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'To obtain his soul': Demonic Desire for the Soul in Marlowe and Others

'O, what will I not do to obtain his soul?' exclaims Mephistopheles in *Dr Faustus*, at a moment of fearful doubt on Faustus's part.¹ The exclamation is a rare revelation of the devil's purpose in this play. For the most part, Mephistopheles appears to be a courteous servant to a gentleman scholar: suave and anxious to please. His exclamation of desire for Faustus's soul, however, betrays an unexpressed craving to dominate Faustus completely and forever. Mephistopheles has demanded that Faustus sign over his soul to the devil, but in the midst of signing Faustus has begun to waver, and the blood in the wound that he made to sign his name has ceased to flow. Surely this must be a providential warning against apostasy! Then Mephistopheles fetches a chafer of coals: 'Here's fire. Come, Faustus, set it on' (2.1.70); the blood 'begins to clear again' (71); and Faustus signs. This is the moment at which Mephistopheles exclaims, in obvious self-congratulation, about his longing for Faustus's soul.

The exclamation seems to imply Mephistopheles' glee at successful misdirection. Making the blood flow by warming the body reduces the problem of congealing blood to mere physiology, erasing Faustus's fear of peril to his soul. Mephistopheles thus prevents Faustus from going back on his determination to serve the devil, so the demonic servant exults at having fooled Faustus into submission. This inference is confirmed when Mephistopheles uses the same technique immediately afterwards. Faustus wonders fearfully when the words '*Homo, fuge!*' suddenly appear on his arm (77), and Mephistopheles acts quickly: 'I'll fetch him somewhat to delight his mind', he determines (82), immediately producing 'Devils, *giving crowns and rich apparel to Faustus, and dance and then depart*' (82 SD). The distraction of a flattering show is effective in making Faustus forget the warning to flee. Mephistopheles does not exclaim gleefully this time, but his purpose in mounting the distracting show is clear.

Mephistopheles' expressed desire is consistent with devilish aspiration to obtain the human soul throughout early English drama. Four other plays before 1642, both early and late, will be considered here to show not only the persistence of this motif but also the unusual, even anomalous, features of Marlowe's treatment. Despite brilliant conformity to the tradition, *Dr Faustus* creates a skeptical and deconstructive context that effectively subverts the orthodox meaning of the tradition. Nonetheless, the tradition persisted in drama and elsewhere, virtually unchanged, long after *Dr. Faustus*, suggesting that Marlowe's play is an aberration where demonic desire for the soul is concerned, no matter how influential it was in other ways. Marlowe disguised his skepticism successfully beneath a veil of orthodox damnation, and assumptions were too deeply seated to recognize what he had done – much less to imitate it. No one in the late sixteenth century had access to the assumptions of human autonomy that would become seemingly obvious in the Enlightenment, and no one therefore had any way of imagining the soul as belonging to one's self (though the soul was thought of as the true self, and one was morally responsible for its destiny): it either belonged to God or the devil.² This, I would argue, is precisely Faustus's dilemma.

Playwrights derived the idea that demons sought to possess the human soul from a long tradition in theology, art, and literature. One metaphoric expression of that craving (arguably biblical in origin) was literal appetite: 'Be sober and watch', writes the author of 1 Peter, 'for your aduersarie the deuil as a roaring lyon walketh about, seeking whome he may deuoure'.³ In *Inferno* 34, Dante unforgettably depicts Satan as a demonic parody of the trinity, having three faces, in each of whose mouths writhes a human soul. As Robert Durling suggests, this is the climax, in the *Inferno*, of Dante's conception of hell as the body of Satan, in parodic imitation of the church (and paradise) as the body of Christ.⁴ Hubert and Jan Van Eyck depict several devils with sinners in their mouths in *The Last Judgment* (1420–5), and the motif is familiar in the later hallucinatory paintings of Hieronimus Bosch as well. The Coventry mystery plays made the idea concrete by depicting the entrance to hell as the gigantic mouth of a devil.⁵ Perhaps influenced by Dante, Milton uses metaphors of human digestion when Lucifer introduces cannons on the second day of the war in heaven (*Paradise Lost*, 6.584–90). Demonic desire is not always conceived in metaphors of ingestion and digestion, as we shall see, but the devil's intense interest in the human soul is a ubiquitous motif in early drama.⁶

