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Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, 
the Oedipus Complex, 
and the Denial of Death 

by PHILIP K. WION

ALTHOUGH Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus has probably occasioned more commentary and controversy than any other play of the English Renaissance outside of Shakespeare, surprisingly little has been written about it from a psychoanalytic point of view. Except for a recent article focussing on Faustus’ final soliloquy, the only study of the play which is deeply and explicitly informed by psychoanalytic concepts and insights, so far as I have been able to discover, is an essay by C. L. Barber, "The Form of Faustus’ Fortunes Good or Bad." Barber concentrates upon those aspects of the play's action and imagery which deal with conflicts and fantasies associated with the earliest stage of psychological development, the oral. The play, he demonstrates, abounds in material related to eating and drinking, hunger and thirst, deprivation and surfeiting, prayer and blasphemy, communion and abandonment. Again and again it dwells upon an intense longing for a joyful at-oneness like that of the infant at its mother's breast, blissfully satisfying its deepest needs for warmth, sustenance, and support, while reaching upward toward a smiling and loving face. Damnation in the play is, among other things, eternal frustration of the longing for the "taste" of this "chiefest bliss." The motherly smile of loving approval is replaced by the "ireful brows" of a scowling, wrathful God.

Such a brief account can only begin to suggest the richness of Barber's discussion of the play. But illuminating as his study is, it does leave room for further psychoanalytically-oriented consideration. Barber deliberately limits his analysis to the 1604 version of the play. "Most of the additional matter in the 1616 version seems to me," he says, "to lack imaginative and stylistic relation to the core of the play" (p. 93, n.). This approach to the much- vexed problems of the text and authorship of the play has the merits of forthrightness and economy, and it cer-
tainly enhances the coherence of Barber's interpretation. But in limiting himself to the 1604 text and focussing so intensively upon oral themes, Barber neglects a wealth of important Oedipal material which also contributes to the power and form of the play, both in the 1604 ("A") version and in the expanded version of 1616 ("B").

What I propose to do is to examine closely features of the play which can be seen to express underlying Oedipal wishes and fears, and to relate them to some of the anxieties and defenses analyzed by Ernest Becker in his powerful synthesis of psychoanalytic and existentialist thought, *The Denial of Death.* In doing so, I want to suggest at least partial answers to some of the questions which have most exercised critics of the play, questions concerning the nature of Faustus' motives, transgressions, and punishment, the relation of the comic scenes to the major action, and the attitudes of the author (or authors) toward Faustus and toward the Christian framework of the play. Most importantly, a psychoanalytic perspective can help us to account for, and perhaps even to transcend, conflicting critical responses to the play, by enabling us to recognize and understand ambivalent and contradictory feelings within the play, both in Faustus himself and on the part of the author(s).

The following brief description of the Oedipal stage of development, from Otto Fenichel's authoritative *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis,* conveys a strong sense of the complexity and ambivalence of the relationships and feelings summed up in the much-abused phrase "the Oedipus complex":

The contradictory strivings of love and hate, or of love for mother and love for father, and so on, seem temporarily to coexist without disturbing each other. It is characteristic of the primary process that contradictions may coexist without leading to disturbing conflicts. As the ego becomes stronger this gradually becomes impossible and conflicts do arise. The boy begins to realize that his love for the mother, his identification love for the father (based on the formula "I would like to be as big as he is and be allowed and able to do all that he does"), and his hatred of the father (based on the fact that the father has certain privileges) conflict with one another. "I love mother and hate father because he takes mother for himself" is an expression for the way in which the boy's impulses typically are condensed, under the conditions of family upbringing. This is called the positive Oedipus complex . . . We speak of a negative Oedipus complex in a boy when love for the father prevails and the mother is hated as a disturbing element in his love for the father. Certain traces of this negative Oedipus complex are normally present along with the positive.3

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I can see no satisfactory way of resolving them" (p. 196). The text I shall be quoting from, that of Irving Ribner, in *The Complete Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1963), is based on the 1616 edition, supplemented and corrected by readings from the 1604 quarto and from the 1619 and later editions. When a passage I quote is found in only one version, I shall note that fact: otherwise it may be assumed that the passage appears in essentially the same form in both versions. Though a fair number of the passages I shall refer to appear only in the 1616 edition, enough relevant material appears in both texts, I believe, to demonstrate convincingly that powerful Oedipal fantasies underlie the play in both its versions. The passages unique to the 1616 text, whether written by Marlowe or by others, generally elaborate, clarify or make more explicit tendencies which are very much at work, though perhaps less obvious, in the 1604 version.

