

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



The Modernisation of the Medieval Staging of Soul in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*

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I

Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (c. 1588-89) marks a divergence from the medieval dramatic tradition that sought to reify the soul, the focal point of the early drama's narrative of spiritual progress. Marlowe's play provides ample spectacle, but its circumspection in producing soul is similar to that of Mephistopheles in providing Faustus with a precise location for hell. Faustus feels the proffer of his soul ought to buy him knowledge of hell's objective, geographical placement, so that he can substitute truth for the indeterminacy of language. Because of its relation to the human signifier, 'the place that men call hell' has not earned his full credence. Mephistopheles answers, 'Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed / In one self place, for where we are is hell, / And where hell is, must we ever be' (2.1.120-126).¹ The same can be said of the soul in Marlowe's play, for it torments the protagonist with an ever-present sense of a boundless sublimity that attaches to and depends upon him as a wilful individual, while remaining incapable of appearing, except ideationally. Unlike the medieval moralities that preceded it, which used a combination of linguistic, bodily and material devices to emblematised soul, *Doctor Faustus* presumes the mission of those didactic works has been accomplished, and the instauration of the Christian ideology of soul is not the ultimate solution, but a problem that precedes the first appearance of the actor who 'must perform / The form of Faustus' fortunes' (1.1.7-8). In Marlowe's time, there was no way to speak of identity without recourse to the figure of the soul, a rhetorical sign of a belief that soul was the ground for mind, will and consciousness.

¹ All textual references are taken from *Doctor Faustus A- and B- texts (1604, 1616)*, ed. by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993) and will be cited parenthetically. Where a quoted passage is essentially the same in both A and B texts of the play, the in-text citation will quote the A text. Where there is different language used in the B text, the A text passage will be given in the body of the essay, and the alternate language will be given in the footnote.

And there was no way for an individual to deploy the figure of soul without feeling an overwhelming sense of obligation to God, and the surrounding human-made structures of meaning, ethics, rewards and punishments that upheld it. Soul, celebrated by centuries of religious drama as the defining feature of humanity, to the point that no one in the play need ask, ‘what is the thing men call soul?’, is now used by Marlowe as the signature figure of poetical discourse on the psychic consequences of believing in the immutability of personal identity in the age of reformed theology.

It may be that ‘there is no more obvious Christian document in all Elizabethan drama than Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*’,² but its soul is not, as it was in the medieval drama, staged as a demonstrable object made evident by the play’s apparatus of signification. It has become a set of conflicts raised by the mimetic representation of a soul-in-process (instead of progress), a character who uses language to point towards the mutation—perhaps even the complete dissolution—of individual personal identity, contrary to the reigning systems of reward and punishment that require it to maintain coherence as an object knowable by itself and by God.

Catherine Belsey argues that the Renaissance stage ‘brought into conjunction and indeed into collision’ an emblematic mode that ‘makes meaning visible’, and an illusionist mode that ‘replicates what is already visible, already known.’³ On a stage more concerned with creating the illusion of a presently unfolding, mundane reality, soul became particularly problematic to represent, because, as stated earlier, it was already known, but never ‘already visible’ in the day-to-day world the stage sought to evoke. The result in *Faustus* is a dichotomy between the use of the linguistically performative device of poetic imagery to create the illusion of soul, and the emblematic, if ‘threadbare devices’ for showing devils and stunts, which ‘intensified the emotional impact of Marlowe’s text even as they undermined its content’.⁴ There are powerful scenes in *Doctor Faustus* where soul is ritualistically outlined by props, effects and bodies: the congealing blood on Faustus’s arm as he attempts to write the ‘deed of gift’ of his soul, the kiss of Helen as ‘Her lips suck forth my soul. See where it flies!’ (2.1.90, 5.1.94), and in the B-text, an image of hell with ‘furies tossing damned souls / On burning forks,’ pointed at by the Bad Angel (envisioned by scholars to be a picture on a backcloth, not performed by live actors)⁵ (5.2.123-124b).

² Leo Kirschbaum, ‘Religious Values in *Doctor Faustus*’ in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Doctor Faustus* ed. by Willard Farnham (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), pp. 77-87 (p. 77).

³ Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 24-6.

⁴ David Riggs, *The World of Christopher Marlowe* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005), p. 238.

⁵ Felix Bosonnet, *The Function of Stage Properties in Christopher Marlowe’s Plays* (Bern, Switzerland: Francke Verlag, 1978), pp. 77-78.

Remembrances by Marlowe's contemporaries emphasise the thrilling atmosphere of evil created by actors playing devils, the aural and visual effects of thunder and lighting, and generally, the play's 'ability to titillate audiences by scaring them out of their wits'.⁶ However, more emotionally affecting is the imagery that defers the appearance of soul by substituting an array of provisional metaphors, as when the Old Man claims, 'I see an angel hovers o'er thy head, / And with a vial full of precious grace / Offers to pour the same into thy soul' (5.1.54-56). He does not point at an object (in which case, he would say, 'See where an angel hovers . . .'), but speaks of his own vision of how Faustus's grace *would be* administered, *if* he would repent.

