

**‘Conjurer Laureates’: Reading Early  
Modern Magicians with Derrida**

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the  
University of Liverpool for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy by  
Sophie Isabella Gray

September 2013

# Abstract

This thesis uses the philosophy of Jacques Derrida to propose a performative method of close reading, which it uses to explore the relationship between language and identity in early modern literary representations of magicians. It addresses the common assumptions we make about the authority and stability of language by exploring the tensions that arise as the magicians attempt to use performative language to realise impossible ambitions of absolute power, knowledge and self presence. The texts studied are a combination of prose and drama from 1512 to 1607. They are read in light of Derrida's engagement with speech act theory in 'Signature Event Context' and 'Limited Inc a b c . . .', and also other related work of his on the performative foundations of literature and the law, including 'Before the Law', 'The Law of Genre', and 'Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundations' of Authority'. The final chapter also takes in *Aporias*.

The magicians' trajectories are followed in three chapters. The first is on the founding violences of their authoritative identities. Working with Derrida's accounts of the law, it begins by describing how the foundation of authority is self-authorizing and therefore performative. It then explores how performative pacts, deals and contracts with the devil are used to establish and authorize the magicians and their supernatural worlds. This metatextual authority is reflected in the magician's own ambitions for the certainty and stability of absolute power and knowledge.

Using the early modern sense of 'perform' as to complete, carry out or make something, the second chapter focuses upon materiality and embodiment as attempts to

stabilise or fix performative utterances. Fake suicide notes and contracts written in blood are analysed to demonstrate the slip and drift equally at work in the structures of writing and signatures. In addition, Friar Bacon's enormous brass head with its promise of 'sound aphorisms' is discussed as an alternative example of the misinformed urge to embody certainty.

The final chapter addresses why almost all the stories of magicians, good and bad, end with their deaths. Following Derrida's *Aporias*, death is represented as the ultimate opening limit, which undermines all attempts at certainty and self-presence. This leads to discussion of the other's role in identity and, it follows, death. The magicians' ends are compared, with particular focus on the sense of a coming event in the final scene of *Doctor Faustus*.

The use of Derrida's work to engage with early modern texts responds to a significant gap in the field. It offers original, contemporary insight into traditional themes of power, language and identity that are usually approached from a historicist perspective. The critical-creative close reading describes and carries out by the thesis suggests an exciting way to performatively respond to literature of the past, bearing witness to it but also transforming it into something new.

## **Acknowledgements**

Firstly, I would like to thank my primary supervisor Dr. Nick Davis for his guidance and for the many fascinating conversations we've shared; also my secondary supervisor Prof. Nandini Das, particularly for her help in brushing up my first draft. I am grateful to the AHRC and the University of Liverpool for the funding that made this thesis possible.

So many family and friends have helped me along the way. My fellow postgraduates in the School of English have made this a truly unique experience. I'll never forget the improbable cakes, raucous reading groups and happy evenings in the pub. Kay also deserves special mention; not only for her admirable proof reading, but also for feeding the appetite of a very hungry bookworm.

Finally, thank you Mum and Dad for your love, support and unshakeable faith. And thank you Michael for your love, kindness, and humour; and for tolerating even my most ridiculous of tortured-author moments. I couldn't have done it without you all.

# Contents

## Note on Primary Texts

1.	Introduction	1
2.	Founding Violences	33
3.	Embodiments	105
4.	Deaths	169
5.	Conclusion	234
6.	Bibliography	239

## Note on the Primary Texts

Where possible the primary texts are cited from modern scholarly editions. In quotations from early modern documents the original spelling, lettering and punctuation have been maintained. Due to the combination of prose and drama, and differing editorial procedures, this has led to some unavoidable inconsistency in the way that the quotations are referenced. See below for details.

Anon., *The Famous Historie of Fryer Bacon* (London: E[dward] A[l]lde, 1629), *STC* 1184, in *Early English Books Online*, <<http://eebo.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 17<sup>th</sup> August 2013]

Referenced by folio number, referred to as *Friar Bacon* prose.

Anon., *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, ed. by Nicola Bennett (London: Nick Hern, 2000)

Referenced by act, scene and line, referred to as the *Merry Devil* play.

Anon., *Virgilius* (Antwerp: John Doesborke, [1518(?)]), *STC* 24828, in *Early English Books Online*, <<http://eebo.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 17<sup>th</sup> August 2013]

Referenced by folio number.

T[homas]. B[rewer]., *The Life and Death of the Merry Deuil of Edmonton* ([London]:

T[homas] P[urfoot?], 1631), *STC* 3719, in *Early English Books Online*,

<<http://eebo.chadwyck.co.uk>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> August 2013]

Referenced by folio number, referred to as the *Merry Devil* prose.

Barnabe Barnes, *The Devil's Charter by Barnabe Barnes: A Critical Edition*, ed. by Jim C. Pogue (London: Garland, 1980)

Referenced by line number.

Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus: A- and B- Texts*, ed. by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993, repr. 1995)

Referenced by act, scene and line number. All quotations from the A-text unless otherwise stated, see Introduction for the rationale of this decision.

P.F. Gent, *The English Faust Book: A Critical Edition Based on the Text of 1592*, ed. by John Henry Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, repr. 2011)

Referenced by page number, referred to as the *EFB*.

Robert Greene, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, ed. by J.A. Lavin (London: Ernest Benn, 1969)

Referenced by scene and line number.

# 1. Introduction

## The event of reading

In ‘some solitary grove’ in the dark of night, Dr Faustus mutters incantations from within a magic circle.<sup>1</sup> Almost immediately a devil — Mephistopheles — appears, and on request takes the form of a Franciscan friar. It seems that the magician’s ‘conjuring speeches’ (1.3.44) have succeeded, and he celebrates by bestowing a remarkable accolade upon himself: ‘now, Faustus, thou art conjurer laureate,/ That canst command great Mephistopheles’ (1.3.33-4). His new title, ‘conjurer laureate’, is an expression of power. The laurel crown suggests the manly prowess of the champion of all magicians, but also the authority of the sovereign who is able to ‘command great Mephistopheles’ and, more troublingly, to perform such potent naming. Already there is something tricky and cyclical going on with his words: he affirms his power by naming himself, but only has the authority to do so thanks to that very name.

But what makes these lines truly remarkable is that they are also re-markable in Derrida’s sense of the term: the image of the conjurer laureate folds back on itself, and not in the neatly self-reflexive way that Faustus might hope.<sup>2</sup> As Ian Maclachlan has described, the re-mark ‘is not simply reflexive, but rather, in effecting a disjunction or failure of self-reflection, marks an opening to reading’ which ‘gives a chance to the uncertain moment of the literary’.<sup>3</sup> In his triumphant speech, Faustus tries to make the word ‘laureate’ close in on

---

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus* (A text), ed. by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen, in *Doctor Faustus: A- and B- Texts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993, repr. 1995), (1.1.155). All subsequent references are to this edition unless otherwise specified.

<sup>2</sup> On the fold see, Jacques Derrida, ‘The Double Session’, in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Bloomsbury, 2004, repr. 2012), pp. 187-316, (esp. pp. 250-2).

<sup>3</sup> Ian Maclachlan, ‘Introduction: Deconstruction, Critical Thought, Literature’, in *Jacques Derrida: Critical Thought*, ed. by Ian Maclachlan (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 1-13, p. 9.

itself to create a sealed loop of sovereign power. But instead it opens up, its alternative literary meanings giving us a chance, or taking us by chance. For all its authority, it is also inextricably linked with poetry, particularly the fluid, subjective transformations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>4</sup> Faustus's symbol thus undermines the absolute authority it represents, implicitly entwining it with the ambiguous and interpretive nature of literature. Even the laurel crown itself is metaphorical, its significance dependent upon imagination and creative reading of the word 'laureate'. In this respect it cannot 'resolve me of all ambiguities' (1.1.82), only perpetuate them. As we shall see, this is related to literature's unstable, essence-less essence, as described by Derrida.

In his account of the re-mark, Maclachlan cautions against 'the decision that rather than *being* something, literature *does* something, that it is a question of performativity or of the event'. He is concerned by 'the presumed unity of such an event in any account which held the literary to *enact* itself', which would suggest that a literary text was present to and continuous with itself, knowing exactly what it is doing and what it must become.<sup>5</sup> For him, the performative appears to be decisive and complete: the bringing about of some kind of end that closes off the chanciness of literature. However, critics such as James Loxley and Mark Robson are beginning to reconsider the performative in a richer, more complex way. The emphasis in their pioneering book *Shakespeare, Jonson and the Claims of the Performative* is on 'exploring the performative in motion, as the force within its own transformations'.<sup>6</sup> In

---

<sup>4</sup> The tradition of celebrating poets with laurel wreathes comes from a myth in *Metamorphoses* about Apollo, the patron god of poetry. Fittingly, it is a tale of transformation, describing how the nymph Daphne morphed into a laurel tree to escape his amorous pursuits. In his remorse the laurel became sacred to him. Marlowe himself was no stranger to Ovid, having translated his *Amores* whilst still at Cambridge. This association with is often forgotten, although a recent collection devotes an entire section to 'Marlowe the Ovidian'. *Christopher Marlowe the Craftsman: Lives, Stage, and Page*, ed. by Sarah K. Scott and M.L. Stapleton (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 125-59. There is also a potential Petrarchan line of enquiry here too, touched on by Roy Eriksen in 'The Epilogue in *Doctor Faustus*: The Petrarchan Context', *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, 9.1 (2010), 1-16.

<sup>5</sup> Maclachlan (ed.), *Critical Thought*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>6</sup> James Loxley and Mark Robson, *Shakespeare, Jonson and the Claims of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 10.

tracing the kinships between various permutations of performative theory, and reading examples of performative language in the plays of Shakespeare and Jonson, they reveal a dynamism born of self-resistance that doesn't just clear a space for the literary, but constitutes critical reading itself.

Literature is always doing something, but in a way that is never complete and never fully in chorus with itself. And, perhaps rather disturbingly, this suggests that when we read or theorize it, it is doing something to us as much as we are doing something to it. Some kind of mutual transformation is always already going on. For Nicholas Royle, this is precisely the point of what is often discussed as the 'literary turn' in modern theory such as Derrida's:

the literary turn isn't about *using* literary works to advance a theoretical argument or understanding — if anything, it's about the inverse logic of how we find ourselves being used — structured, haunted, played with by literature.<sup>7</sup>

His own theory of 'veering' is brimming with movement and energy perhaps related to Loxley and Robson's notion of 'the performative in motion'. 'Veering is kinetic and dynamic' he writes, 'it offers a mobile arsenal of images and ideas for thinking differently about literature' and 'new possibilities for responding to what is on the move and uncertain on the very moment of reading'.<sup>8</sup>

It follows that to engage with literature at its most performative, potent and transformative — at its most literary — we must get very close indeed, so close that the boundaries blur and we are no longer simply outside of the text. This close reading, with, for and after Derrida involves us getting inside, participating and letting the forces at work take

---

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Royle, *Veering: A Theory of Literature*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 97.

<sup>8</sup> Royle, *Veering*, p. viii.

us over even as we attempt to trace their motions. It is reading as the experience of an event, and its happening is always unexpected, creative, performative. Derek Attridge has described the productiveness but also the responsibility of this approach:

We might get a better sense of the status of these encounters if we hold onto Derrida's word *events*, events of reading responding as responsibly as possible to the event of the text, answerable to the uniqueness of the text and thus producing their own uniqueness..... The responsibility involved in such an event of response is to the other... and at the same time a responsibility to the future, since it involves the struggle to create openings within which the other can appear beyond the scope of any of our programmes and predictions, can come to transform what we know or think we know.<sup>9</sup>

Like looking at an atom, when you get close enough to a text, spaces begin to open up, places where it is not, where anything can happen. And, it is in these indefinable, inexhaustible spaces that literature is literature. As Derrida puts it:

There is no — or hardly any, ever so little — literature, that in any event there is no essence of literature, no truth of literature, no literary-being or being-literary of literature.<sup>10</sup>

In this respect, the performative motion we are going to explore and experience is not so much dynamism as *dynamis*, a word that Derrida uses when discussing how literature helps us surpass philosophy by suspending the transcendental or “thetic” search for a text's truth:

This also accounts for the philosophical force of these experiences, a force of provocation to think phenomenality, meaning, object, even being as such, a force which is at least potential, a philosophical *dynamis* — which can, however,

---

<sup>9</sup> Derek Attridge, *Reading and Responsibility: Deconstruction's Traces* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 27-8.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida, 'The Double Session', p. 232.

be developed only in response, in the experience of reading, because it is not hidden in the text like a substance.<sup>11</sup>

The ‘philosophical *dynamis*’ is as such precisely because ‘it is not hidden in the text like a substance’. It is not present, perhaps does not even exist at all; and it is this apparent weakness that tirelessly powers the performative, that powers not only literature and our reading of it, but also the workings of authority, identity and politics. It is beyond diminutive, but it is also bottomless. This is evident in a no doubt related text on mourning, which also ‘cannot be spoken, only experienced, performed’.<sup>12</sup> In this essay, Derrida is caught by Louis Marin’s use of the word *dynamis*:

*Dynamis*: the word seems indispensable.... This *dynamis* here links in a most original way the ideas it has always associated, namely, force, power, and *virtù*, with the possible or virtual *as such*, that is to say, with a virtual that has no vocation to go into action, or rather, whose going into action or whose enactment does not destroy its virtual power.<sup>13</sup>

The *dynamis* is not here, is infinitely weak, and is at work in mourning as much as literature. And not despite of, but because of this, it is, as Derrida says of Hélène Cixous’s writing, ‘for life’. Its ‘mighty might’ binds physical power and subjunctive hope; and even as it binds, it bounds towards the future, right here in the present.<sup>14</sup> It is impossible, it is magical, it is life itself. And in what follows, we shall experience how that which is so vivid in the address of Cixous’s ‘letters of omnipotence’ is also racing, rocking, veering, arriving and departing in

---

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, “‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’: An Interview with Jacques Derrida”, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33-75 (pp. 45-6).

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘By Force of Mourning’, in *The Work of Mourning*, ed. and trans. by Pascale-Anne Braut and Michael Naas (London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 139-164 (p. 143).

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, ‘By Force of Mourning’, p. 146.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *H.C. For Life, That is to Say . . .*, trans. Laurent Milesi and Stefan Herbrecter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), this thread runs throughout the text, but see especially pp. 69-75.

‘Marlowe’s mighty line’, and in the ‘mighting’ writing of all the others, and all of ourselves too.<sup>15</sup> This is where the real magic happens.

As is now clear, literature is something that must be experienced rather than explained. Therefore, the reading that follows will try to put into action the Derrida-influenced close reading described above, in order to explore from the inside the tensions that we have briefly traced in the term ‘conjurer laureate’. The pattern of promise and resistance that folds back on itself is at work in the ambitions and antics of all our magicians — to sometimes tragic, sometimes comic effect — just as it is in the literary movements of the texts themselves. As Derrida says of psychoanalysis, ‘the effect, both affective and effective, of a performative is always magical in appearance. It always operates as if by an enchantment’.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, this project will engage with the performative on multiple levels. It will look at obvious instances, which abound in these tales of conjuring, swearing and signing, but also expose the more deeply ingrained performative structures of identity, authority and experience. This will involve participating in the tensions and contradictions of our texts, squeezing into the gaps where they are at both their most literary and the least themselves. Derrida’s work on the performative and beyond, all of which is elegantly interconnected, will guide the way. By reading his texts alongside the early modern ones, we will explore and explain his ideas whilst also putting them into practice. Hopefully this will enable a close reading of the performative manner described, actively taking part in the forces at play to produce something critical-creative that responds to singularity with singularity. It will enable us to countersign, as Derrida puts it, these amazing texts:

---

<sup>15</sup> Hélène Cixous, *OR, les lettres de mon père*, quoted in Derrida, *H.C. For Life* p. 60; Ben Jonson, ‘To the Memory of My Beloved, The Author, My William Shakespeare, And What He Hath Left Us, in *Renaissance Literature: An Anthology*, ed. by Michael Payne and John Hunter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) pp. 893-3. It is perhaps worth noting that this poem, first published in Shakespeare’s first folio, is itself a work of mourning. Derrida, *H.C. For Life*, p. 70.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida, *H.C for Life*, p, 112.

“Good” literary criticism, the only worthwhile kind, implies an act, a literary signature or counter-signature, an inventive experience of language, *in* language, and inscription of the act of reading in the field of the text that is read.<sup>17</sup>

It is hoped that the result will be an exciting, original response to the enduring question of language and identity in early modern literature, which will take the texts and the everyday thinking of textuality off in unexpected, but not unfounded, directions. It will do something new; but also affirm, witness, and, in some respect, do justice to Derrida, early modern literature, and the innumerable potentials of reading the two together. In this way it should contribute something to a notable gap in Marlowe studies, and perhaps in a corresponding one in broader early modern criticism too.

Anachronism may cause concern when contemporary criticism is put in dialogue with historical texts. But as Simon Critchley has described, Derrida’s work presents us with ‘a task of reading’, which is a praxis or multiple praxoi rather than a fixed ideology.<sup>18</sup> There is, therefore, nothing to prevent us from attempting this task as we engage with any text from any period. Of course, some will lend themselves to this more easily than others though. Attridge has noted that the literature Derrida himself has written on is generally 20<sup>th</sup> century and often perceived of as radical or difficult in some way, such as Blanchot, Cixous or Joyce. These texts most vividly stage the rupture and resistance that preoccupy his work, but Attridge reminds us that ‘they draw this quality not just from their modernity, but also from their being-literary’ and that therefore Derrida ‘leaves open the possibility of examining that ‘certain “literary” practice’ in other periods’.<sup>19</sup> As our reading will demonstrate, early modern depictions of magicians, with their iterations, contradictions and textual instabilities also perform this “literary” practice’ in their own significant way.

---

<sup>17</sup> Derrida, ‘Strange Institution’, p. 52.

<sup>18</sup> Simon Critchley, ‘Derrida the Reader’, *Cardozo Law Review*, 27.2 (2005), 553-565 (553).

<sup>19</sup> Derek Attridge, *Reading and Responsibility*, pp. 24-7, p. 25.

It is also important to consider Derrida's comment on 'Aphorism Countertime', his only sustained reading of Shakespeare: 'as you have noticed, I did not read *Romeo and Juliet* as a sixteenth-century text. I was incapable of it.'<sup>20</sup> Perhaps all of us, even the most seasoned of early modern scholars, are incapable of this. If textuality is all about rupture, if literature has no essence, and reading is always performative, then we can never read a text as it once was. Rather, 'we must begin *wherever we are*', as he famously puts it in *Of Grammatology*.<sup>21</sup> But this is no justification for presentist readings or grand teleological narratives of progression, because 'wherever', 'we' and even 'are' do not stay still. They are not a definable perspective or objective point of reference, but rather the experience of reading *right now*, an experience which is in a sense already lost to itself. In Royle's words, place is placeless, in motion, displacing: 'you have to imagine, rather, something happening at incredible speed, spinning, tilting. That's veering for you'.<sup>22</sup>

And yet, for all its slipperiness, 'wherever we are' is always steeped in the classical structures of thought, which results in 'a sort of paradoxical historicity in the experience of writing' and also of reading. Every time we read or write we engage with the past, simply by virtue of the textuality of our response. We are 'inscribed in a genealogy, whatever the ruptures or denials may be. And the sharper the rupture is, the more vital the genealogical responsibility'.<sup>23</sup> Thus, a radical performative reading transforms a text, but its violence is also a kindness or an invitation. It invokes the elusive *dynamis* of what is not, letting something happen or come. The past is irrevocably lost, but in the vitality of the event we become inheritors, protectors, witnesses. We keep something in motion.

---

<sup>20</sup> Derrida, 'Strange Institution', p. 62.

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 162.

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Royle, *Veering*, p. 104.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Strange Institution', p. 54, p. 55.

## Critical context

The aims and methods of this study are quite unusual in the field of early modern criticism, but it is important to situate them in the context of current work on Marlowe studies and magic. The main strands of Marlowe scholarship consist of biographical and cultural or historical approaches. Critics are fascinated by his life, and many have set themselves the task of either reading the texts through the author, or the author through the texts. Good examples of this include Lisa Hopkins's *Christopher Marlowe: A Literary Life* and Constance Brown Kuriyama's *Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life*, both of which try to develop a picture of the poet and playwright through study of his cultural and literary context.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, some biographers are more compelled by what we cannot know, such as Park Honan's speculative *Christopher Marlowe: Poet and Spy*.<sup>25</sup> Although not a critical text, Ros Barber's genre-breaking *The Marlowe Papers: A Novel in Verse* also deserves mention here.<sup>26</sup> It uniquely merges fact, fiction, and form, exploring the Marlowe/Shakespeare conspiracy theory in a cycle of early modern-esque poetry — surely no other writer of this period could have sparked such a response. The curious nature of Marlowe biography is itself explored in the recent collection *Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson: New Directions in Biography*.<sup>27</sup>

Historicist interpretations thrive in collections such as *Placing the Plays of Christopher Marlowe*, *Christopher Marlowe the Craftsman* and *Marlowe's Empery*.<sup>28</sup> These are often anxious to distance themselves from biographical approaches, and cite the

---

<sup>24</sup> Lisa Hopkins, *Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); Constance Brown Kuriyama, *Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Park Honan, *Christopher Marlowe: Poet and Spy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>26</sup> Ros Barber, *The Marlowe Papers: A Novel in Verse* (London: Hodder and Staughton, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> *Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson: New Directions in Biography*, ed. by Takashi Kozuka and J.R. Mulryne (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> *Placing the Plays of Christopher Marlowe: Fresh Cultural Contexts*, ed. by Sara Munson Deats and Robert A. Logan (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); *Christopher Marlowe the Craftsman*, ed. by Sarah K. Scott and M.L. Stapleton; *Marlowe's Empery: Expanding His Critical Contexts*, ed. by Sara Munson Deats and Robert A. Logan (London: Associated University Presses, 2002).

multiplicity of perspectives open to the cultural critic as a counter to the homogeneity of the biographical monograph. It is a welcome development to see critical acknowledgement of, and pleasure in, the ambiguity that surrounds Marlowe and pervades his writing. As one editor proudly describes the current historicist scene: ‘there is a healthy fearlessness in the face of complexity; and as always, diversity predominates’.<sup>29</sup> Happily, this recognition of multiple Marlowes also seems to be rekindling interest in the close reading of his texts, an excellent example of which is Stephen Booth’s ‘On the Eventfulness in *Hero and Leander*’ in *Christopher Marlowe the Craftsman*.<sup>30</sup>

As yet, contemporary literary theory is relatively uncharted territory for Marlowe scholars. Emily Bartels’s *Spectacles of Strangeness: Imperialism, Alienation, and Marlowe* explores the other in Marlowe’s plays.<sup>31</sup> And in *Sex, Gender and Desire in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* Sara Munson Deats fruitfully uses post-structuralist theories of gender to inform her reading.<sup>32</sup> The growing celebration of heterogeneity, and the call from eminent Marlowe scholars such as Robert A. Logan for ‘a revised version of a close reading of the texts’, are surely an invitation for more direct engagement with theories of language and textuality such as Derrida’s.<sup>33</sup> Clare Harraway demonstrates the potential of this in her book *Re-Citing Marlowe*, which ‘incorporates an analysis of traditional scholarship with an understanding of twentieth-century philosophies of textuality’.<sup>34</sup> She admirably takes the conventions of Marlowe scholarship off in intriguing new directions, but the same

---

<sup>29</sup>Sarah K. Scott and M.L. Stapleton, ‘Introduction: Christopher Marlowe the Craftsman: Lives, Stage, and Page’ in *Christopher Marlowe the Craftsman*, ed. by Sarah K. Scott and M.L. Stapleton, pp. 1-16 (p. 19).

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Booth, ‘On the Eventfulness of *Hero and Leander*’, in *Christopher Marlowe the Craftsman*, ed. by Sarah K. Scott and M.L. Stapleton, pp. 125-36.

<sup>31</sup> Emily Bartels, *Spectacles of Strangeness: Imperialism, Alienation, and Marlowe* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> Sara Munson Deats, *Sex, Gender and Desire in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (London: Associated University Presses, 1997).

<sup>33</sup> Robert Logan, ‘Marlowe Scholarship and Criticism: The Current Scene’, in *Christopher Marlowe the Craftsman: Lives, Stage, and Page*, ed. by Sarah K. Scott and M.L. Stapleton, pp. 15-22 (p. 21).

<sup>34</sup> Clare Harraway, *Re-Citing Marlowe: Approaches to Drama* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p. 17.

performative attention is yet to be given to Marlowe's texts themselves in such a focussed manner.

Marlowe studies are a long standing part of the early modern critical cannon, whereas work specifically on the history and literature of magic, demons and devils occupies a more liminal space. Broadly speaking, not only is the field fairly specialised, but it engages with people and traditions that were often at the edges of things — be it the enclosed world of esoteric academics, socially persecuted witches or obscure and lengthy tracts on demonology. In this respect it offers a useful alternative context in which to situate our project. Now-classic texts by the likes of Frances Yates and Keith Thomas were pioneering in drawing attention to the importance of magic in the early modern period.<sup>35</sup> A significant element of this involved the destabilisation of the boundaries often drawn between magic, science and the arts, which cleared space for other critics to approach these topics more fluidly.

More recent works have performed some interesting and creative interpretations of the past, following in the footsteps of earlier critics but also challenging their assumptions. For example, Stuart Clark's influential book *Thinking with Demons* uses a contemporary approach to language and textuality to respond to witchcraft beliefs. Like the present study, he is interested in using this to respond differently to the past:

to make any kind of sense of the witchcraft beliefs of the past we need to begin with language. By this I mean not only the terms in which they were expressed, and the general system of meanings they presupposed, but the question of how language authorizes any kind of belief at all.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Belief in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London: Widenfeld and Nicholson, 1971, London: Penguin, 1973, repr. 1991); Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1964).

<sup>36</sup> Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 3.

He describes how beliefs about magic were constructed of a network of unstable oppositions that were constantly referring back to, corrupting and resisting one another. These patterns strongly resonate with those Derrida describes, something that Clark at once acknowledges and resists. ‘Theorizing, despite its sins, can help us to understand the past’, he explains, perhaps rather grudgingly.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, his mention of Derrida is minimal; all of it in the footnotes, and all mediated by Christopher Norris, whose introductory guide, *Derrida*, appears to be the only book on or by him that Clark has read. Consequently, his readings are deconstructive in the most loaded sense of the word. He painstakingly explores the complexity of oppositions at play in witchcraft language, only to press them into the service of an overarching narrative of ruin. He finds nothing productive or hopeful in the texts he analyses, only the inexorable descent into ‘a corrosive (shall we say Derridean?) relativism’ that is eventually replaced in the eighteenth century by Rationalism.<sup>38</sup>

John D. Cox’s study of stage devils offers a response to the ‘evolutionary and teleological scheme’ of Clark’s work, as well as that of other more obviously traditional critics.<sup>39</sup> He argues that oppositional thinking does not die out after the twin blows of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. He demonstrates how, on the contrary, both Rationalist and Romantic readings take up the very same pattern by staking their authority through opposition to the archaic polarities that they try to replace. He therefore presents ‘a way of conceptualizing secularization that recovers some sense of oppositional thinking without falling into the polarization and tendentiousness of Enlightenment and Romantic

---

<sup>37</sup> Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, p. 145.

<sup>39</sup> John D. Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred in Early Modern English Drama 1350-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 7.

assumptions'.<sup>40</sup> For him, the secular does not involve total rejection of religion. Instead, it is a shift in culture, where faith becomes a conscious choice to be engaged with in particular moments, rather than being engrained in the fabric of daily life. And this secular shift begins not with the Reformation, but with the uncertain and conflicting policies of Henry VIII, which mingled secular and religious rule for the first time. Consequently, Cox's interpretation has no grand narrative and no hyperbolic point of climax or collapse; it meanders and sometimes turns back on itself, disrupting the notion of historical progression. His approach is less obviously theoretically influenced than Clark's, but in its openness to the whorls and eddies of the past it is actually more attuned to the aims of this project's close reading method. Perhaps this is related to his focus on stage devils, whom as figures of literature are less entangled with our preoccupations with truth and facts than the (no less potentially literary) documents, pamphlets and demonologies of traditional historical study.

This thesis attempts to combine Clark's rightful interest in the conflicted workings of the language of magic, with Cox's sensitivity to the fact that we are by no means free of such oppositions ourselves. Like Cox's work, it presents no clear scheme of progression; for him this is part of a rethinking of historiography, and for us it is the result of performative reading experienced as an event. However, the two are more closely connected than they might first appear. Both use close attention to detail in order to open up a much wider field, exploring patterns in order to destabilise our in faith pattern. There would certainly be scope in a wider project to use Derrida's theories of textuality to outline a structurally open, close reading approach to history, which would be not simply interdisciplinary but at once historical, literary and philosophical.

---

<sup>40</sup> Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, p. 10.

Although Marlowe studies remains on the whole fairly traditional, *Doctor Faustus* often elicits interesting responses that address concerns similar to those explored here. Critics are drawn to the play's resistances, contradictions and tensions, and are increasingly comfortable exploring them rather than explaining them away. Much of this is related to language, and the complex ways in which it is both used and represented in the play, such as the recent interest in its relationship with early modern print culture. Harraway and Sarah Wall-Randell have both placed Faustus alongside his namesake Johann Fust, who features in many early accounts of the invention of the printing press.<sup>41</sup> Fust and Faust hold some fascinating contradictions in balance: they mingle fact and fiction, are equally reviled and admired, and are described as performing both God's work and the devil's.<sup>42</sup>

Harraway and Wall-Randell's analysis reveals the fear and awe with which early printed books were regarded, describing a fine line between divinely inspired technology and unnatural demonic reproduction. Similarly, Georgia E. Brown has considered the play in light of early modern print houses, where pages with heads and feet are worked on by 'printer's devils'.<sup>43</sup> What emerges from studies such as these is a sense of how the development of print infused writing with a supernatural, perhaps even evil quality. Mechanically produced texts seemed untrustworthy; as if they were too effortless to be sincere, or might lead readers astray with their own independent motions. By severing writing from the human hand, printers foregrounded the rupture that structures our language. Far from instilling confidence

---

<sup>41</sup> Harraway, *Re-Citing Marlowe*, pp. 25-50; Sarah Wall-Randell, 'Doctor Faustus and the Printer's Devil', *Studies in English Literature*, 48.2 (2008), 259-81 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sel.0.0001>> ; for a historical account of Fust and the Faustus legend see Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 324-79.

<sup>42</sup> For the clearest outline of Fust and the tradition behind him see Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 324-79.

<sup>43</sup> Georgia E. Brown, 'The Other Black Arts: *Doctor Faustus* and the Inky Worlds of Printing and Writing', in *Doctor Faustus: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Sara Munson Deats, pp. 140-58.

in its readers, the materiality of print had a destabilising effect: it was a site of worry, of moral debate and terror about man's relationship to his words.

A new vein of research on *Doctor Faustus* and the theatre is similarly interested in the potentially supernatural power of words. Deats likens the playwright to the magician, discussing the play in the context of the Elizabethan antitheatrical debate, whilst Robert Logan has associated the power of magic with the power of the imagination.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Noam Reisner has read it alongside Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* to suggest that both texts challenge the Christian-Platonic suspicion of mimesis.<sup>45</sup> Also significant, although not directly discussing *Dr Faustus*, is Mary Thomas Crane's article 'What Was Performance?', which uses the etymology of the word *performance* to reveal an alternative early modern concept of drama as 'exercises which conveyed beneficial and material effects to both performers and audience'.<sup>46</sup> The kind of performance she describes has a direct, material relationship with reality, creating a space where words were capable of *doing* things, and is what related to what is discussed here as performative language. J. Hillis Miller has warned that we must be careful to maintain a distinction between 'performativity as a performance style and performativity as the felicitous operation of a speech act', but Crane's research demonstrates a significant blurring between the two.<sup>47</sup> An actor's performance is perhaps no different to a solemn promise or a judge's verdict — as we shall see, all performatives are all interpretive, and therefore structurally resist the sort of constative distinction that Miller is trying to uphold.

---

<sup>44</sup> Sara Munson Deats, "'Mark this show": Magic and Theater in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, in *Placing the Plays of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. by Sara Munson Deats and Robert A. Logan, pp. 19-24; Robert A. Logan, "'Glutted with Conceit": Imprints of *Doctor Faustus* on *The Tempest*', in *Placing the Plays of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. by Sara Munson Deats and Robert A. Logan, pp. 193-208.

<sup>45</sup> Noam Reisner, 'The Paradox of Mimesis in Sidney's *Defense of Poesie* and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 39.4 (2010), 331-49 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/cambqtlly/bfq028>>

<sup>46</sup> Mary Thomas Crane, 'What Was Performance?', *Criticism*, 43.2 (2001), 169-187 (172) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/crt.2001.0013>>

<sup>47</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *For Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), p. 133.

Plays about magic such as *Dr Faustus* can help us explore these layers and their disruptions, because they stage the paragon performative of conjuring, and — as notorious reports of extra devils onstage suggest — seemed to overflow into reality.<sup>48</sup> A small group of critics have begun to bring speech act theory to their interpretations of *Dr Faustus*. Andrew Sofer lucidly relates the blurring of mimesis and kinesis in onstage conjuring to the ambiguity of theatre itself, using Derrida's concept of iteration to explore the very real Elizabethan fear that words could take on a 'devilish' life of their own.<sup>49</sup> In contrast, Daniel Gates has argued that rather than demonstrating the inherent power of words, the play mocks the theatricality of both magical and religious orthodoxy. He calls on Judith Butler's ideas about the role of the audience in speech acts to suggest that the force of magical words lies in their reception.<sup>50</sup> Taking a different tack, Eric Byville compares performatives in *Dr Faustus* with the *Witch of Edmonton* and *Medea*, arguing that speech acts are a defining feature of what he calls 'witchcraft tragedy.'<sup>51</sup>

The above critics share a focus on the workings of the speech act; they explore how and why it works, and whether the actor-magician has any control over his conjuring. However, others have also explored the performative structures that trouble Faustus's sense of self. Richard Hillman's Lacanian account of subjectivity on the medieval and early modern stage describes the unconscious as a space between the constative and the performative, and

---

<sup>48</sup> E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 423-4.

<sup>49</sup> Andrew Sofer, 'How to Do Things with Demons: Conjuring Performatives in *Doctor Faustus*', *Theatre Journal*, 61.1 (2009), 1-21 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/tj.0.0154>>

<sup>50</sup> Daniel Gates, 'Unpardonable Sins: The Hazards of Performative Language in The Tragic Cases of Francesco Spiera and Doctor Faustus', *Comparative Drama*, 38.1 (2004), 59-81 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2004.0012>>

<sup>51</sup> Eric Byville, 'How to Do Witchcraft Tragedy with Speech Acts', *Comparative Drama*, 45.2 (2011), 1-33 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2011.0013>>

suggests that Faustus becomes trapped in this subjective gap.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Graham Hammill's ethical reading of exchange in the play defines Faustus's tragedy as a 'literary' one, in which he is enclosed by a performative language 'based on neither a one-to-one correspondence between words and things . . . nor a one-to-one correspondence between words and concepts.'<sup>53</sup> In both Hammill and Hillman's work we see a strong interest in subjectivity and the way that the performative's instability prevents Faustus from arriving at a fixed identity. Rick Bowers further analyzes this sense of existence as becoming rather than being, tracing the constant need for reiteration in Faustus's identity of 'academic performativity.'<sup>54</sup>

### **This study**

Like many currently dominant approaches, this thesis uses the instability of meaning and the textuality of experience as a methodology; but it also graphically acknowledges them by making them the theme of the discussion too. This will enable us to see what Derrida describes actually *happening* in the texts, demonstrating how it is far from alien and has nothing to do with meaninglessness or nihilism. From this shared starting point, it will engage with new historicist and cultural materialist interests of power, textuality, materiality, and the liminal. This offers a point of interaction with the critical canon, but also suggests ways in which its boundaries can (and need to) be overflowed. The current criticism prides itself on being liberal, political and conscious of the outsider, but its very dominance places limits and constrictions on the field.

---

<sup>52</sup> Richard Hillman, *Self Speaking in Medieval and Early Modern English Drama: Subjectivity, Discourse and the Stage* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

<sup>53</sup> Graham Hammill, 'Faustus' Fortunes: Commodification, Exchange, and the Form of Literary Subjectivity', *ELH*, 63.2 (1996), 309-336 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/elh.1996.0016>>

<sup>54</sup> Rick Bowers, Almost Famous, Always Iterable: *Doctor Faustus* as Meme of Academic Performativity', in *Placing the Plays of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. by Sara Muson Deats and Robert A. Logan, pp. 113- 124.

By focusing on performative language, this project contributes to an exciting area developing in early modern studies. Over the past decade there has been a quietly gathering interest in using the various forms of speech act theory to read early modern texts. Loxley and Robson's is the first book dedicated to the subject, and will hopefully open the way for further debate. Their concept of 'the performative in motion' is a productive one that we will take up but hopefully also take off somewhere new. Their discussion of the performative ranges through the likes of Austin, Cavell and Derrida, and is as interested in the permutations of the theory as in its effects. In contrast, this thesis concentrates solely on Derrida, and the performance of reading in the wake of his transformation of the performative. In this respect it puts into practice, or tries to experience lucidly, the movement that Loxley and Robson describe.

As we have seen, Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* has already been the subject of speech act theory, thanks to its clear interest in doing things with words.<sup>55</sup> However this has so far taken the abbreviated form of articles and chapters, which necessitates a narrow focus on both the most direct elements of the theory and its examples in the play. The result is detailed analysis of conjuring, contracts, and the power of theatre, but there is still much more to explore. Looking at isolated instances creates the impression that speech acts always work in the same way, which is in many ways precisely not the point. This thesis does something new by offering an extended reading of the performative throughout *Doctor Faustus* and other representations of magicians. Such a sustained approach complicates the application of speech act theory to the texts, which is at times frustrating but nevertheless important. As Derrida himself has said on the subject: 'if things were simple, word would have gotten

---

<sup>55</sup> See Sofer, 'Things with Demons'; Bowers, 'Almost Famous'; Hammill, 'Faustus' Fortunes'; Gates, 'Unpardonable Sins'; and Byville, 'Witchcraft Tragedy' for instance.

around'.<sup>56</sup> It also enables us to follow him beyond the question of what words do, to a broader network of issues such as identity, the disruption of borders, and the ethical and political matter of the self's relation to the other. This is precisely the domain where he believes that speech act theory is 'in its most fecund, most rigorous, and most interesting aspects'.<sup>57</sup> No doubt Derrida's thought can carry us much further still than is attempted here, but it hopes to make a start at least.

In addition, this thesis gives voice to some neglected texts and in doing so will hopefully justify the attention given to them. Although Marlowe's *Faustus* is canonical and no stranger to speech act theory, this is not the case for the majority of the other plays and prose that keep it company here. It is a pleasure to work with the untapped potential of long-forgotten or dismissed texts, but this perhaps eclectic mixture of sources also contributes something to the practice of the theory. Both Austin and Derrida acknowledge that performatives can be written as well as spoken.<sup>58</sup> Despite this, speech act theory has as yet only been applied to early modern drama. By looking at both stage and prose magicians, the discussion suggests a new dimension to the study of performatives in the period. It also engages with the theory with greater rigour, again allowing us to follow its proponents into deeper implications. Some of these texts are at times confused and fragmented; but when accepted and explored these infelicities become part of the exploration of doing things with words. They say and do some remarkable things, often apparently by accident. The A- and B-texts of *Doctor Faustus* are now widely accepted as irreconcilable and all the more

---

<sup>56</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion', trans. by Samuel Weber, in *Limited Inc*, ed. by Gerald Graff, pp. 111-154 (p. 119).

<sup>57</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Limited Inc a b c . . .', trans. by Samuel Weber, in *Limited Inc*, ed. by Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 29-110 (p. 97).

<sup>58</sup> *How to Do* concentrates exclusively on spoken examples, but in another discussion he mentions a performative form 'more common in utterances issued in writing'. J.L. Austin, 'Performative-Constative' in *Philosophy and Ordinary Language*, ed. by Charles E. Caton (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963), pp. 22-54 (p. 25).

interesting for it; there is no reason that the textual difficulties of other less well known texts cannot be equally productive.<sup>59</sup>

### **The texts and the chapters**

The discussion of *Doctor Faustus* is drawn from the A-text, with occasional reference to the B-text. This follows the current trend, which is evident in the number of single text versions based on A that have been published in the past thirty years.<sup>60</sup> As one editor describes it, this earlier version of the play is ‘shorter, harsher, more focussed and more disturbing’, and possesses a striking ‘dramatic brevity and passion’.<sup>61</sup> But unlike champions of it such as Keefer and Bevington and Rasmussen, I do not favour A on the grounds that it is closer to Marlowe’s original intentions. On the contrary, I agree with Warren and Marcus that pursuit of ‘a conscious norm, a hypothetical Marlovian perfection’ is unhelpful.<sup>62</sup>

Both versions of the play have their own merit and particular ideological features, but inevitably a choice must be made.<sup>63</sup> Here the decision is based upon A’s comparatively minimalist staging, and ambiguous language. It omits much of the spectacle in B: the angels and devils put in fewer appearances, and there is no hell mouth in the final scene. Similarly there is less physical fragmentation of Faustus’s body; he is not beheaded in a fight, and his dismembered body is not found by his fellow scholars. This focuses our attention upon the language, better illuminating the powers of the performative. We share in the world of the

---

<sup>59</sup> For persuasive and influential arguments regarding this see Leah S. Marcus, *Unediting the Renaissance* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 38-67; and Michael J. Warren, ‘*Doctor Faustus*: The Old Man and the Text’, *English Literary Renaissance*, 11.2 (1981), 111-147 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6757.1981.tb00808.x>>

<sup>60</sup> Examples include *Doctor Faustus*, ed. by Roma Gill (London: E. Benn, 1989); *Doctor Faustus*, ed. by Roma Gill, in *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); *Doctor Faustus: The A Text*, ed. by David Ormerod and Christopher Wortham (Nedlands: University of Australia Press, 1985); *Doctor Faustus: A 1604 Edition*, ed. by Michael Keefer (Peterborough: Broadview, 1991), 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Peterborough: Broadview, 2007).

<sup>61</sup> Keefer ed., *Doctor Faustus*, p. 10.

<sup>62</sup> Warren, ‘The Old Man and the Text’, 117.

<sup>63</sup> See Marcus *Unediting the Renaissance*, pp. 38-67 for analysis of the ideological differences between the texts.

play as it is woven by Faustus's words, which highlights the interpretive nature of his experience. This in itself creates ambiguity. We do not know, for instance, what becomes of Faustus when he dies, nor whether the devils were already awaiting him when he first tries to summon them, as they do in B. His biased reading of Romans in the opening speech remains a mystery of interpretation that troubles the notion of the authoritative word, whereas in B Mephistopheles triumphantly admits that 'I turned the leaves/ And led thine eye' (B.5.2.100-01). Complementing this, the language of A is also less fixed. What the influential Greg described as the modal inaccuracies of a bad quarto are reinterpreted as fruitful points of overflow.<sup>64</sup> 'The date is expired, the time will come, and he/ will fetch me' (A.5.2.42-43) versus 'The date is expired. This is time, and he/ Will fetch me' (B.5.2.71-72) is a prime example that will be explored in the final chapter.

In addition to Marlowe's play, his source *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus*, also known as the English Faust Book (*EFB* hereafter), will also be discussed.<sup>65</sup> This prose account is a translation of the German chapbook, and is now believed to have been published by at least 1589.<sup>66</sup> There has been much discussion of whether this helps us date Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* as an early or late play, but the primary interest here is the dialogue it produces with our central text. The reading of the Faustus legend will be supplemented with that of other early modern texts about magicians. This will broaden the discussion and draw attention to some fascinating but neglected texts.

---

<sup>64</sup> Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus, 1604-1616: Parallel Texts*, ed. by W. W. Greg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), p. 45.

<sup>65</sup> P.F. Gent, *The English Faust Book: A Critical Edition Based on the Text of 1592*, ed. by John Henry Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, repr. 2011), all subsequent references will be to this edition.

<sup>66</sup> J.R. Fehrenbach, 'A Pre-1592 English Faust Book and the Date of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*', *The Library*, 2 (2001), 327-335 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/library/2.4.327>>

An obvious companion is Robert Greene's play *The Honorable History of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (*Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* hereafter), which was probably written sometime between 1589 and 1590, and was in performance by 1592.<sup>67</sup> Like *Doctor Faustus* and the *EFB* it re-imagines the life of a historical scientist-magician, Roger Bacon. There are interesting resonances in the way that Bacon too tries to gain knowledge by supernatural means, and ends the play repenting his pride. However, he is represented as a benevolent figure whose skills stay just the right side of technology and white magic. There has been some debate about whether Marlowe's or Greene's magician play came first, but again the exact chronology does not influence our discussion.

Like Marlowe's *Faustus*, Greene's Bacon also exists in prose form in an anonymous prose romance called *The Famous Historie of Fryer Bacon* (prose *Friar Bacon* hereafter).<sup>68</sup> The earliest extant copy with a definite date is from 1627, but the narrative is believed to be much older than that, and is often cited as a source for Greene's play. This would suggest that it was published in 1591 or earlier.<sup>69</sup> As with the *EFB*, the basic story is similar to the play, but has some interesting divergences. Although Greene's play receives a fair amount of critical attention, the related prose piece has been neglected. In the past forty years the only work on it has been an article by Richard Levin discussing apparent influences of the clown Richard Tarlton upon its depiction of Miles.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Robert Greene, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, ed. by J.A. Lavin (London: Ernest Benn, 1969), all subsequent references will be to this edition. John Henry Jones, 'Introduction' in, P.F. Gent, *The English Faust Book*, pp. 1-90 (p. 55).

<sup>68</sup> Anon., *The Famous History of Fryer Bacon* (London: E[dward] A[l]lde, 1629), STC 1184, in *Early English Books Online*, <<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 17<sup>th</sup> August 2013], all subsequent references will be to this edition.

<sup>69</sup> For a detailed discussion of possible dates, and whether the extant text can be considered as representative of Greene's source, see Jones, 'Introduction', in P.F. Gent, *The English Faust Book*, pp. 54-72.

<sup>70</sup> Richard, Levin, 'Tarlton in *The Famous History of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 12 (1999), 84-98.

A less well-known but related play is *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* (*Merry Devil* play hereafter), anonymous but variously attributed to Shakespeare, Drayton, Heywood and Dekker.<sup>71</sup> It was probably written between 1600 and 1604 and was entered into the Stationer's Register in 1608.<sup>72</sup> Despite a staged reading and subsequent publication of a modern edition by the Globe Theatre, this play seems to have been ignored by critics since 1950. The only recent mentions are an article contesting the date of an early collection of Shakespeare apocrypha, and a chapter discussing the anonymity of its author.<sup>73</sup> The neglect is probably due to its anonymity and the missing scenes in the extant text, which confuse the final section of the play. It was, however, 'wildly popular' in its day, and is still enjoyable in its current form, featuring lively characters and well-written comedy.<sup>74</sup> It is of particular significance because its eponymous magician-hero Peter Fabell mingles elements of the tragic Faustus and heroic Bacon. He opens the play in high Faustian style only to trail off into the role of a benevolent stage manager whose magic is restrained to small tricks and sleights of hand. He too has a pact with the devil, but shows no sign of repentance at the end. The main plot actually echoes a chapter in the prose *Friar Bacon*, where Bacon uses his magic to aid a pair of starcross'd lovers.

Peter Fabell of *The Merry Devil* play also features in a prose jest book, *The Life and Death of the merry Deuil of Edmonton* by one T.B., who is probably Thomas Brewer (prose

---

<sup>71</sup> Anon., *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, ed. by Nicola Bennett (London: Nick Hern, 2000), all subsequent references will be to this edition.

<sup>72</sup> Nicola Bennett, 'Introduction' in, Anon., *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, pp. xi-xiv (pp. xi-xii).

<sup>73</sup> Peter Kirwan, 'The First Collected 'Shakespeare Apocrypha'', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 62.4 (2011), 594-601 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/shq.2011.0077>>; Barbara Howard Traister, 'Dealing with Dramatic Anonymity: The Case of *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*', in *Anonymity in Early Modern England: "What's in a Name?"*, ed. by Janet Wright Starner and Barbara Howard Traister (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 99-111.

<sup>74</sup> 'Introduction', *Anonymity in Early Modern England*, ed. by Janet Wright Starner and Barbara Howard Traister, pp. 1-12 (p. 9).

*Merry Devil* hereafter).<sup>75</sup> It was entered into the Stationer's Register in 1608, but may have existed earlier in manuscript form, so it is again unclear which came first.<sup>76</sup> Some of its episodes appear to fill gaps in the extant version of the play though, which perhaps suggests that it came afterwards. Intriguingly, Fabell is even more sidelined in this version, and is usurped from the narrative just a few chapters in by his irreverent sidekick Smug. The comedic undertones that many of these texts feature is amplified to the degree that it takes over from the initial subject, perhaps suggesting something about the 'seriousness' of magic words. It is mentioned in Abrams's and Bennett's editions of the play, but appears to have never been studied critically.<sup>77</sup>

Barnabe Barnes's gloriously over the top tragedy *The Devil's Charter* was performed and published in 1607.<sup>78</sup> It describes the rise and fall of Pope Alexander VI who allegedly sold his soul to the devil in exchange for the papal crown. Packed with Machiavellian overtones, it is a play of political and familial machinations gone horribly wrong, and the bodies very quickly begin to pile up. Somewhat later than the other texts, its Jacobean tone is very different and offers a valuable point of contrast. It has received a smattering of critical attention in recent times, with articles primarily paying attention to the play's devils and its interaction with Machiavellian politics.<sup>79</sup> Luke Wilson briefly contrasts Faustus's contract

---

<sup>75</sup> T[homas]. B[rewer]., *The Life and Death of the Merry Devil of Edmonton* ([London]: T[homas] P[urfoot?], 1631), STC 3719, in *Early English Books Online*, <<http://eebo.chadwyck.co.uk>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> August 2013], all subsequent references will be to this edition.

<sup>76</sup> Bennett, 'Intro' in, *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, pp. xiii.

<sup>77</sup> Anon., *The Merry Devil of Edmonton 1608*, ed. by William Amos Abrams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1942).

<sup>78</sup> Barnabe Barnes, *The Devil's Charter by Barnabe Barnes: A Critical Edition*, ed. by Jim C. Pogue (London: Garland, 1980), all subsequent references will be to this edition. Jim C. Pogue, 'Introduction' in, Barnes, *The Devil's Charter* pp. 1-36 (pp. 3-5).

