

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON AN ENGLISH POET

THE PERFORMANCE OF
CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE'S *DR. FAUSTUS*

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THE performance of Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*¹ has become a normal part of our theatrical experience. In the past seven years an enthusiastic spectator could have seen very different productions of the play directed by Nevill Coghill at Oxford, by Charles Marowitz at Glasgow, and by Clifford Williams for the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford. It continues to appeal to university dramatic societies and I believe that it is fair to say that it is more popular in the theatre than many other master works of the English Renaissance drama.

Yet the play, as we know, presents rather special problems which make it seem a surprising choice for modern actors. The two surviving printed texts of the play differ in detail and in substance. Nor is there any general agreement that Marlowe is the sole author of what survives. The play may have been written in collaboration, or it may be a revised version with additions by other hands. What should be performed as Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* is, therefore, a doubtful question. How it should be performed is, perhaps, equally difficult since the text calls for devils with fireworks, a false head which is struck off, a false leg which is pulled off and a number of other sensational devices no longer considered compatible with the decorum of a tragic performance. That actors should frequently be called upon to brave such deep difficulties seems to me surprising. Is the normal performance of *Faustus* not a theatrical abnormality?

The first question—What should be performed?—is possibly easier to deal with than the second. Marlowe has been well served by his recent editors. The labours of Sir Walter Greg, Irving Ribner, John Jump, and Roma Gill have made every reader of their editions of the play acutely aware of the textual

¹ All quotations from Marlowe are taken from *The Plays of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Roma Gill, 1971.

problems. They have suggested ways in which some of these problems can be solved and some circumvented. The editors have given us the best text that can be devised from the material at our disposal. What an actor should do with this material is a different question.

It is not simply that different interpretations of this text are possible and that the critics therefore speak with different voices. If the purpose of playing really is to hold the mirror up to nature then we should expect individual reports of the reflection observed to differ in radical fashion. The critic inevitably exposes himself as he attempts to unravel the play. It is not the opposition of opinion that should surprise us but the depressing measure of agreement. It is depressing, particularly to an actor or director, because it amounts to a considered professional opinion on the part of students of the Elizabethan drama that the play cannot be acted.

This case seems to me to have been put with admirable clarity by Cleanth Brooks in his essay on 'The Unity of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*'.

We have a play that lacks a proper middle, or at least a play that *seems* to lack a middle . . . very early in the play the learned doctor makes his decision to sell his soul to the devil, and after that there seems little to do except to fill in the time before the mortgage falls due and the devil comes to collect the forfeited soul. If the consequence of Faustus' bargain is inevitable, and if nothing can be done to alter it, then it doesn't much matter what one puts in as filler. Hence one can stuff in comedy and farce more or less *ad libitum*, the taste of the audience and its patience in sitting through the play being the only limiting features.¹

These precise Aristotelian terms formulate the difficulties felt by many critics when they contrast the sardonic power of the opening, the tragic consciousness of the vision of Helen, or the terror of the last hour of Faustus's life with the court entertainments or scenes of comic buffoonery which seem to fill up the interval.

Yet to say, as Professor Brooks does, that 'it doesn't much matter what one puts in as filler' demonstrates the failure of this formula to cope with our theatrical experience. The art of low comedy is a difficult and exacting form. It requires precise timing and the careful creation of expectation and response

¹ Cleanth Brooks, 'The Unity of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*', in *To Nevill Coghill from Friends*, ed. J. Lawlor and W. H. Auden, 1966.

between actor and audience. Any comedian knows very well that it matters a great deal what he puts in as filler. The idea that a company can simply wear away the long interval between these two highly structured periods of dramatic tension with a collection of random turns is the best recipe for total theatrical disaster that I have ever heard. If the centre of this play is really as much of a morass as many critics seem to think, then any company which attempts to translate the text on to a stage has undertaken an impossible task.

A play which is not a theatrical masterpiece may still be a literary monument. The philosophical or theological profundity of the surviving great scenes may encourage a properly instructed audience to endure some sway of dullness for their sake. A performer, however, may reasonably hesitate before committing himself to these deeps. At least one critic of a severe and serious cast of mind has recently glanced at these scenes with the cold eye of reason and found them wanting. To A. L. French, the character exhibited in the opening scenes, the Faustus who signs the contract with Lucifer, is neither philosopher nor intellectual but a painfully pointless charlatan whose elementary mistakes in logic and common sense deprive the play of any coherence. The folly of Faustus is only equalled by that of his admirers since the play is

one of the most specious of all the false classics which clog our English literature courses and in which our students, dutiful but puzzled, labour to find the qualities they know they ought to be able to see.¹

This brilliant and bravura critical performance delves a yard below many literary mines but the ensuing scholastic siege warfare should not detract our attention from one inescapable conclusion. By the standards of the old orthodoxy or the new Rymer-like severity there ought to be no performance of Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*.

