

Barbara L. Parker  
William Paterson University  
Marlowe and Shakespeare  
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Doctor Faustus and Shakespeare's Hamlet

Marlowe's Faustus and Shakespeare's Hamlet evince striking parallels. The most obvious is that both protagonists have studied at Wittenberg, ostensibly allying them with radical Protestantism. Less obvious, as I will seek to show, is that both characters undergo a figurative conversion to Roman Catholicism via the agency of the devil, that both experience an ill-fated return to Calvinism, and that both works ultimately censure Roman Catholicism and Calvinism as equally unviable. Collectively, I will further argue, these parallels strongly suggest the influence of Faustus on Shakespeare's play.

Faustus's study of divinity at Wittenberg firmly identifies him with Luther and Reformation theology.<sup>1</sup> Both connections are invoked in the opening scene, which suggests a parody of Luther's conversion experience. In his tortured quest for personal salvation, Luther records how he believed himself doomed to damnation by an implacable God, whom he "secretly, if not blasphemously" hated—a God who through the gospel threatens us "with his righteousness and wrath." One day, reading the Bible in his study, Luther suddenly found in the Book of Romans the key he had been seeking: "The just shall live by faith." Now he realized that God's justice was based not on vindictiveness but on mercy, and that faith was God's gift by which the righteous could live. "Here," writes Luther, "I felt that I was . . . born again. . . . Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise."<sup>2</sup> The epiphany became the foundation of Luther's theology. Luther thus converts from spiritual apostasy to spiritual regeneration and from a Catholic orientation to a Protestant one.

Faustus's conversion is the reverse parallel of Luther's. Like Luther a theologian residing in Wittenberg, Faustus similarly ponders the Bible in his study and his epiphany similarly springs from a passage in Romans concerning God's justice: "The reward of sin is death."<sup>3</sup> Faustus, however, ignores the remainder of the passage, which describes God's gift, through Christ, of eternal life; and the rest of another passage from John promising forgiveness of sin—the very concepts prompting Luther's conversion—and forthwith abjures God for a diabolical religion of magic. In a sequence the precise inversion of Luther's, Faustus thus moves from belief to apostasy, and from a Protestant orientation to a Catholic one, his rebirth and conversion leading him not to the gate of paradise but the gate of hell.

The identification of Faustus's new religion with Roman Catholicism is variously implied. The Protestant identification of the Roman Church with diabolism derived from a long-established association, going back to Luther, of the Pope with Antichrist, the agent of the Devil. To quote Nathan Johnstone, "Protestant reformers became convinced that Catholicism embodied a complete inversion of the true religion, substituting an empty and diabolic piety based only on the authority of man for faith in the word in God." Epitomized by "the satanic corruption of the papacy," the Church of Rome was thus the synagogue of Satan, with the diabolical Pope at its head.<sup>4</sup> The concept becomes explicit in the B-text, when the Protestant-allied Bruno terms the Pope "Proud Lucifer" (3.1.92).

Central to the identification of Catholicism with diabolism was the element of magic. Blurred by the medieval Church, the distinction between magic and religion was revitalized by the propagandists of the Protestant Reformation, who "fastened upon the magical implications which they saw to be inherent in some fundamental aspects of the Church's ritual." As early as 1395, the Lollards had denounced Church exorcisms, hallowing, and conjurations as "the very practice of

necromancy,” contending that they smacked of the rituals of magicians and that the miracles they allegedly wrought were illusory. These charges escalated during the Tudor Reformation, “when the denial of the efficacy of the Catholic rituals of consecration and exorcism became central to the Protestant attack.”<sup>5</sup> With its ritual surrounding the elevation of the Host and the putative transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, the Mass in particular was condemned as a “theatrical performance akin to magic, trickery, or juggling.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly denounced were such practices as conjuration, making the sign of the cross, the invocation of saints and the veneration of their relics, and the use of holy water. In addition, the Church of England sought to remove the incantatory aspects from prayer by supplanting Latin with the vernacular. In thus razing the whole edifice of Catholic magic, Protestantism dismissed the miracles of the papists as frauds, delusions, or the work of the Devil.<sup>7</sup>

