Doctor Faustus and the Sin of Demoniality

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In 1946 Sir Walter Greg advanced a provocative thesis concerning the tragic guilt of Doctor Faustus in Christopher Marlowe’s famous play. Analyzing the scene in which Helen, “fairer than the evening’s air/ Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars” (xviii.112-113), appears to Faustus, Greg stated that “in making her his paramour, Faustus commits the sin of demoniality, that is, bodily intercourse with demons.” Furthermore, “with Faustus’ union with Helen the nice balance between possible salvation and imminent damnation is upset,” so that from this point on salvation is beyond the reach of the hellbound Doctor. Greg finds corroboration for this view in the words of the Old Man, who had urged Faustus to repent and turn to God. Now he cries out:

Accursed Faustus, miserable man,
That from thy soul exclud’st the grace of heaven,
And fliest the throne of his tribunal seat! (xviii.119-121)

Thus Marlowe had depicted, along with “Faustus’ spiritual sin of bartering his soul to the powers of evil . . . its physical complement and counterpart, however he may have disguised it in immortal verse.”

A portion of Greg’s thesis was challenged almost immediately, in 1947, by J. C. Maxwell, who believed that the stress on the element of sensuality in Faustus and on the importance of the scene with Helen obscured the real nature of his sin, namely, pride, by which he brings damnation on himself. Maxwell’s view, on the whole, seems correct. It also allows for Faustus’ indulgence in sensual diversions, for, once being committed to the pact with Satan, Faustus partakes of the sop of sensuality to blot out his fears of impending damnation:

[Her] sweet embraces may extinguish clear
Those thoughts that do dissuade me from my vow,
And keep mine oath I made to Lucifer. (xviii.94-96)

In spite of Maxwell’s pertinent criticism, Greg’s argument has greatly influenced, not to say muddled, subsequent interpretations of the play. It implies that the sin of demoniality is unpardonable, and numerous later critics have agreed that Faustus is indeed lost when he kisses Helen, who is now regarded by most as a succubus, that is, a distaff incubus—“her lips suck forth my soul” (xviii.102). In 1948, Helen Gardner wrote: “Dr. Greg has recently recovered for us the full mingling of horror and beauty in the scene in which Faustus embracing Helen cries: ‘Her lips suck forth my soul: see where it flies!’ He points out that Helen is a ’spirit’ and that in this play a spirit is a devil. ‘Faustus commits the sin of demoniality, that is bodily intercourse with demons.’” Michel Poirier wrote in 1951: “The Old Man is aware that salvation is henceforth impossible”; Leo Kirshebaum, in 1962: “Faustus has given up the last possibility of redemption and embraced hell”; Roma Gill, in 1966: “The kiss signals the ultimate sin, demoniality, the bodily intercourse with spirits.” All this has filtered down to the level of one of the most popular textbooks used in American college survey courses, the Norton Anthology of English Literature (3rd ed., 1974), which includes this observation in the introduction to Dr. Faustus: “When he [Faustus] acquires Helen, who is a spirit, as his paramour, he has committed the sin of demoniality (intercourse with devils) and is beyond repentance.” Only as late as 1969, twenty-two years after Maxwell’s first objection, has this general thesis again been challenged: T. W. Craik points out first, that “spirits” do not always seem to mean devils in this play, and second, that the Old Man “does not explicitly condemn Faustus for demoniality”; thus if this sin should put him “beyond the reach of divine forgiveness, then he is damned for the act of demoniality without the intention.” Therefore, to argue that he is doomed for

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demoniality is "repugnant to the whole nature of the play."4

This is well argued. But another major objection to Greg's argument has yet to be made. Even if Faustus did engage in "demoniality"—as only an adventurous reading of the text would affirm—that sin was not necessarily "ultimate" or "beyond repentance." In the very next scene, in a discussion between Faustus and three of his fellow scholars, the Second Scholar admonishes him to "look up to heaven and remember God's mercy is infinite" (xix.39-40). Although Faustus does not heed the plea, Marlowe very evidently implies that the chance for redemption still exists. A survey of writers on the subject of demonology before Marlowe will prove conclusively that "demoniality" was not considered a mortal sin—"beyond repentance."

