

**The “Hell” of the Theatre: Collapsing Cosmology in the A-text of Christopher
Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus***

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In the A-text of Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* (c. 1604), Marlowe’s eponymous protagonist converses with Mephistopheles, a devil, within his study.¹ He enquires whether the ‘conjuring speeches’ (1.3.45) within his magical books have supplied Mephistopheles’ passage ‘out of hell’ (1.3.75). But Mephistopheles gives an unsettling response:

Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.
Think’st thou that I, who saw the face of God,
And tasted the eternal joys of heaven,
Am not tormented with ten thousand hells
In being deprived of everlasting bliss?
(1.3.76–80)

For the early modern observer, these books, and the incantations found within them, may recall those cosmographical barriers that separated infernal landscapes from their quotidian counterparts. But Mephistopheles collapses this sense of spatial geography. For him, “hell” (76) envelops both the stage and the spaces of the playhouse, and—as I shall demonstrate—those who watch the play within the auditorium take their places alongside Faustus and Mephistopheles as residents within an infernal domain. Like this play’s devil, they cannot taste the “eternal joys of heaven” (78), and the walls and doors of the theatre take the place of cosmic barriers as thresholds into sinister regions.

Why, however, do I use the 1604 text, considered by Leo Kirschbaum and Walter W. Greg in the 1940s as nought but a “typical ‘bad quarto’ based on actors’ reconstruction rather than authorial copy,” as a principal point of reference?² For Roma Gill, prefacing her lauded edition of the play in 1989, the A-text seems “more like the play that Marlowe wrote,” for its

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¹ Christopher Marlowe, “The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus (A-Text, 1604),” in *Doctor Faustus*, ed. David Scott Kastan (Norton, 2005), 5–53. All references to the text will come from Kastan’s edition.

² Charles Nicholl, “*Faustus* and the Politics of Magic,” *London Review of Books* 12, no. 5 (1990), [lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v12/n05/charles-nicholl/faustus-and-the-politics-of-magic](https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v12/n05/charles-nicholl/faustus-and-the-politics-of-magic) (Date accessed: 30 June 2026).

shorter and more dramatic structure resembles the “pacy, episodic speed” of Elizabethan theatre.³ For sure, the 1616 B-text of *Faustus* remains indispensable for understanding the play’s theatrical history. But one cannot dismiss the idea of the later text as a product of revision and enlargement, reflecting the drama’s continued popularity in performance and incorporating material beyond Marlowe’s composition. The B-text’s heightened spectacle and more elaborate theatrical effects therefore illuminate the play’s later stage life rather than its earliest dramaturgical principles. My concern lies with those principles. Where the B-text sharpens or extends patterns already present in the earlier version, I draw upon it briefly for comparison; while attributing either text to the original performance remains a matter of scholarly debate, the A-text nonetheless offers a clear and useful articulation of the play’s theatrical geography.

This play only took printed form in 1604, when Valentine Simmes printed a “1517-line version of the play” for Thomas Bushell.⁴ But the play had a rich performance history prior to this date. For Thomas Healy, the play may have formed part of the repertoire of the Lord Admiral’s Men as early as 1589, and the residence of this playing company at the Rose, a theatre managed by Philip Henslowe, from 1594 precipitated a further “twenty-four performances” up to 1597.⁵ In this respect, *Faustus*’s sophisticated cosmological geography could have later drawn from the innovative archaeological features of the Rose, for the building featured an accessible “area below the stage.”⁶ Unfortunately, archaeological excavations revealing this space did not provide the time to explore this subterranean area in full, but other theatrical works that precede *Faustus* may have used this region for their own purposes. A staging of William Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (c. 1592), which took place at the Rose for the first time on the “23 of Jenewary” in 1593, provides a case in point, since a hidden zone beneath a raised dais may have shaped the “pit” within which Martius discovers the mangled corpse of Bassianus (2.2.30).⁷ Further renovations of the Rose took place in 1595, and a “heauens,” lying suspended on the “pillar base” that corniced the southern edges

³ Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, ed. Roma Gill (A & C Black, 1989), p. vi; Nicholl, “*Faustus* and the Politics of Magic.”

⁴ Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, ed. Kastan, ix.

⁵ Thomas Healy, “*Doctor Faustus*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Patrick Cheney (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 179.

⁶ Julian H. C. Bowsher, “The Rose and its Stages,” in *Shakespeare Survey 60: Theatres for Shakespeare*, ed. Peter Holland (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 43.

⁷ Philip Henslowe, *Henslowe’s Diary*, ed. W. W. Greg (A. H. Bullen, 1904), 16; William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus: Revised Edition*, ed. Jonathan Bate (Bloomsbury, 2018).

of the stage, housed a “throne,” which could enter the stage space through an overhead opening.⁸

This theatre supplied a mimetic representation of cosmological geography. The heavens, in other words, overlooked the stage, while subterranean regions below gave an infernal counterpart. The Rose, then, provided players and playwrights with an opportunity to stage more sophisticated spectacles, and one would expect stagings of the A-text to draw from this expanded theatrical geography following Henslowe’s renovations in 1595. But the 1604 quarto shies away from such spectacle. For Glynne Wickham, none of the stage directions in Marlowe’s works outline “the existence of a stage trap at floor level,” while the “shadow” or “heavens,” resting on “stage pillars,” seem absent.⁹ The original stage directions of this quarto do not instruct an angelic figure to “hover o’er [the] head” of the scholar in the final act of the play with a “vial of precious grace” (5.1.53–54), while no stage trap grants this play’s devils passage from a region beyond the vernacular spaces of the drama.

Even if such mechanisms were available, the A-text does not dramatically depend on a conspicuous cosmological breach. Its infernal geography, for example, is not organised around an ascent from below or a descent from above, but around lateral ingress into an already permeable space. As we shall see, porous borders frame the vernacular spaces of this tragedy; for Leslie Thomson, Marlowe’s “repeated use of the tiring house wall and its openings” may have supplied *Faustus*’s devils with their respective entrances and exits.¹⁰ Stage doors, in other words, become cosmic thresholds, and the wider tendency for theatre historians to “habitually assume” that a trapdoor supplied the entrance from infernal regions stands on shaky ground as a result.¹¹ In this respect, earlier theatres may have facilitated this linear and somewhat mundane representation of a transcendental journey. The “Bel-Savage Play-house,” for example, gave a staging of *Faustus* in “Queene Elizabeths dayes,” and William Prynne recalled how a “visible apparition of the Devill” accosted actors and spectators in the yard, causing “great amazement.”¹² More elaborate theatres, such as the

⁸ Henslowe, *Henslowe’s Diary*, 4; Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574–1642* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 159.

⁹ Glynne Wickham, “‘Exeunt to the Cave’: Notes on the Staging of Marlowe’s Plays,” *The Tulane Drama Review* 8, no. 4 (1964): 189; Glynne Wickham, “‘Heavens,’ Machinery, and Pillars,” in *The First Public Playhouse: The Theatre in Shoreditch, 1576–1598*, ed. Herbert Berry (McGill-Queens University Press, 1979), 4.

¹⁰ Leslie Thomson, ‘Marlowe’s Staging of Meaning’, *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 18, no. 1 (2005): 21.

¹¹ Mark Hutchings, “*Titus Andronicus* and Trapdoors at the Rose and Newington Butts,” in *Shakespeare Survey 71: Recreating Shakespeare*, ed. Peter Holland (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 224.

¹² William Prynne, *Histrion-mastix* (London, 1633), sig. ggg* 4^r.