Two of the earliest extant pre-Reformation plays, roughly contemporary with the Van Eycks' painting, centrally feature the devil's desire for the soul: *The Castle of Perseverance* (1380–1425) and *Wisdom* (1400–50). Both plays

personify the soul as a character called Anima, and both imagine Anima oppositionally poised between devilish rapacity and the loving mercy of God. Early dramatists invariably follow patristic sources in their explanation of *why* the devil craves human souls. God created humankind in order to repopulate heaven after the fall of the angels, intending that human beings should eventually ascend the created hierarchy to something like angelic status.⁷ Satan frustrated this plan by successfully tempting Adam and Eve, and he continued to frustrate God's plan by tempting human beings to reject God's offer of preservation from their own worst inclinations. In short, seeking human souls in order to divert them to hell is the devil's way of upsetting God's offer of redemptive mercy for humankind, and demonic pursuit of the soul is thus part of the cosmic story of enmity between Satan and the human race. This oppositional sense of human destiny is what made it imperative to imagine the soul as belonging either to God or the devil and impossible to imagine it as belonging to oneself.⁸

In *The Castle of Perseverance* cosmic enmity between Satan and the soul is the play's central device, but the metaphor is not ingestion but warfare, following Prudentius.⁹ The World, the Flesh, and the Devil besiege a castle that signifies perseverance in salvation on the part of Humanum Genus, who gains access to the castle in the first place through the sacrament of baptism. (The doctrine of original sin struck patristic commentators as logically requiring that unbaptized infants belonged literally to the devil). The siege is not successful in destroying the castle, since the devil could not destroy salvation itself, but Humanum Genus abandons his own cause by leaving the castle in response to demonic blandishments. Thereafter he lives a life of materialistic acquisitiveness in the scaffold of Mundus, until he eventually dies. At this point his name changes from Humanum Genus to Anima, and the play takes an unusual turn in dealing with life after death, thus becoming, in effect, the first ghost story in English drama. According to the stage plan in the manuscript of *The Castle of Perseverance*, Anima appears from under Humanum Genus's bed after Humanum Genus dies, though the play text has no stage direction.¹⁰ Anima's reference to being 'in this vale' (3010) may refer to purgatory, though Humanum Genus's bed is in the castle of salvation, the stage plan contains no scaffold for purgatory, Anima does not seem to undergo any of the suffering that was traditionally associated with purgatory (especially for an unshriven soul), and Malus Angelus eventually drags Anima to Belial's scaffold, that is, to hell.¹¹ *The Castle of Perseverance* is less interested in the precise location of this soul after death than in the importance of Humanum Genus's dying appeal to God's mercy (3007). On the strength of

this appeal, Anima turns to Bonus Angelus and asks deliverance “fro deuelys drede” (3025). Malus Angelus rejects this prayer immediately, citing Humanum Genus’s commitment to covetousness as justification for taking Anima “Wyth me to helle pytt” (3033). The appetite that World, Flesh, and Devil have shown for Anima in the body thus continues beyond the grave as a claim to Anima herself definitively and forever. At this point, in other words, *The Castle of Perseverance* suggests a silent word play on its title, whereby the devil’s desire for the soul perseveres more effectively than Humanum Genus had persevered in the castle of salvation while alive. What is most alarming about the claim of Malus Angelus is that Bonus Angelus agrees with it: Humanum Genus gave his soul to the devil, Bonus Angelus ruefully notes, and justice demands that the devil have his due (3034–59).

In the end, however, Humanum Genus’s dying appeal to God’s mercy is effective in saving Anima from hell, despite a lifelong commitment to the devil in the form of covetousness. *The Castle of Perseverance* makes this point by devoting over 500 lines to a debate between the four daughters of God – Mercy, Peace, Justice, and Truth – with the first two pleading for God’s preservation of Anima, and the second two appealing against her.¹² Strangely, the debate seems postmodern in that all four points of view are true, though their claims are incommensurate. What saves Anima is not the success of any particular argument at the expense of the others but the decision of the four debaters to agree that God’s plan is best:

Lete vs foure systerys kys
And restore Man to blys,
As was Godys ordenaunce. (3519–21)

This peaceable reconciliation among four female figures thus turns out to be more effective for Anima than the many scenes of raucous knockabout violence on the part of predatory devilish male figures in the preceding play. When Peace and Justice order the devil to let Anima go, the devil has no choice but to obey (3586–93).

In *Wisdom* demonic desire for the soul appears in still another metaphor – courtly seduction – and its presentation is more abstract than *The Castle of Perseverance*, in that Anima appears as a disembodied character from the outset. Nonetheless, the plays share the oppositional assumption that Anima’s destiny lies either with her merciful Creator or with the tempting but destructive devil. This situation is suggested in Anima’s costume, as described in detailed stage directions and explained by Wisdom.¹³ The soul has two parts, he says, which Anima’s costume symbolizes: the cloak she wears is ‘Blake

the seven deadly sins depart: 'Hic recedunt demones' (978 SD). 'Lo, how contrycyon avoydyth the deullys blake! / Dedly synne ys non yow wythin', explains Wisdom (979). Mercy thus preserves the soul, as it does in *The Castle of Perseverance*, despite the soul's worst inclinations and the devil's unstinting efforts to obtain it. 'Dysfygure yow never to the lyknes of the fende', urges Wisdom in closing (1114).

