

SHAKESPEARE'S
DOCTOR FAUSTUS

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The title of this paper does not herald a sensational addition to the established Shakespeare canon. Even amid all the vagaries that over the centuries have afflicted that body of works, no one has yet put forth claim for Shakespearean authorship of *Doctor Faustus*; nor is such a claim to be advanced in what follows. It is indisputable, however, that Shakespeare was neither ignorant of the work of Christopher Marlowe nor impervious to his influence. The question that arises, then, is how can he have neglected what Walter Kerr has called "an example he had before him, an example of Christian tragedy more bleak in its implications than anything the Greeks could have devised: Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*"?¹ Did Shakespeare, in fact, create or even come close to creating his own version of a *Faustus*, that is, a tragedy in which the issue is not worldly defeat and bodily death but defeat *sub specie aeternitatis* and "the eternal penal second death"?

Kerr, as journalist and critic at large, need not apologize for the term "Christian tragedy"; academic practice requires that here, however, it be properly set in quotation marks, at least initially. Beyond an admission, thus signified, that the foregoing attribution of religious affiliation to literary species constitutes a breach of scientific nomenclature, a defence of the underlying concept itself is due. That defence is necessitated by the developing (though by no means universal) consensus that Christianity with its victory *over* death is incompatible with tragedy with its victory *in* death. Perhaps the *locus classicus* of that consensus is the much-quoted dictum of I.

¹ Walter Kerr, *Tragedy and Comedy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967, p. 48.

A. Richards: "Tragedy is only possible to a mind which is for the moment agnostic or Manichean. The least touch of any theology which has a compensating Heaven to offer the tragic hero is fatal."² Richards would rule out of the tragic canon such self-styled tragedies as *Samson Agonistes* and *Polyeucte* along with *comedias* as typified by *El mágico prodigioso*, all of which mete out evenhandedly both death and compensation. But what about plays like *El burlador de Sevilla*, *El condenado por desconfiado*, and *Doctor Faustus*, all of which end in the unambiguously tragic death and damnation of the hero? To speak only of the last of these, is it not precisely the loss of Richards' compensating heaven that constitutes the tragic catastrophe of *Faustus*? A literal reading of the text would support such a conclusion, and a large body of critics has accepted the valedictory final chorus as embodying the purport of the play.³

Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight
and burnéd is Apollo's Laurel bough
That sometime grew within this learned man.
Faustus is gone. Regard his hellish fall . . .⁴

Their adversaries, however, pay more heed to *Faustus*' original, admirable—and quintessentially Renaissance—ambition and vision.

But his dominion that exceeds in this
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man.
A sound magician is a demi-god
Here try thy brains to gain a deity! (A 90-93)

Which of the opposed interpretations is correct is not here at issue. *Faustus*' wish to gain a deity, however, may serve to remind us—if the constant presence of his genius tutelary, Mephistophilis, were insufficient—of the angelic prototype of *Faustus*' "hellish fall." Harry Levin has written that "all tragedy . . . could be traced to that original fall; it was the overplot that adumbrated all subsequent plots. . . ."⁵ The original fall, as recorded in Christian tradition but not

² I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 4th ed. (New York: Harcourt, 1930), p. 246.

³ For an overview of the critical disagreement, see Max Bluestone, "Libido Speculandi," in *Reinterpretation of Elizabethan Drama*, ed. Norman Rabkin (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 89-116.

⁴ *Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, 1604-1616, Parallel Texts*, ed. W. W. Greg (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950). Present line numbers, B2114-17. Subsequent reference will be made parenthetically to line numbers. The "B" indicating the 1616 text will be omitted, but "A" indicating the 1604 text will be included.

⁵ Harry Levin, *Shakespeare and the Revolution of the Times* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), p. 88.

in Genesis, is of course a triple fall. First Lucifer fell; then, tempted by him, Eve and Adam; last—in the new world of the "second Creation" resulting from the earlier falls—Cain. This triple fall was enacted in the Cycles performed until the childhood of those coëvals, Marlowe and Shakespeare.⁶ (The longer-lived moralities, reinforcing the menace of doomsday, ultimately were to stress not the salvation of Everyman and Mankind, but the damnation of *Moros* and *Worldly Man*.)⁷

