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Emmanuel Bock

“If no Divells, no God”: Devils, D(a)emons and Humankind on the Mediaeval and Early Modern English Stage.

Abstract

This thesis looks at the relationship that humanity has with the devil, the demonic, and the daemonic as it is represented in plays from the mediaeval to the Early Modern period in England.

While critics have contradictorily seen the devil as a secular figure on the one hand, and as a vestige of sacred drama on the other, I consider the character from an anthropocentric point of view: the devil helps reveal mankind’s emerging independence from religion and the problems that accompany this development.

Chapter I sets the context for the investigation, tracing the broad outlines of the genesis of the figure that turned into the devil, before the main body of the thesis looks at the interaction between the devil and mankind.

Part I considers the devil as master of his own deeds. Chapters II and III look at his development in the mediaeval Mysteries and Moralities, showing how an ever greater independence of the figure simultaneously leads to him being increasingly used as a character designed to educate mankind. Chapters IV and V reveal a similar pattern: the more confident the devil is of himself and the more he believes himself to be in control, the wiler man proves in freeing himself from his influence. Chapter VI sees the exodus of the devil as mankind takes control of its destiny.

Part II looks at plays in which men attempt to control their fate by controlling the fiend and subjecting him to their power. Chronologically, it parallels the evolution traced in Chapters IV to VI. Chapters VII and VIII show that such efforts prove fruitless and counterproductive as long as the power men derive from their association with the devil is not channelled into a positive vision for the future. Only a model of a society that combines access to power and human responsibility, that substitutes a more selfless morality for an egocentric one, can keep the fiend at bay, as seen in Chapter IX.

Finally, Chapter X tests these findings against *The Birth of Merlin*, which defies categorisation and dating.

“If no Divells, no God”: Devils, D(a)emons and Humankind on the Mediaeval and
Early Modern English Stage.

Emmanuel Bock

Thesis submitted for the qualification of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English Studies

Durham University

2010

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Introduction

Humans have been attempting to catalogue devils for centuries, and, according to the most authoritative account, their total number is somewhere between two and three trillion. Or, to be more precise, 2,665,866,746,664. The source for this figure is Martin Borrhaus (1499-1564), a German Protestant theologian and reformer. His findings were used by Jodocus Hocker (†1566) and Hermann Hammelmann (1525-95) in *Der Teufel selbs, Das ist Warhafftiger bestendiger vnd wolgegründter bericht von den Teufeln, Was sie sein, Woher sie gekomen, Vnd was sie teglich wircken* (1568).¹ Gustav Roskoff (1814-89) gives a concise summary of each chapter of the work:

Kapitel 8 beweist, daß es eine große Menge Teufel gebe. Ihre Zahl ist nicht geringer als die der Engel, wobei die Meinung von Martinus

¹ “The Devil Himself. This is a true, dependable and well-founded report of the devils, what they are, where they come from, and what they effect every day” (my translation).

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Borrhaus angeführt wird, der ihre Zahl auf 2,665,866,746,644 berechnet.²

Even though Roskoff's *Geschichte des Teufels* (1869) was, and to a large extent still is, the standard work on the development of the devil in both scope and depth of treatment, it is a fact that the modern reader is already three steps removed from the original source which is, even in these days of electronic communication and digitalisation, very hard to come by. For the purpose of clarification of all matters that have to do with the devilish supernatural it does not help either that this number, which seems so clear and definitive in its ungraspable absurdity, is only one among many that have been advanced. In *Pseudomonarchia dæmonum*, a 1577 appendix to *De præstigiis dæmonum* (1563), Johann Weyer (1515-88) suggests there are 1,111 legions with 6,666 demons each, i.e. 7,405,926 fallen angels all in all.³ Other sources speak of 2,400 legions, totalling 14,400,000 devils.⁴ Unsurprisingly, it turns out that demon lore is, by its very nature, not an exact science, no matter how much its adepts erroneously insist that one “cannot look to superstition in this. The Devil is precise; the marks of his presence are as definite as stone[.]”⁵ It does not matter whether people believe that they have the devil by the nose, or whether they are mortally afraid of him: he is difficult to grasp and virtually impossible to pinpoint in any of his manifestations.

² “Chapter 8 proves that there are a great many devils. They are no fewer in number than the angels. In this, Martinus Borrhaus's opinion is cited: according to his calculations there are 2,665,866,746,644.” Gustav Roskoff, *Geschichte des Teufels* (1869; Cologne: Parkland, 2003) 374 (my translation).

³ Johann Weyer, *De præstigiis dæmonum*, gen. ed. George Mora, tr. John Shea (Binghamton, NY; Tempe, AZ: Center for Medieval & Early Renaissance Studies, 1998). The edition does not include *Pseudomonarchia dæmonum*, which can be found online at Joseph H. Peterson's *Twilit Grotto—Esoteric Archives* <<http://www.esotericarchives.com/solomon/weyer.htm>>. Weyer leaves it to the reader to work out the total number of demons himself.

⁴ Hannes Vatter, *The Devil in English Literature* (Bern: Francke, 1978) 64.

⁵ Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) 41.

This does not prevent people from dealing with him, though. Ever since he first came, or fell, into the world, the devil has taken hold of the imagination of mankind in countless forms and ways. He has been created and defined; he has been used in religious texts, in folklore, on stage, in pamphlets, in novels, in poems, and in films. Given his unwavering popularity, it was only a matter of time before critics found it necessary to analyse the representation of the devil in relation to religion and society. While Roskoff prepared the ground on the European mainland with *Geschichte des Teufels*, it was E. K. Chambers's *The Mediaeval Stage* (1903) that influenced ways of thinking about plays and their religious content for a long time in the twentieth century. In Book III, chapter twenty, Chambers deals with "The Secularization of the Plays."⁶ He found

some modifications in the general character of the religious plays which accompanied or resulted from [the] great expansion of their scope. These all tend towards that process of secularization, that relaxing of the close bonds between the nascent drama and religious worship, which it is the especial object of this chapter to illustrate.⁷

He analyses how plays like the Mysteries that start out as religious works gradually lose their connection to religion as more secular texts emerge, and in doing so he does not limit his scope solely to the English canon. However, he does not assume that this "tendency to secularization acted universally and uniformly."⁸ He grants that various types of plays in various stages of evolution coexisted. This is a sound insight, which it is useful to keep in mind in relation to the present study as well.

⁶ E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage—Two Volumes Bound As One* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publ., 1996) Vol. II, Bk III, ch. 20 (68-105).

⁷ Chambers, *Mediaeval Stage*, Vol. II, Bk III, ch. 20 (78f).

⁸ Chambers, *Mediaeval Stage*, Vol. II, Bk III, ch. 20 (96).

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Even though this is so, Chambers finds devil figures to be instrumental in the process of secularisation:

in the growth of the devil scenes [...] may we not trace the influence of those masked and blackened demon figures who from all time had been a dear scandal of the Kalends and the Feast of Fools? [...] [A]nd it is noteworthy that in more than one place the *compagnies joyeuses* who inherited the Feast of Fools joined forces with more serious *confréries* and provided comic actors for the religious plays.⁹

On the whole, Chambers sees the evolution of society in general, and of stage plays in particular, as a movement away from the preternatural towards the worldly, and he uses the evidence he finds to support his point.

The most recent of Chambers's critics is John D. Cox. In *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350-1642*, he attempts to disprove Chambers's findings as if they were still largely contaminating the considerations made by present-day scholars. Since his main focus is the devil, he picks out this element as the centre of his criticism: “Chambers' belief that devils were among the first indications of the secular in early English drama made him incapable of seeing them as one of the last vestiges of traditional sacred dramaturgy in the seventeenth century.”¹⁰ Cox's argument is based on the oppositional *daemon est deus inversus* approach and is also indebted to Stuart Clark's development of the concept of inversion in *Thinking with Demons* (1997). Cox says:

⁹ Chambers, *Mediaeval Stage*, Vol. II, Bk III, ch. 20 (91).

¹⁰ John D. Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 7.

My purpose [...] is not to argue that secularization had no effect on the history of the early drama, and particularly on stage devils. Rather, what I propose is a way of conceptualizing secularization that recovers some sense of the traditional oppositional thinking without falling into the polarization and tendentiousness of Enlightenment and Romantic assumptions.¹¹

Cox's work is useful in that it takes a close look at a great number of the extant plays staging devils.¹² He is intrigued by the fact that "[l]ong after they stopped seeing God and the angels, audiences continued to see devils on stage" and asks the question "why devils are the last explicit remnant of continuous traditions in staging the sacred."¹³ In doing so, he reclaims the sacred from the efforts of critics in the wake of Chambers to deny the plays their religious dimension and to put them firmly into the troubled religious context from the fourteenth century to the closing of the theatres in 1642 under Puritan influence. His work, however, does not advocate a return to unadulterated religious attitudes. The secular has altered the image of the devil who appears on stage:

stage devils are closely related to the devil of traditional religion, who is consistent with but not reducible to the devil of theology. Operating supportively within the bounds of traditional religion, stage devils reveal communal values by default, illustrating (often satirically) what fifteenth-century English society saw as most destructive of its social cohesion.¹⁴

¹¹ Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 10.

¹² The appendix of *The Devil and the Sacred* contains a list of the "devil plays in English, 1350-1642" (209-11).

¹³ Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 5.

¹⁴ Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 18.

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With his agenda established in this way, Cox has set himself the same trap as Chambers did—or indeed any study does that follows certain more or less precisely defined ideological and / or critical lines, including the present one. Even while it is possible without major problems to conduct a self-contained and coherent argument, studies run the risk of being caught within the limitations of the methodologies they employ and the points they want to make. Cox tries to free the devil from the shackles he has been forced into in numerous years of critical study—“devils need not be understood either as exuberant subverters of a hegemonic social order or as proto-Enlightenment examples of failed attempts to challenge cosmic order”¹⁵—but at the same time puts him into a different kind of fetters that might or might not be closer to the actual experience the people in Early Modern England really had.

If one approached the devil from an alternative perspective, though, one might add a new facet to his perception, possibly even come to entirely different results. The angle I propose in this thesis might appear unorthodox when applied to the study of Mediaeval and Early Modern English literature, but it is no less rewarding than more traditional ones. Conventionally, God is put in the centre as the master-creator of the Universe and everything that it contains, including angels—some of which eventually fell and turned into devils—and humankind. In this view, men are more or less adept and faithful interpreters and implementers of God’s words and doctrines. No matter what liberties they might take with God’s intentions, or how truly they might construe them from their limited perception, they are always the passive element in the chain of creation, and so is the devil. In contrast to this, I propose to look at the devil and his origins, as well mankind’s relationship to him from the earliest days to Early Modern England, from an anthropocentric

¹⁵ Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 18.

perspective: it is not God who is the creator of supernatural entities, but it is mankind who created divinities good and bad, including daemons, demons and devils. Yet, in trying to make sense of the world and all kinds of phenomena surrounding them, people gave away the agency they had as creators of stories and put it in the hands of the supernatural / divine. In the course of time and with the swing of the pendulum, this relationship between creator and creature was ever so slowly inverted as mankind came to reclaim the agency it had given up centuries before.

While the twenty-first century, thanks to advances in science, technology and philosophy, has more than ever before in history come to recognise this attitude as legitimate, I am by no means suggesting that Early Modern England had already turned into a laic or atheistic society, or that such thoughts would not have been regarded as heresy. Nevertheless, there were profound upheavals that shook the foundations of many an aspect of people's lives. Thanks to, among others, Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), the Earth was removed from the centre of the Universe for good. Physics, chemistry, and biology made equally stunning advances. The foundations of religion were likewise thrown into doubt after Martin Luther (1486-1546) moved to reform the Church, and England's Henry VIII (1491-1547; reigned from 1509) successfully attempted to strip it of as much economic and political influence that he could not control as possible.¹⁶ Throughout Europe, doubt had been cast upon old certainties, and this doubt was not easily dispelled in the aftermath. Michel de Montaigne (1533-92) saw in Luther's efforts a real danger to the foundations of the church and religion as a whole. When

¹⁶ John C. Sommerville, *The Secularization of Early Modern England* (Oxford: OUP, 1992) has a detailed look at the effects that tendencies towards secularisation had on all aspects of life in the period.

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the humanist Pierre Bunel (1499-1546) visited Montaigne’s father with the request to translate *Theologia naturalis sive liber creaturarum* (publ. 1486) by Raimundo de Sabunde (c. 1385-1436), Montaigne saw the need for a renewed propagation of the Spaniard’s work:

ce fut lors que les nouvelletés de Luther commençaiēt d’entrer en crédit et ébranler en beaucoup de lieux notre ancienne créance. En quoi il [Bunel] avait un très bon avis, prévoyant bien, par discours de raison, que ce commencement de maladie déclinerait aisément en un exécrationnable athéisme[.]¹⁷

Montaigne did not see the dangers originate from the learned, the clergy or the politicians. These members of society would have sufficient insight to accept, and sometimes even the desire and the power to effect, the changes and live with the resulting new beliefs and circumstances. Montaigne feared the uneducated,

le vulgaire, n’ayant pas la faculté de juger les choses par elles-mêmes, se laissant emporter à la fortune et aux apparences, après qu’on lui a mis en main la hardiesse de mépriser et de contreroler les opinions qu’il avait eues en extrême révérence, comme sont celles où il va de son salut, et qu’on a mis aucuns articles de sa religion en doute et à la balance, il jette tantôt après aisément en pareille incertitude toutes les autres pièces de sa créance, qui n’avaient pas chez lui plus d’autorité ni de fondement que celles qu’on lui a ébranlées ; et secoue comme un joug tyrannique toutes

¹⁷ Michel de Montaigne, “Essais,” *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Robert Barral (Paris: Seuil, 1992) Bk II, ch. 12 (182). John Florio’s translation of this part of the “Apologie of *Raymond Sebond*” from *The Essayes* reads: “It was even at what time the new-fangles of *Luther* beganne to creepe in favor, and in many places to shake the foundation of our ancient believe. Wherein he seemed to be well advifed, as he who by discourse of reason forefaw, that this budding diefeafe would eafily turne to an execrationnable Atheifme[.]” (London: Val. Sims for Edward Blount, 1603) 252.

les impressions qu'il avait reçues par l'autorité des lois ou révérence de l'ancien usage[.]¹⁸

Montaigne does not only consider the danger of atheism, then, but also sees society on the brink of political anarchy if the ruling classes do not succeed in controlling the masses who might rightly ask why some laws should be obeyed while others can be declared obsolete and even wrong. The dismantling of supposedly sempiternal, divine truths must needs leave a void that cannot be easily filled.

Montaigne's apprehension was not at all exaggerated. Even in 1611, John Donne (1572-1631) still felt that the world was in turmoil:

And new Philosophy calls all in doubt,
 The Element of fire is quite put out;
 The Sun is lost, and th'earth, and no mans wit
 Can well direct him, where to look for it.
 [...]
 'Tis all in pieces, all cohærence gone;
 All just supply, and all Relation:
 Prince, Subject, Father, Sonne, are things forgot,
 For every man alone thinkes he hath got
 To be a Phœnix, and that there can bee
 None of that kinde, of which he is, but hee.¹⁹

¹⁸ Montaigne, "Essais," *Œuvres complètes*, Bk II, ch. 12 (182). "the vulgar many, wanting the facultie to judge of things by themselves, suffering it selfe to be carried away by fortune, and led-on by outward apparances, if once it be possessed with the boldnesse to despise, and malapertnesse to impugne the opinions, which tofore it held in awefull reverence (as are those wherein confilteth their salvation) and that some articles of their religion be made doubtfull and questionable, they will foone and easly admit an equall vncertainty in all other partes of their beliefe, as they that had no other grounded aucthoritie or foundation, but such as are now shaken and weakened, and imediately reject (as tyrannicall yoke) all impreffions, they had in former times received by the aucthoritie of lawes, or reverence of ancient custome[.]" Florio, *Essayes*, 252.

¹⁹ John Donne, "The First Anniversary—An Anatomy of the World," *The Complete English Poems*, Ed. C. A. Patrides, Everyman (London: Dent, 1994) 205-208 & 213-218.

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Clearly, Donne perceives the state of affairs that Montaigne only saw as a possible danger looming at the horizon as a woeful reality in the early seventeenth century. And in 1611 matters had not even arrived at their worst, which would see Charles I (1600-49; reigned from 1625), the defender of the divine right of kings, beheaded by the advocates of a different religious and political system than the one he tried to impose.²⁰ The fact that religion was gradually losing its power was also highlighted by C. S. Lewis:

the language of the “King James Version” reached the height of its reputation in the late eighteenth century, when the Bible was “appreciated” for its “literary power.” This is, of course, a very different thing from its religious use, and Lewis believed that it marked the end of the Bible’s real spiritual power in English culture generally.

In 1500 religion had a language of its own, or perhaps several languages [...]. All of this began to fade in the milder light of common sense. Religion forced its way into consciousness when it had to be expressed in everyday terms. To be sure, this would create a new religious enthusiasm, which lasted at least a century. But it also brought doubts. Doubts had existed before, but only indistinctly. By 1700 it was faith that had a job to sustain itself in a vocabulary drawn from elsewhere.²¹

Paradoxically, the one means that was supposed to take the message of the Bible closer to the hearts and minds of the common people has become, in retrospect, a monumental sign that exactly the opposite was also taking place at the same time.

This insight serves as a fitting parallel for the present study in which I will show that man’s interaction with the devil as presented on stage in Mediaeval and Early

²⁰ Politically, this process had been taking place all along, from Magna Carta (1215) and before, via the Commonwealth (1649-60), to the Bill of Rights (1689) and beyond.

²¹ Sommerville, *Secularization*, 54. The quotations in the first paragraph are from C. S. Lewis, “The Literary Impact of the Authorized Version,” *They Asked for a Paper* (London: Bles, 1962) 44-46.

Modern England gradually leads to man taking on more responsibilities for himself. In the process, man is led to substitute divinely inspired moralities and value systems with more secular ones. This course of action is fraught with difficulties and not always crowned with success, and it is not completed at the end of the Early Modern English era, but it is inevitable. It is not my intention to suggest against all glaring evidence that Early Modern England turned into a secular society and that no one has noticed this so far. Yet, knowing that history does not simply move into one determined direction, but that there are currents, undercurrents and counter-currents that vie against each other until one of them emerges dominantly, I propose to look at how the treatment of the devil and the demonic / daemonic reflects upon the tendencies to put man more into the centre of the universe / society than a focus on the religious aspects would allow. What does the way the devil is treated tell us when we see him as an invention of man resulting from his attempt to make sense of the world rather than as a creature of God? In this light, Chapter I looks at the development of the devil as relevant for this context, from his humble beginnings in Mesopotamia, via his rare occurrences in the Old Testament and increasing prominence in the New Testament, until he becomes a full-blown character of his own right in Mediaeval and Early Modern England.

Parts I and II will then have a close look at the treatment of the devil in relation to humanity, and mankind's behaviour in its dealing with the supernatural, in a limited number of plays rather than opting for a more comprehensive analysis of works that stage devils and broach the issue of the preternatural. I will look in detail at the works in question in order to highlight in how far human beings are consciously or unconsciously freeing themselves from the (self-imposed) influence of the supernatural. Unlike Chambers and Cox, I will apply an inversion of the

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dialectics of creation. Traditionally, creation myths see man recording the history of how gods / a god / God created the world and all that is in it. It is true that man did not come to see himself as the active creator of these myths until a long time after the Early Modern English period, when such an interpretation of events would have been presumptuous and hubristic—akin to the sin that caused the fall of the angels. Nevertheless, the creators of plays, communally or individually, could not help but infuse their creations with anthropocentric ideas of their own. These tendencies become more pronounced over the centuries: as playwrights gradually assert their independence from the stories that their characters derive from, the writers are faced with the problem of legitimising the more prominent position of man after they have established it as a reflection of the changes that are taking place in society. Human demiurges / playwrights need to propose answers to the questions that arise when they return man to the position he had before he set out to explain the natural phenomena that surrounded him, a position he gave up in the process of shaping divine creators as whose child he came to see himself. In the society that saw the productions of these plays each of these efforts in turn effected a gradual and more or less perceptible change of the attitude towards the supernatural.

Chapters II and III in Part I will deal with the Mystery and Morality plays that the Middle Ages produced in the run-up to the flowering of English theatres under Elizabeth I (1533-1603; reigned from 1558) and James I (1566-1625; King of England from 1603). They will look at how the playwrights introduced variations to the image of the devil of theology in plays that are closely linked to the traditional stories of the Bible, as well as plays that move away from such creative limitations, putting man and his relationship to the world increasingly in the centre. Even as early as this, man is ready to assume his responsibilities, although he still depends on

the divine. Next, Chapters IV, V, and VI take the study into the days of Early Modern England proper. The three plays, *Grim the Collier of Croydon* (1600) by William Haughton (mid-1570s-1605), *If This Be not a Good Play, the Devil Is in It* (1611) by Thomas Dekker (c. 1572-1632), and *The Devil Is an Ass* (1616) by Ben Jonson (1572-1637) put devils centre-stage. Each of them has devils sent to earth in order to increase the number of souls that are damned in hell. The plays are treated in their chronological order of creation to show that the hold the devils have over mankind lessens dramatically in the course of the sixteen years that separate the first from the last.

Chapters VII, VIII and IX in Part II change the focus of the investigation. While the devil is, or would like to be, the active agent in the aforementioned plays, it is man himself who would like to see himself in control over the supernatural in *Doctor Faustus* (A-Text c. 1588-92) by Christopher Marlowe (1564-93), *The Devil's Charter* (1606) by Barnabe Barnes (1569?-1609), and *The Tempest* (1611) by William Shakespeare (1564-1616). In all three plays, the main human characters' drive for power leads them to take control over their lives without their having any form of benign authority standing by their side to assist them. In effect, Faustus, Alexander VI, and Prospero need to take their respective fates in their own hands in order to substitute their own visions of the world for the ones they have come to replace by their very act of striving for power. The chronological analysis of the plays reflects that attitudes in Early Modern English society have changed and reveals in how far Faustus and Alexander have taken on more than they bargained for and fail, while Prospero's wiser approach allows him to succeed in his endeavours.

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Finally, Part III presents *The Birth of Merlin* as a test case for the previous findings. Neither the author nor the exact date of the play are known, and its temporal and spatial settings take us away from the focus of the investigation so far. This very indeterminacy allows us to see whether the development that has become evident in Parts I and II is purely accidental, or whether it can also be traced in a play that has no immediate relevance for the era under scrutiny, and yet stems from it. It also allows us to find an answer to the question whether the treatment of the devil depends on the setting of the play as such rather than the immediate influence of the time and society that saw its creation. A similar insight is gained in relation to the question of the human being taking on power against the prevalent dictates of society.

In each of the analyses of the plays in all three parts, the attention is directed to two aspects, namely the interaction of the devils and men on stage *per se*, as well as the way in which the playwright himself treats the image of the devil in relation to the tradition that he takes him from.

Being instated as an archangel, Satan made himself multifariously objectionable and was finally expelled from Heaven. Halfway in his descent he paused, bent his head in thought a moment and at last went back. “There is one favor that I should like to ask,” said he.

“Name it.”

“Man, I understand, is about to be created. He will need laws.”

“What, wretch! you his appointed adversary, charged from the dawn of eternity with hatred of his soul—you ask for the right to make his laws?”

“Pardon; what I have to ask is that he be permitted to make them himself.”

It was so ordered.

“Satan,” Ambrose Bierce, *The Enlarged Devil’s Dictionary*.

I – Creating and Recreating the D(a)emonic

In the beginning God created ye heauen and the earth. [...] Furthermore God said, Let vs make man in our image according to our likenes, and let them rule ouer the filh of the sea, and ouer the foule of the heauen, and ouer the beaftes, & ouer all the earth, and ouer euerie thing that crepeth & moueth on the earth.

(Gen. 1:1 & 1:26)¹

Change is the essence of all creation. Ever since God conceived human beings on the sixth day of creation, mankind, having been commanded to rule, has not ceased to play the selfsame trick on God, creating him in its own image in turn. With the passage of time, people have unswervingly created and recreated him according to their own perceptions, to their own changing fashions and beliefs, and to their own advantage.

¹ Complete bibliographical references to the Bible and the other copy texts of the main works which this study deals with as well as abbreviations used within the main body of the text can be found in the Bibliography on page 391. The Latin originals of texts are given for reference purposes in the appendices.

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The process of creation has never been easy. Even though “God sawe all that he had made, & lo, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31), he also says of Himself that He encompasses both good and evil: “I forme the light and creat darkenes: I make peace & creat euil: I the Lord do all these things” (Isa. 45:74). Man was created in God’s likeness, nurturing an amalgamation of good and evil tendencies, projecting both the benign and malevolent aspects of his nature on to the deity he worships. This inevitably had far-reaching and disturbing implications once God (was) changed into the loving and forgiving Father of the New Testament. When polytheism developed into monotheism, God became good and evil at the same time. It became therefore necessary to (re)create a figure to embody the evil tendencies that could not possibly be ascribed to a loving deity. It seems that the creation of an elusive figure of evil that became known under many an epithet was ultimately unavoidable.²

As far as all aspects of the supernatural, of Good and Evil, of God and the Devil, are concerned, there is nothing that is fixed for all time, even though Religion claims to profess Eternal Truths. In this respect, God seems to be in a better position than the Fiend in any of his incarnations. After all, he is “I AM THAT I AM” (Exod. 3:14), “ α and ω , the beginning & the end, the first and the last” (Rev. 22:13), unchanging throughout time. God at least has the benefit of His priests who endeavour to ascertain and maintain the purity of His word and to keep Him a reasonably fixed entity whose nature appears to partake of the eternal from the limited vantage point of the individual human being and his short lifespan. The same is true to a certain extent for the devil in that he is regarded as a kind of antithesis to

² See chapters 4, “Contrariety”, 5, “Inversion”, and 6, “The Devil, God’s Ape” of Part I in Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon: 1997) 43-93 for a discussion of the fated relationship between God and the devil. Nathan Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England*, Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006) bases his study on Clark’s findings.

God. In the course of the history of Christianity, scholars such as St Augustine of Hippo (354-430) or St Thomas Aquinas (c. 1224-74) have striven to find him an undisputed place and stature within the canonical writings of the Church, whose leaders have always attempted, more or less honestly and more or less successfully, to establish the Truth. There is, however, no denying that this truth has always been influenced by the pressures and givens of the moment and has therefore been susceptible to the need for adaptation and constant change. This is a difficult process for any body that professes to proclaim an Eternal Truth. Still, Satan, mankind's "appointed adversary,"³ has accordingly earned his place, under varying denominations, in official doctrine. The position and portrayal of the members of his kingdom, however, have always been vaguer and more blurred. Although there are many stock phrases, fundamental signs, and ever-recurring names, no universally accepted canon law of demonology has been developed: demons and devils, all kinds of fairies and spirits, come and go with folklore and popular beliefs.⁴ As a result, the realm of Satan is continuously changing and shifting according to the superstitions of the people he encounters on his travels in the wake of God's conquest of the earth. When one looks at the history of the supernatural figures that people our faith and imagination, the question of who creates and who undoes takes on unsuspected dimensions and complications.

³ "Satan," Ambrose Bierce, *The Enlarged Devil's Dictionary* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989).

⁴ In the *grimoires* of the Middle Ages, one can detect a "great variability as a distinguishing feature of manuscript conjuring books. [...] [W]ith the conjuring books scribes freely altered, combined, added, and deleted material." Barbara A. Mowat, "Prospero's Book," *SQ* 52 (2001) 1-33 (8). The same holds true for magic: "the study of Renaissance magical theory is enormously complicated by the imprecision of terminology and by variations in kinds of magic, many of which seem to overlap or duplicate one another. Discussions of magic are further obfuscated by a deliberate vagueness on the part of philosophers about their specific beliefs." Barbara Howard Traister, *Heavenly Necromancers: The Magician in English Renaissance Drama* (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1984) 8.

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I-1 – Yahweh: God and Devil

The Hebrew people developed first a henotheistic⁵ and eventually a monotheistic system of beliefs in the midst of a region of dualistic or polytheistic religions. At first, Yahweh was not the unanimously accepted supreme deity even among the Hebrew people themselves: “I wil furely deftroy all things fromu of the land, faith the Lord. [...] I wil also stretche out mine hand vponu Iudáh, and vpon all the inhabitants of Ierufalém, & I wil cut of the remnant of Báal fromu this place” (Zeph. 1:2 & 4). Given such strife among deities, it is necessary for Zephaniah to stress Yahweh’s avenging character trait. Belief in rival deities, or, inconceivably, disbelief in any supernatural being, was not to be tolerated. To assure his survival in a time and region that were as clustered with deities as the heavens are with stars, Yahweh repeatedly had to show his ability to protect himself and his people throughout the early books of Scripture. Cultural interaction inevitably led to neighbouring creeds influencing one another. Gradually, Yahweh imposed himself as the primary divinity of his people, asserting his hegemony among many a thriving deity, as evidenced in Psalm 82. In it, “God standeth in the affemblie of gods: he iudgeth among gods. [...] I haue faid, Ye are gods, and ye all are children of the moft High. But ye fhall dye as a man, & ye princes, fhall fall like others.” (Ps. 82:1 & 6-7).⁶ Yahweh unambiguously announces the death of all the gods beside him. At the same time, the Psalmist implicitly asserts Yahweh’s timeless supremacy as a judge, and as the creator of the lesser gods by an act of speech—“I haue faid”—reminiscent of the

⁵ Henotheism is the “belief in one god as the deity of the individual, family, or tribe, without asserting that he is the only God: considered as a stage of religious belief between polytheism and monotheism.” (“Henotheism”, *OED*)

⁶ For a detailed analysis of the eight verses of Psalm 82 see Peter Höffcken, “Werden und Vergehen der Götter,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 39 (1983) 129-37.

Creation in Genesis and foreshadowing the beginning of the Gospel according to John.⁷ Though difficult to date, Psalm 82 comes at a moment when the development from polytheism to monotheism was well on its way.

The Old Testament writers make it appear as if it had always been Yahweh's intention to come into his own as the one and only God of the Hebrew people. For them, the development was laid down from time immemorial in the plan of the omnipotent Creator-God. The scientific mind, on the other hand, would argue thus: natural phenomena are turned into deities that are subsequently more or less dissociated from their initial stimulus, a development that eventually leads to the eradication of rival gods and the creation of monotheistic systems, in which one god asserts his supremacy over all the others once a culture has reached a certain required level of development. Such a development seems predestined, too. In Mesopotamia, for instance, there were at one point more than 3,000 recorded deities, the sheer number of which caused confusion, even among believers themselves:

a god worshipped under the same name in two different places might have two quite different cults and would then be distinguished as [...] Ištar (Inana) of Arba'il or Ištar of Uruk, or Nineveh. [...] In due course the overall number of deities was reduced by the expedient of equating or regarding as forms of each other deities whose character was similar. At its most extreme this led to the so-called monotheistic tendencies of the cult of Marduk, in which, at one point, *all* the other male gods' names were alleged to be no more than the "names of Marduk."⁸

⁷ In Early Modern England the power of the word to shape will be dismantled before a new order can be established. See Chapter VIII-8 on page 277.

⁸ "gods and goddesses," Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 2nd ed. (London: British Museum P, 1998) 98.

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For the chroniclers / creators of Yahweh’s lore, however, it is clear that God could not have allowed such Darwinistic notions. He is in control, and the proof of this is put into Scripture. The saying of Deuteronomy, “For the Lord your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, mightie, & terrible” (Deut. 10:17), is superseded at last by Yahweh’s action chronicled in Psalm 82. He has been patient long enough, stomaching his people’s unbelief: “They offred vnto deuils, not to God, *but* to gods whome they knewe not: newe *gods* that came newly vp, whome their fathers feared not. Thou haft forgotten the mightie God, *that* begate thee, & haft forgotten God that formed thee” (Deut. 32:17f). In Psalm 82, these “deuils” and “newe gods” must go. In this way, Yahweh and / or his people rewrite the story of creation. The child becomes father to the man, and the Psalmist is able to invite Yahweh to claim his inheritance at last: “O God, arife, *therefore* iudge thou the earth: for thou shalt inherite all nations” (Ps. 82:8). From the point of view of the faithful, such must have been Yahweh’s plan all along, to be fulfilled when the world was ready for it. From the point of view of the modern scientist, the evidence shows the religious leaders’ endeavours to adapt their creed in, and to, a changing environment.

The region where Yahweh was revealed, or revealed himself, was the home of many cults with countless deities constantly created and uncreated. That this was the case is not only evidenced in Holy Scripture, but also recognised in Early Modern England. Reginald Scot (1538?-99), who was widely read, but whose scientific methods differed from those of modern days, explains the existence of deities in the following way:

Yea, euen as filuer and gold are made idols vnto them that loue them too well, and féeke too much for them: fo are thefe holie men and women

made idols by them that worship them, and attribute vnto them such honor, as to God onelie apperteineth. [...] The heathen gods were for the most part good men, and profitable members to the commonwealth wherein they liued, and deferued fame, &c: in which respect they made gods of them when they were dead; as they made diuels of such emperors and philofophers as they hated, or as had deferued ill among them.⁹

Without entering into the complex issue of the development of monotheistic Judaism or Christianity, Scot recognises that there is an understandable yet deplorable tendency in men to worship that which seems superior to one's own abilities or possessions. In this respect, even Yahweh, who seems originally to have been a storm god, does not stand alone but appears to be a conflation of the traits of the gods El, a deity of divine eternity who was gradually eclipsed as Yahweh was on the rise, and Baal, another storm god who comes to be Yahweh's rival.¹⁰ Yahweh himself evolves to become the Lord God of Hosts and from thence eventually the Father within the Christian Trinity.

Yet, in the same way as the Christian God grew by interaction with surrounding cultures, he became himself a deity in other religious systems and was adapted to their prevalent ideas. As such, he is sometimes conflated with the Platonic idea of a demiurge or creative principle. From here, he develops into one of the forces of evil

⁹ Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft. Heerevnto is added a treatise vpon the nature and substance of spirits and diuels* (London: William Brome, 1584) Bk XVII, ch. 25 (529). The theory derives from Euhemerus, a third-century BC Sicilian who "maintained that the deities of Hellenic mythology were deified men and women, and pretended to cite authentic records of their lives" ("Euhemerism," *OED*). For Scot, this development is equally applicable to the heathens of the past and to the "papifts" of his time. On the whole, although Scot tries to understand and explain the process, he disapproves of the deification of people, and even more of the adoration of Saints by the Catholics. In the same vein, he suggests that the word "Diuill" is made up of the stem "diui" (gods, saints) with "Il" added to it (Bk XVII, ch. 25 [529]).

¹⁰ See "Yahweh יהוה," Karel van der Toorn et al., eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible (DDD)*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1999) 910-19. Compare "El אֵל," (*DDD*, 274-80), "Baal בעל," (*DDD*, 132-39), and "God (I)" (*DDD*, 352-65) for "Elohim". A large number of the major deities seem to have been storm gods: so were Marduk and Zeus / Jupiter. *DDD* lists fifteen different Baal divinities, Baal Zebub being one among them.

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of Gnosticism: “The world, produced from evil matter and possessed by evil demons, cannot be a creation of a good God; it is mostly conceived of as an illusion, or an abortion, dominated by Yahweh, the Jewish demiurge, whose creation and history are depreciated.”¹¹ The God of one religion turns into the Satan of another.

The God who originated in the Middle East does not only extend his wings westward. The influence of Christianity can even be felt further afield, in the Buddhism of the Far East. After his return from a mission of embassy to Thailand, the French Jesuit Guy Tachard (1648-1712) publishes reports of Buddhist beliefs which are “a monstrous mixture of Christianity and the most ridiculous Fables.”¹² In his narrative he speaks of “*Sommonokhodom* (fo the *Siamefe* call the God whom at present they adore)”¹³ and his brother “*Thevathat* [who] makes a Schism and declares himself against his Brother.”¹⁴ Thevathat’s mind is scientifically inclined rather than spiritually, and, although “desir[ing] to be God, but not being really fo, he was ignorant of a great many things, which his Brother perfectly knew.”¹⁵ As a result, the religion he founded, Christianity, is imperfect: since Thevathat knew nothing of the “Doctrine of the Transmigration of Souls, [...] we who are his Disciples find nothing of all those things in the Books he hath left us [and] our Scriptures [are] full of obscurities and doubts.”¹⁶ Thevathat shares with Christ the form of punishment: Sommonokhodom, his brother and judge, condemns Thevathat,

¹¹ “Gnosticism,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 1994 ed. The optimistic elements in Hermeticism went even further, glorifying created man beyond any other creature: “The Hermetic *Asclepius* contains some remarkable passages in which man is cited with *approval* as the maker of earthly gods.” Peter J. French, *John Dee: The World of an Elizabethan Magus* (London: Routledge, 1972) 85. It would take a long time for people to be allowed to breathe such heresies again without fear for life and limb.

¹² Guy Tachard, *A Relation of the Voyage to Siam Performed by Six Jesuits* (London: T. B., 1688; rpt. Bangkok: White Orchid P, 1985) Bk 6 (289).

¹³ Tachard, *Voyage to Siam*, Bk 6 (289).

¹⁴ Tachard, *Voyage to Siam*, Bk 6 (293).

¹⁵ Tachard, *Voyage to Siam*, Bk 6 (293).

¹⁶ Tachard, *Voyage to Siam*, Bk 6 (294).

along with his followers, for the crimes against his brother and makes him suffer in the eighth habitation of hell: “he was fastened to a Crofs with great nails, [...] on his head he had a Crown of Thorns, [...] and to compleat his Mifery, the Infernal place burnt him without confuming of him.”¹⁷ Tachard has no doubt that Thevathat is Christ. Analysing the strategy of the Buddhist religion, the Jesuit concludes:

The fimilitude that is to be found in some points betwixt their Religion and ours, making them believe that Jefus Chrif, is the very fame with that *Thevathat* mentioned in the Scriptures, they are perfwaded that feeing we are the Difciples of the one, we are alfo the followers of the other, and the fear they have of falling into Hell with *Thevathat*, if they follow his Doctrine, fuffers them not to hearken to the propofitions that are made to them of embracing Chriftianity. That which moft confirms them in their prejudice, is that we adore the Image of our Crucified Saviour, which plainly repreffents the punifhment of *Thevathat*.¹⁸

In this way, someone’s god becomes the devil of another, all at the hand of the creative ingenuity of mankind.

I-2 – Astaroth: From Goddess to Demon

Evidently, the adaptation of the roles and statutes of divine figures extends over time and space, and across the entire spectrum of deities, whose fate at the hands of popular belief and official doctrine cannot be predicted. Astarte is one case in point of a goddess who has managed to keep a hold on the minds of man from roughly the

¹⁷ Tachard, *Voyage to Siam*, Bk 6 (295f). The reference could also have found its way into Buddhism via Manichæism, a dualistic religion “which resembles Iranian and Indian religions, Christianity, Buddhism, and Taoism” (“Manichæism,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 1994 ed.). Its founder, Mani (214/5-74/7), also died by crucifixion. The field of influence of Manichæism also extended further, and more readily, into the Far East than that of Christianity.

¹⁸ Tachard, *Voyage to Siam*, Bk 6 (296f).

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fifteenth century BC right through to the Middle Ages and beyond: (s)he will be highly instrumental in the destruction of Alexander VI in *The Devil's Charter*.¹⁹

The name is found in Ugaritic (*ttrt* for *Attart[u]*), Phoenician (*štrt* for *Ashtart*), Hebrew (*Aštōret*), Egyptian (*st̄rt*, *st̄rt*, or *istrt*) and Greek (*Astartē*), and consequently related to, and the counterpart of, the Akkadian *Aš-tar-[tum?]* for *Ishtar*, the goddess of love and war.²⁰ She appears to be the Evening Star, Venus, deified. In Ugarit, as well as in Egypt, she is seen as an armed consort of Baal, although she does not seem to have had a relationship with him. In Egypt, where Seth and Baal are conflated, Seth takes the daughters of Re, namely Anat and Astarte, as his wives. Here, Astarte is a war-goddess. She was also an important female deity in Phoenicia. The goddess further extends her mighty arms into various other Mediterranean cultures: “she became assimilated with the Egyptian deities Isis and Hathor, and in the Greco-Roman world with Aphrodite, Artemis, and Juno, all aspects of the Great Mother.”²¹ The Aramaic goddess Atargatis also takes on traits of Ashtart, who retains a life of her own, too. As she is a rival deity to Yahweh, it does not come as a surprise that the Hebrews did not flatter her greatly:

Hebrew scholars now feel that the goddess Ashtoreth mentioned so often in the Bible is a deliberate conflation of the Greek name Astarte and the Hebrew word *boshet*, “shame,” indicating the Hebrew contempt for her cult. Ashtaroth, the plural form of the goddess's name in Hebrew, became a general term denoting goddesses and paganism.²²

¹⁹ See Chapter VIII.

²⁰ See “Astarte עשתרת,” *DDD*, 109-14.

²¹ “Astarte,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 1994 ed. To be consistent, the list should mention Hera instead of Juno. Hathor was a goddess of the sky and of women.

²² “Astarte,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 1994 ed. Referring to the generic expressions, *DDD* likens the Hebrew *bē'ālīm wēhā'aštārōt* to the Akkadian *ilānu u ištarātu*, meaning “gods and goddesses” (“Astarte עשתרת,” 114). See also Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992) 6, for a concise impression of the interaction between the various Middle and Near Eastern cultures. The idea of one divinity having differing

There are nine occurrences of the divine name Ashtart in the Old Testament, where there appears to be a temple consecrated to Ashtart: “they layed vp his [Saul’s] armour in ye houfe of Afhtaróth” (1 Sam. 31:10). It is in this latter form that the name eventually reappears as the one of one of the principal, now male, demons frequently found in occult literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535) places him within the nine degrees of the order of evil spirits:

In the eighth place are the Accusers, or the Inquisitors, whose prince is *Astarath*, that is, a searcher out: in the Greek language he is called *Diabolos*, that is an accuser, or calumniator, which in the Revelation is called the accuser of the brethren, accusing them night and day before the face of our God.²³

In this way, Astaroth and the devil are conflated into one personality. And there is more Agrippa knows to report about the goddess turned demon:

We find also in sacred writ that many names of evil demons had their rise from most wicked men, or from the habitation of wicked men; as the name *Astaroth*, which is the name of an evil demon, was formerly the

names throughout the world is also expressed in *The Golden Ass* by Lucius Apuleius (c. 125-c. 175): “my name, my divinity is adored throughout all the world, in divers manners, in variable customs, and by many names. For the Phrygians that are the first of all men call me the Mother of the gods at Pessinus; the Athenians, which are sprung from their own soil, Cecropian Minerva; the Cyprians, which are girt about by the sea, Paphian Venus; the Cretans which bear arrows, Dictynnian Diana; the Sicilians, which speak three tongues, infernal Proserpine; the Eleusians their ancient goddess Ceres; some Juno, other Bellona, other Hecate, other Rhamnusia, and principally both sort of the Ethiopians which dwell in the Orient are enlightened by the morning rays of the sun, and the Egyptians, which are excellent in all kind of ancient doctrine, and by their proper ceremonies accustom to worship me, do call me by my true name, Queen Isis.” Trans. William Adlington (Ware: Wordsworth, 1996) Bk 11 (187f). Latin on page 381.

²³ Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, trans. James Freake, ed. Donald Tyson (St Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2003) Bk 3, ch. 18 (510). See also Tyson’s note on Astaroth: “Since she is the female counterpart of Baal (Judges 2:13) and is said to have been depicted with horns by Lucian and Herodian, she is supposed to have been a Moon goddess. [...] In the medieval grimoires Astaroth is metamorphosed into a male demon” (514).

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name of the city of *Og*, king of *Basan*, in which dwelt giants; in like manner *Astaroth* was formerly the city of the *Amorrhæi*.²⁴

For Scot’s reader, this sounds peculiarly familiar. In his exposition about *Astaroth*, Scot is not ashamed to garner more of his information from *Agrippa*, once more enhancing it with material from other sources:

Astaroth, which (as *Iofephus* faith) was the idol of the *Philiftines*, whome the *Iewes* tooke from them at *Salomons* commandement, and was also worshipped of *Salomon*. Which, though it signifie riches, flocks, &c: yet it was once a citie belonging to *Og* the king of *Bafan*, where they saie the giants dwelt. In these respects *Astaroth* is one of the speciall diuels names in *Salomons* coniuration, and greatlie employed by the coniuors.²⁵

For all such dabblers in black art as *Alexander VI*, *Astaroth* was a powerful member of the underworld, which naturally made him equally tempting and dangerous to invoke and raise.

Astaroth is a great and strong duke, comming fourth in the shape of a fowle angell, sitting vpon an infernall dragon, and carrieng on his right

²⁴ *Agrippa*, *Occult Philosophy*, Bk 3, ch. 28 (553). Tyson’s note on “*Amorrhæi*” reads: “*Og* was one of the two Amorite kings who ruled beyond Jordan. See Deut. 4:47” (555). For the giants see Num. 21:33.

²⁵ Scot, *Discoverie*, Bk XVII, ch. 19 (519). The giants Scot refers to are presumably the offspring of “the sonnes of God” and “the daughters of men” (Gen. 6:2). According to the first book of *Enoch*, the promiscuous desire of “the angels, the sons of heaven,” (1 *Enoch* 6:2) led to their being cast out from heaven and the destruction of almost all mankind in the Flood (Gen. 6-8). Scot also mentions that *Astarte*, “fold or flocke, is the name of a shée idol at *Sydonia*, whom *Salomon* worshipped: some thinke it was *Venus*” (*Discoverie*, Bk XVII, ch. 19 [519]); and: “*Astartes* (being as *Cicero* writeth the fourth *Venus*, who was she, as others affirme, whom *Salomon* worshipped at his concubines request) was the goddesse of the *Affyrians*” (*Discoverie*, Bk XVII, ch. 23 [525]). As *Astarte* is manifestly female, while *Astaroth* is a male demon, it is not clear whether Scot consciously equated the two figures. For the book of *Enoch* see H. F. D. Sparks, *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984). If still in doubt, one need only turn to *Weyer* to find the whole truth: “*Astarte*, which seems to be derived from ‘sheepfold’ or ‘flock, herd,’ is the name of a goddess of the Sidonians, who was worshipped by Solomon. Many think her to have been Sidonian *Venus*.” *De præstigiis dæmonum*, Bk 1, ch. 5 (13).

hand a viper: he anfwereth trulie to matters present, past, and to come, and also of all secrets. [...] he faith he fell not of his owne accord. He maketh a man woonderfull learned in the liberall sciences, he ruleth fourtie legions. Let euerie exorcist take heed, that he admit him not too neere him, bicause of his stinking breath.²⁶

In the light of this terrifying description, one cannot help but admire Alexander VI's suicidal bravery. Still, trying to pit his wit against that of the devil, he must find out to his detriment how misled his belief and endeavours really were.²⁷

I-3 – Satan: Rival Deity, Messenger, Accuser, Arch-enemy

While Astaroth and countless legions of his fellow devils have largely passed out of our collective memory, Satan, or the devil²⁸—either conflated into one, or separate beings in their own right—has not only managed to survive, but also to grab a prominent hold on man's imagination and daily life.

Satan started his career inconspicuously enough, with a mere four occurrences of the word, possibly used as a name for a divine being, in the Old Testament. In Numbers, the Angel of the Lord whom Balaam encounters is described as *śātān*, who is “Yahweh's messenger, not his arch-enemy, and he acts in accordance with Yahweh's will rather than opposing it. [...] [T]he ‘real’ *śātān* / adversary in

²⁶ Scot, *Discoverie*, Bk XV, ch. 2 (384). “Exorcist” takes the obsolete meaning of “one who calls or pretends to call up spirits by magical rites” (*OED*, 2).

²⁷ Compare Chapter VIII, especially part 1.

²⁸ “The term ‘devil’ is a rendering of the Greek word *διάβολος*, used as a loan word by Latin Christian writers as *diabolus*. As a proper noun in intertestamental Jewish texts and Christian writings the word denotes the great Adversary of God and righteousness, the Devil. It is so used in the Septuagint as a translation for the Hebrew *śātān* [...], and appears often with this meaning in the New Testament [...]. In ancient Greek usage, however, *διάβολος* was an adjective generally denoting something or someone ‘slandorous’ and ‘defamatory’.” “Devil *Διάβολος*,” *DDD*, 244-49 (quotation 244). See also “Satan *שָׂטָן*, *Σατανᾶς*,” *DDD*, 726-32; Almut Neumann, *Verträge und Pakte mit dem Teufel* (St Ingbert: Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 1997) 15-36; Roskoff, *Geschichte des Teufels* (170-92).

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Numbers 22 is none other than Yahweh himself.”²⁹ In the book of Job, “the children of God came and stode before the Lord, Satán came also among them.”³⁰ Here, the original word *hasśātān*, article plus noun, denotes an accuser. Though “challeng[ing] God at a very profound level, he is nonetheless subject to God’s power and [...] acts on Yahweh’s instructions.”³¹ In Zechariah, Joshua, the high priest, also appears before a tribunal of the Most High, “standing before the Angel of the Lord, and Satan stode at his right hand to refilt him” (Zech. 3:1). Again, the reference is to an accuser, but in this instance, “the *śātān* can be described as a projection into the celestial realm of the objections raised by the losing side”³² in the argument about Joshua’s role in the community. If this is so, then this reference to Satan contains germs of the Christian division between the realm of God and the dominion of the underworld, at least as far as the biblical tradition is concerned. The last mention of Satan comes in the First Book of Chronicles: “And Satan stode vp against Ifraél, and prouoked Daud to nomber Ifraél” (1 Chron. 21:1).³³ At last, this appears to be the emergence of God’s arch-enemy because “Yahweh is no longer thought to be responsible for malevolent behaviour toward humankind, and another divine being capable of acting efficaciously, independent of Yahweh, is.”³⁴ Yet, largely for chronological reasons, it cannot be taken for granted that *śātān* is used as a proper

²⁹ “Satan יָשׁוּ סָטָאָן, סַטַאָנָאָס,” *DDD*, 727. See Num. 22:22-35.

³⁰ Job 1:6. See also Job 2:1. The Authorised Version substitutes “the sons of God” for “the children of God.”

³¹ “Satan יָשׁוּ סָטָאָן, סַטַאָנָאָס,” *DDD*, 728. This agrees with the commentator’s note on Job 1:6 in the Geneva Bible: “This declareth that although Satán be aduerfarie to God, yet he is compelled to obey him, and do him all homage, without whose permifsion, & appointement he can do nothing.” This was common knowledge in Elizabethan days: “As the Lion that killed the difobedient Prophet returning from Bethel, did neither teare his deade body, nor hurt his Affe: after the same maner is the power of the Diuel, being a roaring Lion restrained, and kept within limits, so that he can extend his furie no further, then God giueth him leaue.” Frances Meres, *Palladis Tamia* (London: P. Short, 1598) 330^v; sig. Vv2^v.

³² “Satan יָשׁוּ סָטָאָן, סַטַאָנָאָס,” *DDD*, 729.

³³ Compare 2 Sam. 24:1, where the Lord, not Satan, assumes the role of the instigator of the census.

³⁴ “Satan יָשׁוּ סָטָאָן, סַטַאָנָאָס,” *DDD*, 730.

name, and the emergence of Satan as the antagonist to God, though influenced by apocryphal and pseudepigraphic works, can only clearly be detected in New Testament writings.

However, the development of a rival figure to God was only a matter of time if the question of His omnipotence and goodness were not severely to jeopardise belief in Him. At first, Belial, “the proper name of the Devil, the powerful opponent of God, who accuses people and causes them to sin,”³⁵ and Mastemah, “the Prince of the evil spirits who menace mankind [and who] is identified with Satan,”³⁶ fill the role that is gradually assigned to Satan. Myths of his fall come into existence, such as the one in the Apocryphal Life of Adam and Eve, where Satan is asked to pay reverence to Adam. He tells his own story (truthfully?) to Adam:

I will not worship an inferior and a younger *being than I am*. I am his senior in creation: before he was made I was already made: he ought to worship me. When the rest of the angels, who were under me, heard this, they *too* refused to worship him. And Michael said, Worship the image of God; and, if you will not worship him, you will make the Lord God very angry. And I said, If he is angry with me, I will set my seat above the stars of heaven and I will be like the Most High. And the Lord God was angry with me and banished me and my angels from our glory.³⁷

By and by, Satan throws off the shackles of God. Although he is still limited in his power, and although he still needs God’s permission to tempt man and test his faith, he has already acquired his own kingdom, and his aim is to enlarge it with as many fallen souls as possible. The many different names that refer to the adversary of

³⁵ “Belial בליעל,” *DDD*, 170.

³⁶ “Mastemah משטמה,” *DDD*, 554.

³⁷ The Life of Adam and Eve 14:3-16:1. Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*. Compare Wisd. Sol. 2:24: “thorow enuy of the deuil came death into the worlde;” and Luke 10:18: “I fawe Satan, like lightning, fall downe from heauen.” Satan implicitly admits that God made him.

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God—such as Satan, devil, enemy, Beelzebub, prince of this world, or father of lies³⁸—show that he is on the way to incarnate all evil in the world, although he is still differentiated from the demons and unclean spirits that plague people and that are exorcised by Jesus. At last, however, his character evolves more quickly:

Auch wenn in den Evangelien [...] noch seine alttestamentliche Stellung als Glaubensprüfer zu erkennen ist, so hat er sich in den Briefen und in der Offenbarung bereits von Gott gelöst und ist zu einem eigenständigen Wesen und zu einer die Feinde des Glaubens anführenden Macht geworden. Allerdings ist das Wirken des Teufels auch im Neuen Testament nicht ohne die Zulassung Gottes denkbar.³⁹

It was on this basis that, in the subsequent centuries, the Church Fathers built their lore of the devil.

Thousands of years of religious development do not succeed in reducing humankind’s belief in an evil supernatural being, despite Christianity’s insistence on the good in God and man. Paradoxically, or logically, the better God became, the more evil and powerful the devil grew. The further the Church spread throughout the world, the more nature spirits and supernatural creatures that peopled the subdued folklore needed to be taken in and assimilated in either God’s kingdom (as saints) or the devil’s realm. By the sixteenth century, the existence of the devil was almost a prerequisite for the existence of God himself. “There is no question nor theme (faith

³⁸ Mark 3:22; Matt. 13:39; Matt. 13:39; Mark 3:22; John 12:31; John 8:44. Scot reveals: “But *Calvine* faith; Where fathan or the diuell is named in the singlar number, thereby is meant that power of wickedness, that standeth against the kingdome of iustice. And where manie diuels are named in the scriptures, we are thereby taught, that we muft fight with an infinite multitude of enimies” (*Discoverie*, Bk XVII, ch. 16 [515]).

³⁹ “Even though his role as the tester of faith derived from the Old Testament is still recognisable in the Gospels, he has been detached from God in the Epistles and the Apocalypse. He has become a power in his own right, a leader of the enemies of the faith. However, even in the New Testament, his work is unthinkable without the permission of God.” Neumann, *Verträge*, 35f (my translation).

Hierome Cardone) so difficult to deale in, nor so noble an argument to dispute upon, as this of diuels and spirits. For that being confessed or doubted of, the eternitie of the foule is either affirmed or denied.”⁴⁰ Oppositions are absolutely necessary, and devils and demons have to exist to make God’s existence, and man’s existence on earth and in afterlife, conceivable and meaningful. This is confirmed by the notorious exorcist John Darrel (c. 1562-c. 1607): “If neither possession, nor witchcraft, (contrary to that hath bene so longe generally & confidently affirmed) why should we thinke that there are Divells? If no Divells, no God.”⁴¹ In this, Darrel has the support of one of the highest, albeit amateur, authorities, King James VI of Scotland / I of England:

Doubtlellie who denyeth the power of the Deuill, woulde likewise denie the power of God, if they could for thame. For since the Deuill is the verie contrarie opposite to God, there can be no better way to know God, then by the contrarie; as by the ones power (though a creature) to admire the power of the great Creator: by the fallhood of the one to confidder the trueth of the other, [...]: And so fourth in all the rest of the effence of God, and qualities of the Deuill.⁴²

If the existence of God is denied, then the entire social network breaks down and the floodgates to chaos are irrevocably opened wide. One way of reacting to this is dealing with the issue by trying to prop up the coherence of society with alternative values, as Jonson and Shakespeare attempt to do.⁴³ However, the only—and the more orthodox—conclusion that the timorous can conceive is that angels and, by

⁴⁰ Scot, *Discoverie*, Bk XVII, ch. 1 (489). Scot refers to Bk 16, ch. 93, “Dæmones et mortui,” of *De varietate rerum* (1577) by Gerolamo Cardano (1501-76).

⁴¹ *Triall of Maift. Dorrell* (1599) 8; Also quoted in Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 236 (note 5).

⁴² King James I, *Dæmonologie* (Edinburgh: Robert Waldegrave, 1597) Bk 2, ch. 7 (54f).

⁴³ See Chapters VI and IX.

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extension, fallen angels—devils and demons—exist, and that they “are creatures of God.”⁴⁴ This, however, does not mean that people should be allowed to give in to vain superstitions and any kind of necromancy, since they are beyond human understanding. Therefore, Scot recommends, “touching this myfterie of angels, let vs reuerentlie thinke of them, and not currioullie search into the nature of them, confidering the vileness of our condition, in respect of the glorie of their creation.” As for devils and stories of Lucifer, they are “vaine queftions, which *Paule* fpeaketh of.”⁴⁵

The probing into matters of the supernatural, and especially devils, could, of course, be potentially demystifying. In an age with awakening scientific curiosity, nothing that was created would stay off limits for long:

If devils were indeed part of the natural order, then their nature, like that of anything else, could presumably be described in itself, rather than as a perversion of angelic nature. A naturalization of the demonic therefore took place that made everything associated with it appear to be “natural” as well, including a host of folk beliefs and practices.⁴⁶

Yet, even so, superstitions are tenacious, and a lot of rationalism is needed in order to eradicate them.

⁴⁴ Scot, *Discoverie*, Bk XVII, ch. 10 (505). Scot professes to “thinke [this] with *Caluine*.” See book one, chapter one of Weyer’s, *De præstigiis dæmonum* for a Renaissance account of “The Origin of the Devil, the Time of His Creation, His essence, and His Fall” (title; 3-5).

⁴⁵ Scot, *Discoverie*, Bk XVII, ch. 10 (506). Scot does not give a reference to the passage he has in mind.

⁴⁶ Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 180.

I-4 – The Anatomy of Belial

Belial is another one of the devils who preserves a certain influence until well into the Renaissance. He is especially given a prominent role in the Mysteries and Moralities.⁴⁷ The term appears twenty-seven times in the Bible.⁴⁸ In the course of time and because of translation, or rather transliteration, from Hebrew into other languages, the term, which initially largely referred to physical forces and abstract concepts, gradually came to be personified. It is variously translated as “wickedness,” “worthless,” or “useless,” and variants include “Beliar” and “Belior.”

Belial is not unknown outside Scripture, and he appears as a force in other religions as well. In some contexts Belial is even the proper name of the Devil. The fact that he seems to have been assigned the role of God’s chief opponent, and that he kept it up to the plays of the Middle Ages, derives from the dualism, the opposition between good and bad, rooted in Zoroastrianism which holds that God will eventually triumph. In one instance this is also reflected in the New Testament. In what looks like an attempt to counteract the burgeoning dualistic Gnostic tendencies in the young Corinthian church, Paul cautions the Corinthians: “Be not vnequally yoked with the infideles: for what feloſhip hath the righteouſnes with vnrighteouſnes? and what communion hath the light with darkenes? And what concorde hath the Chriſt with Belial? or what parte hath the beleuer with the infidel?” (2 Cor. 6:14f).

Belial also crops up elsewhere. In the apocryphal Questions of Bartholomew, also (inaccurately) known as the Gospel of Bartholomew, the apostle, protected by

⁴⁷ See Chapters II-3 and III.

⁴⁸ “Belial בלעל,” *DDD*, 169-71.

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Jesus, from whom he draws strength for his faith, gets the chance to question the “adversary of men,”⁴⁹ who is graphically described as a most frightful figure indeed:

And the length of him was one thousand six hundred cubits and his breadth forty cubits, and his face was like lightning of fire and his eyes full of darkness. And out of his nostrils came a stinking smoke; and his mouth was the gulf of a precipice, and one of his wings was four-score cubits.⁵⁰

Despite the blood-curdling appearance, this devil cannot help but reveal the truth— “even if I would hide anything I cannot, for he who would convict me is near”⁵¹— when Bartholomew questions him about his identity:

If you will know my name, at the first I was called Satanael, which is interpreted a messenger of God, but when I rejected the image of God my name was called Satanias, that is, an angel that keeps hell (Tartarus). [...] For indeed I was formed the first angel; for when God made the heavens, he took a handful of fire and formed me first, Michael second, Gabriel third, Uriel fourth, Raphael fifth, Nathanael sixth, and other angels of whom I cannot tell the names.⁵²

Even though it seems unlikely that the mediaeval authors of the *Mysteries and Moralities* knew about the *Questions of Bartholomew* or about other pseudepigraphal books such as *Jubilees*, which also record the fall of the angels, the knowledge of Belial’s position in the hierarchy of demonology had somehow, in

⁴⁹ *Questions of Bartholomew*, 4:7; Elliott, *Apocryphal NT*, 661.

⁵⁰ *Questions of Bartholomew*, 4:13; Elliott, *Apocryphal NT*, 662.

⁵¹ *Questions of Bartholomew*, 4:27; Elliott, *Apocryphal NT*, 663.

⁵² *Questions of Bartholomew*, 4:25 & 28; Elliott, *Apocryphal NT*, 663.

certain traditions, made its way to the Middle Ages as being synonymous with the prince of darkness.

However, his status evolved through time and changed in importance depending on the position of the person who wanted to use him. Agrippa mentions him in his *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* (1531). Here his position is more ambiguous. Indeed, in the third book of Agrippa's work, Belial has been demoted and is merely a prince in the third order of the evil spirits, "the Vessels of Iniquity, which are also called the Vessels of Wrath."⁵³ The order regroups vessels of death, fury, wrath, destroying and slaying, "and their prince is *Belial*, which is interpreted without yoke or disobedient, a prevaricator and an apostate, of whom *Paul* to the Corinthians saith, what agreement hath Christ with *Belial*?"⁵⁴ Agrippa's work seems to be the source for *Hierarchie of Angells* (1635) by Thomas Heywood (c. 1573-1641). Among other things, the seventh tract deals with the fall of Lucifer and the hierarchy among the fallen angels where

The third Classe comprehends
Veffels of Wrath, who haue no other ends
Than to to [sic.] deuife all Mischiefes; *Belial* hee
Is call'd, for his approv'd Iniquitie.⁵⁵

Heywood also concurs with Agrippa *re* the interpretation of the demon's name: "the word [*Belial*]/ Imports an Out-Law without Yoke or Lord."⁵⁶ Scot, however, follows Weyer's *Pseudomonarchia dæmonum*. For him Belial is not among the

⁵³ Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy*, Bk 3, ch. 18 (509). Compare Jacobus Palladinus de Theramo, *Das Buch Belial* (Augsburg, 1473).

⁵⁴ Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy*, Bk 3, ch. 18 (509).

⁵⁵ Thomas Heywood, *The Hierarchie of Bleffed Angells* (London: Adam Islip, 1635) 436.

⁵⁶ Heywood, *Hierarchie*, 437.

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lesser devils: “Some faie that the king *Beliall* was created immediatlie after *Lucifer*, and therefore they thinke that he was father and feducer of them which fell being of the orders. For he fell firft among the worthier and wifer fort[.]”⁵⁷

Whereas followers of dark magic do not seem to have valued him too highly, he is made good use of in a sermon entitled *The Anatomie of Belial* (1602) by William Burton (c. 1545-1616). He bases his series of ten sermons on Pro. 6:12-15:

The vnthrifty man [or the man of Belijal] and the wicked man, or [the man of vanity] walketh with a froward mouth. 13. He maketh a figne with his eyes, he signifieth with his feete, he instructeth with his fingers. 14. Lewd things are in his heart, he imagineth euill continually, and raifeth vp contentions. 15. Therefore his destruction fhall come speedily, he fhall be destroyed fuddenly without recouery.⁵⁸

Basing his premise on the authority of “the Ebrew tongue,” Burton is able to equate the “vnthrifty man” with a “man of *Beliall*: that is, a lawleffe perfon.”⁵⁹ As he analyses the servant, he gets a pretty clear picture of the master:

This text may well be called the Anatomy of *Belial*, becaufe it fearcheth and openeth euery veine of him, and euery finew of him, to the very heart, and to that which is in the heart, as Anatomies do: and fheweth the caufes of euery fpirituall difeafe, and the effects of euery caufe, and what it is that bringeth the wicked man to his wofull end, as Anatomies doe.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Scot, *Discoverie*, Bk XV, ch. 2 (382).

⁵⁸ [William Burton,] *Ten Sermons vpon the First, Second, Third and Fourth Verfes of the fixt of Mathew. [...] Whereunto Is Annexed another Treatife Called the Anatomie of Belial* (London: Richard Field, 1602) 123. The additions in square brackets are Burton’s.

⁵⁹ Burton, *Belial*, 123.

⁶⁰ Burton, *Belial*, 123.

All this allows him to produce a graphic image of sinful behaviour which may, on the one hand, be a powerful deterrent, but on the other hand lead to rather ugly witch-hunts. Clearly, however, Belial was still very much in some people's minds around 1600, and he was also found to be fairly useful.

I-5 – The Roaring Devil Abroad

It is fairly evident that the real existence of devils, demons, and spirits is taken for granted up to the Renaissance and beyond. Publicly, neither the common people nor the leading church authorities doubt it.

According to St Thomas Aquinas, there was “the possibility of devils roaming through the earth, being used by Providence as means of purging the faith of humans.”⁶¹ The German reformer Martin Luther “retained a folk belief in elves, gnomes, fairies, sprites, and witches, and fearfully believed that ‘many regions are inhabited by devils. Prussia is full of them, and Lapland of witches.’ ”⁶² Indeed, Luther seems to have had no small role to play in the revalorisation of the devil, plunging the world into a renewed belief in supernatural evil after “the hey-day of humanism” which had transformed magic into that of “the devout, contemplative philosopher.” “because of Luther it [the age] became the age of the Devil abroad, going ‘like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.’ ”⁶³ Scot bases himself on

⁶¹ Margaret Ann O’Brien, “Christian Belief in *Doctor Faustus*,” *ELH* 37 (1970) 4. O’Brien refers to *Summa theologiae*, I, Q. 64, art. 4. See on page 220.

⁶² “Demons, Demon Possession,” *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992). Luther is quoted from Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury P, 1950). See also Roskoff, *Geschichte des Teufels*, “Luthers Glaube an den Teufel” (“Luther’s Belief in the Devil”) 361-427.

⁶³ John Henry Jones, introduction, *Faustus and the Censor*, by William Empson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) 5f. The quotation refers to 1 Peter 5:8. Compare Psalm 22:12-13: “Manie yong bulles haue compaffed me: mightie bulles of Balhán haue clofed me about. They gape vpon me with their mouthes, as a ramping and roaring lion.”

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evidence garnered from Scripture to conclude in favour of the existence of devils: “I denie not therefore that there are spirits and diuels, of such substance as it hath pleased GOD to create them. But in what place soeuer it be found or read in the scriptures, a spirit or diuell is to be vnderstood spirituallie, and is neither a corporall nor a visible thing.”⁶⁴ Even scientists, such as the German physician Johann Weyer, did not openly doubt the existence of the devil. He explains how the imagination functions and how it impresses images and illusions on man’s inner eye and then sets down how demons make use of this physical faculty, weakening the victim from within:

Having obtained from God the power of forming such apparitions and impressing them upon physical spirits of the soul, the demons use these forms to portray persons—now joyful, and engaged in eating, drinking, dancing, singing, and sexual intercourse—now sad, and devising or suffering every kind of evil—now human, now bestial, now smothering someone, now flying about. The sentient soul is imprinted with these forms as though with the things themselves. Hence it happens that a human being sometimes thinks that he is an ass shut up in a bag, or very often a flying eagle; and sometimes he seems to be carried from place to place with Diana and her nymphs or in some other company of silly women, and to join in dances, and travel far abroad, and be present at all sorts of other madness. These persons experience when waking what others see in sleep.⁶⁵

The idea itself is certainly not new. Scot, too, acknowledges that “[s]ome faie that they are onelie imaginations in the mind of man.”⁶⁶ Yet, he would never go as far as

⁶⁴ Scot, *Discoverie*, Bk XVII, ch. 13 (510).

⁶⁵ Weyer, *De præstigiis dæmonum*, Bk 3, ch. 8 (188f). Weyer continues by supporting his views with the help of Church authorities in a chapter entitled “How the devil corrupts the imagination of men and seems to prophesy: the views of Augustine” (Bk 3, ch. 9 [189]).

⁶⁶ Scot, *Discoverie*, Bk XVII, ch. 2 (492).

the Sadducees, a Jewish priestly sect who only recognised the five Mosaic books of the Torah as God’s indubitable revelation and as a consequence denied the immortality of the soul and the existence of angelic beings, devils and spirits. Such a (non-)belief is, of course, heretical and indefensible for Scot.⁶⁷ It is ironic that his remarks should earn him the censure of King James, who “feare[s] indeede, there be ouer many *Sadduces* in this worlde, that denies all kindes of *fpirites*,”⁶⁸ and who has not read his Scot very closely. James lashes out

againft the damnable opinions of two principally in our age, whereof the one called *SCOT* an Englishman, is not afhamed in publike print to deny, that ther can be fuch a thing as Witch-craft: and fo mainteines the old error of the Sadducees, in denying of *fpirits*.⁶⁹

Not only conjuring devils and spirits seems to have been potentially dangerous, but also dealing with them in any way whatsoever, as there was no telling how the authorities might misread any well-meant endeavour.⁷⁰ Even in 1616, Jonson’s *The Devil Is an Ass* was banned after one single performance only.