<sup>79</sup> On devils see John D. Cox, 'Stage Devilry in Two King's Men Plays of 1606', *Modern Language Review*, 93.4 (1998), 934-47 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3736267>>; Astrid Stilma, 'Angels, Demons and Political Action in Two Early Jacobean History Plays', *Critical Survey*, 23.2 (2011), 9-25 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.3167/cs.2011.230202>>; David Farley-Hills, 'King James and Barnes's *Devil's Charter*', *Notes and Queries*, 37 (1990), 206-08. On Machiavelli see Jacqueline E.M. Latham, 'Machiavelli, Policy, and *The Devil's Charter*', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 1 (1984), 97-108.

with Alexander's in his excellent book on law in early modern drama *Theaters of Intention*, but frustratingly does not investigate it further.<sup>80</sup>

And finally there is *Virgilius*, an anonymous prose romance that gives a fantastical account of the life and times of the poet Virgil, drawing on the medieval folk tradition that he possessed magical powers.<sup>81</sup> The English version published in 1518 is a translation of a Dutch text published a few years earlier in 1512.<sup>82</sup> Robert Maslen has described it as 'the most influential work of this kind before the Faustbuch', and indeed it was so popular that it was reprinted by a London publisher in 1562.<sup>83</sup> Aside from Maslen's welcome discussion of early modern magical travel narratives, the only other recent works on *Virgilius* are two notes independently suggesting it as a source for a minor episode in William Haughton's *Englishmen for my Money*.<sup>84</sup> The standard text on variations of the Virgil legends remains John Webster Spargo's *Virgil the Necromancer: Studies in Virgilian Legends*.<sup>85</sup>

The texts are a mixture of drama and prose, which, as already discussed, enables us to explore the performative in terms of both speech and writing. In several cases versions of the same story appear, told in different forms. This dialogue between forms was not unusual in the period — Shakespeare, for instance, often raided prose sources such as romances and histories — however, it is particularly relevant here because it provides a literary example of iteration at work. To further demonstrate the productive possibilities of this iteration, the texts

---

<sup>80</sup> Luke Wilson, *Theaters of Intention: Drama and the Law in Early Modern England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 214-15.

<sup>81</sup> Anon., *Virgilius* (Antwerp: John Doesborke, [1518(?)]), STC 24828, in *Early English Books Online*, <<http://eebo.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 17<sup>th</sup> August 2013], all subsequent references will be to this edition.

<sup>82</sup> Andrew Fleck, 'The Origins of *Englishmen for my Money*'s 'Lover in the Basket' Episode in Doesborch's *Lyfe of Virgilius*', *Notes and Queries*, 57.3 (2010), 357-59 (357) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjq060>>

<sup>83</sup> R.W. Maslen, 'Magical Journeys in Sixteenth-Century Prose Fiction', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 44.1 (2011), 35-50 (38) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5699/yearengstud.41.1.0035>>

<sup>84</sup> Fleck; Richard Levin, 'A Source of Haughton's *Englishmen for my Money*', *Notes and Queries*, 53.1 (2006), 57-59 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjj127>>

<sup>85</sup> John Webster Spargo, *Virgil the Necromancer: Studies in Virgilian Legends* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1934).

chosen are deliberately very similar in their general plot, but idiosyncratic in their execution of it.

The texts all feature a magician as a central character, who loosely follows a trajectory that is powered by the performative's contradictory motion. These characters begin by craving the stability of the absolute, be it in terms of knowledge or power, which seems to be promised them by the supernatural power of magic words. They then try to found themselves as absolute authorities through conjuring and swearing allegiance to the devil. This is actually a doubly performative act, in which the magician uses speech acts, but is also caught up in the equally performative and interpretive structure of authority. Some use this to their advantage, and escape the devil's clutches through trickery and play, whilst others are trapped by blind faith in their own words. And finally, all but one of our heroes dies. This may not appear related, but readings of Derrida will demonstrate how it is part of the unfulfilled and non-present *dynamis* that drives the motion of literature, language and our experience of life itself. Consequently, much of the discussion is about failure, misunderstanding and tragedy; but it is hoped that the closeness of the reading will move beyond this to the vitality and hope that Derrida finds in disruption and incompleteness.

Magic was a hot topic in the period, particularly on the stage, and many texts have needs-must been excluded here. As mentioned above, the present group have been chosen for their marked similarities and vivid layering of performatives. However, a broader discussion could also find resonances in other more well-known plays. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in particular seems to fit the conjurer laureate pattern in its own delicate way: Prospero seeks absolute knowledge in his library, bargains with Ariel, and ultimately drowns his books. Similarly, Jonson's magnificently structured caper *The Alchemist* takes the themes of

deception and failure to cynical extremes, and could provide a counterpoint to the more or less sincere depictions of magic in the present texts.

The slightly later witch plays that became popular in the seventeenth century are also omitted. As critics such as Barbara Traister have noted, Faustus's pact with the devil is actually the stuff of witchcraft, as opposed to the magician's typical enslavement of spirits.<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, our texts do something quite different to the social commentary of the witch plays. As Ian McAdam has powerfully described in psychoanalytic terms, the craving for the absolute that characterises our magicians can be linked to a disruption in ideals of masculinity during the Reformation. He argues that the highs and lows of stage magicians were a way of exploring the fears and fantasies associated with this disruption, and also of trying out new formulations of gender identity.<sup>87</sup> This may have been a distinctly masculine concern at the time, but is now relevant to people of all genders and inclinations, which is perhaps why plays such as *Dr Faustus* continue to fascinate us today.

Derrida's philosophy is remarkably consistent and interconnected, and consequently, the selection of particular texts of his over others will always involve the exclusion of valuable cross-references, alternative perspectives, developments and variations. Constrained by time, space and limited experience, this thesis will only be able to directly engage with a small corner of Derrida's oeuvre here. Three texts explicitly concerning speech act theory form an important part of the discussion: 'Signature Event Context', 'Limited Inc a b c . . .'

---

<sup>86</sup> Barbara Traister, *Heavenly Necromancers: The Magician in Early Modern English Drama* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), pp. 90-3.

<sup>87</sup> Ian McAdam, *Magic and Masculinity in Early Modern English Drama* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009), pp. 1-22.

and ‘Afterword: Towards an Ethic of Discussion’, all of which are collected in *Limited Inc.*<sup>88</sup> Derrida’s explication, critique and transformation of the theory enables us to progress from the obvious performatives of conjuring, promising and so forth to a discussion of the contrary structures of self-limiting openness that enables life and literature to happen.

A related group interested in the performativity of authority, which articulate some of the implications of the work on speech act theory, will also be studied. ‘Force of Law’ discusses the ‘mystical foundation’ of the law, in the most general sense of the word, and ‘Declarations of Independence’ discusses a similar theme with regard to signatures.<sup>89</sup> ‘Before the Law’ and ‘Law of Genre’ — readings of Kafka and Blanchot respectively — focus on the intersection between law and literature, and the disruptions and impurities that this entails. In addition, Derrida’s encomium of Hélène Cixous, *H.C. For Life, That Is to Say...*, combines magic and performativity to describe the ‘might’ of her writing.<sup>90</sup> A text on *Romeo and Juliet*, ‘Aphorism Countertime’, is not directly about the performative, but instead plays with ideas of jurisdiction, identity and the potential dangers of enclosure.<sup>91</sup> It is also of note for us, because it is Derrida’s only text solely devoted to the reading of an early modern English text.

---

<sup>88</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’, trans. by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, in *Limited Inc.*, ed. by Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 1-23; ‘Limited Inc a b c . . .’; ‘Afterword: Towards an Ethic of Discussion’.

<sup>89</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Declarations of Independence’, trans. Tom Keenan and Tom Pepper, *New Political Science*, 7.1 (1986), 7-15 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07393148608429608>>; ‘Force of Law’, trans. by Mary Quaintance, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. by Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3-67; ‘The Law of Genre’, trans. by Avital Ronell, in *Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 221-252.

<sup>90</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Before the Law’, trans. by Avital Ronell and Christine Roulston, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge, pp. 181-120.

<sup>91</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Aphorism Countertime’, trans. Nicholas Royle, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 414-33.

And finally, there is a different group that addresses the beyond. *Aporias* helps us to comprehend the mind- and language- bending impossibility of one's own death.<sup>92</sup> It also develops the discussion of borders and boundaries in 'Aphorism Countertime'. The thinking of death as an unknowable but inevitable event feeds into the concept of the messianic, which we explore further through Derrida's more overtly religious texts, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', 'Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone' and 'On Forgiveness'.<sup>93</sup>

What follows will try to at once describe and carry out a performative close reading of early modern prose and drama magicians. The aim is to bear witness to the significance of Derrida's theories to texts of this period, and in doing so to demonstrate an approach that engages with current scholarly interest in textuality, power and multiplicity from a fresh angle that is both creative and critical. More specifically, the thesis will use this method to explore the performative motions that drive the triumphs and tribulations of our magicians as they strive for the absolute. Close reading of moments of difficulty and contradiction in the texts will reveal how the performative provokes and encourages our yearning for certainty, self-presence and purity, whilst simultaneously rendering its fulfilment impossible. A broadening of the discussion with then show how this pattern is at work not only in instances of promising, conjuring and betting, but also in the structures of identity, authority and literature. Finally, and most importantly, it will argue that this deeply ingrained resistance is actually a fruitful opening, and how the restless back and forth motion of the performative

---

<sup>92</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Aporias: Dying — awaiting (one another at) the "limits of truth"*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

<sup>93</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', trans. Ken Frieden, in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 73-142; 'Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of "religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone', trans. Gil Anidjar, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 40-101; 'On Forgiveness', trans. by Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes, in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 25-60.

can be understood as the dynamis that makes language, thought and experience as we know it possible.

The discussion is divided into three chapters. It begins, in 'Founding Violences', with spoken performatives, although conjuring is not our main concern. Instead we analyse the making and breaking of promises, bets and oaths in order understand the performative foundations of the magicians' transgressive beginnings. Derrida's theories of the contradictory structure of law are of assistance here. As he describes, authority is founded on 'a performative and therefore interpretive violence'.<sup>94</sup> For our magicians this takes the form of making — and sometimes also breaking — pacts with the devil. Intoxicatingly, a supernatural word of promise or summoning is apparently all that is required of the magicians to gain the power to shape the world to their will.

However, close reading of these moments reveals how even these most potent of performative words shift and drift, and cannot bring self-made certainty. Trickery, deception and misunderstandings ensue; language will not stay still. The slipperiness of these foundations raises questions of the authority they instate, hinting that it is as interpretive and fluid as literature, and indeed our own reading of it. The performative is what makes the rise and fall of authorities possible, but also prevents them from ever being more than dominant interpretations. Similarly, the absolute of law is always corrupted by the kernel of lawlessness in its founding moments. This has seismic implications for the magicians, as it suggests an internal contradiction in their ambitions, which renders unattainable their goal of the absolute.

---

<sup>94</sup> Derrida, 'Force of Law', p. 13.

The second chapter, 'Embodiments', moves onto written performatives. It explores how many magicians try to use materiality such as writing to embody their intention more fixedly than with speech alone. With recourse to Derrida's work on textuality, it analyses the tensions that arise from such projects, and the iterative structures that render this kind of absolute textual authority also impossible. We begin with writing in the contract scenes, but also consider less literal embodiments such as Friar Bacon's brazen head and Faustus's magic encyclopaedia. Through more close reading we uncover the absence, spacing and rupture that structure even the most physical of communications; and discover that this is not a hindrance, but the means by which all kinds of writing are kept alive and in motion. Here the discussion broadens, revealing how concepts such as identity and experience can also be understood as forms of writing. Boundaries begin to emerge as an important motif, but in a destabilising sense. The spacing of text, the outline of a body, the demarcation of a name all enclose what they identify, and in doing so they introduce an element of the unknown: an outer edge, a resistance, the other within the self. Again, this disrupts the conjurer laureates' ambitions, suggesting that division is inherent in our very sense of being.

The final chapter, 'Deaths', reiterates the patterns of the previous ones, but also draws them out to much wider conclusions. Again we turn to Derrida, this time to *Aporias*. As he describes, death is the ultimate destabilising boundary; 'my death' is unique to each and every one of us, but comes as an event that is incomprehensible, unexpected and beyond experience. It follows that the markers of self — 'I', 'me' and 'my' — are effaced by the very outline that make them possible and legible. Language breaks at this horizon, but our texts bravely attempt to address it anyway. As the magicians approach far closer to the boundaries of themselves than they ever did with conjuring, the texts produce fascinating asynchronicities and contradictions that defy time, space and presence. The analysis takes in

the difficulties of preparing for one's death, and also the contradictory structures of forgiveness and prayer. This concluding section may sound rather morbid, but a reading of the terrifying final scene in *Doctor Faustus* actually reveals a glimmer of hope. Faustus's experience of the yet-to-come is truly horrific, but in can be read traces of the openness of the unknown; of the way that iteration harbours life, its disruption holding open the messianic promise of the future. This suggests that the limit of experience is the limit of the performative writing that simultaneously interprets, founds and transforms the world as we know it. Remarkably, life itself can thus be understood as a massive graphematic structure, with death as its spacing. And this no tragedy, but a gift from beyond.

## 2. Founding Violences

This chapter opens with some groundwork, outlining Austin's speech act theory, and Derrida's engagement with it. It explains what a performative utterance is, and how it is different to the more common constative. The exciting implications of Austin's project are then discussed: that ultimately all statements are performative and therefore bear no relation to truth. Next, we move onto Derrida's work on the theory. His central criticism is that Austin's methodology sidelines non-serious uses language, but this broadens into a discussion about the iterable structure of writing. This is important, as iterability will be a significant element of our analysis.

Once we have grasped the fundamentals of speech act theory, the all-consuming desire for the absolute that characterises all of our magicians is outlined. Thus prepared, we finally move on to our main subject of founding violences. We explore the making and breaking of pacts, rules and promises with which the magicians try to found themselves as supernatural authorities. However, the performative also runs much deeper than these immediate examples. Reading the magicians' founding moments through some of Derrida's texts on law reveals authority is itself structured performatively, and therefore rests upon a 'mystical foundation' that confounds both reason and justice.<sup>1</sup> In its inaugural moments the law overflows itself, becoming literary and interpretive: precisely that which it aligns itself against.

---

<sup>1</sup>Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law', trans. by Mary Quaintance, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. by Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3-67, p. 11.

This ‘dangerous supplement’, as Derrida refers to it in *Of Grammatology*, is a feature that we will come across time and time again. This is no coincidence, as it is the point from which all the tensions that interest us radiate.<sup>2</sup> As Simon Morgan Wortham explains, ‘the supplement adds itself to an ostensibly ideal or original presence in the form of exposing the lack and self-difference at its very origin. For Derrida, in other words, supplementarity is at the always-divided ‘origin’ of presence.’<sup>3</sup> The supplement adds by taking away the absolute purity or presence of that which it completes; and is considered ‘dangerous’ because it corrupts the very thing it makes possible. Throughout the history of metaphysics, and also in our day to day thinking of life, there has always been a struggle to sideline, repress or explain away the supplement, because of the way it seems to undermine every ideal we strive for. The very same thing can be seen happening in our conjurer laureates and their ambitions for the absolute. They exploit the most potent language they know of in an attempt to be free of uncertainty and instability, but the words they use, and indeed the concept of authority itself, cannot help but introduce further unknowns and absences that resist all closure.

The tragic magicians are unable to accept or acknowledge the supplement, and their stubborn faith in the authority of their words results in them becoming irrevocably entangled with the devil. The comedic ones, however, embrace the supplementary opening by joining in the trickery. They refuse to take their pacts seriously, and exploit puns, play acting and slapstick in order to slip from his clutches. There is an intriguing connection here with the late medieval patristic salvation theory known as ‘the guiler beguiled’. In this folk tradition, Christ and Satan are depicted as tricksters locked in a battle of wits that Christ eventually wins in the harrowing of hell. Kathleen Ashley explains:

---

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 141-164.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Morgan Wortham, *The Derrida Dictionary* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 204.

According to this theory, when the Devil beguiled men into sin he won the right to take them in death. In order to redeem mankind, the deity disguised himself in human flesh, and the disguise tricked the Devil into attempting to kill one who was not mortal. This abuse of the Devil's legitimate power cancels the Devil's claim to men's souls after the coming of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

This story has fascinating implications. Firstly, there is the suggestion that God and the devil have some kind of agreement about who gets which souls. This brings the two supposedly polar opposites of Christianity together in a mutually beneficial relationship, which need must corrupt the absolute good of one and the absolute evil of the other. They are almost reconfigured as equals; cosmic businessmen wheeling and dealing in eternity. And not only does God make this deal with the enemy, but he breaks it too, undermining the sanctity of his own divine word. Secondly, there is the manner in which God breaks the deal. Rather than using his omnipotence to simply put his change of mind into action, he plays the devil at his own game. Christ is put on earth to fulfil a trickster role almost indistinguishable from that of the devil. The popular late medieval phrase 'the guiler beguiled' neatly captures just how close good comes to evil in this triumph.<sup>5</sup>

The guiler beguiled is thus a supplementary belief. It is non-scriptural, and more influenced by ancient folk traditions than the theological doctrines of the medieval church or university. Similarly, the trickster-Christ with his 'ambivalent potential for both creative and destructive activity', is himself a supplement to the pristine goodness conventionally associated with the son of God. He is, as Ashley thrillingly puts it, 'the mythical breaker of

---

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen M. Ashley, 'The Guiler Beguiled: Christ and Satan as Theological Tricksters in Medieval Religious Literature', *Criticism*, 24.2 (1982), 126-37 (127).

<sup>5</sup> Ashley, 'Guiler Beguiled', 133.

taboos and violator of boundaries, who is both a sacred and a dangerous figure'.<sup>6</sup> And although the ends of his trickery are those of conventional Christianity, his means disrupt the simplicity or 'purity' of what he achieves. Our good magicians are not necessarily Christ figures, far from it; but nevertheless, the resonances between them and the trickster-saviour signal a supplementary complexity at work in late medieval and early modern beliefs, which we perhaps do not always acknowledge. This is makes for some very rich moments in our texts; but it also poses the question, if even Christ is not absolutely himself, how can our magicians ever expect to achieve the same?

### **Austin**

Our discussion of the performative and beyond is primarily guided by Derrida, but it is important to understand whence the concept first came. His most direct work on speech act theory is, after all, an interpretation of J.L. Austin's seminal *How to Do Things with Words*. Despite this, Austin is often skimmed over in favour of the racier debate between Searle and Derrida, both of whom have a somewhat different agenda.<sup>7</sup>

In the past philosophers of language generally held that the majority of sentences were constatives. That is to say, they make a statement about something, such as 'I am hungry' or 'today is Tuesday'. However, in the 1950s the English philosopher J.L. Austin identified a new category of sentence whose utterance is also an action. These performatives are recognisable by two remarkable but simple characteristics:

---

<sup>6</sup> Ashley, 'Guiler Beguiled', 127, 137.

<sup>7</sup> For an example of how fruitful Austin's work can be in a continental context see Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) (first publ. as *The Literary Speech Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983)).

- A. They do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constate anything at all, are not ‘true or false’; and  
 B. the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as, or ‘just’ saying something.<sup>8</sup>

Such words that are able to act upon the world but are unaccountable to truth may sound rare and special, but we actually encounter them on a daily basis. Every time we make a bet, a promise or a warning we are performing a speech act. ‘I bet it rains tomorrow’ is not a description of an action I’ve already done, nor is it simply a statement of my belief that it will rain. Speaking it is the action itself of making the bet. The distinction between constative and performative may seem fairly self-evident, but Austin’s acknowledgment of it is actually quite radical. Beneath his rather quaint Oxford don tone lies a determination to make ‘the firm ground of prejudice slide away beneath our feet’, to ‘play Old Harry with... the true/false fetish and the value/fact fetish’.<sup>9</sup>

Because they are neither true nor false, performatives must be analysed along different axes. In Austin’s terms they are open to various ‘infelicities’ that can cause them to go wrong, and are either ‘happy’ or ‘unhappy’ depending upon the circumstances in which they are spoken. I might, for instance, sarcastically bet a million pounds that my friend will be late, even though I have no such money and have no intention of handing anything over if I lose. Similarly, I can smash a champagne bottle against a boat and name it the ‘Mr Stalin’ (Austin’s example!), but unless I have been appointed to do so it will have no effect on the ship or its captain, and I might well be arrested.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. by Marina Sbisa and J.O. Urmston, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, p. 13; p. 151.

<sup>10</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, p. 23.

Firstly a happy performative must be a conventional procedure, appropriate to the situation and completely and correctly executed. Secondly it must be performed with sincere intention, and fulfilled with the appropriate behaviour in the future. Interestingly, the infelicities relating to the former will void the action, whereas in the case of problems with the latter the action will be performed, but in a ‘hollow’ way.<sup>11</sup> For example, a marriage is void if either the bride or groom is already married, whereas a promise can be made without being kept. In addition, there are infelicities that performatives share with both actions in general and language in general. Like actions, a performative can be carried out by mistake, under duress or unintentionally. And like all utterances, it can be ‘used not seriously’: spoken as a joke, ironically or by an actor onstage.<sup>12</sup>

Austin puts aside the problem of non-serious usage in order to focus on what he calls ‘performative utterances... issued in ordinary instances’.<sup>13</sup> He is particularly intrigued by mistakes, which seem to blur his distinction between performatives and constatives. For instance, when a judge in a courtroom pronounces someone guilty he is uttering a happy performative. Its action transforms the defendant into a criminal, with all the implications that brings. But what if his judgment is incorrect? Alternatively, what happens if I sincerely promise to give you something but then forget to give it to you? Austin comes to the conclusion that ‘for a certain performative utterance to be happy, certain statements have *to be true*’.<sup>14</sup> These ‘certain statements’ turn out to be numerous; not only must a judgement correlate with the truth, but also in more general cases it must be true that I am sincere, am entitled to make the utterance, have followed the procedure correctly and so forth. He then

---

<sup>11</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, p. 22.

<sup>13</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, p. 45.

broadens this to demonstrate that just as the happiness of 'I promise' relies upon certain implied truths, the truth of 'the cat sat on the mat' has a similar reliance. Its veracity depends upon a series of implications, including that I believe what I say, that the cat and the mat both exist, and that the mat is not on the cat.

What emerges from this minute attention to detail is that the truth of a statement is as complex and entwined with its context as the happiness of a performative. Truth or falsity is simply one mode of assessment among others, which merely analyses 'how the words stand in respect of satisfactoriness to the facts, events, situations, &c., to which they refer'.<sup>15</sup> In light of this Austin ditches his original constative/performative distinction in favour of an approach that takes in the whole speech act or speech situation. In this new system, what is said, what the speaker intends, and what effect the utterance has are mapped as locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary forces respectively. This elegantly highlights the interrelationship between saying and doing. Even the baldest constative is powered by a performative intention, even if it is simply the implied 'I state' or 'I describe'. Conversely, any performative is also a statement that relies upon other statements. Perlocutionary force adds further subtlety by acknowledging how the effect of an utterance is not always the intended one, highlighting the ever present gap between our inner world and the outer one, and the limitations of the medium with which we attempt to bridge it.

Austin's final lecture consists of lengthy lists of illocutionary force, bringing home the punch line that all utterances are an action. He humbly closes with the admission that 'I have as usual failed to leave enough time in which to say why what I have said is

---

<sup>15</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, p. 149.

interesting'.<sup>16</sup> This is somewhat unfair, seeing as he has demolished the old dogma attached to truth, demonstrated that all utterance is action, and restored the analysis of language back to its natural, 'ordinary' context. However he does leave things tantalisingly open-ended, which is perhaps why so many other thinkers have been keen to take up where he left off. This is in part due to his untimely death, which left this preliminary work undeveloped. More significantly though, it is testament to the seismic importance of what he had discovered. His speech act theory has implications for the way we think about identity, law, gender, ethics and performance in both fact and fiction, reaching further than one man's work could ever have contained.

Curiously, what has most interested poststructuralist thinkers in Austin's theory is what it leaves out. In his anatomising Austin acknowledges that the precise set of circumstances required for a felicitous performative leave it open to all kinds of failure, many of which stem not from its particular structure but from qualities it shares with language in general. Conventional procedures can be improperly followed, acts can be accidental. In particular, words can be quoted outside of their original context or repeated onstage, resulting in 'non-serious' performatives that are '*in a peculiar way hollow or void*'.<sup>17</sup> He notes the intriguing characteristics of the non-serious and infelicitous, but quickly passes over them as part of a 'general doctrine' above and beyond his current exploration of 'performative utterances ... issued in ordinary circumstances'.<sup>18</sup> It is this step in his argument that Derrida takes issue with, complaining that although Austin recognises the pervasiveness of infelicity, 'it is not interrogated as an essential predicate or as a *law*'.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, p. 163.

<sup>17</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', trans. by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, in *Limited Inc*, ed. by Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 15.

For Derrida, Austin's assumption that failure, accident and insincerity can be separated out and excluded from the discussion of felicitous and 'ordinary' speech acts is precisely where he goes wrong. This is because the problematic iterability that Austin recognises in speech situations also runs much deeper, and is inherent within the structures of locution itself. It is a law, just like the contradictory 'law of the law of genre'.<sup>20</sup> Derrida argues that all writing (and thus all communication) is able to survive in the absence of any sender or receiver, which implies that intention is not one of its defining features. Instead, what remains is the message's ability to be repeated, whether anyone can understand it or not; this, he argues, is what makes writing writing. Reiteration therefore is not merely a misfortune that sometimes occurs, but an enabling function that *must* happen for communication of any sort to be possible at all.

This is a controversial point. In Austin's defence critics such as Cavell, Felman and Loxley would all point to the humour, even failure, so intrinsic to Austin's thought, and to the 'scare quotes' he carefully places around the word 'seriously'.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, anyone who has enjoyed Austin's uniquely entertaining style will agree that they have a point. Discussing the quirks of another essay by Austin, Derrida himself wonders 'may we thus be permitted to smile at it along with his ghost?'<sup>22</sup> But whether he gets the joke here or not, or whether there is even a joke at all, is actually less important than the possibility of dispute itself. Derrida sums this up in response to Searle's accusation that he has misunderstood Austin: 'if a

---

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', trans. by Avital Ronell, in *Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 221-252 (p. 231).

<sup>21</sup> Stanley Cavell, 'Introduction', in Felman, *Scandal*, p. xvii. On failure see Felman, *Scandal*, esp. pp. 41-47; and James Loxley, *Performativity* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 6-43.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Inc (2)', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *Without Alibi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 71-160 (p. 79). He is referring to Austin's essay 'Three Ways of Spilling Ink', *The Philosophical Review*, 75.4 (1966), 427-40 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2183222>>

misunderstanding (for example, of Austin's theses) is possible, if a *mis-* in general ("mistake," "misunderstanding," "misinterpretation," "misstatement," to mention only those included in Sarl's list of accusations from the first paragraph on) is possible, what does that imply concerning the structure of speech acts in general?'<sup>23</sup>

His attention to non-serious and abnormal elements beyond Austin's focus is thus valid and important. The concept of a law of lawlessness within the law of language, and his turn towards an analysis of writing are of particular significance to the current study. But nevertheless they share a sentiment with Austin's project to 'play old Harry' with the philosophical establishment.<sup>24</sup> On balance it is perhaps most helpful to read Derrida's response as a surpassing or creative interpretation rather than an outright critique. In a reading of Heidegger, he describes *Being and Time* as a 'work' because it surpasses its own boundaries. 'Such is perhaps the case for every work worthy of its name: there, what puts thinking into operation exceeds its own borders or what thinking itself intends to present of those borders', he suggests, and this is perhaps also the case with Austin's equally overflowing text.<sup>25</sup>

Austin's legacy has been taken up by many, with varying degrees of success and sensitivity. Two early inheritors of his work were Stanley Cavell and John Searle, the difference in whose approaches are testament to the diversity of his speech act theory. Cavell justifies Austin's championing of ordinary language. He argues that language is a shared world in which we are immersed, governed by moral and ethical duties to that world and the

---

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Limited Inc a b c . . .', trans. by Samuel Weber, in *Limited Inc*, ed. by Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 29-110 (p. 37).

<sup>24</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, p. 151.

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Aporias: Dying — awaiting (one another at) the "limits of truth"*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 32.

others who partake in it.<sup>26</sup> Searle, on the other hand, goes in completely the opposite direction by rejecting pragmatics and attempting to create a systematic theoretical machinery of speech in action.<sup>27</sup> In 1972 the publication of Derrida's radical reading of Austin as *Signature Event Context* sparked a heated debate that continues today. An outraged Searle published a response to which Derrida replied with a close and damning analysis of his opponent's own piece, and others soon joined the fray.<sup>28</sup> This infamous battle caught the imagination of many poststructuralist thinkers, and the performative quickly became a popular motif. Much good has come of this, but as James Loxley has observed there is a tendency to skim over Austin's work and misrepresent him in light of the famous argument in which he had no part. In the more strident accounts he becomes an unrecognisable ideological punch-bag, a conservative stick-in-the-mud forcing an 'authoritarian, patriarchal imposition of law and order'.<sup>29</sup>

The reading here will spend considerably more time on Derrida than Austin, largely because we will be reading our texts in light of his wider work. However it is important to acknowledge his indebtedness, and be clear that his analysis is largely one of deep understanding and creative appreciation. The challenge to philosophic dogma, the suspicion of truth and the turn to a moral assessment of language are all already quietly there in Austin's work; in his unique style Derrida excavates and unfurls them. There is criticism too, to be sure, but then it would not be philosophy without that.

---

<sup>26</sup> Stanley Cavell, 'Must we Mean what we Say?' in *Must we Mean what we Say?: A Book of Essays* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 1-43.

<sup>27</sup> John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

<sup>28</sup> John R. Searle, 'Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida', *Glyph*, 2 (1977).

<sup>29</sup> Loxley, *Performativity*, pp. 3-4, quoting J.H. Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 56.

### **Absolute Ambitions**

Armed with a basic understanding of Austin's speech act theory, and Derrida's engagement with it, we are now ready to begin investigating the magicians. As mentioned in the introduction, Marlowe's Faustus wants to 'resolve me of all ambiguities' (1.1.82). This hunger for the absolute is shared by all of our conjurer laureates, and its pattern of seductive promise coupled with inevitable failure drives the plots surrounding them. It is important, therefore, to get to grips with this ambition and its implications before we consider what happens when our magicians attempt to fulfil it.

Again, Faustus provides the clearest example. In the play's opening scene, we encounter him in his study, systematically rejecting the disciplines of medieval academia. Volumes by Aristotle, Galen, Justinian and Jerome, representing logic, medicine, law and religion respectively, are all discarded because he believes that he has reached their 'end' (1.1.1-50).<sup>30</sup> The play on an 'end' as both a goal and an outer limit implies that he has not only achieved the utmost in each subject but also that he has expanded beyond their horizons.<sup>31</sup> He represents himself as simply larger than the subjects he has studied, and in doing so undermines any sense of their knowledge constituting the world. By situating himself looking in from beyond the outer edges of academia he constructs a unique epistemology that insists on there being something beyond knowledge, and his elevated perspective makes him the sole authority of this outsize reality.

---

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus* (A text), ed. by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen, in *Doctor Faustus: A- and B- Texts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993, repr. 1995). All subsequent references are to this edition unless otherwise specified.

<sup>31</sup> For more on the significance of 'ends' in this scene, and the many critics who have discussed it, see pp. 207-210 of this thesis.

But he is not simply searching for a revolutionary new science to teach him about the world. Faustus's 'necromantic books' (1.1.52) are the only texts that can satisfy him, but only because of the god-like power they can give him. These books are 'heavenly' (1.1.52) and have the potential to catapult him from the earth into the transcendent position of creator, enabling him to turn God's nature into 'a world of profit and delight,/ Of power, of honour, of omnipotence' (1.1.55-6). The only limit to the magician's possibilities is an almost limitless one, for he who can 'raise the wind or rend the clouds' (1.1.61) has an authority that 'stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man' (1.1.63). Significantly, this mingles the physical magic that can manipulate the weather and command kings with the interpretive performative of individual experience. The communal 'truth' of academic knowledge is opposed with the personal experience of the magician, whose elevated perspective creates the world. This is, of course, a transgressive usurping of the divine performative Word of Christianity.

It follows that Faustus is not only in pursuit of absolute power, but an absolute consciousness; where his sense of self, his subjective experience of being, will no longer be a private filter but constitutive of reality itself. He wishes to conjure spirits who will 'resolve me of all ambiguities' (1.1.82), thus subsuming all other interpretations and perspectives. The 'me' of this line tellingly reveals how his project is not about acquiring knowledge and solving the mysteries of the world. On the contrary, it is all about extending Faustus's consciousness so that nothing is ambiguous *to him*. It is in this respect that this we will be speaking of identity — in an experiential, almost phenomenological sense rather than a socially constructed one. The chorus's image of Faustus 'swoll'n with cunning of a self-conceit' (prol.20) takes on a new resonance when we interpret his ambition in this way. His 'self-conceit' is not simply arrogance, but self-conception, which is also the subjectivity of a

personal understanding or opinion. And ‘swoll’n’ suggests this consciousness bloating horribly to fill the world.

This ambition has the performative as both its means and end. Byville has argued that magical speech acts are the shaping factor of the protagonists and plots of what he calls ‘witchcraft tragedy’, and that ‘such power stems from the very nature of supernatural performatives, which possess a unique capacity for self-determination and the ability to dictate, rather than describe, external reality.’<sup>32</sup> And indeed, Faustus wishes to literalize his performative experience of the world through conjuring, the manner described by Byville. This is related to Derrida’s criticism that in its original Austinian form, speech act theory posits the speaker’s consciousness as its ‘organizing center’.<sup>33</sup> For Austin, the success or failure of an utterance often depends upon whether I sincerely mean what I say and intend to fulfil it. This creates a system where the speaker is fully present and in control of their words and the context in which they are spoken, making him or her the sovereign of a self-made ‘teleological jurisdiction’.<sup>34</sup> Crudely put, a speech act appears to have the potential to fully realise intention, and therefore to create absolute certainty and authority, just as Faustus’s desires.

Faustus’s attitude is not an unusual one. On the contrary, this yearning is the very *telos* of intention and intentionality, which, as Derrida describes, ‘orients and organises the movement and the possibility of a fulfilment, realization and *actualization* in a plenitude that

---

<sup>32</sup> Eric Byville, ‘How to Do Witchcraft Tragedy with Speech Acts, *Comparative Drama*, 45.2 (2011), 1-33 (3) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2011.0013>>

<sup>33</sup> ‘Signature Event Context’, p. 15.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Signature Event Context’, p. 15.

would be *present* to and identical with itself.’<sup>35</sup> However, this striving will never come to fruition:

intention or attention, directed towards something iterable which in turn determines it as being iterable, will strive or tend in vain to actualize or fulfil itself, for it cannot, by virtue of its very structure, ever achieve this goal. In no case will it be fulfilled, actualized, totally present to its object and to itself. It is divided and deported in advance, by its iterability, towards others, removed in advance from itself. This re-move makes its movement possible.<sup>36</sup>

We will explore Derrida’s concept of iteration later, but for now it is enough to understand that the repeatability that makes language possible also prevents it from becoming absolute, because every repetition is subtly different, a division of sorts. And this resistance goes for identity and intention as well as the language they exploit, because when ‘directed toward something iterable’ the iterable ‘in turn determines it as iterable’. The means and the end work in exactly the same way. Thus, the structure of the conjurer laureates’ ambitions prevents them from ever being achievable, even before they begin reaching for them.

Marjorie Garber detects a similar pattern in her observation that ‘much of the tension in Marlowe’s plays derives from the dialectic between aspiration and limitation’.<sup>37</sup> Her word ‘dialectic’ perhaps too strongly suggests the clarity of diametric opposites, and the possibility of resolution. However, the tension she notes between ‘aspiration and limitation’ is very significant, and is also expressed in the conflicting definitions of *absolute* itself. On the one hand, it describes something ‘free from all external restraint or interference; unrestricted, unlimited’, suggesting that which is interminable and boundless. But on the other, it can also

---

<sup>35</sup> Derrida, ‘Limited Inc a b c . . .’, p. 56.

<sup>36</sup> Derrida, ‘Signature, Event Context’, p. 56.

<sup>37</sup> Marjorie Garber, “‘Infinite Riches in a Little Room’: Closure and Enclosure in Marlowe’, in *Two Renaissance Mythmakers*, ed. Alvin B. Kerman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 3-21 (p. 3, p.12).

mean complete or perfect; 'free from imperfection or deficiency' or 'complete or entire in degree'.<sup>38</sup> This second group of senses contradict the first by describing the complete enclosure of wholeness, which is necessarily defined by its boundaries. To be absolutely absolute is thus to be at once limitless and perfectly circumscribed: it is impossible within the conventional limits of being.

Ian McAdam has captured something of this dilemma in his psychoanalytical accounts of magic and masculinity in the early modern period:

Faustus's "damnation" is the manifestation of a devastating psychological dilemma. While he has the will to be omnipotent, his human consciousness must define itself against an "other" external to it, which is more powerful than he. Faustus must therefore limit or contain a self that wishes to be uncontained, that wants to stretch "as far as doth the mind of man".<sup>39</sup>

For him, the unresolved conflict within Faustus's ambition can be understood as a pre-oedipal narcissism, founded upon 'the conflation of personal humility and spiritual grandiosity' in the protestant manly ideal.<sup>40</sup> The external other that he refers to is the protestant God, but our reading with Derrida will come to suggest that the name 'God' refers to same originary absent-presence or contradiction that we will speak of here in terms of language.

Once we have understood this idealising pattern in *Doctor Faustus*, it begins to crop up everywhere; and it is almost impossible not to sense it at work in the rise and fall of our other conjurer laureates too. The Faustus of Marlowe's source is obviously bent on the same

---

<sup>38</sup> 'absolute, adj. (and adv.) and .n.' in, *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <<http://oed.com>> [accessed 65<sup>th</sup> April 2014].

<sup>39</sup> Ian McAdam, *The Irony of Identity: Self and Imagination in the Drama of Christopher Marlowe* (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), pp. 123-4.

<sup>40</sup> McAdam, *Magic and Masculinity*, p. 85. The specifically protestant elements of the neurosis are expanded in this text, see pp. 49-96.

doomed ambition. Alexander in *The Devil's Charter* desires the political and religious power of the papal crown. The divinely ordained 'Triple-Diadem' (26) marks him out as God's minister on earth, imbuing him with an authority that no Catholic on earth can dispute. The scholar Friar Bacon is in pursuit of absolute knowledge and political stability. In Greene's play he risks all to construct a brass head that will 'unfold strange doubts and aphorisms' (2.25) and 'compass England with a wall of brass' (2.29) so solid that 'If then Caesars lived ... They should not touch a grass of English ground' (2.58-60). The episode is also recounted in the prose version, where Bacon makes the head to learn how to encircle England 'and so make himselfe famous hereafter to all posterities' (sig. B4<sup>v</sup>). In this case his ambition for immortality of a sort is perhaps another way of grasping at the absolute. And in a more metatextual manner, technicians of comedy such as Bacon, Fabell and Virgilius also exert a god-like absolute power. In manipulating events towards a happy ending, they seem to stand at a distance, above and beyond the plot or narrative that contains them.

### **Founding Violences**

Significantly, the pursuit of the absolute always begins with a transgression. We see this in both Faustus' rejection of academia, but also more generally in the way that all but one of our magicians obtains their power through an agreement with the devil. This is where Derrida's concept of the 'founding violence' comes in, and with it this chapter takes a turn away from magic and towards the law.<sup>41</sup> This may initially seem surprising, but the rich field of work on law and literature in early modern studies is testament to how 'early modern literature is conspicuous in the intimacy of its engagement with the law'.<sup>42</sup> But whilst much of the discipline works on the specifics of the early modern justice system, we are going to discuss

---

<sup>41</sup> 'Force of Law', p. 35.

<sup>42</sup> Subha Mukherji, 'Understood Relations': Law and Literature in Early Modern Studies', in *Literature Compass*, 6/3 (2009), 706-725, (706). This article provides an excellent overview of this thriving field.

law in a more conceptual sense. Derrida is interested in the law-ness of law; in what makes certain statements absolutely authoritative and enforceable, and how their mechanical universality intersects with individual moments of judgement and justice. As our discussion will demonstrate, these questions apply not only to civil rule, but to genre, literary criticism, and what we like to think of as knowledge. What will emerge is that law and literature actually share an interpretive, performative structure that resonates with the conjurer laureate identity.

For the law to be law it must at least appear to be absolute: two systems cannot operate at once, there must be no choice in the matter. It follows that in its founding moments any authority must vanquish its predecessor with an illegal act of violence. Contradictorily, this suggests that every law will always have begun as an outlaw, and it is precisely this outsider position that enables it to enact the overthrow and institute itself. Transgressing causes it to act simultaneously outside of and against the old law, and in doing so undermines its authority by demonstrating that it is not absolute. And if it is not absolute, it is not law. In an incredible performative motion, the violence of the crime transforms itself so that it is no longer criminal. On the contrary, it is legitimised as the founding of a new order.

Significantly, Derrida notes that this self-justifying aggression is ‘a performative and therefore interpretive violence’.<sup>43</sup> It overthrows the old law by rereading it, and at the same time produces a new interpretive model to make sense of and legitimise its violence. In this respect, as Stanley Fish has clearly shown, all authority, all truth, is simply a matter of the

---

<sup>43</sup> ‘Force of Law’, p. 13.

dominant interpretation.<sup>44</sup> Here then, at the very locus of the law's authority, is a point of contact with the subjectivity of literature. Both are essentially modes of representation, which are always open to reinterpretation. This is affirmed by critics who have found a connection between dramatic changes in early modern legal practise and the equally radical blossoming of drama in the period.<sup>45</sup> Kahn has described how the poet and law-maker were often invoked as analogues of one another, both associated with 'the productive capacity of the human imagination to create new artefacts', which went beyond mimesis alone.<sup>46</sup> Similarly in our texts the distinctions between author and magician often begin to blur.<sup>47</sup>

We can see the interpretive nature of this founding violence at work in Faustus's rejection of academia. A reinterpretation can be enough to send the old establishment crashing to the ground, as he demonstrates when he belittlingly reads from his academic books. Even the word of God can be altered:

Stipendium peccati mors est. Ha!  
 Stipendum, etc.  
 The reward of sin is death. That's hard.  
 Si peccasse negamus, fallimur  
 Et nulla est in nobis veritas.  
 If we say that we have no sin,  
 We deceive ourselves, and there's no truth in us.  
 Why then belike we must sin,  
 And so consequently die.

<sup>44</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1980). See in particular 'How to do Things with Austin and Searle: Speech Act Theory and Literary Criticism', pp. 197-45.

<sup>45</sup> See for instance: Subha Mukherji, *Law and Representation in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Luke Wilson, *Theaters of Intention: Drama and the Law in Early Modern England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Lorna Hutson, *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>46</sup> Victoria Kahn, *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640-1674* (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 15-20, (p. 15).

<sup>47</sup> See Sara Munson Deats, 'Mark this show', in *Placing the Plays of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. by Sara Munson Deats and Robert A. Logan; and Marjorie Garber, "'Here's Nothing Writ": Scribe, Script and Circumscription in Marlowe's Plays', *Theatre Journal*, 36.3 (1984), 301-20 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3206949>> For Garber the shared relationship is not necessarily a positive one, on the contrary it is 'a struggle for master of stage and text between the playwright and his inscribed characters' (301).

Ay, we must die an everlasting death.  
 What doctrine call you this, *Che serà sera*,  
 What will be, shall be? Divinity adieu!  
 (1.1.39-50)

Faustus quotes twice from the bible, but both times omits the subsequent lines which promise redemption in spite of man's sin. This simple omission is enough to transform the message, so that it appears not just cruel but almost ridiculously deterministic. Its cyclical logic is then easily dismissed with the colloquial platitude '*Che serà sera*'. The ease with which Faustus bids the bible and his books of logic, medicine and law 'adieu' is violent because of how it crushes their authority. And yet, it also transforms the scene of his reading into a self-reflexive 'dominion that ... stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man' (1.1.63).

This is exciting stuff, and it is easy to see why Faustus and the other magicians are so intoxicated by the potential of performative interpretation. But there's a rub, because it compromises the very ambitions it makes possible. The founding violence works by exploiting the interpretive nature of its rival, but in doing so it cannot help but reveal that its own authority is structured in just the same way. This is what Derrida after Montaigne describes as 'mystical foundation of authority': a 'performative tautology' where its words have the authority to make the law because the law has authorized them to do so.<sup>48</sup> The self-referentiality that at first appears to be the means to absolute power ultimately results in it being founded on nothing at all, suspended over an abyss. This is because the founding violence occurs in a gap between the destruction of old law and the instituting of the new. Later it is retroactively authorized but in its event there is no rule for it to work for or against.

---

<sup>48</sup> 'Force of Law', p. 11; p. 33.

‘Here is a silence walled up in the violent structure of the founding act’.<sup>49</sup> Neither crime nor justice exists in its happening, and it is therefore incomprehensible and terrifying, even to the law that it founds.

Thus authority can never be absolute, never achieve the total self-presence of idealization, because it is structured by this absence that makes it alien to itself. As Derrida points out whilst discussing Kafka’s parable of the country man patiently waiting forever at the gates before the law: ‘this is obvious, but since he is *before* it because he cannot enter it, he is also *outside the law* (an outlaw). He is neither under the law nor in the law. He is both a subject of the law and an outlaw.’<sup>50</sup> In other words, pure authority does not exist. We never reach the law itself, and instead are always delayed by an infinite regress of representations of it that simultaneously give and bar access, like the fearsome gatekeepers in Kafka’s story. Significantly, this problematic structure resonates with the concept of the conjurer laureate, in which the authoritative and the interpretive are similarly pulled together by the performative. This has unsettling implications for our magicians’ identities, suggesting that they too might harbour an absence at their centre. And that this may prevent them from ever being fully self-present to themselves, ever achieving the ambition for the absolute that contradictorily makes them who they are.

In this chapter we will use these two terms, *conjurer laureate* and *founding violence*, to help us explore the tensions that simultaneously help and hinder the magicians as they transgressively found and authorise their powers by consorting with devils. Much of the action involves speech acts such as conjuring, swearing, promising and betting. The early

---

<sup>49</sup> ‘Force of Law’, p. 14.

<sup>50</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Before the Law’, trans. by Avital Ronell and Christine Roulston, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge, pp. 181-120 (p. 204).

modern contract law that surrounds these kinds of actions, and indeed its relation to witchcraft, have already been explored quite extensively.<sup>51</sup> Rather than looking at specific instances of law, we will broach the subject in Derrida's broader terms of the 'law of the law', which 'is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy'.<sup>52</sup> We will use analysis of these very explicit performatives to help us better understand the interpretive structure that they share with authority and identity. As we shall see, some magicians playfully use the interpretive structure of the performative to their advantage, and free themselves from the devil. But others remain tragically bound because to break their word would undermine the illusory authority of their conjurer laureate identity. Contradictorily, the more the magicians hold on to their belief in the authority of their words, the less power they seem to have over what happens to them. Implicit in this is a critique of the way we all think about language and meaning on a day-to-day basis.

### ***Virgilius***

*Virgilius* provides a clear example of the magician's founding violence. His dealings with the devil are quite underwhelming, little more than a chance encounter and a schoolboy's dare. Nevertheless, the making and breaking they entail results in a remarkable self-authorising identity that justifies its own performative force, and whose influence resonates throughout the narrative, making it the protagonist's own.

---

<sup>51</sup> On contract law see See for instance: David Harris Sacks, 'The Promise and the Contract in Early Modern England: Slade's Case in Perspective', in *Rhetoric and Law in Early Modern England*, ed. by Victoria Kahn and Lorna Hutson (London: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 28-53; Luke Wilson 'Ben Jonson and the Law of Contract', in *Rhetoric and Law in Early Modern England*, ed. by Victoria Kahn and Lorna Hutson, pp. 143-65; Charles Spinosa, 'The Transformation of Intentionality: Debt and Contract in *The Merchant of Venice*', *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature*, 5 (1993), 370-410; Hutson; Kahn. On witchcraft in particular see *Theaters of Intention*, pp. 184-215; Daniel Yeager, 'Marlowe's *Faustus*: Contract as Metaphor?' in *University of Chicago Law School Roundtable*, 2.2 (1995), 599-618; Todd Butler, 'Swearing Justice in Henry Goodcole and The Witch of Edmonton', *Studies in English Literature*, 50.1 (2010), 127-45 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sel.0.0084>>; Todd Butler, 'Bedevilling Spectacle: Law, Literature and Early Modern Witchcraft', *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities*, 20.2 (2008), 111-29.

<sup>52</sup> 'Law of Genre', p. 227.

Like most of his peers, Virgilius is an excellent student as a child, and when the other boys ‘goo to play and sport them in the fyldes’ he goes walking in the hills and stumbles across a cave (sig. B3<sup>r</sup>).<sup>53</sup> Hearing a voice calling his name, he explores further and finds a devil trapped beneath some wooden boards. There is no conventional conjuring here. If anything the devil has done the summoning, and consequently it is he who proposes a deal: ‘the many bokes of nygromancy’ in return for freedom (sig. B3<sup>v</sup>). Needless to say, Virgilius obliges. The devil seems to keep his word; he does not turn on his liberator, nor do the books disappear in a puff of smoke. However, our hero immediately breaks his side of the bargain by instigating a counter-agreement, wagering that the devil is too big to fit back into his prison. His wording is significant: ‘shulde ye well passe into the hole that ye ca out of [...] I holde yt beste plegge that I haue ye shall not do it’.

The mention of a pledge stresses that the bet is a form of contract, because it suggests that Virgilius is providing surety for his own words rather than challenging the veracity of the devil’s. In the sixteenth century a pledge was most commonly a physical guarantor, such as a bail, a deposit, or even a hostage. Thus the structure of the wager implies that in making the bet some token is temporarily passed into the devil’s possession, and will remain there should the prediction fail. But what is this item that can quantify the value of words? In this case it is nothing more than the word ‘pledge’ itself, which anticipates the more conceptual modern usage of the word as an oath or verbal commitment. It follows that the deal is actually a rather unfair one: Virgilius bets with his words whilst the devil must bet with his body. If the devil wins he will gain nothing, for the good standing of one’s word is of no use to anyone

---

<sup>53</sup> Anon., *Virgilius* (Antwerp: John Doesborke, [1518(?)]), STC 24828, in *Early English Books Online*, <<http://eebo.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 17<sup>th</sup> August 2013], (sig. B4<sup>r</sup>). All subsequent references will be to this edition.

but the speaker, whilst Virgilius has plotted a win-win situation for himself where the devil will end up either physically trapped in the hole or contractually trapped by a debt.

The devil falls for the trick, and as he squeezes back into the hole, Virgilius seals him in again. The tricky wager is entertaining in its pseudo-legal jugglery and effortless manipulation of the foolish devil. Above and beyond this, though, it also demonstrates the young student developing a magician's appreciation for the potency of wordplay. It is tempting to associate performatives with the certainty of binding obligation, but the central drive of Austin's argument is that speech acts are irreconcilable with truth value. They can be felicitous or infelicitous, but never true or false. It is in this respect that Felman argues that 'language ... is a field of enjoyment, not of knowledge'. In her gleeful reading of Moliere's *Don Juan*, the performative is a space of playful seduction, of moving bodies. The hero's irresistible charm comes from his conviction that saying is 'doing: action on the interlocutor, modifying the situation and the interplay of forces within it'.<sup>54</sup> In his betting games with the devil, whose body he does indeed seduce into movement, Virgilius perhaps discovers a similar ludic potency.

Virgilius' violence is an inherently playful one, but in no way does this undermine the authority that emerges from it. The all-important word 'pledge' represents the self-reflexive moment where his words become authorized to authorize themselves, which creates a vital contractual crux between the constative and the performative. As Austin described, the success of a performative is dependent upon a whole network of factors caught up in its context. With his clever choice of words however, Virgilius creates his own favourable context as he speaks. And this empowerment is not just a fancy supernatural effect; Derrida

---

<sup>54</sup> Felman, *Scandal*, p. 14.

observes a similar phenomenon in the American Declaration of Independence. He argues that the ‘fabulous retroactivity’ of its authorising signatures make it impossible to tell whether the document states or produces freedom. Signing turns the constative text into a performative right, but can only do so when the right to sign has been authorized by the document. Only by signing do we give ourselves the authority to sign, and once completed a performative charge races backwards through the mark.<sup>55</sup> A similar duality can be seen at work in Virgilius’ pledge, in the way that his word acts as a signature or guarantor for his words and turns a constative statement of disbelief into a performative challenge.

