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CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN TRADITION IN MARLOWE'S *DOCTOR FAUSTUS*

By T. McALINDON

God is now conceived of as something outside man and man's handiwork, and it follows that it must be idolatry to worship that which Phidias and Scopas made . . . Night will fall upon man's wisdom now that man has been taught that he is nothing. He had discovered, or half-discovered, that the world is round and one of many like it, but now he must believe that the sky is but a tent spread above a level floor, and that he may be stirred into a frenzy of anxiety and so to moral transformation, blot out the knowledge or half-knowledge that he has lived many times, and think that all eternity depends upon a moment's decision.—Yeats, *A Vision*

IN RECENT YEARS, particularly since W. W. Greg observed that the famous address to Helen of Troy is not, as it seems, a simple hymn in praise of a classical heroine and of classical beauty,¹ critical attention has been increasingly directed towards Marlowe's deliberately ironic detachment from the hero of *Dr. Faustus* and towards his almost complete acceptance (as far as the play is concerned) of an orthodox religious interpretation of the magician's behavior. The validity of this approach may be demonstrated still further by an examination of the function of classical mythology in the tragedy. The irony implicit in the Helen-passage is the culmination of an irony which underlies all the mythological elements in the play. Further, this irony originates in accepted theological attitudes to the classical gods and their fables and serves to emphasize a spiritual evaluation of the ambitions and passions which destroy the erring theologian of Wittenberg. Basically, mythology and magic are conceived in *Dr. Faustus* as pseudo-divinity. They are the matter contained in the forbidden books to which Faustus turns when he rejects the book of God: "the secrets of astronomy" are "Graven in the book of Jove's high firmament" and the magician inevitably seeks "to scale Olympus' top" (Chorus I, 2-4).² The use of classical mythology in *Dr. Faustus*, then, may be seen as distinct from that in Marlowe's other plays. It does more than serve the neutral and typically Renaissance purpose of aesthetic intensification and metaphoric extension. It has a dramatic role and, with magic, acts as the "heavenly" illusion which lures Faustus into Hell.

The manner in which Faustus rejects divinity illuminates the nature and function of mythology as conceived by the dramatist. The first indication that the overt and simple judgements of the prologue are not intended merely to satisfy censorship, and that orthodox religious doctrine will be vindicated at the level of dramatic suggestion, is to be found in Faustus' two quotations from the New Testament and the conclusions which he draws from them (i.39-47). It has been pointed out that I John ix completely reverses the drift of the previous verse, quoted by Faustus;³ and the same objection must be made to his choice of Rom. vi.23. An unbiassed look at the immediate contexts of the two quotations would have produced little evidence for his assertion that Christian theology was "hard" (i.40), "unpleasant, harsh, contemptible and vile" (i.108), and none at all for his belief that it led logically to a despairing consciousness of sin and a fatalistic acceptance of everlasting death (i.43-46). Indeed, John's first epistle and (particularly) Paul's letter to the Romans are, from beginning to end, singularly ardent expositions of the doctrines of grace and redemption. The sinfulness of all mankind is clearly stressed, but this is set against Christ's "ransoming blood" (Rom. iii.25 and cf. I John v.5-8),⁴ where its acknowledged universality emphasizes the immensity of God's mercy. Faustus, too, could have chosen more relevant admonitions from the two epistles: Paul's vivid characterization of the heathens who, fantastic in their imaginations and blind in their hearts, exchanged the glory of an imperishable God for man-made images (Rom. i.18-32); and the last sentence of John's brief letter: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (I John v.21).

This perverse use of Jerome's bible—supposedly the result of an attempt to "view it well"

¹ "The Damnation of Faustus," *MLR*, xli (1946), 105-106.

² The edition used is that of J. D. Jump, *Revels Plays*, London, 1962.

³ J. B. Steane, *Marlowe: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, Eng., 1964), p. 159.

⁴ It is this image of redemption which Faustus recalls before he dies: "yet for Christ's sake, whose blood hath ransomed me . . ." (xix.167).

(i.38)—has all the appearance of the devil “quoting scripture.” More precisely, it reminds us that in the mythos of ascetical theology gross misinterpretation and misapplication of biblical passages was a favourite device of the devil for ensnaring souls who have advanced in the spiritual life.⁶ Although Mephostophilis has not yet appeared on the scene our suspicion regarding Faustus’ error here is perfectly justified. Marlowe reverts at two points towards the end of the play to this original false image of theology and defines its nature and origin. The Old Man warns Faustus against stubborn perseverance in sin and reminds him of the pains of Hell, but adds to this admonition a qualification whose wording recalls the early rejection of theology and suggests that Faustus was led to attribute to the biblical rebukes a character quite the reverse of their authors’ intention:

If this my exhortation
Seems harsh and all unpleasant; let it not,
For, gentle son, I speak it not in wrath
Or envy of thee, but in tender love
And pity of thy future misery;
And so have hope that this my kind rebuke,
Checking thy body, may amend thy soul.
(xviii.48–54)

Later, Mephostophilis gloatingly admits that it was he who engineered that first intellectual confusion and the consequent disastrous choice.⁶

I do confess it, Faustus, and rejoice.
’Twas I that, when thou wert i’ the way to heaven,
Damm’d up thy passage; when thou took’st the book
To view the scriptures, then I turn’d the leaves
And led thine eye. (xix.92–96)

For Faustus this first misinterpretation of divinity is the logical beginning of the end, the gateway into a world of false appearances. In rejecting theology he does not simply choose diablerie; rather he embraces the devil’s most seductive manifestations, magic and mythology. Heavenly has come to seem hellish (equivalent to envy, cruelty, and despair); and now the old gods and magic serve to make hellish seem heavenly, by providing new rites, gratifying self-esteem, and offering satisfactions which are readily perceptible to the senses. One of the main functions of mythological matter is to suggest that the new ethic is the reverse of “hard,” “unpleasant, harsh, contemptible and vile.”

