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Who Truly Damns Faustus

Up until the end of the play, it is unclear whether Faustus is truly damned. At all turns, Mephistophilis and Lucifer seem to repeatedly try to keep Faustus away from all ideas of God and Heaven. These attempts and reinforcements make it questionable as to whether they truly have a claim on his soul. He is told repeatedly that all he has to do is repent, and he will be saved. The contract with Lucifer is broken several times by both sides, but he chooses to stand by it instead of asking God for forgiveness. In the end, *he* damns himself.

Throughout the play, Faustus seems to not understand the full scope of what he has done, or is going to do. The beginning of Faustus's downfall starts with a sin, the lust for power. It seems like not only is he struggling for satisfaction in life, but with his Faith. His argument for denouncing God is that God is not just, but it seems more like he's not taking it seriously. He tells the audience/himself,

“The reward of sin is death? That's hard.

Si pecasse negamus, fallimur, et null est in nobis veritas.

If we say that we have no sin,

We deceive ourselves, and there's no truth in us.

Why then belike we must sin,

And so consequently die (1.40-45).”

His justification for sin is that man will inevitably sin, and if he is to die for sinning, he may as well sin and gain what he wants. He takes the blasphemy further by going on to say, “And necromantic books are heavenly! (1.50)” His learning accomplishments have not satisfied

him, and he seeks something different. He believes that thing is magic.

“Such is the subject of the Institute,
And universal body of the law:
This study fit’s a mercenary drudge
Who aims at nothing but external trash!
To servile and illiberal for me.
When all is done, divinity is best: (1.32-37).”

Scholarly learning is not enough for him. It does not give him the power or recognition he wants. He wants power over people and the ability to do amazing things. He believes that becoming a magician will let him transcend God and become godly himself. “A sound magician is a mighty god (1.62).” He thinks that becoming a magician will satisfy his discontentment in his learning accomplishments. By becoming a magician and learning necromancy (among other things), he gains the powers of God. But instead of using his abilities for good, he uses them at his own pleasure.

Despite being told from all sides that he is going down a terrible path, he continues onward in a seemingly blissfully ignorant manner. Mephastophilis says,

“Why this is hell, nor am I out of it.
Think’st though 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 (3. 76-82).”

He responds by basically telling Mephastophilis to toughen up. He holds himself in high esteem and doesn't heed any warnings. One might think that Faustus simply thinks that it's worth it, but really he is just unable to comprehend what awaits him. He isn't just naïve, he believes himself to be invincible. He is incapable of grasping the knowledge that he has damned himself to hell for eternity. Faustus responds,

“What, is great Mephastophilis so passionate
For being deprived of the joys of heaven?
Learn thou of Faustus manly fortitude,
And scorn thou joys thou never shalt possess (3.83-86).”

Lucifer and Mephastophilis are very focused on the material with Faustus. They make him swear to hand over his belongings upon his death and make a whole scene just for him to sell his soul. Mephastophilis tells him to finish the ritual,

“Then stab thine arm courageously,
And bind thy soul, that at some certain day
Great Lucifer may claim it as his own,
And then be though as great as Lucifer (5.49-52).”

It seems as if they are trying to *convince* Faustus that he is damned, which implies that he isn't unless he believes himself to be. In the same breath, the Good Angel and his former scholar friends tell him repeatedly that he can still repent. All he has to do is ask for forgiveness. But as Lucifer and Mephastophilis continually tell him he *is* damned and *is* going to hell, he seems to believe that it is inevitable. He cannot get past his original denouncement of God.

Faustus declares his soul sold, but Mephastophilis tells him, “But Faustus, thou must write it / In manner of a deed of gift (5.59-60).” There is a heavy emphasis that his soul must be

given as a gift. Mephastophilis tells him,

“But Faustus, thou must bequeath it solely,
And write a deed of gift with thine own blood,
For that security craves great Lucifer.
If thou deny it, I will back to hell (5.34-37).”