Fortune, staged more elaborate renditions of the drama. But dramatizations retained the sense of unsettling staging. John Melton, for example, recalled one performance in 1620:

Another will fore-tell of Lightning and Thunder that shall happen such a day, when there are no such Inflammations seene, except men go to the Fortune in Golding-Lane to see the Tragedie of Doctor Faustus: There indeede a man may behold shagge-hayr'd deuills runne roaring ouer the Stage with Squibs in their mouthes, while Drummers make thunder in the Tying-house, and the twelue-penny Hirelings make artificial Lightning in the Heauens.¹³

Faustus's vivid show of horror certainly had longevity, satisfying the interests of Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences. But Melton's comments also convey how the play's imagery envelops the auditorium in which it was performed, for the walls of the Fortune contain those "shagge-hayr'd deuills" that transgress into everyday space to the "Lightning" and "thunder" of Last Judgement. In this respect, sinister biblical portents take place within the theatre, and the doors of the building become unsettling thresholds through which spectators could encounter damnation for themselves.

For the early modern English spectator, then, *Faustus* may supply a temporary residence *within* hell, for the spaces of the theatre provide observers with sinister soundscapes of an infernal domain. Thomas Middleton, for example, recalled how the timbers of the "Old Theatre crakt and frighted the Audience" in 1604, while pandemonium greeted that "extra devil" who took its place uninvited "among the actors on stage" during a performance at Exeter.¹⁴ These maleficent agents do not take up residence in spatially distant areas. They languish instead alongside this play's tragic protagonist, and those who watch the play find themselves drawn into the "hell" of the playhouse, settling uncomfortably close to Faustus's final resting place. Faustus, then, no longer needs those "necromantic books" (1.1.50) that promise access to forces "more powerful than [he]"; hell has already claimed the study, making such tools theatrically – and conceptually – superfluous.¹⁵

Faustus, as I shall show in what follows, thus questions hell as an area that lies beyond fixed cosmological borders. In doing so, the play reveals a more sinister set of implications, for one's presence within a seemingly infernal theatre sets the scene for diabolical encounter. In this respect, the play may engage with how playgoing settled uneasily within the wider religious polemics of a post-Reformation world. For John

¹³ John Melton, *Astrolagaster* (London, 1620), sig. E4^r.

¹⁴ Thomas Middleton, *The Black Book* (London, 1604), sig. B4^r; Leah S. Marcus, "Textual Indeterminacy and Ideological Difference: The Case of *Doctor Faustus*", *Renaissance Drama* 20, no. 1 (1989): 4.

¹⁵ Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Clarendon Press, 1993), 3.

Northbroke, writing in 1577, such “idle pastimes” corrupted public morals, and Philip Stubbes outlined in 1595 how events taking place within these venues encouraged individuals to “contemn God and all His laws.”¹⁶ For William Prynne, “more playbooks were printed than sermons,” and spectacles taking place on the stage wrested attention away from spiritual messages delivered from the pulpit.¹⁷ For these individuals, playgoing remained the true enemy, and events taking place on the stage tempted rapt audiences ever further away from the scriptural interpretations of a post-Reformation world. Indeed, for Mephistopheles, hell thus began at the box office, and paid admission enacts its own quiet descent. He relocates rather than eliminates supernatural threat. As we shall see, infernal power no longer depends on ritual efficacy or textual mediation, but instead manifests as a spatially proximate and ambient presence within the dramatic world itself.

“Out of Hell”: Spatially Distant Afterlives

To appreciate the force of this relocation, it is first necessary to recover the spatial assumptions that *Faustus* inherits, for the play’s infernal geography derives much of its unsettling power from its departure from earlier cosmological models. The idea of a spatially distant afterlife was not new. It recurs in Mesopotamian, Semitic, and classical traditions. It also shapes Christian cosmological geography. In Luke 16:22–23, for example, the rich man Dives pleads with Abraham while imprisoned in a place of eternal punishment:

And it came to pass, that the beggar [Lazarus] died, and was buried, and was carried up by the angels into Abraham’s bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; and in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

(Luke 16: 22–23)¹⁸

This passage evokes Hesiod’s cosmological geography, for an incarcerated figure resides in a place beneath, “lift[ing] up his eyes” to face those who observe how torturous flames roast his flesh. He seems remote from those who overlook his punishment from above. Righteous individuals, in other words, take up residence *above*, while Dives languishes in spaces *below*, facing retribution for his transgressions.¹⁹ These two parties reside in separate

¹⁶ Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3–4.

¹⁷ Leah S. Marcus, “Antitheatricality: The Theatre as a Scourge,” in *A New Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. A. F. Kinney and T. W. Hopper (Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 186.

¹⁸ All references to biblical passages come from the King James Version (KJV).

¹⁹ D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 34; Peter Marshall, “The Reformation of Hell? Protestant and Catholic Infernalisms in England, c. 1560–1640,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 61, no. 2 (2010): 298.

places. But while scriptural depictions of the afterlife segregate the good from the bad, such illustrations of retribution generated problems, for Lazarus and Abraham stand within speaking distance of Dives, who beseeches the beggar “dip the tip of his finger in water” to cool his burning tongue. They thus occupy a region unsettlingly adjacent to those who endure retribution, for the narrative permits direct speech across a “great gulf” (Luke 16:24–26), collapsing absolute separation into visible and audible closeness.

Such proximity complicates any single notion of sealed paradisiacal separation. Yet this vivid illustration exposes a troubling problem. For, if the righteous resided in such easy vicinity to the damned, how could they be in paradise? Baptism introduced other complications, for this sacrament, being introduced after Lazarus and Abraham die, did not apply to those long-dead holy men who consolidated their faith prior to Christ’s resurrection. Those who are denied this sacrament, in other words, appear consigned to a darker realm.²⁰ Other scriptural passages provided solutions to this problem, however. Matthew 27:52, Isaiah 42:7, and 1 Peter 3:19, for example, describe Christ’s descent to hell after the crucifixion, where he confronts Satan and leads his followers up from *Sheol*. For the author of Matthew’s gospel, the “many bodies of the saints” emerge from their tombs, returning to the “holy city” to appear “unto many” (Matthew 27: 52–53). Christ greets his disciples after this enterprise concludes, resolving the doubt of Thomas, and angels then carry him “up to heaven” while his followers watch (Luke 24:51).

Hell remains spatially distant in these accounts, yet its boundaries prove permeable under divine incursion. For Rufinus of Aquileia, authoring an early Christian creed, Christ descends to hell, binds Satan, and leads the righteous departed to paradise.²¹ Early versions of the Apostles’ Creed, authenticated after the Fourth Declaration of Sirmium in 359 and formalised in a document published at Constantinople in 381, echoed this tale of divine descent following the crucifixion.²² For St Athanasius, a cosmic battle took place within these distant regions, and Christ rises “agayne” on “the third day,” ascending “into heaven” where he “sytteth on the right hand of the father.”²³

²⁰ Allen Cabaniss, “The Harrowing of Hell, Psalm 24, and Pliny the Younger: A Note,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 7, no. 1 (1953): 64, 67. Also see 1 Corinthians 15: 29.

²¹ John J. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (Longman, 1972), 378–82.

²² Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski, *The Apostles’ Creed and its Early Christian Context* (T & T Clark, 2009), 56–57; Henry A. Kelly, “Hell with Purgatory and Two Limbos: The Geography and Theology of the Underworld.” In *Hell and its Afterlife: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. I. Morreira and M. Toscano (London: Ashgate, 2010), 124.