⁶⁷ See Scot, *Discoverie*, Bk XVII, ch. 2 (491).

⁶⁸ James I, *Dæmonologie*, Bk 2, ch. 7 (55).

⁶⁹ James I, *Dæmonologie*, Preface to the Reader (2^v).

⁷⁰ The devil is indeed a wily enemy of mankind, succeeding in setting believers against believers, deviating attention from himself. Commenting on book one, chapter eight of Weyer’s *De præstigijs dæmonum* entitled “The Devil’s Prophets, Enthusiasts, Pythian Women, and His Many Sibyls,” D. P. Walker notes “here, as elsewhere, the double-crosses of Wier’s Devil are so subtle as to make it almost impossible to distinguish him from God.” *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (London: Warburg Institute, 1958) 152. It is not clear whether man’s cleverness is not ultimately the devil’s greatest asset, for “the diuell indeed entreth into the mind, and that waie seeketh mans confusion.” Scot, *Discoverie*, Bk I, ch. 6 (13).

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I-6 – (Ab)Using the Devil

The church authorities were bound to use such a potent figure to their greatest advantage and the glory of the Church. In this sense, they were the first, and most successful, to assert their creative power over the figure.

Logically, the devil’s aims and the ones of the Church should be diametrically opposed. Satan, for one, believed that he had found the perfect ploy to use the very essence of God’s nature to undo him. For this purpose, he used a stratagem which Clark has termed “Inversion,” namely the idea that “Satan was not understood positively in terms of what he was, but only in terms of what he was not.”⁷¹ This theory touches the core of the devil’s nature:

Inversion was not simply a policy by which Satan undermined Christendom; it was what he was. [...] All contemporary demonologists reinforced the point by asserting that the Devil’s inversion represented a counterfeit, a dissembling mockery of the nature of God.⁷²

The Church, on the other hand, was equally convinced that its strategy would eventually lead it to triumph over the fiend. It was in its interest to present the devil as a frightening figure in order to show the people the way to safety in its bosom. Along with sermons from the pulpit, the Mystery and Morality plays in England serve this educational purpose. Now the devil appears on stage in a dark black coat with feathers, now he enters as the vice exemplifying sins that cause the disruption of the social order, such as uncharitable pride. The use of the figure always aims to purify the sinner, either by instilling cathartic fear, or by holding a mirror up to

⁷¹ Johnstone, *Devil and Demonism*, 15.

⁷² Johnstone, *Devil and Demonism*, 15.

nature to show the offenders where they erred. In this respect, all devils are firmly controlled by both God, whose creature the fiend is, and by those who minister his word on earth, who recreate the figure to serve as a powerful tool to control the (un)faithful.

At first sight, the devil gets his way as he is rewarded by being allowed to carry the sinner, whom he tempted and manipulated all along, off to hell. Ultimately, however, and to Satan's great dismay, the devil is revealed as a mere pawn in the game of chess for souls, played between God and man, rather than between God and the devil:

the devils function as prosecuting attorneys, ensuring that their claim to the damned is honored. Their victory is pyrrhic, however, for while they eagerly assert their right, they do so according to terms God established long before, and they thus implicitly concede the justice of God not only against the human damned but against themselves.⁷³

The evidence for this seems so conclusive at first sight as to make one pity the devil more than anything else. The ploy is not a new one, either. The apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus even goes as far as to attribute the defeat of Satan and the destruction of hell to Satan's own greed in trying to win as many souls for his kingdom as possible. In doing so, he was marvellously blinded and did not realise that he was courting disaster when he wanted to have the Son of God among his victims:

And Hades took Satan and said to him, "O Beelzebub, heir of fire and torment, enemy of the saints, through what necessity did you contrive that the King of Glory should be crucified, so that he should come here

⁷³ Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 27. Cox, however, does not see that these pyrrhic victories also empower man gradually to reclaim more of his agency from God.

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and strip us naked? Turn and see that not one dead man is left in me, but all that you gained through the tree of knowledge you have lost through the tree of the cross. All your joy is changed into sorrow. You wished to kill the King of Glory, but have killed yourself. For since I have received you to hold you fast, you shall learn by experience what evils I shall do to you. O arch-devil, the beginning of death, the root of sin, the end of all evil, what evil did you find in Jesus to procure his destruction? How did you dare to commit such great wickedness? How did you study to bring down such a man into this darkness, through whom you have been deprived of all who have died since the beginning?”⁷⁴

Hubris and pride, the same vices that caused Satan’s fall in the first place, again undo the devil.

This is a story that can be traced throughout the history of the representations of the devil, from the earliest days of Christianity to Elizabethan England and beyond. In early missionary tales, the devil is again and again robbed of what he believes is his due, either through the intervention of the larger community—as in the fourth-century *Life of Basilus*, Archbishop of Caesarea (†379)—or through the intercession of Mary—as in the Legend of Theophilus dating from the seventh century—or through the interference of Christ himself. The devil is left behind as the loser, even at moments when he believes himself to have gained the upper hand. It seems as if man, who always seeks new challenges, had created for himself an enemy with an in-built self-destruct button: useful for the safeguarding of morality, but at the end of the day strangely naïve despite all his ruses and ploys. Even people in Early Modern England could bear witness to this. According to popular lore, the devil had—once more—succeeded in interrupting a production of *Doctor Faustus* by mingling with

⁷⁴ “Christ’s Descent into Hell” of the Gospel of Nicodemus, 23:1. Elliott, *Apocryphal NT* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) 188f. The story was well known in Renaissance England and dramatised in Mystery plays.

the actors disguised as devils. The playhouse was thrown into confusion when people realised that there was one devil too many on stage. This alarmed audience and actors alike. The play was interrupted, the playhouse vacated. Yet, as pious religious sentiment ran high and repentance and contrition were at the top of everyone's mind, the devil's victory was short-lived:

The tradition concerning the occasion of the foundation [of Dulwich College] runs thus: that Mr. Alleyne, being a Tragedian and one of the original actors in many of the celebrated Shakespear's plays, in one of which he played a Demon, with six others, and was in the midst of the play surpriz'd by an apparition of the Devil, which so work'd on his Fancy, that he made a Vow, which he perform'd at this Place.⁷⁵

This was the origin of “the college of God's Gift,”⁷⁶ set up with the intention of providing education and almshouses for the poor. In this instance, not even the corrupting influence of the world could undo the good deed: “Notwithstanding all the solemnity of this deed of gift, the founder lived to change his mind upon a second marriage, when he was very desirous of revoking his charity, but was not allowed to.”⁷⁷ Two hundred years later, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) has (a frustrated or ensnaring) Mephistopheles introduce himself to Faust in similar terms. To the question of who or what Mephistopheles is, the spirit replies: “Ein Teil

⁷⁵ John Aubrey, *Natural History and Antiquities of Surrey* (1718-19) i.190; quoted in E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923) 424. Scot ridiculed such belief: “*J. Bodin* confesseth, that he is afraid to read such conjurations as *John Wierus* reciteth; least (belike) the divell would come up, and scratch him with his fowle long nailes. In which sort I woonder that the divell dealeth with none other, than witches and conjurors. I for my part have read a number of their conjurations, but never could see anie divels of theirs, except it were in a plaie. But the divell (belike) knoweth my mind; to wit, that I would be loth to come within the compasse of his clawes.” *Discoverie*, Bk XV, ch. 26 (443).

⁷⁶ Alan Palmer and Veronica Palmer, *Who's Who in Shakespeare's England* (1981; London: Methuen, 2000), “Alleyne, Edward,” 3.

⁷⁷ John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, ed. Richard Barber (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1982) 18. Even though the anecdote might be apocryphal, it still reflects the spirit of the age.

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von jener Kraft, / Die stets das Böse will und stets das Gute schafft.”⁷⁸ Ultimately, the devil’s actions appear to be self-defeating, “a manifestation of the myopia and self-absorption which constitute destructive moral choices and result in more of the same.”⁷⁹

However, such a one-sided view of the devil is just too good to be true. It did not take long for people to realise that he could be made to become an even more powerful tool to exercise control. After long years of persecution, the early Christian Church gradually became established securely and imposed itself upon other religions in and around the Roman Empire. The first decisive step for this, after Constantine I (280?-337) had recognised Christianity as a legal religion of the Roman Empire in 319, came in 392 when it was adopted as the official state religion under Emperor Theodosius I (347-95). The focus for Christianity then gradually shifted. Since the survival and domination of the religion was now assured, the next phase was the continuing conversion of people from other faiths. In this, the devil served to show how powerless other creeds were when they attempted to rival Christianity, and he helped to convince people of the superiority of Jesus Christ and the Christian God. When this process was completed more or less satisfactorily, the leaders could direct their attention to the suppression of countless rival sects and heretics, such as the Cathars and Albigenses (twelfth and thirteenth centuries) or the Bogomils (tenth to fifteenth centuries). For this end, the figure of the devil must have appeared almost as a gift sent by God that could be adapted and used on many occasions and in many ways by the Dominicans, the “Dogs of God,” and the Inquisition. This process was especially pronounced when the Pope and the Church

⁷⁸ “I am a part of the force that always wants Evil and always produces Good” (my translation). Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, ed. Erich Trunz (Munich: Beck, 1986), “Studierzimmer,” 1335f.

⁷⁹ Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 103.

of Rome came under political pressure during the fourteenth century. In a way, man's attempt at creating a spirit had backfired badly.

In adverse circumstances, the devil is particularly useful when it comes to eradicating possible enemies within the Church: even the slightest form of deviant behaviour can be interpreted as apostasy or the proof of the offender's having entered a league with the devil. The crime can then be punished accordingly without the accused standing much chance of proving their innocence. The list for this is gradually expanded over the centuries, ranging from practising a religion other than Christianity, via an active pact with the devil, to a passive pact with him, which comes about when one does not observe common Christian morals without, however, positively abjuring Christianity. In the High Middle Ages, it comes to include magic, fortune-telling, astrology, superstition, or even certain practices of medicine. When, in such a general atmosphere, the chief Inquisitor betrays manifest and compulsive misogynistic tendencies, the scene is set for disaster, which occurs, for instance, in the form of the witch-craft trials of the fifteenth century under Heinrich Kraemer (1430-1505). At this moment, the devil, with the active and constructive help of man, really has won a decisive battle against Christ, even from within the very bosom of the Church.

The more complex the figure of the devil had become in the course of centuries, the easier it was to fall into his snares without ever even realising it, even believing oneself to be acting to the best intentions for the greatest good of the Church, as Kraemer will almost certainly have thought. The situation certainly did not improve after Martin Luther caused the hiatus in the Christian Church. In these circumstances, all Christian churches were only too happy to bedevil their opponents. As Samuel Harsnett (1561-1631), Archbishop of York, concludes in his

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scathing, sarcastic and spiteful tirade against Catholics in general, and the Jesuit William Weston (1549/50-1615) and his followers in particular: all the papists aim at is to make English Protestants appear to be the “heires of Satan” and to make them “renounce theyr duty, loue, and allegeance to theyr naturall Soueraigne, and to fwear theyr fealty and obedience, to the vnnaturall monfter of hell,”⁸⁰ i.e. the Pope. Choosing one’s religion is less a matter of belief than a question of national loyalty. In England, all good Protestants came to see the Pope as the embodiment of Antichrist on earth.

I-7 – All the World’s a Stage

Whether the devil is one of God’s creatures, or whether he owes his thriving life to man, the result for mankind is none too advantageous. An enemy has been created and unleashed upon the earth that, at least in the Western world, imbued with the spirit of Christianity, has governed the minds and actions of people for a long time. After thousands of years of development, the devil has gradually managed to free himself from the servitude of his creator, whether it be God or man, and to stand on his own two cloven feet. The power of the creator has been transferred to the creature who comes to hold the creator in thrall. The stage is set for a battle of wills and wits that sees mankind pitted against the devil: each of the opponents attempts to create a new world advantageous to himself by making use of the other’s assets which either of them craves for himself. It is this drama that is repeatedly enacted on

⁸⁰ Samuel Harsnett, *A Declaration of Egregious Popifh Impoftures* (London: James Roberts, 1603) sig. V4^r; 151.

the English stage from the Middle Ages onwards up to the Early Modern English era.⁸¹

⁸¹ The development of the devil cannot be disassociated from the development of his dwelling place, Hell. See Alan E. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell—Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds* (London: UCL P, 1993) for a study of this question. His definition “Hell [...] is a divinely sanctioned place of eternal torment for the wicked” (3) is useful in that it succinctly expresses the underlying, tacit idea that was held about the place (or state of mind) in all religions that believe that people will be judged after they die.

PART I

--

THE DEVIL IN HIS OWN RIGHT

Everybody gets the Devil he deserves.

Arturo Pérez-Reverte, *The Dumas Club*

II – The Mysteries

One of the most spectacular forms of staging this battle of wills in the time leading towards the first blossoming of the theatres in Early Modern England is doubtless that of the Mystery plays which were staged in various communities in England from the fourteenth century onwards. The four major cycles that have come down to the twenty-first century, usually known as the cycles of York, N-Town—erroneously referred to as *Ludus Coventriæ*, a term coined by Richard James (bap. 1591-1638), librarian to Sir Robert Cotton 1571-1631—Towneley (or Wakefield), and Chester, present the contemporary reader with certain problems.¹

Pope Urban IV (c. 1200-64, Pope from 1261) instigated the feast of Corpus Christi in 1264.² The cycles were performed over scores of years at the Corpus

¹ For book-length studies of these four cycles see, especially, V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (London: Arnold, 1966); Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (London: Routledge, 1972); and in particular Wilhelm Bomke, *Die Teufelsfiguren der mittelenglischen Dramen* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1989). In the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, “the whole cycle was called a *play*, while the individual portions were *pageants*.” Meg Twycross, “The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays,” *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 39. Since all the current editions of the texts speak about “cycles” and “plays”, this original distinction is not adopted.

² Due to Urban IV’s early death, the feast was only confirmed at the Council of Vienna in 1311.

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Christi processions. Dramatic responsibility rested with the guilds or with the authorities of the community, and the plays were necessarily subject to continuous revision.³ It is undeniable that “the great majority of plays in the existing medieval repertoire are devoted to religious purposes and primarily brought into being to render the salient truths of the Christian faith graphic and compelling for those unable to read the scriptures for themselves.”⁴ However, the religious authorities looked with a critical eye upon the productions that associated themselves with the Corpus Christi processions but that, in the process, distracted the worshippers from the adoration of the Host *per se*. While the plays were not banned (despite reservations certain clerics had towards theatrical productions *tout court*), they were held separately from the main religious devotions:

The disassociation of the cycles from the Corpus Christi procession during the course of the first half of the fifteenth century no doubt reflects ecclesiastical dissatisfaction with an experiment that was only partially successful. By severing the plays, but not suppressing them, however, religious authorities were able to have the best of both worlds: the Procession of the Sacrament would regain its dignity and importance, and the plays would continue to edify the laity.⁵

³ Unfortunately, it is impossible to pinpoint with absolute certainty the age to which the portrayals of the devils as they were finally fixed in printer’s ink belong. In some respects their representations in the Mysteries are closer to the Elizabethan era than to the period in which they first originated. “At what point in their development the cycle texts came to take the form that they manifest today is difficult to establish, given the lack of sufficient intermediary versions, but there seems to have been a general increase in situational and verbal elaboration. Composition was of course continuous and spread over perhaps decades, involving constant revisions from radical re-writing to a process of minor modifications.” William Tydeman, “An Introduction to Medieval English Theatre,” *Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, 25. See also the chronological table in Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher, *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008) xix-xxi.

⁴ Tydeman, “An Introduction to Medieval English Theatre,” *Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, 17.

⁵ Woolf, *Mystery Plays*, 74.

This also meant that the craftsmen producing the plays were freed from purely ecclesiastical and theological restrictions, and they found themselves in the position to reflect local peculiarities and preoccupations. Not surprisingly, the cycles sometimes contain salient comments on events taking place at a particular time that were weighty enough to invite criticism in such a public and widespread medium as these cycle plays. What the plays impart, therefore, is a blend of late mediaeval, Roman Catholic theology with concerns that were alive at various moments during the cycles' compositional histories. They are imbued with the art and personalities of their many authors and revisers. It is precisely this blend of the secular and spiritual that makes the Mystery plays such a rewarding place to look at how the craftsmen attempted to take control over the demonic.

II-1 – The Fall of the Angels

Although the Mystery cycles follow the structure of the biblical accounts closely, the devils' and demons' roles in the plays are far from negligible, contrary to what the comparatively sparse occurrences of devils in Scripture would suggest. The creators of the cycles knew where they could find a good story and did not hesitate to look for material outside the bounds of recognised Scripture: they turned to the Apocrypha instead. In their plays, they took greater liberties than one might expect, or than the Church authorities might have liked.

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YORK

The spectators of the very short York play *The Fall of the Angels* meet a most self-centred I Angelus Deficiens, Lucifer, who illustrates the proverb “pride comes before a fall.” While the Angels keep praising God, Lucifer, whom God has raised to be master of all things “moste nexte after me” (York 1.33), sees only himself:

All the myrth þat es made es markide in me!
þe bemes of my brighthode ar byrmande so bryghte,
And I so seemly in syghte myselfe now I se,
For lyke a lorde am I lefte to lende in þis lighte.

...

My powar es passande my peres.

(York 1.49-52 & 56)⁶

There is also II Angelus Deficiens, who keeps admiring himself endlessly and who betrays worrying narcissistic tendencies: “O, what I am fetys and fayre and figured full fytt!” (York 1.65).⁷ York does not dramatise only the one corrupting angel drawing after him legions of innocent ones: it seems that all the angels that came to fall were equally guilty. As representatives for all other deficient angels in heaven, both fall for their pride and their hubris, the first one turning immediately into “Lucifer, Deiabolus in inferno” (York 1.97; sd).⁸ The idea that so many appear to have been corrupted of their own free will, as it were, not by one diabolic tempter, seems to be a daringly liberal interpretation of theological dogma, too daring indeed to be developed further at this stage, even though the etymology of Lucifer’s epithet,

⁶ lende = dwell; remain

⁷ fetys = handsome

⁸ The convention that the fallen angel is called Lucifer in heaven and changes his name to Satan once he is in hell is generally not respected.

Angelus Deficiens, suggests an explanation. “Deficiens” might imply the angels had a choice: while God created his creatures perfect, some chose to fall away from their original perfection.⁹ If the authors of the cycle had this in mind when they named Lucifer, they made a daring equation between the devil and man. As Heywood later notes:

*Through enuy of the Diuell came Death into the world. He then being the author of Sin, is likewise the author of Death. And yet though he had power to tempt man to Sinne, (Man hauing Free-will) he could not constraine him to giue consent.*¹⁰

In a sense, then, both the devil and man are created the same. Still, all potentially explosive questions are eschewed, and the dark mood changes immediately after the expulsion from heaven.

When Lucifer and II Diabolus bewail their fate, the extreme drama of the fall is eased for the audience as they witness a scene of comic relief when devils turn one against another:

Owte on þe Lucifer, lurdan, oure lyghte has þou lorne.

...

þe hegheste of heuen hade þou hyght vs.

Lucifer in inferno

Walaway! Wa es me now, nowe es it war thane it was.

Vnthryuandely threpe 3he—I sayde but a thoghte.

⁹ The etymology for “deficient” in *OED* reads “de + *facĕre* to make, do” with “de” having “the function of undoing or reversing the action of a verb” (“de-, *prefix*” I.6; *OED*). In Towneley, the angels are “malus,” not “deficiens.” My thanks go to Dr Robert Carver for pointing the Latin out to me.

¹⁰ Heywood, *Hierarchie of Angells*, 464.

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II Diabolus

We, lurdande, þou lost vs.

Lucifer in inferno

þhe ly! Owte allas!

I wyste noghte þis wo sculde be wroghte.

Owte on þhow, lurdans, þhe smore me in smoke.

II Diabolus

This wo has þou wroghte vs.

Lucifer in inferno

þhe ly, þhe ly!

II Diabolus

Thou lyes, and þat sall þou by:

We, lurdande, haue at þowe, lat loke!

(York 1.108 & 112-20)¹¹

The play undergoes a return to traditional theology as all the devils seem to agree that Lucifer caused their misfortune, they merely following his lead.¹² So far, the message for the audience is twofold: beware of over-reaching self-indulgence and make sure you keep to your station in society. If you do not, not only will the punishment be terrible, but you will also be made the laughing-stock of the entire community as you try to shift the blame from one person to another, which is an all-too-human trait. For the audience, it must have been easy to mock the afflicted, as it usually is for sinners who see others guilty of their own sins caught out. Hence, Lucifer and the other fallen angels, despite the marked iconic opposition between white / light and black / darkness that the play is at pains to establish, never have the

¹¹ owte on = *interjection of lamentation* | lurdan = wretch; scoundrel | vnthryuandely = unprofitably | threpe = dispute | smore = suffocate | lat loke = see here

¹² Compare Chester's Play 2, *Adam and Eve; Cain and Abel*, where Adam's agreement with Eve before the temptation turns to bitter reproaches at the moment of their punishment.

chance of becoming figures of terror. Rather, they impart their educative function through comedy: laughter should gradually give way to personal insight.¹³

TOWNELEY

The Towneley spectators behold an equally self-absorbed and self-delusional Lucifer who raves about himself: “I am so fare and bright, / of me commys all this light” (Towneley 1:82f). This Lucifer, who talks himself into believing that he is the highest of the high, and who says of himself, “I am lord of blis, / ... / master ye shall me call” (Towneley 1.94 & 98), actually manages to sit in God’s throne. The corruption reaches its climax when he asks other angels to confirm his position:

Say, felows, how semys now me
 To sit in seyte of trynyte?
 I am so bright of ich a lym
 I trow me seme as well as hym.
primus angelus malus: Thou art so fayre vnto my syght[.]
 (Towneley 1.104-8)

Lucifer does not need the other angels to push him to the usurpation of God’s throne, but once the deed has been committed, he needs their approval. By giving it, they damn themselves. And yet, this monstrous deed remains unchallenged for a surprisingly long time, and Lucifer falls later than expected, namely when he wants to “take a flyght” (Towneley 1.131) to reach even higher than God’s seat. Only then will he and the angels who listened to his lies fall with due clamour: “*Tunc exibunt*

¹³ In 1616, Ben Jonson will try to educate man through shame that he experiences first hand. See on page 174.

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demonos clamando” (Towneley 1.131; sd). Like the York demons, Towneley’s devils do not spare Lucifer, who does not get to say another word after the fall. Yet, although they are quick with reproaches, they do not start fighting among each other. Their role is rather to educate by negative example solely, and by their lamentations they warn everybody who is receptive to such a caveat. They actually address the audience directly:

Alas, the ioy that we were In
haue we lost, for oure syn.
alas, that euer cam pride in thoght,
ffor it has broght vs all to noight.
We were in myrth and Ioy enoghe
When lucifer to pride drogh.
Alas, we may warrie wikkyd pride,
so may ye all that standys be side[.]

(Towneley 1.150-7)¹⁴

Whether such wailing finds the way to the spectators’ hearts, or whether it just produces unedifying *Schadenfreude*, is open to debate.

N-TOWN

The N-Town cycle’s *The Creation of Heaven; The Fall of Lucifer* adds to Lucifere’s¹⁵ pride his limitless desire to be worshipped in God’s stead by all the angels. His fall, however, is staged in a far less theatrical way. There does not seem to be much room for spectacular effects as God merely pronounces doom to

¹⁴ drogh = betook himself | warrie = curse

¹⁵ The names adopted in the discussions about the various plays are the ones used in the respective copy texts.

Lucifere: “I bydde þe falle from hefne to helle” (N-Town 1.67). Lucifere bitterly accepts God’s sentence:

At thy byddyng þi wyl I werke,
And pas fro joy to peyne smerte.

Now to helle þe wey I take,
In endeles peyn þer to be pyht.
For fere of fyre a fart I crake!
In helle donjoon myn dene is dyth.

(N-Town 1.75f & 79-82)¹⁶

The devil seems rather meek and resigned when he so readily accepts the punishment for his trespass, even implicitly accepting and confirming God’s power. But underneath the calm surface a storm is brewing that spells mischief for all those who think they can get away with upsetting the natural, God-given laws and order. All complacent spectators have a rude awakening when a deafening explosion is produced to make the devil’s fart heard near and far: the comic element inherent in the words is rapidly done away with when the audience get an inkling of what the devil has in store for them in “helle donjoon.”¹⁷ A skilful actor might even have carried the speech from lowly meekness to frightening fury. It seems that N-Town’s authors did not wish to educate by comedy: terror was their medium.

It appears that the creators of these three Mystery plays largely stuck to official Christian dogma in their representation of the devil. According to accepted theology, “the good angels in the first instant after their creation in their free will ‘by one

¹⁶ smerte = sharp; acute | pyht = put | dene = grave | dyth = prepared; made

¹⁷ “Martial Rose points out that the sound of the ‘fearful farting of a frustrated fiend’ was made to carry through the use of gunpowder.” Stephen Spector, ed., *The N-Town Play; Cotton MS Vespasian D. 8—Volume II: Commentary, Appendices and Glossary*, EETS ss 12 (London: Oxford UP, 1991) 419.

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meritorious act came to beatitude’, and the devil, conversely exercising his free will, fell.”¹⁸ York, Towneley, and N-Town illustrate this message iconographically, giving as reasons for Lucifer’s fall his characteristic pride. At the same time, they were at liberty to make remarkable changes to their original material, thereby turning the fiend into a direct means of education for the faithful. Yet, the liberties they took were far less substantial than those of the creators of the Chester play.

CHESTER

Chester’s *The Fall of Lucifer* differs markedly from the above plays. The creator of the Chester *Fall* goes along a riskier and theologically rather adventurous path, attempting to endow Luciffer with what might be called a conscience. Woolf considers this approach entirely unsuccessful:

he [the Chester author] inevitably raises in his diffuse play a moral and psychological problem that it was well beyond his capacity and intention to answer: he therefore has to show an abrupt and unmotivated change of heart in Satan, and his treatment seems mechanical, even crude.¹⁹

Indeed, Luciffer does not immediately exhibit his presumptuous pride, but he even recognises Deus as his creator:

Nine orders here bene witterlye,
that thou hast made here full right.
In thy blisse full brighte the bee,

¹⁸ Woolf, *Mystery Plays*, 107.

¹⁹ Woolf, *Mystery Plays*, 107.

and I the principall, lorde, here in thy sighte.

(Chester 1.60-3)²⁰

The pride that Luciffer already betrays here is not yet the pride that will cause his fall. It is rather the pride of a servant who knows his station and is content with it, but who is at the same time aware of his worth for his lord and his unrivalled position among this lord's attendants, his breast swelling with a feeling that one might untheologically call legitimate pride. Yet, for Deus there is no such thing: all pride is sinful. This is why he pronounces a warning:

Nowe, Luciffer and Lightborne, loke lowely you bee.
 The blessinge of my begyninge I geve to my first operacion.
 For crafte nor for cuninge, cast never comprehension;
 exalte you not to exelente into high exaltation.

(Chester 1.68-71)

The creators of the Chester play take a first significant step towards emancipating the devil, through his companion, from his scriptural sources by giving him a name of his own, unrecorded in angel lore or in the *grimoires*: “Lightborne”.²¹ A new spirit has been tentatively created, the ancestor of many that were to follow with more or less close ties to the religious writings, culminating eventually in “Pippin,” “Philpot,” “Maho,” “Modu,” “Hilco,” “Smolkin,” or “Luftie huffe-cap,” absurd figures that Harsnett presents in *Popish Impostures* and Shakespeare uses in *King*

²⁰ Witterlye = surely; truly

²¹ Indeed, “only Chester names Lucifer’s sycophantic deputy and gives him a prominent role in inciting his master; ... The name seems etymologically significant, suggesting ‘born of light’ or ‘borne by light’.” R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, eds, *The Chester Mystery Cycle—Volume II: Commentary and Glossary*, EETS ss 9 (London: Oxford UP, 1986) 9.

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Lear (1605).²² The creators of Chester have taken a huge step: by emancipating the devil, they have also emancipated themselves and all the writers to follow who want to take up their example.

The warning expressed is the warning of a sovereign anxious to preserve his authority and position. It is clear for anyone to understand, especially since it is followed by the unmistakable creation of a prison for potential renegades: “The worlde that is bouth voyde and vayne, I forme in the formacion, / with a dongion of darkenes which never shall have endinge” (Chester 1.73f).²³ Chester’s *Fall of Lucifer* introduces a dark note rather early on. It leaves the audience to wonder why this should be so without immediately answering the question. The very fact that the well-known event of the fall is not staged straight away arouses curiosity and demands attentive spectators who hear Deus repeat his warning:

loke you not fall in noe despaier.
Touche not my throne by non assente.
All your beautie I shall appaier,
and pride fall oughte in your intente.

(Chester 1.90-3)²⁴

Deus’s behaviour is indeed mysterious. It seems that it is he himself who first plants the idea of Lucifer’s aspiration to Deus’s throne, and it is he who reinforces the warning against pride. Lucifer insists that “Thy greate godhead we ever dreade, / and never exsaulte ourselves soe hie” (Chester 1.96f), and his companion Lightborne confirms “And I ame marked of that same moulde” (Chester 1.102).

²² Harsnett, *Popish Impoftures*, sig. C3^v & C4^r (46f); Shakespeare, *King Lear*, IV.i.

²³ vayne = empty

²⁴ appaier = harm; destroy

Later on he proves that he is indeed so. Deus, meanwhile, keeps harping on the same theme:

I have forbyd that ye neare shoulde;
 but keepe you well in that stature.
 The same covenante I charge you houlde,
 in paine of heaven your forfeiture.

(Chester 1.106-9)

Having duly admonished his angels, Deus makes Luciffer governor in his stead and leaves to go about his business, or to observe the angels in secret, which would be a masterful stroke of stagecraft.²⁵ All this is very fanciful, and it radically deviates from scholastic theology, which holds that “the power that produced the angels was God, and he cannot cause sin; therefore the devil could not have turned evil in the very first instant of his existence.”²⁶ Further,

It is true that there must be time between any two instants, where time is continuous. [...] But angels are in no way contained in the heavenly motion which is where the measure of continuous time begins; so that if we speak of angels, we can only mean a succession of acts of mind or will. [...] And in all the angels this first act of self-reflection was good. [...] Thus the first act was common to them all; it was by the second that they separated. In a first instant they were all good; in a second, they divided into the good and the evil.²⁷

²⁵ Compare Vincentio, Duke of Vienna, absenting himself and putting Angelo in charge to find out what the latter is worth in *Measure for Measure* (1604). In a sense, Prospero finds himself in a similar position on the island.

²⁶ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, Q. 63, “Sin in the Angels,” art. 5, “Did the devil turn evil, voluntarily, immediately on being created?”; ed. Thomas Gilby, OP, et al. 61 vols. Blackfriars. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964-1981, vol. 9 (265). Latin on page 384.

²⁷ Aquinas, *Summa*, I, Q. 63, art. 6, “Was there a time-interval between the creation and the fall of the first angel that sinned?”; vol. 9 (269). Latin on page 385.

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In this respect, the Chester *Fall* is certainly problematic. In order to be true to the accepted doctrine, the second act of Lucifer could not be anything else than his sinning, as it is presented in the other plays that iconographise the fall. If this were the measurement of quality applicable to the Mystery plays, Woolf would be right in denigrating the play. Yet, the Chester authors did not put theology in the centre, but Lucifer’s human nature, as it were.

According to Aquinas, “since [devils] are intellectual beings: they can have no natural inclination to evil; and so cannot be evil by nature.”²⁸ If this is so, there must always have been a possibility for the angels to choose either good or bad. It is this which Chester attempts to dramatise. Here, then, is Lucifer, “bearer of lighte” and “governour” (Chester 1.101 & 113), second only to Deus. His attention has been drawn, by Deus himself, to two dangerous aspects of which he should beware: pride and God’s throne. Surely, even if theologians cannot but disapprove, the spectators can easily understand why Lucifer’s thoughts revolve around himself. After all, he is “wouderous brighte” (Chester 1.126). Besides, the one realisation leads almost syllogistically to the next: “yf that I were [in God’s seat], / then shoulde I be as wise as hee” (Chester 1.130f). This thought only gradually takes hold in Lucifer’s mind, and he does not immediately or blindly rush where angels fear to tread. Instead, he seeks for the approval of the “angells all that bene here” (Chester 1.132).²⁹ Naturally, he finds nothing but opposition, which equally naturally inflames him and increases the heat of his pride:

²⁸ Aquinas, *Summa*, I, Q. 63, art. 4, “Are any devils bad by nature?”; vol. 9 (261). Latin on page 384.

²⁹ As there is strength in numbers, the angels fall together; later, Faustus fights alone, and fails. There is a lesson he has not yet learnt.

[*Cherubyn:*] Therefore I warne the, Luciffer,
this pride will torne to greate distresse.
Luciffer: Destresse? I commaunde you for to cease
and see the beautie that I beare.
All heaven shines through my brightnes
for God himselfe shines not so cleare.

(Chester 1.140-5)

It is at this moment, after further protestations from the Dominaciones, Principates, and Cherubyn to the effect that Luciffer should desist, that he at last finds a sympathiser in Lighteborne:

In fayth, brother, yet you shall
sitt in this throne—arte cleane and cleare—
that yee maye be as wise withall
as God himselfe, yf he were heare.

(Chester 1.158-61)

Both, the good angels' resistance as well as Lighteborne's support and flattery, are instrumental to Luciffer's sin. Without the opposition of the others, he would not find the needed motivation to carry his intention through, for hardly anything is as enticing as doing that which is forbidden. Equally importantly, without his sidekick, Luciffer would not be able to pluck up the courage to take the step and sit in Deus's throne. The psychology that the Chester authors invest in the play works, and it is absolutely stunning that an angel that has no model in Scripture, that the authors have invented for this very purpose, has such a far-reaching influence on Luciffer, whose agency is limited in that he is not the instigator of his own deed. As the devil's advocate, one could even say that a creation from a human pen led to Luciffer's fall. There is hardly anything that could be more modern than this.

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And it was thus that an angel sinned: of his own free will he pursued a good for himself without regard for the rule of the divine will.³⁰

Chester may not follow scholastic theology *au pied de la lettre*, but the outcome is the same, and the educational value for the audience might even be enhanced because the situation that unfolds before their eyes is easily applicable to their own personal experiences. For who among them, be it lowly serf, master, nobleman or king, had not already striven to rise above his station or desired to have that which was not his due? To be sure, for at least some of the time during which the cycle was performed, the memories of the Wars of the Roses (1455-85) must have been fresh in people’s minds so that the fall of the angels must have been a fitting comment on the ravages England had seen during the second half of the fifteenth century. The message of Chester’s *Fall* is, then, not least a very aristocratic one. In the words of St Thomas Aquinas (1224/25-74):

And it was thus that the devil aspired to be as God. [...] [H]e desired godlikeness in this sense, that he placed his ultimate bliss in an objective to be obtained by the force of his own nature alone, rejecting the supernatural bliss which depends on the Grace of God.³¹

What the play shows is not contrary to this explanation, and it can be read validly as an analysis of potentially anarchical disorder in society as well as an, albeit liberal, adaptation of the biblical account of the fall of the angels, which is in itself based to a large extent on apocryphal sources. While the Chester *Fall* deviates, then, from scholastic theology, the play does not become inferior to the others. On the contrary,

³⁰ Aquinas, *Summa*, I, Q. 63, art. 1, “Can there be moral evil in angels?”; vol. 9 (251). Latin on page 383.

³¹ Aquinas, *Summa*, I, Q. 63, art. 3, “Did the devil desire to be as God?”; vol. 9 (257). Latin on page 384.

it becomes subtler and gives the impression of being quite modern, as it does not only warn the audience of pride, but also traces the path along which such trespasses may come about. As such, it becomes a mirror for everybody's own lives, should they wish to see.

Certainly, no one will be the worse for heeding the message of the play in their own lives. Despite the fact that Deus is all-knowing,³² he, in his goodness, attempts to warn Luciffer, in the same way that God warns Adam and Eve not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, or in the same way as Christ repeatedly admonishes Judas not to betray him in N-Town's Play 27, *The Last Supper; The Conspiracy with Judas*, or in the same way, for that matter, as Mephistopheles tells Faustus about the dangers of his choice in order to bait him. Yet, like Faustus, Luciffer does not hear, but takes a seat in Deus's place: "Here will I sitt nowe in his steade, / to exsaulte *myselfe* in this same see" (Chester 1.186f).³³ And this is where he falls into narcissistic raving:

I ame pearlesse and prince of pride,
for God hymselfe shines not so sheene.
...
Behoulde my bodye, handes and head—
the mighte of God is marked in mee.
...
I ame your comforte, bouth lorde and head,
the meirth and might of the majestye.

(Chester 1.184f, 188f & 192f)³⁴

³² Aquinas, *Summa*, I, Q. 14, "On God's knowledge," art. 13, "Has God knowledge on contingent future events?"; vol. 4 (47 & 49) explains why it is possible for men to have free will in their lives which are subjected to the linear laws of time. It also explains the creation of the "dongion of darkenes" before ever there are signs of sin visible to anyone.

³³ Italics added. Compare Luciffer's promise that he would never do so in Chester 1.96 on page 62.

³⁴ As another example of the devil's inversion, this foreshadows Christ's drawing attention to his body and his wounds received for the salvation of mankind. See for instance Chester 19.240-247, *Christ on the Road to Emmaus; Doubting Thomas*, and 24.421-428, *The Last Judgement*. It is also reminiscent of the *ecce homo* theme: before Pilate delivers Christ to the Jews for crucifixion, he

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Luciffer blasphemously exalts himself as far as to appropriate phrases of Deus’s opening speech: “Through might of my most majestie / your meirth shall ever be mendinge” (Chester 1.50f). But where Deus, who is not corporeal, stresses his internal qualities, Luciffer largely focuses on external elements of his body, turning to gull the comforts he believes he has to offer. The message Deus hurls at Luciffer when he returns to find his position usurped is a message fit for kings, and those who would like to become so, but certainly not only for them:

I made thee my frende; thou arte my foe.
Why haste thou tresspassed thus to me?
Above all angells there were no moe
that sitt so nighe my majestye.
I charge you to fall till I byd “Whoo,”
into the deepe pitt of hell ever to bee.

(Chester 1.224-9)³⁵

What follows is the customary falling out of the devils, in this instance Luciffer and Lighteborne, in hell. They probably enter in the traditional demon’s costume to reinforce the terror of their words and the impact of their negative example for the audience: Primus Demon and Secundus Demon, as they are now called, have a row about whose fault the fall was, wildly roaring and revealingly bewailing their loss of external beauty:

Secundus Demon: Thou haste us broughte this wicked waye
Through thy mighte and thy pryde[.]

asks them to look at Jesus in a last, futile attempt to make them change their mind as they see the suffering man. Although this phrase has not found its way into the cycle plays, it would be a fitting contrast to Lucifer pointing himself out.

³⁵ Compare Henry V unmasking the traitors Cambridge, Grey and Scoop in II.ii of Shakespeare’s play: here as there the punishment is merciless.

...
Primus Demon: Thy witt yt was as well as myne,
 of that pryde that we did shewe[.]

(Chester 1.242f & 246f)

Here then, Chester, unlike York, makes the demons joint conspirators in their plot against Deus. The cycle presents them in such a way as to invite ridicule as a means of education for everyone too innocent to see behind the screen of the preceding scenes of the play.

Chester deviates in yet another element from the other plays. In N-Town and Towneley, the first play of which probably contained the temptation of Adam and Eve as well,³⁶ the devil is given the last word, thereby duly terrifying the audience into observing Christian ways of life. York and Chester, however, end with the events of creation of the first day, a fitting restoration of order which is more comforting than an end in hell, and Deus's blessing: "And baynely I gyf it my blyssyng" (York 1.160).³⁷ Yet, in York the devil is firmly confined in hell, for the time being. In Chester, however, he makes a dark prediction:

Primus Demon: And therefore I shall for his sake
 Shewe mankynde greate envye.
 As soone as ever he can hym make,
 I shall sende, hym to destroye,

 one—of myne order shall he bee—
 to make mankinde to doe amisse.
 Ruffyn, my frende fayer and free,

³⁶ Twelve leaves of the Wakefield MS creation play after line 267 are lost.

³⁷ baynely = willingly; readily. See Chester 1.301: "I geve yt here my blessinge."

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loke that thou keepe mankinde from blesse[.]

(Chester 1.254-61)³⁸

Primus Demon has an astonishing insight into events to come, which adds a bitter aftertaste to Deus’s ensuing approval of his creation, and which opens up the play, connecting it clearly with what is to come and embedding it quite firmly in the cycle. As far as the immediate educational impact is concerned, this course serves as a bleak reminder that, once there has been division in a community, the restoration of order is not such an easy matter: as long as there are people that feel injured, rightly or wrongly, chaos will always loom in the background. The fact that Primus Demon, *alias* Luciffer, is locked up firmly in hell—“I ame so fast bounde in this cheare / and never away hense shall passe” (Chester 1.271f)—does not in fact prevent further mischief from happening as he sends his acolyte Ruffyn to work the destruction of Adam and Eve and all future generations.³⁹ In the same way, many Englishmen might be experiencing the repercussions of another fall much closer to their time: the crisis of English royalty during the Wars of the Roses. The message is even still pertinent for the religious controversies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

³⁸ Ruffyn reappears in Chester’s fifth play, *Moses and the Law; Balaack and Balaam*, where the gentile priest Balaam claims “I have godes wonder fell; / both Ruffyn and Reynell / will worke right as I them tell” (Chester 5.212-214). In both plays the figure’s appearance is inconsequential, yet again a new devil with a new name has been created. In N-Town’s *Passion Play I*, which contains the conspiracy against Jesus, “Rewfyn” is one of the “jewgys of Jewry” (26.194 & 257) that are instrumental in bringing about Jesus’s condemnation. There is, however, no hint that either he or Leon are devils. Neither Rewfyn nor Ruffyn are names recorded in traditional angel or demon lore. “Ruffyn” is, however, a variant of the Kentish and Norfolk family name “Ruffell”, but attaching deeper meaning to this might be going a bit too far. For a discussion of the name “Rufman”, see Chapter V-1 on page 147. “Ragnell” is one of the spirits Antechristus pointlessly invokes in Chester’s *Antichrist* (23.647).

³⁹ The fact that Luciffer / Primus Demon does not return to earth himself but sends a deputy is not as unfounded as might at first appear. Strictly speaking, Lucifer and Satan are after all not one and the same creature. There is also a clear tendency in the course of time merely to send lesser devils to earth, confining Lucifer / Satan himself in hell.

THE DEVIL REMOULDED

Among them, the creators of the four Mystery cycles show signs of marvellous ingenuity when it comes to shaping the devil for their own special needs. They did not slavishly imitate the model from Scripture but thought hard about the message they wanted to convey and how to convey it best, remoulding the devil's character and personality in the process.

The four plays of the fall of the angels stage five different types of demons. The audience see a devil who is given the chance to be the *instrumentum Dei*, when he is made God's deputy, a function which he reveals in the Old Testament when he is the adversary to man, not to God. They are also presented with the fallen angel, as well as a character who betrays budding signs of Lucifer / Satan as the emperor of hell. But the devil also appears as the tempter (not of man, but of other devils), as well as the comic devil. In one way or another, the educational element is very strong in each of the cycles, and it continues more or less along the lines that the first plays established. In this respect, the fall of the angels sets events in motion that will run their unflinching course until the clockwork winds down at Judgement Day.

II-2 – Adam and Eve

While the various *Falls* touch the angels solely and are educational by way of example for mankind, the temptations of Adam and Eve and the ensuing expulsions from Paradise concern the spectators more closely.

Essentially, the fall of Adam and Eve is a re-enactment of the fall that took place in heaven in one of the first instants of creation. The story starts over again

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with the devil’s feeling of dissatisfaction: his spite, jealousy, and envy are aroused by the fact that God has chosen such an inferior being as man, “such a caytiffe made of claye” (Chester 2.177), to inhabit such a matchless place as paradise. Motives for the devils’ corruption of man are given in each of the plays except N-Town’s *The Creation of the World; The Fall of Man*, where Serpens appears out of the blue and starts tempting Eve, “fayr wyff and comely dame” (N-Town 2.87), straight away. The element of surprise must have been awe-inspiring, suggesting eloquently that evil appears unexpectedly and is nevertheless easy to discern for those who are not directly touched by it. Whether the motives are paraphrased by Lucifer—

God has maide man with his hend,
to haue that blis withoutten end,
The neyn ordre to fulfill,
that after vs left, sich is his will.
And now ar thay in paradise;
bot thens thay shall, if we be wise.

(Towneley 1.262-7)⁴⁰—

or given voice more directly by Satanus—“The kynde of man he thoght to take / And theratt hadde I grete envye” (York 5.12f)⁴¹—the result is always the same: Adam and Eve shall be tempted, this time for a good end: the edification and education of the audience.

The fact that the presentation of the fall of Adam and Eve is, despite all the varying details in the three extant plays, a repetition of the foregoing fall of the angels is especially marked in Chester’s *Adam and Eve; Cain and Abel*. While Lucifer’s trespass was entirely unprovoked by God in York, N-Town, and

⁴⁰ See also Chester 2.169-176 and 2.201-204.

⁴¹ See also Diabolus in N-Town 2.235-242.

Towneley, this prohibition was explicitly spelt out in Chester, almost as a test of Lucifer's mettle. God conducts the same test again with man in Paradise when he admonishes him “of this tree, for weale nor wyne, / thou eate by noe way” (Chester 2.119f).⁴² In each of the plays, God potentially awakens Adam's and Eve's curiosity about the tree in the same way as he put the temptation to Lucifer. In York, the tree bears the fruit that allows “knowyng / Bothe of good and yll” (York 4.86f). N-Town calls it “þis tre þat is of cunnyng” (N-Town 2.38), while Chester just pronounces an unmotivated ban of its fruit.⁴³ The punishment for breaking God's commandment is the same each time: if you eat, “Ye speyd yourself to spyll” (York 4.89),⁴⁴ or “þu deyst, þu skapyst nowth!” (N-Town 2.43), and “death thee behoves” (Chester 2.122).

Post-lapsarian man often desires that which is expressly forbidden. This is not the case with man in a state of pre-lapsarian grace. As a result, it should have been easy for man to follow God's commandment since he was not yet subject to sinful desire. Chester is again the most daring play in that it introduces a slight hint—that may or may not be taken at face value, coming, as it does, from Demon—that man might not have been able to resist temptation for a very long time, even if he had been left alone:

That woman is forbydden to doe
for anythinge the will thereto.
Therefore that tree shee shall come to

⁴² weale = prosperity | wyne = understanding; (possibly) pleasure

⁴³ The tree is only called “tree of knowledge” in the stage direction following Chester 2.112, yet the audience must have been aware of what they saw. But the play also stresses that wisdom and knowledge are two entirely different things: although man is forbidden to eat from the tree of knowledge, Deus informs Adam that “it is good that thou be wise” (Chester 2.111).

⁴⁴ speyd = hasten | spyll = ruin; grief |

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and assaye which it is.

(Chester 2.185-8)

Chester gives man a certain kind of independence that marks a step towards his finding his own place after he has paid for his mistakes. York and N-Town, on the other hand, are more sympathetic towards man, thereby also denying him the agency he may have in Chester. They make it unmistakably clear that it was Satan in a “worme liknes” (York 5.23), or Serpens in the form of a “fayr aungell” (N-Town 2.156),⁴⁵ who seek out Eve without her taking an initial step, plant the seed of corruption, make it grow, and bring in a rich harvest in the form of all mankind. Adam and Eve are punished and condemned, not to immediate death, as Deus seems to have threatened, but to “tille withalle þi meete and drynke / For euermore” (York 6.59f) and the eventual death of the body. Even here, man’s nature is similar to the devil’s, foreshadowing his future on the Elizabethan / Jacobean stage.⁴⁶ Just like the fallen angels before, Adam and Eve go on to blame each other for their lapse, a quarrel that is especially virulent in its misogynistic exclamations by Adam in Chester. Even though he hardly needed any persuading at all to eat the fruit that is “sweete and passinge feare” (Chester 2.254), he is all too ready to blame Eve for everything once the scales have fallen from his eyes:

Yea, sooth sayde I in prophecye
when thou was taken of my bodye—
mans woe thou would bee witterlye;
therfore thou was soe named.

(Chester 2.269-72)

⁴⁵ Later on, Eve describes him as “A werm with an aungelys face” (N-Town 2.220).

⁴⁶ See the discussions on Houghton’s, Dekker’s and Jonson’s plays below.

It is easy to prophesy in hindsight, and Adam even goes so far as to call Eve and the devil “the suster and the brother” (Chester 2.356). Once more, another of God’s creatures has sorely disappointed him and failed a test. Yet, while the devil’s quarrelling in hell might have been hilarious, this is not the case here, for it touches everyone in the audience to the quick. What good is it “of good and evell to have knowinge” (Chester 2.371) if the price is the loss of grace in exchange for toil, pain and death? When Adam and Eve are expelled from Paradise, Deus posts four angelic sentries at the garden’s gates with a bleak message: the gleam of hope mentioned by Primus Angelus—“Wysdome, Right, Mercye, and Mighte / shall buy them and other moe” (Chester 2.399f)—is embedded in overwhelming negatives, stressing that man is Deus’s “foe” (Chester 2.396) and has lost everything. Future plays in different times will find different ways of dealing with the plight, eventually leading man to free himself from the influence of the devil, but also, in the logic of inversion and contrariety, to free himself from the influence of God. At this point in time, however, the solution cannot yet be so progressive, even though the seed has been sown here.

At first sight, it seems as if the devil had brought home his first unqualified victory. Man has lost the state of grace, is expelled from Paradise, and is made subject to all kinds of pain eking out his meagre existence. In the process of this corruption, he has also succeeded in having the serpent, whose form he used, cursed by God and set up as a prime enemy of mankind on earth, thus planting the seed of strife between man and the animal kingdom. And yet, somehow, humankind has succeeded in turning the tables on the devil. For, although in each of the cycles God

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curse the “wikkid worme” (York 5.150),⁴⁷ the question of who exactly has been cursed is not so clear for the audiences of the plays. They have heard the devil say “the edders coate I will take one” (Chester 2.206) and have possibly even seen him do so. The matter is even more dubious in York, where Satanus clearly states that “In a worme liknes wille Y wende” (York 5.23). The question hinges on whether the devil takes on the form of the “worme”, or whether he actually possesses the animal in the same way as he possessed the man and the swine in Mark 5:1-16 and elsewhere. If the former is the case, it implies that the punishment is actually brought down on Satanus in person. This becomes clearest in N-Town. Although it is the “werm wyckyd in kende” (N-Town 2.262) who bears the brunt of Deus’s curse, it is Diabolus himself who gets to reply to it:

At þi byddyng fowle I falle,
I kreve hom to my stynkyng stalle.
Helle pyt and hevyn halle
Xal do þi byddyng bone.
I falle down here a fowle freke;
For þis falle I gynne to qweke.
With a fart my brech I breke!
My sorwe comyth ful sone.

(N-Town 2.267-74)⁴⁸

As in Play 1, Diabolus’s speech is again a mixture of meek acceptance of God’s judgement, linked with defiance and threats. Indeed, his fart and its accompanying blood-curdling special effect ensure once again that the audience are duly impressed. Nevertheless, there is the slightly consolatory idea that even Diabolus got what he

⁴⁷ “wyckyd worm” (N-Town 2.259); “Edder” (Chester 2.297).

⁴⁸ bone = desire; command | freke = man; person

deserved, and that there is no escaping Deus’s justice. N-Town also offers another glimpse of hope for the spectators and mankind when Deus announces that the curse will be reversed: “Vpon þi gutt þu xalt glyde, / ... Tyl a maydon in medyl-erth be born” (N-Town 2.261 & 263), hinting at Christ’s virginal birth of Mary and man’s eventual salvation. Such a salvation is indeed possible because of a fundamental difference between the devil’s original sin and man’s: the devil’s desire to sin came entirely from within himself, while outside stimuli led Adam and Eve to their fall. While the devil’s nature is thus forever fixed in evil, man can be redeemed.⁴⁹

There is also another, even more important, but well-known lesson for the audience in the plays, and the devil is misused to teach it. The plays remind the viewers forcefully that the devil is likely to appear in any unexpected, but more often than not pleasing, shape to his unsuspecting victims. He must have been easily recognisable on stage, especially if he appears as an adder “that wynges like a bryde shee hase— / feete as an edder, a maydens face” (Chester 2.194f),⁵⁰ and the audience’s unavailing hissing to warn the unsuspecting Eve, whose duty to heed God’s command must have been equally evident, is as readily imaginable as it is fruitless. In a sense, then, Adam’s and Eve’s temptation holds a mirror up to the people. If they are alert, they will realise that even they will be able to recognise the mark of the devil in whatever form he comes. They only need to be clear about their own duty towards God and towards society. Far from fulfilling his prime objective of corrupting as many people as possible, the devil again comes to be used in the cycle plays to reinforce God’s instructions. This was the approach of the Mysteries:

⁴⁹ The issue acquires a different angle when man reclaims more agency for himself. Only Jonson and Shakespeare manage to propose a viable solution to this issue.

⁵⁰ The stage direction for Serpens’s entry reads “*Supremus volucris, penna serpens, pede forma, forma puella*” (Chester 2.208; sd) and confirms Demon’s planned disguise.

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they presented the devil as a real force of evil in the world and at the same time used him to warn the people of himself.

II-3 – Herod’s Story

This story repeats itself over and over again throughout the cycles. When the audience meet King Herod, they are presented with a re-enactment of the consequences resulting from Lucifer’s original sin, pride.

In the two cycles that stage Herod and that culminate in a simultaneous appearance on the stage of Herod and the devil, namely N-Town’s Play 20, *The Slaughter of the Innocents*; *The Death of Herod*, and Chester’s Play 10, *The Slaughter of the Innocents*, Herod has no scruples about exhibiting his vain splendour—“þer is no lorde in þis werde þat lokygh me lyche” (N-Town 18.75)—exalting himself (blasphemously) above everyone and everything:

I weld this world withouten weene;
I beate all those unboxone binne;
I drive the devills all bydeene
deepe in hell adowne.

For I am kinge of all mankynde;
I byd, I beate, I loose, I bynde;
I maister the moone. Take this in mynd—
that I am most of might.

I am the greatest above degree

That is, or was, or ever shalbe[.]

(Chester 8.173-82)⁵¹

Herod considers himself a god, and in this bears parallels to Barnes’s Alexander VI, from his endeavours to rule the world unto his suffering the same fate. His evil nature is underpinned by his swearing “Be Mahound, dyngne duke of helle” (N-Town 18.92).⁵² And yet, true to the biblical message, the N-Town and Chester plays go to show that, however dominant evil people might be, and however secure their hold on power seems to them, there is justice, both earthly and divine.

CHESTER

Retribution comes more swiftly than anyone would have expected. Very soon Chester’s Herodes learns that his command to kill “neyther on nor two / ... but a thousand and yett moo” (Chester 10.169 & 171) children also led to the murder of his own son. In the process, worldly finery is revealed to be mere trumpery. Just like Herodes, his son was dressed “right sycker in silke arraye, / in gould and pyrrie that was so gaye” (Chester 10.409f), and still no one recognised that this was a child out of the ordinary. Even though this event is not historically accurate, the plays present a forceful image of how Herodes himself has effectually contrived to bring to nought his one and only shot at overcoming mortality through progeny. The doom that he himself pronounced—

⁵¹ weld = control; rule | wene = doubt | unboxone = disobedient | all bydeene = all together
There are undeveloped suggestions that this Herod, who drives devils down to hell and is the master of the moon, could actually be a sorcerer. Compare Caliban’s mother Sycorax on page 286.

⁵² Again, the prophet in one religion has become the devil in another one, albeit anachronistically.

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though wee therefore should goe to hell,
all the children of Israell
wee deeme them to be slayne

(Chester 10.122-4)—

has overtaken him faster than he ever thought possible, if indeed he ever thought he would be subject to the common laws of mortality at all. The moment he learns the news of his son’s death, a terrible blackness comes over him. His speech in this state of mind is so terrifying in its graphic details of living death and fear of being haunted that it is sure to get to the marrow of even the most hardened sinners among the audience:

Alas, what the divell is this to meane?
Alas, my dayes binne now donne!
I wott I must dye soone.
Booteles is me to make mone,
for dampned I must bee.
My legges roten and my armes;
that nowe I see of feindes swarmes—
I have donne so many harmes—
from hell comminge after mee.

...

I bequeath here in this place
my soule to be with Sathanas

(Chester 10.417-25 & 430f)

Herodes exhibits a despair that reaches depths as profound as those Marlowe’s Faustus finds himself in at the end of his life. While Faustus played for high stakes and could not find a way not to pay the price, Herodes throws away his life at the first moment of adversity. Despair is the sin that overtakes them both, though it is, in

Faustus’s case, a rather perversely intellectualised despair. At this point, Chester touches upon a question that will become increasingly important in Renaissance plays that pit man against the devil: where does the devil’s power over man have its limits? The answer lies in the issue of predestination versus free will. According to Thomist theology, people are not condemned right from the outset:

one predestined must needs be saved, namely on a conditional necessity, which does not impair freewill. Hence although one whom God reprobates cannot gain grace, nevertheless the fact that he flounders in this or that sin happens of his own responsibility, and therefore is rightly imputed to him for blame.⁵³

Herodes gives Sathanas power over him because he actively and of his own free will decides to bequeath the fiend his soul. Had he not done so and striven for mercy, there might have been room for salvation. But as Herodes stands before the shambles of his life, the thoughts of his evil deeds crowd in on him in the form of personified demons, overwhelm him, and lead him unambiguously to will his soul to Sathanas. This is enough for Demon to appear straight away:

From Lucifer, that lord, I am sent
to fetch this kinges sowle here present
into hell[.]

(Chester 10.442-4)

Again a devil is used to make a fine point, proving that all sinners will suffer their just reward. And again, even while the devil’s powers are unimpeded and at their

⁵³ Aquinas, *Summa*, I, Q. 23, “Predestination,” art. 3, “Is anybody rejected by God?”; vol. 5 (117 & 119). Latin on page 383. See also *Summa*, I, Q. 23, art. 8, “Can predestination be helped by the prayers of the saints?”; vol. 5 (141).

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highest, Demon does not cross God’s plans and purposes, but he furthers them, both on the eternal scale as well as on the little stage of the Corpus Christi play.

Yet, the Chester playwrights are jocular people. Once more, they do not allow terror alone to drive home the message. Mirth gradually takes over. At first, Demon frightens the audience by breaking the illusion of drama and addressing the people directly: “I am comen to fetch this lord you froe, / ... And with this crooked crambocke your backes shall I clowe” (Chester 10.436 & 438). But, after Herodes has been promised “ever to live in woe” (Chester 10.445), these threats quickly turn into devilish jokes partly based on local preoccupations:

No more shall you trespass. By my lewtye,
that filles there measures falseye
shall beare this lord companye;
the gett none other grave.
I will you bringe thus to woe,
and come agayne and fetch moe
as fast as I maye goe.
Farewell, and have good-daye.

(Chester 10.450-7)

What the spectators are left with is an uneasy mixture of a bad conscience (in case one did indeed use false measures), approbation (to see those evil-doers threatened with their just punishment), relief (the devil did not take me along), and dread (who knows what shortcomings the returning fiend might find in me?). Of course, there will always have been those complacent and self-righteous enough to fail to apply the lesson to themselves. But no one could say that they had not been warned even by the devil himself.

N-TOWN

In the more sober N-Town play, on the other hand, the warning role falls to Mors. The portrayal of the character of Chester's Herodes goes beyond the limits of type and offers glimpses of an art to come, carrying even the seeds of a Faustus and Alexander. N-Town's Herodes Rex, on the other hand, is the type of the tyrant who, blind to any *mene tekel*,⁵⁴ is struck down unsuspectingly during the high tide of his pride. He is not allowed a bad conscience, and, unlike Chester's Herodes, he never even has the slightest chance of reformation. This must strike to the quick of all those who feel secure in their lives, never expecting Mors to come the way he does:

I am Deth, Goddys masangere.
 Allmyghty God hath sent me here
 3on lordeyn to sle, withowtyn dwere,
 For his wykkyd werkyng.

(N-Town 20.177-80)

Here the devil is stripped of his role. Justice belongs to the God who says "Vengeance is mine" (Rom. 12:19) and who sends Mors (whose speeches revolve around the theme of the Great Leveller) to strike Herodes Rex down in the middle of a Bacchanalian celebration in honour of his successful killing thousands of innocents. Mors is a development of the Old Testament *śātān* in Numbers, but while *śātān* served to bring evil events to man, freeing the monotheistic God from all blame, Mors is clearly God's agent: he strikes where death is deserved according to

⁵⁴ Dan. 5:25.

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both temporal and eternal law, and he does not leave room for remorse. God appears to be less merciful than the devil.

The role of the devil as the servant of God also becomes clearer. While the dry, didactic element falls to Mors, Diabolus enters the stage like a vulture who gladly cleans up the carrion left by Mors. God leaves the dirty work to Diabolus, who rejoices almost like a child who is happy because he gets an unexpected present:

All oure! All oure! þis catel is myn!
I xall hem brynge onto my celle.
I xal hem teche pleys fyn,
And shewe such myrthe as is in helle!

(N-Town 20.233-6)

The sarcasm in the speech, while effective in revealing the callous nature of the devil with regard to his victims, does not hide Diabolus’s subordinate position in the greater hierarchy. He comes across as a lowly dogsbody who does what is expected of him without realising that he merely serves the interest of a higher and juster power whose aims he has, in theory, vowed to undermine. In all this he still thinks the world of himself and generally has a good time of it.

As it turns out, even though the focus on the devil’s small role differs in the N-Town and Chester plays, he is used to instruct the onlookers each time he appears. In N-Town, where the moralising as such is left to Mors, Diabolus’s graphical carrying off of Herodes Rex with devilish roaring serves as a fine deterrent, while in Chester he is additionally given the honour of tutoring the audience in the common lesson that it is ultimately man’s own deeds which condemn him to hell.

II-4 – The Ignorant Devil

The ensuing plays that stage the devil reveal him as a character who is to a large extent a mere plaything in God’s governing plan. His confident entry full of pride and hubris in the York temptation play—

And certis, all þat hath ben sithen borne
 Has comen to me, mydday and morne,
 And I haue ordayned so þam forne
 None may þame fende,
 Þat fro all likyng ar they lorne
 Withowten ende.

(York 22.13-18)⁵⁵—

quickly gives way to confusion that is to persist until the end not only of the temptation plays, but to the end of each cycle. The devil’s bewilderment arises because he cannot tell the exact nature of this “doseberd” (Chester 12.5)⁵⁶ that is Christ:

What þat he is I cannot se;
 Whethyr God or man, what þat he be
 I cannot telle in no degré.

(N-Town 23.192-4)

Of course, the devil being lesser than God, his knowledge is also necessarily limited, and his judgement is prone to error: “the demons do not behold the eternal causes of

⁵⁵ fende = defend; fight on their behalf (= forne)

⁵⁶ doseberd = stupid fellow; dullard; simpleton

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temporal events, the cardinal causes, so to speak, in the Wisdom of God.”⁵⁷ This is why the devil can actually be beguiled, especially since Christ made sure his identity was not revealed in the first place:

And for to make þe mased and madde,
And by þat resoune þus dewly to haue
Mi Godhede here, I hidde
In Marie modir myne,
For it schulde noȝt be kidde
To þe nor to none of thyne.

(York 22.247-52)⁵⁸

All the following plays with demons rely heavily on the mediaeval idea of the abuse-of-power theory devised by the patristic writers, especially St Augustine and Gregory I, the Great (c. 540-604; Pope from 590):⁵⁹ as Satan contrives to put Jesus, who was without sin, to death, he oversteps his power and thus loses his claim on the souls of mankind. This is why it is so important for the devil to find out whether Christ is God or not: “If he proves to be God, Satan will avoid putting him to death. If he is not God, Satan will take him to hell without fear. But if Satan cannot find out, he will have to put him to death and take whatever consequences ensue.”⁶⁰

In N-Town’s solemn Play 23, *The Parliament of Hell; The Temptation*, the infernal trinity Sathan, Belyall and Belsabub put their heads together to find the best

⁵⁷ St Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984) Bk 9, ch. 22 (368). Latin on page 388. St Augustine continues to explain that devils have more knowledge of the future than men, but less than the holy angels and God.

⁵⁸ mased = bewildered

⁵⁹ See Alan H. Nelson, “The Temptation of Christ; or, The Temptation of Satan,” *Medieval English Drama: Essays Critical and Contextual*, ed. Jerome Taylor and Alan H. Nelson (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1972) 218-29; and David L. Wee, “The Temptation of Christ and the Motif of Divine Duplicity in the Corpus Christi Cycle Drama,” *MP* 72 (1974) 1-16.

⁶⁰ Nelson, “Temptation,” 222.

course to adopt in order to establish whether Christ represents a threat to hell and all the devils. The play proposes to highlight the hollow magnitude of the forces which hell gathers together to confront Jesus. In effect, though, Sathan cuts a poor figure. Sure enough, he uses his wits “Hym to tempte in synnys thre” (N-Town 23.50), i.e. to try to make Jesus fall through the same sins that caused the devil himself as well as Adam and Eve to fall, namely “gluttonye, vaynglorye, there bine too, / covetous of highnes alsoe” (Chester 12.173f). But he must needs fail in his cunning, and when this happens, he roars and thunders frightfully: “For sorwe I lete a crakke” (N-Town 23.195). Educating the audience through terror, he points out the extent of the victory Christ has achieved in the desert. Yet, all this sound and fury merely serves to hide his confusion, his inability to see the obvious which he himself had clearly stated earlier on without drawing the proper conclusions: “If hee be God in mans kinde, / my crafte then fully fayles” (Chester 12.43f). Yet, the moment his craft has failed, he also fails to open his eyes to the inevitable, as Pug does on a lesser scale in Jonson’s *The Devil Is an Ass*. In York, Diabolus spells his own doom: “He musteres what myght he has, / Hye mote he hang” (York 22.177f). His determination to work towards the destruction of Jesus will only mean his own eventual destruction. All this leads to the conclusions that “Christ rather than Satan is the real tempter. Masking his identity from Satan, and refusing to reveal it in spite of all Satan’s wiles, Christ gives him no alternative but to set out on a disastrous course which will end with the release of souls from Satan’s power.”⁶¹ In 1616, a similar liberation will set Fitzdottrel free, though without the intervention of Christ.

⁶¹ Nelson, “Temptation,” 229.

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Here as there, even knowledge will not keep the devil from destruction. In York’s Play 30, *Christ before Pilate I: The Dream of Pilate’s Wife*, Diabolus realises exactly what is going on:

This gentilman, Jesu, of cursednesse he can,
Be any syngne þat I see þis same is Goddis sonne.
And he be slone oure solace will sese,
He will saue man saule fro oure sonde[.]

(York 30.160-3)

The resulting situation is quite ironic. For a seemingly good deed, Diabolus decides to warn Pilate’s wife in a dream, threatening her loss of worldly power and trumpery, which she loves: “Youre striffe and youre strenghe schal be stroyed, / Youre richesse schal be refte you þat is rude” (York 30.173f).⁶² Again the devil tries to work his plans through woman: having succeeded in damning mankind with the help of Eve, he hopes to save himself this time by using a woman to save Jesus’s life, thereby keeping mankind in a state of damnation. Sin, however, carries its own reward, and Diabolus’s plan is foiled because he made Pilate’s son live a debauched life. Though Filius agrees to inform Pilate of his mother’s dream, “firste will I nappe in þis nede, / For he hase mystir of a morne-slepe þat mydnyght is myssand” (York 30.194f). This loss of time will prove detrimental.

N-Town, too, highlights that Sathan has worked only too well for his own destruction. He has “made redy his cros þat he [Christ] xal dye upon” (N-Town 31.25), but after Demon’s warning he realises that “he onys in helle be, / He xal oure power brest” (N-Town 31.40f). Even though the warning against

⁶² For the dream of Pilate’s wife, see Matt. 27:19. It is developed in *The Gospel of Nicodemus*.

executing Jesus gets through to Pylat via his wife, it is to no avail. Following the biblical account closely, N-Town shows how Pylat cannot sway the will of the people of Judah, and all his “craft” (N-Town 31.57) cannot save him or hell from ruin. After all, Sattan

[...] gaffe to þe Jewes counsaile
 Þat þei schulde alway garre hym dye.
 I entered in Judas
 Þat forwarde to fulfille[.]

(York 30.163-6)

Be it by ignorance or hubris, the devil is always beguiled: a short-term advantage weighs more than the long-term survival of the devil and of all hell.

Chester has once more the most forward-pointing play. Its Diabolus almost arouses pity by his lamentation at the end of his efforts:

Alas, for shame I am shent.
 With hell-houndes when I am hent
 I must be ragged and all torent
 and dryven to the fyre.

(Chester 12.153-6)

Diabolus has failed, and now he must return to his strict master to suffer the punishment for his deficiency. He himself is going to be tormented instead of the victim he did not manage to bring. In the long run, Hell cannot stand as it is divided against itself even in this. Much later, devils on the secular London stage, detached from the religious framework that governed the efforts of the cycle playwrights, will

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suffer similar fates as they go to earth and find the tasks unexpectedly challenging.⁶³

As a wily trickster, Diabolus readily finds a solution for his problem:

But I am nowe of good intent
to hould a court ful diligent,
and call my servants verament
shortly for to appeare;
then to reward with dignitie
that all their life have served mee.
In burninge blys there shall they bee
and sytt with Luciferre.