This newfound ability to self-authorize, and consequently to make words into actions, has the potential to open up the narrative to a whole new world of magic and wonder. We might infer from the narrative that Virgilius steals the devil’s books and learns his magic from them. However the volumes are not mentioned again in this episode and the narrator is elusive:

Than called the deuyll dredefully to Virgilius and sayd what haue ye done  
 Virgilius answered abyde there styll to your day apoynted. And fro thensforth  
 abydeth he there. And so Virgilius beca very connyng in ye practyse of the  
 blacke scyece.  
 (sig. B4<sup>r</sup>)

Magic books do crop up several times later on, but at this particular point, at the birth of Virgilius’ identity as a magician, they are strangely absent. This implies that his magic is somehow distinct from the devil and his magic books, and has no need of their validating context. Breaking the deal breaks him away from the devil, causing the locus of authority to shift so that his powers are independent and able to authorize as they act. In light of this his

---

<sup>55</sup> See Jacques Derrida, ‘Declarations of Independence’, *New Political Science*, 7.1 (1986), 7-15.

identity as a magician is a formidable one, seemingly self-originating and self-affirming. Its supernatural integrity narrows the gaps in Austin's speech act model, bringing locution, illocution and perlocution into chorus. 'Let there be light' is the ultimate supernatural unification of intending, saying and doing, and it follows that Virgilius' identity as a magician is approaching the godlike absolute.

The significance of this retroactive self-authorization can also be read in literary terms, in the form and medium of the narrative as a whole. The title *Virgilius* names both the narrative and its eponymous hero so that one authenticates the other. The story begins several generations before he is born, and the title hangs unaffirmed until the schoolboy who bears its name appears in the third chapter to act as a pledge, a physical verification of its value and significance. However, in the Möbius Loop fashion described by Derrida, the importance of the boy wandering in the hills is himself verified by the title, which being prior almost seems to bestow *its* name on *him*. Splendidly, the title page of the earliest extant copy of the text is a handwritten transcription, certifying the printed text with the semblance of a signature that retroactively empowers the force of Virgilius' magical identity (sig. A1<sup>r</sup>). This signature both is and is not Virgilius', and its metatextual quality states and performs, playfully crossing the boundaries of the text's identity. 'The title names and guarantees the identity, the unity and the boundaries of the original work which it entitles', but in this instance the text is exceeded by the hero it is supposed to contain.<sup>56</sup> The repetition of his name within and without the narrative affirms his singular authority but also challenges its uniqueness, dividing what it should enclose. Again there is violence here, in 'the rise of an entitling authority'.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Derrida, 'Before the Law', pp. 188-89.

<sup>57</sup> Derrida, 'Before the Law', p. 201.

Virgilius' magical identity is founded upon a violence against the conventions of language and trust of another. Yet in the double performative motion described above, his reinterpretation of the rules comes to legitimise its own trespass. We encounter him from within a given structure of right and wrong shaped by countless social, historical and personal influences. However, these various moral parameters are confounded by the double negative of Virgilius sinfully making a deal with the devil and untrustworthily breaking it. The moral confusion of wrongs piled on wrongs that somehow comes to feel right clears an amoral or a-legal space. This is where the real magic happens, because from this 'abyss' the magician conjures his own fantastical jurisdiction, which cannot be disputed because it has no external point of reference.<sup>58</sup> A new identity is also formed: that of Virgilius the conjurer laureate, whose power is structured performatively like that of the law. He precedes and justifies this exciting new context like a signature or the eponymous title that precedes the narrative.

The performative empowerment of Virgilius' founding violence sends ripples throughout the text, transforming our reading. For instance, the narrative begins by invoking its own originating myth, the story of Romulus and Remus establishing the two great cities of Italy. The first few chapters establish the tone of classical epic and a plot featuring family jealousies, competing cities and revenge killings. In the midst of this a seemingly irrelevant knight is mentioned, who marries a senator's daughter. These liminal figures, with little connection to the heroic lineage of Rome, turn out to be Virgilius' parents. Thus, his family origins break with the context provided by the preceding narrative. He is not a Roman emperor, but the child of a knight who has fallen out of favour; and the history that has been imparted to the reader is not his. The gap is further widened when his father dies, his mother is threatened with disinheritance, and he himself is revealed to be a scholar who 'stodyed

---

<sup>58</sup> Derrida, 'Force of Law', p. 14.

dyligently' (sig. B3<sup>f</sup>). Evidently the young Virgilius has no family riches and no warlike vendetta, just nagging relatives who want his mother to remarry. In a neat bit of early modern intertextuality, his talents instead lie in the tradition of his namesake Virgil, who wrote about classical heroes rather than starring as one. Legend has it that the poet's family farmlands were confiscated by Emperor Octavian to settle his armies on after the Roman civil war, and that his *Eclogues* were written in protest against this. Virgilius, too, has to protect his family's land, but uses magic words instead of pastoral ones to make his point.

By the time we reach the incident with the devil, Virgilius' genealogy has already somewhat dislocated him from the narrative's initial heroic context. The distinctly Christian encounter then transplants him into medieval chapbook territory and a fresh set of parameters outlining right and wrong. Interestingly this is not a departure from the multiple identities of Virgil the poet in this period. From late antiquity onwards he was depicted as variously a magician, an unintentionally wise pagan, a prophetic precursor to Christianity, sometimes even a good Christian in all but creed.<sup>59</sup> In this context the deal offered by the devil can be seen as an opportunity to either adhere to or break with an interlocking set of laws described in the overlapping Christian and Virgilian traditions.

But the agreement with the devil is not the impossible theoretical 'pure performative' described by Derrida, because the contractual process relies upon a whole other network of conventions and laws. The ideals of trust and honesty, of duty to one's word that make such deals possible are founded on centuries of transactions, contracts and legislation. Virgilius

---

<sup>59</sup> Colin Burrow, 'Virgils, From Dante to Milton', in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, ed. by Charles Martindale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 79-90. On Virgilius and magic see also John Webster Spargo, *Virgil the Necromancer: Studies in Virgilian Legends* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1934).

then breaks this too, but whereas the previous violence against Christianity and the mythology of his namesake was guided by the devil, this second aggression against the basic good faith that underpins everyday life (not to say contract law) allies him with nothing other than himself. The wager he poses is neither the act of a Christian, a poet, a merchant nor even a pagan. Again this marks it as a founding violence, the decisive but incomprehensible beginning of something new that will itself come to be the permeating structure of the narrative.

This structure is no less than Virgilius himself. He is absent, unborn, in the opening chapters, but his name in the title looms over the unfolding events. They articulate a process of disentanglement, where the burgeoning protagonist is freed from the perspectives of various contexts, culminating in the violence of making and breaking a deal with the devil. The opening classical sections may at first appear almost irrelevant to his characterisation, but perhaps they define him by being what he is not. A formless pocket is created in which anything can happen, and what happens is Virgilius, with his fantastical travel, magic powers and uncanny automata. This is evident in the way that the narrative slides over the pragmatics of developing magic powers, placing the hero at the centre of his authority. It is as if his magical travel narrative is simply too large to fit into any context other than its own.

In this unique self-authorising space Virgilius' dubious dealings with the devil can be reconfigured in any way he chooses. As Derrida describes, the moment of founding violence is an amoral, unintelligible one, and it follows that his interaction with the devil and blatant breach of contract cannot be judged as either good or bad. And anyway if judgement is at all possible, our pleasure and complicity in reading his antics unfold are sure to colour it. The synonymy between the narrative's title and its hero represents a two-way performative

where magical *Virgilius* is his story, and vice versa. Here the notion of self-authorization takes on a weirdly literal quality, almost as if he is writing himself, forging through his travels the only world fit to articulate his fantastic identity.

The heady genre of magical travel narrative mirrors its unfettered protagonist, because, as Rob Maslen puts it, ‘to narrate such a journey is to set your mind at liberty for a while and question everything your teachers told you about right and wrong, truth and falsehood, the orthodox and the heretical.’<sup>60</sup> He describes how this genre was not tied to any particular ideology, and under the guise of Lucianic satire’s wilful fantasy was free to play mischief with whatever agenda it desired. For him the combination of power and danger in *Virgilius* thus lends the text ‘an eerily amoral atmosphere’, which echoes the lawless space we have traced within the founding of the law.<sup>61</sup> In this respect the narrative does not so much circumscribe *Virgilius* as perform his freedom. In the recurrent motif of writing in Marlowe’s plays Garber has found ‘a struggle for mastery of stage and text between the playwright and his inscribed characters’.<sup>62</sup> She argues that ultimately the author always wins the day, circumscribing even the most rebellious of characters. This text, however, is anonymous and not so easily enclosed. The narrative seems to perform *Virgilius*’ freedom rather than simply describing it, and vice versa, constituting a text that seems to almost supernaturally happen of its own accord.

---

<sup>60</sup> R.W. Maslen, ‘Magical Journeys in Sixteenth-Century Prose Fiction’, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 44.1 (2011), 35-50 (36) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5699/yearengstud.41.1.0035>>

<sup>61</sup> Maslen, ‘Magical Journeys’, 38.

<sup>62</sup> Garber, ‘Here’s Nothing Writ’, 301.

*The Merry Devil of Edmonton*

Peter Fabell in the *Merry Devil* play is a more homely figure than Virgilius. His story is a comedy firmly rooted in the real life geography of Enfield Chase, Edmonton and Waltham, where he uses his powers to aid a pair of ill-fated lovers. This may seem rather tame in comparison to Virgilius. But this conjurer laureate is nevertheless an authority figure: a playwright or director ensuring that the law of the genre is fulfilled and love wins the day. Significantly though, even the power of this law enforcer must first be founded upon violence, which causes him to complicate the conventions he upholds. As the play's oxymoronic title signals, containments such as genre can never be absolute or pure.

The play actually begins on the brink of tragedy. The prologue sets the scene, explaining how 'Peter Fabell a renowned Scholar' lies asleep in his study, blissfully unaware of the 'spirit/ That many years attended his command' who is on his way to 'claim the scholar for his due'.<sup>63</sup> As we move into the induction Fabell is joltingly awoken by a 'fatal chime' (ind.1) warning him that something is coming. This is of course strikingly reminiscent of the final scene of *Doctor Faustus*, where the tragic hero counts down his last moments to the chiming of a clock. What's more, it turns out that he has even signed 'a formal deed.... recorded now in hell' (ind.28-29), which Coreb the devil takes great pleasure in reminding him of. Fabell's powers have a clear intertextual debt, and following the Faustian pattern it seems that tragedy must be imminent.

Fabell, however, has other ideas. He plays along for a bit, showily repenting and asking for a few last moments to clear up his business before he dies. So pitiful is his act that

---

<sup>63</sup> Anon., *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, ed. by Nicola Bennett (London: Nick Hern, 2000), prol.9; prol.28-33. All subsequent references will be to this edition.



‘Conjure’, a word strongly associated with Faustus and dangerous black magic, no longer carries its expected authority. It has drifted from a supernatural command to its other weaker meaning of to ‘beseech or entreat’. Coreb’s conjuring is still a speech act, but one more clearly at the mercy of the listener, part of a group that Cavell categorises as ‘passionate utterances’.<sup>64</sup> He can beseech all he likes, but this does not guarantee the words’ effect upon Fabell’s actions. The ineffectiveness of Coreb’s demonic performative highlights how we are no longer in the jurisdiction of infernal pacts, damnation and forbidden magic. Instead, we are in a comic space of Fabell’s own making. He eventually agrees to let the devil go, but only on his terms, insisting that Coreb allow him another seven years of life. He makes the devil formally swear to the new conditions, but after the events that have just unfolded we get the sense that this arrangement is unlikely to hold good either. Indeed the date on Fabell’s head is not allowed to overshadow the play’s comedy, and is never mentioned again.

Tragedy is powerfully dispelled, and the rules of one genre are replaced with those of another. In his incredible aversion of disaster Fabell is instated as the custodian of comedy. Not only in the humorous sense, but also in the theatrical one of a light play that always ends happily. The induction’s final couplet is testament to this new order: ‘Then thus betwixt us two this variance ends, /Thou to thy fellow fiends, I to my friends’ (1.1.83-84). It carefully separates comedy and tragedy by placing conjuring, incantations and necromancy in opposition to friendship, jokes in the tavern and the poaching of venison. Similarly, its rhyme creates a pleasing sense of resolution and closure, readying us for a fresh, less hair-raising start in the main body of the play. Fabell’s founding violence has become the benevolent law of comedy. And yet for all the couplet’s decisiveness and divisiveness, it also works against its own neat distinctions. The pun hints that the only thing separating comedy and tragedy,

---

<sup>64</sup> Cavell, ‘Foreword’ in Felman, *Scandal*, p. xx.

the supernatural and the domestic, ‘fiends’ and ‘friends’, is a play on words, the smallest slip of the tongue or the eye.

The play then begins anew, almost as if the induction had never happened. It opens on a scene set in The George tavern, where the premises of a classic comedy are quickly set up. Fabell’s friends Millicent and Raymond are in love, but Millicent’s greedy father is plotting otherwise. He plans to break their betrothal by sending her to a nunnery, only to call her back again to marry the wealthy Frank Jerningham instead. When Fabell hears of this he steps up as protector of the happy ending. Many comedies feature a character in the role of engineer, but his magician’s skill allows the play to bend the constraints of possibility even further than usual. His power is clear in the way he consoles the desperate Raymond. ‘There’s nought *can* alter it, be merry lad’ reassures his father, to which Fabell adds ‘There’s nought *shall* alter it, be merry lad’ [my stress] (1.2.53-54). Mouchensey’s words suggest naive faith in love, whilst the magician’s state the law with certainty: that love will win the day in the face of disaster.

Thus Fabell becomes an authority figure of sorts. In a soliloquy he swears that he will not let Raymond ‘for want of skill lose the wench thou lov’st’ (1.1.76), and sets to work as a director or playwright guiding the course of true love. Not wholly dissimilar to Faustus’s dreams of elevation, this level of control requires a certain distance from the main action of the play. This is evident in the way that Fabell is presented from the outset as something of an outsider, an incongruous ‘Cambridge scholar’ (1.1.37) in a country pub, unfamiliar to some of the locals. His use of soliloquy at the end of this scene separates him too, providing an anterior space in which he can comment upon the unfolding events, as Prospero does in his similarly metatheatrical role in *The Tempest*. This is a play that thrives on the quick-fire

humour of asides, and notably it features only one other soliloquy, in which Raymond marvels at his friend's powers.

But whilst Prospero lingers on the edges of scenes in *The Tempest*, muttering satisfaction as his plan unfolds flawlessly before his eyes, Fabell is absent from the stage for most of the play. We know that his magic saves the day, but it is not wholly clear what this actually entails. The other characters seem equally in the dark, and even at the very end of the play the best Millicent can come up with in explanation is 'His tutor here did act that cunning part,/ And in our love hath joined much wit to art' (5.1.220-21). Fabell himself speaks in similarly vague terms about how 'age and craft, with wit and art have met' (1.2.189). Words such as 'art', 'craft' and 'wit' may allude to magic, but could equally be describing great intellect and craftsman-like skill.

The play's anticlimactic coyness about Fabell's power can be related to Derrida's 'mystical foundation of authority'.<sup>65</sup> The founding violence instates and authorizes the law in a self-referential manner. The result is a tautology where Fabell's 'cunning' affirms the potency of his 'art' and his 'art' affirms the potency of his 'cunning', without us ever seeing the force itself in action. Like the gatekeepers in Kafka's parable, Fabell's magic is represented and obscured at the same time so that there is always something between us and his law. This is affirmed in the play's structure, which annexes the founding violence in the anterior space of the induction. It cuts into the main body of action but is also cut off from it. We are dimly aware of the source of Fabell's authority, but it remains inaccessible: discontinuous and incongruous to the plot it nevertheless drives.

---

<sup>65</sup> Derrida, 'Force of Law', p. 11.

The euphemistic representation of Fabell's magic also reveals a tension between the play's supernatural, potentially tragic means and the domestic harmony of its comedic end. In fits of anger Fabell occasionally threatens great and terrible things, such as to 'make the briny sea to rise at Ware,/ And drown the marshes unto Stratford bridge', (1.2.79-80) to terrify all the travellers on the road to Tottenham Cross (1.2.191), and even 'make the Abbess wear the Canon's hose' (2.2.98). At these moments he seems to get carried away with the subversive and violent potential of his powers, and at one point even has to be reminded by Millicent's brother to 'pursue the project scholar' (2.1.201). And yet in practise nothing of this sort happens. Fabell contents himself with 'pretty sleights.... No conjurations, nor such weighty spells/ as tie the soul to their performancy' (5.1.259-60). He cleverly disguises himself and Raymond as monks and coordinates a cunning plan, but there is nothing here that revels in breaking the parameters of realism and nature as Virgilius does.<sup>66</sup>

This is perhaps related to the way that the law always begins as an outlaw. Conventional and derivative in his original genre, the damned magician becomes a potent rogue force when transplanted into another. His otherness is what makes him such a powerful enforcer of comedy; and although the transgressive anxieties of magic are toned down by words such as 'art' and 'craft', an empowering kernel of its boundary-breaking must be preserved. Virgilius and his magical travel narrative smoothly perform one another, but *The Merry Devil* complicates the relationship between genre and protagonist. Fable upholds but also compromises the comedy, and the comedy upholds but also compromises him. The happy ending is made to happen by a tragic interlocutor, whose powers are authorized in the

---

<sup>66</sup> The play's careful balance between chaos and harmony is perhaps related to the concept of the comedic green world, first described by Northrop Frye. 'The Argument of Comedy', in *Shakespeare: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1945-2000*, ed. by Russ McDonald (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 93-99 (first publ. in *English Institute Essays 1948*, ed. by D.A. Robertson Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949)).

founding violence of the induction. This reveals a structural contradiction hidden at the heart of authority, what Derrida calls the ‘law of the law of genre’.<sup>67</sup> It is simultaneously ‘a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy’, and ‘the law of overflowing, of *excess*, the law of participation without membership’, problematising the sanctity of boundaries from inside and out.<sup>68</sup>

All ends well in the *Merry Devil*, just as comedy orders. However, the faithful carrying out of the law resists the rule that the play tries to submit to. This is due to the interplay between the singular and universal, which is at work in any attempt to apply the law and every act of literature. Derrida elsewhere refers to this as the problem of the event versus the machine.<sup>69</sup> The Law must be universal, but must be applied uniquely to each and every case that comes before it. Otherwise it would be purely mechanical and devoid of justice or mercy. But, this means that the singular moment of decision is ultimately outside of the law, a moment of madness. Literature is a similar crossing point: defined, protected and authorized by the laws such as genre, but also disrupting them in the singularity of each text.

The rule of comedy is enforced through Fabell, but in the singular manner of this particular comedy, which in another time and space was potentially a tragedy. In this respect it unfolds outside of the law’s universal rule, in the mad moment of performance. This comes to a pleasing climax in the final scene. Once morning has come and all the players are together and in need of explanation he appears with the metatheatrical words ‘now knights I enter, now my part begins’ (5.1.251). This is his role: the incredible explanation, the comedic force that only just manages to hold together the almost impossible; the improbability that we

---

<sup>67</sup> Derrida, ‘Law of Genre’, p. 227.

<sup>68</sup> Derrida, ‘Law of Genre’, p. 228.

<sup>69</sup> See Derrida, ‘Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Inc (2)’.

accept because it is the key to our happy ending. The closing line of this speech sums it up: ‘And let our toil to future ages prove,/ The devil of Edmonton did good in Love’ (5.1.268-69).

### **Prose *Merry Devil of Edmonton***

Like his fellow good magicians, the prose Fabell achieves his ‘absolute’ identity by making and breaking a deal with the devil, as is described in the narrative’s first chapter. His ordinary tale is similar to that of his dramatic brother. ‘At the first entrance of M. Peter into the Art of Magick’ he summoned a devil who agreed to be his servant in exchange for his soul. Later there is a disagreement, because ‘no terme or time was set at the contract’.<sup>70</sup> The devil believes he has done enough and that Fabell’s time is due, whereas Fabell insists that he will only give up his soul on death. He proposes a compromise: ‘spare me but till this inche-long end of candle’ (sig. A4<sup>v</sup>), to which the devil agrees. He promptly pockets the candle, thus freezing the deal with humorous panache. In the following chapter there is an additional twist, when the devil manages to steal the candle one night when Fabell is sleeping. The magician saves himself by arguing that he is more use on earth than in hell, promising that ‘Ile labor all the time I haue to liue for Hells aduantage: Ile beare more soules along with me to Hell then twenty of your cunningst Deuills shall’ (sig. B1<sup>v</sup>). Wary of being tricked again the devil makes him swear, and Fabell does so, making an oath that ‘when I am buried, either within the Church, without the Church, in the Church porch. Church-yard Street, field, or high way, take thou my soule’ (sig. B1<sup>v</sup>). The narrative then fast-forwards to the end of Fabell’s life, describing how he ingeniously digs his own grave into the church wall, precisely evading the conditions of his oath and saving his soul.

---

<sup>70</sup> T[homas]. B[rewer]., *The Life and Death of the Merry Devil of Edmonton* ([London]: T[homas] P[urfoot?], 1631), STC 3719, in *Early English Books Online*, <<http://eebo.chadwyck.co.uk>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> August 2013], sig. A4<sup>r</sup>; sig. A4<sup>v</sup>. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

The eponymous hero's life and death are condensed into just two short chapters at the beginning of the narrative. The demonic provenance of his powers is clearly demonstrated but simultaneously rejected, so that we can accept Fabell as a legitimately Christian comedic hero. Again the violences of making and breaking a pact with the devil found a fantastical space where anything can happen. In this particular text, however, the arbitrariness of the conjurer laureate's authority is itself exploited in the most remarkable of fashions. In chapter four Fabell is beaten at his own game by Smug, an anarchic clown character who also features in the play version. Smug bets that he can perform a trick more impressive than Fabell's conjuring. He claims that he can light a candle so that everyone in the room except the magician will be able to see it; impressed, Fabell takes him up on the challenge. With a pragmatic logic not dissimilar to the hero's own when tricking the devil, Smug simply and triumphantly places the candle on his head. No one can deny that it is just as he promised, and he wins the bet. Fabell gracefully admits defeat, and sends for 'his well woon liquor', seeing that Smug drinks enough to end up 'lay be the walls for ye night' (sig. B4<sup>v</sup>). This is an intriguing instance of a playful performative, because he wins the bet by simultaneously failing and not failing to do what he said. It is akin to the 'scandalous' performative described by Felman in her reading of *Don Juan*, whose effectiveness is also paradoxically entangled with failure. For philandering hero, felicity is about seduction; getting bodies to move as you wish, in the pursuit of pleasure and laughter.<sup>71</sup> Fabell's candle is indeed lit so that everyone except he can see it, but not in the spectacular, supernatural manner implicitly promised in the bet's context. Despite this, Smug's failed magic is witty enough to seduce his competitor into defeat.

---

<sup>71</sup> Felman, *Scandal*, esp. pp. 41-47. Failure is central to her reading of both the antics of Don Juan and Austin's speech act theory.

The episode feels minor, just one amusing anecdote among many. But as Virgilius demonstrated, a bet is as powerful a performative as a conjuring incantation is, and has the same founding potential. Fabell loses and is effaced from the narrative, never to be mentioned again, leaving Smug's antics to fill the sixteen remaining chapters. Just like Virgilius breaking the devil's authority, Smug's trick demonstrates that despite the induction's claims, Fabell's power as magician and protagonist is far from absolute. The exposure of his fallibility opens up a gap between what he intends and what actually happens, exploding the notion of the ideal magician whose identity is seamlessly at one with his context. In his place we get quite the opposite: a buffoon whose mistakes, accidents and indignities are gleefully catalogued in the rest of the narrative. A unique authorising space has been created to house tales of Smug mistaking a colander for a chamber pot, smiting the buttocks of a love rival with a hot poker, and being locked out of the house by his wife. This time, however, we are aware of the arbitrariness of this space, of Smug's misrule as a jester king, and are constantly reminded of this by the anarchic episodes that it fosters.

### ***The Devil's Charter***

Alexander in *The Devil's Charter* is quite a different prospect, being a much maligned historical figure who allegedly sold his soul in exchange for the papal crown. Like the good magicians, his story begins with the performative violence of a deal with the devil, safely annexed in the form of an introductory dumb show. The significant difference is that the transgressive promise he makes is never broken, which means that his authority and the identity that he has built around it are never wholly his own. His origins can always be traced back to the devil who gave him his crown, and to whom he owes his soul. This is perhaps echoed in the way that the play's title does not allude to its main protagonist as *Virgilius* and

the *Merry Devil* titles do. Instead it is explicitly about a charter, a document, which is not Alexander's but the devil's. Similarly, we are guided through the play by the Italian historian Guicciardini whose *History of Italy* was popular in England in the period and is used liberally by Barnes as a source.<sup>72</sup> Although close to several Medici Popes, Guicciardini's *History* is critical of both the corrupt papacy and the Medici family's dictator-like rule over Florence. His metatheatrical presence thus rewrites Alexander's actions as a damning historical narrative, further undermining his authority as magician, pope and protagonist. Conflicting laws are at work in this play.

Alexander has quite clearly performed violence, as is evident in Guicciardini's disgust at his actions:

Thus first with golden bribes he did corrupt  
 The purple conclave: then by divelish art  
*Sathan* transfigur'd like a Pronotarie  
 To him makes offer of the triple Crowne  
 For certaine yeares agreed betwixt them two.  
 The life of action shall expresse the rest.  
 (67-72)

Not only has Alexander corrupted the institution of the church, but he has also defied the instruction of its faith. So gross is his behaviour that it cannot be expressed in 'the life of action', and must be reduced to a 'vision offered to thine eyes' (27), safely conjured for our instruction by the historian. In theory Alexander's abuse should have razed the old system to the ground, leaving him free to performatively construct himself and his empire as he chooses, but in practice things are not as simple as that. His insincerity catches up with him,

---

<sup>72</sup> Pogue (ed.), *The Devil's Charter by Barnabe Barnes: A Critical Edition*, (London: Garland, 1980), pp. 7-11.

so that nothing, not even his own authoritative identity can be performed with integrity. A mad, bitter relativism infects the play, driving it towards hideous tragedy.

We do not meet Alexander until the fourth scene, and during his Faustian soliloquy it quickly becomes clear that something is wrong:

With what expence of money plate and jewels  
 This Miter is attayn'd my Coffers witsnesse:  
 But *Astaroth* my couenant with thee  
 Made for this soule more pretious then all treasure,  
 Afflicts my conscience, O but *Alexander*  
 Thy conscience is no conscience; if a conscience,  
 It is a leoprouse and poluted conscience.  
 But what? a coward for thy conscience?  
 (351-59)

He is anxious about the loss of his soul, but does not entertain breaking his word or manipulating it to escape from the devil. Instead he turns the word games upon himself, toying with the word 'conscience' to persuade himself that all is well. He complains that the pact 'afflicts my conscience', but his law-breaking violence has already destroyed the notion of morality. As he says, a 'leaprouse and poluted' conscience is no conscience. His close repetition of the word heightens its sense of emptiness, the over-familiarity of the sound causing it to become meaningless to the ear. He uses this to his advantage, mockingly questioning himself 'what? A coward for thy conscience?' This thing 'conscience' is nothing, and therefore nothing to be afraid of: his insincerity has killed it.

Alexander's erasure of conscience is not in itself a problem; it is an instance of the violence required in founding a new authority. The difficulty comes when he tries to find alternative justification of his actions:

The divill is witness with me when I seald it  
 And cauteriz'd this conscience now seard up  
 To banish out faith, hope and charity;  
 Using the name of Christian as a stale  
 For *Arcane* plots and intricate designs  
 That all my misty machinations  
 And Counsels held with black *Tartarian* fiends  
 Were for the glorious sunne-shine of my sonnes;  
 That they might mounte in equall paralel  
 With golden majesty like *Saturnes* sonne  
 To darte downe fire and thunder on their foes.  
 That, that was it, which I so much desir'd  
 To see my sonnes through all the world admir'd,  
 (360-72)

Justification is necessary; it is the founding step that transforms the acts of the outlaw into the new law. Our good magicians justified their consorting with the devil by breaking from him, and in that process they became self-authorising authorities of their own jurisdiction.

Alexander, however, is unable to do this. Rather than performatively instating himself as the new power, he argues instead that his moral, spiritual and institutional violence 'were for the glorious sunne-shine of my sonnes'. This justification is a moral one, grown from the 'faith, hope and charity' that he has already banished. He unwittingly falls back on the old law of 'conscience', except it no longer exists because he crushed it himself just moments before.

When Alexander signs the devil's charter he breaks with the old law. The event of his violence is a moment between two laws: the old has been crushed, but the new is not yet instated. It is suspended, as Derrida describes, over an abyss. This terrifying, indecipherable

instance of non-law is inherent to the architecture of law and is contained within all authority, preventing it from ever becoming absolute.<sup>73</sup> In most cases the persuasion and conviction of a new interpretation is able to establish a new order, but Alexander is unable to come up with a felicitous interpretation. And without felicity the performative founding of authority fails. Insincerity chimes in the way that he grasps at filial authorization with ‘that, that was it’, as if it is he himself who needs persuading. His lack of conviction is testament to the space of non-law, but is perhaps also its cause: he is so corrupt that he has no genuine belief in anything at all, not even himself. His cynicism has enabled him to trample morality and the church in his campaign for power, but it also prevents him from establishing himself as a legitimate authority. The fluidity of the performative inspires the comedic magicians with the power of absolute play, but paralyzes Alexander in his relativism.

Alexander’s cynicism is manifested in the play by the Borgia family’s cartoonish Machiavellian politics, and the philosopher’s influence on it has been adeptly discussed by Jacqueline Latham.<sup>74</sup> Although he has decided that ‘In spite of grace, conscience and Acharon/ I will rejoyce, and triumph in my Charter’ (373-74), he summons his sons to keep up the pretence of fatherly love and sacrifice. At first he gushingly describes how he will divide Italy between them, and sweetly urges that ‘with perfect love, deare boyes love one another/ So either shal be strengthened by his brother’ (426-27). However, he quickly gets down to business, instructing his worryingly honest son Candy in the ways of policy:

---

<sup>73</sup> Derrida, ‘Force of Law’, pp. 35-36.

<sup>74</sup> Jacqueline E.M. Latham, ‘Machiavelli, Policy, and *The Devil’s Charter*’, *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 1 (1984), 97-108.

You must not be so ceremonious  
 Of oathes and honesty, Princes of this world  
 Are not prickt in the bookes of conscience,  
 (442-44)

The irony here is that if Alexander took his own advice he could be free of his agreement with the devil. The mention of ceremony in particular reminds us of how fragile the success or authority of a performative is, how easy it would be for him to break away. Yet even in his advice on insincerity he cannot be fully sincere.

Alexander goes on to make a statement that perfectly sums up the malaise of *The Devil's Charter's* world:

Beleeve me *Candy* things are as they seeme,  
 Not what they be themselves; all is opinion:  
 And all this world is but opinion.  
 (483-85)

There is no guiding authority here, be it law, morality or the papal crown; the opinion that wins out is simply the one fought for with the most aggression. The terrible state that this has caused in Italy is carefully laid out in the play's opening scenes, depicting it as lawless and without guidance. First Sforza meets with King Charles of France, describing Italy as a sinking ship whose 'sayles are rent, mastes spent and rudder brooke' (101). So desperate is he that he pleads Charles to rescue it by invasion. This nationwide malaise is then shown in closer detail in the following scene, where some angry young men of Rome post savage libels about the pope and his family upon 'reverent Pasquill, idol of verity' (197).<sup>75</sup> They rage

---

<sup>75</sup> In sixteenth century Rome satirical verses and political lampoons were traditionally pasted to a statue near the Piazza Navona known as Pasquil. ('Pasquil' in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 7<sup>th</sup> edn., ed. by Dinah Birch (Oxford reference: 2009), <<http://www.oxfordreference.com>> [accessed 21<sup>st</sup> August 2013].

about Alexander's iniquity, and mourn that under his rule '*Rome* (which should be Vertues Paradise) / Bare of all good, is wildernesse of vice' (224-25).

It also does strange things to Alexander's identity as magician and pope. Supernatural self-authorization transforms the good magicians into god-like figures, but Alexander's botched foundations turn him into something of a parody of this. He has achieved power by being the most violent in his self-interest, but if things are 'not what they be themselves' (484) he gains no authority with his possession of the papal crown. He is blasphemously god-like in his position as Pope, supposedly divinely authorized as God's minister on earth, but this is nothing but an appearance, how things 'seeme' (482). Rather than achieving any sense of being 'for his person ... absolute' (sig. A4<sup>r</sup>) like Peter Fabell, Alexander becomes its antithesis, a symbol of the originary terror and meaninglessness before a thing is what it is. The signing of the devil's charter does not found Alexander as Pope, or Machiavellian magician extraordinaire, instead it unleashes a cycle of violence, which is literalised in the actions of his murderous offspring Lucretia and Caesar. He attempts to justify his transgressions by claiming that he did them for his children, but his cynical relativism bites back at him when they in turn commit horrific crimes in his name. Writing in blood seals the demonic document, but it is family blood that streams throughout.

Lucretia, for instance, murders her husband Viselli to silence his scandalous belief that she has committed incest with her father and brother. As she is steeling herself to do the deed she invokes the Machiavellian qualities of her family bloodline:

Let none of *Borgias* race in policies  
 Exceed thee *Lucrece*: now prove *Cæsars* Sister,  
 So deepe in bloody stratagemes as hee:

All sinnes have found examples in all times.  
(582-85)

Although she plans to hijack Viselli's name with a fake suicide note, she nevertheless turns to her own family name to authorize her actions. The infamous connotations of 'Borgia' are almost expected to guarantee the success of Lucretia's plot. However, she is also invoking the space of the Borgia name on a more personal and familial level. Mimicking the hereditary fury that galvanises family revengers such as Hamlet, she urges herself to live up to her birth and 'prove *Cæsars* Sister'. The implication is that she must protect the Borgia name and that by doing so she will be brought closer into its fold. Cyclically, the name she invokes for strength is the name she needs strength to protect, another example of the broken logic and language games that riddle the play. Her need for approval is further demonstrated when the deed is done and she anticipates her family's pleased reactions:

Now will my father *Alexander* say  
That I did take the best and safest way,  
And *Cæsar* will approve it with his heart,  
That *Lucrece* hath perform'd a cunning parte.  
(714-17)

Like Alexander claiming that his blasphemous ascent to power is 'for the glorious sunshine of my sonnes' (367), Lucretia shies away from the murder by focussing on how it will bring family favour. However, her cruel appropriation of her dead husband's signature has already broken the authorizing power of the name.

Caesar's crime is even more heinous. He is furious when his honourable brother Candy is put in charge of the army, and kills him in a fit of jealousy. His triumphant soliloquy presents the fratricide as the beginning of his path to power:

*Saturne* ... Lord of my birth, auspicious to my life,  
 This is my first degree to domination.  
 Who can, or (if they could) who dare suspect,  
 How *Cæsar Borgia* kild his brother *Candie*?  
 This is infallible, that many crimes  
 Lurke underneath the robes of Holinesse:  
 And underneath my Purple tunicle  
 This fact concealed is: *Ascanio Sforza*  
 Shall strangely (by some wilie policies)  
 Be brought into suspect for *Candies* death.  
 Sister *Lucretia* thou must follow next:  
 My fathers shame and mine, endeth in thee.  
 Now shew thy selfe true *Cæsar*; *Cæsar* shall  
 Either liue *Cæsar* like, or not at all.  
 (1815-31)

His ominous words 'this is my first degree to domination' suggest that this is the first violence among many, with his sister next on the list. He talks of aiding Alexander by ending 'my fathers shame and mine', but his resolve that '*Caesar* shall /Either live *Caesar* like, or not at all' hints that will not stop at being the Pope's only child. In this hyper-Machiavellian world Alexander's violent rise to power can only ever be followed by further, more terrible aggression. He has taught his children well, too well. This is of course the case for all authority and law, but it is pushed to its furthest, most terrible conclusions in this play.

Alexander is heartbroken by Candy's death, and conjures devils to 'shew me that damned childe of reprobation' (1948) who killed him. Even he draws the line at fratricide, and confronts Caesar in a strange epistemological waltz of 'I know you know I know' and 'you do not know what you think you know I know':

CAESAR: A plague upon your divills you deale with them,  
 That watch more narrowly to catch your soule  
 Then he which sought my brother Candies death,  
 You know that Sathan is the lord of lies  
 A false accuser and desembler,  
 Tell your falce liers they be lying Divils.  
 ALEX.: Caesar no more, Caesar no more, thou knowst.  
 CAESAR: What know I?  
 ALEX.: That I know, dissemble not.  
 (2054-63)

This almost comedic groping around for the truth vividly demonstrates how unstable authority is in the play's relativist world. If 'all this world is but opinion' (485) then Alexander is free to manipulate it to his advantage, but anyone else cynical enough is equally free to alter it. The absurdity allows Caesar to abruptly change tack and unwittingly use his father's own justification against him:

Pull me not downe good father with your conscience:  
 Your conscience, father of my conscience is.  
 My conscience is as like your conscience,  
 As it were printed with the selfe-same stampe.  
 I know my sinnes are burthenous, and beare them,  
 Your sinnes more hainous, yet your robes conceale them.  
 (2071-77)

Again the word 'conscience' is bandied around to the point of meaninglessness, heightened by the earlier erosion in Alexander's speech. The argument is reiterated, but turned on its head, exposing how feeble it is. The jarring repetition reveals the circularity of the play's logic, which causes the son to literally repeat his father. Alexander says he does evil out of love and ambition for his sons, whilst Caesar claims to do evil because he is his father's son. The buck is passed up and down the bloodline without ever coming to rest, a vicious circle that defies any notion of beginning or end. There is plenty of violence here but nothing

emerges from it. In this respect Caesar's description of himself and his father being 'printed with the selfe-same stampe' is telling. His metaphor primarily suggests mechanical reproduction, but by the late sixteenth century 'stamp' was also beginning to be used to describe a certifying mark. Combined, the two contrasting images suggest a frightening, machine-like force that has little interest in Alexander or Caesar as individuals. They are marked by something impassive, unhuman, outside of the realm of law and authority.

The confrontation should be a moment of catharsis. The two men try to extricate themselves from one another, Alexander with his moral outrage and Caesar with his proud assertion 'I know my sinnes are burthenous, and beare them,/ Your sinnes more hainous, yet your robes conceale them.' However, the shared language in their cynical appropriations of 'conscience' is mirrored in the twin hypocrisy of their attacks on one another. Merciless Alexander, who has already set in motion a plot to poison his own daughter, has no right to take the moral high ground. Similarly, Caesar's criticism of his father's dissemblance is farcical when we recall in the previous scene his own smugness that the murder of Candy was concealed 'underneath my Purple tunicle' (1824). They are horribly the same, and the plot must also continue in the same way. Alexander finally acknowledges this with the words '*Caesar* the Divill hath bin thy Schole-maister' (2214-5), and embraces his partner in crime. In keeping with the play's cyclical logic, he suggests that they authorize one another:

A triple joy succeeds a single grieffe,  
 I haue engag'd all to make *Cæsar* great,  
*Cæsar* it suteth with thy grace and glory,  
 To cloake my vices, I will pardon thine,  
 Let one of us excuse an others crimes,  
 And for this bloody fact so lately done.  
 (2129-34)

Nothing has been resolved, the violence continues albeit with an additional layer of empty justification. Caesar closes the agreement dreaming of how he will ride brutally into battle with ‘*Caesar o nullo* written in my guydon/ When with my troopes victoriously I ride on’ (2144-45). The motto ‘Caesar or nothing’ perhaps sums up the unsettling hollowness of this play. On the one hand it is a message of absolute power, but on the other it suggests that the great and authoritative name is indistinguishable from ‘nothing’. The rule at work is not that of the Borgias, but of violence and insane tragedy itself.

### ***The English Faust Book***

The Faustus of Marlowe’s source comes from a fairly conventional background, but soon rejects the constraints of academia, and ‘being of a naughty mind and otherwise addicted, applied not his studies, but took himself to other exercises’.<sup>76</sup> He graduates with the title ‘Doctor of Divinity’ (p. 92), but his ambitions are not contented, and he soon becomes entangled with ‘divers that were seen in those devilish arts’ (p. 92). He is ‘delighted with their books, words, and names so well’ that eventually ‘he could not abide to be called doctor of divinity, but waxed a worldly man, and named himself an astrologian, and a mathematician: and for a shadow sometimes a physician’ (p. 93).

It is this new outlaw language that inspires Faustus to dabble in magic, and ‘being expert in using his *vocabula*, figures, characters, conjurations, and other ceremonial actions, ... in all the haste he put in a practise to bring the devil before him’ (p. 93). ‘Vocabula’ is a significant word here, which Jones glosses as ‘names, i.e. of God, e.g. Jehovah, Elohi, Agla, Tetragrammaton, etc., used in conjurations’ (p. 188 n. 74). Ciphers such as these are

---

<sup>76</sup> P.F. Gent, *The English Faust Book: A Critical Edition Based on the Text of 1592*, ed. by John Henry Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, repr. 2011), p.92. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

remarkable instances of language that speak the unspeakable. They act as placeholders to mark the absence of the one thing that can never be present, that is beyond our conceptions of absence and presence. For those of faith, these words articulate a love and respect for the sacred, for the divine secret at the boundary of language, which one must and is always already speaking of, but also can and must never speak of.<sup>77</sup> For Faustus, however, they speak God's absence loud and clear, and their allusive wordplay articulates nothing but the meaninglessness of his authoritative name. He revels in the transgressive violence of rereading and rearranging the pious letters as he chooses — literally inscribing them 'forward and backward anagrammatised' (1.3.9) in Marlowe's play— to turn them into an infernal summons.

However, as Garber has discussed, the religious is not so easily diffused:

Writing the name of Jehovah is a manifestly taboo or forbidden act. Faustus's blasphemous enterprise is, however, doomed to self-subversion. For to anagrammatize the name of Jehovah —to rearrange the letters so as to form a new word— is merely to replicate the original pious replacement of the tetragrammaton, YWVH.<sup>78</sup>

The sanctity of the names of God is structural and precedes any attempt to manipulate them. Their very failure is what makes them sacred. Thus, when Faustus anagrammatizes Jehova, or uses the vocabula to infernal ends, he is very deliberately not speaking of God; but this is no different to a theologian's not speaking of God, or a Hebrew scholar's. And in his determination to remain silent on the subject, he has inevitably already brought it up. Without God the manipulation of these particular letters would have no frisson, no transgressive

<sup>77</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', trans. Ken Frieden, in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 73-142 (pp. 74-6).

<sup>78</sup> Garber, "'Here's Nothing Writ'", 310.

significance, perhaps no meaning at all. Not simply because the concept of blasphemy is dependent upon religion, but, more interestingly, because God is beyond our distinctions of presence and absence, speech and silence; beyond the language that is the only tool we have to even begin to think about these things. Garber explains how the etymology of Jehovah means simultaneously ‘he who causes to be’ and ‘he who indeed will (show himself to) be’, resulting in a name that is ‘ineffably multiple and indeterminate’.<sup>79</sup> No interpretation can ever confute or constrain such a name; even the most radical of readings is testament to, and made possible by, its beyond-ness, which resists certainty and holds open all possibilities.

What begins to emerge here is a crossing of negative theology and Derrida’s philosophy of textuality, what he has called a ‘becoming-theological of all discourse’.<sup>80</sup> The productive patterns of undecidability and disruption that enable us to grasp the faintest trace of God are remarkably similar to the spacing, iteration and ruptures of textuality that we will be discussing. Perhaps the two are even somehow the same:

God’s name would suit everything that may not be broached, approached or designated, except in an indirect and negative manner. Every negative sentence would already be haunted by God or by the name of God, the distinction between God and God’s name opening up the very space of this enigma.<sup>81</sup>

Or as he puts it later in the same essay: ‘language has started without us, in us and before us. This is what theology calls God, and it is necessary, it will have been necessary, to speak’.<sup>82</sup> The texts we are about to discuss are full of devils, covenants, prayers and damnation, but despite this we will primarily be talking about language, not religion. This is no doubt a

---

<sup>79</sup> Garber, “‘Here’s Nothing Writ’”, p. 311.

<sup>80</sup> Derrida, ‘How to Avoid Speaking’, p. 76.

<sup>81</sup> Derrida, ‘How to Avoid Speaking’, p. 76.

<sup>82</sup> Derrida, ‘How to Avoid Speaking’, p. 99.

denial of sorts, but perhaps its silence whispers of new ways in which we could read religion differently in early modern texts, ways that trouble the traditional distinctions of the Reformation. In their deranged pursuit of the absolute, our magicians perhaps demonstrate a misreading of God and the God-like, which is very closely entwined with their misunderstanding of the capacities of language. The absolute, life-giving necessity of uncertainty and incompleteness is constantly working against the binds of their ambition—something we will return to later.

Like his counterpart in Marlowe's drama, the Faustus of the *EFB* wants to play God, toying performatively with language to shape the world as he chooses. A notable instance of this is where the translator departs from the *EFB*'s German source by making Faustus explicitly call for Mephistopheles by name in his conjuration. Jones believes that this change is intentional, since calling directly for Lucifer himself would be tantamount to suicide. For him the summoning of a specific, more minor spirit therefore 'indicates that Faustus is no lunatic amateur'. However, 'Mephistopheles' is not a traditional infernal name and was most likely invented somewhere along the legend's transmission. Consequently, Faustus is conjuring by the book, but also outside of it. Jones suggests that the name 'probably derives from tortured Greek: 'no friend to light', punning also on 'no friend to Faust'.<sup>83</sup> This self-referential twist surely undermines his claim that Faustus names Mephistopheles because he is an experienced conjurer.

The root of his name suggests that Mephistopheles is somehow born of Faustus in the moment of conjuring. It alludes to the demonic without actually speaking of it, turning inwards instead to identify him in terms of his relationship to the conjurer. In this respect

---

<sup>83</sup> Jones, 'Introduction', in P.F. Gent, *The English Faust Book*, pp. 19-20.

Mephistopheles is deeply personal, nameable by Faustus alone; and the act of summoning takes on a quality of authorship. Furthermore, since the name he gives him is derived from his own, the invention of Mephistopheles is by extension the invention of the magician himself. He summons a devil to realize his ambitions, but does so in a self-referential way that forms a closed, microcosmic system of power, which depicts him as the absolute author of himself.

The self-reference in Faustus's founding violence seems to point towards an absolute power, but as we have seen the circularity of such logic creates a 'mystical foundation' that will always limit the possibility of the absolute. We can trace this in the shifting power dynamics of Faustus's interactions with Mephistopheles. He undermines his status as conjurer laureate even as he tries to performatively affirm it.

When Faustus first summons Mephistopheles their origins blur together so that it is difficult to distinguish who has sprung from whom, which raises questions about who exactly is doing the conjuring here. Faustus meticulously carries out his magical ceremony: he heads to a sinister wood, draws arcane symbols on the ground and waits until the appropriate time of night. He authoritatively begins to summon Mephistopheles, and is rewarded with howling 'as if heaven and earth would have come together with wind', a 'mighty Dragon' and a flaming globe from which emerges the figure of a flaming man (p. 94). His words seem to exert an astonishing force on the world, but perhaps it is the devil that really puts on the show. The pyrotechnics are a little too carefully tailored to Faustus's whims. He is frightened just enough that he can boast afterwards about his bravery in the face of hell, but when he begins to wonder whether conjuring was such a good idea, he is quickly soothed by 'such music of all sorts, as if the nymphs themselves had been in place' (p. 94). Similarly, when he

becomes bored with the spectacle and ‘vexed at the Spirits so long tarrying’ (p. 94)

Mephistopheles promptly appears in the more palatable form of a friar. Faustus is audience to a display that appears to be dazzling testament to the potency of his own magic. And yet at the same time the demonstration subverts the dynamics of conjuring by casting its own spell on him. Alarming, Faustus’s faith in his magic words makes him complicit in his own trickery. As the narrator describes, even whilst staring into the face of hell he is able to ‘persuade himself that the devil should give him his request before he would leave’ (p. 94).

Significantly, Faustus’s spells are not authoritative alone. A mutuality begins to emerge in the relationship between the magician and his devil, which is perhaps not dissimilar to that between Alexander and Caesar in *The Devil’s Charter*. Faustus creates his Mephistopheles in his own name, but is also reliant upon his performance to affirm his powers. This perhaps explains the narrative’s rather surprising shift to a tone of contractual wrangling and legal minutiae in the following chapters. Pleased with what he has seen, Faustus demands that Mephistopheles come to his house the following day. The translator modifies the title of the next chapter, heightening the developing sense of domesticity. To the heading in the German version ‘The conference of Doctor Faustus with the spirit’ he adds that that the spirit is Mephistopheles and that the meeting occurs ‘the morning following at his own house’ (p. 95). There is perhaps a hint of mockery in this almost cosy addition, which later develops into a rare moment of dry humour when he adds ‘Thus the spirit and Faustus were agreed and dwelt together: no doubt there was a virtuous housekeeping’ (p. 100).

The *EFB*’s drift from the supernatural to the mundane is the most explicit example of a pattern that occurs time and time again in our texts, and indeed in the argument of this thesis. The conjurer laureates are trying to do amazing, transcendent things with words, but it

is important to remember that their spells are nevertheless a part of the very same language that we all use on a daily basis. This is perhaps illustrated in a different way in *Doctor Faustus*, when the illiterate ostlers Robin and Rafe succeed in conjuring Mephistopheles with a book they have stolen from Faustus.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, there is an amusing irony in the way that the magicians pin their supernatural hopes on a type of utterance first discovered in the discipline known as ‘ordinary language’.<sup>85</sup> It reminds us that the felicity of a performative, even the wildest conjuration, depends upon the speaker invoking a formula and persuading an audience to comply with their interpretation of it.<sup>86</sup> Byville argues that ‘vows, promises, oaths, curses, prayers, and commands take on special importance ... as they draw parallels and contrasts between the illicit performatives of the witch and the utterances sanctioned by her society’, but this is precisely not the case. His mistake is to confuse social and linguistic communities: no distinction can be drawn between ‘sanctioned’ and ‘illicit’ language, because to function at all the illicit must still comply with certain shared patterns and conventions. One cannot make a speech act happen wholly alone. In the performatively structured ambitions of our conjurer laureates this internal contradiction becomes a potentially disastrous self-limiting factor.

With black humour, the gradual shift towards the mundane in the *EFB* marks Faustus’s gradual descent into tragedy. The more he conjures, swears and signs in pursuit of absolute power and independence, the more entangled with the devil he becomes. In his first conjuration, Faustus only asks that Mephistopheles meet him in his study the following morning. In the German version he conjures him back, but the English translation is already

---

<sup>84</sup> See pp. 162-166 of this thesis for more on this incident.

<sup>85</sup> Austin clearly marks out his stance on this in his first book ‘the fact is, as I shall try to make clear, that our ordinary words are much subtler in their uses, and mark many more distinctions, than philosophers have realized’. *Sense and Sensibilia*, ed. by G.J. Warnock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 3.