In Christian apologetics and theology (more obviously in Christian myth and legend) idolatry and magic had always been held the most dan-

gerous (because the most alluring and widespread) of all the shapes which Satan assumed in his envious efforts to pervert mankind; and it is almost impossible to find in patristic or medieval religious literature a discussion of one which does not involve the other. The association is traditional and is found in the Old Testament.⁷ It was given most memorable and influential expression in the apocryphal *Book of Enoch*, a work well known to early Christians. According to *Enoch* magic and false gods were a twin birth, simultaneously created in a context of pride, rebellion, and lust: the fallen angels who had revolted against God were filled with desire for the daughters of men, begot giants upon them, taught men magic and passed themselves off as gods.⁸ In patristic and medieval theology the gods *qua* gods were naturally regarded as pure fiction; as demons they were real in one way or another. The “divinity” of mythological figures, it was taught, may have arisen out of hero worship and the imaginings of poets, or out of the marvels performed by idols, oracles, and magicians. But whatever its immediate cause it was ultimately inspired by demons who used lying, immoral fables and false miracles (magic) to attract men to polytheism, that is to demonolatry.⁹ Idolatry then was apparent divinity, and magic was the apparent divine power which gave it authority. Both were characteristic manifestations of Satan, “the ape of God.” Guided by this basic concep-

⁶ See, for example, Cassian, *Conferences*, I, xx: “By some skilful assumption he twists and turns the precious text of Scripture into a meaning harmful and contrary to the true meaning.” Tr. D. Chadwick in *Western Asceticism*, Library of Christian Classics, XII (London and Philadelphia, 1958), 210.

⁷ W. W. Greg noted this connection between Mephostophilis and Faustus’ misuse of the Bible in his edition of the play: *Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, 1604–1616* (Oxford, 1950), p. 395.

⁸ See, for example, Exodus vii–xi and Num. xxv.1–2. Cf. Rev. ix.20–21.

⁹ *The Book of Enoch*, tr. R. H. Charles (Oxford, 1893), Chs. vi–xi. “Enoch’s” doctrine was accepted by Tertullian: *De idolatria*, Cap. iv, ix, *De cultu feminarum*, I, ii–iii (Migne, *PL*, I, 741, 747, 1419–1422). See also Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, xv, xxiii (*PL*, xli, 468–471).

⁹ For these points see, for example, Tertullian, *De idolatria*, Cap. iv, ix–x, *Apologeticus*, Cap. x–xi, xxii–xxiv, *Ad nationes*, II, xiii (*PL*, I, 741, 747–752, 380–391, 463–481, 676–677); Augustine, *De civ. Dei*, II, xxiv, III, ii–iv, IV, xxx, VI, vi–vii, etc. (*PL*, xli, 70–73, 79–82, 136–137, 182–186). For medieval repetition of these ideas see Isidore, *Etymologiae*, VIII, xi, 4 (*PL*, lxxxii, 314); Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II, Pt. II, qu. xciv, arts. 1 and 4. See also J. Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods*, tr. B. French, Bollingen Series, xxxviii (New York, 1953), p. 17, who, I believe, underestimates medieval emphasis on the demonic associations of the gods.

tion and strongly influenced by their observation of contemporary pagan practices, early Christian writers endowed the gods of the gentiles with certain pronounced and unflattering characteristics, which were familiar throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and found their way into *Dr. Faustus*.

The cults of the heathen deities, it was stressed, had a treacherous sensual glamour, a spirit of passionate, orgiastic abandon. These qualities were evident in the poetic fables dealing with the loves, riots, and revenges of the gods. Worse still they were embodied in the plays and games (*ludi*), the shows and contests (*spectacula*), which were performed at the chief feasts of the gods.¹⁰ Indeed it was even claimed that idol worship would never have spread but for the vicious entertainments by which the demons had made it attractive.¹¹ The real danger in such "religious" entertainments was not so much that they were public invitations to immoral behavior but that they "set the very worst examples before wretched men under the guise of divine actions" and so encouraged every shameless sinner to dignify himself with the name of God's imitator.¹² For Tertullian—and in this as in all his teachings on idolatry he is a representative voice as well as an authority for subsequent ages—idolatry and lust are synonymous: polytheism is regarded as a form of spiritual adultery (an adulteration of true divinity) as well as an unfailing source of sexual impurity.¹³ Apologists took undisguised pleasure in cataloguing the sexual aberrations of the gods from Venus and Jove down to the irrepressible race of rustic, erotic divinities (such as satyrs, fauns, and sylvans) and argued that their vices showed them to be not gods at all but imaginary beings, or wicked men, or incubus demons.¹⁴ The erotic aspect of the gods relates naturally to the urgent doctrine that, though they frequently give the impression of a genuinely benevolent desire to please and help, their friendliness is sham: the gifts, the cures, and the prophecies of the gods are diabolical snares to catch the imprudent.¹⁵

In patristic and medieval use of these theological commonplaces the notion of false appearances is frequently in evidence. Basically it arises from the apologetic or polemical need to distinguish between true and false religion, miracle and magic, orthodoxy and heresy; but it touches many aspects of the Christian-pagan debate. The theological preoccupation with false appearances is of particular interest to the student of medieval and Renaissance literature

when it arises in connection with the changes or fabrications of the human form attributed to gods and magicians and professionally practised by actors. The gods and magicians, it was frequently remembered, were forever altering their own appearance or that of others, or simply creating phantoms, for cruel and deceptive purposes; while in the theatre men masqueraded as gods in stories about lust and violence and so gave divine sanction to immorality. All such metamorphoses were regarded as thoroughly typical products of Satan, "the father of lies," whose chief mode of deception was to approach men in the reassuring guise of a heavenly spirit. The following (by no means unusual) passage from Augustine's *De civitate Dei* indicates just how deeply this whole conception of false appearances or metamorphosis was embedded in Christian thinking on magic, mythology, and pagan literature. The passage occurs in that section of the work where Augustine is engaged in refuting the teachings of the magically-inclined Platonic philosophers, Apuleius, Porphyry, and Plotinus, and of the earlier Pythagoras, famed for his necromancy and his doctrine of metempsychosis. It is with this kind of sage that Faustus aligns himself when he cries "His ghost be with the old philosophers!" (iii.63) and when, much later, he bitterly regrets the untruth of the Pythagorean-Platonic doctrine which would have allowed him to be changed into an animal in his next life (xix.174-176).¹⁶