I do not find the cyclical plays of the Falls to be tragic, but I do contend that, both as *exempla* and as accounts of the origin of the tragic world, they are prototragic. With Adam and Eve, man became mortal in the passive sense; with Cain, in the active. Elizabethan and much Greek tragedy ends in the death of the protagonist. Few are those protagonists, however—and most of those few, women: Antigone, Phèdre, Juliet, the Duchess of Malfi—who do not first kill, letting the blood that will have theirs. In the Genesis account of Cain and Abel, God states that "the voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now are you cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand"; this account is arguably the prototype of mainstream tragedy.⁸ *Doctor Faustus* is clearly not a mainstream tragedy. *Faustus* does not seek vengeance and blood but knowledge and "to gain a deity." In that pursuit, his prototypes are Adam and Eve, who ate the forbidden fruit to "be like God, knowing good and evil," and who brought upon mankind—*pace* Shakespeare—a primal *elder* curse than Cain's: "Cursed is the ground because of you: in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life . . . till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return" (3:5, 17-19).

Plays that duplicate the fall of Adam and Eve even down to the identical motivation of wresting supernatural knowledge from the deity are rare indeed; one thinks readily of *Prometheus* . . . and of *Faustus*. More common are plays that deal with damnation in general. Apart from the specifically homiletic mysteries and moralities, however, there are only such rarities as the *Burlador* and

⁶ According to Glynne Wickham, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Heritage* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1969), p. 5, "Chester lost the right to perform its Cycle with impunity in 1574, York in 1575, Wakefield in 1576 and Coventry as late as 1581.

⁷ *Moros* is the hero of W. Wager's *The Longer Thou Livest*, *Worldly Man* of that author's *Enough is a Good as a Feast*, both available in Regents Renaissance Drama Series (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1967), ed. R. Mark Benbow.

⁸ *New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). All references will be to Genesis with subsequent parenthetical inclusion of chapter and verse. Present quotation is 4:11.

the *Condenado*, cited above, together with a handful of plays, including the *Atheist's Tragedy* and the *Tragedy of Biron*, which—with Shakespeare's Laertes—"dare damnation" (*Hamlet*, IV.v.134).⁹ Instead, playwrights who undertake this theme seem, in their predilection for ultimate salvation, to be advocates of Giraldi Cinthio's *tragedia di fin lieto*.¹⁰ In spite of the existence of a modest number of plays dealing with damnation, Shakespeare is not generally considered to have added to the store. In fact, Roland Mushat Frye has been widely approved for his conclusion that "Shakespeare's works are pervasively secular in that they make no encompassing appeal to theological categories and in that they are concerned with the dramatization (apart from distinctively Christian doctrines) of universally human situations within a temporal and this-worldly arena."¹¹

Such, indeed, is generally the case. But are there no exceptions? Frye will grant only that, "though the plays do not furnish us evidence of Shakespeare's religious orientation, they do attest to his theological literacy and to his uncanny ability to adapt his impressive religious knowledge to dramatic purposes" (p. 271). I would suggest that that ability to adapt does indeed permit Shakespeare to deal with the issue of man's eternal fate:

- (1) in some of the histories, as a realistic concern of his Christian personages (not of primary interest here);
- (2) in *Hamlet*, as (at the very least) a retarding element;
- (3) in *Othello*, as a metaphor;
- (4) in *Macbeth*, as a secularized analogue to *Faustus*.¹²

(If, of what Bradley termed Shakespeare's four "major tragedies," I have omitted only *Lear*, it is because, for all its eschatological

⁹ *Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. B. Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). Parenthetical references are to play, act, scene, line, with omission of elements evident from text.

¹⁰ G. B. Giraldi (Cinthio), *Discorso intorno al comporre delle comedie, e delle tragedie* (Venetia, 1554 and Ed. Daelli, Milano, 1864) ii, 32-38, for discussion of term, which may be translated "tragedy with a happy ending." Giraldi uses the term repeatedly here and in other writings. Typical plays in which tragedy is averted and salvation substituted for damnation are Calderón's *Mágico* and, in the case of Alice Arden, the anonymous *Arden of Faversham*.

¹¹ Roland Mushat Frye, *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963), p.43.