²³ Drawing from earlier descriptions of the underworld found in classical mythology, this creed appears in Thomas Cranmer’s *The Book of Common Prayer* (c. 1549), which sought to rebut and revise the elaborate

A vertically ordered cosmology, then, structures the afterlife in Christian writings, for hell lies below while the heavens are situated above. For Caesarius of Heisterbach (c. 1180–1240), gaping chasms in the earth, clogged by noxious gases, often marked the threshold to the former domain.²⁴ Yet the gradual influx of other cultures and imaginative traditions, particularly following the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410 A.D., broadened iconographic representations of these entrances. For Joyce R.N. Galpern, such variation reflected a “wider search for an iconography of hell that could be understood by Christian and pagan alike.”²⁵ The “Behemoth,” the “huge land beast” of Gregory the Great’s *Moralia, Sive Expositio in Job* (c. 578–95 A.D.), for example, embodied the devouring force, while the “Leviathan,” the sea-beast of Hebrew Scripture, extended the menace of an infernal entrance into the abyssal deep.²⁶ Folkloric sources introduced additional monstrous forms that refigured this sinister threshold in medieval iconography. A “dragon-like head with glowing eyes and sharp teeth,” spreading its jaws “wide against the circle . . . [of] the cosmos,” shaped another entrance in a thirteenth-century manuscript of Hildegard von Bingen’s *Liber divinorum operum* (c. 1163–70), now preserved at Lucca, Italy. Drawing on traditions that placed infernal abysses “towards the west outside the curvature of the earth,” this “terrible mouth . . . flung open for the purpose of engulfing,” marked the entryway into a hellish domain as a devouring, bestial aperture.²⁷ A sculpture at Gosforth, Cumbria, moreover, demonstrates how such monstrous thresholds migrated into northern devotional landscapes. Drawing on Nordic mythology to transmit Scriptural truths and expressing “complex (Christian) theological concerns to . . . their Anglo Scandinavian cultural milieu,” the Celtic

iconography depicting the afterlife found within Christian traditions. See “The Book of Common Prayer, 1549,” in *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, 1662*, ed. Brian Cummings (Oxford University Press, 2010).

²⁴ See Caesarius of Heisterbach, *The Dialogue on Miracles*, 2 vols, trans. H. von E. Scott and C. C. Swinton Bland (Harcourt Brace, 1929), 2, 302; Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans. Janos M. Bak and Paul A. Hollingworth (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 183; Kristen Poole, *Supernatural Environments in Shakespeare’s England: Demonism, Divinity, and Drama* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 116. For Clare Merrick, the cauldron provided another distinct iconographical representation. The lips of such vessels, within which broth roiled under heat, were ‘often inverted to become associated with death, evil and the supernatural’. See Clare Merrick, “The Cauldron and the Threat of the ‘Other’ in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Middleton’s *The Witch*, and Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*,” *The Journal of Marlowe Studies* 5, no. 1 (2025): 50.

²⁵ Joyce R. N. Galpern, “The Shape of Hell in Anglo Saxon England,” PhD Thesis (University of California Press, 1977), 3.

²⁶ Galpern, “The Shape of Hell,” 142.

²⁷ Pamela Sheingorn, “‘Who can open the doors to his face?’: The Iconography of Hell Mouth,” in *The Iconography of Hell*, ed. Clifford Davidson and Thomas H. Seiler (Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 3. Also see Hildegard von Bingen, *Welt und Mensch: Das Buch “Das Operatione Die” aus dem Greater Kodex*, ed. Heinrich Schipperges (Otto Müller, 1965), 188.

cross atop the monument stands alongside carvings that recall how the god Viðarr wrestles against the open jaws of Fenrir, the monstrous wolf who heralds Ragnarök.²⁸

Hell thus remains spatially distant, yet its boundary became increasingly imaginable – not merely as a chasm in the earth, but as a mouth poised to swallow the world, a threshold through which imagination could pass. In medieval churches, the open mouths of monstrous beings vividly portrayed the fate of the negligent Christian. In a striking frieze on the western front of Lincoln Cathedral, a beast’s jaws appear agape, threatening to engulf the damned, while Christ, resplendent in his crown, grasps the hands of those drawn towards infernal destruction. In this respect, this illustration recalls how Viðarr struggles against the jaws of Fenrir. A Doom image above the chancel at St Thomas à Becket, Salisbury, likewise showcases jaws that consume the condemned. The Doom image at Wenhaston similarly portrays sinners moving ever closer to the mouth of a monstrous creature, lashed together by the folds of an infernal tongue, while the colossal head of a dragon-like creature, wielding a set of blackened teeth, surges inexorably towards a group of condemned sinners, who teeter helplessly atop the arches flanking the central nave at the church of St Peter and St Paul, Pickering.

The mouths of these unnamed creatures shaped an infernal entryway in medieval cycle drama, translating cosmological boundary into performance architecture. The inventory of the Mercers’ *Last Judgement*, which unfolded during the York Cycle in 1433, for instance, included a hell mouth, and such iconographical representations acquired more sophisticated designs in other performances.²⁹ Indeed, the Castle Museum at Carcassonne holds an English alabaster panel from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, which depicts the jaws of a hell mouth as part of the stage architecture for a performance of *The Harrowing of Hell*. Here, the enclosing teeth formed a sinister architectural border, allowing lesser demons to “go spar the gates [and] set watches on the walls’.”³⁰ Records of a Passion play at Metz in 1347 outline an even more elaborate gateway: a hell-mouth that opened and closed “at its own accord,” while a similar threshold, featuring a “neithere Chap” or jaw, appeared in a

²⁸ Amanda Doviak, “Doorway to Devotion: Recovering the Christian Nature of the Gosforth Cross,” *Religions* 12, no. 228 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12040228>. For a physical description of the monument, see Richard N. Bailey, *England’s Earliest Sculptors* (University of Toronto Press, 1996), 86.

²⁹ Sheingorn, “The Iconography of Hell Mouth,” 6. Also see Alexandra Johnston and Margaret Dorrell, “The Domsday Pageant of the York Mercers, 1433,” *Leeds Studies in English* 5, no. 1 (1971): 31.

³⁰ M. D. Anderson, *Drama and Imagery in English Medieval Churches* (Cambridge University Press, 1963), 127.

stage play at Lincoln in 1564.³¹ In the Chester Cycle, meanwhile, a pageant wagon carried a “hell mouth with collapsing gates.” For Peter Meredith, this design offered a visible escape route for the righteous, who could leave their “netted enclosure” and follow Christ to paradise after the latter broke down its gates.³²

Paradoxically, such extravagant stage designs emerged from the economic instability of public performance. Technologically sophisticated and richly decorated stages and props contributed to the sense of spectacle, obliging audiences to stop and stare. For Charles W. R. D. Mosely, this strategy stabilised what was otherwise a “chancy” form of financial compensation by encouraging donations.³³ Christianised cosmological geography, for example, took mechanical form in an iron swing that connected heaven, hell, and vernacular space in the Mercers’ *Last Judgement*. This device enabled Deus to “fly vppe to heauen” and dramatized Satan’s descent to hell after the Fall.³⁴ The stage directions of the *Paris Resurrection*, a play for a fixed stage, likewise describe a monumental vision of the underworld: a tall, covered, and netted tower concealing the damned from the view of rapt spectators:

Limbo . . . should be made like a tall square tower surrounded by nets so that through the said nets one can see from the audience the souls who are inside when the Anima Christi has forced his way inside there. But before his coming the said tower shall be provided with black cloth curtains all round which shall cover the said nets and prevent [the souls] from being seen until the entrance of Anima Christi, and then the said curtains shall be cunningly pulled aside on small rings so that the people in the audience can see inside the said tower through the said nets.³⁵

Besieging hell after his crucifixion, Christ forces his way into this fortified tower, battering down its gates. Those imprisoned within it gain an exit in the ensuing confrontation, following the victorious deity to paradise in a spectacle at once vivid, entertaining, and terrifying.