When a play which cannot be acted is none the less frequently and sometimes triumphantly performed either the theatrical public is co-operating in its own deception or the theory has failed to engage with the real dramatic form of the play in question. Between the scholarly debate that surrounds the figure of Faustus in his study and the applause which greets that figure's performance upon the stage of a public theatre there is a great gulf fixed. The question that I venture to ask you to

¹ A. L. French, 'The Philosophy of *Dr. Faustus*', *Essays in Criticism* 20 (1970), 123-42.

examine with me this afternoon is whether it is possible to build a bridge through the moving air of controversy which will permit us to cross this great divide in reasonable safety. Can we find a point of view which will allow us to conjure the great forces of textual criticism and scholarly commentary so that those rash enough to wish to perform the play may rely upon their support?

It has been customary to use as scapegoats in this matter those who, for their own profit, arranged, or revised, or merely stole, the texts printed in 1604 and 1616. It is now agreed that they issued them to the world in an evidently imperfect state. Marlowe's masterpiece has thus been mangled on its way to the printing-house and the loss supplied by random recollections of old tags and pieces of business from the tiring-house. I do not deny that we may have lost much. Yet one puzzling feature of these two texts almost persuades me that we do those responsible for that early anonymous editorial work an injustice. If the A text of 1604 is a memorially reconstructed text, and if the B text of 1616 has as its ultimate source the chaos of a dead author's 'foul papers',¹ it seems strange that both should have reasonable versions of the great speeches at the beginning and end of the play but that the presumed and hypothetical great central speeches should have disappeared from both versions. The fact that the B text is heavily dependent upon the A version provides one possible explanation of this loss. Another explanation, however, is possible and I venture to conjecture that the great central speeches have left not a wrack behind in either version because Marlowe did not write them. He did not write them because the nature of his play did not require them. In other words I wish to suggest that those who prepared these versions of Marlowe's play for the printer, whatever their other sins of omission or commission, have correctly reported the form of Marlowe's play—and that it is our failure to appreciate the nature of this form which has created our critical difficulties.

These difficulties begin with the contract concluded between Faustus and Lucifer. There are three main objections to this bargain:

1. The reasons advanced by Faustus for invoking Lucifer's power are illogical and spurious.
2. The contract itself is a ludicrous document by any tests of either legality or common sense.

¹ Sir Walter Greg (ed.), *Marlowe's Doctor Faustus 1604-1616*, 1950.

3. Mephistophilis makes it abundantly clear that the bargain will not be kept by the infernal powers, yet Faustus appears so stupid that he is unaware, even at the last moment, that he has been cheated as well as damned.

These are strong arguments. One of the most remarkable things about them is that those who advance them actually write as if they expected Marlowe, with the exercise of more care and thought, to be able to provide sound and convincing reasons for Faustus's dismissal of logic, medicine, law, and divinity. It is precisely this dissatisfaction and disaffection on the part of his audience that Marlowe appeals to in the speech. Sixty lines of verse cannot abolish the arts and sciences but they can appeal to humanity's restless desire to reach beyond them. The great instrument of the speech is the rhetorical question:

Is to dispute well logic's chiefest end?
Affords this art no greater miracle? (i. i. 8-9)

The governing assumption is that there are 'greater miracles' which cannot be reached by the physician, the lawyer, or the divine. That this process is irrational is not to be denied—its irrationality will later be emphasized by Mephistophilis—but anyone who asserts that he is immune from such discontent-bred desires is also the victim of an irrational delusion. The power of magic is precisely its promise to fulfil irrational aspirations.

The contract with Lucifer is equally ambiguous in character. Both sides clearly interpret it in their own fashion—and the fashion in which they interpret it is the subject of Marlowe's dramatic development. It is not strictly a contract since in the end neither side is in a position to enforce the bargain. Faustus is never in control of Lucifer and Mephistophilis, while it is not the contract, but his inability to repent of it, that destroys Faustus. Yet it is more terrible than a legal contract since it represents an irresistible compulsion on the part of Faustus. On the stage its most dramatic detail is that it has to be signed and sealed in blood, blood which has to be heated by fire brought from hell before the deed is accomplished, and which can only be cancelled or redeemed by the blood of Christ or the life-blood of Faustus himself.

It is, of course, no part of the dramatist's purpose that Faustus should be aware of this until a much later stage in the action. It is equally essential that the nature of his danger and his folly should be made absolutely clear to the audience. In

this Mephistophilis is the agent of the dramatist. The celebrated question

Faustus. How comes it then that thou art out of hell?

Mephostophilis. Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.

(I. iii. 75-6)

and the later confident statement by Faustus

Faustus. I think hell's a fable.

Mephostophilis. Ay, think so still, till experience change thy mind.

(II. i. 126-7)

are used to establish more than the derisive despair of Mephistophilis. That Faustus should be blind to the destruction waiting for him is good theology—he is blinded by pride—and good psychology since the destiny which makes men call for their own destruction reveals itself last of all to its author and creator. It is also a superb stroke of dramatic art. In creating the consciousness of hell within the mind of the audience it has established the logic of suspense which now controls the rest of the play.