¹² When this paper was originally read, I was asked why I had excluded from consideration such a Christian play as *Measure for Measure*. Doubtless, much could be learned by pursuing Shakespeare's use of the task of salvation and damnation in it and in the other comedies. That is the task of another day and, perhaps, of another hand.

references, *Lear* is effectively the most "this-worldly" of the four, precisely because it invests this world with the awe, the terror, the majesty traditionally reserved for the next. . . .)¹³

While a thorough examination of *Hamlet* (of *Othello* and *Macbeth* as well) is well outside my purview, I wish to show how eschatological considerations, always subordinate to the development of action and character, are essential to an understanding of the play. Let it be stated from the first, however, that Hamlet's eternal fate is not what dominates the concerns of the play. It is rather the hero's attitude toward the eternal fate of others that shapes the action of the play and Hamlet's own *earthly* fate. Whatever Shakespeare may have thought about the life to come—and, perhaps, with *Macbeth*, he "jumped" it, or with *Autolycus*, he "slept out the thought of it"—the Ghost makes of it a major issue (*Macbeth*, I.vii.7; *Winters Tale*, IV.iii.30):

Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin
Unhous' . . . led, disappointed, unanel'd,
No reck'ning made, but sent to my account
With all my imperfections on my head.
O horrible, O horrible, most horrible!

(*Hamlet*, I.v.76-80)

To his father's retreating ghost, Hamlet reacts by giving voice to the quandary in which he will be immobilized until the "Mousetrap" finally establishes the truth, and with it, the ghost's credentials.

O all you host of heaven! O earth! what else?
And shall I couple hell! (92-93)

For, if his father's eternal fate is damnation, and the ghost is an emissary of Hell, the trap is indeed set for Hamlet's own soul.

If his [Claudius'] occulted guilt
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
It is a damned ghost that we have seen.

(III.ii.80-82)

¹³ It would be instructive, however, to contrast the Scholar's shortcut to knowledge and the long, hard royal journey from blindness to self-knowledge. I have begun that study, rather tangentially, in my doctoral thesis, "Trie thy braines to gaine a deitie: Christian Tragedy of the Fall," Harvard Univ., 1978, pp. 239-40, and expect in time to resume it.

some "relish of salvation" is a retarding element to Hamlet's revenge and thus to the entire plot, but also for our better understanding of the "form of Faustus' fortunes."

What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy
But to confront the visage of offense?
And what's in prayer but this twofold force,
To be forestalled ere we come to fall,
Or pardon'd being down? "forgive me my foul murder"?
That cannot be, since I am still possess'd
of those effects for which I did the murder:
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
May one be pardon'd and retain th' offense?
. . . not so above. (III.iii.43-56)

Recalling Santayana's observation that Faustus was "forbidden to repent when he has really repented, may we say the same of Claudius?¹⁷ The Danish king would not himself make such a claim. "Not so above." He is not prepared to relinquish crown, ambition, and queen; his repentance is incomplete and thus invalid.

Faustus in his final moment offers to burn his books, the very point of departure for his excursion into diabolism (remember the opening monologue), but to borrow the words of the Old Man who appears in Act V, sin by custom *has* grown into nature (1819). For that reason and since the very words that follow are the ambiguous "oh Mephostophilis"—possibly a reaffirmation of their bond, so much more exigent than a mere pact—Faustus too still retains the offense. Of course, the issue of *Hamlet* is no more the eternal fate of Claudius than it is that of its hero. Doomsday does not arrive in Shakespeare any more than it does literally in Marlowe (Max Bluestone, for one, can contend that, while the devils carry off Faustus' body, we cannot be certain that they also acquire his soul).¹⁸ But where, in his final monologue, Faustus seeks in vain for any and all means to stave off that day, in *Hamlet*, thoughts of doomsday serve to considerable effect in retarding the action and, for a while, in staving off the eventual catastrophe.

The immortal longings of Othello are something else again. I agree with Norman Rabkin that "nowhere else in Shakespeare are we led to think more explicitly in Christian terms. Of all the tragic

¹⁷ George Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, rpt. New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1960), p. 14.
¹⁸ Bluestone, p. 41.

heroes Othello is the most emphatically Christian . . . He sees his life . . . simply as a 'pilgrimage'. These are merely signals. What really matters is not the fact that Othello is a devoted Christian, but the fact that his love for Desdemona is a version of Christian faith."¹⁹ Othello's is a curious Christianity indeed, whose poles of salvation and damnation serve principally as metaphors for his devotion to Desdemona and for the destruction of that faith. Chaos, alas, does come again when Othello feels himself betrayed by his wife; faced with his broken idol, he translates (to used Frye's terminology) his "universally human situation within a temporal and this-worldly arena" into images of eternal perdition. Othello is hardly alone, however, in his cottage-industry cult. As P. N. Dunn puts it, "it is our nature to be continually setting up false gods. If we worship any of them with consistent devotion, shaping our whole life and bringing all our qualities to bear upon its service, we are creating for it a religion and a ritual."²⁰