These two early pre-Reformation plays represent a pattern that persists in drama across the religious divide of the sixteenth century. Though protestants literally demonized many aspects of traditional religion, they were nonetheless indebted to it for virtually every form of expression, including drama, and many aspects of traditional belief survived mortal conflicts over doctrine, liturgy, and church governance. We thus find the pattern of the devil's keen interest in the soul not only in two of the earliest morality plays, as we have just noticed, but also in one of the latest, Nathaniel Woodes's *Conflict of Conscience* (1570–81), which has often been compared to *Dr Faustus* because of its hero's despairing and tragic end.¹⁶

The Conflict of Conscience abandons the abstract personification of the fifteenth-century plays in favor of greater literalism and historical specificity (in this too Woodes anticipates Marlowe), but it retains their oppositional sense of human destiny. The devil appears only once and relatively briefly, offering a soliloquy in the first scene that functions as a prologue to explain what follows. Satan is concerned to maintain his kingdom, which he defines as 'this world'.¹⁷ His definition is not a secularizing of the traditional view, as if there were no afterlife with the devil in hell. Rather, Woodes's Satan makes a strategic protestant point by spiritualizing God's kingdom in terms of true (protestant) belief and practice and simultaneously identifying Satan's kingdom as 'this world' and his ally as the pope, whom Satan calls 'my darling dear, / My eldest Boy, in whom I do delight' (1.1.84–5).¹⁸ Woodes accommodates conventions of personification allegory in the morality play by giving the pope three henchmen who are Satan's instruments in *The Conflict of Conscience* – Avarice, Tyranny, and Hypocrisy – and these three vices do the devil's work for him after Satan leaves the stage.

Since true belief and practice were the source of salvation for protestants, as for catholics, the ultimate destiny of the soul is no less an issue in *The Conflict of Conscience* than in earlier plays. The difference is the content of doctrine and moral behavior in each case. Indeed, the plot turns on Philologus's decision to recant his protestant belief in the face of temptation by the vices, who do their best to convert this learned protestant hero to catholic belief and practice, which in this play are construed as the chief danger to the

soul. Philologus acknowledges as much in pleading with a cardinal who has imprisoned him and threatens his life:

I humbly beseech you, of Christian charity,
 You seek not of purpose my blood for to spill,
 For if I have displeased your authority
 In reasonable causes redress it I will.
 But in this respect I fear I should kill
 My soul forever, if against my conscience
 I should to the Pope's laws acknowledge obedience. (4.1.1152–8)

Philologus' fear of killing his soul forever is the same fear that turns Anima to God again in both *The Castle of Perseverance* and *Wisdom*. The particular content of this play's threat to the soul is different, but the threat is identical.

In the end, however, even the content of the threat comes increasingly closer to tradition as *The Conflict of Conscience* moves to its climactic recantation. For what finally turns Philologus is not the stick of violence and torture but the carrot of wealth, power, and prestige, as described by a vice called Sensual Suggestion. Philologus loses his soul, in other words, for the sake of worldly success, which is the same temptation that defeats Anima in earlier plays. 'I am fully resolved', Philologus declares,

In these delights to take my whole solace,
 And what pain soever hereby I incur,
 Whether heaven or hell, whether God's wrath or grace,
 This glass of delight I will ever embrace. (4.1.1404–8)

Even his adult children cannot sway him: Sensual Suggestion's description of 'worldly joys' makes him deaf to their pleas. 'And, to say truth, I do not care what to my soul betide, / So long as this prosperity and wealth by me abide' (5.2.1696–7). Humanum Genus says almost the same thing as he surrenders to Mundus in *The Castle of Perseverance*. 'What schulde I recknen of domys-day, / So that I be riche and of gret aray?' (607–8). The devil's intense appeal to Philologus's soul is unmistakable in the play's closing scenes, when protestant theologians attempt to dissuade him, and Horror of Mind torments him. Philologus does not cease to believe the (protestant) truth; he simply ceases to act in light of what he knows, and so sees himself as a divinely ordained exemplum:

Therefore in wrath he [God] did me send this horrible vexation,
 And hath me wounded in the soul with grievous tribulation,
 That I may be a precedent in whom all men may view
 Those torments which to them that will forsake the Lord are due.
 (5.3.1904–7)

Having abandoned his soul to the devil, he finds, as *Humanum Genus* does before the debate of the Four Daughters, that God in justice turns against him.

