

Doctor Faustus: Death of a Bibliophile

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Immediately after signing the contract pledging his body and soul to the devil, Dr. Faustus asks Mephostophilis, “where is the place that men call Hell?” (2.1.505)¹ Mephostophilis truthfully answers Faustus’ inquiry, “Hell hath no limits” (2.1.510), but Faustus rejects this as “trifles, and meere old wives Tales” (2.1.524). Failing to recognize true information, Faustus requests sensual gratification in the form of a wife. The devil can only provide a woman devil (he cannot deal in the Christian sacrament of marriage) and Faustus is again unsatisfied. Critics of *Doctor Faustus* have been quick to underline the point: Faustus receives very little in exchange for his soul.

But few critics have noted the way in which the demon assuages Faustus’ disappointment; he does it with a gift: a book which will allow the doctor to control the weather and call up armoured guards. Faustus promises to keep the tome “as chary as my life” (2.1.551), but he is not entirely satisfied; he wants another book: “Yet faine would I have a booke wherein I might beholde al spels and incantations, that I might raise up spirits when I please” (2.1.551.01-02). Mephostophilis replies that this information is also in the book he holds in his hand, and the devil turns to the appropriate page. Frustrated, Faustus asks for yet another book that will show “al characters of planets of the heavens” (2.1.551.04-05). “Heere they are too,” Mephostophilis replies, turning the page. The scene becomes funny:

Faustus. Nay let me have one booke more, and then I have done, wherein I might see al plants, hearbes and trees that grow upon the earth.

Mephostophilis. Here they be.

Faustus. O thou art deceived.

Mephostophilis. Tut I warrant thee. *Turne to them.* (2.1.551.08-13)

Impossibly encyclopedic, this particular book itself would seem to be magic, anticipating Faustus' desires and transforming itself to fulfill them.² It shows what ever the reader wants, a magical cipher that may, in fact, be filled with blank pages on which the reader projects his desire.³ Faustus is torn between wonderment at its scope and frustration that such a book robs him of the excuse of owning two or three books instead of the one.

This remarkable scene highlights a little-recognized fact about the play: *Doctor Faustus* is as much about books—the physical objects—as knowledge and its use. More than any other English drama of the 16th century, *Doctor Faustus* revolves around the text, the reader's manipulation of it, and its manipulation of the reader. Faustus enters the stage with books in hand and leaves it with books on his mind; in between he both transforms and is transformed by the printed word. His tragedy is largely a failure to raise this relationship from physical possession and mere technique to the complex dialectic of faith that is the proper response to sacred text.

I

The book is established as the dominant object of the play in the first scene. The Chorus prologue introduces Faustus as "this the man that in his study sits" (Chorus 1.28), but the opening direction, "*Enter Faustus in his study*," suggests a walk-on entrance. Presumably he enters, or is "discovered in," the inner stage, and, over the course of his 90 line monologue, moves forward so he can command his servant Wagner to fetch the magicians Valdes and Cornelius.⁴ The location of "his study" is conveyed to the audience by the simplest of portable props: books. Faustus quotes from Aristotle (and Ramus?),⁵ Galen, Justinian, and the Bible, indicating the presence of four books.⁶ He looks for specific quotations with the asides, "*Galen come*," "*where is Justinian?*" and "*Jeromes Bible Faustus, view it well*," obvious clues to the actor to pick up the books, flip through them, and slam them shut impatiently. The A text does not allow for an inner stage, so unless a rudimentary set (say a book-laden table) is in place, the actor would have to carry his books on with him.⁷ The image of the Faustus

burdened by books would alert the largely illiterate audience to his scholar's status.