<sup>86</sup> Byville ‘Witchcraft Tragedy’, p. 4.

foregrounding a dangerous mutuality. This Faustus simply waits for Mephistopheles until ‘at his hour appointed he came’ (p. 95).<sup>87</sup> Faustus’s conjuring power over the devil is deliberately written out in the translation, replaced with the mundane conventions that oblige us to keep appointments. The binding force of an ‘appointment’ is underlined and made particularly prudent here by its original, now obsolete meaning of ‘the action of agreeing, or coming to an arrangement; an agreement, pact, contract.’<sup>88</sup> The *EFB*’s slight reconfiguration of the meeting anticipates the contractual nitpicking that is to come, and undermines Faustus’s grandiose intentions by reminding us that there is nothing supernatural about keeping an appointment or making an agreement. Such speech acts could be felicitous whether he was a learned magician or turnip farmer.

Once Mephistopheles has arrived ‘began Doctor Faustus anew with him to conjure him’ (p. 95), but the devil is already here, and in this new context conjuring begins to take on another sense. Along with the current magical sense ‘to invoke by supernatural power, to effect by magic or jugglery’, the verb *to conjure* was at this time also associated with pacts, meaning ‘to swear together; to make a privy compact by an oath; to form a conspiracy; to conspire’, or in a more controlling sense ‘to constrain by oath, to charge or appeal to solemnly.’ Indeed, the word is actually a merging of two distinct Middle English words, *conjure* and *con-jure*, meaning ‘to summon’ and ‘to exhort or make a pact’ respectively. The additional contractual layer of meaning to conjuring in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries affirms that the spectacle in the woods is not a simple manifestation of Faustus’s individual power but a mutual engagement. This is echoed in the move to his house, a private, domestic space where conspirators can meet in safety. According to early modern

---

<sup>87</sup> See Jones’ edition for annotations on P.F.’s alterations to his source.

<sup>88</sup> ‘appointment, n.’ in *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <<http://oed.com>> [accessed, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2013]

texts on the subject, witches served devils, whilst magicians commanded them; and as critics such as McAdam, Traister and Wilson have noted, Faustus's relationship with Mephistopheles is therefore closer to that of a witch than a magician. McAdam also adds that magicians were sometimes associated with homosexuality and the surrender of sodomy, perceived at the time as some kind of 'manly failure'.<sup>89</sup> It follows that in attempting to exert manly prowess, Faustus actually compromises the stereotypes of masculinity, and his play for singular dominance takes on potentially homoerotic undertones. What makes the word 'conjure' so interesting, though, is the way that it contains this destabilisation even before the effeminising pact has been made. This suggests that masculinity is always partly feminine, that dominance is servility, and vice-versa.

Although Faustus does not formalize the pact in writing until the fifth chapter, it looms over the opening section, grimly driving the narrative along. It is embedded from the beginning in the narrator's moralizing asides — 'who can hold Faustus from the devil?' (p. 92) — in Faustus's love of 'bookes, words and names' (p. 93) and in the etymology of conjuring. This is all the more unsettling because Faustus seems oblivious to it. When he meets Mephistopheles in his study he is still under the impression that he can simply command the devil to perform his will. He lays forth his demands authoritatively, in a list of 'certain articles':

then began Doctor Faustus anew with him to conjure him that he should be obedient unto him, and to answer him certain articles, and to fulfil them in all points.

That the Spirit should serve him and be obedient unto him in all things that he asked of him from that hour until the hour of his death.

Further, any thing that he desired of him he should bring it to him.

---

<sup>89</sup> McAdam, *Magic and Masculinity*, pp. 52-5; and *Irony of Identity*, pp. 125-31 Barbara Traister, *Heavenly Necromancers: The Magician in Early Modern English Drama* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), pp. 90-7, Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, pp. 92-3.

Also, that in all Faustus his demands or interrogations, the spirit should tell him nothing but that which is true.  
(p. 95)

His legalese sounds powerful, unequivocal, as is reflected in the way that it is formally presented in the text as a numbered list.

However, Faustus does not ‘conjure’ in the manner he expects. Instead of obeying, Mephistopheles ‘laid his case foorth, that he had no such power of himselfe’ (p. 95). The notion of him arguing ‘his case’ transforms the context, whisking us away from the magician’s study to a law court or debating hall. Conjuring’s mutuality necessarily leaves it open to the potential violence of betrayal or opposition. The chapter titles affirm this combative underbelly by transitioning from the authoritative ‘how he conjured the Diuel, making him appear’ (p. 93), to the communal ‘conference of Doctor Faustus with the Spirit Mephostophiles’ (p. 95), to the more confrontational ‘parley’ described in the fourth and fifth chapters. Similarly, Mephistopheles’ need to consult with his boss suggests a sham business deal involving the linguistic duelling of negotiation. Again, the supernatural force of calling absent, immaterial things into being bleeds surprisingly into the matter of business. This highlights the mundanity of Faustus’s performative language, but also invokes the spectral quality of the commodity, which Derrida reads in Marx’s politics of exchange. As Derrida describes it, an object becomes something other to itself when it becomes a commodity, something ‘sensuous but non-sensuous’ that whirls and dances, a performer on the stage of the market. The intersection suggests that Faustus’s dealings with the devil are dangerously

divisive and illusory, but in the most commonplace of ways.<sup>90</sup> We begin to wonder what exactly it is he is risking all for.

The change in tone decentres Faustus so that he is no longer the sole authority in his conjuring, if he ever was at all. A network of participants is revealed, who must work together if the magic is to happen. As with *The Devil's Charter*, what is founded in Faustus's break from convention is not entirely his own. He tries to tear himself away as his comedic peers do, insisting 'I will have my request and yet I will not be damned' (p. 95), but he is too reverent of his own performative words to do so. But more than this, his arrogant failure to acknowledge the mutual structure of his conjuring is perhaps what destroys him. Without the knowing gap between self and other the comedic space of word games and trickery is closed, leaving Faustus with no escape.

Mephistopheles ominously replies 'Then shalt thou want thy desire, and yet art thou mine notwithstanding: if any man would detain thee it is in vain, for thine infidelity hath confounded thee' (p. 95). This is primarily a Christian message about punishment for Faustus's 'very ungodly life' (p. 92), but has broader implications too. 'Infidelity' signifies religious disbelief, but carries other more general senses of disloyalty or unfaithfulness too. This implies the rejection of mutuality, perhaps a desire for independence and self-sufficiency, as we see in Faustus's inability to recognise the conspirative undertone to his conjuring. Read in this light, 'confounded' also takes on additional significance. Again there

---

<sup>90</sup>See Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 45-46 and pp. 147-65 (p. 150). For related readings of economics in *Doctor Faustus* see Hammill; and David Hawkes, 'Raising Mephistopheles: Performative Representation and Alienated Labour in *The Tempest*' in *Working Subjects in Early Modern English Drama*, ed. by Michelle M. Dowd and Natasha Korda (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 177-91, (pp. 182-83).

is a primarily religious meaning of being brought to perdition, but it is accompanied by other related senses of ‘to confuse’, ‘corrupt purity’, ‘mix or mingle’, and ‘to confute an argument’. If, like our other magicians, Faustus is yearning for a god-like absolute identity, then this confounding is the destruction of it even before it has begun.

There is perhaps bleak confirmation of this when Mephistopheles returns in the following chapter with news that he has ‘full authority from his prince to do whatsoever he would request, if so be Faustus would promise to be his’ (p. 96). In a dramatic turnaround from his defiant ‘I will have my request, and yet I will not be damned’ (p. 95) in the previous chapter, Faustus responds that ‘his request was none other but to become a Devil, or at least a limb of him’ (p. 96). In addition he restates and expands his articles, so that first and foremost is the condition that ‘he might be a spirit in shape and quality’ (p. 96). ‘Spirit’ and ‘devil’ are loosely interchangeable in the *EFB*, and here Faustus willingly appropriates the damnation that is the price for Mephistopheles’ service. He becomes one with the thing he intended to control, erasing himself in the process.

### *Doctor Faustus*

Similarly, Faustus’s first meeting with Mephistopheles in Marlowe’s play initially appears to be a thrilling demonstration of a felicitous speech act. All the circumstances appear right: it is darkest night, and Faustus has ‘prayed and sacrificed’ (1.3.7) to the devils in preparation. His intentions are made clear in both his instructions to himself to ‘be resolute/ And try the uttermost magic can perform’ (1.3.14-15), and in the arcane circle that vividly and earnestly marks the stage, outlining the physical space — or context — in which his intentions will become reality. Faustus begins his incantations and Mephistopheles appears, even changing his shape when requested. Mephistopheles’ tumultuous show in the *EFB* engulfs the

magician, and his speech is lost in the hubbub so that the narrator merely describes him 'calling' on the devil (ch.2). In contrast, Marlowe's protagonist seems coolly in control of the situation, ordering with convincing authority 'I charge thee to return and change thy shape;/ Thou art too ugly to attend on me' (1.3.24-5). Language, intention, and the bodies on stage momentarily coincide, creating the appearance of a flawless, unambiguous performative.

Faustus gloats at the wondrous efficacy of his words:

I see there's virtue in my heavenly words.  
 Who would not be proficient in this art?  
 How pliant is this Mephistopheles,  
 Full of obedience and humility!  
 Such is the force of magic and my spells.  
 No, Faustus, thou art conjurer laureate  
 That canst command great Mephistopheles.  
 (1.3.28-34)

As when he sighs 'these necromantic books are heavenly' (1.1.52), the word 'heavenly' again appears in the most impious of settings, which transfers the status of deity to Faustus and implies that the magic words have elevated him to a position of god-like control. In his transformed world devilish incantations become virtuous. There is simply no space for doubt in this speech; he experiences Mephistopheles as 'pliant ... full of obedience and humility', and because he is the centre of his fantastic new world that's all there is to it. The accolade 'conjurer laureate' styles Faustus as the champion of magicians, as though he has already completed his struggle and achieved his goal through 'the force of magic and my spells'. It suggests control and singularity, echoing the 'teleological jurisdiction' of felicitous context

and therefore putting a name to the integral association of his identity with the success of his speech acts.<sup>91</sup>

However, the moment that Mephistopheles begins to speak, Faustus's magical agency is undermined. He explains that he must have permission from Lucifer to serve him, and Faustus incredulously asks 'did not my conjuring speeches raise thee?' (1.3.46). The devil's response shatters the illusion of Faustus's necromantic power:

That was the cause, but yet *per accidens*;  
 For, when we hear one rack the name of God,  
 Abjure the Scriptures and his Saviour Christ,  
 We fly in hope to get his glorious soul;  
 Nor will we come unless he use such means  
 Whereby he is in danger to be damned,  
 Therefore the shortest cut for conjuring  
 Is stoutly to abjure the Trinity  
 And pray devoutly to the prince of hell.  
 (1.3.47–55)

Conjuring provides a context for Mephistopheles' appearance but is not its direct cause.<sup>92</sup>

The invocation of academic Latin creates a mocking sense of scholastic triviality, sending Faustus back to the world of fusty scholars and dusty books that he so forcibly rejects in the play's opening scene. This immediately introduces intertextuality to his magic, dispersing the image of the 'conjurer laureate', sovereign over his singular context. Furthermore, Mephistopheles' dividing of phenomena into their substance and accident is mirrored in medieval philosophy of language, which divides words into their primary and secondary significations and opens up the possibility of a statement to say one thing *per se* and another

---

<sup>91</sup> 'Signature Event Context', p. 15.

<sup>92</sup> David Hawkes offers an interesting reading of this moment that parallels the performatives of magic and money. He argues that 'the liberation of the *per accidens* from the *per se*' represents usury's 'autonomous reproduction of financial value', and that consequently Mephistopheles 'currency is the performative sign'. Hawkes, 'Raising Mephistopheles', pp. 182-83.

*per accidens*.<sup>93</sup> His dismissal of Faustus's magic thus subtly puts us in mind of alternative meanings and potential misreadings.

As we have seen, intention is not the sovereign ruler of the speech act. Infelicity and failure cannot be held at bay, and despite Faustus's best intentions Mephistopheles will not take his words seriously. This crushing dismissal rudely awakens Faustus to the subjectivity of his utterances, demonstrating that, perhaps like Austin, he cannot simply disregard the flexibilities of language when it suits him. The non-serious cannot be distinguished from the serious, leading Stanley Fish to draw the surprising conclusion that all language can be considered fictional.<sup>94</sup> This twists the proud moniker 'conjuror laureate', reminding us that the laurel wreath is also associated poetry, specifically with the metamorphic and highly figurative poetry of Ovid and Petrarch. In Fish's model the performative becomes aligned with fiction, which is reflected in Graham Hammill's reading of Faustus's tragedy as a literary one in which the subjective, non-epistemological field of literary language becomes 'absolutely inescapable'.<sup>95</sup> We can perhaps locate the beginning of this tragic downfall in the destabilisation of the 'conjuror laureate' identity.

Further slipperiness occurs in the etymology of the all-important word 'conjure'. When Mephistopheles describes the 'shortest cut to conjuring,' he replaces 'conjure' with the deceptively similar sounding 'abjure.' *Abjure*, meaning 'to renounce an oath, or recant an opinion', has a similar performative quality to *conjure* in its magical sense of 'to invoke by supernatural power'. They share a root in the Latin *iurare*, 'to swear', which is modified by

---

<sup>93</sup> Stein Ebbesen, 'Language, medieval theories of,' in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<http://www.rep.routledge.com>> [accessed April 2 2011].

<sup>94</sup> Fish, 'Interpretive Communities', pp. 231-45.

<sup>95</sup> Graham Hammill, 'Faustus' Fortunes: Commodification, Exchange, and the Form of Literary Subjectivity', *ELH*, 63.2 (1996), 309-336 (309) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/elh.1996.0016>>

either *con* meaning ‘in’, or *ab* meaning ‘out or away’.<sup>96</sup> The smallest tweak of the prefix is enough to transform the direction and intent of the verb, revealing how much the performative’s force is dependent upon its relationship with the world around it. It perhaps also forecasts the violent seesawing that prevents Faustus from ever achieving the certainty he yearns for. Furthermore, ‘abjure’ alongside the suggestion of alternative meanings in ‘*per accidens*’ may bring to mind the other senses of ‘conjure.’ As we saw in our reading of the *EFB*, ‘conjure’ at this time had magical connotations both serious and frivolous, but was also associated with pacts. In this usage it could mean ‘to swear together; to make a privy compact by an oath; to form a conspiracy; to conspire,’ or in a more controlling sense ‘to constrain by oath, to charge or appeal to solemnly.’

The contractual undertones to Faustus’s conjuring alter his ‘conjurer laureate’ role by transforming it from an individual act of power into a mutual agreement. Even before the fatal deal is struck, the felicity of Faustus’s performatives, and thus the identity he pins on that force, are alarmingly dependent upon a demonic other, upon the cooperation of Mephistopheles. The magician performs (or appears to perform) the initial summoning, but it is the devil whom enacts his desires, dashing across the globe to collect grapes, rendering him invisible and bringing Helen of Troy to the stage. Both etymologically and pragmatically the concept of ‘conjurer’ demands a partner in crime. This inherent mutuality is explicitly unfolded and acted out in the process of Faustus’s first negotiation with Mephistopheles.

And yet, Faustus still plays language games in an attempt to shape his reality:

This word ‘damnation’ terrifies not him,  
For he confounds hell in Elysium.

---

<sup>96</sup> ‘conjure, v,’ and ‘abjure, v,’ in *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <<http://oed.com>> [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> June 2013]

His ghost be with the old philosophers.  
 But, leaving these vain trifles of men's souls,  
 Tell me, what is that Lucifer, thy lord?  
 (1.3.60-64)

The terrible spiritual state of 'damnation' is relegated to being nothing but a 'word', and Christian hell is switched with pagan Elysium, the ancient Greek heaven for gods and heroes. Easily said, but not so easily done, as Faustus himself betrays even in this speech. He rejects Christian idiom only to return to the question of 'what is that Lucifer, thy lord?', initiating a conversation about his rebellion and fall from God's favour, in which damnation plays a very real and painful part. Indeed, so real is damnation that for Mephistopheles 'this is hell' right here and now, because he is 'tormented with ten thousand hells/ In being deprived of everlasting bliss's (1.3.81-82). Similarly, Faustus uses self-aggrandizing illeism alongside the reference to Elysium to make his own words sound like the stuff of legends, but in doing so is distanced from what he says. There is perhaps also a conflicting cowardly undertone that insists that it is 'he' not 'I' who is saying such blasphemous things. However, as the B-text's casual emendations of this speech into the first person demonstrate, the grammatical shift from 'he' to 'I' does little to alter its blasphemous significance.

All of this goes on before the deal with Lucifer is brought up, and creates a very specific environment that the pact must inhabit. The discontinuity between Faustus and Mephistopheles' interpretation of causality, the double meaning of the verb *to conjure*, and Faustus's broken but dependant relationship with words sketch out a world in flux that cannot be disassociated from the multivalence of words. The subtleties of language become the subtleties of the play's reality, forming a universe under the influence of what Kristen Poole

calls ‘Ovidian physics’, a distinctly literary plasticity.<sup>97</sup> Again there is again a sense here that the conjurer laureate has a natural affinity with flux rather than power or authority. In such a space the burgeoning deal with Lucifer and its subsequent physical embodiment as a deed of gift become subjective, unpredictable and problematic, a far cry from the usual comfortable certainties of the law. The *EFB* moves inexorably towards the contract, embedding it in the narrative and gradually allowing it to reveal itself so that it seems an almost natural conclusion. In contrast, Marlowe’s play presents a world in which such a thing feels almost impossible, but somehow manages to happen anyway.

Marlowe’s Faustus is not unwittingly possessed by the force of the contract, as his prose brother seems to be. Instead his improbable proposal arises from the seizing of another opportunity to embellish his conjurer laureate identity. Talking about his own personal hell as a fallen angel, Mephistopheles has a flash of guilt (or at least pretends to do so), and urges ‘O Faustus, leave these frivolous demands,/ Which strike a terror to my fainting soul!’ (1.3.83-84). But this unexpected moment of sensitivity from the devil does not move Faustus to consider what he is doing, instead he attacks it as a weakness to further puff up himself by virtue of contrast:

What, is great Mephistopheles so passionate  
 For being deprived of the joys of heaven?  
 Learn thou of Faustus manly fortitude  
 And scorn those joys thou never shalt possess.  
 Go bear these tidings to great Lucifer:  
 (1.3.85-89)

---

<sup>97</sup> Kristen Poole, ‘The Devil’s in the Archive: Doctor Faustus and Ovidian Physics’, *Renaissance Drama*, 35 (2006), 191-219.

In a vain attempt to regain control of the situation he mockingly urges Mephistopheles to ‘learn thou of Faustus manly fortitude’ (1.3.87) from his heretical proposal. ‘Strength or bravery’ is the uppermost sense of ‘fortitude’ here, but it can also mean ‘physical or structural strength’ or ‘a position or circumstance which heightens the influence of a planet’. The astrological sense recalls the earlier image of his ambition, of him gazing down from a point of elevation where ‘all things that move between the quiet poles/ Shall be at my command’ (1.1.58-9). It styles this moment of offering a deal as the pinnacle of Faustus’s trajectory, overconfidently implying success and closure like the conjurer laureate’s crown. This alarming faith in his absolute identity is amplified in the structural sense of ‘fortitude’, which styles him as an impenetrable fortress. He depicts himself as safely enclosed within his own personal jurisdiction, protected but also entitled by unbreachable boundaries. It is an image of idealization and therefore of law, ‘The law which is always the city’s law, the law of cities and edifices, protected by gates and boundaries, of spaces shut by doors’.<sup>98</sup>

He suggests the fatal deal ‘seeing Faustus hath incurred eternal death/ By desperate thoughts against Jove’s deity’ (1.3.90-91). Again, this undermines any representation of his submission to damnation as bravery, because it seems that he has little choice in the matter. But at the same time there is perhaps something courageous about the audacity of offering the devil something that you believe to be already his. Wilson describes this as a ‘preposterous’ contractual construction, which in many ways it is.<sup>99</sup> However, the proposal ‘he surrenders up his soul/ So he will spare him four and twenty years’ (1.1.92-93) is so intertwined with the self-destructive assertion of Faustus’s identity that arguably it pushes the contractual

---

<sup>98</sup> Derrida, ‘Before the Law’, p. 195.

<sup>99</sup> Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, p. 206.

significance to one side, delaying it until the next act. This is affirmed in the language he uses to state his terms, which is very different to the legalese of the articles in the *EFB*:

Letting him live in all voluptuousness,  
 Having thee [Mephistopheles] ever to attend on me,  
 To me give whatsoever I shall ask,  
 To tell me whatsoever I demand,  
 To slay mine enemies and aid my friends,  
 And always be obedient to my will.  
 (1.3.94-99)

Although the Faustus in the *EFB* uses words such as ‘whatsoever’ and ‘anything’, his formulation is precise and specific. In contrast the gushing ‘all’, ‘ever’, ‘whatsoever’, ‘always’ of Marlowe’s Faustus seems over-excitable and almost childish, as if he can barely contain his desire for *everything*. The slip from lofty third person to the ‘me, me, me’ of his demands further suggests a slip in decorum and self-control, all of which detracts from the careful wording and minute attention to detail that we associate with legal contracts.

The manner in which Faustus puts forward the deal can be read as a modification of his identity, which rearranges the authorial omnipotence of the conjurer laureate by giving him a mediator through whom he can create his reality. The embodiment of will in performative utterance is exchanged for the simpler, more easily verified embodiment of will in the anterior body of Mephistopheles. As Faustus himself says in the closing soliloquy of this scene:

Had I as many souls as there be stars  
 I'd give them all for Mephistopheles.  
 By him I'll be great emperor of the world.  
 (1.3.104-6)

Conjuring is supposedly a paradigm of illocutionary force, but here the dense causality of the speech act is distended across space and time between the dual points of speaker and actor. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries *to perform* was ‘to complete an action or object’, and in this respect Mephistopheles performs Faustus’s performatives by finishing what his words have begun.<sup>100</sup> This challenges the Austinian predicates of wholeness or completion in the speech situation, breaking open the hermetic context ruled over by a single consciousness. Contradictorily, Mephistopheles and the pact with Lucifer become the medium through which Faustus can manifest everything that his fantasy already tells him to be true. They undermine his conjurer laureate identity, yet are a vital catalyst to its functioning. This is brought to its full conclusion as the speech progresses and Faustus reprises his earlier fantasy, plotting how he will shift continents, ‘make a bridge through the moving air’ (1.3.107) and dictate the lives of emperors. Astonishingly, it seems that nothing has changed; Faustus and his terrible dreams continue just as they did before he bound himself in fictions and put his soul on the line.

We have established that whilst these plays and narratives are superficially about magic, they are also about language, identity and authority, and therefore about law. The various layers of law at work have been explored, and their shared performative foundations traced. This has led to consideration of the idealization that all law yearns towards, and the inbuilt limitations that prevent it from ever fulfilling its *telos*. There is still much more to be said about this, however. The next chapter will think further on the tension between idealization and iterability by analysing attempts to fix or embody meaning in writing. In the

---

<sup>100</sup> Mary Thomas Crane, ‘What Was Performance?’, *Criticism*, 43.2 (2001), 169-187 (169-87)  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/crt.2001.0013>>

process we shall explore the implications for those magicians who refuse to let go of their absolute ambitions.

### 3. Embodiments

The previous chapter explored how magicians performatively conjure, make deals with, and even trick the devil, in an attempt to fulfil their yearning for the absolute. In the examples so far this has all been carried out verbally, but many take the extra step of formalizing their agreements in writing, often in their own blood. This literal embodiment of intention would seem to stabilise the pact and the authority of its author, appealing to the conjurer laureate's idealizing urges. But on the contrary, the turn to the material often has tragic, fragmentary results. With help from Derrida's *Signature Event Context*, our reading of embodied texts and textual bodies will demonstrate that meaning cannot be pinned to the page or manifested in any solid, enduring form. This is because writing is no different to other forms of communication; all are equally subject to the break and drift of the graphematic structure. The failure of embodiment to produce certainty or stability reveals something interesting about materiality and presence: that physical endurance does not necessarily imply continuation.

It follows that the conventional understanding of presence must be rethought to include non-presence, rupture and difference. Ultimately, the mark of writing can no longer be opposed to effacement or disappearance. This is deeply problematic for our magicians, who literally invest body and soul in their demonic contracts. Rather than supernaturally extending their power or fixing their fate, the blood texts highlight the division, the troubling supplement of alterity, that structures identity. For the characters we are following this is the stuff of tragedy, but by reading with the supplement we can catch a glimpse of how vital it is. Its openness is the space where life takes place, where the *dynamis* powers the possibility of

reading and writing, in the broadest senses of those terms. In reading with but also quite radically against or beyond plot, we will bear witness to this.

Before we begin our analysis of the magicians' embodiment, we need to understand Derrida's approach to textuality. The name 'speech act' suggests a verbal phenomenon, and indeed the examples that Austin discusses are all instances of people swearing, promising, stating and so forth aloud. However, the written word can carry a performative force too, and in the case of contracts and signatures it is often considered more binding than its spoken equivalent. Many of our magicians take recourse to writing when it comes to formalising their deal with the devil. It is also from the perspective of text that Derrida most directly engages with Austin in 'Signature Event Context', 'Limited Inc a b c ....', and 'Typewriter Ribbon'. Significantly though, he does so not because writing has superior qualities of endurance and certainty, but to demonstrate that it shares its 'graphematic structure' with all other forms of communication, including performative utterances.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the very characteristics of this structure defy the possibility of certitude, and therefore of the authority of the author or speaker's consciousness over its words.

The graphematic structure that Derrida describes is founded upon iterability. For writing to be writing it must be repeatable, otherwise no one would be able to read it. This allows us to communicate across time and space with people who are not present. For instance, I can write someone a postcard whilst sipping a beer in the Alps and several days later they will receive my message in Manchester. In everyday life we tend to assume that in this way writing 'extends' the limits of the spoken word. However, Derrida notes that this concept of extension assumes 'a sort of *homogenous* space of communication' where

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', trans. by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, in *Limited Inc*, ed. by Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp .1-23 (p. 17).

meaning is whole, unified and self-identical.<sup>2</sup> The same can be said of identity and conscious experience: we recognise ourselves and each other day to day because of continuity in names, faces, memories.

However, the homogeneity of communication should not be considered as given. Each time a message is repeated it is grafted into a new context, which alters it. The change can be subtle, such as when I write a note to myself and read it the next day, or dramatic as when I sarcastically read aloud a politician's promise in the newspaper. This is why Derrida favours the term 'iterability' over 'repetition'. And there is no limit to this capacity for citation. The structure that makes writing legible also demands that it is possible for it to be grafted into any and every context. It follows that our words have very little to do with the moment in which they were written, including its author or intended recipient. Conventionally we assume that an author's intention is preserved in their writing, but iteration confounds this notion of their authority. Rather than extending a single unified meaning, iteration divides and differentiates as it identifies. Each time the message is the same-but-different. Perhaps rather eerily, the same also goes for our identity and experience, which irrevocably change with each passing moment. Otherness and difference are introduced into the structure of identity, compromising the ideals of unity, purity and self-identicalness.

Writing, it seems, has a life of its own. As soon as it is written it breaks away from its originating context, independently iterating itself over and over. Severed from the consciousness of its author, but working on regardless, there is something of the automata about it. As Derrida puts it, 'to write is to produce a mark that will constitute a sort of

---

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', p. 3.

machine, which is productive in turn... offering things and itself to be read and to be rewritten'.<sup>3</sup> There is an interesting tension here between the singular moment of intended communication, and the mechanical thing that emerges from it, which is oblivious to intention, consciousness or origin. The event of writing is thus a rupture, the cut and slice of the machine. It breaks with its context and breaks with itself, becoming different with each iteration. What is left to be read as a mark is a remainder, the differentiating space where identity is bound up with alterity, and is 'repeatable and is identifiable *in, through* and even *in view* of its alteration.'<sup>4</sup>

The graphematic structure allows our writing to remain after we and our intentions have gone, whether we have died, left the room or simply changed our minds about what we want to say. But this is not simply a happy coincidence. The possibility of sender and receiver's absence is inherent to what makes writing legible, and in the event of its rupture we are as good as dead anyway. In the final analysis, the mark always has the potential to be self-sufficient, able to function in the absence of any referent, signified, sender or receiver. Despite the materiality of text, and its reassuring illusion of endurance, writing is thus structured by absence rather than presence, or more rigorously, by non-presence. The context of communication is absent from the iteration, so that the mark floats free of origin and reference. The text is absent from itself because its identity is dependent upon differential spacing, and it alters as it iterates. 'It only produces itself in losing itself *aussi sec*, textually, in the process of iteration'.<sup>5</sup> It is in this respect that Derrida describes the grapheme as 'the non-present *remainder* of a differential mark'.<sup>6</sup> A 'remainder' because it is what is ruptured, recognisable but divided and different. And non-present because once reference and identity

<sup>3</sup> Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Limited Inc a b c . . .', trans. by Samuel Weber, in *Limited Inc*, ed. by Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 29-110 (p. 53).

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', p. 108 n. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', p. 10.

are acknowledged as differential, then the traditional opposition of presence and absence no longer holds good.

As is now clear, what Derrida has to say about writing has implications far beyond words on a page, which simply presents as a starting point the easiest to follow demonstration of iterability. His term 'grapheme' refers not only to traditional text, but to speech, non-linguistic forms of communication, and the experience of being and presence. The whole manner in which we think about the individual's existence in the world is at stake. But what does this have to do with Austin in particular? Derrida argues that the space and spacing of the grapheme, its disruption of presence, is precisely what troubles *How to Do Things with Words*. According to him 'all the difficulties encountered by Austin intersect in the place where both writing and presence are in question.'<sup>7</sup> In coming up with a form of utterance that is an event, Austin thrillingly challenges the conventional values of truth and falsity, only to replace them with the equally ingrained assumptions of classical phenomenology. He proposes a theory of speech acts assuming that he knows what an act is, and that it is guided by intention, consciousness and presence. His performatives are liberated from the truth but are governed by an authoritative speaker, whose intentions and consciousness are fully self-present and identical. As we have seen, Derrida's concept of the grapheme and its iterative structure challenge this by blurring oppositions such as absence and presence, and rendering the certainty of absolute self-presence impossible. It is iteration's instantaneous blurring of what it identifies and dividing of what it encloses that causes Austin such difficulty when he tries to systematise his speech act theory. The singularity of the event defies all rules and regulation; it cannot be expected or intended, and if it ever happens it will happen by chance.

---

<sup>7</sup> Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', p. 19.

This is not to say that intention plays no role in communication, that meaning is fluid to the point of meaninglessness, or that people can never perform felicitous speech acts. What Derrida ultimately takes issue with is the *telos* of plenitude or fulfilment that informs intention and attention's relationship to the iterable. This idealizing urge has us continually striving towards the certainty of absolute self-presence and self-identity. But although iterability enables or presents this goal, its differential nature simultaneously renders it fulfilment impossible. We can see the idealizing tendency at work in the authoritative and central role that intention has in Austin's rules of felicity, but also at a more pervasive level in his methodological exclusion of non-serious speech acts from the discussion. He notes that performative utterances are open to certain infelicities that affect all utterances, such as quotation, citation and other not 'serious' use. In doing so he acknowledges the pervasiveness of what Derrida calls iterability, but chooses to place it to one side the better to focus upon performatives 'issued in ordinary circumstances'.<sup>8</sup> This action may well have been temporary, and as is clear from Austin's uniquely wry style of writing, he is no stranger to the pleasures of toying with the boundaries of seriousness. Nevertheless, it is a purifying action in the spirit of idealization, which tries to close the serious off from anomaly in order to make it clear and self-present. It assumes that oppositions such as serious and non-serious are themselves unified and self-identical, and that the boundaries between them are clear cut and absolute.

An interesting result of this is that Austin's method necessarily imposes a hierarchy. If serious and non-serious are wholly distinct then they cannot be considered simultaneously; one must be approached before the other, given priority and precedence. Although 'parasitical' non-serious usage is acknowledged as an integral part of language, it is

---

<sup>8</sup> J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. by Marina Sbisa and J.O. Urmston, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 22.

considered acceptable to exclude it in order to preserve the identity of the thing it participates in.<sup>9</sup> Yet as we have seen, the favouring of one over the other is arbitrary, and open to interpretation. This is where Derrida's discussion brings speech act theory into dialogue with ethical-political concerns. Boundaries, the demarcations of us and them with which we organize and legislate our world are equally unfounded. He is emphatic that it is in this manner that the performative has greatest import: 'I am convinced that speech act theory is fundamentally and in its most fecund, most rigorous, and most interesting aspects (need I recall that it interests me considerably?) a theory of right or of law, of convention, of political ethics or of politics as ethics.'<sup>10</sup> Our magicians are just as driven by the idealizing *telos*. They seek the certainty of absolute power and absolute knowledge, their conjuring performatives setting them on a path that culminates in an all-subsuming identity whose intentions are flawlessly realized in the outside world. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that the prose and plays that tell their stories often juxtapose magical utterances with the written performatives of contracts and signatures.

### *Doctor Faustus*<sup>11</sup>

Once he realizes that his conjuring words are not certainties and therefore not guaranteed to make his fantasy a reality, Faustus turns to different, more literal kind of materiality. He will use Mephistopheles' body to perform what his performatives cannot. Again, we can see the drive of idealization at work in the early modern sense of *perform* as 'to complete or finish an object or action': Faustus wants the closure of a fully realized will. As Mary Thomas Crane has described, performance in this period was more closely associated with directness and physicality than with deceptive mimesis, and could be used to describe the construction or

---

<sup>9</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida, 'Limited Inc a b c . . .', p. 97.

<sup>11</sup> Elements of this section have previously been published as Sophie Gray, 'Embodied Texts and Textual Bodies in *Doctor Faustus*', *Marlowe Studies: An Annual*, 2 (2012), 39-56.

fashioning of a physical object.<sup>12</sup> Evident in this is a preoccupation with presence, as if Faustus plans to extend the reach and endurance of his being by embodying his will in physical form. In this respect Mephistopheles' body is already entangled with writing: mistakenly regarded, like a textual corpus, as 'an especially potent means of communication' capable of '*extending* enormously, if not infinitely, the domain of oral or gestural communication'.<sup>13</sup>

Faustus proposes an agreement with Lucifer so that for twenty-four years he will have Mephistopheles to physically realize his intentions. And it is only a short step from this fantasy of the devil inscribing his master's intentions on the world to Faustus signing his name on the contract. Both are structured by the same faith in the authority of the author and communication's fidelity to its source, and both trust a physical embodiment to sustain this. Lucifer is therefore clever to insist that the pact be formalised in a text. As we have seen, speech and writing and all other forms of communication share the same graphematic structure of iterability. Rather than manifesting Faustus's intention in a new enduring form, the demonic document simply magnifies the problems of identity and authority already at hand.

At the beginning of act two Mephistopheles arrives from hell with the news 'that I shall wait on Faustus whilst I live, / So he will buy my service with his soul'.<sup>14</sup> Faustus argues that he has already 'hazarded' (2.1.33) his soul with blasphemy but it seems that this is not enough:

---

<sup>12</sup> Mary Thomas Crane, 'What Was Performance?', *Criticism*, 43.2 (2001), 169-187 (172-9) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/crt.2001.0013>>

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus* (A text), ed. by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen, in *Doctor Faustus: A- and B- Texts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993, repr. 1995), 2.1.31-32. All subsequent references are to this edition unless otherwise specified.

But Faustus, thou must bequeath it solemnly  
 And write a deed of gift in thine own blood,  
 For that security craves great Lucifer.  
 (2.1.34-36)

It is absurd to imagine the prince of hell following correct English legal practice, so the demand for a document must surely be a trap for his victim rather than surety for himself. Mephistopheles' words are perfectly tailored to seduce Faustus's conjurer laureate identity, a move even crueller seeing as the authoritative efficacy of his magic words has already been crushed. In particular, 'solemnly' hints at ceremony and seriousness, seductively invoking the terms of the felicitous performative and the authoritative intention at its centre. It offers Faustus the opportunity to play out the glamorous games of magical ritual once again, rebuilding the illusion of his authority. Yet at the same time the notion of solemnity shifts the binding contractual performative from a locus of fact with material proof to one of subjective morality.

This is one of the greatest triumphs of Austin's theory but causes significant problems for Faustus, who has invested his identity in the success of his conjuring words, and is still in search of absolute certainty. It insists that he has a duty to his words, which disastrously inverts the relationship between him and his language. Rather than words performing his will, his will must complete the illocutionary force of his words by maintaining what he promised. And ultimately this is how all law works too, its interpretation seeming authoritative and absolute simply because we make it so. No writing is ever truly binding; structurally there is nothing to stop Faustus repenting, but to do so would be to admit the fragility of his intended meaning. To break his word would be to break his conjurer laureate identity, and so he submits to be damned. The materiality of the deed of gift only serves to heighten Faustus's

dual obligation towards and dependence upon the agreement. It appears to embody his intentions and identity, yet is itself reliant upon these to maintain its illusion of authority. He was entranced by the material force of the spoken performative, which transformed words into actions; but this written version seems all the more potent because it produces a lasting artefact. It appears to have the potential to finally realize his greatest ambitions, and best of all it will do so in his own hand, in his own name. In an impossible self-referential loop it seems as though the personal mark of his signature will authorize the contract to authorize and affirm his identity as the conjurer laureate.

Lucifer's demand that the deed of gift must be written 'in thine own blood' (2.1.35) adds further showy glamour to the promise of enduring and certified self-authorization. The use of blood ink plays with embodiment on multiple levels, out-performing the performative. It produces a text made of a corporeal substance, enabling Faustus to write literally and metaphorically 'with' his body. In an idealizing movement this appears to close the circle of intention, language and body to produce a wholly self-sufficient, unified communication. The physical continuity between Faustus and the fabric of his words exemplifies the assumption that writing is a presence that can extend a homogenous space of meaning. Or as Andrew Stott more beguilingly puts it, blood writing is a 'fairy-tale solution to the hermeneutic difficulty represented by reading'.<sup>15</sup> It is as if writing with a bodily fluid, the fluid that sustains life no less, is expected to somehow transfer something of the human body's corporeality to the text. It is tempting to imagine that for such words it should be simply impossible to mean anything other than what their author intended. This implied sincerity carried within the medium itself, charges the performative promise with additional felicity,

---

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Stott, 'Faustus's Signature and the Signatures of *Dr. Faustus*', *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, 54 (1998), 27–43 (34).

making it feel all the more powerful almost to the point of tipping it back into the realm of certainty.

However we know that, like speech, written words have an independent life of their own, regardless of their medium. Text produces a tangible object, but this is simply the remainder of a rupture. Because iteration is inherent in its graphematic structure, the words write themselves out of their original context just as they are being written into it. It follows that the physical fabric of what is left preserves nothing of what was meant at the moment of inscription and therefore has no bearing on its sincerity, felicity or truth. This insurmountable break between the event of writing and the text it produces is what Derrida is referring to when he describes the grapheme as a ‘non-present remainder’.<sup>16</sup> It is a difficult concept, but one which is vital in disentangling writing from presence: the material presence of the text is actually a marker of the absent event of writing. Graham Hammill has demonstrated the importance of this disruption in *Doctor Faustus*.<sup>17</sup> In breaking from its point of origin, the writing opens itself up to the limitless possibilities of iteration. Faustus writes the contract to ‘make an end immediately’ (2.1.72), but this is only the beginning. The structure that allows the deed of gift to be reiterated or read again at a later date, creating that illusion of endurance, also insists that the message will be constantly different to itself. This is made particularly clear by the document’s counterintuitive materiality, but it is actually no different to Mephistopheles’ ability to cite Faustus’s earnest conjuring into the more cynical context of *per accidens*.

Every second that passes alters the writing’s context, and therefore changes its meaning, even if every other circumstance remains identical. This is evident in the potential

---

<sup>16</sup> Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Graham Hammill, ‘Faustus’ Fortunes: Commodification, Exchange, and the Form of Literary Subjectivity’, *ELH*, 63.2 (1996), 309-336 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/elh.1996.0016>>

for punning in the term *will* in this scene. When Faustus formulates the contract he is articulating his desire, putting his will into words, but he is also producing a last will and testament to bequeath ownership of his soul on his death. One will should be the absolute embodiment of the other, but this is not the case. He himself composes the words of the document, but in this context their specific function is to survive beyond his death and to speak for him when he is gone. And, as is tragically evident in the final scene, what Faustus wills as he writes the contract is very different from what he wills in his last speech, when he is desperate to be saved from hell. Without its wording being altered, the text goes from being a ticket to absolute power to a death warrant. Its author's intention is not fixed by being inscribed on the page, and his identity continues to divide and differ, causing him to reread his own words in a new context. The strangely objectifying quality of a 'deed of gift', usually reserved for bestowing material possessions such as furniture and money, similarly causes Faustus to become other to himself.<sup>18</sup> He is not only the author of the text but also its subject and (when he reads it aloud to Mephistopheles) its reader. This is particularly clear in performance: when we watch Faustus writing the document onstage, we cannot say whether we are witnessing him as author or subject.

The division between Faustus as author and subject of his text is amplified by the way that the contract scene also represents him as distinct from his own body. His desperate grasping at the complete embodiment of his intention results in an eerie incompleteness or disembodiment from himself. This further disrupts the classical assumptions about materiality and presence. In the midst of his desperate push for certainty, the solid presence and unity of his own body is brought into question. Destabilisation can be seen at work in the contradictory language of Mephistopheles' instructions to Faustus:

---

<sup>18</sup> J. H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (London: Butterworths, 1990), pp. 432-33.

Then stab thine 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.  
 (2.1.49–52)

On the surface his speech is full of dynamic, physical words such as ‘stab’ and ‘bind’, encouraging quick and decisive action. However, the combination of expulsion and retention in stabbing and binding is a contradictory one that both unites and divides. It is possible to interpret the pattern of wounding followed by binding as a medical one, such as in surgery or therapeutic bloodletting. However, in this situation the metaphysical mismatch of ‘arm’ and ‘soul’ suggests a botched procedure. A physical wound is made and then carelessly left open, as the ‘binding’ force which would make the body whole again instead encloses the soul, isolating it from the figure that began the gesture. This conflict produces division, somehow cutting Faustus’s soul off from his body. But it also goes further, pushing beyond the conventional boundaries of the materiality it divides by infringing on the immaterial, metaphysical realm of the soul. The cut that Mephistopheles urges Faustus to make will not simply break open the material of his body; it will also break open the notion of material itself.

This brings us back again to the performative, and to Derrida’s assertion that Austin’s theory runs into trouble when writing and presence are called into question.<sup>19</sup> His initial outlining of the performative is intoxicating because it appears to describe a pure force which, unlike semantic communication, is independent of an outside referent and therefore formidably self-sufficient. The physical gesture of the body stabbing itself perhaps represents something similar; it is a self-reflexive transmission of force, seeming to sidestep the

---

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’, p. 19.

troublesome gaps in linguistic communication. Faustus's conjuring words drifted most embarrassingly, but surely in this physical violence against himself his self-presence must maintain its integrity. However, the heady air of ritual about this scene reveals the gesture to be a communication like any other. The ceremony feels powerful because it is repeatable — it is this that makes it a ceremony — and follows an ancient pattern silted with meaning. It may not involve words, or the representation of an outside referent, but its glamour and significance draw from that same iterative structure of the grapheme. It follows that the stabbing of Faustus's arm will coincide with a break or disruption of presence like that of any other mark. His physical presence will take on non-presence, and he will become a remainder, a different and deferred version of himself.

Mephistopheles rounds off the speech with the promise that Faustus will be at one with Lucifer:

... that at some certain day  
Great Lucifer may claim it as his own,  
And then be thou as great as Lucifer.  
(2.1.50-52)

The image of healing or unity gone wrong becomes an inversion of the divine union promised to Christians in the kingdom of heaven. Mephistopheles' language superficially promises the unity, certainty, and glory that Faustus associates with the performative, but contained within it is the threat of fragmentation. The reward of wholeness will not be union with himself but with Lucifer, whose very being is in turn identified by what it is not. 'An angel once' (1.3.66), now fallen from his heavenly origins to and reigning over a realm of absence, 'tormented with ten thousand hells / In being deprived of everlasting bliss' (1.3.81–

82). In the hands of Mephistopheles, ‘a born deconstructor’, in Garber’s words, the Christian return to origin becomes a different kind of eternity: a never-ending alterity.<sup>20</sup>

The tensions between what the performative embodiment promises and what it simultaneously resists are running high when Faustus finally cuts his arm:

Lo Mephistopheles, 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 the blood that trickles from mine arm,  
 And let it be propitious for my wish.  
 (2.1.53–58)

‘Proper’ is a highly significant adjective, primarily stressing that the ink with which Faustus is about to write the contract is from his own body. The material identification between the two would seem to enforce obedience and loyalty from the writing, binding it to its author and origin. There is a heavily literal sense of self-presence in the blood ink, which again moves towards the plenitude and fulfilment of idealization. Like Austin’s description of the performative utterance, it appears powerfully self-sufficient because to some degree it carries its referent within itself. In this context the written words ‘I, John Faustus of Wittenberg’ (2.1.106) are not simply a flawed representative of an external being, they say Faustus but *are* him as well. This potent self-reference is heightened by the way that this ritual sacrifice is a self-sacrifice: Faustus both performs and receives the violence, containing the entire gesture and its force within his body. So intoxicated is he by this most performative of performances that he almost forgets why he made the cut in the first place. ‘Let this be propitious for my

---

<sup>20</sup> Marjorie Garber, “‘Here’s Nothing Writ’: Scribe, Script and Circumscription in Marlowe’s Plays’, *Theatre Journal*, 36.3 (1984), 301-20 (308) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3206949>>

wish' he triumphantly cries, only for Mephistopheles to respond with his customary dryness 'But Faustus, thou must write it in manner of a deed of gift' (2.1.59-60).

However, for all its corporeality, Faustus's gory gesture is divisive, and puts into question the presence that seemingly imbues it with authority. From the play's opening line 'settle thy studies, Faustus, and begin' (1.1.1), his illeism sets him at a vainglorious distance from himself, but something eerier is going on here. He begins talking about 'my proper blood' and ends with reference to 'the blood that trickles from mine arm'. In the process of the speech he becomes disconnected from what he considers to be this most intimate and integral part of himself. At its most basic level, the self-sacrifice is superficially contained within a single body, but this material unity is divided by the violence it performs against itself. Force, such as that carried in the performative, is by its nature divisive; there must be a difference in force for us to notice it at work at all.<sup>21</sup> It must be inflicted upon one by the other. Austin himself recognises this when he reimages the performative as a holistic speech act comprising of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary forces. 'Proper' blood is spilt, but it is also a 'proper' hand that moves against it. As with Lucifer's proposed format of a 'deed-of-gift', Faustus is both subject and object of his symbolic action. He tries to keep up the pretence of integrity by flamboyantly urging us to 'view' the apparently obedient performance of his blood as it 'trickles from mine arm'. Division is already implicit in his words though, which assert his ownership of 'mine arm' whilst loosing 'the blood' from the constraints of any possessive determiner.

What is evident here is that the self-identity of what is 'proper' is yet another concept of purity that is necessarily impure. The physical presence of Faustus's body cutting,

---

<sup>21</sup> This is Derrida's primary interest in 'Force of Law'. 'Force of Law', trans. by Mary Quaintance, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. by Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3-67 (cf. p. 7).

bleeding and forming text is no guarantee of absolute certainty. The self contains the other even before any cut is made, but once the blood is spilt it becomes very vividly alterior, taking on the autonomy of an iterable text. It follows that when Faustus cuts his flesh he is caricaturing the cut of the event. He begins to write, cutting again with each stroke, and what remains is mechanically independent from him. In this process the deeply personal text written in his own hand and blood eerily takes on something of the machine. If it can be said to extend Faustus's presence at all, it does so not as what is proper to him but as a prop or prosthesis. Its relationship to him is characterised by spacing, its purpose is to stand in for his presence, long after his absence, to speak for him once his own lips are silent. In other words, a whole new corpus or body that does and does not represent the self is born.

The uncanny quality of this textual prosthesis brings us to the particular difficulties of citing oneself in a signature. As Derrida observes, our day-to-day understanding of the signature is highly contradictory; we trust it to signify both absence and presence, to repeat a singular event. Perhaps more than any other form of writing, the signature is perceived to fix a text against the interpretive drift of time and iteration. Austin himself describes how a signature helps 'tether' a text to its 'utterance-origin', the speaker doing the action. However, this understanding of its authority cannot help but collapse in on itself, because it relies upon the mark being legible (that is, iterable) and is meaningful only in the context of all other signatures, of the tradition of signing one's name.<sup>22</sup>

Derrida's metaphor for the signature is a divided seal, which is especially interesting with regard to Faustus's prosthesis.<sup>23</sup> We can imagine the body's flesh and blood as various

---

<sup>22</sup> Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', pp. 19-21; see also Austin, *How to Do*, pp. 60-61. For the strange structure of the signature see Jacques Derrida, 'Declarations of Independence', trans. Tom Keenan and Tom Pepper, *New Political Science*, 7.1 (1986), 7-15 (10-11) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07393148608429608>>

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', p. 20.

kinds of seal: The skin seals the structures and systems of the body from the outside world, and when it is breached, the blood wells and clots to seal the wound. At the same time though, flesh and particularly blood can also be used as signatures or wax seals to guarantee authenticity. In modern science, the DNA carried in the blood is considered an unequivocal mark of identity, but as disputes settled by duel, love letters written in blood, and the much disputed pound of flesh as guarantor in *The Merchant of Venice* all suggest, the material of the body has always been charged with an authenticating power.<sup>24</sup> Lowell Gallagher has described the significance of seals in the contract scene through comparison with the archiving potency of red wax seals, which effectively stop the passage of time between writing and reading.<sup>25</sup>

However, there is perhaps more to be said about the connection between sealed texts and the series of divisions in the play. Faustus divides his body's seal by producing a prosthesis, which undermines the authenticity and agency of his physical presence. To authenticate the prosthetic contract, he writes it in his own blood, which involves breaking the skin's seal. Similarly, the blood's natural mark is broken in the act of writing, which prevents it from clotting to close the body and forces it to dry as a textual closure, a signature, instead. Each division of the seal compromises its singularity. As Derrida says of his own reproduced signature at the end of 'Signature Event Context', a 'counterfeit' is produced.<sup>26</sup> But this is also the only way to affirm its authority. To be authoritative the signature must be legible, and therefore repeatable; but the event of repetition is distinct and subtly different to the one before. This reflects the iterative tensions at work in identity too. As its etymology demonstrates it has its roots in sameness (from Latin *idem*, 'same'), but it requires an element

---

<sup>24</sup> For more on bloody love letters see Stott, 'Faustus's Signature', 33–35.

<sup>25</sup> Lowell Gallagher, 'Faustus's Blood and the (Messianic) Question of Ethics', *English Literary History*, 73.1 (2006), 1–29 (12) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/elh.2006.0002>>

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, 'Signature Event Context,' p. 21.

of spacing or difference in order to recognise itself. Thus, identity always eludes itself, just as the signature slips away from its author. The more Faustus tries to assert himself, the more materially present he tries to become, the wider his internal divisions and differences gape.