Confronted with an adversary of the stature and singleminded determination of Iago, Othello's religion, had it been the worship of the true highest good, might have been as easily undermined as in fact it is. Still, Bernard Spivack has shown that Iago, while partaking of the diabolical, is not literally a *Morality Vice*, much less a Mephostophilis, however often he may be referred to as a devil.²¹ In the event, it is the weakness of Othello, like that of Faustus, more than the quality of the foe, that undoes him, but the weakness is not unmixed with strength. Neither connubial love nor intellectual curiosity is deserving of opprobrium, much less damnation real or figural. For Willard Farnham, "in Shakespeare the imperfection is placed before us not as a taint in or falling away from goodness or nobility so much as a lack of balance, even a civil war of goods, in man's noblest nature. Under this aspect a catastrophe may seem to be partly produced by good itself."²² The good in Faustus is what the Old Man calls his "amiability" along with what I have simplistically denominated intellectual curiosity. The good in Othello is more complex. In the present brief study, I can only point to three of his characteristic virtues: his preëminence in his occupation, war; his

¹⁹ Norman Rabkin, *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding* (New York: Free Press, 1967), p. 63.

²⁰ P. N. Dunn, "Honour and the Christian Background in Calderón," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* (Liverpool, 1960; rpt. *Critical Essays on the Theatre of Calderón*, ed. Bruce Wardropper, New York: New York Univ. Press, 1965), p. 65.

²¹ Bernard Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958).

²² Willard Farnham, *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1936), p. 440.

trusting nature; his love for his wife. Each of these goods, of course, has its dark side. Othello's military occupation has left him strong in the executive, weak in the judicial side of government; his trust of Iago will work his ruin; his love, expressed in terms of a pseudo-religion, takes on that least attractive aspect of the apostate, the tendency to persecute the rejected cult.²³

Dunn, when he referred to humanity's hapless tendency to create religions and rituals for its false gods, concluded: "So it is with courtly love. Lover poets . . . have expressed their complete absorption in the object of their love in the terms of a pseudo-religion, and while speaking figuratively, they have spoken the truth."²⁴ Othello, while hardly the traditional courtly lover, is patently a lover, and a poet who waxes nowhere more poetic than in speaking of his love and (precisely) expresses his complete absorption in terms of religion. How "pseudo" is that religion in Othello's mind? How figurative his language? At one extreme of commentary, taking Othello at his word, the Christian allegorizers see his tragic fall as, literally, his damnation. We may join R. M. Frye in lamenting such exaggerations, but to ignore the Christian interpretation *imposed* upon his situation by Othello himself is to remain, as A. A. Parker has described the devil in Calderón's *Mágico*, "in ignorance within sight of knowledge."²⁵ To ask whether Othello knows he is speaking figuratively is to question the "true pretenses" under which all poets present themselves to us. But more like a spoilt priest than a practising warrior, he seems incapable of seeing himself and his situation in other than theological language.

While that peculiar cast of vision persists throughout the play and is frequently shared by the other characters, it may be most clearly discerned in Othello's rôle in Act V. As Dunn observed we create for our idols not only a religion but a *ritual*. From the opening lines of the final scene, it is apparent that Othello conceives of his course of action not as that of a jealous husband but as that of a ritual executioner: in effect, the warrior officiates at his wife's summary court martial. His identification with the divine in "this sorrow's heavenly; / It strikes where it doth love" (I have underscored Faustus' favorite term of approbation) would tend to put Othello in the tradition of Adam and Eve (V.ii.21-22). While he may seem to join the ranks of the usurpers upon divinity, Othello's desire for

²³ My assessment of Othello is very much dependent upon, although disagreeing with, that of Robert B. Heilman, *Magic in the Web* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1956), *passim*, especially the chapter on "Action and Language".

²⁴ Dunn, p. 65.

