

A Bleeding Hand:

Habit, Grace, and Free Will in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*

Abigail Leali

Braniff Graduate School

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John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, famously asserts that God denies the reprobate soul grace: “[the apostle John] affirms not that pardon is denied to [the reprobates] if they turn themselves to the Lord; but he absolutely denies the possibility of their attaining to repentance, because they are stricken with eternal blindness by the righteous judgment of God, on account of their ingratitude.”¹ Those not elected by God to receive grace, in other words, are unilaterally barred even from the choice to repent. Any apparent sorrow they might feel for their sins is thus not “*conversion* and *prayer*” but “blind torment by which [they] are distracted, when they see that it is necessary for them to seek God in order to find a remedy for their miseries, while at the same time they continue to flee from his approach.”² Even when the reprobate becomes aware of his sin, it only leads to a greater rejection of God, since God refuses to let him turn away from his offenses. God blinds him to humility and allows him to despair.

In Christopher Marlowe’s *Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, Faustus is faced with what at first seems to be such a case of divinely ordained reprobation; despite his increasingly desperate efforts to turn to God after he sells his soul to the demon Mephistophilis, he finds himself unable to do so. On the one hand, Marlowe is deeply conscious of Calvinistic predestination over the course of the play, hinting several times that Faustus’s heart is too hardened to repent.³ On the other, he also seems to insist that Faustus maintains his free will to the very end of his life.⁴ However, though Faustus’s inability—or unwillingness—to repent appears to be an act of God’s will, on closer examination it becomes clear that his gradual habituation to sin under Mephistophilis’s influence also plays a pivotal role in hardening his

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Allen (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education) 1:3.3.24.

² Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:3.3.24.

³ See, for example, Christopher Marlowe, “The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 10th ed., (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018) B:5.194-197, 12.53-55.

⁴ See, for example, Marlowe, “Doctor Faustus,” 12.43-47, 69-71.

heart to the point where he can no longer turn to God. Marlowe, writing in yet-newly Protestant England, seems to enter into the Calvinistic conversation to critique an extreme interpretation of elective predestination through his exploration of Faustus's free will. Through Faustus's narrative journey, he posits that it may be a person's own habits, not God's judgment alone, that render him open to or barred from repentance and grace.

In the prologue of the play, Marlowe is ambiguous regarding Faustus's agency in his own damnation, obliging the reader to search for an answer in the play itself. "Till swollen with cunning, of a self-conceit," he says, "[Faustus's] waxen wings did mount above his reach, / And melting heavens conspired his overthrow" (Prologue.20-22). It is possible Marlowe means to suggest that God played a dominant role in Faustus's damnation, which would favor a Calvinist interpretation of the play, but the nature of the allusion complicates this approach by introducing a pagan conception of God as conspiratorial. Meanwhile, the imagery of Icarus places Faustus's hubristic will to sin in the primary causal role—after all, it was Icarus's foolhardiness, not the heat of the sun, that killed him. The heavens have their role in reprobation, but so does man. Rather than simply providing an explanation for the tragedy of the play, therefore, Marlowe wrestles with the tension between a radically free view of man's damnation and an overly allegorized, even humanized view of the divine.

If the pagan's hubris is overthrown by Zeus's vindication, he thus seems to ask, how and for what is the reprobate Christian damned? The first hint of an answer arrives when Faustus, watching his blood clot as he attempts to sign away his soul, wonders,

What might the staying of my blood portend?
 Is it unwilling I should write this bill?
 Why streams it not, that I may write afresh:
 "Faustus gives to thee his soul"? Ah, there it stayed!
 Why should'st thou not? Is not thy soul thine own? (5.64-68)

His blood refuses to offer itself for his devious purpose. And, even at the very last moment, he sees the word “*Homo fuge*” (“O man, fly”) inscribed on his arm (5.77), exhorting him to turn back. Far from actively damning Faustus, God seems to be providing him a chance to reflect on his decision, forcing him to resolve within himself his disposition towards him. Yet, though Faustus recognizes the meaning of the clotted blood, he insists that he, not God, is the owner of his soul; he sets himself in opposition to his Creator. Just as the sun melted Icarus’s waxen wings, so the light of grace melts away Faustus’s rationalizations to reveal the hardness in his heart. Had he been soft to the core, God’s intercession here, mild as it is in comparison to what follows, may have melted his blasphemous resolve instead of calcifying it. God’s mercy offers him a chance to turn back, but he, in his willful pride, rejects it.