The library Faustus carries contains classical authors who represent the great academic pursuits of philosophy, medicine, and law. It also contains the Vulgate, at least the New Testament. This small collection, then, is a bringing together of the best of the classical wisdom and Christian truth. Faustus' use of this marvelous source of knowledge is revealing: he dismisses the classical authors with an abruptness which indicates that his ultimate decision to pursue magic is actually a foredrawn conclusion. His misreading of the Scriptures (Rom. 6:23, 1 John 1:8)—the one book all his audience would recognize⁸—would have been clear to the audience if the other logical errors⁹ of the soliloquy proved too obscure.¹⁰

This flippant disregard for the contents of his books contrasts with Faustus' love of books as physical objects, a love first revealed us near the end of his opening monologue¹¹ when he turns to what the Good Angel calls "that damned booke" (1.1.97). Putting aside the Bible, he picks up the fifth and last book and declares

These Metaphisicks of Magitians,
And Negromantick bookes are heavenly.
Lines, Circles, Signes, Letters, and Characters,
I these are those that *Faustus* most desires.
O what a world of profite and delight,
Of power, of honour, and omnipotence,
Is promised to the Studious Artizan?
(1.1.75-82)

The "heavenly" is ironic, and the speed with which the first books were dismissed is emphasized by the time spent on this particular tome.¹² It is significant that he does not, as he did with the previous books, quote its content. It captivates his imagination because of its nature as a *physical* object.¹³ Book in hand, Faustus lists the things that he will accomplish once he is indoctrinated in the black arts: he will command the elements of nature themselves. Owning the right book is, for Faustus, synonymous with immediate knowledge and, therefore, power.

When Valdes and Cornelius learn of Faustus' plan to pursue magic, they tell him that "these bookes, thy wit, and our experience, / Shall

make all Nations to Canonize us" (1.1.146-47). "*These bookes*" presumably refer to volumes that Valdes and his partner carry. Wit and experience, however, end up having little to do with the process of becoming a magician. The magicians, like Faustus, jump from physical possession of the books to omnipotence. Valdes summarizes the necessary apprenticeship in five lines:

Then hast thee to some solitary Grove,
And beare wise *Bacons*, and *Abanus* workes,
The *Hebrew* Psalter, and new Testament;
And whatsoever else is requisite,
We will informe thee e'er our conference cease.
(1.1.180-84)

Cornelius has to remind Valdes that Faustus must be instructed in certain rudiments before he can begin, but this tutelage takes only one evening, excluding the time that Faustus allots for dinner (1.1.190). That same night, Faustus calls up Mephostophilis.¹⁴ Significantly, Valdes proposes four volumes, the number of books Faustus has just rejected. *This* library, however, will not be dismissed; rather, it will be consulted with precision for "names of holy Saints, / Figures of every adjunct to the heavens, / And Characters of Signes" (1.3.238-40) when Faustus carries them on stage in 1.3.

By the end of Act 1, then, we may have seen as many as nine books carried about the stage: Faustus' magic book and the four he rejects, as well as Valdes' four. The image of the scholar carrying books has appeared four times: at Faustus' entrance in 1.1 and 1.3, and in the persons of Valdes and Cornelius. In 2.1 Mephostophilis gives Faustus the miraculously complete book of spells and arcane facts.

In 2.2 the devils repeat the pattern of distracting Faustus from true knowledge with the gift of books. Faustus demands from Mephostophilis the name of the creator of the universe. The devil cannot repeat it, and Faustus perceives that he has been cheated. He calls on Christ to save his distressed soul, but his prayer is cut short by the appearance of Lucifer and Beelzebub, who frighten Faustus into a paradoxical demonic repentance: "*Faustus* vowses never to looke to heaven / Never to name God, or to pray to him, / To burne his Scriptures" (2.2.648-50). The latter promise is telling: Faustus naively

believes that the destruction of physical text will effect the scope of Christian faith. Lucifer now distracts Faustus with a Spenserian parade of the Seven Deadly Sins (including Envy, who would have all books burned because he cannot read) and then makes Faustus the gift of a book: "peruse this booke, and view it throughly, / And thou shalt turne thy selfe into what shape thou wilt" (2.2.717-18). Faustus repeats the words of thanks he gave to Mephostophilis—"This will I keepe as chary as my life" (2.2.719)—and he does put the information in this book to use. Later in the play he will change his body so that he can be dismembered and decapitated without harm, and so he can eat entire cartloads of hay.¹⁵