¹⁰ Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, Cap. xv, *De spectaculis*, Cap. x, xv, xxvii (PL, I, 411-419, 716-718, 721-722, 733-734); Cyprian, *De spectaculis*, Cap. iv-vi (PL, IV, 813-815); Augustine, *De civ. Dei*, II, viii-xiv, xxv-xxix, IV, xxvi-xxvii, VI, vi-vii, VII, xxxiii (PL, XLI, 53-60, 73-78, 132-134, 182-186, 221-222). Compare Isidore, *Etyim.*, XVIII, xvi, xxvii-xxviii, who derives his equation "shows = desires" (XVIII.xvi. i) from Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, Cap. xiv (PL, I, 721). Tertullian (*De spect.*, i) and Cyprian (*De spect.*, iv) stress that the whole purpose of the demons in the plays is to delude the mind by ravishing the eye and ear.

¹¹ Cyprian, *De spectaculis*, Cap. iv (PL, IV, 813). Cf. Augustine, *De civ. Dei*, VII, xviii (PL, XLI, 208).

¹² Augustine, *De civ. Dei*, II, xiv and vii; see also II, viii, xxvi, xxvii (PL, XLI, 59, 53, 74, 76). This is probably Augustine's main moral objection to the "histrionic" gods.

¹³ *De idolatria*, Cap. i (PL, I, 737-739). Cf. Augustine, *De civ. Dei*, II, iv, and VII, xxi (PL, XLI, 49, 210-211).

¹⁴ Tertullian, *Ad nationes*, II, vii, x, xiii (PL, I, 667, 672, 677); Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, Cap. xxxiv (PG, VI, 875-878); Augustine, *De civ. Dei*, III, iii, vi, vii, ix, xv, xxxiii, XVIII, xiii (PL, XLI, 81, 184-186, 187-188, 468, 570-572).

¹⁵ Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, Cap. xvii-xix (PG, VI, 842-850); Augustine, *De divinatione daemonum*, Cap. vi-vii (PL, XL, 586-588), *De civ. Dei*, VIII, xxiv (PL, XLI, 250).

¹⁶ The teachings of Pythagoras and Plato on metempsychosis were frequently mocked by the Fathers: see Tertullian,

O excellent theurgy [the so-called 'white' magic of the Platonists]! O admirable purification of the soul! a theurgy in which the violence of impure envy has more influence than the entreaty of purity and holiness. Rather let us abominate and avoid the deceits of such wicked spirits, and listen to sound doctrine. As to those who perform these filthy cleansings by sacrilegious rites, and see in their initiated state . . . certain wonderfully lovely appearances of angels or gods, this is what the apostle refers to when he speaks of "Satan transforming himself into an angel of light" [II Cor. xi. 14]. For these are the delusive appearances of that spirit who longs to entangle wretched souls in the deceptive worship of many and false gods, and to turn them aside from the true worship of the true God, by whom alone they are cleansed and healed, and who as was said of Proteus, "turns himself into all shapes" [Virgil, *Georgics*, iv, 411] equally hurtful, whether he assaults us as an enemy, or assume the disguise of a friend.¹⁷

That Marlowe would have been familiar with the ideas summarized above can hardly be doubted, for they had become major constituents in the Christian conception of evil. It is most unlikely, too, that he had not read *The City of God* while studying theology at Cambridge.¹⁸ In any case he would have encountered such ideas in contemporary religious discussions on witchcraft. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century treatises on witchcraft are littered with references to patristic and medieval authorities, especially Augustine.¹⁹ And they show little or no alteration of the traditional doctrines. The more marvellous and reprehensible deeds of the witches—their transformations of themselves and of others, their copulations with demons in the shape of men, women, or animals—are traced back to the classical myths as to their source.²⁰ The satyrs and fauns, the nymphs and other wanton women celebrated by pagan poets, are still erotic demons and still active.²¹ Apollo remains the patron of the divinatory arts and, as always, a devil.²² His sister Diana has become the most constant demon-companion of witches in their nocturnal transvections. She presides over their licentious festivities, brings them into contact with the dead, bewitches men with her beauty, and is worshipped as a goddess.²³ Some even claim to be familiar with the Fates, but these women, a theologian warns, are demons.²⁴ The ancient magicians to whom the Fathers had referred most frequently and given almost the status of gods are often recalled;²⁵ and so, with evident satisfaction, are their disastrous ends.²⁶ Lastly, the demons always seek to be worshipped as gods,²⁷ and sometimes promise their followers

that they too will be gods.²⁸ The belief that magic is synonymous with idolatry and mythology is, in fact, clearly discernible:

But let us see of what this pact [the witches' pact with the devil] consists. The witch renounces God, Chrism, Baptism, and his part in Paradise: he gives himself to Satan and takes him for his sole master and swears to him never to speak of God or the Virgin Mary or the saints of Heaven, except in mockery and derision. What does all this prove but his Idolatry, his Apostasy,

Apol., Cap. xlviii (*PL*, i, 588–589); Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, Cap. iii (*PG*, vi, 811); Augustine, *De civ. Dei*, x, xxx (*PL*, xli, 309–311). For Pythagoras as necromancer see *De civ. Dei*, vii, xxxv. The Neo-Platonists were often mentioned (as occultists) in medieval and Renaissance studies of witchcraft and demonology.

¹⁷ *De civ. Dei*, x, x (*PL*, xli, 288); tr. M. Dods, *The City of God* (Edinburgh, 1871), i, 397. See also *De civ. Dei*, vii, xxxv, x, xxvii, xviii, xviii (*PL*, xli, 223, 306, 570–571).