As the play progresses, this pattern of wasted opportunities repeats again and again; with each rejection, however, Faustus becomes less capable of repentance, even as he grows more aware of his soul’s desperate state. Early on, Faustus’s Evil Angel is easily able to convince him to “think of honor and of wealth” as opposed to “heaven, and heavenly things” (5.20-21). After Mephistophilis convinces him of God’s existence, however, he declares, “I will renounce this magic, and repent . . . Be I a devil, yet God may pity me” (5.187-91). Yet, with this last attempt at Christian hope, he realizes,

My heart’s so hardened I cannot repent!
 Scarce can I name salvation, faith, or heaven,
 But fearful echoes thunder in mine ears,
 “Faustus, thou art damned” (5.194-97)

Faustus recognizes that his heart has been hardened against God by sin, but Marlowe’s immediate juxtaposition of his hope in God’s mercy with his fear of God’s wrath suggests not unadulterated Calvinistic reprobation but rather a lack of trust in and knowledge of God’s character—“If [I fly] unto God” he earlier assumed, “he’ll throw me down to hell” (5.77-78). A

little later, when he calls on Christ to save his soul, his Evil Angel declares that “devils shall tear thee into pieces,” while his Good Angel replies, “Repent, and they shall never raze thy skin” (5.254-55). Faustus hears again that God is omnipotent, that He would still forgive him. But his God is wrath, not mercy, waiting to take revenge on his hubristic mission for dominance. Faustus sees God as a pagan might see Zeus. And so, he does not repent. Instead, he allows Lucifer to intimidate him and vows to think no more on God (5.263-71). The fundamental conflict in Faustus’s soul, therefore, does not appear to be an utter absence of grace—without it, one would wonder how the Good Angel could continue to spur him to repentance at all—but rather his own unwillingness to entrust his soul to God and “risk” the wrath of demons, not to mention God himself. Each time this happens, Faustus habituates himself to fear God instead of taking refuge in him.

As Faustus increasingly believes he must rely on his own will, however, in practice he correspondingly puts more faith in Mephistophilis. Instead of achieving his goal of becoming “great emperor of the world” and “join[ing] the hills that bind the Afric shore” (4.104-7), his lofty ambitions are degraded to petty pranks on the Pope (7.57-99), bringing grapes to please a pregnant duchess (11.1-32), and other relative trifles. Faustus grows used to choosing the mere sensation of power over his greater (albeit no more virtuous) ambitions. He grows addicted to his fleshly desires, however insignificant. And it is Mephistophilis who drives him along this futile path: he suggests, for instance, that they prank the Pope when Faustus has already determined to “see the monuments / And situation of bright-splendent Rome” (7.46-52). He keeps Faustus from encountering the beauty of a religion antithetical to his demonic designs. Faustus thus becomes accustomed to relying on Mephistophilis’ powers and judgment more even than his own, and, like his chosen guide, he grows trifling and petty, vindictive and

malicious, aimless and self-seeking. His trust in Mephistophilis only reinforces his addiction to sin.

At last, in the final two scenes of the play, Marlowe draws together Faustus's pride and habituation to sin to mount his most vivid criticism of elective predestination. In his last moments, Faustus receives many opportunities to repent and many assurances that it is still possible, but he is so habituated to consider the world in terms of convenient demonic power and material pleasure that he finds it impossible to do so. In one prominent instance, an old man appears to Faustus and exhorts him to penance, telling him,

I see an angel hovers o'er thy head
And with a vial full of precious grace
Offers to pour the same into thy soul!
Then call for mercy, and avoid despair. (12.43-47)

Yet, when Faustus tries to reflect on his sins, he realizes,

where is mercy now?
I do repent, and yet I do despair.
Hell strives with grace for conquest in my breast!" (12.53-55)