Soul rhetoric provides the individual with a cultural means for self-identification, and by withholding the soul as a visual object, *Doctor Faustus* exemplifies how a sense of self is founded upon, and continually recreated and tested through a series of self-dialogic, imaginative speech acts. The speaker's soul is understood to be the premise for all self-interested argumentation, even while the soul rhetoric that constitutes him as a subject is tied to various ideological interests at play in society. For Faustus, soul comes with theological strings attached, and its currency can only be transacted within the ontological economy of Christianity. In explaining how a subject identifies itself through an articulated investment in its own representation in discourse, Stuart Hall states that, 'Identities are, as it were, the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always 'knowing' . . . that they are representations, that representation is always constructed across a 'lack', across a division, from the place of the Other, and thus can never be adequate—identical—to the subject processes which are invested in them'.⁷ Hall's discussion of the psycho-discursive aspects of identity formation took place in the context of late twentieth-century postmodernist deconstruction and its 'anti-essentialist critique of ethnic, racial and national conceptions of cultural identity.' At the end of the sixteenth century, it was religious conceptions of cultural identity that were, if not exactly critiqued, shown to be problematic to the individual who attempted to use them to navigate personal and political relationships. Catherine Belsey argues that 'The humanist subject' of Renaissance drama speaks in such a way as to foreground the difference between who it is and what it says, and thus 'is always other than itself, can never be what it speaks.'⁸ Marlowe places Faustus between *knowing* himself as a soulful representation made and transacted by language, and *believing* himself to be an eternally soulful being who, although he can never be identical to

⁶ David Bevington, 'The Performance History' in *Doctor Faustus: A Critical Guide* ed. by Sara Munson Deats (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 41-71 (p. 42).

⁷ Stuart Hall, 'Introduction: Who Needs Identity?' in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 1996), pp. 1-17 (p. 6).

⁸ Belsey, p. 52.

a representation, is nevertheless identifiable by God as a singular individual who will be held accountable for his sins.

In his final speech of the play, in a panic over his approaching reckoning, Faustus is obliged to retreat from one place of lack into another, from the Christian version of a self owned by God, where his desires are negated, back towards the vanishing point of the natural world, to a time when ‘stars . . . reigned’, not deities, where death brings a dispersal and an end to all ‘subject processes.’ Speaking of ‘mountains . . . hills . . . earth . . . stars . . . mist . . . cloud . . . air . . . beasts . . . elements . . . waterdrops’ and ‘ocean,’ he tries to build a new, materially determined, empirically reliable stage through which his soul can truly pass on. Before he utters a final offer to ‘burn my books,’ and rid himself of all corrupting discourse, he speaks directly to the soul he sold. He wishes he could force an expiration date for the punishment called for in his infernal transaction by producing a finite soul, and through its dissolution, refuse any longer to exist as a sensible, identifiable individual.

What is most interesting about *Doctor Faustus* is that the last alternative soul he imagines through poetry is a soul *without* eternal subjectivity, and therefore without identity itself, either from the inside, or the outside. Once the normally subjective soul can no longer take itself as an object, it ceases to be identified by God or anyone else. In his final speech, Faustus begs:

Mountains and hills, come, come and fall on me,
And hide me from the heavy wrath of God!
No, no!
Then will I headlong run into the earth.
Earth, gape! O, no, it will not harbor me.
You stars that reigned at my nativity,
Whose influence hath allotted death and hell,
Now draw up Faustus like a foggy mist
Into the entrails of yon laboring cloud,
That when you vomit forth into the air,
My limbs may issue from your smoky mouths,
So that my soul may but ascend to heaven. (5.2.84-95)

At this stage, he is still able to imagine a scenario where the soul could separate from the body, and be harboured in heaven, purified by the expulsion of his sinful flesh. When he recalls that ‘no end is limited to damnèd souls,’ he changes his mind. To escape truly would mean he would have to divest himself of soul once and for all, so that the consciousness

that was once Faustus 'should fly from me,' and leave that 'me' at peace, its soulful awareness forever lost:

Why wert thou not a creature wanting soul?
Or why is this immortal that thou hast?
Ah, Pythagoras' metempsychosis, wert that true,
This soul should fly from me and I be changed
Unto some brutish beast.
All beasts are happy, for, when they die,
Their souls are soon dissolved in elements;
But mine must live still to be plagued in hell.
...
The clock striketh twelve.
O, it strikes, it strikes! Now, body, turn to air,
Or Lucifer will bear thee quick to hell.
Thunder and lightning.
O soul, be changed into little⁹ waterdrops,
And fall into the ocean, ne'er be found! (5.2.105-19)