But the cut is not simply a murderous severance; even this cannot be absolute. The remains of Faustus's writing are coldly automatic and machine-like, and yet at the same time blood he writes with carries moral or spiritual intelligence that he himself lacks. It puts a spanner in the works, intersecting the mechanical with the unknown, with that which is forever beyond knowledge. The opening it creates is related to what Derrida calls the messianic:

The *messianic*, or messianicity without messianism: the opening to the future or the coming of the other as the advent of justice, but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration. The coming of the other can only emerge as a singular event when no anticipation sees it coming, when the other and death— and radical evil— can come as a surprise at any moment. Possibilities that both open and can always interrupt history, or at least the ordinary course of history.<sup>27</sup>

The messianic is not a particular belief — although its shape is most familiar to many of us in the shape of Christian or Jewish theology — it is the structure of belief or hope; the point where the general, the mechanical, the rational, crosses with the singular, the other, the mystical, at the knife edge of the experience of an event. Because of this it always remains just out of reach, in a continuous tense of the yet-to-come that breaks our concepts of time and grammar.

---

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of "religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone', trans. Gil Anidjar, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 40-101 (p. 56).

As the quote above suggests, the messianic is entangled with justice, forgiveness, and the risk but also the trust or promise involved in any interaction with the other. Gallagher has addressed the ‘messianic question of ethics’ raised by Faustus’s blood’s intervention in the contract scene. He argues that ‘the blood appears charged with an incipient meaningfulness that arrives in advance of the text he is poised to write. In other words, it is already a text, of a sort’.<sup>28</sup> Its message is of God’s covenant with man and the messianic promise of its fulfilment to come. A promise made but not yet fulfilled, of that which will come again for the first time, which Faustus cannot yet heed but is already anxiously parodying, repeating, in this scene. Gallagher is interested in the way that the blood’s material stubbornness momentarily disrupts the scene of writing:

the caesura introduced by the blood’s preemptive clotting marks a breach in time, which is to say that it exposes the contingency of the very medium through meaning adheres to events or, if you will, through which history is made— and converted into the vehicle of messianisms.<sup>29</sup>

For him this suspension points to another messianic: a materialist ethics based on a ‘filament of the “not-known” which subsists in the given character of the known’. And he uses it to rethink the way in which early modern studies addresses the relationship between ethics and materiality.<sup>30</sup>

The Christological resonances and resistances in this scene helpfully foreground the messianic, but the implications of its structural openness to the yet-to-come goes beyond matters of judgement and justice. It is also the shape of iteration, which alters as it repeats,

---

<sup>28</sup> Gallagher, ‘Faustus’s Blood’, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Gallagher, ‘Faustus’s Blood’, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Gallagher, ‘Faustus’s Blood’, 15.

making or letting the other come, and makes possible writing in all of the senses we have discussed so far:

Such reference to the other will always have taken place. Prior to every proposition and even before discourse in general — whether a promise, prayer, praise or celebration. The most negative discourse... preserves a trace of the other. A trace of an event older than it *or* of a “taking place” to come, both of them: here there is neither an alternative nor any contradiction.<sup>31</sup>

It makes possible text on a page, but also our experience of the world, our sense of who we are, and our relationships with others. But ‘shape’ or ‘structure’ is perhaps not the right word, because this opening to the other or the yet-to-come is no solemn gateway. It is motion— or not even motion, but absolute speed, as Derrida describes it in praise of the mighty life of Hélène Cixous’s writing:

before being, earlier than being and in order to be the animation and elation, the rhythm of a sentence, its pulse and heartbeat, its breath or its tachycardia, before being and in order to be what it is in fact, namely a speed of displacement in writing— well, speed should change its name because it operates this rhythmic or spatio-temporal *displacement* only by beginning with *replacement*. Before displacing, it replaces.<sup>32</sup>

This originary speed races ahead, enabling the rhythm, the beat and the breath; the motions we think of as being. But it is so fast because it is always already replacing. It is faster than me and you and time, because:

it is first of all the relation to oneself as the relation to the other, of a metonymy or homonymy that *replaces* a noun, a mark, the address, or the meaning of a

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, trans. Ken Frieden, in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 73-142 (p. 97).

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida, *H.C. For Life, That is to Say . . .*, trans. Laurent Milesi and Stefan Herbrecter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 73.

phoneme, of a syllable, or of a grapheme, etc., instantly, at once, without delay. Replaces them on the spot, at once, and forthwith.<sup>33</sup>

Speed is the infinite identities of 'I', the reading that is also the writing of a countersignature, the conjurer laureate who is a poet and a sovereign, and a master, slave and conspirator. And as it races towards the other who is already here, it makes things *happen*:

if this logic is also a logic of the mighty power of eventhood, it is because the replacement lies precisely in taking the place, in *taking place*, therefore in taking place in the very replacement which, receiving the place, gives place, and opening, lets the place open itself; it lets/makes the open place come about through the replaceability of the irreplaceable itself. The speed of replacement is the very placement of what is called an event, in its absolute inaugurality.<sup>34</sup>

We can thus haltingly follow Cixous's 'grammatical alchemy', and try to change the tense of the messianic's yet-to-come, to one that 'allies the present participle with the subjunctive modality of the order of the promise', which performs, wishes and commands the event all at once.<sup>35</sup> This is the tense of '*for-life*', which 'at once gives and replaces life with life in view'.<sup>36</sup> It articulates the point where the singular crosses the general; where the experience, *the living*, of writing in all its forms, turns the mechanical and conventional into the happening of an event, over and over again. Life is not what happens — that is already over — nor what will happen — that might never come — instead, it is this motion of (re)placement, so speedy and tireless that it feels like balancing on a knife edge. In this respect, the text of Faustus's blood is not just a promise of life on the other side. It is a promise of life right here and now, on this side, the side of life, which, as we shall see in the final chapter, is perhaps the only side there is.

---

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, *H.C. For Life*, p. 73.

<sup>34</sup> Derrida, *H.C. For Life*, p. 74.

<sup>35</sup> Derrida, *H.C. For Life*, 70.

<sup>36</sup> Derrida, *H.C. For Life*, 88.

In light of the blood's liveliness, Mephistopheles' move to 'fetch thee fire to dissolve it straight' (2.1.63) becomes intensely sinister. Rather than simply melting an inanimate substance, the fire is burning away the agency encoded in the blood's life-text to produce dead ink. This perhaps reminds us of the processes in the production of ink itself, where organic, once-living materials such as wood, ivory, or lamp oil are charred to produce various forms of carbon black pigment. There is certainly a feeling of scientific manipulation here, as if Mephistopheles is a chemist or apothecary at work with his substances. He tries to crush the impossible magic of 'for-life', creating instead an obedient medium of certainty, whose inscription will leave Faustus with nowhere to go.

As Faustus says in Christological parody as he finally signs the deed, '*consummatum est*' (2.1.74): not 'it is being done' but 'it is done.' However, it is not done. His act of writing has been performed, but against all odds his blood is not yet finished, perhaps can never be finished. Its indestructible, inexhaustible kernel of alterity makes one last resistance. In a terrifying inversion of author and medium, a text appears on Faustus's arm:

Consummatum est; this bill is ended,  
 And Faustus hath bequeathed his soul to Lucifer.  
 But what is this inscription on mine arm?  
 'Homo, fuge!' Wither should I fly?  
 If unto God, he'll throw me down to hell.  
 My senses are deceived; here's nothing writ.  
 I see it plain; here in this place is writ  
 'Homo, fuge!' Yet shall not Faustus fly.  
 (2.1.74–81)

Faustus may have performed the ultimate violence against the natural text of his blood, but here his body fights back with all its might, producing its own inscription and refusing to let

anything end. At work is an immense supplementary paradox ‘that complicates all of this in a manner that is both terrible and yet nonviolent (for it is perhaps nonviolence itself)’.<sup>37</sup> Once it is recognised that repetition produces alterity, and that presence is riven with nonpresence, then writing is no longer opposed to erasure. Garber is thus shrewd to note that ‘At this pivotal moment, the play becomes a plot of simultaneous writing and unwriting — the more Faustus would write, the more “here’s nothing writ.”’<sup>38</sup> It follows that any performative force exerted in an attempt to fix context and therefore meaning cannot be a pure or total force. It must also communicate a trace of weakness, even nonviolence.<sup>39</sup> Faustus’s repeated aggressions will never achieve the absolute he craves, no matter how brutal, how ugly they become.

The *homo fuge* can thus be interpreted as testament to this integral flip. It inverts the dynamic of writing so that Faustus’s body momentarily becomes a palimpsest. He is the medium of these words, and yet their assertion or enforcement upon his flesh is in some respect distinctly nonviolent. Indeed they are perhaps not even there, as Faustus tries to assure himself when he says ‘here’s nothing writ’. This is because they are already a part of him, and rise to the surface of his skin as a reminder of the weakness communicated in his own force. The layering of involuntary text over the supposedly agent body mercilessly demonstrates how divided Faustus has become; brutally enacting the alterity that aids but also prevents his conjurer laureate identity. But it is also a desperate last-ditch attempt to protect Faustus from himself. It is an affirmation of the other, which makes identity, life and change possible. And here that other is quite literally trying to save Faustus’s soul with its uncanny inscription.

---

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion’, trans. by Samuel Weber, in *Limited Inc*, ed. by Gerald Graff, pp. 111-154 (p. 137).

<sup>38</sup> Garber, “‘Here’s Nothing Writ’”, 108.

<sup>39</sup> Derrida, ‘Afterword’, pp. 137-38.

One has to wonder how Faustus can ignore this tragic, beautiful, life-giving message. As we have seen, its significance is inescapable, but unfortunately it is not undeniable. With typical panache, Mephistopheles deftly turns the scene on its head once again. ‘I’ll fetch him somewhat to delight his mind’ (2.1.82) he mutters, and summons a ridiculous party of dancing devils whose sheer inappropriateness crushes the *homo fuge*’s incredible but fragile event of the other. What else could we expect from a play that so clearly enjoys to ‘play old Harry’ even more than Austin does?<sup>40</sup> Faustus’s attention slips and with it the scene slips too. He is suddenly immersed once again in his conjurer laureate fantasy, surveying an infernal masque with Mephistopheles at his side offering to ‘show thee what magic can perform’ (2.1.85). The marks of the *homo fuge* do not go away, they were a part of Faustus in the first place, and in any respect perhaps they were not ever there at all. But Faustus has changed, he has done the deed. Transposed into this new context, ‘grafted’ — to use Derrida’s apt term — onto or into Faustus’s godless body, they become not only words of damnation but a performative articulation of hell.<sup>41</sup> They are a hidden scar that tells of what Faustus has done, of the hell that is to come, and of a personal world of suffering right here on earth. The warning to flee hell essentially becomes hell itself. As Mephistopheles explains with fiendish simplicity: ‘where we are is hell, / And where hell is, there must we ever be’ (2.1.25-26).

Although Mephistopheles to some extent seduces Faustus into damnation with his promises of greatness and power, his victim also participates disturbingly in his own beguiling. He seems to revel in the physicality of his blood text and the solemnity of the signing, turning it into an elaborate ceremony. This makes little difference to the binding powers of the pact, but it makes him believe that it is enduring and irrevocable. For instance,

---

<sup>40</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, p. 151.

<sup>41</sup> Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’, p. 9.

Mephistopheles insists on the production of a deed of gift, ‘for that security craves great Lucifer’ (2.1.36); but Faustus delivers above and beyond this material condition. He not only writes the deed in his own blood, but also makes an unprompted show of handing it over, pronouncing ‘here Mephistopheles, receive this scroll,/ A deed of gift of body and of soul’ (2.1.89-90). The almost perfect iambic pentameter of the couplet creates an air of closure and finality (albeit held open by the tiniest skip in the rhythm of each line, counter to the speaker’s intentions). Similarly, the link between ‘soul’ and ‘scroll’, distinguished by just one slip of a syllable, suggests the ultimate objectification of Faustus’s soul, which when the document is passed over will (he imagines) be literally out of his hands.

As if this weren’t enough, Faustus also insists on reading his text aloud, as if it were some kind of incantation. This adds to the scene’s heavy ceremony, amplifying his conviction that something is *happening* here. It also gives the audience access to the contents of the document, revealing another dangerous hyperbole. Lucifer only asks for Faustus’s soul, but in the deed he bequeaths ‘the said John Faustus, body and soul, flesh, blood, or goods’ (2.1.110-11). If his soul is already compromised, then such petty matters of ‘flesh, blood, or goods’ perhaps fade into insignificance, and might as well be thrown into the deal. However, this modification of the terms reveals more than just carelessness, because it underlines his preoccupation with the material, and the stability and certainty that he so misguidedly associates with it. For him the soul cannot be extricated from the ‘flesh, blood, or goods’ in this transaction; and this closing of the gap between the known and the unknown is what makes it so thrilling and potent.

Mephistopheles adroitly begins to play along, responding with ‘Speak, Faustus. Do you deliver this as your deed?’ (2.1.114-5), words which echo those Faustus spoke to him

previously: ‘Did not my conjuring speeches raise thee? Speak’ (1.3.46). This takes him back to his delusion of conjurer laureate omnipotence, and the accompanying faith in the realising properties of performative, ceremonial language. However, with his fondness for glamour and drama, it seems that Faustus has already convinced himself. And tragically, this is perhaps all that his struggles and torture come down to: belief, misconstrued as knowledge. The contract with Lucifer will never be absolutely binding, because its words will always resist themselves in some way, just as the blood did. This is why the Good Angel, the Old Man, Faustus’s peers at the university, and even sometimes Faustus himself, urge him to repent: because with their messianic structure it is never too late, or if it is too late, it is always also not yet time. When Mephistopheles asks ‘do you deliver this *as* your deed?’ [my stress], he reveals something vital that Faustus is too caught up in his fantasies to notice. The document is only his will (in both senses of the word) *as such*, and therefore his will, his life, his soul are not present in it. If only he could relinquish his grasping at certainty and reconcile himself with the unknown that is always already there, he would immediately discover openness, hope and belief; that which in a Christian context is called God, but is also known otherwise as life, might, *différance*, the other.<sup>42</sup>

The reiteration of this scene in Act Five is a poignant affirmation of Faustus’s tragic blindness. In his despair, he almost resorts to suicide, but at the last minute — functioning much like the blood’s messianic caesura in the earlier scene — the mysterious Old Man causes him to pause for thought. Furious, Mephistopheles rounds on him with a barrage of legalistic language: ‘Thou traitor, Faustus, I arrest thy soul/ For disobedience to my sovereign lord’ (5.1.67-8). As we know, authority is simply a question of the dominant interpretation,

---

<sup>42</sup> On the relationship between negative theology and Derrida’s philosophy of language see Derrida, *How to Avoid Speaking*.

and here words such as ‘traitor’, ‘arrest’, ‘disobedience’, and ‘sovereign lord’ return Faustus to the shackles of his initial understanding of the deed of gift as unequivocal law.

Interestingly, Mephistopheles threatens Faustus with Lucifer’s power, whilst also alluding to the illusory omnipotence that he felt as the conjurer laureate, author of his own document and destiny. His appeal to both terror and fantasy cannot fail, despite its contradiction. Faustus has begun to ‘drift’ (5.1.75), but here Mephistopheles arrests his movement, literally bringing him to a standstill, fixing him on the spot, incarcerating him in the name of the ‘law’, just as he deadened the rebellious blood with coals. The insidious repetition here, along with Mephistopheles’ urgency to reaffirm the authority of a document that he claims to be unequivocal, should signal to Faustus that all hope is not lost. Tragically, though, he cannot resist the allure of the impossible absolute text, and like an addict he returns helplessly to his old illusion:

Sweet Mephistopheles, entreat thy lord  
 To pardon my unjust presumption,  
 And with my blood again I will confirm  
 My former vow I made to Lucifer.  
 (5.1.70-3)

Once again he goes beyond what the devil calls for. He repeats himself, and the very possibility of this repetition affirms an opening of hope. But, terribly, he reads it in the opposite direction, back towards a malfunctioning but deathly belief in certainty, and certainty in belief.

### ***The English Faust Book***

Luke Wilson has described how the *EFB* has a ‘tendency to generate surplus that resists any closure of accounts’.<sup>43</sup> Much of this surplus is writing, left behind after Faustus’s death and collated within the *EFB*’s narrative. There is the original covenant ‘found in his house after his most lamentable end, with all the rest of his damnable practises used in his whole life’, and a renewal of the agreement ‘sent to a dear friend of the said Doctor Faustus being his kinsman’.<sup>44</sup> Accounts of Faustus’s life also survive, one autobiographical ‘found by his boy in his study; which afterwards was published to the whole city of Wittenberg in open print’ (p. 122), ‘this history of Doctor Faustus, noted and of him written’ (p. 180) found and added to by his university peers, and another version ‘what his servant had noted thereof’ (p. 180). In this respect, the chapbook itself, translated into English hundreds of years after Faustus’s apparent lifetime, can be seen as a remainder of the history it describes, a product of its own narrative. The *EFB*’s narrator makes much of this, anxiously or proudly stressing the provenance of his sources throughout to present his tale as an apparently ‘genuine’ account of real events.

However, text does not obediently preserve the past in the manner that the *EFB*’s narrator tries to suggest, as is clear in the internal contradictions of his own highly interpretive reproduction of Faustus’s story. He is insistent that we take note of Faustus’s cautionary tale as a reminder to always remember God, our internal truth. And yet, the instances of writing described within the text work against this, because whenever Faustus

---

<sup>43</sup> Luke Wilson, *Theaters of Intention: Drama and the Law in Early Modern England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 210.

<sup>44</sup> P.F. Gent, *The English Faust Book: A Critical Edition Based on the Text of 1592*, ed. by John Henry Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, repr. 2011), p. 98; p. 167. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

writes he does so in a state of forgetfulness. Garret A. Sullivan has described how memory and forgetfulness were entangled with reading and salvation in Protestant religion. Reading religious books was not about imparting new information so much as affirming the patterns of what one should already know. He explains how ‘forgetting is not understood as the erasure of knowledge necessary to salvation from the memory, but as an action or series of actions that represents a particular attitude towards that knowledge’ (66). Interestingly, this suggests that it is not the text’s stability that can protect us from damnation, but the way in which we interpret it. A good reader will remember their place and humbly accept the ‘truth’ of a text, therefore garnering away further spiritual remembrance. A bad reader, however, exerts their will and imagination over what they read, and in this forgetfulness is unable to navigate correctly though the text, drifting every further from God’s message.<sup>45</sup>

Good and bad writing, memory and forgetfulness, begin to mingle confusingly, revealing an intriguing undecidability at work behind the *EFB*’s text. The first time that Mephistopheles introduces the condition that ‘for confirmation of the same, he should make him a writing, written with his own blood’ (p. 96) Faustus quickly agrees because ‘his mind was so inflamed, that he forgot his soul’ (p. 97). Similarly, in the chapter that he draws his blood and begins to write he is so taken with Mephistopheles’ high status in hell that he ‘forgot the Lord his maker, and Christ his redeemer’ (p. 97). When the devil returns to collect the document he dazzles Faustus with visions of fantastic animals and sweet music ‘the which so ravished his mind, that he thought he had been in another world, forgot both body and soul, in so much that he was minded never to change his opinion concerning that which he had done’ (p. 100). And when the deal is finally done, Faustus’s amnesia is complete and

---

<sup>45</sup> Garret A. Sullivan reads Marlowe’s *Faustus* in similar terms of self-forgetting. He provides a good overview of early modern traditions of salvation’s relationship to memory and the mnemonic role that books played in this, and then contrasts this with Faustus’s forgetfulness, which causes him to read the scriptures incorrectly. *Memory and Forgetting in English Renaissance Drama: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Webster* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 65-87 (66).

the narrator describes how ‘having already puffed up his heart, that he had forgot the mind of a man, and thought rather himself to be a spirit’ (p. 100). Rather than preserving his identity and its intentions, Faustus’s writing seems to exaggerate the break of the mark so that its author too is cut adrift from his original context. This is perhaps akin to writing as *hypomnēsis* in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, which externalises and therefore atrophies knowledge, producing ‘not memory, but memorials’.<sup>46</sup> The deed of gift represents a lethal forgetfulness of God’s writing already in the soul. The internal Christian truth of Faustus’s being, which should be known inwardly thorough living memory of *mnēmē*, is replaced with an external illusion of literal self-authorship, an imitation that can only ever result in death.

But this is complicated by Faustus’s first-person interjection when the narrative repeats the contract verbatim. Here the narrator’s evidence refuses to behave itself, and works at odds with his argument. In his own words Faustus does not sound lost, but confident in the embodying powers of his writing. The covenant opens by stressing his identity and his body’s relationship to the text: ‘I Johannes Faustus, Doctor, do openly acknowledge with mine own hand, to the greater force and strengthening of this letter’ (p. 98). It closes in the same manner: ‘I say it, and it shall be so. And to the more strengthening of this writing, I have written it with mine own hand and blood, being in perfect memory’ (p. 99). As in Marlowe’s play, the emphasis on the document’s materiality implies confidence in the stability of its physical form, presenting the writing as a direct embodiment of intention. ‘I say it, and it shall be so’ encapsulates this belief and underlines the document’s speech act-like structure. Consequently, the encircling of the agreement’s articles with vivid authorial markings can be interpreted as an attempt to outline a contextual jurisdiction for the author’s ruling consciousness. Again this is an image of divine power, an imitation of the ‘and it was so’ in

---

<sup>46</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’, in *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London: Bloomsbury, 2004, repr. 2013), pp. 67-186 (p. 109).

Genesis 1 that describes God dictating the world into being. It seems that Faustus has not forgotten God, but simply chosen to replace him.

We are dealing with a strange double vision here. On the one hand is Faustus's absolute faith in his writing to realize his conjurer laureate identity, and on the other is the narrator's representation of it as a deathly site of disappearance. As we shall come to see later, these contrary, simultaneous interpretations allude to the 'double participation' that Derrida reads in *Phaedrus*, which reveals that writing 'constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other'.<sup>47</sup> Faustus's words only briefly interrupt the narrator's authority, and for the majority of the story we are safely ensconced within his version of events. However the tension does not go away when Faustus's first person text does, and is actually carried within the narration in the conflict between the good writing of God in Faustus's soul and the bad writing of the contract.

In the narrator's hands, the embodiment of the promise on the page articulates the disembodiment of its author. As a result, his account of the contract writing is strangely disconnected and underwhelming:

and to confirm it the more assuredly, he took a small penknife, and pricked a vein in his left hand, and for certainty thereupon, were seen on his hand these words written, as if they had been written with blood, *o homo fuge*: whereat the spirit vanished, but Faustus continued in his damnable mind, and made his writing as followeth.

(p. 98)

---

<sup>47</sup> Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', p. 130.

There is no melodramatic gesturing to behold the ‘proper blood’ (*Faustus*, 2.1.54), nor even any sign of horror at the ominous words ‘*homo fuge*’ appearing on Faustus’s hand. It is reported that the words ‘were seene’ but by whom is unclear. Mephistopheles appears to comprehend and makes himself scarce, but Faustus is either oblivious or wilfully ignorant. The warning is generically addressed to ‘man’, but the devil seems more able to respond to it than the magician, which suggests that in his forgetfulness he has already descended to some sub-demonic level of humanity. This is evident in the strong contrast between Marlowe’s ‘But what is this inscription on mine arm?/ *Homo fuge!* Wither should I fly?’ (2.1.76-77) and the *EFB*’s ‘seene upon his hand these words written, as if they had been written with blood, o *homo fuge*’. The stage-Faustus is appalled by the text’s material presence on his body, stressing ‘mine arm’ and using the invasive noun ‘inscription’, which implies physical, intimate damage to himself. He reads the words aloud, and it is this that announces their presence to the audience. The iteration remakes the warning as his own so that it is incorporated into his language as it is incorporated into his skin. In addition, the personalisation in the translation from third person ‘*homo fuge*’ to first person ‘withere should I fly?’ demonstrates him clearly appropriating the message. As we saw earlier, the ‘*homo fuge*’ is in some respects a part of him even before it manifests itself. However, his prose predecessor does not take ownership of the message in the same way. The words are ‘seene’ but not necessarily by Faustus, and it is left to the narrator to iterate them to the reader. The identification of text with body is not so gruesome either; this ‘*homo fuge*’ is ‘written’ rather than inscribed, and in whose blood is not specified.

The chronology of the appearance of the ‘*homo fuge*’ differs between the prose and the play too. In Marlowe’s version Faustus cuts his arm and begins to write, then the blood congeals and Mephistopheles brings fire to dissolve it, and when the bill is finished the

message appears on his arm. However in the source Faustus cuts his arm, then the message appears, and then he ignores it and writes his obligation. Whereas the play unfolds so that the blood has the final say, the original prose timing presents the embodied words as a warning, and an ineffectual one at that. In his urgency to highlight just how damnable his protagonist is the narrator verges on undermining the authority of the biblical quotation. Also significant is the way that the blood in the *EFB* does not resist being used as blasphemous ink. This is perhaps because Faustus has forgotten his body and soul. Thus estranged, his blood is in effect already spilled, already inanimate and deathly. It does not need to go through the sacrificial burning that transforms the blood into ink in the play. In this respect the bloody text perhaps loses the ‘fairy-tale’ power described by Stott.<sup>48</sup> But in its place arises a sinister alternative inhuman embodiment: the suggestion that even before he writes the contract Faustus is suffused with demonic ink.

Most significantly though, the change in timing disrupts the messianic structure that Gallagher reads in the play. In Marlowe’s version the blood congeals to stall the writing, and the ‘*homo fuge*’ then further upsets time as a judgement from the future that has come too soon. It opens a productive space of uncertainty within the material, which is the site of morality, but also of life. In the *EFB* the ‘*homo fuge*’ holds no such messianic potency. Its pre-emptive appearance compresses the future anterior, so that the judgement is happening here and now. This is perhaps echoed in the way that unlike the non-present shimmering of the words in the play, these ones are seen ‘for certainty’. The blood’s role is effectively reversed, its message becoming one of certain damnation; cold and impassive like a machine.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Stott, ‘Faustus’s Signature’, 34.

<sup>49</sup> Indeed, without the ethical space of the unknown, forgiveness can become equally mechanical. See Jacques Derrida, ‘Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Inc (2)’, trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *Without Alibi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 71-160 (esp. pp. 85-87 and pp. 134-35).

This perhaps has something to do with the difference in genre between the two versions. The play unfolds in the immediacy of the present; each staging is a unique event in which anything can happen. In contrast, the prose narrative recounts the story in the past tense, through the mediation of the rather pompous narrator who is quite clearly certain that Faustus was damned and deserves everything he got. The account is given as a cautionary tale 'out of the which example every Christian may learn, but chiefly the stiff-necked and high-minded may thereby learn to fear God' (p. 181). In this respect he has already been judged, most explicitly by the author but also implicitly by God. The resistance of Faustus's blood in the play reminds us that he still has a chance, whereas the prose appears certain about what will happen even before it finishes telling its story. The *EFB* denies its Faustus the fluid possibilities of the yet to come, trapping him in some kind of mechanical present that constantly severs itself from past and future. The materiality of the contract becomes the material transfer of goods. This perhaps helps explain the unsettling way in which he so easily forgets himself.

In the *EFB* Faustus writes the document in a state of forgetfulness, which causes his words to efface his identity and renders his past inaccessible. He is estranged from his soul, body and blood, and without the flux and flow of uncertainty that makes things live he has no anterior future either. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, he is desperate to remember and be remembered. He attempts to manufacture a history out of writing that will endure beyond his own doomed present. After a spectacular trip into hell on the back of a curly haired bear, Faustus awakens back in his study, and, on deciding that it was not just a dream, 'most carefully took pen and ink, and wrote those things in order as he had seen' (p. 122). Later, he discusses his will with his servant, and as well as bequeathing him books, summons a devil to

serve him 'upon condition that thou publish my cunning, and my merry conceits, with all that I have done (when I am dead) in an history' (p. 173). The catch is that this devil will not obey the servant until Faustus is dead, and is there in part to help him 'remember all' (p. 173) and ensure that the history is full and accurate.

Interestingly, Lucifer also forces Faustus to write to remember, or at least to forget forgetting. After the encounter with the old man, he begins to have thoughts of repentance and decides to 'deny all that he had promised unto Lucifer' (p. 167). This planned denial can perhaps be seen as a wilful forgetfulness, and Faustus's entertaining it suggests that he has forgotten the binding nature of his contract. This is an attempt to return to the fluidity he forsook when first forgetting his body and soul, but it is crushed by Lucifer's demand that he 'begin again and write another writing with thine own blood' (p. 167). It seems that the original text cannot be reinstated, because it is already lost to the past. In Faustus's hellish present it is irretrievable, and so he must 'begin again' and give himself away once more. The absence of a future anterior perhaps means that this is the only possible outcome, because without the flow of life there is no space for interpretation or alternative endings.

Faustus tries to replace the living flow of blood with the flow of ink, attempting to construct a past and a future through the material presence of text in time. His memories appear to be preserved in the written word, which has the capacity to remain legible long into the future. However, the present materiality of the text cannot be so easily equated with the past of its author. Even in an autobiographical mode the author is removed in time and space from the experiences they reiterate to record, and their written words exist as something outside of themselves. This independent thing may continue to exist long after the events it describes, even long after its author's death, but this does not mean that it carries their

memory with it. It is precisely this that the narrator exploits when he appropriates the surplus of Faustus's story and to his own preachy ends. But whilst it makes his retelling possible, it also undermines his usage of it as factual evidence, and in turn destabilises the notion of the spiritual 'truth' that his version of the text is supposed to remind us of.

In the *EFB* memory and forgetfulness, good writing and bad writing, *mnēnē* and *hypomnēsis* become confusingly entangled. This is partly due to the conflict between Faustus's textual remnants and the interpretation that the narrator tries to call them into service of. But it is also symptomatic of an internal conflict within the narrator's agenda. His own text is represented as a pious reminder of God's truth, but it finds its authority on writings that it describes as false, transgressive and even deathly. This suggests that writing is more complex than either author or protagonist like to think; that its material embodiment complicates rather than stabilises meaning and presence.

### *The Devil's Charter*

Another bad magician, Alexander in *The Devil's Charter*, also signs his soul away in a document. But whilst the fateful writing in *Doctor Faustus* reveals a preoccupation with embodiment, this play goes one step further by silently bodying forth the signing in a dumb-show. The play opens with the prologue promising 'bloud and Tragedie,/ Murther , foule incest and Hypocrisie', and then Italian historian Francesco Gucciardini descends from heaven to elaborate, explaining that this is the tragedy of Pope Alexander the Sixth and his son Caesar and 'their faithlesse, fearless, and ambitious liues'.<sup>50</sup> The tone is a bombastic, self-consciously rhetorical one that invokes the likes of 'the Strumpet of proud Babylon,/ Her Cup with fornication foaming full' (7-8) and 'the Christall Palace of/ true Fame' (12-13),

---

<sup>50</sup> Barnabe Barnes, *The Devil's Charter by Barnabe Barnes: A Critical Edition*, ed. by Jim C. Pogue (London: Garland, 1980), 5-6; 24. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

revelling in its theatrical language. Despite this, the all-important moment when Roderigo Borgia promises his soul to the devil in exchange for the power to become Pope Alexander is presented as a dumb show, a ‘vision offerd to your eyes’ (27) and conjured by the chorus Guicchiardini with a silver rod.

Dumb shows were popular in this period, but Barnes’s is notable for its ‘considerable elaboration’ and the important information it conveys about the protagonist.<sup>51</sup> Earlier critics such as Pearne see the device primarily as a way to speed up the plot and provide ‘spectacle and incident’ to keep the audience happy. Indeed, the dumb-show in *The Devil’s Charter* provides spectacle aplenty, but its function is more complex than simply gaudy embellishment. As Katherine M. Carey has argued, dumb shows are a ‘window within a window’ whose ‘hypermediation’ or layering provides a heightened awareness of representation.<sup>52</sup> Depicting the pact scene in this alternative form stresses the performance of writing, the ceremonially-charged power of the act, which works above and beyond the meaning of the words themselves. The impact of this silent writing reveals that, like utterances such as ‘I conjure’ or ‘I swear’, the ritual of the written word can also be a performative. Unlike other dumb shows of the period, this is not an allegorical gloss or a summary of what is to come. It is not a complementary anterior to the play but the direct cause of its events. But whilst showing the significance of the act, the dumb show also represents the un-actable. It is important to remember that the mime we see onstage is a vision, conjured for our instruction by Guicchiardini. As Lisa Hopkins says of the dumb-show in *The Changeling*, which represents the loss of Beatrice’s virginity to a man who has no

---

<sup>51</sup> B.R. Pearne, ‘Dumb-Show in Elizabethan Drama’, *Review of English Studies*, 11.44 (1935), 385-405 (397-98).

<sup>52</sup> Katherine M. Carey, ‘The Aesthetics of Immediacy and Hypermediation: The Dumb Shows in Webster’s *The White Devil*’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 23.1 (2007), 73-80 (73-75), <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0266454X06000650>>

intention of marrying her: ‘instead of the act of darkness, we see the dumb-show’.<sup>53</sup> The actors and audience are shielded from the abomination of Alexander’s founding violence, but perhaps more interestingly the illusory prologue anticipates the vacuous Machiavellian world that is to follow. In keeping with Alexander’s maxim ‘things are as they seeme/ Not what they be themselves’ (483-4), the whole play is in effect founded upon a monstrous absence.<sup>54</sup>

Barnes’s depiction of the contract signing is a bold enactment of a demonic founding violence, its physicality made all the more striking by the silence. With the aid of a monk and a magic book Alexander raises and dismisses several devils in succession until he eventually conjures one ‘in robes/ pontificall with a triple Crowne on his head, and/ Crosse keyes in his hand’ (49-51). On one level this is clearly an anti-catholic slight in keeping with the political climate of Jacobean England. But it also blurs the boundaries between the magician and his fiends, because the chosen devil grotesquely mirrors Alexander’s desired, and indeed future, identity as the demon-pope.

For Jacqueline E.M. Latham the ‘emblematic’ point of this mirroring ‘is not that the devil creates popes, but that the papacy is the incarnation of the devil and that, in becoming pope, Alexander takes on evil himself’.<sup>55</sup> Arguably though, since the dumb show’s role is not ‘emblematic’ but the trigger for the events that follow, we must look for a more direct significance. The devil in pope’s clothing can either project forwards as a prophecy of what is to come or glance backwards to the source of Alexander’s powerful new identity. Either he is inheriting himself from the devil, or he himself is doomed to become a devil in the future. Both these possibilities exist at once, and their dual perspective of time and causality

---

<sup>53</sup> Lisa Hopkins, ‘Acting the Act in *The Changeling*’, *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, 8 (1995), 107-11 (108).

<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, Hopkins also discusses absence in *The Changeling*, ‘Acting the Act’, 108-09.

<sup>55</sup> Jacqueline E.M. Latham, ‘Machiavelli, Policy, and *The Devil’s Charter*’, *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 1 (1984), 97-108 (100).

surround Alexander with the demonic. He is enclosed by the parodic image of the devil in pope's clothing, which is both his past and future. In 'Aphorism Countertime' Derrida describes names as aphorisms: words that outline but also enclose us, paradoxically distinguish us by marking out our ending.<sup>56</sup> In this respect death is contained within the structure of identity, and it follows that the devils circumscribing Alexander perhaps represent the erasure of himself, his life, and his death as contained within his name. This has significant implications for the document about to be signed, because he effectively has no mark to sign with. Again, the authority of authorship is put into question, and his claim to the founding violence represented in the dumb-show is undermined. This inverts the scene's power dynamics, suggesting that Alexander is not in control of the situation, but a victim of violence or maybe even the by product of it. This raises the question, who or what is being authorized in this silent, transgressive ceremony? The play's title epitomises this in that it remains ambiguous about who the eponymous devil is and to whom the 'charter' belongs.

The pontifical devil brings with him an accomplice:

ensuing in blacke  
robes-like a pronotary, a cornerd Cappe on his head, a  
box of Lancets at his girdle, a little peece of fine  
parchment in his hand.  
(51-54)

This creature is a strange mix of the ecclesiastical, the legal and the medical. A 'pronotary' is an official of the papal court, but is also a contracted form of *prothonotary*, which is more generally 'a chief clerk or recorder in a court of law'. Furthermore, it shares its Latin root *notarius* with *notary*, 'a person authorized to draw up or certify legal documents such as

---

<sup>56</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Aphorism Countertime', trans. Nicholas Royle, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 414-33 (p. 416).

deeds and contracts'.<sup>57</sup> The religious sense of the title is enforced by the pronotary's association with the pope-devil, whilst the legal sense is bolstered by the 'little peece of fine parchment in his hand', literally the 'charter' of the title. In addition, however, there is a 'box of Lancets at his girdle', archaic medical implements used for bleeding and opening abscesses. Thus the rather ridiculous symbol-laden figure manages to silently articulate the nuances of his role's etymology and embellishes them with a gory, demonic flourish.

The effect of the pronotary is a distinctive interlinking of power and physicality, which takes on a foreboding tone when combined with the suspicion that Alexander is not entirely in control of what is happening. As part of the Curia the pronotary devil represents the enforcement of the ultimate institutional power. Founded on the Roman Catholic Church, the papal court is in theory authorized by God, and it follows that its judgements are syllogistically, by their nature, absolute and just. In this respect, no founding violence can be as potent as that which signs itself with God's name, and the devil in the pope's crown draws the self-authorising potential of the religious institution to its most subversive of conclusions. The outward mark of God's authorization becomes more important than the divine law it is meant to enforce, and the system becomes closed and self-referential, playing at fancy dress and recycling old symbols to authorize itself. Hammill observes a similar effect in Pope Adrian's justification of his papal right in the B-text of *Doctor Faustus*. Objects such as the triple crown are used as evidence of what Hammill sees as rhetorical or literary performative authorization. But in the B-text, as in *The Devil's Charter*, 'the very object that should stand as perspicuous and determinate evidence of who is Pope is instead caught within a network of theft and fraudulence so intricate that the object can itself indicate no proper owner'. This is testament to the way that 'being Pope means having one's Being stated in objects that could,

---

<sup>57</sup> 'prothonotary, n.' and 'notary, n.', in *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <<http://oed.com>> [accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2012]

potentially, also become one's undoing'.<sup>58</sup> However it also affirms that, like in *Doctor Faustus* and the *EFB*, materiality is no guarantee of certainty or propriety. The passing over of the crown from the devil to Alexander can signify either the transfer of powers or quite the opposite, and perhaps even both at once if we remember that all force also communicates weakness.

The more general sense of the pronotary as a legal secretary and contract writer takes this mad institutional power and marries it with the written word. Again we are drawn back to the deceptively reassuring physicality of things that can be held, kept and shown to others. This perhaps culminates in the 'little peece of fine parchment' that Barnes takes the effort to place in the devil's hands. This inconsequential looking scrap is the play's namesake. Indeed, the choice of *The Devil's Charter* over *The Devil's Deed*, *Pact* or *Contract* is significant because all the binding, empowering and authorising senses of *charter* have their roots in the originating literal meaning 'a leaf of paper'. In modern English *contract* is often associated with a legal document, but in this period few formal agreements were written down and in court a contract was a transaction rather than a mutual exchange of promises.<sup>59</sup> Thus no word is better suited to shifting our attention to text, to the materiality of words embodied on the page.

The play's opening dumb show very clearly sets up a fascination with the relationship between power and objects. Although this scene is silent and we therefore cannot know what the charter says, the signing is nevertheless meticulously mimed onstage:

Hee [Alexander] willingly receiueth him [the pronotary]; to whome hee deliuereth the wryting, which seeming to reade, presently the Pronotary strippeth

<sup>58</sup> Hammill, 'Faustus's Fortunes', 314-15.

<sup>59</sup> Baker, *English Legal History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (London: Butterworths, 1990), p. 360.

up Alexanders sleeue and letteth his arme blood in a saucer, and having taken a peece from the Pronotary, subscribeth to the parchent; delivereth it: the remainder of the blood, the other diuill seemeth to suppe up.  
(55-61)

The action implies that the terms of the deal have already been drafted in hell, and that Alexander need only agree to them. As with the visual suggestion that the papal crown is either inherited from the devils or destined to turn him into a devil, the pre-existence of the charter destabilises his ownership of this founding violence by implying that the damage has already been begun by someone else somewhere else. This passivity is perhaps reflected in the way that it is the pronotary who bares Alexander's arm and draws the blood, turning an act of self-sacrifice into an act of violence against the signer. Similarly, the stage directions instruct him to 'subscribeth', traditionally meaning 'to sign at the bottom as a witness or consenting party to authorize a document'. There is no conjuring or demanding going on here, merely submission. The charter requires his mark to empower it, but the words he brings to life are not his own, and anyway the foundations of Alexander's name and identity have already been shaken by the encircling devils.

The difficulties of Alexander's signature are evident in the ambiguous way that he is referred to by the play text. The original stage directions for the dumb show are thorough but confusing, because they switch between referring to him by his Christian name 'Roderigo' and his papal name 'Alexander'. Once the contract scene is over and dialogue has been restored he is systematically called 'Alexander', but in the play's founding moments his identity is unstable. One cannot help but wonder which name he subscribes with. If he signs as 'Roderigo' then the 'Alexander' of the main body of the play is alienated from this founding moment, and if he signs as 'Alexander' then a sacrifice is made of his old identity. Either way, the divisive breaking moment that the document emerges from is unavoidable

and succinctly articulated. What's more, the mark he makes is also already the mark of the devil before he even puts quill to paper. Whoever or whatever he signs as Alexander/Roderigo is doomed, but the ambiguity of this most important of self-signifiers magnifies a slip and shift at work in every signature. No matter how sincere the act is, a signature inevitably becomes other from its author the moment it unfurls on the page. Its structure and design is to speak for the absent.

Something strange is also happening with the amount of paperwork present in the scene, which mirrors the slipperiness of the signature. The pronotary appears with a parchment in hand, which he gives to Alexander to read. Having read and presumably agreed to the charter, he then takes another piece of parchment from the devil, signs it and returns it. Evidently there is not one document here, but two. Alexander signs one and returns it to the devil whilst keeping the other for himself, suggesting something akin to the legal practice of producing an indenture and counter of a document as means of proof or receipt.<sup>60</sup> The dumb show works hard to found a world where power equals materiality, but this duplication undermines the objectivity of a contract as a physical thing. The two copies have different owners, and are taken away to different places to be read by different people at different times. Alexander is depicted as signing one parchment and keeping the other. This suggests two subtly different texts with different authors and authorising signatures, presumably one outlining his side of the bargain and the other outlining the devil's. The fatal implications of this are only fully realized at the play's end, when Alexander is dying of his own poisoned wine and discovers that, thanks to an interpretive ambiguity in the contract, his time has come seven years earlier than he expected. This perhaps typifies what Cox calls, after Shakespeare,

---

<sup>60</sup> The earliest examples of *Counterpart* and *indenture* listed by the OED are from 1617 and 1672 respectively, but the exchanging of documents in the dumb show and the devil's subsequent production of a 'counterpart' to Alexander's copy of the charter suggest that this concept may have been in use slightly earlier. *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <<http://oed.com>> [accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2012]

‘the equivocation of the fiend’: even the unarguable physicality of the signed, sealed and delivered charter is not safe from the evil ambiguity of the devil’s words.<sup>61</sup>

Like both Faustuses, Alexander writes a demonic contract in his own blood, whose contents returns at the end of the play to be the death of him. However, there is also another wayward writing in the play that approaches the question of authorial ownership from a different angle. It is written under duress, fully playing out the implications of the dumb show’s suggestion that a signature is not necessarily a mark of control. It is a horrific but less supernatural counterpart to the demonic contract, reminding us that there is nothing devilish about the drift and play of language. And more frighteningly, it demonstrates how commonly held assumptions about authorial consciousness being transmitted through a text are potentially far more dangerous than the freedom of iteration.

Alexander’s equally unpleasant daughter Lucretia is married to the lord Viselli, but apparently has other lovers, allegedly including her own father and brother. Aware of these rumours, Viselli tries to keep her away from her ‘friends’ (630) in Rome. Without letting on whether his suspicions are true, she decides to ‘revenge these wrongs/ And love impon’d with thy jealousie’ (594-5) with a cunning plan to murder him. One evening she sits him down to discuss their marriage problems, and grabs him by surprise, threatening him with his own dagger. But instead of killing him then and there she forces him to write something:

Take pen and incke: tis not to make thy will;  
For if thou wilt subscribe, I will not kill.  
Tis but to cleere those scandals of my shame,  
With which thy jealousie did me defame.  
(687-90)

---

<sup>61</sup> Cox, ‘Stage Devilry in Two King’s Men Plays of 1606’, *Modern Language Review*, 93.4 (1998), 934-47 (934). The phrase is from Macbeth.

At this point the contents of the note remains obscure, and the ambiguous verb ‘subscribe’ (used earlier to describe Alexander’s signing in the dumb show) leaves it unclear whether Viselli is made to write out the whole thing or just sign the bottom of a pre-prepared text. Either way, the mark of his identity is used to authorize the words and add credence to their message. However, as the all-too-easy rhyme of ‘tis not to make thy will;/ For if thou wilt subscribe, I will not kill’ perhaps hints, Lucretia has no intention of letting him live, and when the note is finished she promptly stabs him to death. Significantly, her assurance ‘tis not to make thy will’ was not a lie, and is testament to how fascinated *The Devil’s Charter* is with double meanings and the surprising flexibility of truth.

Objectivity is similarly duped in Viselli’s signature, which is genuine but problematic because it was made under duress. ‘Now that part is played’ (692) says Lucretia once he has subscribed, and her choice of noun reveals the duality in the apparently authoritative act of signing. The signature is a *part* in that it is an objective step in her plan, and a physical component of the alternative reality that she intends to superimpose over the murder. But aside from this schematic perspective, it is also a *part* in the theatrical sense; an artificial gesture where Viselli is other to himself, performed in order to further a fictional plot. ‘Performed’ is an important word because it reminds us that the signature is a performative that implicitly states that ‘this is my intention’, and has the perlocutionary effect of making the document official and authoritative in the eyes of the reader. The complexities of Viselli’s signature and what exactly it does, clearly demonstrates how the serious and non-serious are absolutely indistinguishable. The multiplicitous structure of language becomes a foundation for Alexander’s maxim ‘things are as they seeme/ Not what they be in themselves’ (483-4), because there simply is no ‘in themselves’ inherent in our words. At first this appears to

authorize all kinds of ruthless machinations, but it also challenges the authority that such politics grasps at. If Viselli's signature can mean anything, then Alexander's own identity and mark are equally subjective, and the trappings that signify his political power are fully open to interpretation.

When Viselli is dead Lucretia lays him on the ground with the dagger in his hand and the note in his pocket. The writing is not his 'will', but nevertheless its material form and close proximity to his body authorize it in the law to speak for him now that he is unable to speak for himself. When he is found his body becomes a communication, just like the hidden note. Barbarossa reads Viselli's remains, interpreting that 'this dagger grasped in his fatal hand/ Reueales some violence, wrought on himselfe' (750-51), a reading which Lucretia encourages by glossing her dead husband with the melodramatic cry 'now with these eyes I see the murtherer' (779). This paves the way for the discovery of the note itself, which Moticilla expects 'will bewray some matter' (786). The *OED* describes 'bewray' as 'probably more or less of a conscious archaism since the 17<sup>th</sup> cent.; the ordinary modern equivalent is *expose*', but its usage here perhaps has a greater significance. 'Expose' has very physical and visual associations, such as to leave something open to danger or the elements; or to unmask something, bring it to light or make it visible. In contrast, 'bewray' is a more verbal form of reveal, originally meaning to accuse or speak evil of, and expanding to describe exposure through the telling of secrets and betrayal of someone's confidence. Eerily, the note on Viselli's body does not passively show what has become of him; it engages the living in discourse and tells them. The other characters assume that this makes its testament more reliable, but really its active engagement with the present means that it has already drifted away from and is lost to the past.

When the writing is finally read aloud by Barbarossa it is revealed to be a fake suicide note, describing how Viselli was unable to live with his guilt after having discovered that his accusations against Lucretia were unfounded. It closes in a similar manner to the demonic documents: ‘subscribed with mine own hand, and sealed with my seale. Gismond Viselli’ (804-5). Although he is not bargaining with his soul, Viselli’s signature still invests his identity in the writing to enhance its authority. Similarly, there is no blood ink, but his ‘hand’ has been literally and metaphorically given over to the embodiment of the words on the page. This turns into a bitter pun when juxtaposed with the note’s account of how ‘with mine own vnfortunate hands I haue ended my life’ (802). Just as Faustus styles his blood writing as a self-sacrifice, Viselli’s writing is in effect his own death warrant. With documentary evidence that she is innocent Lucretia has no need for him to live, and so in a roundabout way his writing hand does indeed become the hand that kills him. Once again the plot’s dark transitions rely upon the subjective way in which the truth can tell lies: in a sense Viselli does die by his own hand, and when Lucretia cries ‘told I not that the murtherer was present?’ (813) she is in fact telling the truth.

Most unsettling in Viselli’s tragedy, however, is the way that not only his writing but also his identity becomes distorted. The growth and change of text over time is a natural effect of its iterative structure, but in this case the assumptions of the readers hijack his identity and pull that along too. His lost consciousness is not allowed to rest, and by assuming that it is present in his words his readers actually do him further offence. They zombify the author, forcibly raising him from the dead to act against his own volition, and it is the signature that authorizes them to do this. Here we see how even the mark of oneself is an independent agent, and why Derrida describes his own signature as a ‘counterfeit’.<sup>62</sup> So

---

<sup>62</sup> Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’, p. 21.

strong are the cultural assumptions about the veracity of the signature that it takes the supernatural to discover the truth about Viselli's death, when Alexander conjures a devil to show him who killed his and his son Candy. Alexander has Lucretia killed with poisoned makeup, but when he philosophises 'he that would rise to riches and renowne/ Must not regard though he pull millions downe' (2004-5), it is clear that he is more interested in protecting his political career than giving Viselli justice. Rather bleakly, his writing is allowed to continue speaking falsely for him.

The two fatal signatures in *The Devil's Charter* demonstrate the independence of autograph from author. However the play's world counter-intuitively clings to surface realities of the material, creating an amoral, hyper-political environment where anything that can be engineered is authorized. Critics have noted that this and the characters' brutal expediency align the play with Machiavelli's political philosophy, which was a popular topic of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Indeed, the play is perhaps more intimately connected to him than most because it features his friend and champion Francesco Guicciardini as a narrator, and depicts the crimes of Caesar de Borgia, whom he describes as an exemplar ruler in his most famous work *The Prince*.<sup>63</sup> In this respect the play has a curiously circular relationship with its political kinsman, much like Alexander has with the devils. It depicts a figure who to some extent inspired *The Prince* in the light of the cartoonishly evil Machiavellianism that arose from sensationalist readings of it. Latham simply sees this self-reference as affirmation of the play's intimate relationship with Machiavelli, but on the contrary it raises questions about origins, interpretation and identity.

---

<sup>63</sup> Latham, 'Machiavelli, Policy', 98.