¹⁸ See the remarks on the character of theological teaching in sixteenth-century Cambridge in D. Cole, *Suffering and Evil in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (Princeton, 1962), pp. 193–195. See also H. Gough, *A General Index to the Publications of the Parker Society* (Cambridge, Eng., 1855), s.v. "Augustine" and "Tertullian," where there is evidence that sixteenth-century English divines were thoroughly familiar with the writings of these two Fathers.

¹⁹ For references to Augustine's teaching see F. M. Guazzo, *Compendium Maleficarum*, ed. M. Summers and tr. E. A. Ashwin (London, 1929), pp. 8, 14, 30, 59–60; H. Boguet, *An Examen of Witches [Discours Sorciers]*, ed. Summers, tr. Ashwin (London, 1929), pp. 15, 31, 97, 142, etc.; L. M. Sinistrari, *De la démonialité et des animaux incubes et succubes*, tr. (from the Latin) I. Liseux (Paris, 1876), pp. 21, 82, 118, 132, 190, 192, etc.; H. C. Lea, *Materials Toward a History of Witchcraft*, ed. A. C. Howard, 2 vols. (New York and London, 1957), pp. 264, 266, 296, 326, 348, 354, 372.

²⁰ Guazzo, *Compendium*, p. 8; Boguet, *An Examen*, pp. 32, 39, 43, 138; Lea, *Materials*, pp. 315, 359, 372, 480, 562.

²¹ Boguet, pp. 33–34, 56–57; Lea, pp. 473–474, 507.

²² Lea, pp. 473, 500; Boguet, pp. 103–104; G. Sinclair, *Satan's Invisible World Discovered*, rept. from the original edn. of 1685 (Edinburgh, 1871), Preface, A 4. Cf. Milton, *Paradise Regained* 1.390–396, 455–459.

²³ Lea, pp. 139, 177, 179, 181, 261, 277, 355, 357, 375, 406, 590, etc. See also Du Cange, *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*, ed. L. Favre (Niort, 1884), s.v. "Diana."

²⁴ Lea, p. 289.

²⁵ Guazzo, p. 11 (Simon Magus and Pythagoras); Boguet, p. 42 (Pythagoras "the philosopher of Tyana"), p. 141 (Apuleius and Lucian).

²⁶ Guazzo, p. 160 (Simon Magus and Zoroaster); Boguet, p. 42 (Simon), Lea, p. 495 (Zoroaster). Zoroaster, legendary founder of the magic arts, aspired to be a stellar god and was eventually set on fire and consumed by the demon he imported too much. See the *Clementine Recognitions*, iv, xxvii (*PG*, i, 1326–27), quoted by Guazzo; and Augustine, *De civ. Dei*, xxi, xiv (*PL*, xli, 728).

²⁷ Lea, pp. 206, 209, 213–217, 220, 224, etc. Boguet (p. 61) and Guazzo (p. 54) refer to Satan as "the ape of God," one of his oldest titles.

²⁸ P. H. Kocher, *Christopher Marlowe: A Study of his Thought, Learning and Character* (London, 1949), p. 146.

his Paganism, and his Atheism? . . . I say that the first pact of the witch with Satan shows his Idolatry, because he turns from the Creator to the Creature; his Apostasy because he bankrupts himself of his first and true religion and his first baptism to hurl himself into a sea of superstitions; his Paganism because he undertakes to serve and worship devils as true Gods; his atheism because the first three crimes lead to Atheism especially, the last which is to serve and worship many devils as gods, since Polytheism is the same thing as Atheism.²⁹

The original Faust Book had its own mythological suggestions for Marlowe. There were the nymphs in the wood where the magician consulted with Satan, and Faustus' permanent succubus, Helen of Troy—no major goddess, but of divine extraction, and most famous of all the classical "wantons".³⁰ Marlowe was to turn this companion of the old book into a dazzling necromantic vision which is at once the greatest of the magician's achievements, the loveliest and most deceptive of his illusions, and his final commitment to Hell. In *Dr. Faustus* Helen is made the climax of numerous mythological references. The prominence of mythological imagery in itself is hardly surprising in a Renaissance drama, especially one by Marlowe. But, as has been stated, this is mythology with a difference, mythology which invites moral and theological criticism. Aesthetically realized (how else could Faustus be bewitched?), its beauty contributes immensely to tragic irony.

As soon as Faustus rejects true divinity the old gods invade his mind with (in the theological view) complete inevitability. He clearly reveals that he wishes to be a magician because "a sound magician is a mighty god" (i.61). That he is confronted with a choice between theology and mythology is nicely demonstrated by the persuasions of the Good and the Evil Angel, one urging him to read the scriptures and avoid blasphemy, the other pressing upon him "the damned book" which would allow him to be "on earth as Jove is in the sky, / Lord and commander of these elements" (i.75-76). The tempter Cornelius, too, assures him that he will perform such "miracles" through astrology and natural magic that he will be "more frequented for this mystery than heretofore the Delphian oracle" (i.140-141)—he will surpass Apollo. And in retrospect he proudly compares his triumphs over the German churchmen (the Romans will be vanquished too), and his magnetic popularity, with the power exercised by sweet Orpheus over the infernal spirits when he came to hell (i.111-115). It is not just the word "hell" here which suggests the

mythological snare; his proud handling of theological matters really did, we have seen, attract the infernal spirits.