The play has so far spent its material effects to demonstrate Faustus' amazing magical powers and the devilry in which he revels. Now the magic is over, and he is incapable of performing such a drastic deconstruction of his being, from eternal soul into cyclical matter, by any means other than the transubstantiation of poetry. Further, for the actor at this point in dramatic history, there are no longer any stage properties other than language, not even the body itself, that can be employed to stand for a *separated*, disposed soul, whether it is bought and sold, resurrected, or thrown away into the ocean. After glimpsing the mortalist prospect of body-soul fusion, Faustus opts to hold onto his religious faith, and remain who he is: a soulful creature forever subject to the judgmental gaze of the deity in whom he still believes, and whom he at last implores, 'My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!' (5.2.120). *Doctor Faustus* marks the point at which the actor uses poetry to mime a person who cannot build a relation with his disappearing self in poetical discourse, and is thereby unable to use that discourse to rehearse passage into a different kind of salvation, one that depends on the loss of Christian identity, not its maintenance. That Faustus chooses not to identify with his own portrayal of a dissolved body-soul does not render the philosophy null, but it does render the play a tragedy, since by choosing not to lose himself wholly in the way the nature imagery suggests, he must settle for a spiritual identity that gives a prospect of nothing but an endless awareness of his own suffering.

⁹ 'small' (5.2.186B)

II

As David Bevington states in *From Mankind to Marlowe*, prior to the institutionalisation of the professional theatre in England, the morality play was ‘the prevailing vehicle of expression in popular drama’,¹⁰ and Marlowe had been exposed to them in performance. In noting *Doctor Faustus*’s important similarities to medieval drama, including its ‘alternation between edification and amusement . . . and sequence of homiletic characters,’ Bevington places it ‘squarely in the tradition of the dramatic Psychomachia,’ a type of play ‘based upon the conflict between good and evil for the soul of a man’.¹¹ Yet, the figures around Faustus are more allegorical than he: ‘The comic villains dramatize in ludicrous fashion the besetting sins of Faustus himself: ambition, covetousness, and the sins of the flesh. . . . They personify the purely degenerate side of Faustus and so allow the loftiness of his tragedy to exist more coherently in its own right’.¹² But, as Susan Snyder and others have noted, the formal loftiness is never fully achieved, even if the tragedy is. ‘The certitude of God, a hindrance to the questioning spirit of tragedy, is blurred in a haze of subjectivity.’ His lack of commitment to God brings about Faustus’ tragic downfall, and transforms the play into a ‘parody of sainthood’.¹³

In the absence of the sort of objectively determined, materially affirmed soul manufactured by the morality plays, Marlowe employs a supplementary rhetoric of the soul to represent Faustus as a subject who fails, or refuses, to reform what he feels to be an essential self, a self who stands to benefit from the promises of eternal consciousness made in a more allegorical form of religious drama in the period leading up to *Doctor Faustus*. In earlier eras, the soul was the saving grace of the play, and offered eternity to its characters as a solution to the precarious, usually painful experience of mortal life. This notion of soul is sold to the audience, not only rhetorically on its merits, but through its treatment as a material thing. In medieval drama, the souls, whether of damned or saved individual persons, or of the ascension of holy saints or the deity, were depicted either by the bodies of actors explicitly designated to be souls being carried or lifted out of the playing space, or by a stage property, such as an animal bladder, or some kind of doll made of wood or soft materials, that was substituted for the body of the actor at the key moment of ascent to

¹⁰ David M. Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 252, 257, and 259.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 254.

¹³ Susan Snyder, ‘Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* As an Inverted Saint’s Life’, *Studies in Philology* 63: 4 (1966), 565-577 (p. 568)

heaven or descent to hell.¹⁴ The surviving playtexts ‘are not particularly explicit about stage business,’ but scholars have been able to theorise about the ‘techniques and devices that might have been employed in their performance’¹⁵ through closely reading the plays, and by looking at the surrounding material documentation, such as inventories and town records, drawings, paintings, church windows and other artworks that replicate dramatic practice.

