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### Authors

Friedenreich, K  
Gill, R  
Kuriyama, CB  
et al.

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# The Dialectic of Despair in *Doctor Faustus*

KING-KOK CHEUNG

Many critics have called attention to the connection between Faustus's despair and his damnation. Some see despair as the justification of his damnation, others as but a sign of his damnation. The first view insists upon the responsibility and the perversity of the sinner: despair is an evil choice, an obdurate denial of divine mercy. The second view takes for granted the sinfulness of despair, but underlines its inevitable consequence: despair, being a state of mind proper to the reprobate, will necessarily lead to damnation.<sup>1</sup> Both of these views underestimate the dramatic and tragic potential of despair in the play. I wish to suggest that despair and salvational possibility in *Doctor Faustus* are dialectical rather than antithetical, that Faustus's despair, in tormenting him and in evoking the alternative of repentance, works dialectically to keep alive the possibility of salvation.

To insist on seeing Marlowe's treatment of Christian ideas as wholly believing or as wholly ironic, as many critics have done, is to bury evidence on the other side, and both views ignore a third, existential, view which is beyond religion and blasphemy. By "existential" I mean simply a view which proves itself in existence, regardless of an individual's persuasions, though Kierkegaard's notion of despair has admittedly influenced my reading of Marlowe's play. According to Kierkegaard, despair is a condition of being, issuing from the timeless

clash between possibility and necessity, between human immortal longings and the fact of mortality. However, because such despair is grounded in the love of life on earth, I believe it cannot, *pace* Kierkegaard, be cured through Christian faith. Hence Faustus sickens unto death despite the nagging possibility of religious salvation. First I will discuss how the dialectic of religious despair operates in the play, and then speculate on why Faustus persists in despair notwithstanding the dialectic.

Since despair has traditionally denoted the despair of salvation, the possibility of salvation presents itself every time the sinner despairs. M. M. Mahood, who feels that "despair dominates the play, and that the word itself recurs with a gloomy, tolling insistence,"<sup>2</sup> fails to notice that this word always appears in conjunction with the possibility of salvation, that despair never tolls without a concomitant ring of hope, that despair keeps the play alive with suspense and tension. Rather than setting the seal on damnation, despair keeps the lines open for repentance and salvation.

Initially Marlowe presents Faustus as an autonomous individual who willfully indulges in self-delusion and who incurs his own damnation through despair. Faustus reveals his proclivity for self-deception when he reads two bleak verses from Jerome's Bible. The first verse threatens: "The reward of sin is death" (i.40).<sup>3</sup> The threat becomes personal in the second verse: "if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and there's no truth in us" (i.41-43). Many critics have noticed that Faustus overlooks the complementary verse in the Bible which promises salvation to those who confess their sins and which therefore safeguards against despair. Instead he jumps to the conclusion that all "must die an everlasting death" (i.45). For one as erudite as Faustus, the failure to notice the hopeful qualification seems deliberate.

Faustus's damnation attests no more to predestination than to self-determination. In his own words,

Now, Faustus, must  
Thou needs be damn'd, and canst thou not be sav'd.  
What boots it then to think of God or heaven?  
Away with such vain fancies, and despair;  
Despair in God, and trust in Beelzebub.

Now go not backward; no, Faustus, be resolute.  
(v.1-6)

Commenting on this passage, Muriel C. Bradbrook remarks: "If it takes so many negatives to stop Faustus's repentance there must be very strong forces working for it." After making this claim for Faustus's chance of salvation, however, Bradbrook undercuts her own claim by following medieval lore in calling despair "the means by which the devils, from the very beginning, secure Faustus's soul, making him incapable of repentance, even though he wills with all his might to repent."<sup>4</sup> Such a definition of despair renders Faustus's spiritual struggle illusory and the periodic appearance of the good and bad angels a meaningless ritual. The reverse of Bradbrook's statement seems to me more plausible: although Faustus wills with all his might to forsake God in favor of the Devil, his despair, in tormenting him and in evoking the alternative of repentance, works dialectically to keep alive the possibility of salvation.

