

Power and the unknown in dr. faustus and the tempest



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Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* present similar definitions of "power" through the differing circumstances of their protagonists. Power, in these plays, can be thought of as "control of the unknown." If one character has control of something another character has no understanding of, the first character can gain power over the second. While Faustus and Prospero are both presented as highly educated and powerful magicians, Prospero is generally able to exert power over all *The Tempest's* characters because he is constantly aware of what is happening, while the play's other characters are unaware of what is occurring. Faustus, on the other hand, fails not because he is overly ambitious or proud, but because he believes himself to be in control while he is actually under Mephostophilis' power, kept unaware of what is being done to him. Looked at together, the plays seem to offer an argument for prudence and caution when faced with the opportunity to gain power, rather than arguing against ambition as might be assumed in the case of Faustus.

While the plays' plots show it is not quite so simple, both protagonists equate knowledge with power, and so pursue learning on their quest to become more powerful. Prospero, when telling his daughter the history of how they arrived on their island, says he grew distant from his position as Duke of Milan because he was "rapt in secret studies" (1. 2. 176), and did not resist his usurpation because his library "Was dukedom enough" (1. 2. 212). Though he may be downplaying how much he values his actual dukedom to make sure Miranda remains ignorant of his ambitions, this does reveal his devotion to his studies. He does not explicitly state why he values knowledge so much, however. This is explained later by other characters.

Faustus also professes a love of knowledge, but is more explicit about why, frequently equating it not only to power, but also to magic. He says that through studying his books, a “ world of profit and delight / of power, of honor, of omnipotence / is promised to the studious artisan!” (1. 1. 51-3), explicitly showing that his purpose in studying is to gain power, specifically magical power as suggested by “ omnipotence.”

Possessing knowledge, however, is only part of what is required to gain power. First, the characters have to use their knowledge in a way that takes advantage of someone who does not possess the same knowledge. Prospero is cautious and never states exactly why he is so concerned with his studies, but Caliban reveals this information when he is planning with Stephano and Trinculo to overthrow Prospero. He tells them to take control of the magician’s books because without them “ He’s but a sot” and “ hath not / One spirit to command” (3. 2. 1488-9). This reveals that Prospero, much like Faustus, uses the knowledge from his books in order to gain power. This is displayed in his relationship with Ariel. Prospero does not do much magic in the play, instead commanding his servant spirit Ariel to perform magical tasks. However, in order to command a spirit that has powers such as commanding storms, Prospero must have some sort of power of his own. When Ariel briefly complains to Prospero and asks for freedom, Prospero recounts the story of how he freed the spirit from a trap he was put in by a witch, and threatens him, saying “ If thou more murmur’st, I will rend an oak / And peg thee in his knotty entrails till / Thou hast howl’d away twelve winters” (1. 2. 432-4). While Ariel has powers Prospero does not, the powers Prospero does possess allows him to wield Ariel like a tool. The play does not

expand upon the nature of Prospero's power over the spirit, but it is clear that Prospero has the knowledge required to free Ariel and to imprison him again, while Ariel, although very powerful, does not have this knowledge. This puts Prospero in a position of power over Ariel.

Faustus' relationship with Mephostophilis appears similar to Prospero's relationship with Ariel, in that Faustus does little magic himself, but commands the demon to perform magical tasks. However, Marlowe's play, unlike Shakespeare's, actually shows the magician's process of summoning and attempting to control his spirit. In this process, Faustus, unlike Prospero, finds himself unwittingly under the control of the spirit. Faustus' main problem is that he becomes extremely excited by the prospect of being a powerful magician. "Tis magic," Faustus says to his friends Valdes and Cornelius, " magic that hath ravished me," already convinced of his own magical power despite the fact that he has not yet performed any magic (1. 1. 109). When Mephostophilis appears, presumably as a result of an elaborate ritual, Faustus says " Such is the force of magic and my spells," showing that the demon's appearance has further confirmed his existing belief in his power (1. 3. 30).

This, rather than the moment he accepts the demon's bargain, is the moment in which Faustus dooms himself. He is too blinded by excitement and the idea of the power he thinks he has to appropriately process what the demon says to him. " I came now hither of mine own accord," Mephostophilis tells Faustus, " For when we hear one rack the name of God... We fly in hope to get his glorious soul" (1. 3. 43-8). The demon lets the audience know that Faustus, despite his elaborate ritual, did absolutely no magic. The demon <https://assignbuster.com/power-and-the-unknown-in-dr-faustus-and-the-tempest-2/>

came simply because Faustus blasphemed, and saw it as an opportunity to steal a soul. This means that the knowledge Faustus possessed either did not function properly, or is untrue. Therefore, Faustus has no power over Mephostophilis, because he does not have control over any knowledge the demon does not.