In his study of the staging of souls and spirits in medieval English drama, Rafael Portillo lists a ‘tentative typology of all spirits found in the English plays’:

- a. The Holy Ghost, visible to other personages and to the audience in a fair number of plays, with or without a speaking part.
- b. The souls of dying people which, as soon as their bodies drop dead, fly up to heaven or are dragged down to hell.
- c. The character known as Anima Christi—the Soul of Jesus after crucifixion—who acts as Heaven’s champion in the ‘Harrowing of Hell’ plays.
- d. In the same plays, the procession of souls freed from hell—Adam, Eve, Abraham, John the Baptist etc.—which appear and walk on stage too.
- e. Souls—like that of Mary in the N-Town Assumption—which go back to their bodies, bringing about their resurrection.
- f. Good or bad spirits, similar but not identical to angels or devils, who enter the body of other people and act as their counsellors.
- g. The Human Soul, to be found as an allegorical, independent character in *Wisdom* only, even if it appears with some allegorical features in other moralities as well.¹⁶

¹⁴ See, for example, Véronique Plesch, ‘Notes for the Staging of a Late Medieval Passion Play’ in *Material Culture and Medieval Drama*, ed. by Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), pp. 75-102. A manuscript in the Provençal language from ‘the end of the fifteenth or the beginning of the sixteenth century’ gives directions for the staging of a passion play, and in particular, how souls are to be staged. The scene of the Agony in the Garden calls for the actors playing devils physically to ‘take the souls of the bad thief . . . and of Judas.’ The ‘souls of the thieves are to be played by children,’ and the manuscript ‘suggests that the actor playing Judas be provided with . . . ‘a set or two of bowels from a sheep’ to be tucked into the actor’s shirt’ to signify his soul leaving his body upon death (p. 79). We cannot assume these same practices occurred in England (Plesch believes they ‘allow comparisons with contemporary French, Provençal and Piedmontese theatre’ [p. 75]). However, as detailed staging descriptions from the pre-Reformation period are rare, they nonetheless merit attention.

¹⁵ Rafael Portillo, ‘Impersonating Spirits: Ghosts and Souls on the Medieval Stage’, *Leeds Studies in English* 32 (2001), 431-438 (p. 431).

¹⁶ Portillo, p. 432.

Douglas Bruster's study of the use of hand properties notes that, 'From the late 1580s through the 1630s, the number of props in early modern plays decreased at a steady rate... [P]lays used fewer and fewer props but at the same time increased their pressure on these props, and on the putative difference between the animate and the inanimate'.¹⁷ By Marlowe's day, the emphasis was on creating a hierarchical distinction between humans as controlling agents and the material objects over which they ought to have control. Without the soul being produced as such, either through the force of allegorical insistence on the body of the actor as having been transformed from a mortally fused body-soul into a postmortem, pure-soul signifier, or through the appearance of a stage property standing in for the otherwise notional and disembodied, post-mortem soul, Faustus's soul can only be produced by his own discursive acts of identification with, or resistance to, the various images of soul rendered by his imagination through the form of poetry. The play foregrounds the way metaphorical language is used by a subject to articulate a dialectical relation between soul as a stage for the free play of the phenomenological events of an apperceptive mind, and soul as an anxiously situated, culturally conditioned identity. Ironically, it is the drama of Marlowe that uses poetical abstraction to imagine a purely materialistic soul, and the drama of the middle ages that used its materiality to signify the purely ethereal, abstract soul. We can note the ways in which *Faustus* modernises the drama's procedures for reification of the soul by considering it in light of two medieval morality plays which feature Soul as a character: *The Castle of Perseverance* (c1400-1425) and *Wisdom* (c1460), plays that used actors' bodies, stage properties and figurative language to build a properly Christian, acceptably soulful identity. In the concluding portion of *The Castle of Perseverance*, 'Death comes and Mankind's riches are seized by the enigmatic I-wot-nevere-Whoo, while his Soul is carried to Hell. The Four Daughters of God—Mercy, Peace, Righteousness and Truth—hold a debate, which Mercy wins, freeing the Soul to ascend to Heaven'.¹⁸ Although he had blithely adopted the identity offered him by Covetousness (Avarice), Mankind (Humanum Genus) spends his dying words reorienting himself in relation to God's mercy by no longer relating to himself as a greedy materialist:

To Helle I schal bothe fare and fle
 But [Unless] God me graunte of hys grace.
 I deye certeynly.
 Now my lyfe I have lore [lost].

¹⁷ Douglas Bruster, 'The Dramatic Life of Objects in the Early Modern Theater' in *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, ed. by Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 67-96 (p. 90).

¹⁸ Pamela M. King, 'Morality Plays' in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 240-264 (p. 244).

Myn hert brekyth, I syhe sore.
A word may I speke, no more.
I putte me in Goddys mercy.¹⁹

At that point, another actor enters to play his soul (Anima), and picks up where Mankind left off. David Klausner's notes to this scene explain that, 'According to the stage plan, the Soul (perhaps played by a boy) has been under Mankind's bed for the whole of the play so far, waiting for his entrance. Although it would be a long wait . . . the sudden appearance of the Soul at the moment of Mankind's death would provide a simple but extraordinary theatrical effect.' To mark its difference from the mortal body, the soul refuses to identify with its former bodily controller:

'Mercy,' this was my last tale
That evere my body was abowth.
...
Body, thou dedyst brew a byttyr bale [sorrow]
To thi lustys whanne gannyst loute.
Thi sely [wretched] sowle schal ben akale [cold];
I beye [pay for] thi dedys wyth rewly rowte [terrible blows],
And al it is for gyle.
...
To me thou hast browyn [brewed] a byttyr jows [potion].
...
Weleaway! I was ful wod [mad]
That I forsoke myn Aungyl Good
And wyth Coveytyse stod
Tyl that day that I schuld dey [die].²⁰

In his reading of the poetic style of the *Castle*, Oliver Pickering finds that 'the day-to-day world surrounding the dramatist is not often, in itself, his prime poetic stimulus. Instead it is death, and events in the life of Christ central to mankind's salvation, which most often inspire this writer to express himself figuratively'.²¹ Thus, the one-time Anima uses a metaphor, it is to express frustration that, when it was alive and in its body, the body wasted its effort by working to 'brew a byttyr bale' or 'jows.' Like the medieval dramatist,

¹⁹ *The Castle of Perseverance*, ed. by David Klausner (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2010), ll. 3001-7.

²⁰ *Ibid*, ll, 3008-72.

²¹ Oliver S. Pickering, 'Poetic Style and Poetic Affiliation in *The Castle of Perseverance*', *Leeds Studies in English* 29 (1998), 275-291 (p. 279).

Marlowe has as his prime poetic stimulus the approach of death, but without the repentance of the character that would make it appropriate to employ a substitute body to stand for his reformed soul, the actor playing Faustus can only console himself by playing with various self-annihilating images. At the climactic moment, he cannot undergo a change that would require a substitution. He can only leave the stage.

In *Wisdom*, every material effort is made to emphasise the difference between a knowledgeable Anima at the end of the play, and the ignorant Anima of the beginning:

Through a series of costume changes, the play visually charts Anima's progression from her initial state of purity tainted by original sin through her fall into sin and her return to grace after she confesses. Initially, Anima appears clothed in a white robe and black mantle, but she loses that costume, becoming horribly disfigured under the influence of Lucifer. Her eventual return to grace is indicated by a corresponding return to the white robe and black mantle.²²

Prior to her change, Anima at the outset of the play states to Wisdom an awareness of what her role is in the play, but expresses a complete lack of identity with it, because she has no model to which she can aspire: 'I that represent here the soull of man. / Wat ys a soull, wyll ye declare?'²³ As a human body taking up space, she is nothing but an object. She is, however, ready to represent, to transform herself into a sign of a subject who knows, not just what Christianity is, but who she is as a faithful Christian. Towards the end, she gives various indications that she is undergoing a conversion. Stage directions state that 'the Soule syngyth in the most lamentabull wyse',²⁴ and then:

Here entrethe Anima, wyth the Fyve Wyttys [Senses] goynge before, Mynde on the on [one] syde and Undyrstondynge on the other syde and Wyll folowyng, all in here fyrst clothyng, her chapplettys [coronets] and crestys [badges], and all havynge on crownys.²⁵

Julie Paulson finds *Wisdom*'s treatment of Anima's transformation to be a 'highly material depiction of the soul,' and argues that it 'radically exteriorizes the soul's inner faculties'.²⁶

²² Julie Paulson, 'A Theater of the Soul's Interior: Contemplative Literature and Penitential Education in the Morality Play *Wisdom*', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38: 2 (2008), 253-283 (p. 254).

²³ *Wisdom in Two Moral Interludes: 'The Pride of Life' and 'Wisdom'*, ed. by David Klausner (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008), ll. 101-2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 995.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, l. 1065.

²⁶ Paulson, p. 254.

Unlike the condemned soul of Faustus, which remains verbally constructed, the saved soul commands display: ‘The elaborate spectacle of Anima and her inner faculties’ penitential cleansing is finally a visible sign of the invisible grace of human redemption’.²⁷

III

In the final scene of *Faustus*, without a sign of redemption, the parade of effects halts, and ‘it is the absence of any property which manifests the total isolation of the protagonist.’²⁸ In Felix Bosonnet’s view, Faustus ‘fills the emptiness of the space surrounding him with despairing and delirious fantasies’.²⁹ However, it is unfair to classify his dream of escape as a fantasy. He has for the moment rendered an imaginative, but still logical vision of soul divestment. Through it, the audience has witnessed a rehearsal of retreat from the frighteningly theoretical Christian stage where their lives now play, locked into a transactional economy where death appears not to offer a portal of release for the thinking matter of the mind, but interrupts time itself, buying access into an eternity of soulful consciousness, be it in heaven or hell. With his alternative depictions, ‘Faustus can therefore be seen to be looking for a sense of interconnectedness between humankind and nature, organisms and mechanisms, mind and matter’.³⁰

Since Bevington’s benchmark study, critics have examined ‘The manner in which ‘an indigenous structural heritage was employed and transformed by Marlowe, Greene, Dekker, Shakespeare, and their contemporaries’.³¹ Recent discussions focus on the way the drama in Marlowe’s time became more ornately self-reflexive, and morally inconclusive, by revealing that cultural forms like the drama are implicated in and beholden to the promulgation of particular ways of ordering and representing the confluence of conditions, material and spiritual, that come to bear on the individual’s sense of self, and the subsequent choices they make as a result. At issue is the adequacy of the drama to represent meaningfully the contradictions that a more positivist practice of representation had appeared to sort out.