All the play tells us of Faustus "in his infancy," of course, is that he was "born of parents base of stock" and that "at riper years" he went to Wittenberg, where "his kinsmen chiefly brought him up" (Prol. 10-14). But although Faustus' own parents never enter the play, there are many relationships in it which are analogous in various ways to the relations between child and parents, especially between son and father; and it is not difficult to see how Oedipal conflicts (those of Faustus, or of Marlowe, or of a reader) can be displaced onto these analogous relationships.

The number of master-servant relationships in the play, for instance, is strikingly large. Faustus is master to his servant Wagner, whom the scholars refer to as Faustus' "boy" (I.i.3). Wagner, in turn, becomes master to Robin—though Robin resists, and regards the epithet "boy" as a "disgrace to my person" (I.iv.2, B only); he agrees to serve only under compulsion. It is not altogether clear whose servant Dick, Robin's crony, is; but he has some interesting things to say about his master and his mistress, as we shall see. Mephistophilis is "a servant to great Lucifer" (I.iii.40) and offers to become Faustus' "slave" if he will "buy my service with his soul" (II.i.45,32). It is not long, however, before Lucifer is compelling Faustus to "show thyself an obedient servant" (II.ii.101, B only).

Political and ecclesiastical relationships also provide analogues to parent-child relationships. Faustus dwells on the might (and limitations) of "Emperors and kings" (I.i.58) in his fantasies of the powers he hopes to gain through magic; among other things, he would like to "chase the Prince of Parma from our land / And reign sole king of all the provinces" (I.94-95). "His reverend fatherhood" the Pope (III.i.166, B only), the Emperor, the Duke of Anholt, and the knight Benvolio are all men of authority or status onto whom Faustus displaces Oedipal feelings. The Old Man who appears briefly and significantly near the end of the play is not identified with respect to social role or status. But he is more obviously a father figure in relation to Faustus than any of these others; he even addresses Faustus as "gentle son" (V.i.50, B only).

Most important of all the relationships in the play which can be seen as Oedipal are those between Faustus and God, on the one hand, and between Faustus and the demonic figures, on the other. Contributing to the significance and resonance of these are Oedipal relationships among the central figures in the Christian framework of the play. The relationship between God and Christ is, of course, that of Father and obedient Son. The relationship between God and Lucifer is much more complex. In most respects, Lucifer is an anti-Christ, a rebellious son. But he can also be seen, surprisingly enough, as an obedient son, insofar as he functions as God's agent, the instrument through whom God punishes those who have provoked his wrath. There are, in fact, at least four different kinds of Oedipal significance Lucifer (or other demonic figures)
can have for a man like Faustus. The devil can represent the son who defies the father, and the son who imitates the father. He can also represent the father who is admired and imitated, and the father who is hated and feared. 6 (Late in the play, Lucifer himself refers to Faustus as chief of “the subjects of our monarchy, / Those souls whom sin seals the black sons of hell” [V.ii.2–3, B only; my emphasis].)

As father figure, the devil seems to be a rather late derivative of God himself. According to Ernest Jones, “coincidently with the growth of the Satan idea in the later history of the Jews . . . the character of the Yahweh belief changed and approximated much more nearly to the modern one of a benevolent God. In the earlier history of the Jews Yahweh combined the attributes of both God and Devil; evil as well as good proceeded directly from him. . . .’’ As Freud himself put it,

It does not need much analytic perspicacity to guess that God and the Devil were originally identical—were a single figure which was later split into two figures with opposite attributes. . . . The contradictions in the original nature of God are . . . a reflection of the ambivalence which governs the relation of the individual to his personal father. If the benevolent and righteous God is a substitute for his father, it is not to be wondered at that his hostile attitude to his father, too, which is one of hating and fearing him and of making complaints against him, should have come to expression in the creation of Satan. 7

What does Faustus want? He wants what all of us wanted as children, and still do, in all probability, in some more or less hidden recesses of our psyches. Among other things, he wants the “profit and delight,” “power,” “honor,” even “omnipotence” (I.i.54–55), which many of the father figures in the play seem to him to have. The powers of earthly emperors and kings are finite, of course, as Faustus acknowledges; but the powers of spirits, of devils, of gods, of God Himself, stretch “as far as doth the mind of man” (I.i.62). (That, no doubt, is why they were invented, as Faustus hints every time he raises the possibility that these figures may be “fables” and illusions.) Fathers also seem to have secret and unlimited knowledge, as well as power; so Faustus wants to pry into “the secrets of all foreign kings” (I.i.88) and to be resolved “of all ambiguities” (I.i.81).

The knowledge of the fathers is not merely intellectual, however, nor is all power simply physical or political. Our minds have an insistent way of connecting knowledge and power with sex (at both the conscious and unconscious levels), as the Biblical use of the verb “to know” and the phrase “carnal knowledge” suggest. The play’s presentation of

6. I am following Ernest Jones’s analysis in Chapter VI, “The Devil,” of his book On the Nightmare (New York: Liveright, 1951); see pp. 166 ff. for detailed discussion of these four aspects of the Devil’s significance.