The replacement of theology by mythology is accomplished in the third scene where the black rites of witchcraft and astrology are performed. Marlowe, the classical scholar and theologian, seems acutely aware here that magic and demonology are the last vital home of the old gods. Christian and pagan elements are both vividly present in this scene, but in a form of deep mutual antagonism. The gods of Acheron are proclaimed, the Holy Trinity is abjured (iii.16-17). The Hebrew Psalter and the New Testament (i.154), the names of God and his saints, are brought forward only to be "racked" or tortured (iii.49), "Forward and backward anagrammatized" and—like the first two biblical quotations—"breviated" (iii.9-10), in order to please the demons and extract power from the sidereal gods or "erring stars" (iii.12). In the first highly suggestive speech Faustus identifies himself with Night and makes an imaginative flight into the dark heaven of the astrologers, "longing to view Orion's drizzling look" (iii.2). The really powerful star in this scene, however, as in the whole play, is not Orion, but Lucifer, who is both classical, stellar divinity and Christian demon; and his beautiful name rings triumphantly but menacingly from line to line (see especially iii.72-75), its sinister relevance to his own proud behavior unseen by Faustus. The translator of Ovid could not have failed to reflect on the striking fusion of mythology and demonology, of light and dark, in the name of the principal spirit to whom Faustus dedicated himself in this nocturnal and astrological scene. Indeed, the prominence of Lucifer's name immediately after the astrological invocations, and the language in which he is subsequently characterized, strongly suggest Marlowe's consciousness that the "Princeps Orientis" (iii.17), the bright Lucifer (v.158) whom "God threw . . . from the face of Heaven" (iii.71) to become "Chief lord and regent of perpetual night" (v.56), was a religious version of that brilliant star who was at once herald of morning (Venus) and of night (Hesper):

. . . Lucifer, so by allusion call'd
Of that bright star by Satan paragon'd.
(*Paradise Lost* x.424-425)

²⁹ Boguet, p. 206.

³⁰ *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus, 1592 . . . 1594*, modernized and ed. W. Rose, Broadway Translations (London, n.d.), pp. 68 (the nymphs), 178-180, 193-194 (Helen).

The modern reader may not respond to the mythological associations of Lucifer (*qua demon*) with the same force as did the educated reader of the sixteenth century. Not only was the latter more affected by the classics and astronomy but his reading would have told him that the identification of the star and the demon was very rare before his own period; that in fact Satan's other name was hardly in general use at all until the sixteenth century.³¹ Evidence of a self-conscious response to the dual nature of Lucifer is not wanting in this period. About the middle of the sixteenth century an English preacher described heretical theologians as fallen stars—followers of Lucifer who fell not alone but drew a train of other stars with him into darkness.³² But the Faust Book itself subtly underlined the perfect propriety with which Lucifer should come to control the destiny of an erring divine who signed himself "Dr. Faustus the Astrologian," was forever inquiring into the nature and movement of the heavenly bodies, and, on one occasion, flatly denied the possibility of a star falling from the sky.³³ The kind of divine-demonic ambiguity epitomized by the chief spirit of Marlowe's tragedy is particularly obvious in Faustus' claim, in this third scene, that he "confounds Hell in Elysium" (l. 62); and it is present, though without pagan associations, in his jesting command that the devil should change from his proper but repulsive shape into an old friar, "since that holy shape becomes a devil best" (iii.28). Faustus' early claim that the spirits will resolve all ambiguities (i.79) seems singularly ironic now.

Theological attacks on mythology commonly made a distinction between true and fabulous narrative, the scriptures and poetry: the gods of pagans were celebrated in largely fictitious and immoral fables and plays which delude the mind by working on the senses, whereas God is revealed in a set of writings which are entirely historical and edifying.³⁴ This distinction is frequently stated or suggested in *Dr. Faustus* in connection both with the written word and the show or play; and the genesis of the distinction—in the conflict between theology and mythology—is nearly always evident. From the start Faustus read badly. He did not "view it well" (i.38), his eye was led (xix.96), and so he was easily persuaded to treat truth as fiction and fiction as truth. Hell, he claims, is "a fable" (v.128) and the after-life "old wives' tales" (v.136). Yet he quickly accepts the assertion that the contents of the evil book are not fictional. Mephostophilis produces on request a book dealing with necro-

mancy, astrology, and natural magic, so rapidly that Faustus suggests, with jocular insincerity and far more truth than he realizes, that what he is shown is fraudulent or illusory; which Mephostophilis naturally denies (v.178–179). Then in their dialogue on "divine astrology" (vi.34) Mephostophilis assures him (vi.43–44) that the astral gods (Saturn, Mars, Jupiter, Venus, and Mercury are mentioned) "are not feigned, but are erring stars" ("erring," one assumes, being ironically ambiguous).³⁵ Orthodox teachings on the cosmos, backed by the authority of Scripture—the good books—are dismissed by the demon as fictions: "they be but fables" (vi.63).³⁶

Fictions of a less serious order come to dominate Faustus' life and secure his damnation by frustrating the half-hearted approximations of his mind to the truth. He is gladly distracted from the terrifying thought of Hell by the sweet pleasures derived from mythological fable:

Have I not 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?

(vi. 26–30)

³¹ The only passage in the Bible which mentions Lucifer is Isaiah xiv.4. This refers to a king of Babylon, but the Fathers interpreted it as signifying the fall of Satan. See, for example, Origen, *De principiis*, I, v, 5 (PG, xi, 163) where, however, the demon is not explicitly connected with the star. Characteristic of the general neglect of "Lucifer" as the devil's name in the Middle Ages is its omission from Isidore's chapter "De diis gentium" (*Etyim.* viii, xi), where one would expect it to figure with "Satan," "Beelzebub," "Belial," and "Leviathan." *NED*, however, gives a few Anglo-Saxon and ME instances. Lea, p. 285, wonders if a treatise dated 1498 does not offer the first identification of the star and the demon. For Lucifer the astral god see, for example, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, 115, 723, IV, 629, 665, XI, 98, 271, 346, 570, etc.

³² *The Sermons of Edwin Sandys, D. D.* [d. 1587], ed. J. Ayre, Parker Society Publications (Cambridge, Eng., 1842), p. 362.

³³ *The History . . . of Doctor John Faustus*, pp. 71, 74, 88–89, 147, 149.