³¹ Anon., *The Staging of Religious Drama in the Later Middle Ages: Texts and Documents in English Translation*, ed. Peter Meredith and John E. Tailby (Medieval Institute Publications, 1983), 90. Also see Donald C. Stuart, “The Stage Setting of Hell and the Iconography of the Middle Ages,” *Romantic Review* 4, no. 1 (1913): 339; Anon., *The Records of Plays and Playgoers in Lincolnshire, 1300-1585*, ed. S. Karhl (Malone Society Publications, 1974), 67.

³² Peter Meredith, “The Iconography of Hell in the English Cycles: A Practical Perspective,” in Davidson and Seiler, *The Iconography of Hell*, 160.

³³ Charles W. R. D. Mosely, *English Renaissance Drama: An Introduction to Theatre and Theatres in Shakespeare’s Time* (Humanities EBooks, 2007), 13.

³⁴ Johnston and Dorrell, “The Doomsday Pageant of the York Mercers, 1433,” 31. Also see Peter Holding, “Stagecraft in the York Cycle,” *Theatre Notebook* 37, no. 2 (1990): 51–60.

³⁵ Meredith, “The Iconography of Hell in the English Cycles,” 160.

Christian theology, medieval iconography, and cycle drama, then, consistently imagined hell as a spatially distinct realm. It was a place that lay beyond the remits of vernacular space, and conspicuous thresholds, such as a chasm, a monstrous mouth, or an elaborate stage machine supplied the ingresses into these places. These same traditions repeatedly disclosed the permeability of that boundary, allowing speech, vision, or divine passage across what ought to have remained an absolute divide. *Doctor Faustus* inherits these assumptions, but its reconfiguration of infernal space belongs to a markedly different theatrical and religious culture. The question, therefore, is not whether the play abandons this inherited geography, but how it reimagines its visual and theatrical expression within the commercial playhouse.

Iconoclasm And Ingenuity: The Hell of Faustus's Theatre

In some respects, the Reformation drove forward such a transformation, for vivid iconographical representations of infernal thresholds met the ire of Protestant authorities. Those images decorating the interiors of medieval churches were the first to be targeted. Ely Cathedral offers a case in point: "iconoclastic hammers" defaced the elaborate sculptures that lined "the walls of [its] fourteenth-century Lady Chapel."³⁶ For John Phillips, these systematic acts of destruction hinged not just on religious disapproval: while some religious forerunners of the Reformation regarded "images, relics, and saints" as "excessive," humanist thinkers increasingly viewed elaborate illustration as unnecessary to religious practice.³⁷ That "piece of timber painted," for example, did not sit well with Grace Palmer in 1531, and she refused to grant funds for lights that could illuminate this immaculate icon within the church of St Osyth's in Essex.³⁸ As Helen Parish notes, John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* (c. 1563) celebrated those "pre-Reformation assaults on roods, images, and cults." John Hilsley, the Bishop of Rochester, publicly destroyed a mechanised and moving likeness of Christ at Boxley Abbey, Kent.³⁹

³⁶ Michael O'Connor, *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theatre in Early-Modern England* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

³⁷ John Phillips, *The Reformation of Images: Destruction of Art in England, 1535–1660* (California: University of California Press, 1973), 6.

³⁸ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. V. A. Kolve and G. Olson (Norton, 1989), 259; 262.

³⁹ Helen Parish, *Monks, Miracles, and Magic: Reformation Representations of the Medieval Church* (Routledge, 2005), 79; Robert Hutchinson, *Thomas Cromwell: The Rise and Fall of Henry VIII's Most Notorious Minister* (Phoenix Press, 2008), 162-3. Also see Peter Marshall, "The Rood of Boxley, the Blood of Hales, and the Defence of the Henrician Church," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 46, no. 4 (1995): 689–96.

Such hostility did not suddenly emerge in the sixteenth century. This suspicion of spectacle possessed far deeper roots. As John W. Harris has observed, the early Christian fathers regarded the “lively street theatre of the mimes” and the “elaborate performances of the pantomimes” in the Roman Empire as morally and spiritually disruptive.⁴⁰ These performances were criticised as sites of “petty jealousies and squabbles” and as arenas in which actors could preen “themselves if they came into royal favour.”⁴¹ These anxieties re-emerged with renewed force in the iconoclastic climate of early modern England. For Henri Fluchère, post-Reformation sentiment cultivated a refusal to “compromise with Sin,” and those who could “welcome, encourage, and tolerate it” could become the object of sustained attack.⁴² For Philip Stubbes, contemporary plays interrupted the development of Christian virtue:

Do they not maintain bawdy, insinuate foolery, and renew the remembrance of heathen idolatry? Do they not induce whoredom and uncleanness? Nay, are they not rather plain devourers of maidenly virginity and chastity? For proof whereof mark but the flocking and running to Theatres and Curtains, daily and hourly, night and day, time and tide, to see plays and interludes, where such wanton gestures, such bawdy speeches, such laughing and fleering, such clipping and culling, such winking and glancing of wanton eyes, and the like is used, as is wonderful to behold.⁴³

In this respect, performances became sites of compounded anxiety. While Stubbes focuses on how events taking place on the stage influenced spectators’ behaviour, the actors’ embodied imitations of fictional characters became another sticking point. As Kirk Quinsland has observed, theatrical performances presented ambiguous messages, for an “audience member [could] hear simultaneously the voice of Christ and the voice of the flesh.”⁴⁴ The body of the actor, in other words, resembled the icon, presenting a visible semblance of what it was not.

Such acrimonious responses hardly helped those who participated in the secular theatre of the sixteenth century, and patrons faced a contentious dilemma. Sir Francis Walsingham shared this apprehension for theatre practice, and his move to approve the Queen’s Men in 1583 has been interpreted as seeking instead to align the “reform movement”

⁴⁰ John W. Harris, *Medieval Theatre in Context: An Introduction* (Routledge, 1992), 10.

⁴¹ Harris, *Medieval Theatre in Context*, 12.

⁴² Henri Fluchère, *Shakespeare and the Elizabethans*, trans. Guy Hamilton (Hill & Wang Dramabook, 1956), 70.

⁴³ Cited in Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama Under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), 20.

