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Theatricality: Work of the Devil?

**“**Now, Faustus, must thou needs be damned?/ And canst thou not be saved?/ What boots it then to think on God or heaven?/ Away with such vain fancies and despair,/ Despair in God and trust in Belzebub./ Now go not backward. No, Faustus, be resolute./ Why waverest thou? Oh, something soundeth in mine ears/ Abjure this magic, turn to God again./ Ay, and Faustus will turn to God again./ To God? He loves thee not/ The God thou servest is thine own appetite,/ Wherein is fixed the love of Belzebub,/ To him I’ll build an altar and a church,/ And offer lukewarm blood of new-born babies” (1.5.1-14).

In this passage from Christopher Marlowe’s play, *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*, Dr. Faustus is struggling with his decision to sign his soul over to the devil, Lucifer, in exchange for 24 years of service from Lucifer’s right hand man Mephostophilis. In order to accomplish such a feat, Faustus must reject the God of his previous beliefs, and turn completely away from religion. Though he makes his decision quickly and believes that it is the right choice, throughout the entirety of the play, Faustus questions this choice, and seemingly wants to repent and turn back to God, saving his soul.

Fasutus’ word choice to display his thoughts includes words such as “damned”, “despair”, as well as many other negative sounding words. These words point towards Faustus’ mounting discontent with his choice, as well as his internal turmoil. Faustus also uses words such as “fancies” and “abjure”, the first of which is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as “a supposition resting on no solid grounds; an arbitrary notion”. The phrase “vain fancies” points towards Faustus’ increasing belief that the path he rejected, or the path to Heaven, was an impossible notion, that would not be able to be achieved (ln 13). The OED defines “abjure” as “to renounce on oath, forswear; to withdraw, retract, recant (a heresy or other opinion or position formerly held)”. Faustus’ use of this word sums up his position, as he uses abjure in reference to his opportunity to repent and go to Heaven. This shows his rejection of faith, and gradual increase in distance from the “Good” Angel’s urges towards heaven.

The word choices that Marlowe makes throughout this passage represent both the Faustus’ struggle and the constant fight between Good and Evil during the play. He constantly repeats God’s name, portraying how he still holds onto at least a shred of his past beliefs and has not yet completely rejected them. Also important is the choice to describe his affiliation with the Devil and Mephostophilis as “magic”, which emphasizes Faustus’ uncertainty about his choice, and points to the theatrical way in which his choices are presented, as well as how Mephostophilis tries to persuade him to be damned (ln. 8). Mephostophilis uses devils disguised as humans to illustrate Faustus’ choices, resorting to magically infused theater to portray them, and persuade him. The passage in itself is representative of Faustus’ conflict, as his first statements are about his desire to repent, then he abruptly accepts his damnation, only to repeat the cycle once more before the end of the passage. Faustus has many moments throughout the play where he questions his decisions, usually after Mephostophilis informs him of a way to utilize his newfound “powers”.

Marlowe’s word choice in line 13 is interesting, where Faustus resolutely states, “To him [Belzebub] I’ll build an altar and a church”, and “altar” is defined as “a block, pile, table, stand, or other raised structure, […] on which to place or sacrifice offerings to a deity” by the OED. The OED also defines “deity” as “the estate or rank of a god”, which conflicts with the being who is addressed by such a term, the Devil. This conflict echoes Faustus’ statements that embrace and reject, alternatively, redemption and damnation. A final word in line 13 that was an interesting and conflicting choice was the “church”, defined by the OED as “The Lord’s house”, and “A building for public Christian worship”. Marlowe’s choice to place altar and church, two definitively Christian words, in the context of Devil worship and paganism emphasizes Faustus’ belief that his decision is still religious, and his struggle. This provides the reader with evidence of Faustus’ confusion about what he wants to have occur, or who he wants to win in the fight for his soul, if it is even retrievable at this point. It also further proves Faustus’ confusion regarding his decision being the best available, as he settled for 24 years of service in exchange for his soul, as well as believing that the Devil would act in his best interest.