The Conflict of Conscience is famous for its double ending: the first in despair, the second in hope. The first ending is most consistent with the Calvinist idea that only a predestined saint will persevere in salvation to the end of life: Philologus does not persevere, so he is not a saint, and that is why he dies in despair. Closer to traditional theology and drama, however, is the revised ending that Woodes wrote for the play's second issue (both were published in 1581). In this version, the Nuntius says that 'at the last God changed his [Philologus'] mind, His mercies for to crave' (548). Nothing is said about the soul and the devil in the revised version, but the implication of God's mercy is clear: Philologus's soul is snatched from the jaws of the devil who appears in the play's first scene, determining to enlarge his kingdom. Nuntius's final line in the revised version may well refer not only to Philologus' physical suffering but to the suffering of his soul as well: 'And now the Lord in mercy great hath eased him of his pain' (550).

Though Shakespeare never staged a ravenous devil, he was familiar with the metaphor of devilish appetite for the soul, as we noticed in *Henry V*, and the motif of the devil's intense interest in the soul appears with particular poignancy in the late tragedies, where the oppositional sense of the soul's destiny is assumed. Looking at the wife he has just murdered, Othello deeply laments what he has done in terms that would be familiar to earlier dramatists:

When we shall meet at compt, *account, judgment day*
 This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,
 And fiends will snatch at it
 Whip me, ye devils,
 From possession of this heavenly sight!
 Blow me about in winds! Roast me in sulfur!
 Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire! *(Othello 5.2.282–9)*

None of this literally happens in the play, but nothing indicates that Othello does not believe it will, or at least should, and the effect is no less powerful. Iago, who tempts Othello to doubt Desdemona, is no demon, but he is

repeatedly associated with hell, especially in his own language, and Othello wonders if his tormentor has hoofs for feet, just before he wounds him: 'I look down towards his feet; but that's a fable. / If thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee' (5.2.294–5). Iago's famous 'motiveless malignity', in Coleridge's phrase, would not have been mysterious to an audience familiar with greedy demons: they knew the devil needed no other motive for desiring human souls than his envy of them and of God.

Macbeth is more overtly tempted by demonic power than any other character Shakespeare created, and no one is more aware than Macbeth that his soul is at stake. Hearing a prophecy that Banquo's descendants are to be kings of Scotland in the future, Macbeth regrets that his murder of Duncan will benefit only Banquo in the long run:

If 't be so,
 For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind; *defiled*
 For them the gracious Duncan have I murdered,
 Put rancors in the vessel of my peace
 Only for them, and mine eternal jewel
 Given to the common enemy of man
 To make them kings, the seeds of Banquo kings. (*Macbeth*, 3.1.65–71)

'Mine eternal jewel' is his soul, and 'the common enemy of man' is, of course, the devil. Macbeth's envy of Banquo's descendants is arguably demonic itself (envy was, after all, one of the seven deadly sins), because it prompts him to expand the circle of his victims, which eventually grows to include Lady Macduff and her children. Like Philologus in *The Conflict of Conscience*, Macbeth sins not through unbelief but through refusing to act on what he knows to be right. When at last he confronts Macduff, Macbeth at first refuses to engage him: 'But get thee back! My soul is too much charged / With blood of thine already' (5.8.6–7). His hesitation to incur more guilt when his soul is already lost offers a poignant glimpse into a once undefiled mind whose loss he still laments. But the glimpse is brief. Macbeth carries on in the false belief that his life is charmed and that Macduff cannot harm him, only to realize that this too is the work of 'juggling fiends' (like Mephistopheles), who are

no more to be believed
 That palter with us in a double sense,
 That keep the word of promise to our ear
 And break it to our hope. (5.8.19–22)

Shakespeare's hesitation to stage literal devils in his tragedies is often attributed to growing skepticism and sophistication in English drama, but in fact the custom persisted long after Shakespeare, and the effect in later plays is not necessarily silly and old-fashioned. Thomas Dekker was especially drawn to it, and his treatment of devils in *If This Be Not a Good Play, the Devil Is in It* (1611–2), *The Virgin Martyr* (1620), and *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621) consistently presents the tradition of the devil's preying on the soul seriously and credibly, thus assuming, once again, the oppositional destiny of the soul. *The Virgin Martyr* revives the Tudor genre of the protestant saint's play, such as Thomas Garter's *Virtuous and Godly Susanna* (1563–9) or Elizabeth Cary's *Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry* (1602–5), which turn on the same principle as *The Conflict of Conscience*, that is, the perseverance of (protestant) saints in the face of oppression (and in Susanna's case, in the face of explicitly demonic temptation). To be sure, Dekker's Dorothea is a pre-Reformation saint, whose story is told in the *Legenda Aurea*, but she is mentioned in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, and everything about her story as Dekker and Massinger retell it, suggests Foxe's way of describing protestant fidelity in the face of catholic oppression.¹⁹