Faustus’ sexual desires is relatively truncated and oblique. But it is perhaps significant that when Faustus has signed the pact, he asks Mephistophilis first for answers to his questions and then immediately, and rather abruptly, for a wife: “For I am wanton and lascivious, / And cannot live without a wife” (II.i.140–41). The clearest equation of sex and knowledge in the play is carried by a double entendre in an exchange between Robin and Dick:

Dick. . . . an my master come, he’ll conjure you, 'faith.
Robin. My master conjure me? I'll tell thee what: an my master come here, I'll clap as fair a pair of horns on’s head as e'er thou sawest in thy life.
Dick. Thou needst not do that, for my mistress hath done it.
Robin. Ay, there be of us here that have waded as deep into matters as other men, if they were disposed to talk.
Dick. A plague take you! I thought you did not sneak up and down after her for nothing.

(I.iii.13–22, B, my emphasis; the A version of this scene also connects sex and knowledge, but less neatly)

Is the sexual activity in the play Oedipal, in the narrow sense of implying incestuous desires for the mother? The question is not an easy one to answer. Except for Robin’s energetic boasting that he has cuckolded his master, and the brief speech of the female figure of Lechery in the show of the Seven Deadly Sins, heterosexual desire in the play is generally deflected from its usual genital aims, as Barber has suggested (pp. 100–104). For example, when Valdes imagines the spirits who will be available to the conjurers in the form of “women or unwedded maids,” he sees them as “Shadowing more beauty in their airy brows / Than in the white breasts of the queen of love” (I.i.129–30), thus focussing attention upon the association between breasts and face which contributes to the pattern of oral fantasies Barber has described. Similarly, Barber points out, Faustus is fascinated and enraptured by Helen’s face and her lips that “suck forth my soul” (V.i.102).

Barber emphasizes the oral aims of Faustus’ desires; what I want to suggest is that these oral aims imply an identification of their object with the mother. With this possibility in mind, observe what happens as Faustus continues his famous speech to Helen. A clear father figure, the Old Man, re-enters just in time to see Faustus return her kiss (A only). Faustus then proceeds to fantasize himself as young Paris, combatting “weak Menelaus” (V.i.108), the husband he has cuckolded, and wounding his powerful champion, Achilles, in the heel. W. W. Greg and other critics have suggested that Faustus seals his doom by copulating with the demonic Helen, a succuba after all.9 Be that as it may, it seems clear that underlying the deed is a fantasy of sexual possession of a figure unconsciously equated with the mother, in a spirit of defiance of her hus-

band, who is regarded, momentarily at least, as weak and vulnerable.

But it is not the mother alone whom Faustus seeks to love. The final lines of this speech ostensibly continue his praise of Helen:

Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter
When he appeared to hapless Semele,
More lovely than the monarch of the sky
In wanton Arethusa's azured arms . . . (V.ii.114-17)

The imagery of these lines implies punishment in the very act of fulfilling forbidden desires. Moreover, the similes astonishingly reverse the sexes, so that Helen is compared to Jupiter, the father of the gods, and Faustus himself to a "hapless" female. This is not the first time in the play such a reversal or confusion of sexual identity has been suggested. When Faustus rejects in disgust the "devil dressed like a woman" (II.ii.146, S.D.) Mephistophilis offers him as a wife, Mephistophilis urges him to think no more of marriage, "if thou lovest me" (II.ii.150). He then promises to bring Faustus "the fairest courtesans" he wishes:

She whom thine eye shall like, thy heart shall have,
Were she as chaste as was Penelope,
As wise as Saba, or as beautiful
As was bright Lucifer before his fall.
(II.ii.153-56, my emphasis)

Both here and in Faustus' speech to Helen, the fantasy slides from desire for a woman to the suggestion of love for a powerful and dazzling male. I do not think we will go far wrong if we conclude that strong "negative" Oedipal feelings of love for the father underlie these startling progressions of imagery. Even the idea of overt sexual relations with the father surfaces momentarily, elsewhere in the play. When the Duke of Anholt gives an order to "commit the rascals" who have disturbed his court, Dick impudently replies, "Commit with us! He were as good commit with his father as commit with us" (IV.vii.44-45, B only; the idiom is most familiar in a line from King Lear: "commit not with man's sworn spouse" [11.iv.77]).