³⁴ Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, Cap. xiv–xv, xviii–xxi, *De spectaculis*, Cap. xxix, *Ad nationes*, II, i, vii (PL, I, 403–419, 434–469, 735, 657–659, 666–667); Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, Cap. xxi–xxii (PG, VI, 851–858); Augustine, *De civ. Dei*, II, xxvii–xxviii, x, xviii (PL, xli, 76–77, 296–297). Cf. *The Works of Bishop Jewel* [d. 1571], ed. J. Ayre, Parker Society Publications (Cambridge, Eng., 1848), III, 289; *The Works of Roger Hutchinson* [d. 1550], ed. J. Bruce, Parker Soc. Pubs. (Cambridge, Eng., 1842), pp. 176–178.

³⁵ The pagan choice of "erring" or "wandering" stars (planets) as gods had been a source of Christian irony long before Marlowe. See, for example, Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, Cap. ix (PG, VI, 826).

³⁶ On the heterodox nature of Mephostophilis' astronomy see F. R. Johnson, "Marlowe's 'Imperial Heaven,'" *ELH*, xii (1945), 35–44, and "Marlowe's Astronomy and Renaissance Scepticism," *ELH*, xiii (1946), 241–250; P. H. Kocher, *Christopher Marlowe*, pp. 217–219.

Faustus can answer such questions perfectly when they are relevant only to other deluded mortals, and the answer is "No"; as he himself explained subsequently to the Emperor who sought to embrace the equally "ravishing" (xii.56) vision of Alexander the Great, "These are but shadows, not substantial" (xii.55). But Faustus presently will be guilty of just such an embrace himself.

To divinely inspired visions and writings, on the other hand, Faustus ascribes precisely the character which belongs to "blind" Homer (another *double entendre*), sweet Musaeus, and tales of love; there are heavenly visions and hellish ones in the Christian life, and Faustus gets them muddled up. During the signing of the covenant the salutary message "*Homo fuge*" is miraculously written on his arm and this he defines as optical illusion: "My senses are deceiv'd, here's nothing writ" (v.79). When the writing reappears and Faustus is in danger of responding correctly, Mephostophilis adroitly leads his eye away to the vanities of a histrionic devil show—a *spectaculum* or a *ludus*; and, unlike the divine vision, it has no real significance at all:

What means this show? Speak, Mephostophilis.
Nothing, Faustus but to delight they mind.
(v.83-84)

In character and purpose this show conforms perfectly to the theological conception of the shows and plays as created by demons "among the other evils of idolatry, in order to draw man away from his Lord and bind him to their own service," "not plain truths but mere fictions."⁸⁷ So also does the "show" (vi.110) or "pastime" (vi.105) of the Seven Deadly Sins (with musical accompaniment), for it makes Faustus forget how horrible Lucifer really is when he comes to punish ("O, what art thou that look'st so terribly?"—vi.89) and persuades him to accept the suggestion that Hell is really quite an entertaining place:

Fau. O, how this sight doth delight my soul!
Luc. But, Faustus, in hell is all manner of delight.
Fau. O, might I see hell and return again safe, how
happy were I then!
(vi.171-173)

Up to this point in the play Faustus has been a probationer rather than a practitioner of the black arts; but now he sets out to scale the home of the gods, finds for himself the astrological secrets "Graven in the book of Jove's high firmament," and makes his own choice of things "fair and gorgeous to the eye" (viii.10). This development is manifest too in his new relationship with

develish and mythological fictions. Previously lured on as an enchanted spectator of shows and pastimes, he is now given the book of transformations or metamorphoses (vi.175-176). Thus he becomes actor, deity, and devil, and actively participates in the art of histrionic illusion:

Then in this show let me an actor be
That this proud Pope may Faustus' cunning see.
(viii. 76-77)

The "supernatural gulling" (Appendix, x.6) of the Pope and his cardinals would seem to be an *ad hoc* invention designed to appeal to anti-Catholic sentiments in the sixteenth century, but, in fact, it is based on conceptions, widespread in medieval ascetical theology, legend, and drama, of the devil as a jester who plays mockingly with men by setting before their eyes enticing or terrible illusions, and of his general attack on the soul as a dangerous game or play.⁸⁸ It was largely through ecclesiastical insistence on the hellish origin of the idolatrous *ludi* and *spectacula* that the devil, by a reverse process, acquired this intriguing, histrionic persona. Thus, when Marlowe introduces the old gods into the knavish shows of Faustus and Mephostophilis during the gulling of Benvolio, he does so with theological correctness. The metamorphosis of Benvolio and his friends into stags is traced to a mythological origin in the story of Diana and Actaeon (Ovid, *Metam.* III.143-252), and the connection is made more exact through the punishment of the transformed men by hell-hounds—an addition to the given episode. And so Faustus comes to play the part of that cold, cruel goddess beloved of witches: "And I'll play Diana and send you horns presently" (xi.53). Tertullian would not have wanted better evidence for his sarcastic assertion that the gods best known to the pagans were villainous actors and jesters in disguise.⁸⁹ But we need not ascribe Marlowe's linking of the old

⁸⁷ *De spectaculis*, Cap. x and xix (PL, I, 718, 735). It should perhaps be noted that when Faustus dismisses Darius, Alexander, and his paramour as unreal ("shadows"), he may also mean that they are merely actors in a play: "shadow" (meaning "a delusive image") being applied metaphorically in sixteenth-century usage to actor and play. Cf. *MND* v.i.212, 430, and see *NED*, s.v. "shadow."

⁸⁸ *Vita S. Pachomii*, Cap. xvii (PL, LXXIII, 85); *The English Text of the Ancrene Riwe*, ed. M. Day, EETS, O.S. No. 225 (London, 1952), pp. 93-95; Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, xxiii, ii (PL, LXXVI, 670-671). For a 15th-century statement of these ideas see Lea, *Materials Toward a History of Witchcraft*, p. 267. See also my article "Comedy and Terror in Middle English Literature: The Diabolical Game," *MLR*, LX (1965), 323-332.