It seems to have been an accepted fact throughout the Middle Ages that so-called incubi or succubi plagued men and women but that any sin with these creatures was pardonable. In the Latin-Christian world Augustine conceded to common opinion that the incubi "performed obscenities and attacked and sought congress with [women]." Male and female sexual molesters are present in apocryphal books (Acts of Thomas), saints' lives (St. Anthony, St. Bernard), and commentaries (by Justin Martyr, Isidore, Strabo).5 By the time of the high Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas considered the older but discarded opinion that Genesis 6 gives the story of intercourse between spirits, fallen angels, and human beings, and that children resulted, and accepted the reality of the creatures called incubi and succubi.6 By the late

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4 "Faustus' Damnation Reconsidered," Renaissance Drama, NS 2 (Evanson, 1969), 189-196. In 1974, Robert H. West wrote: Faustus takes 'with Helen the supreme and vile pleasures that may be also the supreme sin of the many with which he confirms his apostasy.' ELR, 4 (1974), 236.


6 Aquinas' views are quoted in Lea, I, 155-156. For the earlier view of Genesis 6, see Justin Martyr (note 5 above).
fifteenth century, Jacob Sprenger and Henry Kramer, the authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (the *Hammer of Witches*), could state: “The Scripture speaks of incubi and succubi lusting after women.” They include extensive documentation of the activities of these creatures in the Middle Ages. Naturally enough, questions about unions between demon spirits and human beings were posed by various churchmen. Did the demons copulate for pleasure or to bring humans closer to hell? William of Auvergne states that the devils did not do this work mainly for pleasure, but to lure souls to hell. But men and women who engaged in such unions were forgiven for the venial trespassing if they repented. In the Acts of Thomas (second century) Thomas releases a woman from a five-year sexual bondage to a devil, and she becomes an avid Christian. Caesarius of Heisterbach (ca. 1235) records that a priest’s daughter confesses her long familiarity with a devil and is forgiven (though her father is then beaten to death by the angry incubus). Thomas of Cantimpré tells of women who were oppressed by incubi in the confessional, and of one particular woman who, corrupted in mind and body, admitted that she had intercourse with the incubus. She was liberated from the incubus after years of prayer and the priest graciously categorized the intercourse as “poena culpae” rather than as “culpa.” In 1484, the “Witch Bull” of Innocent VIII reveals the Pope’s horror that so many German laymen should be so forgetful of their souls’ salvation as to have commerce with incubi and succubi. Repentance would seem to wash away past indiscretions.

In Celtic England, another tradition of sexual spirits was present. It seems to have altered the direction of the Latin Christian tradition and to have modified the enormity of the sin. The Celtic demons are not always satanic and at rare moments could even be benign or beneficent. Included among these spirits are the incubus in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* (and in subsequent versions by Wace, Layamon, and Malory); the violent “daemones incubos et succubos” of Walter Map (the progeny of such unions, the churchman Walter tells us, were usually unfortunate); and underworld creatures such as the queen of Elfland in the ballad

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6Lea. I, 153.


8Lea. I, 154

9The Bull was included in the second edition of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (pp. xlii-xliv)
“Thomas Rhymer,” the Morrigan, the fairy king in Sir Orfeo, and the seductress in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Most of these underworld creatures were dangerous and unpredictable, but rarely were they consigned to the Christian hell. The merging of Celtic-English with Latin-Christian—and to some extent with the Latin, especially Ovidian—traditions of the sexual night-spirits gave writers of the later Middle Ages and early Renaissance a whole spectrum of figurative entities ranging from malevolent demons of hell to beneficent fairies of the upper air—the latter being part of the Celtic heritage.