An examination of early-modern Catholic prayers shows how thoroughly they are steeped in notions of magic. According to Eamon Duffy, “The names of God and other exotic-sounding names, the manual signs and invocation of the cross, together with other texts possessing ‘vertu,’ . . . were regularly used in conjurations of spirits for purposes of divination.” Personal prayers commonly included catenas of the various names of God, repeated incantatory or manual invocations of the cross, the invocation of saints, and the ubiquitous plea for protection from the devil or evil spirits. The sign of the cross was deemed particularly potent in this regard. Essentially, therefore, these were prayers of exorcism. Also common were sprinklings of Latin and the implementation of mystical signs and symbols. Thus “the dividing line between religion and magic dissolves,” in prayers that “come closer to spells and charms than to anything else.”<sup>8</sup>

These facts provide a context for Faustus’s conjuration. Faustus has preceded his ritual with a “sacrifice” (1.3.7)—a term profoundly identified with the Roman-rite Mass. Condemned as

blasphemous in Article 31 of the Church of England's Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, the Mass was viewed by Protestants as a blood or propitiary sacrifice, idolatrous and cannibalistic. Thus Thomas Becon, in a representative polemical epithet, terms Roman Catholics "bloody sacrificers." As Becon explains, all blood sacrifices ceased with Christ; the papists, however, take upon them "to sacrifice the Son of God, and to make him meat."<sup>9</sup> Faustus's annagrammatization of "Jehovah's name" (1.3.8-9) recalls the magical incantations based on the names of God, with which Roman Catholic primers abounded.<sup>10</sup> Capping this sacrifice is an invocation "of holy saints," the use of mystical "figures" and "characters" to elicit the desired spirits, and a prayer—in Latin—that includes a catena of "holy" names (Beelzebub, Demogorgon, Gehenna) whose mention is calculated to produce the Devil. For good measure, Faustus sprinkles holy water and makes the sign of the cross, the latter, as Arthur Kinney notes, intended as a charm to overcome diabolical disobedience.<sup>11</sup> The Mass will later be repeated as Faustus vows to erect to his demon God "an altar and a church" where he will "offer lukewarm blood of newborn babes" (2.1.13-14).<sup>12</sup> "Altar" was itself a theologically fraught word; the locus of the Roman-rite Mass, the exclusionary and idolatrous altar was abolished by the Church of England and replaced with the Communion Table. Faustus's ritual thus conflates a black mass and a reverse exorcism. In a perverse twist, Faustus employs holy water and the sign of the cross not to deflect demons but to summon them. The entire ritual perfectly illustrates the Protestant charge that Catholicism is an inversion of true religion.

Underscoring the identification of Faustus's new faith with Roman Catholicism is his command to Mephistopheles to return as a Franciscan friar, since "That holy shape becomes a devil best" (1.3.25-26). The statement, to quote John King in a related context, "invokes the long-standing Protestant gibe that the Fiend may walk the earth in disguise as a member of the mendicant orders or a Jesuit priest." In John Bale's Three Laws, for instance, Hypocrisy is garbed as a

Franciscan Friar, as is Satan in Milton's In Quintum Novembris.<sup>13</sup> Further emphasizing the identification is the Pope's ceremony in Rome, which closely parallels Faustus's conjuration. Prompted by Faustus's discomfiting of the papal court, the Cardinal proposes a dirge—in actuality, an exorcism—to allay the fury of an apparently disgruntled ghost. The Pope crosses himself three times and Faustus (the “ghost”) is cursed with “Bell, book, and candle.” These words are recited “Forward and backward” (3.1.85), recalling “Jehovah's name / Forward and backward anagrammatized” (1.3.8-9) in Faustus's ritual. There follows a Latin incantation “magically” calculated to “curse Faustus to hell” (3.1.85), and the rite concludes with an invocation of the saints (“et omnes Sancti” [3.1.99]).

Faustus's magic and miracles are revealed as shams from the outset. Mephistopheles appears not because Faustus conjured him but because Faustus abjured God and Mephistopheles accordingly hopes to obtain his soul. Indeed, Faustus performs not a single magical feat; it is Mephistopheles who produces the shades of Alexander the Great and Helen of Troy, and even the lowly dish of grapes for the pregnant duchess. His impotence is horrifically underscored by the last scene: the stars, the mountains, the hills, even his own body are deaf to the commands of the “god” who envisaged control of the cosmos. Faustus's entire career as a magician thus suggests an exemplum of the Protestant indictment of magic as blasphemy and of the “miracles” produced as the work of the devil.