At the moment in the play that the passage is spoken, Dr. Faustus is speaking to himself while experiencing the unending struggle between good and evil inside his mind. He has been wrestling with the decision he made to sign his soul over to the devil, Lucifer, throughout the entirety of the play. At this point, Faustus is weighing his options, as well as struggling to stay resolute in his decisions. He is the only one on the stage, however the Good and Evil angels join him, immediately after his deliberation. These two characters have previously appeared many times throughout the play, at times where Faustus is spiritually and mentally weak. They serve as discouragement, and encouragement, respectively, though Faustus seems to place more stock in the thoughts and urgings of the Evil Angel. This scene, when looked at in respect to the whole play, serves as a basis for Faustus’ internal conflict as well as for his consistent deliberation with the angels.

If I were the director in charge of adding stage directions for the actors, I would direct Faustus to be alone on a stage during this scene, pacing from side to side in a manner displaying his inner turmoil. By pacing across the stage, the audience would be able to better gain a grasp on how conflicted Faustus is, and it would put into actions what he is expressing in words. On the stage, I would suggest having minimal props, as Faustus is a man without many material possessions. As he paces, I would direct him to make grand gestures with his arms, alternating with times where he would draw his arms into his body, as a display of vulnerability and confusion. When Faustus states “No, Faustus, be resolute”, I would direct him to stand firmly, and thrust his hands, with fists clenched, to the ground (ln.6). Similarly, while Faustus talks about turning to God, I would direct him to bury his head in his hands as a way of showing his vulnerability and distress.

For lighting this scene, I would choose subdued and darker tones, which would help to visually represent Faustus’ turmoil. At the very end of his speech, I would suggest the lighting to drastically change from the subdued tones to dark and dim, as it would represent Faustus’ rejection of redemption and turn to damnation. This would also provide a sinister welcome to the Good and Evil angels, who arrive to persuade Faustus to conform to their respective wills. By making the stage increasingly darker but never pitch black, it would display how Faustus experiences some moments of deep uncertainty, and seems to be in the “gray area” between right and wrong. When Faustus makes the shift from speaking about turning back to God to his love for the Devil, the dark and dramatic lighting of the stage would signify the darkness creeping into Faustus’ soul.

To accompany the stage directions and lighting of the play, I would choose to have a certain type of music playing throughout the action of this scene. It would follow the cues for the lighting, being generally dreary and dark sounding through the first half of Faustus’ statement, and building into the most intensity on the line “To God? He loves thee not” (ln 10). This would represent, coupled with the dark lighting, the darkening and changing of Faustus’ mind. By adding in sound and light cues, as well as directing the actor to visibly display his conflicting feelings of resolution and uncertainty, I believe that it would make the most out of the performance of the passage, as it would underscore the words being spoken, and emphasize the role that the passage holds in relation to the work as a whole.

This passage is notable in the depiction of Faustus’ internal struggle between what is right and wrong, and summarizes his constant vacillation between redemption and damnation. Faustus is a weak character who believes that he needs the help of the Devil in order to gain all that he wants in life, though he settles for a deal that hardly seems to be fair, as he signs his soul over in exchange for only 24 years of service. It doesn’t seem to be logical that Faustus would be willing to settle for such a deal if he was more resolute in his beliefs. When looked at in relation to Faustus’ character development throughout the play, this passage explains much about the direction that Faustus goes in terms of his path away from redemption. When Faustus proclaims, “To God? He loves thee not./ The God thou servest is thine own appetite”, it displays how Faustus continually turns away from redemption and God, and follows his own whims and desires, no matter where they may take him (ll. 10-11). As the play progresses and Faustus becomes more deeply entrenched in the promises that Mephostophilis makes to him, he turns farther and farther from faith and seeks the “comfort” of the Devil.

This passage displays how Faustus is a character dragged down by his own wavering morals, and how he is constantly affected by his choice. Faustus, throughout the entirety of the play, wrestles with the idea of what is good and what is bad, articulating it at several points. Through word choice and dramatic instances, Marlowe presents Faustus’ turmoil, and allows for ease in interpretation to the stage. Marlowe establishes him as a conflicted character and continues to circle back to that point, which gives the audience evidence that Faustus is indeed weak and uncertain, and has truly made a deal with the Devil.

Works Cited

“Abjure.” *The Oxford English Dictionary.* Online.

“Altar.” *The Oxford English Dictionary.* Online.

“Church.” *The Oxford English Dictionary.* Online.

“Deity.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Online.