²⁵ A. A. Parker, "The Devil in the Drama of Calderón," *Critical Essays* (see n. 20), pp. 3-23. The concept of *ignorancia* is crucial to Parker's interpretation.

knowledge is distinctly more ambivalent than that of most tragic heroes. He would have "ocular proof," but he "had been happy . . . [So [he] had nothing known" (III.iii.360, 345-47). For, Othello would be like God not in His knowledge but in another way: like Hamlet and Lear and so many other Shakespearean heroes, courting not the curse of Adam but that of Cain, he would usurp the vengeance that is the Lord's, he would be what Lear calls a "justicer" (III.vi.21). Not only in "this sorrow's heavenly . . ." does Othello invite this interpretation, but he pointedly identifies himself with that specific attribute of God in,

Oh balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
Justice to break her sword! (V.i.16-17; emphasis mine)

Once all vengeful passion is spent and Othello has a "new acquist" (Milton's exquisite formulation of the tragic effect upon the chorus of *Samson Agonistes*), an "acquist" that is scarcely to be borne, he modifies the metaphor of himself as heavenly justice and uses Christian terms of reference in a sense that is at once more orthodox and more literal.

When we shall meet at compt [the Last Judgement]
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,
And fiends will snatch at it. (273-75)

Literally, the look of Desdemona, whom Othello has not executed but murdered, is her look as she lies dead in her bed. That look, the evidence of his crime, will drive him from heaven. But the metaphor of Desdemona as the idol of Othello's cult may not have been completely abandoned or transformed. Recalling that the damned are said voluntarily to flee from the divine presence, I might suggest that "that look of thine" remains for Othello the beatific vision, now and in this world "forever" denied him.

Robert W. West, presenting a secular interpretation of this passage, concludes that "even when he says that Desdemona's look will hurl him from heaven, attention is rather on the loss of his wife than on that of his soul."²⁶ My objection to and difference with the totally secular reading could not be better defined than in this context. For Othello, the loss of his wife *is* the loss of his soul. Shakespeare, in search of a metaphor to suggest the exclusive, all-embracing, all-sustaining love of Othello for Desdemona, could find no better one than the union of the soul with its Creator through religious devotion; he has borrowed from metaphysics to give weight to his metaphor. He could count on his audience to appreciate the

²⁶ Robert W. West, "The Christianness of Othello," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, XV, 4 (Autumn, 1964), 341.

gravity of the fall thus truly sublimated. He could also count on them—I agree with West—to refrain from speculation, outside the framework of the metaphor, about the actual state of Othello's soul at the eventual Last Judgement. Concerning that day, as always in Shakespeare, "the rest is silence."

If Othello might have been justified in saying with Mephistopholis that "this is hell, nor am I out of it," his hell, unlike the devils' and Faustus', is not eternal (301. He can and does bring it to an end when he convenes a second court martial, executes the "malignant and turban'd Turk," and brings his own thisworldly life, the only life with which the play is concerned, to a "bloody period" (V.ii.353, 357). An even better proof that this earthly life can be hell and man not out of it is the tragic hero who best heeds Othello's instruction, "on horror's head horrors accumulate/ Do deeds to make heaven weep, all earth amaz'd," Macbeth (*Othello*, III.iii.370-71).

Hamartia-ridden and evil as he may become and for all his trafficking with the supernatural as personified by the witches, Macbeth is himself resolutely anti-eschatological. Where the Moor would see human love in theological terms, the Scot, in the moment when he is most aware of the peril to his soul, would "jump the life to come" (I.vii.7). Rooted "upon this bank and shoal of time," he constricts the perimeters of the field on which his psychomachia will take place (6). But in this, perhaps the most literally consequential of tragedies, in which nothing can "trammel up the consequence," he recognises that "we still have judgment here" (3,8). The consequences of his own acts, of course, effectuate that "this-worldly" last judgement. But in his efforts to secularize his own play, Macbeth again "o'erleaps" (27). One might say that he overleaps his creator's design, that Shakespeare was not willing that his hero jump the life to come so early and so definitively, but I should prefer to suggest that Christianity, most obviously incarnated in this play by the offstage English king, has its own untrammelled consequences.

In any case, Macbeth as a secularist exemplifies in several instances the backsliding and the unregenerate Christian heritage that characterise Faustus' address to Lucifer: "that sight will be as pleasant to me as Paradise was to Adam the first day of his creation" (673-74). The first such instance is disputable: "Had I but died an hour before this chance/ I had liv'd a blessed time," which for J. V. Cunningham means "my life had ended in a state of grace" (II.iii.91-92).²⁷ Doubtless, Macbeth wishes to convey to his listeners a different meaning, exemplified in the sense in which he uses the

²⁷ J. V. Cunningham, *Woe or Wonder, The Emotional Effect of Shakespearean Tragedy* (Univ. of Denver Press, 1951; rpt. Chicago, Swallow Press, no date), p. 18.

term "grace." The speaker is the public Macbeth, acting the rôle of aggrieved subject and host. In context, however, remember all the soul searching, the total ambivalence with which Macbeth has approached the murder of Duncan and most of all, the last words he has spoken before donning the mask.