### **Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay**

Despite being a supposedly ‘good’ magician, Friar Bacon’s magical intentions have much in common with Faustus’s. He too seeks knowledge and power, evidently craving a similar stability and authority. But whilst Faustus seeks to embody his dreams first in magic speech acts, then in the anterior body of Mephistopheles, and finally in the contract with Lucifer, Bacon takes the embodiment of his ambitions to more literal extremes. He performs little conjuring, and makes no supernatural deals. Instead his powers are materialized in an enormous brass head that, it is fabled, will ‘unfold strange doubts and aphorisms/ And read a lecture in Philosophy’ (2.25-26), and enable him to ‘compass England with a wall of brasse’ (2.29).<sup>64</sup> Like the contract written in blood, the head can be seen as a prosthesis that enables the magician to extend the limits of his authority. With its solid, unambiguous form it may initially seem to be less problematic in this function. Its powers are perhaps technological rather than supernatural or superstitious: its revelations will be a triumph of science and learning, the product of man’s God-given knowledge. Similarly, the use of blood ink means that Faustus’s contract is a part of his body, whereas Bacon’s head is a distinct object made of inanimate brass. The automaton might appear to embody all the fearsome reliability of the pure machine; its mechanical independence and technical objectivity lend it an air of unequivocal authority. But as we discovered in the previous chapter, authority has a mystical foundation that entwines technology and science with the subjectivities and uncertainties of interpretation, hope and belief:

the mystical thus understood allies belief or credit, the fiduciary or the trustworthy, the secret, (which here signifies “mystical”) to foundation, to knowledge, we will later say also, to science as “doing”, as theory, practice and

---

<sup>64</sup> Robert Greene, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, ed. by J.A. Lavin (London: Ernest Benn, 1969), 2.25-6; 2.29. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

theoretical practice — which is to say, to faith, to performativity, and to technoscientific or tele-technological performance.<sup>65</sup>

On closer inspection, Bacon's alternative form of embodiment is no solution, and is open to the same issues that prevent Faustus from reaching certainty. What is different is the way that the play and its hero deal with the destabilization it carries within it.

The head's ability to utter aphorisms and wall England with brass are reiterated time and time again in remarkably repetitive language. Its close association with aphorism in particular reveals a deep rooted connection with the manner in which Faustus tries to use speech acts. As Derrida has described, the aphorism is a sealed space that in its moments of duration excludes all other discourses.<sup>66</sup> It has a jurisdiction like that of a founding violence or the intention-centred context that dominates standard speech act theory. This offers another seductive illusion of certainty. It follows that Faustus's magic words and Bacon's brazen head are differing representations of the same thirst for an absolute, all powerful consciousness. Interestingly, Faustus and Bacon both promise to conjure magical walls of brass to protect their respective nations. This urge of fortification perhaps provide a geopolitical analogue of their ambitions of absolute identity, expressing the same desire to enclose a jurisdiction, like the magic circle Faustus draws upon the ground when he first conjures Mephistopheles. As McAdam puts it 'In his fantasy to wall England with brass, the country really serves as a metaphor for Bacon's own grandiose self; he recognizes no need to *engage* with any other. The fantasy is thus a dream of omnipotence and omniscience'.<sup>67</sup> In this description there is also a sense of the aphoristic, of a dream of total independence that 'recognizes no need to *engage* with any other'.

---

<sup>65</sup> Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge', p. 57.

<sup>66</sup> Derrida, 'Aphorism Countertime', pp. 417-18.

<sup>67</sup> Ian McAdam, *Magic and Masculinity in Early Modern English Drama* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009), p. 39.

This obsession with enclosure is also evident in Bacon's frequent use of the word *frame*. Three times in the play he speaks of how he has 'framde' or 'framde out' the head of brass (2.54, 2.164, 11.17), and also claims that his wall around England will surpass 'the brazen walles framde by Semiramis' (2.162). Similarly he gloats 'you haue seene the Frier frame his art by prooffe' (2.164) after humiliating a sceptical peer who suspects that he 'tels of more than magicke can performe' (2.76). The now prevalent sense of 'to set or enclose something in a frame' is not recorded until the eighteenth century. Instead Bacon uses the word in a more fundamentally material sense of creation or construction, of giving something structure and shape. Both forms are transitive, but whilst the modern meaning describes an aesthetic addition, a final flourish to finish off or complement something, the earlier formulation dictates the physical presence of its object. It follows that the head's material existence is not simply a glamorous embodiment of Bacon's magic, but the mode of its presence. This is evident in Bacon's fervent urgings to Miles when he is appointed to watch the head: 'now Miles in thee rests Frier Bacons weale,/ The honour and renowne af all his life,/ Hangs in the watching of this brazen-head'(11.25-26). Without its successful performance he and his magic are nothing. As with Faustus and the '*per accidens*' (1.3.47) incident, authorship and origin are distorted by the way that the framed object begins to subsume its creator. Again, mutuality begins to emerge from an apparently simple, one-way power dynamic, questioning the possibility of the absolute individual.

The aphorism offers a space of absolute authority, but like the performative its structure leaves it open to the vagaries of chance, mistake and the non-serious. The event is always lurking ahead ready to surprise the smooth workings of the machine. Its sealed state allows it to reign absolutely within the jurisdiction of itself, but its imperviousness to what is

outside itself also renders it powerless against whatever surrounding context it sits in. It can and must encounter the other, because its unique space depends upon an exterior to define its interior, but these meetings will be accidental and at the mercy of chance. Anything can happen to the aphorism, and what happens to the head is Bacon's irreverent assistant Miles. The magicians Bacon and Bungay have been keeping constant watch over it for sixty days and nights, but, too tired to stay awake any longer, Bacon fatefully asks Miles to take over on the night that it is due to speak. Traister has suggested that 'Bacon's human limitations are apparent here' and 'it is appropriate that these limitations should appear here, as Bacon is overreaching'.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, for McAdam Miles 'emblemizes the human nature Bacon tries to "master" but on which he is ultimately dependent.'<sup>69</sup> It is surely significant that both critics find a palliative humanity in this scene that corrects Bacon's transgressive or psychologically unviable ambition. This is perhaps related to the motion and might of language, the chanciness that animates our experience of writing and turns the mechanics of repetition into the experience of an event.

Miles's task is simply to watch over the head and awaken his master when it begins to talk, but he fails to take his orders or his charge seriously. 'Now, Jesus bless me, what a goodly head it is; and a nose!' (11.43) he comically observes, as he sits down against a post that he hopes will be 'as good as a watchman to wake me if I/ chance to slumber' (11.47-48). Of course this leads to inevitable slapstick, with Miles falling asleep and being jolted awake by a violent knock on the head. 'Passion a God I have almost broke my pate' (11.50) he cries, humorously but also ominously forecasting the head's fate. By coincidence typical to the aphorism, the head also awakens at this point, inadvertently aligning itself with the clown.

---

<sup>68</sup> Barbara Traister, *Heavenly Necromancers: The Magician in Early Modern English Drama* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), p. 79.

<sup>69</sup> McAdam, *Magic and Masculinity*, p. 40.

Finally, the brazen head speaks the long-promised aphorisms: ‘time is’ (11.53), ‘time was’ (11.64), ‘time is passed’ (11.73). True to their form, these pithy utterances cannot be denied, but Miles is not impressed. He addresses it directly, asking ‘why master Brazenhead have you such a capital/ nose, and answer you with syllables [?]’ (11.54-55). His attempt to engage it in discourse, and the cheerful rambling of his speech in contrast to the head’s aphorisms, highlight the smallness of its jurisdiction. Its words may be absolutes within their space, but when it can ‘speak but two words at once’ (11.66) this power is negligible. Here we see the flip side of enclosure, and therefore another way in which force contains an inversion of its own power. It subscribes an outline to enable identity, but in doing so necessarily limits the thing it defines. Miles’s language has no such authority, but the diminutive aphorism is picked up and swept along in the effusion of his playful discourse. Unlike less certain forms, it is unable fight back or defend itself because by definition it cannot even acknowledge the other who engages with it.

Miles subjects the head to further indignities by iterating its supposedly mighty utterances:

.... ‘Time is’? Is this all my  
 master’s cunning, to spend seven years’ study about ‘Time  
 is’? ....  
 .... ‘Time  
 was.’ Yea, marry, time was when my master was a wise man,  
 but that was before he began to make the brazen head.  
 (11.55-68)

He faithfully quotes its words, but translates them into something entirely non-serious. The prose version of the story amplifies this, allowing Miles to incorporate the head’s words into silly songs based upon familiar folk tunes, invoking a very different oral tradition. This

demonstrates how, for all its sealed-up authority, the aphorism is entirely at the mercy of context's whims, as fluid and open to interpretation as a popular ballad. From the inside its meaning is absolute, but from the outside it is abandoned to drift just as much as any other communication. Here we see how closely the aphorism is related to the speech act, how Bacon's semi-technological head is no different to Faustus's magic words or the text of his contract. The apparently differing materialities of all three begin to merge, reminding us that all forms of communication share the same essential structure of iterability.

Miles's mocking iteration also challenges the distinction between the serious and the non-serious. Bacon, his peers and even the King's anticipation of the head's aphorisms imply an expectation that its words will do something, will carry an illocutionary force. Yet, what it comes out with has no such effect as 'I promise' or 'I bet'. Similarly, when Miles iterates its words, it is again difficult to say whether any act has been performed. Something does happen: time passes and the head is destroyed, but if there is any chain of causation leading to this it is incomprehensible. Neither Miles's nor the head's words can be said to be more effective; neither's intention (if the head can be said to have intention or consciousness at all) is able to make anything happen. Perhaps the mysterious aphorisms in this scene act out the impossibility of a fully sealed, authoritative speech act. Such a communication would always be felicitous, just as the aphorism is always undeniable, but this would only be the case within its own inaccessible interior. It would be unable to interact with anything else and therefore would do nothing, transmit no illocutionary force, in the shared world of discourse. Most likely it would not even be comprehensible.

The head in particular is a creature of iteration. Faustus's document disguises its iterability beneath an illusion of endurance, whereas the head is a (dare I say) brazen

performer. It performs in the early modern sense by giving Bacon's powers a corporeal presence, and also in its role as a prosthetic extension to complete the powers required to fulfil his ambitions. But on a more metatheatrical level it is also a performer in the way that it requires an audience to hear its utterances. It must be watched: if and only if Bacon is present when it speaks will its promise of 'strange aphorisms' and a wall of brass be fulfilled. Alone or in the non-serious company of Miles the effect of its words is unintelligible. This posing of the head as a performer associates it with the iterative nature of theatre in general, which is founded upon the same but different performance of a play text from night to night. And this is not simply a matter of form, because Friar Bacon is part of a self-consciously theatrical and iterative tradition that Kent Cartwright has defined as 'humanist drama'. He argues that playwrights in the late 1580s tried to encourage repeat visitors to the theatre by drawing on old hits whilst presenting them with a fresh twist. This resulted in plays full of the humanist techniques of imitation, allusion, cross referencing and satire, fully aware of their place within the contemporary theatrical canon.<sup>70</sup> Alongside stock characters, plots and phrases, stage properties formed a pool that playwrights could dip into at will, and it is likely that the brazen head, so spectacularly incongruous to us now, may have been familiar to sixteenth century audiences from productions of Greene's earlier play *Alphonsus, King of Aragon*.<sup>71</sup>

The head is structured by both the absolute of the aphorism and the infinite mutability of iteration. This contradiction is evident in the way that the content of its utterances articulates the flow of time that enforces iteration and confounds the stability of its own sealed form. 'Time is', 'time was' and 'time is passed' it announces like the ticking of a clock, speaking out against the apparent durability of its brass form and sealed language.

---

<sup>70</sup> Kent Cartwright, *Theatre and Humanism: English Drama in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 222-23.

<sup>71</sup> Kevin LaGrandeur, 'The Talking Brass Head as a Symbol of Dangerous Knowledge', *English Studies*, 80.5 (1999), 408-88 (409), <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00138389908599194>>

Earlier, Bacon's academic colleagues had promised grandiose commemoration, should he succeed in realising his ambitions:

Oxford shall in characters of brass,  
 And statues such as were built up in Rome  
 Eternize Friar Bacon for his art.  
 (2.40-42)

However, the message his creation carries is that nothing, not even brass, can extend a stable presence into the future. As if to prove its word, the brazen head is duly destroyed by a disembodied hand wielding a hammer as it speaks those final words 'time is passed'. This destruction is perhaps its strongest, most literal moment of embodiment, where the object flawlessly does what it says, paralleling the flow of text in Faustus's blood inscribing life through the body. And like Faustus's blood, the head's moment of impossible absolute communication works against the intents of its author, its flare of brilliance merely illuminating what is not possible.

It is tempting to read the head's destruction negatively in terms of pious iconoclasm, a penance for academic overreaching or an elaborate memento mori.<sup>72</sup> Bacon himself seems to do so:

'Tis past indeed. Ah, villain, time is past;  
 My life, my fame, my glory, all are past.  
 Bacon, the turrets of thy hope are ruined down;  
 Thy seven years' study lieth in the dust;  
 [...]

---

<sup>72</sup> See respectively: Mark Dahlquist, 'Love and Technological Iconoclasm in Robert Greene's Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay', *ELH*, 78.1 (2011), 51-77, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/elh.2011.0007>> ; LaGrandeur 'Dangerous Knowledge', 412; Todd Andrew Borlik, 'More Than Art': Clockwork Automata, the Extemporising Actor, and the Brazen Head in Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay', in *The Automaton in English Renaissance Literature*, ed. Wendy Beth Hyman (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 129-44.

Bacon might boast more than a man might boast,  
 But now the braves of Bacon hath an end;  
 Europe's conceit of Bacon hath an end;  
 His seven years' practice sorteth to ill end;  
 (11.92-112)

He subtly echoes Faustus's image of himself as a fortified tower, except here it is derelict in a classic image of Babel-esque transgressive ambition. Everything is 'past', including the 'fame', 'glory' even 'life' by which Bacon identified himself, and an inevitable 'end' has been reached. To some degree this is also contained within the aphorism, whose sententiousness can spill over into pomposity and become 'a sly calculation aiming at the greatest authority'.<sup>73</sup> Good or ill, its structure reveals an important relationship between identity and enclosure, which is evident in both the absolutes that Faustus and Bacon model themselves on, and the encircling walls they intend to build. Identity depends upon being distinct, which is impossible without an outer limit. Thus, to have an identity is to have an ending. The same goes for the jurisdictions of authority, be it on a map or within the semantic space of Austinian context or an aphorism. Faustus aspires to a 'dominion that .../ Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man' (1.1.63) but without an outline there can be no sense of 'dominion' and therefore no sense of Faustian rule. Similarly, neither Bacon nor his head would be recognizable were they infinite and could not be celebrated for their academic achievements. Therefore, to maintain Bacon's 'life', 'fame' and 'glory' they must remain finite. This dual force of identity and enclosure is yet another example of how endurance on any level, be it material, semantic or political, is essentially impossible.

However, this realization is not as gloomy as it may first appear, simply because *the play does not end here*. Dahlquist argues that this is because Bacon is still required to perform an act of internal iconoclasm, but more optimistically it is perhaps a function of the

<sup>73</sup> Derrida, 'Aphorism Countertime', p. 417.

play's humanist interest in imitation, cross-referencing and allusion.<sup>74</sup> Even as Bacon mourns everything that 'tis past', he is iterating the lost head's aphorism. He insists that everything has come to an 'end', but his own repetition of the word prevents things from coming to a close. This endlessness is also present on a wider scale at plot level in the way that the play 'contains its own sequel'.<sup>75</sup> It supplements itself beyond its tragic ending so that two scenes later Bacon is back, this time with a magic mirror. After an unpleasant incident where what is seen in the glass motivates two local boys to kill each other, the destruction of a magical object is repeated in a different light, this time with Bacon doing the damage and renouncing his powers. Neatly it is the 'poniard that did end the fatal lives' (13.80) that delivers the blow.

It is this willing embrace of iteration within the structures of the play that causes Friar Bacon's fate to differ so strongly from Faustus's. The brazen head and the demonic contract are identical in that they are both communications of monolithic intent, and thus the functioning of both is equally intertwined with iteration. However, whilst Faustus refuses to accept the mutability of his words and, ultimately, himself, Bacon comes to realize that transformation is not just possible, but necessary. The head plays a vital part in this by showing that for all its absolutism the aphorism is finite, and therefore can and must go astray. The truth it teaches is that there is no truth. In this respect, its spectacular destruction is not a failure at all, because it takes a conceptual hit on behalf of Bacon and in doing so reveals the iterative structure as site of limitless possibilities. Iteration gives Bacon a second chance, and when he reassures himself 'sins have their salves repentance can do much./ Think mercy sits where Justice holds her seat' (14.99-100) he transforms 'time is, time was, time is passed' into a message of redemption. The important realization here is that iterative flux is not just a punishment for arrogant striving for absolutes, nor is it inherently corrosive

---

<sup>74</sup> Dahlquist, 'Love and Technological Iconoclasm', 70.

<sup>75</sup> Cartwright, *Theater and Humanism*, p. 244.

or nihilistic. Grafted into certain contexts it may appear this way, but beneath this it is the life of language, the effect of life upon language.

### **Coda— Doctor Faustus**

*Doctor Faustus* tackles questions of embodiment and materiality most memorably in its fascinating representation of the contract signing. However, the magic encyclopaedia that Mephistopheles gives to Faustus just after he has signed provides an interesting parallel to Bacon's aphoristic brass head. In his opening soliloquy Faustus could not find what he wanted in the whole canon of human knowledge, but this single encyclopedic volume is able to expand to fit his every whim. Whatever information he asks for, be it incantations, astronomy or natural science, it is there with the turn of a page. As a neat embodiment of the performative words and forms that can enact all his heart's desires, the book appears to be the perfect reward for the agreement he has just embodied in writing. Its contents are apparently infinite yet are decisively contained between two covers, a contradiction that appeals to Faustus's ambitions for an absolute identity.

The materiality of the magical encyclopedia resembles that of Bacon's brass head. By embodying the performative in an object it creates an illusion of stability and certainty, as if the incantations it contains can be unproblematically wielded like a weapon. And like the head's metallic form, its binding represents an aphoristic enclosure. Between its covers lies a jurisdiction of absolute authority, made all the more formidable because this book's contents are apparently infinite. There could be no more potent symbol of the magician's power; it contains everything and is therefore capable of doing anything. But as with the head, the book's definitive enclosure is its weakness as well as its strength. Speech acts are conventionally considered as events, they are *what happens*. In this scene, however,

performative magic embodied in the supernatural encyclopedia becomes a thing which events *happen to*.

What the magical encyclopaedia embodies is the paradoxical relationship between performativity and event. A felicitous speech act uses the conventions of language to produce the event it speaks of, but for Derrida the singularity of the event depends upon it coming from the outside, totally unexpectedly, and therefore ‘couldn’t care less about the performative’.<sup>76</sup> The book has the potential to contain words that can do anything and everything in the world, but this in itself does not make for certainty. Like Faustus’s tower-like identity, the enclosed jurisdiction of a speech act has an outer edge with which it has no choice but to interact with the outside world. Capable of producing events, it is also vulnerable to events itself. Chance, accident and the madness of what happens sweep it along irresistibly.

This is affirmed in the unexpected comedic scene that immediately follows Faustus receiving the magic book. In the previous act Faustus’s boy Wagner had acquired a servant of his own by conjuring devils to scare Robin the ostler into accepting his offer of employment. He has presumably learnt his supernatural abilities from his master, and summons the devils by simply calling their names. Robin takes inspiration from this, and in this later scene proudly shows off ‘one of Doctor Faustus’s conjuring books’ (2.2.1-2) that he has stolen. On seeing him, his friend Rafe incredulously asks ‘come, what dost thou with that same book? Thou/ canst not read’ (2.3.15-16). Despite this, Robin is confident that he can get him drunk ‘at any tavern in Europe for/ nothing’ (2.2.25-6) and help him seduce Nan Spit. No conjuring

---

<sup>76</sup> Derrida, ‘Typewriter Ribbon’, p. 146.

happens here, but in a later scene the two tease the vintner and accidentally summon Mephistopheles using Latin nonsense mixed with garbled scraps of the liturgy.

A crime perhaps exemplifies the event; it happens out of the blue, traumatically, because as Derrida says the event is blind to intention and desire, and can therefore only be experienced as a trauma.<sup>77</sup> This other, who is not the book's owner and is so alien to it that he cannot read the words that comprise it, stumbles across it at random and is able to take it just like that. Its power supposedly lies in the words it contains, but nevertheless Robin is able to conjure Mephistopheles simply by owning it. This dramatically undermines the linguistic conventions that make speech acts happen. Pure event, he bypasses the complex demands of felicity, haphazardly breaking the rules until something miraculously happens. And what happens does so by sheer accident. Robin begins muttering his meaningless incantations to intimidate and distract the Vintner whilst he palms a stolen goblet to Rafe, and is terrified when Mephistopheles appears with fireworks. Indeed, his intention to keep the goblet clearly has no significance whatsoever because in his fear he throws it back to the Vintner.

Mephistopheles tries to punish the two by turning them into an ape and a dog. But even this goes awry when a pleased Robin exclaims 'How, into an ape! That's brave. I'll have fine sport/ with the boys; I'll get nuts and apples enough' (3.2.41-2) and assures Rafe that 'thy head will never be out of the pottage pot' (3.2.44). Ridiculously the plentiful food that Robin expects to come across as an ape almost fulfils a desire that someone projected onto him earlier. When looking for someone to press into his service, Wagner imagined Robin a likely candidate because of his hunger:

---

<sup>77</sup> Derrida, 'Typewriter Ribbon', pp. 159-60.

The villain is bare, and out of service, and so  
 hungry, that I know he would give his soul to the devil for  
 a shoulder of mutton though it were blood-raw.  
 (1.4.8-10)

This is not the case, and Robin proudly retorts that he would ‘need have it well roasted and a good sauce to/ it, if I pay so dear’ (1.4.13-14). Nevertheless, an alien intention projected onto Robin by someone else is here finally realized by accident, as punishment for an accidental conjuring, thanks to but also regardless of his theft of a book that he cannot read.

Like Miles’s scene with the brass head, Robin and Rafe’s encounters with the magic encyclopedia poke fun at authority by exploiting the very boundaries that outline its power. The impossibility of absolute knowledge is supernaturally achieved through the infinite book, but as is made very clear this does nothing to protect it from what cannot be known or expected. Again it is demonstrated how the force that an authority exerts is equally a non-force or weakness, and is liable to flip at any moment. This is all very funny, and makes for exciting and unpredictable drama. But on a more frightening note, it perhaps makes us wonder what exactly it is that Faustus is sacrificing everything for.

This reading of the various attempts at embodiment in these texts provides further affirmation that the *telos* of idealization is limited by the very iteration and difference that make it possible. For our magicians, who all struggle determinedly against this inherent limitation, this is the stuff of tragedy. However, it is important to remember that iteration is not in itself a destructive force, and its openness is not meaninglessness. On the contrary, ‘it is precisely to the extent that this relation to *telos* is also intricate, complex, split, that there is movement, life, language, intention, etc’.<sup>78</sup> This will be considered further in the following chapter, where this delimiting limitation and its relation to death are more explicitly explored

---

<sup>78</sup> Derrida, ‘Afterword’, p. 129.

through accounts of the magicians' endings. It must surely be significant that almost every one of our texts feels the need to record the details of its protagonist's death.

## 4. Deaths

In the first chapter we discovered how the notion of authority itself is interpretive and performative. According to the destabilising rule of the supplement, it therefore undermines the absolute ambitions it makes possible. In the second chapter we found that this kernel of alterity or absence structures all writing too; and that experience and identity must also be thought of in terms of this textuality. Not only is absolute authority impossible, but so is complete knowledge and presence of the self. This implies disaster for our magicians, but can also be interpreted as a messianic openness that surpasses the tragedy of their failure. Our reading of embodiment came to suggest that this structure of limitation or corruption is not only necessary but vital, in the sense of life-giving. By frustrating idealisation it holds open the future, enabling uncertainty to power communication, growth and change.

In this final chapter we turn to death, which may seem surprising after the optimism that closed our analysis of embodiments. On the contrary, though, death is the ultimate spacing, and functions just as the rupture of a text or the performative foundation of authority does. It makes as tangible as possible the absence or non-presence that keeps life, language and identity moving. In this respect, it is perhaps no coincidence that after conjuring and infernal contracts, death is the most recurrent theme in our texts. Even the departures of the apparently good, Christian magicians are depicted; so this is no matter of just deserts.

Death is unthinkable, unspeakable, and it follows that what we are really going to discuss here is the self's relationship to the other— and not simply to other people, but to that which is completely beyond me and my knowledge or experience, utterly alien. As we explore the ways that our texts try to broach this impossible subject, we will think about

forgiveness and prayer. These are very special performatives that confound conventional notions of presence and authority, because their felicity is completely in the hands of the other. We will also consider in more detail the absolute alterity of the event, and its relationship to the promise of the messianic. More than either of the previous chapters, this final one is brimming with the language of Christianity. It is about hope and belief when every shred of knowledge is lost, and the trust that we therefore have to give and bear witness too every single time we speak with another, whether they are present or not. It is about what is beyond: the originary division that confounds the chronology, presence and meaning that it makes possible. We can name this God or religion, but it is equally the writing in which our experience and thought are so utterly immersed. As Derrida puts it, 'language has always started without us, in us and before us. This is what theology calls God, and it is necessary, it will have been necessary, to speak'.<sup>1</sup>

As is only fitting, our reading shares in the tragedy and terror of our magicians' deaths, but also surpasses them. They have all failed in their ambition to become the absolute conjurer laureate, but in doing so have denied the utter death and stillness of complete self-presence. Their ends represent a gift: the gift of openness, of the dynamis that keeps writing alive, and enables us to read (and perhaps write) these centuries-old texts once again, but for the very first time, right here and right now.

As Derrida expresses in the subtitle of *Aporias*, death is 'beyond the limits of truth'. It presents the limits of knowledge, language, consciousness and presence:

Fundamentally, one knows perhaps neither the meaning nor the referent of this word [death]. It is well known that if there is one word that remains absolutely

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', trans. Ken Frieden, in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 73-142 (p. 99).

unassignable or unassigning with respect to its concept and to its thingness, it is the word “death.”<sup>2</sup>

The word we living have for it is simply a place holder for something out there beyond our experience, which we will no longer be able to name when it finally happens to us. It follows that we only know of death ‘as such’. In light of this the concept of ‘my death’ becomes quite a problem, in the sense of both a projection thrown forwards, and of a prosthesis hidden behind for protection or secrecy.<sup>3</sup> My death is singular and irreplaceable; nobody can die on my behalf or in my place. And yet the arrangement of words ‘my death’ is impossible, meaningless. This is because consciousness, identity and language — everything that informs the ‘my’ — cannot be reconciled with ‘death’, which represents both the limit and its crossing point.

This does strange things to the notions of proper and property, which Derrida explores through analysis of Heidegger’s famous contradictory assertion in *Being and Time* that whilst death is the most proper possibility for *Dasein*, it is the possibility of something that is precisely impossible for *Dasein*. To put it crudely, Heidegger argues that *Dasein* (conscious being, literally *da-sein*, ‘being-there’) is always projected forwards into the realm of possibilities. This defines it, but also causes it to be incomplete until death, which is the ultimate, final possibility to end all possibility. In this respect, *Dasein* ‘stands before’ itself in death, and understands its existence through its always immanent nonexistence. And yet, when death does come, *Dasein* will no longer be there to experience it. Thus, death is the most proper possibility, the most unique and defining of *Dasein*’s possibilities, but also the one that it can never experience because it limits experience itself. We will not be discussing

---

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Aporias: Dying — awaiting (one another at) the “limits of truth”*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Derrida draws these two senses of problem from their Greek root *problēma*, both of which are present in the background throughout *Aporias*. See in particular pp. 11-12.

Heidegger here, but this problematic twisting of the boundaries of what is mine will have significance for our magicians, who attempt to appropriate their own deaths.

We are stuck here in this discussion of death at what Derrida calls an ‘aporia’: a difficult, prohibited or even impossible passage, but more accurately a ‘nonpassage’ because it upsets the very notion of borders and boundaries.<sup>4</sup> As a nonpassage the aporia cannot be negotiated, resolved or overcome, instead it must be endured. Thus it is no longer a passage at all, and must be experienced as an event. It is what happens, insanely, unexpectedly and by chance, and its utter disinterest in logic or dialectics means that it causes problems precisely in the place where it is no longer possible to constitute a problem. At the aporia there is neither projection nor protection. The concept of the boundary is disrupted and the self is laid bare to the other. What unfolds in *Aporias* is therefore a thinking ‘*according to*’ this remarkable nonpassage rather than a struggle against it. It is an approach that has quietly informed much of Derrida’s work, and elsewhere he has described the method of deconstruction itself as ‘a certain aporetic experience of the impossible’.<sup>5</sup> Death is perhaps the ultimate aporia, but other motifs of undecidability such as iteration, justice and the double bind are also aporetic. It follows that the encounters our magicians have with death are not unrelated to their founding violences or the troubles they have with writing.

The aporia is an event, the unexpected coming or arrival of something. But who or what exactly is it that comes? It is impossible to know, because it necessarily comes from beyond the outer limit, and if we knew what to expect its coming would not be an event. Derrida’s word for this is the *arrivant*. This French term can variously mean arrival, arriving, or newcomer, encapsulating the uncertainty of the event and its disruption of the borders it at

---

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, p. 13, p. 15 (paraphrasing *Psyché: Invention de l’autre*, p. 27).

once delimits and crosses. As an arrival it is simply what comes, what we have been waiting for. As arriving it is not here yet, so we cannot know who or what it is, or even when it is going to arrive. And as the newcomer it does not simply cross the threshold, it ‘affects the very experience of the threshold’, problematizing the problem and confounding the dialectic oppositions that a border always divides.<sup>6</sup>

Thinking in these aporetic terms enables us to grasp the contradictions that trouble the boundaries of being. I know that my death is coming, but I do not know what it is, or when and where it is going to come. Death is imminent, but will always come too soon, and life will have been so short. And when it does finally arrive, it will be uniquely mine but impossible for ‘me’ to experience. This most personal and singular of occurrences is thus structured by the other, the *arrivant*. Like the event of writing it cuts, dividing and disrupting self-presence, breaching supposedly uncrossable borders. In French, Derrida’s subtitle *Mourir — s’attendre aux “limites de la vérité”* (translated as ‘Dying — Awaiting (one another at) “the limits of truth”’) expresses this by playing with the multiple transitivity available to *s’attendre*. One awaits one’s self, in awaiting one’s own death; but when it happens this event will come as the *arrivant*, so one is awaiting the other too.<sup>7</sup>

In a supplementary logic, we can also wait for each other, in the mutual promise of mourning that structures all our relationships. The sad truth is that one will always die before the other, and he or she who is left behind will mourn. Again time is disrupted by anachronism, because two can never die together, and it is the one who arrives late who must wait. This mutual promise of waiting, with all its openness to the other, is for Derrida ‘as

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, pp. 33-35 (p. 35).

<sup>7</sup> It is also a temporal translation of Heidegger’s spatial *mit dem Tod steht sich das Dasein selbst in seinem eigensten Seinkönnen bevor*- ‘with death *Dasein* stands before itself in its most proper possibility’. Derrida’s interpretation opens up the transitivity of waiting, so that one awaits not only oneself, but also the wholly other, and both also await one another. (pp. 64-9)

close as ever to the limits of truth'.<sup>8</sup> It is the nearest that the living ever come to death, and therefore the only way we can understand life. The 'originary mourning' of always already awaiting each other is precisely the spacing that enables the self to comprehend its relation to itself.<sup>9</sup> It follows that 'my death', the thing most unique and proper to me, is almost entirely other. As Derrida concludes, 'the death of the other, this death of the other in "me" is fundamentally the only death that is named in the syntagm "my death," with all the consequences that one can draw from this.' We will try to explore some of these consequences in our readings of the magicians' deaths.<sup>10</sup>

In *Aporias* Derrida demonstrates what a fascinating and significant sticking point death is. The concept of 'my death' circumscribes identity, enabling us to recognise ourselves, and it is singularly mine. At the same time however, it is always already welcoming the other in. Death thus delimits the most fundamental boundaries of existence, identity, knowledge and consciousness, but simultaneously crosses and destabilises them, holding everything open. Therefore, it is surely significant that almost all of our idealizing magicians, good and bad, finally face their end on stage or on the page. We probably assume that all fictional characters would eventually die were their narrative or plot extended long enough, but the authors of these accounts all take the pains to tangibly lay their protagonists to rest, or at least pronounce them dead. This is perhaps to do with their doomed drive to fulfil the *telos* of idealization. They attempt to appropriate their end to their own end, but this absolute loop can never be allowed to close upon itself. The texts and our discussion of them are inevitably hindered by the way that we the living can only experience and speak of death 'as such'. When we read of or watch the magicians die we are experiencing the death of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, p. 65.

<sup>9</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, p. 61.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, p. 76.

other. Nevertheless, these texts gamely face the aporia of ‘my death’, getting as close as they can through a series of false endings, anachronisms and supernatural survivals.

### *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*

In the opening induction of *The Merry Devil* play, we encounter Peter Fabell on the due date of his pact. The devil comes to collect his soul, only to be tricked into allowing him another seven years of life. The main plot then unfolds, happily culminating in a wedding and a good breakfast, with no mention of the protagonist’s impending death. In the prose version, though, something far more interesting happens. Fabell makes a deal with the devil when he begins using magic, but does not specify a ‘terme or time’.<sup>11</sup> Instead, the agreement seems to be that he will give up his soul when his life comes to an end of its own accord. The impatient devil demands that he ‘set a time of payment’ (sig. A4<sup>v</sup>), and Fabell cunningly promises that he can have his soul as soon as his candle has burnt out. Needless to say, he promptly blows out the candle and pockets it, effectively stopping the contract’s passage of time. The devil does not give up, however, and one night he steals the candle from his pocket whilst he is asleep. Once again they haggle, and agree that if Fabell does everything he can to tempt other souls to hell, the devil will allow him his soul until his natural death. Wary of being fooled again, the devil makes him swear to the terms:

Why (sayd Maister Peter ) by the blacke riuer, Lucifer thy Lord sweares by, I sweare, I will: and when I am buried, either within the Church, without the Church, in the Church porch. Church-yard Street, field, or high way, take thou my soule.

(sig. B1<sup>v</sup>)

---

<sup>11</sup> Anon., *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, ed. by Nicola Bennett (London: Nick Hern, 2000), sig. A4<sup>v</sup>. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

Cleverly, he swears ‘by the blacke riuer, Lucifer thy Lord sweares by’, turning his promise into a citation of someone else’s. It sounds impressive, but in Fabell’s context ‘the blacke riuer’ is of no significance and cannot bind him. But there is also something else going on here. Fabell’s wording feels overly precise, almost to the point of sarcasm. However it soon becomes clear that his verbosity is more than just petulance. The narrative fast-forwards to Fabell’s old age. His body, with its ‘white haires, weaknesse, aches and such like signes’ (sig. B1<sup>v</sup>) gives him warning that his time is almost come, and he begins to make preparations for his death. He digs his death bed into the wall of the church, and remains there ‘hartly praying & repenting him of all the euill he had committed’ (sig. B1<sup>v</sup>). Unlike the earlier situation where the devil tried to take him by surprise, Fabell here embraces death as such, trying to meet it on his terms.

He is still grasping at the comfort of knowing that he has done everything he can in life to speed his soul to heaven after death; trying to hide from the aporia behind the self-affirming knowledge of his piety. This is not so different from what our magicians have been doing all along, using self-authorising performatives in an attempt to create some kind of certainty. But at the same time, his terms are no longer his, were always already no longer his. Confession and prayer are never simply statements of fact or pious intention, and their felicity cannot be realised by the speaker alone. On the contrary, they irrevocably open up to the other:

In every prayer there must be an address to the other as other: for example— I will say, at the risk of shocking— God. The act of addressing oneself to the other must, of course, mean praying, that is, asking, supplicating, searching out. No matter what, for the pure prayer demands only that the other hear it, receive it, be present to it, be the other as such, a gift, call and even cause for prayer. This first trait thus characterizes a discourse (an act of language even if prayer is silent) which, as such, is not predicative, theological or constative.

(p. 110)

Fabell's words are sent ahead of him with no certainty that they will be felicitous or even heard. All he has is the hope that sooner or later redemption will come.

We cannot really embrace death, because it is not here yet. Preparations in life, no matter how close to the end, bear no significance to the coming event. This is because something impossible happens to the 'I' and 'my' of 'I pray for forgiveness of my sins' when the threshold is crossed. Fabell's prayers and repentance have no effect upon the uncertainty of death. And what's more they have no effect upon the uncertainty of forgiveness, because it too is an aporia. For Derrida, 'pure forgiveness' is an event and is 'mad', 'unconditional' and therefore 'aneconomic'.<sup>12</sup> Repentance or punishment are not given proportionally in exchange for it, otherwise it would become the cold workings of a law machine. This is not to say that forgiveness does not happen, any more than death does not happen; but rather that we cannot work towards it, prepare for it. It must be left wholly in the secrecy of hands of the other.

So Fabell is still stuck; still enduring what are now two related aporias. This is perhaps characterised by his curious death bed, dug into the church wall with his own hands. He has carefully planned its location, but it remains inherently undecidable: his body is neither inside nor outside the church. This cunningly exploits a loophole hidden in his promise to the devil, denying him claim to his soul. Here is an aporia of his very own: the language he used to make the agreement creates a pocket, not dissimilar to the time-freezing pocket in which he hides the candle, where he is free from any obligation to that very

---

<sup>12</sup> 'On Forgiveness', trans. by Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes, in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 25-60 (pp. 34-35).

language. He inhabits the boundary itself, neither one side nor the other of its dividing line, reminiscent of the '*arrivant* par excellence... whatever, whoever, in arriving, does not cross a threshold separating two identifiable places'.<sup>13</sup> This does not solve anything; on the contrary it demonstrates a potent thinking *of* the aporia, which moves with uncertainty rather than struggling against it. In this remarkable gesture Fabell acknowledges the event to come without expecting it, mimicking or performing its uncertainty with what is left of his dying body. He impossibly divides whilst remaining continuous: awaiting himself, awaiting something unknown and wholly other, and each also awaiting the other.

As well as disrupting space, the hole in the church wall also upsets time and being. It introduces an anachronism that thwarts the devil for a second time. He triumphantly arrives to claim his prize, only to find that he is at the wrong time as well as in the wrong place. Interestingly, this taps into both the spatial disruption of Heidegger's *steht sich....bevor* and the temporal, transitive disruption of Derrida's *s'attendre*. Fabell smugly informs him 'thou comest too soone, and yet to late to haue it' (sig. B1<sup>v</sup>). Impossibly, this suggests that the magician is paused on the very knife edge of life and death, both still here and already gone. Furthermore, it turns out that 'he that redeemed my soule hath took't to keepe' (sig. B1<sup>v</sup>). Fabell is not yet wholly dead, but he is already forgiven. Derrida describes how 'forgiveness is not, it *should not be*, normal, normative, normalising. It *should* remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality'.<sup>14</sup> And this is certainly the case here. Regardless of any expectations or preparations, and regardless of time, space, life and death, forgiveness interrupts in the most extraordinary of fashions.

---

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, 'On Forgiveness', pp. 31-32.

This may be an overtly Christian narrative, but forgiveness is not the end. We have witnessed everything it is possible for us to know (and some things it should be impossible for us to know) of ‘The Life and Death of the merry Deuill of Edmonton’. And yet the narrative does not finish here, for this is only chapter two and there are eighteen more to go. Fabell appears to have crossed every boundary imaginable in approaching his death, but here he even surpasses his own end. We read of him dying, only for the next chapter to begin ‘Maister Peter Fabell one morning very early, walking the fields...’ (sig. B2<sup>r</sup>). He haunts himself, crossing the boundaries that enclose identity. Similarly, the narrative returns to the beginning, but we readers can never forget the end. In this sense we are already awaiting him at the limit, mimicking the mourning that structures our every relationship with each other. Here we see how the *arrivant*, the event, cannot be disentangled from the *revenant*, the ghost or literally that which comes back. The yet-to-come, be it death, oneself, the other, is always cast ahead. But by being ahead it is before, and therefore prior to the present, is its origin and its past.<sup>15</sup> The ordering disrupts itself, so that what will come has already been, and will begin for the first time by coming back. Thus the self has its origins in the other, the living in the dead, and presence cannot be separated from absence.

The ghostly games are not limited to Fabell, either. His bawdy sidekick Smug, who eventually usurps him in the narrative, is also something of a revenant. This is actually revealed before the story begins, in the introductory poem ‘Smugs Ghost’. Smug talks in the first person, directly to the reader. He begins by spookily telling us of his incorporeal body, describing how ‘with the ayrie essence sempiternne,/ You might a body (now is dust discernne)’ (sig. A3<sup>r</sup>). Once again —or for the first time— time and materiality are disrupted. Smug

---

<sup>15</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), esp. pp. xix-xx and pp. 4-11.

speaks to us from beyond the grave, somehow enabling us to see a body that ‘now is dust’ and hear words that should not be utterable.

Smug mournfully recalls how vivacious and carefree he was in life. He contrasts the sad image of his friends ‘that holpe to beare my body to the graue’ (sig. A3<sup>r</sup>) with memories of them drinking and stealing venison together, a tale that will be re-lived in detail within the course of the main narrative. ‘Grant my ghost this, though our bones be rotte/ Our names may lieu & never be forgotten’ (sig. A3<sup>v</sup>) he begs. Tragically, we cannot yet do him this kindness, because we need to hear the story first. In a different way here, our mourning for him takes the form of waiting or delay. The poem is a fairly standard memento mori, but just as we cannot remember Smug’s life yet, neither can we remember our own deaths yet. Recalling death is supposed to create the incentive to live well, but as we have seen, it is impossible to expect or prepare for the event of ‘my death’. So even if we could remember what has not happened yet, it would make no difference to its eventual happening. Remarkably, this introduction puts the reader in the same situation that Fabell will experience in two chapter’s time, trying to attempt the impossible and prepare for the unprepareable. In dizzyingly anachronistic ordering, Smug’s haunting of us causes us to haunt Fabell, who dies and then haunts the rest of the narrative.

For all its rude jokes and humorous idiocy this narrative nevertheless begins with the death of its two heroes. This necessarily casts a subtle mourning tone over everything that follows, no matter how lively or vivacious. In this way it is perhaps a reminder in a more positive way than that of the traditional memento mori. It reminds us, quite literally, that the death of the other comes first, and that the most personal and proper notion of ‘my death’ will always carry the other in me. The structure of *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*’s narrative

makes little conventional sense: its introduction opens the text after Smug's end, and then it begins with Fabell's end, only to begin once more somewhere in the middle. It spectacularly disrupts the borders and boundaries of time, space and being, liberating itself from the conventional laws of order and progression that usually structure text. It therefore has no obligation to adhere to the rules of linear narrative, and resists being interpreted decisively, simply or in a straight line. This in turn frees the reader, broadening the possibilities of our reading by productively complicating our position before, after, in front, behind, inside the text.

### ***The Famous History of Friar Bacon***

The prose *Friar Bacon* also has an interest in trying to lay magicians to rest. As the subtitle details, it tells not only of 'wonderfull things that he did in his Life' but 'Also the manner of his Death' and in addition 'the Lives and Deaths of the two Conjurers, Bungey and Vandermast'.<sup>16</sup> Bungay and Vandermast's demises are directly linked to their pacts with devils. The two have been playing tricks on each other at an inn, and eventually decide to resolve their mutual dislike in a supernatural duel. They summon mythological creatures to terrify each other and when that is not enough they both conjure devils to help them. Bungay's devil drives a hard bargain, insisting on payment of 'but three drops of blood', (sig. F4<sup>v</sup>) and threatening that if he does not agree he will aid Vandermast instead. Funnily enough, his opponent's devil says the very same thing. Desperate for victory, they both make the payment and begin the fight again, only to be overtaken by a 'great tempest, with thundring and lightning' (sig. G1<sup>r</sup>). The narrator explains that 'the Devill would be paid for the knowledge that hee had lent them, hee would tarry no longer, but then tooke them in the height of their wickednesse, and bereft them of their lives' (sig. G1<sup>r</sup>).

---

<sup>16</sup> Robert Greene, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, ed. by J.A. Lavin (London: Ernest Benn, 1969), sig. A3<sup>r</sup>. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

It seems that the drops of blood are not the beginning of Bungay and Vandermast's dealings with the devil, but he cleverly chooses this moment 'at the height of their wickedness' to call in his dues, making the greatest possible profit on the agreement. Unlike Fabell, who is highly conscious of his impending death, these vain magicians are each so intent destroying the other that they forget the danger they are putting themselves in. Every death is singular and irreplaceable, yet these two are both so bent on becoming the one and only conjurer laureate that they end up becoming mirrors to one another. And they do not simply present a likeness. Their battle is a mutual performance where they complement and complete one another's gestures: Vandermast conjures a dragon, Bungay sends St George after it; Bungay calls up a sea monster, Vandermast invokes Perseus. Similarly, their devils both play exactly same trick on them, and this trick works because it is clear that they will both react in the same way to the prospect of losing. Boundaries are being violently drawn in their battle for singularity, each trying to wholly shut out the possibility of the other. However, the demarcations are a surface of interface, necessarily permeable and requiring the mutual participation of the two enemies. There is an inherent hospitality at work in the standoff, clearly evident in the way that one carefully accommodates the mythological conjurations of the other.

Two cannot die together; the aporia of death is one of asynchronicity. And yet the impossible almost happens here. Bungay and Vandermast seem to contain one another and appear to be brought together in death along the dividing lines of their battle. Perhaps we can read into this something of the difficulty in reconciling the singularity of 'my death' and therefore 'my life' with the universal inevitability that everybody lives and everybody dies. First person markers such as 'I', 'me' and 'my' are deeply personal, but apply to everyone.

This aporia traces but also disrupts precisely the boundaries of identity (and therefore authority) that Bungay and Vandermast are fighting about. An interesting footnote to this is the way that the two singular, impossible events of death are treated in identical fashion by the townsfolk who find their bodies. Despite the dubious state of their corpses, whose burns clearly suggest the work of the devil, they are both given ‘a Christian buriall’: Bungay ‘because of his Order sake’ and Vandermast ‘because he was a stranger’ (sig. G1<sup>r</sup>). Having crossed the uncrossable limit their differences become irrelevant, and to the living they are simply the unknowable dead. This is not, however, to say that the living are dismissive or rudely ignorant. Vandermast gets his Christian burial ‘because he was a stranger’ but perhaps Bungay is now a stranger too.

As with *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, we encounter the death of another before that of the protagonist himself. The events that lead up to Bacon’s death are quite different, but are nevertheless haunted by his fellow magicians’ sticky ends. All is going well until some local young men ask to use his ‘rare Glasse’ (sig. G1<sup>v</sup>) to check up on their fathers. This mirror enables the user to see ‘any thing that was done within fifty miles about him’ (sig. G1<sup>v</sup>). It is well known in the area because Bacon is ‘no niggard of his cunning’ (sig. G2<sup>r</sup>) and shares its powers with those who ask. Significantly, the narrator is keen to depict the mirror in a positive light. It is described as a ‘wonderfull glasse’ (sig. G2<sup>r</sup>) of ‘excellent nature’ (sig. G1<sup>v</sup>), and is ‘rare’ rather than supernatural. As with the rest of Bacon’s magic, there is no explicit mention of assistance from devils or spirits, it is simply a wondrous object — perhaps even a piece of technology — that happens to be in his possession.

Bacon clearly has good intentions in sharing his mirror with the locals, as do the young men themselves, who simply wish to check up on their fathers back in their

hometown. They are friends, and so are their fathers, who are also neighbours. They do not expect the mirror to show them anything dangerous, but when they peer into it they see the men fighting in hatred. In another strange doubling of death, the sons also fall to blows and end up killing one another. It is as if they are compelled to reflect what they see in the reflection, causing the singular event of death to multiply as if in a hall of mirrors. The boundaries between father and son, reflection and reality blur confusingly in the path of the coming aporia. The simulacra in the mirror become both a prediction of the terrible event that is about to happen, and the origin of that event.

The narrator is careful to excuse Bacon, stating that the young men died ‘through their own follies’ (sig. G2<sup>f</sup>). However the hero is less kind, and ‘judg[es]’ (sig. G2<sup>f</sup>) that the mirror, and by implication he himself, has caused their deaths. Judgement is yet another aporia, closely related to that of forgiveness. To be legal it must apply the rules of the law, but to be just it must consider each case singularly. The moment of judgement sits balanced between event and machine. Bacon unjustly, perhaps mechanically, judges himself guilty: ‘Wretched in thy knowledge, in thy understanding wretched; for thy Art hath beene the ruine of these two Gentlemen’, he laments (sig. G2<sup>v</sup>). In his remorse he renounces magic and turns to faith because ‘had I beene busied in those holy things, the which mine Order tyes me to. I had not had that time that made this wicked Glasse’ (sig. G2<sup>v</sup>). He also inflicts violent punishment by smashing the offending glass. In Greene’s *Friar Bacon* play the destruction of the magic glass is cathartic, but in this version the sacrifice is cruelly met with the terrible news that Vandermast and his friend Bungay have also died. Chance is clearly not on Bacon’s side. A string of anachronistic, singular deaths almost impossibly arrange themselves in what looks like a terrible accusation. The *contretemps* slips into chorus, and in the madness of judgement Bacon reads meaning in the illegible. He aligns his mirror with Bungay and

Vandermast's transgressive magic, and comes to the conclusion that dabbling in the sciences when one should be praying is as dangerous as feeding drops of blood to the devil.

In the next and final chapter Bacon falls into deep mediation on both 'the vanitie of Arts and Sciences' (sig. G2<sup>v</sup>) and the wonders of the divinity that he has neglected. The word 'condemn' (sig. G2<sup>v</sup>) is repeated over and over: he condemns himself for studying magic, neglecting divinity and 'for spending a time so short, so ill as he had done his' (sig. G2<sup>v</sup>). There is a strong sense of ending here, of Bacon closing off from himself all possibility of forgiveness or redemption. Significantly, this is also a closing off from the other. His is an auto-condemnation: both self-reflexive and alarmingly mechanical, leaving no space for the impossible forgiveness of the victims or their families. Again the self-sufficiency of the performative 'I judge' is used to create certainty. This is evident in the way he very stridently performs his guilt rather than asking for forgiveness. He gathers 'Friends, Schollers, and others' (sig. G3<sup>r</sup>) together and publicly burns his books on a bonfire. He also makes a speech to them describing how his impressive accumulation of knowledge has only led to 'the losse of a better knowledge, the losse of divine Studies, which makes the immortal part of man: (his Soule) blessed' (sig. G3<sup>r</sup>). The wondrous possibilities of his learning are all shut down, destroyed in this violent self-affirmation of guilt.

There is perhaps something rather selfish in Bacon's all consuming-guilt. It denies others the opportunity to give the gift of forgiveness, but also closes off the gifts he himself could have given to others. In these final chapters the narrator divides from his protagonist, tempering the self-inflicted judgements with a sense of loss and regret about all that the hero renounces. Bacon decisively smashes the mirror as rejoinder for the deaths it caused, but in his account of this the narrator cannot help dwelling on the rarity of the treasure that has been

lost. He mournfully describes how ‘with that he broke his rare and wonderfull Glasse, whose like the whole world had not’ (sig. G2<sup>v</sup>). Similarly, in his public speech Bacon enumerates his astonishing knowledge, listing how he has ‘unlocked the secrets of Art and Nature’, ‘found the secrets of the Starres’ and ‘found out the secrets of Trees, Plants and Stones, with their several uses’ (sig. G3<sup>r</sup>). Presumably his intention is to unfavourably juxtapose the fleetingness of such knowledge with the eternal truths of divinity, but it is difficult not to end up marvelling at the extent of his abilities and the capacities of his learning. To some extent, Bacon’s own fervent words challenge the goodness of his actions. And when the narrator takes back over, the value of what is being thrown away is made even clearer. The onlookers protest as he makes to burn his books ‘because in them there were those things that after-ages might receive great benefit by’ (sig. G3<sup>r</sup>). Bacon is adamant though, and the narrator sadly describes how he ‘threw them all into the fire, and in that flame burnt the greatest learning in the world’ (sig. G3<sup>r</sup>).