⁴⁴ Kirk Quinsland, “Antitheatricalism and the Interpretation of Tudor Allegorical Performance,” *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, 55, no. 2 (2015): 371.

with a “developing English culture.”⁴⁵ He had to cater for his fellow courtiers, who welcomed extravagant spectacles taking place before them. They oversaw a staging of *Guismond of Salerne* on a temporary stage at Greenwich in 1566, and Cupid allegedly descended onto the stage from above, perhaps making use of pulleys and winches that could “fly an actor between the stage and the space above it.” Such spectacles seemed common in court stagings, for a “constant expenditure on pulleys, ropes, cords, and wires for various kinds of effects” featured regularly in the accounts of the Revels.⁴⁶ In 1564, for example, “charrets ffor the goddesses & dieuers devisses as the heauens and clowds” appeared in the inventory of a court masque, while an “Iron woorke for a frame for A Seate in a pageant” featured in performances by Italian players at Windsor and Reading ten years later.⁴⁷

Of course, these wider religious anxieties acquired particular significance for the commercial theatre in which *Doctor Faustus* was first performed. An assault against court drama was a risky business. Vehement criticism against such pastimes would hardly have gone down well with members of the court. Yet the explosion of secular theatre after Elizabeth I ascended the throne in 1558 gave critics an easier target. In several respects, such secular theatre had challenges of their own. For William Ingram, complications arose in ways that shadowed “any new or emerging trade”: the endorsement of playing companies by powerful figures could not settle a market that had become saturated, and many “more playing companies failed than succeeded.”⁴⁸ The first amphitheatre, the Red Lion, which was built for John Brayne in 1567 in Whitechapel, may have been designed to overcome these challenges, for its walls and doors cut off the area of performance from the streets that encircled the building, ensuring that spectators could only watch the play if they were granted access, perhaps paying a fee.⁴⁹ Admittedly, the Red Lion had a short life, but successive playhouses drew from the design of this prototype. They were built in areas that lay “on the margins of society, in the Liberties located outside the city walls and, to the south, across the

⁴⁵ Scott McMillan and Sally-Beth Maclean, *The Queen's Men and their Plays* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 31; E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols (Cambridge University Press, 1923), 2, 104–5.

⁴⁶ John H. Astington, “Descent Machinery in the Playhouses,” *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 2, no. 1 (1985): 120.

⁴⁷ Anon., *Documents Relating to the Revels Office at Court in the Time of King Edward VI and Queen Mary*, ed. Albert Feuillerat (Uystpruyst, 1914), 117, 227.

⁴⁸ William Ingram, “The Economics of Playing,” in *A Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. David Scott Kastan (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 313.

⁴⁹ Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11.

natural barrier of the Thames,” and disapproving anti-theatricalists could do little to intervene in those pastimes unfolding beyond their immediate jurisdiction.⁵⁰

These buildings were believed to be placed beyond spiritual safety, and the stage plays taking place within them were considered as things that “sucked out of the Devills teates,” nourishing attendees in “ydolatry heathenrie and sinne.”⁵¹ For Stephen Gosson, writing in 1582, playgoing resembled “the eating of meat sacrificed to idols,” contravening the instruction made in Paul’s Epistle to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 8:4–8). Such pastimes came perilously close to how “Popish priests . . . transformed the celebrating of the Sacrament of the Lords supper into a Masse-game,” and other critics, including William Rankins, Henry Cross, John Northbrooke, and Anthony Munday, lingered on how playgoing endangered spiritual health, introducing a “dangerous moral corruption” that could stain the dispositions of a god-fearing populace.⁵² As Jonas Barish has observed, such “opposition to theater develop[ed] when the theater itself most plentifully prosper[ed],” for vice was seen to manifest within these spaces of spectacle, drawing attendees ever further away from a righteous path.⁵³

Marlowe, then, may have thus “struck while his iron was hot,” for the courtyard of the Bel Savage, an “active inn” that lay within “the City Ward of Faringdon Without and the parish of St Bride,” may have given one of the earliest stagings of Marlowe’s *Faustus* in 1589.⁵⁴ The surge of anti-theatrical sentiment, in other words, formed a noisy backdrop within which the play could emerge, and Mephistopheles appears to draw on such criticism when he converses with Faustus for the first time:

Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.
Think’st thou that I, who saw the face of God,
And tasted the eternal joys of heaven,
Am not tormented with ten thousand hells
In being deprived of everlasting bliss?
(1.3.76–80)

⁵⁰ Valerie I. J. Pearl, *London and the Puritan Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1961), 40–41; Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (University of Michigan Press, 1995), 8.

⁵¹ Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London, 1583), sig. [L. vi].

⁵² O’Connor, *The Idolatrous Eye*, 14; John Rainolds, *Th’overthrow of Stage-playes* (London, 1599), 61. Also see William Rankins, *A Mirrour of Monsters* (London, 1587); Henry Cross, *Vertues Commonwealth* (London, 1603); John Northbrooke, *Spiritus est vicarius Christi in terra: A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine playes or Enterludes . . . are reprov’d* (London, 1577); Anthony Munday, *A second and third blast of retrait from plaies and Theaters* (London, 1580).

⁵³ Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (University of California Press, 1981), 61.

⁵⁴ Park Honan, *Christopher Marlowe: Poet & Spy* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 199; Herbert Berry, “The Bell Savage Inn and Playhouse in London,” *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 19, no. 1 (2006): 121.

This theatre, he claims, enacts a “hell” of its own (76), and those who watch the play settle within a dangerous site of spiritual corruption, their pastimes drawing them ever closer to diabolical divergence.⁵⁵

But Faustus remains unaware of this inversion, for an infernal domain as a space that lies beyond the remits of a vernacular world inform his understanding. Indeed, he believes that his “conjuring speeches” have “raise[d]” (1.3.45) this figure “out of hell” (1.3.79). He evokes a familiar spatial paradigm, for maleficent agents traditionally entered stage spaces from elsewhere, becoming unfamiliar strangers within the spaces of a play. In *Mankind* (c. 1470), for example, a place somewhere offstage sources the devil Titivillus, and Nowadays brings about his entrance, requesting the audience to “make space” for this sinister character (1.473).⁵⁶ In this respect, Titivillus breaches the borders of the play’s world, partaking in a journey from a liminal zone beyond borders of the playing space. The early fixed stages, reserved for court drama, provided alternative representations of a cosmic journey, for a menacing zone beneath grants passage to those demons that invade the stage in Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville’s *The Tragedy of Gorboduc* (c. 1561).⁵⁷ In Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1592), a maddened Hieronimo draws in vain upon a similar journey. Overcome with grief, he scrabbles to retrieve his lost son from a distant place below, burrowing unsuccessfully “through the stage door with his dagger” in an attempt to showcase those “deadly wounds” that have stopped short the life of his son (3.12.70 s.d.–72).⁵⁸ Another sinister under-stage space develops in *Titus Andronicus* (c. 1592), and Martius beseeches his brother, Quintus, to pull him from the site in which he finds the mangled corpse of Bassianus:

Upon his bloody finger he doth wear,
A precious ring that lightens all this hole,
Which, like a taper in some monument
Doth shine on the dead man’s earthly cheeks
And shows the ragged entrails of this pit.
So pale did shine the moon on Pyramus

⁵⁵ This paradigm, whereby vernacular spaces structure supernatural environments, is noticeable in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. See Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton University Press, 2001). For Romeo, a residence beyond the walls of Verona likewise forms “purgatory, torture,” and “hell itself” in *Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1597). See William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. René Weis (Bloomsbury, 2012), 3.3.18.

⁵⁶ Anon., ‘Mankind’, in *Medieval Drama*, ed. David Bevington (Hackett, 2012), 901–38.

⁵⁷ Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville, *The Tragedie of Gorboduc, or Ferrex and Porrex*, ed. I. B. Cauthen Jr. (Nebraska University Press, 1970).

⁵⁸ Edward B. M. Rendall, “Temporal Instability, Wildernesses, and the Otherworld in Early Modern Drama,” *Literature* 2, no. 4 (2022): 331; Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, ed. Clara Calvo and Jesús Tronch (Bloomsbury, 2013).

When he did lie bathed in maiden blood.
O, brother, help me with thy fainting hand—
If fear hath made me faint, as me it hath—
Out of this foul devouring receptacle,
As hateful as Cocytus’ misty mouth.