The loss of the love of God the Father is a recurrent motif in the play. Even Lucifer was "most dearly loved of God" (I.iii.66) before his fall, and Mephistophilis, "who saw the face of God" (I.iii.77), is tormented most deeply by the thought of what he has lost. It is significant, in this context, that one of the legal texts Faustus ponders in his opening soliloquy refers to the conditions under which a father can disinherit his son: "Exhaereditare filium non potest pater nisi—" (I.i.31); for Faustus feels rejected by God, as well as rejecting toward him. Faustus' turning to the devils is in part a desperate, confused, willfully blind attempt to substitute their love—of which he and they speak repeatedly—for that of God, which he feels has been withdrawn from him and can never be regained:
Despair in God, and trust in Beelzebub.
... Faustus will turn to God again!
To God? He loves thee not.
The God thou serv'st is thine own appetite,
Wherein is fixed the love of Beelzebub. (II.i.5,9-12)

We are accustomed to thinking of Faustus primarily as rebellious and antagonistic toward authority. But in fact he often shows tender and submissive feelings toward people of superior status and power. Though he is childishly defiant toward the grotesquely arrogant Pope Adrian, for example, he is deferential almost to the point of obsequiousness toward Adrian's rivals, the Emperor Carolus and Pope Bruno.¹⁰

These gracious words, most royal Carolus,
Shall make poor Faustus to his utmost power
Both love and serve the German Emperor
And lay his life at holy Bruno's feet.

(IV.ii.14–17, B; A's language is slightly less exaggerated)

And toward the end of the play, a much mellowed Faustus is content to play the role of court entertainer to the Duke and Duchess of Anholt, and thinks himself "highly recompensed in that it pleaseth your grace to think but well of that which Faustus hath performed" (IV.vii.5–7). In short, his feelings toward his "fathers" are highly contradictory.

Intense Oedipal desires, whether positive or negative, inevitably arouse intense anxiety. And that anxiety, according to Freud, is almost bound, for males, to focus upon a specific fear, the fear of castration.¹¹

To challenge the powerful and hated father, wishing his removal so that you can have the mother all to yourself, is to fear retaliation (for the wish as much as for the deed). To wish to take the mother's place in the father's affection is to wish to be female (Semele or Arethusa to the father's Jupiter), and therefore to give up the surest and most highly prized natural attribute of maleness, the penis. The fear of castration can easily be displaced, however, and surface as fear of decapitation, being lamed, or any of the other "terrible tortures adults dream up, amputations, mutilations, blindings, and the like."¹²

Doctor Faustus is, in fact, riddled with threats, fears and dramatizations of various kinds of mutilation. The first such threat occurs in the scene which parodies Faustus' pact with Lucifer. Wagner bullies Robin into his service by threatening, "If thou dost not presently bind thyself to me for seven years, I'll turn all the lice about thee into familiars and make them tear thee in pieces" (I.iv.19–21). Once Faustus has con-

¹⁰ The appearance of two rival popes in the play parallels the splitting of the father into God and Devil. Faustus sides with the defeated Bruno against the victorious Adrian, as he sides with Lucifer against God. The play's Protestant audience is naturally expected to share Faustus' attitude here; Protestant ambivalence toward traditional authority is thus not only characteristic of the play's hero, but assumed to be characteristic of its audience as well.

¹¹ See, for example, Freud's paper on "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" (1924), Std. Ed., XIX, 173–179.

cluded his bargain, the threat of dismemberment is renewed, with increasing intensity, every time he wavers in his allegiance to the devils. When Faustus begins to discover the limits of Mephistophilis’ responsiveness to his inquiries, for instance (Mephistophilis refuses to tell “who made the world” [II.ii.67], who really has a father’s creative powers), he tries to turn to God. But the Bad Angel warns him, “If thou repent, devils will tear thee in pieces” (II.ii.81); and when he calls on Christ it is Lucifer who appears, to terrify him into submission. Near the end of the play Faustus is almost won over by the Old Man; but Mephistophilis “arrests” his soul “For disobedience to my sovereign lord. / Revolt, or I’ll in piecemeal tear thy flesh” (V.i.75–76). At the end of the play (in the 1616 version) Faustus’ body finally is torn to pieces: after his soul has been carried off to hell, his fellow scholars find his limbs “All torn asunder by the hand of death”; or rather, as another of the scholars amends the statement, “The devils whom Faustus served have torn him thus” (V.iii.7,8, B only).