Despair summons God despite itself; no sooner has Faustus decided to banish the "vain fancies" than despair evokes one—the "God" in "Despair in God." Religious despair, though a professed rejection of God, cannot take place in the absence of the divine object of despair.<sup>5</sup> Because despair entails the thought of God, it will not leave Faustus in peace; it puts him in thrall to Christianity and unsettles him with godly thoughts. However, Faustus imputes his mental perturbations to his irresoluteness, which he tries to overcome by confirming himself in sin. Thus, rather than being "the means by which the devils . . . [make] him incapable of repentance," as Bradbrook suggests, despair elicits in Faustus thoughts of heaven, and therefore must be exorcised through greater commitment to sin.

Immediately after Faustus has pronounced his own damnation, exhorting himself to be "resolute" in his evil ways, an inner voice interjects to shake his determination: "Why waver'st thou? O, something soundeth in mine ears, / 'Abjure this magic, turn to God again!" (v.7-8). Whenever Faustus despairs, the tantalizing possibility of salvation hovers over him. Contrary to Arieih Sach's contention that the play's situation "by its very nature cannot be suspenseful, since Faustus's despair is such as to make his reprobation a foregone conclusion,"<sup>6</sup> the play's power lies in its painful suspense which can be experienced even

flesh that disrupts his sensuous enjoyment. Whereas despair is hardly known to Chapman's Bussy D'ambois, Tournear's Vindici, or Marlowe's own Tamburlaine, all of whom gloat over their crimes, it plagues Faustus recurrently. The despair which puts Faustus above other desperadoes not only stands in the way of his repentance, but also cheats him of sinful pleasure. Because of his deep conviction of sin, Faustus dares not hope for divine mercy. Because of his fear of damnation, his earthly joys are compromised. Whereas moral insensitivity arms the other daredevils for sinful exploits and allows them to wallow in forbidden pleasures, Faustus's despair exacts its own penance and will not leave him even to his buffoonery. Not surprisingly, Frederick S. Boas suspects Marlowe of shortchanging Faustus: "Had Marlowe vouchsafed us a sight of Faustus in his sinful pleasures it would have been a fitter prelude to his fast approaching doom."<sup>9</sup> Had Marlowe granted us such a sight, however, he would have held his tragedy at the level of a morality, meting out simple poetic justice. With incisive irony, Marlowe shows that the rebel who defies the Christian God is nevertheless too steeped in Christianity to relish the fruit of sin. The hair shirt of despair pricks and chafes; even Faustus's greatest pleasure is no more than an anodyne. He admits that he would have committed suicide "Had not sweet pleasure conquer'd deep despair" (vi.25).

Despair and repentance are again entertained together in the Old Man episode. Moved by the Old Man, Faustus agrees to ponder his sin:

I do repent, and yet I do despair;  
Hell strives with grace for conquest in my breast.  
What shall I do to shun the snares of death?  
(xviii.71-73)

Although Faustus again sees repentance and despair as antithetical, he cannot deliberate on one without invoking the other, just as he cannot contemplate hell without reflecting on grace. Rather than being mutually exclusive, despair and repentance vie with each other in Faustus's spiritual struggle. The more painfully he is torn between despair and repentance, the more vivid becomes the possibility that he may yet be saved. To evade the painful spiritual struggle, Faustus again diverts himself with bodily pleasure, begging Mephistophilis to

by an audience that knows the outcome. Despite his despair, or rather because of it, Faustus's spiritual welfare remains in doubt till the final scene.

Before going to the final scene, let me pause for a moment over the comic scenes which continue to puzzle critics. John D. Jump, for instance, notes the discrepancy "between the tragic Faustus, fluctuating between arrogance and remorse, whom Marlowe portrays, and the jaunty anti-papist wonder-worker and court entertainer who bears Faustus's name in the comic scenes."<sup>7</sup> The easiest solution is to say that these scenes are not written by Marlowe. There is, however, a better way to reconcile these scenes with the rest of the play, a way which deepens the tragedy. Disappointed by his pact with the Devil and despairing of salvation, Faustus anesthetizes himself by turning to what Kierkegaard calls "Philistinism," which "tranquilizes itself in the trivial."<sup>8</sup>

Faustus's consciousness of his sorry plight amid trivial diversions is made obvious when he interrupts his practical joke on the horse-courser with the following soliloquy:

What art thou, Faustus, but a man condemn'd to die?  
Thy fatal time draws to a final end;  
Despair doth drive distrust into my thoughts.  
Confound these passions with a quiet sleep.  
Tush, Christ did call the thief upon the cross;  
Then rest thee, Faustus, quiet in conceit.  
(xv.21-26).