Since the exact nature of suspense is crucial to my argument I must attempt to clarify my meaning for you. Let us suppose that a similar contract with Lucifer has been made by a member of our present audience. If the due date were to expire this minute the arrival of the infernal powers to claim their property would, no doubt, cause a certain amount of surprise and shock. On the other hand if we were informed of the existence of this contract, told that it expired at six o'clock, and were then convinced by a sardonic Mephistophilis of the reality of hell, we should be in a state of suspense until the clock struck. This is the difference between surprise and suspense. Suspense depends upon information and it is the more powerful of the two since it permits the audience to become involved emotionally in the situation—it allows, shall we say, for the arousal of pity and terror.

The opening scenes of *Dr. Faustus* are designed to create such an involvement and the logic of the real world—if we can use so doubtful an expression—is rightly subordinated by the dramatist to this fundamental part of his art. Once this principle has been grasped it should become apparent that Marlowe has shaped his play in order to serve this basic logic of suspense. This is the overriding necessity which dictates its form. The way in which it ought to be performed is, therefore, the way that accords most closely with the laws which govern the creation and control of suspense in a work of art.

Fortunately I do not need to take upon myself the formulation of these new unities. We can safely turn for a discussion of these problems to a work by two modern masters of the art of suspense. My own earlier example will already have been recognized as an adaptation and simplification of the definition of suspense offered by Alfred Hitchcock in conversation with François Truffaut. The published version of these taped conversations,¹ superbly edited by the French director, I take to be a document of major critical, literary, and cinematic importance. If I failed to quote Hitchcock's actual words on this occasion it is because his example is concerned with a bomb under a table and in these troubled times I felt that reference to a bomb, even in Burlington House, might cause some danger of a joke misfired.

For our purposes it will be sufficient to isolate and comment upon three stages in the creation of suspense. These are:

1. The discovery and employment of a suitable MacGuffin.
2. Its exploitation and development in a series of rapid transitions.
3. The way in which these methods permit an author to concentrate all of his resources upon the image which is the source of the work's emotional power.

I shall argue that all of these methods are employed by Marlowe in the creation of *Dr. Faustus*.

Hitchcock describes the origin of the term 'MacGuffin' in the following way:

It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men in a train. One man says, 'What's that package up there in the baggage rack?'

And the other answers, 'Oh, that's a MacGuffin.' The first one asks, 'What's a MacGuffin?'

'Well,' the other man says, 'it's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.'

The first man says, 'But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands', and the other one answers, 'Well then, that's no MacGuffin!' So you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all.²

This apparently private symbolism is used to describe a common phenomenon of great importance since the first, the most immediate, critical question that is aroused by any work in the suspense genre is exactly this question of probability.

¹ François Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, Paris 1966 (published in London in 1968: my quotations are taken from the Panther book edition, 1969).

² *Hitchcock*, p. 158.

Faced with an extraordinary series of events the spectator may well ask how they came to happen in that particular fashion to these specific people. The answer is governed by the logic of art rather than the laws of probability. As Hitchcock puts it: "Why don't they go to the police?" I've always replied, "They don't go to the police because it's dull."¹ Thus in *The Lady Vanishes* we are expected to believe that a message vital to the security of the country is coded as the first few bars of a popular folk-song and sent across Europe in the custody of a little old lady so frail that anyone could knock her over. We are then also expected to believe that her opponents are prepared to go to quite extraordinary lengths of ingenuity to ensure that the lady vanishes. It is indeed 'Fantasy, sheer fantasy'.² Even more remarkable is the case of *Notorious*—a film where the plot turns upon some samples of uranium concealed in winebottles. It was made in 1944 when the explosive possibilities of uranium were not yet known to a wide public. The original producers turned down the project and sold it as a package deal to R.K.O. because they thought the atom bomb 'was such a goddam foolish thing to base a movie on'.³

Yet, as Hitchcock points out, the producer was wrong to suppose that the atom bomb was the basis of the story. The basis of the story is an emotion created by a situation—that of 'a man in love with a girl who, in the course of her official duties, had to go to bed with another man and even had to marry him'.³ The producer had failed to distinguish between the MacGuffin—the more or less plausible excuse for the story which will not stand up to logical examination—and the story itself.

I now wish to argue that the basis of the story of Dr. Faustus is an emotion created by a situation—a man who delivers his soul to the devil. This emotion is an observable fact of psychology familiar to every member of the audience. The contract itself, and the conjuring which accompanies it, are, on the other hand, a MacGuffin—the device which is necessary to set the delicate mechanism of the action in motion. From this point of view it is irrelevant to argue that the Elizabethans took conjuring and necromancy seriously. We treat the atom bomb with a fair degree of seriousness. The seriousness of these matters is not in question since the effect of the work of art does not depend on them. The only thing that matters is that they should seem to be

¹ *Hitchcock*, p. 341.

² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

of importance to the characters, to the narrator or dramatist they need be of no importance at all.

