free agent; rather, his autonomy is given to him by God. Even in the traditional assumption that Lucifer is the antithesis to God, his existence is dictated by the existence of God, by the nature of his being an angel created by God. In other words, he cannot exist if God does not exist, and his powers are dictated directly as a result of his relationship with God. This reinforces the argument that Faustus is excessively proud, by attempting to subvert the natural order of 'God above all,' by seizing full autonomy, which Lucifer also tried (and failed) to subvert. All beings are given their powers (good or bad) by God; there is no other way (Macdonald).

This conversation belies arguments that Faustus's punishment is undeserved. Heroic ambition and excessive pride – Mephostophilis clearly warned Faustus of them, and Faustus did

not listen. Mephostophilis is telling Faustus that he would be as damned as Mephostophilis if he consigned his soul to hell. Why warn Faustus, if as a devil, it is in Mephostophilis's best interests to ensure the contract is signed? By blurring the lines between human and demon (we are sympathetic to both), our attention is even more drawn to the fundamental difference between them. It is possible that Mephostophilis, not being able to claim salvation as a fallen angel, is showing Faustus that *he* is able to claim salvation from his sins, as a consequence of being human. If Lucifer, an angel, could not escape the consequences of his flaws, how could a mere mortal like Faustus hope to go unpunished for his, or at the very least, without repentance, which all humans are capable of?

Let us study this in greater detail. By presenting this play in the fashion of a morality play, where all human sins go punished if unrepented, Marlowe aligns himself with the Church. There is no heterodoxy in the doctrine as some scholars have suggested (Westlund). The method of presenting the doctrine, however, is unorthodox. What is untraditional is the unhappy ending for our main character. In *Everyman*¸ for example, Everyman ends in heaven after a strenuous ascension. Likewise, in *Castle of Perseverance*, Mankind receives God's mercy and is delivered from Hell. Yet Faustus does not fall into this pleasing category. At his point of death, Faustus refuses to reflect on each of his sinful actions committed over the years, and does not renounce the actions of his misspent life. In the throes of his death, he cries, "I'll burn my books! – Ah, Mephostophilis!" which tells us two things: first, it does not indicate a regret for the illicit knowledge; rather it indicates that he still does not understand the magnitude and seriousness of his sins outside of despair (XIX.190). He does not understand why they are an offense against God, and as an extension, why Lucifer might have been punished similarly. Again, I say that he is twice-damned: once for his forgivable sins, and once for the unforgivable sin of despair. This psychology, this dissonance between action and understanding of action, is likely what caused Faustus to ignore Mephostophilis's earlier warning about repeating Lucifer's crimes (see section 4.1 above). Secondly, Faustus's last cry is not a call for God and forgiveness, it is still a reach to hell. Even in the last remnants of life, he is unable to recognize his actions for what they are – he is fearful of hell and damnation, but does not believe in heaven and salvation. Indeed further proof of this can be found by looking back a little, to when the clock strikes eleven. He attempts to cry out to God, but his lack of conviction in heaven and salvation turns him to cry out for Lucifer instead. Faustus observes aloud that "[o]ne drop [of Christ's blood] would save my soul, half a drop. Ah, my Christ! / Rend not my heart for naming of my Christ; / Yet will I call on him. O, spare me, Lucifer!" (XIX.147-149).

Furthermore, as Faustus enters the last moments of his life, he wastes precious time. He spends much time debating how to escape hell:

Mountains and hills, come, come, and fall on me,

And hide me from the heavy wrath of God!

No, no:

Then will I headlong run into the earth.

Earth, gape! O, no, it will not harbour me.

(XIX.152-156)

and how he can save his soul, and even how he can escape suffering for eternity, in creative ways:

O God,

If thou wilt not have mercy on my soul,

Yet for Christ's sake, whose blood hath ransom'd me,

Impose some end to my incessant pain;

Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years,

A hundred thousand, and at last be sav'd.

(XIX.165-170)

He despairs and dangerously assumes that God will not save his soul, undervaluing God's ability to save. In all his manic desperation, he runs from one possible solution to another. But he fails to recognize the *one simple action* that *can* induce salvation: repentance. Because he did not review his sins, as I previously noted, he cannot repent, and cannot be saved. What he is so blind to – repentance for salvation - is what the audience recognizes easily, and longingly desires for him to see. The message for the audience is not to avoid making a pact with the devil or even committing any of the deadly sins – it is to not refuse repentance.

7 Conclusion

This play recognizes that according to traditional Christian doctrine, Faustus should not have been saved except through repentance. His willful ignorance makes him not a noble character undone by his despair; instead, he is the ironic scholar who was so learned in all fields except in self-examination. His failure to recognize his own dark affair with the deadly sins, compounded with his great sin of repeated despair in God's ability to save him, is what ultimately leads to his untimely demise (Escobedo). Because Marlowe merely borrows from humanist styles (such as in referencing classical myths, and reinstating the mysteries of the afterlife), and still gives Faustus the chance to be saved until death, autonomy is given; salvation is in the hands of Faustus himself. The concept of predestination (from the moment Faustus decides to reject God and sign the pact) is rejected. A close examination reveals that the similarities with Catholic thought outweigh the renaissance qualities, revealing a message firmly rooted in medieval ways, rather than the emerging renaissance.

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