This points to the idea that damnation and sin are internal. If Faustus never asks for forgiveness, he will be eternally damned. As long as he believes he is in a binding contract that prevents him from speaking to God, he can never ask for forgiveness.

Faustus lays out conditions that if broken, will terminate the contract. Faustus says,

“Here, Mephastophilis, receive this scroll,
A deed of gift of body and of soul:
But yet conditionally, that thou perform
All articles prescribed between us both (5.88-92).”

This is important, because even when Mephastophilis breaks the contract, he holds to it. According to this ‘ritual’, the contract is a piece of paper that he could easily tear up and denounce, but never does. He seems to damn himself as he comes to terms with what he’s done.

Faustus asks Mephastophilis what hell is like, but he doesn’t believe it really exists.

Mephastophilis tells him,

“With the bowels of these elements,
Where we are tortured and remain for ever,
Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed
In one self place; for where we are is hell,
And where hell is, there must we ever be.

And to conclude, when all the world dissolves,
 And ever creature shall be purified,
 All places shall be hell that is not heaven (5.118-125)."

It is a vividly bleak picture but Faustus tells him confidently, maybe even in jest, "Come, I think hell's a fable (5.119)." To which Mephistophilis responds ominously, "Ay, think so still, till experience change thy mind (5.120)." Faustus has sold his soul to Lucifer, but he doesn't believe in hell. At this point, he seems like a first class sinner. Not only does he not truly acknowledge his sin, but he doesn't believe in his punishment.

When he does begin to believe in hell, he *believes* that he is damned, and that there is no way he can repent. Faustus damns himself by refusing to repent. Despite the fact that he has already broken the contract by praying to God, he believes the contract holds. The Good Angel tells him, "Faustus, repent, yet God will pity thee (5.188)." He is still able to save his soul, even after all he's done in the last 24 years. But he tells the angel,

"My heart's so hardened I cannot repent!
 Scarce can I name salvation, faith, or heaven,
 But fearful echoes thunders in mine ears,
 'Faustus, thou art damned'; (5.194-197)."

He holds to the contract, even though the conditions he set have been broken, and he has given his belongings to Wagner instead of Lucifer. Mephistophilis even breaks Faustus's conditions when he refuses to speak of who created the universe. Faustus demands, "Villain, have I not bound thee to tell me anything? (5.244)." Mephistophilis tells him, "Ay, that is not against our kingdom; but this is: / Think thou on hell, Faustus, for thou art damned (5.245-246)." But this has just been countered by the Good Angel again several lines earlier, and even after.

“Never too late, if Faustus will repent (5.243).” “Repent, and they shall never raze thy skin (5.255).” He has every opportunity to repent, but doesn’t.

The final scene does not redeem him. His excuse for not repenting is, “Oft I have thought to do so, but the devil threatened / to tear me in pieces if I named God, to fetch both body and soul (13.42-43).” Wouldn’t it be better to be torn to pieces but saved and go to heaven rather than spend eternity in hell? The chorus tells the audience to “Regard his hellish fall, / Whose mindful fortune may exhort the wise / Only to wonder unlawful things (Epilogue.4-7).” In a religious perspective, it seems to be telling the audience to not seek knowledge not given by God. It validates the doctrine on sin he rejected at the beginning of the play.

Faustus ultimately damns himself. His lust for power, and most importantly, his lack of Faith, consume him. Despite all of the guidance and warnings he’s given, he does not realize his error until he is about to be dragged to hell. At this point, he believes it is too late for his soul to be saved. God does not seem to be present in the play, but despite that, Faustus cries out to him for mercy, though not forgiveness. Lucifer presents himself to claim Faustus’s soul, but God never once speaks to Faustus. Even so, he somehow regains his Faith and prays. Ironically, this leads him to accept his just punishment by God for sinning, and only asks for the mercy of eventual salvation. As he is being dragged to hell, he doesn’t try to repent but begs for a reduced time to be spent there. Faustus seems to recognize his deeds, and damns himself. Instead of repenting, he accepts the punishment.