From at least the time of Chaucer, the incubus could be a comic figure, as he is in the “Wife of Bath’s Tale,” where the Wife explains that elves and fairies which once walked the land do so no more; their places are taken by friars. As a result women can go safely “up and doun,” for “ther is noon oother incubus but he/ and he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.” She means that whereas the fairy incubus was likely to rape or abduct, the friar—and she has Friar Hubert in mind—would seduce gently with smiles, double talk, and ingratiating lisp—he will do “but dishonour.” In Marlowe’s time, Reginald Scot made a supreme effort to refute the irrational but deep-rooted belief in incubi and demons, though as literary figures they continued to be used (Shakespeare’s The Tempest has Caliban, the son of Sycorax and an incubus; Middleton’s The Witch includes a prankish and grotesque succubus/incubus team, Heccat and her son Firestone). Ultimately the context of the literary work determines exactly what kind of a figure the succubus/incubus is and whether any serious punishment will result from a union with such a creature. In view of the general


opinion that intercourse with demon spirits was a venial, not a mortal, sin ("Witch Bull," 1484), it seems unwise simply to assert that Faustus is doomed when he kisses the lips of the spirit, Helen.

Two further points might be made to qualify Greg's statements and their amplifications by other critics. First, nothing anywhere in the text of the play suggests that Faustus lost his soul here, though one might admit that Faustus lost his heart, judging by his rhapsodic hymn to Helen. The speech, beautiful as it is, represents neither the thematic nor structural climax of the play. Faustus, in fact, had asked for Helen mainly to get his mind off the real problem; her "sweet embraces may extinguish" his rational thoughts and allow him to keep his vow to Lucifer (xviii.94-96). Helen's function in the play was different only in degree from that of the incident recounted in scene v, when Faustus requested a wife and Mephostophilis supplied him with a "hot whore." Spirit or not, that creature was no more a traditional succubus than Helen, and Mephostophilis in neither case was tempting Faustus to commit the sin of demoniality. In the first instance he was trying to dissuade him from participating in a sacrament; in the second, according to Faustus' own words, he was helping him to "keep mine oath I made to Lucifer." Marlowe's source, the Faustbook, gives the same motive for the appearance of the first female; it also reports a Helen pregnant by Faustus, but there is no indication that either woman was a demon.  

The view that demoniality was not involved in either case is further buttressed by a glance at the scene following Helen's appearance. The pridelful aspiration of Doctor Faustus through diabolical means to become a god has continued for twenty-four years. Now the time is drawing to an end and with it comes the terrifying realization that he will be damned. The structural and thematic climax of the play is at hand. It was neither delayed nor expedited by the Helen episode. Shortly before her entry Faustus cries out:

Accursed Faustus, where is mercy now?
I do repent, and yet I do despair;
Hell strives with grace for conquest in my breast,
What shall I do to shun the snares of death? (xviii.70-74)

15Johann Spies, The History of the Damnable Life and Desired Death of Doctor John Faustus, trans. P. F. (1592), ed. William Rose (New York, 1925), chap. 9, pp. 80-82 and chap. 55, p 193. According to this Faustbook, Faustus sired on Helen a son, Justin, who performed magical deeds. "This child told Doctor Faustus many things that were to come, and what strange matters were done in foreign countries." Helen and Justin disappeared at Faustus' death.
In the following scene, Faustus, in utter desperation, tells his friends: "Faustus' offense can ne'er be pardoned: the serpent that tempted Eve may be saved, but not Faustus." It is a kind of inverted pride that prompts him to regard his sin as worse than that of Satan himself. He also reveals that his sin had more to do with books than sheer sensuality—"O would I had never seen Wittenberg, never read book" (xix.41-45). The horrible denouement now follows.

As Maxwell so ably stated in 1947, it is pride, not demoniality that best suits the character of Faustus as Marlowe conceived it. The appearance of Helen was the last of Faustus' diabolically attained pleasures and the most exquisite among them all. We may concede this much. Certainly none of the others inspired such ecstasy in him. He had asked for "heavenly Helen" as his "paramour"—"to glut the longing of my heart's desire" (xviii.91-93), and Mephostophilis had obliged with this last ravishing token, as the time was drawing short. But Helen was just another interlude within the mighty tragedy. 16 Thus there is no structural, thematic, textual, or cultural reason why we should agree with Greg's thesis that Faustus loses his soul in scene xviii during the Helen speech or that Faustus engaged in the sin of demoniality. Even if we grant that he did commit the latter sin, it was not, in this scene, either "ultimate" or "beyond repentance."

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