Sara Munson Deats explores theatrical self-reflexivity in *Doctor Faustus* by looking at how the play responds to contemporary society’s ‘conflicted attitude toward the occult and its

²⁷ Ibid, p. 279.

²⁸ Bosonnet, p. 80

²⁹ Ibid, p. 80.

³⁰ Christa Knellworth King, *Faustus and the Promises of the New Science, c. 1580–1730* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2008), p. 87.

³¹ Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe*, p. 199.

love/hate relationship with the stage'.³² For Faustus, the discrepancy between his 'heroic aspirations and his limited achievements' are due to his lack of control over his own imagination. '[A]lthough Faustus's imagination may be the final cause of his many spectacles, it is never the efficient cause, since the magician must always work through the agency of Mephistopheles and his spirits,' just as the playwright's vision is mediated by the several people involved in the staging of his play.³³ In Marlowe's case, it is not that his imaginative vision has been compromised by the collaborative nature of the theatre, to the extent that the emergence of a true soul-spectacle is prevented. Instead, we're shown how the limits of poetical language, in concert with the imagination, lack the efficiency to deliver to us the play's crucial (non)spectacle, which is the protagonist's soul. Marlowe uses the figure of soul to stage the psycho-linguistic processes the already-Christianised subject goes through when, mediated by the poetical images staged in the mind, he tries to conjure a free-ranging alternative to what was previously believed to be a consistently unified and stable self. The radical suggestion is that Faustus could imagine leaving the transactional economy of Christianity altogether, since to give up identity itself would mean he is willing not to exist in any form whereby he could claim compensation or punishment for owning his soul.

As many critics have observed, the play shows that the extreme contradictions of Christian preachments are inherently tragic, in part because they depend on material forms of culture to represent doctrines that urge a turning away from materialism and temporality. The drama then becomes a necessary evil, due to the human reliance on the sensual, as well as on language that evokes the sensual. In his study of Protestantism's uneasy relationship with figural representations, Thomas Luxon summarizes Calvin's view of 'the depraved nature of human beings always to conjure presence into the index of the absent, and then to mistake that index for the presence of the absent one'.³⁴ Faustus' depraved conjuring is therefore not so much an act of hubris as it is, in the words of Jonathan Dollimore, evidence of 'an insecurity verging on despair.' It is true that, 'Arrogant he certainly is, but it is wrong to see Faustus at the outset as secure in the knowledge that existing forms of knowledge are inadequate. Rather, his search for more complete knowledge is itself a search for security. . . . [N]o teleological integration of identity, self-consciousness and purpose obtains'.³⁵

³² Sara Munson Deats, "'Mark this show": Magic and Theater in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*' in *Placing the Plays of Christopher Marlowe: Fresh Cultural Contexts*, ed. by Sara Munson Deats and Robert A. Logan (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 13-24 (p. 24).

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³⁴ Thomas H. Luxon, *Literal Figures: Puritan Allegory and the Reformation Crisis in Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 40.

³⁵ Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1984), pp. 112-13.

Calvin laid the blame on humans for their lack of soulful wholesomeness, and the need for material affirmation that is its consequence. He makes clear in Book 1, Chapter 15 of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that ‘Nothing is more inconstant than man, because his soul is agitated, and variously distracted by contrary motions; he frequently mistakes through ignorance; he is vanquished by some of the smallest temptations; we know that the soul is the receptacle of every kind of impurity.’ Therefore, the human soul cannot be said ‘to be a part of the essence of God. . . . [C]reation is not a transfusion, but an origination of existence from nothing,’ even though the soul ‘is given by God, and returns to him on its departure from the body’ (203).³⁶ If the human soul is on its own until the body’s death, Faustus asks himself, ‘Why shouldst thou not’ trade it for more complete knowledge? The key question follows, which indicates just how incomplete his knowledge is: ‘Is not thy soul thy own?’ (2.1.68). In the end, he experiments with the notion that his soul is indeed his, and that he can turn away from Christian habits of thought to posit a fully natural soul. He does not imagine that his soul could be *like* waterdrops; he imagines that it would change *into* waterdrops. He attempts, as Luxon describes, to use figural representation ‘to conjure presence into the index of the absent’, but only in order to make himself absent, and unidentifiable. His vision of resurrection by physical decay is both cyclical and not cyclical, in that, with the dispersal of his bodily matter into water, his soul will exit the cycle, but even as water he is not assured a disappearance from God’s purview. The metaphorical structures of early Christianity relied on cyclical nature imagery, but used it to laud God’s ability to reclaim soul and body over the course of the process, preventing the irreversible loss of self that Faustus wishes. Resurrection metaphors of the first and second centuries attempted to expand on ‘Pauline metaphors of seeds and first fruits’ by relying on ‘naturalistic images that stress return or repetition: the cycle of the seasons, the flowering of trees or shrubs, the coming of dawn after darkness.’³⁷ However, Caroline Walker Bynum argues, the patristic writers ‘do not mean at all what Paul means.’ Instead of Paul’s emphasis on real *difference* and *change*, Christian metaphors insist that these signs should be read in their natural totality, practically as literal evidence of God’s power over all natural and supernatural systems, not as metaphorical teaching tools with a convenient semiotic utility. Unlike Paul’s examples, later Christian metaphors ‘stress not the change from corruption to incorruption, or the difference between natural and spiritual, between the dry, dead seed and the flowering sheaf; rather they make the world to come a grander and more abundant version of this world. . . .[T]hey draw such a close analogy between