⁸⁹ *Apologeticus*, Cap. xv, *Ad nationes*, I, x (PL, I, 416, 647).

gods and devilry with play-acting solely to his academic reading of the Fathers; the teachings of Tertullian and Augustine were the explicit basis of the vigorous religious attacks made on the English stage in the last quarter of the sixteenth century.⁴⁰

The description of these histrionic and magical feats of Faustus as "artful sport" which "drives sad thoughts away" (xvi.121) applies even more tellingly to his magnificent escapade with Helen of Troy and the cupids. If, after playing Diana, Faustus is oppressed by "sad" or serious thoughts (xv.20-26), he is thoroughly overwhelmed by them after making love to Helen. This scene stands in relation to the last two precisely as fiction to fact. In the last scenes mythology withers away in the presence of theology, and the few pagan relics found there—the Ovidian lover's appeal for time (xix.142), the astrologer's hope that he and not God controls the heavenly bodies (II. 136-141), and the vain Neo-Platonist search for some brutish metamorphosis (II. 174-178)—are but final ironic exposures of the great mythological lie epitomized by Helen. Fittingly, it is with Helen that Faustus indulges in his most ambitious piece of mythological play-acting; in her drama his earlier, pathetically false, conception of himself as a paragon of "manly fortitude" (iii.97) acquires, for one vanishing moment, a spurious reality:

I will be Paris, and for love of thee
Instead of Troy shall Wittenberg be sack'd,
And I will combat with weak Menelaus
And wear thy colours on my plumed crest,
Yea, I will wound Achilles in the heel
And then return to Helen for a kiss.
(xviii.106-111)

The interlude with Helen also provides the culmination of a series of erotic fictions which have titillated Faustus since the start of his magical and Jove-like career. The erotic element in the tragedy may seem to sort ill with the *hubris* of an aspiring mind, but it conforms to the traditional theological view of magic and idolatry. It represents the sensuous appeal of paganism, which blinds the intellect, conditioning men to consider divinity "harsh" and "unpleasant," and it embodies the spiritual impurity, the union with Satan, implied by idolatry.⁴¹ Sexual gratifications are promised to Faustus, and in mythological terms, in the first scene: the spirits will come to him in the form of women or "unwedded maids," lovelier than Venus herself:

Shadowing more beauty in their airy brows

Than in the white breasts of the queen of love
(i.127-128)

Faustus would seem to have these enchanting creatures in mind when he enthusiastically asks permission to "conjure in some lusty grove" (i.150): the woodland haunts of the nymphs, fays, and Dianas are both "pleasant"⁴² and "full of lust and sexual desire."⁴³ In scene three he determines to "live in all voluptuousness" (I. 94). And by scene five he is feeling decidedly "wanton and lascivious" (I. 142), but is deflected from taking a wife by Mephostophilis, who asserts that "marriage is but a ceremonial toy" (I. 150) and promises him his choice of the fairest courtisans: "she whom thine eye shall like, thy heart shall have" (I. 155). And, suggests Mephostophilis, she might well have (incongruously) the chastity of Penelope or the wisdom of the Queen of Sheba, or (suspiciously) the beauty of "bright Lucifer before his fall" (II. 156-158). The she-devil who has just previously been summoned to distract Faustus' mind from thoughts of marriage (II. 147-150) is undoubtedly the real object of this elegantly ambiguous promise. Other premonitions of Faustus' grand erotic illusion are, of course, the vision or dumb-show of Darius, Alexander, and his "beauteous paramour" (a nice synopsis of the lust and violence which the theologians identified with the pagan shows), and the story of Paris' affair with the nymph Oenone. The advent of Helen is suitably heralded with banquetting, carousing, swilling, and belly-cheer (xviii.6-8).

The mythological female in the play, although ravishing, has certain obviously damning characteristics. Apart from being a "paramour" who contributes to the satanic suggestion that marriage is no more than a ceremonial show or toy, she is also, so far as Faustus is concerned, an illusion. The awed question "Was this the face

⁴⁰ Various opponents of the Elizabethan theatre said that the stage is "a *spectacle* [italics mine] and a school for all wickedness and vice to be learned in"; that plays are idolatry, the devil's sermons; that playhouses are schools of lust and vice; and that attendance at them was condemned by Augustine, the Fathers, and the Bible. See M. C. Bradbrook, *The Rise of the Common Player: A Study of Actor and Society in Shakespeare's England* (London, 1962), pp. 69, 72, 74, 76-77.

⁴¹ In the witchcraft tradition the adoration of Satan and signing of the pact are followed immediately by orgy and by sexual intercourse with him (as incubus or succubus): see Boguet, *An Examen of Witches*, pp. 57, 207-208; Lea, pp. 293, 371. This convention probably derives from the patristic conception of idolatry as a double adultery.

⁴² Jump, *Dr. Faustus*, glossarial note (p. 14) on "lusty."

⁴³ *NED*, s. v. "lusty." (Archaic usage.)

that launch'd a thousand ships" (xviii.99) merits the same negative answer as "Have I not made blind Homer sing to me" (vi.26). Faustus' succubus is a devilish illusion based on a poetic fable, no more Helen of Troy than he is Jove or Diana, or they divine. Moreover, the mythological lover is attended with violence, destruction, and misery. Paris, the last important alter-ego of Faustus, paid a fatal price for his desertion of Oenone, since she bitterly refused to exercise her supernatural powers of healing when he received his death wound; and she herself committed suicide, grief-stricken by his end. Faustus, too, in his ecstatic eulogy of Helen's dazzling beauty, sees her in the role of Jove and himself in that of one of the god's many mortal lovers:

Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter
When he appeared to hapless Semele.
(xviii.114-115)

Unfortunately, the fate of Faustus and of Semele—like the brilliance of Helen and Jupiter—are very alike; for Semele's request (to see her godly lover in his proper form), when granted, instantly reduced her to ashes in a supernatural inferno: "corpus mortale tumultus / Non tulit aetherios donisque iugalibus arsit" (Ovid, *Metam.* iii. 308-309). Similarly Helen, although "heavenly" (xviii.32, 93), gave rise to an angry ten-years' war (xviii.30-31), "brought the spoils to rich Dardania" (xviii.26) ("caused the destructive invasions of rich Troy"),⁴⁴ and, most memorably, "burnt the topless towers of Ilium" (xviii.100). Her brightness is indeed that of "bright Lucifer before his fall," an ominous prelude to an everlasting fire and spiritual darkness. The light jest which Faustus made when he beheld his first (undisguised) devil-woman comes home to roost when he embraces Helen: "Here's a hot whore indeed!" (v.150).