This last book confirms Faustus in the devil's way until near the end of the play. But the image of the scholar and his books is kept before us: when Faustus flies to Rome with Mephostophilis to peep at the Papal court, he ironically condemns the Cardinal's "superstitious Bookes" (3.1.893). After he and the devil play their sophomoric tricks on the Pope, the Friars enter with bell, book, and candle to curse their unseen tormentors. Faustus makes fun of the curse: "Bell, Booke, and Candle; Candle, Booke, and Bell, / Forward and backward, to curse *Faustus* to hell" (3.2.1074-75). And yet when Mephostophilis gave Faustus the first magic book, the devil was himself dressed as a Friar. We must note, if Faustus does not, this image of the ostensible holy man carrying the superstitious book, and, as John Cutts points out, this image is in fact a mirror of Faustus himself.¹⁶

II

These props, images, and references raise two points. The first is the fallacy William Barrett called the illusion of technique: the assumption that the application of specific processes to any appropriate realm of the human experience will create consistent, predictable results.¹⁷ What Faustus desires is the ultimate self-help book—a book that will make him omnipotent and omniscient in ten easy lessons.

This fallacy is graphically illustrated for us in the clown scenes. Robin steals one of Faustus' conjuring books, and his friend Dick chides his presumption: "'Snayles, what hast thou got there, a book?

why thou canst not tell ne're a word on't" (2.3.730-31). But Robin can spell out the sounds of the words if he takes the time to break them down by letters: "*A per se, a, t. h. e. the: o per se, o, demy orgon, gorgon*" (2.3.727-28). Bare literacy turns out to be sufficient to call up Mephostophilis himself, whose anger is testament to the power of even Robin's spells:

You Princely Legions of infernall Rule,
How am I vexed by these villaines Charmes?
From *Constantinople* have they brought me now,
Onely for the pleasure of these damned slaves.
(3.3.1116-19)

With one book—not even the four Faustus is told to use—a clown can command supernatural forces; with the right book, wisdom and experience are unnecessary.

The second point is more complex. At the play's opening Faustus held books that represented the best of Western civilization, but he edited them to suit his own ends, transforming their texts in a way that undercut their wisdom and denied their truths. He changed them to satisfy his immediate wants, employing false technique to justify his desire for more "practical" information, pure technique, symbolized for him by the physical object of the book itself. The book Mephostophilis gave him worked at a more sophisticated level: it changed itself to satisfy its reader's desires; it provided technique, any technique, to keep its reader enthralled. Finally, Lucifer's book completed the circle: it changed the reader; the final self-help book, it provided the techniques Faustus had been seeking. The reader manipulated the text; the text manipulated itself; the text manipulated the reader.

III

In the last act of the play, technique and transformation, book and scholar come together. When Faustus, on his last evening, begins to contemplate his imminent damnation, he phrases his regret in terms of books: "Though my heart pant and quiver to remember that I have been a student here these thirty yeares, O would I had never seene

Wittenberg, never read book" (5.2.1841-42). But *reading* too much has never been his problem. Before beginning his career as a magician, Faustus dreamt of conjuring spirits who would resolve him "of all ambiguities" by reading him "strange Philosophy," presumably from other occult books that he would no longer have to read himself, merely own. And he managed to ignore the message written in his own blood—"Homo fuge!" (2.1.470)—when he was signing the contract with Mephostophilis.¹⁸ It is his predisposition not to read, but merely to possess, that has led him to this predicament.

Faustus trusts the book *as object*, and Mephostophilis exploits this devotion in his final conversation with Faustus. The devil has to ensure that Faustus' despair is complete so that he will not attempt, or will fail at, any repentance. Mephostophilis does this by talking about books:

I doe confesse it *Faustus*, and rejoyce;
 'Twas I, that when thou wer't i'the way of heaven,
 Damb'd up thy passage; when thou took'st the booke,
 To view the Scriptures, then I turn'd the leaves
 And led thine eye.
 What, weep'st thou? 'tis too late, despaire, farewell,
 Fooles that will laugh on earth, must weepe in hell.
 (5.2.1885-91)

This is the one comment that is sure to break the man: to tell him that he has been betrayed by that which he most covets.