To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself.
Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!
(II.ii.70-71)

We may reasonably conclude, then, that for all his pretences, Macbeth might let slip here a word, however ironic, of genuine contrition.

Less a matter of dispute is the second instance of unregenerate Christianity. In the very act of plotting Banquo's death, in a soliloquy otherwise bereft of the intense ambivalence which earlier had been his, Macbeth finds among the reasons for his second crime that in committing his first crime he has given his "eternal jewel/ ...to the common enemy of man" (III.i.67-68). It is indicative of his new state of moral conscience that the thought that he has sold his soul to the devil gives him no pause, but rather argues in favor of further blood-letting. Macbeth, like Faustus, has become identified with evil; repentance appears to be a course denied with equal certitude to both. But, as we learn later, Macbeth overleaps Faustus and Claudius who seek repentance but would "retain the offense."

I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
(III.iv.135-37)

Macbeth in this instance thinks not of the goods to be retained or restored, but of the sheer effort that would be required to retrace the bloody steps that have brought him to this point of *taedium vitae*. More than Faustus, who initiated his own perdition before the arrival on the scene of Mephistopholis, Macbeth is a self-tempter. Where earlier the gift of his eternal jewel has argued for further crime in order to retain the offense, now that he has committed the second crime and perceived that there is no turning back without an effort beyond the reach of his secularized soul, Macbeth chooses as his next victim his own conscience. Further practice is all that is needed to still its abusive voice.

My strange and self-abuse
Is the initiate fear that wants hard use;
We are yet but young in deed.

(141-43)

When he returns to the weird sisters, "bent to know,/ By the worst means, the worst," Macbeth sets out on the road to his doom (133-34). The consequence of his savage attack on Fife is that in bereaving the Thane of Fife he proves to have provoked the one man who can slay him, the man of no woman born (IV.i.80).

With all the evil that characterizes this hero-villain, there are, of course, two sources of evil external to him. Lady Macbeth, so notably devoid of the scrupulous compunction that afflicts her husband, proves a true daughter of Eve (apparently she has been successfully tempted even before Macbeth) and in turn acts the temptress of her mate. Although she will eventually become the victim of her own wiles, in her initial single-mindedness of approach to the craft of tempter, she well might give lessons to Mephistophilis. She remains, nonetheless, as this-worldly as Macbeth and the other secularizers would wish to see the entire play. The weird sisters, the second source of evil external to Macbeth, even though of the earth earthy, can scarcely qualify as this-worldly. They constitute something of a problem for the secularists, but hardly an insurmountable obstacle to their reading. To be sure, witchcraft would have been identified with diabolism by Shakespeare's original audience, and the preternatural knowledge of the witches cannot readily be explained in secular terms. Nevertheless, in a story focussing upon the internalization of evil within Macbeth, their rôle can be de-emphasized, and belief in their power accounted but an accidental and ephemeral cultural phenomenon.

However that may be, for our purposes, the witches might best be viewed in their oracular capacity, in their function as purveyors of occult and forbidden knowledge. The first parents wanted to be like God in His knowledge of Good and Evil and so had recourse to the one forbidden fruit in the garden, a fruit proffered—in Genesis—by the most cunning of the animals that the Lord God had made—and in the mystery plays—by Satan himself (3.1). Faustus sought a knowledge not contained in his existing library and so turned to the prize books of his infernal tutors, Mephistophilis and Lucifer, for a moment identifying himself with justice—as does Othello—in fact, fearful of "this even-handed justice" which leads to "judgment here," with the gods, pushing back the frontiers of human limitations.²⁸ It may be instructive to recall that the original meaning of hubris was

²⁸ For example, Richard B. Sewall in *The Vision of Tragedy* (New Haven, Yale Univ. Press, 1959), p. 65, speaks of "the compulsion of modern man to deny his limitations, press ever further into the mysteries of the universe which appears steadily to yield more and more of its secrets."