The narrative then moves on to how ‘caused he to be made in the Church-wall a Cell, where he locked himselfe in, and there remained to his death’ (sig. G3<sup>v</sup>) after which he is lain in a grave ‘he digged with his own nayles’ (sig. G3<sup>v</sup>). This is remarkably similar to Fabell’s resting place, but has a very different effect. Their holes in the wall are both inscriptions in space, but one cut is an opening, whereas the other is a memorial, communicating only loss. In awaiting his death Fabell finally moves with uncertainty, throwing himself open to whatever event will come. For Bacon, however, the end has to all intents and purposes already come. He has condemned himself and erased all trace of his former life and learning. The magician who saved men from the devil and protected the course of true love is gone. It follows that his hole in the wall is simply a manifestation of his closure, a place to wait out the ending of the end. The narrator catches something of this in his final line: ‘Thus was the

Life and Death of this famous Fryer, who lived most part of his life a Magician, and dyed a true penitent Sinner and an Anchorite' (sig. G3<sup>v</sup>). Interestingly, we do not find out if Bacon gains salvation or not. His stubborn shutting down will not let us in. But in addition, his brutal self-judgement and exercising of punishment have perhaps estranged him from its possibility. Not because of his crime or the arrogance of his self-judgement, but because in his transformation from magician to anchorite the guilty one is no longer there to be forgiven. Perhaps the anchorite will find his space in heaven, but the magician, whom we have followed throughout the narrative, cannot. This is perhaps another way in which this account doubles death.

This reminds us that enclosure of any kind is limitation as well as protection or authority, and that the hole in the church wall is actually no different to the fortitude of Faustus's tower-like identity. While still a magician out in the world Bacon is famed for being 'no niggard of his cunning' (sig. G2<sup>r</sup>), but his pious retreat into his cell crushes the generosity that distinguishes good magicians such as Bacon and Fabell from the self-absorbed bad ones. His showy renouncement of magic denies not only his immediate friends but an endless stream of 'after-ages' (sig. G3<sup>r</sup>) the gift of his knowledge. His inner suffering and self-repulsion turns outwards, punishing those around him as much as himself.

### ***The English Faust Book***

Like Fabell and Bacon, Faustus in the *EFB* also repents before his death. Interestingly though, his last minute conversion is related to the iteration of his contract with the devil. His dramatic about-turn towards Christianity at the end of the narrative very clearly demonstrates how text and author become different from themselves and each other over time as the life of both progresses. The slip and drift that causes such trouble to Marlowe's Faustus is actually

his saving grace. In 'Plato's Pharmacy', Derrida describes writing as a *pharmakon*: either a remedy or poison or both at once. It has the ability to shift between oppositions because it is in itself neither one nor the other, perhaps does not even have an identity as such. Rather it is 'the prior medium in which differentiation in general is produced'.<sup>17</sup> Earlier we saw how writing is contradictorily linked to memory in the *EFB* in a similar manner to Plato's *mnēmē* and *hypomnēnē*. On the one hand, Faustus forgets God and the truth written in his soul, replacing them with the deathly materiality of the contract with Lucifer. On the other, the narrator exploits the textual remnants of his life and his own written interpretation of them as a means to remember Faustus's sins and therefore not to forget God ourselves. Writing is both a poison and a remedy, the source of damnation and of salvation. In its final chapters the *EFB* seems to absorb this opposition and its narrator's dialectic, didactic intentions, so that Faustus's writing becomes a site of equivocation, and his death becomes unexpectedly ambiguous.

As we have seen, Faustus's story is brimming with texts that are supposed to capture and stabilise. His contract is a deadly trap that cuts him off apparently irreparably from God. And to preserve what is left from this rupture he compulsively composes his own history. He writes an account of his trip to hell to preserve the memory of the 'such wonderful things' (p. 122) he saw there. Similarly he asks his servant to write a history of his life, and sends a letter to an old school friend describing how he flew around the world in eight days. Both of which speak of an arrogant desire for fame and remembrance to counter his own forgetting of himself. However, in the unusually lengthy closing chapter Faustus has a change of heart. He describes how 'those lewd practises the which this full 24. yeares I haue followed, you shall hereafter finde them in writing', but urges that his 'lamentable end ... be a sufficient warning'

---

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', in *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London: Bloomsbury, 2004, repr. 2013), pp. 67-186 (pp. 128-9).

(p. 178) against such behaviour. Although the words have not changed, the arrogant, transgressive magician who wrote them has. And he has the performative power to reread and transform the proof of his damnation. The intentions of the consciousness that was present at the time of writing are not carried in the text, so that whilst the marks remain fixed, their meaning is shaped by whatever context they happen to be in from moment to moment.

Faustus realizes the fruitful potential of iteration when he rereads his contract with Lucifer at the end of the play. The limitless potential to reread has been there all along, but it is always difficult for an author to read over their own work. This is particularly the case for Faustus because in his excitement at becoming the author of a demonic contract, he had forgotten the other countless possibilities of his identity. Writing more does not help him reconnect with the fluidity he has lost, but being confronted with an old text of his does. At the appointed time of Faustus's death Mephistopheles returns his written contract, juxtaposing his confident, supposedly enduring, earlier self with the terrified and desperate creature he now is. Author is recast as reader, and the discrepancy between the two is all too clear. But rather than just descending into despair, Faustus grasps at this difference, turning the poison into a remedy.<sup>18</sup> Despite the prospect of almost certain damnation he begins to exploit the potential of iteration, reading his own past in a new repentant context, and encouraging those around him to do the same. This does not change the past or necessarily save him from hell, but it opens him up to the other both inside and outside of himself. As we have seen, the other disrupts boundaries, preventing them from ever fully closing. It holds them open to the limitless possibilities of the supplement, which means that anything can happen. In such a space there is hope, a messianic faith in what is coming.

---

<sup>18</sup> This echoes Derrida's account of the hemlock used to execute Socrates, 'which in the *Phaedo* is never called anything but a *pharmakon*'. It is 'presented to Socrates as a poison yet it is transformed through the effects of the Socratic *logos* and of the philosophical demonstration in the *Phaedo*, into a means of deliverance, a way toward salvation, a cathartic power' ('Plato's Pharmacy', pp. 129).

Faustus performs his new openness by publicly confessing his sins in an 'oration' (p. 177). This is both similar and very different to Bacon's speech, because an oration can be both a formal public speech and a meditative prayer. The self-authorization and supposed stability of a signed document is replaced with a performative begging for forgiveness that can only be fulfilled by the listener or reader. We are clear by now about the ways in which writing is no different to speech, but the spoken delivery of Faustus's confession is still notable because it makes no illusions about its authority or endurance. His switch to utterance demonstrates an acceptance of the necessary fluidity that structures both language and identity. In many ways it is the opposite of his counterpart in Marlowe's play, who shifts from faith in conjuring, to dependence upon Mephistopheles, to investing all in the written contract. Prayer, conjuring and authorization are all performatives, but the former is special because of its incompleteness. Intention is offered up, in the hope that its message will be received kindly, and that forgiveness will be granted. In the face of the aporia it is communication knowingly without boundaries, an utterance freed from its author and left to drift and act (or not act) as chance and circumstance chooses. But it is also hope without certainty, a Christian leap of faith that might just save Faustus's soul. Neither the protagonist nor the reader has any idea of whether his confession will be effective. His body is found 'lying on the horse dung, most monstrously torn' (p. 180), but it is impossible to say what has become of his soul.

Faustus's death is far from decisive. It is perhaps not even singular. After his confession his friends urge him to learn the words of a particular prayer that goes: 'Although, O Lord, I must leave my sinful body unto the devil, being by him deluded, yet thou in mercy mayest preserve my soul' (p. 179). This is contrary to what he agreed in the contract with

Lucifer, but as this final chapter so emphatically demonstrates, writing is not certainty. It divides death, opening up the possibility of multiple endings for his body and soul. Similarly, Mephistopheles tries to comfort his ex-master with thoughts of an end beyond the end: ‘My *Faustus*, be not thou so cowardly minded; for although that thou loosest thy body, it is not long unto the day of judgement, and thou must die at the last, although thou live many thousand years’ (p. 176). The narrator dismisses this as ‘false, and against the saying of the holy scriptures’ (p. 176), but it nevertheless embellishes the undecidability of Faustus’s death and forgiveness. Perhaps, impossibly, he will be damned *and* forgiven. As he says himself, ‘I die both a good and bad Christian’ (p. 178), balanced on the undecidable borders of death and judgement.

There is no finality to Faustus’s end, and this is reflected in what has been described as the *EFB*’s ‘tendency to generate surplus that resist any final closure of accounts.’<sup>19</sup> After Faustus has died the scholars go to his house and find ‘this history of Doctor Faustus noted, and of him written as is before declared’ (p. 180) and ‘annexe’ onto it the final chapter of his demise, and also his servant’s account is ‘made into another book’ (p. 180). In addition, the *EFB*’s narrative appears to be a collation of these histories alongside various documentary remnants such as the letter to his friend, a copy of the original deed and the reiterated deed that was sent to a kinsman of his. With each addition and edition, each translation or reading, the narrative and its outcome is altered and therefore multiplied. The moralising narrator of the present version is adamant that ‘thus ended the whole history of Doctor *Faustus* his conjuration, and other acts that he did in his life’ (p. 181), and that the only reading of it is a cautionary one of use to all Christians. However the most devout section, the final chapter, arises from precisely the opposite, from the ability to read differently. The *EFB* can turn out

---

<sup>19</sup> Luke Wilson, *Theaters of Intention: Drama and the Law in Early Modern England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 210.

piously or blasphemously; it can be historicised, deconstructed or simply read for pleasure. The texts it is founded on and the text that is its fabric resist decision and simple opposition, because they are beyond or behind this kind of project. Like Faustus on the brink of death, there can be no survival or endurance of meaning in the conventional sense, but there is the limitless possibility of something else.

### *Virgilius*

Perhaps the strangest death of all is Virgilius's. Death is always untimely, but Fabell and Bacon's at least manage to manufacture a sense of readiness for the coming unknown. Whilst they go having prepared as best they can in life to die well, Virgilius actually meets his end whilst attempting to prolong his life. The ultimate limit cuts him off in the very process of trying to surpass it. The final chapter of the narrative begins with an account of how 'Thus as Virgilius i his lyfe had done many maruyulous and sotyll thynges And also had promysed to the Emperour many other dyuerse thynges and meruylouse' (sig. E4<sup>v</sup>). The strange manner in which this is put mingles past and future. 'Virgilius i his lyfe had done many maruyulous and sotyll thynges' reads like an epitaph, laden with a sense of reflection and hindsight, maybe even mourning. The pluperfect tense of 'had promysed' also suggests events lost far in the past. The narrator may be looking backwards, but the Virgilius he describes is still looking forwards in his grandiose promises to the Emperor. These include making trees 'bere frute thre tymes in a yere', 'maken ye shyppes for to sayle ageynste the streme as with the streme', making 'ye peny to be as lgytly gat as spente', and enabling women to give birth 'wtout any maner felynge anye payne at all' (sig. E4<sup>v</sup>-F1<sup>r</sup>). Notably, the pledge to alter the workings of fruit trees involves disrupting the passage of time, just like the strange opening of the chapter does. The uncertainty of the iterative cycles of nature, the seasons by which we mark the passing of the months, would be transformed into a prelapsarian stability.

There is a strong underlying sense of Christian transgression here. This is further evident in the way that all of Virgilius's promises will brazenly fiddle with the God-given patterns in nature. In this respect they are as transgressive as Faustus's threats to 'make the moon drop from her sphere/ Or the ocean to overwhelm the world' (1.3.39-40). Granted, he wishes to use his powers for benevolent purposes rather than being bent on needless destruction, but the religious implications of the final two promises underline the problematic undertone. The pain of childbirth and the struggle to provide for themselves are two of the sufferings that God condemns Adam and Eve to when they are ejected from the Garden of Eden. Thus Virgilius's apparently good hearted promises can be seen as an attempt to reverse the fall, not through faith and repentance, but through skilful use of the knowledge that distanced humanity from its creator in the first place. There is a Hermetic piety to this ambition, but it also represents the crossing of certain uncrossable borders, transgressing in order to restore the damages of the first transgression.<sup>20</sup> Even more problematically, it is a dream of self-sufficiency that actually has no need for God, and therefore erases the concept of a divine origin outside of ourselves. As Faustus brags, 'A sound magician is a mighty god' (1.1.64). There is a belated admission that all this shall be done only 'if that it fortun'd hym nat to dye in the mene wyle' (sig. F1<sup>r</sup>), but there remains a strong sense that Virgilius intends to leave nothing to chance.

Enclosure and the metaphor of walls and towers are recurring themes in these magicians' deaths. Faustus gets caught in a contract with the devil after bragging of his 'fortitude', whilst Fabell and Bacon both end their days ensconced in the walls of a church.

---

<sup>20</sup> Faustus can read in terms of the Hermetic tradition. For an overview of this see Andrew Duxfield, 'New Directions: *Doctor Faustus* and Renaissance Hermeticism', in *Doctor Faustus: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Sarah Munson Deats (London: Continuum, 2010) pp. 96-110. See also the classic text on the hermetic tradition, Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1964).

Similarly, Virgilius makes his promises to the Emperor and then immediately goes off to make ‘a goodly castell that hadde but one goynge in thereto’ (sig. F1<sup>r</sup>). In a necromantic parallel to the spiritual rebirth of the two good magicians, he completely cuts himself off from the outside world to transform himself into a new man. The contrast between their humble hollows and his own heavily protected tower perhaps demonstrates how his retirement from the world is a self-affirmation rather than a holy self-effacement. The Anchorite’s cell is a negative space carved inside a border and makes no physical imposition upon the world, whereas Virgilius’s tower is a bombastic structure conspicuously standing ‘without the cytie of Rome’ (sig. F1<sup>r</sup>). Even its fortifications are showy: a single gate lined with ‘xxiiij. yron flayles’ and ‘xij men on ece side styll a pece smytynge with the flayes neuer seasing the oon after ye other’ (sig. F1<sup>r</sup>). These iron men are not merely security; they are a dramatic testament to Virgilius’s powers, harking back to accounts of his other successes with automata earlier in the narrative. Like the crime-busting iron men and hounds that terrify the nightwalkers of Rome into submission, these guardians are the violent enforcers of Virgilius’s self-authorized jurisdiction. Instead of passively resisting the external, they aggressively act against it so that any trespasser who attempts to infringe on his space is ‘slayne’ (sig. F1<sup>r</sup>). Furthermore, their humanoid form transgressively imitates God creating man in his own image.

However for all his architectural posturing, Virgilius is not entirely independent or self-sufficient. Firstly, his powers are accepted and authorized by the patronage of the Emperor, and he must ask his permission before he can go on retreat. So successfully has he ingratiated himself that the Emperor refuses because ‘he wolde haue Virgilius at all times by hym’ (sig. F1<sup>v</sup>). Crossing another limit of what a courtier is free to do, he decides to disobey and go ahead with his plan anyway. But as we shall see, our relationships with those who

depend on us and on whom we depend are mutual and cannot be so easily dismissed, just as with Faustus and Mephistopheles. Secondly, when Virgilius departs to the castle to begin the rejuvenation process he does not go entirely alone: he takes with him a servant from his home whom he 'aboue all men trusted & knewe well that he wolde best kep his counsayll' (sig. F1<sup>v</sup>). This man is not only allowed into the castle, but is also shown how to get past the deadly automata so that he can come and go of his own accord. It is a highly significant moment, as Virgilius acknowledges when he makes a point of pronouncing him 'my dere beloved frende / and he that I aboue all me truste / & knowe moost of my secret' (sig. F1<sup>v</sup>). He then takes the servant to the heart of his castle and explains the process that will renew him.

Bizarrely, Virgilius's plan to extend his life involves being chopped into small pieces, salted and placed in a barrel beneath an ever-burning lamp, whose oil must drip on him continuously for nine days. The barrel creates a sealed world within a sealed world, a self-made womb where the powerful magician can cause himself to be born anew simply by stewing in his own juices. However despite the circular self-sufficiency of this rejuvenation, he obviously cannot begin it alone because someone needs to do the chopping. The poor servant is thus put to a fairytale test of faith and obedience, and must paradoxically kill his master in order to save him. After much agonising he obeys, carefully following Virgilius's curious instructions. He leaves the castle and sets the iron men furiously flaying again, and all is apparently well. However, the necessary disrupting force of another quickly interrupts the process, as Virgilius's disobedience of the Emperor comes back to haunt him.

The Emperor soon begins to miss his magician, and summons the servant to ask what has become of him because 'he knew well that virgilius loued hym aboue all men in the

worlde' (sig. A2<sup>v</sup>). The servant does his best, saying that his master went away without telling him where, but the Emperor will not be fooled and forces him to admit that Virgilius is in the castle. On arriving there they are confronted with the fearsome automaton defences. The servant loyally claims that he does not know how to stop them, but the Emperor calls his bluff and threatens to kill him if he cannot gain access. Once inside, his followers search high and low for Virgilius and eventually come across his body in the barrel hidden in the cellar. Furious, the Emperor asks who did such a thing and when the servant refuses to answer he kills him. In doing so he unwittingly kills Virgilius too, because there is no one else who knows the importance of keeping the lamp over his barrel filled. It is not entirely clear what happens next, but Virgilius seems to comprehend what has happened. A 'naked chylde' emerges from the barrel, runs around it four times, and says 'Cursed be the tyme that ye cam euer here', before promptly vanishing. Nothing is left of Virgilius but his remains 'in the barell deed' (sig. A2<sup>f</sup>).

The child apparition gives an intriguingly odd glimpse of what might have been going on inside the barrel. Its immature form suggests that Virgilius's rebirth was a literal one, with some part of him going through the natural stages of human development. Again this suggests a rather cruel and unsettling desire to be entirely self-sufficient and self-authorising. The barrel acts as synthetic second womb in which Virgilius is able to wrench himself from his origins. He re-engenders himself independent of God or even a mother. One gets the feeling that had he been successful, he would have emerged all the more powerful, as if a concentrated or distilled version of himself. He is disengaged from his past, including all the history of his family and birth so carefully laid out earlier in the narrative. It is the hideous culmination of the chain of founding violences that disengage him from the confines of genre, Christianity, and the clutches of the devil. The enclosing border of all these limits are

broken open, only for him to end up squeezed into a barrel, his body irreparably divided into countless pieces. His self-enclosure is also not dissimilar to the Christian renouncement that Fabell and Bacon make, but instead of opening up to the other he turns in on himself to disastrous effect. And despite his brutal severance from the past in pursuit of a self-sufficient future, and the fact that he is sliced and diced at his own request, his death nevertheless comes too soon. The creepy child figure that emerges from the barrel as an unfinished Virgilius is a very heavily underlined symbol of this.

Without his loyal servant there is no one to keep watch over the oil in Virgilius's lamp, and the impact of this loss neatly demonstrates the significance of the other. We only know ourselves under the gaze of the other. The Emperor's intervention provides a more cynical note. During the course of the narrative a close political relationship is forged between Virgilius and the Emperor, which slowly blossoms into something mutually beneficial. Much of the action involves him either struggling against or acting on behalf of the Emperor for various civic, political or personal reasons. They first meet in a clash over Virgilius's inheritance rights, but when the magician has triumphed, showing off his powers in the process, he makes a smart political move. Offering a truce, he points out that 'be ryght ye shulde make of me as one of your greattest lords and nerest of your kindred for I at your nede maye helpe you more that al your other folke' (sig. C3<sup>v</sup>). They become (more or less) friends, and Virgilius helps protect Rome, receiving good favour from the Emperor in return. Significantly his power does not all come from arcane knowledge nor even from his own intellect; it is also political, and politics requires others.

Virgilius initially appears refreshingly independent in the way that he fools the devil as a boy and sets off on his own self-authorized adventure. However, his relationship with the

Emperor perhaps functions as an equally dangerous equivalent to the demonic contract. Like Faustus, whose performatives can only be realized through the body of Mephistopheles, Virgilius's wealth and freedom are to some extent reliant upon his eminent patron. He may assume that if he can make the trees fruit three times a year then there is no reason he cannot disobey the orders of his ruler, but as we see in his disastrous intervention this is not the case. Like a date of fulfilment on a contract, the Emperor's summons cannot be ignored, even by a man who is to all intents and purposes dead. Here we see that the positioning of early modern magicians involves more than just a Christian matrix. The various deaths depicted in prose and dramatic accounts are not simply matters of Christian punishment or redemption. Even when these factors are dismissed the tensions between the images of the fortified tower and the mutual agreement remain, fighting it out across otherwise very different characters and narratives.

### *The Devil's Charter*

Like Virgilius's, Alexander's death in *The Devil's Charter* is spectacularly untimely. Not simply because life will always have been so short, but because he has misread the charter and mistakenly believes that he has seven more years before the devil will take his soul. Just as in the dumb-show where he makes the agreement with the devil, his miscalculation illustrates how little control Alexander has over his situation. Rather like Virgilius's ultimately fatal relationship with the Emperor, the jurisdiction of Alexander's monolithic identity is disrupted by his inherent dependence upon the other. His Machiavellian motto describes a hollow world of surfaces and outward appearances:

things are as they seeme  
Not what they be themselves; all is opinion:

And all this world is but opinion.<sup>21</sup>

It assumes that this mutability can be manipulated to create a context over which he has the certainty of absolute power. However, the devil's hand in his unanticipated death confounds this megalomaniac idealization with equivocation and uncertainty. Even the charter, willingly signed by Alexander in his own blood, ends up surpassing his own interpretation of its meaning.

Until the fateful dinner party, events have aligned to affirm Alexander's empowered self-image, much like the conjuring scene where Faustus is convinced that his magic words have summoned Mephistopheles. However, the illusion is too fragile to last. Blissfully unaware that his time is almost up, Alexander plots to poison Cardinals Cornetto, Modina and Caraffa in order to appropriate their treasuries to fund his son Caesar's wars across Italy. The cardinals arrive for dinner and everything seems to be flawlessly in place. The specially prepared poisoned wine is sealed in bottles that are authenticated by Caesar's signet, alongside an unsullied bottle for the conspirators to safely drink. As far as Alexander is concerned nothing can go wrong, because he has carefully tailored all appearances. He has bought out or intimidated everyone involved into silence, and thanks to Caesar's deceptive seal the cardinals will have no idea that their lives are at risk. However, there is another force at hand working against Alexander's designs. Whilst the men are in conversation about the great good Caesar's wars have done the church, the unthinkable happens: a devil appears and quietly switches the bottles. This disastrous act comes from outside of Alexander's jurisdiction, it is unplanned and alien, and this is precisely why it is unstoppable.

---

<sup>21</sup> Barnabe Barnes, *The Devil's Charter by Barnabe Barnes: A Critical Edition*, ed. by Jim C. Pogue (London: Garland, 1980), 483-5. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

Alexander is so busy smooth-talking his victims into a false sense of security that he fails to notice what has just happened. 'Bring me some wine' (3195) he demands, which is pointedly echoed by his son's order: 'some wine for his Holines owne mouth, *Bernardo*' (3197-8). Bernardo is in on the plot, and with his odd specificity of his instruction Caesar hamfully demonstrates language carefully being used to shape events and ensure that Alexander is given the correct wine. However, the hyper self-awareness of such cunning talk is only powerful within the context of the plan, and does not protect against the unexpected. Consequently, both Caesar and his father end up drinking the poison. The fatal words 'some wine for his Holines owne mouth, *Bernardo*' can actually be interpreted in several ways. And from a certain angle there is an element of black humour in the way that the two Borgias perhaps do indeed get the wine that their own mouths deserve. This once again affirms that Alexander's motto and the world he has constructed from it are nothing but fragile political artifice. There is power in his ability to manipulate reality, but this mutability is also accessible by others, and whatever he shapes can be instantly remoulded by the devil. He fails because disguised within his cynicism is a naive faith in idealization, which assumes that his own personal take on reality has the stability to remain the authoritative one.

Poison is a particularly apt way for Alexander to go, because it works silently and stealthily, an exemplar of hidden corruption. His own appreciation for this is evident in the way that it is his chosen method for punishing his daughter Lucretia's murderous secret. He gives her poisoned makeup, mocking her veneer of feminine innocence. As Tanya Pollard has observed, this causes an interesting destabilisation of boundaries. The cosmetics corrode her skin, and 'by erasing the line that separates inner and outer, they call into question the category of the superficial, suggesting that artifice can never be only skin deep'<sup>22</sup> We perhaps

---

<sup>22</sup> Tanya Pollard, 'Beauty's Poisonous Properties', *Shakespeare Studies*, 27 (1999), 187-210 (189).

see a similar effect in Alexander's poisoning. It is a fitting comeuppance for a bent Pope, but also represents a destabilising force running beneath the surface of his Machiavellian pretence. He arrogantly believes himself to be at the centre of a self-made world over which he has complete control. However, the unseen and unexpected switching of the wine bottles undermines his fantasy, reminding us that no context is absolute and therefore nothing is certain. There are other inexorable forces at work that have no interest in his petty machinations. As with Virgilius, the mutual grounding of Alexander's power compromises the notion of the absolute identity. The dumb-show makes it clear that the devil has made him who and what he is, is his beginning and end. His sense of self necessarily contains the other, is dependent on the other if it is to recognise itself at all. We have seen that this is always the case, and is not corrupting and destructive but the site of life itself. However in the histrionic world of Barnes's play, Alexander's hypocritical denial of his reliance on the other is translated into devils mercilessly unravelling the plans they helped him to lay.

More fundamentally, however, death must come to even this doubly-powerful pope-magician. In the play his end is closely related to the devils who minister the fatal poison, but the impossible possibility of death itself troubles Alexander's imagined authority. From the propriety of identity and being arises a sense of self-presence and certainty: this is *myself* and it is therefore fully within my understanding and control. And yet, our recognition of ourselves and our being is only available through experience of nonbeing, death. And since 'my death' is impossible, it follows that I know myself through the death of the other. This is what Derrida means by the other in me. As he describes it: 'the death of the other, this death of the other in "me" is fundamentally the only death that is named in the syntagm "my death," with all the consequences that one can draw from this'.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, p. 76.

The concept of ‘the death of the other in “me”’ is particularly difficult for Alexander. The play has a hefty body count, but many of these deaths are merely part of the mechanics of his rise to power. Lives are sacrificed in service of himself, but this is in a positive, quantifiable manner rather than as an unknown limit that refuses limitation. For him ‘my death’ is even more impossible than usual, if such a thing is possible. Death has always been to the cultivation of himself and his world, which makes the event of his own end almost inconceivable. Except this is precisely the way ‘my death’ always comes. This is perhaps why the play’s final act is so spectacularly messy and bloated: in approaching the heightened aporia of Alexander’s death it goes beyond comprehension and possibility. It is as if the world of the play is his, and when its centre begins to fail it too descends into chaos.

Echoing the shocking event of Alexander and Caesar drinking the poisoned wine, the remaining scenes unfold unexpectedly and incoherently. Scene five interrupts the chaos in the papal court to bring us a gathering of devils plotting Alexander’s end. This happens disorientatingly out of synch, after we have seen the bottles switched by an enterprising devil. ‘The date of his damnation is at hand’ (3266), gloats one, except the slide down to hell has already begun. Astaroth, Belchar and Varca arrive onstage calling one another’s names, and scheme their victim’s descent into hell. Their language is supernatural and overblown, similar to those other unnatural creatures of event, the witches in *Macbeth*. To add to the confusion, Astaroth in his opening speech talks of Alexander as if he is already dead:

Let *Orcus Erebus* and *Acheron* ,  
 And all those Ghosts which haunt the pitchy vaultes  
 Of cole black hags in *Cimerian* shades  
 Muster themselues in numbers numberlesse,  
 To daunce about the Ghost of *Alexander*.  
 (3255-3259)

Although he is not quite dead yet, he is referred to as a 'ghost', a remnant cut off by the slicing of the event. And in a sense is this perhaps true, because Alexander's world is already unravelling, regardless that he still has hours or moments to live. In this respect the final scenes of this play inhabit a border space between life and death, just like Fabell does in his cell in the church wall. We feel the aporetic effect in the uncanny talk of 'the Ghost of *Alexander*' and the way that he is indistinguishable from 'all those Ghosts' who will haunt him. Similarly, the oxymoronic 'numbers numberlesse' drives language towards the impossible in an attempt to articulate this deathly sense of beyond.

If the poisoned wine bottles come too early, then this attention to the contract comes too late. The document so painstakingly depicted being signed in the dumb-show has lain silent and forgotten until now, even though it is the driving force behind the plot. In the midst of the demonic talk of hellish torture, Varca bureaucratically brings it up:

Our firy region voyd of all religion,  
 And diuilish order by necessity,  
 Compell'd requires his present policy.  
 (3260-62)

'Policy' may refer to Alexander's evil political methods, but also to the paper charter. The OED cites two related contemporary meanings in this sense, of 'a document constituting a contract of insurance', or of 'a conditional note dependent upon the outcome of a bet'.<sup>24</sup> Neither of these quite applies to the document in question, but their undertones draw us back to the charter that started it all, and to the performative foundations of Alexander's power. Varca's words seem to suggest that since the charter came from hell, it must one day return

---

<sup>24</sup> 'Policy, n.', in *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <<http://oed.com>> [accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2013].

there to be reunited with its indenture. There is again a trace of idealization at work here, of completing, 'performing' the agreement by physically rejoining the papers that authorized it. The materiality of the writing is contrasted with the wayward journey it is compelled to make to hell, quite contrary to its author's wishes. The incomprehensible demonic interruption then ends with the devils bizarrely performing 'for [Alexander's] sake a hornpipe' (3279). It sets us up perfectly for the final scene; after what we have just witnessed it feels like absolutely anything could happen.

The final scene brings us full circle back to Alexander's study, where he is supported by two cardinals. He suddenly wishes to be alone, and asks them to leave him. He rejects their offers of prayer in favour of a melodramatic soliloquy on his imminent damnation, mourning himself rather than depending on others to do it for him. In classic *memento mori* style he reflects on the fleeting nature of greatness, musing to himself:

what were it  
 To be possessed of this uniuerse  
 And leave it all behind him in a moment?  
 (3324-26)

His surprisingly pious sounding reflections are reminiscent of Bacon or Fabell renouncing the world and their magic but this is undone by his decision to 'Invoke those Angells of eternall darknesse/ To shew me now the manner of death' (3337-38). He claims not to fear death, but summons the angels of darkness 'though in security' (3335). Evidently he is still hungering after the power of knowledge, despite his pitiful talk. This desperate grasping for knowledge illustrates how he still does not appreciate what is happening, and makes the coming of the *aporia* all the more brutal and frightening.

But it turns out that there is no need to conjure dark spirits. Alexander draws the curtain in his study to reveal ‘the diuill sitting in his pontificals’ (3339-41). Even this most private and proper of places, the space that represents the magician’s powers and where Alexander’s rise to power began, is not fully sealed. In the original stage productions this discovery would have been all the more shocking. The curtained area was an anterior onstage space distinct from the rest of the action, which up until now only Alexander had entered.<sup>25</sup> Most disturbingly of all, the devil is apparently quite at home, sitting in Alexander’s chair and wearing his robes. He has even usurped his role as summoner. This is most unexpected, and its presence in his inner sanctum is a vivid representation of the limitations of self-presence. The devil represents the external other, but also the other inside, the contradictory and non-present elements that structure consciousness and presence. The devil has to be here, and was already here all along, because without him there would be no Alexander.

As we have already seen, iteration always produces difference, and the play toys with this contradiction to great dramatic effect. Brilliantly, this affirmation of inherent alterity explores its own implications, because it also happens to be a reiteration of the dumb-show that opened the play. There is a neat cyclical element to this, bringing Alexander full circle just as Faustus does. We are once again in Alexander’s study with a devil in pope’s clothing. But there are also dramatic differences. Whilst it was ‘Roderigo’ who performed the original conjuring, ‘Alexander’ (his papal name) is the one who faces the devil this time. And whilst the crown is ceremonially handed over the first time, this time it is taken away. Most significantly of all, however, Alexander/Roderigo entered the dumb-show willingly, but in this scene he is brutally taken by surprise. What we are witnessing is a frightening lack of

---

<sup>25</sup> Pogue ed., *The English Faust Book*, pp. 23-26.

authority, as the author of the charter suddenly realizes what his own words are about to do to him.

Alexander tries to regain some sort of control of himself and the situation by reaching for his magic book, the symbol of his magical status, but the devil simply laughs in his face. The powerful words will not come any more and he stutters ineffectually ‘I exorcise thee foule malignant spirit /In the names of, of, of— —’ (3355-56). But little does he know that exorcising cannot be disentangled from conjuration.<sup>26</sup> With another iterative twist his language begins to slip, not into the silence of the dumb-show but into fragmented incoherence:

Dissolue, dissolue, break, breake,  
black soule dissolue,  
And poyson all this hemisphere with sinne.  
(3360-62)

Throughout the play he has been marked by his lethal eloquence, which can smoothly conjure glittering political images, but in the coming of the aporia power ‘as such’ begins to falter. Notably it is ‘I’ that he loses first, uttering instead a stream of unmoored verbs.

Of course there is no way this grandiloquent play would end here. Alexander recovers himself enough to make one last challenge, arguing ‘Father of lies my time is not expir’d’ (3367). Time seems to be of little consequence anymore, but nevertheless the devil offers to explain the situation. It is a moment that Wilson describes as ‘closer to farce than high tragedy’, which again highlights the fineness of the interpretive knife edge that separates the

---

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, pp. 40-48.

two.<sup>27</sup> Devil and Pope ridiculously ‘sit together’ (3375) so that Astaroth can ‘declare it plainly’ (3374) like a teacher with a struggling pupil. It turns out that Alexander has been reading the words ‘11. et 7. dies 8. post moriere’ (377) as eighteen years and eight days. However, with a clever twist of sophistry, the devil persuades him that they were intended to signify eleven years and seven days, on the eighth of which Alexander is to die. Wording is literally a matter of life and death here, but even this most serious of documents cannot be relied upon to talk straight. Seven years disappear in the blink of an eye, destabilising even the *a priori*, analytic writing of mathematics. This multiplying of meaning capitalises on the relationship between iteration and alterity represented by the reprise of the dumb-show’s set up. Even as author of a document signed in his own blood, Alexander has no authority over the meaning of his text. And if he cannot control his own writing, how can he ever expect to control reality with petty disguise and deception? His identity as authority figure, the self-enclosure of his jurisdiction, simply cannot hold any longer. His frightening power has flipped itself to reveal the weakness it also transmits.

He is so broken that he does not even challenge the devil’s rather obscure alternative interpretation. Instead he tries a different tack and launches into a cod theological defence of his ‘divine’ (3405) soul. His trite talk of how his soul is ‘stamp’t with the seale of heauen’ (3409) thanks to the natural divinity of man who is ‘*microcosmus*/ The little world and second tipe of God’ (3421-22) are wholly out of character. In this dramatic departure from dastardly antihero to bland theologian we perhaps see Alexander die before our eyes. It is a neat way of dealing with the problem of death ‘as such’ onstage, allowing him to move in a sense beyond the limits of himself before our very eyes. With his soul sold, his illusions destroyed and the powers that realized his ambitions turned against him, there is literally

---

<sup>27</sup> Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, p. 214.

nothing left of him. He is an empty shell, uttering Christian beatitudes that are all the more meaningless in the context of all that he has done.

Alexander is well and truly done for now, but in a final manifestation of his pride and desperation he still will not go quietly. He piously or pompously urges the devil ‘pawse yet a little, let me meditate’ (3472). This could be his one last chance to repent and open himself up to what is coming as Fabell does, except his mediation comes out a babble, perhaps the closest language can get to articulating the unknown:

Mercy, mercy, mercy; arise arise: up, up, up:  
 fy, fyino, no? stirre stubburne, stonie, stiff  
 indurate heart not yet, up. why, what? wilt thou not  
 foule traytor? to my soule? not yet?  
 (3475-78)

The scene drags on still longer, with Alexander begging the devil to show him what will become of Caesar. So verbose is this incoherent ending that the devil actually leaves him mid speech to pursue other business. Finally another arrives with ‘the wagon of blacke *Dis*’ (3550) to carry him off to hell, fittingly telling him that ‘horizons now stand thee not instead’ (3553). Alexander is on the limit of the limit, the very brink of the impossible ‘my death’. The audience too hang in suspense: after so many false endings we now have no idea when Alexander’s death is going to come. And then it does. He is surrounded by devils and thrust beneath the stage.

Insanely though, even this end is not the end. As with the *Doctor Faustus* B text, the play lives on for one final short exchange when the cardinals and Bentivoli stumble across Alexander’s remains. Clearly he really had gone too far, because unlike even the more

transgressive of our other magicians, his death is actually celebrated. ‘Banquets and bonfiers through the Citty make/ In signe our Church is freed from infamy’ (3591-92), cries Bentivoli in his joy. His subjects take great pleasure in having the last performative word, gleefully pronouncing him dead.

### *Doctor Faustus*

As Michael Neill has described, the opening scene of *Doctor Faustus* is ‘a beginning fraught with the consciousness of ending’.<sup>28</sup> We first encounter Faustus in his study, urging himself ‘begin/ to sound the depth of that thou will profess’ (1.1.1-2).<sup>29</sup> He initially comes across as a pioneer, bravely testing the limits of human knowledge, but when he turns to his books a very different project is revealed. He works his way through the iconic texts of medieval academia, systematically dismissing Aristotle for logic, Galen for medicine, Justinian for law and Jerome for divinity. His confidence in dividing up each subject and summing it up with a single quote demonstrates a reductive and conservative approach to learning. As Edward A. Snow puts it, the emphasis is on ‘the order of books— on compartmentalization and inventory, on hierarchical ordering, on the programmatic acquisition of knowledge.’<sup>30</sup> Rather than pushing boundaries Faustus is delimiting them, turning pinnacles and purposes into restrictions. The narrowness of his reading is evident in his use of the word ‘end’ itself, which crushes the nuances of its multiple meanings. The foolhardiness of this is already evident in his poor scholarship, which is full of misquotations, misattributions and outrageous editing.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), p. 206.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus* (A text), ed. by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen, in *Doctor Faustus: A- and B- Texts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993, repr. 1995), (1.1.1-2). All subsequent references are to this edition unless otherwise specified.

<sup>30</sup> Edward A. Snow, ‘Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* and the Ends of Desire’, in *Two Renaissance Mythmakers: Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 70-132 (pp. 79-80).

<sup>31</sup> Only the Justinian quote is unproblematic, see Snow pp. 75-76.

His reductive attempts to ‘sound the depths’ brutally constricts the possibilities of knowledge, but has the flattering effect of presenting Faustus himself as above and beyond the limits of academia. And, more transgressively, beyond the limits of what God permits us to know. But despite having apparently surpassed the ends of logic, medicine, law, and divinity, he finds himself disappointingly ‘still but Faustus, and a man’ (1.1.23). The borders of his own existence still pose a problem, because even if he knows everything it is possible to know, the unknowable ‘my death’ remains beyond his reach. Death is as Derrida describes ‘beyond the limits of truth’, and cannot be contained by Faustus’s systematic, rule-governed version of knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

Anxiety about his own end simmers beneath the surface of his braggadocio. As many critics have noted, Faustus’s dismissal of Aristotle ‘bid *on kai me on* farewell’ reveals a wish to be rid of the troubling questions of being and not being.<sup>33</sup> His rejection of medicine is similarly telling:

Are not thy bills hung up as monuments,  
 Whey whole cities have escaped the plague  
 And thousand desperate maladies been eased?  
 Yet art thou still but Faustus, and a man,  
 Wouldst thou make men to live eternally  
 Or, being dead, raise them to life again,  
 Then this profession were to be esteemed.  
 Physic, farewell!  
 (1.1.20-7)

His frustration that despite surpassing the end of medicine he is ‘still but Faustus, and a man’ is followed by a fantasy about eternal life. It is surely self-interest rather than professional esteem or altruism that sends his thoughts in this direction. His infamous summing up of the

---

<sup>32</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>33</sup> For instance, Snow, 75-76; and Graham Hammill, ‘Faustus’s Fortunes: Commodification, Exchange, and the Form of Literary Subjectivity’, *ELH*, 63.2 (1996), 309-336 (313) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/elh.1996.0016>>

Bible as ‘Ay, we must die an everlasting death’ (1.1.46) is also full of fear. He mockingly responds ‘why doctrine call you this? *Che serà sera?*’ (1.1.69), trying to make light of the unknown and uncontrollable nature of predestination. But behind his sneers is a horror of ‘what will be, shall be’ (1.1.50), of the certain uncertainty beyond the limit of ‘my death’.

The ‘necromantic books’ (1.1.52) are so seductive because they seem to offer a solution to the crippling uncertainty that circumscribes existence. Faustus dreams of how with the aid of magic he will have spirits to ‘resolve me of all ambiguities’, and manufacture ‘a world of profit and delight,/ Of power, of honor, of omnipotence’ (1.1.55-56) over which he will have complete control. His dominion will not simply be that of ‘emperors and kings’ (1.1.59), but will ‘stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man’ (1.1.63). This image reconfigures the mind as the final frontier, depicting a radical and violent realization of phenomenology where Faustus’s consciousness will subsume all boundaries to *become* the world. And fittingly performative words, which initially appear to hold the speaker’s consciousness as their organising centre, are going to help him do it.

Faustus aspires to be free from the limitation of ends, but even in this there lies a veiled teleology. Endlessness is his end. Derrida has argued that intention itself always moves in pursuit of goal. The very concept depends upon the possibility of fulfillment or idealization, which in its most complete form is ‘a plenitude that would be *present* to and identical with itself’.<sup>34</sup> To be totally self-present and self-identical is to be constant, unchanging and free from any doubt, contradiction or accident. It is a formidable thought, one which we can see in Faustus’s quest for an absolute, all-subsuming identity. In this

---

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Limited Inc a b c . . .’, trans. by Samuel Weber, in *Limited Inc*, ed. by Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 29-110 (p. 56).

respect, his ambition to realize his dreams is a paradigm of the energy that drives all intention.

Armed with the intention of all intentions, and the performative magic words to make it a reality, it seems that Faustus cannot fail. But when he conjures Mephistopheles something most embarrassing happens. The devil reveals that he has come because Faustus's blasphemy has compromised his soul, not because his 'conjuring speeches' (1.3.46) have summoned him. Faustus is doomed, having already 'incurred eternal death' (1.3.90). He is confronted with limit that frightens him most, and he tries to counter his unimaginable, impossible 'eternal death' by giving his body and soul over to Lucifer on his own terms. This is a much discussed moment. Wilson and Dollimore see Faustus's proposition as an act of 'despair', and Garber suggests that 'Faustus becomes in time his own enclosure, trapped by his need to do away with limits'.<sup>35</sup> Whereas for Snow, Faustus's 'most fearful prospect' is a different limit, that of 'ultimate fulfilment or satiety', and the open-endedness of the contract is a way to keep his desires continuously projecting forwards, pushing the limit back.<sup>36</sup> More pragmatically, Stephen Orgel has observed that in that terms of early modern life expectancy, Faustus's 24 years of invulnerability is actually quite a good deal: 'the magic that damns you is also, quite simply, the only thing that can save your life'.<sup>37</sup>

In all of these accounts Faustus is fairly desperate and helpless, but perhaps he is making a terrifying calculation. By using his death as a bargaining chip Faustus turns it into a commodity, and therefore something proper to himself and under his control. In this respect,

---

<sup>35</sup> Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, p. 206; Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 114; Marjorie Garber "'Infinite Riches in a Little Room": Closure and Enclosure in Marlowe', in *Two Renaissance Mythmakers* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 3-21 (p. 11).

<sup>36</sup> Snow, 'Ends of Desire', pp. 83-87.

<sup>37</sup> Stephen Orgel, *The Authentic Shakespeare and Other Problems of the Early Modern Stage* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 228.

his proposition plays strange games with the boundaries that define identity, expanding him just as he wished for. Death represents the end or horizon of the self, but its enclosure also outlines individuality. By appropriating his own end Faustus seems to cheat those boundaries, subsuming his outside limit and therefore freeing his identity from limitation. By taking matters into his own hands he affirms his powerful self-sufficiency, pre-empting the originary workings of both God and the devil.

Making the deal only to sit around and wait for Lucifer to take his soul would be counter to the self-possession that Faustus is striving for, so he stipulates a strange condition in the deed of gift: ‘on these conditions following:/ first, that Faustus may be a spirit in form and substance’ (2.1.96-97). He is effectively requesting his own death, twenty four years early. As well as engineering death and therefore making it familiar, becoming a spirit also has other advantages that appeal to him. ‘Spirit’ has idealizing connotations, suggesting a transcendent essence or more literally a distillation.<sup>38</sup> To become ‘a spirit in form and substance’ is to be purified, stripped down of inconsistencies and contradictions, to approach the transparency of absolute self-presence.

This relentless movement towards idealization is the *telos* that structures intention’s relationship to the iterable, or consciousness’ relationship to language. Fulfilment structures the concept of intention, and the iterability of the mark allows it to work towards this ambition. However intention never reaches total fulfilment because iteration always produces division and difference. Iterability enables the possibility of absolute idealization, but also renders it impossible because the ability to repeat is always also the ability — perhaps even necessity — to alter. It is from this fragmented discontinuous-continuity that patterns such as

---

<sup>38</sup> ‘spirit, n.’, in *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <<http://oed.com>> [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> May 2013].

identity arise. Without the spacing of difference it would be impossible to recognise concepts such as intention, *telos* and identity, and nothing would ever grow or change. It follows that total idealization is a frightening concept. As Derrida puts it, the desire for idealization is ‘indestructible, or, I would even venture to say, “immortal”, and moreover, for the same reasons, mortal, or rather, deadly, in the sense of death-bearing. Is not the “pure realization of self-presence” itself also death?’<sup>39</sup> In light of this, Faustus’s decision to outwit his death by appropriating it begins to make an apocalyptic kind of sense. He embraces his end in pursuit of goal whose fruition would be the most total annihilation imaginable, or unimaginable, since it would explode every concept that currently structures human thought. It would be the end of ends. Thankfully iteration renders this achievement impossible, but in this strange spirit-space opened up by the contract Marlowe’s play toys with the question of ‘what if?’

The good and evil angels can be read as an exploration of what would happen should intention be wholly fulfilled. They turn up whenever Faustus is alone and equivocating, invading and problematising the private space of the soliloquy. They are often considered as archaic moral machinery, but over the course of the play their voices and intentions blur ambiguously with Faustus’s. Rather than didactically exemplifying the situation in an allegorical or archetypal mode they complicate it further. Take for instance the soliloquy at the beginning of act two, in which the angels perhaps speak before they have arrived onstage.

O, something soundeth in mine ears:  
 “Abjure this magic and turn to God again!”  
 To God? He loves thee not.  
 The god thou servest is thine own appetite,  
 Wherein is fixed the love of Beelzebub.  
 To him I’ll build an altar and a church  
 And offer the lukewarm blood of new-born babes.  
*Enter GOOD ANGEL and EVIL [ANGEL]*

---

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion’, trans. by Samuel Weber, in *Limited Inc*, ed. by Gerald Graff, pp. 111-154 (p. 116).

(2.1.7-14)

Faustus is famed for his illeism and his anxious indecision, so it is quite possible that this is simply the deranged ramblings of a man who fears for his soul. But perhaps there is something more uncanny going on here. In the earliest printed editions there is no punctuation to suggest who says what in this speech, leaving modern editors to hazard a guess. Bevington and Rasmussen add quotation marks in an attempt to distinguish ‘abjure this magic and turn to God again’ from Faustus’s own words, implying that he is repeating what he hears the good angel say. However, there are no such marks around the response:

To God? He loves thee not.  
 The god thou servest is thine own appetite,  
 Wherein is fixed the love of Beelzebub.  
 (2.1.9-11)

The editors seem to be suggesting that these lines are Faustus’s own response to the good angel’s interjection, but they are also similar to the way that the bad angel often ridicules his adversary. He could well be repeating the bad angel’s retort, caught in the middle of a celestial argument. This might explain why Faustus then shifts into the first person in ‘to him I’ll build an altar’, as if he is responding with a promise to the evil angel’s insistence that he must follow Beelzebub now.

So there could be one, two or three voices involved in this exchange. The confusion can be interpreted as a half-glimpse of what the total idealization of Faustus the ‘spirit’ would look like. Strange and frightening things happen to identity in this hypothetical absolute context. Speaker, meaning and addressee are all fully present to themselves and each other without any doubt or ambiguity. But without the outlines provided by gaps of uncertainty and

difference it becomes impossible to tell one consciousness from another, and self and other are rendered meaningless. By becoming absolutely self-identical one also becomes identical to everyone else. The angels somehow emanate from within Faustus himself, and vice-versa, when they do make finally their appearance onstage his thoughts seem to grow from their cries. Interestingly, McAdam makes a similar comment whilst discussing how it is difficult to distinguish the demonic and the divine in the play: ‘the expansion of the self into omnipotence/omnipresence results in the nightmare of having no viable “other” to give or receive from, of being eternally alone, self-enclosed in a world where everything is a function only of one’s mind’.<sup>40</sup>

Along with the destruction of identity, language would also become useless in this absolute context. With no gap between self and other there is no space for communication. Intention would be immediately, automatically realized and unequivocally understood without need for transmission through mediums such as language. More than this, the very possibility of language or any other sign would be destroyed. For Derrida all communication is structured by an independence from its author. It must be repeatable in (and therefore alterable by) other contexts, and must be able to survive its author’s absence or death. Without these factors it simply would not be able to communicate. The absolute would be a space of a-meaning, a-morality, a-certainty; a deathly neutrality where such concepts would not even exist.

This reading perhaps offers an explanation of why audiences and critics have such difficulty with the good and evil angels. The melding of identities makes it impossible to decide whether they are conventional characters in their own right, psychological

---

<sup>40</sup> Ian McAdam, *The Irony of Identity: Self and Imagination in the Drama of Christopher Marlowe* (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), p. 122.

manifestations of Faustus's inner struggle, or transcendent allegorical motifs. Similarly, we can perhaps better appreciate Faustus's moral paralysis. He becomes trapped in the middle, unable to heed either one or the other because their communication takes place at an uncanny point where communication itself begins to break down. And yet for all their confusion these scenes are powerful and captivating. They take place at the limits of meaning, but their meaning has ominous significance for Faustus and his ambitions. They disrupt our understanding of character almost to the point of collapse, but in doing so reveal something about how character is made. The strange forces at work here are perhaps related to what Nicholas Royle has described as 'dramaturgic telepathy' in his reading of *Anthony and Cleopatra*. As he describes, theatre's unique potential for grafting and repetition between characters and across plots creates a sophisticated and exciting literary space where the mechanics of theatre, such as plot, character and motif, are expanded and transformed.<sup>41</sup>

Faustus tries to idealize himself by becoming 'a spirit': that is, purified, singular and beyond death. The interactions with the good and evil angels are a nightmarish imagining of what would happen if his identity was fully realized. But because the iteration that allows intention to reach towards this *telos* also limits it from ever fulfilling it, the exploration can only go so far. The play bravely probes the frightening question of 'what if' but at the same time exploits iteration's limiting factor by turning Faustus's seemingly decisive end into a 'non-end'.<sup>42</sup> The fact that it carries on at all after the contract is handed over is itself testament to the fact that Faustus has not achieved his absolute identity. Instead of infinitely extending his self-presence, he has iterated himself. And in doing so has 'bid *On kai me on* farewell' (1.1.12), but not in the manner he intended. Hammill argues that this farewell is interesting because it is unsuccessful:

---

<sup>41</sup> Nicholas Royle, *Telepathy and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 142-59, esp. p. 147 and p. 208 n. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Derrida, 'Afterword', p. 129.