So Faustus’ fears of dismemberment—of symbolic castration—are fulfilled in the end: “Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight” (Ep. 1). What of his wishes? If symbolic castration is his punishment, are his “crimes” the Oedipal transgressions which evoke fear of this punishment? In part, at least, I think they are. Faustus’ taking Helen for his paramour seems, as we have seen, to be equated unconsciously with incestuous possession of the mother. Symbolic patricide may also be present in the same scene. For a moment, it seems as if Faustus may find in the Old Man’s “tender love / And pity” (V.i.51–52, B only) the fatherly support and forgiveness which would enable him to repent and turn from desperate trust in Lucifer to faith in a benevolent God. But Mephistophilis’ threat to tear his flesh in pieces terrifies him into a renewal of his commitment to the devils. In the next breath, Faustus goes on to seek revenge—not upon the demonic masters he fears, but upon the harmless, fatherly Old Man:

Torment, sweet friend, that base and aged man
That durst dissuade me from thy Lucifer,
With greatest torment that our hell affords. (V.i.84–86)

Although Mephistophilis admits that “His faith is great; I cannot touch his soul,” he agrees to “afflict his body” (V.i.87–88), and at the end of the scene, as Faustus leaves with Helen, devils enter to carry out his aggressive wishes (A only). The Old Man is triumphant in spirit, to be sure; but it does appear that the devils take him away torturing his body. His last line, “hence I fly unto my God” (V.i.127, A only), may signify physical death as well as spiritual triumph, in fact a kind of martyrdom. 13

Fantasies of castration also lie behind some of the comic episodes of the play, which thus turn out to have considerable imaginative (if not stylistic) relation to the “core of the play” after all. It is almost as if Faustus were attempting to master his fears by making sport with them, like a child (or adult, for that matter) going over and over a disturbing experience in play in order to overcome the anxieties which threaten to overwhelm him. 4 “His artful sport drives all sad thoughts away” (IV.vii.112), as the Duke of Anholt says. In the episode with the Horse-Courser, for instance, Faustus’ leg comes off as the Horse-Courser he has cheated tries to wake him to get his money back. But Faustus isn’t bothered at all; he shouts for help merely in order to scare the Horse-Courser away, and then he exults that he “hath his leg again” (IV.v.51) and his victim’s forty dollars as well. The symbolic significance of the leg comes near the surface in a later scene, when the Carter’s taunts and the Horse-Courser’s puzzled questions lead to the general exclamation, “O horrible! Had the doctor three legs?” (IV.vii.98, B only). (I’m reminded of the question of a prostitute in the Circe chapter of Ulysses: “How’s your middle leg?”) 15

The episode involving the knight Benvolio also offers a (more or less) comic handling of castration anxieties, in a context which includes several other Oedipal motifs. Faustus revenges himself for Benvolio’s scorn of his powers by placing horns on his head. In both versions Benvolio is made the butt of jokes about cuckolding. In the 1616 version, the underlying sexual nature of the conflict is confirmed both by the dumb show (in which a battle between two men is followed by a woman’s joining the victor and embracing him) and by Benvolio’s angry aside: “’Sblood, and scholars be such cuckold makers to clap horns of honest men’s heads o’ this order, I’ll ne’er trust smooth faces and small ruffs more. But an I be not revenged for this, would I might be turned to a gaping oyster and drink nothing but salt water” (IV.ii.111-15, B only). Not to take revenge in this situation, Benvolio’s imagery implies, is to be un-manned, to be reduced to a creature suggestive of the female genitals. His brutal retaliation in the following scene constitutes another symbolic castration of Faustus. Not only is Faustus decapitated; Benvolio fantasizes about nailing horns to his head, cutting off his beard, and putting out his eyes. But Benvolio (the name is certainly ironic!) never gets to carry out his sadistic intentions. Instead, Faustus jumps up—rising from the dead, undoing the symbolic castration he has suffered—and turns the tables on his attackers, ordering Mephistophilis to “break [Benvolio’s] bones / As he intended to dismember me” (IV.iii.90-91, B only).

Another motif which can be related to fear of castration is that of

14. On the use of play to master anxiety, see Fenichel, pp. 44-45, and Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), Std. Ed., XVIII, 14-17.
Faustus’ cutting his own arm to provide the blood with which to write his pact. Some comments by Fenichel on the nature of masochism are illuminating in this connection:

The masochistic act may represent a “lesser evil”: by a self-destructive act one unconsciously pays a small price to avert a greater dreaded evil. This is the psychology of “sacrifice.” A greater hurt is averted by voluntarily submitting the ego to an earlier and lesser one.

Many masochistic phenomena appear in analysis as a strengthening of a passive-receptive giving oneself up for the sake of the pleasure of regaining participation in omnipotence. One’s own smallness can be enjoyed if it serves as a way of feeling that one participates in somebody else’s greatness. (p. 74)

Faustus’ offer of a second self-wounding, in order to avert the tearing of his flesh threatened as punishment for heeding the Old Man’s warnings (V.i.77-81), is precisely the sort of propitiatory sacrifice described in the first passage. Faustus even initiates the idea of renewing the pact himself. That his initial self-wounding represents a “giving oneself up for the sake of . . . participation in omnipotence” is suggested by the very language with which Faustus accompanies his gesture:

Meph. Then Faustus, stab thy arm courageously, And bind thy soul that at some certain day Great Lucifer may claim it as his own, And then be thou as great as Lucifer.