(2.2.226–36)

As noted earlier, *Titus Andronicus* was staged around two years before the revival of Marlowe’s tragedy, and the absence of a trapdoor would have made the unfortunate descent of this character “difficult to conceive.”⁵⁹ This “pit” acquires the familiar imagery of a medieval past, for the “ragged entrails” (230) of this “foul devouring receptacle” (235) contain the “misty mouth” of the Cocytus (236), one of the rivers that flowed through a classical underworld.⁶⁰ In this respect, spaces beneath become sites within which the iconographical representations of two distinct cultures converge, shaping a dismal domain through which one must be ingested by the gaping maw of an unnamed creature.⁶¹

For Laurence Publicover, such hidden under-stage spaces inform the “demonic nature” of those who venture from them, who have access to a “form of truth hidden from everyday experience.”⁶² In Shakespeare’s *Henry VI Part 2* (c. 1596–99), for example, a “burning lake” lies within the “darkness” of a space below the dais (1.4.39), supplying Asnath, a malevolent spirit, with a place of residence.⁶³ But the A-text of *Faustus* does not draw upon this spatial paradigm, for other sites seem to supply Mephistopheles after Faustus concludes his incantation, drawing out the “circle” within which “Jehovah’s name” is “[f]orward and backward anagrammatised” (1.3.8–9):

Sint mihi dei Acherontis propitii! Valeat numen triplex Jehovahae! Ignei,
aerii, aquatic, spiritus, salvete! Orientis princeps Beelzebub, inferni
ardentis monarcha, et Demogorgon, propitiamus vos, ut appareat et

⁵⁹ Hutchings, “*Titus Andronicus* and Trapdoors,” 225. Also see Alan C. Dessen, “Two Falls and a Trap: Shakespeare and the Spectacles of Realism,” *English Literary Renaissance* 5, no. 1 (1975): 291–307.

⁶⁰ The entrance to this hidden space beneath the stage may draw from folkloric sources. The *vagina dentate* motif seems one of the most prominent, and this gaping mouth, perhaps adorned with teeth, features in much scholarship on the play. See, for example, Mary L. Fawcett, “Arms/Words/Tears: Language and the Body in *Titus Andronicus*,” *English Literary History* 50, no. 2 (1983): 261–77; Cynthia Marshall, “‘I Can Interpret All Her Martyr’d Signs’: *Titus Andronicus*, Feminism, and the Limits of Interpretation,” in *Sexuality and Politics in English Drama*, ed. Carole Levin and Karen Robertson (Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 193–209.

⁶¹ In the closing acts of the play, this under-stage space becomes Aaron’s prison, and Lucius requests his followers “bring down [this] devil,” placing him in a hidden zone within which ‘everlasting fire’ can roast his flesh (5.1.145–48).

⁶² Laurence Publicover, “*King Lear* and the Art of Fathoming,” *Renaissance Drama* 46, no. 1 (2018): 187.

⁶³ William Shakespeare, *King Henry VI Part 2*, ed. Ronald Knowles, Arden Shakespeare, 3rd Series (Bloomsbury, 2016). For the fusion between classical traditions, see Naseeb Shaheen, *Biblical References in Shakespeare’s History Plays* (University of Delaware Press, 1989), 46.

surgat Mephistopheles! Quid tu moraris? Per Jehovam, Gehennam,
et consecratam aquam quam nunc spargo, signumque crucis quod
nunc facio, et per vota nostra, ipse nunc surgat nobis dicatus
Mephistopheles!

Enter [MEPHISTOPHELES, *dressed as*] a Devil.
(1.3.16–22 s.d.)

[May the gods of Acheron be generous to me! Away with the threefold power of Jehovah! Hail spirits of fire, air, and water! The prince of the East, Beelzebub, monarch of burning hell, and Demogorgon, we beseech you that Mephistopheles may rise and appear. Why do you delay? By Jehovah, Gehenna, and the holy water I now sprinkle, and by the sign of the cross I now make, and by our vows, may Mephistopheles himself arise at our command!]⁶⁴

Faustus thus constructs the portal through which his diabolical companion can appear, manifesting among those words that both pronounce and invert a divine name. In some respects, he calls for Mephistopheles to “arise” at his “command.” But the stage directions do not outline an explicit ascent from below. Rather, Mephistopheles “[e]nter[s]” (22 s.d.); an entrance *through* the stage doors may take the place of an ascent from below, and the seemingly un-magical doors that lead into Faustus’s study become unsettling suppliers of diabolical aid.

I would like to linger on this passage for a little longer, for no foreboding soundscape distances this incantation from those vernacular conversations taking place in the drama. We can consider, for example, how “[t]hunder and lightning” (5.1.110 s.d.) precede the vengeful arrival of infernal companions in the concluding moments of the play. The sophisticated stagecraft of sixteenth-century drama may again supply the charge, since the “rolled cannon ball,” “drye ffatte [shot],” or “gunpowder” sounded the “thunder” in university productions.⁶⁵ A combination of “thunder and fyre,” for example, heralds the arrival of Belial in a staging of *The Conversion of Saint Paul*, a late medieval religious drama.⁶⁶ This soundscape may have diffused into Elizabethan theatre. Indeed, “[t]hunder [and] lyghtning” announce the arrival of those devils from the “bowells of the yearth” in a bookkeeper’s apograph of *John of Bordeaux* (c. 1592), while a cacophony of discordant noises herald the arrival of the “ghost of

⁶⁴ I take David Scott Kastan’s translation. See Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, ed. Kastan, 14.

⁶⁵ Phillip Butterworth, *Theatre of Fire: Special Effects in Early English and Scottish Theatre* (The Society for Theatre Research, 1998), 45.

⁶⁶ Donald C. Baker, John L. Murphey, and Louis B. Hall, *The Late Medieval Religious Plays of Bodleian MSS Digby 133 and E Museo 160* (Oxford University Press, 1982), 15.

the Black Prince” in *Richard II or Thomas of Woodstock*, an anonymous, untitled, and incomplete Elizabethan manuscript now preserved in the Egerton collection at the British Library.⁶⁷

For Bruce R. Smith, this “stupendous sound effect” of “thunder” often provided “the aural sign of supernatural happenings,” existing alongside the “exploding squibs” that outlined when “devils arrived on the scene from hell.”⁶⁸ For Thomson, such soundscapes recalled those “unnatural disruptions” that were “believed to accompany the appearance and actions of . . . witches, devils, and conjurors.” In the B-text, moreover, “[t]hunder” authenticates Faustus’s incantation (1.3.15 SD), giving sonic representation to the collapse of the barriers that separate supernatural environments from their everyday counterparts.⁶⁹ But in the stage directions of its predecessor, this signifier of cosmological disruption seems to rent the fabric of vernacular space. If, indeed, some performances took place without such sound effects, Mephistopheles may have very well have come onto the stage in ways that resemble the entrances of this play’s worldly characters. The effect is striking, for this devil occupies the same acoustic environment as Faustus: no thunder conspicuously splits the air, and no lightning fractures the stage space. If thunder marks the violent irruption of hell into everyday space, its removal implies that no such boundary requires breaching, because infernal presence is already coextensive with the space Faustus inhabits. In the A-text, this devil does not tear through the structure of the cosmos, entering instead as though he had always been proximate.

In this respect, the scene reframes Faustus’s elaborate ritual: Faustus does not rupture the natural order so much as activate a presence already embedded within it, for Mephistopheles’ understated ingress renders the stage as less a fortified zone breached by infernal force than a permeable site in which inverted forms of behaviour take the place of the incantation as the medium of manifestation.⁷⁰ For Mephistopheles, it is one who “rack[s] the name of God” and “[a]bjures the Scriptures” (1.3.47–48) who brings about malevolent

⁶⁷ Henry Chettle, *John of Bordeaux*, ed. W. L. Renwick (Malone Society Reprints, 1936); W. W. Greg, *Dramatic Documents from the Elizabethan Playhouses: Stage Parts: Actors’ Parts: Prompt Books* (Oxford University Press, 1931), 256.