(Chester 12.161-8)

On the one hand, Diabolus is totally blind to the deeper implications of his failure. He is only concerned with his immediate discomfort. The solution for that problem, though it is a potentially worrying inversion of the Last Judgement to come, is certain to raise a few laughs in the audience, thanks to its biting sarcasm. Surely, everyone will have someone in mind whom he would readily see carried away to this hellish bliss with Diabolus. On the other hand, there is always that tormenting uncertainty about who exactly will have to make his way to Luciferre, which duly helps to keep expectations low and thus prevents hubris from taking hold of the spectators. Although the Doctour explains that, with Christ’s resistance to Diabolus’s temptations, Adam’s fall was quite reversed, there will always be at the back of the onlookers’ minds the uncomfortable thought that the devil perseveres in his task of collecting the souls of the reprobate. Even here he is driven to serve God’s purpose.

⁶³ See the discussions of Haughton, Dekker, and Jonson below.

II-5 – Judgement

Eventually, all forces are subject to Deus’s law. After the harrowing of hell, Belyall accepts Anima Christi’s dominance, confessing that “Onto þi byddyng must we bow” (N-Town 33.34). Upon this, Anima Christi decrees “In endeles dampnacyon xalt þu be, / And nevyr comyn out of helle” (N-Town 35.55f). Yet, this does not condemn the devil to a life of inaction: he and his minions keep fulfilling a purpose in God’s sempiternal plan, even though it might not be the one they had in mind for themselves when they rebelled.

When Judgement Day comes, Deus’s patience will come to an end, and he will “make endyng of mannes folie” (York 47.64). The time for mercy will be past and this day “þer domys þus haue I dight / To ilke a man as he hath serued me” (York 47.79f). When the God of Mercy becomes the Judge, the diaboli become Deus’s agents again. They revert to their early Old Testament role of accusers: it is their duty and pleasure to list all the sinners’ misdeeds in preparation for their descent to hell:

I fynde here wretyn in þin forheed
 Þu wore so stowte and sett in pryde
 Þu woldyst nott zeve a pore man breed,
 But from þi dore þu woldyst hym chyde.

(N-Town 42.92-5)

The role of the demons is enhanced in Towneley’s Play 30, *Iudicium*. The play reads very modern: it has two demons presenting a mirror of society to the audience. Each and every sin is recorded in their “bokys” (Towneley 30.140), which prove that the world has become a true breeding-ground for sinners to such an extent that even the

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demons are almost at a loss what to do with all the damned souls: “had domysday oght tarid / We must haue biggid hell more” (Towneley 30.179f).⁶⁴ Though the demons get to do what they should delight in, even they are terrified of God as “the Iuge is right dredfull” (Towneley 30.124). At first sight, the situation does not look very good for mankind: God does not interfere in man’s affairs, while Lucifer is always at man’s side when man is in need of help: “I am with 3ow at all tymes whan 3e to councel me call” (N-Town 26.123). Whenever God leaves man alone to fend for himself, he is prone to weakness and falls prey to sinning easily. Though Christ appears to Thomas to make him believe and to stress that “blyssyd be tho of þis þat haue no syght / And beleve in me” (N-Town 38.350f), others are not so lucky.

Judas’s role, for instance, is both traditional and surprising. He is largely left to his own ruminations and is turned into an early example of the independence of humanity when it comes to sinning. Apart from Jesus’s repeated admonitions as to whether Judas is really sure that he wants to betray Jesus—which parallel God’s warning to Adam and Eve in Eden, with a similar dire outcome—and the temptations that come from his fellow Jews, there is no outside intervention, and certainly no demonic whispering, that leads Judas to deliver Christ. At this point, even Jesus might play a dubious role. Though he warns Judas that “Yt xal be þi dampnacyon” (N-Town 27.455), he also provides the last straw that makes him carry out his intentions by (rightly) withdrawing his trust: “Me þu ast solde, þat was þi frend; / Þat þu hast begonne, brenge to an ende” (N-Town 27.464f). But it is only after Judas has committed the deed and forsaken his soul that a demon intervenes.

⁶⁴ The devils in Jonson’s *Ass* suffer from a similar dilemma: hell has been outdone by people. See on page 176.

A, a, Judas, derlyng myn,
 Þu art þe best to me þat evyr was bore!
 Þu xalt be crownyd in helle peyn[.]

(N-Town 27.466-8)

The demon merely records the events in which he has not played any apparent role. In this respect, N-Town tentatively adumbrates a future development on the English stage which will show people as self-reliant when it comes to taking any decision, including the decision to sin. This also means that the divine Judge is freed from the responsibility towards man, who has after all been granted free will to do what he deems best.⁶⁵ And still Jesus weeps for each and every soul that is lost to the devils, whose bounden duty it is to collect the souls of the fallen.

The demons in Chester's *Judgement* show that even Jesus's hands are tied. They are far more independent than the demons in the other plays. They count on Christ being a "rightuouse judge" (Chester 24.509) and actually remind him that they are allowed to prove that men sinned: "to reaçon there deedes I am dight / to prove these men for myne" (Chester 24.515f). While the demons of the other cycles only intervene when they are given leave by God to do so, Chester's demons are fully conscious of their rights and stand ready to demand what they see to be their due. Secundus Demon forthrightly challenges Jesus to stand by his word:

Yf there bee anye [good deed], saye on! Lettes see!
 Yf there be nonne, deeme them to mee;
 or elles thou art as false as wee—
 all men shall well knowe.

(Chester 24.569-72)

⁶⁵ Compare Aquinas, *Summa*, I, Q. 83, "Freewill," and I, Q. 114, "Demonic Attacks."

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In a sense, it looks as if God’s immemorial plan here turned against him: even if he wanted to show mercy, he could not. Still, as later plays show, man is not necessarily better off without God’s intervention. At this point, it is a warning to all sinners, and this warning could equally apply to earthly jurisdiction: it was clearly designed to make the people toe the line and respect their lords.

In the plays which see the devil centre-stage with Jesus, the Diabolus / Sathan is absolutely instrumental in conveying the message, both of salvation, as well as of the uncertainty that remains: despite God’s mercy, the devil is a dangerous enemy. Still, mortal fear is misplaced since Christ has come to help man, to show him the proper way, and to save him. There is only one *caveat*: damnation will be yours if you have served the devil all your life. After all, Jesus says of men that “ouerecome schall þei noȝt be / Bot yf þay will” (York 22.197f).

Generally speaking, the Mystery cycles follow the biblical accounts. At times, though, they take extraordinary liberties with the characters they were supposed to present on stage. The common denominator in plays that stage devils is the outcome of sinning: the sinner is condemned to hell and handed over to the devils. At other times, the plays are forward-looking. The writers of the cycles, especially Chester, manage to invest the devils with all-too-understandably human qualities, liberating them ever so slightly from the tight framework dictated by Scripture. On the other hand, even human beings have a brief moment of emancipation from the devil—and, in the logic of inversion and contrariety—from God as well. Naturally, this is not to

last, and the outcome cannot be anything but disastrous at this point in time, and will still be so all too often on the Early Modern English stage.

The main aim of the devil is still to destroy the social coherence and community. In the Middle Ages, this coherence can only be restored when Christian virtues are embraced. In this respect, the intent behind the use of devils is clear: it is their duty to strengthen the Christian faith by giving a negative example of their effects on the innocent and as a result secure the Church's hold on power. In the didactic Mystery plays there can be no doubt about the outcome and the moral function of the devil and his acolytes: they will never be able to betray the faithful among the Lord's flock, but woe betide the sinners. Yet, at the same time, it would be naïve to assume uncritically that "in the streets and in English the plays presented the doctrine of the Church as faithfully as those acted in churches and in Latin."⁶⁶ The Mysteries certainly presented the biblical story for the edification of the general public, and they must undoubtedly have done so "with the blessing of the church,"⁶⁷ or they would not have done it at all. But to believe that they did not carry a further message would discredit the intelligence of their authors and of the audience. Sometimes they also point forward to future developments that see man seeking to find a place for himself based on his own powers.

⁶⁶ F. P. Wilson, *The English Drama 1485-1585*, ed. G. K. Hunter (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969) 3.

⁶⁷ Wilson, *English Drama*, 3.

Whosoever shal visit the chappel of Satan, I meane the Theater, shal finde there no want of yong ruffins, nor lacke of harlots, vtterlie past al shame: who presse to the fore-frunt of the scaffoldes, to the end to showe their impudencie, and to be as an obiect to al mens eies.

Anthony Munday (distinguished playwright), *A Second and Third Blast of Retrait from Plaies and Theaters*

III – The Moralities

The credit for taking the forces of evil dramatically out of the biblical context and giving them a place and more immediate meaning in everyone's daily life goes to Morality plays such as the fragmentary *The Pride of Life* (early fifteenth century), *The Castle of Perseverance* (c. 1425), or *Mankind* (the earliest records dating back to about 1470).

III-1 – The Castle of Perseverance

With its thematic and chronological scope, *The Castle of Perseverance* is the most impressive of the Moralities before *Everyman*, in all likelihood a translation and adaptation of the Dutch play *Elckerlyc* (c. 1500). It accompanies Humanum Genus throughout his lifetime, chronicling the assault of all kinds of sinful temptations as well as the assistance of various heavenly powers. In the course of his life Humanum Genus finds that it falls to himself alone to make the right decisions that will earn him his place in heaven since each of the powers, good or bad, that play a role in the

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drama, and, by extension, in every man’s life, are evenly matched in this allegorical presentation of a human life.¹ With this constellation of characters, *The Castle of Perseverance* takes the next step towards an emancipation of mankind: even though spiritual forces still have an influence on people’s lives, the responsibility to take decisions falls to themselves alone.

Unlike the Mysteries, *Castle* does not start in heaven. It is a product of the fallen world that begins with the presentation of an unholy trinity, Mundus, Belyal, and Caro—i.e. the World, Satan, and Flesh—engineering to the best of their abilities the destruction of a creation that is not theirs. The allegorical concept of the play immediately introduces a new element that is not present in the Mysteries where, on the whole, biblical demonic figures bring evil into the world as tempters. In *Castle*, however, it is the world itself that is evil, and so is the flesh. Even if this is not a return to old dualistic ideas that everything non-spiritual, indeed everything created, (albeit by God²) is a bad thing, it has a potential ring of controversial Lollard ideas to it: even though Lollardy was never a truly unified movement, it by and large rejected worldly pomp and the temptations of the flesh.³ Both are formidable enemies in *Castle*. Mundus does not find it difficult to corrupt with the help of his “tresorer, Syr Coueytise” (*Castle* 181). Indeed, “Euery ryche rengne rapyth hym ful rad / In lustys and in lykyngys my lawys to lerne” (*Castle* 185f).⁴ Caro likewise successfully tempts mankind with a host of sinful activities. Humanum Genus will

¹ For the balancing of the fifteen good and bad characters, see Mark Eccles, *The Macro Plays* (London: Oxford UP, 1969) xxv-xxvi.

² In some dualistic systems, matter is created by a demiurge or by a lesser (evil) deity.

³ Notions that were to be grouped under the epithet “Lollard” were first developed by John Wycliffe (c. 1330-84) and later on taken up by followers who came largely from clerical and academic backgrounds.

⁴ rengne = kingdom | rapyth = hasten; drive; draw | rad = quickly

easily give in to “Glotomy,” “Lechery,” and “Slawth” (*Castle* 248 & 250f), allowing Caro to triumph: “Þou I drywe to dust, in drosse for to drepe” (*Castle* 262).

MUNDUS

This change of focus is readily understandable historically. The world and all its emanations must have been weighing heavily on the author of the Morality, if not on the people as a whole. Around 1425, the troubles and repercussions of the Black Death, which had ravaged Europe in the middle of the previous century and which may have cost as many as twenty million lives in the process, were still not entirely overcome. There were renewed outbreaks until well into the middle of the fifteenth century, and in 1425 the disease had struck again in Ireland. The situation was not improved by the fact that the Hundred Years’ War (1337-1453) was still in full swing. It rapidly drained the resources of the country, impoverishing the general population, while a chosen few were able to make their fortunes. Besides, the situation for the English had just taken a turn for the worse when Henry V (1386/7-1422; King from 1413) died, leaving the throne to his nine-month-old son. Quite naturally, the people had cause to worry, especially since there was a power struggle developing between Henry Beaufort (1374-1447), Chancellor and Chief Minister of the realm (who also held influential positions in the church), and Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester (1391-1447), who was acting regent in England while the official regent John, Duke of Bedford (1389-1435), was leading the English troops in France. The prologue to the Wars of the Roses had begun.

At the same time, even religion had lost some of its lustre. Although the troubles of the Reformation were still a hundred years away, and although the Great Western

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Schism (with its many contentions between two—and, after 1409, even three—popes, each of them claiming to be the true primate of the Roman Church), had virtually been resolved with the election of Martin V (1368-1431; pope from 1417), doubts must have been cast upon the practices and teachings of the church. Not without reason does Mundus mention “ryche Rome” at the end of the enumeration of his domains—which includes “Normande,” but excludes England: “All þese londys at myn avyse / Arn castyn to my werdly wyse” (*Castle* 178, 175 & 179f).⁵ Whether the author of *Castle* was at pains to appease such doubts with the eventually rewarding outcome for Humanum Genus, or whether he uses the play as a (successful) guise for Lollard ideas, which had been forced underground after Sir John Oldcastle (1378-1417) had fruitlessly rebelled against Henry V in 1414, one thing at least cannot be denied: he betrayed a feeling of deep distrust towards the world, if not a certain sense of world-weariness, that was to find expression in various ways in the centuries to come.

SATANAS, BELIAL, ET AL.

While the devils had taken a decisive step towards a more secular existence, the traditional devil still looms large in the array of foes that beset Humanum Genus on his way through life. The moment he enters the stage, his darkness and his roaring make Satanas immediately recognisable:

Now I sytte, Satanas, in my sad synne,
As deuyl dowty, in draf as a drake.

⁵ Apart from “longe Pygmayne” (*Castle* 176), Rome is the only location that is qualified with an adjective, and a highly charged one at that.

I champe and I chafe, I chocke on my chynne,
I am boystows and bold, as Belyal þe blake.

(*Castle* 196-99)⁶

The kind of spectacle that was intended is clearly announced in the general stage directions in the manuscript of the play where it says: “He that shall play Belial, look that he have gunpowder burning in pipes, in his hands, and in his ears, and in his arse, when he goeth to battle.”⁷ He is not the subtle seducer of the early biblical accounts, but the foul arch-fiend who conveys the terrors of hell with every means at his disposal. Clearly, the devil was a serious threat to life and limb, and not only to the actor who played his part: “Bothe þe bak and þe buttoke brestyth al on brenne, / Wyth werkys of wreche I werke hem mykyl wrake” (*Castle* 202f).⁸ There is only one thing that pleases Belyal: “In woo is al my wenne” (*Castle* 204).

To achieve his aim of making men suffer unspeakable woe, he has his minions that he sends forth to scour the earth for victims:

Pryde, Wretthe, and Enuye, I sey in my sawe,
Kyngys, kayserys, and kempys and many a kene knyth,
þese louely lordys han lernyd hem my lawe.

To my dene þei wyl drawe

Alholy Mankynne[.]

(*Castle* 214-8)⁹

⁶ dowty = valiant | draf = filth | drake = dragon | champe = gnash my teeth | chocke = thrust | chynne = crack; fissure | boystows = violent; fierce

⁷ Transcription from Folger MS. V. a. 354, f. 195^v from <<http://ise.uvic.ca/Library/SLTnoframes/stage/castle2.html>>, which is part of the *Internet Shakespeare Editions* of the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada. The original page of the manuscript is located under <<http://ise.uvic.ca/Library/SLTnoframes/stage/perseverance.html>> and printed in Eccles, *Macro Plays*, facing the title page.

⁸ wreche = vengeance | mykyl = great | wrake = ruin

⁹ Pride, wrath and envy are called “þe Deuelys chyldryn þre” (*Castle* 894) by Avaricia. The fact that Belyal does not go forth himself but sends lowlier members of his realm is loosely based on biblical authority. The Angel that comes down from Heaven in Revelation “tooke the dragon that olde serpent, which is the deuil and Satan, and he bounde him a thousand yeres” (Rev. 20:2; see

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And finally, Belyal makes it clear that his power is not only limited to Humanum Genus in the play itself, but extends to all the audience present, whom he addresses directly and much more forcefully than Mundus and Caro do:

Gadyr 3ou togedyr, 3e boyis, on þis grene!
In þis brode bugyl a blast wanne I blowe,
Al þis werld schal be wood iwys as I wene
And to my byddynghe bende.

(*Castle* 227-30)¹⁰

In the light of this furore, reminiscent of the angels blowing the seven trumpets in John’s apocalyptic vision of the Last Judgement¹¹ and possibly a parody of it, Belyal certainly comes across as the most redoubtable of the enemies. He is also a prime exponent of at least one of the sins he wants to snare Humanum Genus with: pride. Despite the traditional burden that comes with pride, he does not doubt for a single moment that he will succeed in his endeavour. Even Humanum Genus’s taking refuge in the “Castel of Perseueranse,” the inhabitants of which “schal neuere fallyn in dedly synne” (*Castle* 1705 & 1704), only appears to be a temporary setback for Belyal since his victim wholly succumbs to the second onslaught of Malus Angelus, “þe Werld, þe Flesch, and þe Deuyl of hell” as well as “þe synnys seuene” (*Castle* 1718 & 1720).

also the following verse). Furthermore, Belial himself tells Bartholomew: “If I were able to go forth by myself I would have destroyed the whole world in three days, but neither I nor any of the six hundred go forth. For we have other swift ministers whom we command, and furnish them with a hook of many points and send them forth to hunt, and they catch for us souls of men, enticing them with various tempting baits, that is, by drunkenness and laughter, by backbiting, hypocrisy, pleasures, fornication, and the rest of the trifles that come out of their treasures.” The Questions of Bartholomew, 4:44; Elliott, *Apocryphal NT*, 664.

¹⁰ gadyr = gather | wood = mad | iwys = certainly

¹¹ For the seven angels with trumpets, see Rev. 8-11.

Yet, Belyal's influence and power do not extend as far as he thinks. It is not he alone that wins Humanum Genus over for sinful deeds, but it is precisely the combined effort of all these evil powers that are necessary for the corrupters to carry the day. It is certainly true that Belyal is one of the more potent exponents of the forces of temptation, and yet it turns out that he is not the ultimate instigator of the corruption of Humanum Genus. This role falls to Malus Angelus who in effect coordinates the attack,¹² and from whom Humanum Genus will be taken at the behest of God.¹³ So, while Belyal comes across as the loudest and most hair-raising of the enemies, creating the most sound and fury,¹⁴ he is no longer mankind's chief adversary. Nor are demons or evil spirits alone in this task, as was the case in the Moralities. Caro, and especially Mundus, are far more instrumental in corrupting Humanum Genus than the devil is. Mankind is caught in a game the rules of which are made by the world which promises everything but, at the end of the day, delivers nothing:

A, a, þis game goth as I wolde.
 Mankynde wyl neuere þe Werld forsake.
 Tyl he be ded and vndyr molde
 Holy to me he wyl hym take.
 To Coveytyse he hath hym 3olde;

...

All þese gamys he schal bewayle,
 For I, þe Werld, am of þis entayle,
 In hys moste nede I schal hym fayle,
 And al for Coveytyse.

(*Castle* 2687-91 & 2696-9)

¹² See *Castle* 1969-94.

¹³ See *Castle* 3586-93.

¹⁴ See for instance *Castle* 2060-8 or 2186-98.

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Humanum Genus learns the truth behind this fiendish plot only too soon when Mors extends his cold grip to him towards the end of a selfish life. At this point his desperate and naïve plea for help is only answered by a condescending and sarcastic “Owe, Mankynd, hathe Dethe wyth þe spoke? / Ageyns hym helpyth no wage” (*Castle* 2869f). By and by Mundus shows his true face in a masterfully crafted speech that must strike terror into mankind’s soul:

Oure bonde of loue schal sone be broke;
In colde clay schal be þy cage;
Now schal þe Werld on þe be wroke
For þou hast don so gret outrage.
 þi good þou schalt forgoo.
 Werldlys good þou hast forgon
 And wyth tottys þou schalt be torn.

(*Castle* 2873-9)¹⁵

Rising from an introductory mild denial to a callous, gleeful threat in the concluding lines—“þus haue I seruyd here-beforn / A hundryd thousand moo” (*Castle* 2880f)—Mundus is more than worthy of the devil, whose role he takes on in effect, displacing Belyal in the event.

Belyal’s pride is subjected to more than just one fall. Pride, wrath and envy all play a part in the corruption of mankind on earth, but they, and their prince along with them, are only second rate to greed, which is promoted by the overbearing world. Belyal is therefore not only displaced from his role as Humanum Genus’s main adversary, but he must also suffer the traditional loss of whichever part he hoped to have in his prey.

¹⁵ wroke = avenged | tottys = devils

THE DAUGHTERS OF GOD

The outlook is bleak, and yet Humanum Genus is lucky in the end. In Early Modern England, man will increasingly make an effort to rely on himself to achieve (a more secular form of) salvation. At this point in time, Humanum Genus is saved despite the initial efforts of Truth and Justice, two of the four daughters of God. Advocating the idea of God as the rightful Judge, Truth vehemently speaks against the validity of deathbed repentance:

Late repentaunce if man saue scholde,
 Wheyþyr he wrouth wel or wyckydnese,
 þanne euery man wold be bolde
 To trespas in trost of forʒevenesse.

(*Castle* 3275-8)¹⁶

It is only Peace who brings about the final reconciliation and makes the four daughters of God stand united in a plea that He should extend His mercy to Humanum Genus.

The message that comes at the end of the play is then highly ambiguous. On the one hand, Mankind's last words were "I putte me in Goddys mercy" (*Castle* 3007), the *conditio sine qua non* for salvation to be attained. On the other hand, there is a case made for not considering last-minute repentance after a life full of sin, especially since Humanum Genus "wolde neuere þe hungry / Neyþyr clothe nor fede" (*Castle* 3472f). He did not practise any of the other acts of mercy during his lifetime either, as Truth is at pains to point out.¹⁷ Besides, in his final speech Pater

¹⁶ The main speeches of Truth and Justice take up 3249-313 and 3379-443 respectively.

¹⁷ The complete speech runs from 3470-82.

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himself is anxious to stress the importance of “þe seuene dedys of mercy” (*Castle* 3628) when it comes to judging who has earned the right to take up his place in heaven in future instances. The difference from the Mystery plays is truly remarkable. The author of *Castle* has taken a huge step towards displacing the devil, virtually making him obsolete in the process. This happens by an (unconscious) return to an Old Testament situation where God has all the forces of good and evil under His control. At this moment, Truth and Justice are virtually assigned the roles that the devils have in the Judgement Plays of the Mystery cycles, showing that the worlds of heaven and hell are not as diametrically opposed as one might think.

The underlying reason for God’s decision to grant mankind a place in heaven, however, is expressed some time before His final speech:

Syn 3e acordyd beth all in fere,
My jugement I wyl 3eue 3ou by
Not aftyr deseruyng to do reddere,
To dampne Mankynde to turmentry,
But brynge hym to my blysse ful clere
In heuene to dwelle endelesly,
At 3our prayere forþi.

(*Castle* 3563-9)¹⁸

For God to grant his mercy to a man, and to all mankind, there must be the intercession of a third party. In Thomist belief, for such an intercession not to take place would mean rendering Christ’s sacrifice on the cross pointless. While intercession becomes a problematic issue after the Anglican break from Rome in

¹⁸ reddere = rigorous punishment

plays such as Dekker's *Good Play*,¹⁹ an issue that will need to be solved on different grounds, it is still needful and redemptive at this point in time. At the end of the play, despite the final fervent insistence that men on earth should do good, and despite a rather negative and disillusioned representation of the world and its effects on man, there is a sense that everything will be for the best.²⁰ Although the message seems to be that man should heed the dictates of goodness and perform the seven acts of mercy, there is an underlying idea of predestination. However, it is not the rather bleak Puritan concept of predestination that will make life so difficult for the likes of Faustus.²¹ On the contrary. It seems rather that, despite all the efforts of the world, of the devil and his acolytes, and of the flesh, mankind is predestined to come into its inheritance thanks to intercession and mercy: God extends his hands to each and everyone. "Misericordia Domini plena est terra" (*Castle* 3574). This, however, also means that there is predestination for the devil. The outlook for the fiend is very bleak indeed. His, not man's, endeavours are fruitless. He who starts out as the (literally) most startling character sees his worth eclipsed by his fellow-tempters who take precedence over him in matters of temptation and corruption. The almost inevitable consequence of this is that, in the course of the play, he gradually fades from sight, as do Mundus and Caro, making room for the true heroes of the play, God and Man. A necessary step that will allow man to become more self-reliant has been taken. As characters such as Faustus, Alexander and Prospero prove, this does not necessarily make life any easier, though.

¹⁹ See Barterville's temporary repulsion from hell in V-4 below.

²⁰ See *Castle* 3637-44. That speech in itself is, however, again highly ambiguous in saying that the good will come to heaven and the bad will suffer in hell, while at the same time urging the audience to take example from a play in which a sinner is saved on different grounds. Perhaps the underlying idea is that forgiveness should have no end, as suggested in Mat. 18:21f: "Then came Peter to him, & said, Master, how oft shall my brother sinne against me, & I shall forgive him? vnto feuen times? Iesus said vnto him, I say not to thee, vnto feuen times, but vnto feuentie times feuen times."

²¹ See Chapter VII-9 below.

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III-2 – Wisdom & Mankind

In dramatic art, if not in real life, the displacement of the devil has come a long way by the end of the fifteenth century. In *Wisdom*, the constellation of the forces of evil setting out to corrupt the soul is essentially the same as in *The Castle of Perseverance*: “Ye haue thre enmyes; of hem be ware: / The Worlde, þe Flesche, and þe Fende.” (*Wisdom* 293f). Although Lucifer is, structurally speaking, pushed aside in much the same way as Balyal is in *Castle*, his merrier, more light-hearted, and yet at the same time more immediately critical appearance on stage as a “prowde galonte” (*Wisdom* 325; s.d.) might, when compared to the heavily moralising characters of goodness, even be counterproductive. Who would not be attracted to a shining, flashy character that promises an exciting life in comparison to the daily dull execution of repetitive chores? After all, evil is very often more alluring than goodness. As a result, even though the scope of Lucifer’s role has been reduced, he is still revealed as a dangerous enemy who has taken on a new disguise in order to adapt to the changing times. Even in this respect, the authors of the Moralities were true craftsmen.

Mankind, too, follows a similar pattern:

þe haue thre aduersaryis and he [Titivillus] ys mayster of hem all:
That ys to sey, the Dewell, þe World, þe Flesch and þe Fell.
The New Gyse, Nowadayis, Nowgth, þe World we may hem call;
And propyrly Titiuillus syngnyfyth the Fend of helle[.]

(*Mankind* 883-6)

Although Titivillus is characterised as the Fiend by Mercy, he displays more of the traits that are usually associated with the burlesque Vice than with either the devil of

the Mystery plays or the thundering Belyal of *Castle*. He is a jester rather than a devil. Another element that makes him differ from the traditional fiend is his name. While Lucyfer and even Belyal still have roots in Scripture, the source of “Titivillus” is largely obscure. However, there are conjectures that it is “in origin a creation of monastic wit,” possibly punning on the phrase “*tītivillitium* used once by Plautus, and inferred to mean ‘a mere trifle, a bagatelle’.”²² In fact, Titivillus is defined as the “[n]ame for a devil said to collect fragments of words dropped, skipped, or mumbled in the recitation of divine service, and to carry them to hell, to be registered against the offender; hence, a name for a demon or devil in the mystery plays.”²³ In the same way as the name is an invention of the Middle Ages—supposedly, it occurs for the first time in a Latin sermon dating from the first half of the fourteenth century—the character, with all its aspects of the budding Vice, is a child of this time as well.²⁴

Significantly, though, *Mankind* takes up the suggestion of Chester’s *The Fall of the Angels* and its unhistorical Lightborne. It gives the demon an original name and, by naming him, attempts to exert a certain amount of control over the figure. Although the wish to belittle the devil clearly speaks from the name, it would be a mistake to underestimate his powers. In this way, the liberation from the evil influence does not succeed. Still, the devil has started to distance himself from the purely biblical figure that he was and is taking on a life of his own, less roaring, but far merrier, more set on revelation than on corruption. His creators take his

²² “†titivil,” *OED*, etymology.

²³ “†titivil,” *OED*. See also the expression “not a jot or tittle” in “jot,” n.1 and “tittle” n.2, *OED*. “†tītivillīcium,” *Gaffiot* confirms this interpretation: “chose sans valeur, un rien.”

²⁴ “In its technical use the word ‘Vice’ first occurs in [John] Heywood’s [1496/7-in or after 1578] *Love* and *Weather*, where No-lover-nor-loved and Merry Report are each described as ‘the Vice’. [...] In the earliest documentary references the Vice is associated with the jester.” Wilson, *English Drama*, 60f. Wilson also summarises the various opinions about the sources for the Vice, who “has more ancestors than can be counted on the fingers of one hand” (62).

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development into a new direction. He becomes more and more a child of the world than a reprobate from heaven. It appears that the classical devil from Scripture is not needed at all cost any longer by the end of the fifteenth century.

III-3 – Everyman

The devil plays no part in *Everyman* at all. When God surveys the state of affairs on earth, the only conclusion he can draw is a gloomy one:

And nowe I se the people do clene for sake me
They vse the seuen deedly synnes dampnable
As pryde coueytise wrathe and lechery
Now in the worlde be made commendable[.]

(*Everyman* 35-8)

The world is indeed a sinful place, and the situation seems to have deteriorated compared to the plays that sport a devil. There is no tempter now to lead man away from the strait and narrow²⁵ to the highway of sin, but it is mankind itself that has taken on an active role in this deplorable endeavour.

The disappearance of the fiend does not improve matters on earth. It rather makes things worse since man does no longer have an—albeit shallow—excuse for the sins he commits. In effect “they wyll become moche worse than beestes” (*Everyman* 49). Death, the adversary that God then sends to earth to remind man that “of theyr lyfe they be nothings sure” (*Everyman* 41), is not, unlike the devil in any of his countless incarnations, God’s adversary, but has rather reverted to the role

²⁵ Mat. 7:14.

Satan, the adversary, had in the Book of Job: he is the scourge of mankind that torments people, not only with God's permission, but at His express behest:

Where arte thou deth thou myghty messengere
Dethe: Almyghty god I am here at your wyll
 Your commaundement to fulfyll
God: Go thou to euery man
 And shewe hym in my name
 A pylgrymage he must on hym take
 Which he in no wyse may escape

(*Everyman* 63-9)

It seems as if the devil has reached the end of his absolute usefulness as early as this: man commits sins of himself, untempted by demons. God can do without the devil, and so will new generations of dramatists.

This development is not necessarily a good thing for mankind, since people themselves are now entirely responsible for all their deeds, good and bad. For the dramatists, on the other hand, new challenges arise. They need to find answers to problems that had previously been solved by having recourse to the divine and the demonic. As these spiritual aspects are displaced by an increasing focus on a more independent humanity, new dimensions open up that playwrights are ready to explore. These new perspectives come with an increasing secularisation of drama in general. This goes both hand in hand with, but also against, the general drift of the times:

During the middle years of the [sixteenth] century the drama was beginning to assume the secular cast which nowadays most of us take for granted. Plays on secular themes there had been before, but if by 1540 the drama was still mainly allegorical, by 1580 it had become mainly

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secular. Perhaps it would be better to say that it had become ostensibly secular, for, allegorical or non-allegorical, it was still didactic.²⁶

Yet, the devil is too enticing and useful a character to be easily discarded and left out for good, even on the secular stage. And so it comes about that he makes his appearance again and again, sometimes in a niche, but sometimes also as one of the main characters. Much later, he returns to earth, and to the stage, to find matters possibly just a little bit different from how he used to know them.

²⁶ Wilson, *English Drama*, 85.

Interlude

When the devil returned with a vengeance to the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage, he had undergone a transformation: in collective beliefs, the biblical demon had mixed his characteristics with the sprites of local folklore:

Quite early he became so indispensable a property of legend and folk-tale that he was confused in the popular mind with elf and dwarf, satyr and Puck and Robin Goodfellow, etc. Quite early—long before he found his way into the religious plays—he became a comic figure. [...] It is this devil of the folk which found his way onto the English comic stage through the rather restricted avenue of the mystery play[.]¹

In the three plays that are centre-stage in chapters IV to VI, the first thing that hits the eye in comparison to the devil in the Mysteries and, to a large extent, the Moralities is the fact that he has lost his exclusive derivation from the Christian tradition.

¹ Russell Potter, "Three Jacobean Devil Plays," *SP* 28 (1931) 730f.

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The main devils in *Grim the Collier of Croydon; or, The Devil and His Dame: with The Devil and Saint Dunstan*² are Pluto, Minos, Æacus and Rhadamanth. In Greco-Roman mythology Pluto is the ruler of the underworld, the kingdom of the dead, son of Saturn and brother to Jupiter and Neptune, who presides over his associates, the three judges of the netherworld: Minos, son of Zeus and Europa, ruler of Crete during his lifetime; Æacus, son of Zeus and Ægina; and Rhadamanth, son of Jupiter and Europa. To round the picture off, it is “furies” (*Grim*, I.i.42; s.d.; 105)—though not necessarily the three Furies of classical antiquity—who act as infernal guards, taking on the role that would go to minor devils in a Christian context. The situation is much the same in the troubled *If This Be not a Good Play, the Devil Is in It* by Thomas Dekker.³ Dekker’s play adds Charon to the pageant of characters from the Greek / Roman (under)world, but it also gives the biblical Lucifer a prominent position in the hierarchy of this world.⁴ *The Devil Is an Ass* by Ben Jonson, on the other hand, is more austere in its display of hellish figures. Jonson makes exclusive use of the Christian tradition again: Satan is his sole hero. But his play features the return of the Vice, alongside the allegorical-style naming of the human characters in the play.

² The play was published in 1662 and then attributed to one I. T. See William M. Baillie, “The Date and Authorship of *Grim the Collier of Croydon*,” *MP* 76 (1978) 179-84. Baillie, basing his argument on Dunstan’s last words, rightly suggests that the original title of the play must have been *The Devil and His Dame* (179). Apart from the fact that the latter title will much rather draw a crowd than the reference to an obscure Grim, it also does better justice to the structure of the play than the former: out of the twenty-one scenes that make up *Grim*, only four star the eponymous hero in the subplot. There is hardly any interaction between the two storylines either. Robin Goodfellow is the only character to appear in both plots, even though he enters Grim’s world only later in the play, after he has been driven from Castiliano’s household.

³ Arthur Freeman, “The Date of Dekker’s *If This Be not a Good Play, the Devil Is in It*,” *PQ* 44 (1965) 122-4.

⁴ In *Good Play* IV.ii, Rufman, Shacklesoul and Lurchall report the progress of their missions to Lucifer, and after Shacklesoul has succeeded in undoing most of the monks, it is Lucifer that he invokes in his joy: “laugh *Lucifer*, dance grim fiends of hell” (*Good Play*, I.iii.192).

Potter considers these plays to be “based on current folk-lore or legend; and each was evidently written to meet the box-office demand.”⁵ On one level his limiting assessment is certainly right. *Grim* is the first play to focus on the devil, and not the human being, as the central character. Its success inspired a fair number of spin-offs. It is an enjoyable little comedy about love, marriage, and their vagaries, in which the devil Belphegor, *alias* Castiliano, is sent from hell to Italy to determine whether wives have indeed become “the plague of mankind” (*Grim*, I.i.61; 106) to such an extent that they become “the instrument to end [men’s lives]” (*Grim*, I.i.100; 107). The play is, however, not misogynistic, as Grim’s Joan provides a balancing figure of female virtue without it being too good to be true thanks to her straightforward, down-to-earth character.

Dekker’s play is (possibly as a reflection of the author’s difficult financial and personal circumstances) a more bitter work which offers less of a positive outlook.⁶ The three strands of the plot follow the corrupting machinations of devils at court, in a monastery, and in the world of money-lending and usury in Naples.⁷ These threads are knotted together by both hell and King Alphonso, who learns with great difficulty and misery that it is his duty as head of state to keep society from corruption by his own, virtuous example. Although order is eventually restored, the end is far from comforting. Even the attempts of attenuation by comic relief might leave the more perceptive members of the audience with a bitter aftertaste.

⁵ Potter, “Devil Plays,” 736. If so, Jonson’s play backfired badly: it was only performed once.

⁶ Around 1610, Dekker found it increasingly difficult to capture the taste of the audience and to write truly successful plays that would save him, momentarily, from his debts. The fact that theatres kept suffering from the effects of the plague did not help his financial situation either. Eventually he was imprisoned for debt from 1612-19.

⁷ Sidney R. Homan investigates the material used in creating the play in “*A Looking-Glass for London and England: the Source for Dekker’s If It Be not a Good Play, the Devil Is in It*,” *N&Q* os 211 (1966) 301f.

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The potentially bitter exposure of common London vices takes on a more sarcastic and lively form in Jonson’s play. In essence, it revolves around the beguiling of the gullible Fabian Fitzdottrel at the hands of all kinds of tricksters, such as Engine, Mercraft, or Everill, that haunted the streets of London in the early seventeenth century. While Dekker may have tried to cast his net wide and to address more timeless issues beyond the immediate scope of everyday vices, and, in the process, lost the audience’s interest, Jonson’s satire was aimed at, and reached, the heart of the times. As events unravel, the only figure that turns out to be even more naïve than Fitzdottrel himself is Pug, the unfortunate, second-rate devil. Fitzdottrel, who, in the course of the play, risks losing not only all his land and property, but his faithful wife as well, may just come away the wiser for his experiences in the end, although a serious doubt remains: he would probably not have gained any insight even if he had actually managed to see *The Devil Is an Ass*, or rather, to show off the coat which he almost sold his wife for. If Jonson thinks much of his craft as a playwright, then he does not rate the audience’s power of perception very highly.

In many respects, these three plays are as diverse as the characters and approaches of their authors are, and as different as the sixteen years that separate the first one from the last. Even the element that stands out as the ostensibly obvious connection between the three plays, the devil mentioned in their respective titles, turns out, under closer scrutiny, to reveal telling variations that reflect both the concerns of the authors as well as the passing of time and people’s perception of the devil in general.

Don't pay the ferryman
Don't even fix a price.
Don't pay the ferryman
Until he gets you to the other side.

Chris de Burgh, "Don't Pay the Ferryman"

IV – Grim the Collier of Croydon

Neither Haughton nor Dekker are concerned with presenting a mythologically consistent picture of hell and its inhabitants. Indeed, the mythology is corrupted with facets of Christian theology and popular belief. Pluto himself does in fact not share much more with his Roman namesake than his name. He may be the ruler of the underworld, but his character is also strongly imbued, albeit not with Christian values, but with the prevailing ideas of a Christian framework.

IV-1 – The Gods and Heroes of Classical Mythology

The Greeks' and Romans' view of the afterlife differed markedly from the one Christians had.¹ For a start, everyone who died, rich or poor, virtuous or corrupt, descended into the infernal regions where they were to spend the rest of recorded

¹ What follows can be no more than a brief sketch of ancient mythological ideas, details of which naturally vary in relation to time and space. In any case, any individual's knowledge in the Renaissance must have been coloured by personal learning and experience, so insight into the broad mythological traits should suffice for an adequate picture of the possible perceptions in Elizabethan England.

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time, forgetful, according to some, of the life they had led on earth, after crossing the river Lethe. A reward in paradise for good deeds done in life, or eternal punishment in hell for one’s shortcomings along Christian guidelines, were not on the agenda. Generally, the underworld was glum, gloomy and obscure, even though it also had more pleasant places to offer, especially for those who used to be heroes / demi-gods during their lifetimes. Still, permission to dwell there was desired but largely arbitrary and only partly based on merit. In *The Odyssey*, Homer (c. 8th century BC) sings of the Old Man of the Sea telling Menelaos:

But for you, Menelaos, O fostered of Zeus, it is not the gods’ will
that you shall die and go to your end in horse-pasturing Argos,
but the immortals will convoy you to the Elysian
Field, and the limits of the earth, where fair-haired Rhadamanthys
is, and where there is made the easiest life for mortals[.]
[...]
This, because Helen is yours and you are son-in-law therefore
to Zeus.²

Family bonds, it appears, matter more than the wisdom Menelaos brought to his reign or his valiant deeds in the course of the Trojan war. They are the only reason advanced by the Old Man of the Sea in his explanation why Menelaos will be allowed to sojourn in the Elysian Field.

In *Works and Days*, Hesiod (fl. c. 700 BC) makes it even clearer that it is fortune, which largely depends upon the goodwill of the gods, that decides upon the mortals’ fate after death. Speaking about “the godly race of the heroes who are called demigods,” i.e. the fourth race of men, he says:

² Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. and introd. Richmond Lattimore (New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1991) Bk IV, 561-5 & 569f.

There [at Troy] some of them were engulfed by the consummation of death, but to some Zeus the father, son of Kronos, granted a life and home apart from men, and settled them at the ends of the earth. These dwell with carefree heart in the Isles of the Blessed Ones, beside the deep-swirling Oceanus: fortunate Heroes, for whom the grain-giving soil bears its honey-sweet fruits thrice a year.³

Elysium is clearly a part of the underworld reserved for the favourites of the gods and for heroes, who are not necessarily virtuous people, while none of the people can evade their fate of spending a considerable amount of time in the underworld.

IV-2 – Christian Classical Underworld

In *Grim* the boundaries between mythological and Christian world views are hazy indeed. Haughton does not explicitly state that it is merely sinners who come to hell. The only character the audience see is Malbecco, who is called upon to prove whether he can “justly say / Thou wert not author of thy own decay” (*Grim*, I.i.52f; 105). There is no immediate indication whether Pluto also welcomes righteous people to his dominion, even though it seems tempting to assume, in the light of Malbecco’s trial, that he does not. If this is so, the transition from the mythological Underworld to the Christian idea of hell has been implicitly made and is not (to be) questioned.

This evolution is undisputed in Dekker’s *Good Play*, which begins with Charon’s complaining that “Ghosts now come not thronging to my boate, / But drop

³ Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*, trans. M. L. West (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) 41f. The word μακαρ used for the “Blessed Ones” always refers to the gods as opposed to the mortals. According to A. Bailly, it means “bienheureux, *en parl. des dieux, opp. aux mortels*”. *Dictionnaire Grec Français* (Paris: Hachette, 1950).

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by one and one in” (*Good Play*, I.i.33f). Pluto’s dogsbodies have sadly neglected their duties to make sure the sinners on earth find their way to hell:

Is not the world as t’ was?
Once mother of Rapes, Incests, and Sodomies,
Atheisme, and Blasphemies, plump Boyes indeed,
That suck’d (our Dams brest) is shee now barren? Ha!
Is there a dearth of villaines?
Omn.: More now then euer?
Pluto: Is there such penurie of man-kinde, Hell-houndes?
You can lye snoring.
Ruffman: Each land is full of Rake-hells.
(*Good Play*, I.i.61-7)

As Pluto knows full well, “aboue vs dwell, / Diuells brauer and more subtill then in Hell” (*Good Play*, I.i.75f). It is again the world, *Mundus*, that is the originator of all sins, not one of Pluto’s minions. The inhabitants of the underworld are only needed to implement punishment for the unrighteous. And it is these human devils exclusively, not the just or the repentant, that can become inhabitants of Pluto’s Underworld, which, in both plays, is clearly a transfiguration of the Christian vision of hell into the realm of mythology. Taking the logical next step, Jonson will return to a more purely Christian adaptation of hell, peopled solely by Satan and the likes of Pug as well as vices like Iniquity. With this, Jonson chooses not to draw his material from classical sources, but from the chronologically closer world of the *Mystery and Morality* plays. In effect, though, it is not his underworld that comes really alive for the spectator, as it does in *Grim* and *Good Play*, but the real world and society of seventeenth century London and England where “people have their Vices [...] most like to Virtues” (*Ass*, I.i.121).

In *Grim*, the matter that the infernal court is about to hear is presented as a most weighty one:

the greatness of his present cause
Hath made ourselves [Pluto] in person sit as judge,
To hear th' arraignment of Malbecco's ghost.

(*Grim*, I.i.47-9; 105)

The ensuing hearing leads to Malbecco's staying with Pluto and the judges until Belphegor returns from his reconnaissance mission on earth. Only then will there be a decision regarding Malbecco's "doom" (*Grim*, I.i.147; 108). The proceedings seem so straightforward, so natural that the confusion of mythological and Christian elements goes largely unnoticed. Haughton is vague about what kind of "doom" he means. In a mythological world view, it would refer to punishment within the infernal regions themselves, while to Christians it would imply Malbecco's condemnation in hell or salvation in paradise. Given that the case is about a suicide, the question that is raised is a highly sensitive one, namely whether suicides have the right to salvation. It is, however, consciously eschewed by the play, and resolved in the end within the terms of the—less controversial—mythological framework.

Yet, because of the mixture of Christian and mythological elements, Pluto and the other judges in *Grim*—whom Pluto calls unequivocally "ever-dreaded judges of black hell" (*Grim*, I.i.43; 105) and "you lords of hell" (*Grim*, I.i.101; 107)—and the judges in Dekker's *Good Play*, or other contemporaneous English plays for that matter, have moved beyond redemption into a Christian era. While reinterpreting the past from the point of view of the present is a natural process, the implications in this context are potentially explosive: as Haughton applies Christian elements to Pluto and his hell, Pluto becomes one, in the minds of the spectators and arguably

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even the author, with the Christian devil, and the judges and other figures with the devil’s minions. However, by making Pluto / the devil the judge of the fate of the dead, Haughton gives Pluto / the devil traits of God himself. Although an overreaching aspiration to God’s throne originally led to Lucifer’s fall, the devil is not invested anywhere in biblical dogma with the power to judge the living and the dead. This is the sole preserve of God. Yet, that which might be theological dynamite at the hands of a more astute playwright of the stature of a Marlowe, who might have produced a more lasting work with far-ranging implications, is drowned in the general jocular atmosphere of the play.⁴

IV-3 – Belphegor

The confusion of elements of the most diverse historical traditions does not end here. Clearly, purist considerations regarding mythological / biblical correctness lost out against the dramatic usefulness of the demonic figures.

When Malbecco has told his doleful tale about how badly his wife treated him, there appears a devil who stems from an entirely different tradition: Belphegor.⁵ *Grim*’s hell is then also peopled by ancient Semitic divine figures: the Moabite idol Baal-Peor was “the god of licentiousness”⁶ whom the Jews worshipped after they

⁴ The historical setting of *Grim* is equally confused. The action takes place in the months running up to “Holyrood-day” (*Grim*, IV; 154), 14th September of a non-defined year, supposedly during the lifetime of St Dunstan (909?-88), chief advisor to King Edgar the Peaceful (943/4-75; King from 959). However, any timeline will fail to accommodate the lives of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the (fictitious) earls of Kent and London, as well as classical demons.

⁵ For an account of the three main sources of *Grim* and the characters deriving thence see Baillie, “Date and Authorship,” 179f. See also D. W. Thompson, “Belphegor in *Grim the Collier* and Riche’s *Farewell*,” *MLN* 50 (1935) 99-102.

⁶ “Belphegor,” Gustav Davidson, *A Dictionary of Angels—Including the Fallen Angels* (New York, NY: Free Press; London: Collier-Macmillan, 1967) 74. Belphegor is another instance of the Jews recasting the roles of deities of rival cults and bedevilling them: “The sexual rites connected with the cult of the Baal of Peor have to do with the aspect of fertility. As this cult is addressed to Baal,

“began to commit whoredome with the daughters of Moáb: [...] And Ifraél coupled him self vnto Báal Peór” (Num. 25:1 & 3).⁷ Naturally, the Jewish God of the Old Testament, being as jealous—or, depending on one’s point of view, as concerned about the welfare of his people—as he was, was far from pleased: “the wrath of the Lord was kindled againſt Ifraél” (Num. 25:3).⁸ Belphegor falls from his position among the principalities and, “[i]n Hell, [...] is the demon of discoveries and ingenious inventions.”⁹

Once more, though, Haughton, following *The Tale of Belfagor* (written 1515-20; published 1545) by Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), is not concerned with cabbalistic truths, which he might not have known anyway. The exact nature of Belphegor, of whom Machiavelli says that he was “once, before his fall from Heaven, an archangel, now an arch-devil,”¹⁰ is of no import. Implicitly, as it is the case with Pluto, he is (dis)placed into a Christian framework and system of values, taking on the characteristics of a devil as dictated by the principles of a Renaissance Christian world view. Not even the name—or any devil’s name for that matter—could have put a doubt about this in the audience’s mind, nor does the author question the equation “creatures of the underworld equals Christian value system” at any moment. The behaviour of the characters on stage is just too familiar, fitting the cultural context perfectly.

Nevertheless, it seems odd that the rather untypical Belphegor of the play should be a prominent potentate in any kind of hell, and one cannot help but wonder

who is the god of nature, it is hoped to contribute to his bringing new life out of death.” See “Baal of Peor בעל פעור,” *DDD*, 147f.

⁷ Compare the coupling of the sons of heaven with the daughters of man and their resulting fall in 1 Enoch 6:2. Both trespasses lead to death.

⁸ Compare Psalm 106:26-9.

⁹ “Belphegor,” Davidson, *Angels*, 74.

¹⁰ Niccolò Machiavelli, “The Tale of Belfagor,” *The Literary Works of Machiavelli*, ed. and trans. J. R. Hale (London: Oxford UP, 1961) 194.

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whether Pluto does not have an ulterior motive when he chooses Belphegor for this particular assignment on earth:

He is the fittest that I know in hell
To undertake a task of such import;
For he is patient, mild, and pitiful—
Humours but ill agreeing with our kingdom.

(*Grim*, I.i.118-21; 107)

It seems equally odd that a Christianised Pluto should really care whether men commit suicide because they are driven to it by women or whether it be for any other cause. After all, it is the devils’ trade to tempt men to sinful activities, and it does not stand to reason why suicided husbands should be treated any differently from all other suicides. Making an exception for them would be uncharacteristically humane and even run counter to hell’s guidelines. Since it is hardly likely either that Pluto seeks to be distracted from an unbearably dull existence by sending Belphegor to earth, one can only suspect the manipulating hand of the playwright, Haughton, taking up Machiavelli’s initial lead: ultimately it is not Pluto who is interested in the outcome of the experiment, but the author, for the benefit of the audience (and his own pocket). It is also revealing for the age that such tampering with all kinds of traditions should be allowed so easily. The author’s quietly grinning irony is only thinly disguised behind Pluto’s assessment of his acolyte’s character. No doubt, Belphegor, who seems to be a trustworthy devil, is chosen because Pluto / Machiavelli / Haughton must realise as well as anyone that women will be able to drive anybody mad if they succeed in overcoming Belphegor’s mildness and patience. Moreover, these characteristics also serve the dramatist’s purpose, especially when they are coupled with an appealing amount of *naïveté*.

These ingredients are the source of the many amusing twists and turns of Haughton's comedy. They transform Belphegor into a potentially passive character. This is a stroke of genius which causes a unique deviation from the devil's initial conception in the Christian view. After all, that devil became what he is by an active and conscious deed of will. Unlike Pluto, Belphegor at first believes that he is totally in control of events, though. This devilish characteristic is enhanced by his unwarranted boasting of a more than healthy amount of cocksureness and hubris. In his delusion, Belphegor considers virtue, both male and female, to serve one purpose only, namely his own glorification:

when I back again return to hell
All women may be bound to reverence me
For saving of their credits, as I will.

(*Grim*, I.iii.24-6; 112)

However, what ensues based on these premises illustrates how events may tragically dictate the actions of a character, even against his own wish. Right from the outset, then, begins the path towards Belphegor's failure.

It goes together with a change of name. In a further twist of the investing of devils with new names, it is Belphegor himself this time, not an anonymous playwright as was the case in Chester and *Mankind*, who changes his identity. This is highly significant as it is the devil himself who proceeds to his own undoing. Although this is required as a disguise for the devil on earth, it also points to a change in the perceptions, faculties, and possibly even the character of Belphegor. His earthly incarnation, Castiliano, may go some way to prove that there is actually more in a name than some might think. Both cocksureness and hubris soon evaporate in the face of the tongue which he himself has restored to Honorea with

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the help of a “herb, which mortal men have seldom found, / [And which I can] with ease procure me, when I list” (*Grim*, II.i.98f; 118). In this way, Belphegor perversely becomes the main vehicle for a warning against the practice of black magic: few would want to practise the “secret arts” (*Grim*, II.i.33; 115)—of which Castiliano is, naturally, an *aficionado*—if the result is a general sighing of “I would to God her tongue were tied again” (*Grim*, II.i.131; 119). The play and its comedy might provide more powerful deterrents than all threats, legal or religious, possibly could.

IV-4 – St Dunstan

The fact that the devil is turned into less than a shadow of himself does not lead to the Church playing a strengthened and glorious role in return. By the rules of inversion, St Dunstan, Belphegor’s counterpart, also suffers a series of setbacks, and it is far from clear whether they are part of his plan, or whether he is seriously baffled by them.

Dunstan sets out to teach both Castiliano and the audience a lesson in the traditional contest between wise men. The aim is the restoration of Honorea’s tongue. Praising the power of heaven against the use of black magic, he even warns Castiliano against taking the first step to ruin:

Fond man, presuming on thy weaker skill,
That think’st by art to overrule the heavens!
Thou know’st not what it is thou undertak’st.

(*Grim*, II.i.41-3; 115f)

Dunstan’s apparent failure to restore Honorea’s tongue, and Castiliano’s preventing Dunstan from sounding his harp might all be part of Dunstan’s larger plan to foil

Castiliano’s enterprise as they boost his confidence and are the sources of his eventual defeat.¹¹ In magical contests, even an ostensible failure serves God’s higher purpose. After all, “how vnfearcheable are his iudgements, & his wayes pait finding out” (Rom. 11:33).¹² Whether there are plans that God has, whether Dunstan knows about them, or whether he is only an instrument in them, is impossible to find out from the bare words on the page. Remarks such as

My weaker senses cannot apprehend
The means this stranger us’d to make her speak:
There is some secret mystery therein,
Conceal’d from Dunstan, which the heavens reveal
That I may scourge this bold, blaspheming man

(*Grim*, II.i.142-6; 119)

may be addressed to the characters on stage, with a secret wink aside, or they may be genuine reflections of Dunstan’s bewilderment. It takes an actor and a stage to breathe life into the character, who might be clandestinely gesturing to the audience to indicate that more is going on than meets the eye or the ear, enhancing both the drama and the comedy on stage.

The action of the play emanates from Dunstan’s dream in the first place. Although Dunstan is “o’ercome with sleep” (*Grim*, I.i.41; 105) at the beginning of the play, it would seem logical for him to be in control of his dream since it appears to be the means chosen by, or given to, him to instruct the audience that he was wrongly accused

¹¹ The play is by far not dramatic enough to allow Castiliano’s shortcomings to be called overreaching or hubris, but the prerequisites of these are clearly detectable.

¹² Compare Job 11:7f.

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for a conjuror
By reason of those many miracles
Which heaven for holy life endowed me with

(*Grim*, I.i.22-4; 104).

In this light it would be strange for him not to recognise Belphegor in the guise of Castiliano. Yet, it might still be possible that Dunstan is confused by the events. He largely lets men fend for themselves, which reflects the stance God has taken towards mankind. Still, his rare entries on stage do not make him appear as a benevolent guiding hand or a more classical *deus ex machina*. In truth, the character has little depth and does not shine too gloriously at all, even though he is highly instrumental in securing the devil’s defeat. He also helps to make the devil a means of education, as he has been every so often in the course of his existence and appearance in print and on the stage, when he announces unambiguously:

Mark well the process of the devil’s disguise,
Who happily may learn you to be wise.
Women, beware! and make your bargains well;
The devil, to choose a wife, is come from hell.

(*Grim*, I.i.159-62; 109)

Thanks to this warning, the audience might know more about Castiliano than Dunstan does in the course of the events.

In effect, both the devil and the representative of God on earth come across as two rather helpless figures. Honorea’s tongue is not loosened by Dunstan’s prayer, but by devilish means. Clearly, the result is not encouraging as Honorea’s first words are not meek thanks, but a long tirade against all the men in her company. Precisely by not acting but letting the devil have his wish—which Belphegor might

well regret the very moment it comes true, since even “[t]he devil cannot tie a woman’s tongue” (*Grim*, II.i.133; 119)—Dunstan has Castiliano by the nose. Although this is an unobtrusive adaptation of the mediaeval legend of Dunstan tempted by the devil,¹³ the credit for success cannot go entirely to Dunstan as Castiliano is caught in the increasingly complex plots devised by Morgan to marry his daughter to Lacy, his chosen son-in-law. This time Castiliano does not find out what is really going on. To top it all, he completely lacks pluck: he does not cause an uproar against any of the tricks that are played on him, but he stoically accepts whatever befalls him since “there is no remedy [...] for a wife” (*Grim*, II.v.103f; 135). Men, or women, clearly have gained the upper hand, relegating both the devil and God’s representative to the second league.

IV-5 – The Gulls

Castiliano, overwhelmed by the events that have engulfed him, innocently entertains those in his house who mean to cuckold him, and he is totally deceived by his wife Marian, whom he thinks entirely free of blame:

¹³ “The most popular legend concerning [Dunstan] tells how he vanquished the Devil, who came to tempt him. Dunstan was making a golden chalice for his church when the Devil appeared. Dunstan instantly seized the fiend by the nose with his hot tongs and held him fast. An old rhyme records the encounter: ‘Saint Dunstan so the story goes / Once pulled the Devil by the nose / With red-hot tongs; which made him roar, / That he was heard three miles or more.’” John Vince, *Discovering Saints in Britain*, Discovering 64, 3rd ed. (Princes Risborough: Shire, 2001) 20. Other sources add that the devil came in the disguise of a beautiful young woman, which might point to him being Belphegor, who “[w]hen invoked, he appears in the form of a young woman.” Davidson, *Angels*, 74. Her charms had, however, no effect whatsoever on the saint who recognised the fiend when his hoofs showed from underneath the skirt. Furthermore, “Sussex and Kentish folk will tell you that the Devil, espying the waters at Tunbridge Wells, swooped down and thrust his nose deep beneath them. To this day the spring-water is red and tastes of sulphur.” David Nash Ford, “The Legend of St. Dunstan & the Devil,” *Britannia*, 2000. 31 Dec. 2009. <<http://www.britannia.com/history/legend/dundevel.html>>.

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Marian is mine;
Who, though she be a shrew, yet is she honest.
[...]
Well, Marian, thou liv’st yet free from blame.
Let ladies go; thou art the devil’s dame.

(*Grim*, III.ii.35f & 46f; 141)

It is not entirely clear what Castiliano actually means by this, whether he stoically accepts that a true consort of the devil is supposed to behave in a way more devilish than the devil himself; or whether he is rather proud of her energetic behaviour. The phrase in itself, however, is remarkable. It is common knowledge that the devil’s dame is of a nature far worse than the fiend. Castiliano’s remark strikes a fittingly misogynistic note in a piece that bedevils women as well as exonerates them. It is also a prime example of dramatic irony, as Castiliano is totally unaware of the deeper implications of his analysis of the situation and the danger that arises for himself. Trusting in the allegiances created by wedlock, he lets his guard down entirely and as a result becomes the plaything in the centre of the various plots and counterplots that go on around him. The humans see further than he does and enjoy the prospect of leading Castiliano by the nose: “He’s passing cunning to deceive himself— / But, all the better for the after-sport” (*Grim*, II.iii.81f; 125). Castiliano really goes out of his way to help men deceive him by willingly, if unwittingly, providing all the opportunities that they need to carry out their plans.

Other devils are not more successful in their endeavours, either. The demon that appears in Musgrave’s shape as a catalyst to corrupt Honorea by urging her to “Go home, and learn to live / As chaste as Lucrece” (*Grim*, III.iii.27f; 142) implements a plan that backfires badly as well. The thought that this devil planted in her mind comes to bear unwanted virtuous fruit:

Thou shalt not train me, or induce my love
 To loose desires or dishonoured thoughts.
 'Tis God's own work that struck a deep remorse
 Into my tainted heart for my past folly.

(*Grim*, IV.ii.45-8; 161)

This insight is not limited to Honorea, either. Lacy, spying on her and witnessing her constancy, is forced to conclude that “Men may surmise amiss in jealousy, / Of those that live in untouch'd honesty” (*Grim*, IV.ii.70f; 162). If the devil that appeared in Musgrave's shape did not fully cure Lacy of the curse of jealousy, it at least taught him a valuable lesson about the green-eyed monster.

Hell's inhabitants are really out of luck with their ventures on earth, and their ill fortune is amplified by the weakness of their characters. Apart from being patient, mild and pitiful, Castiliano is also a very gullible incarnation of Belphegor. Even though he virtually catches Marian and Clinton in the act of adultery, it is they who manage to make him have such a bad conscience about his suspicions that he nigh on apologises for his—justified—jealousy:

And, gentle captain, be not you offended;
 I was too hot at first, but now repent it.
 I prythee, gentle dame, forgive me this[.]

(*Grim*, III.iv.297-9; 153)

Towards the end it transpires that it is not the devil who corrupts human beings, but it is humans, and especially certain women, who almost succeed in corrupting the devil. The effect of Castiliano's oncoming melancholy at the prospect of having to return to hell leads him to make a thoughtless promise: “Ask what thou wilt, and I will give it thee” (*Grim*, IV.iii.78; 165). As a result, when Marian wants him to kill

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Earl Lacy, Castiliano is less free to do what he wants than ever before, struck in fetters by (wo)mankind. If all things were as tradition would have them, Castiliano, and Belphegor within him, should rejoice at this successful corruption of a human soul. Not even the consideration that it corroborates Malbecco’s initial allegations should dampen the joy at this damnable instigation to sin in any way. However, this inversion of roles manoeuvres Castiliano into a position that does not do him proud: he is forced into an entirely passive role that he does not delight in. Whether there is a budding sense of pride and self-esteem becoming a devil, or whether there is a less than fiendish remaining seed of goodness in Castiliano, Marian’s overwhelming amount of unexpected evil energy makes him do good despite himself. Like Satan who was made to warn Pilate in the Mysteries, or Pug who will prevent adultery in *The Devil Is an Ass*, the devil is caught in a no-win situation. In an aside to the audience, Castiliano declares:

Well, I have promis’d her to kill the earl;
And yet, I hope ye will not think I’ll do it.
[...]
But in my absence no man shall report
That for my dame’s sake I did any hurt.

(*Grim*, IV.iii.125f & 132f; 167)

Instead, it is Castiliano who suffers (willingly): poisoned by Marian, in danger of being assassinated by the jealous Clinton, unjustly threatened by the law for the supposed murder of Earl Lacy, he is only saved by the natural end to his term on earth:

Lordings, adieu! and my curs’d wife, farewell!
If me ye seek, come follow me to hell.

The ground opens, and they both fall down into it.

(*Grim*, V.iii.61f & s.d.; 175)

In the end, Castiliano / Belphegor takes the same exit from the stage that is traditionally reserved for the damned sinner who has reached the end of his term on earth and who has not succeeded in wriggling out of his relationship with the devil.

IV-6 – Akercock / Puck

While Belphegor / Castiliano is used and abused to instil morals he does not intend and to highlight the agency mankind has claimed for itself, Akercock, who accompanies Castiliano as Robin Goodfellow, consciously and purposefully becomes a force for good despite his playfully mischievous nature that accords with English fairy lore.¹⁴

The same conflation of classical / foreign and younger / local sources that the main devils undergo can be observed in Haughton's treatment of Belphegor's

¹⁴ Robin Goodfellow, or Puck, is a complex figure in English mythology that is even more difficult to pinpoint or limit to a uniform definition than the devil himself is, especially as folk lore is by its very nature volatile and changeable, leading to contradictory events in its subjects' *vitæ*. Some aspects of Robin Goodfellow's character are compiled in the anonymous *Robin Good-Fellovv, His Mad Prankes, and Merry Iefis* (1628). While "he had never been represented either as a fairy or a puck before 1594, he has been known to the popular mind, since *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as Puck, and as a happy, frisky fairy of moonlit nights and summer evenings", and "his origin and race were never determined". Minor White Latham, *The Elizabethan Fairies* (New York: Columbia UP, 1930) 220 & 235. Shakespeare was the first to treat Puck and Robin as one and the same person. For a recent attempt at characterisations, see Allen W. Wright, "Puck Through the Ages," *Puck That Shrewd and Knavish Sprite Called Robin Goodfellow*, 1997-2009. 31 Dec. 2009. <<http://www.boldoutlaw.com/puckrobin/puckages.html>>. More traditional studies were carried out by Katharine Mary Briggs, *The Anatomy of Puck* (1959; New York: Arno P, 1977); H. N. Gibson, "Status of the Offspring of the Human-Fairy Marriage," *Folklore* 61.1 (1953) 282-5; Hope E. Allen, "The Influence of Superstition on Vocabulary," *PMLA* 51.4 (1936) 904-20; and Charles P. G. Scott, "The Devil and His Imps: An Etymological Inquisition," *TAPA* 26 (1895) 79-146. Robin is a very versatile and useful character: wherever he appears, the good or bad character traits of the imp are variously brought to light just as required by the mortal who wishes to use him in his plays or writings.

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sidekick. This treatment seems to have been only all too common and indeed natural:

The hobgoblins, brownies and pucks of folk-lore were variously regarded as ghosts, simple-minded devils, kindly domestic fairies and mischievous but harmless spirits and even, occasionally, human beings who had been carried off by the fairies. It seems likely that the kindly feeling had survived from pre-Christian times, and the ghost belief may have been a survival of primitive ancestor worship, reinforced by psychic phenomena. The devil theory was that taught by the church.¹⁵

Apart from the fact that Robin in *Grim* is more perceptive than his master as far as women are concerned, he is neither willing nor bound to suffer the tyrannies of certain members of the fair sex. As long as he accompanies Castiliano as his servant, he plays the role of the fool who can reveal painful truths and get off scot-free.¹⁶ However, when Marian’s continued mistreatment of him drives him away—“Zounds! I had rather be in hell than here” (*Grim*, III.i.2; 139)—he enters Grim’s world where he truly takes on the role of Robin Goodfellow, and where he will

live betwixt two shapes;
When as I list, in this transforme’d disguise,
I’ll fright the country-people as they pass;
And sometimes turn me to some other form,
And so delude them with fantastic shows.
But woe betide the silly dairymaids,
For I shall fleet their cream-bowls night by night,

¹⁵ Briggs, *Puck*, 71.

¹⁶ See for instance his comment on Honorea after the loosening of her tongue—“Happy man be his dole that misseth her, say I” (*Grim*, II.i.141; 119; “man” is a misprint for “may”)—or his sardonic remarks on Castiliano’s marrying the wrong wife (*Grim*, II.v.27-87, *passim*; 132-4).

And slice the bacon-fitches as they hang.

(*Grim*, IV.i.10-7; 154)

Robin is in no way an evil character, even though he roams the countryside, causing some harmless mischief to superstitious folk. What he finds among the simple people, trying to test the mettle of country lasses, is a situation that bears parallels to the one among the gentry, with the double-crossing Parson Shorthose pretending to help both Grim, the collier, and Clack, the miller, to win Joan while secretly vowing that Joan “shall be neither his nor thine, / For I intend to make her mine” (*Grim*, II.iv.114f; 129). In a sense, Shorthose is no better than a devil himself—a telling side-swipe at religion—and it takes a devil to drive out his devilries. Accordingly, it is Robin who cures, as it were, the parson of his desire for Joan, thanks to her unwavering faithfulness to the collier:

I like this country-girl’s condition well;
 She’s faithful, and a lover but to one:
 Robin stands here to right both Grim and her.

(*Grim*, IV.i.86-8; 156)

The situation that develops is quite ambiguous, and yet a stock situation in any play portraying society. The parson, beset with the frailties of the flesh, slips into the role of the devil, while the devil, because of the virtues of one woman, sets things right: “ ’Twas Robin beat this holy mind into him. / I think more cudgelling would make him more honest” (*Grim*, V.i.58f; 169). This does not mean that Robin is Akercock turned angel. For, in assisting Grim, he helps someone who, in the eyes of society, is as black as the devil himself and leads his “life in a coalpit, like one of the devil’s drudges” (*Grim*, II.iv.57f; 128), and one who is certainly no paragon of virtue,

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either. In a characteristically human fit of vanity, which precisely endears him to the devil, Grim exaggerates his exploits in beating the miller and parson to win Joan for himself, which leads Robin to comment: “Nay, there you lie. The collier is excellent / To be companion to the devil himself” (*Grim*, IV.i.152f; 159). Incidentally, it is Joan who identifies the source of all evil, which turns out to be quite an unexpected one: “O God! what a dangerous thing it is but to peep once into love! I was never so haunted with my harvest-work as I am with love’s passions” (*Grim*, II.iv.10-3; 126).