Set in the late Roman empire, *The Virgin Martyr* includes a literal devil, Harpax, who nonetheless appears in human guise throughout most of the play and only reveals his '*fearefull shape, fire flashing*' when his intended victim in the main plot, Theophilus, converts to Christianity.²⁰ Theophilus, however, is only one of many characters whom the devil tempts in this play. Dorothea, the title character, is the principal one, and she enunciates the motif we have been following throughout early drama when Theophilus' apostate daughters, Christeta and Caliste, attempt to convert her to Roman religion. 'Haue you not clouen feet? are you not diuels?' demands Dorothea, as she rejects their religious rites:

O call them rather iugling mysteries,
 The baytes and nets of hell, your soules the prey
 For which the Diuell angles, your false pleasures
 A steepe descent by which you headlong fall
 Into eternall torments. (3.1.111–5)

Her image of the devil fishing for souls reappears later in the play when Harpax taunts Theophilus offstage, as Theophilus is in the throes of changing his belief:

Harpax. Ha, ha, ha, ha, great lickorish foole.
Theoph. What art thou?
Harpax. A Fisherman.
Theoph. What doest thou catch.
Harpax. Soules, soules, a fish cal'd soules. (5.1.83–5)²¹

Harpax angles for Theophilus' soul throughout the play by encouraging him in his harsh persecution of Christians in much the same way that Iago encourages Othello's jealousy. When Calista and Christeta fail to convert Dorothea to Roman religion and instead themselves convert to Christianity, Harpax urges Theophilus to act:

Your Honour is ingag'd,
 The credit of our cause depends vpon it,
 Something you must doe suddenly. (3.2.95–7)

'They merit death', he urges, and Theophilus is all too compliant, peremptorily killing his daughters on the spot, in a time-honored gesture of stoic Roman paternity. The stage direction that follows is equivalent to Mephistopheles' exclamation of delight at obtaining Faustus's soul: '*Exit with Harpax hugging him, laughing*' (3.2.124 SD). In the subplot of *The Virgin Martyr*, Harpax tempts his victims by promising them wealth and echoing the same biblical description of Satan as 'the prince of this world' that we noticed in *The Conflict of Conscience*.

I am a Prince disguise

 I am a Prince, and many a man by me
 (Let him but keepe my rules) shall soone grow rich. (3.3.133–7)

Presumably the temptation to follow the devil for wealth is relegated to the subplot of this play, because covetousness is less noble than the temptation to follow stoic Roman religion and philosophy. Nonetheless, the subplot ties this play more closely to its predecessors, from *The Castle of Perseverance* to *The Conflict of Conscience*, which emphasize covetousness as the devil's principal means of acquiring the soul.

Viewing *Dr Faustus* in a continuous dramatic tradition – the latest example staged more than thirty years after the first production of Marlowe's play – helps both to clarify and distinguish Marlowe's accomplishment. We noticed that Marlowe was thoroughly familiar with the tradition we have been

following through early English drama, and he treats it effectively in Mephistopheles' successful temptation of Faustus. This temptation arguably parallels the vices' temptation of Philologus in *The Conflict of Conscience*. Mephistopheles appeals to Faustus's desire for 'a world of profit and delight, / Of power, of honour, of omnipotence' (1.1.55–6), 'giving crowns and rich apparel to Faustus' (2.1.82 SD), and thus diverting him from the warning that appears on his arm as he is about to sign the pact with the devil.

Mephistopheles' duplicity goes deeper, however, and raises puzzling questions. For example, is the pact that Faustus signs indeed irrevocable, as Mephistopheles repeatedly claims it is, and are subsequent assurances of God's continuing interest in Faustus false?²² Whereas we are given no reason to think that the Good Angel and the Old Man are liars, we have every reason to suspect that Mephistopheles lies when he claims that the pact is irrevocable. For one thing, if the pact were indeed as effective as Mephistopheles declares it to be, the devil would not need to keep diverting Faustus from going over to God after he has signed the pact: with this victim securely on the hook, the devil would abandon him and move on to less certain souls. Moreover, it should be no surprise that Mephistopheles lies to Faustus, for the devil 'is a liar, and the father thereof' (John 8:44).

But then what are we to make of an exchange like the following, where Mephistopheles frankly acknowledges the traditional truth about *why* the devil wants Faustus's soul?