It should not be assumed that this element of sheer fantasy means that the ultimate effect of the works in question is not realistic. Talking of his screen version of John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* Hitchcock recalls that the thing which gave him most pleasure was the rapidity of the transitions: 'You use one idea after another and eliminate anything that interferes with the swift pace.'¹ Truffaut's own comment upon this seems to me a revealing account of the way in which this style necessarily imposes its own form upon the work of art:

It's a style that tends to do away with anything that is merely utilitarian, so as to retain only those scenes that are fun to shoot and watch. It's the kind of cinema that is extremely satisfying to audiences and yet often irritates the critics. While looking at the movie, or after seeing it, they will analyse the script, which, of course, doesn't stand up to logical analysis. So they will single out as weaknesses those aspects that are the very essence of this film genre, as, for instance, a thoroughly casual approach to the plausible.¹

What has been created is drama which is 'life with the dull bits cut out'²—the moments that are left are the moments of suspense and suspense creates the emotion which gives the story its power to grip the mind and imagination of the audience. The improbability of theatrical illusion offers its audience a realistic glimpse of the operation of essential human passion in all its contradictory variety.

One more example will permit me to complete my case. An illustration of the operation of suspense from *Rear Window* seems to me to offer a close parallel to the case of *Dr. Faustus*:

A curious person goes into somebody else's room and begins to search through the drawers. Now, you show the person who lives in that room coming up the stairs. Then you go back to the person who is searching, and the public feels like warning him, 'Be careful, watch out, someone's coming up the stairs.' Therefore, even if the snooper is not a likeable character, the audience will still feel anxiety for him. Of course, when the character is attractive, as for instance Grace Kelly in *Rear Window*, the public's emotion is greatly intensified.³

The double image, a girl searching in a room and a man climbing the stairs, actually creates the emotion, and the mounting anxiety felt by the audience ensures their involvement in the problems faced by the central character.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

² *Ibid.*, p. 112.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

Faustus is clearly engaged upon a search of one kind or another—though whether it is for knowledge, power, or pleasure remains something of an open question. All the time that he is so engaged the audience is made aware of the slow approach of the powers of hell until the fearsome property of a huge hell mouth actually opens at the back of the stage and apparently reduces him to a mangled corpse. The double nature of his bond ensures that Faustus is suspended in limbo long enough to engage the interest and sympathy of the audience as well as arousing their fear at his fate. The rapid transitions of the central scenes—the shows at court and the slapstick disasters of the clowns—are the images which make the audience aware of the increasingly precarious nature of his situation. It remains to demonstrate how these varied parts of the drama contribute towards the central suspense effect.

No sooner has Faustus signed and sealed his bargain than he repents—or rather he says that he repents, for it is plain that he merely endures regret or remorse, since repentance implies some positive action to reverse the fatal course of action or behaviour. Yet his questions about paradise and creation are so obviously a threat to the kingdom of hell that Lucifer and Beelzebub arrive in person to interrupt the uncomfortable course of his independent thought. They resolve to occupy him with ‘some pastime’ (II. ii. 102) and the result is the extraordinary show of the seven deadly sins.

It would be a serious error to regard this as simply a ‘theatrical’ device to fill up time. Faustus has summoned Mephistophilis and signed away his soul to Lucifer in the pursuit of knowledge, power, and pleasure. All the power and knowledge that hell affords now walk the stage in the persons of the actors playing the seven deadly sins. The show is thus an exact emblematic description of the situation of Faustus since the only power which the dark monarchy of hell can offer its subjects is the power to commit the seven deadly sins. Faustus is, therefore, being entertained by a representation of the bonds which will fetter him until his destruction at the end of the play. The director ought, therefore, to arrange his stage picture so that some idea of this fatal progression is conveyed to the audience.

This suggestion of a threatening presence forecasting a desperate future was, I believe, achieved by the weird skeletal figures employed by Clifford Williams in his 1968 production at Stratford. They are ‘unhistorical’ in the sense that they do not resemble contemporary depictions of the seven deadly sins but

they are also 'historical' in the sense that they convey to a modern audience the imminent threat of death and decay contained in the Biblical text which Faustus has already dismissed, '*Stipendium peccati mors est*' (i. i. 39). Having played their part satisfactorily at this stage of the action they were used again for a brilliant theatrical effect at the end of the play. Faustus finished his final speech grovelling in abject terror on the ground. The clock finished striking. Nothing happened. After a long moment Faustus raised his head and looked round the totally empty stage. He started to laugh. As he reached the hysteria of relief, the back wall of the stage gave way and fell forward in sections revealing an ominous red glow and a set of spikes like the dragon's teeth of the Siegfried Line. The denizens of hell emerged with a kind of slow continuous shuffle until Faustus was surrounded by a circle of these skeletal figures—including the seven deadly sins. He was then seized and carried shrieking through the teeth of hell mouth which closed leaving the wall of Faustus's study again intact. The actors and the director had thus achieved a notable modern stage effect which was entirely in keeping with the spirit of the text they were interpreting.