Even though everything turns out all right in the end, the boundaries between good and bad have become quite vague. And the twisting of categories continues. No one but the morally upright Joan is afraid of Robin. Grim positively welcomes him into his house, ironically qualifying him as “one of the honestest merry devils that ever I saw” (*Grim*, V.i.140f; 171). Furthermore, the shady situation is righted before it even has a chance to get out of hand thanks to Robin’s timely intervention, which goes beyond “Helping poor servants to despatch their work, / To brew and bake, and other husbandry” (*Grim*, V.i.116f; 171) for half a year. Robin has shed the largest part of Akercock that is in him when he starts to haunt Grim’s field and assumes significant character traits of Puck. He is clearly a force that causes good in the rural community. The underlying morality, however, seems rather hazy. After all, Joan, who has so far stood up as the honourable ideal of a woman in the play, does not get her wish to leave Robin’s company, whose motives she suspects and fears. In a way, Grim coerces her to accept Robin and his gifts against her will when he says “if you cannot endure the devil, you’ll never love the collier” (*Grim*, V.i.144f; 171), a phrase which strangely echoes Robin’s “for long time ago / The

devil call'd the collier like to like" (*Grim*, IV.i.30f; 155), which underlies his decision to stand by Grim's side.

All of this would cast a dubious shadow over the proceedings were it not for the light-hearted atmosphere of the comedy and the undoubted good effects that Robin's interventions produce. At the end of the day, the confusion does not get a chance to get a hold over the audience's memory. In spite of everything, it is also thanks to Robin that the play manages to "keep Grim's forehead from the horn" (*Grim*, V.i.172; 172), and it is he who "must report in hell / Better of women than my master can" (*Grim*, IV.i.170f; 159). At the end of the day, Robin comes to promote true love, honour, and faithful behaviour. This seems to be in character with the general perception of the sprite at the time. Indeed, constancy in love and faithfulness are also Robin Goodfellow's preoccupations in the anonymous *Tell-Trothes New-years Gift* of 1593. In Haughton's play all the indications are that this does not happen despite himself, which is certainly not the case with his devilish master.

IV-7 – They Are Mankind Grown

So far, both the devil and his hellish acolyte turned English folklore sprite have not been a great force for evil. Neither of them have really lived up to their reputation. Belphegor / Castiliano, incapable of filling his role as a devil, grows unwilling to do so. His (independent) associate Robin Akercock only plays harmless mischief on the one hand, while actively promoting faithful love on the other. To find true devils in *Grim*, one must turn to the human beings.

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It is especially certain women who delight in this role, particularly when it comes to their attitude to men and marriage, the catalyst of the play. Belphegor is forced to experience the consequences of the situation first hand, much to his regret. The dismantling of the devil begins very harmlessly, with women merely getting their will over that of men. Initially Robin can easily make fun of Castiliano’s “I must have [Marian] because she will have me” (*Grim*, II.v.70; 133).¹⁷ Yet, the situation soon escalates. With the help of such seemingly innocent remarks as “[*Musgrave*.:] she is mild enough, if she be please’d. / *Castiliano [aside]*: So is the devil, they say” (*Grim*, II.vii.36f; 137), phrases like Robin’s “Now, farewell, master! but, shrewd dame, fare-ill! / I’ll leave you, though the devil is with you still” (*Grim*, II.i.20f; 140) acquire a delicious ring of irony. Unlike Belphegor, women are not passively driven into sinning. Willingly, they play an active part in immoral activities—“Maids cannot, but a wife a fault may hide” (*Grim*, III.iv.27; 144)¹⁸—which quickly lead to adultery¹⁹ and thoughts of murder. In the process, Marian beguiles both Clinton and Castiliano. While the former is blindly made to jeopardise his soul, praying to “Bright Lucifer” (*Grim*, V.ii.1; 172), the latter moves inevitably on towards his destiny with eyes wide open:

[*Marian, aside*.:] When thou hast poison’d him, I’ll poison thee.

Exit Marian.

Castiliano: O wonderful, how women can dissemble!

Now she can kiss me, hang about my neck,

¹⁷ See also “Who keeps a shrew against her will, had better let her go” (*Grim*, II.v.87; 134) and “Some have their wives for pleasure, some for need” (*Grim*, II.v.101; 134).

¹⁸ See also Marian’s ensuing soliloquy and Nan’s speech (*Grim*, III.iv.36-43 & 54-62; 144f).

¹⁹ See *Grim*, III.iv.96, 140, 150, 248, 303; 146-54.

And soothe me with smooth smiles and lewd entreaties.

(*Grim*, IV.iii.121-24; 167)²⁰

And so it happens that the worst curse in the play, desperately uttered by none other than Castiliano, is not directed at the underworld at all:

O, she's mankind grown!

O miserable men that must live so,

And damned strumpets, authors of this woe!

(*Grim*, III.iv.236-8; 151)

In the play's morally topsy-turvy world, Haughton even withholds the gratification of poetic justice: Marian, the author of most of the woe in the play, escapes her deserved punishment. She is vindicated by Morgan at the moment of Castiliano's descent into hell: "Alas, poor Marian! we have wrong'd thee much" (*Grim*, V.iii.68; 175). So evil is both defeated and shines victorious:

Nay, let him go, and sink into the ground;

For such as he are better lost than found.

Now, Honorea, we are freed from blame,

And both enrich'd with happy widow's name.

(*Grim*, V.iii.70-3; 175)

It is the devil who returns to hell a little bit the worse for wear. He does not have his horns scorched, but he has earned them during his stay on earth. Small wonder that Belphegor reaches a disheartening conclusion: "O vile earth, / Worse for us devils

²⁰ See also "my dame hath poison'd me: / When she spoke fairest, then she did this act" (*Grim*, V.iii.8f; 173), or Castiliano's bitter "Ay, there's a girl! think you I did not well, / To live with such a wife, to come from hell?" (*Grim*, V.iii.48f; 174).

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than hell itself for men!” (*Grim*, V.iv.7f; 177). At this point in time, and as a result of the structure of the play, the subplot’s Joan cannot be held up as an example of the self-redeeming features of mankind. Man must still draw closer to the abyss before the insight that Jonson offers in 1616 can take hold.

IV-8 – Judgement

Neither the inversion of the role of hell nor the alarming corruption of men and especially women lead to any far-reaching consequences, though, as the play ends on a non-conclusion.

The tame potentates of hell needlessly invested a lot of resources to establish a mere platitude:

Pluto: Doth then, Belphegor, this report of thine

Against all women hold in general?

Belphegor: Not so, great prince: for, as ’mongst other creatures,

Under that sex are mingled good and bad;

There are some women virtuous, chaste, and true,

And to all those the devil will give their due.

(*Grim*, V.iv.48-53; 179)

Everything ties in with the general drift of the play, which is all sport and merry-making. The initial judgement scene in hell, which might easily have been turned into an infernal travesty of the Last Judgement, or which might have opened the door to dramatic soul-searching of Marlovian dimensions, is toned down by the fact that it is part of Dunstan’s dream. The final judgement in hell is equally far from

threatening. The sentences that are pronounced seem harmless, and the prevailing atmosphere is jolly:

And now, for joy Belphegor is return'd,
The furies shall their tortures cast away,
And all hell o'er we'll make it holiday.

(*Grim*, V.iv.80-2; 180)

Everything is just good entertainment. Belphegor is not made the laughing stock of hell, but all the devils are condemned to wear the cuckold's horns as well. Malbecco's doom turns out to be milder than it could have been: he becomes another scourge of mankind as he shall roam the earth as "fearful Jealousy" (*Grim*, V.iv.77; 180), though events in the play have shown that mankind itself can just as well take care of the tasks that befall him. In effect, Malbecco becomes what Edmund Spenser (1552-99) had made him in *The Faerie Queene* in 1590.²¹

The devils are anything but vicious, and the fact that they have botched every single one of their endeavours does not concern them overly much. The devil is demoted: notwithstanding he is the main character in *Grim*, he becomes a mere pawn in Marian's plots and Haughton's play. He is not a figure of terror any more, and one can hardly even see in him a figure of education. He is just one harmless element that drives the comedy along and helps it make its point about man's complicated relationship with woman. "[M]ak[ing] experiment / If hell be not on earth as well as here" (*Grim*, I.i.149f; 108), which is a potentially explosive

²¹ "There dwels he euer, miserable swaine, / Hatefull both to him selfe, and euery wight; / Where he through priuy grieffe, and horrour vaine, / Is woxen so deform'd, that he has quight / Forgot he was a man, and *Gealosie* is hight." Edmund Spenser, "The Faerie Qveene," *Spenser: Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. Smith and E. de Selincourt (1912; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970) Bk III, Canto x, Stanza 60; 200.

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investigation and which leads to a question which causes Faustus such anguish, turns out to be no more than a comic bubble. When Reginald Scot comments on Robin Goodfellow in 1584, he, unwittingly, sums up the predicament of all spiritual creatures in an age that sees science making increasingly confident steps towards a demystification of popular beliefs. Highlighting the pointlessness of asking partial readers, especially Papists, to approach works such as his impartially, Scot realises that

I should no more preuaile herein, than if a hundred yeares since I should haue intreated your predecessors to beleeeue, that Robin goodfellowe, that great and ancient bulbegger, had beene but a coufening merchant, and no diuell indeed. [...] But Robin goodfellowe ceafeth now to be much feared[.]²²

In this way, Robin Goodfellow is going the way of all spirits. The more there is known about the figure, the less it takes hold of the fancy of the people.²³ The figure of the devil is undergoing a similar development, although at this point it is not yet clear when he will cease to be much feared. Still, by 1600, beginning with Haughton’s play, “this weak and idle theme [is], / No more yielding but a dream” (*MND*, V.i.427f).²⁴ Incidentally, the prologue made this clear right from the start:

Let it not fright you; this I dare to say,
Here is no lecherous devil in our play.
...
But if your children cry when Robin comes,

²² Scot, *Discoverie*, “To the Readers;” sig. B2^r-B2^v.

²³ Whether such a development is preferable to eventual oblivion depends on the nature of the spirit. The development towards ridicule takes on drastic form in Jonson’s *The Devil Is an Ass*.

²⁴ The irony is that Puck’s words apply more to Haughton’s play than to Shakespeare’s.

You may to still them buy here pears or plums.

(*Grim*, Prologue, 11f & 17f; 103)

Besides, the very fact that all of this happens under the *ægis* of Dunstan—or of the Prologue, or indeed of the playwright (it is hard to say where the illusion starts or ends, especially since it is not Dunstan who closes the play but Pluto, though Dunstan seems to know what is coming this time)²⁵—is reassuring from the start. The incongruous mixture of the various traditions—classical, Jewish, tenth century English, later mediaeval legends, Italian Renaissance influence, all brought to life in late Elizabethan London²⁶—only adds to the holiday atmosphere which a Pluto turned devil, of all people, conjures up at the end, and which makes the audience forget that all is not right in the world of men, even though this is the very issue that ails Early Modern English society and that Dekker will have a closer look at in *If This Be not a Good Play*.

²⁵ See *Grim*, V.iii.108-17; 177.

²⁶ The list could be expanded: reprinted soon after the Restoration and rediscovered / re-examined in the early years of the third millennium.

Wenn Engel hassen
Stürzen sie wie Steine aus dem Himmelszelt
Wenn Engel hassen
Fliegen sie als dunkle Vögel in die Welt
Wenn Engel hassen
Landen sie als schwarzer Schatten der uns quält
Und nehmen Rache
An den Menschen, die gefallen sind wie sie.

Subway to Sally, 'Herzblut'

V – If This Be not a Good Play, the Devil Is in It

Since it is not a comedy, Dekker's *Good Play* is a much darker work of the author whom Frances Meres (1565/6-1647) rated among "our best for Tragedie."¹ And Dekker's picture of the world is bleak. In *The Seven Deadly Sins of London* (1606), which he styles an "old Enterlude of Iniquitie"², Dekker had already realised that London was certainly not the best of all possible worlds, despite the fact that he dearly loved the capital.

Whereas Belphegor / Castiliano was sent to earth on a most uncharacteristic errant—justice rather than damnation—the devils in Dekker's work are devils as we still know them today: like Mephistopheles, they become the companions of human beings with the intent of lying in wait for a favourable moment to lead men into temptation. But unlike Mephistopheles, they have not been called *expressis verbis*, striking a pact with people who as good as sell them their souls right from the start without admitting to themselves that this is the case. With the characters in Dekker's

¹ Meres, *Palladis Tamia*, 283^r; sig. Oo3^r.

² Thomas Dekker, *The Seven Deadly Sinnes of London* (London: E. A. for Nathaniel Butter, 1606) n.p. (appended to the opening "Address to the Reader").

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play, it is touch and go up to the last moment to see whether they will eventually end up in hell or not, for the devil may only lead his victim to the abyss, but it is man himself who needs to take the final leap, damning himself by his action.

In Dekker’s play the sinner is to be judged by “*Minos* (the iust:) *Rhadamanth* (the temperate:) / And *Æacus* (the seuere.)” (*Good Play*, V.iv.120f). In this respect, the adaptation of the hellish characters is similar to the one found in *Grim*. But Dekker also mixes his source traditions. In *Good Play*, IV.ii.34-125, it is none other but Lucifer that pays Earth a visit to check on the progress of the infernal emissaries. His position within the hierarchy of the triumvirate of Minos, Rhadamanth and Æacus is not made clear. As for the remaining devils, *nomen est omen*. When Pluto’s subordinates sent to the world cannot cope with the task that they have been entrusted with, they can call for helpers such as “*Starch-hound*, *Tobacco-spawling*, / *Vpshotten*, *Suckland*, *Glitterback*” (*Good Play*, I.i.127f). Each name either points to a characteristic of the devil or poignantly denounces sinful practices in civilised society.³

Dekker, then, does by and large not follow the same strategy as Haughton when it comes to naming his devils, except for the rulers of the underworld. While the latter derives his names from the sources he is basing his play on, Dekker taps into the allegorical tradition so prominent in mediaeval literature and in dramas such as *Everyman*. Though he does not quite achieve Jonson’s mastery when it comes to naming, he follows the example of many a playwright of his own day and age to characterise his figures economically and instantly. Creatures called Narcisso,

³ See Cyrus Hoy’s commentary on the names in *Introductions, Notes, and Commentaries to Texts in The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker, Edited by Fredson Bowers*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980) 89f. “Decker’s fiends are the drudges of Pluto, abused for their indolence, flogged at will, and peremptorily sent where he chooses.” Charles E. Herford, *Studies in the Literary Relations of England and Germany in the Sixteenth Century* (1886; London: Cass, 1966) 310f.

Jovinelli, Brisco, Spendola, Barterville or Scumbroth, for example, do not need much more introducing beyond mentioning their name, and they are certain to serve adequately as vehicles for Dekker's criticism of the shortcomings and abuses that permeate English society.

V-1 – Rufman

The name of one of the main devils, Rufman, is neither immediately apparent as allegorical, nor does it stem from traditional demonic lore. Everything points to the author's emancipating his characters from tradition with the help of his creative talent.

Rufman is sent to Alphonso, the newly instated King of Naples, who is

aptly inclinde

To any bendings; least his youthfull browes
Reach at Stars only, wey down his loftiest boughes
With leaden plomets, poison his best thoughts with tast
Of things most sensuall; if the heart once wast
The body feeles consumption; good or bad kings
Breede Subiects like them[.]

(*Good Play*, I.i.96-102)

These are the conventional tactics that the devil has used throughout time to ensnare more or less willing victims. The bait was commonplace: "As they that would haue dogs come vnto them, allure them with bread or flefh: so ye diuel allureth foules vnto him with pleasures and riches."⁴ While the procedure is a poor show of the devil's

⁴ Meres, *Palladis Tamia*, 330^v; sig. Vv2^v.

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wit—or of the (non-)evolution of mankind for that matter—it is Rufman’s name that bears better witness to the ingenuity of the devil, and the author behind him.

Dekker may have found a model in the Islamic tradition where there is a spirit called Ruman,

a special angel of the lower regions who requires of all the deceased that come before him to write down the evil deeds they performed on earth and for which they were consigned to Hell. Ruman then delivers the deceased to the angels Munkar and Nakir for punishment.⁵

Though distant and outlandish for the average Briton of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Islamic world and culture were by no means unheard of in England, especially as far as medicine, philosophy and sciences were concerned. Besides, there was contact as a result of the Crusades as well as of the Moors’ conquest of Spain, and through maritime trade.⁶ If Dekker had really had this angel in mind, whether through chance acquaintance or by a more solid knowledge of the supernatural world both within and beyond the shores of England, the implications would have been very subtle if not obscure. Still, the hidden message to Papists would have been that confessing your sins does not serve as the first step towards forgiveness, but only helps to raise awareness of your evil deeds on earth, inevitably awakening an anticipated sense of despair in view of the punishment that is to come in hell. A bleak vision indeed. But Dekker would have taken the implications and the resulting irony even a step further. Rufman’s role in the play is not a passive one. He

⁵ “Ruman,” Davidson, *Angels*, 247f. Compare Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *The Encyclopedia of Angels*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Checkmark Books-Facts on File, 2004) 315: “In Islamic lore, angel who screens souls consigned to hell. Ruman requires the souls to write down all the evil deeds that led to their condemnation. He then delivers the souls to Munkar (Monker) and Nakir.”

⁶ Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004). In 1603, Richard Knolles (late 1540s-1610) wrote *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* in response to the growing Ottoman threat, a threat which is also reflected in Shakespeare’s *Othello* (1603/4).

also becomes the tempter, guiding courtiers along the path of sin and inciting that which he will later be called upon to record for the judging angels. This would truly be a stroke of genius.

Yet, as such academic subtleties would inevitably have been lost on virtually all of the spectators at a London theatre, it seems only too likely that the name Dekker gave the devil is emblematic, no more and no less. In all likelihood, Rufman, who is dispatched to the court of the newly-crowned King Alphonso of Naples, highlights the devil's impersonation of the aristocrat and courtier, and of all the negative traits associated with them. The courtier is reduced to the ruff⁷ he wears around his neck, and Dekker holds the pompousness of the garment and its owner right up in front of the eyes of the audience. The effect is strengthened by another underlying meaning of the word "ruff", which is "an exalted or elated state; elation, pride, vainglory."⁸ This connotation adds more pleasant irony to Rufman's name and is another fecund source of merriment for the groundlings who would have the ruffed aristocracy well in sight in the elevated boxes behind or around the stage, allusions which might leave the latter rather ruffled in their seats and yet at the same time forced to sit through the unpleasant moments without turning a hair.⁹ And there is even more in the name. The allusion to pride and vainglory, both cardinal sins, implicitly points to Rufman's potential failure, recalling as it does the fall of the first angel, Lucifer, for pride and hubris. Right from the start, Rufman's path seems clear and the question arises whether he is destined to follow the way of his illustrious predecessor.

⁷ A "ruff" is an "article of neck-ware, usually consisting of starched linen or muslin arranged in horizontal flutings and standing out all round the neck, worn especially in the reigns of Elizabeth and James I" (*OED*, n.2.2).

⁸ "ruff," *OED*, n.6.2, obsolete. The phrase "in his ruff" was "very common from c 1570 to 1675."

⁹ See Fitzdottrel's plan to go to the theatre to be seen in his new cloak in Jonson's *The Devil Is an Ass*, I.vi.31-8.

regard to their own sins, defying God’s authority. When Rufman gives his name as Bohor, Iouinelli resorts to sarcasm to leave no doubt about his own position at the court of Naples, attempting to mock and degrade the pretentious newcomer right from the start and to keep him in a low position within the pecking order at court. In doing so, he naturally disregards possible connotations of the name, at least one of which may only be meaningful for the audience. First of all, in its pronunciation it is reminiscent of the Boar, Richard III, the king corrupted in his pursuit of absolute power. Rufman / Bohor, scheming for the destruction of all those around him, is not that different from the Shakespearean tyrant. On the other hand, the name allows Rufman to disguise his evil intentions, turning him into the wolf in the sheep’s skin by also alluding to the nephew of the Arthurian Sir Lancelot of the Lake, Sir Bors, also known as Sir Bohort. Who could believe that a demon hides behind the illustrious namesake of one who was pure enough to see the Holy Grail and to return to tell the tale? Reminiscent of Christ’s temptation, Sir Bohort successfully avoided temptation from a lady and her “twelve jantilwomen” who threw themselves from “an hyghe batilment” to solicit sexual favours and who turned out to be demons in disguise, raging at their failure: “he harde a grete noyse and a grete cry as all fyndys of helle had bene about hym.”¹¹ How delightful to turn a classic character who defies the fiend in his disguises into the arch-enemy himself.

Sarcasm effectively blinds Iouinelli and prevents him from becoming suspicious towards Rufman, who feels encouraged to drop a few more hints as to his true identity when he traces his origins back to his Tartar grandfather. Since the King is anxious to assuage Rufman’s rage—and eager to hear about the promised wonders

¹¹ Sir Thomas Malory, “The Tale of the Sankgreal Briefly Drawn out of French Which Is a Tale Chronicled For One of the Truest And One of the Holiest That Is in This World”, *Malory: Works*, ed. Eugène Vinaver (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 571 (11, 10 and 25f).

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of the world—the courtiers present do not get the chance to react in speaking to Rufman’s disclosure, which clearly serves as a warning to them, though they will hardly grasp its complete implications. To readers of *Principal Navigations* (1598-1600) by Richard Hakluyt (1552?-1616), however, it was well known that the tribe of the Tartars,

an huge nation, and a barbarous and inhumane people, whose law is lawlesse, whose wrath is furious, euen the rod of Gods anger, ouerrunneth, and vtterly wafteth infinite countreyes, cruelly abolishing all things where they come, with fire and sword.¹²

Later, Hakluyt also mentions various Tartar tribes, among which are the “Shalcans, which [...] differ in name more then in regiment, or other condition, from the Crim Tartar.”¹³ The warning that Rufman expresses—do not trifle with me lest you risk being seriously hurt—can easily be extended from life and limb to the courtiers’ souls, Tartar being only a thin disguise for Tartarus, the lower regions of ancient Greek and Roman mythology, and easily adapted in the Renaissance to stand for hell.¹⁴ Rufman then merely repeats what everyone knows but hardly anyone applies to their own situation: the devil, coming from Tartarus, is at home everywhere in the world and reaps the fruit of his works all over the place. As these courtiers illustrate, mankind has become more self-reliant. Yet, by its overbearing ignorance of the

¹² Richard Hakluyt, “Part of an Epistle Written By One Yuo of Narbona vnto the Archbilhop of Burdeaux, Containing the Confession of an Englishman as Touching the Barbarous Demeanour of the Tartars, ... Recorded by Mathew Paris in the Yere of Our Lord 1243,” *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (London: George Bilhop, 1599) 20.

¹³ Hakluyt, “Of the Tartars, and Other Borderers to the Country of Rußia, with Whom They Haue Molt to Doe in Warre, and Peace,” *Principal Navigations*, 490. “The most rude & barbarous is counted the *Mordwit* Tartar”. Hakluyt incorporated *Of The Rvsse Common Wealth* (London: T. D. for Thomas Charde, 1591) ch. 19 (65ff) by Giles Fletcher (bap. 1546-1611). *Jerusalem Redux*, Fletcher’s attempt to prove that the ten tribes of the Tartars were the descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel, was published in 1677 only.

¹⁴ “Tartar,” *OED*, n.4.

danger of attacks from hell, it runs a serious risk since it has not yet succeeded in setting up moral defences of its own.

Rufman is not only a testament to Dekker's ingenuity, but he also becomes a prime example of the versatility of the age that he stems from. Not so long ago, the devil was still firmly rooted in his biblical origins. Now, in the early years of the seventeenth century, there is no limit as to where he can find his basis. He can draw as cunningly from mediaeval legend and adapt its Christian outlook as he can make use of the most up-to-date advances in exploration and science. Both the devil and his creator-playwrights must have (sinfully) revelled in the possibilities that were opening up to them. With this all-encompassing background, he truly has the potential to corrupt the world and everyone in it. And yet, as always, it is his destiny to fall short of his expectations.

V-3 – Failure through Success

Insight is denied the characters in the play. Rufman is gauging the attitude of the aristocrats, but he has also started manipulating them, making sure that there is little danger of the stuffed-up, self-seeking courtiers reading between the lines of what he says. Such is their greed and arrogance that they will never penetrate Rufman's disguise, no matter how explicit he might be about his true nature. It is their haughtiness and greed—how readily they agree with Rufman that “euery mans ayme, / Is to hit pleasure” (*Good Play*, I.ii.187f)—which prevents them from looking more closely at his words and which, at the same time, puts them in the same category as the hubristic devil they scorn. All of this foreshadows dire consequences for the lot of them.

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This a development which they all, except Octavio, embrace with open arms. Rufman easily manages to corrupt society with the king at its head in terms that recall no less than the Fall of Man:

ith garden of varietie
The vast world! you are staru'de midst your satietie,
Plucke no one Apple from the golden Tree,
But shake the fruite of euery pleasure downe.

(*Good Play*, II.i.202-5)

With the apple and the golden tree, an allusion to the Garden of the Hesperides, Dekker takes up the mythological frame of reference. In the Christian logic, though, plucking the apple is not a Herculean task, but a damnable deed, which King Alphonso does without thinking about twice. If eating one apple puts you beyond redemption, you may just as well indulge in all the others, too. Faustus has to work hard for the rotten gains that Alphonso has simply thrust upon him. While Faustus goes through a whole lot of pain and anguish and is told that he “must bequeath [his soul] solemnly / And write a deed of gift with [his] own blood” (*Faustus*, II.i.34f), Alphonso gives his soul away with a hug:

Aske what thou wilt haue
But to stay here.
Rufman: Loe, this is all I craue.

Hug him.
(*Good Play*, II.i.208f).

In this way, Alphonso, too, gets everything that he has ever craved since Rufman awakened the desire for it in his breast such a short while ago: “If out the jawes of

Hell Golde may bee got / *Blacke Artes* are mine to doo't" (*Good Play*, II.i.218f). If Pluto is right and "good or bad kings / Breede Subjects like them" (*Good Play*, I.i.101f),¹⁵ then Rufman has made a huge step towards success.

At this point Dekker wastes an opportunity to develop the fight for the soul of a king and the survival of a state. Since Alphonso is not a hardened sinner and does not actively seek to imperil his soul, the fact that he does not react to this latest, clearest indication that Rufman is dangerous company can only be attributed to his youth and naïvety. This raises the question whether Alphonso is truly virtuous, or whether his virtuous schemes at the beginning of his reign were only products of his innocence and inexperience bound to be put to the test sooner or later. What is the true value of untried virtue in the eyes of God? "As Pirats fet vpon rich loaden fhips, but paffe by them that be emptie: fo the diuell affaileth them that be stuffed with vertues, but he lets wicked worldlings and mammonifts liue in quiet."¹⁶ The devil's attacks appear as a compliment to young king Alphonso, recalling Job's plight, with the notable difference that Pluto, an independent mythological ruler of his own right, does not need to ask God's permission to put Alphonso to the test. Dekker, however, casts his net too wide. Wishing to portray all the corruption of society, he cannot follow Alphonso's progress in detail because he must also turn his attention to the other two areas where the devils hope to find future residents for hell.

As a result, one gets the impression that the events on stage are far less epic than the large scope of the play would have the audience believe. Dekker's theme is not the tribulations of one man and the damnation of his immortal soul with its wide-ranging consequences. It is the exposure of the corruption of (London) society right

¹⁵ "As one night is fufficient to bring darknellè ouer the whole world: fo the Prince of darkenes is fufficient to difturbe al mortall creatures." Meres, *Palladis Tamia*, 330^v; sig. Vv2^v.

¹⁶ Meres, *Palladis Tamia*, 331^r; sig. Vv3^r.

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through every stratum. True drama on a grander scale is therefore missing from the entire proceedings. Little effort is necessary for each of Pluto’s envoys to make stunning progress at the beginning of their missions. Shacklesoul, who enters a monastery as Friar Rush, overcomes the monks’ resistance with a simple syllogism.¹⁷ He proves that “hee who eates not good meate is damde” in the following way: “the soule followes the temperature of the body, hee that feedes well hath a good temperature of body, *Ergo*, he that feedes well hath a good soule” (*Good Play*, I.iii.71 & 86-8). The virtue that Dekker exhibits both at court and at the monastery does not appear deep-rooted, Rush’s victory being too easy and swiftly carried out. As the Prior should know that “most men couet still the broadest way” (*Good Play*, I.iii.129), it was his duty to keep his guard up. But he is only too eager to conclude that the monks “haue too long forborne / To tast heauens blessings fully” (*Good Play*, I.iii.101f) and to welcome Rush as “some Angel” (*Good Play*, I.iii.103), easily brushing aside the Subprior’s answer: “Rather some diuell sent to bewitch our soules” (*Good Play*, I.iii.104). Shacklesoul’s jubilations at the end of Act I read like an allegorical sermon on the hierarchy of sins designed to remind the audience what exactly will lead them, too, along the broadest way most speedily to hell. As at court, only the resistance of one faithful soul ensures the continuation of the play, but not of the drama: Subprior Clement stands as firm in his beliefs and resists all change as bravely as Octavio, offering Shacklesoul a final challenge at the monastery.

¹⁷ Dekker adapted Friar Rush’s pranks for one of the three strands of his play. The first extant copy of *The Historie of Friar Rvsh* dates from 1620, but the character had gone down into folklore long before that: a book about him was entered in the Stationer’s Register in 1567/8. Hoy, *Introductions*, vol. 3, 73-8, outlines the sources for the Friar Rush stories and discusses Dekker’s adaptations, their qualities and drawbacks. See also Herford, *Literary Relations*, 293-318.

In a world that honours appearance higher than true devotion both on and off stage, and where material aims carry the day over spiritual values, the Subprior comes across as a rather tedious old man. True, his constancy in the face of adversity is admirable, and it drives Shacklesoul to the edge of despair:

Subprior: Eternall power, thankes on my humbled knee,
Thou still to constant brests giu'st victory.

Exit.

Shacklesoul: No way to conquer thee? Ile giue thee ore:
Ne're fishd I so, (yet lost a soule) before.

(Good Play, IV.iv.62-5)

Shacklesoul's attacks on the Subprior's soul in *Good Play*, IV.iv.42-51 are prime examples of devilish hubris and how it leads to failure. During Shacklesoul's assaults, the Subprior assumes a more formidable aspect when he, like a magus, roars against the devil: "or'e thee by these holy spells haue I strong command" (*Good Play*, IV.iv.54). Sadly, however, there is no room for the development of this facet of the Subprior's character. He remains rather wearisome and does not grow into a figure one could relate to. He is beyond temptation, always one and the same, which removes him beyond interest, too, since he is so little beset by the countless conflicts that pester people's daily lives.

King Alphonso is much closer to the audience as he undergoes many a conflict, growing from a green young lad into a worthy king, fortified by experience. As the scholar, soldier and mariner, whom he alienated at the beginning of his reign, "Now serue as wheeles of [his] destruction" (*Good Play*, V.i.24), and as the tide of war turns violently against him, Alphonso realises that this insight was dearly bought:

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O bane of Kings! (thou inchanting flatterie,
Thy venome now I feele, eating my heart,
More mortall than an Indians poisned dart.

(*Good Play*, V.i.8-10)

Rufman has indeed succeeded with his initial plan to draw the world into confusion by corrupting its head and securing the king’s soul for Pluto. By professing his lasting loyalty—“Ile sticke to you euer: / I am no Courtier sir of fortunes making” (*Good Play*, V.i.37f)—he almost draws King Alphonso to the brink of destruction:

now more pittifull wise nature growes,
Who cuts of mans yeeres to cut off his woes.
Rufman: True sir, and teaches him a thousand waies
To leade him out this horrid giddy maze.
King: I apprehend thee, a small daggers point,
Opens the vaines to cure our plurizy.

(*Good Play*, V.i.46-51)

The ensuing incantation of all the suicides in the world—philosophers, peers, kings—succeeds in ecstatically resolving Alphonso to embrace the same fate. Yet, at the very last moment Rufman grows careless and, in one line, undoes all the work he has achieved so far:

King: I embrace thee noblest friend.
Rufman: Lets saile together.
King: Content braue *Bohor*: oh! but whither? whither?
Rufman: From hell, (this world,) from fiends, (in shapes of men.)
King: No: into hel, from men to be dambd black with fiends.
Me thinkes I see hell iawne to swallow vs.
Rufman: Fuh, this is but the swimming of your braine,
By looking downe-wards with a timerous eye.

King: My soule was sunck too low, to looke more hye,
Forgiuenes heauen.

Allarums.

Rufman: The whippes of furies lash mee: the foe comes on.

King: And wee will meete him, dare confusion,
And the worlds mixed poisons, there is a hand
That fights for Kings, and vnder that weele stand.

(*Good Play*, V.i.64-76)

The devils are out of luck. Whenever it comes to finalising their plans, they stumble over their cocksureness. If Rufman had answered Alphonso's questions literally, painting a paradisiacal image of the world to come, the King would never have been reminded of the sinfulness of the deed he was about to commit. As it is, his casting his eye towards heaven and reminding himself of the hand that fights for kings is totally believable. Rufman immediately drops the mask of the faithful friend who will not live "a minute after you," the beguiled Alphonso (*Good Play*, V.i.63), and betrays his diabolical nature. The entire scene is a superb example of how the devil manages to be left out in the rain at the eleventh hour, despite all his scheming and efforts. In the light of all these failures of his minions sent to earth, Pluto's comment on the qualities of his fellow devils, "The'rs but few good in hell" (*Good Play*, I.i.130), acquires an entirely new dimension. On the other hand, however, Alphonso's insight spells hope for the future of mankind: as one corrupt king will ruin an entire state, so a virtuous one who is aware of his responsibilities might also be able to achieve restoration.¹⁸

¹⁸ Compare Bernardo's corruption at the hands of Alexander VI on page 263.

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V-4 – Bartervile

The demons in Dekker’s play are truer to their traditional nature than the ones in Haughton’s play, and the true villains in *Good Play* easily top the human devils in *Grim*. Tellingly their chief exponent is to be found among the merchants in the city. The devil Lurchall, who does not need to hide his name, is sent to Bartervile, whose name speaks volumes, and who is easily the equal of his hellish companion:

Lurchall, now tha’rt in, and for yeares bound,
To play the Merchant, play him right: th’ast found
A Master, who more villenie has by hart,
Then thou by rote; See him but play his owne part,
And thou doest Hell good seruice; *Barteruile*,
Theres in thy name a Haruest make mee smile.

(*Good Play*, II.ii.10-5)¹⁹

Because of such good services rendered, Bartervile’s reward is certain in coming as Lurchall will only be too happy “to damb thee in hels pit” (*Good Play*, II.ii.34). Given his personal background, it is easy to see why Dekker shows little sympathy for the professionals in the city, where corruption was already rife well before the arrival of the devil’s minion. This differs from what has been seen at court or at the monastery, where temptation comes from the outside. Greed for money has done the trick for Bartervile, who is evil through and through, but also a character of certain interesting contradictions. Bartervile would do anything to amass as large a fortune as possible. When he is at his wits’ end, he readily embraces any suggestion, be it

¹⁹ Herford, *Literary Relations*, is too sympathetic when he says that the “merchant, though without any virtuous prepossessions, has hitherto kept within the verge of honesty” (312).

never so devilish, that might help him achieve his aim. He does not care about the consequences in the next life and boldly defies the devil:

I. Gent.: Dambde wretch, thou wilt goe quicke to hell I feare.

Bartervile: No sir, the diuell shall fetch me when I goe

Lurchall: Th'at all my errand.

(*Good Play*, II.ii.149-51)

The First Gentleman's exclamation, echoing Pluto's earlier assessment of mankind, bears more truth than he would care to admit: "diuels on earth dwell, / And men are no where, all this world is hell" (*Good Play*, II.ii.154f).

Bartervile is the villain that "sels [his] soule for mony" (*Good Play*, II.ii.154), and money only. Unlike Faustus, he never thinks twice about what he is doing, Mammon being his only god. But his keen progress towards hell is stayed just a little because he, like Faustus,²⁰ experiences certain scruples when it comes to swearing: "If oathes had back-dores to come in at, without danger of damnation, to catch a mans soule bith back, swearing were braue" (*Good Play*, II.ii.164f). However, the potential drama that such itching of a man's conscience offers never takes off. Bartervile's hesitation is due to a vague remnant of a cultural given that he neither understands nor cares for, and that disturbs him like a stubborn fly wishing to feed on a man's sweat and refusing to be chased away, rather than to an honestly felt compunction about his sins. There is no fight against Lurchall's proposition of a way out of the dilemma: drowning all scruples in alcohol will solve Bartervile's problems, and it will take the devil another step closer to securing the usurer's soul.

²⁰ See *Faustus*, II.i.1-115.

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As a result, Bartervile, strong with the courage of spirits and “periuriously forsworne” (*Good Play*, III.iii.30), is struck dead the very moment he swears

let that eye,
Which sees me play false, scourge my periury
With fearefull stripes.

(*Good Play*, III.iii.32-4)

It is a constant in the devils’ dealings with humankind that they are not able to advance the moment when they may put people into the fetters of hell by as little as one jot, no matter how bad people’s sins may be or how many sins they may have committed. Man’s active participation in this process is always required in one way or another. When Bartervile provides this here with his perjury, he dies and goes straight to hell, with Lurchall and Rufman vulture-like “*about him*” (*Good Play*, III.iii.34; sd). The first of the triumphs of hell’s minions seems to be complete just as the second half of the play begins. Yet, Lurchall’s and Rufman’s joy is short-lived as another human being foils their plans. Farneze, whom Bartervile tried to ruin, becomes the unwitting advocate of the usurer: “Wud I had lost all, tho I had bin cozened, / Rather than thou thy soule” (*Good Play*, III.iii.35f). True to the Catholic Christian tradition, according to which sinners are saved by the intercession of an advocate with God, Farneze manages to save Bartervile from damnation (for now), without being aware at all of his good deed, as it were: “the diuels turn’d puritane I feare, / He hates (me thinkes) to heare his own child swears” (*Good Play*, III.iii.52f).

The irony is manifold as no one present realises what has actually happened. Rufman, stupefied, exclaims “the diuell will not receiue him” (*Good Play*, III.iii.40), and King Alphonso, who, ironically, delivers Bartervile to the (earthly) judgement of Rufman, has a similar interpretation ready:

If to his life, the diuel giues longer lease,
To build more worke for hel, goe see; and from him
Exact a strict account of what he owes vs.

(*Good Play*, III.iii.60-2)

The reason for Bartervile's return does not become immediately apparent. Clearly, Rufman is surprised by his prey's rejection from the Underworld. Pluto, though absolutely certain of Bartervile's eventual damnation, does not seem to suffer from a fit of devilish overreaching, allowing Bartervile to run loose just a little longer for the sake of his amusement. The only possible explanation would be salvation through intercession. But that which was still permissible at the time of *The Castle of Perseverance*²¹ has become heresy in the course of the Reformation. The 1563 *Articles of Religion* declared all such practices superstitious and idolatrous. "The Romyſhe doctrine concernyng purgatorie, pardons, worshipping and adoration afwell of images, as of reliques, and alfo inuocation of Saintes, is a fonde thing, vainly inuented, and grounded vpon no warrantie of Scripture, but rather repugnaunt to the worde of God."²² With Bartervile's help, Dekker makes a double point. If the Church of Rome were right in this part of its doctrine, Bartervile, edified by the experience, would make use of the second chance he has been given and become a reformed man. However, the leopard does not change its spots, and nothing will save the truly evil. In Dekker's eyes, there is no hope for usurers, even if they have been given a sign, and in this instance, not only the devil, but even God Himself is used by a playwright to make a point.

²¹ See Chapter III-1 on page 106.

²² Church of England, "Article XXII: Of Purgatorie," *Articles* (London: Richarde Iugge and Iohn Cawood, 1571) 8.

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Barterville continues in his schemes worse than before. The plan which he then outlines to Lurchall is so diabolical that even the devil, forgetting his incognito, exclaims in admiration, “You haue out-reachd me”, which leads Barterville to boast that he will “out-reache the diuell” (*Good Play*, IV.i.69). True to his words, Barterville does not hide his utter egocentricity and total disregard for other people’s lives:

we may smile in our securer port:
Seeing others sea-tost: why tis but a sport
For him thats safe, to see proud waues swallow
Whole fletes of wretched soules: it needes must follow,
Nature sent man into the world, (alone,)
Without all company, but to care for one,
And that ile doe.

(*Good Play*, IV.i.76-82)

It is not God who made man and woman, but Nature. This is a daring statement that one might like to see inspired by new, heretic scientific thought. Again Dekker touches upon potential religious and political dynamite when he has Barterville deny the existence of a Creator. However, as every so often, the idea is not taken up at the end of the scene, nor would a development of the issue truly fit the general tenor of the play. As it stands, it is also unclear whether Lurchall grasps the total scale of Barterville’s remarks when he, echoing Pluto’s opening assessment, admits “I came to teach, but now (me thinkes) must learne” (*Good Play*, IV.i.84). Were Barterville to develop his remarks further, though, not only God’s existence would be in danger, but, thanks to the rules of inversion and contrariety, also the devil’s. Besides, given the kind of character that Barterville is, it would also spell doom for the coherence of

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The scene is reminiscent of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.²³ Rightfully or not, Alphonso takes the place of the avenging God of the Old Testament who would save the city for the sake of ten righteous people, but finds that there are not as many as that. The restoration of order is also a step backwards, away from forgiveness towards a more absolutist attitude of the vengeful ruler and god. Besides, the symbolism of razing the monastic den of sin to the ground is in itself ambiguous:

Immortall thanks for our deliuerance:
Race to the ground those wals: no stone shall stand,
To tell such place was euer in our land,
What welth can there be found, giue to the poore,
Another house wee build and thee restore,
To former virginitie: weepe not for these ruines,
Thou shalt from vs haue honours.

(*Good Play*, V.iii.150-6)

Alphonso appears to be a monarch devoted to his God. Earlier, he felt a guiding hand supposedly standing by his side when he was close to the abyss. Now, he seems to thank God for being delivered from all his banes and pledges to build a new house on the ruins of the old one. Like King Henry VIII, he sets out to reform the old, corrupt religion. But Henry VIII set himself up as the defender of a new faith and put himself at the head of his own church. His motives were anything but charitable. Though appearing so, Alphonso's might not be, either. In Act III, after he had learnt of the monastery's corruption, he decreed:

The Couent, the Demeasnes, Immunities,
Rents, Customes, Chartres, what to this house of *Baall*

²³ See Gen. 18-19.

Soeuer is belonging — *Brisco* tis thine.

(*Good Play*, III.iii.117-9)

Naturally enough, the Subprior qualifies such a decree as “theft” (*Good Play*, III.iii.121), and Octavio paints the darkest image of Alphonso’s young reign: “Woe to those dayes, / When to raise Vpstarts, the poore *CHVRCH* decayes” (*Good Play*, III.iii.122f).

At the end of the play, to make up for his earlier sins, Alphonso gives the riches of the monastery, the fall of which *he* has pronounced, to the poor, but he does not specify what new house will take the place of the old one. Indeed, the thanks he gives are not to an immortal God. They are themselves “immortal,” perpetual rather than addressed to a divinity, incorruptible rather than heavenly. Alphonso vouchsafes to be just and virtuous, but he takes the authority to uphold his justice and virtue from himself rather than from God. Without a guarantor, who can say whether he will stick to his resolutions? While Shakespeare’s Henry V, reflecting on the victory of his troops at Agincourt, offers his triumph to God, threatening with death all those that “take that praise from God / Which is his only” (*H5*, IV.viii.115f), King Alphonso’s final thoughts and words are for a totally different deity: “Warre here resignes his black and horrid stage / To sportfull *Hymen*, God of Mariage” (*Good Play*, V.iii.160f). Even though he has only just managed not to lose the war, his kingdom, and his eternal soul, he still relies on himself only and still seems to put pleasure before duty.

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V-6 – Man, God’s Greatest Enemy

Dekker’s play has a distinctive, though unconscious, tendency towards secularisation. Like *The Historie of Frier Rvsh*, it is first and foremost an allegory of the fallen state of the world in general, and London society in particular, though removed in both time and space. But the subtext seems to point to more than just that. It is true that the sharp attacks on religion are extenuated towards the end of the play. Earlier on, the Subprior exclaimed:

I feare *RELIGIONS* Fall: Alacke I see
This world’s a Cittie built by the most Hie,
But kept by man, (*GODS*) greatest enemie.

(*Good Play*, III.iii.134-6)

In Act V, this analysis seems to have lost much of its validity and poignancy, but it is absolutely clear that a return to the *status quo ante*, as far as the position of religion is concerned, is impossible. Innocence has been lost on all counts, and though most men do no longer appear to be God’s greatest enemies, they do not unambiguously rally around God’s cause on earth either.

The play does not end on a vindication of God’s plans, but with the staging of another trial in hell, a panopticon of men’s vices. It seems as if there were an unreserved winner: “the devils are successful in the end and the play is closed with a purely extraneous scene of diablerie in which the puritans are rather pointedly ridiculed.”²⁴ The devils, it seems, have kept the upper hand, although they, too, have reckoned without their host and have been taught the lesson that “aboue vs dwell, /

²⁴ Potter, “Devil Plays,” 734.

Diuels brauer and more subtile then in Hell” (*Good Play*, I.i.75f). While it is true that the last scene on earth allows the devils to feast on the sinners of the play, and the people left behind bear the promise of a less corrupt future, the devils’ success is by and large not based on their own schemes and machinations. Like Barterville, the people themselves have largely worked for their own undoing. The last scene tries to contain all the serious questions that have arisen:

The epilogue, one feels, was intended to exhibit human society in process of becoming so self-sufficient in its capacity for corruption as to render hell and its minions superfluous. Instead, the epilogue settles for a series of tabloid sketches of the sensations of the day, leaving the audience to infer for itself how long hell can compete with the world’s deviousness and prodigality and violence. The panic that seizes on Pluto’s kingdom with the arrival of a shipload of Puritans is presumably intended to show that hell has met its match.²⁵

Hoy is of course right: in the same way as Belphegor in *Grim* has no hand in the corruption of Marian, *Good Play*’s devils are not the ultimate instigators of evil in every case. Certainly Barterville would have been as vile as he was even without any influence from outside. But while the last scene was certainly designed to make the play go out with a bang more than anything else, more serious issues are nevertheless at stake because the play is not only about the devils’ inadequacies.

Although far-reaching developments as to man’s attitude to himself and religion have not yet taken place, they have at least been set in motion. However, it seems certain that Dekker himself did not think through all the consequences. The Puritan is sent to hell because he “pulled a whole church downe vpon [his] backe” (*Good*

²⁵ Hoy, *Introductions*, vol. 3, 83.

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Play, V.iv.283), and Minos is mortally afraid that “he will pull all hell downe too” (*Good Play*, V.iv.284). The consequence is inevitable: hell will not be of any use if its counterpart heaven is denied its existence. Though there are still plenty of religions left that the Puritan expelled from hell can destroy, the Subprior’s fear that all religion will fall is corroborated in the play. Though Dekker’s intentions were certainly not as radical as that, and could not have been with a working body of censors in place, the issue itself remains in the air: once the thought has been thought, it will not easily be removed. Still, Ravailac’s unanswered question rings uncannily in the ear: “Why is the diuell, / (If man be borne good) suffred to make him euill?” (*Good Play*, V.iv.29f). An answer is not ventured, and cannot be ventured, either in the logic of the last scene or of the play as a whole. But the matter leaves a bitter aftertaste. In the Mystery plays, Jesus could leave man to fend for himself because he could be reasonably sure that he had done everything to prepare him for a life without the immediate, though with the spiritual, presence of God. In Dekker’s play, this is not so certain any more. The divine authority that promised to stand by man in his darkest hour might just not care, or, worse still, it might be altogether absent. Ravailac’s question certainly points to deep despair, and the Prior’s unexpected demise—“the Kernell of a grape stopt his winde-pipe” (*Good Play*, V.iii.17f)—might point just as readily to a vengeful Old Testament deity who punishes those who have displeased Him as to the hand of blind fortune that cuts off people randomly. It is hard to say which view might be preferable.

If This Be not a Good Play, the Devil Is in It, the play that broaches the question of hell’s effect on people, but that all along leaves God strangely out of the equation at almost every turn, takes on very disturbing qualities. It is blacker and potentially far more explosive than the jolly last scene in hell suggests. Deliberately or

inadvertently, Dekker raises the question as to what the outcome will be if man is left alone on earth to fend for himself. An answer there is none.

Mes chers frères, n’oubliez jamais, quand vous entendrez vanter le progrès des lumières, que la plus belle des ruses du diable est de vous persuader qu’il n’existe pas !

Charles Baudelaire, ‘Le joueur généreux’, *Petits poèmes en prose*

VI – The Devil Is an Ass

Jonson’s *The Devil Is an Ass* takes this development a step further. It reveals a world where the presence of God neither dominates nor exercises any form of moral guidance, though there is no immediate sense of forlornness anywhere.

Like Dekker’s play, *Ass* paints an image of contemporary London, its vices, and its moral pitfalls, where people rather struggle in the search for worldly possessions than in a pursuit of moral perfection that, by and large, goes against the current of the times.¹ Indeed the one time when God is actually mentioned, apart from the use of his name in greetings or—sinfully—in curses,² he is *expressis verbis* forbidden to make his benign influence felt: after being baited, Fitzdottrel, rather short-sightedly, exclaims, “I wi’ not have good fortune, or God’s blessing / Let in while I am busy” (*Ass*, II.i.175f) craving worldly fortune. Furthermore, at the end of the play, it is neither worldly nor heavenly justice that sets matters right, but it is human wisdom

¹ See Satan’s and Iniquity’s tours of the City of London and England in *Ass* I.i.8-34 and I.i.55-75 respectively: they give a general impression of the world where *The Devil Is an Ass* is set.

² See *Ass* I.iv.103 and I.vi.223 for greetings and I.ii.15, I.ii.25, I.iii.33 and III.v.35 & 38, among other instances, for curses. The third Commandment, “Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vaine” (Exod. 20:7), forbids this.

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and common sense in the figure of Manly. At first he is inconspicuous as Wittipol’s apparent side-kick, but he develops to embody the undisputed voice of morality and reason:

It is not manly to take joy, or pride
In human errors. We do all ill things:
They do ’em worst that love ’em, and dwell there,
Till the plague comes. The few that have the seeds
Of goodness left will sooner make their way
To a true life by shame, than punishment.

(*Ass*, V.viii.169-74)

After merely standing by as Wittipol’s commenting companion in Acts I and II, Manly is disgusted by the female manners that he witnesses in IV.iv.190-2. He is eventually spurred into action, urging Wittipol to be virtuous in IV.vi.28-34, and he finally takes on the role of the sovereign in plays who sets everything right at the end in V.viii.151-74.

VI-1 – The Voice of Man

It is significant that Manly’s voice makes itself fully heard only at the moment when the news of Pug’s disappearance reaches the assembled company around Fitzdottrel, at which point the latter sees the light and vows to make “honourable amends to truth” (*Ass*, V.viii.147). Except for Manly, all the characters that are left on stage have to carry their share of guilt and folly. All of them are responsible for their own deeds, none having been tempted and corrupted by any supernatural force whatsoever, but none having been guided back to the path of justice and

righteousness by a preternatural authority either. Whether, after the closing of the play, the end is a moral or an immoral one for the individual characters is left to their own appreciation of what is folly and what is common sense. It is man's innate sense of goodness that becomes the primary touchstone for an ethical life. Jonson never touches upon the question whether the "seeds of goodness" that Manly sees in every human being are (im)planted by a divine moral authority or not. He bypasses a crucial theological issue that has a potentially weighty impact on religion.

The corollary of the presumption that man is enough unto himself to determine what is good and to act accordingly is the equally heretic idea that man knows evil and acts upon evil inspiration based on his own authority. Although Jonson does not literally present the situation in such glaring terms, Satan certainly betrays this tendency when he discusses Pug's request to be sent to earth for the greater glory of hell.

This is not what will do; they are other things
 That are received now upon earth for Vices,
 Stranger, and newer: and changed every hour.
 They ride 'em like their horses off their legs,
 And here they come to Hell, whole legions of 'em,
 Every week, tired. We still strive to breed
 And rear 'em up new ones; but they do not stand
 When they come there: they turn 'em on our hands.
 And it is feared they have a stud o' their own
 Will put down ours.

(*Ass*, I.i.100-9)

Not only are the vices, the olden-day minions of hell, not up to the task of corrupting human beings on earth. The development of the metaphor of breeding actually leads Jonson to honour people with their own active creative power of evil that outdoes

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Satan’s. Worse still: what evil people do is not crude and vulgar any more. People have really succeeded in refining the art of sinning beyond even the devil’s wildest dreams: “They have their Vices there most like to Virtues; / You cannot know ’em apart by any difference” (*Ass*, I.i.121f). From the very beginning, Jonson extends this idea to encompass the audience itself. The Prologue makes it clear that *The Devil Is an Ass* will be a reflection of London society where immoral actions are ten a penny and good deeds few and far between: “This tract / Will ne’er admit our vice, because of yours” (*Ass*, Prolog. 8f).³ For the play to hold a mirror up to nature, Pug has his wish and is allowed to go to earth, having his victim chosen for him by Satan, who basically sets Pug up and makes sure he will fail his mission. In due course, Pug realises this the hard way: “Satan himself has ta’en a shape to’abuse me” (*Ass*, III.vi.32). Ironically, even Satan may be short-sighted: by proving himself right on a small scale, he will help prove hell outdated.

VI-2 – Moonlings

Satire derives from the fact that the person whom Satan has chosen as an assistant in this task would not be a match for him under normal circumstances.

Fitzdottrel is a sinner, but neither grave nor obdurate. He treats his wife poorly, which is bad enough, but unlike Barterville he does not actively seek to sin to maximise his profit. Although he believes himself to be independent, judicious, and able to take care of his own, he is in fact rather simple-minded and finds himself at

³ The line is beautifully multi-dimensional, with the word “vice” alluding to both the abstract evil deed as well as the figure of the Vice on stage, and the word “tract” potentially referring to Jonson’s written work (“tract,” n.1, *OED*), the space of time it takes to act the play (“tract,” n.3 I1c, *OED*), and even, if one stretches the definition only a little bit, the stage where the play is being acted (“tract,” n.3 I3a, *OED*).

the mercy of everyone around him. They know about his eccentricities, his weaknesses, and his wealth, and they do their utmost to take advantage of him by tempting him with his predilections. Clearly he is not up to the commonplace standards of corruption in London and should be an easy target for the likes of Pug. In any case, none of his human adversaries seem to have any trouble beguiling Fitzdottrel.

When Wittipol offers Fitzdottrel a coat in exchange for a seemingly harmless interview with Frances in *Ass* I.iv, it is Wittipol who takes on the role of the tempter, and would succeed in his plans of seduction were it not for Frances's sense of right and honour. When Merecraft baits Fitzdottrel with the land scheme in *Ass* II.i, it is Merecraft who enacts the devil's role, and would succeed were it not for the fact that he is himself entangled in the confusion of all the nets that he cast out, but that have proven too much for him. As events unfold, Fitzdottrel, in his naïvety, is driven from one pitfall to the next, entangling himself ever more hopelessly in the web of troubling circumstances until the only way out is his feigning demonic possession at the end of the play. When Pug, however, enters Fitzdottrel's service in order to tempt the country squire to commit any sin whatsoever, let alone a mortal one, he fails. The irony is all too delicious. Fitzdottrel must have sighed a hundred times "Would I might see the devil" (*Ass*, I.ii.10), but from the moment when he actually appears, and up unto the bitter end, Fitzdottrel does not recognise whom he has in his company, even though he probably appears in the very "brave young shape" (*Ass*, I.ii.152) Fitzdottrel wanted him to assume.

This lack of insight is hardly surprising, given the almost infantile misconceptions Fitzdottrel has about the devil. They ridicule both him and the hoax conjurers whom he employs to summon the fiend:

“If no Divells, no God.”

Were he a kind devil,
And had humanity in him, he would come but
To save one’s longing. I should use him well,
I swear, and with respect—would he would try me—
Not as the conjurors do when they ha’ raised him;
Get him in bonds, and send him post, on errands
A thousand miles; it is preposterous, that,
And, I believe, is the true cause he comes not.
[...]
They do not know how to entertain the Devil.

(*Ass*, I.ii.33-40 & 44)

Naturally, there is a satirical slant to these words. If this attitude approximates in any way the public perception of the devil in general and conjuring in particular in the year “Six hundred and sixteen” (*Ass*, I.i.81), then it has moved a long way from the awe-inspiring terror that shook Marlowe’s Faustus barely thirty years before. But this world is in flux: it has done away with all traditional certainties; it is looking for new stability and value systems; and it will do away with age-old political systems in a little more than another thirty years’ time. In 1616 things are not what they seem, and in the past things seemed different from what they really were. There appears to be a total breakdown of all frames of reference. As Satan himself noticed earlier on: vices and virtues cannot be told apart. This causes credibility problems for both Pug and Fitzdottrel:

Pug: Sir, I am a devil.
Fitzdottrel: How!
Pug: A true devil, sir.
Fitzdottrel: Nay, now you lie—
Under your favour, friend, for I’ll not quarrel.
I looked o’ your feet afore; you cannot cozen me,
Your shoe’s not cloven, sir, you are whole hoofed.

Pug: Sir, that's a popular error deceives many[.]

(*Ass*, I.iii.25-30)

While Fitzdottrel does not believe that he has truly summoned a devil—or, more precisely, that the devil has chosen to come to him and serve him in order to be able to corrupt him better—he is ready enough to deck himself out in undeserved merits. Since Pug is called “Devil” (*Ass*, I.iii.32), he will employ him, not only to save money, but also to show off a possession that others in London society will envy him for: “I’ll entertain him for the name sake” (*Ass*, I.iii.36). It is, however, telling that the cozeners in London’s high society are suitably unimpressed by Pug’s name. For them, there is not much that is in it, and they prefer the superficiality of appearance to the matter that might hide underneath. Consequently, Tailbush urges Mistress Fitzdottrel to

Call him De-vile, sweet madam.

Mistress F.: What you please, ladies.

Tailbush: De-vile’s a prettier name!

Eitherside: And sounds, methinks,

As it came in with the Conqueror[.]

(*Ass*, IV.iv.187-9)

The affectation displayed in the entire scene reflects badly on the leading members of society, and the punning underscores the “vile” morality of the inhabitants of the city (“ville”).

As a new attraction in town that everyone flocks to see, Pug is made to look like a fool as he is paraded almost like a native recently arrived from the New World. That he lets down his master in the process is only natural enough for a devil, even though he uncharacteristically tries to give his best. Unsurprisingly, Fitzdottrel does

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not appreciate this at all: “Why did you do this, now? / On purpose to discredit me? You damned Devil.” (*Ass*, IV.iv.220f). Fitzdottrel was equally honestly surprised when he learnt about the hand Pug had had in his cuckolding and treats him as he would treat any misbehaving servant: he cudgels him.

You most mere rogue! You open manifest villain!

You fiend apparent, you! You declared hellhound!

Pug: Good sir!

Fitzdottrel: Good knave, good rascal, and good traitor!

Now I do find you parcel-Devil, indeed.

Upon’the point of trust? I’your first charge?

The very day of your probation?

(*Ass*, II.iii.12-7)

The irony is apparent and by now well-established. It is clear that Fitzdottrel does not really believe that Pug is a devil: “If thy name were not Devil, / Thou shouldst not stay a minute with me” (*Ass*, II.iii.28f). It is not clear at all, though, in how far he believes that devils exist in the first place.

Most of the other characters do not spare a thought for the devil either, unless he serves their purposes, in which case they pick whatever particular aspect of the supernatural tradition that suits their purposes best. Fitzdottrel is no exception to this rule, even though he is certainly the most gullible of the characters in *The Devil Is an Ass*. As a result, it does not come as a surprise that he condemns all dishonest and devious behaviour in Pug that is directed against him. In fact, it never even occurs to him that it might be natural behaviour in a devil. All he is obsessed with is the idea of having the devil raised “For hidden treasure / He hopes to find” (*Ass*, I.v.17f). As one would expect, Ben Jonson uses this attitude to highlight the people’s

superstitious beliefs and shows how easy it is for the many would-be conjurors to beguile and exploit the credulous shamelessly:

his men of art, who are the race may coin him.
 Promise gold-mountains, and the covetous
 Are still more prodigal.

(*Ass*, I.v.21-3)

All the conmen that crowd around Fitzdottrel find him an easy and lucrative prey. On the face of it, Fitzdottrel is truly a “moonling” (*Ass*, I.vi.158) whose every act “proclaims his asinine nature” (*Ass*, I.vi.165). This reaches its climax in the last scene when he is forced to act being possessed by the devil in a last effort to save himself and the tricksters Mercraft and Everill when the situation finally comes to a head and all the schemes they enacted go badly awry.

VI-3 – Demonism and Authority

In the turbulent final scene Jonson reveals the foolishness of demonic possession, at the same time pointing to the suffering that may result from it if the situation is not rationally approached by the authorities.⁴ Implicitly, he also denounces such virulent tracts as Harsnett’s *Popiſh Impoſtures* in as far as they are designed to set one strand of society against another.

Unlike Fitzdottrel, Sir Paul Eitherside, the parodic embodiment of the Puritan and his theologically defined beliefs in the all-pervasive influence of the devil by way of internal temptation, believes he immediately knows a demonic manifestation

⁴ See page 13 of Peter Happé’s introduction to *Ass* as well as footnote 32 (45).

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when he sees one: “That is the Devil speaks and laughs in him” (*Ass*, V.viii.29). Whether Fitzdottrel’s performance is so convincing that even sceptics take the devil’s presence at face value, or whether his acting shines through does not matter. In both instances the credibility of devilish possession is revealed to the audience as something that should be critically scrutinised, both on and off stage. Jonson also exposes the role of the authorities as a crucial one in all matters of such preternatural occurrences. Sir Paul Eitherside clearly loses out in comparison to what Jonson expects of the powers that be as he bases his judgement on all the superstitious signs that were common knowledge—uncontrolled speech, speaking in different voices and languages, and foaming, among others⁵—and that Merecraft and Everill make Fitzdottrel exploit to the last jot. While the more rational people present find it staggering that anyone could fall for Fitzdottrel’s performance, the judge betrays all the trappings of unjust and dictatorial rulers:

Wittipol: Hath this then credit with you?
Manly: Do you believe in’t?
Paul: Gentlemen, I’ll discharge
My conscience. ’Tis a clear conspiracy!
A dark, and devilish practice! I detest it.
Wittipol: The Justice sure will prove the merrier man!
Manly: This is most strange, sir!
Paul: Come not to confront
Authority with impudence.

(*Ass*, V.viii.54-60)

The inherent criticism is quite stunning since it is not only directed towards the magistrature, and as such towards the political system as a whole, but also lashes out

⁵ See *Ass*, V.viii.24-136.

against theology. Neither Protestants nor Anglicans, neither Puritans nor Catholics must have taken kindly to such overt criticism since belief in the devil, albeit differing in the finer points of theology, was still part and parcel of any Christian denomination. In this light, it is hardly surprising that Jonson's play was only staged once, especially since the apparent fool of the play, Fitzdottrel, turns out to have more insight than the Justice. He at least knows when it is "time to leave off counterfeiting" (*Ass*, V.viii.137).⁶ And yet, Wittipol's assessment of Fitzdottrel, that "no wit of man / Or roses can redeem [him] from being an ass" (*Ass*, I.vi.158f), is proven wrong in the end. After all, albeit misguided by his folly and choice of business associates, Fitzdottrel is not an evil person at heart.

VI-4 – Evil and the World

Most of the other personae are not angels, but they are not downright vicious either. Unlike Haughton and Dekker, Jonson does not have the need to create cruel and ruthless villains, and doing so would be beside the point that he wants to make.

For Jonson, evil does not lurk in far-away countries and distant times. It is not displayed on stage for the edification (if all goes well), or the disport (which seems more likely) of the theatre-goers as evil that does not have a burning immediacy for the people who become receptive witnesses of it in the playhouse. Jonson draws attention to the fact that evil is everywhere around the people, in the theatre as well as in the streets of London where those who walk about with open eyes can spot the many types of evil-doers whom Jonson draws upon to display the loose morality of

⁶ The fact that it is Fitzdottrel who, in just over half a line and as an aside, vouchsafes that faith is enough to keep the devil at bay—"I have faith against him." (*Ass*, V.viii.141)—is not enough to redeem either Fitzdottrel or the play. Sir Paul Eitherside's "I will make honourable amends to truth" (*Ass*, V.viii.147) comes across as equally unconvincing.

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his London contemporaries. Evil does not appear as murdering bravado or treacherous crime. As Happé notes “the projects themselves [which Merecraft advances to cozen Fitzdottrel] are quite practical”⁷ and not bad as such. The evil element enters the equation with the intention that Merecraft and Everill have in implementing the projects, namely to cheat Fitzdottrel of his money, illustrating how temptation and corruption may turn good into bad, and that it is virtually omnipresent.

The procedure as such is certainly worthy of the devil, but the fact that it has been devised by man and man alone hints at the possibility that the devil is in the process of losing his usefulness and becoming obsolete. All of this does not mean, however, that there is no punishment to fit the crime:

Upon all the participants in these two plots Jonson casts a critical, judging eye. No one gets away without moral evaluation, and there is an overriding sense of justice and discrimination which again argues a morally coherent universe in which the qualities of human beings, however disgraced by evil activities, are still perceptible and still capable of affecting the prospect of a just society. Indeed it is through the delineation of evil and the experience of folly that the possibilities of justice and love are allowed to emerge.⁸

Jonson’s universe is certainly a moral one, yet the basis of this morality (though it might be historically shaped by Christian thought and value systems that are in flux) takes its root from man, at least in Jonson’s 1616 play. Again, as in *Grim and Good Play*, the divine element is absent. It is as if the devil were to lose his right to exist in the process. This is a worrying development since the nature of the devil and God

⁷ Happé, introduction, *Ass*, 15.

⁸ Happé, introduction, *Ass*, 5.

are still closely linked. The two depend upon each other. The devil cannot exist without the divine since he takes the very definition and essence of his personality from God. The corollary of this development, never explicitly spelt out—it could not be in Jonson’s day and age—but always somehow implicitly lurking below the surface, is the question about the very existence of God himself. Marlowe might have gone out with a bang, what with true or forged accusations of being an atheist. His works certainly shake the foundations of Christian thought and supernaturalism. Jonson did not lead such a thrilling life and always laid great store by living within the centre that made up society. Yet he, too, was capable of producing potentially subversive material. What makes this all the more astonishing is precisely the fact that he wrote his play from within the centre, and not from the margins.

VI-5 – Elegy for the Devil

With this in mind, *The Devil Is an Ass* reads like an elegy for the devil. Everywhere he turns, Pug finds that he has joined the vice in the ranks of the demonic figures that have become obsolete. From the first moment, even Satan tells him that he is effectually incompetent, “too dull a devil to be trusted / Forth in those parts” (*Ass*, I.i.26f). This is not a great boost for Pug’s morale. Yet, as there is no school like the school of life, all of Pug’s subsequent experiences tell him that Satan, who has withdrawn from the world almost like God has, was right all along.

After witnessing the ensnaring of Fitzdottrel, Pug cannot help but admire Merecraft and Engine. “To hear men such professors / Grown in our subtlest sciences” (*Ass*, II.ii.11f) makes him lose courage to vie for supremacy in that field. He just decides “To make this master of mine cuckold: / The primitive work of

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darkness will I practise” (*Ass*, II.ii.13f). From the start Pug finds himself relegated to the second league, which he does not like, but which he does not take too much to heart either since he derives pleasure from the thought of corrupting Mistress Frances: “Most delicate damned flesh / She will be” (*Ass*, II.ii.19f). He understands too late that Mistress Frances does not need him to procure a lover for her on the one hand, and that she is too virtuous a woman to be drawn to the path of sinning by the likes of him on the other.⁹ He even fails at the most basic, and yet most essential task of securing her trust, while he himself is badly disappointed by the untrustworthiness of human beings.¹⁰ For Pug things go from bad to worse as he miserably fails to recognise the scheming that is going on right under his nose between Mistress Frances and Wittipol, which leads him to exclaim dejectedly “The devil is an ass! Fooled off! And beaten! / Nay, made an instrument! And could not scent it!” (*Ass*, II.vi.25f). As the shame of it all leads him to take rash actions to get his own back for his slighted honour, alerting Fitzdottrel about his wife’s tryst, his actions are again counterproductive:

This, for the malice of it,
And my revenge may pass! But now my conscience
Tells me I have profited the cause of Hell
But little, in the breaking-off their loves.

(*Ass*, II.vii.23-6)

At least this deed earns him Fitzdottrel’s forgiveness, a doubtful honour: “Devil, you have redeemed all” (*Ass*, II.vii.42).

⁹ Like *Grim*’s Joan, she could make a positive impact on her surroundings if her role could be expanded.

¹⁰ *Ass*, I.v.3.

Next Pug gets the opportunity to participate in Merecraft's scheme of defrauding Fitzdottrel of a ring, an errand which should be to his liking. Yet, first of all, he is paraded like a horse, then instructed like a child,¹¹ only to fail his duty completely again because he is too distracted by his own fleshly desires:

I do so long to have a little venery,
 While I am in this body! I would taste
 Of every sin a little, if it might be
 After the manner of man!

(*Ass*, III,vi.7-10)

It is not men, but Pug who learns the hard way that sin carries its own reward.

My devilish chief has put me here in flesh,
 To shame me! This dull body I am in,
 I perceive nothing with! I offer at nothing
 That will succeed!

(*Ass*, III.vi.28-31)

It is only Pug, though, who finds the human body and its senses, “the unlucky carcass of a cutpurse, / Wherein I could do nothing” (*Ass*, V.vi.35f), inappropriate for the kind of sinful behaviour that leads men to hell. It did not keep its human occupant from becoming a worthier rogue than Pug, and hardly any of his human antagonists find it difficult to achieve what he himself strives so hard and yet so vainly for. Pug's experience highlights the quality of the dishonesty that can be found in London. In a delightful twist of events, it is therefore not the characters who undergo a painful learning process, but it is Pug who is gradually coming to

¹¹ *Ass*, III.v.22f and 29-33. Such instruction, only worse, is repeated in Act IV, when Pug is tested to see whether he is fit to become an escudero (*Ass*, IV.iv.182-250).