Fire is the most recurrent image in the tragedy, and it probably finds its most expressive embodiment in Faustus' histrionic identification of himself with Paris and the almost proverbial flames of Troy: this suggests the point where mythological pastimes, fables, and eroticism all end—in ashes. For Marlowe and his audience, too, the fire image must have been inseparable from the whole notion of witchcraft: the witch played with fire in a literal as well as a metaphorical sense, for it was necessary to some of his more destructive and daring rites;⁴⁵ fire, a violent reduction to ashes, caused the death of Zoroaster, father of all witches;⁴⁶ death by fire was, too, the standard execution in the Middle Ages and six-

teenth century for all such "heretics";⁴⁷ and fire was the customary end of all black books: "I'll burn my books!" (xix.190). In the play, of course, the image relates most obviously to the consuming flames from which the spirits come, which constitute the last vision or "show" of Faustus on earth (xix.116-127), which play about his house at the moment of death (xx.11-12), and await him thereafter. The very last image in the play is one of fire, and it marks, most poignantly, the simultaneous end of the old gods and of one who aspired to be like them:

Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight,
And burned is Apollo's laurel bough
That sometime grew within this learned man
(Epil., ll. 1-3)

Scene xix has already provided a pointed recollection of Faustus' original failure to look properly at the epistles and a consequent vindication of divinity. These lines may contain another such reminiscence and vindication. They perhaps recall a stern (though benevolent) passage in the epistle to the Romans, where Paul, reverting to his opening theme of idolatry and its related sins, warns the converted gentiles that if they become guilty of spiritual pride they will be in danger of rejoining those blinded ones who bowed their knees to Baal and were cut off by God. The cutting and burning of the idolatrous bough could well have been inspired by these sentences:

Though wilt say then: The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in. Well; because of unbelief they were broken off. But thou standest by faith: be not highminded, but fear. For if God hath not spared the natural branches, *fear* lest perhaps also he spare not thee. See then the severity of God; towards them indeed that are fallen, the severity; but towards thee, the goodness of God, if thou abide in goodness. Otherwise, thou also shalt be cut off. (Rom. xi.19-22 Douay Version, 1582.)

The fairly substantial number of references to the classical underworld and its deities in *Dr. Faustus* do not, it must be conceded, give obvious support to the argument that classical mythology serves a special function in this play. These deities or spirits have the same sinister character in, say, classical or Renaissance accounts of Medea and Circe as they do here. But this does not weaken my argument. The infernal places and

⁴⁴ F. S. Boas (ed.), *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (London, 1932), p. 159, glossarial note (v.i.24).

⁴⁵ Boguet, p. 86 (cf. p. 60); Guazzo, *Compendium Maleficarum*, pp. 55, 95.

⁴⁶ See above, n. 26.

⁴⁷ Boguet, p. 233; Lea, pp. 232-260.

gods of the heathens, being manifestly hostile to the light, and instruments of spiritual punishment, could always pass easily into Christian demonology without any real alteration of character. It was the celestial deities who, in completely orthodox Christian literature as in *Dr. Faustus*, necessarily acquired a new, non-heathen character, that of infernal spirits in disguise, devilish fictions. Characteristically, it is Mephistophilis who most forcibly expresses this conception of the mythological beings who have inspired, consoled, and deluded Faustus. Of the magician's play-acting among the gods and heroes of the Greeks, the demon speaks with chilly, ecclesiastical sarcasm:

- Beel. And here we'll stay
To mark how he doth demean himself.
Meph. How should he be but in desperate lunacy?
Fond worldling, now his heart blood dries with
grief,
His conscience kills it, and his labouring brain
Begets a world of idle fantasies
To overreach the devil; but all in vain:
His store of pleasures must be sauc'd with pain.
(xix.9-16)

Words and ideas which were formerly applied to Christian doctrines by Faustus' Evil Angel ("illusions, fruits of lunacy, /That make men foolish that do use them most"—v.19-20) are here used in their proper context, that is, in relation to magic and mythology. Evil transformations have come to an end, appearance and reality are one, the play is over; but Faustus has been supernaturally gulled.

Marlowe was not the only great poet of the

Renaissance period to repeat the stern doctrine that classical myth was vain fable or to identify the gods with demons. Milton did so, notably in his *Nativity Ode* and in the first book of *Paradise Lost*, and with a directness that is alien to the ironical method of Marlowe. Yet when Milton remembers the beautiful or benevolent aspects of the old gods he does not always suggest with artistic conviction that these are essentially spurious—snares for the spirit. As Douglas Bush has shown, Milton's use of classical mythology often reveals "a clear divorce between artist and theologian."⁴⁸ In *Dr. Faustus* by contrast there is never any fusion of classical ornament and Christian doctrine; when confusion arises it has a dramatic significance, and in reality they are as opposed as the Evil and the Good Angel.⁴⁹

To advance this interpretation of the mythological content of *Dr. Faustus*, it need hardly be added, is by no means equivalent to suggesting that Marlowe was, after all, a convinced Christian. It is rather to credit him with having adjusted perfectly to the philosophy inherent in the given story and with having expressed his own fine, ironic sense in the established ironies of Christian literature. It is to credit him with an exceptional degree of artistic objectivity.

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⁴⁸ *Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry* (Minneapolis and London, 1932), p. 273.

⁴⁹ Sc. iii, l. 91, provides the only apparent exception to this rule: Faustus speaks of his "desperate thoughts against Jove's deity."