Faustus. [stabbing his arm] Lo, Mephistophilis, for love of thee, I cut mine arm, and with my proper blood Assure my soul to be great Lucifer’s, Chief lord and regent of perpetual night. View here this blood that trickles from mine arm, And let it be propitious for my wish. (II.i.48-57)

These self-sacrificial motives help account for Faustus’ hidden, unfulfilled but nevertheless strong tendency to identify himself with Christ, as in his blasphemous yet oddly appropriate use of the phrase “Consummatum est” when he has completed the pact (II.i.73). Confused and ambivalent as his feelings toward his “fathers” may be, among them are tendencies which parallel Christ’s obedient submissiveness to his Father’s will—or at least that of the good Christian who seeks salvation in self-sacrifice. Faustus wants to yield, to submit, to be at one with a power greater than himself. If not with God, then with the Devil.

Why? Because part of him knows, deep down, that he cannot stand alone, that to be “but Faustus and a man” (I.i.23) is to be “but a man condemned to die” (IV.v.33). From the outset of the play, Faustus is desperate for miracles, for freedom, for immortality, and he knows that alone he cannot have or create them. So, like every child, he seeks for support, sustenance and assurance that he is more than a mere dying animal, wherever he can find these things in the mysterious, threatening world he was born into. In a culture organized around the patriarchal...
family, it is not surprising that omnipotence (and omniscience)\(^\text{16}\) should come to be located in the father, and in those other authorities who later function as his surrogates. But here’s the catch—father figures invested with huge protective powers necessarily become not only sources of comfort, but also objects of fear: such protection may be withdrawn, such powers may be turned against the person who trusts in them. To submit to the fathers thus means, for Faustus, to be subject to the same terrors he was trying to flee—loss of self and of manhood, helpless dependency, suffering and ultimately death.

In phrasing Faustus’ dilemma this way, I am drawing upon ideas developed by Ernest Becker in *The Denial of Death*. Thus far, I have been talking about the play’s Oedipal materials in more or less orthodox Freudian terms. Becker suggests ways of reformulating certain psychoanalytic concepts which bring even more of the play into relation with the themes I have been focussing on. The Oedipus complex, he argues (following Norman O. Brown),

is not the narrowly sexual problem of lust and competitiveness that Freud made out in his early work. Rather the Oedipus complex is the Oedipal project, a project that sums up the basic problem of the child’s life: whether he will be a passive object of fate, an appendage of others, a plaything of the world or whether he will be an active center within himself—whether he will control his own destiny with his own powers or not. As Brown put it: “The Oedipal project is [. . .] a product of the conflict of ambivalence and an attempt to overcome that conflict by narcissistic inflation. The essence of the Oedipal complex is the project of becoming God—in Spinoza’s formula, *causa sui*. [. . .] By the same token, it plainly exhibits infantile narcissism perverted by the flight from death [. . .].” The Oedipal project is the flight from passivity, from obliteration, from contingency: the child wants to conquer death by becoming the *father of himself*, the creator and sustainer of his own life.\(^\text{17}\)

But if *this* is what the Oedipal desires finally amount to, not only cultural prohibitions but also the natural limitations of being a human animal prevent their successful realization. “The narcissistic project of self-creation, using the body as the primary base of operations, is doomed to failure. And the child finds it out: *this* is how we understand the power and meaning of what is called the ‘castration complex [. . .]’” (Becker, p. 37).

From the beginning, Faustus’ protest against human limitation is a desperate attempt to deny the “complex symbol,” to use Becker’s

16. Attributing omniscience to God or to other father figures can be seen as a maneuver for salvaging one’s own infantile feeling of narcissistic omniscience—“I may not know everything, but my daddy does.” Faustus’ insatiable desire for knowledge—whether acquired by natural or by magical means—can be seen as an intense desire to restore for himself that feeling of omniscience. “It is good to be wise, as it is to be healthy and wealthy. But we must remember that there exists a very widespread fantasy that heaven lay about us in our infancy and that then we were omnipotent and omniscient. The world and our knowledge of it was intuitively a priori graspable, finite, though unbounded. When we are proved otherwise than omnipotent and omniscient, there is resentment, followed by an effort through magical, real, or part-magical part-real means to restore and to repair the gaps and lesions in this primal feeling.”—Bertram D. Lewin, “Education or the Quest for Omniscience,” in *Selected Writings of Bertram D. Lewin*, ed. Jacob A. Arlow (New York: The Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 1973), p. 466.