Faustus. Stay, Mephistopheles, and tell me, what good will my soul do thy lord?

Mephistopheles. Enlarge his kingdom.

Faustus. Is that the reason he tempts us thus?

Mephistopheles. *Solamen miseris socios habuisse doloris* (2.1.38–42)²³

This exchange comes after and complements an earlier one in which Mephistopheles explains the tradition we have been following:

Faustus. Tell me what is that Lucifer thy lord?

Mephistopheles. Arch-regent and commander of all spirits.

Faustus. Was not that Lucifer an angel once?

Mephistopheles. Yes, Faustus, and dearly loved of God.

Faustus. How comes it then that he is prince of devils?

Mephistopheles. O, by aspiring pride and insolence,

For which God threw him from the face of heaven. (1.3.64–70)

If the devil is a liar, is he lying at these moments as well?

One solution to the problem of Mephistopheles' lies is that Marlowe's devil occasionally uses the truth as another kind of misdirection.²⁴ Faustus early expresses his impatience with traditional academic explanations as 'external trash – / Too servile and illiberal for me' (1.1.35–6). For the devil himself to offer such explanations therefore has the effect of renewing Faustus's impatience with them, which is presumably just what the devil wants:

Mephistopheles. O Faustus, leave these frivolous demands,
Which strike a terror to my fainting soul!
Faustus. What, is great Mephistopheles so passionate
For being deprived of the joys of heaven?
Learn thou of Faustus manly fortitude,
And scorn those joys thou never shalt possess. (1.3.83–7)

In other words, Mephistopheles tells the truth occasionally as an exercise in reverse psychology, successfully manipulating his victim to reject traditional limitations, because that rejection puts Faustus's soul more firmly in the devil's grasp. When Faustus is in a different frame of mind and inclined to repent, Mephistopheles reverts to threats and lies about the efficacy of the pact with the same intent: to prevent Faustus from going over to the other side. 'O, what will I not do to obtain his soul?' (2.1.73).

If this way of understanding Mephistopheles' strange mixture of lies and truth has merit, then it is not hard to see Mephistopheles as the most subtle treatment of the ravaging devil in early drama. But I would urge that *Dr. Faustus* complements its brilliantly manipulative devil with a subversive and skeptical variation of the tradition that makes this play unlike any other before or after it, by deliberately deconstructing the traditional opposition between God and the devil as seekers for Faustus's soul. Marlowe does this largely by replacing a lovingly merciful God with a merely powerful cosmic dominator, thus effectively conflating God and the devil where Faustus is concerned, even though they are in competition with each other. Another play that comes close to treating God this way is *The Conflict of Conscience* in its original version, which emphasizes 'the judgments of the Lord, / Who, though He spare His rod awhile, in hope we will amend, / If we persist in wickedness, He plagues us in the end' (6.1.2081–3; my emphasis). Yet even the unrevised *Conflict* emphasizes God's mercy more than *Dr. Faustus* does. Mephistopheles reports that God defeated Lucifer, as we just noticed, and Faustus also struggles from the beginning to avoid being defeated by God, only to find in the end that he is defeated by both the devil and God. Though three characters

allude to God's mercy in the A-Text, Faustus himself does so only once: 'Be I a devil, yet God may pity me; / Ay, God will pity me if I repent' (2.3.16).²⁵ The Evil Angel immediately replies, 'Ay, but Faustus never shall repent', and Faustus draws a seemingly orthodox Calvinist conclusion: 'My heart's so hardened I cannot repent' (2.3.17–18). But the episode clarifies no more than does Faustus's pact with Lucifer. If God hardens Faustus's heart, as Calvinists would argue, why does the play prompt Faustus's hard-hearted response with a comment from the *Evil Angel*? More seriously, if Faustus is right about his hardened heart, is the Good Angel wrong when he says, moments before, 'Faustus, repent yet, God will pity thee' (2.2.12)?

Even if one reads the episode as unambiguously orthodox, Faustus in fact twice calls on Christ, and the results are startling. In response to the Good Angel's urging him to 'repent', Faustus cries out, 'Ah, Christ, my Saviour, / Seek to save distressed Faustus' soul!' (2.3.82–3). But the Good Angel silently exits, and the stage direction indicates the immediate entrance of Lucifer, Beelzebub, and Mephistopheles. The appearance of this infernal trinity is mute testimony to the falsehood of Mephistopheles' claim about the effectiveness of the pact that Faustus signed, because if it was effective, why do devils need to appear when Faustus calls on Christ? More puzzling than what the appearance of three devils says about the pact is what their appearance says about God. Calvinists would say that Faustus does not mean what he says, because if he really meant it, God would respond. But if this is true, why do *devils* need to appear? The Calvinist reading makes Faustus's damnation as certain as the devils' claim their pact is, yet the devils continue to appear as if they need to prevent Faustus from going over to God, and reassurances of God's continuing interest in Faustus appear long after this point in the play. At the very least, the Calvinist reading is a stark contrast with pre-Reformation tradition, where a lively sense of God's mercy is an effective oppositional alternative to the devil's rapacity. Humanum Genus's dying cry for mercy in *The Castle of Perseverance* is enough to preserve him from the penalty of a lifetime of covetousness.