The show of the seven deadly sins is followed in the text by one of the more dubious of the comic scenes. Robin the clown has somehow acquired one of the doctor's conjuring books and is using it to impress Dick the ostler. It bears a strong resemblance to an earlier scene between Wagner and Robin and it seems reasonable to suppose that the textual tradition is a confused one. The difficulties of the text, however, do not require us to conclude that this is merely a comic filler. The comic scenes have been defended on the grounds that they parody the main action—yet if this were all that they achieved it might be possible to cut them without any serious loss to the action. Low comedy has a much more vital function than parody in Marlowe's dramatic economy. We have drawn a distinction between suspense and surprise. Surprise is the governing principle of low comedy and these episodes exist to provide the audience with a continual series of necessary shocks and surprises which would destroy the suspense structure of the main action.

The comedy of these scenes is of the savage farcical kind which Muriel Bradbrook has connected with the 'eldritch'¹ tradition and which may also be observed in the farcical

¹ Muriel Bradbrook, 'Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and the Eldritch Tradition', in *Essays on Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Drama*, edited by Richard Hosley, 1963.

masterpieces of the silent cinema. It represents the successful release of enormously aggressive feelings and it also illustrates the unobserved dangers and pitfalls which lie along the path chosen by Faustus. He is dismembered in jest by the knights who strike off his false head or the horse-courser who pulls off his leg—but the devils will laugh last when they disjoint him in earnest.¹ The surprise effects of low comedy are being used to remind the audience of the dangers involved in this particular pursuit of pleasure and satisfaction—since although we have been partly persuaded that the pains of hell are mainly a mental process this play insists, I believe rightly, that physical pain and bodily torture are properly associated with humanity's experience of that vicious kingdom.

These scenes are not, therefore, an unacceptable mixture of tragedy and farce. They form a necessary part of the main action. 'In the mystery and suspense genre, a tongue in cheek approach is indispensable'²—since it is only in this way that a psychotic reality can be made interesting, entertaining, bearable, and therefore ultimately instructive for an audience. If the comic scenes are once accepted as an integral part of the play's structure two consequences follow for its performance. One is that every resource of theatrical illusion must be used to make the false head or the detachable leg convincing if comic surprises. The second is that a director should be led to inquire why the comic scenes build up to a clear climax in the fourth act when all the low-life characters who have had any dealings with Faustus erupt drunkenly into the courtyard of the palace of the Duke of Vanholt.

The scenes at this nobleman's house have been described as the weakest in the play. Faustus gratifies him by commanding Mephistophilis to bring a bunch of grapes for the pregnant duchess. He then entertains them by permitting the rabble to enter and charming them dumb. These actions, so often dismissed as trivial, seem to me potentially powerful and threatening when set into their proper context. It is the business of those performing the play to recognize that context and provide it for the audience. The central scenes of *Dr. Faustus* present an elaborate series of stage pictures. We pass from the show of the seven deadly sins to the Pope's banquet in Rome. This is followed by three scenes of visionary invocation—at the court

¹ Michael Hattaway, 'The Theology of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*', in *Renaissance Drama* iii (1970), edited by S. Schoenbaum.

² *Hitchcock*, p. 247.

of the Emperor Charles V Faustus summons spirits to represent Alexander the Great and his paramour; at the house of the Duke of Vanholt he makes Mephistophilis a bearer of grapes; in the privacy of his own study he conjures up the vision of Helen and falls in love with the demonic representation of her beauty. These visions create the balance of suspense in the centre of the play because they are linked together by an imagery and symbolism which was familiar to the Renaissance and which has not lost its power to charm a modern audience.

The scenes in Rome are clearly connected with the vision of the seven deadly sins. The Pope mounts his throne using his rival Bruno as a footstool in the same fashion that Tamburlaine stands on Bajazeth. Pride, wrath, and covetousness are the badges of this vicar of Christ while envy, sloth, and gluttony will play their part in the ensuing banquet. It may be suggested that it is an emblem of the banquet of sense—the desire to feed the five senses and ignore the true feast of life which nourishes the soul¹—but it is also a banquet which can never be enjoyed. The meat and wine are, like the rival pope Bruno, snatched from the grasp of his holiness by Faustus and Mephistophilis. It is also evident that while Faustus may play the harpy on this occasion his own desires are likely to remain for ever tantalizingly beyond his reach. Faustus at this moment in the play is clearly attempting to feed his senses at the expense of his soul. A critic might be forgiven for assuming that Marlowe was now prepared to work out the morality structure in formal fashion and show Faustus engaged in all of the seven deadly sins paraded before him, and before the audience, by Lucifer.

Marlowe, however, now uses his basic suspense structure in order to develop his theme in a new and surprising direction. This development has been prepared for by Faustus's speech at II. ii. 18–32 which argues that it is only the power of 'sweet pleasure' conquering 'deep despair' which prevents him from committing suicide

Faustus. Have not I made blind Homer sing to me
Of Alexander's love and Oenon's death?
And hath not he, that built the walls of Thebes
With ravishing sound of his melodious harp,
Made music with my Mephostophilis.

The Alexander who is the subject of Homer's song is, of course,

¹ Frank Kermode, 'The Banquet of Sense', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 44 (1961) 66–99, now reprinted in *Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne*, 1971.