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phrase, which is death. As he leafs through his books in his opening soliloquy, Faustus circles back again and again to human helplessness against death. Medicine is futile in his eyes unless it can “make men to live eternally, / Or, being dead, raise them to life again” (I.i.24-25). Divinity’s most powerful message for Faustus is that

we must sin,

And so consequently die.

Ay, we must die an everlasting death. (I.i.45-47)

His defense is an attempt to leave behind the body of this death and to live, magically, entirely in a world of symbols—“lines, circles, signs, letters, and characters— / Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires” (I.i.52-53). This is the boundless world of “the mind of man,” in which “A sound magician is a demi-god” (I.i.62,63). How better put the project of becoming father of oneself, causa sui, by an act of the will and imagination, than the way Faustus does: “Here try thy brains to get [beget] a deity” (I.i.64)?

The body and its mortality are not to be transcended quite so easily as Faustus imagines in his initial rush of enthusiasm, however. At the heart of the human dilemma, as Becker insists, is the fact that the nature of human beings is radically paradoxical, that we are “half animal and half symbolic” (p. 26). Faustus is tortured upon the cross of that paradox. When he signs the pact, he signs away “both body and soul” (II.i.104, my emphasis), and the phrase “body and soul” echoes like a leitmotif throughout the play. Faustus tries desperately to separate the two. But even as he signs away his soul—“Is not thy soul thine own?” (II.i.67)—his body protests, and the blood congeals. The first clause of the pact stipulates that he is to be “a spirit in form and substance” (II.i.95); but he learns that spirits can suffer as painfully as bodies: Mephistophilis speaks of feeling “terror” in his “fainting soul” (I.i.82), and assures Faustus that the devils have pain “as great as have the human souls of men” (II.i.43). The Old Man tells Faustus that he hopes his “kind rebuke, / Checking thy body, may amend thy soul” (V.i.54, B only); but in his final soliloquy, Faustus finds that neither his body nor his soul can escape the suffering his fate has brought upon him. As we have seen, the Old Man has the faith and courage to endure physical torture and death, while triumphing in the spirit. But Faustus has neither such courage nor such faith.

Where might they be found? Critics sometimes talk as if heroism were the norm among human beings, and condemn and condescend to Faus-
But Becker seems to me to be nearer the truth; psychoanalysis and Kierkegaard's existential (and Augustinian) Christianity agree, he maintains, that most human beings will resort to almost any degree of self-deception and uncritical dependence upon the real or fancied powers of others, rather than face the realities of their condition and risk despair. Faustus' fate is so absorbing and terrifying, I think, precisely because the play expresses our primitive fears and desires so fully and at the same time dares to question, even to withhold from Faustus himself, most of the defenses we commonly rely on to sustain our equanimity and our lives.

Becker, citing Otto Rank and William James, among others, argues that most forms of mental illness can be understood as failures of defense against the fundamental insecurities of the human condition. A "psychotic" person is one "for whom life is a more insurmountable problem than for others, for whom the burden of anxiety and fear is about as constant as his daily breath" (p. 217). Faustus' desperate final soliloquy, with its leaping, twisting, agonized efforts at escape from the fate which awaits him, body and soul, is not meant, perhaps, as a dramatization of madness. But Mephistophilis' anticipatory gloating does seem an accurate description: "How should" Faustus "demean himself," Mephistophilis asks,

but in desperate lunacy?
Fond worldling, now his heart-blood dries with grief;
His conscience kills it, and his laboring brain
Begets a world of idle fantasies
To over-reach the devil. But all in vain . . .

(V.ii.10-15, B only)

Conscience is the voice of the parents, internalized as the superego, which can be more irrational, demanding and cruel than the actual parents ever were. And guilt is aggression turned by the superego back against the self. Faustus' self-torment is both dramatized and augmented, in his final scene, by the words and actions of the others who confront him. Mephistophilis now reveals that the trust Faustus placed in him was betrayed from the start. The Good Angel no longer exhorts Faustus to repent, but dwells on the joys he has lost; the Bad Angel taunts him with visions of the sufferings that await him in hell. The tortures to which Lucifer subjects him are ratified by his vision of the wrathful God who "Stretcheth out his arm and bends his ireful brows" and looks "so fierce on me" (V.ii.147-48, 184). How could such an onslaught, from without and from within, be humanly sustained?

The answer is, I suspect, that it can't be. An ego under such pressures almost has to disintegrate; hence the symbolic appropriateness of the dismemberment of Faustus' body. (The ego is, developmentally, a "body-ego" first of all, according to Freud.)

20. The Ego and the Id (1923), Std.Ed., XIX, 16-17.
put the other way around, too: a strong, well-integrated ego is one which is fashioned precisely to prevent such overwhelming anxiety as Faustus experiences here. The terror of Faustus' final state is the terror of total defenselessness against the most thorough deprivation and implacable hostility conceivable. That—imagined as interminable—is what damnation is.

