

# Faustus and mephastophilis



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Throughout the course of *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, a complex relationship develops between Dr. Faustus and the devil Mephastophilis that can be characterized by Faustus' total dependence on his counterpart and a mutual sense of possessiveness that inadvertently reveals the despair and longing of Mephastophilis. The pact that Faustus makes with Lucifer is similar to a dark ceremony of matrimony that binds Mephastophilis to Faustus as a servant, "I, John Faustus...do give both body and soul to Lucifer...and his servant Mephastophilis," (Scene V/ Lines 104-106). The devil is a servant with a certain degree of authority over his master, however, because he is the source of the man's power, and with the lines of influence blurred, the two characters grow on one another and bring the inherent sentimentality of their personalities to the surface. It is this imbalance of power between Faustus and Mephastophilis that affects the dynamic of the play most directly. Even though Mephastophilis is technically defined as Faustus' servant in the contract, Faustus is completely reliant on the devil, because he is powerless without him. The doctor himself realizes that Mephastophilis is an essential conduit for his powers as he states, "By him (Mephastophilis) I'll be great emperor of the world," (III/ 104) instead of saying that he would rule entirely of his own volition. It is also Faustus' hellish partner who performs every one of the mortal's feats of magic. When the doctor wants to harass the pope, he is able to do so only because Mephastophilis makes him invisible, and Faustus is able to summon Alexander the Great and grapes in winter because he has a devil at his side not because he has special powers or abilities. Faustus' reliance on his partner trivializes his pact with Lucifer, because essentially the man sold his soul in exchange for the limited service of a devil as opposed to the grandiose aspirations he had in his opening

monologue that “ All things that move between the quiet poles/ Shall be at my command,” (I/ 56-57). The only command that Faustus actually has is over Mephistophilis, but that authority is limited by the spirit’s ultimate allegiance to Lucifer who prevents his servant from giving Faustus a wife or speaking of the world’s creator, because both acts concern the divine and are therefore out of Lucifer’s dominion. This limit of knowledge frustrates Faustus as he chides Mephistophilis, “ Villain, have I not bound thee to tell me anything?” and the devil replies, “ Ay, that is not against our kingdom; but this is./ Think thou on hell, Faustus, for thou art damned,” (V/ 246-248). Despite these limitations, however, Faustus’ reliance on the devil endears him to his “ Sweet Mephistophilis,” (V/ 244). While their relationship is not explicitly eroticized, there is a bond between Faustus and Mephistophilis that goes beyond the traditional master-servant relationship. When Mephistophilis tells Faustus to cut his arm so that he can sign the contract in blood, the doctor says, “...for love of thee,/ I cut my arm,”(V/ 53) and the devil in turn plays upon this sentiment when Faustus requests a wife as he states, “ If thou lovest me, think no more of it,”(V/ 150). Even though Faustus’ love for the devil comes from the power that Mephistophilis has rather than his actual personality, it has the capacity to engender a strong sense of possessiveness in both companions. Mephistophilis seems to actually want to make Faustus happy as he guides him through Rome, “ And now, my Faustus, that thou may’st perceive/ What Rome containeth to delight thee with,”(VII/ 28-29). In all his time spent with the mortal Faustus, the devil Mephistophilis becomes attached to the damned man. When the angry horse-courser tries to force his way into Faustus’ chamber, Mephistophilis acts as a sort of nurse ensuring that his master’s sleep is not

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disturbed. After he lets the man in, it is Mephistophilis who carries on business with the horse-courser while Faustus simply wails about the loss of his "leg." Even though Faustus' love of Mephistophilis is a product of his lust for power, Mephistophilis' feelings towards Faustus are rooted in the fact that the devil can relate to the mortal because he is on the verge of eternal damnation. When Faustus asks him how he came out of hell, Mephistophilis replies that, for him, hell exists wherever he goes because he has known God and heaven and lost them for all eternity. As Mephistophilis describes his everlasting torment, a sense of compassion overtakes him and he pleads with Faustus, "O Faustus, leave these frivolous demands,/ Which strike a terror to my fainting soul," (III/ 81-82). This plea seems uncharacteristic for one of the original denizens of hell, but Mephistophilis realizes that Faustus is at a turning point in his life where he can either damn or save his soul, and out of a deep-seated empathy for this precarious position between paradise and hell, the devil gives Faustus a chance to make the right decision. This entreaty indicates that if Mephistophilis had the chance to go back and change his existence, then he would never have renounced God, because the cost was too great. Unfortunately, Faustus is so blinded by pride that he does not heed the warning, and he starts down the same path of damnation that Mephistophilis himself had chosen in the past. Interaction with a mortal that reminds Mephistophilis of himself causes the devil to take an introspective view, and when he fetches the coals to thin Faustus' blood, the spirit momentarily reveals a sense of despair, "Oh what will not I do to obtain his soul!" (V/ 73). This outcry reveals the baseness of Mephistophilis' existence, because he is forced to run errands for a mortal man in order to usher his relatively insignificant soul into hell. He sees the

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vanity of Faustus' "frivolous demands," which are not worth the eternity of torment that Mephastophilis is all too familiar with. As a committed servant of Lucifer, however, Mephastophilis is bound to his hellish duty and can do no more to dissuade the mortal Faustus. Even his one brief moment of commiseration would certainly not have made his master Lucifer happy. While his relationship with Faustus does not necessarily change Mephastophilis, it does reveal the complexity of his character. Even though he is an eternally damned devil, he still longs for the presence of God and eternal bliss to the point that he attempts to guide Faustus in the right direction in his stead. One might normally think that a devil like Mephastophilis would be unequivocally evil and mean-spirited, but his relation with Faustus reveals the complexities of his character. He is eternally damned, but he does not revel in his own nefariousness, and is in fact capable of compassion. Dr. Faustus is too self-absorbed to listen to the spirit though, and he loses his soul as a result of his excess of pride. Through his pact with Lucifer, the mortal man does not gain any sort of real power or authority, but merely the minimal services of a devil who performs parlor tricks for the man. Faustus sold his soul for the illusion of power, which is demonstrated by his reliance on Mephastophilis, and he does not fully realize the folly of his actions until Lucifer's hordes drag him into hell. Works Cited: Marlowe, Christopher, "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus." The Norton Anthology of English Literature. Vol 1. Ed. M. H. Abrams. 7th ed. New York, NY.