The play reabsorbs the question of Being that Faustus renounces within the domain of the literary in such a way that Being becomes eccentric to meaning. If, as Thomas Aquinas asserts (in the most commonplace philosophical fashion), form is the principle of being, then in Faustus performativity is the form of a being that is always someplace else'.<sup>43</sup>

Like a text sliced away from the event of its writing, he has slipped into the gap between absence and presence, and is best described as a 'non present remainder'.<sup>44</sup> Evidently crossing the border of 'my death' compromises 'my' rather than 'death'.

He is, therefore, a 'spirit' in a difference sense of the word. As we have seen, it can signify an essence or transcendent quality, but can also refer to a disembodied soul or 'a supernatural, incorporeal, rational being or personality' capable of making itself visible and 'frequently regarded as troublesome, terrifying or hostile to mankind'.<sup>45</sup> The former is akin to the *telos* of fulfilment, whilst the latter describes the other inside of it: a ghost, a remnant, which by its inherent otherness is closed off from the possibility of wholeness or self-sufficiency. It is always the wrong side of the border, but is also always already inside of it, disrupting the very possibility of borders and therefore of the absolute. Its non-identity haunts identity, its non-presence haunts presence.

Contrary to all his ambitions of certitude and stability, Faustus has become something impossible. Having crossed the aporia of death he is now beyond the limits of truth and knowledge. This perhaps explains the play's shift to a more comedic tone in acts three and four, where Faustus goes in a more qualitative pursuit of pleasure, laughter and admiration. As Orgel observes, 'there must be more to life than books. So we start again, with less

---

<sup>43</sup> Hammill, 'Faustus's Fortunes', 313.

<sup>44</sup> <sup>44</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', trans. by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, in *Limited Inc*, ed. by Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp .1-23 (p. 10).

<sup>45</sup> 'spirit, n.', in *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <<http://oed.com>> [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> May 2013].

material, more free-floating ambitions'.<sup>46</sup> Faustus used to pester Mephistopheles for information on the workings of the heavens and the location of hell, and wished to fortify his home city with a wall of brass. But his desire for such certainties is now displaced in favour of aporetic pleasures. He spookily interrupts the Pope's feast, reiterates the long dead Alexander and his paramour for King Carolus, and anachronously presents the Duchess of Vanholt with grapes in 'the dead time of winter' (4.2.11). This is not a fall from tragic seriousness, but a broadening of the horizons of possibility, which makes space for the freedom and subversion of the magical travel narrative style described by Maslen.<sup>47</sup>

Wagner opens act three with an account of Faustus's noble pursuits with Mephistopheles, describing how he rode a dragon to the top of Mount Olympus 'to know the secrets of astronomy' (3.ch.2), and 'now is gone to prove cosmography' (3.ch.7). He even naively believes that his master has gone to Rome to 'take some part of holy Peter's feast,/ That to this day is highly solemnized' (3.ch.10-11). However when Faustus and Mephistopheles appear it becomes clear that neither discovery nor faith is on the agenda. All he wants to do, it seems, is wander Europe taking in the sights 'of Trier....Paris....Naples....Venice, Padua, and the rest' (3.1.2-16). Pleasingly he even pays his respects to his fellow magician Virgil (or Virgilius as he is known in our prose text) at 'learnèd Maro's golden tomb' (3.1.13). Having crossed the most final of borders he is inspired to cross another and another. There is a glowing sense of liberation to this speech, but perhaps also an undertone of loss or incompleteness. No matter how many wondrous things he experiences he will never be whole, and no matter how many borders he crosses he will always be an outsider.

The spectral undertones to Faustus's escapades as a spirit are mostly muted, but in the scenes at the Vatican he quite literally plays the part of a ghost. Mephistopheles reminds him that he wanted to 'take some part of holy Peter's feast' (3.1.51), and he agrees to take a break from sightseeing:

---

<sup>46</sup> Orgel, *Authentic Shakespeare*, p. 227.

<sup>47</sup> R. W. Maslen, 'Magical Journeys in Sixteenth-Century Prose Fiction', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 44.1 (2011), 35-50 (36) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5699/yearenglstud.41.1.0035>> The comedic elements of the play are beginning to receive favourable critical attention, see for instance Suzan Last, 'Marlowe's Literary Double Agency: *Doctor Faustus* as a subversive Comedy of Error', *Renaissance and Reformation*, 24.1 (2000), 23-44; and Ruth Stevenson, 'The Comic Core of Both A- and B- Editions of *Doctor Faustus*', *SEL*, 53.2 (2013), 401-49. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sel.2013.0021>>

Well, I'm content to compass then some sport  
 And by their folly make us merriment.  
 Then charm me that I  
 May be invisible, to do what I please  
 Unseen of any whilst I stay in Rome.  
 (3.1.54-57)

His response ticks all the boxes of the OED's ghostly definition of *spirit*. He intends to 'make us merriment' at the expense of the uncomprehending friars, and his request to be 'invisible' suggests a control over whether he is seen or not. But things are not quite as simple as that, because to be wholly 'unseen of any whilst I stay in the Rome' would not be haunting at all. As is clear in the cake-snatching, disembodied voices and invisible punches that ensue, the sport is in being apparent whilst remaining inapparent, manifesting oneself through foreign bodies. The Pope and his friars cannot see Faustus and Mephistopheles; they are present to them only through the flying plates and smarting ears. In his games Faustus exploits the aporetic possibility of impossibility that he has become, parodying the break and disappearance that structure his nonpresence. As the mystified cardinal puts it, 'my lord it may be some ghost' (3.1.73), his vague words 'may' and 'some' suggesting the innumerable nature of the spectre or spectres.<sup>48</sup> In this ghosting game we see Faustus divide and double, triple before our very eyes. Indeed, the humour of this scene relies upon our appreciation of its double vision, which enables it to play out broad slapstick and supernatural horror simultaneously.

The friars respond to this invasion in the only way they know how, with an exorcism. This is interesting as it is a performative that is perhaps no different to conjuring. As we have seen, the English verb *to conjure* contains meanings of both mastery and mutuality; it can signify showy supernatural summoning, or conspiracy whispered in secret. However in *Specters of Marx* Derrida also describes an additional layer. The French noun *conjunction* can mean all of these things, as well as exorcism or 'conjurement'. As he puts it, the word 'has the good fortune to work and to produce, without any possible reappropriation, a forever errant surplus value'.<sup>49</sup> The supplementary nature of conjuring means that it will always contain its opposite: there is sending away in summoning, fear in desire, and vice versa.

<sup>48</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>49</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, pp. 47-48; p. 40.

Boundaries are troubled yet again, because with conjuring it is never clear which direction the crossing is happening in.

An intriguing effect of this is the suggestion that Faustus's conjuring Mephistopheles is no different to the friar's exorcism of himself. 'We shall be cursed with bell, / book and candle' (3.2.82-83), panics (or perhaps jokes) Mephistopheles. Faustus replies with a mocking piece of doggerel:

How? Bell, book and candle; candle, book and bell.  
 Forward and backward, to curse Faustus to hell.  
 Anon you shall hear a hog grunt, a calf bleat, and an ass bray,  
 Because it is Saint Peter's holy day.  
 (3.2.84-87)

His jesting words are reminiscent of those he uttered so seriously in his preparations to conjure Mephistopheles:

Within this circle is Jehovah's name  
 Forward and backward anagrammatized,  
 The 'breviated names of holy saints,  
 Figures of every adjunct to the heavens,  
 And characters of signs and erring stars,  
 By which the spirits are enforced to rise.  
 (1.3.8-13)

His manipulations of Jehovah 'forward and backward anagrammatized' were an earnest (or 'sincere', to use Austin's term) attempt to create the perfect conditions and conventions for a conjuring speech act. But this time his jingling rearrangement of the right of excommunication is performed irreverently from a position of disregard for the ceremony that empowers it. In a remarkable iterative loop, conjuring is grafted from one of the play's most serious scenes to one of its silliest. And furthermore, Faustus is now on the receiving end of the supernatural performative, playing the same cynical role that Mephistopheles did

with his mention of summoning *per accidens*. Just as the devil refused to read Faustus's words in the serious manner he intended, Faustus now transforms the friars' earnest incantations into a nursery rhyme-like nonsense. Splendidly, there is even an illusion of efficacy here too. The friars chant and the unwanted guests leave, despite rather than because of the ritual.

Hammill argues that the interaction between the two instances of conjuring reveals the 'literariness' of the performative, which requires a 'suspension of disbelief' to be successful. The friars believe but Faustus does not, and so the exorcism does not work; just as Faustus believes but Mephistopheles does not, and so the summoning does not work (at least not how he intends it to).<sup>50</sup> However, this distinction still maintains consciousness as the organising centre of the speech act. More accurately, the iteration of conjuring across these two scenes challenges assumptions about the purity of such language and the self-presence of its speaker or author. One form of conjuration contains the other, and Faustus contains both Mephistopheles and the friars, as they do him. What may initially appear to be simple opposites reveal on closer inspection a far richer form of interrelationship. Every performative of power is structured by fear, desire and contradiction: the unintended that lurks beneath the surface of consciousness. It is in this respect that Derrida suggests that 'Ego= ghost. Therefore "I am" would mean "I am haunted": I am haunted by myself who am (haunted by myself who am haunted by myself who am...and so forth)'.<sup>51</sup> In yet another twist of expectation, it turns out that in this scene Faustus is haunting himself as much as he is haunting the Pope.

---

<sup>50</sup> Hammill, 'Faustus's Fortunes', 310.

<sup>51</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 133.

This apparently silly scene is truly remarkable. Its subtleties trouble almost every boundary we have encountered. Identity is disrupted in the way that Faustus is revealed to be the same as both the friars and Mephistopheles, and also very different to himself in the earlier scene. The purity of the distinction between self and other is further compromised by the way that Faustus arguably haunts himself as much as haunting the Pope. Power and the force it exerts are reversed: conjurer becomes conjured, summoning becomes exorcising, desire becomes fear. The direction in which the boundaries are being crossed becomes unclear. And the distinction between serious and non-serious is also disrupted. The Pope-baiting is funny for the perpetrators and their audience, but is terrifying for the victims. The high drama of act one merges with the slapstick comedy of act three. Humorous iteration reveals the deepest of complexities.

The interlinking effect of these multiple forms of destabilisation is elegantly summed up by Derrida as ‘the series constituted by hostage, host, guest, ghost, holy ghost and *Geist*’.<sup>52</sup> One is taken by force as a hostage, but is also invited as a guest; and in the French word *hôtes* host and guest are indistinguishable. But the guest/hostage is always already here but already gone, haunting like ghost; and if we try to exorcise it we are letting it in even more. Thinking on the immaterial remnant then leads to other forms of spirit: the holy ghost or the spirit of an age or a person. This chain of figures is played out with brilliant literalness in the scene at the Vatican. It begins with a banquet, the picture of hospitality, where the host just happens to be the one being showered with food and gifts. ‘My lord, here’s a dainty dish was sent me from the Bishop of Milan’ (3.1.64-5), says the Pope as he offers his gift to his guest. But soon it is troubled by the arrival of ‘some ghost’ in the form of Faustus, who is a ‘spirit’ and in some sense already dead and gone. He helps himself to the Pope’s dainties but

---

<sup>52</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, p. 60.

also appropriates the situation, holding the host hostage at his own party. And all this crossing of boundaries takes place against a backdrop of faith, where the friars call on the divine to intervene and eject the transgressor.<sup>53</sup>

The Pope-baiting is only the first of a string of aporetic adventures, but it is certainly the most productive for our reading. Throughout acts three and four Faustus continues to play with the boundaries he was so keen to circumscribe. But the play must end sometime, and Faustus's pocket of limitless possibility is itself limited to a specific period of just twenty-four years. Even as a spirit the certainty of impending death still hangs over him, overshadowing any smaller scale illusions of infinite power. It can never be wholly appropriated, even by Faustus's supernatural contortions of being. What makes this second death so terrible is precisely this way in which it is yet to come, painfully anticipated throughout but waiting patiently in the wings until the very last moment. Death must *happen to* Faustus with all the trauma of the event. Its happening must be alien, unwilled and unwished for, totally alterior to the magician who has given everything to efface the other.

Act five begins with Wagner confused by his master's behaviour:

I think my master means to die shortly,  
 For he hath given to me all his goods.  
 And yet, methinks that if death were near,  
 He would not banquet, and carouse, and swill  
 Amongst the students as even now he doth,  
 Who are at supper with such belly cheer  
 As Wagner ne'er beheld in all his life.  
 (5.1.1-7)

---

<sup>53</sup> Their Latin dirge, '*Maledicat Dominus!*' literally translates as 'may God curse him'.

In a rather pitiful reiteration of his deed of gift to Lucifer, Faustus is apparently trying to prepare for his death by bequeathing his goods, which are the only thing he has left to give. As with his earlier request to become a spirit, it is as if he is trying to gain at least an impression of control in the face of a terrible unknown. Dealing with his property creates the illusion that he also has ownership of his death, as is evident in Wagner's curious wording 'I think master means to die shortly'. The orderliness and convention of knowing exactly what is to become of his possessions perhaps also offer a shred of comfort against having no idea of what is to become of himself. For although both we and Faustus know that the end is nigh, it is impossible to imagine what is actually going to happen. Death goes beyond the reaches of our comprehension, it is unimaginable. In life it is something that happens to other people, and although our time will surely come too, our consciousnesses cannot compute their own vanishing point. 'My death' always refers to the death of the other, to death 'as such'. In this respect, the inevitable is also the impossible.

Something is coming and Faustus knows it. He spends the middle section of the play in denial, travelling Europe playing tricks and showing off, even coming home again to carouse 'with such belly cheer' with the students of Wittenberg. But he cannot keep the terrible secret hidden away forever. Indeed, the aporia is a sticking point 'in the very place where *it would no longer be possible to constitute a problem*'. It effaces the protection of the problēma as shield or projection, leaving us 'disarmed, delivered to the other, incapable even of sheltering ourselves behind what could still protect the interiority of a secret.'<sup>54</sup> In the play's final scene confesses to his fellow scholars:

I writ them a bill with mine own  
blood. The date is expired, the time will come, and he

---

<sup>54</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, p. 12.

will fetch me.  
(5.2.41-3)

In the B-text these lines are altered to make the tenses consistent:

I writ them a bill in mine  
own blood. The date is expired. This is the time, and he  
will fetch me.  
(B.5.2.70-2)

The contrast highlights the dreadful event-ness articulated in the earlier version. In the B-text everything is already over, 'this is the time' and it is happening here onstage, within the limits of performance and comprehension. It maintains the connection between event, experience and materiality, adhering to the old notion that being is presence, and that consequently when Faustus is dragged offstage by the devils he will be well and truly dead. The A-text, however, opens up a terrifying space of waiting: 'the date is expired' but the time is yet to come. This expiration is structured by uncertainty, reaching beyond the confines of what can be witnessed, experienced or even thought in a conventional sense. It brings us back to the unknown, to the vast other that is utterly beyond the limits of our control. It is an event, and Faustus trembles in the face of it.

Confronted with the coming of death Faustus trembles with fear, but this is not simply the shivering of spooked flesh: his ideologies tremble too. Throughout the play and particularly in the final act Faustus equivocates between God and the devil. The good angel and the old man repeatedly remind him that repentance is an option, but he never seems quite able to grasp it with conviction. 'I do repent and yet I do despair' (5.1.64) he moans, on the brink of salvation, only to be forced into a renewal of his vows to Lucifer. There are many

theological and psychological explanations of Faustus's fatal inability to choose, but perhaps his oscillation represents the unexpected, impossible nature of this event that is yet to come. The A-text confession closes off the past ('the date is expired') but leaves the future open ('the time will come'). The certainty of absolutes no longer holds good and consequently the boundaries between opposites such as life and death or salvation and damnation themselves begin to shiver in something akin to what David Applebaum has called 'a vibratory movement of between'.<sup>55</sup> The belief that we can pinpoint the end and constrain it to a particular date and time is also unsettled. As Nicholas Royle puts it: 'Derrida's conception of the place and time of death — and therefore of the place and time of life, of presence, of experience itself — is perhaps best described as a trembling conception and trembling of the concept'.<sup>56</sup>

This physiological, ideological, ontological trembling comes to its climax in Faustus's final soliloquy as the end comes ever closer. 'Ah, Faustus, now hast thou but one bare hour to live' he tells himself, painfully aware of his last hour slipping away, but even the striking of the clock seems to glitch, marking out the half hour all too quickly. Whilst the hands slip around too fast, Faustus begs the circling heavens to stop, or at least slow down:

Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven,  
That time may cease and midnight never come.  
Fair Nature's eye, rise, rise again, and make  
Perpetual day; or let this hour be but  
A year, a month, a week, a natural day,  
That Faustus may repent and save his soul.  
O lente, lente currite, noctis equi!  
(5.2.68-74)

---

<sup>55</sup> David Appelbaum, *Jacques Derrida's Ghost: A Conjuration* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), p. 69.

<sup>56</sup> Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 288 n. 13.

Time is wrenched in both directions at once, distorting our sense of when and how this final scene is unfolding. Similarly, Faustus stands still in his study whilst his language whirls with ticking clocks, ‘ever-moving spheres’ and the relentless horses of the night. Even the Latin tag is turned upside down, so that ‘what in Ovid is a wish to extend a night of erotic pleasure serves for Faustus as an expression of apocalyptic dread’.<sup>57</sup> In these contractions the distinctions between past, present and future, and between slowness, stasis and speed begin to tremble, their spasms opening up an equivocal ending space. Faustus tries to be pragmatic, trying to hold still the shuddering by firmly telling himself that ‘The stars move still; time runs; the clock will strike;/ The devil will come, and Faustus must be damned’ (5.2.75-76). But no sooner has the judgement ‘damned’ left his lips then he cries out to heaven ‘O, I’ll leap up to my God!’ (5.2.77). And as he reaches for God he feels demonic hands pulling him down and he finds himself begging ‘O, spare me, Lucifer!’ (5.2.81) instead. Terror rises because what is coming still is not here yet, and in his uncertainty Faustus’s pleas can only shuttle desperately back and forth between his own nightmares of Lucifer and ‘the ireful brows’ of God.

Even in the final lines of the play we cannot be sure of what is happening, or if it has even started yet. With his last breaths Faustus blames his parents, himself, and Lucifer, but also pleads with God, with ‘adders and serpents’ (5.2.121) and with Lucifer. He even offers to burn his books. So close to the end, and yet Faustus still does not seem to know who or what he is dealing with, excruciatingly it is still not here. In light of this, no final words could be more fitting than the deeply ambiguous aposiopesis ‘Ah, Mephistopheles!’ (5.2.123). The abruptness of this ending defies its decisiveness, making it feel as arbitrary as the mistimed striking of the clock. It is as if the play has ended without ever reaching the end, closing on

---

<sup>57</sup> Snow, ‘Ends of Desire’, p. 77.

‘the subjunctivity of the sigh: that death not come, *not yet!*’<sup>58</sup> The breathtaking suddenness of this ending makes for powerful theatre, but it also allows the event, the time that will come, to remain in a state of yet to come. Like all good horror this leaves the most difficult job to the audience’s imaginations, but more importantly it carries the aporia of openness through limitation right to the play’s conclusion, performing upon Faustus precisely what it has uncovered through the process of his doomed mission for the absolute.

The A-text’s cut-off displays astonishing self-reflexive rigour, but not everyone is comfortable with its apparent brutality. The B-text famously features an additional scene where a pair of scholars find Faustus’s body ‘torn asunder by the hands of death’ (B.5.3.7), and assure us that he shall receive a proper funeral:

Well, gentlemen, though Faustus’s end be such  
 As every Christian here laments to think on,  
 Yet, for he was a scholar once admired  
 For wondrous knowledge in our German schools,  
 We’ll give his mangled limbs due burial,  
 And the students, clothed in mourning black,  
 Shall wait upon his heavy funeral.  
 (B.5.3.13-19)

Michael Neill has suggested that this addition is ‘designed to transform the arbitrary violence of ending into a ritual of consummation’.<sup>59</sup> There is certainly a desire in these alterations to soften the cutting suddenness of that ending, but as Garber has argued there is perhaps also a more sinister one of laying the transgressive Faustus to rest.<sup>60</sup> For Derrida the pronouncement of death, of placing the dead safely in the ground so that we know exactly when and where

---

<sup>58</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, p. 69.

<sup>59</sup> Neill, *Issues of Death*, p. 213.

<sup>60</sup> Garber argues this in both ‘Closure and Enclosure in Marlowe’, p. 21; and “‘Here’s Nothing Writ’: Scribe, Script and Circumscription in Marlowe’s Plays’, *Theatre Journal*, 36.3 (1984), 301-20 (314)  
 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3206949>>

they are, is tantamount to murder.<sup>61</sup> It is an appeal once again to the absolute, an attempt to reassure the living that only they are alive, that the dead are gone and not coming back. The promise of a funeral may pleasingly round off the edges and offer closure and reassurance to the audience, but it brutalises the play in a manner far crueller than the A-text's cut. But once again the play resists the absolute, and the funeral is promised but never infringes the stage. The printers clearly felt that the further curtailing was required, for they attempt their own closure in the motto 'Terminat hora diem; terminat Author opus'.<sup>62</sup> And in later centuries, editorial confluations of the A and B texts perhaps also attempt in their own way to exorcise the play's lingering sense of incompleteness. The surplus that surrounds the textual difficulties of *Doctor Faustus* attempts to address its incompleteness, but in doing so it simply provides testament to the inherent openness of the non-end. Were the play absolute or 'finished', had the event come, there simply would be nothing left to add.

This lingering yet to come is terrifying for Faustus, but it also makes possible a glimmer of hope that surpasses what is actually happening onstage. Iterability is the site of life, but its fruitfulness, its openness, depends and insists upon division and difference. Therefore, where there is a cut, there is no finality. And since forgiveness cannot be 'in the service of finality', it too remains possible in the most impossible of ways.<sup>63</sup> This almost appalling sense of the forgiveness-to-come is a messianic 'stripped of everything, as it should be... which makes its way through absolute night'.<sup>64</sup> It brings us back to blood, which fills Faustus's vision in his torment of waiting: 'See, see, where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!/ One drop would save my soul, half a drop. Ah my Christ!' (5.2.78-79) However,

---

<sup>61</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>62</sup> Neill, *Issues of Death*, p. 213.

<sup>63</sup> 'On Forgiveness', trans. by Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes, in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 25-60 (p. 31).

<sup>64</sup> 'Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of "religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone', trans. Gil Anidjar, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 40-101 (pp. 56-7).

as we should perhaps expect by now, the motif does not return in the way we might expect. Indeed, as Gallagher notes, this vision ‘for all its baroque intensity does not supersede the unvoiced messianicity of the pooling blood in the earlier scene’.<sup>65</sup> Its unequivocal message of salvation is rerouted through the transgressive contract scene, where the blood’s flowing and clotting counter to Faustus’s intentions represented the limitless possibilities of iteration. The Christian symbol of fulfilment is transformed by what came before, because the similarity reveals it to be an iteration of sorts itself. Christ’s blood iterates Faustus’s blood, repeating and altering a scene that was already itself a parodic iteration of Christ on the cross. The structure of its message is always already limiting the absolute it communicates.

This shifts us from the determination of messianism to the openness of the messianic. Were this the culmination of a messianism, the blood flowing in the firmament would be the final judgement, of salvation either gracefully offered or tantalisingly held out of reach. Either of these interpretations would bring us to an end, albeit an eternal one: we would know for sure that Faustus was either forgiven forever or damned forever. Were Christ or anything else to come right now there would be no need for or even possibility of hope. But iteration overflows and therefore limits the possibility of this finality. Instead, the blood streams but Faustus is cut off from it just as he tries to call its name, the purity of his pleas disrupted by Lucifer:

Ah, my Christ!  
 Ah, rend not my heart for naming of my Christ!  
 Yet will I call on him. O spare me, Lucifer!  
 Where is it now? ‘Tis gone ...  
 (5.2.79-82)

---

<sup>65</sup> Lowell Gallagher, ‘Faustus’s Blood and the (Messianic) Question of Ethics’, *English Literary History*, 73.1 (2006), 1–29 (22) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/elh.2006.0002>>

Evidently he is unforgivable. Nor can anything be offered in exchange for forgiveness. Neither 'Christ's sake, whose blood hath ransomed me' (5.2.100) nor Faustus's own suffering in hell for 'a thousand years, a hundred thousand' (5.2.102-03) is enough payment to buy him 'some end' (5.2.101) to his torture.

It seems that forgiveness is impossible, but this is precisely the point. It makes possible the impossible possibility of forgiveness as an extraordinary, unexpected, incredible event. As Derrida describes, 'forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable. One cannot, or should not forgive; there is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable.'<sup>66</sup> There is no grace, no gift, if the crime were forgivable, because its forgiveness would be mechanical, its possibility carried there in the crime all along. It has to arise from the cut, the irreducible spacing between one and the other, between now and the future anterior. Christ's blood cannot save Faustus, because to remain impossible and beyond the mechanics of sense and law, forgiveness must also be unconditional. The exchange of one suffering for another is too simple, its meaning too discernible. Gallagher describes a similar structural uncertainty when he suggests that the 'missed rendezvous' between the messianic of Faustus blood and the messianism of Christ's blood 'is what holds open the possibility of envisioning redemption, and the shape of the future, outside the language of bonds and debts'.<sup>67</sup> Salvation through Christ implies transformation, and therefore an end: the divine eradication of sin in which it is neither the crime nor the guilty who receives forgiveness. The same goes for repentance, whose transformation is performed so vividly and fervently by some of our other magicians. This is not to say that Faustus is saved. But his ending's radical refusal of endings holds the future open, to the messianic yet to come. This is precisely why his death scene must end with a brutal cut, because to have it otherwise would break all hope

---

<sup>66</sup> Derrida, 'On Forgiveness', pp. 32-33.

<sup>67</sup> Gallagher, 'Faustus's blood', 22.

— not only for Faustus, but for the way we read *Doctor Faustus* and all of the other texts we have encountered.

## 4. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was at once to describe and to carry out a series of close readings informed by the philosophy of Derrida, exploring it in and through early modern representations of magicians. It tried to get inside of the texts, not just observing, but participating in the performative motions that power them. Such a method is necessarily creative. It is a counter-signature that bears witness to a text, but in doing so also inscribes something new. In this respect it is a method of reading as an event — albeit one that surpasses methodology's association with expectation, prediction and control. By virtue of this approach, the second aim was to testify to the significance of Derrida's work to early modern texts, as well as to the seductiveness and productiveness of reading with him.

This was achieved by reading both with and against the grain of our primary texts, in order to make tangible the disruptive back-and-forth motion of the performative in motion, the *dynamis* that powers all literature. This involved digging into the conflicting etymologies and definitions of words such as *conjure*, to expose their inherently supplementary and divisive nature. And similarly, with Derrida's help, we excavated the self-limiting contradictions that structure the fundamental concepts of authority, identity and the absolute. Related tensions were also traced at the level of plot, between the magicians' iterative means and absolute ends. Their striving for the absolute was based upon certain assumptions about being and presence, which were always already being resisted and undermined by the very language upon which they pinned their hopes. The experience of this reading will hopefully have laid out the philosophical groundwork of the thesis' method whilst also performing the thrill of it as an event in action.

What has been seen and done here responds to the current early modern critical canon's interest in multiplicity and close reading. It also engages with key areas of interest such as authority, identity and textuality in the period. However, it does so in a critical-creative manner, which tries to surpass the bounds of the historicist approach that currently dominates the field. In treating reading as an event, in acknowledging that something irrevocable happens every time we read, we give centuries-old texts a voice in the present; we keep them alive and in motion in a way that trying to recreate the past does not.

This analysis of conjurer laureates is just one instance of how Derrida-influenced close reading can bring early modern texts to life in the most exciting of ways. The clear performative of conjuring, and our heroes' obvious idealising drive have made this an excellent place to start. Altering the way we think about reading also involves a rethink of how we deal with early modern texts. The discussion has placed canonical texts alongside obscure and neglected ones, and this is integral to a rigorous relationship with Derrida's theories of textuality. 'Corrupted', incomplete, and non-canonical texts cannot be justifiably sidelined in a method that pays attention precisely to the contradictory, the non-serious and the liminal. *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* prose and play are a case in point. The play in particular was very popular in its day, and both versions have proved productive for the current reading, thanks to their intriguing disruptions of time and space. Sadly, though, these texts are largely forgotten today, because of their anonymity and inconsistency, and because no complete or authoritative copy of either has survived.<sup>1</sup> The textual difficulties of *Doctor Faustus* are now accepted and even celebrated by critics; there is no reason that this openness to the problematic cannot be extended to less well known texts.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Barbara Howard Traister, 'Dealing with Dramatic Anonymity: The Case of *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*', in *Anonymity in Early Modern England: "What's in a Name?"*, ed. by Janet Wright Starner and Barbara Howard Traister (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 99-111.

Similarly, this method could also inform the way that we approach the editing of early modern texts. It supports editions that actively highlight the multiple and conflicting versions of a text, rather than collating and reducing them to obscure textual notes. Digital technology has the potential to layer texts in a manageable and accessible manner, and could even produce an edition of editions, superimposing generations of editorial decisions.<sup>2</sup> Some editors of Shakespeare have already begun to exploit these possibilities. Examples include the searchable *Enfolded Hamlet*, which entwines the second quarto with the first folio, and Faber's interactive *Sonnets* app, which features a modernized text alongside video performances, commentaries, and a facsimile of the 1609 edition.<sup>3</sup> The only foray Marlowe has made into this territory is Hilary Binda's hypertext *Doctor Faustus*, which links the A- and B-texts with the *EFB*. This helpfully facilitates cross-referencing and comparison, but does not investigate the interpretive potentials of digital editions.

I have suggested some general, methodological applications of this Derrida-informed approach to texts and reading, but it is perhaps also helpful to point to some more specific work that could move beyond the current study. The invention of the printing press and subsequent growth of print culture is one of the most significant events of the early modern period. Significantly, Faustus the magician intersects with a Johann Fust or Faust who often crops up in early histories of the press.<sup>4</sup> A deconstructive analysis of this would complement

---

<sup>2</sup> There is heated critical debate about literature in the digital age, see for instance: Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext and the Remediation of Print*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001); Jerome McGann, *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); George P. Landow (ed.), *Hyper/Text/Theory* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994). On early modern editions specifically see Ian Lancashire, 'Editing English Renaissance Electronic Texts', in *The Literary Text in the Digital Age*, ed. by Richard J. Finneran (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Bernice W. Kliman, ed. *The Enfolded Hamlet* (1996) <<http://triggs.djvu.org/global-language.com/enfolded/>>; *The Sonnets by William Shakespeare* (Faber and Touch Press: 2012), available via iTunes App Store.

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough historical overview of the Fust/Faustus connection, see Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 324-79. For a more literary analysis see Sarah Wall-Randell, 'Doctor Faustus and the Printer's Devil', *Studies in English Literature*, 48.2 (2008), 259-81 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sel.0.0001>>; and Clare Harraway, *Re-Citing Marlowe: Approaches to Drama* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 25-50.

the focus on speech and handwriting here. Furthermore, the mechanical reproduction of text provides a literal way to think about the relationship between what Derrida calls the event and the machine, which I have only touched upon here. Perhaps by exploring it further we can understand the current faith in the stability of writing.

Derrida's concept of writing extends far beyond words on the page, to the way that we encounter and experience the world and use our language to construct it. His troubling of boundaries has significant ethical and political implications for our relationship to others, be it a lover, the dead or those on the edges of society. In its final chapter the discussion of the performative began to open up and touch upon hope and the messianic. However, this could be taken up more directly through analysis of texts involving forgiveness, responsibility and impossible happy endings. Shakespeare's late plays would be good candidates for this, in particular the odd and beautiful *The Winter's Tale*, which features a kangaroo court scene, the heavy work of mourning, and miraculous survival. Similarly, magpie-like romances such as Sydney's *Old and New Arcadia*, and Greene's *Pandosto* present other exciting possibilities. These sprawling texts break all kinds of boundaries; fusing styles, genres and forms, and playing their narratives out across both real and imagined lands. And with their cross-dressing, intrigues and mistaken identities, the characters repeatedly disrupt distinctions of class, gender and self. There is a certain event-ness about these romances that combines almost wooden generic convention with mad moments of the absolutely unexpected and improbable chance.

The performativity of reading with, for, or after Derrida demands countless contradictions: of interpretation that inscribes, of weakness that is strength, and violence that enacts the greatest responsibility. It is impossible, and therefore demands of us an irrational

belief in magic. Indeed, 'the effect, both affective and effective, of a performative is always magical in appearance. It always operates as if by an enchantment.' This openness to that which resists certainty or knowledge is a lot to ask today, particularly within the context of academic criticism. But, as Derrida says of reading Cixous, 'the great magician of the letter': 'do put yourself to the test if you can and have the courage, watch out, you'll see what you'll see and you'll read what you'll read.'<sup>5</sup> Just like magic.

---

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, *H.C. For Life, That is to Say . . .*, trans. Laurent Milesi and Stefan Herbrechter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 112, p. 65, p. 144.

## 5. Bibliography

Anon., *The Famous Historie of Fryer Bacon* (London: E[dward] A[l]lde, 1629), STC 1184, in *Early English Books Online*, <<http://eebo.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 17<sup>th</sup> August 2013]

Anon., *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, ed. by Nicola Bennett (London: Nick Hern, 2000)

Anon., *The Merry Devil of Edmonton 1608*, ed. by William Amos Abrams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1942)

Anon., *Virgilius* (Antwerp: John Doesborke, [1518(?)]), STC 24828, in *Early English Books Online*, <<http://eebo.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 17<sup>th</sup> August 2013]

Appelbaum, David, *Jacques Derrida's Ghost: A Conjunction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009)

Ashley, Kathleen M., 'The Guiler Beguiled: Christ and Satan as Theological Tricksters in Medieval Religious Literature', *Criticism*, 24.2 (1982), 126-37

Attridge, Derek, *Reading and Responsibility: Deconstruction's Traces* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010)

Austin, J.L., *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. by Marina Sbisa and J.O. Urmston, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980)

—— ‘Performative–Constative’ in *Philosophy and Ordinary Language*, ed. by Charles E. Caton (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963), pp. 22-54

—— *Sense and Sensibilia*, ed. by G.J. Warnock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962)

—— ‘Three Ways of Spilling Ink’, *The Philosophical Review*, 75.4 (1966), 427-40

<<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2183222>>

Barber, Ros, *The Marlowe Papers: A Novel in Verse* (London: Hodder and Staughton, 2012)

Baker, J. H., *An Introduction to English Legal History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (London: Butterworths, 1990)

Barnes, Barnabe, *The Devil’s Charter: A Critical Edition*, ed. by Jim C. Pogue (London: Garland, 1980)

Bartels, Emily, *Spectacles of Strangeness: Imperialism, Alienation, and Marlowe* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1993)

Birch, Dinah (ed.), ‘Pasquil’ in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 7<sup>th</sup> edn. (Oxford reference: 2009), <<http://www.oxfordreference.com>> [accessed 21<sup>st</sup> August 2013]

Bolter, Jay David, *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext and the Remediation of Print*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001)

Booth, Stephen, 'On the Eventfulness of *Hero and Leander*', in *Christopher Marlowe the Craftsman: Lives, Stage, and Page*, ed. by Sarah K. Scott and M.L. Stapleton (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010) pp. 125-36

Borlik, Todd Andrew, '“More Than Art”: Clockwork Automata, the Extemporising Actor, and the Brazen Head in Friar *Bacon and Friar Bungay*', in *The Automaton in English Renaissance Literature*, ed. Wendy Beth Hyman (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 129-44

Bowers, Rick, 'Almost Famous, Always Iterable: *Doctor Faustus* as Meme of Academic Performativity', in *Placing the Plays of Christopher Marlowe: Fresh Cultural Contexts*, ed. by Sara Munson Deats and Robert A. Logan (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 113- 124

Brandt, Bruce E. 'The Critical Backstory', in *Doctor Faustus A Critical Guide*, ed. by Sara Munson Deats (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 17-41

B[rewer]. T[homas]., *The Life and Death of the Merry Deuil of Edmonton* ([London]: T[homas] P[urfoot?], 1631), STC 3719, in *Early English Books Online*, <<http://eebo.chadwyck.co.uk>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> August 2013]

Brown, Georgia E., 'The Other Black Arts: *Doctor Faustus* and the Inky Worlds of Printing and Writing', in *Doctor Faustus: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Sara Munson Deats (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 140-58

Burrow, Colin, 'Virgils, From Dante to Milton', in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, ed. by Charles Martindale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 79-90

Butler, Todd, 'Bedevilling Spectacle: Law, Literature and Early Modern Witchcraft', *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities*, 20.2 (2008), 111-29

——, 'Swearing Justice in Henry Goodcole and The Witch of Edmonton', *Studies in English Literature*, 50.1 (2010), 127-45 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sel.0.0084>>

Byville, Eric, 'How to Do Witchcraft Tragedy with Speech Acts', *Comparative Drama*, 45.2 (2011), 1-33 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2011.0013>>

Carey, Katherine M., 'The Aesthetics of Immediacy and Hypermediation: The Dumb Shows in Webster's *The White Devil*', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 23.1 (2007), 73-80  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0266454X06000650>>

Cartwright, Kent, *Theatre and Humanism: English Drama in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

Cavell, Stanley, 'Introduction', in Shoshana Felman, *Seduction in Two Languages: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003)

—— 'Must we Mean what we Say?' in *Must we Mean what we Say?: A Book of Essays* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 1-43

Chambers, E.K., *The Elizabethan Stage*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923)

Clark, Stuart, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997)

Cox, John D., 'Stage Devilry in Two King's Men Plays of 1606', *Modern Language Review*, 93.4 (1998), 934-47 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3736267>>

——— *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

Crane, Mary Thomas, 'What Was Performance?', *Criticism*, 43.2 (2001), 169-187 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/crt.2001.0013>>

Critchley, Simon, 'Derrida the Reader', *Cardozo Law Review*, 27.2 (2005), 553-565

Dahlquist, Mark, 'Love and Technological Iconoclasm in Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*', *ELH*, 78.1 (2011), 51-77, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/elh.2011.0007>>

Derrida, Jacques, 'Afterword: Towards an Ethic of Discussion', trans. by Samuel Weber, in *Limited Inc*, ed. by Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 111-160

——— 'Aphorism Countertime', trans. Nicholas Royle, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 414-33

—— *Aporias: Dying — awaiting (one another at) the “limits of truth”*, trans. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993)

—— ‘Before the Law’, trans. by Avital Ronell and Christine Roulston, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge, pp. 181-120

—— ‘Declarations of Independence’, trans. by Tom Keenan and Tom Pepper, *New Political Science*, 7.1 (1986), 7-15 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07393148608429608>>

—— ‘The Double Session’, in *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London: Bloomsbury, 2004, repr. 2012), pp. 187-316

—— ‘Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of “religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone’, trans. by Gil Anidjar, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 40-101

—— ‘Force of Law’, trans. by Mary Quaintance, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. by Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3-67

—— ‘By Force of Mourning’, in *The Work of Mourning*, ed. and trans. by Pascale-Anne Braut and Michael Naas (London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 139-164

—— *H.C. For Life, That is to Say . . .*, trans. by Laurent Milesi and Stefan Herbrechter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006)

—— ‘The Law of Genre’, trans. by Avital Ronell, in *Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 221-252

—— ‘Limited Inc a b c . . .’, trans. by Samuel Weber, in *Limited Inc*, ed. by Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 29-110

—— *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976)

—— ‘On Forgiveness’, trans. by Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes, in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 25-60

—— ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’, in *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London: Bloomsbury, 2004, repr. 2013), pp. 67-186

—— ‘Signature Event Context’, trans. by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, in *Limited Inc*, ed. by Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 1-23

—— *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994)

—— ‘“This Strange Institution Called Literature”: an Interview with Jacques Derrida’, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33-75

—— ‘Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Inc (2)’, trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *Without Alibi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 71-160

Dollimore, Jonathan, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)

Duxfield, Andrew, ‘New Directions: *Doctor Faustus* and Renaissance Hermeticism’, in *Doctor Faustus: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Sarah Munson Deats (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 96-110

Ebbesen, Stein, ‘Language, medieval theories of,’ in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<http://www.rep.routledge.com>> [accessed April 2 2011]

Eriksen, Roy, ‘The Epilogue in *Doctor Faustus*: The Petrarchan Context’, *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, 9.1 (2010), 1-16

Farley-Hills, David, ‘King James and Barnes’ *Devil’s Charter*’, *Notes and Queries*, 37 (1990), 206-08

Fehrenbach, J.R., ‘A Pre-1592 English Faust Book and the Date of Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*’, *The Library*, 2 (2001), 327-335 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/library/2.4.327>>

Felman, Shoshana, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) (first publ. as *The Literary Speech Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983))

Fish, Stanley, *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1980)

Fleck, Andrew, 'The Origins of *Englishmen for my Money*'s 'Lover in the Basket' Episode in Doesborch's *Lyfe of Virgilius*', *Notes and Queries*, 57.3 (2010), 357-59  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjq060>>

Frye, Northrop, 'The Argument of Comedy', in *Shakespeare: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1945-2000*, ed. by Russ McDonald (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 93-99 (first publ. in *English Institute Essays 1948*, ed. by D.A. Robertson Jnr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949))

Gallagher, Lowell, 'Faustus's Blood and the (Messianic) Question of Ethics', *English Literary History*, 73.1 (2006), 1-29 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/elh.2006.0002>>

Garber, Marjorie, "'Here's Nothing Writ": Scribe, Script and Circumscription in Marlowe's Plays', *Theatre Journal*, 36.3 (1984), 301-320 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3206949>>

——— "'Infinite Riches in a Little Room": Closure and Enclosure in Marlowe', in *Two Renaissance Mythmakers* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 3-21

Gates, Daniel, 'Unpardonable Sins: The Hazards of Performative Language in The Tragic Cases of Francesco Spiera and Doctor Faustus', *Comparative Drama*, 38.1 (2004), 59-81  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2004.0012>>

Gent, P.F., *The English Faust Book: A Critical Edition Based on the Text of 1592*, ed. by John Henry Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, repr. 2011)

Gray, Sophie, 'Embodied Texts and Textual Bodies in *Doctor Faustus*', *Marlowe Studies: An Annual*, 2 (2012), 39-56

Greene, Robert, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, ed. by J.A. Lavin (London: Ernest Benn, 1969)

Hammill, Graham, 'Faustus' Fortunes: Commodification, Exchange, and the Form of Literary Subjectivity', *ELH*, 63.2 (1996), 309-336 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/elh.1996.0016>>

Harraway, Clare, *Re-Citing Marlowe: Approaches to Drama* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000)

Harris Sacks, David, 'The Promise and the Contract in Early Modern England: Slade's Case in Perspective', in *Rhetoric and Law in Early Modern England*, ed. by Victoria Kahn and Lorna Hutson (London: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 28-53

Hawkes, David, 'Raising Mephistopheles: Performative Representation and Alienated Labour in *The Tempest*', in *Working Subjects in Early Modern English Drama*, ed. by Michelle M. Dowd and Natasha Korda (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 177-91

Hillman, Richard, *Self Speaking in Medieval and Early Modern English Drama: Subjectivity, Discourse and the Stage* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997)

Honan, Park, *Christopher Marlowe: Poet and Spy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

Hopkins, Lisa 'Acting the Act in *The Changeling*', *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, 8 (1995), 107-11

——— *Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000)

Hutson, Lorna, *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)

Johns, Adrian, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1998)

Jonson, Ben, 'To the Memory of My Beloved, The Author, My William Shakespeare, And What He Hath Left Us', in *Renaissance Literature: An Anthology*, ed. by Michael Payne and John Hunter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) pp. 893-3

Kahn, Victoria, *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640-1674* (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2004)

Kirwan, Peter, 'The First Collected 'Shakespeare Apocrypha'', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 62.4 (2011), 594-601 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/shq.2011.0077>>

Kliman, Bernice W. (ed.), *The Enfolded Hamlet* (1996) <<http://triggs.djvu.org/global-language.com/ENFOLDED/>> [accessed 12<sup>th</sup> September 2013]

Kozuka, Takashi and J.R. Mulryne (eds.), *Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson: New Directions in Biography* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006)

Kuriyama, Constance Brown, *Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2002)

Latham, Jacqueline E.M., 'Machiavelli, Policy, and *The Devil's Charter*', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 1 (1984), 97-108

LaGrandeur, Kevin, 'The Talking Brass Head as a Symbol of Dangerous Knowledge', *English Studies*, 80.5 (1999), 408-88 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00138389908599194>>

Lancashire, Ian, 'Editing English Renaissance Electronic Texts', in *The Literary Text in the Digital Age*, ed. by Richard J. Finneran (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996)

Landow, George P. (ed.), *Hyper/Text/Theory* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994)

Levin, Richard, 'A Source of Haughton's *Englishmen for my Money*', *Notes and Queries*, 53.1 (2006), 57-59 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjj127>>

—— ‘Tarlton in *The Famous History of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*’, *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 12 (1999), 84-98

Logan, Robert A., “‘Glutted with Conceit’”: Imprints of *Doctor Faustus* on *The Tempest*, in *Placing the Plays of Christopher Marlowe: Fresh Cultural Contexts*, ed. by Sara Munson Deats and Robert A. Logan (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 193-208

Loxley, James, *Performativity* (London: Routledge, 2007)

Loxely, James and Mark Robson, *Shakespeare, Jonson and the Claims of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 2013)

Machlachlan, Ian, *Jacques Derrida: Critical Thought* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004)

Marlowe, Christopher, *Doctor Faustus: A- and B- Texts*, ed. by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993, repr. 1995)

—— *Doctor Faustus*, ed. by Roma Gill (London: E. Benn, 1989)

—— *Doctor Faustus*, ed. by Roma Gill, in *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990)

—— *Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, 1604-1616: Parallel Texts*, ed. by W. W. Greg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950)

— *Doctor Faustus: A 1604 Edition*, ed. by Michael Keefer, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Peterborough: Broadview, 2007)

— *Doctor Faustus: The A Text*, ed. by David Ormerod and Christopher Wortham (Nedlands: University of Australia Press, 1985)

Marcus, Leah S., *Unediting the Renaissance* (London: Routledge, 1996)

Maslen, R.W., 'Magical Journeys in Sixteenth-Century Prose Fiction', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 44.1 (2011), 35-50 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5699/yearenglstud.41.1.0035>>

McGann, Jerome, *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web* (New York: Palgrave, 2001)

McAdam, Ian, *Magic and Masculinity in Early Modern English Drama* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009)

— *The Irony of Identity: Self and Imagination in the Drama of Christopher Marlowe* (London: Associated University Presses, 1999)

Miller, J. Hillis, *For Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009)

Mukherji, Subha, *Law and Representation in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

—— “‘Understood Relations’”: Law and Literature in Early Modern Studies’, in *Literature Compass*, 6/3 (2009), 706-725

Munson Deats, Sara, “‘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: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 19-24

—— *Sex, Gender and Desire in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (London: Associated University Presses, 1997)

Munson Deats, Sara and Robert A. Logan (eds.), *Marlowe’s Empery: Expanding His Critical Contexts* (London: Associated University Presses, 2002)

Neill, Michael, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998)

Orgel, Stephen, *The Authentic Shakespeare and Other Problems of the Early Modern Stage* (London: Routledge, 2002)

Pearne, B.R, ‘Dumb-Show in Elizabethan Drama’, *Review of English Studies*, 11.44 (1935), 385-405

Pollard, Tanya, ‘Beauty’s Poisonous Properties’, *Shakespeare Studies*, 27 (1999), 187-210

Poole, Kristen, 'The Devil's in the Archive: Doctor Faustus and Ovidian Physics',  
*Renaissance Drama*, 35 (2006), 191-219

Reisner, Noam, 'The Paradox of Mimesis in Sidney's *Defense of Poesie* and Marlowe's  
*Doctor Faustus*', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 39.4 (2010), 331-49  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/cambqtly.bfq028>>

Royle, Nicholas, *Jacques Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2004)

——— *Telepathy and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991)

——— *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003)

——— *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011)

Scott, Sarah K., and M.L. Stapleton, 'Introduction: Christopher Marlowe the Craftsman:  
Lives, Stage, and Page' in *Christopher Marlowe the Craftsman: Lives, Stage, and Page*, ed.  
by Sarah K. Scott and M.L. Stapleton (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 1-16

Searle, John R., 'Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida', *Glyph*, 2 (1977)

——— *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge  
University Press, 1969)

Snow, Edward A., 'Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and the Ends of Desire', in *Two Renaissance Mythmakers: Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 70-132

Shakespeare, William, *The Sonnets by William Shakespeare* (Faber and Touch Press: 2012)

Sofer, Andrew 'How to Do Things with Demons: Conjuring Performatives in *Doctor Faustus*', *Theatre Journal*, 61.1 (2009), 1-21 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/tj.0.0154>>

Spinosa, Charles, 'The Transformation of Intentionality: Debt and Contract in *The Merchant of Venice*', *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature*, 5 (1993), 370-410

Stevenson, Ruth, 'The Comic Core of Both A- and B-Editions of *Doctor Faustus*', *Studies in English Literature*, 53.2 (2013), 401-419 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sel.2013.0011>>

Stilma, Astrid, 'Angels, Demons and Political Action in Two Early Jacobean History Plays', *Critical Survey*, 23.2 (2011), 9-25 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.3167/cs.2011.230202>>

Stott, Andrew, 'Faustus' Signature and the Signatures of *Dr. Faustus*', *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, 54 (1998), 27-43

Sullivan, Garret A., *Memory and Forgetting in English Renaissance Drama: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Webster* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

Thomas, Keith, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Belief in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London: Widenfeld and Nicholson, 1971, London: Penguin, 1973, repr. 1991)

Traister, Barbara, *Heavenly Necromancers: The Magician in English Renaissance Drama* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984)

Traister, Barbara Howard, 'Dealing with Dramatic Anonymity: The Case of *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*', in *Anonymity in Early Modern England: "What's in a Name?"*, ed. by Janet Wright Starner and Barbara Howard Traister (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 99-111

Wall-Randell, Sarah, 'Doctor Faustus and the Printer's Devil', *Studies in English Literature*, 48.2 (2008), 259-81 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sel.0.0001>>

Warren, Michael J., 'Doctor Faustus: The Old Man and the Text', *English Literary Renaissance*, 11.2 (1981), 111-147 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6757.1981.tb00808.x>>

Webster Spargo, John, *Virgil the Necromancer: Studies in Virgilian Legends* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1934)

Wilson, Luke, 'Ben Jonson and the Law of Contract', in *Rhetoric and Law in Early Modern England*, ed. by Victoria Kahn and Lorna Hutson (London: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 143-65

—— *Theaters of Intention: Drama and the Law in Early Modern England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000)

Wortham, Simon Morgan, *The Derrida Dictionary* (London: Continuum, 2010)

Yates, Frances, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1964)

Yeager, Daniel, 'Marlowe's *Faustus*: Contract as Metaphor?' in *University of Chicago Law School Roundtable*, 2.2 (1995), 599-618