⁶⁸ Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 220.

⁶⁹ Leslie Thomson, “The Meaning of ‘Thunder and Lightning’: Stage Directions and Audience Expectations,” *Early Theatre* 2, no. 1 (1999): 11. For the B-text, see Christopher Marlowe, “The Tragedy of Doctor Faustus (B-Text, 1616),” in *Doctor Faustus*, ed. D.S. Kastan, 54–122.

⁷⁰ In some respects, the B-text may develop this ambient presence of the infernal, for Lucifer and fellow devils already overlook the conjuror before he begins his incantation in the opening of 1.3.

agency, and Faustus does so alone in the opening moments of the play, denouncing those scriptural teachings of the Vulgate as “hard” (1.3.40). These decidedly non-magical musings, taking place on an empty stage, grant diabolical agents passage, outlining how such nefarious forces take shape *within* Faustus’s study and, by extension, within the walls and behind the doors of the theatre.

For Mephistopheles, then, diabolism no longer hinges on a particular form: a divergence from scriptural teachings alone grants malevolent agency passage into everyday space. Those spirits who allegedly “fetch [Faustus] what [he] please[s]” (1.1.79) are not constrained by his magical books; his deviant behaviour constitutes the devout prayer to the “prince of hell” (1.3.54), the “shortest cut for conjuring” (1.3.52). This formless paradigm pervades the comic subplots of the play. “Baliol and Belcher” (1.4.45), for example, require neither “necromantic books” (1.1.50) nor formal ritual, intruding on proceedings when Wagner, Faustus’s servant, clashes with Robin in the comic conclusion of the first act. Robin’s decidedly botched incantation from occultic volumes, moreover, draws an irate Mephistopheles from “Constantinople” (3.2.40), as quoted in full below:

I’ll tell you what I mean. [*He reads.*] “Sanctobulorum
Periphrasticon.” Nay, I’ll tickle you, vintner. Look to the gob-
let, Rafe. [*Reads.*] “Polypragmos Belseborams framento pa-
costiphos tostus Mephistopheles, & c.”

Enter MEPHISTOPHELES, sets squibs at their backs[, and then
exits]. They run about [transformed].
(3.225–28 s.d.)

For David Scott Kastan, this show of “nonsense Latin” takes the place of Faustus’s more formulaic speech, yet Robin still brings a diabolical companion onstage, perhaps outlining how “little Faustus achieves.”⁷¹ The breakdown of linguistic form thus enacts the breakdown of cosmological distance: competing vocal registers fracture against one another within a single utterance. The Greek suffixes “os” and “on” collide with their Latin counterparts, producing a degenerative and formless parody of Faustus’s incantation (26–27). Deictic instability further unsettles the speech, for Robin’s address shifts restlessly between book, vintner, and Rafe; incantatory focus gives way to distraction, and a commonplace quarrel supplies an unexpected form of ritual legitimacy. Diabolical agency thus inheres within the

⁷¹ Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, ed. Kastan, 38. Also see Katherine Walker, ‘Clowns and Demonic Learning in *Doctor Faustus*,’ *ELH* 87, no. 2 (2020): 405–31.

ordinary disorder of tavern life, and Mephistopheles’ intrusion signals not the breach of a guarded threshold but the exposure of a world already permeable to infernal presence.

Damnèd Denizens Beneath Hellish Heavens

The consequences of this spatial transformation become clearer when the A-text of *Doctor Faustus* is placed alongside other plays concerned with magic and the supernatural. Although many of Marlowe’s contemporaries likewise undermine the efficacy of ceremonial ritual, *Faustus* alone relocates infernal power from occult performance to the ordinary spaces of theatrical experience, where supernatural danger becomes ambient rather than exceptional. For Barbara H. Traister, *Faustus* may outline a broader theatrical “decline in the seriousness and status of demonic magic.”⁷² In Robert Greene’s *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (c. 1590), anti-climax undercuts the Latin incantations preserved in Bacon’s prized volumes: the “[h]ostess of Henley” (1.2.123), rather than a spirit, answers his call, and the tavern supplies a comic figure, who suggestively recollects how Master Burden, a sceptic of Bacon’s magic, played her at cards at the Bell Inn (1.2.137).⁷³ John Lyly’s *Galatea* (c. 1584) similarly deflates celestial aspiration, for its astronomer tumbles “backward . . . into a pond” as he strains to observe the heavens (5.1.18).⁷⁴ In *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* (c. 1608), Fabel may outwit a supernatural adversary in the induction, securing “seven more years of life,” yet his subsequent ingenuity remains resolutely mundane.⁷⁵ He does not supply spirits that “dance such nightly jigs” (1.2.190) nor “fellows of a handful high” (2.2.88); bathos, not sublime revelation, seems the outcome of ceremonial magic.⁷⁶ Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist* (c. 1610) similarly exposes magical practices as mere fraudulent enterprises, and Doll, its prostitute, enacts a supernatural figure, speaking “through the trunk” like “one of [Subtle’s] familiars” (1.4.5).⁷⁷

Unlike these comedic representations of magical practice, the A-text of Marlowe’s *Faustus* relocates rather than eliminates supernatural threat. Infernal power no longer depends

⁷² Barbara H. Traister, “Magic and the Decline of Demons: A View from the Stage,” in *Magical Transformations on the Early Modern English Stage*, ed. Lisa Hopkins and Helen Ostovich (Ashgate, 2014), 111.

⁷³ Robert Greene, “Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay,” in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay: John of Bordeaux, or the Second Part of Friar Bacon*, ed. B. Cellini (La Nuova Italia, 1952), 3–104.

⁷⁴ John Lyly, “Gallathea,” in *The Complete Works of John Lyly*, ed. R. Warwick Bond, 3 vols (Clarendon Press, 1902), 2, 418–85.

⁷⁵ Peter Kirwan, “‘We Ring This Round with Our Invoking Spells’: Magic as Embedded Authorship in *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*,” in Hopkins and Ostovich, *Magical Transformations*, 111.

⁷⁶ Anon., *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, ed. Nicola Bennett (Nick Hern, 2000).

⁷⁷ Ben Jonson, “The Alchemist,” in *Ben Jonson: The Alchemist and Other Plays*, ed. Gordon Campbell (Oxford University Press, 1998).

upon ritual efficacy or occult books, but instead permeates the shared theatrical space of the stage. The danger of diabolism thus intensifies rather than diminishes, for Mephistopheles does not require the books that allegedly grant him passage, and ominous sounds that evoke cosmological collapse do not precede his intrusions into everyday space. Indeed, he may be immanent, situated close by and transgressing into the everyday spaces of the play in ways that are decidedly not transcendental. In this respect, the spaces Faustus inhabits become zones of permanent infernal proximity, and he unconsciously takes up residence in an accessible space within which maleficent agents have free rein over their human counterparts.