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realise in how far his own role is drawing to an end. At this point, he is left in a mortal fear of being punished by both his earthly and his preternatural masters. In his despair he turns for help to Merecraft, the very person who put him into this unenviable situation.¹²

Although it takes a while, Pug finally sees everything clearly. As he listens to the supposedly prevalent noble morality that Wittipol, disguised as the Spanish Lady, propagates for the edification of Mistress Frances, Pug cannot help but exclaim in admiration “You talk of a university! Why, Hell is / A grammar school to this” (*Ass*, IV.iv.170f).¹³ But he soon loses this admiration as he himself becomes the prime sufferer of the proceedings: “Dear chief, relieve me, or I perish” (*Ass*, IV.iv.249).¹⁴ This is another instance of inversion, this time of the scene of Jesus praying to God to spare him the suffering he is about to endure.¹⁵ Pug’s ensuing desire to return to Hell as soon as possible, together with his enumeration of all the torments of the underworld,¹⁶ is part of the same technique: ironically, while men hope to live their eternal lives in Paradise but can, more often than not, reconcile themselves to their lives on Earth as a necessary prequel to the expected reward, Pug is totally unable to stand the troubles of earth a moment longer.

The last blow comes when even the gullible Fitzdottrel denounces him at the moment of his highest despair on earth:

¹² See *Ass*, III.vi.32-61.

¹³ See also “Who, / Coming from Hell, could look for such catechising? / The Devil is an Ass. I acknowledge it” (*Ass*, IV.iv.241-3).

¹⁴ See also “O chief, call me to Hell again, and free me” (*Ass*, IV.iv.210) and “*Fitzdottrel*: Why did you do this, now? / Of purpose to discredit me? You damned Devil. / *Pug*: [Aside] Sure if I be not yet, I shall be. All / My days in Hell were holy-days to this” (*Ass*, IV.iv.220-3).

¹⁵ See Matt. 26:39, Mark 14:36 and Luke 22:42. Nevertheless, Pug does not deliver himself totally and unconditionally into the hands of his chief, as Jesus does into the hands of his Father. In this way, every inversion serves to highlight the differences between the divine and the demonic.

¹⁶ *Ass*, V.ii.1-17.

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’Tis no hard thing t’outdo the Devil in:
A boy o’ thirteen year old made him an ass
But t’other day.”

(*Ass*, V.v.49-51)

VI-6 – How Shall His Kingdom Endure?

When Pug is imprisoned in Newgate, the story has come full circle, at least for him. Shame is the punishment that he suffers first: “How is the name of Devil / Discredited in me” (*Ass*, V.vi.3f).

Shame is also the remedy that Manly offers the human sinners at the end of the play. With shame comes the realisation that Satan was right all along. Although Satan had not expected otherwise from the beginning, he appears in Newgate to tell Pug off in the highest degree, praising one of the least worthy members of the human race in the process:

Impudent fiend

Stop thy lewd mouth. Dost thou not shame and tremble
To lay thine own dull damned defects upon
An innocent case there? Why, thou heavy slave!
The spirit that did possess that flesh before
Put more true life in a finger and a thumb,
Than thou in the whole mass.

(*Ass*, V.vi.36-42)

Even though the worth of the praise is of dubious quality for mankind, this is a confirmation from one of the highest authorities that people have become emancipated and can rely upon themselves for any mischievous and damnable deed without having recourse to the ministers of hell. Better, men can even outdo them in

the act. Satan believes that, thanks to Pug, humankind has won a decisive victory over the underworld:

The hurt thou' hast done, to let men know their strength,
And that they're able to outdo a devil
Put in a body, will for ever be
A scar upon our name! Whom hast thou dealt with,
Woman or man, this day, but have outgone thee
Some way, and most have proved the better fiends?

(*Ass*, V.vi.57-62)

And so, as an emblem for the situation on earth, Pug is made to leave the stage on the back of the outdated Vice Iniquity:

He that carries the fiend is sure of his load.
The Devil was wont to carry away the evil;
But now the evil out-carries the Devil.

(*Ass*, V.vi.75-7)

Even in 1616, the dissention that reigned among the inhabitants of hell in the *Mysteries* is still an issue. Mistrust has turned into open strife among the creatures of Satan's realm and illustrates how weak the foundations are on which the demonic has come to stand: "Euery kingdome diuided againft it felfe, is brought to nought: and euery citie or houfe, diuided againft it felfe, fhall not stand. So if Satan caft out Satan, hee is diuided againft himfelfe: how fhall then his kingdome endure?" (Mat. 12:25f).¹⁷ It is not necessarily a consolation for Satan, nor for humanity, that his analysis of the situation is not entirely correct. After all, no one recognised Pug

¹⁷ Compare Mark 3:22-6 and Luke 11:14-20.

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as a fiend, and therefore Satan exaggerates the damage that Pug has done in that sense. However, the fact that Pug has been so blatantly ignored and that all his efforts have come to naught bodes ill for the future—or well, depending on one’s point of view. With regard to this development, all of hell is caught between the devil and the deep blue sea: neither of the two slants of the question can really console Satan, who would be hard-pressed to establish which one is worse.

VI-7 – Hell on Earth

Jonson’s play is not framed by opening and closing scenes in hell. Both *Grim* and *Good Play* end where they began. This offered a bleak reminder for the people, the message being that judgement day will come and that it will certainly not be a pleasant experience at all. Furthermore, while both Haughton and Dekker return to the underworld to allow the respective rulers to judge human beings, Jonson chooses to remove the devil physically in the third but last scene. Besides, Satan is not allowed to judge any man or woman—which was not his prerogative anyway but just a concession to the inversion that traditionally set off the devil against God—but he judges Pug instead, undermining his own empire in the process:

Satan sees mortals as escaping from his power, and although he does not state it, this must mean a hope of salvation for mankind. Even though it is comic, this framework makes clear the perennial and subtle nature of evil, and it indicates that Jonson’s purpose is stimulated by indignation about the evil within human beings.¹⁸

¹⁸ Happé, introduction, *Ass*, 5.

The devil leaves the stage, but whether there is hope of salvation again depends upon one's point of view and whether one believes that man's tendency to do good can win the upper hand over his capacity for mischief and evil. After all, with the total absence of divine support in *The Devil Is an Ass*, mankind is finally left to itself. All the events that are displayed on stage do not greatly point to an imminent happy ending. As early as 1886, Herford noted that “[n]othing more anomalous in the London of Jonson's day could be conceived” than the adventures of a stupid devil like Pug on earth in an increasingly less superstitious society,

yet it is so managed that it loses all its strangeness. So perfectly is the supernatural element welded with the human, that it almost ceases to appear supernatural.¹⁹

Inverting this point of view, one could say that evil has ceased to inspire a supernatural dread and has become so natural in society that the devil has lost his ability to stand out unless he lays it on thick, as he does in his spectacular disappearance from Newgate, leaving behind “the sulphur of hell-coal” (*Ass*, V.vii.10). In all other respects human beings have indeed taken over. *The Devil Is an Ass* is

a fully coherent dramatization of the comedy of diabolic insufficiency in the face of human society's refined capacity for mischief, its superior powers of treachery.²⁰

¹⁹ Herford, *Literary Relations*, 319. See also Herford's discussion of Satan's and Pug's outdated characters on 318-21, where he speaks of the “obsolescence of supernaturalism of every kind in our older drama, and Jonson's sense of it. [...] Jonson's helplessly outwitted Pug is a type of the senile stage [...] which preceded his complete extinction” (321).

²⁰ Hoy, *Introductions*, vol. 3, 83.

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Merecraft is the chief exponent of this evolution, the principal tempter of his fellow-men. Yet, a significant development has taken place. Merecraft is neither alone, nor does he rely on the traditional means of alchemy and necromancy to summon the spirits that are to help him in his corruptions:

Spirits? O, no such thing! Wife! Wit, mere wit!

This man defies the Devil, and all his works!

He does't by engine and devices, he!

(*Ass*, II.iii.44-6)

Listening to Fitzdottrel, one gets the impression that, in relation to the spiritual world, the industrial age began a couple of centuries before its actual onset. But this is totally in keeping with the general drift that can be discerned in the plays and throughout the age itself. It is not surprising that an increasing secularisation goes hand in hand with a movement towards spiritual enlightenment and technological innovation. Yet, whether technology, which is neither spiritual nor moral *per se*, can help mankind move towards redemption and a better society is a question that was unanswered in Early Modern England, and still remains so today. But as Jonson's universe, at least, is a moral one, hope remains, especially since the audience has been shown that sin carries its own reward. Besides, there is a striking similarity between many a devil in many a play and Merecraft. In the same way as the devil loses out all too often because his ambition takes him too far, Merecraft also loses in the end because of the same reason: “You are so covetous still to embrace / More than you can, that you lose all” (*Ass*, V.v.61f). After all, pride will have a fall. Yet in the end, the characters are not condemned to “making ropes of sand, / Catching the winds together in a net” (*Ass*, V.ii.6f) or similar such torments. They are left to a

remedying sense of their own shame. Even though old superstitions have not yet been broken, the play shows that there is hope for this, too.

In the inverted world of Jonson's London it is easy to understand the devil's despair. One could hear him exclaim "O vile earth, / Worse for us devils than hell itself for men" (*Grim*, V.iii.48f). On the whole, however, the devils in *The Devil Is an Ass* are far less devilish, and the men and women far less cruel, than they are in *Grim* and *Good Play*. Crude effect makes room for subtlety, and an entirely new dimension of evil is anatomised in Jonson's play. The fact that it was banned after its very first performance allows the conclusion that it must have contained more than a mere grain of truth and that this truth was still too hurtful to be told without ill effect.

Interlude

From the Middle Ages onwards, the devil is invariably used for educational purposes in plays that put him centre stage in one way or another. In the Mysteries, edification is largely achieved through terror. Yet his crude method is quickly replaced by laughter. Even though the message the devil is eventually made to carry in Elizabethan and Jacobean times is still based on the Christian foundations and morals of society, the secularisation of drama inevitably leads to the dissemination of a more secular message as well. The increasing secularisation of the world in turn causes the devil to be increasingly out of touch with what is actually going on, or at least unable to cope with the changes. Even the Antichrists in the Mystery plays fail to know whether Jesus is actually the Son of God or merely an ordinary man, which leads to their ultimate downfall. As one of the main agents in some plays, the devil is explicitly used to hold a mirror up to the audience to criticise the customs of the day and age. As such, he becomes one of the main figures of reform (always provided the audience is ready to accept criticism). Unlike one might have expected, he is

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hardly ever the corruptor—although that is his initial function in the plays—but a means to provoke good.

Parallel to this development in the realm of the spirits, mankind itself also undergoes change. At times people are all too ready to commit sins; at other times, they do not need the devil to be provoked, or even outdo him in their viciousness. Mankind is increasingly left alone, solely responsible for its own actions, guided by its own sense of what is wrong more than by a divinely imposed morality. In a religious context, this has devastating implications for salvation. But in the emerging secular context, it does not really matter. There are no more threats of implications beyond the here and now that make men behave virtuously. In any case, it turns out that it is not the fiend who leads man to the abyss, but it is increasingly man himself who feels the urge to go there, thinks of the means to achieve his desire, and actively wants to do it. The outlook is not comforting if humankind does not succeed in replacing the discarded morality with another one.

The question remains whether audiences, and people in general, are educable in any way. The devil, whether as himself or as a figure adopted by the playwright, is hardly ever capable of learning from his mistakes, but persists in his self-chosen, and afterwards fixed, path to cause as much mischief and harm as possible. In plays, however, the devil is invariably turned into a pale shadow of the self that he desires to be. On the whole, it does not look as if anyone really objected to, or even cared about, the change that had taken place. If nothing else, this largely uncommented transformation is yet another sign that people in Early Modern England were gradually making more room for themselves within the (self-imposed) shackles of history, within a less enlightened and more superstitious form of religion, and within

a society that considered certain forms of free-thinking as a direct threat to its authority and an attack on its foundations.

Even an apparently banal piece of work like Houghton's *Grim*, a play that owes its survival entirely to accident (and someone's need to make a living by taking advantage of someone else's earlier pains) rather than to artistic or literary merit, bears witness to the change that had taken place by the very fact that it did not produce a stir at all, neither on nor off the London stage. Indeed, it is indicative of the mood of the day: devils on stage did not frighten people any more. On the contrary, they carried the promise of drawing crowds. The businessmen-playwrights realised the potential in devils and devilries on stage, and they set out to stage the fiend more often, even as a central character. As a result, the devil acquires a commercial value, which he may always have had: seeing him enacted along with the special effects used to stage him must have been an extra incentive for mediaeval spectators to watch the Mysteries and the Moralities. He had never before been put as centre-stage as in the waning Elizabethan era, though.

Satan, of course, hides under many guises, to fulfil his work the better. It only becomes problematic when he turns into the victim of his own success, so to speak, and fails to corrupt, or, even worse, becomes the victim of man's capers. Paradoxical as it may seem, in the course of time the devil has—again—become closely associated with man's ongoing aspiration towards all the nobler strands that can be found within humanity. While few of the playwrights and actors might actually have been aware of this development, it is a formula that has been used at least since God gave Satan permission to test Job: try people's mettle and make them rise through adversity. However, while the devil may well be a comic figure, it will always take a human being to assume the tragical role of a Faustus. True devils will always be

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characters of flesh and blood, such as Dekker’s Barterville, or Shakespeare’s Richard III or Iago. Belphegor / Castiliano may be ne’er so ill used on stage, his intentions may be ever so good and thwarted by the evil that reigns among mankind, yet he will never reach the tragical depths that could cause people to feel true empathy with him as they do with a human character. This impossibility is built into the historical framework of his very figure and the tradition that he stems from. As a result, while Belphegor / Castiliano, shallow though he may be in comparison to a Mephistopheles, shown on stage might have caused an uproar a mere dozen years before the first performance of *Grim*, he does not matter any more in the early years of the new century when it comes to producing insight and catharsis through terror and pity. Ben Jonson was clearly aware of this:

Remember,
What number it is. Six hundred and sixteen.
Had it but been five hundred, though some sixty
Above—that’s fifty years ago, and six,
When every great man had his Vice stand by him,

(*Ass*, I.i.80-4)

then matters would have been different. The realisation must have been more painful for Haughton than for Jonson, the greater artist. Still, it holds true: the devil is not the arch-fiend any more, but merely a character to be made fun of on stage, and the educational element, which still gives the figure its *raison d’être*, derives from mockery and laughter. Familiarity breeds contempt. Seeing, or hearing about, any form of demons too many times will eventually demystify them. The fact that the devils act so humanly in the opening scene of *Grim* takes away the sting of their traditional nature, as Belphegor painfully learns during experiences among people.

Taking away the mystery of the devil also means taking the fear, and Belphegor, too, has become an anachronistic element in a world that has begun a hardly perceptible, but eventually irreversible, movement towards secularisation.

Part of this development is the fact that it is not the fiend who leads mankind to the place where they suffer. It is mankind itself that does the trick, a development which begins as early as *Everyman*. In a way, the devil is caught in an impossible situation. On the one hand, he must tempt and lure people to hell. But as he does so, he engineers his own destruction, which was inevitable from the start anyway, as he is just part of a greater plan which he cannot, at any point, circumvent or obstruct. The situation becomes really problematic, though, when along with the devil, God disappears, and with God his mercy, the champion of humanity in heaven that was the pillar that supported mankind in the Mysteries as well as the Moralities. Mercy has gone within the space of twenty odd years. And it is far from certain whether this is a wholly reassuring development, in the same way as the victory of virtue at the end of *The Devil Is an Ass* is rather abrupt (though prepared for the space of an act and a half), and smacks more of the feel-good-factor than of a real, lasting solution for the audience. Jonson hopes that mankind will be able to make it by itself, but the ensuing historical development told a different story, at least for a few decades to come.

The devil had another ruse. If coming to man on his own impulse turned out to be counterproductive, there was always the inverted scheme: he could make man, who always strives for that which he does not have, believe that he had something to give him, and make him envious and burning to call him. This led to black magic and man's attempt to control the spirit world, and offered another chance for the devil to triumph.

PART II

--

MASTER AND SLAVE

“Tell you what. Let me sweeten the deal for you a bit ...”
Beelzebub

Robert Asprin, *Hit and Myth*

VII – Doctor Faustus

Ever since they first appeared in the German myth, Mephistopheles and Faustus have become the stuff of legend. Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* (c. 1588-92)¹ has played an important role in this process, not least because both of Marlowe’s characters are almost impossible to grasp definitively and offer endless scope for discussion.

Faustus (and his creator, Marlowe) has been seen as the archetypal overreacher; he has subverted (or failed to subvert) the established order through transgression; he has likewise fashioned himself (or failed to fashion himself) within the givens of the

¹ For a discussion of the dating of the play see Michael Keefer, ed., *Christopher Marlowe’s “Doctor Faustus”—A 1604-Version Edition* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview P, 1991) lv-lx. Compare the argument based on psychological evidence in Ian McAdam, *The Irony of Identity: Self and Imagination in the Drama of Christopher Marlowe* (Newark, NJ: U of Delaware P; London: Associated UP, 1999) 41f. Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred* uses dramaturgical evidence for his thesis (110 & 230, note 8). See also U. M. Ellis-Fermor, *Christopher Marlowe* (Hamden, CT: Archeron, 1967) 88-122. The source of the Faust-legend, “*The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus*, which was published in London in 1592, was, as the title page announces, newly printed and in places amended, so there must have been an earlier edition of which all trace is lost. [...] There occurs in the Stationers’ Registers under the date 28th of February, 1589, the entry of ‘A ballad of the life and deathe of Doctor FFAUSTUS the great Cunngerer. Allowed under the hand of the Bishop of London.’ ” William Rose, ed., *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus, 1592* (Broadway Translations. London: Routledge; New York, NY: Dutton, [1925?]).

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surrounding culture which was rent by seemingly irreconcilable paradoxes; his aspiration towards the supernatural has been analysed as his failure to come to terms with his sexual identity and his contradictory desire both to control the “other” and to surrender himself to it; he is mourned, or denounced, as the victim in a power struggle, sandwiched, not between good and evil, but between two irresistible superhuman agents; the tragedy of his quest has been hailed as having human, spiritual, and supernatural dimensions; his failure has been lamented because of the weakness of his own character and faith; and he has been seen to struggle in vain against the overpowering will of the harsh, cruel and unloving Calvinist, Old Testament God, who had not noted him down among the faithful who are given the grace to repent.²

Fact is that Faustus is the (brain)child of an age that was in flux in every domain, be it religious, political, scientific or geographic. Old certainties were cast, or forced, overboard, and new truths needed to be established in order to make sense of the emerging perspectives. This was a difficult task, especially since the history that needed to be rewritten was supposed to reveal eternal truths. Still, people succeeded. John Foxe (1516-87), tried to make people believe that “the true Catholicke Church of Chrif^t”³ was well embarked upon the next phase of its development. His *Actes and Monuments* (1584) detailed the development of the true Church through the ages, from the “fuffering time of the church,” through the “florifhing time” and the “declining time of the church,” each of which lasting three

² See for instance: Harry Levin, *The Overreacher* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 1952); Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1980); Jonathan Dollimore, “*Doctor Faustus*: Subversion through Transgression,” 1984, in *Christopher Marlowe*, ed. and introd. Richard Wilson (London: Longman, 1999); Keefer, *1604-Version*; McAdam, *Irony of Identity*.

³ John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (London: John Daye, 1584) 24. Foxe’s monumental work was first published in 1563 and ran through four editions in his lifetime (1570, 1576, and 1584, the last three being considerably revised).

hundred years, “untill the loofing out of Sathan” instigated the “time of the Antichrift in the church.” Yet, after four hundred years of unchallenged rule of the Antichrist, began the “reformation of the Church,” which would lead to eventual purification before the Second Coming of Christ.⁴ Foxe employs the same tactics, then, as the Hebrews did when they adapted Yahweh to the changing times.⁵

The same kind of game was being played at high stakes in the world of politics, a world where the survival of the chosen ideal is paramount and to be achieved at all costs. To effect this, the creation of an alternate reality that furthers one’s own interests best is not taboo. In such a world it might be thought wise to create what cannot otherwise be had, as might have been the case with the Babington Plot in 1586. Marlowe’s close involvement with espionage might have made him realise the “demonic character of those contemporary servants of the state whose double role was to incite subversion and to stand as its accuser”⁶ at the same time. Ultimately, this might lead to the creation of a world without foundations where “nothing is / But what is not” (*Mac.* I.iii.141f). This casts a shadow upon the trustworthiness of words, especially since “that which we communicate is speech, and speech is not the same thing as the things that exist.”⁷ The challenge is to find ways of bridging the gap between reality and speech and creating one’s own reality in the process.

It is this which Faustus attempts when he seeks to make use of the powers of the underworld. In doing so, he needs to find his position in relation to the two extreme attitudes one can hold towards religion. He might come to side with his creator Marlowe who, according to Richard Baines, swore that “the first beginning of

⁴ Foxe, *Actes*, 1.

⁵ See Chapter I-1.

⁶ Keefer, *1604-Version*, xxvi.

⁷ Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1948) 129; quoted in Greenblatt, *Self-Fashioning*, 215. Except for the time the play is presented by actors on stage, the only reality of *Doctor Faustus* is in (written) speech.

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Religioun was only to keep men in awe.”⁸ He might also agree with Scot, who held that “to doo anie thing without Chrif, is to wearie our felues in vaine.”⁹ Under the influence of Mephistopheles, even this remark might sound like a promise of guaranteed success, or like a threat to control people.

VII-1 – What’s in a Name?

Like the Devil himself, Mephistopheles, invoked to help Faustus achieve his dreams, is commonly believed to be “a liar, and the father thereof” (John 8:44). He is a devil among many and, in his own words, “a servant to great Lucifer” (*Faustus*, I.iii.40).

Mephistopheles is not Lucifer or Satan himself—in the Christian tradition, both figures have been equated since about the fourth century AD—but merely one of the many devils that people the Christian underworld in popular imagination. Like other devils who will appear on the stage in the years to come, he is a devil without tradition. He makes his first appearance ever in connection with the German Faust legend emerging in the sixteenth century. In fact, even to date, Mephistopheles seems to have been confined to the Faust stories, a literary character with no life outside this particular narrative. If Lightborne and his likes are Mephistopheles’ predecessors, in the sense that they are the original offspring of a human being’s creative energy, Mephistopheles’ existence is the culmination of people’s creative energy that uses an age-old, divinely inspired figure, reshapes it, and gives it exclusive life and meaning in relation to a single human character. Mephistopheles

⁸ Quoted in Constance Brown Kuriyama, *Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2002) 221.

⁹ Scot, *Discoverie*, Bk XVII, ch. 1 (490). Compare John 15:5: “I am the vine: ye *are* the branches: he that abideth in me, & I in him, the same bringeth forthe much frute: for without me can ye do nothing.”

was created for Faustus, and Faustus only. As a result, they become the representatives of their respective race, and the contest that they enter can be seen as a contest of all mankind versus all the underworld. In the logic of inversion, God is also bound in this equation, which raises the stakes as high as they can possibly be. The fates of the two characters are inextricably intertwined, and there is no life for Mephistopheles beyond the life of Faustus. At the end of the day, this makes Mephistopheles' efforts self-defeating: when Faustus disappears, Mephistopheles will disappear. Paradoxically, not least thanks to Mephistopheles, Faustus has gained an approximation of perpetual life in the minds of men.

The origin of the name is obscure. If a Hebrew etymology is presupposed, then the following might be a possible explanation:

According to the speculation of eminent Göthe scholar K. J. Schröer (1886) it is a compound of Heb. mephitz “destroyer” + tophele “liar” (short for tophele sheqer, lit. “falsehood plasterer;” cf. Job xiii.4). Names of devils in the Middle Ages in most cases derived from Heb.¹⁰

The entry in Bächtold-Stäubli's *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* is considerably more thorough and scientifically rigorous, but ultimately it does not lead to greater insight into the source of the name. After an extended analysis of Hebrew etymology and variant spellings, the *Handwörterbuch* concludes:

Es ist natürlich schwer, bei diesen Namen, für deren Erklärung eine Menge Möglichkeiten in Rechnung zu stellen sind, sichere

¹⁰ “Mephistopheles,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, ed. Douglas Harper, 31 Dec. 2009. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Mephistopheles>>. The name is not a creation of the Middle Ages, though.

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Entscheidungen zu treffen, aber die Bedeutung „Zerstörer des Guten (Gottes)“ würde dem Wesen des M. durchaus entsprechen.¹¹

Since neither the coiner of the name nor its exact derivation are known, it is hardly surprising that the educated guesses in English-speaking literary criticism follow a different line of thought:

Butler, (*The Myth of the Magus*, (Cambridge) 1948) sees it as a near miss for both ‘*Me-photo-philes*’ (‘No friend to light’) and ‘*Me-Fausto-philes*’ (‘No friend to Faust’), but one exact derivation was provided by Ernst Zittelmann (*Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, XIV, 1926, pp. 65f): by interchange of the middle two syllables of ‘*Me to phos philes*’ (Greek: ‘The light is not a friend’). This seems far-fetched until it is remembered that nouns in a Greek lexicon are always followed by their article: *phos, to*, and at once the interpretation is acceptable.¹²

Marlowe might even have altered the name further to add yet another extra dimension:

if the Mephistophilis of the A-text of *Doctor Faustus* is Marlowe’s usage, then this derivation was not lost on Marlowe who has changed ‘light’ to ‘right’ or ‘lawfulness’ (*phas*) without bothering to correct for gender. Hence Mephistophilis is antinomian, whether the laws be divine or human.¹³

¹¹ “Mephistopheles,” Hanns Bächtold-Stäubli, ed., *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, 1927-1942, 10 vols. (Berlin & New York, NY: de Gruyter, 2005) vol. 6 (179). “In the light of the numerous possible explanations for these names, it is of course difficult to take decisions that may be regarded as certain. However, the meaning “Destroyer of the Good (God)” would certainly fit M.’s nature” (my translation).

¹² Jones, postscript, *Faustus and the Censor*, by Empson, 203.

¹³ Jones, postscript, *Faustus and the Censor*, by Empson, 203f. However, *phas*, or indeed *fas*, is not Greek but Latin. The first entry for *fas* in *OLD* reads “That which is right or permissible by divine law,” and there is no mention in *LDJ* for *φάσ* to mean “law.” Empson himself speculates passionately about the vowel shifts in the name of Faustus’s companion: “It seems as well to put ‘Meph’ for the familiar spirit of Faust, not to raise a laugh but to solve a difficulty. The best form

It is undisputed, though, that Mephistopheles has a “manufactured name (possibly from three Greek words meaning ‘not loving the light’).”¹⁴ Since few would have understood the allusions anyway four hundred years ago, this easiest of explanations is in all likelihood also the most pertinent one. After all, it is right that he should have a Greek name, not a Babylonian or a Syrian one: Mephistopheles is a demon invented by humanism. His agenda differs from that of older devils. Only part of his mission is to win Faustus for hell. There is more at stake, for Faustus strives on behalf of humanity: Mephistopheles could be the means to help Faustus transcend his limitations.

Just as the name of the character that appears in the German Faust-Book is formed of various allusions, so the figure himself seems to be a (con)fusion of popular tradition, legend, and *grimoires*:

The Lucifuge or Fly-the-light is a particular genus of malevolent spirit, recognized by Trithemius in his *Liber Octo Quaestionum*, and he becomes the basic prototype for the Mephistophiles of the Faust-book, a much more developed character who takes on the sophisticated wiliness of the *Teuffelliteratur* to ensnare Faustus. Mephistophiles is thus a composite figure, part semi-autonomous and reluctantly obedient but naïve Lucifuge, part paid-up member of the Devil, one of the numberless cohort who, according to contemporary belief, were constantly on the watch for a potential victim and were masters in the art of inspiring despair in God—the unforgivable sin.¹⁵

of the name is ‘Mephistopheles’, with an *i*, well known from Goethe but invented earlier in the eighteenth century. It makes the spirit a cool civil servant, a tax collector perhaps, or an inquisitor. The Faust-book calls him ‘Mephostophiles’ with an *o*, so that he is a rather clumsy but forceful, even jovial character. The A-text of Marlowe, which we have no adequate reason to doubt, calls him ‘Mephostophilis’, so that he is a bleating sheep-like figure, who demands love but could bite.” *Faustus and the Censor*, 45f (note 20).

¹⁴ “Mephistopheles,” *Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, 15th ed., 1995.

¹⁵ Jones, introduction, *Faustus and the Censor*, by Empson, 12. Lucifuge Rofocale is a spirit known to the Solomonic literature who is supposed to help the magus find buried treasures. Jones warns

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Given the popular success of the German source—the Faust Book was translated into six different languages in as many years—it is likely that both Faust and his companion had acquired a certain notoriety in England by 1588. Though people might have had preconceived notions about Mephistopheles, this does not mean that Marlowe was slave to the public’s expectations. Marlowe’s creative imagination was literally free to form Mephistopheles in any way he liked or thought necessary for his play and needs, especially as demons “haue no fhape at all; for they are fpirits, who neuer haue anie.”¹⁶

VII-2 – Return and Change Thy Shape

Faustus is carrying out a similar creative process as Marlowe as he tries to control the spirit world with his words. Although Marlowe sketches Faustus’s incantation concisely, every element a superstitious audience would expect to hear is mentioned—“gloomy” night (*Faustus*, I.iii.1), prayers and sacrifices, a magic circle, “Jehovah’s name, / Forward and backward anagrammatized” (*Faustus*, I.iii.8f), a Latin invocation—and the appearance of the devil occurs so swiftly that the spectators hardly have time to realise what is going on before their dreaded expectations are fulfilled. The B-text, however, relativises Faustus’s amount of control and suggests that it might just be an illusion with Faustus as an actor on the stage in somebody else’s play: “Lucifer and four devils” (*Faustus*, B-text: I.iii; s.d.) are watching over all of Faustus’s proceedings throughout the scene.

that “one must be wary [of him] as he will try to negotiate a bilateral pact in which the magician will have to pay the price” (11).

¹⁶ Scot, *Discoverie*, Bk XVII, ch. 9 (505). See the discussion about the reality of God, angels, and demons on page 31.

In either text, Faustus's illusions of mastery are not shattered, though. Mephistopheles appears in a shape that makes Faustus exclaim "Thou art too ugly to attend on me" (*Faustus*, I.iii.24), probably in the form of a dragon.¹⁷ At first sight, he is really the devil of popular imagination—dangerous, petrifying, a threat to life and limb—as he was exploited by the religious fathers to frighten potential sinners in order to make sure they stayed within the protective body of the church. Yet, appearing as a terrifying monster is certainly counterproductive from the devil's point of view:

furelie the diuell were not fo wife in his generation, as I take him to be, if he would terrifie men with fuch vglie shapes, though he could doo it at his pleasure. For by that meanes men should haue good occafion & oportunitie to flie from him, & to run to God for succour.¹⁸

Still, the startling shape also serves Mephistopheles' own purpose as it allows him to manipulate Faustus by giving him a false sense of his powers and abilities:

I charge thee to return and change thy shape.
Thou art too ugly to attend on me.
Go, and return an old Franciscan friar;
That holy shape becomes a devil best.

(*Faustus*, I.iii.23-6)

¹⁷ "[W]hereat suddenly over his head hanged hovering in the air a mighty Dragon" (*EFB*, ch. 2; 69). Mephistopheles also appears as a dragon in the pageant of hell's creatures in chapter nineteen (108). This seems to be his real shape. As Lucifer informs Faustus: "we cannot change our hellish form, [...] yet can we blind men's eyes in such sort, that when we will we repair unto them, as if we were men or Angels of light, although our dwelling be in darkness" (*EFB*, ch. 19; 108). In a playhouse "Eventary tacken of all the properties for my *Lord Admeralles men*, the 10 of Marche 1598," Philip Henslowe itemises "j dragon in fostes." R. A. Foakes and R. T. Rickert, eds., *Henslowe's Diary* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1961) 319 (54f) & 320 (84).

¹⁸ Scot, *Discoverie*, Bk XVII, ch. 11 (507). Compare George Gifford (1547/8-1600): "It is moft necessarrie for vs all to know, what strong aduersaries we haue to encounter withall, that we may fly vnto the Lord God, and seek to bee armed with his power against them." George Gifford, *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraftes* (London, John Windet, 1593) sig. C2^r.

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As long as he cannot put his abilities into perspective by the benefit of someone else’s opinion, he speaks of himself as the “conjurer laureate, / That canst command great Mephistopheles” (*Faustus*, I.iii.32f). His abundant self-confidence is never shaken, and his words suggest indignation that Mephistopheles dares appear before him in a shape that offends his eye. The very fact that Mephistopheles obeys Faustus ungrudgingly only serves to confirm the magician in the belief in his power:

I see there’s virtue in my heavenly words.
Who would not be proficient in this art?
How pliant is this Mephistopheles,
Full of obedience and humility!

(*Faustus*, I.iii.27-30)¹⁹

Such is the gullibility of proud human nature that the combination of the trust in magic and spells, together with Mephistopheles’ undevilish humility, works to ensnare Faustus better and faster than any sophisticated trickery on the devil’s behalf would. It also leads Faustus to invert the morality in the world that he creates for himself in his mind: magic, a practice that is condemned by the authorities, becomes virtuous, necromantic words become heavenly, and the fiend becomes humble.

Faustus was never really free when it came to choosing his path. When he was still wavering whether to pursue the course of magic, the Bad Angel had encouraged him: “Be thou on earth as Jove is in the sky, / Lord and commander of these elements” (*Faustus*, I.i.78f). And Mephistopheles makes doubly sure that Faustus’s belief should in no way be shaken before he has to face a few sobering revelations. At Faustus’s “*Quin redis, Mephistopheles, fratris imagine!*” (*Faustus*, I.iii.34),

¹⁹ See Fitzdottrel’s appreciation of the devil on page 178.

Mephistopheles indeed appears in the desired shape and seems entirely servile: “Now, Faustus, what wouldst thou have me do?” (*Faustus*, I.iii.35). The illusion is complete. By alluding to Saul’s words when he was converted from a persecutor of Christ to one of his most ardent disciples—“Lord, what wilt thou that I do?” (Acts 9:6)—Mephistopheles does not only make “an ironic commentary on Faustus’s desertion”²⁰ of the fellowship of Christ. He also gives Faustus the impression that he recognises him as his master in Christ’s, or Lucifer’s, stead. The blasphemy goes completely unnoticed, or, if noticed, unchallenged, by Faustus. He readily accepts his role and accommodates himself easily within it:

I charge thee wait upon me whilst I live,
 To do whatever Faustus shall command,
 Be it to make the moon drop from her sphere
 Or the ocean to overwhelm the world.

(*Faustus*, I.iii.36-9)

The tactics of the devil have worked wonders in lulling Faustus into a false sense of security. Faustus believes so strongly that he is merely asking for what is his due that even the naked truth about hell that Mephistopheles reveals to him from time to time seems unbelievable to him. Yet, “the devil sometimes speaks the truth” only to confuse his victim and to ensnare him all the more easily.²¹ All too often, Faustus chooses to believe what he lists instead of opening his eyes to the reality around him.

²⁰ O’Brien, “Christian Belief in *Doctor Faustus*,” *ELH*, 37 (1970) 4.

²¹ The expression is proverbial (Tilley, D266).

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VII-3 – Sanctobulorum Periphrasticon

Marlowe’s Mephistopheles is a master manipulator. The Faust of the Faust-Book is lured into the devil’s trap simply by his pride as he may seemingly command a mighty prince. The truth is more complicated in *Doctor Faustus*.

Marlowe’s Faustus is rapidly caught in the devil’s snares as he sees the prize that he was almost certain of having won suddenly threatened to be removed again from his grasp. Astonishment—“Did not he charge thee to appear to me?” (*Faustus*, I.iii.43)—gives way to consternation—“Did not my conjuring speeches raise thee?” (*Faustus*, I.iii.45)—and a rather feeble attempt to reassert his power over the spirit: “Speak” (*Faustus*, I.iii.45). Mephistopheles speaks indeed, but what he says is hardly good news for Faustus. It undermines everything Faustus believes to have achieved. The secret art of conjuring is not needed to summon a devil, since it is enough to “rack the name of God, / Abjure the scriptures and his Saviour Christ” (*Faustus*, I.iii.47f), i.e. to make sure that one “is in danger to be damned” (*Faustus*, I.iii.51) to achieve this aim. Even here, Mephistopheles might be economical with the truth: when Robin manages to call Mephistopheles from Constantinople in Act III, Scene ii, his gobbledygook is hardly blasphemous: “*Sanctobulorum Periphrasticon! [...] Polypragmos Belseborams framanto pacostiphos tostu Mephistopheles!*” (*Faustus*, III.ii.25-7). Calling the devil seems to be easy enough. Even he can be gulled: Wagner effortlessly commands Balioll and Belcher in Act I, Scene iv.

The main issue, however, is how to make Faustus commit himself to hell rather than permit him to liberate himself from his limitations and find his own vocation. And Faustus is easily manipulated with the carrot and the stick. The very moment

Mephistopheles disenchants Faustus about the power the magus believed he had, he offers Faustus a foolproof way of getting what he wants:

Therefore, the shortest cut for conjuring
Is stoutly to abjure the Trinity
And pray devoutly to the prince of hell.

Faustus: So Faustus hath
Already done, and holds this principle:
There is no chief but only Beelzebub,
To whom Faustus doth dedicate himself.

(I.iii.52-8)²²

If that which is at stake in Faustus's venture were not so serious, he could almost be compared to a child who has been promised a toy and seen himself very nearly in its possession when, all of a sudden, it risks being withdrawn beyond reach. Sulking and reverting to the behaviour that appeared to fulfil this aim seems but a natural reaction. And this is precisely what his opponent wants. The devil is indeed a wily one when it comes to corrupting those that are predisposed, and predisposition to sin is a prerequisite for the devil to have any power over him: "that olde and craftie enemie of ours, affailes none, [...] except he firft finde an entresse reddey for him[.]"²³

Whether he likes it or not, at this moment agency is taken away from Faustus on every level. His art cannot command the devil, and control over his reactions is denied him by Mephistopheles' careful playing with Faustus's desires and responses. Indeed, he experiences first hand what was known all along by scholasticism and traditional demonology:

²² Faustus holds Beelzebub, not Lucifer, to be the chief devil to whom he wants to pray and "trust in" (*Faustus*, II.i.5). The two are not one and the same lord in the underworld: Act II, scene iii stages both. Even here Marlowe engineers a subtle but marked revolution in the hierarchy of hell, reinforcing the idea that man is increasingly gaining control.

²³ James I, *Dæmonologie*, Bk 2, ch. 2 (32).

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it is no power inherent in the circles, or in the holines of the names of God blasphemoullie vsed: nor in whatfoeuer rites or ceremonies at that time vsed, that either can raise any infernall spirit, or yet limitat him perforce within or without these circles. For it is he onelie, the father of all lyes, who hauing first of all prescribed that forme of doing, feining himselfe to be commanded & restrained thereby, wil be loath to passe the boundes of these injunctiones; afwell thereby to make them glory in the impiring ouer him (as I saide before:) As likewise to make himselfe so to be trusted in these little thinges, that he may haue the better commoditie thereafter, to deceiue them in the end with a tricke once for all; I meane the euerlasting perdition of their soul & body.²⁴

It turns out that “all arts that profess to coerce [devils] are false. [...] And certainly no human compulsion, mechanical or other, works on devils.”²⁵ It does not throw a positive light on Faustus’s learning that he is ignorant of this.

Faustus’s bid to set himself up as the master of the devil and shape his own world is jeopardised right from the start. Yet, Mephistopheles is not much better off, either. He is a subtle tactician who is clear about what he wants, and who has the necessary power and skills to get it. Still, he is limited in his powers and agency. First of all, this is due to his subordination to Lucifer: “No more than he commands must we perform” (*Faustus*, I.iii.42). Secondly, Lucifer is limited in what he may command, too. As William Perkins (1558-1602) says, he may only ever endeavour to make men fall “when God permits him.”²⁶ Besides,

the angel’s will cleaves to its object in a fixed unchanging way. Before he makes his choice, or course, he could freely adhere to a given object

²⁴ James I, *Dæmonologie*, Bk 1, ch. 5 (16f).

²⁵ Robert H. West, “The Impatient Magic of Dr. Faustus,” *ELR* 4 (1974) 224.

²⁶ William Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft* (Cambridge: Cantrel Legge, 1608) 47.

or its contrary [...]; but once he has attached himself to an object, the attachment is changeless.

[...]

And so it is that the good angels, having once attached themselves to goodness are forever established in it; but the bad angels, once they have sinned, are fixed in sin.²⁷

Similarly, Faustus will have to be led in one way or another down the path of sin. And he also needs to persevere on it and be denied any opportunity to repent, for “to say that there is any sin in this life of which one cannot repent is erroneous.”²⁸ Yet, if Faustus does not choose of his own volition to accompany Mephistopheles along the path to perdition, then there is nothing the devil can do:

St Augustine proves that *nothing other than man’s own will makes his mind the slave of his desire*. Now, a man becomes a slave to his evil desires only through sin. Therefore, the cause of sin cannot be the devil; this comes only from man’s own will.²⁹

All in all, Faustus’s endeavour is not doomed to fail from the outset. It is up to Faustus to prove that he has the mettle to achieve that which he desires.

²⁷ Aquinas, *Summa*, I, Q. 64, “The Devil’s Punishment,” art. 2, “Is the Will of the Devils Fixed in Evil?”; vol. 9 (291). Latin on page 385. Despite its Protestant colouring, the Faust legend, both in Germany and in England, operates within this framework, at least as far as demonology is concerned. “[T]he great Thomistic system still stood, only fractionally modified in Protestant theology. Competing platonistic and rationalistic views were not well known enough, self-consistent enough, or enough adaptable to Scripture to rival the orthodox system.” West, “Impatient Magic,” (224, note 10).

²⁸ Aquinas, *Summa*, III, Q. 86, “The Effect of Penance,” art. 1, “Are All Sins Removed through Penance?”; vol. 60 (75). Protestants would take issue with the sentence that follows: “First, because this would deny free will. Secondly, because it would detract from the power of grace, whereby the heart of any sinner whatsoever can be moved to repentance.” Latin on page 387.

²⁹ Aquinas, *Summa*, II (1) Q. 80, “The Devil as an External Cause of Sin,” art. 1, “Does the Devil Directly Cause Man to Sin?”; vol. 25 (219). Latin on page 387.

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VII-4 – Ensnared by the Terrors of Hell

Mephistopheles first needs to make Faustus believe that he will not be able to escape. In order to do so, Mephistopheles uses “reverse psychology.”³⁰ Instead of luring Faustus into taking the fatal step, he warns him of hell with the intention of attracting him all the better.

Instead of graphically displaying the terrors of hell, Mephistopheles brings to the fore his human side, trying to arouse pity for himself. Upon Faustus’s unconvinced “How comes it then that thou art out of hell?” (*Faustus*, I.iii.76), Mephistopheles answers in a strikingly undevilish way:

Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.
Think’st thou that I, who saw the face of God
And tasted the eternal joys of heaven,
Am not tormented with ten thousand hells
In being deprived of everlasting bliss?
O Faustus, leave these frivolous demands,
Which strike a terror to my fainting soul!

(*Faustus*, I.iii.77-83)

The fire of hell is within the self; it is only the light of God as suffered by those who deny His love.³¹ Mephistopheles experiences the very horror of the fact that his will is fixed in the choice he made when he came to fall with Lucifer. Whereas the Mephistophiles of the Faust-Book reacts to this fixity by directing his envy, malice,

³⁰ Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 118.

³¹ Aquinas argues that, “although the devils, while abroad in this dark atmosphere, are not actually imprisoned in the fire of hell, yet their punishment is not the less for that, since they know that the imprisonment awaits them. This is what is meant by *the Gloss on James, They take the fire of hell with them wherever they go.*” *Summa*, I, Q. 64, art. 4, “Is this Atmosphere of Ours the Place Where the Devils Are Punished?”; vol. 9 (297 & 299). The reference is to James 3:6. Latin on page 386.

and hate towards humankind in order to get some of his own back by depriving the Kingdom of God of human souls, Mephistopheles here seems to live through entirely different emotions: it looks as if every fibre of his being regretted the fact that there is no hope of changing his condition. Though full of rhetoric, the language is deprived of any hint towards the seven deadly sins: no pride, no envy, no anger; only deepest misery and desolation shake the very foundations of his being. At this moment, Mephistopheles does not come across as the arch-enemy of mankind, but only as a pitiable fallen angel, reduced to a human form on stage, who adds emphasis to Faustus's blindness and the danger he is about to run. Mephistopheles achieves what all other devils on the stage fail to do: he gives the impression that there could actually be drama in his soul and that he could be worthy of compassion.

Faustus, though, could not care less, neither for Mephistopheles, nor for himself. The moment when Mephistopheles lays bare his suffering, Faustus cuts in with his defiant, but wholly misguided, bombast:

What, is great Mephistopheles so passionate
For being deprived of the joys of heaven?
Learn thou of Faustus manly fortitude,
And scorn those joys thou never shalt possess.

(Faustus, I.iii.84-7)

An inversion of roles has again taken place. Faustus believes himself able to outdo the devil in every respect, first by controlling him, now by showing more courage and determination than he. Faustus reacts like the devil by pouring scorn on God's gifts to mankind, even though he, unlike the devil, has not done anything yet that would put him beyond grace and redemption. Yet, Mephistopheles seems to have succeeded in turning the circle the magician uses to control the conjured spirit into a

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trap, rather than a protective cushion, for Faustus. Faustus goes on heroically to challenge Lucifer and hazards his soul for a good life and Mephistopheles’ services:

Go bear these tidings to great Lucifer:
Seeing Faustus hath incurred eternal death
By desp’rate thoughts against Jove’s deity,
Say he surrenders up to him his soul[.]

(*Faustus*, I.iii.88-91)

Faustus never notices that he is no match for Mephistopheles. Before Mephistopheles’ lament, Faustus wanted to command at no cost to himself; now he is ready to wager the dearest he has. From desiring to be an omnipotent necromancer, Faustus is reduced to a mere witch who enters a pact with the devil: “the Witches ar servantes onelie, and slaues to the Devil; but the Necromanciers are his maisters and commanders.”³²

Mephistopheles, who has read Faustus extremely well, masterfully plays the role he is assigned in the Christian universe: he brought himself down to a human level below what Faustus would like to see himself only to fire Faustus’s vanity. By doing so he gives Faustus the chance of feeling superior to the devil only to have him fall into his trap more readily. Even though Faustus may be blinded to it, it is clear that Mephistopheles only strives for one thing: “O, what will not I do to obtain his soul?” (*Faustus*, II.i.73). Since this is all he can desire, anything, including his grief, that might make Mephistopheles seem human is mere play-acting. The devils

³² James I, *Dæmonologie*, Bk 1, ch. 3 (9). However, Epistemon immediately qualifies the power of the necromancers who can only be the devil’s commanders “*secundum quid*: For it is not by anie power that they can haue over him, but *ex pacto* allanerlie: whereby he oblices himself in some trifles to them, that he may on the other part obtaine the fruition of their body & soule, which is the onlie thing he huntet for.”

do certainly have something corresponding to grief. [...] [T]he will of the devils is that many things should not be that are, and should be that are not; thus in their envy, they wish that those who are saved were damned. [...] But to grieve about the evil that is suffering, or about sin only because of the suffering it entails, this only as such implies the natural goodness that is impaired by suffering[.] [...] No devil, then, is grieved about the evil of sin as such, since his will is fixed in wickedness.³³

Both Faustus and Mephistopheles are caught in their own lonely minds that deprive them of the agency they crave.

VII-5 – Nothing Is But What Is Not

The moment when Faustus conjures up Mephistopheles is the beginning of a complex interaction between two characters who each firmly believe they have the power to impose their own will upon the other. In the light of Mephistopheles' subtle playing with Faustus's wishes and desires, combined with Faustus's surprising credulity in the initial encounter, the first round goes clearly to the devil. Undoubtedly, however, Faustus sees himself as the winner of this part of the contest, for he, too, believes himself to have come closer to his aim, which he repeatedly states before he enters the actual pact with Mephistopheles:

I'll be great emperor of the world
And make a bridge through the moving air
To pass the ocean with a band of men;
I'll join the hills that bind the Afric shore

³³ Aquinas, *Summa*, I, Q. 64, art. 3, "Do the Devils Suffer Pain?"; vol. 9 (293 & 295). Latin on page 385.

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And make that land continent to Spain,
And both contributory to my crown. [etc.]

(*Faustus*, I.iii.105-10)

It is largely by these insubstantial worlds that he creates within his mind with the help of his words that he convinces himself that he could have everything he desired using “Lines, circles, signs, letters, and characters” (*Faustus*, I.i.53). Very early on in the play, “swoll’n with cunning of a self-conceit” (*Faustus*, Prologue; 20), Faustus becomes intoxicated by the power and poetry of his own words. However, there is a danger in words that he does not recognise, although he himself gives expression to it:

Valdes, sweet Valdes, and Cornelius
Know that your words have won me at the last
To practise magic and concealèd arts.
Yet not your words only, but mine own fantasy,
That will receive no object, for my head
But ruminates on necromantic skill.

(*Faustus*, I.i.102-7)

Words take up his mental faculties to such an extent that he is completely unable to think of anything but magic and its rumoured benefits. For him, “function / Is smother’d in surmise” (*Mac*. I.iii.140f).

This inability to think clearly throws a dubious light on the logic of his reasoning. On the one hand, Faustus’s being completely taken up by magic explains why he rejects logic, medicine, law, and theology. It also explains the superficiality and selectivity of his reasoning, and the many mistakes he makes by imperfectly using the texts he bases his arguments on. Ironically, the first skill Faustus rejects is

logic, which he nevertheless keeps using as he goes on to reject the other fields of learning and to embrace magic. Indeed, logic is the very talent he would need to prevent himself from rejecting divinity and falling into the trap of necromancy again and again until the hour of his death. Because he is so taken up by this one fantasy, Faustus “fails to see how accurately his tendentious summaries reveal his blindness. [...] Faustus is the son who disinherits himself, the doctor who dies of his own physic, the subtle theologian deceived and damned by his own logic.” Indeed, “he ventures upon a subject of which he is woefully ignorant.”³⁴

All of this does not credit Faustus with the independence he aims to gain. In order to achieve his ambition of limitless power over a dominion that “Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man” (*Faustus*, I.i.63), Faustus needs help, guidance, and stimulation from minds other than his own. Though the worlds he himself creates in his mind enchant him, they are not enough for him. Instead of going beyond his limits himself, he is taken in by the visions and worlds others create for him, again with the help of the enthralling power of words. Valdes and Cornelius conjure up worlds that are not so different from the ones Faustus fantasises about:

As Indian Moors obey their Spanish lords,
So shall the subjects of every element
Be always serviceable to us three.
Like lions shall they guard us when we please, [etc.]

(*Faustus*, I.i.123-6)³⁵

³⁴ William Blackburn, “‘Heavenly Words:’ Marlowe’s Faustus as a Renaissance Magician.” *ESC* 4 (1978) 6f & 5.

³⁵ The fact that lions are to guard Faustus may contain a sinister allusion: “your aduerfarie the deuil as a roaring lyon walketh about, feking whome he may deuoure” (1 Peter 5:8). The lion may turn out to guard his prey rather than protect Faustus from harm.

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The Good Angel and the Bad Angel, as “externalizations of two tendencies within Faustus,”³⁶ also have their share in this. Faustus having visions of power, the advice of the Bad Angel carries the day:

Be thou on earth as Jove is in the sky,
Lord and commander of these elements.

Faustus: How am I glutted with conceit of this!

(*Faustus*, I.i.78-80)

The Good and the Bad Angel are more than just expressions of Faustus’s thoughts. They are similar to the external forces that spur him on, thereby increasing the momentum that drags him along on his path. At the same time, however, they are also Faustus’s mind at work, creating an alternative world to the world of the Christian religion he grew up in. He does not yet fully dare to rival God, but he certainly feels that he can be like Jove, the mythological Roman god. As Faustus still refuses to name God as the divinity he denies, he shuts his mind against the fact that what he might reject is indeed real. This allows him to create his own heroic world unto himself, in which he can choose his alliances as he lists, and in which he may be able to escape the punishment that awaits him in the reality of the God he discards.

The fact remains, however, that Faustus is passively pushed towards embracing magic before he actively chooses it as his own study: “’Tis magic, magic that hath ravished me” (I.i.112). The use of the word “ravished” suggests that Faustus was not in a position to choose: his own desires guided him to the abyss, and Mephistopheles is largely innocent in this. Faustus has not yet been tempted by the devil when he

³⁶ O’Brien, “Christian Belief in *Doctor Faustus*,” 6.

conjures for the first time, nor was it Mephistopheles who made him think of using magic:

The demons cannot put thoughts into our heads by causing them from within since the power of thought is subject to the will. However, the devil is called the kindler of thoughts in that he incites us to think, either by persuading us to desire the things we think of, or by arousing our emotions.³⁷

It is only after this that Mephistopheles tries his luck: “the devil tempts so as to find out about this interior state of a man in order that he may then tempt him to that vice to which he is more prone.”³⁸ This should not be too difficult if the sinner follows Satan’s hubris and craves total mastery of the world.

VII-6 – The Pact

As of the moment they agree upon the pact, both players give up the independence they had. Their destinies become entwined. Faustus needs Mephistopheles for the fulfilment of his desires. Indeed, Faustus will not be able to transform any single one of his thoughts into reality without Mephistopheles’ help. From being the slave to his passions, he also becomes the slave to Mephistopheles, although the pact he pens himself makes him believe that he has dominion over the spirit.

The attitude in the late sixteenth century towards the traditional pact with the devil was divided. Scientific explanations tried to reveal the vanity of it. Weyer was

³⁷ Aquinas, *Summa*, I, Q. 111, “How Angels Act on Men,” art. 2, “Can Angels Change Man’s Will?”; vol. 15 (25). Latin on page 386.

³⁸ Aquinas, *Summa*, I, Q. 114, “Demonic Attacks,” art. 2, “Is Tempting a Special Job of Demons?”; vol. 15 (79). Latin on page 386.

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ahead of his time in that he tried to attribute the belief in demonic possession to physiological, and even psychological, causes:

we can clearly recognize that the pact is illusory and that it is fabricated and confirmed by the deceptive appearance of a phantasm, or a fancy of the mind or the phantastical body of a blinding spirit; it is therefore of no weight. The deception occurs [...] when an apparition of Satan’s choice is cunningly imposed upon the optic or visual nerves by the disturbing of the appropriate humours and spirits[.]³⁹

Even Weyer still credits the ultimate reason for these disruptions to the devil. Reginald Scot concurs with the essence of this analysis, although he is far less scientific and precise in his endeavour to disprove the possibility of a bargain with the devil. His refutation is a mixture of learning, logic, and floccinaucinihilipilification:

But furelie the indentures, conteining those couenants, are fealed with butter; and the labels are but bables. What firme bargaine can be made betwixt a carnall bodie and a spirituall? Let any wise or honest man tell me, that either hath beene a partie, or a witneffe; and I will beleue him. But by what authoritie, profe, or testimonie; and vpon what ground all this geere standeth, if you read *M. Mal.* you shall find, to the shame of the reporters (who doo so varie in their tales, and are at such contrarietie:) and to the reproch of the beleeuers of such absurd lies.⁴⁰

³⁹ Weyer, *De præstigiis dæmonum*, Bk 3, ch. 3 (173).

⁴⁰ Scot, *Discoverie*, Bk III, ch. 4 (44f). Scot proves that “*there can no reall league be made with the diuell the first author of the league*” (Bk III, ch. 4 [title; 44]) in chapters four to six in Book III. He also launches himself into a “*confutation of the manifold vanities contened in the precedent chapters, speciallie of commanding of diuels,*” claiming that he “that can be perfluaded that these things are true [...] may soone be brought to beleue that the moone is made of greene cheefe” (Bk XV, ch. 5 [396]).

For many, though, the possibility of a pact with a devil was all too real. James I goes into great lengths to detail the “formes and effectes”⁴¹ of such contracts. In doing so, he largely repeats the procedures that can be found in Marlowe’s play, which may have influenced his conceptions. For this context, Perkins makes the most significant justification for the pact as it ties in with the inverted world that Faustus has created for himself:

The end why the Deuill feeketh to make a league with men, may be this; It is a point of his pollicy, not to be readie at euery mans command to doe for him what he would, except he be sure of his reward; and no other meanes will ferue his turne for taking affurance hereof, but this couenant. [...] As God therefore hath made a couenant with his people, fo Satan ioynes in league with the world, labouring to bind some men vnto him, that so if it were possible, he might drawe them from the couenant of God, and disgrace the same. Againe, as God hath his word and Sacraments, the seales of his couenant vnto beleeuers; fo the deuill hath his words and certaine outward signes to ratifie the same to his instruments[.]⁴²

Faustus’s pact with the devil is an absolute necessity for both Faustus and Mephistopheles. Since the use of magic cannot assure Mephistopheles’ services, the pact is the only kind of guarantee that Faustus can have to see his desires fulfilled. For Mephistopheles, it is the only means of pressure that he will be able to use in the long run to keep Faustus safely on the path towards damnation.

Faustus knows this. In the same way as he is not ready to abjure the name of God and replaces him by the term “Jove,” he does not deny the existence of his immortal soul. Significantly, he does not see himself able to protect it in his world.

⁴¹ James I, *Dæmonologie*, Bk 1, ch. 6 (19).

⁴² Perkins, *Witchcraft*, 45-7.

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Therefore he does not give it away lightly. Mephistopheles needs to make use of all the wit he can muster to make Faustus fall into line. First, he threatens Faustus with leaving him and denying him the fulfilment of his wishes. After threats follow promises of gratification:

But tell me, Faustus, shall I have thy soul?
And I will be thy slave, and wait on thee,
And give thee more than thou hast wit to ask.

(Faustus, II.i.45-7)

Faustus can be “as great as Lucifer” (*Faustus*, II.i.52). This is all too tempting to a man like Faustus, who wants to transcend his human limitations. However, it also points out Mephistopheles’ belief that Faustus is limited, not only physically, but in his mental faculties, too. There are more things in heaven and earth than Faustus can conceive in his philosophy. He always deludes himself: even if he could translate into reality whatever the mind of man can imagine, he would still be limited, as the mind of man feeds, and grows, and is limited by the scope and boundaries of man’s experiences.

Still, Mephistopheles cannot relent in his efforts to keep Faustus satisfied. As Faustus hesitates to sign the pact, the devil produces a show by which he intends “Nothing, Faustus, but to delight thy mind withal / And to show thee what magic can perform” (*Faustus*, II.i.84f). Faustus is drawn into the world Mephistopheles stages for him, but what Mephistopheles produces is indeed a mere show, designed to divert Faustus’s thoughts from serious problems, and from a falling back to the succour of his God. Delight is all that is offered, a sensation that profits no one but Faustus, and only for a short time. All it produces is the desire for more delight or, failing that, ever increasing dissatisfaction. It is a vicious circle that will ensnare

Faustus beyond redemption. What Mephistopheles offers Faustus is nothing more than being able to become a performer of shows with the help of his demon.

When Faustus does at last hand the deed of gift over, giving his soul for twenty-four years of Mephistopheles' services, he does not gain any power himself. As a matter of fact, throughout the rest of the play, the first clause of the pact—"That Faustus may be a spirit in form and substance" (*Faustus*, II.i.97)—does not seem to have any effect on Faustus's powers and abilities. It does not take very long before the limitations of the power of hell become apparent. Not only is Mephistopheles unable to transform Faustus into a spirit, investing him with the powers that come with being a spirit. He is also unable, or unwilling, to fulfil Faustus's wishes. When Faustus asks for a wife, for instance, all he gets is "*a Devil dressed like a woman*" (*Faustus*, II.i.146; s.d.), whom he immediately recognises as being nothing but "*a hot whore*" (*Faustus*, II.i.148).

For Mephistopheles it is imperative that Faustus never act upon the realisation of these limitations, that he sign the deed of gift and never question it afterwards. It is the key trick that makes Faustus believe that, no matter what he does, and no matter which way he turns, he is damned beyond redemption. It works on Faustus's mind even as he is about to sign the pact: "'*Homo, fuge!*' Whither should I fly? / If unto God, he'll throw thee down to hell" (*Faustus*, II.i.77f). Later, it is the most efficacious tool because it allows Mephistopheles to confront Faustus with a tangible proof, set down on paper, in black, blood and white, of what he has offered and committed himself to. Furthermore, it carries all the more weight because it is Faustus himself who words the pact in its entirety, both the devil's obligations as well as his own. This time, the words that he uses as a basis for the fulfilment of all his wishes trap his mind and will lead him to his end in damnation.

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In all of this it does not actually matter whether the contract is actually binding or not. The important thing is that Faustus believes in its validity. Mephistopheles, servant to the father of lies, knows that there is hardly any sin that cannot be forgiven: “Wherefore I say vnto you, euerie sinne and blasphemie shalbe forgiuen vnto men: but the blasphemie *againft* the holie Gofit shal not be forgiuen vnto men” (Matt. 12:31).⁴³ Faustus may have had “desp’rate thoughts against Jove’s deity” (*Faustus*, I.iii.90) and “hazarded” (*Faustus*, II.i.33) his soul for Mephistopheles. He may also have committed a heinous sin by entering a pact with the devil. But he has not blasphemed the Holy Ghost. Since Mephistopheles knows this, along with the fact that Faustus may slip through his fingers the moment he truly decides to repent, accepting all the consequences this entails, the spirit finds himself in the unenviable situation of having to make Faustus stay in line for twenty-four years, fulfilling the terms of the pact (in earnest or in show), or serving Faustus in order to control him.

The pact is vain in the sense that the devil never intends to keep the terms that refer to his obligations. On the other hand, it is highly useful in keeping Faustus from falling away from the devil, since there is no way for him to know for sure whether the bargain is enforceable or not. As a result, Faustus is led to believe that he is in a situation in which “for him it is simultaneously never too late, and always already too late, to repent.”⁴⁴ This unsettling paradox will even further disrupt his ability for clear thought, blinding him to his true potential, and eventually undoing him.

⁴³ Compare Mark 3:28f and Luke 12:10. See also *Cenodoxus* (1600) by Jakob Bidermann (1578-1639). Is Cenodoxus eventually damned because he repented too late, or because Christ realises that Cenodoxus’ change of heart is not genuine?

⁴⁴ Luke Wilson, *Theaters of Intention: Drama and the Law in Early Modern England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2000) 203.

VII-7 – The End of Desire

If Faustus really had “obtained what I desire” (*Faustus*, I.iii.113), the play would end even before a pact with Mephistopheles is struck. Having one’s wishes fulfilled can only be the beginning of the action.

Yet, Faustus never acts himself to translate any of the positive visions he might have into reality. He is certainly driven by the sinful craving for personal glorification, yet it is always Mephistopheles who acts for Faustus upon Faustus’s instigation. The moment he contracts Mephistopheles to himself, he starts relying so much on the demon to do things for him that he seems unable to perform anything by himself at all. This is why he cannot free himself from the influence of the devil. Although Mephistopheles and Lucifer present Faustus with books to “Bring whirlwinds, tempests, thunder, and lightning” (*Faustus*, II.i.160), or to enable him to “turn thyself into what shape thou wilt” (*Faustus*, II.iii.163), Faustus is never seen performing wonders of his own. He may be playing pranks at the Pope’s feast, but it was Mephistopheles who made him invisible by “*placing a robe on Faustus*” (*Faustus*, III.i.58; s.d.). When Faustus wanted “to see the monuments / And situation of bright splendid Rome” (*Faustus*, III.i.47f), it was Mephistopheles who urged Faustus to stay to “see a troupe of bald-pate friars / Whose *summum bonum* is in belly cheer” (*Faustus*, III.i.52f). As the scene degenerates, Faustus and Mephistopheles “*beat the Friars, and fling fireworks among them*” (*Faustus*, III.i.99; s.d.). As both come to resemble the devils of the Morality plays that drive the sinners away to hell, Faustus reaches the lowest point in his career, being no better than a lowly vice. While Faustus has a semblance of agency, he actually comes to help the devil perform his work.

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A similar ambiguity pervades the scenes at the courts of the Emperor and of the Duke of Vanholt. Faustus finds himself in a position of subservience to the princes, and of dependence on Mephistopheles, who produces devils that “lively resemble Alexander and his paramour” (*Faustus*, IV.i.48f) and inspiritate Helen, who is the “swift spirit” (*Faustus*, IV.ii.23) that fetches the grapes for the Duchess of Vanholt, and who transforms the disbelieving knight, making him wear horns and taking them away again. Faustus may be famous, and none in the land “can compare with [him] for the rare effects of magic” (*Faustus*, IV.i.3f), but he is not free to produce what he wants, nor is it he who produces it. He is presented rather like a servant to the whims of others, spirit or human. Even his craving for Helen does not stem from his own imagination, but from a request of the Scholars. It is their wish that creates a new desire in Faustus, and it arises only after Faustus feels the need to deaden his powers of reflection and repentance once more. To the outside world it may seem that it is Faustus’s “art” (*Faustus*, IV.i.41) that is at the root of his feats. However, he himself knows that it is the “power of my spirit” (*Faustus*, IV.i.41)—a cunningly ambiguous phrase that allows Faustus to make people believe in his agency—that performs everything.

Faustus turns out to be too limited in his philosophy to produce good with the power that he bound unto himself. He is not only too weak to control the spirit that he chose, but even too weak to impose his will on other people. Instead of becoming the creator of his own alternative reality, he becomes a character in a play that is written by others.

VII-8 – The School of Abuse

It is pleasure that has kept Faustus from repenting. For a long while it seems to have been enough to have “made blind Homer sing to [him]” (*Faustus*, II.iii.26), even though it was but an ephemeral delight, enacted before him by unreal spirits only. As Faustus comes to realise that this kind of gratification is a stumbling block on the way to salvation, he turns his thoughts to heaven. Yet, tellingly, the only thing he regrets is being “deprived [...] of those *joys*” (*Faustus*, II.iii.3; italics added) that can be found in heaven. True to his hedonism, which blinds him to the greater rewards that can be had from heaven, it is the thought of pleasure that prompts his resolve: “Faustus shall ne’er repent” (*Faustus*, II.iii.32). The thought is locked by the remembrance that “Thou art a spirit” (*Faustus*, II.iii.13) whose will is fixed. Even though it was not enacted, the first clause of the pact, which was to liberate Faustus from his human limitations, now actually turns against him, preventing him from shaking off Lucifer’s shackles. Faustus is easily trapped by the negative thoughts, while work for the good never manages to get a hold on him when his ruminations revolve around himself only.

There is only one chance for Faustus to regain his true human dignity and worth: renouncing his hedonistic and egocentric self. Only when he puts Christ in the centre of the world—“Ah, Christ, my Saviour, / Seek to save distressed Faustus’ soul!” (*Faustus*, II.iii.81f) and “Think, Faustus, upon God, that made the world.” (*Faustus*, II.iii.72)—can his existence actually gain some kind of meaning. The one time when Faustus comes close to turning his back on Mephistopheles, who has totally dissatisfied him, Mephistopheles needs Lucifer to put on a great show to

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placate Faustus. What follows is the culmination of the inversion that has pervaded so much of the play.

First of all, Lucifer sets himself up as the party wronged by Faustus:

We come to tell thee thou dost injure us.
Thou talk'st of Christ, contrary to thy promise.
Thou shouldst not think of God. Think of the devil,
And of his dame, too.

(*Faustus*, II.iii.89-92)⁴⁵

When Faustus “vows never to look to heaven” (*Faustus*, II.iii.94), Lucifer promises to gratify him with some mere “pastime” (*Faustus*, II.iii.99). Distraction, possibly linked to relief that Lucifer turns out to be so condescending and forgiving, almost like Christ, is everything Faustus needs to be happy: “this feeds my soul!” (*Faustus*, II.iii.157). The ensuing pageant of the Seven Deadly Sins is a prime example of how theatre manipulates the audience and corrupts the moral values it should instil. Faustus knows, but ignores on purpose, the fact that the playwright and actors that produce the show for him are highly dangerous and do certainly not have his best interests in mind. Ironically, Faustus is won back into his allegiance with hell by figures that embody everything that hell stands for and that would have been used in the earlier Morality tradition to reinforce the people’s trust in God’s covenant. It also shows the devil’s absolute mastery in matters of manipulation as he reinterprets the Deadly Sins. As Lucifer presents Faustus with a reflection of some of his own faults, Faustus fails to see his own image. In this way, theatre becomes devilish:

⁴⁵ The B-Text clearly reveals the inversion of roles when Lucifer tells Faustus: “So shalt thou show thyself an obedient servant, and we will highly gratify thee for it” (*Faustus*, B-Text, II.iii.96f).

The Carpenter rayfeth not his frame without tooles, nor the Deuill his woork without instrumentes: were not Players the meane, to make thefe affemblyes, fuch multitudes wold hardly be drawne in fo narowe roome. They feeke not to hurte, but defire too pleafe: they haue purged their Comedyes of wanton ſpeeches, yet the Corne whiche they fell, is full of Cockle: and the drinke that they drawe, ouercharged with dregges. There is more in them then we perceiue, the Deuill ſtandes at our elbowe when we fee not, ſpeaks when we heare him not, ſtrikes when wee feele not, and woundeth fore when he rafeth no ſkinne, nor rentes the fleſhe. In thoſe thinges, that we leaſt miſtruſt, the greateſt daunger dooth often lurke.⁴⁶

Faustus falls indeed victim to the danger that Stephen Gosson (1554-1624) warns of in *The Schoole of Abuse* (1579): he is blinded by show and spectacle. His emotions are gratified and eclipse all his faculties of rational thought. The magician who aspired to create his own world is undone by Lucifer’s play.