While Faustus may be compounding his sin by taking the good thief as a sign that last-minute repentance is acceptable, that the sinner can wait, the theological reference does show that Faustus still can entertain hopes of salvation. His self-imperatives to "Confound these passions with a quiet sleep," to "rest . . . quiet in conceit," betray his spiritual restlessness and disquiet. Since the throes of despair beget thoughts of salvation, the times when Faustus despairs are the times when he seems most capable of breaking through to God.

If Faustus could have abandoned himself completely, rejecting the desirability of salvation, then at least he would have been able to "live in all voluptuousness" (iii.94) during his twenty-four years on earth. But the possibility of salvation continues to be a thorn in Faustus's

of that God, as Constance Brown Kuriyama suggests.<sup>12</sup> When an inner voice bids Faustus to "Abjure this magic, turn to God again" (v. 7-8), his instinct responds: "To God? He loves thee not" (l. 9). When his arm reveals the words "*Homo Fuge*," all Faustus can think of is "Whither should I fly? / If unto God, he'll throw me down to hell" (v. 77-78).

Faustus turns to Mephistophilis for help, only to double his fear gradually, for Faustus can hardly distinguish God from the Devil at the end. Indeed, the peculiar horror of the last scene is Faustus's hysterical conflation of the two:

Ah, my Christ!—  
 Rend not my heart for naming of 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.  
 Mountains and hills, come, come, and fall on me,  
 And hide me from the heavy wrath of God!  
 (xix.147-153)

The direct address and the direct entreaty in the first two lines suggest that it is Christ who rends Faustus's heart—at least till we reach the next line in which Lucifer emerges as the tormentor. However, as soon as Christ is succeeded by Lucifer, the fierce archfiend merges with the fierce God: "O, spare me, Lucifer! . . . and see where God / Stretcheth out his arm and bends his ireful brows." Now beseeching God, now Lucifer, Faustus recoils as much from the King of Heaven as from the Prince of Hell.

The scene reveals Faustus's metaphysical bondage. In a Christian society, the very word despair, despite its ostentatious apostate implications, tacitly acknowledges the existence of God. Faustus's despair implicates him in the very context from which he tries to extricate himself. Despair leads inevitably to his damnation, not so much in the ways orthodox critics suggest as because despair binds him to the belief in heaven and hell then prevalent, according to which he is damned. The Good and Bad Angels are likewise voices of the social conscience which readily labels people as good or bad. While refusing to conform to social norms, Faustus nevertheless has internalized the judgement of society and must regard himself negatively as a "spirit." He cannot

summon Helen, "whose sweet embraces may extinguish clear / Those thoughts that do dissuade me from my vow / And keep mine oath I made to Lucifer" (xviii.94-96). These lines give the impression that it is just as difficult to follow Lucifer faithfully as to follow God. Far from being a sin "which would infallibly guide the soul to its infernal destination," as Sachs suggests,<sup>10</sup> Faustus's despair makes it hard for Faustus to go to hell.

But why does Faustus work so hard to go to hell despite the dialectical workings of despair? I submit that Faustus's theological despair has its root in existential despair, which is already apparent at the beginning of the play when Faustus complains that for all his natural knowledge,

Yet art thou still but Faustus, and a man.  
 Couldst thou make men to live eternally  
 Or being dead raise them to life again,  
 Then this profession were to be esteem'd.  
 (i.23-26)

This passage has often divided critics. It suggests guilty presumption to some and heroic aspiration to others, eliciting both disapproval and admiration. But there is a third way to read this passage, and that is to see it simply as an expression of the timeless longing to exceed human confinement, to bypass death, to be immortal. Faustus does not crave eternity (which contains and involves God-in-Heaven) but immortality, which is "deathless life on this earth," as Hannah Arendt puts it.<sup>11</sup> At the height of his spiritual struggle, rather than seeking the means to enter heaven, Faustus asks himself, "what shall I do to shun the snares of death?" Just as the thought of overcoming death has driven him to black magic at the outset, so he yearns for immortality to his last day, as evident in his wistful plea to Helen—"make me immortal with a kiss" (xviii.101). The erotic energy which runs through this memorable line is charged with the woe and wonder of human life.

To immortalize mortals is a desperate enterprise. The play resounds with the constant collision of possibility and necessity. Despite his desire for unlimited freedom, Faustus seems constrained, from the beginning, by foreknowledge of his damnation and of God's hatred. His rejection of God is qualified or even prompted by an uncontrollable fear

avoid the Christian frame of reference; he cannot "shun the snares" of Christianity.