But Calvinism is equally censured. On the last day of his life, when he is moments from hell, Faustus re-embraces the God he abjured. This God, however, is not one of mercy and compassion but a brutal Calvinist God of vengeance and wrath, whom Marlowe subtly conflates with the Devil, rendering them virtually indistinguishable. Marlowe does this through physical description (God's “ireful brows” and “fierce” aspect [5.1.79,113] recall the terror-inspiring mien of

Lucifer [2.3.83]); and through the subtle use of antecedents. Thus, “I’ll leap up to my God! Who pulls me down?” becomes “I’ll leap up to my God, who pulls me down.” Similarly, in “Ah, my Christ! Ah, rend not my heart for naming of my Christ,” Christ becomes the addressee and the torturer. In the next line, God and the devil become synonymous: “Yet will I call on him. O, spare me, Lucifer” (emphasis added). The brutal vindictiveness of this demonic God culminates in his final acts: solicited by the dying Faustus, he refuses to allay the sinner’s agony and withholds the single drop of blood that will save his soul. Calvinism, Marlowe suggests, is as lethal and as fallacious as Catholicism.

Like Faustus, Hamlet is a theological product of Wittenberg (the importance attaching to Wittenberg in the play is suggested by its mention four times in 55 lines [1.2.113-67])<sup>14</sup> and undergoes a figurative conversion to Roman Catholicism through the agency of the Devil. The Ghost is allied with the demonic from the outset, through its eschewal of daylight (1.5.88-89), its umbrage at the mention of heaven (1.1.48-49; compare Mephistopheles’ offense at the mention of God [Faustus 2.3.64-71]), and its fleeing upon the crowing of the cock (1.1.146; the cock was symbolic of Christ). These devices culminate in its identification with Roman Catholicism (as noted above, the Roman Church was deemed the synagogue of Satan) and in particular with Purgatory. Protestant theology had expunged Purgatory as a diabolical illusion, and with it, the reason for a spirit’s return from that realm: to solicit prayers from the living for the purpose of shortening its term of purgatorial travail. Any ghost claiming to be from Purgatory, therefore, was doubtless a demon in disguise. Moreover, even Catholics knew that no saved soul (only the saved expiated sin in Purgatory) would call for revenge—another name for murder. As Hamlet ironically notes, “The spirit that I have seen / May be a de’il, and the de’il hath power / T’assume a pleasing

shape. Yea, and perhaps / Out of my weakness and my melancholy, /... Abuses me to damn me” (2.2.533-38).

Hamlet’s conversion is a parody of Moses’ receipt of the Ten Commandments.<sup>15</sup> As God summoned Moses to the top of the Mount in order to proclaim his Law to him apart, so the Ghost beckons Hamlet “to a more removed ground”—“As if it some impartment did desire / To [him] alone” (1.4.58-61). The Ghost’s prefatory words to Hamlet, “I am thy father’s spirit” (1.5.8) evoke those of God to Moses: “I am the Lord thy God” (Exod. 20.2). Particularly noteworthy are Hamlet’s words climaxing the Ghost’s injunction to revenge, as he vows to efface from the “table” of his memory all previous learning—“All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past / That youth and observation copied there” (1.5.96-98)—and supplant it with the Ghost’s “commandment” to revenge. The term “table[s]” recurs several lines later, as Hamlet prepares to record—apparently, on some literal tablets—“That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.” Particularly in the context of this scene, “commandment” and “table” take on acute significance, evoking the stone “tables” God gave Moses containing His “Lawe & the commandement” (Exod. 24.12). Hamlet’s supplanting of all previous learning with the Ghost’s command means that the theology of Wittenberg has been replaced by that of the Ghost. Centering on revenge and murder, both mortal sins, the Ghost’s injunction thus becomes a blasphemous parody of the Ten Commandments, which define man’s moral and religious duties to his fellows and God. In the Ghost, diabolism and Roman Catholicism perfectly coalesce. It is not surprising, therefore, that Hamlet’s embrace of the Ghost’s “doctrine” is the catalyst for the death of virtually every major character in the play.