In the play's closing monologue, Faustus returns to the blend of classical and Christian wisdom that he rejected in the first scene of the play. He quotes Ovid and Pythagoras; he sees Christ's blood streaming in the firmament, but he is unable to reach the half a drop that would save him. The knowledge he rejected is no longer open to him; he cannot transform it now to suit his ends. Nor can he transform his situation—the text of his final hour on earth. He wishes

That time may cease, and midnight never come.
 Faire natures eye, rise, rise againe and make
 Perpetuall day: or let this houre be but
 A yeare, a month, a weeke, a naturall day,
 That *Faustus* may repent, and save his soule.
 (5.2.1930-34)

He asks that his damnation last a thousand years, a hundred thousand, so long as it is not eternal (5.2.1961-63). Finally, he wishes to transform himself:

This soule should flie from me, and I be chang'd
Unto some brutish beast.
All beasts are happy, for when they die
Their soules are soone dissolv'd in elements,
But mine must live still to be plagu'd in hell.
(5.2.1967-71)

"O soule be chang'd into little water drops, / And fall into the Ocean, ne're be found" (5.2.1977-78). But all three levels of transformation now fail. All technique now proves illusory; there are no recipes for the faith he needs. The thunder sounds and the devils enter.

Faustus has not grasped the difference between the possession of books and knowledge, between technique and the transformation of faith. But Marlowe provides us with the character of the Old Man to make the point clear. On the two occasions when Faustus calls up the ghost of Helen of Troy, the Old Man comes forward to deliver a sermon of Christian truth. The Old Man encourages Faustus to repent, explains the eternal suffering of hell, and predicts God's mercy:

I see an Angell hover ore thy head,
And with a vyoll full of pretious grace,
Offers to poure the same into thy soule,
Then call for mercy, and avoyd despaire.
(5.1.1730-34)

This angel is not a "spirit" visible to the audience, such as the form of Helen that Faustus lies with; it is a Christian perception of the unity of things expressed, necessarily, in metaphor, a metaphor inspired by faith. The Old Man is confident that this faith shall triumph over "vile hel," just as the truth of the Scriptures Faustus pledged to burn will triumph over the destruction of the physical text. The Old Man carries no book; unlike the magician or superstitious Catholic, his faith is not dependent upon the object. Faith cannot be manufactured through technique; it can only be realized in the reader as the interior—not physical—self is transformed by the sacred text.

Faustus never comes to this realization. He transformed the text and was in turn transformed himself, into a grotesquerie, an eater of hay, a prankster, a damned man. Yet in his very last moments, he clings to the illusion of technique and tries a final gambit. In preparation for death, Faustus had willed to his servant Wagner his "wealth, his house, his goods, and store of golden plate; besides two thousand duckets ready coin'd" (5.1.1675-76), everything but his books. This is a marked departure from the *Faustbook* in which Faustus passes his books on to Wagner with the caveat "that thou wouldst not let them bee common, but vse them for thine owne pleasure, and studie carefully in them."¹⁹ Now, as the devils approach, he cries out his last desperate words: "Tle burne my bookes; ah *Mephostophilis*" (5.2.1982). The ultimate offering, his dearest possessions, and in Faustus' mind the source of his predicament. But burning the books will no more save Faustus than burning the Scriptures will destroy the faith of Christians like the Old Man; all it will do is turn his study, the room he sought to escape through magic, into a miniature inferno, a preview of his ultimate destination.²⁰ In the end, the bibliophile is carted off to hell and the books remain. This last desperate technique has failed, and Faustus' final transformation will last forever.

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NOTES

¹All references to the text cite *The Complete Plays*, ed. Fredson Bowers, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), vol. 2.

²This is Marlowe's invention. In the *English Faustbook* Mephostophilis merely gives Faustus a book "of all maner of diuelish and enchanted artes": P. M. Palmer and R. P. More, eds., *The Sources of the Faust Tradition from Simon Magus to Lessing* (New York: Oxford UP, 1936) 148.