³⁶ Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by John Allen, 3 vols. (New Haven, CT: Philip H. Nicklin, 1816), I, p. 203.

³⁷ Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 23-4.

resurrection and natural change that they either make resurrection a process set in motion by the very nature of things, or they make *all* growth dependent on divine action'.³⁸

Even as their religion insisted on the primacy of spirit over the temporal, Christian believers of Marlowe's time sought to reconcile a growing enthusiasm for the knowledge gleaned from studies in natural philosophy with an enduring belief in the soul. Richard Sugg examines the belief held by people in early modern England that inside them were vital spirits — 'invisible vapours pulsing through their bodies'.³⁹ The vital spirits were conducted in various ways by the organs, and worked to link the impulses of the immaterial soul to the actions of the material body. Sugg argues that the emphasis on the role of vital spirits in bridging between the metaphysical soul argued by Christianity and the natural, materially evident processes of the body evolved in response to threats posed by heretical, yet compelling humanist arguments of the early 1500s that sidestepped the doctrinally orthodox versions of Aristotelian philosophy to reassert his original mortalist notions of soul. For both Protestants and Catholics, 'in the sixteenth century . . . the body became all the more highly valued as an attractively limited, immediate, personal site of fusion between the natural and the supernatural. . . [A]s Protestants and Catholics defined themselves against one another, the soul became as never before a site of fiercely asserted religious identity'.⁴⁰ The contents and processes of the natural, material body, with its internal complexity graphically glorified in textual diagrams and live, in publically staged dissections, were to be seen as evidence of the wonderful intricacy of the soul's network of operation.⁴¹ 'In this kind of context, no one needed to explicitly point out how powerfully overcharged the Christian soul had become',⁴² but Marlowe certainly trades on the dramatic value of the overcharged soul, as well as the new emphasis on reading the body as the means of soul's actualization, not its eclipse. However, even though Faustus opts finally to maintain himself as an eternally conscious body-soul in the eyes of God, he is successful in being able at least to imagine how he could take his material soul to the logical next stage, the stage at which identity is lost when the physical habitation of the soul is dissolved into elements.

Raymond Williams explains that, 'In the orthodox medieval concept of nature, man was, of course, included,' but he was hierarchically placed, and 'The idea of a place in the order

³⁸ Ibid, p. 24.

³⁹ Richard Sugg, *The Smoke of the Soul: Medicine, Physiology and Religion in Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 26.

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 58-9.

⁴¹ Ibid, pp. 88-9.

⁴² Ibid, p. 59.

implied a destiny'.⁴³ To know the world was to know the importance of one's place in it, 'and the definition of this importance was in discovering his relation to God'.⁴⁴ There is no relation to nature without a relation to God. As Williams observes of both *Faustus* and *Tamburlaine*, the choice was 'whether to learn one's important place in the order of nature, or learn how to surpass it'.⁴⁵ Faustus seeks a place in nature, but realises that, unless he is willing to dishonour his contract with Lucifer and God, and give up his soulful identity (and renounce all profits from its sale, whether to God or the devil), he will still exist in a problematic, i.e., tormented, relation to God.

For the state and Church authorities, as well as the upper classes in general, 'it was politically essential to uphold the doctrine of eternal rewards and punishments,' since 'the prospect of punishment in the next world was a more effective sanction for law-abiding behavior than anything the law could offer'.⁴⁶ Instructing people to identify as soulful interpellated them with a sense of anxiety at transgressing all laws, not just God's. As much as Marlowe may have agreed with Michel Foucault that 'The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy,' even 'the prison of the body',⁴⁷ *Doctor Faustus* contradicts that notion by showing that the acceptance of a soulful identity can just as easily result, not in the tractable acceptance of natural, ecclesiastical and civic laws, but in a freely enterprising agency that seeks to dominate them all.