Marlowe implies that Faustus retains some potential for repentance, however dulled by his years of debauchery. He comes so close to grace, in fact, that Mephistophilis fears his soul may yet be saved from hell ("His faith is great, I cannot touch his soul") and resolves to tempt his body to sin—a temptation to which Faustus falls prey when he asks to sleep with the demon in the guise of Helen of Troy (12.69-78). The old man then calls him "Accursèd" (12.101), implying that the time to turn back may have passed. Faustus's acclimation to base pleasures and his dependence on Mephistophilis for guidance distract him from accepting God's offered grace and lead him further into sin. As time runs short, scholars adjure him to call on God, but he retorts, "the devil threatened to tear me in pieces if I named God" (13.42-43). Unwilling or unable to recognize that God's power transcends that of the devil, he calls on Nature (13.62) and almost petitions

Christ to save him, yet he finishes his prayer, “O spare me, Lucifer!” (13.73). Marlowe has revealed the true state of Faustus’s heart: he is afraid to call on God because of his fear of the devil; he is unable to resist the distractions of earthly pleasure long enough to repent.

Instead, he calls out for mercy from the unfeeling “gods” he has chosen to serve, underscoring his faith in and reliance on demonic authority. He calls on the stars, he curses himself and Lucifer, and his last desperate call is for Mephistophilis, the demon he had trusted so often to help him (13.113). But Mephistophilis, of course, does not spare him. God, then, does not damn Faustus; in fact, only he could have offered the vision of Christ’s blood as a final effort to save his soul (13.70-71). Yet Faustus still believes he can “leap up to God” (13.69) of his own accord and save his own soul; he fails to recognize or trust in God’s mercy, and he fails to truly repent of his sins. His mind has been darkened by years of immorality, and, though he can recognize grace, he is unable to grasp it or even to reach for it. At best, this account of Faustus’s damnation is only partially Calvinistic; against the backdrop of Faustus’s long habituation to sin, God’s agency seems limited mostly to offering Faustus chances either to repent or to harden his heart, leaving the rest to his own free will. It is Faustus’s addiction to sin and distorted view of God, which he makes no effort to correct, that hinder his repentance. The light of grace shines bright as ever, but Faustus has never learned to embrace it. He only feels its blazing heat.

Faustus’s narrative, therefore, does seem to answer Marlowe’s Icarus question: it is not the “conspiracy” of the heavens that damns Faustus, though to the first-time reader—and perhaps even to Faustus himself—it may appear so; rather, it is his own desire for and habituation to sin that justly bar him from grace. Radical elective predestination is at last likened to ancient paganism, depicting God’s damning agency as a willful choice to condemn the reprobate without

hope of grace. Its God, like Zeus, becomes vindictive and jealous, not patient and merciful. Though Marlowe's God may not grant Faustus a supernatural grace to repent, Marlowe makes it clear that Faustus himself is not disposed to receive any such mercy. Faustus's damnation is just because it is his own actions that condemn him. And God, rather than holding Faustus back from repentance, is glorified by respecting the consequences of his free choice—a great act of love in itself in the face of so many such vitriolic blasphemies. Marlowe seems to suggest that to see God as inconstant in his loving desire to forgive is in fact what condemns Faustus. Faustus does not believe that God will respect his free will or desire to save him. He never realizes that it is *he* who changed: God's love for him remained the same, even as Mephistophilis dragged him down to hell. And the very call to repentance meant to save him, in his hell-bound death speaks out against him in greater judgment.

Through this sobering depiction of sin and its consequences, therefore, Marlowe illustrates that it is possible for a man to be unable to repent when faced with the truth of his position before God, but it is not God's "conspiracy" that causes him to harden in the light of grace; instead, it is his own short-sightedness as he turns toward pride and false gods. Faustus died as he had lived: a slave to the demons he strove to conquer, a slave to his lusts, a slave to his pride. He could not trust God because he never truly tried, unwilling to risk his soul to save it. He was not humble or faithful, and in his fear he abandoned the love of a God who would have forgiven all his blasphemies, if only he had been willing to fly to Him.

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