³John P. Cutts misreads this passage and posits several books that Faustus later rejects as "slender trifles": *The Left Hand of God* (Haddonfield, N. J.: Haddonfield, 1973) 114; Harry Levin makes a similar error and interprets Faustus' "O thou art deceiued" as an exclamation of despair at having sold his soul so cheap: *The Overreacher* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1952) 118. The stage direction "turn to them" (my emphasis) must refer to the plural subjects of Faustus' interest, not the singular "a [or one] book" Faustus desires. To interpret Faustus'

final comment as despair instead of delighted incredulity ignores his reaction to books throughout the play.

⁴H. W. Matalene III argues that the actor playing chorus—possibly the same actor who plays Wagner—remains on stage for the first speech: "Marlowe's *Faustus* and the Comforts of Academicism," *English Literary History* 39 (1972): 501-02.

⁵Critics who have pursued the Petrus Ramus reading of the "*Bene dissere est finis logices*" quotation include Michael Hattaway, "The Theology of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*," *Renaissance Drama* ns 3 (1970): 56; and A. N. Okerlund, "The Intellectual Folly of Dr. Faustus," *Studies in Philology* 74 (1977): 262-63.

⁶Even if we accept the Ramus reading of "*bene dissere . . .*," the line is uttered by Faustus as he contemplates the "*Analitikes*," and is presumably a memorized tag; he does not hold a book of Ramus' teachings.

⁷Matalene 503.

⁸R. W. Ingram, "'Pride in Learning goeth before a fall': Dr. Faustus' opening soliloquy," *Mosaic* 13.1 (1979): 73.

⁹Okerlund has the best short analysis of the logic mistakes in the opening soliloquy: 264-65.

¹⁰Hattaway reminds us that the scriptural argument concerning everlasting death that Faustus truncates was repeated in the Homilies read every Sunday throughout England: 57.

¹¹And perhaps also by his name. Levin points out that one of the earliest printers bore the name Johann Fust: 109.

¹²Wilbur Sanders, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968) 225.

¹³Ironically, the book would almost certainly look little different from the ones rejected: although *Henslowe's Papers* list such *Faustus* props as "Hell mought," "the sittie of Rome," and "dragon in fostes," no "magic book" is mentioned: Walter W. Greg, ed., *Henslowe's Papers* (London: A. H. Bullen, 1907) 116, 118. Henslowe does, however, list books he has purchased for the theatre (see, for example, 121); presumably the books the actors carry on stage would have been snatched from this collection.

¹⁴Roy Eriksen argues that the conference with Valdes and Cornelius takes place in the morning, and by "dinner" Faustus means lunch: "What resting place is this? Aspects of Time and Place in *Doctor Faustus* (1616)," *Renaissance Drama* ns 16 (1985): 55. But Faustus' last comment of the scene, "For e're I sleep . . . This night I'll conjure" (1.1.192-93), is suggestive of the more thematically appropriate evening setting.

¹⁵In the *Faustbook*, Faustus uses this power immediately: "hee looking vpon [Lucifer's book], straight waies changed himselfe into a Hog, then into a Worme, then into a Dragon, and finding this for his purpose, it liked him well." Palmer 165.

¹⁶Cutts 128.

¹⁷See his book, *The Illusion of Technique* (Garden City, N. J.: Anchor, 1978).

¹⁸Douglas Cole, *Suffering and Evil in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1962) 227.

¹⁹Palmer 222.

²⁰In "'Infinite Riches in a Little Room': Closure and Enclosure in Marlowe," *Two Renaissance Mythmakers*, ed. Alvin Kernan (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1977), Majorie Garber describes Faustus' conjuring circle as the "encapsulating artifact" of the play (17), but surely his study is the work's dominant image of confinement. He begins his career in it, and after reaching a peak of circling the Earth "Even to the height of *Primum Mobile*," he spirals back to it through a series of ever-diminishing spaces: Europe, the Pope's palace, the Emperor's court, the Duke's estate, and finally the study again.