Paris who carried off Helen from Menelaus. This kind of vision is now repeated three times. For the Emperor Charles V Faustus conjures up the spirit of Alexander the Great; in the privacy of his own study he will conjure up Helen who charmed the Trojan Alexander and burnt 'the topless towers of Ilium' (v. i. 98). In between he sends Mephistophilis for grapes and charms dumb those who are intoxicated by the juice of the grape—as Faustus will himself be charmed into the final silence of death by his intoxication with the beauty of Helen.

The Emperor desired to see the spirit of Alexander because he acknowledged him to be the type and symbol of true imperial power. This is indeed represented as Alexander is directed to overcome Darius on the stage and then offer the imperial crown of Persia to his paramour. We have only to turn as far as North's Plutarch to remind ourselves that this paramour was the celebrated Thais who sat at Alexander's side during the great banquet at Persepolis, the capital of Persia, and, flown with insolence and wine, persuaded him to burn down the city in her honour. The burning city seems to me an integral and important part of the play's imagery. Persepolis and Troy are both burning pyres which light Faustus on his road to the eternal burning city which is the capital of hell. The show of Alexander and his paramour seems to me a deliberate invitation to the actors to stress the main elements of a known story—a vision of triumphant power and majesty which is then overcome by the power of beauty and prostrated by the insidiously intoxicating Dionysian power of wine.

The direction of the argument should now be plain. I believe that it is particularly important that the low-life characters should be shown drinking themselves into a state of aggressive intoxication before they erupt into the courtyard at the Duke of Vanholt's. It is important that the duchess should be pregnant and it is vital that Mephistophilis should be dispatched to Asia for grapes. If the text is here imperfect that imperfection should not blind us to the importance of these elements in combination. They are the essential elements of one of the mysterious Bacchanals so popular with the artists of the Renaissance. It seems to me exactly the same kind of symbolism which inspired Michelangelo's statue of Bacchus or the remarkable series of paintings executed by Titian for the study of Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara.¹

¹ Fritz Saxl, 'A Humanist Dreamland', in *A Heritage of Images*, ed. E. H. Gombrich, Peregrine, 1970. John Walker, *Bellini and Titian at Ferrara*, 1956.

To those who deny the presence of such symbols in Marlowe's text I can only reply that stage directions, realized or implied, are an integral part of the text and that they seem to me to be clearly and firmly indicated by the whole construction of the play. These visions prepare the audience for the final brilliant appearance of Helen. Since the presence of a solitary girl, or a boy actor, could not compete with the other shows, Marlowe has given Faustus the lines which have become part of the consciousness of Europe. Central to that speech, and widely expressed in imagery throughout this period, is her extraordinary double nature as a vision of eternal beauty which also destroys men through the irresistible force of their own passions. Shakespeare employs this double symbolism, and extends it to Cressida, in that haunting and terrifying play *Troilus and Cressida* which is also, in its own fashion, a vision of hell. This double nature is acquired because Helen was the prize offered to Paris by Venus to ensure her victory in the contest of beauty with Juno and Athena. Paris becomes the image of a man who is destroyed by preferring passion to wisdom or majesty. His case is thus emblematically similar to Acteon who, having seen Diana naked in the forest, was turned into a stag and pursued and killed by his own hounds. This image is, I believe, created in surprise fashion by Marlowe immediately after the vision of Alexander when Benvolio, the knight who has slept through the vision and refuses to believe in it, is given horns by Faustus. The entire subsequent sequence of the beheading in the forest and the hunting of the ambush party by devils is the necessary ludicrous accompaniment which reminds the audience that the art of Faustus is stretched over unsounded depths of despair.

I do not, therefore, think it extravagant to see in the elements of the scene at the Duke of Vanholt's the essentials of a Dionysiac ritual. The girl is pregnant and the swift dispatch of Mephistophilis for the grapes which will satisfy her craving celebrates the powers of creation in a similar, though less extreme, form as Titian's *Venus Worship* at Ferrara. The powers of destruction are represented by the rout who have been worshipping Bacchus in their own potentially dangerous fashion. The low-life characters burst in because they have, throughout the play, represented the debased and dangerous side of Faustus's magic—a reminder that accidental judgements and casual slaughters are the constant consequences of following passion wherever it leads. These powers are here still under control since Faustus can charm them dumb. Left to their own devices they might well have

imitated the Bacchantes by tearing him in pieces—a fate which eventually overtakes him when he is shredded by the devils he has been using as his agents in this his private attempt to confound hell in Elysium.