In his anguish, Faustus resigns himself to "despair and die" (xviii.56). But even this last hope, this desire to be done with it all, this defiant refusal to be bound by the fetters of religion, is laden with conventional religious significance, so that to die takes on the meaning of to "die an everlasting death." "Despair and die" epitomizes the existential condition of "no exit" in *Doctor Faustus*.

While focusing on one theme inevitably does some injustice to the play as a whole, exploring Marlowe's treatment of despair helps to reveal the play's divergent possibilities. Tragedy constantly frustrates our longing for a definite answer,<sup>13</sup> our persistent desire to know "What means this show." This tragedy confronts us with warring possibilities which qualify doctrinal prescriptions and shake our reasoning. *Doctor Faustus* is tragic not so much because the hero is painfully suspended between good and evil, fate and freedom, as because these opposing categories blur and blend in the play. Despair, an oft-denounced sin, is seen as the strongest force which, for better or for worse, binds Faustus to Christianity, because despair, viewed by many as a sign of inevitable damnation, constantly teases the sinner with the possibility of salvation. Faustus's theological despair may finally be seen as concealing an existential despair, with his particular dilemma reflecting the human predicament. To see the play steadily and to see it whole, one must embrace all these paradoxes, lest one lapse into the same wishful thinking and commit the same foolish sin as Faustus, who would invoke evil spirits to "Resolve . . . all ambiguities."

#### NOTES

1. For the first view see Lily B. Campbell, "Doctor Faustus: A Case of Conscience," *PMLA*, 67 (1952), 219-239; Gerald Cox, "Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and 'Sin against the Holy Ghost,'" *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 36 (1973), 119-137; Paul H. Koeber, *Christopher Marlowe: A Study of His Thought, Learning, and Character* (Chapel Hill, N. C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1946), pp. 104-119; John G. McCloskey, "The Theme of Despair in Marlowe's *Faustus*," *College English*, 4 (1942), 110-113; M. M. Mahood, *Poetry and Humanism* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1950), pp. 64-74. For the second view see Helen Gardner, "Milton's 'Satan' and the Theme of Damnation in Elizabethan Tragedy," *English Studies*, 1 (1948), 46-66; Arieh Sachs, "The Religious Despair of Doctor Faustus," *Journal of English and*

*Germanic Philology*, 63 (1964), 625-647; Joseph Westlund, "The Orthodox Christian Framework of Marlowe's *Faustus*," *SEL*, 3 (1963), 190-205.

2. *Poetry and Humanism*, p. 67.
3. Citations of Marlowe's play are from *Doctor Faustus*, ed. John D. Jump (London: Methuen, 1965). I am aware of the recent critical preference for the A-text (see Fredson Bowers, "Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*: The 1602 Additions," *Studies in Bibliography*, 26 [1973], 1-18; Constance Brown Kuriyama, "Dr. Greg and *Doctor Faustus*: The Supposed Originality of the 1616 Text," *English Literary Renaissance*, 5 [1975], 171-197), but the parts of the play which form the basis of my argument are mostly those which appear in both the 1604 and 1616 editions.
4. *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), p. 151.
5. C. L. Barber notes the irony in the characters' use of religious terms such as "heaven," "blest," "canonize" to describe magic: "In repeatedly using such expressions, which often 'come naturally' in the colloquial language of a Christian society, the rebels seem to stumble uncannily upon words which condemn them by the logic of a situation larger than they are." ("The Form of Faustus' Fortunes Good or Bad," *Tulane Drama Review*, 8 [1964], 99.) Nowhere is such recurrent lapse more apparent than in Faustus's despair.
6. "The Religious Despair of Doctor Faustus," 638.
7. Introduction, *Doctor Faustus*, p. 38.
8. *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (1941; rpt. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 174.
9. *Christopher Marlowe: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), p. 216.
10. "The Religious Despair of Doctor Faustus," 628.
11. *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 18.
12. Kuriyama uses Erik Erikson's concept of negative identity to show how "Marlowe can neither conceive of nor define a wholesome rebellion; to him the values, language, and dramatic conventions of self-condemnation are inescapable, yet intolerable." (*Hammer Or Anvil* [New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1980], p. 130.)
13. Stephen Booth convincingly argues the elusiveness of tragedy in *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Indefinition, and Tragedy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 79-118.

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