At the end of the day all these shows and achievements are mere trumpery. Yet, Faustus is far gone in the reality of the inverted world of Mephistopheles’ play, in which it is “unjust presumption” (*Faustus*, V.i.70) to rebel against the devil, the “sovereign lord” (*Faustus*, V.i.67), whom one should honour with an “unfeigned heart” (*Faustus*, V.i.73). In this world that offers no lasting positive perspective for Faustus, he always fails to apply to himself the statements and experiences that would profit him most. When Faustus asks Mephistopheles to torment the Old Man “With greatest torments that *our* hell affords” (*Faustus*, V.i.77; italics added), he identifies with the forces of darkness to such an extent that he never believes Mephistopheles’ statement “His faith is great. I cannot touch his soul” (*Faustus*, V.i.78) to be true for himself as well. Pride and presumption caused the devil’s fall;

⁴⁶ Stephen Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse* (London: Thomas VVoodcocke, 1579) 19^v; sig. 3^v.

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presumption would cause another fall, namely Faustus’s falling away from Lucifer into the hands of God. It is this kind of inverted presumption that Faustus lacks.

VII-9 – The Fall of Man

But Faustus does not only fall prey to Mephistopheles. All the devil’s efforts would be in vain if Faustus did not act himself to engineer his damnation. The devil may to a certain extent oversee the play that has Faustus as a star, but within his own mind, Faustus creates another play for himself, appropriating roles of people that have made a lasting impression on his mind. It certainly reflects on his inflated sense of self-esteem that one of these people is Christ Jesus himself.

When Faustus has finished writing the deed of gift, he uses Christ’s last words on the cross according to John: “*Consummatum est*” (*Faustus*, II.i.74)—“It is finished” (John 19:30). Yet,

whatever identity Faustus can thereby achieve is limited to the status of brilliant parody. His blasphemy is the uncanny expression of a perverse, despairing faith, an appropriation to himself of the most solemn and momentous words available in his culture to mark the decisive boundary in his life, an ambiguous equation of himself with Christ, first as God, then as dying man.⁴⁷

Yet, the implications of Faustus’s taking on such a role go further than that, without Faustus being aware of it. In the same way as Christ enacts the part that was laid

⁴⁷ Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 214.

down for him in the Old Testament and bows his will to the will of the Father,⁴⁸ Faustus, too, comes to take on a role that was written for him by someone else. In the logic of Faustus's assuming the part of Christ, this someone else must be God himself. This would feed into the Calvinist theory of double predestination: Faustus cannot be damned, no matter what he does, if he is one of God's elect; and if he is not, it does not matter what he does, since nothing will secure him salvation. God writes the lives of all men and women living on earth, whether they realise it or not. While Greenblatt allows for Faustus to have a certain amount of control over his fate and the shaping of his identity, if only by allowing him to choose the figure he wants to model his identity on, the parallel with Christ, taken to extremes, robs Faustus even of the semblance of free agency. Christ might have had a choice on Mount Olive—a choice which he never seriously considered making as he was fully aware of, and committed to, his duty and responsibility towards God and mankind—whereas Faustus, in his position as a mere imitator, can never escape from his role. In this scenario, everything Faustus says and does has been set down for him from time immemorial, and there is nothing he can do to avert his fate. At the end of the day, whether one is aware of this or not, whether one actively tries to shape one's life or merely trots along the path prescribed by fate, does not make a difference to the eventual outcome of one's life and afterlife.

However, there can be no certainty for Faustus about whether *Faustus* has been written by God or not. God is never staged in the play, and his voice is never heard

⁴⁸ Referring to Psalm 96:22, John writes: "After, when Iesus knewe that all things were *performed*, that ye Scripture might be fulfilled, he said, I thirft" (John 19:28; italics added). Jesus is indeed not free to act as he wants: "Father, if thou wilt, take away this cup from me: neuertheles, not my wil, but thine be done" (Luke 22:42; compare Matt. 26:39).

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except through the filter of the characters on stage.⁴⁹ Whatever Faustus believes with regard to hell derives from theology, his own learning and beliefs, popular legend, and Mephistopheles’ statements. Whatever Faustus believes with regard to God derives from theology, his own learning and beliefs, popular legend, and the statements of the devils he meets, but it lacks the external authority of God. Whether Faustus considers God wrathful or merciful does not matter. He refuses to consider seriously the thought that he might not be free to choose his own path. This is the reason why he does not limit himself to seeing himself like a second Christ figure.⁵⁰

The comparison is not taken up *expressis verbis* again, so it is not clear whether Faustus actively desired the equation, or whether it was an unconscious quotation from Scripture, prompted by his former studies. If he did actively aim to parody Christ, he would indeed also take on the role of Lucifer, who desired to become like God, and who fell for his pride and presumption. This would again deny him the agency that he so much craves. Besides, in the play he never dares to rival Lucifer, whom he always acknowledges as superior and lord. Ironically, though, if Faustus gave himself up, as Christ did, and accepted a subservient position within the healing bounds of society, he would probably set himself free to become more of a man than he achieves to be.

Faustus, then, is neither Christ nor Lucifer. He takes on so many roles in the course of the play that there is none he can play to perfection. Nor is that what he wants, since it would mean limiting himself to the pattern someone else has already set. At the end of the day, Faustus does not know what he really wants. Being a

⁴⁹ “God is a force never much exerted in a contest where even his inaction is overpowering. Yet though doctrine seems to give the game to God before it begins, dramatic action almost leaves him out of it.” West, “Impatient Magic,” 219.

⁵⁰ Besides, not even enacting Christ’s role would satisfy Faustus in the long run: he is too undetermined about what he wants and, at any rate, would soon be bored by being limited to one role only.

“mighty god” (*Faustus*, I.i.64) sounds attractive. So does being as rich as Croesus, knowledgeable as Solomon, or mighty as Alexander the Great. On the other hand, being a great conjuror, renowned throughout Europe and welcome at the courts of the high and mighty, might also be tempting, as would be taking on the part of Paris as warrior and lover. Faustus’s “archetypal act of role-taking”⁵¹ sets him apart from the commoners that appear in the play. Robin and Rafe automatically accept the parts that are assigned to them, be it their roles in real life as clownish figures and laughable rogues in society, or the hides they are forced to live in by Mephistopheles: dog or ape, they are both sure that they will have “fine sport” (*Faustus*, III.ii.40) whatever they are.

While Faustus is conscious about his role-taking, he is neither the happier nor the more independent for it. By appropriating role after role—or rather, by continuously alluding to, taking on, and subsequently discarding one role for another—Faustus seeks to enlarge his destiny. What he effectually achieves, though, is a limitation. He can only use his imagination to adapt the roles of people he has studied for his own situation. Naturally enough, they prove dissatisfying, and instead of managing to write his own role, he is being written by the roles he has chosen because he needs to twist and turn to stretch the boundaries that come with his knowledge of the characters. Faustus never manages to free himself from the weight of the past he has acquired through learning, and to define himself detached from other personalities. He always identifies himself in comparison to the society that he lives in. Indeed, the one role he never thinks of enacting consciously and wholeheartedly is the part of what he could be himself as a useful individual within society. Faustus’s character is highly paradoxical in that, on the one hand, he defines

⁵¹ Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 214.

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himself too closely with regard to larger than life figures, which he finds wanting for his purposes, while, on the other hand, he dissociates himself from what would be meaningful grounds for comparison. Only within the bounds of society would he find the potential to become what might offer him a hint of satisfaction. Faustus, lacking faith and patience, is a bit like the devil who “desired that to which he would eventually have come had he curbed his desire.”⁵² Within the play, then, it is neither God, nor Lucifer who write Faustus. It is Faustus himself who attempts to write a proper part for himself. Testing many, he is unable to find the one that would be tailor-made for him, precisely because they were tailor-made for others. Ironically, however, the actor of Faustus plays the very role that has been made to measure for the real / fictitious character “Faustus” as written by Christopher Marlowe. The Faustus that cannot find a role that would fit him and that would allow him to make his existence meaningful perfectly embodies the type of the Renaissance man that searches for new stabilities in the light of the old ones that are failing. While the character Faustus is fated to keep looking and failing in the process, the role “Faustus” is as accurate as Marlowe could make it.

Faustus is totally dissociated from his self: he does not know what he is, and he ends up not knowing what he wants. Mephistopheles, on the other hand, is always at one with himself, whatever he does, be it lure Faustus, serve him, or threaten him. He always aims for the one goal that governs his entire existence: laying hands on Faustus’s soul. Small wonder that it is easy for the devil to beguile Faustus, who is most at one with himself in his desire for knowledge, but who has been trapped, because of this desire, by one who will never be able to fulfil his desire. In his

⁵² Aquinas, *Summa*, I, Q. 63, “Sin in the Angels,” art. 3, “Did the Devil Desire to Be as God?”; vol. 9 (259). Latin on page 384.

uncertainty about himself, Faustus has undoubtedly chosen his allegiances wrongly. It is ironic that this split in Faustus's identity should be mirrored by the fact that two texts have been transmitted that enact a similar split nature. In all likelihood, neither of the texts is the one that Marlowe wrote, nor is the text Marlowe wrote necessarily the one that was enacted on the Elizabethan stage. The fact, however, that "*Doctor Faustus*, exists in *two* versions and is so plagued by textual problems as to threaten the concept of authorship altogether"⁵³ reflects Faustus's predicament: he does not know what to do to seal the rift in his character and find his one true self that can live within society and prevent doom. In this way, the play also reflects the age in which it was written: people in Early Modern England were trying to carve out a new place for themselves, tentatively freeing themselves from higher (spiritual and worldly) forces, yet still being unable to do so because they only knew what they were running away from, not what they were heading for.

At the end of the play, Faustus is completely left alone. Mephistopheles deserts him after Act V, Scene i, having done everything necessary to lock Faustus's mind firmly on the path of calamity. In Scene ii, he interacts with the Scholars, one of whom points exactly towards what would have prevented Faustus from travelling the lonely road towards despair: "Belike he is grown into some sickness by being over-solitary" (*Faustus*, V.ii.7f). Society and company might have exerted their healing powers early on in Faustus's course. Now, his mind is set: "Faustus' offence can ne'er be pardoned" (*Faustus*, V.ii.14), so he plays the role of the despairing overreacher admirably as he exposes his deeds to his horrified audience:

⁵³ Patrick Cheney, *Marlowe's Counterfeit Profession: Ovid, Spenser, Counter-Nationhood* (Toronto, Ontario: U of Toronto P, 1997) 13. Compare Keefer, *1604-Version*, xvi-xxii.

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Ah, my God, I would weep, but the devil draws in my tears. Gush forth blood instead of tears, yea, life and soul. O, he stays my tongue! I would lift up my hands, but see, they hold them, they hold them.

All: Who, Faustus?

Faustus: Lucifer and Mephistopheles. Ah, gentlemen! I gave them my soul for my cunning.

All: God forbid!

Faustus: God forbade indeed, but Faustus hath done it.

[...]

Second Scholar: O, what shall we do to save Faustus?

Faustus: Talk not of me, but save yourselves and depart.

Third Scholar: God will strengthen me. I will stay with Faustus.

First Scholar [to the Third Scholar]: Tempt not God, sweet friend, but let us into the next room and there pray for him.

(*Faustus*, V.ii.27-35 & 45-9)

Faustus is indeed so convincing that he drives away what few friends he might have left, and it might be gratifying to him that he comes to resemble Christ deserted by all his disciples. Whereas in previous instances of inversion, it is the devil who comes to parody God blasphemously, it is fitting that that it should be Faustus at this point. After Mephistopheles has left the stage, there is none other left to take on this role. In this respect, Sinfield is too sympathetic towards Faustus when attributes to him “a morality provocatively superior to God’s.”⁵⁴ He sees Faustus’s plea to the scholars to depart as an act of altruism towards the dangers his colleagues would run when facing an unforgiving Reformation god who sends his minion, the devil, to collect a sinner in anticipation of the pre-ordained and just punishment. Such philanthropic consideration for the well-being of others is out of character for Faustus, who can always only see himself and bewail his own shortcomings. There

⁵⁴ Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1992) 237.

is no reason why he should have learnt to think of others first at this point. On the contrary, he sends his companions away the better to act out the martyrial role that he has chosen for himself. Whereas this spells the doom for Faustus, it is a marked step for mankind towards becoming more self-conscious, freeing itself from the shackles of the spiritual world. Faustus makes sure his loneliness in the final soliloquy is absolute. Society, however, is not completely ready to stand by those daring enough to transcend old concepts: neither scholar makes too much of an effort to support Faustus.⁵⁵

At the end, Faustus falls prey to his own words and traps himself in the scene that he and Mephistopheles have set in the past twenty-four years. The belief in that world has come to be so strong that, twist and turn as he might, he cannot find a way out. Words will not serve any more. There is no need any more for the devil to oversee his work of destruction. Faustus's own limitations are enough to secure this.⁵⁶ Whether accompanied by the devil, or overtaken by him at the end of one's life, challenging one's limitations is presented to be a dangerous game to play. Living within the rules is easy; living without the rules will inevitably lead to dreadful ends. Achieving one's desire at the very moment of conceiving it is ultimately unsatisfying. Only natural growth gives satisfaction, while effortlessness leaves only emptiness behind. *Hamlet's* Polonius might be a babbling fool, but his parting advice to Laertes is sound: "This above all: to thine own self be true" (*Ham.* I.iii.78). Even if Faustus had known about it, he would probably not have

⁵⁵ Compare Alexander VI's last moments in Chapter VIII-7.

⁵⁶ See the early *Basilusvita* for an example of having one's cake and eating it: the servant Pretorius enters a pact with the devil to win the love of his master's daughter. When his illicit pact is discovered because of his exclusion from the Christian community, this very community rallies to cheat the devil of his prize and reunite Pretorius both with his wife and the community. However, the victory is not easy and sacrifices are demanded. Marlowe's Faustus does not have the power for this.

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listened. The trouble with him is that he never found out what his own self was. The play also reveals that such issues are not for commoners for whom it appears to be much easier to be true to their selves. Indeed, most people are simple happy when they can lead their daily lives in relative happiness and comfort, without being bothered with deep questions of state and morality. Leading an easy, unthoughtful life might truly be the most devilish temptation of all.

From the start Faustus did not know better than to invert the world order he grew up in, without substituting it with a new one. As Lucifer takes the place of God, Faustus merely corrupts everything he touches without creating a new *modus vivendi* that might or might not revolve around him, but that is not limited to him. Vying for power, trying to put man above the devil, Faustus is bound to lose because he puts himself and himself alone in the centre without creating a meaningful community that embraces other people. It is this which would be necessary to build a new world. In this way, Faustus also reflects the society of the waning sixteenth century: while it is looking for a way to solve the many problems that beset it, it is not yet ready to propose a solution, given the inflexible political and religious circumstances of the time.

Meine Seele ist nur aus einem einzigen Grund nicht zu verkaufen
... die Summe ist mir noch zu niedrig.

Andreas Kurz, *Nachtfalke*

VIII – The Devil’s Charter

While *Doctor Faustus* raises questions that touch the core of human nature and man’s relationship with the divine, Barnabe Barnes’s *The Devil’s Charter* takes the spectator right into the world of the theatre of blood. Out of the more than fifty *dramatis personæ*, seventeen meet their untimely end either on or off stage. There is stabbing, shooting, drowning, and poisoning; there is viricide, fratricide, filicide, and all manner of other treacherous and ruthless assassinations. The staging is equally luscious, culminating in Alexander VI’s pact with Astaroth and the repeated appearances of devils, conjured by the Pope with never a doubt to his absolute mastery until he loses his power over them out of the blue in the *scæna ultima*.

Faustus tries to create a world of his own, though he is not clear about what he would do if he succeeded. Alexander VI, on the other hand, has no doubt whatsoever in his mind about what to accomplish: he strives for unrivalled mastery in the world and does not shy away from using any licit and illicit secular and spiritual means at his disposal to reach his aim. Like Faustus, the Pope wishes to create his own world, one where the Borgia dynasty reigns supreme. While Faustus is the dreamer

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detached from reality, Alexander is firmly rooted in the matters of the world the old structures of which he needs to destroy in order to replace them by an edifice that suits his unholy aspirations. By presenting this struggle, *The Devil's Charter* offers an insight into the workings and machinations of power politics in general, and into the atmosphere of the time immediately after the Gunpowder Plot in particular. To a certain extent, Alexander is also a projection of his author, Barnabe Barnes himself. Truly Machiavellian, but not born under an auspicious star, Barnes was always ready to use whatever means came into his hands to improve his social position that did not meet his ambition. After all, as the son of a bishop of Durham he was a gentleman by birth and felt he should have made his way in the world more successfully than he actually did. A low point in his career came in 1598, when Barnes clumsily tried, and miserably failed, to poison John Browne, an enemy of Lord Eure, warden of the Middle Marches.¹ There are more similarities between author and character than might be comfortable, not least in their application of the doctrine expounded in Machiavelli's *Il Principe* (1513; pub. 1532), of which Barnes owned a copy.²

¹ See Madeleine Hope Dodds, “Barnabe Barnes of Durham: Poet and Playwright,” *Pubs. of the Soc. of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne* 4th ser. 24 (1946) 28-34; Mark Eccles, “Barnabe Barnes,” *Thomas Lodge and Other Elizabethans*, ed. Charles J. Sisson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1933) 175-210.

² Bawcutt, N. W. “Barnabe Barnes's Ownership of Machiavelli's *Discorsi*.” *N&Q* 227 (1982) 411. In what follows, the term “Machiavellian” is used anachronistically. Machiavelli uses Alexander VI as an example for his theories, so his behaviour, which should by rights be termed “Alexandrian,” is Machiavellian before its time.

VIII-1 – The Whore of Babylon

The Devil’s Charter presents itself as a traditional chronicle of the unspeakable atrocities that a corrupt and worldly church is guilty of. From the outset Roderigo Borgia is shown as boundlessly ambitious.

A dumb show illustrates the course of Borgia’s accession to the Papal See. He enters “betwixt two other Cardinals [...] one of which hee guideth to a Tent, where a Table is furnished with diuers bagges of money, which that Cardinall beareth away” (*Charter*, Prologue; 29-32). Bribing could easily have made him Pope. However, Borgia lacks an important Machiavellian virtue: patience. He cannot wait for the right opportunity to turn the favour of the moment to his fullest advantage. Instead, he readily takes the first shortcut to the Papacy that presents itself to him in the shape of “a Moncke with a magical booke and rod” (*Charter*, Prologue; 35f).³ Faustus had the help of Valdes and Cornelius to guide him on the way to necromancy, but at least he made himself believe that he summoned the devil with his own powers acquired through learning. Borgia, on the other hand, has magic performed for him. In his striving for worldly power, selling a soul is just as harmless a step to take as any other that serves to bring him closer to his aim. On the face of it, he could have achieved his ends equally well without supernatural intervention, especially since he is not animated by a craving desire to trespass against God’s divine law and rival him. The world is enough for him.

At this point, the consequences of the act do not matter for either Barnes or Borgia: there is no drama of the soul. While the congealing of Faustus’s blood points to the divine power that offers his conscience the possibility to rethink his actions,

³ See Mephistopheles’ guise on page 213.

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Borgia is in no need to pause since he has no such qualms whatsoever. Although he is frightened by the “diuill in most vgly shape” (*Charter*, Prologue; 40), “hee willingly receiueth” (*Charter*, Prologue; 48) the same fiend in the form of a “pronotary” (*Charter*, Prologue; 46).⁴ The possibility of attaining power blinds him to all consequences of his actions, and his conscience never even pricks him in the least:

to whome hee [the devil] deliuereth the wryting, which seeming to reade, presently the Pronotary strippeth vp *Alexanders* sleeue and letteth his arme bloud in a saucer, and hauing taken a peece from the Pronotary, subscribeth to the parchment; deliuereth it: the remainder of the bloud, the other diuill seemeth to suppe vp.

(*Charter*, Prologue; 49-53)

By the stage direction “seeming to reade,” the reading experience of the play gains an extra dimension that is not present in performance. It throws doubt on how thoroughly Borgia really studies the covenant. He might be detained from reading properly because he is naïve, or because of his arrogance and hubris. At the same time, the devil might already be at work, blinding Borgia to the obvious. Still, Roderigo Borgia is made Pope Alexander VI, effortlessly and eagerly. Even the power of magical conjuration comes to him as an unasked for gift: “from him [the devil] disroabed is put the rich Cap the Tunicle, and the triple Crowne set vpon

⁴ Jacqueline E. M. Latham comments on the three appearances of the devil in the dumb show: “The nature of evil is defined through the three forms taken by the devil: in his first manifestation, ugliness represents evil as it is; next death, the sergeant with a mace, shows the end to which evil will bring man; finally the devil dressed as pope is the personification to the Jacobean audience of the hypocrisy of evil. ... [T]he papacy is the incarnation of the devil.” “Machiavelli, Policy, and *The Devil’s Charter*,” *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 1 (1984) 100. For the shape of his first apparition, see Scot’s description on page 26.

Alexanders head, the Crosse-keys deliuered into his hands; and withall a magicall booke” (*Charter*, Prologue; 53-6).

By accepting the vestments of the Papacy bestowed by a devil, Alexander takes on the characteristics of Satan himself. He becomes a devil disguised as an ecclesiastical figure, a practice that was first seen on the English stage in *The Temptation of Our Lord* (1538) by John Bale (1495-1563), in which the Pope is in league with Satan as well.⁵ The show by which this is performed here is impressive: there is ample “thunder and lightning” (*Charter*, Prologue; 56f), but the character behind it seems hollow. It is evident that there is no hope for Alexander, especially since his seat is in Rome, “the Strumpet of proud *Babylon*” (*Charter*, Prologue; 8). The commentator to the 1602 edition of the Geneva Bible unequivocally identifies the Babylon in Rev. 17:3-5 with the “harlot, the spiritual Babylon, which is Rome. She is described by her attire, profefsion, and deeds.”⁶ From this point of view, Rome, being the heart of the Catholic Church, was utterly corrupted by the devil, the antichrist, who reigned supremely within its walls and blinded many. The Romish Pope is further equated with Antichrist through the libels of the two gentlemen. Abusing the initials of Alexander’s name and title, “*Alexander, Sextus, Pontifex, Maximus*” (*Charter*, I.iii; 243), they attribute to him the qualities of “*Auaritia, Superbia, Perfidia, Malitia*” (*Charter*, I.iii; 242): avarice, pride, faithlessness or treachery, and malice. However, they do not stop there: “*M.P.S.A.* These are the same letters with the first beginning at the last, *Magnum Petrum Sequitur Antichristus. Phy Diabolo*, our blessed *Alexander* (beeing *Saint Peeters* successor) this diuilish libeller calls *Antichrist*” (*Charter*, I.iii; 246-9). It is not the drama of the

⁵ John D. Cox, “Stage Devils in English Reformation Plays,” *CD 32* (1998) 88.

⁶ Rev. 17:4 annotation 4. *The Geneva Bible: The Annotated New Testament, 1602 Edition*. Ed. Gerald T. Sheppard. Pilgrim Classic Commentaries 1. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim P, 1989. The commentary to the 1602 edition has been greatly expanded from 1560.

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fight for Alexander’s soul that Barnes stages, but the corruption of the Papist church as a tool in Alexander’s attempt to create a world in which he reigns sole master.

VIII-2 – Conscience Cauterised

Barnes does not completely disown Alexander of an inner life. Sitting amongst his books and money, with the papal crown reassuringly displayed in front of him, the Pope muses:

With what expence of money plate and iewels
This Miter is attayn’d my Coffers witnessse:
But *Astaroth* my couenant with thee
Made for this soule more pretious then all treasure,
Afflicts my conscience, O but *Alexander*
Thy conscience is no conscience; if a conscience,
It is a leoprouse and poluted conscience.
But what? a coward for thy conscience?
The diuill is witnessse with me when I seald it
And cauteriz’d this conscience now seard vp
To banish out faith, hope and charity;
Vsing the name of Christian as a stale
For *Arcane* plots and intricate designes
That all my misty machinations
And Counsels held with black *Tartarian* fiends
Were for the glorious sunne-shine of my sonnes[.]

(*Charter*, I.iv; 327-42)

While the opening lines confirm what the audience already knows about Alexander’s past career, his reference to his conscience comes as a surprise after his apparent readiness to enter the pact. Still, this reference is so fleeting and superficial that one gets the impression that Barnes only put it in as a tribute to James I, whose

Βασιλικὸν δῶρον had spoken in almost exactly the same words about conscience, and which had been reissued in London in 1603.

For James I, a conscience is “the conferuer of Religion,”⁷ and the love of God is the basis for good governance.⁸

Aboue all them, my Sonne, labour to keepe found this conscience, which many prattle of, but ouer few feele: especiallie be carefull to keepe it free from two difeases, wherewith it vseth oft to be infected; to wit, Leaprofie, and Superfition; the former is the mother of Atheifme, the other of Heresies. By a lea proufe conscience, I meane *a cauterized conscience*, as *Paul* calleth it, being become senselesse of sinne, through sleeping in a carelesse securitie [...]. And by superstition, I meane, when one restraines himselfe to any other rule in the seruice of God, then is warranted by the word, the onely trew square of Gods seruice.⁹

If the effect that the contract with the devil has upon the Pope is anything like the one James I describes, if his conscience is indeed deadened and rendered insensible, then there is no way in which Alexander could set up a wholesome governance of his domain. Having “become senselesse of sinne” is morally indefensible in both a King or a Pope, but it is quite useful for someone who wants to make his way in the world. A conscience, a sense of right and wrong that is defined by a greater authority than Alexander’s own corrupt standards, would only be a stumbling block on his way to achieving his aims. With a sealed conscience, though, he can freely use his “*Arcane plots*,” “*intricate designes*,” and “*misty machinations*,” the marks of the Machiavellian politician, to achieve his aims.

⁷ King James I, *Βασιλικὸν δῶρον* or *His Maiesties Instrvctions to His Dearest Sonne, Henry the Prince* (London: Felix Kyngston for Iohn Norton, 1603) Bk 1 (14).

⁸ James I, *Βασιλικὸν δῶρον*, Bk 1 (1f).

⁹ James I, *Βασιλικὸν δῶρον*, Bk 1 (15f). For “a cauterized conscience” see 1 Tim. 4:2. See also David Farley-Hills, “King James and Barnes’s *Devil’s Charter*,” *N&Q* os 235 (1990) 206-8.

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Alexander certainly has a vision greater than Faustus’s, and his aims are not entirely self-centred either. Knowing that the pact with the devil will not eternalise his earthly life, he delights in the prospect of seeing his sons keeping his legacy alive in the future:

That, that was it, which I so much desir’d
To see my sonnes through all the world admir’d,
In spite of grace, conscience, and *Acharon*
I will reioyce, and triumph in my Charter.

(*Charter*, I.iv; 346-9)

The conscience may be sealed, but his emotions are not. Love for his sons really moves Alexander: he plots for them, and he is delighted by his success. And he has cause for gloating. What he has achieved by the terms set down in the bond holds for him a certainty greater than the one that could ever be provided by earthly assurances: “*Sedibis Romæ Papa, summa in fælicitate tui et Filiorum annos 11. et 7. dies 8. post moriere*” (*Charter*, I.iv; 351f). In his elated mood, Alexander laughs to scorn the power of the fiend and almost flippantly dismisses the implications of his covenant. The moment of honouring the terms of the contract is still far away, and, seemingly secure in his earthly seat, there is no burning reason why he should let the worries get to his heart. That is what allows him to exclaim triumphantly: “Well this rich Miter thought it cost me deare / Shall make me liue in pompe whilst I liue heere” (*Charter*, I.iv; 384f).¹⁰ Given Alexander’s contempt for the devil’s power, he could just as well refer to the cost for his coffers than the one for his immortal self. Indeed, for his abrupt failure at the end to make sense, it is necessary for him to be

¹⁰ Jim C. Pogue, ed., “*The Devil’s Charter*” by Barnabe Barnes: *A Critical Edition* (New York, NY: Garland, 1980) corrects “though” for “thought” (I.iv.384).

unaware of any danger lurking in the background. This ignorance goes hand in hand with his defiance of all matters spiritual in favour of the tangible earthly reality that he strives in. In all this he does not realise that he builds his empire on sand as the basis is dynastic greed rather than the good of the people that depend on his care.

VIII-3 – Two Sons

The two sons, whom Alexander loves to such an extent that “for their sakes [he] dare[s] adventure hell” (*Charter*, I.iv; 365) and on whom he builds his future, do not actually display the proper brotherly love that could be the foundation for the Borgias’ dynasty.

When, summoned by their father, Caesar and Candy enter together, they are “striving for priority” (*Charter*, I.iv; 367). Alexander’s example has rubbed off on his sons: worldly status and pre-eminence is all that matters, even in private. Alexander feeds this appetite by dividing “this earthly glory which [he] hold[s]” (*Charter*, I.iv; 369) equally between the two not so brotherly contenders. It is the Pope’s intention that the Duke of Candy, general of the Pope’s armed forces, and Caesar, Cardinal of Valence, should “Gaine double strength with [their] vnited loues” (*Charter*, I.iv; 386). He holds up to them the shining example of the power of Castor and Pollux:

Castor would not be called but *Pollux Castor*
 And *Castor Castors Pollux*: so my *Candy*
 Be *Cæsars Candy*, *Cæsar*, *Candies Cæsar*,
 With perfect loue, deare boyes loue one another

“If no Divells, no God.”

So either shal be strengthened by his brother.

(*Charter*, I.iv; 397-401)¹¹

Alexander is mistaken, though, that a bond of love sealed with a gift of earthly goods will prove strong enough in an environment of greed, equivocation, shady dealings and Machiavellian politics. Unknowingly, he alludes to the impossibility of the plan himself when he refers to a stellar constellation that does not exist as such. He speaks of the glory of Alpha Geminorum and Beta Geminorum, the two stars into which Castor and Pollux were “stellified” (*Charter*, I.iv; 391) after their deaths: “When they together shine the welkin cleeres” (*Charter*, I.iv; 393). However, the two stars never appear in the sky together: the one sets as the other one rises, a revealing allusion to the myth that either of the Roman brothers must be present in Hades at any time.

Alexander’s call to his sons to unite their loves for the two of them to be stronger goes unheard in the light of his other, devilish, Machiavellian teachings which Caesar, unlike Candy, has already assimilated into his very being. Caesar is an even better source model for Machiavelli’s *The Prince* than Alexander VI. But at least Alexander and Caesar think alike. Only Candy has a mind for a more spiritual outlook: “*A che me fido, guarda me Dio, / On in Gods name*” (*Charter*, III.v; 1634f). Scorn and mockery are the only rewards he reaps for his faith when Caesar kills him: “youle be at ease anon” (*Charter*, III.v; 1639). The only person to put his trust in God turns out to be too naïve to cope with the wiles of the world. Machiavelli was right when he said that “a man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily

¹¹ Nick de Somogyi, ed., *The Devil’s Charter: A Tragedy Containing the Life and Death of Pope Alexander the Sixth*. Globe Quartos. (1607; London: Nick Hern, 1999) amends the misprint of line 398: “And Pollux Castor’s Pollux.”

comes to grief among so many who are not virtuous.”¹² It looks indeed as if the Cains of the world were far more adapted to winning it. Caesar, who should be a defender of the faith like his father, is certainly one of them:

It is the precious Ornament of Princes
To be strong hearted, proud, and valiant,
But well attempted with callidity[.]

(*Charter*, I.iv; 474-6)

Were it not for the reference to “callidity” or cunning, Caesar’s advice would almost be honourable and morally acceptable. Even King James could be similarly Machiavellian:

in any thing that is expressly commanded or prohibited in the booke of God, ye cannot be ouer precise, euen in the least thing; [...] But as for all other things not contained in the Scripture, spare not to vse or alter them, as the necessitie of the time shall require.¹³

Machiavelli and James come to frighteningly similar conclusions when it comes to adapting one’s actions to the necessities of the moment. What saves James, though, is the insistence on the absolute supremacy of the word of the Bible, while Machiavelli, basing his advice on an analysis of the weakness and egocentricity of human nature, moves any loyalty to virtue to second place without, however, wholly discarding it. The world of *The Devil’s Charter* takes this philosophy to extremes: the word counts for nothing, and people who are overly trusting are lost when they find themselves confronted with the kind of policies that are advocated by Caesar

¹² Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. and introd. George Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995) ch. 15 (48).

¹³ James I, *Βασιλικὸν δῶρον*, Bk 1 (19).

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and Alexander. So Candy learns to his own detriment that his “heart is too much spic’d with honesty” (*Charter*, I.iv; 413):

You must not be so ceremonious
Of oathes and honesty, Princes of this world
Are not prickt in the bookes of conscience,
You may not breake your promise for a world:¹⁴
Learne this one lesson looke yee marke it well,
It is not alwaies needfull to keepe promise,
For Princes (forc’d by meere necessity
To passe their faithfull promisses) againe
Forc’d by the same necessity to breake promise.

(*Charter*, I.iv; 416-24)

In a world like this, security cannot be had, and destruction is bound to follow sooner or later.

VIII-4 – Two Moralities

From a purely pragmatic point of view, these precepts might be sensible when applied with moderation. In the world of politics, morality is very often merely an ideal that is advanced to legitimise the apparent justice of the prince’s rule. Seeming is of utmost importance for Machiavelli’s prince whose every policy and ideology only serve to guarantee his survival based on the survival of his state. The worldly-minded person can hardly blame Alexander when he postulates that “Your nearest Charity concernes your selfe” (*Charter*, I.iv; 451). In doing so, however, Alexander perverts the biblical “Thou shalt loue thy neighbour as thy selfe” (Matt. 22:39),

¹⁴ Somogyi replaces the colon with a question mark.

setting himself up as the standard of morality. Whereas Christ’s commandment is all-encompassing, linking the other and the self in a bond that will contain all strife and contention because the good of the one is the good of the other, Alexander’s standard is entirely self-centred, disregarding the well-being of the other if the self runs the danger of losing out on the advantages it regards as naturally its own.

Alexander firmly believes that the Machiavellian principles he advances will be successful, although few people would be brave enough to admit applying them:

contemporary experience shows that princes who have achieved great things have been those who have given their word lightly, who have known how to trick men with their cunning, and who, in the end, have overcome those abiding by honest principles. [...] [B]ecause men are wretched creatures who would not keep their word to you, you need not keep your word to them. And no prince ever lacked good excuses to colour his bad faith. [...] But one must know how to colour one’s actions and to be a great liar and deceiver. Men are so simple, and so much creatures of circumstance, that the deceiver will always find someone ready to be deceived.¹⁵

There is nothing particularly devilish in this descriptive exposition of *Realpolitik*. It is interesting, though, that Machiavelli should pick Pope Alexander VI as a prime historical example of a prince who applied this theory effectively. “Alexander VI never did anything, or thought of anything, other than deceiving men; and he always found victims for his deceptions.”¹⁶ The circle, started by the real Alexander, exemplified by Machiavelli, closes with Barnes who again illustrates Machiavelli’s example by reinventing Alexander as the prime instance of the embodied fiend. His Alexander is strong enough to impose his vision of the world upon the world itself:

¹⁵ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 18 (54f).

¹⁶ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 18 (55).

“If no Divells, no God.”

Beleeue me *Candy* things are as they seeme,
Not what they be themselues; all is opinion:
And all this world is but opinion.

(*Charter*, I.iv; 456-8)

Success is guaranteed when the world believes what the ruler wants it to believe. In recreating the world along these principles, though, it loses all stability, which neither of the Borgias realises. Machiavelli, on the other hand, aware of the dangers, would not have approved of crimes such as Caesar’s slaying Candy or Lucretia’s murdering her husband. Amoralty is not permissible: “it cannot be called prowess to kill fellow citizens, to betray friends, to be treacherous, pitiless, irreligious. These ways can win a prince power but not glory.”¹⁷ It is one thing to kill an enemy, who is to expect danger and a threat to his life from his opponent, or who might even be killed in a pre-emptive strike or self-defence, but it is quite another thing to slaughter unsuspecting friends since it opens the doors wide to anarchical insecurity.

The Borgias never make this distinction, but neither do the other political parties, each of which is ready to undo the other by denying them their authority. When Alexander accuses Charles VIII’s party of having their souls “sould to *Lucifer*” (*Charter*, II.i; 1021), they retort by a customary “No Pope but *Lucifer* in *Peters Chaire*” (*Charter*, II.i; 1027), which is closer to the truth than they suspect. Similarly, the pacts that are signed at the end of Act II are not worth the parchment they are written on. The show of friendship between Alexander and Charles is merely intended to cover up the hollowness of the “*Charter Bipartite*” that is “drawne / Betwixt you: to confirme this amity” (*Charter*, II.i; 1108f). Here is another devil’s charter that is almost certain only to hold no longer than it is useful

¹⁷ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 8 (27).

for either of the two parties involved. Peace is maintained not because the players on the political stage are morally better than Alexander, but because there is a will to find a common denominator for their alliance. Indeed, “the value of international agreement as a sign of faith is undermined by the revelation of the expedient calculations that underlie it.”¹⁸ Given that Alexander actively sets up a world where the word matters little, it is perplexing that he should never even suspect the devil of treating him likewise. He is not the master-schemer after all.

VIII-5 – The Conscience of a Pope

Alexander shies away from nothing, neither sodomy, nor buggery, nor at this point the murder of Astor, his former beloved, for greed: “I must haue his Lands” (*Charter*, IV.i; 1838). As his crimes grow in magnitude, he becomes inured to their horror, which is mirrored in the reaction of other characters.

BERNARDO

Bernardo’s reaction reveals the magnitude of the Pope’s latest crime. Alexander’s trusty servant is used to seeing the Pope commit many a heinous act, yet the plotted death of Astor and his brother move him to break his silence:

Were it not that my conscience hath bene fyer’d,
With flames of purgatory by this Pope,
I neuer could endure such villany,

¹⁸ Jacqueline Latham, “Machiavelli,” 104.

“If no Divells, no God.”

The best is he doth pardon all my sinnes.

(*Charter*, IV.v; 2443-6)

Alexander does not only jeopardise his own salvation: he also blindly destroys the eternal well-being of those that are entrusted in his care. Although he is invested with the power to remit sins, he perverts this right by absolving people from the sins that he instigated them to commit. Unlike Alexander, Bernardo feels the sting of his conscience and lucidly realises that the deeds he does in the service of the Pope are downright despicable. And yet, he remains in the Pope’s service and carries out his commands since his master holds the highest authority that can absolve him from suffering the eternal consequences of his crimes.

The power Alexander has over common people is virtually absolute for those who believe in the afterlife and accept the Pope’s authority. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Bernardo is to be excused for his actions. Being in the service of the impersonated fiend has corrupted him as well. Ultimately, it is not merely the prospect of the absolution of his sins that makes him obey. He realises that “Thus doth one hideous act succeed an other, / Vntill the mouth of mischeife be made vp” (*Charter*, V.ii; 2745f), but he also analyses his own situation and deeds correctly:

When any deed of murther must be done,
To serue his Holinesse, call for *Bernardo*.
He must be principall or accessory
To serue all purposes; for gold or pardone,
The Pope giues both; and I can take them both:
Gold can make hard the softest conscience,
And mine is harden’d by the practise of it.

(*Charter*, V.ii; 2752-8)

Bernardo has become the image of his master, selling his soul for money and absolution of his sins. His fate illustrates the ill effects a corrupt leader can have on society as a whole.¹⁹ Unlike Faustus, Alexander manages to fulfil his ambition and create an empire of his own, shaping the world according to his own desires and for his own enjoyment. However, the values that he bases his venture on are wholly corrupt and will not stand. Bernardo’s fate foreshadows that of Alexander VI. As with the day of judgement, the end for Bernardo comes swiftly and unexpectedly. Caesar kills him for a crime he has not committed, the purported poisoning of Alexander and Caesar. People who rule by deceit and cruelty find no peace of mind and suspect each and everybody of treason, since betraying others is what is foremost on their own minds. Bernardo, the trusty and true servant, leaves the stage without being given another word. Even if he had wanted to, there is no opportunity for him to make peace with his maker. His disappearance shows that an internally corrupt and amoral world cannot stand and that justice will be done, albeit for the wrong reason.

CAESAR

At the end of the day, Alexander’s efforts turn out to be self-defeating: one of his sons has learnt the lesson the father was trying to teach all too well.

Alexander knows that Caesar is Candy’s murderer. Inverting Christ’s words when he calls upon the fishermen Simon-Peter and Andrew to become his disciples, saying “Followe me, and I wil make you fihers of men” (Matt. 4:19), Alexander compares Caesar to “some subtill Fisher that layd nets / For *Candies* life and honor”

¹⁹ Compare King Alphonso in Chapter V.

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(*Charter*, IV.ii; 1881f). The perversion is manifest, and Caesar retorts with another biblical allusion: “Am I the keeper of my brothers person?” (*Charter*, IV.ii; 1889).²⁰ Words may be empty shells for the likes of the Borgias when they interact with political opponents, and yet in their private dealings with one another both Alexander and Caesar are quick to take up the stings that the words carry. When Alexander rightly curses Caesar as “Execrable *Cain*; perfidious Homecide” (*Charter*, IV.ii; 1890), it turns out that each one knows about the other one’s dark secret:

Caesar. A plague vpon your diuills you deale with them,
That watch more narrowly to catch your soule
Then he which sought my brother *Candies* death,
You know that Sathan is the lord of lies
A false accuser and desembler,
Tell your familiers they be lying Diuils.

(*Charter*, IV.ii; 1893-8)

For a while, they both attempt their best to make the other one feel guilty to gain the upper hand in their strife for control over the world. Yet, soon they realise that an empire divided cannot stand, and they both recognise that they are two of a kind:

Caesar. Pull me not downe good father with your conscience:
Your conscience, father of my conscience is.
My conscience is as like your conscience,
As it were printed with the selfe-same stampe.
I know my sinnes are burthenous, and beare them,
Your sinnes more hainous, yet your robes conceale them.

(*Charter*, IV.ii; 1909-14)

²⁰ Compare Gen. 4:9.

The revelation comes as a total surprise for Alexander who has to realise painfully that one of his plans, the aggrandisement of his two sons, has come to fruition in a way completely different from the one he had worked for. Instead of having both sons set upon felicitous careers, one as the Duke of Candy, the other as the Cardinal of Valence, he has to come to terms with the realisation that one son is dead and the other one is his murderer. The shock of finding his own policies applied to himself is almost more than he can bear, and he is ready to cast Caesar out.

Alexander’s inability to have foreseen this development foreshadows his failure to anticipate the devil’s equivocation at the end of the play. Indeed, now would be the moment for him to sever his pact with the devil, which expressly stated that he and his sons would live in felicity.²¹ That, of course, would also entail a falling back upon his own powers and upon the fickle fortunes of the world. Renouncing the devil could only mean returning to the bosom of God, giving oneself up by accepting someone else’s authority. Alexander, however, does not have the moral stature to become a servant after having been the master. Indeed, he cannot imagine that he could have greater satisfaction if he embraced God’s positive values than he derives from his involvement with Lucifer. Despite all his wiliness, this failure to take a moral stand will lead to the destruction of all his achievements.

Caesar knows about everything: the pact with the devil, the bribing, the poisoning of enemy cardinals to get their goods, the incest with Lucretia, the murder of Gemen Ottoman whom Alexander had promised to deliver into the hands of Charles, the sodomy committed with Astor Manfredi, the commissioning of Lucretia’s death which became necessary because he had instigated her to murder her husband. Alexander VI turns out to be at the root of all evil in Italy, yet he

²¹ See on page 254.

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cannot help exclaiming: “*Cæsar* the Diuill hath bin thy Schole-maister” (*Charter*, IV.ii; 1951). Alexander’s horror at seeing his plots disclosed mingles with a certain gleeful pride in having taught his son so well to succeed in the world by a complete disregard of moral scruples. This makes Alexander see himself as what he has become: the devil incarnate.

Yet, Alexander’s conscience is still seared, for it does not take him long to rejoice in Caesar’s likeness to himself. He enters into another pact, this time with his son:

Cæsar it suteth with thy grace and glory,
To cloake my vices, I will pardon thine,
Let one of vs excuse an others crimes,
And for this bloody fact so lately done,
As thou didst cunningly begin proceed,
To lay the guilt or imputation
On them whose death may doe thee benefit:
And neuer was my soule better contented,
Then that our woes are with rich hopes preuented.

(*Charter*, IV.ii; 1967-75)

The two remaining Borgias are a world unto themselves, wholly self-sufficient, yet wholly reliant on one another for the success of their conspiracy. They have displaced the devil on earth, but they have not replaced his influence with a more positive moral outlook for humanity as they continue to implement his dictates for their own advantage. Yet, this does not mean that everything goes according to their plans. Although Caesar’s suggestion keeps Alexander’s present fortune intact, it effectively destroys the plans the Pope had for the time after his death: at that time there will be no one to fill Alexander’s place, and the Pope’s hopes for the

continuation of his dynasty as rulers of Italy have been severely jeopardised with Candy’s death.

VIII-6 – Conjurations

In the same way as Alexander seems to control and dominate Caesar, he also seems to exercise mastery over the devil. This, however, does not come without an effort. At this late stage in his career he “must [...] labour like a collyers horse” (*Charter*, IV.i; 1749) in order to conjure the fiend.

Barnes’s source for Alexander’s conjuration is mainly the *Heptameron* by Peter de Abano (c. 1250-c. 1316).²² It is a fact that Barnes goes into great lengths to make the conjuration as authentic as possible, yet still does not get it completely right.²³ Barnes, who might have heard about the occurrence at the *Doctor Faustus* performance, might want to make sure that no devil is accidentally conjured. Or he might want to assure that he is not in breach of the “Act againft Conjurat[i]on, Witchcraft, and dealing with evil and wicked Spirits”²⁴ from the first year of James’s reign, which was the first “statutory prohibition against the making of demonic pacts”²⁵ in England. The truth, however, is that Alexander’s charm would be as ineffective as Baglioni’s parodic invocation, in Act III, Scene v, of the

²² Peter Abano was a doctor at Padua. The *Heptameron*, which is considered to be falsely attributed to him, lists the rituals that need to be observed exactly to conjure angels and spirits safely for each of the seven days of the week.

²³ For incongruities compare pages 88, 89, 94 and 107 of Peter de Abano, “Heptameron,” trans. Robert Turner, *Henry Cornelius Agrippa His Fourth Book of Occult Philosophy* (London: John Harrifon, 1655). Gareth Roberts, “A New Source for Barnabe Barnes’s *The Devil’s Charter*,” *N&Q* 221 (1976) 210-2 shows that Barnes owned a copy of Agrippa’s book (dated c. 1600).

²⁴ *The Statutes at Large* (London: John Bill, 1684) Anno Primo Jacobi Regis, ch. XII (486).

²⁵ Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, 185.

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fowle fiende of *Acheron*
By puissant *Hoblecock* and *Bristletoe*,
By *Windicaper Monti-bogglebo*.
Polipotmos and the dreadfull names
of *Mulli-sacke* and *Hermocotterock* [etc.]

(*Charter*, III.v; 1511-5)²⁶

If the devil did not choose to appear of his own will, as Mephistopheles does in *Doctor Faustus*, he would not come. By the fiend’s appearance Alexander thinks himself safe in his powers, and the thought that the plottings which he has disturbed the devil in might be “subuersions” and “[t]riumphant treasons and assassinate” (*Charter*, IV.i; 1774 & 1777) of and against himself never even remotely comes to his mind. Thus the devil makes sure that, for Alexander, the overthrow comes like a bolt from the blue.

Before Alexander himself meets his end, the audience is prepared for the nasty surprise that is in store for the Pope when the “*Deuill commeth and changeth the Popes bottles*” (*Charter*, V.iv; 2916f), setting off the mechanism that will catch Alexander in his own trap, poisoning him with the wine that was intended to do away with his opponents, Cardinals Cornetto and Modina. In one single line, all of Alexander’s scheming comes to nought. From being the supreme creator of his own world who, by means of worse than Machiavellian politics, imposed his will on the reality around him, the Pope is effectively relegated to the role of a pawn in someone else’s play. Cardinal Modina is at the same time right and wrong when he exclaims: “Let Sathan worke, he neuer shall preuaile” (*Charter*, V.iv; 2961). At the end of the day, the devilish Alexander will not be able to carry out his plans, in the same way

²⁶ One is again reminded of Harsnett’s *Popish Impostures*. Its date of composition is close to the composition of Barnes’s play.

as the real devil will never be able to harm the souls of those whose “refuge and defence is from above” (*Charter*, V.iv; 2960). Yet, for those like Alexander, who have sold their souls to the fiend consciously and willingly, and who have basically worked against the restorative power of society, destroying its social cohesion for their own egoistic gratification, there is no remedy against their absolute undoing. In effect it does not even matter whether the terms of the pact have been fulfilled or not. For the human overreacher who binds himself to a force that is inherently destructive all striving is fated to end in destruction that originates within the man himself.

In Act V, Scene v, Astaroth, Belchar, and Varca parody Alexander’s conjuration as they summon each other from their “firy region voyd of all religion” (*Charter*, V.v; 2996)²⁷ by a triple calling of each of their respective names. They come together to announce the punishments that Alexander is bound to suffer for each of his sins since the “date of his damnation is at hand” (*Charter*, V.v; 3002). At the end of the day, Alexander, the master-manipulator, is defeated by his own weapons.

VIII-7 – Scæna Ultima

When the *scæna ultima* begins, Alexander is not beset by any doubts about his plans whatsoever. Indeed, to his mind, the devil still grants him another seven years in office, so his only fear is that “*Cæsar* shall miscarry” (*Charter*, V.iv; 2981). This train of thought allows him to advise the two cardinals, who fear for his life, to think of their own sins, not of his, since “tis a goodly *exorcisme* / *Quem penitet peccasse*

²⁷ If the devil is considered as the inversion of God, whose existence finds its expression in religion, then denying religion means denying one’s own existence.

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pæne est innocens” (*Charter, scæna ultima*; 3024f).²⁸ And, again failing to apply his own advice to his own situation, Alexander seems to consider everyone surrounding him as “mere fooles” (*Charter, scæna ultima*; 3026). Nevertheless, the thought of repentance sets him thinking upon the meaning of the word, and for a moment it seems as if he could come to life again:

Oh wretched *Alexander*, slaue of sinne
And of damnation; what is he that can
Deliuer thy poore soule? oh none but he
That when thou didst renounce him cast of thee,
Repentance is in vaine, mercy too late[.]

(*Charter, scæna ultima*; 3043-7)

Thus belief, a soothing ally for the devout, becomes Alexander’s greatest enemy. His belief that he has excluded himself from the Kingdom of God shapes his world and his behaviour towards God, which causes him to discard all hope in the merciful Lord of the New Covenant. As belief can set the Pope’s destiny in a negative direction, it could just as well take Alexander towards higher spheres. Yet, human beings tend to be set in their ways once their strategies have proved satisfactory. So far, the devil has served Alexander well, and there does not seem to be a reason why that should change in the short run. Although Alexander realises that all earthly goods and achievements are trumpery unless “some one man [might] attaine that happinesse / Which our first *Adam* had in *Parradice*” (*Charter, scæna ultima*; 3056f), he is too far gone on his evil path to mend his ways. At last, his short-sightedness dooms him to hell:

²⁸ “He who repents having sinned is as good as innocent.”

And yet I feare it not: though in security
 Once more I will with powrefull exorcismes,
 Inuoke those Angells of eternall darkenesse
 To shew me now the manner of death.

*Alexander draweth the Curtaine of his studie where hee
 discovereth the diuill sitting in his pontificals, Alexander crosseth
 himselfe starting at the sight.*

Devil. What dost thou start foule child of reprobation,
 Vaine are thy crosses, vaine all exorcismies,
 Those be no fruites of faith but mere hypocrifie[.]

(*Charter, scæna ultima; 3064-73*)²⁹

Lack of fear is not always a good thing as fear causes people to exercise caution and judgement in their actions. Frightful stories of hell have always been instrumental in creating fear of the devil and herding believers within the community of Christ. One of the reasons why Alexander cannot escape the clutches of the fiend is the fact that the devil has never given him cause to be afraid. Such fear would have proved counterproductive to the devil’s cause. The sudden and uncalled-for appearance of the devil, who again presents Alexander with a mirror image of himself, as he did in the opening dumb show, strikes him silent and robs him of his vocal powers, causing him to cross himself, which was expressly forbidden in his pact with the devil. Yet, this is never made an issue, the temporal terms of the pact having already been fulfilled.

Alexander is immediately and harshly confronted with his utter helplessness. It is the devil’s purpose here to confound him by confronting him with the truth, so as to prevent any emotion that might bring about what one might call a deathbed repentance. For the first time Alexander hears, but does not believe, from the “Father

²⁹ Pogue, *Devil’s Charter*, amends 3067 to read “the manner of my death.”

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of lies” (*Charter, scæna ultima*; 3092) that all his efforts at summoning devils were in vain: they always appeared of their own will, and all of Alexander’s rituals were “mere hypocrisie”, i.e. make-believe on the devil’s part to ensnare Alexander. For all his equivocation and duplicity, Alexander VI is blinded by his own ambition when he comes to dealing with a wilier schemer. Ignorance, rather than arrogance and hubris, has made him disregard what has been right there before his eyes throughout most of the play. All along Alexander has been “sleeping in a careleffe securitie,”³⁰ not seeing the obvious, and not applying his own warning to Candy—“Princes of this world / Are not prickt in the bookes of conscience” (*Charter, I.iv*; 417f)—to his own relationship with the prince of darkness, who is not too ceremonious about his conscience either.

In what follows, the devil toys with his helpless prey and gloats over Alexander’s vain attempts at wriggling himself out of his grip. In the face of the devil’s equivocation with the terms of the pact, Alexander does not realise that words have lost their power to shape the world according to his own desires. The world that Alexander finds himself in is a world of complete insecurity and semblance in which everything may be cast into doubt and reinterpreted at any moment. Ironically, it is a world which he, by becoming an expert at equivocation, has helped to destabilise. It is a world in which not even contracts—which are, after all, mere conventions among people based on a common ideology that must be stable enough over time to make all the signatories believe they have to adhere to the contract’s stipulations—need to be binding,³¹ while contracts with the devil never are. Still, as there is no absolute certainty about this, Alexander himself was in all

³⁰ See *Βασιλικὸν δῶρον* on page 253.

³¹ Compare Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, 197 & 207.

likelihood planning to dishonour the terms of the contract himself by the very learned and complicated theological reasoning he later tries to fool the devil with. The devil only beat him to it. In this light, it is only fair and logical that Alexander, the worldly Antichrist in the play, should fail to convince with his words in the end, and that he should fall by words which he himself helped to destabilise by withdrawing their semantic basis. The fact that Alexander did not foresee this development points to his ultimate failure as an expert in Machiavellian politics. He does not only turn his back on society as the entity that guarantees meaning and survival. He also discards the one tool that could restore cohesion if it were used wisely and meaningfully. Tearing down old worlds and replacing them with new ones is not as straightforward as it seems, especially when the means to create anew has been rendered useless in the process of destruction.

At the end of the play, words do not matter any more. Only what is within matters, and there is very little good in Alexander. As the devil rightly stresses, Alexander has shaped his own fate:

I do confesse thy soule was first ordayn’d
 To good: but by free-will to sinne thou slaue,
 Hast sold that soule from happinesse to hell.

(*Charter, scæna ultima*; 3130-2)³²

Alexander is no longer free to achieve liberation from damnation by his own means, and his appeal to the devil is in vain since the devil is naturally not interested in

³² Alexander, the papist presented by the Anglican Barnes, is close to the Faustus of the A-Text where the Good Angel admonishes: “Never too late, if Faustus can repent” (*Faustus*, II.iii.78). In the light of double predestination, Faustus will only be able to repent if the Calvinist God has set him down as one of the elect, which he cannot know. The choice and agency that is denied this Faustus is returned to him in the B-Text: “Never too late, if Faustus will repent” (*Faustus*, B-Text, II.iii.78). Knowing Barnes, this is not an option Alexander VI is given.

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letting Alexander’s soul slip through his fingers. Help and salvation can only come from God. Alexander seems to feel this instinctively, and he tries to implore God’s mercy. It is at this point that he must realise the extent of his inner death that probably started a long time ago and reached its culmination the moment he signed the pact: it was at that moment that he gave up his freedom and ability to shape his own destiny, subjugating himself to the will of the fiend and the terms of the contract. Limited in his mind, he was free to act only in so far as the devil concurred with his plans, a mere puppet while he thought himself mistakenly to be the puppet-master. Now his lack of conscience also turns against him, and the audience comes to witness the “demise of an automaton,”³³ rather than the death of a tragic hero:

Alexander. Pawse yet a little, let me meditate.

Alexander holdeth vp his hands wringing and softly crying.

Mercy, mercy, mercy; arise arise: vp, vp, vp: fy, fy: no, no? stirre
stubburne, stonie, stiff indurate heart. not yet, vp. why, what? wilt thou
not foule traytor? to my soule? not yet?

The Diuill laugheth.

Arise, arise, aduance heart clogg’d with sinne,
Oppressed with damnation: vp, aduance yet.

(Charter, scæna ultima; 3187-95)

Throughout his career, Alexander has endlessly manipulated the world without, but he cannot manipulate the world within. What is not given him by true faith and God’s grace, he cannot summon up himself. Alexander lacks Claudius’s insight who, having tried to repent, exclaims: “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below: / Words without thoughts never to heaven go” (*Ham.* III.iii.97f). In Barnes’s

³³ Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, 215.

play it is the devil who spells out the lesson that Alexander will never interiorise: “He charmes in *Dauids* words with *Iudas spirit*” (*Charter, scæna ultima*; 3206).

Alexander’s last moments are in stark contrast with his daughter’s in Act IV, Scene iii. Lucretia, too, had committed many a sin in her life, but she genuinely came to repent at the end. Lucretia’s last-minute repentance sheds light on Alexander’s failure. Lucretia feels that human beings can only truly shape their own destiny when they lose their own will and place their trust in a superior power. Her prayer and invocation of God’s mercy come from the heart:

Mercyfull father let not thy mercy passe
 Extend thy mercy where no mercy was.
 Mercyfull father for thy sonnes deere merrit
 Pardon my sinnfull soule receiue my spirrit.

(*Charter, IV.iii*; 2135-8)

Alexander, on the other hand, vainly tries to compose the right words in his own mind and, like Faustus, on his own.

The final straw that is to break Alexander’s back comes when he is shown the manner of Lucretia’s and Caesar’s death as a mirror of what his scheming has come to and produced. He is completely baffled, and all hope of redemption is taken from him:

Thou for the poysoning of thy daughter poysoned
 He for the murthering of his brother murdered.
Alexander. Thus God is onely iust.
Devil. The Diuill cannot deny it.

(*Charter, scæna ultima*; 3234-7)

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Alexander misses the point completely, forgetting that, at that moment, in his study and totally isolated from the world that would provide another perspective, he is immersed in a reality that is entirely shaped by the devil, the “Father of lies,” who will only show that to Alexander which serves his purpose. Like Faustus, Alexander has lost all semblance of agency. It is the greatest triumph of his equivocation that the devil can concur with, and strengthen, the Pope’s own conclusion, which expresses Alexander’s complete resignation and deepest despair: by justice Alexander is necessarily doomed and mercy is entirely ruled out. This belief does not allow Alexander to see that God might well be the only one who is just, but he is also merciful, if man only believes. Again, the words by which Alexander hoped to win the world have lost him the world, his life, and his eternal soul. When Alexander is stripped of his pontificals—

My roabes, my roabes, he robs me of my roabes,
Bring me my roabes, or take away my life,
My roabes, my life, my soule and all is gone.

(*Charter, scæna ultima*; 3250-2)³⁴—

and is faced with his own true self, he can but rave in horror and die a pitiable death. When he has to fall back to himself and himself alone, without having recourse to the show and the unreality that hides the true essence of existence, he finds that there is nothing left that he can use to save him. He has lost all the power to use words to mould the world according to his wishes. In the last scene, Alexander is pathetically stripped of everything he prided himself on in life. He is but a pawn in the devil’s game.

³⁴ Compare Caesar’s remark on page 264, Richard III’s mad raging for a horse, and Shylock’s ranting about his ducats and his daughter.

His identity on stage is even further diluted when he becomes the mouthpiece of the author of the play himself. For a brief moment the actor breaks the fourth wall and lectures the audience:

Learne miserable wretched mortall men,
 By this example of a sinfull soule,
 What are the fruites of pride and Auarice,
 [...]
 Of deepe dissembling and hypocrisie,
 Learne wicked worldlings, learne, learne, learne by me
 To saue your soules, though I condemned be.

(*Charter, scæna ultima*; 3239-41 & 3245-7)

The moment is brief and fleeting, and before the audience grasps what has happened, Alexander is caught up in his role again.³⁵ Yet, it hints that ultimately it is neither Alexander nor the fiend who are the creators of the world the audience is drawn into, but the playwright Barnabe Barnes of Durham, who is trying to impose his own view of the world on actors, audience, and readers alike.

VIII-8 – Imperfect Undertaking

In effect, then, Barnes manages to “dramatize effectively the amoral realities of the struggle for power”³⁶ and the self-defeating limitations that come with it.

Barnes’s play is almost too Machiavellian and too pertinent in its portrayal of the realities of politics to be of comfort after the shock of the Gunpowder Plot has

³⁵ The comparison to Prospero is revealing: whereas the Duke of Milan manages to break free from the shackles that the play imposes on him, and, by implication, figuratively from everything that confines man, Alexander is for ever unable to achieve a similar release.

³⁶ Latham, “Machiavelli,” 107.

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worn off. For, although the play was designed to display Barnes’s ideas to James I as similar to his own, *The Devil’s Charter* has a greater effect on the masses, stirring emotions of revenge, than it has a bearing on the reasoning of state. The rift that had rent Europe in the previous century largely because the Bishop of Rome did not desist from worldly claims of power was still threatening states with destruction. The Reformation had destroyed the basis of religious cohesion and was accompanied by an explosion of knowledge which inevitably led to a reformation of religious, secular, political and scientific thoughts and ideas. This being so, James was certainly wise when he let problems rest as far as the dynamics within the realm would allow him to. In 1606, he imposed the Oath of Allegiance, reinforcing again the point he had already made in 1603/4, namely that the Papists needed to reform one special point of their doctrine,

that arrogant and ambitious Supremacie of their Head the Pope, whereby he not onely claimes to bee Spirituall head of all Chrifians, but alfo to haue an Imperiall ciuill power ouer all Kings and Emperors, dethroning and decrowning Princes with his foot as pleafeth him, and difpenfing and difpofing of all Kingdomes and Empires at his appetite.³⁷

The Oath of Allegiance was not intended to be a punishment for the Catholics, but yet another insistence on James’s desire to “develop a more modern theory of Church and State”³⁸ in which there was a clear division between the two forces, at

³⁷ King James I, “A Speech, As It Was Delivered in the Vpper Hovse of the Parliament to The Lords Spiritvuall and Temporall, and to the Knights, Citizens and Burgell'es There Affembled, on Mvnday the XIX. Day of March 1603. Being the First Day of the Firt Parliament,” *The Workes of the Most High and Mightie Prince, James* (London: Robert Barker and Iohn Bill, 1616) 492. In the Gregorian calendar, the year is 1604.

³⁸ Antonia Fraser, *VI of Scotland—King James—I of England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1994) 111. Such an endeavour did not prevent King James from being subjected to more superstitious beliefs and interests such as witchcraft. This is in itself not astonishing as there are

least as far as the Pope’s interference in matters of state was concerned. In 1607, few were interested in the destabilisation of the realm: “viewed from the Catholic perspective, the defeat of the Armada in 1588, or the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, cease to be landmarks and become embarrassments.”³⁹ While most Catholics were ashamed that the events themselves had ever happened, only a few continued to deplore their failure. James I, for one, was eager to restore stability.

At the end of his play, Barnes, however, is content with the destruction of one of the two forces in the state. He leaves a vacuum without offering a solution for the continuation of the temporal and spiritual rulers for the good of the state when Rome has been purged of the Borgias. There is no one there to take over the helm. Even their eradication did not result from good forces within the state but was merely a matter of time since “[v]iolence must be inflicted once for all,”⁴⁰ or else it leads to the ruler’s downfall. In *The Devil’s Charter* violence leads only to further violence, and satiety never sets in. Thus the play is only gratifying for the moment. True, it offers a spectacle of how not to behave. Alexander’s

corps shall be conuaid to saint *Peeters*,
Open for all beholders, that they may
See the reward of sinne, amend and pray.

(*Charter, scæna ultima*; 3296-8)

Even Caesar suffers his “Iust *Nemesis*” (*Charter, scæna ultima*; 3314). Thus far justice is done and all seems well. But there is no sense of moral rejuvenation, and

many reformers who are at the forefront of modernity on the one hand, while nurturing seemingly contradictory tendencies on the other. Indeed, Luther himself was one of them. See on page 37.

³⁹ Alison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination, 1558-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 115.

⁴⁰ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 8 (30).

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virtue remains strangely shrouded. There is no vision of how to behave, no positive morality to replace the one that has been rendered obsolete. The audience only get an image of a world where the word counts for nothing: it is as volatile as the air that breathes it. Indeed, Barnes takes away the foundation on which, according to St John, all the world was built:

In the beginning was that Word, and that Word was with God, and that Word was God. This fame was in the beginning with God. All things were made by it, and without it was made nothing that was made. In it was life and that life was the light of man. And that light fhineth in the darknes, and the darknellē comprehended it not.

(John: 1:1-5)

In the same way as Alexander discards Christ, Barnes discards the possibility of ever building on secure ground. If faith in the word is not restored, there cannot even be sand offered as a foundation for renewal. *The Devil's Charter* reflects the spirit of the age which had found out that absolute truth, either scientific or spiritual, cannot even be approximated. It is a play of the troubled and disorientated Renaissance even beyond the influence of Machiavelli. As all values are torn down and none offered to replace them, the devil does not only win Alexander's soul, but even the world of *The Devil's Charter* itself. The logical conclusion is that neither can stand, and other means need to be found to give society safety and cohesion.

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan.
The proper study of mankind is man.

Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*

IX – The Tempest

In the plays that dramatise man's encounter with the devil on a grander scale, the outcome seems to be inevitably tragic for the human being. This is not necessarily so because the fiend is more powerful than his victim of flesh and blood. It is rather the transgressor of human and divine law who gets in his own way.

Faustus is obsessed with the ideas of everything that is seemingly possible to such an extent that he completely ignores what would be desirable and profitable for him to achieve within the regenerative bounds of society. Destruction strikes from within, with Mephistopheles' help being instrumental, but ultimately only secondary. All things considered, it is highly doubtful whether Faustus, self-centred as he is, could have become a beneficial member of society even under the most auspicious circumstances. Alexander VI's hubris blinds him to the machinations of Astaroth, who keeps waiting in the background until the time is ripe for him to collect his due. Alexander, too, fails to focus his efforts on building a functioning society where morality upholds social cohesion. Both plays are permeated by a rigorously Christian outlook. *Doctor Faustus* is Protestant to a degree that is nigh on

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impossible to define, given the numerous difficulties that come with it, while *The Devil's Charter* is sternly anti-Catholic. Under these circumstances, the outcome is virtually preordained: Faustus, the aspirant-transgressor of human limitations, must bear the bitter fruit of his endeavour, and the rightful order of society must be restored after the demise of the devil incarnate Alexander VI.

At the end of the day, however, the solutions both plays offer are unsatisfactory. Both Faustus and Alexander attempt to transcend the limitations of the world they live in and necessarily undo its foundations in the process. However, in their ventures, they fall short of envisioning and creating a viable alternative to the model they left behind, partly because their visions are too self-centred and narrow-minded, and partly because simply inverting the world and its values does not guarantee success.

In comparison to both Faustus and Alexander VI, Prospero of *The Tempest* seems quite unfairly privileged. He really appears to have it all right from the start and without having entered demonic pacts with potentially dire outcomes:

As a mage he controls nature; as a prince he conquers the passions which had excluded him from his kingdom and overthrown law; as a scholar he repairs his loss of Eden; as a man he learns to temper his passions, an achievement essential to success in any of the other activities.¹

For Kermode, not a single flaw tarnishes the glow of Prospero's achievements. And, thanks to his virtuous behaviour, Prospero has every success as a magician, which is the main role he takes up on the island: “He is the victor in a magical contest; he commands spirits; he is the director of numerous shows and spectacles; and he

¹ Frank Kermode, foreword, *The Tempest*, by William Shakespeare (The Arden Shakespeare; 2nd ser.; 1954; London: Routledge, 1988) xlvi.

assists young love.”² Unlike his unlucky, or unwise, fellow-magicians, Prospero does not have to pay for his success with life and limb. On the contrary: he is even rewarded with the restitution of his dukedom and the prospective foundation of a dynasty that will eventually unite the two proud houses of Milan and Naples. Yet, despite these stunning feats, Traister, who does not only deal with magi in Elizabethan drama but also looks at Prospero against the backdrop of the magicians in mediaeval romances, does not see in Prospero that remarkable a character: “The only unusual features of Prospero as dramatic magician are the success of his magic and his total dominance of the play in which he participates; otherwise he is a rather conventional figure.”³

A point can be made in the defence of both considerations, diametrically opposed as they are. However, this fact highlights that readers and critics have all too often ignored that “Prospero is a complex, erratic, and even contradictory figure.”⁴ They have more or less deliberately idealised what they read and saw. After all, admitting to Prospero’s and *The Tempest*’s darker aspects means destroying the feel-good factor of what people would often like to see as a play that, at first sight, radiates harmony, and that one would like to end on a note of reconciliation and romance. Opening one’s eye to the many contradictions and sinister passions would lead to an unwelcome revelation of a main character and a play that are equally disturbing and unsettling as Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, and that ultimately leave the audience to ask more questions than they are given an answer to. This is not least the case as far as Prospero’s magic is concerned, the

² Traister, *Necromancers*, 126. However, Prospero never had a direct magical encounter with Sycorax: “Then was this island / (Save for the son that [she] did litter here, A freckled whelp, hag-born) not honour’d with / A human shape” (*Tmp.* I.ii.281-4).