The play strips Faustus of all defenses and of all hope. But it does provide defenses for us, ways of mitigating the anxiety that complete identification with Faustus—complete abandonment to the painful Oedipal, oral and other fantasies it evokes in us—would bring. Apart from the defenses it provides simply as art, with art's implicit assurance of order and control, the play offers alternative identifications to that with Faustus. The anonymous scholars who try to comfort Faustus, who pray for him and mourn for him, and who will "give his mangled limbs due burial" (V.i.iii.17, B only) are presented as sensible, pious, and compassionate, though limited, men. They have never ventured to question the roles and meanings their culture has provided for them, and they are dismayed at Faustus' audacity. (Their first impulse, when they hear of his dabbling in magic, is to turn to Authority for help: "But come, let us go and inform the rector. / It may be his grave counsel may reclaim him" [I.iii.30-31].) Yet they can also admire and pity Faustus, and their feelings toward him suggest a model for our own. The Chorus, too, like the chorus of a Greek tragedy, offers a traditionally sanctioned perspective on Faustus' experience which allows us to distance ourselves from his tragic fate, and to deny or renounce the motives in ourselves which tend in the same direction:

Faustus is gone. Regard his hellish fall, Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise Only to wonder at unlawful things, Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits To practice more than heavenly power permits. (Ep. 4-8)

Even here, however, something of Faustus' ambivalent attitude remains; the emphasis is on the prohibition of "unlawful things" enjoined by "heavenly power." The same sort of ambivalence has crept into the words of the Chorus as far back as the prologue, where we hear, in the midst of lines dwelling on Faustus' own responsibility for his downfall, that "heavens conspired his overthrow" (Pro!. 22). The Christian world view within which the action of the play is presented is thus given the authoritarian and pessimistic inflection characteristic of the more austere, demanding and guilt-ridden—in a word, puritanical—strains of

21. See Simon O. Lesser, Fiction and the Unconscious (New York: Vintage, 1962), pp. 128-131, and passim. It is likely that much of the dissatisfaction readers feel with Doctor Faustus as a work of art comes from its failure to provide completely adequate formal assurance that its author, or authors, have mastered its underlying fantasies. "Certainly there is much in the play to suggest an involvement too deeply personal to be mastered imaginatively"—Wilbur Sanders, The Dramatist and the Received Idea; Studies in the Plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1968), p. 212.
Christian belief and practice. This world view is thus paradoxically both the play’s central defense against Oedipal motives and anxieties, and at the same time a manifestation of them.

Christianity does not have to be authoritarian, punitive, obsessed with sin and death. Luther’s task, according to Erik Erikson, was precisely to overcome “the hypertrophy of the negative conscience inherent in our whole Judaeo-Christian heritage in which, as Luther put it: ‘Christ becomes more formidable as a tyrant and a judge than was Moses.’”

Luther’s solution to his intense struggles with his father, his negative conscience, and a wrathful God was to achieve identification with the suffering Son:

Luther abandoned the appreciation of Christ as a substitute who has died “for”—in the sense of “instead of”—us; he also abandoned the concept of Christ as an ideal figure to be imitated, or abjectly venerated, or ceremonially remembered as an event in the past. Christ now becomes the core of the Christian’s identity: quotidianus Christi adventus, Christ is today here, in me. The affirmed passivity of suffering becomes the daily Passion and the Passion is the substitution of the primitive sacrifice of others with a most active, most masterly, affirmation of man’s nothingness—which, by his own masterly choice, becomes his existential identity.

Luther crowns his attempt to cure the wounds of this wrath by changing God’s attributes: instead of being like an earthly father whose mood-swings are incomprehensible to his small son, God is given the attribute of ira misericordiae—a wrath which is really compassion. With this concept, Luther was at last able to forgive God for being a Father, and grant Him justification. (pp. 212-13, 221-22)

Even Luther, however, could not sustain this solution throughout his anguished life. And Faustus, like Marlowe behind him, perhaps, cannot make the Old Man’s leap of faith to acceptance of his mortal condition, atonement with the Father, and forgiveness both of his fathers and of himself.

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22. For a lucid account of “the morbid and powerful fascination that the Calvinist doctrine of Reprobation seems to have had for Elizabethan minds,” see Sanders, pp. 243-252.
24. Compare the words of the Old Man:

It may be this my exhortation
Seems harsh and all unpleasant; let it not,
For, gentle son, I speak it not in wrath
Or envy of thee, but in tender love
And pity of thy future misery.
And so have hope that this my kind rebuke,
Checking thy body, may amend thy soul. (V.i.48-54)