If, as Stuart Hall theorised, the moment in which a person identifies as a particular kind of subject is achieved when the subject articulates itself in response to a particularly, perhaps even coercively suggestive discourse, then Faustus uses his imagination to articulate himself into existence as a subject who has been culturally materialized through language. The speaking body becomes the means of reification of the moment of articulation of a fused soul-body, one that can 'ne'er be found,' even at the resurrection. At its most basic level, soul denotes 'something which is hidden from others but open to one's own awareness'.⁴⁸ Modernisation in staging is effected in *Faustus* by the drama's staging of the mind-as-stage. Marlowe's drama portrays a person already in a postmodern condition of

⁴³ Raymond Williams, 'Ideas of Nature' in *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 67-85 (p. 74).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 75.

⁴⁶ Keith Thomas, *The Ends of Life: Roads to Fulfilment in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 234.

⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 30.

⁴⁸ Paul S. MacDonald, *History of the Concept of Mind: Speculations about Soul, Mind, and Spirit from Homer to Hume* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), p. 2.

self-consciousness in relation to Protestant discourse, which, given its didactic nature, is precisely the outcome aimed for.

If, as Masha Raskolnikov finds, the medieval literary tradition ‘frames a relationship between parts of the person rather than isolating and, at times, idealising the body in its inscrutability, as if it were possible to posit pure materiality as an object of study’⁴⁹ then *Faustus* settles on a reconciliation to an impossible to separate (even for the purposes of attaining salvation) body-soul fusion. Marlowe makes the main goal of the drama the reconciliation of people to the fact that they are apperceptive beings for whom the duality that is felt to exist between body and soul is an effect of the fact that the mind can take itself as an object. What one plots after that must be thought in concert with, as well as opposition to, prevailing historical conditions and the kinds of scripted procedures for thinking they produce, including imaginative, aesthetical forms, with the drama being foremost among them.

When the patristic theologians turned to pre-Christian philosophers to aid in building a system of meaning that would cohere Scripture, they found ‘in classical Greek and Roman philosophy no continuous tradition of discussion of the problem of personal identity.’ Their search for a way to explain the resurrection of the individual Christian believer marks ‘the real beginning of the philosophical debate over personal identity,’ for ‘It was critical . . . both that humans survive their bodily deaths as *individuals* and that as *individuals* they subsequently be held accountable for their earthly lives’.⁵⁰ *Doctor Faustus* is innovative in that it suggests that if people are willing to use their imaginations, not to solidify their identities as property-holders over their souls, but to construct a body-soul that can elude contemporary structures of a religious-dictated identity, they could use poetical language to build a retreat.

IV

In the final scene of the play, Faustus imagines receiving protection in the towering structures of the natural world, and asks them to collapse down on him. Even if it would mean his body would be destroyed as a result, perhaps the soul could be hidden and inaccessible along with the body, underneath the burial pile:

⁴⁹ Masha Raskolnikov, *Body against Soul: Gender and Sowlehele in Middle English Allegory* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009), p. 8.

⁵⁰ Raymond Martin and John Barresi, *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self: an Intellectual History of Personal Identity* (New York: Columbia UP, 2006), p. 56.

Mountains and hills, come, come and fall on me,
And hide me from the heavy wrath of God!⁵¹ (5.2.84-85)

Realising he will not be able to escape that way, he then wishes he could be free of soul by becoming an animal born without one, or who, if having one in life, would lose it upon death, when soul becomes physical matter ‘dissolved in elements’ and without an identity:

Why wert thou not a creature wanting soul?
Or why is this immortal that thou hast?
Ah, Pythagoras’ metempsychosis, wert that true,
This soul should fly from me and I be changed
Unto some brutish beast.
All beasts are happy, for, when they die,
Their souls are soon dissolved in elements;
But mine must live still to be plagued in hell. (5.2.105-12)

Despite his last-minute embrace of a theory in which the body and soul are non-divisible, and therefore mutually dissolvable in nature, tradition channels Faustus’ imagination back toward his belief in the Anglo-Protestant version of the Christian offer of eternity, which emphasises the separation of the two at the point of death, and the power of God to objectify every subject, regardless of what that subject may be capable of imagining about itself. Even so, the play breaks with the morality tradition, and refuses to reify the mind’s apperceptiveness. Faustus’s body *and* soul will suffer the same fate, because they are considered to be one and the same. In Marlowe’s hands, soul proves to be a mystery not entirely solvable by the methods of drama. *Faustus* can be considered modern because it problematises the soul with the indeterminacy of poetry, providing at least a momentary alternative to the culture’s habit of thinking about the dilemma of personal finitude.

⁵¹ ‘Heaven’ (5.2.157B).