The imagery of the text, and its translation into a visual context, seem to me to fit the description that Edgar Wind gives us of the *Bacchus* of Michelangelo (Pl. XVII). He draws attention to the fact that the satyr at his side bites a bunch of grapes, the symbol of life, but stands upon the flayed skin of an animal, which signifies death:

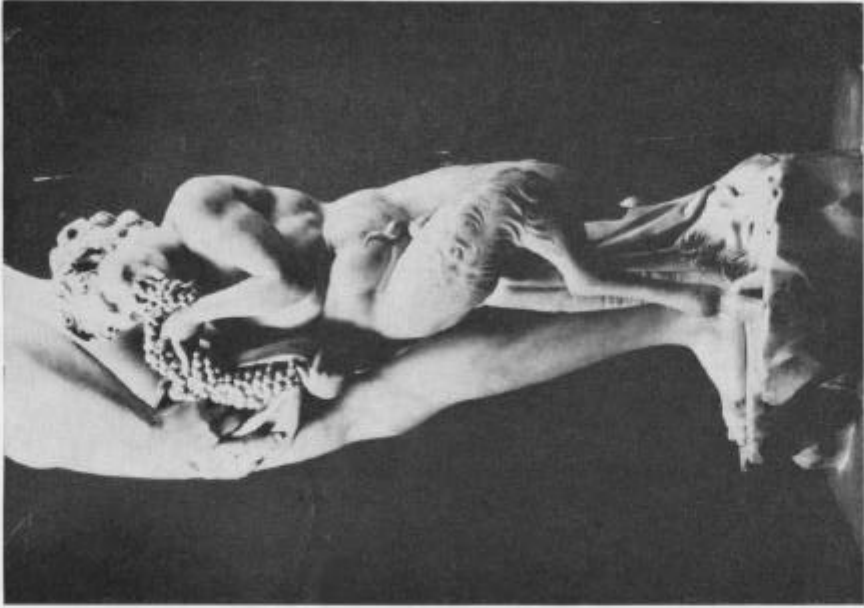
The god offering the cup of rejoicing introduces a ritual of cruel destruction, and his twofold gift is illustrated in the figure of the little satyr. While he 'furtively enjoys', as Condivi says, the grapes which are enveloped in the flayed skin, he is so placed that the skin and head of the tortured animal emerge between his own goat feet. Half-human, half-animal, he himself willingly holds and supports the horrid symbol of agony because in it is laid the fruit of rejoicing which he smilingly touches with his lips. As the mysteries of Bacchus are both destructive and consoling, because he conveys the power to draw life out of death, he fittingly presides over a garden of ruins, the desolate site of enthusiasm.¹

This seems to me exactly the tone of the Bacchic mysteries in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*.

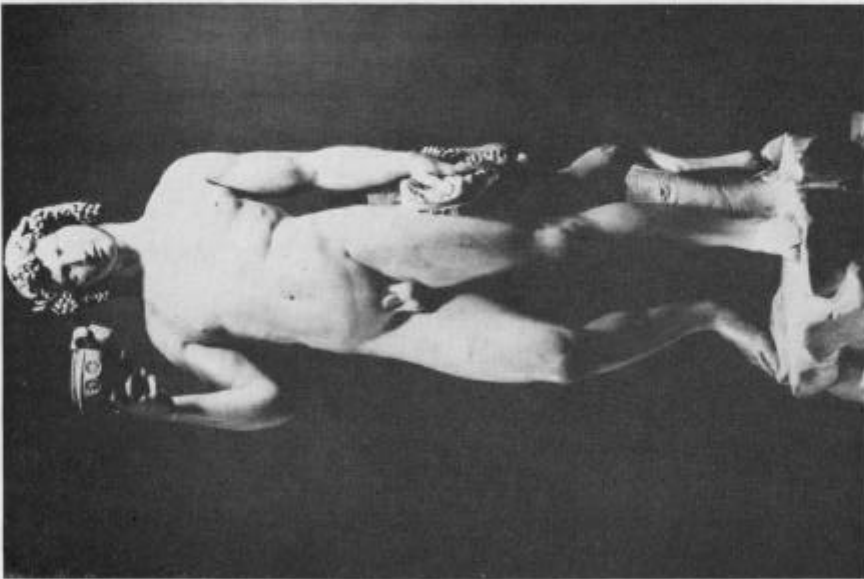
He is aware of the Elysian vision of sensuality caught by Titian in *The Andrians* (Pl. XVIII). Helen occupies the same dominant position in Marlowe's composition that the sleeping Bacchante does in Titian's. It was to emphasize this compelling power of beauty that Clifford Williams made his Helen pass naked over the stage. The brilliance of the verse intoxicates the audience with the Dionysiac power of poetry in exactly the same fashion as Faustus is intoxicated by the beauty of his own creation. Yet these lines also emphasize the darker side of this vision, the double aspect of the god sculpted by Michelangelo.

The visions of Faustus have thus moved from the appearance of Alexander and Thais where Darius was cast down and preparations made to burn the city of Persepolis, through the Bacchanal at the Duke of Vanholt's where the rout rush in only to find that their hideous roar can still be controlled by the doctor's art, to the final vision of Helen. The lines which express the central truth of this vision have been properly reserved for the moment when they will achieve their maximum

¹ Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, Peregrine, 1967, pp. 185-6.