³ Traister, *Necromancers*, 126.

⁴ Stephen Orgel, introduction, *The Tempest*, by William Shakespeare (The Oxford Shakespeare; 1987; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008) 5.

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assessments of which cover the entire panoply, from wholly white to completely dark. Traister, for instance, believes that, unlike other magicians in the drama of the period, “Prospero makes no mistakes as a magician, has no flaws in his magic that might explain why magic does not make him forever omnipotent.”⁵ At the other end of the spectrum, Cosmo Corfield, who bases his argument on the assumption that Prospero’s project is motivated solely by revenge, emphasises that “Prospero’s vengeance is theurgically inappropriate,”⁶ blemishing that which should be altogether pure: “Prospero’s revenge suggests a preoccupation with his past and a failure to control passion.”⁷ In the end, “Prospero overcomes his lust for revenge, but cannot remove the contaminating blot formed by it. Not only is his project ruined, then; his magical career is in disarray, and he is rendered incapable of proceeding further to ‘energize in the gods.’”⁸

Even though Prospero discards his magic at the end of the play,⁹ an answer needs to be found as to whether its use is legitimate, as the moral dimension of Prospero’s plan also hinges on it. For it is clear that Prospero has a plan, and that magic is a substantial part of it. Yet, again there is more to Prospero’s design than meets the eye, especially when seen within the broad chronological context of the present study. Though indispensable for the execution of the plot, magic is essentially merely a means to an end. In 1611, Prospero might actually be set to succeed in his endeavour where Faustus and Alexander were still bound to fail. In doing so, Prospero lights the way for an evolution that Jonson will bring to a certain

⁵ Traister, *Necromancers*, 146.

⁶ Cosmo Corfield, “Why Does Prospero Abjure His ‘Rough Magic?’” *SQ* 36 (1985) 41.

⁷ Corfield, “Rough Magic,” 41.

⁸ Corfield, “Rough Magic,” 41 (note 26).

⁹ However, referring to *Tmp.* V.i.33-57, where Prospero promises to “drown [his] book,” Orgel highlights another one of the play’s ambiguities: “The claim of omnipotence powerfully expresses the magnitude of what is to be given up, but the play includes no comparative moment for the renunciation itself. In fact, we will look in vain for Prospero breaking his staff and drowning his book. The promise, here, is everything.” Orgel, introduction, *The Tempest*, 53.

climax in *The Devil Is an Ass* five years later: the liberation of man from his dependence on the supernatural through an unprecedented focus on man's own abilities and potential. Prospero knows full well that he failed in his duties when he was still Duke of Milan, and the time he has spent on the island has given him ample opportunity to analyse his failure and to find the underlying reasons for it. As Duke of Milan, he was still very much like Faustus and Alexander, focused on a single, self-centred goal that he believed would provide him satisfaction by allowing him to transcend his human limitations, possibly even to overcome his mortality. The years of comparative solitude on the island have taught Prospero that this is not a goal worth pursuing as he has experienced at first hand the dire outcome such quests often take. As a result, he has changed course. Although he might appear as such, he is no longer primarily a stage-master and controller of events. He has risen to the challenge of becoming a reformer of people, not least of himself. He has realised that, in order to achieve great ends, man must take fate into his own hands and that he must assume responsibility for himself. This can only truly be achieved if man becomes independent of distracting superstitions—among others the belief in magic—and concentrates on what it means to be truly human rather than on getting personal satisfaction and gratification only. On the way to a more meaningful human existence, magic is merely a stumbling-block. Yet, even here, Prospero must not be idealised and mistaken for an innocent optimist such as Gonzalo. He knows that not everybody is ready for such a liberation, and that strong leadership is necessary for the change to be brought about without calamity. Prospero's project must therefore take into consideration the social givens in order to be brought to a successful end. In fact, even though it points forward towards new horizons with new possibilities

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for man, it is at the same time a masterpiece of *Realpolitik* which even Machiavelli could have wholeheartedly applauded.¹⁰

IX-1 – Prospero’s Magic

The primary means for this project is magic, the exact nature of which is baffling. Some critics do not even consider it to be the thing *per se* and rather interpret it as a “comprehensive analogy or symbol that parallels or stands for some abstractions as government, art, or science.”¹¹ If, however, the magic is taken at face value, the distinction that is made traditionally is between Sycorax’s black magic and Prospero’s white magic: Sycorax

is a practitioner of “natural” magic, a goetist who exploited the universal sympathies, but whose power is limited by the fact that she could command, as a rule, only devils and the lowest orders of spirits. Prospero, on the other hand, is a theurgist, whose Art is to achieve supremacy over the natural world by holy magic.¹²

In *De Incertitudine et Vanitate Scientiarum* (1530), Agrippa considers both types of magic to be somehow problematic: “Goetia is unfortunate, by the commerces of unclean spirits made up of the rites of wicked curiosities, unlawful charms, and deprecations, and is abandoned and execrated by all laws. Of this kind are those which we nowadays call necromancers and witches.”¹³ Theurgy is no less problematic, though: “many think that theurgia is not unlawful, as if this be

¹⁰ Compare Orgel, introduction, *The Tempest*, 50-56.

¹¹ Robert H. West, *Shakespeare & the Outer Mystery* (Lexington, KY: U of Kentucky P, 1968) 82.

¹² Kermode, foreword, *The Tempest*, xl.

¹³ *De Incertitudine et Vanitate Scientiarum*, ch. 45; reprinted in Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy*, 695.

governed by good angels, and a divine deity[.] [...] But sometimes impure spirits, and deceiving powers, that they be worshipped and adored for gods, require also this purity. Therefore here is great need of caution[.]”¹⁴ Even here nothing is ever as it seems, though. In *An Apologie for Poetrie* (1581; pub. 1595), Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86) notes: “*Agrippa* will be as merry in shewing the vanitie of Science, as *Erasmus* was in commending of follie.”¹⁵ In a world where the wrong beliefs could cost people their lives, nothing can be taken at face value:

Sidney makes it clear that he perceived Agrippa’s *De incertitudine & vanitate scientiarum declamatio invectiva* for what it really was, a kind of satire. He had a complete understanding of Agrippa and his magical philosophy if he knew that this work, which was meant to fool the authorities, was a sham.¹⁶

Shakespeare, too, confuses the different kinds of magic. When Prospero abjures magic in *Tmp.* V.i.33-57, his “invocation, in fact, conflicts with his conception of Prospero as a white magician.”¹⁷ The boundaries between black and white magic were never clear-cut, and neither form was considered to be holy, except by the practitioner of magic himself in whose interest it was to place himself within the permissible bounds of society and religion. Yet, once a step was taken on this slippery slope, damnation seemed inevitable:

For divers men having attained to a great perfection in learning, & yet remaining overbare (alas) of the spirit of regeneration and frutes thereof:

¹⁴ *De Incertitudine*, ch. 46; reprinted in Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy*, 699.

¹⁵ Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apologie for Poetrie* (London: Henry Olney, 1595) sig. G2^v.

¹⁶ French, *John Dee*, 144. Compare Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, 90f for a discussion of the value of Agrippa’s retraction of magical beliefs.

¹⁷ C. J. Sisson, “The Magic of Prospero,” *SS* 11 (1958) 76.

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finding all naturall things common, [...] they affaie to vindicate vnto them a greater name, by not onlie knowing the courfe of things heavenlie, but likewife to clim to the knowledge of things to come thereby. Which, at the firft face appearing lawfull vnto them, in respect the ground thereof feemeth to proceed of naturall caufes onelie: they are fo allured thereby, that finding their practize to prooue true in fundry things, they studie to know the caufe thereof: and fo mounting from degree to degree, vpon the flipperie and vncertaine fcale of curiositie; they are at laft entifed, that where lawfull artes or sciences failes, to fatisfie their reftles mindes, even to feeke to that black and vnlawfull fciencie of *Magie*.¹⁸

Four hundred years on, categories have not become less problematic. Prospero could fit into a vast number of traditions. In *The Tempest*, the reader finds

a recognizable Hermetic magus, a Prospero much like Agrippa, Trithemius, and John Dee, men who linked magic to intellectual study, who said with Ficino and with Pico that magic is the greatest of the philosophies, the greatest of the sciences, taking the magus away from the pettiness of this world and drawing him close to the gods.¹⁹

For Mowat, Prospero’s speech of abjuration “links Prospero to a tradition as venerable as that of the magus, a tradition which was seen in the Renaissance as the antithesis of Hermetic magic,” and he becomes “a magician who, unlike the magus, does not seek spiritual growth, but seeks instead godlike control over the natural and supernatural worlds.”²⁰ While Mowat grants that Shakespeare put the speech in

¹⁸ James I, *Dæmonologie*, Bk 1, ch. 3 (10).

¹⁹ Mowat, “Hocus,” 284. Johannes Trithemius (1462-1516), German abbot, historian and scholar. John Dee (1527-1608), English alchemist, astrologer and mathematician. Marsilio Ficino (1433-99), Italian Neoplatonist philosopher, theologian and linguist. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-93), Italian scholar and Neoplatonist philosopher, author of *De hominis dignitate oratio*, or *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.

²⁰ Mowat, “Hocus,” 287.

deliberately, she also clears Prospero of its potential disconcerting implications since, “[a]s he reaches the culmination of his ‘hybrisrede’ he immediately dismisses it, and dismisses the magic that it celebrates,”²¹ leading Prospero on to another tradition of magic, namely that

of the wizard—the pagan enchanter brought into the Christian world, the magician with the magus’s pride in his secret knowledge, the enchanter’s power over the elements, the sorcerer’s control over spirits, and, finally, the Christian’s concern over the fate of his soul.²²

Finally, analysing Prospero’s apparently contractual relationship to Ariel, Mowat also places Prospero in a rather unexpected category:

Ariel’s language is not that of a demon, nor of a *dæmon*, but of a servant boy ready for his freedom, and further, that the language with which he and Prospero haggle over a few more hours of service belongs more to the mundane world of the streetcorner “art-Magician” or “Jugler” [...] than to the arcane, terrifying Hermetic or demonic spheres.²³

The bottom-line of it all, then, is that no one knows where exactly to situate Prospero within the limits of “Theurgist, Mage, Goetist, Trickster, Stage Manager.”²⁴ In the light of these uncertainties, West’s appreciation of the play’s

²¹ Mowat, “Hocus,” 288. Mowat borrows the term “hybrisrede”—speech (full) of hubris—from Kurt Tetzeli von Rosador, *Magie im Elisabethanischen Drama* (Braunschweig: Westermann, 1970).

²² Mowat, “Hocus,” 289.

²³ Mowat, “Hocus,” 297.

²⁴ Stephen J. Miko, “Tempest,” *ELH* 49 (1982) 4. Traister notes that “[a]nother element of this stock formula that found early development in the romance epic is the portrait of the magician as artist, as creator and director of spectacle, pageant, and masque. [...] Magicians specialize, as do artists, in the creation of illusion, and it is not surprising that the one becomes a symbol for the other.” *Heavenly Necromancers*, 29.

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magic, with its firm insistence on the limits of understanding, seems to be the wisest approach possible:

The Tempest's treatment of magic and spirits does not ratify for the play any self-contained thaumaturgic system, however it may suggest one. [...] [T]he play shows thaumaturgical speculation merely as a shadow of thaumaturgical operation. [...] [T]he play has real correspondence to some Renaissance theory of ceremonial control of demons. But it has also a reserve: spirit magic in general and Prospero's in particular is at last darkly mysterious—to the character, to the audience, and even to the author.²⁵

All in all, it seems safest to settle one's mind to the recognition that, while none of the elements of Prospero's magic as such are an invention of Shakespeare's, Prospero's Art itself is greater than the sum of its parts, ultimately incomprehensible and only acceptable on the grounds of faith, as any supernatural and spiritual question finally is. All this may leave behind a sense of disappointment:

Prospero's magic power slides into fakery; Ceres and Iris are “really” only spirits who are in turn “really” only actors. The “reality” of fakery of the magician's power and our inability to fix this power as supernatural or sleight-of-hand are central to the play and its vision of life, just as they point to the central ambiguities in our own vision of man in the natural and supernatural worlds.²⁶

What really matters at the end of the day is the fact that Prospero has acquired, somehow or other, a vast amount of power. Whether this power is good or bad depends entirely on the use Prospero makes of it, and whether he succeeds in

²⁵ West, *Outer Mystery*, 83.

²⁶ Mowat, “Hocus,” 303.

overcoming the limitations that led Faustus and Alexander to a dismal end. It is Prospero’s internal development in relation to his potentially (self-)destructive powers that is the true drama of the play.

IX-2 – Prospero’s Studies

Prospero does not seek to subjugate heaven and earth, ready to venture everything in his quest, and the acquisition of more than human power is not what matters first and foremost. In his narrative to Miranda of life in Milan, Prospero passes over this issue fast, though seemingly unashamedly and without giving the impression that his conscience is in any way afflicted.

When he was Duke of Milan, Prospero’s aim was the “bettering of [his] mind,” (*Tmp.* I.ii.90) which is, at the heart of it, a noble endeavour. To do justice to his reputation that he was “for the liberal arts / Without a parallel.” (*Tmp.* I.ii.73f), he concentrated an increasing amount of time and effort on his studies of these arts.²⁷ In this very study lies the danger: “As for the studie of other liberall artes and sciences, I would haue you reasonably verfed in them, but not preassing to bee a paffe-maifter in any of them: for that can not but diftract you from the points of your calling[.]”²⁸ This is precisely the initial mistake that Prospero makes and that estranges him from himself and from his realm:

those being all my study,
The government I cast upon my brother
And to my state grew stranger, being transported

²⁷ The liberal arts consisted of the trivium (grammar, logic, rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy).

²⁸ James I, *Βασιλικὸν δῶρον*, Bk 2 (94).

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And rapt in secret studies.

(*Tmp.* I.ii.74-7)

Prospero has become alienated from his people and his government, but his “secret studies”—a phrase which either innocently refers to the fact that Prospero has retired from the world, making his work mysterious to everyone else, or to the dangerously clandestine nature of the material he has discovered, namely magic—may also have revealed perilous dimensions of himself he had not been aware of before. Evidently, the recollection of the events of twelve years ago works Prospero into a passion that he hardly can, nor strives to, contain. However, it is almost certain that his agitation does not arise because of possible misgivings he has about his studies. Rather, the memory of his brother’s treachery, which he is about to reveal to Miranda, overpowers his emotions.

In the events that led Prospero to lose his realm, he was not without blemish, either. In his bid for intellectual and, in all likelihood, supernatural power, he neglected his duties towards his state and his subjects—although he must have believed that he had provided properly for them by appointing his brother as his deputy—and lost the power he had when Antonio removed him from the throne. However, Prospero’s fall was clearly a punishment for a political lapse, not a religious or moral one. Prospero had been busy working out his dream, whatever it may have been. Along the way he forgot to heed the reality in his state. Out of the blue an alternate reality to Prospero’s, someone else’s dream, burst upon him forcefully, in one brief instant shattering everything he had been working for. All the while Prospero was secluded, Antonio had been busy with his own dream and acted faster and more efficiently than Prospero.

IX-3 – Demiurges

This initial vying for power that took place in the firmly sublunary world of Milan points to *The Tempest's* dramatisation of the struggle of a number of characters to find a means to get a hold on the power that would allow them to turn their personal dreams into their own and other people's reality.

It is not only Prospero who strives for demiurgic energy and who succeeds to a large extent in becoming, if not like a god, then at least like a deity, and who, on the island, controls every single aspect of the external world down to, "it would appear, the local weather."²⁹ There are also unsuspected characters—like Antonio and Sebastian, Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo—who strive in their modest, restricted worlds and with their limited intellectual and physical abilities to become little demiurges in their own right by being autonomous creative forces in the reality they live in or in the dreams they try to impose on others. This is certainly the case if the expression "demiurgic" is granted the widest possible connotations, ranging from its original, literal meaning pertaining to craftsmen, craftsmanship and creativity, to its philosophical implications referring to the creative power of a subordinate deity which, though not creating substance out of nothing, gives existing, chaotic matter meaningful and lasting shape and form.³⁰

At the end of the day, it does not matter how narrow these worlds may be, and how unexceptional the outlooks of the figures that inhabit them are. All that matters

²⁹ Miko, "Tempest," 5.

³⁰ Although *OED* defines "Demiurge" only in its philosophical and transcendental connotations—"A name for the Maker or Creator of the world, in Platonic Philosophy; in certain later systems, as the Gnostic, conceived as a being subordinate to the Supreme Being, and sometimes as the author of evil."—the opening up of the category is borne out by *Merriam-Webster*: "demiurge, 2: something (as an institution, idea, or individual) conceived as an autonomous creative force or decisive power."

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is whether they can make a difference within the confines of the reality they live in and impose the shape they have in mind upon it. After all, the picture that needs to be taken into account is always limited by the frame that surrounds it. Depending on who the players are, the frame that defines power and supremacy may sometimes be very limited indeed. Again, in this striving for power, it is neither the means nor the scope that matters, but the effect the endeavours have on the people.

IX-4 – Caliban

After Sycorax’s death, her son Caliban is the only human creature left on the island until Prospero’s and Miranda’s arrival. As a child of nature, he has no dreams of domination and high-flying achievement. The island provides everything he needs and is, literally and metaphorically, all the world to him. Knowing the secrets of the isle is bliss for him, and, with this knowledge, he has virtually everything he needs to reign supremely—if indeed there were such a need for him as to reign. He knows “all the qualities o’ th’ isle” (*Tmp.* I.ii.337), “every fertile inch o’ th’ island” (*Tmp.* II.ii.148), knows where to find “the best springs” (*Tmp.* II.ii.160), “pig-nuts” (*Tmp.* II.ii.168) and all manner of other victuals. If everything is provided for and can be garnered with a little bit of not too tedious work, and if, over and above that, there is no knowledge of what else can be desired, life must indeed seem perfect.

NATURE

However, even Caliban has a dream on his island that

is full of noises,
 Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
 Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
 Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
 That if I then had wak'd after long sleep,
 Will make me sleep again, and then in dreaming,
 The clouds methought would open, and show riches
 Ready to drop upon me, that when I wak'd
 I cried to dream again.

(*Tmp.* III.ii.135-43)

Caliban does not demand much of life. The dreams he has are sensuous and escapist. It seems that pleasure, innocent pleasure at that as it is detached from all physical and social aspiration, is highest on his agenda. Caliban may have lived unbred and unkempt on the island for years, but the fact that it is music that has ravished him, passively, and not the active search for illicit knowledge or delusions of power, only speaks in his favour, especially in a play that emphasises the restorative value of soft and solemn music throughout.³¹

What Caliban does not make clear, however, is whether he has always innocently had this dream of sheer bliss in listening to the sounds and airs of the island, or whether this is a dream he only started having after Prospero came to punish him corporeally. Even the level of innocence or corruption of the “riches” Caliban dreams of will almost certainly vary with his experience and change as to whether the dream is dreamt before or after Prospero’s arrival. Fact is, though, that

³¹ John P. Cutts, “Music and the Supernatural in *The Tempest*: A Study in Interpretation,” *Music & Letters* 39 (1958) 347-58. Notice, though, that it is the natural music of the island that has this effect on Caliban here. When music is composed—constructed and artificial, as it were—it may also have more sinister connotations: “Music represents magic and is an emblem of moral harmony, but it is also a means of manipulative control.” David Lindley, *The Tempest* (London: Shakespeare at Stratford-Thomson Learning, 2003) 217.

Prospero taught Caliban the creative power of language, but he does not give him the means to make use of it.

When Prospero arrives, Caliban learns that he has lost something that he did not know he had: absolute mastery of the island. Willy-nilly, Caliban is introduced to the notion of categories of power, and one of the first things he must learn is that he does not have the means to match Prospero's absolute supremacy on the island, since

His art is of such pow'r,
It would control my dam's god, Setebos,
And make a vassal of him.

(*Tmp.* I.ii.372-4)

Caliban is fully aware of his subordinate position on the island. Because of the education he has received from Prospero, he knows about social relationships. The realisation of the wrong that was done to him is with him constantly. It is therefore inevitable that, with a sense of justice budding, Caliban should feel loathing towards Prospero. And he is intelligent enough to make Prospero feel both the injustice he has committed, and the basic vainness of Prospero's own reign on the island: "I am all the subjects that you have, / Which first was mine own king" (*Tmp.* I.ii.341f). The answer hits home and provokes Prospero's anger. He points out that Caliban suffers because of his attempted rape of Miranda. As two wronged but self-righteous parties face one another, it is impossible to tell whose fault is the greater: "questionable act appears to have followed questionable act."³³

³³ Constance Jordan, *Shakespeare's Monarchies: Ruler and Subject in the Romances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1997) 160.

“If no Divells, no God.”

At first sight, Prospero’s anger seems justified. Yet, Prospero’s education itself may have failed, and it is not clear to what extent he is justified in complaining that Caliban is a “devil, a born devil, on whose nature / Nurture can never stick” (*Tmp.* IV.i.188f). While Caliban is unrepentant about his deed, the possible reasons for this are not as straightforward as Prospero would make them appear. In retrospect, and after the continuous mistreatment that started because of his *faux pas*, Caliban seems to interpret the rape as a means of acquiring a substitute form of the power which he lost to Prospero upon his arrival. At the time, however, Caliban may have acted out of instinct against which Prospero, who has social barriers ingrained that control instinct, might not have warned him. Basically, there is no more reason to believe Prospero unreservedly than there is not to believe Caliban. However, since Caliban is the underdog, with no possibility of rectifying the situation and proving Prospero wrong, Prospero has not only got absolute physical power over Caliban, but also absolute power to present his story the way he would like to.

MOONCALVES

Caliban, however, has a burning desire to regain what he has lost (and what he was much happier without, though he is not aware of it).³⁴ He does not give in easily. He is lucid enough to court his “most auspicious star” (*Tmp.* I.ii.182) and to seize the opportunity to regain power the moment it presents itself.

What happens when Caliban comes across Stephano and Trinculo must be a grotesque mirror image of what occurred when Prospero first set foot on the island.

³⁴ For an answer to the question as to who can rightfully claim possession of the island see Orgel, introduction, *The Tempest*, 37.

Caliban is taken in (again) by the novelty of his experiences and the “brave new world” (*Tmp.* V.i.183) that is penetrating his limited scope of experiences. He is as ready to follow Stephano as he was ready to take kindly to Prospero, partly because Caliban naïvely believes that Stephano, who gives him drink, is kind to him, and partly because he is under the novel influence of alcohol. Naturally, Caliban is only too eager to curse Prospero and become Stephano’s subject. This happens the more so because Stephano unintentionally makes Caliban believe that he is actually some kind of celestial being:

Caliban: Hast thou not dropp’d from heaven?

Stephano: Out o’ th’ moon, I do assure thee. I was the Man i’ th’ Moon,
when time was.

Caliban: I have seen thee in her, and I do adore thee.

(*Tmp.* II.ii.137-40)

Caliban is easily fooled by words that fit his outlook on the world. Those that dupe him, however, merely have “greatness thrust upon ’em” (*TN* II.v.146). They do not seek for it, but as it comes along their way, they are ready to embrace it without being prepared for it: “the King and all our company else being drown’d, we will inherit here” (*Tmp.* II.ii.174f). In doing so, they commit the same injustice as Prospero had by oppressing one of the previous inhabitants of the island before Prospero and Miranda set foot on it. Caliban, however, does not mind:

’Ban, ’Ban, Ca-Caliban

Has a new master, get a new man.

Freedom, high-day! high-day, freedom! freedom, high-day, freedom!

(*Tmp.* II.ii.184-7)

“If no Divells, no God.”

Clearly, freedom is not an absolute concept. If the master is chosen freely, even servitude can be freedom. Caliban still has to learn, though, that there are responsibilities that come with freedom, and that failing to assume those responsibilities will lead to disaster.

DRIVE FOR POWER

More is required to become a competent ruler than sheer luck, and having grown up in civilised society does not set people at an implicit advantage over simpler folk.

Caliban has much more integrity than Trinculo and Stephano. The latter accepts what he believes is the kingship on the island only because he does not have to make a great effort to have it. Faced with true authority, he gives it up as readily as he picked it up. When challenged by Prospero, Stephano does not protest, especially since alcohol is just about the only thing he really cares for. He shamefully shrinks out of sight, hoping to escape notice and punishment. He thereby proves himself to have the true mettle of a subject, courageous only when inebriated and not faced with opposition, for the rest tossed wherever the wind of authority blows him.

Caliban, on the other hand, rather parallels Antonio in his attempt to turn things to his advantage. From very early on he is good at playing Stephano off against Trinculo, lording him and being very willing indeed to “lick [Stephano’s] shoe” (*Tmp.* III.ii.23). However, this does not happen out of a sense of sheer grovelling subjection. He has a cunning plan to use Stephano and Trinculo to get rid of Prospero. He aims his manipulations at Stephano, asking him “to hearken once again to the suit I made to thee” (*Tmp.* III.ii.38f) by means of the kind of language that would be used at court. Stephano, feeling quite tickled at this, plays his role with

great dignity. In as exemplary an act of diplomatic manipulation as any that could take place at a civilised court, Caliban turns the tables on the initial master-servant relationship: he masterfully manipulates Stephano into doing what he wants without ever having been tutored in political calculation.

While Caliban, then, does not have the studied and socially acquired guile and the evil of Antonio, he is quite Machiavellian in his desire to get rid of Prospero. Even exchanging one master for another does not make him hesitate. However, if Caliban's allusions are anything to go by, he would have been perfectly able to throw off the shackles of the rule of "King Stephano" (*Tmp.* IV.i.222) sooner or later. After all, he has shown impressively enough that he has the drive to change the world according to his own desires.

NOBILITY

What undoes Caliban in the end is not only the mistake of having unwisely, yet perforce, chosen the wrong, superficial accomplices. He also fails because of the fact that he was all along contending against a greater power, trying in vain to stage a play within someone else's play. Caliban is not checked by pinches of a bad conscience or any moral qualms that tell him from within that he is about to commit a reprehensible deed. If he had succeeded, if no greater power had intervened, he might readily have taken the next step closer towards fulfilling part of his dream of ruling the island. Of course, there is again, no telling what would have happened afterwards, and how the relationship between Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo would have developed. If morality and rectitude are prerequisites for a stable social network, though, chaos would certainly have followed.

“If no Divells, no God.”

In this, he is lucky that Prospero has prevented his plans, and that he is not “pinch’d to death” (*Tmp.* V.i.276) by Prospero, as he expects he will be. Furthermore, he witnesses the poor figures that Stephano and Trinculo cut in front of the royal party. The show of mercy and his insight into his former master’s true character open his eyes:

I’ll be wise hereafter,
And seek for grace. What a thrice-double ass
Was I to take this drunkard for a god,
And worship this dull fool!

(*Tmp.* V.i.295-8)

Prospero may be grossly mistaken in his judgement that Caliban will never be able to learn and develop stabilising moral values, although the learning process will always be prone to setbacks. The play suggests, though, that such values are necessary for stability, and that those who do not have them should forever be under someone else’s control for the better of society.

IX-5 – Antonio

While Caliban is a novice and lacks the necessary education in the quest for power and control over one’s own and other people’s lives, Prospero’s brother, Antonio, has the prerequisites to be a successful shaper of his own fate.

USURPATION

Back in Milan, it was Antonio who turned out to be the most successful manipulator of fate when he applied all his abilities to rise in the world and impose upon it a reality of his own making. The story that Prospero tells of his misfortunes when he was Duke of Milan is one of classic application of Machiavellian policies told from the point of view of the erstwhile defeated who expects to be the victor. It is a story that must needs present Prospero, the narrator, as the innocent victim at the hands of his tainted brother who only just shied away from directly committing fratricide. Prospero will not grant his brother Antonio a remnant of moral scruples, brushing his own shortcomings aside: “whoever is responsible for another’s becoming powerful ruins himself.”³⁵ He attributes the fact that he and Miranda were not killed to political calculation: Antonio is concerned about how his deed would be perceived in the public eye, and he fears the people of Milan:

they durst not [kill us],
 So dear the love my people bore me; nor set
 A mark so bloody on the business; but
 With colours fairer painted their foul ends.

(*Tmp.* I.ii.140-3)

In this way, Antonio can hypocritically wash his hands of his brother’s death, which he expects the Fates to take care of, and at the same time forestall a possible uprising of the people of Milan.

³⁵ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 3 (13).

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In his narrative, Prospero lets on that Antonio has taken great care to plan his *coup d'état* well in advance:

Thy false uncle

[...]

Being once perfected how to grant suits,
How to deny them, who t' advance, and who
To trash for overtopping, new created
The creatures that were mine, I say, or chang'd 'em,
Or else new form'd 'em; having both the key
Of officer and office, set all hearts i' th' state
To what tune pleas'd his ear [...].

(*Temp.* I.ii.77 & 79-85)

Once Antonio had free rein in his office, he made sure to have the loyalties of those in key positions in his government. Left alone at the helm, with Prospero “neglecting worldly ends” (*Temp.* I.ii.89) and probably being no great help when it came to governing, he created the reality in the Dukedom of Milan anew, shaping the situation according to his own desires and advantage, creating an entirely new world inhabited by creatures, not people or even subjects, and making both the people and the nobles think highly of him. In a non-magical world, there can be no more powerful position than Antonio's since, wielded diplomatically, it allows him to create a world and people according to his liking and needs. No wonder that Prospero is infuriated at the thought of what was taken from him by his own fault. In short, therefore, Antonio made sure that power would be, and would remain, securely in his hands. All this is sound political practice:

against a man who is highly esteemed conspiracy is difficult [...]. One of the most powerful safeguards a prince can have against conspiracies is to

avoid being hated by the populace. This is because the conspirator always thinks that by killing the prince he will satisfy the people; but if he thinks that he will outrage the people, he will never have the courage to go ahead with his enterprise [...]. [O]n the side of the conspirator there is nothing except fear, envy, and the terrifying prospect of punishment; on the side of the prince there is the majesty of government, there are laws, the resource of his friends and of the state to protect him. Add to all this the goodwill of the people, and it is unthinkable that anyone should be so rash as to conspire.³⁶

In all of his dealings before he decided to become “Absolute Milan” (*Tmp.* I.ii.109), Antonio acted as a wise prince, following the dictates of sensible statesmanship and securing his position against conspiracy from within, whereas Prospero acted unsoundly by making himself indifferent to his people and neglecting his duties as head of state.

Only when Antonio, according to Prospero’s account, actively “confederates / [...] wi’ th’ King of Naples” (*Tmp.* I.ii.111f) does he start to break the fraternal bond that should guarantee his loyalty to Prospero. Only then does he transgress the boundaries of kinship and fidelity, and only then does he abuse the power he was given by Prospero. But his alliance with the King of Naples costs Antonio dearly. He secures the Dukedom for himself only by giving up its independence which Prospero had safeguarded so far. In order to obtain “fair Milan / With all the honours” (*Tmp.* I.ii.126f), Antonio promises the King of Naples to pay annual tribute. However, the most important thing at that moment is the undisputed rule of Milan, and Antonio is patient enough to bide his time in the hope of being able to reverse the subjection in due course.

³⁶ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 19 (57 & 58).

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GUILT

The opportunity for the *coup d'état* was created by Prospero's naivety and negligence in the first place, an unfortunate development. Even Prospero recognises this in his narrative to Miranda. “I, thus neglecting worldly ends,” he says,

in my false brother
Awak'd an evil nature, and my trust,
Like a good parent, did beget of him
A falsehood in its contrary, as great
As my trust was, which had indeed no limit,
A confidence sans bound.

(*Temp.* I.ii.89 & 92-7)

Prospero is neither innocent of his own downfall nor of Antonio's corruption. To be sure, Antonio's deed cannot be excused or justified from any moral point of view.³⁷ Yet, while Prospero cannot be blamed for having actively brought to the fore the evil in his brother's nature, he is most certainly guilty of a sin of omission: he self-centredly pursued his own ends and neglected his people, of whom Antonio was one, and his responsibility towards them. This responsibility comes with the leadership of a state, and it was understood to be sacred:

For I doe acknowledge, that the speciall and greatest point of difference that is betwixt a rightfull King and an vfurping Tyrant is in this; That whereas the proude and ambitious Tyrant doeth thinke his Kingdome and people are onely ordeined for fatisfaction of his defires and vnreasonable appetites; The righteous and iuft King doeth by the contrary acknowledge himfelfe to bee ordeined for the procuring of the wealth

³⁷ See Machiavelli on page 260.

and prosperitie of his people, and that his greateft and principall worldly felicitie muft confift in their prosperitie. If you bee rich I cannot bee poore, if you bee happy I cannot but bee fortunate, and I proteft that your welfare fhall euer be my greateft care and contentment: [...] fo muft a righteous King know himfelfe to bee ordeined for his people, and not his people for him.³⁸

Prospero does not fall under the charge of being a tyrant, but he overlooked his duty of procuring the wealth and prosperity of his people and his state. Machiavelli could certainly not blame Antonio for taking advantage of the situation and for trying to become in deed what he had been for a considerable time in show: the supreme ruler of the Dukedom of Milan. Antonio recognised the signs of the times: he courted his “most auspicious star” (*Tmp.* I.ii.182) and acted swiftly, knowing “that the one who adapts his policy to the times prospers, and likewise that the one whose policy clashes with the demands of the time does not.”³⁹ Yet, a man should never trust fickle fortune: “the less a man has relied on fortune the stronger he has made his position.”⁴⁰ Still, “fortune is the arbiter of half the things we do, leaving the other half or so to be controlled by ourselves.”⁴¹ Antonio falls in the category of those historical princes who

do not seem to have had from fortune anything other than opportunity. Fortune, as it were, provided the matter but they gave it its form; without opportunity their prowess would have been extinguished, and without such prowess the opportunity would have come in vain.⁴²

³⁸ James I, “Speech of March 1603,” 494f.

³⁹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 25 (78).

⁴⁰ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 6 (18).

⁴¹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 25 (78).

⁴² Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 6 (18).

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Prospero was short-sighted, and as a result he put the safety of his entire state in jeopardy. At the end of the day, he was not yet fit to rule his state: “[t]he prince who does not detect evils the moment they appear is lacking in true wisdom; but few rulers have the ability to do so.”⁴³ Out of Prospero’s short-sightedness grew the canker of Antonio’s evil, which might have remained dormant if Prospero had managed his affairs more wisely.

However, according to Prospero’s representation of events, Antonio was evil to the core of his nature, and it would only have been a matter of time for this to break through. Indeed, Prospero believes that a person’s true nature will out. Antonio, like Caliban, is another one on “whose nature / Nurture can never stick” (*Tmp.* IV.i.188f). While Prospero makes himself out to be virtuous and trusting without reserve, “Like a good parent” (*Tmp.* I.ii.94), he places Antonio at the extreme opposite end of the scales of good and evil. Furthermore, according to Prospero’s interpretation of his brother’s nature, there is nothing he can do to resist his destiny, as he is indeed “Fated to th’ purpose” (*Tmp.* I.ii.129) of deposing his brother. With this representation of what happened in Milan, Prospero aims to minimise his own shortcomings, since he implies that there was nothing he could have done to prevent the workings of fate in his narration of the past. This, however, is not entirely correct:

Most men follow their passions; only the wise resist. And therefore in the majority of cases astrological predications may well be verified. All the same, as Ptolemy remarks, *The wise man dominates the stars*; he checks

⁴³ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 13 (45).

their effects by withstanding his passions, for he is free and not under the sway of the heavenly bodies.⁴⁴

While the religious framework does not immediately apply to the world of *The Tempest*, this is something that Prospero himself will have to learn before he can return to Milan.

RECREATING REALITY

While Prospero has the means to exonerate himself, this does not lessen his guilt and shortcomings. Still, he creates his own version of the events of twelve years ago, in the same way as Antonio created, ruthlessly but entirely without supernatural aid, first for himself, then for everyone else to see and experience, a reality of his own devising which he unhesitatingly imprinted on Milan and Naples. He was

like one
 Who having into truth, by telling of it,
 Made such a sinner of his memory
 To credit his own lie—he did believe
 He was indeed the Duke, out o' th' substitution,
 And executing th' outward face of royalty
 With all prerogative.

(*Tmp.* I.ii.99-105)

According to Prospero's account of the events, Antonio is guilty of self-delusion and a serious distortion of reality:

⁴⁴ Aquinas, *Summa*, II (1), Q. 9, "Causes of Volition," art. 5, "Is the Will Moved by the Heavenly Bodies?"; vol. 17 (79). Latin on page 387.

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Antonio’s rule as pseudo-“Absolute Milan” was itself the consequence of another kind of self-deception. By a “telling” of his status as the Duke of Milan, Antonio came to believe that he actually and justifiably held that office. Language here created an illusion that substituted for the reality it masked.⁴⁵

Antonio would indeed be guilty of living in a self-made cloud-cuckoo-land, as Faustus does to a certain extent, if he did not actually go on and take action to make his fantasy come true. Antonio is not a deluded maniac who has visions of absolute, godlike power, as is testified by his political success.

While it is still the victor who writes history, it is not he who defines morality or states whether the nature of true kingship is external or internal, divinely ordained or freely exchangeable:

The usurpers are obviously concerned with acquiring the trappings of kingship, not in becoming true kings themselves. Totally unconcerned with the common good, Antonio, Sebastian, and Macbeth display little interest in the actual business of ruling. Hence they do not think that becoming a king involves any internal process of development. One need only get possession of the crown; in the deluded eyes of the usurper, all the other benefits of kingship will automatically follow.⁴⁶

The play, however, does not offer a value judgement on Antonio’s rule. In the world of *Realpolitik*, it does not matter whether one is the legitimate ruler on the throne or not. In fact, “one judges by the result. So let a prince set about the task of conquering and maintaining his state; his methods will always be judged honourable and will be

⁴⁵ Jordan, *Monarchies*, 152. Compare Paul A. Cantor, “Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*: The Wise Man as Hero,” *SQ* 31 (1980) 70.

⁴⁶ Cantor, “Wise Man,” 72.

universally praised”⁴⁷ if he is successful. Even though the play does not endorse the Machiavellian morality that shines through in Prospero’s relation of the events in Milan, the political reality that infuses the background of *The Tempest* is miles away from what could be termed Christian ethics that stress the ruler’s divine blessing by God and insist on dynastic legitimation, as James I had done when he ascended the throne of England, “this Seate (which GOD by my Birthright and lineall descent had in the fulneffe of time prouided for me).”⁴⁸

Although one may condemn Antonio’s deeds in Milan, arguing that the end does not justify the means, it remains a fact that Antonio has succeeded, for a limited time at least, in rewriting history both in word and deed. Antonio creates the new reality and catapults himself to the top of society. Unlike Barnes’s Alexander VI, he does this without having recourse to supernatural agencies that help him acquire what he desires. Apart from his alliance with Naples, he is a man unto himself used to being in control and remarkably good at it. When fortune is not against him, when he is among his own, he is perfectly capable of knowing what he wants. He can turn his desires into reality all by himself, judged only by his success and by himself. This has obvious advantages. If he fails, he fails because of himself. As he discards any form of higher authority, a failure, though not a pleasant experience, would have consequences limited entirely to the here and now.

⁴⁷ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 18 (56).

⁴⁸ James I, “Speech of March 1603,” 485.

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IX-6 – Religious Framework

While there are forces in *The Tempest* that influence men’s lives for better or for worse, forces that favour him who is alert enough to recognise the sign of the times and act upon it, there is no hint that these forces discriminate between good and bad and punish men accordingly.

The Tempest truly acknowledges and requires a belief in the supernatural for the play and its magic to work. Yet, the forces that are mentioned throughout are impassive and do not seem to care overly much about what is going on in the little world below. Gonzalo is ready to entrust his destiny to the hands of “the wills above” (*Tmp.* I.i.67), and to seek protection from them: “good angels / Preserve the King!” (*Tmp.* II.i.306f). Towards the end of their ordeal on the island, he prays for “Some heavenly power [to] guide us / Out of this fearful country” (*Tmp.* V.i.105f). It is also he, the Utopian, or foolish, believer in the possibility of setting up a kingdom that would “excel the golden age” (*Tmp.* II.i.169), who firmly and unreservedly trusts the heavenly powers to have a design to everything that is happening on earth. He believes that there is no gratuitous event, even though it might seem so to human beings from their limited perspectives:

Look down, you gods,
And on this couple drop a blessed crown!
For it is you that have chalk’d forth the way
Which brought us hither.

(*Tmp.* V.i.201-4)

However, it is only Alonso who concurs, and it is not entirely clear if his “amen” (*Tmp.* V.i.204) extends to the blessing of Ferdinand and Miranda, or to Gonzalo’s statement about the controlling hands of the gods, or to both. And even for Gonzalo

himself, who swears “I’ th’ name of something holy” (*Tmp.* III.iii.94), the powers above are unfathomable, undefinable, and unnameable. There is only one approximation to the idea of the Christian God. It occurs when Antonio and Sebastian actually deride Gonzalo’s vision of the golden age, mockingly addressing him as king: “*Sebastian:* ’Save his Majesty! / *Antonio:* Long live Gonzalo!” (*Tmp.* II.i.169f). The formulaic expression “God save his Majesty” is elided. The intended reference, however, is clear but does not point to a reverend belief in the Christian God, or in any god for that matter. Furthermore, those characters that honestly believe in the supernatural are also vague in their allusions to it. When Ferdinand sadly concludes that the vanished music “waits upon / Some god o’ th’ island” (*Tmp.* I.ii.389f), he has positive expectations, but the overall attitude towards the music and the god is comforting, rather than judging or morally guiding. Besides, the god is not specified, and could just as well turn out to be a Setebos than a benign entity.

The Tempest portrays a polytheistic frame of reference: the existing divinities are never clearly identified. Worse, the gods are either absent from the events of the world, or they have a callous attitude towards it. Prospero himself, who later on in the play assumes the role of fate and fortune through Ariel and “the rabble” (*Tmp.* IV.i.37), rather believes in unreliable fortune than in just gods. He and Miranda were “blessedly help hither” (*Tmp.* I.ii.63) “By Providence divine” (*Tmp.* I.ii.159). In the same way, not he but an “accident most strange” (*Tmp.* I.ii.178) has brought his enemies within the reach of his powers. While it is true that “bountiful Fortune” (*Tmp.* I.ii.178) is “Now my dear lady” (*Tmp.* I.ii.179), though she did not seem to be so twelve years before, such favours cannot be taken for granted, and it is imperative that Prospero take advantage of the favourable

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situation. All in all, *The Tempest* moves in a world of uncertain supernatural powers that seem more absent than present. Their workings appear to tend towards a restoration of the social order, though it is impossible to tell whether by design or by accident. And they do most certainly not put everything right for human beings, who need to take fate into their own hands to a large extent, partly because they want to, and partly because they are driven to. While *The Tempest* was certainly written and performed in a Christian society that had lost all certainties, the characters within the play cannot without hesitation be accepted to be “human[s] in a Christian world.”⁴⁹

IX-7 – The Conscience of a Usurper

For Antonio, this curious mishmash between secular and spiritual outlooks means that there is no fear of divine retribution that tempers his actions or slows down his progress. The here and now is all that matters. While he might vaguely believe in a superior consciousness, he certainly does not see this as an authority rewarding or punishing people according to their deserts. Without an afterlife, nothing clouds the enjoyment of his triumphs. There is never even the slightest hint that he might wager present worldly felicity for future eternal suffering. He relies entirely upon himself and has a blind and almost supercilious trust in his own abilities to mould the world, and the people that inhabit it, according to his own desires.

As a result, there is never a moment when he hesitates or has reservations about his own advancement. Presented with the opportunity of ridding himself of his overlord, he does not hesitate in the least and sets to work immediately to beguile Sebastian to commit the same crime he is guilty of: usurpation of the elder brother’s

⁴⁹ Mowat, “Hocus,” 290.

crown. This time, however, the crime will be much worse as it involves Alonso's murder. In Antonio's world, it is he who is the devil that ensnares his friends and rivals and makes them his victims in order to promote his own position, winding his way like a wily fiend into the heart of "Noble Sebastian" (*Tmp.* II.i.215) step by step and corrupting him all too easily. Both Antonio and Sebastian come closer than ever to losing touch with reality, as there is a clear delusory and self-blinding angle to their plot. Nevertheless, Antonio is thoroughly confident that he can become ruler (over a dozen people) on the island, in the same way as he made all of Prospero's creatures his when he was in Milan: "My brother's servants / Were then my fellows, now they are my men" (*Tmp.* II.i.273f).

There is no real reason for Antonio and Sebastian to think they could not pull this off and create a miniature court and society on the island, taking power and control as far as possible (even though, caught on the island, they lack a prospect for the future). Neither divinity nor devil make Antonio pause over his projected course. The only power that could stop Antonio on his path is, then, within himself: his conscience, being

the light of knowledge that God hath planted in man, which euer watching ouer all his actions, as it beareth him joyfull testimonie when he does right, fo it choppeth it him with a feeling that hee hath done wrong, when euer he commiteth any finne. And surely, although this confcience bee a great torture to the wicked, yet is it as great a comfort to the godlie, if wee will confider it rightly.⁵⁰

For James I, conscience is an important tool that governs the equitable relationship between all men and is important in a just state, even though it is not unproblematic:

⁵⁰ James I, *Βασιλικὸν δῶρον*, Bk 1 (14). See also on page 253.

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“a small sinne wilfullie committed, with a deliberate resolution to breake the bridle of conscience therein, is farre more grievous before God, then a greater sinne committed in a suddaine passion, when conscience is a sleepe.”⁵¹ None of this applies to Antonio who negates all forms of salvatory or retributory religion by categorically negating his belief even in conscience. Compared to Faustus and Alexander VI, Antonio has evolved, though the merits of this evolution are doubtful. It is his conscience that briefly causes Faustus to hesitate before taking the decisive step. It is his conscience that eventually causes Alexander’s downfall. Yet, conscience does not stand in Antonio’s way:

Sebastian: But for your conscience?

Antonio: Ay, sir; where lies that? If ’twere a kibe,
’Twould put me to my slipper; but I feel not
This deity in my bosom. Twenty consciences,
That stand ’twixt me and Milan, candied be they,
And melt ere they molest!

(*Tmp.* II.i.275-80)

Antonio again reinforces his belief in himself as the creator of his own destiny and the judge of his own actions.

In this light, Antonio’s silence at the end of the play is the silence of one who has met more than his match. His brother has taken all the demiurgic powers of manipulation and creation away from him and he finds himself at his mercy. Antonio’s dream turns into a nightmare because he failed to recognise what any successful Machiavellian prince should be wary of all the time: “as fortune is changeable whereas men are obstinate in their ways, men prosper so long as fortune

⁵¹ James I, *Βασιλικὸν δῶρον*, Bk 1 (16f).

and policy are in accord, and when there is a clash they fail.”⁵² Antonio is precisely such an obstinate prince who never thinks of changing ways that have so far been the means of his success. Fortune has changed, and Antonio is the last to recognise this. Even in his stubborn silence he seems to refuse to accept Prospero’s mastery over his fate or to attribute it to his own shortcomings. In this instance, it is Prospero who is the ultimate manipulator behind Antonio’s failure. While Antonio was master of the revels in Italy, he has become a mere pawn in his brother’s play on the island.

Antonio, like Caliban, is then not stopped because of better knowledge or reformation. Left to himself, there would be no inner or outer limits to impede his path to power and greatness. As is the case with Caliban, it is again a higher power that brings about the change for the better. Again this power is neither divine nor demonic. If it had not intervened, there would be no telling how far Antonio would have been prepared to go to reach his aims, taking down society in the process, as Alexander VI did.

IX-8 – Prospero

The higher power that stops Antonio short in his track is Prospero, the single most potent figure on the island. Unlike *Doctor Faustus*, however, *The Tempest* never makes an issue of the question of whether the source of Prospero’s power is licit or illicit, good or bad. It is clear from the start that there is no demonic pact or venturing of eternal salvation involved. Instead, power quite simply derives from learning.

⁵² Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 25 (80).

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LIMITS

There is no explanation of how or why Prospero has come to have virtually unlimited control over Ariel. It is only evident that there was no need and no use for spirit-conjuring magic, with Ariel everlastingly locked fast in the tree. In the light of the uncaring supernatural world in *The Tempest*, the welfare of Prospero’s eternal soul in the procedure is not questioned. Besides, while Faustus and Alexander VI need their respective devils to provide them with the power they crave, and in the obtaining of it wager their immortal souls, the situation is inverted as far as Prospero and Ariel are concerned. There is nothing the spirit could offer Prospero since he already wields the power that allows him to make Ariel his servant. *The Tempest* has taken a decisive step towards putting man into the centre, a step that will be mirrored five years later in Jonson’s *The Devil Is an Ass*. Here, it is the human being who is the creditor, while the spirit is in the position of the supplicant. The power is in learning alone, not in tapping into the spiritual world. One of the reasons of Alexander’s and Faustus’s downfalls resides in the fact that they never see themselves as debtors to the devil and clearly underestimate the danger of the situation they have got themselves into. For Prospero, on the other hand, there is no need to have care since the play does not intimate that Prospero is guilty of a sin against divinity in the acquisition of his powers.

Even so, Prospero’s control is limited. For one, he cannot leave the island when he chooses to. Indeed, he is subject to the workings of fortune as much as everyone else. His project can only be set going the moment there is an “auspicious star” (*Tmp.* I.ii.182). He therefore needs to work closely together with the forces of nature and take advantage of the favour of the moment if he wants to bring his projects to a

successful end. In the same way, Prospero needs to take account of the nature of the servant-creatures, spiritual as well as bodily, that are under his command. Prospero himself admits that,

as 'tis,
We cannot miss him [Caliban]. He does make our fire,
Fetch in our wood, and serves in offices
That profit us.

(*Tmp.* I.ii.310-3)

Although Prospero has unlimited control over the spirits of the island, which he usually exerts through the medium of Ariel, he clearly realises that he must not make the same mistake Sycorax made when she tried to force Ariel to carry out labours that did not agree with his nature, since he is “a spirit too delicate / To act her earthy and abhorr'd commands” (*Tmp.* I.ii.272f). For such menial tasks Prospero needs a Caliban. This also means that the power he wields through Ariel cannot be destructive since it is likely that Ariel would refuse to carry out for Prospero abhorred commands of whatever nature in the same way as he refused to carry them out for Sycorax. While Prospero thus needs to take heed of the nature of things as well as of fortune, he has the advantage of “prescience” (*Tmp.* I.ii.180), which he can make use of to direct his powers into the most fruitful tracks possible in harmonious conjunction with nature.

THE TRAPPINGS OF DIVINITY

All in all Prospero's power is unchallenged by either human or divine intervention. While he is to a certain extent at the mercy of fortune, he lives in the same kind of

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spiritual universe as his brother Antonio. Fortune may exist, but it does not judge good or bad, and arbitrating deities are conspicuously absent from anything that happens on the island. In the same way as Antonio was free to act the way he wanted to in Italy, checked only by the need to avoid an uprising of his subjects, so Prospero has *carte blanche* on the island thanks to his magical powers which put him above all challenge. He has indeed “appropriated the trappings of divinity,”⁵³ and he does not hesitate to make extensive use of his powers.

Prospero puts himself in the position of a deity when he provides the opportunity for Antonio and Sebastian to conspire against Alonso. “It is as if Prospero [...] were deliberately setting up an experiment to test the nature and strength of human villainy.”⁵⁴ What makes the value of the experiment doubtful, however, is the fact that Prospero full well knows what its outcome is going to be: “Given Antonio, murder and treachery will follow. He will prey instinctively upon those innocent enough to trust him or incautious enough to sleep in his presence.”⁵⁵ Experience has certainly taught Prospero to read his brother just as well. The motivation behind this experiment is therefore at best open to conflicting interpretations. For a long time it is not clear whether the balance will eventually swing towards punishment or towards mercy, nor does it become apparent which, if any, of these Prospero had in mind when he instructed Ariel to send everyone except Antonio and Sebastian to sleep. Prospero offers an inkling of how far he sees himself in the role of the otherwise absent deity in the speech he instructs Ariel to deliver to the court party in the figure of a harpy:

⁵³ Jordan, *Monarchies*, 5.

⁵⁴ Robert Grams Hunter, *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness* (New York, NY: Columbia UP, 1965) 230.

⁵⁵ Hunter, *Forgiveness*, 230. Hunter omits to mention that Alonso’s falling asleep is not due to his incautiousness, but to Prospero’s intervention.

You are three men of sin, whom Destiny,
 That hath to instrument this lower world
 And what is in't, the never-surfeited sea
 Hath caus'd to belch up you; and on this island
 Where man doth not inhabit—you 'mongst men
 Being most unfit to live. I have made you mad;
 [...]

I and my fellows
 Are ministers of Fate.
 [...]

But remember
 (For that's my business to you) that you three
 From Milan did supplant good Prospero,
 Expos'd unto the sea (which hath requite it)
 Him, and his innocent child; for which foul deed
 The pow'rs, delaying (not forgetting), have
 Incens'd the seas and shores—yea, all the creatures,
 Against your peace.

(*Tmp.* III.iii.53-8, 60f & 68-75)

While the speech is designed to put the listeners into fear of just supernatural powers that oversee events on earth to put them right eventually, it becomes clear to anyone who knows that it is Prospero who is pulling the strings that he does indeed put himself on the same footing as Destiny and Fate. It was he, in the role of Destiny and the powers who do not forget past wrongs, who caused the sea to storm and who brought about the crew's and passengers' safe landing on the shores of the island, but who, at the same time, does not grant them peace. Ariel, the minister of Fate, acts under Prospero's orders. Soon, Prospero is at the height of his powers, and there is no one nor anything that can stop him on his path, since there is no one on the island, in the skies, or in hell that could match his abilities. Dramatic interplay is totally absent in *The Tempest*, since no one is in the position to thwart Prospero's

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project. At first sight, such absolute control in one character does not promise a very exciting play, since there does not appear to be room for a conflict with an undecided outcome. In this respect, *The Tempest* presents itself as a *Doctor Faustus* with God on stage who makes it clear right from the start what Faustus’s fate is going to be.

THE CONSCIENCE OF A DUKE

Prospero’s powers do not always inspire sympathy: “Prospero’s magic is the basis of charismatic rule. It engenders visions of omnipotence [...] which prove to be as hubristic as they are self-deluding.”⁵⁶ Again, however, as with Antonio, these visions would only be chimerical if Prospero either lacked the power to make them last, or if he deceived himself about how far exactly his power could go. Neither of these applies. Prospero is very clear about his abilities. Thanks to his magical art, he could do with and to his enemies whatever he wanted to. What is more, he could even enforce punishments for “their high wrongs [which] I am strook to th’ quick [with]” (*Tmp.* V.i.25) without any fear of divine retribution. Furthermore, in the sense that his actions are never restrained by his conscience, he shows that he has more of his brother than his admirers would readily admit. The erratic and vindictive streak in his nature that causes him to lose his temper with Caliban and even with Ariel would certainly not object to seeing past wrongs avenged: “delaying (not forgetting)” (*Tmp.* III.iii.73) punishment is, and perforce has been, at the heart of his strategy.

⁵⁶ Kurt Tetzeli von Rosador, “The Power of Magic: From *Endimion* to *The Tempest*,” SS 43 (1991) 12f.

Towards the end, it seems to be Ariel who brings out the better aspects of Prospero's nature:

Your charm so strongly works 'em
That if you now beheld them, your affections
Would become tender.

Prospero: Dost thou think so, spirit?
Ariel: Mine would, sir, were I human.
Prospero: And mine shall.
Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling
Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,
One of their kind, that relish all as sharply
Passion as they, be kindlier mov'd than thou art?

(*Tmp.* V.i.17-24)

On the face of it, it does indeed look as if Ariel had turned Prospero from the God who insists that “Vengeance is mine” (Rom. 12:19) into the merciful and forgiving Christian God of the New Covenant who asserts that the “rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance” (*Tmp.* V.i.27f). If this were true, it would not shed a positive light at all on Prospero. It would make him appear as a man who does not really know what to do with the opportunity that fate has provided him with; as a man who exercises his power for the sake of it without having made up his mind as to what results it should yield; as a man who does not only want to take revenge, but also to maximise pointless torture before he moves for the final kill.

However, on the whole Prospero's attitude is laudable, while there is always a lingering suspicion that even here Prospero assumes the role of a divine figure who can freely choose to punish or forgive without being the worse for either course of action. However, James I advises a similar strategy:

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Embrace true Magnanimitie, not in being vindictiue, which the corrupted iudgements of the worlde thinkes to bee true Magnanimitie; but by the contrarie, in thinking your offender not worthy of your wrath, emptying ouer your owne passion, and triumphing in the commanding your selfe to forgiue.⁵⁷

At the end of the day, neither James nor Prospero are truly humble as there lurks, in James’s Christian advice to forgive, a suggestion of haughty overbearing.

REACHING FOR THE SOUL

Yet, it is evident that Prospero has a “project” (*Tmp.* II.i.299; V.i.1; Epilogue 12) and a clear idea of what he wants to achieve: restoration of his Dukedom and healing of the social rift that was created twelve years before. The reason why he goes about this by subjecting his enemies to inward and outward tortures has to do with the single most significant constraint that is part and parcel of his magical powers: no matter how far he has control over nature, he simply cannot control whatever goes on inside human beings. The real limitations of Prospero’s power lie within. The way Shakespeare presents Prospero’s magic differs—yet again—from the traditional views of natural magic in Early Modern England. This theory of magic saw two kinds of operations: “subjective” and “transitive.” While in the former the “effects [...] remain within the operator,” in the latter

the operator imposes an effect on someone else without undergoing it himself. [...] The use of transitive magic directed at animate beings constitutes an overlap with practical psychology; such magic is meant to

⁵⁷ James I, *Βασιλικὸν δῶρον*, Bk 2 (95).

control and direct other people's emotions by altering their imagination in a specific and permanent way.⁵⁸

While this squares with how the devil was believed to work upon witches, there is no suggestion in *The Tempest* that Prospero's magic extends this far. Prospero can lay violent hands on his enemies' physical bodies, but he cannot with a flick of his wand, nor with Ariel's help, turn an evil nature into a good one. Antonio will not become a loving brother just because Prospero might tell him to be so. Simple words will not give Alonso an insight into what he did wrong in helping to depose Prospero. A spell will not make Ferdinand fall in love with Miranda. And, at the end of the day, Prospero's book will not help him to control himself and to overcome his potentially murderous passions in favour of the restoration of the Milanese and Neapolitan communities.⁵⁹

The conflict that runs as an undercurrent through *The Tempest* is therefore intense, but largely hidden from the eyes of the audience, whose attention is absorbed by the magic and events on the island. Throughout the play, Prospero has to reason with himself that, although it would be easy to follow his heart and to take revenge, it would not be the right thing to do, since it would wreak havoc in the community he wishes to return to. In planning his project, therefore, he follows his mind, however difficult he might find it. In terms of restoring the damaged community, it is imperative that all the people, good and evil, of noble and of common blood, come to live together under one uncontested ruler. In order to achieve this, he has to show everyone that this time round there is no way of

⁵⁸ Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, 82.

⁵⁹ This issue cuts right into the heart of the debate of free will that was of such central importance to the religious controversies during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and to Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* in particular. How Puritanical would Prospero be as a divine figure?

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undermining his supremacy. In this respect, the physical subjugation of his enemies is only preparatory to the psychological one, which needs to differ with respect to the various characters.

King Alonso, who does not seem to be thoroughly evil, is the easiest figure to bring around and be reconciled with. While he was one of the villains in Italy, he becomes the victim on the island. Prospero combines corporeal torture with a remembrance of his wrongs, which he links in a cause and effect relationship with Ferdinand’s apparent death:

O, it is monstrous! monstrous!
Methought the billows spoke, and told me of it;
The winds did sing it to me, and the thunder,
That deep and dreadful organ-pipe, pronounc’d
The name of Prosper; it did base my trespass.
Therefore my son i’ th’ ooze is bedded.

(Tmp. III.iii.95-100)

This brings about Alonso’s remorse, penitence and reformation, which he proves to Prospero. When Prospero, testing Alonso again, breaks it to the King of Naples that “I / Have lost my daughter” (*Tmp. V.i.147f*), Alonso spontaneously declares that he would lief give his life to see the youngsters restored:

O heavens, that they were living both in Naples,
The King and Queen there! That they were, I wish
Myself were mudded in that oozy bed
Where my son lies.

(Tmp. V.i.149-52)

Alonso giving himself up for the benefit of others, together with his instinctive remorse when he came out of his trance, is all Prospero needs to restore son and daughter and to bring about the healing between the two principalities. With the burden of a guilty conscience lifted and the future of his dynasty gloriously secured, a gift which comes entirely unsuspected and largely undeserved, Alonso has certainly been made an unwavering friend and ally of Prospero's.

Antonio is altogether more difficult to win around. Indeed, all the signs are that Prospero does ultimately not attempt to achieve his brother's reformation, and it is evident that Antonio does not repent at any moment. And yet, Prospero forgives him:

For you, most wicked sir, whom to call brother
 Would even infect my mouth, I do forgive
 Thy rankest fault—all of them.

(Tmp. V.i.130-2)

On the face of it, Prospero appears to show an amount of clemency equal to what might be expected of a forgiving deity. Yet, in the world of politics, clemency and forgiveness without the power to back one's position against opposition would amount to an open invitation to another coup. Prospero, however, has made sure that he wields this power and more than hints to Antonio and Sebastian that they are at his mercy:

But you, my brace of lords, were I so minded,
 Here I could pluck his Highness' frown upon you
 And justify you traitors. At this time
 I will tell no tales.

(Tmp. V.i.126-9)

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Secret knowledge from a mysterious source holds Antonio and Sebastian in check: “Prospero can only control them, as he controlled Caliban, through the power of his knowledge of their evil.”⁶⁰ Yet, this knowledge is not the whole story. By producing the pageant of Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo, and by impressing upon the nobles the ease with which he managed to suppress their conspiracy, Prospero makes it clear that he does not only have secret knowledge but also the power to protect himself physically. This power is the more awe-inspiring because no one knows where it derives from, especially since Prospero is the only one who ever sees Ariel. Furthermore, Prospero makes sure that all will believe that he has in fact overcome the witch Sycorax. While he does not actually say so, he does not make an unnecessary effort to undeceive his awed audience either.

In all of this Prospero reveals himself to be an equally cunning Machiavellian politician as Antonio has ever been. With respect to Antonio, he realises that it “is far better to be feared than loved if you cannot be both.”⁶¹ And for the benefit of all, not only for himself, he follows the idea that “when he has the chance an able prince should cunningly foster some opposition to himself so that by overcoming it he can enhance his own stature.”⁶² With all this in mind, Prospero can confidently claim his dukedom from Antonio. As he has learnt how to deal with human nature, which lies beyond the control of magic at all times, and as he is certain that he can control cankerous growths and excesses in human nature, it is not a risk for him to declare that all of the people on the island, friends and enemies alike, “shall be themselves” (*Tmp.* V.i.32). This does not necessarily mean that everyone will be virtuous or that the evil will be reformed. “Evil cannot, however, be finally and completely

⁶⁰ Hunter, *Forgiveness*, 240.

⁶¹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 17 (52).

⁶² Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 20 (68).

destroyed. Antonio, in some form, will always exist and can only be forgiven for existing.”⁶³ It is part of the success of Prospero’s project that he himself has learnt that even these people have a right to exist. Although some people cannot be changed, a wise and deserving prince will always be able to find room for even the undesirable traits of people’s characters and devise ways of containing them in a space where they will not be able to cause harm and even serve his purpose.

For Breight, all of Act V is a mere show of the exercise of the subtleties of statesmanship. Prospero employs “a characteristic strategy of state power [which] is to mask subjection of the body with a show of benevolence.”⁶⁴ Ruling is down to the exercise of power, and ultimately “[f]orgiveness is irrelevant.”⁶⁵ However, adhering strictly to such an interpretation would be negating the better part of Prospero’s nature, which is undoubtedly present. After all, he initially cares for Caliban before the attempted rape; he loves his daughter and Ariel; and he endeavours to restore the social community in Milan to the wholeness it had before his deposition, or even to improve upon the situation as it was when he was Duke of Milan. Forgiveness is indeed relevant, and that Prospero really means it with respect to his brother is revealed when he first mentions his intention to forgive, not to forget, on stage:

Flesh and blood,
 You, brother mine, that [entertain’d] ambition,
 Expell’d remorse and nature, whom, with Sebastian
 (Whose inward pinches therefore are most strong),
 Would here have kill’d your king, I do forgive thee,
 Unnatural though thou art.

(*Tmp.* V.i.74-9)

⁶³ Hunter, *Forgiveness*, 241.

⁶⁴ Breight, “Treason,” 28.

⁶⁵ Breight, “Treason,” 22.

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These words are said when all the members of the court party are still charmed and unable to hear Prospero, so there is no reason to suppose that he is manipulating his audience and hiding his true intentions. “Prospero calls Antonio and Sebastian worse than devils; they are corrupted into a positivism which removes morality from the world, erects power into a god, and calculation and self-seeking into a principle of action.”⁶⁶ If it were correct that Prospero pursues only political ends, he would in effect not be morally on a more respectable standing than Antonio or Sebastian. But Prospero has learnt to put the integrity of the community first, and the fact that he uses the tactics of the society he is about to return to should not be used against him. Restoration and change must come from within and not be artificially imposed from without. After all, the mistakes he made in Milan have taught him that it is indeed important to care for his subjects, however tempting it might be to spend one’s whole life acquiring knowledge.

IX-9 – Abjuring Magic

When Prospero returns to Milan, he will have abjured his magic. Corfield believes that he does so because his

vengeance is [...] morally contaminating. [...] As a revenger Prospero assumes the powers of godhead, setting himself up as a substitute for heaven. Implicit in Prospero’s project is a degree of presumption[.] [...] Prospero’s revenge project [...] is fundamentally misguided in the first place. [...] Prospero himself has failed his test. Instead of pursuing appropriate theurgic ends, he has chosen to “court” the “auspicious star”

⁶⁶ D. G. James, *The Dream of Prospero* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 150.

so as to pursue a revenge plot. He has misapplied his theurgy and, in the light of his failure, must abjure it.⁶⁷

However, when Prospero abjures his art there is no hint that he does it with a bad conscience or regrets doing it; nor is Prospero's project at the heart of it a project of revenge, but of restoration. Throughout the play there is no suggestion that Prospero will have to suffer for his acquisition and application of supernatural powers.

The reason why Prospero abjures does ultimately not have to do with the moral implications of his art, but with its usefulness in the world, and especially upon his return to Milan. Little good for the community would come from the head of state's being able to "[bedim] / The noontide sun, [call] forth the mutinous winds" (*Tmp.* V.i.41f), to "[rift] Jove's stout oak / With his own bolt" (*Tmp.* V.i.45f), or to raise the dead. All this would give him power, make him famous throughout the world, and cause him to have at least as many jealous enemies as there would be true or pretended friends. Magic would give him power, but it would not make him a better man or an abler governor of his state, nor would it inevitably assure him of the love and respect of his people. Prospero's magic is "rough" (*Tmp.* V.i.50) in the sense that it is unable to touch the man within. It can achieve feats of great magnitude, but it is not subtle enough to touch men's hearts and minds. It can instil terror, but if the man or woman it is directed at refuses to change his or her ways, there is nothing that can be done.

Mowat claims that Prospero "delights in his magic powers; however, as a human in a Christian world, he must eventually admit the 'roughness' of his magic."⁶⁸ While the former might be true, Prospero does not abjure magic on moral,

⁶⁷ Corfield, "Rough Magic," 41-3.

⁶⁸ Mowat, "Hocus," 290.

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but on practical grounds. If he wants to govern his state with understanding, he needs to live like a man among men, sharing their concerns, abilities, and limitations. Hubristic elevation to divinity, if that was ever an aim Prospero aspired to, has been discarded for good. Having more power than anyone else around him would eventually alienate him once more from his state and people and make him as lonely a figure as Faustus was. Prospero is not a parodically inverted Christ-figure, though. While Faustus in Prospero’s place might have seen himself in the role of a misunderstood saviour incarnate, concentrating only on the suffering in his role and largely discarding the beneficial effect for humanity, Prospero does not wish to redeem mankind from original sin through self-sacrifice. He wants to work for the good of society with himself very much present and alive.

Prospero becomes the supreme embodiment on the English stage of the paradoxical figure of the magician: a man of great power who can force or influence nature to alter her course for him, but a man nonetheless limited who is, finally, not a god, only human, and thus faces boundaries beyond which he must not pass. [...] [H]e embodies the paradox of superhuman power that is humanly limited.⁶⁹

Yet, Prospero is only humanly limited because he himself decides to be so. Limitation is indeed necessary if he does not want to become a lonesome outcast but an integrated member of the community which he has restored to its wholeness so resolutely and according to the best of his knowledge and conscience. And just as he decides to embark upon this course himself, he at least gives everybody else the opportunity to pursue their own aims. “Prospero’s grace will allow his [...] subjects

⁶⁹ Traister, *Necromancers*, 146.

both freedom and a conscious (hence also conscientious) life.”⁷⁰ This does not mean that Prospero is flawless in his judgements. Being human, he will make mistakes, even though these mistakes might be less devastating than the ones committed with his magical powers.