Signaling the completion of Hamlet’s conversion is his swearing, upon returning to his companions, by Saint Patrick, keeper of Purgatory (1.5.135). The conversion is underscored by the Catholic mindset he now attests, as he assumes the role of the Catholic God of salvation by works:

he elects not to dispatch Claudius in the act of praying, since doing so will send his soul to heaven, but rather to wait until

he is drunk, asleep or in his rage,  
Or in th'incestuous pleasure of his bed,  
At game a-swearing, or about some act  
That has no relish of salvation in't—

and then kill him so that “his soul may be as damned and black / As hell whereto it goes” (3.3.89-96). In his mother’s closet, he becomes the priest-confessor, in a parody of the Catholic sacrament of Penance. The three parts of the sacrament—contrition, confession, and satisfaction—are sequentially invoked: contrition, as Gertrude, following Hamlet’s sermon on her unvirtuous spousal relationship, cries “O Hamlet, speak no more. / Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul / And there I see such black and grieved spots / As will leave there their tinct” (3.4.86-88); confession, as Hamlet commands her to “Confess” herself “to heaven” (3.4.147); and satisfaction (the imposition of a particular penance to be performed), as Hamlet instructs her to henceforth eschew Claudius’s bed (3.4.157-66).

Hamlet’s return to Protestantism—specifically, to predestinarian Calvinism—occurs en route to England. The conversion is depicted as both a literal return and a (re)birth, as he emerges from the womb of the sea to arrive “naked” (4.7.45) on Denmark’s shore (note his related statement about being “two days old at sea” [4.6.14]). His embrace of Calvinism proves as lethal as his embrace of Roman Catholicism. In addition to its incurring his belief that Heaven enabled his murder of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he disregards his own misgivings concerning his upcoming duel with Laertes as well as Horatio’s warning that he will lose, accepting the challenge

on the ground that Providence has already determined his fate. The decision leads directly to his death, a slew of additional deaths, and Denmark's takeover by a foreign prince.

Did Faustus influence Shakespeare's writing of Hamlet? Returning to the parallels, we note that both protagonists have studied at Wittenberg, allying each with radical Protestantism; in both plays, the devil is identified with Roman Catholicism; both protagonists convert to that religion through the devil's agency, the devil's aim in both instances being the protagonist's soul; both characters are vulnerable to the devil through some flaw or vice (in Faustus's case, satanic pride and abjuration of God; in Hamlet's, a disposition to melancholy); both undergo an ill-fated return to Calvinism; and both plays portray Calvinism and Roman Catholicism as equally fallacious. The nature and sheer copiousness of these parallels point to Shakespeare's indebtedness to Marlowe.

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<sup>1</sup> I concur in Greg's contention that the A-text's "Wurtemberg" is a corruption of "Wittenberg," Faustus's abode and place of study in the English Faustbook, Marlowe's source. Wurtemberg, however, would have comparable significance, given its earlier association with Calvinism.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings" (1548), trans. Lewis W. Spitz, in Luther's Works, ed. Lewis W. Spitz, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 34 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 337.

<sup>3</sup> References to the play are to Christopher Marlowe: Doctor Faustus, ed. David Scott Kastan, Norton Critical Editions (New York: Norton, 2005). Scriptural references are to the Geneva Bible (1560), reproduced in facsimile (Columbus: Lazarus Ministry Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Nathan Johnstone, The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 28-29. This paragraph is indebted to Johnstone.

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<sup>5</sup> Keith Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England (New York: Oxford UP, 1971), 50-52.

<sup>6</sup> John King, Milton and Religious Controversy: Satire and Polemic in Paradise Lost (Cambridge, Eng., Cambridge UP, 2000), 102.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic, 64, 53, 76.

<sup>8</sup> Eamon Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580 (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1982), 268-76, 281.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Becon, "The Displaying of the Popish Mass," in Prayers and Other Pieces of Thomas Becon, ed. John Ayre, Parker Society (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1844), 258-59.

<sup>10</sup> Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, 7-8.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur F. Kinney, ed., Renaissance Drama: An Anthology of Plays and Entertainments (Blackwell, 1999), 167 n.

<sup>12</sup> The device of blood sacrifice to satirize the Mass was not unique to Marlowe. Spenser's Geryoneo, who figures both Philip of Spain and the Inquisition, erects in his "Church" an idolatrous altar, where he offers "in sinfull sacrifice / The flesh of men," brutishly "powring forth their blood" (The Faerie Queene 5.11.19, 5.10.28). Shakespeare also implements the parodic blood sacrifice in Titus Andronicus, in the sacrificial killing of Alarbus. See Barbara L. Parker, Plato's Republic and Shakespeare's Rome: A Political Study of the Roman Works (U of Delaware Press, 2004), 117-18.

<sup>13</sup> King, Milton and Religious Controversy, 103, 104.

<sup>14</sup> Hamlet references are to the Arden Shakespeare edition, Third Series, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Thompson, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> I have learned that Roy Battenhouse also made this observation but have not yet located the Battenhouse source.