Michelangelo: Bacchus





Titian: The Andrians

dramatic effect. The burning city is a prominent part of this effect and its self-destructive quality is emphasized:

O, thou art fairer than the evening's air,
 Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars.
 Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter,
 When he appear'd to hapless Semele:
 More lovely than the monarch of the sky,
 In wanton Arethusa's azur'd arms,
 And none but thou shalt be my paramour.

(v. i. 110-16)

If Helen is more beautiful than the evening stars, or the sun reflected in the sacred spring of the muses, she is also like Jupiter who unwillingly fulfilled his promise to Semele by appearing in his true godhead and so burnt her to ashes.¹

The vision of Faustus is, therefore, similar to the Platonic mysteries which are the inspiration of some of the greatest visual art of the Renaissance. This vision is not a hopeless pursuit of the banquet of sense or the seven deadly sins. It is part of the arcane and mystical philosophy which men like Marsilio Ficino and Giordano Bruno hoped would be capable of changing men and altering circumstances. Their aspiration was a commonwealth where the love of knowledge and the knowledge of love might create the peace and freedom of a better world than this. Marlowe touches this vision with the darker aspects of the Dionysiac frenzy but this creation of Faustus's imagination is still one of the most powerful images in the play. It is this ability to confound hell in Elysium that Faustus is dramatically demonstrated to have been seeking in his contract with Lucifer. Faustus has created this kingdom of the poetic imagination in despite of hell. Mephistophilis, however, is ever present as a reminder that the kingdom of the imagination may be a treacherous illusion. The suspense of the play is generated as we watch Faustus try and fail to impose his own interpretation of the bond and his own vision of beauty upon an evil that is over-determined²—a force which exists within his own mind and also outside it in a fashion which may be personified rather than understood.

Marlowe's hell is a more serious matter than a stage conjurer's amusing tricks. Nor, if we take the Baines document

¹ Elizabeth M. Brennan has kindly reminded me that the result of the union of Jupiter and Semele was the birth of Dionysus.

² E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, 1951, provides an excellent discussion of over-determined events.

seriously,—and I believe we must—can his view of theology be attributed to his sharing that stern hatred of pleasure which has for so long made Calvinism so popular in northern Europe. One of the most remarkable features of the play is that its suspense is not created in the most obviously acceptable way—it does not arise as a result of a desperate struggle on the part of Faustus to repent. The Good and Evil angel are there to remind the audience of the possibility of repentance but I think it is fair to say that they voice his thoughts rather than do battle for his soul. It is possible for Faustus to repent up to the last moment—in his last speech he sees Christ's blood stream in the firmament—but the audience cannot believe in such a repentance when Faustus is himself so totally convinced that he can never achieve it. This is because Mephistophilis dramatizes the enormous weight of what amounts, on the part of Faustus, to a conditioned reflex or response.¹

It is admitted in the opening scenes that Faustus has a predisposition to acts which are likely to damn or destroy him—or else the forces of hell would never have been able to materialize and conclude their bargain. The play dramatizes a man battling unsuccessfully to turn his natural desires and predispositions into creative form—the vision of the Bacchanal—but being in the end destroyed by an addictive force he has failed to comprehend or control. It is not surprising that he should suffer from the same horror and the deep despair experienced by drinkers, gamblers, drug addicts, and other compulsive neurotics who are destroyed by the very habit that helps them to bear an otherwise intolerable existence. This is, I think, one of the meanings of Elysium seen as a Bacchic frenzy.

In *The Hidden Order of Art* Anton Ehrenzweig has suggested that one of the reasons that Dionysiac elements of a dying god who may, or may not, be recreated appear so often in works of art is that it acts as a metaphor or image of the artist's own creative struggle:

Up to a point any truly creative work involves casting aside sharply crystallized modes of rational thought and image making. To this extent creativity involves self-destruction. This self-destructive attack may explain why art is so often concerned with tragedy.²

There seems little doubt that Marlowe was himself familiar with many forms of self-destructive activity—his death appears to

¹ H. J. Eysenck, *Fact and Fiction in Psychology*, 1965, p. 98 and p. 105.

² Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art*, Paladin, 1970, p. 15.

have been courted to such an extent that it was virtually self-inflicted. Yet where Faustus fails, Marlowe, I would argue, succeeded. He has given us a vision of man's terrible powers of self-destruction which does confound hell in Elysium because it controls even those extreme forces within the disciplined framework of a great work of art. It is a triumph of the creative imagination over the forces which threaten to destroy it. Yet it reminds its audience of how tenuous a hold order and vision have on the surrounding chaos. The audience resembles Faustus in that it sees presented on the stage a triumphant Bacchic frenzy offering them a vision of power and beauty which yet persuades them that they are in hell, and will never be out of it. The play reaches far beyond our orthodox certainties about the world and touches upon the compulsions which condition our lives and which it is difficult for us to understand or control. The play dramatizes the ineradicable fear that the pursuit of pleasure is never a guiltless activity and that it forces upon us an unavoidable complicity in our own destruction. We are all attended by Mephistophilis. It is for this reason that the play continues to be acted and form a normal part of our theatrical experience. It is a normal part of our experience. We are all engaged in the performance of Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*.

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