²⁹ For a discussion of the original meaning, see Kaufmann, pp. 73-74 (see n. 15).

nothing at all like the present concept; it meant *wanton violence*.²⁹ It is exemplified by those who—with Cain—seek not knowledge but blood: Hamlet, for all his misgivings; Othello, metamorphosed by his own metaphor. Macbeth clearly has a bloody foot in that camp, but in fact he unites in his person the two camps, at the same time exemplifying both the original and the current meaning of hubris.

Macbeth seeks knowledge of the future and, seeking it from the witches, taps a source which, for Christianity, is diabolically inspired and so much forbidden as the more direct route to hell chosen by Faustus. Thus, Macbeth can also be seen as hubristically wishing to share the knowledge of God. At the same time, while not for one moment identifying himself with justice—as does Othello—in fact, fearful of "this even-handed justice" which leads to "judgment here," Macbeth sets out to mold the future to his liking: "For mine own good/. All causes shall give way" (I.vii.10,8; III.v.134-35). In that attempt, he manifestly arrogates another power that is God's alone; in fact, he makes his own the *summum bonum*. Furthermore, he tries to repeal the law of consequentiality, perhaps the supreme law of tragedy, and—in that he is still but Macbeth and a man, a tragic man—he brings upon himself the inevitable tragic consequences.

None of these three tragedies is in itself a *Doctor Faustus*. *The Tragical History of Claudius* was never written, and Hamlet's fall is far from Faustian. Othello's perdition, however intensely felt as such by the hero, remains a powerful metaphor, no more. *Macbeth*, with Macbeth, successfully "jump[s] the life to come," culminating in "judgment here." Severally and together, however, the three plays more than substantiate what R. M. Frye, called Shakespeare's "uncanny ability to adapt his impressive religious knowledge to dramatic purposes." They also serve to illuminate, if not to solve, some of the problems of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*—for all its hard places, the only one we have. Hamlet merely demonstrates the powerful hold that the concept of damnation can have, but Claudius embodies the obstacles that prevent escape from the very fact of damnation. Is that other sinner, Faustus, "forbidden to repent when he has really repented" or is his desire to repent vitiated by his wish to "retain the offense"? Othello represents a hero whose very goodness brings him down. Is the Faustus of the opening monologue, the hero of (and martyr to) intellectual curiosity, incompatible with the Faustus of the Epilogue, him of the "hellish fall"? Or does not the gravity of Faustus' fall depend—just as does that of Othello—upon a double vision, and which view is metaphor in Faustus' case? In killing Duncan, Macbeth murders not only sleep but grace (in every sense). Momentarily under the protection of the biblical curse on any prospective slayer of Cain, he seeks to abrogate the curse of toil

delivered to Adam (4.15, 3.17). While it is not quite fair to relate the episodic *Faustus* to the eminently consequential *Macbeth*, may we not entertain the notion that what holds Faustus down when he would leap up to his God and what would make the returning as tedious for Macbeth as the going o'er is "sin by custom grown into nature"? Dead with Duncan is the Old Man who made that diagnosis of Faustus' state of soul. Damned if only by judgement here are the two protagonists whose hubris could never permit them to say to themselves "Hold! enough!"

Did Shakespeare come no closer to writing a *Faustus*? Now that we have viewed three tragedies, we might whimsically translate ourselves for a moment to that other source of great tragedy, Athens. There, invoking the local convention, we might expect a satyr play to treat in comic perspective the theme presented by the three tragedies. Earlier, I said that Shakespeare in some of his history plays deals with the issue of man's eternal fate as a realistic concern of his Christian personages. That scarcely comes as a surprise and is not worth pursuing here. These few lines from I *Henry IV* constitute in miniature, however, the satyr play that an Athenian Shakespeare might have appended to his triad of tragedies:

Poins. . . Jack, how agrees the devil and thee about thy soul that thou soldest him on Good Friday last, for a cup of Madeira and a cold capon's leg?

Prince. Sir John stands to his word, the devil shall have his bargain, for he was never yet a breaker of proverbs. He will give the devil his due.

Poins. Then art thou damn'd for keeping thy word with the devil.

Prince. Else he had been damn'd for cozening the devil.
(I.ii.114-23)

We might recall Faustus'

Hell claimes his right. . .

And *Faustus* now will come to do thee right. (1831-33)

and wonder if that dilemma of Jack Falstaff's does not come very close to the essence of much tragedy of whatever denomination: damned if you do, damned if you don't. Like his creature, Shakespeare—in common with Marlowe and the other great tragedians—was "never yet a breaker of proverbs".

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