Faustus calls on God famously again in the play's closing lines:

See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!
 One drop would save my soul, half a drop. Ah, my Christ!
 Yet will I call on him. O, spare me, Lucifer!
 Where is it now? 'Tis gone; and see where God
 Stretcheth out his arm and bends his ireful brows! (5.2.79–83)

In what sense does Faustus see either the blood of Christ in the firmament or the threatening arm and face of God? Are they really signs in the heavens, like the sign on his arm earlier that bade him flee the devil, or are they merely in his mind's eye? If the first is true – if the sign of redemptive mercy really does appear to him – then why is it withdrawn and replaced with a sign of God's wrath? Is God so fickle and arbitrary or so inclined to tantalize hopeless reprobates with signs of hope? If the signs are merely in Faustus's mind, then why would Faustus perceive God as merciful in one second and harshly rejecting the next? Would a reprobate sinner even be able to imagine the redemptive mercy of God enough to plead for it, and if he *is* able to do so, why is his plea not effective?

I would argue that *Dr. Faustus* raises such questions and makes them irresolvably ambiguous, because it emphasizes the suffocating impossibility of human autonomy rather than the destiny of the soul. The play shows a close familiarity with the tradition of the voracious devil, and it offers enough elaboration on the tradition to make it convincing and possibly even true – as indeed it had to be if the play was to be staged in the sixteenth century. Yet the tradition seems to be elaborated here to draw our attention away from something else – as the clever patter and seductive visions of the devil draw away Faustus's attention. What the orthodox tradition makes us miss, if we are not looking carefully, is the terrible and deeply heterodox dilemma in which Faustus finds himself. No matter how we answer the questions of this play, the presence of the devil in it is much more compelling than the presence of God, and both merge indistinguishably by the end, leaving us with the one indubitable fact that Faustus is dominated and destroyed. The Chorus reinforces the play's sense of a merely powerful God. The Prologue says that 'heavens conspired his [Faustus's] overthrow' (Pro. 22), and the Epilogue is only a little less direct, as the Chorus warns 'the wise'

Only to wonder at unlawful things,
Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits
To practise more than heavenly power permits. (Epi. 6–8)

The phrase the Chorus uses is 'heavenly *power*', not 'heavenly *mercy*', and the power in question seems merely limiting, perhaps even arbitrary. Moreover, it seems indistinguishable from the 'deepness' of 'unlawful things', and the closing Chorus therefore reinforces the vision of Faustus's total defeat in his attempt to compete with malign or at best indifferent cosmic powers, of whatever kind. One of those powers confusingly admits to having been

defeated at some time by the other, but both crave to obtain Faustus's soul, and his ambitious quest to find a dominion that 'Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man' (1.1.63) results only in his utter defeat by both of them. The tragedy of Faustus is not that he damns himself, but that he is the only one in this play who intensely desires his soul and yet cannot obtain it.

Notes

- 1 Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, ed David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Manchester, 1993), 2.1.73. All quotations are from the A-text, because 'the critical verdict has swung strongly in favour of' it (ix), but the argument made here applies substantially to the B-text as well.
- 2 In many ways this understanding of *Dr Faustus* is similar to Jonathan Dollimore's in *Radical Tragedy* (Brighton, 1984), 109–19. Whereas Dollimore sees 'radical tragedy' as the product of 'emergent materialism', however, I see a profound difference between *Dr Faustus* and other contemporary tragedies, as I make clear in alluding to *Othello* and *Macbeth* below. I would therefore concede that while Enlightenment rationalism may be just barely emergent in *Dr Faustus*, it is a mistake to collapse the future into the past by reading nineteenth-century materialism into this sixteenth-century play.
- 3 1 Peter 5:8 in *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition*, ed Lloyd E. Berry (Madison, 1969). Shakespeare alludes to this text in *Henry V* 2.2.121–5:

If that same demon that hath gulled thee thus
 Should with his lion gait walk the whole world,
 He might return to vasty Tartar back
 And tell the legions, "I can never win
 A soul so easy as that Englishman's."