Prospero’s development goes even a step further. Having learnt to rely upon himself and his humanity without any distracting aid does not mean that he is not longer complex, erratic, and contradictory.⁷¹ However, when he asserts that “this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine” (*Tmp.* V.i.275f), he does more than just accept Caliban as a member of society. In fact, the acknowledgement of Caliban is an important step for Prospero to take. If Caliban really embodies “a whole range of qualities that we see in Prospero, but that he consistently denies in himself: rage, passion, vindictiveness; perhaps deepest and most disruptive, sexuality,”⁷² then Prospero has at last accepted all of his humanity and character. The insight is deep. Good and evil tendencies vie for supremacy in everyone. In the face of this strife, failure is possible. But failure must be risked for a meaningful development as a human being and as a politician, father, friend, and as a representative for mankind’s evolution, to take place. Nobody can survive in the long run as a split Jekyll and Hyde personality without serious consequences to ensue. Being human in a human society is all that really matters. But one must strive to be wholly human, embracing one’s whole personality, dark and light. When one sees Prospero and his party leave the island to return to Milan, one can truly exclaim “The world was all before them.”⁷³ It is a fresh start, with fresh possibilities for either failure, or success. The

⁷⁰ Jordan, *Monarchies*, 177.

⁷¹ See on page 283.

⁷² Orgel, introduction, *The Tempest*, 28.

⁷³ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (Longman Annotated English Poets; 1968; Harlow: Longman, 1990), Bk XII, 646.

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fact that *The Tempest* denies real closure—and is as such the culmination in a series of other open-ended Shakespearean plays such as *Measure for Measure*, where Isabella’s answer to Vincentio’s proposal of marriage is withheld—spells a sign of hope for the future of mankind this time around.

IX-10 – The Grace of the Dramaturge

Prospero has that to give which Faustus searches for in vain: grace. This does not mean that he rejects power. On the contrary. Without a certain amount of power he would not be able to grant grace. At the end of the play he appropriates an art that is no less formidable than magic: again he takes control of the narrative, recreating the past in his own terms and doing his best to shape the future according to his own wishes.

In the end, all the parties that were scattered about the island ever since Prospero’s storm had cast them ashore, as well as the inhabitants of the island, come together where Prospero dwells. For this one night, Prospero’s cell becomes the shelter for everyone, the disturbing characters, such as Caliban and Antonio, as well as the worthy ones. It is a mirror image of the future society in Milan. The community has been made whole again without a death to pay for it, and the former mage, who has effected the restitution of order, is at the heart of the social gathering to command the eyes and ears of all those present. He promises that part of that night

I’ll waste
With such discourse as, I doubt not, shall make it
Go quick away—the story of my life,

And the particular accidents gone by
 Since I came to this isle.

(*Tmp.* V.i.303-7)

Having given up one kind of power, his magic, Prospero reverts to the role of storyteller and dramaturge, which gives him absolute control over the events he wants to present. He is the victor who writes the history that will be passed on to future generations in Italy. With the narration of events in his cave, he embarks upon his demiurgic project of reshaping society and reality without the help of magic. And no one is there to contest it.

On the one hand, “Prospero’s demiurgic bid for freedom has ended. Like the escaped prisoner, he is caught and tethered back to reality again.”⁷⁴ On the other hand, however, his new art might be able to create a new reality more lasting and more secure than his magical visions have ever been or could be. The visions of the island might be “melted into air, into thin air” (*Tmp.* IV.i.150). Yet, the visions that Prospero can create with the power of words might be equally enchanting and convincing for the people in Milan and Naples. Furthermore, these visions have the potential to become reality. True, life and all that exists is ephemeral:

And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
 The cloud-capp’d tow’rs, the gorgeous palaces,
 The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
 Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
 And like this insubstantial pageant faded
 Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
 As dreams are made on; and our little life

⁷⁴ Corfield, “Rough Magic,” 48.

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Is rounded with a sleep.

(*Temp.* IV.i.151-8)

However, everyone’s life is not led in such cosmic terms that question the ultimate meaning of everything that is. Even if all that is will be uncreated one day, this does not release human beings from their responsibility to care for the here and now, as Antonio ironically does, and to make it as good a place as they possibly can. If Prospero’s magic, and the visions he was able to conjure up with its help, have resulted in such a melancholy outlook on the world, it is just as well that he relinquishes it in favour of caring for his people.

When Prospero leaves the island with all the other visitors, the world lying all before them, they leave behind them a truly happy creature: Ariel. All he ever wanted was his freedom from servitude to be able to enjoy his existence. Ariel embodies true delight in pure existence. As a genuine spiritual being, he is free from all desire to create, achieve, and acquire, in short, from everything that is of such central importance to the life of any human being. Curiosity and the yearning to move on to new shores are not part of his character. It is highly ironic that he, who is the instrument of all of Prospero’s miracles, and who has the innate power to create everything and anything he likes, does not have the wish to use this power, either for himself or for others. Once his freedom is had, he is totally disassociated from all forms of desire and aspiration, and living merrily is all he wishes to do.⁷⁵ He has achieved what Prospero has not achieved, and what human beings cannot achieve: being able to have everything, yet desiring nothing. This is undoubtedly the only possible way to experience happiness, but it is not an option that is open to most human beings, whose desire to obtain material goods only intensifies with the

⁷⁵ In this respect he is not at all so different from Caliban.

amount of power they gain, and whose duty it is to function as social beings. Even though Prospero does not spell this out, it is one of the insights that he takes away with him from the island.

The final insight of the play comes in the epilogue where Prospero even further loosens his grip on power, presenting himself as the human being he is:

Now my charms are all o'erthrown,
 And what strength I have's mine own,
 Which is most faint. Now 'tis true,
 I must be here confin'd by you,
 Or sent to Naples. Let me not,
 Since I have my dukedom got,
 And pardon'd the deceiver, dwell
 In this bare island by your spell,
 But release me from my bands
 With the help of your good hands.
 Gentle breath of yours my sails
 Must fill, or else my project fails,
 Which was to please. Now I want
 Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,
 And my ending is despair,
 Unless I be reliev'd by prayer,
 Which pierces so, that it assaults
 Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
 As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
 Let your indulgence set me free.

(Tmp. Epilogue, 1-20)

On one level, the epilogue completely pierces the illusion of the play, showing Prospero and the other characters on stage as the actors they have been throughout. On another level, the actor who plays Prospero still retains his role as Duke of Milan. The epilogue therefore speaks both in the voice of the playwright as well as

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in the voice of the ruler who has succeeded in becoming his own playwright. The conventions that govern their actions are surprisingly similar. Both have the power to create within the minds of their audience new worlds, transient in the case of the playwright, but potentially perpetual in the case of the ruler. Yet, in both cases, they cannot exercise their power freely without taking stock of the people that they try to impose their will on. If the worlds the playwright creates do not please the theatre-goers, no amount of verbal cunning will save him from failure. If the society the ruler shapes is not accepted by the majority of his subjects, neither divine nor legal powers will make his leadership last. It is all a matter of give and take, and at the end of the day no one has such power as to be able to impose whatever he likes against the will of the community.

Faustus is unable to put his power to rightful use for the benefit of the community. Putting himself first, he loses himself. Alexander VI refuses to accept boundaries and loses life and soul to the devil. Both characters fail because they are not ready to accept their limitations. Prospero, on the other hand, has the courage to put his fate in the hands of the community—as a duke—and of the audience—as a representative of the playwright. By reloading his power in this way, he actually gains more power that is transferred to his project from the spectators. But he also needs the audience for the play to make sense, in the same way as Prospero needs the people on the island for his revenge to work. Giving oneself up and working from within the community for the community achieves restoration. Because Prospero has this courage, there is every hope that future life will prosper. Of course, possessing the necessary verbal skills to nudge the audience into giving the desired response, as Prospero does in the last few lines of the epilogue, actually helps. But

most people will be happy simply to have been consulted and to have experienced the illusion of control.

PART III

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A TEST CASE

The Devil is God's Man's Ape.

(Not so) Proverbial

X – The Birth of Merlin

The development that is evidenced in the chronological comparison of these plays has proven to be far more revolutionary than it would be if every work were considered on its own and within a more limited time-frame. The change in attitude towards the supernatural and the spiritual that took its first tentative steps in the Middle Ages comes to a head in the heyday of the theatres in Early Modern England when the search for a new world order cannot be ignored by anyone who looks at the times with a critical eye. This is not to say that writers consciously set out as a group to push a certain agenda. It only goes to prove that, in an increasingly unstable world, there were issues of stability pressing enough to find expression on stage, either as a reflection of events in history, or as a presentation of ideas for a new, better conception of society.

The changes that some of the leading minds of the time had started to think about, and offer solutions to, in the detached world of the stage did not actually find a reflection in people's everyday lives. The interplay between the public representations of radical ideas on stage, veiled or otherwise, and their actual

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source / implementation in society is like the chicken and egg question. At the end of the day it is impossible to say what exactly the trigger for gradual change was. One small step here or there led to another until the realisation sank in that things were not as they used to be any more at all.

In this light, a play that is free from the constraints of time and place is a rewarding object of study as it allows the theory to be tested against a background that is as neutral as it can possibly be. The findings derived from a play that is removed chronologically, physically, and imaginarily from the Early Modern English stage and still a child of it might shed a new light on the development that was taking place, confirming or rejecting the thesis advanced so far.

X-1 – Origin

1662 saw the publication of *The Birth of Merlin: or, The Childe Hath Founde His Father* for Francis Kirkman (1631-after 1674) and Henry Marsh (?). The title page assigns the play to “*William Shakespear, and William Rowley*”¹ (c. 1585-1626), although neither external nor internal evidence allows the tragedy to be attributed unambiguously to both, or either, of the two authors: “In the absence of reliable external evidence the question of authorship must remain open: any individual (or combination of individuals) who was writing before 1662 may have had a hand in the play as it now stands.”²

¹ Joanna Udall, ed., *A Critical Old-Spelling Edition of The Birth of Merlin (Q 1662)*, MHRA Texts and Dissertations 31 (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1991) 118 & 119: title page.

² Udall, *Birth*, 31. See 23-31 for an analysis of the issues of authorship. Mark Dominik, *William Shakespeare and The Birth of Merlin* (Beaverton, OR: Alioth P, 1991) has the most recent book-length discussion of the question.

Dating the play is also problematic. When all factors are considered, the *terminus ante quem* for final revisions of, additions to, and cuts from the text as it now stands is the moment of its going to print in 1662, while the first possible date of its inception has occasionally been advanced to as early as 1596. In the absence of all unequivocal external documentation regarding the conception of *The Birth of Merlin*, the play stands undated and will, in all likelihood, remain undatable. Hence, the closest reliable dates that can be put forward for the drama are sometime between 1596 and 1626, the former based on an entry in the diary by Philip Henslowe (c. 1555-1616), and the latter being the year of William Rowley's death.³

It is precisely this cumulative amount of uncertainties about the play that makes it so tantalising with regard to the treatment of the devil and magic. It is also a revealing reflection of sixteenth century society in an early mediaeval mythological setting. In this light, some assumptions can safely be made. *The Birth of Merlin* is a play written in a Christian society that was still struggling to come to grips with a schism in its religion. It is a play set in, and about, a society that was engaged in a course diametrically opposed to the one society had taken when the play was conceived: while Christians were at best drifting apart on the European continent as well as in England during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, there was a strong movement towards the unification of peoples under one undivided Christian faith on the British Isles a thousand years earlier, during the fifth and sixth centuries. It is also a play about a myth mainly created more than five hundred years after the purported events; a myth set down by Geoffrey of Monmouth (†1155) in his *Historia regum Britanniae* (1136-9) and the *Vita Merlini* (≈1148-51); a myth

³ Alfred Harbage, *Annals of English Drama*, revs. S. Schoenbaum and Sylvia Stoler Wagonheim, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 1989) favours 1608 as the most likely date of creation but indicates the limits of 1597-1621. N.W. Bawcutt, *The Control and Censorship of Caroline Drama* (Oxford: OUP, 1996) dates the play to 1622 (136).

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embellished by subsequent generations that turned the pseudo-historical account into romance fiction which became particularly popular during the reign of the Tudors. So far, however, all efforts of situating the play have been frustrated: although the playwright(s) adapt(s) the myth to suit the needs of the drama, the situation never becomes specific enough to connect issues in the play with complete certainty to either Elizabeth I, James I, or even Charles I personally, or to events taking place during their reigns. Udall must conclude that *The Birth of Merlin*

sorts ill with these assumptions about a writer’s consciousness. Not only does it contain no obvious allusions to contemporary events, it offers no evidence that the author’s interest in the themes tackled was anything more than an awareness of their superficially dramatic qualities. It reveals an approach which is imitative, but unquestioning.⁴

However, the weakness of the play with regard to its dramatic relevance to contemporary political events and the resulting timelessness could prove an asset when it comes to shedding light on people’s attitudes towards the supernatural.

X-2 – The Supremacy of Christianity

The play is set in an era of uneasy transition from paganism to Christianity. In this way, it mirrors the uncertainties that beset people’s lives in Early Modern England, who also had to choose their religious and political allegiances.

The historical balance would eventually shift towards Christianity when Pope Gregory I sent the Benedictine Augustine, later St Augustine of Canterbury

⁴ Udall, *Birth*, 111. For an extensive discussion of the historical relevance of the events portrayed in the play, see 89-111.

(†604/5), from Rome to Britain to convert the peoples who had made their homes on the isles. Before his arrival, and after the Romans had left Britain, during the troublesome years of fighting between the Roman Catholic Britons and the pagan Saxons throughout long periods of the fifth century, political domination and religious allegiance were very much two sides of the same coin. As a result, elements of both Christian and pagan traditions pervade historical Britain as well as the play. The antinomy between the Christian Britons and the pagan Saxons is firmly established when there arrives at court

A man of rare esteem for holyness,
 A reverent Hermit, that by miracle
 Not onely saved our army,
 But without aid of man o'rethrew
 The pagan Host, and with wonder sir,
 As might confirm a Kingdom to his faith.

(Birth, I.i.71-6)

The Christian Britons win one of their greatest victories over the Saxons with the miraculous help of the holy Hermit Anselme.⁵ At no point throughout the play is the Saxon magical religion a match for Christianity. Anselme wins the battle against the Saxons as easily for the Britons as he later on defeats Proximus in the magical contest that is to prove the superiority of either paganism or Christianity. Indeed, Anselme's mere presence is enough to strike fear into the hearts of Armel and Plesgeth,⁶ spirits raised by the Saxon magician, at Aurelius's request to embody

⁵ Compare Macbeth's saving the day in *Mac.* I.ii. Neither victory ultimately lays the foundations for a lasting society.

⁶ Armel and Plesgeth are invented with the intention of giving them a duly pagan ring. They are not found in common angel lore, although the suffix “-el”, Hebrew for “God”, aligns Armel with the

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“*Achilles* and brave *Hector*, our great Ancestor, / Both in their warlike habits”

(*Birth*, II.ii.198f), in order to prove the supremacy of pagan magic:

Plesgeth: Our charms are all dissolv'd, *Armel*, away,

'Tis worse then hell to us, whilst here we stay.

[...]

[*Proximus*:] By all the Infernal powers, the prince of devils

Is in this Hermits habit, what else could force

My Spirits quake or tremble thus?

Hermit: Weak argument to hide your want of skill:

Does the devil fear the devil, or war with hell?

(*Birth*, II.ii.214f & 219-23)⁷

The only argument that is ever advanced on either side to bedevil the opponent is the commonplace opposition of one man's good being another man's ill.⁸ The question of what is morally good and bad is not raised at all. “What devil is this?” asks a Saxon lord when he first sees Anselme at Aurelius's court. For the Saxons, the hermit is “That cursed Christian, by whose hellish charmes / Our army was o'rethrown” (*Birth*, I.ii.187-9). For Edol, on the other hand, the Saxon Artesia is equally devilish: “what black devil / Could so bewitch the King” (*Birth*, II.ii.42f) as to enter into a peace from an unambiguously stronger military position? In this kind of argument, it will be the winner who eventually writes history, branding the

eastern tradition, especially as there is an angel named Armiel, who is “an angel officer of the 11th hour of the night, serving under Dardariel.” See “Armiel,” Davidson, *Angels*, 55.

⁷ Compare *Doctor Faustus* and the production of “such spirits as can lively resemble Alexander and his paramour” (IV.i.50) as well as the first line of the Epilogue of *The Tempest* where Prospero overthrows his charms willingly. There is even a foreshadowing, or an echo, of Jonson's Pug, in *The Devil Is an Ass*, who also finds earth worse than hell. Also compare the weak situation of hell in Jonson's *Ass* on page 191, or the relationship between the Borgias in Chapters VIII-3 and VIII-5.

⁸ See *Charter* on page 260.

opponent as the fiend in the process. The categories of good and bad are not clearly defined in a society that lingers uneasily in limbo.

In the events that are actually presented in the play, Proximus and his likes clearly come off worst. Despite all their powers of penetrating the secrets of nature and of time, the magicians are not all-knowing. When the child, Merlin, is found and threatened to be sacrificed at Proximus's behest, it is Proximus himself who dies because of a similar failure to know all and foresee the future, strikingly establishing Merlin's superior talents, and belying Proximus's claims of his "Art infalable" (*Birth*, IV.i.175):

[*Merlin:*] If thou thy self wilt write thine Epitaph,
Dispatch it quickly, there's not a minutes time
'Twixt thee and thy death.

Proximus: Ha, ha, ha.

A stone falls and kills Proximus.

(*Birth*, IV.i.178-81)

In this way, the supremacy of the Britons, the Christian faction, is established. Thanks to this powerful demonstration of Merlin's art, it does not come as a surprise that Vortiger stoically accepts Merlin's prophecy of his impending doom for his moral failure: "If it be Fate, it cannot be withstood, / We got our Crown so, be it lost in blood" (*Birth*, IV.i.256f). His fate seems justified, too, since it appears to be heaven's punishment for his sins, and since Vortiger promotes a magical religion destined to die out rather than Christianity that has the active support of the Christian God.

In the light of all this, it is, however, astonishing that the Christian Britons eventually lose out against the pagan Saxons. At the end of the play Uter Pendragon

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accepts his prophesied fate as stoically as Vortiger did his, almost totally detached from all its implications and unconcerned by the events that will set an end to his line:

Thanks to our Prophet
For this so wish'd for satisfaction,
And hereby now we learn that always Fate
Must be observ'd, what ever that decree,
All future times shall still record this Story,
Of *Merlin's* learned worth, and *Arthur's* glory.

(*Birth*, V.ii.105-10)

The idea is almost Shakespearean in its insistence on the supremacy of the word over “marble [and] the gilded monuments” (*Son.* 55.1). Strikingly, though, the universe is devoid of a governing moral principle as events just happen without any form of justice, be it man-made or heavenly, intervening in the process. Fate is truly blind and arbitrary, life is cut off without reason, and there is nothing after death.

X-3 – Shades of Grey

Nothing is entirely clear-cut in this pre-Arthurian world, which harbours more shades of grey than one might expect.

Even the characters who most profess themselves to be Christian still show vestiges of their earlier pagan allegiances and a lingering emotional closeness to the religion of the Britons' ancestors. Although the new religion is fervently embraced and recognised in its power, it does not yet prove to be an obstacle to an inter-religious marriage. Neither the hermit's adamant insistence that Aurelius should not

marry Artesia, nor Donobert's opposition, which voices the general feeling among the nobility, can cure Aurelius's foolish fondness. Christianity is not in the position to provide a barrier against manifestly unwise political decisions when the king is in thrall of the woman that courts his destruction: "may my Religion, / Crown, State, and Kingdom fail, when I fail thee" (*Birth*, I.ii.211f). In this way Aurelius forgoes the protection of what is presented as the one true religion, the Hermit's, whom he had only a little earlier termed "a jewel worth a Kingdom" (*Birth*, I.ii.27).

Division enters the realm when man puts his desires above the dictates of statesmanship. In doing so, Aurelius proves to his own detriment that Christianity is, for the time being, the only right choice in terms of both religion and politics. However, not even in hindsight is he offered the benefit of this realisation. After Artesia, the *belle dame sans merci*, has Aurelius in thrall, there is nothing that will ever be able to make him see reason. Love makes him blind to any proof that singles out the Saxons as the wrong allies. To this blindness is added the jealousy he feels for his brother Uter, who manages to overcome his infatuation with Artesia. It makes Aurelius abandon the Britons and leave his court to join Artesia and Ostorius in Winchester where he is eventually "poison'd [...] / By the Traiterous Saxons" (*Birth*, IV.v.63 & 65), indicating that Christianity would have been the right choice now.

Yet, the unquestioning allegiance to religion is not without problems as the cases of Modesta and Constantia show by the grief they cause both their fathers and their thwarted husbands. The two women take their religion very seriously and embrace celibacy for the greater glory of God rather than life as married women for the benefit of society. An appeal to a bishop to talk the two daughters out of their plans is unfruitful since "'tis against the Law / And Orders of the Church to force a

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Marriage” (*Birth*, III.ii.135f). Neither the bishop nor Anselme are willing to resolve the dilemma that Modesta’s and Constantia’s decision brings about since they themselves are caught in it:

Edwin: O reverent Sir, perswade not her to leave me.

Hermit: My Lord I do not, nor to cease to love ye,
I onely pray her faith may fixed stand,
Marriage was blest I know with heavens own hand.

(*Birth*, III.ii.21-4)

Although religion proves its authority in both worldly and spiritual matters and supports the political system that is sympathetic of the faith, it is unable, and unwilling, to settle disputes that involve rightful claims of both the spiritual and the secular. In this respect, it is inadequate when it comes to tackling the day to day problems that are as important as grander affairs of state. Underlying all of this is the firmly held belief that “happiness is yonder / [...] This world can never give it” (*Birth*, I.ii.168 & 170), which needs to be reconciled with practical issues of God’s Kingdom on earth. Such a reconciliation does not take place in *The Birth of Merlin*, though, which limits itself to revealing the painful contradictions of the spiritual and the secular without offering any way out. If this reflects in any way on the situation in Early Modern England, the playwright did certainly not see the future as bright.

The problems that arise account for Anselme’s gradually fading out of the play: once Merlin is born, he takes over the role that the Hermit filled in the first half. Almost necessarily, the focus changes when Merlin enters. While Anselme intervened actively and helped the Britons win the day because they in turn promoted his creed, Merlin’s task is largely limited to prophesying what the future holds, a sign that religion is really losing its usefulness. At the end of the day, this

may be the one decisive strength of the pagan Saxons: they are not governed by conflicting interests but focus solely on political power and employ all means at their disposal, magic and marriage as well as scheming and treason, for this end. In this way, even that which is reprehensible will prosper if the good do not find a means to stand united.

X-4 – Magic

The supernatural is accepted and embraced throughout the play as an irrefutable reality. Therefore, religion and a belief in God are shown as prerequisites for the correct functioning of society. That is why it comes as no surprise that magic is part of everyday life.

Donobert unhesitatingly attributes Modesta's impassioned plea for a single life to the influence of black magic, even though it has been endorsed by the Hermit: "Her soul's enchanted with infected Spells" (*Birth*, III.ii.96). Likewise, Anselme is ready to acknowledge the evil magic in Artesia's charms when he rhetorically wonders "What magick could so linck thee [Aurelius] to this mischief?" (*Birth*, I.ii.179), while Octa openly denounces Anselme's feats as "magick, hellbred magick" (*Birth*, II.ii.155). The stances are more than just figures of speech: the vestiges of the pagan traditions are still very much part of people's lifeblood, no matter what faction they belong to. The world teems with a dazzling array of magicians. There are bards, druids, wizards, conjurers, auraspers, capnomansters, witches and jugglers (*Birth*, IV.i.42-5), and there is never so much as a hint of censure. All these wizards and witches have as much right to exist and exercise their

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calling as has Anselme. There is never a thought of condemning them. This they do themselves as their powers are ineffective.

Even spirit-conjuring magic is not contested. The Christian context of *Doctor Faustus* requires Faustus to make sure and doubly sure that everyone understands that the figures he raises are mere sprites and not the actual forms and substances of Alexander the Great and his consort. In Marlowe’s play, the aspiration towards becoming a mage is bad enough without the charge of aspiring to the godhead by raising the dead. In *The Birth of Merlin*, it is tacitly understood and accepted by all those present that the figures cannot be more than spirits. Preparations for the complicated procedure of summoning them are not necessary. The source of the two parties’ art is never enquired into. There is no doubt that everything taking place is perfectly legitimate and within the norm, rather than rare and memorable, in this early Britain. Although Proximus loses, he is not damned, neither by the political or the religious authorities, nor by an avenging deity. The show must go on, both on the Elizabethan / Jacobean / Caroline stage as well as in Aurelius’s realm. Yet, when the king leaves in expectation of another show, the first step is still made towards his political downfall. The reason for this, however, is not any kind of supernatural guilt that he has laden upon himself, but his neglect of his worldly duties as a king in favour of sweet dalliance with Artesia. Responsible acting towards the state is paramount, no matter by what powers it is achieved. But even then success is not guaranteed.

X-5 – Merlin’s Parentage

The fact that magic is tacitly accepted does not mean that it is a gift for everyone. Anselme has it because of his allegiance to the Christian God. The prophet Merlin has it because of his parentage which finds its roots in both the natural and the supernatural worlds.

In Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britanniae*, Merlin’s birth seems to be an entirely noble affair, related by Merlin’s mother herself to King Vortigern:

When they were brought into his presence, the King received the mother with due courtesy, for he knew that she came of a noble family. Then he began to ask her by what man she had conceived the lad. “By my living soul, Lord King,” she said, “and by your living soul, too, I did not have relations with any man to make me bear this child. I know only this: that, when I was in our private apartments with my sister nuns, some one used to come to me in the form of a most handsome young man. He would often hold me tightly in his arms and kiss me. When he had been some little time with me he would disappear, so that I could no longer see him. Many times, too, when I was sitting alone, he would talk with me, without becoming visible; and when he came to see me in this way he would often make love with me, as a man would do, and in that way he made me pregnant. [...]”

Naturally, King and court are all amazed. Yet, Maugantius, the King’s soothsayer, proposes a tentative answer to the mystery:

“In the books written by our sages,” he said to Vortigern, “and in many historical narratives, I have discovered that quite a number of men have been born in this way. As Apuleius asserts in the *De deo Socratis*, between the moon and the earth live spirits which we call incubus demons. These have partly the nature of men and partly that of angels,

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and when they wish they assume mortal shapes and have intercourse with women. It is possible that one of these appeared to this woman and begot the lad in her.”⁹

Although Merlin is a natural child, Merlin’s mother in this version of Monmouth’s accounts is a respectable person, a nun who is innocently seduced by the mysterious visitor. The very fact that she acknowledges the child as hers makes Merlin a legitimate son, endowed with all the rights and duties that come with kinship. Indeed, according to Welsh custom, legitimacy is not based on a child being born within wedlock, but on the father’s decision to admit to his paternity publicly. This might account for Maugantius’s favourable interpretation of the “incubus demons” he derives from Apuleius as being in part angelic, in part human, an interpretation which, in these terms, is not Apuleian, but a Christian colouring of his thoughts. It lays a positive base for Merlin’s reception at Vortigern’s court, which is reinforced by Merlin’s immediate solving of the mysteries the King’s divines had been unable to probe.

The play’s “*Joan Go-too ’t*” (*Birth*, II.i.95) does not stem from such noble stock. Clearly, the moment Joan has to admit the circumstances of the conception to King Vortiger, she realises more fully than ever before how wrong her copulation with the unknown “Gentleman” (*Birth*, II.i.4) actually was:

Merlin: Mother speak freely and unastonisht,
That which you dar’d to act, dread not to name.

⁹ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. and introd. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), Part IV; Bk VI, ch. 18 (167f). Thorpe translates verbatim the Latin text of Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth*, ed. Acton Griscom (London: Longmans, Green, 1929), which is based on Camb. Univ. Libr. MS. 1706. He also divides the text into eight thematic parts. The more customary, albeit not Monmouthian, book and chapter divisions are given for the convenience of cross-reference. Also compare the story of Amor and Psyche.

Joan: In which I shall betray my sin and shame,
 But since it must be so, then know great King,
 All that my self yet knows of him, is this:
 In pride of blood and beauty I did live,
 My glass the Altar was, my face the Idol,
 Such was my peevish love unto my self,
 That I did hate all other[.]
 [...]
 In midst of this most leaprous disease,
 A seeming fair yong man appear'd unto me,
 In all things suiting my aspiring pride,
 And with him brought along a conquering power,
 To which my frailty yielded, from whose embraces
 This issue came, what more he is, I know not.

(*Birth*, IV.i.145-53 & 160-5)

Joan realises, albeit too late, that there is blame attached to Merlin's conception and that admitting to it might cost her and her son dearly. After all, there is no telling how the king will react to the story of a simple country wench who bore a spirit's child and who is as yet unaware that the incubus was the devil himself. That which made for many a comic moment when Joan and the Clown were still looking for a father for Merlin might now be the cause of her physical death. Luckily, Vortiger is kindly disposed towards her: "Some *Incubus*, or Spirit of the night / Begot him then, for sure no mortal did it" (*Birth*, IV.i.166f). Nevertheless, Merlin, who is the only one to know all about his father, thinks it wise to prevent any further probing into the mystery:

No matter who my Lord, leave further quest,
 Since 'tis as hurtful as unnecessary
 More to enquire[.]

(*Birth*, IV.i.168-70)

“If no Divells, no God.”

The circumstances surrounding Merlin’s conception and birth do not therefore become problematic, although there is no telling what would happen if the true nature of the prophet’s father became known. Accepting the existence of spirits is one thing, but dealing with the devil himself might be a different matter altogether. Ironically, it is Proximus who points the finger to the spot when he urges the need to find “The fien’d begotten childe” (*Birth*, IV.i.133). For once, Proximus’s “Art infalable” (*Birth*, IV.i.175) has instructed him rightly. It does, however, not become evident whether Proximus actually believes it himself, or whether it is a trick he can afford to pull because of his magical powers.

However this may be, the resulting situation is highly ambiguous. Here is Merlin, the prophet who comes to work for the good of society and to help it find a new stability within the diametrically opposed factions that contend for power in this era in flux, whose parentage can clearly be traced back to the force of evil *par excellence*, the devil. In Merlin, who incarnates the perfect inverted image of Mary’s immaculate conception and Christ’s restorative birth, the forces of good and evil become conflated, and it can never be absolutely clear whether Merlin’s actions are not in one way or another dangerous for the restoration of society despite himself.

With this hint of danger and illicitness, *The Birth or Merlin* is closer to the Welsh text of the saga of Merlin’s birth than to the Latin of Griscom’s manuscript. The former is far less sympathetic towards Merlin and his mother and gives the story an entirely different edge:

And then the king asked the women who was father of the boy. “On my faith,” said she, “I know not. Only daughter was I to the king of dyfed. And when still Young, I was made a nun at kaer Vyrddin. And as I slept among my sisters, in my sleep I saw a Young man who embraced me; but when I awoke, there was no one but my sisters and myself. After this

I conceived and this boy was born to me. And on my faith in god, more than this there never was between a man and myself.” And then the king asked of Bishop maygan, “Could this be true?” “It could,” said he. “For when Lyssyffer and the evil angels who sinned with him, fell, in the places and in the forms under which they were when God bade them cease, in those places they are to this day, and some of them are able to assume the forms of women, some of men; and thus perhaps was this boy begotten.”¹⁰

This text shows more Christian influences than the Latin one of the Cambridge MS. The incubus demons, which go back to Plato’s conception of the inhabitants of the heavenly regions, have been transformed into Lucifer and his fallen angels. Merlin’s conception is not tacitly accepted by his mother, in the Latin MS a daughter of a noble family and a nun who does not know how to react to the advances of a most handsome young man, and who took evidently innocent pleasure in being kissed by this unexpected suitor. It is not the play’s coquettish, narcissistic country lass either, who virtually invites the Devil’s advances and is an easy victim in the fulfilment of his plans. In the Welsh manuscript, the conception is likened to downright rape since the king’s daughter is asleep and unable either to consent or deny the advances. While in the former two instances, Merlin’s mother is at least partly to blame, the Welsh manuscript shifts the guilt entirely on the devil. Paradoxically, this means that Merlin’s position in society is more secure in the Welsh text than it is in the others where the guilt of the mother might easily be passed on to the offspring.¹¹

¹⁰ Griscom, *History*, 380-2. Griscom’s edition of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia* provides the translation of the Welsh Manuscript held in Jesus College, Oxford (MS. LXI) “for easy comparison and contrast” (150).

¹¹ The text that Jacob Hammer constructs from five different manuscript sources has an interesting variant in this respect. While Griscom’s Latin has a tendency to view the incubus demons positively rather than negatively, Hammer’s *Maugantius* adds an extra negative edge to them. In it the spirits’ nature partakes still of the human and of the angelic. However, there are also “*maligni et immundi spiritus*” that live in the regions between heaven and earth. The slight possibility that Merlin’s mother might have been victim to one of those casts a subtle doubt over his existence.

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However, the issue of Merlin’s possible guilt is not taken up in the play, suggesting that the past might not be as important as a person’s actual deeds and morality. A development of the problem is prevented, miraculously, by Proximus’s gratuitous death which forcefully establishes both Merlin’s prophetic gifts and also suggests that he might be favoured by whatever supernatural powers there are. Closely following the record of Monmouth’s events, the play also forestalls any danger for Merlin by his immediately solving the mystery of Vortiger’s ill-fated castle, by his ensuing summoning of the two dragons, their fight, and his interpretation of the emblem. Merlin is not Cassandra. He is Joseph. His every prophecy is believed, and he is respected for them, no matter whether they be good or bad. On the whole, except for the non-indigenous Saxons, Merlin is accepted across the factions. In all evidence, Merlin’s parentage does not stand in the way of his relationship with the secular worthies of the realm.

X-6 – Merlin and the Devil

At the beginning, there is something uncanny about the inexplicable apparition of the friend who takes on more the air of an immaterial dream figure than a real person. However, there is nothing demonic about him when he first appears to Joan. After all, no greater harm has been done other than what any lusty courtier might also have inflicted.

The next encounter, however, makes it unmistakably clear, albeit only for the audience, what mischief is afoot: “*Enter the Devil in mans habit, richly attir’d, his*

See Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia regum Britanniae: A Variant Version Edited from Manuscripts*, ed. Jacob Hammer (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1951), Bk VI (121). The passage is mainly based on a manuscript held in Cardiff Public Library.

feet and his head horrid” (*Birth*, III.i.141; s.d.). It is the first time the supposed gentleman is seen on stage, and all suspicions come true. Yet, the obvious is still hidden from Joan’s view: “My love, my friend is come, yonder he goes” (*Birth*, III.i.144). In this way, the devil becomes a parable for the evil that lurks underneath the surface and that those involved are unable to see. Even though he appears to be a tame devil at first, giving himself the air of a tenderly loving father towards Joan, there are veiled threats. Joan bears a “fatal fruit” (*Birth*, III.i.155), and with such a fruit brought into the world, the devil must have an ominous outcome in mind for the “day of doom” (*Birth*, III.i.156). But no harm is done, yet. At first, the Clown does not recognise the devil for what he is, either, even though he calls him “Ragamuffin” (*Birth*, III.iv.64), which is the name of a demon.¹² Later though, when he realises who Joan’s suitor is—“I do most horribly begin to suspect my kindred; this brother in law of mine is the Devil sure, and though he hide his horns with his Hat and Feather, I spi’d his cloven foot for all his cunning” (*Birth*, III.iv.103-6)—he does not act on this insight. Evil is accepted, and if an advantage comes from it, it is not condemned as morally bad.

Virtually every aspect that has to do with this devil is intriguing. Merlin’s birth, for instance, is worthy of even the most notorious and antagonistic of all the princes of hell, “full of sound and fury” (*Mac*. V.v.27):

Mix light and darkness, earth and heaven dissolve,
 Be of one piece agen, and turn to *Chaos*,
 Break all your works you powers, and spoil the world ...

(*Birth*, III.iii.1-3)

¹² In this meaning first and last recorded by *OED* in Langland’s *Pierce Ploughman* in 1393.

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At last, here is a devil who fulfils his role as the enemy of creation who invests all his energies in working towards the utter destruction of everything that is and has ever been in order to undo the works of God. That is an aim worthy of the fiend. Surely, his unexpected entry on the stage, amidst “*Thunder and Lightning*” (*Birth*, III.iii; s.d.), just after Modesta and Constantia have vowed their lives to God, is enough to strike fear and terror into the hearts of any audience. This would be promising, if the devil did not lose heart in the face of his own courage. Almost as if he knew that his project cannot be crowned with success, he gives in without even trying:

... Or if you will maintain earth still, give way
And life to this abortive birth now coming,
Whose fame shall add unto your Oracles.

(*Birth*, III.iii.4-6)

The devil’s rhetoric seems to be “Signifying nothing” (*Mac*. V.v.28): if I cannot have destruction, let me have creation, he says. He implores the “powers” to grant life to Merlin, who is about to be born, for the fame of these powers, not for his own. Every category of good and bad is confused in this scene as well as in the undercurrent of the entire play. First, Merlin’s birth is abortive.¹³ A little later, however, the devil calls it a “birth prodigious” (*Birth*, III.iii.15). It becomes so at the moment “*Lucina, and the three Fates*” (*Birth*, III.iii.14; s.d.) enter at the express invocation of the devil who calls upon

¹³ Udall’s gloss reads “monstrous.” *Merlin*, 219.

Lucina, Hecate, dreadful Queen of Night,
 [And] Bright *Proserpine*, be pleas'd for *Ceres* love,
 From *Stigian* darkness, [to] summon up the Fates[.]

(*Birth*, III.iii.7-9)

The devil invokes a trinity of classical goddesses—who all seem to be different incarnations of Artemis / Diana, the goddess that “presid[es] over the travails of women”¹⁴—to make sure the birth does not fail. And yet, his using the word “abortive” seems to point to the possibility that this might be a real danger. According to *OED*, it could also suggest “failing of the intended effect, coming to nought; fruitless, useless, unsuccessful.”¹⁵ True, the devil also calls upon the assistance of the “spirits of infernal deeps, / Squint ey'd *Erictho*, midnight *Incubus*” (*Birth*, III.iii.12f) and implores the Fates “To bring this mixture of infernal seed, / To humane being” (*Birth*, III.iii.18f). Yet, there is a sense that this scene, which should be the crown of the devil's triumph, is also the foundation of his eventual downfall.

First of all, the devil himself introduces spirits from a foreign world into Britain, which brings about a strange mixture of traditions in the play: not only are Christians opposed to pagans, but the supposedly Christian devil is in one world with classical deities. This implicitly reduces the importance of his stature. What should have been a blasphemous mirror image of Christ's birth, and even his death—with the return to chaos paralleling the darkness that falls and the rending of the shroud in the

¹⁴ “Diana,” John Lemprière, *Lemprière's Classical Dictionary* (London: Bracken, 1994). Lemprière, whose work was first published in 1788, says the following about the other goddesses in their respective entries: “Some suppose [Lucina] with great probability to be the same as Diana or Juno, because these two goddesses were also sometimes called Lucina, and presided over the labours of women.”; “HECATE, a daughter of Perses and Asteria, according to Hesiod, or rather of Jupiter and Latona, was the same as Proserpine or Diana.”; “Proserpine [...] was known by the different names of *Core*, *Theogamia*, *Libitina*, *Hecate*, *Juno inferna*, [...]”

¹⁵ “abortive,” *OED*, n. and adj. B1b. The draft revision of June 2009 records the meaning Udall gives “abortive” in her gloss as an addition to “of, relating to, or resulting from abortion or failure.”

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temple—is nothing more but a birth such as the Greek world saw over and over again. Even though the Fates honour the devil with the appellation “great servant to th’ infernal King” (*Birth*, III.iii.23), they implicitly reduce his importance. He is no longer the fiend himself, but a mere *aide de camp* who even needs the help of superseded deities to prevent the loss of his creation. Even worse, he loses his son to the Fates. It is they who give him

All their assisting powers of Knowledge, Arts,
Learning, Wisdom, all the hidden parts
Of all-admiring Prophecy[.]

(*Birth*, III.iii.25-7)

The devil is nothing. He neither gives to Merlin, nor does he receive anything from him. And Merlin gets it all:

his Art shall stand
A wall of brass to guard the *Brittain* Land,
Even from this minute, all his Arts appears,
Manlike in Judgement, Person, State, and years[.]

(*Birth*, III.iii.28-31)

And, most revealingly of all, the devil does not even get to name his offspring. In this respect his claim over his son is far less than he might imagine: it is the Fates who provide the son of Joan and the devil with the name “*Merlin Silvester*” (*Birth*, III.iii.34). An important symbolic act has been denied him.¹⁶ Right from the start, his plans have been thwarted. With Merlin’s birth, the devil does not gain hold

¹⁶ Interestingly, in the course of mankind’s dealing with the devil and demons, people have gradually claimed the right to name the creatures they encounter / create. If one considers Harsnett again, this right has eventually reduced the figures of the underworld *ad absurdum*.

on power, but, more dramatically even than Anselme, he is relegated to the second ranks. Merlin is at the centre of it all, and neither Merlin nor his actions cast a moral judgement.

Interestingly, the only person to spot the danger of the canker that destroys people and society from within is Joan.¹⁷ Recognising who the father of her child actually is, a reformed Joan rejects the “Hell-hound” (*Birth*, V.i.8), renouncing everything that has to do with the devil in her life, even unto her very existence:

Oh rot my memory before my flesh,
Let him be called some hell or earth-bred monster,
That ne'er had hapless woman for a mother:
Sweet death deliver me[.]

(*Birth*, V.i.25-7)

In answer to Joan's provocations, the devil, in appropriate anger, decides to remove Joan from Merlin forever. Still, his assertion, by which he inverts Yahweh's “I am that I am,” “I am the same I was” (*Birth*, V.i.32) rings hollow, now that he is trying to gain face. Although he behaves totally unlike himself, i.e., like a real devil for the nonce, his change of heart comes too late: he is quickly and effortlessly demoted by Merlin who comes to the rescue like any larger-than-life hero should. At first, the devil does not even recognise his son as the latter drives away the spirits that torment Joan:

Devil: Ha! What's he?

Merlin: *The Childe has found his Father,*

¹⁷ Compare Joan in *Grim*, and Frances in *The Devil Is an Ass*.

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Do you not know me?

Devil: Merlin!

(*Birth*, V.i.49-51)

What ensues is spectacular, but it hides the moral implications that were hinted at in Joan’s reformation as Merlin effortlessly prevails:

Thou didst beget thy scourge, storm not, nor stir,
The power of *Merlins* Art is all confirm’d
In the Fates decretals, — — — Ile ransack hell,
And make thy masters bow unto my spells,
Thou first shall taste it[.]

(*Birth*, V.i.70-4)

Merlin makes short shrift with the devil, and eventually “*The Rock incloses him*” (*Birth*, V.i.77; s.d.).¹⁸ However, to elevate this scene to a parallel with Christ’s Harrowing of Hell and Merlin with Christ would be presumptuous: the notion that the greatest good comes out of the greatest evil does not find reflection in the action of the play. This may be due to the playwright’s ultimate inability to develop a clear moral concept and vision of society as it should be if it is to last. However, it does not seem too far-fetched to assume that the play, as it stands, with all its emphasis on show and its confusion of the morally good and bad that are impossible to disentangle one from another, is more a reflection of the real world than one might feel comfortable with.

¹⁸ See “The Harrowing of Hell,” stanza 29, in the *York Mystery Plays* where Jesus commands the Archangel Michael to bind Satan who “synke[s] in to helle pitte” (37:348).

X-7 – A New World Order

The author of the play, a Rowley rather than a Shakespeare, accepts Geoffrey of Monmouth's framework and works within it to engender a show designed to have as much public appeal as possible. Religious or magical considerations are not of any importance to him: they are not points of contention that would be typical of a play that seeks to question, to divide and to unite. There is obviously not much fear of repressive measures by the religious or political authorities either. The Monmouthian framework helps to diffuse such contention, but it also sheds a light on the situation of the time of the play.

The play is a conflation of contradictory traditions. The classical lives beside the Christian; the mythological is pitched against the mediaeval and the folkloric; Christ and Mary see their inversion in Merlin and Joan; the pagan and the Christian are constantly at odds. Yet, in all of this there is no suggestion of an absolute good and an absolute bad. The Saxons lose at the beginning, yet this does not point to the moral superiority of the Christians, who will eventually disappear, and whose fall is not a moral comment in any way. Rise and fall are not linked to reward and punishment, but to a natural, cyclical movement that every man, that every social network, and that even every preternatural creature is caught within.

The Birth of Merlin provides an unusual solution to the issue of the intrinsic value of the supernatural and its pertaining moralities. Ultimately, there is no support from any preternatural being, at least not if one seeks moral absolutes. In effect, in the world that in no way denies the existence nor the importance of the supernatural, mankind is left unto itself to carve out a *modus vivendi* and a moral framework to survive in the world. But the play does not suggest which course of action to take. It

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does not even hint whether such total freedom to act is a great opportunity or a heavy burden. In this respect, the insistence in this play is on man’s autonomy, as it is in *The Devil Is an Ass* and *The Tempest*. Unfortunately, there is no sense of the author’s confidence that, or whether, man will eventually succeed. This is sacrificed to the show that his play ultimately is. At the end of the day, life might not be much more.

The Birth of Merlin does not add anything at all to man’s fight for his position in the world. The playwright does not assume his social responsibilities in the writing of the play, or rather, he might not have cared. Producing a play as a source of income for himself and distraction for the audience seems to have been all that mattered. While this has freed people from the destructive influence of the supernatural on the one hand, it is also undoing the efforts of people who care for society and would like to effect a change for the better. Whereas plays like *The Birth of Merlin* do not ultimately stop such a positive evolution, they certainly reveal one of the tendencies that slow down man’s advance towards a more enlightened world order.

2,665,866,746,664? Or more? Or fewer?

Conclusion

In the Renaissance, the period that, across Europe, roughly spanned the time from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, man was reborn in many ways, a rebirth largely due to a return to the original classical sources and the thoughts emanating from the days of classical antiquity. The impact this *rinascimento* had on all aspects of life—art, science, politics, and religion—was profound. As humanity looked at itself with new eyes, it also renewed its interest in God as well as in his antithesis, the devil, who rose to new prominence in the imagination of mankind. Yet, the devil's rebirth, though manmade, was not always to humanity's advantage.

At the threshold of the seventeenth century, before the onset of what has come to be termed the Age of Reason, Shakespeare boldly used Hamlet to show what the way forward would be. Barely a century before, Copernicus had removed man scientifically from the centre of the universe, a step which asserts man's independence from the divine as it is based on reason rather than on faith. Now Shakespeare put him back into the centre of attention on earth: "What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving,

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how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god!” (*Ham.* II.ii.303-7). Both acts are necessary steps in the drive for mankind to assume its own responsibilities. At first sight, Shakespeare recalls Pico de Mirandola’s *De hominis dignitate* (1486) in Hamlet’s speech. A close look, however, reveals the road that has been travelled since the waning twelfth century. Pico believes that to man

is given to be what he desires and what he wills. [...] And if he is not contented with the fate of any creature, he will gather himself into the centre of his own unity and become one spirit with God, will join the solitary darkness of the Father, who is above all things, and will stand ahead of things.¹

While Pico’s emphasis is on man fulfilling his ambitions within a Catholic Christian framework—as he is at pains to establish in the following paragraphs—Hamlet, Shakespeare’s spokesman, changes the focus when he compares man to “a god”. Becoming one spirit with God is no longer the be-all and end-all of man’s journey on earth. God has been displaced from the centre and replaced by man. And man has indeed all the assets required to make him “the beauty of the world” (*Ham.* II.ii.303) in both thought and deed.

Yet, there is an inherent and hereditary illness that ails man and that prevents him from fully rising to the height of his abilities. For this Pico rightly puts the onus on man:

¹ Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate*, VI.25 & 31. *Progetto Pico Project*. 27 July 2010. <http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/pico/text/riva/eframe.html>. Latin on page 382.

It is in order for us to understand that, because we were born with the option to be what we want to be, we must take most care of this; lest people say of us that, being held in honor, we did not realize that we reduced ourselves to brutes and mindless beasts of burden. Let us rather remember the saying of Asaph the prophet: “You are all gods and sons of the most high,” unless abusing the most indulgent liberality of the Father, we turn from beneficial to harmful the free choice he bestowed on us.²

Pico’s analysis remains valid even if God is taken out of the equation. Whether man answers to his Creator God or to himself, he ought to know, but often fails to realise, that with ability and free will comes responsibility. As Sidney notes in *An Apologie for Poetrie*, this has been a problem for man since “that first accursed fall of Adam: with our erected will, maketh vs know what perfection is, and yet our infected will, keepeth vs from reaching vnto it.”³ When Hamlet sighs that “Man delights not me” (*Ham.* II.ii.309), he expresses in a nutshell all that is wrong, not only with himself, but with society as a whole. One of the elements that leads to the dismal end of *Hamlet* is people’s predatory attitude towards their fellow men as they fail to see the good and the beautiful, concentrating egoistically on trifles that cause the

death of twenty thousand men,
That for a fantasy and trick of fame
Go to their graves like beds[.]

(*Ham.* IV.iv.60-2)

² Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate*, X.48f. *Progetto Pico Project*. 27 July 2010. <http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/pico/text/riva/eframe.html>. Latin on page 382. Interestingly, Pico anticipates the development in Hamlet’s speech when he changes the addressee in Asaph’s words from the angels to man. Compare the original context of Psalm 82 on page 18.

³ Sidney, *Apologie*, sig. C2^rf.

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At the end of the play, when Fortinbras, who is also driven by ambition, takes over the sceptre, it is far from clear whether restoration can come from the all-pervasive destruction. However, with Prospero’s help in *The Tempest* just over a decade later, Shakespeare would show all those who wanted to see a way to a more humanist and enlightened approach to social living, with fewer natural and supernatural demons around.

The counter-currents against more enlightened approaches to living, however, were anything but negligible, even, if not almost necessarily, during the ensuing Ages of Reason and Enlightenment. At the very time when Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) came to define Enlightenment in “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?” as “der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbst verschuldeten Unmündigkeit,”⁴ Goethe was working on his version of the Faust legend, trying over decades to find a satisfactory way for Faust to escape the clutches of Mephistopheles and carving out a viable position for humanity in the process. The quest would occupy Goethe for the rest of his life, and it is doubtful whether the solution he proposed was entirely to his satisfaction. Even if his dying wish for more light is apocryphal and cannot necessarily be solely applied to his dealing with Faust and the supernatural, it is at least the product of Goethe’s age and bears witness to the fact that even a lifelong struggle to shed more light upon all kinds of mysteries—natural, supernatural, scientific, medical, or psychological—that surround human beings will ultimately only lead to more questions, more to be desired than even the most prolific endeavours could ever reveal. More can be known, and so people strive to know more.

⁴ “An answer to the question, ‘What is Enlightenment?’ ” and “Enlightenment is man’s way out of his self-inflicted immaturity” (my translations). Immanuel Kant, “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?” *Kants Werke: Akademie-Textausgabe*, vol. 8: “Abhandlungen nach 1781” (1912; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968) 33 & 35.

Again and again, though, humanity proves resistant to learning from its past as it does not seem to be able to avoid the snares of irrationality. It might be true that the materialistically and scientifically cold twenty-first century no longer believes with Reverend Hale in *The Crucible* (1953) by Arthur Miller (1915-2005) that

[h]ere [in books] is all the invisible world, caught, defined, and calculated. In these books the Devil stands stripped of all his brute disguises. Here are all your familiar spirits—your incubi and succubi; your witches that go by land, by air, and by sea; your wizards of the night and of the day. Have no fear now—we shall find him out if he has come among us[.]⁵

Still, *The Crucible* was acutely relevant in the McCarthy era, and when one looks at the ongoing present-day “War on Terror,” one notices that its relevance has not gone away. The focus has merely been shifted. In such circumstances, one cannot help but feel that the devil has tightened, rather than lost, his grip on humanity. Communism might have thought to have done away with God—Yuri Gagarin (1934-68) looked and looked, but did not see God⁶—but there is still unbroken belief in, or at least unholy fascination with, his counterpart everywhere. In Mesopotamia, in the days of many gods, the time when this thesis started its journey, there were few devils, if any: they were simply not particularly agreeable gods. A few thousand years later, there are few gods left, if any, but the devil has followed God’s instruction to Noah to “Bring forth the fruit, and multiply, and replenish the earth” (Gen. 9:1). As if it were not enough for all manner of opponents—political, social, economical—to

⁵ Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) 42. Paradoxically, it might be precisely such a belief, namely that the devil and his manifestations can be itemised, understood, and subsequently shelved once and for all, that would help people free themselves from his influence. There is, however, no telling how dire the consequences for God would be if humanity successfully put together such a catalogue.

⁶ Apocryphal.

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bedevil each other in real life, the devil is also beamed ever more impressively into our homes, and screened in Technicolor, widescreen and Dolby Digital-*cum*-THX in all the multiplexes around the world, in Christian and non-Christian contexts alike, in films such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Fear No Evil* (1981), *Angel Heart* (1987) or *The Ninth Gate* (1999), to name but a few among the countlessly many. Instead of providing humanity with a prop against superstition, technology seems to boost people's imagination and favour the representation of, and fascination with, the fiend. While God's word finds it increasingly challenging to make itself heard in the loud age of electronic communication and chatter, the devil's voice has no problem resounding from all four corners of the world.

In this light, and with the proverbial wisdom of hindsight, it might appear that the endeavours of the Early Modern English playwrights who attempted to enlighten the theatre-goers with a more human vision of the world full of religious controversy and damaging superstition, as Jonson and Shakespeare did most forcefully, did not make the impact in real life that they would have liked. Fundamentally speaking, mankind has not changed. Then, as now, people were fascinated by the unknown, the inexplicable, and the shady, especially if it managed to send a hair-raising shiver down their spine. It is hardly surprising that, in plays that stage the devil, those were prevalent that merely tell a good yarn without asking people to think deeply or act upon the lesson learnt. This is the case for *The Birth of Merlin*, as well as for most of the plays that Cox lists in the appendix to *The Devil and the Sacred*.⁷ However (and this is good news for humanity) the story does not end there: these B-plays have

⁷ Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 209-11.

proved less enduring than the ones that address larger issues.⁸ At the end of the day, merely pleasing or distracting people proves not to be enough: the voice of reason does manage to make itself heard and to make a difference.

In any case, the relationship man has with the preternatural *per se*, and the demonic in particular, is never an easy one. It comes to a head in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, which is indicative of man's inability ever to disentangle contrary ways of thinking and in this sense perfectly reflects the times when it was (re-)written. In *Doctor Faustus*, it is the Catholic and Protestant theologies of free will and predestination that are at loggerheads:

In Marlowe's play they are, in effect, simultaneously present, but they cannot be read simultaneously; instead they obstruct, entangle, and choke each other. In performance, one or the other may be closed down, but the texts as we have them offer to nudge audiences first this way then that, not allowing interpretation to settle.⁹

Sinfield's reading is useful in that it allows meaning to be restored in a text that threatens to undo meaning. He highlights the fact that the problem is built into the play (not least as a consequence of its complicated textual history), and not a product of the reader's / audience's faulty logic. His reading prevents people from going mad precisely because he allows them to know whence the maddening contradictions derive.

It may lead to the thought that there is no coherent or consistent answer because we are on an ideological faultline where the churches have had

⁸ Again, a parallel can be drawn between the Early Modern English stage and the present day film industry: who dares venture an answer to the question, which films will be part of the collective mind in four hundred years' time?

⁹ Sinfield, *Faultlines*, 236.

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to struggle to render their notions adequate. It may suggest not only that Faustus is caught in a cat-and-mouse game played by God at the expense of people, but also that God makes up the rules as he goes along.¹⁰

At this point, Sinfield does not choose to take his interpretation even a step further, beyond the immediate attitude of Early Modern English people.

As this thesis has shown, however, matters may be taken beyond this way of reading this play, and others from the same era. With man increasingly manoeuvred into the centre of attention—even though this cannot be acknowledged *expressis verbis* in the sixteenth century—it is not God who makes up the rules as he goes along, but men who make up the rules as they believed God found them appropriate. In this way, mankind might indeed be taking over from God and, as a novice in the game, not getting things quite as right yet as people would have liked. Nor could they have, given the philosophical, religious, scientific and political circumstances of the age. Even if man’s agency in religious matters was not perceived in this way at the time, this is nevertheless precisely what had begun to happen. It is the resulting non-linear development that this thesis has been at pains to trace from the early days via the Middle Ages to the age of Shakespeare. Around the year 1600, decisive new ideas were added to the collective unconscious. Sinfield sees “two traps in the play [*Doctor Faustus*]. One is set by God for Dr. Faustus; the other is set by Marlowe, for God.”¹¹ Again, Sinfield stops short of taking another step. Marlowe could merely be highlighting the problem that Early Modern England was facing, the trap that the age was setting God. There could not be a solution at his time. Yet, solutions could be proposed, and were proposed a couple of decades later in plays

¹⁰ Sinfield, *Faultlines*, 236.

¹¹ Sinfield, *Faultlines*, 237.

such as Jonson's *The Devil Is an Ass*, and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Even if they did not have an immediate impact on life in general, the very fact that there were people then, as there are now, showing that different approaches are possible is all that is ever needed to spell hope for mankind. Patiently, throughout the history of ideas, Prospero and his likes show that Donne's gloomy appreciation of the "new Philosophy"¹² in 1611 was not warranted.

¹² See on page 9.

APPENDICES

*Appendix I: Lucius Apuleius*THE GOLDEN ASS

Apulée. *Les Métamorphoses ou l'âne d'or*. Ed. D. S. Robertson. Trans. Paul Vallette. 3 vols. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1940-1946. <http://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost02/Apuleius/apu_me00.html>.

XI.5—translation on page 25

cuius numen unicum multiformi specie, ritu vario, nomine multiiugo totus veneratur orbis. Inde primigenii Phryges Pessinuntiam deum matrem, hinc autocthones Attici Cecropeiam Minervam, illinc fluctuantes Cyprii Paphiam Venerem, Cretes sagittiferi Dictynnam Dianam, Siculi trilingues Stygiam Proserpinam, Eleusinii vetusti Actaeam Cererem, Iunonem alii, Bellonam alii, Hecatam isti, Rhamnusiam illi, et qui nascentis dei Solis inchoantibus et occidentis inclinantibus inlustrantur radiis Aethiopes utrique priscaque doctrina pollentes Aegyptii caerimoniis me propriis percolentes appellant vero nomine reginam Isidem.

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Appendix 2: Pico della Mirandola

DE HOMINIS DIGNITATE

Pico della Mirandola. *De hominis dignitate*. Ed. and trans. Massimo Riva. *Progetto Pico Project* <http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/pico/text/ov.html>.

VI.25 & 31—translation on page 370

Cui datum id habere quod optat, id esse quod velit. [...] Et si nulla creaturarum sorte contentus in unitatis centrum suae se receperit, unus cum Deo spiritus factus, in solitaria Patris caligine qui est super omnia constitutus omnibus antestabit.

X.48f—translation on page 371

Ut intelligamus, postquam hac nati sumus conditione, ut id simus quod esse volumus, curare hoc potissimum debere nos, ut illud quidem in nos non dicatur, cum in honore essemus non cognovisse similes factos brutis et iumentis insipientibus. Sed illud potius Asaph prophetae: «Dii estis et filii Excelsi omnes», ne, abutentes indulgentissima Patris liberalitate, quam dedit ille liberam optionem, e salutari noxiam faciamus nobis.

Appendix 3: St Thomas Aquinas

SUMMA THEOLOGICÆ

St Thomas Aquinas. *Summa theologiae*. Ed. Thomas Gilby, OP, et al. 61 vols. Blackfriars. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964-1981.

I.23.3 (5:118)—translation on page 81

... quod prædestinatum necesse est salvari necessitate conditionata, quæ non tollit libertatem arbitrii. Unde, licet aliquis non possit gratiam adipisci qui reprobatur a Deo, tamen quod peccatum vel illud labatur ex ejus libero arbitrio contingit. Unde et merito ei imputatur in culpam.

I.63.1 (9:250)—translation on page 66

Et hoc modo angelus peccavit convertendo se per liberum arbitrium ad proprium bonum absque ordine ad regulam divinæ voluntatis.

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I.63.3 (9:256)—translation on page 66

Et hoc modo diabolus appetiit esse ut Deus [...]. [I]n hoc appetiit indebite esse similis Deo, quia appetiit ut finem ultimum beatitudinis id ad quod virtute suæ naturæ poterat pervenire, avertens suum appetitum a beatitudine supernaturali, quæ est ex gratia Dei.

I.63.3 (9:258)—translation on page 242

appetiit illud ad quod pervenisset, si stetisset.

I.63.4 (9:260)—translation on page 64

Unde cum dæmones sint substantiæ intellectuales, nullo modo possunt habere inclinationem naturalem in aliquod quodcumque malum; et ideo non possunt esse naturaliter mali.

I.63.5 (9:264)—translation on page 63

Agens autem quod angelos in esse produxit, scilicet Deus, non potest esse causa peccati. Unde non potest dici quod diabolus in primo instanti suæ creationis fuerit malus.

I.63.6 (9:268)—translation on page 63

Ad quartum dicendum quod inter quælibet duo instantia esse tempus medium, habens veritatem, inquantum tempus est continuum [...]. Sed tamen in angelis, qui non sunt subjecti cœlesti motui, qui primo per tempus continuum mensuratur, tempus accipitur pro ipsa successione operationum intellectus, vel etiam affectus. [...] Et hæc quidem operatio in omnibus bona fuit. [...] Et sic prima operatio fuit omnibus communis; sed in secunda sunt distincti. Et ideo in primo instanti omnes fuerunt boni, sed in secundo fuerunt boni a malis distincti.

I.64.2 (9:290)—translation on page 218

voluntas autem angeli adhæret fix et immobiliter. Et ideo si consideretur ante adhæSIONem, potest libere adhærere et huic et opposito [...] sed postquam jam adhæsit, immobiliter adhæret.

[...]

Sic igitur et boni angeli semel adhærentes justitiæ, sunt in illa confirmati; mali vero peccantes sunt in peccato obstinati.

I.64.3 (9:292 & 294)—translation on page 223

Et necesse est dicere quod in eis sit dolor [...] Patet autem quod dæmones multa vellent non esse, quæ sunt, et esse, quæ non sunt. Vellent enim, cum sint invidi, damnari eos qui salvantur.

[...]

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Dolere autem de malo pœnæ, vel de malo culpæ propter pœnam attestatur bonitati naturæ, cui malum pœnæ opponitur. [...] Dæmon ergo, cum perversæ sit voluntatis, et obstinatæ, de malo culpæ non dolet.

I.64.4 (9:296 & 298)—translation on page 220

licet dæmones non actu alligentur gehennali igni dum sunt in aëre isto caliginoso, tamen ex hoc ipso quod sciunt illam alligationem sibi deberi, eorum pœna non diminitur. Unde dicitur in quadam *Glossa Jac.* 3 quod *portant secum ignem gehennæ quocumque vadant.*

I.111.2 (15:24)—translation on page 227

Dæmones non possunt immittere cogitationes, interius eas causando, cum usus cogitivæ virtutis subiaceat voluntati. Dicitur tamen Diabolus incensor cogitationum, inquantum incitat ad cogitandum, vel ad appetendum cogitata, per modum persuadentis, vel passionem concitantis.

I.114.2 (15:78)—translation on page 227

Et ideo diabolus tentat explorando interiorem conditionem hominis, ut de illo vitio tentet, ad quod homo magis pronus est.

II (1) 9.5 (17:78)—translation on page 308

Plures autem hominum sequuntur passiones, quibus soli sapientes resistunt. Et ideo ut in pluribus verificantur ea quæ prænuntiantur de actibus hominum secundum considerationem cælestium corporum. Sed tamen, ut Ptolomæus dicit in Centiloquio, *sapiens dominatur astris*, scilicet quia, resistens passionibus, impedit per voluntatem liberam, et nequaquam motui cælesti subiectam, huiusmodi corporum cælestium effectus.

II (1) 80.1 (25:218)—translation on page 219

Augustinus probat in I et III *de Lib. Arb.* quod *nulla alia re fit mens hominis serva libidinis, nisi propria voluntate*. Sed homo non fit servus libidinis nisi per peccatum. Ergo causa peccati non potest esse diabolus, sed sola propria voluntas.

III.86.1 (60:74)—translation on page 219

Unde dicere quod aliquod peccatum sit in hac vita de quo aliquis poenitere non possit, est erroneum. Primo quidem, quia per hoc tolleretur libertas arbitrii. Secundo, quia derogaretur virtuti gratiæ, per quam moveri potest cor cuiuscumque peccatoris ad pœnitendum.

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Appendix 4: St Augustine

DE CIVITATE DEI

St Augustine. *De civitate Dei*. Ed. B. Dombart and A. Kalb. Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina XLVII & XLVIII. Turnhout: Brepols, 1955. <http://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost05/Augustinus/aug_cd00.html>.

IX.22—translation on page 85

daemones autem non aeternas temporum causas et quodam modo
cardinales in dei sapientia contemplantur

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<i>Ham.</i>	<i>Hamlet</i>
<i>Mac.</i>	<i>Macbeth</i>
<i>MND</i>	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>
<i>Tmp.</i>	<i>The Tempest</i>
<i>TN</i>	<i>Twelfth Night</i>

EFB Jones, John Henry, ed. *The English Faust Book—A Critical Edition Based on the Text of 1592*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.¹

¹ Mephostophiles is adopted for the name of the devil in *EFB*, while Mephistopheles is used for Marlowe's play.

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- Castle* *The Castle of Perseverance*
- Mankind* *Mankind*
- Wisdom* *Wisdom*
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² The titles of the plays in all cycles are editorial. For the York cycle, Beadle’s more recent edition is preferred over Lucy Toulmin Smith’s 1885 *editio princeps*.

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³ McKerrow preserves the exact layout of the 1607 edition of the play and on the whole appears to be the most scholarly edition available until the forthcoming publication of the play by the Malone Society, edited by Richard Proudfoot and Henry Woudhuysen. However, since the spelling of characters’ names is inconsistent throughout the play, the spelling as given in the *dramatis personæ* on pages 40f of Pogue’s edition is adopted outside quotations.

⁴ Quotations refer to the A-Text, unless otherwise indicated.

⁵ Farmer does not greatly edit the 1662 text but dividing the play into acts (but without scene divisions except for those in Act I, which are already incorporated in the 1662 text). Hence, subdivisions into scenes and reference to line numbers, supplemented by page numbers for easy reference, are mine. They will help convey an impression of the chronology as well as the coherence of the play.

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Definitions taken from *OED* are from *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>>. They are from the second edition of 1989 unless otherwise noted.

Abbreviations

<i>Ambix</i>	<i>Ambix—The Journal of the Society for the Study of Alchemy and Early Chemistry</i>
<i>Anglia</i>	<i>Anglia: Zeitschrift für englische Philologie</i>
<i>CD</i>	<i>Comparative Drama</i>
<i>CI</i>	<i>Critical Inquiry</i>
<i>DDD</i>	<i>Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible</i>
<i>DLB</i>	<i>Dictionary of Literary Biography</i>
<i>DNB</i>	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
<i>DNB-OL</i>	<i>Dictionary of National Biography Online Edition</i>
<i>EA</i>	<i>Études Anglaises</i>
<i>EETS</i>	<i>Early English Text Society</i>
<i>EFB</i>	<i>The English Faust Book</i>
<i>EH</i>	<i>Essays in History</i>
<i>ELR</i>	<i>English Literary Renaissance</i>
<i>EPM</i>	<i>Études de Philosophie Médiévale</i>
<i>ES</i>	<i>English Studies</i>
<i>ESC</i>	<i>English Studies in Canada</i>
<i>Gaffiot</i>	<i>Félix Gaffiot: Dictionnaire Latin-Français</i>
<i>HJEAS</i>	<i>Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>The Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>JAF</i>	<i>The Journal of American Folklore</i>
<i>JHI</i>	<i>Journal of the History of Ideas</i>
<i>LSJ</i>	<i>Liddell, Scott, Jones: A Greek-English Lexicon</i>
<i>Merriam-Webster</i>	<i>Webster's Third New International Dictionary</i>
<i>MET</i>	<i>Medieval English Theatre</i>
<i>MLN</i>	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
<i>MLR</i>	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
<i>MP</i>	<i>Modern Philology</i>

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<i>N&Q</i>	<i>Notes and Queries</i>
<i>NSS</i>	<i>New Shakespeare Society</i>
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
<i>OLD</i>	<i>Oxford Latin Dictionary</i>
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>PMLA</i>
<i>PQ</i>	<i>Philological Quarterly</i>
<i>RES</i>	<i>The Review of English Studies</i>
<i>SHCT</i>	<i>Studies in the History of Christian Thought</i>
<i>SIRIR</i>	<i>Société internationale de recherches interdisciplinaires sur la Renaissance</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Studies in Philology</i>
<i>SQ</i>	<i>Shakespeare Quarterly</i>
<i>SS</i>	<i>Shakespeare Survey</i>
<i>SSt</i>	<i>Shakespeare Studies</i>
<i>TAPA</i>	<i>Transactions of the American Philological Association (1869-1896)</i>
<i>Tilley</i>	<i>Morris Palmer Tilley: A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England</i>
<i>YES</i>	<i>The Yearbook of English Studies</i>
<i>YR</i>	<i>The Yale Review</i>

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