Prospero has a similar moment in the backstory of *The Tempest* when his brother plans to usurp his dukedom. Rather than resisting his plans and grabbing for more immediate power, he shows prudence and chooses not to resist. Letting himself lose power allows him to come back later, regain his status, and put his daughter in a position of power. If he had chosen to resist his brother at the time, this end may not have been possible. He may have put himself at a greater disadvantage or in greater danger by resisting his brother. Faustus, rather than taking the new information he is presented with into account like Prospero did, effectively ignores Mephostophilis' statement. He takes the path Prospero chose not to, and decides to grab for immediate power, instead of updating his knowledge in the face of a force that can overpower him and figuring out what else he can do to gain power. When Mephostophilis tells Faustus about the torment of eternal separation from the joys of Heaven, Faustus tells the demon to "Learn... of Faustus manly fortitude, / And scorn those joys..." (1. 3. 84-5). Even after Mephostophilis has refuted the idea that Faustus has done any magic, Faustus not only ignores the demon and continues to believe in his own power, but also believes that he is superior to the demon. Faustus implies that Mephostophilis is somehow weak for feeling the pain of damnation, and that he is capable of resisting such pain. Since nothing Mephostophilis does

dissuades Faustus from believing in his own power, the magician unknowingly allows himself to be manipulated by the demon, thinking he has power over Mephostophilis when the demon does what he commands, as Prospero does when he commands Ariel.

Unlike the relationship between Ariel and Prospero, however, the demon is the one with control over Faustus. Mephostophilis, as an entity trying to gain power over Faustus, seems to be giving Faustus a strangely large amount of information about hell and damnation, which could alter what the magician chooses to do. He probably feels justified in doing so, though, as he may be aware of the amount to which Faustus is blinded by his own illusions of power. The demon helps these illusions grow every time he obeys the magician's commands. The demon does, however, withhold important information that allows him to maintain control over Faustus' soul when the magician starts to doubt the wisdom of his choice. Several times in the play, Faustus expresses concern over the fate of his soul, and is visited by a Good Angel and an Evil Angel. Initially, the Evil Angel tempts him into studying magic by telling him he can be "as Jove is in the sky, / Lord and commander of these elements," contributing to his excitement about gaining power (1. 1. 75-6). Once Faustus makes his deal with Mephostophilis, though, the Angel's statements become more ambiguous. When Faustus asks "prayer, repentance, what of these?", the Evil Angel responds "illusions, fruits of lunacy, / That make men foolish" after the Good Angel tells Faustus these are "means to bring thee unto heaven" (1. 5. 16-9). The Evil Angel could be directly contradicting the Good Angel, confirming the current idea of Predestination and saying Faustus is doomed to Hell no matter what he does,

implying that it is a “ foolish illusion” to believe that repentance can bring Faustus to Heaven. However, there is nothing in the Evil Angel’s comment that directly states that salvation is impossible. His claim that prayer and repentance are “ fruits of lunacy” could also be another way of feeding Faustus’ desire for power, suggesting that the only way to save himself is to abandon the earthy power, which would be “ foolish” for one that values power. Faustus, still blinded by power despite his worries, always ends up listening to the Evil Angel’s suggestions, possibly confusing the ideas that “ salvation is impossible” and “ salvation takes away your power and potential” for one another. If any character in the play has the knowledge of whether or not Predestination is true, it is Mephostophilis, who, as a powerful demon, would likely have knowledge of who enters Hell and why. The demon purposefully withholds such information from Faustus. It could be the key to freeing Faustus from the demon’s bargain, like Prospero’s secret knowledge that could free Ariel, but Mephostophilis chooses instead to keep Faustus ignorant as to whether or not he can save himself, and Faustus, clinging to his desire for power, chooses to interpret the Angel’s ambiguous comments as “ salvation is impossible” to sustain this desire. Because of this, Faustus more closely resembles Ariel than Prospero, despite the fact that both protagonists are ostensibly powerful magicians who control spirits, because Faustus is enslaved to Mephostophilis due to his lack of knowledge.

When looked at together, these plays seem to be offering an argument for caution and prudence for people who want to maintain their positions of power. Seen in the context of *The Tempest*, Faustus does not fall simply due to his ambition or hunger for forbidden knowledge. Faustus is no more

ambitious than Prospero, and both seem equally driven to learn, but despite these similar traits, Prospero ends the play regaining his power while Faustus is sent to Hell. This is not because Faustus is ambitious, but because he allowed his ambitions to blind him to their consequences, while Prospero is able to look at his ambitions from a longer term perspective. This allows Prospero to calculate ways to gain power without losing anything he cannot regain. One can only speculate, though, what would have happened if Ariel had been more powerful and tricked Prospero into freeing him in order to gain power over the magician. Prospero may have shown the caution he did when threatened by his brother, but the prospect of power may have been too hard to resist, despite any risks. This also recommends exercising caution in the face of manipulation.