Quotations of Shakespeare are from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed David M. Bevington, 4th ed (New York, 1997).
- 4 Robert M. Durling, 'Deceit and Digestion in the Belly of Hell', in *Allegory and Representation*, ed Stephen J. Greenblatt (Baltimore, 1981), 61–93.
- 5 Some thirty references to payments for making, painting, mending, cleaning, and 'keeping' (storing? playing the 'keeper' or porter of?) 'hell mouth' and 'hell head' occur in the Coventry records between 1538 and 1572. See R.W. Ingram, ed, *Records of Early English Drama Coventry* (Toronto, 1981). Barbara Palmer's survey of demonic iconography identifies devils' weapons with contemporary tools for hunting, harvesting, and cooking, again pointing to the metaphor of devilish appetite. See 'The Inhabitants of Hell: Devils', in *The*

- Iconography of Hell*, ed Clifford Davidson and Thomas H. Seiler (Kalamazoo, 1992), 25.
- 6 I am grateful to Curtis Gruenler, Charles Huttar, William Pannapacker, and Kathleen Verduin for suggestions about the history of this tradition.
 - 7 This explanation for Satanic enmity was first formulated by the Eastern Fathers but not supported by Thomas Aquinas, who doubted that the angels were created before the visible universe (*Summa Theologica* Ia, 61, 3a). The older view was, however, adopted by Milton in *Paradise Lost*, almost a century after *Dr Faustus* was first produced.
 - 8 I follow Stuart Clark's magisterial analysis here, in *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1997). Clark argues that oppositional thinking was so deeply embedded in European consciousness that it did not give way, even among intellectuals, until the triumph of rationalism in the eighteenth century.
 - 9 Bernard Spivack discusses the influence of this metaphor on homiletic drama in *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (New York, 1958), 60–95.
 - 10 *The Castle of Perseverance*, ed Mark Eccles, *The Macro Plays*, EETS O.S. 262 (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 1.
 - 11 On the pain of purgatory, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 47–101. If Greenblatt is right about pervasive pre-Reformation belief in purgatory, *The Castle of Perseverance* is a striking aberration from it.
 - 12 This debate is also staged in the N-Town cycle, which makes it the motive for the Annunciation, and in a fragment from the 1570s called *Processus Satanae* by W.W. Greg. See *Parliament of Heaven*, ed Stephen Spector, *The N-Town Play*, EETS s.s. 11, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1991), 1.111–18, and *Processus Satanae*, ed W.W. Greg, Malone Society Collections, vol 2, pt 3 (London, 1931), 239–50. For commentary on the debate of the Four Daughters, see Samuel C. Chew, *The Virtues Reconciled: An Iconographic Study* (Toronto, 1947).
 - 13 'Here entreth ANIMA as a mayde, in wyght clothe of golde gysely purfyled [handsomely bordered] with mynyver [fur], a mantyll of blake therwppoon'. *Wisdom*, ed Eccles, *The Macro Plays*, 17 SD.
 - 14 For commentary on reason and 'sensuality' as the two parts of the soul, see Eccles, ed, *Macro Plays*, 204–5, nn. 103–70 and 135.
 - 15 On 'disfiguring' in *Wisdom*, see David M. Bevington, "'Black and wyght, fowl and fayer": Stage Picture in *Wisdom*', in *The Wisdom Symposium*, ed Milla Cozart Riggio (New York, 1986), 18–38.
 - 16 See, for example, David M. Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), 245–51.

- 17 Nathaniel Woodes, *The Conflict of Conscience*, ed Edgar T. Schell and J.D. Schuchter in *English Morality Plays and Moral Interludes* (New York, 1969), 1.1.2 and 22.
- 18 Woodes echoes The Gospel of John, which three times refers to Satan as 'the prince of this world' (John 12:31, 14:30, and 16:11), but the idea seems to have originated in the letters of Paul. See 2 Cor. 4:4 and Eph. 2:2 and 6:12.
- 19 For further discussion of this point, see John D. Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 171.
- 20 *The Virgin Martyr*, ed Fredson Bowers, *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, 4 vols (Cambridge, 1953–61), 5.1.122 SD.
- 21 V.A. Kolve reproduces a fifteenth-century illustration of the devil fishing for souls and offers further references to this particular metaphor of the devil's desire for human souls in *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* (Stanford, 1984), 338, Figure 163.
- 22 These assurances are offered twice by the Good Angel (2.3.12 and 79–81) and once by the Old Man (5.1.36–57).
- 23 'It is a comfort to the wretched to have had companions in misery' (Bevington and Rasmussen's translation).
- 24 This is argued at greater length in Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 107–26.
- 25 The other three allusions are made by the Good Angel (2.3.12), the Old Man (5.1.44–47), and the Second Scholar (5.2.60–61).