This ambivalent infernal presence becomes clear in the concluding moments of the play, for Faustus glances up towards those “ever-moving spheres of heaven,” beseeching time to “cease” and for “midnight [to] never come” (5.2.64–65). But these celestial bodies continue their journey, and Faustus’s fear concerning what is to come unravels what is left of his resolve:

O, I’ll leap up to my God! Who pulls me down?
See, see, where Christ’s blood streams in the firmament!
One drop would save my soul, half a drop. 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. And see, where God
Stretcheth out his arm and bends his ireful brows!
(5.2.73–79)

At first glance, the heavens appear to offer Faustus the possibility of salvation, for the “firmament” supplies those sanguine “streams” that should grant him deliverance from sin (74); the “arm” of an omnipotent agent “stretch[es] out,” bending “his ireful brows” even as he reaches downward, grasping for the stricken figure who calls up from below (79). But a closer look at the passage supplies a more jaded conclusion, and the *caesurae* in line 74 and 78 grant the speaker the time needed to motion to those who observe him from the auditorium. Faustus does not seem to be speaking to himself. Instead, he supplies a meticulous lecture for the final time, demonstrating how those impassive heavens that extend above the stage offer no sign of the merciful intervention he so desperately seeks, for the cruor that should grant him Grace is well and truly “gone” (78). Indeed, it may never have manifested, leaving him in a world governed by immediate infernal presence, from which divine salvation has irreversibly withdrawn.

For Tiffany Stern, these overhead areas supplied entrances through which benevolent spirits could descend, sinking in some cases through the canopy that covered the stage.⁷⁸ As Emanuel Stelzer points out, other deities descend from this space in the anonymous *Love and Fortune* (c. 1580), William Gager’s *Dido* (c. 1583), and Lyly’s *Galatea*, resolving those “unsolvable problems” that unfold on the dais below.⁷⁹ But the final moments of the A-text of *Faustus* invert this paradigm, for the architectural space traditionally associated with divine intervention becomes instead the focus of Faustus’s deepest anxiety. That “laboring cloud,” which gathers above him, offers not the promise of heavenly aid but a terrifying image of dissolution and Faustus imagines his body drawn into its “entrails,” only to be “vomit[ed] forth into the air” through its “smoky mouths” in the desperate hope that his soul might “yet ascend to heaven” (5.2.87–90). The heavens thus become a site of profound uncertainty rather than assured redemption. They no longer guarantee divine intervention, and Faustus turns instead towards the “mountains and hills” beneath them, beseeching them to conceal him from the “heavy wrath” of a cosmic master (5.2.81). Yet even these refuges fail him. Unable to escape either above or below, Faustus laments those who “hath deprived [him] of the joys of heaven” (5.2.108).

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that “Lucifer” takes the place of “Christ” as the force who overhears Faustus’s cries for mercy (5.2.75–77), for this protagonist’s desperate vision of the heavens imagines not a descent into hell but the dismemberment of his own body. This inversion takes a vivid final form in the closing moments of the play:

The clock striketh twelve.

O, it strikes, it strikes! Now, body, turn to air,
Or Lucifer will bear thee quick to hell!
Thunder and lightning.
O soul, be changed into little water drops
And fall into the ocean, ne’er be found!

Enter DEVILS.

My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!
Adders and serpents, let me breathe awhile!
Ugly hell, gape not! Come not, Lucifer!
I’ll burn my books! Ah, Mephistopheles!

⁷⁸ Tiffany Stern, “Spaces of Performance: Shakespeare’s Playhouse Inside Out,” *Anuario Calderoniano* 16, no. 1 (2023): 30.

⁷⁹ Emanuel Stelzer, “Questions of Mediation of the *Deus Ex Machina* in Elizabethan Drama,” in *What is a Greek Source on the Early Modern English Stage? Fifteen New Essays*, ed. Silvia Bigliazzi and Tania Demetriou (SKÉNE. Texts and Studies, 2024), 264.

Exeunt [DEVILS] with him.

(5.2.108 s.d.–16 s.d.)

As we have seen, an ominous soundscape does not precede Mephistopheles' entrance onstage. But its conspicuous return in the closing moments of the play generates a cosmic charge, for such aerial cacophonies formed "one of a number of disasters due to divine wrath."⁸⁰ This unnerving sound supplies Faustus with a cosmic answer, enacting how "thunders and lightnings" shroud the descent of a deity to the summit of Sinai in the Book of Exodus (Exodus 19: 16). But any sense of divine immanence dissipates in the lines that follow, for the "fierce gaze" of a divine agent takes the shape of its opposite (113). Infernal power thus assumes the force and authority of the divine, and a repentant Faustus, promising to "burn [his] books" (16), wrestles against these agents as they drag him towards the abyss that awaits him.

This concluding speech supplies a worrying problem, for the sinister spaces of hell take shape within the heavens, and infernal agents take their places overhead, supplying an antithesis of redemption (5.2.77). Faustus, in other words, cannot escape his fate, languishing beneath those "melting heavens" that conspire to bring about his "overthrow" (Prologue 22). Indeed, such paradisiacal spaces supply their inverse. We can consider, for example, how a "heavenly beauty" (5.1.29) "glut[s]" Faustus with lascivious desires (5.1.82), pushing him ever further away from salvation, for its embraces "extinguish clean" those thoughts that otherwise "dissuade [him] from his vow" (5.1.85–86). Indeed, angelic agents seem remarkably distant. No stage directions, for example, indicate the presence of the "angel" that "hovers o'er [Faustus's] head," offering the "vial full of precious grace" (5.1.57), while devils, rather than celestial beings, greet the *senex* who urges Faustus to repent in the concluding moments of the play, transporting the former to the "furnace" whereby he shall "try [his] faith" (5.1.114).

Hell, then, becomes theatrically representable; heaven, by contrast, is not, and Faustus unknowingly probes the limits of the world he inhabits:

FAUSTUS	Well I am answered. Tell me who made the world?
MEPHISTOPHELES	I will not.
FAUSTUS	Sweet Mephistopheles, tell me.
MEPHISTOPHELES	Move me not, for I will not tell thee.
FAUSTUS	Villain, have I not bound thee to tell me any thing.

⁸⁰ Charles E. Hammond, "The Interpretation of Thunder," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 2 (1994): 499.

The “Hell” of the Theatre

MEPHISTOPHELES Ay, that is not against our kingdom; but this
is. Think thou on hell, Faustus, for thou art damned.
(2.3.64–70)

For the late medieval parishioner, the “sentence of eternal damnation” followed the “instant of death,” and those graphic representations of infernal destruction, decorating the interiors of the church, outlined the eternal punishment that awaited unrepentant individuals after the moment of death.⁸¹ But Mephistopheles inverts this paradigm: the stasis meant for after death instead envelops the scholar within his study. In this respect, an infernal “kingdom” (69) comes to define the stage space, its doors barring the intrusion of benevolent forces into the spaces of the play. A fate that *should* unfold after death, then, manifests in the world of the living, where Faustus takes up residence, experiencing an “everlasting separation from God.”⁸²

Faustus, then, functions as yet another denizen of this godless world, and his residence within justifies the unorthodox entrances of authentic devils. The stage itself facilitates their presence: no thunder heralds Lucifer and Beelzebub (2.3.80 s.d.), and the stage doors grant infernal agents passage into Faustus's study. No hallmarks of a transcendental journey, for example, augment the entrance of the Seven Deadly Sins:

LUCIFER Faustus, we
are come from hell to show thee some pastime. Sit down,
and thou shalt see all the Seven Deadly Sins appear in
their proper shapes.

FAUSTUS That sight will be as pleasing unto me as Paradise
was to Adam, the first day of his creation.

LUCIFER Talk not of Paradise nor creation, but
mark this show. Talk of the devil and nothing else.
Come away!

Enter the SEVEN DEADLY SINS.

(2.3.96–104 SD)

For Lucifer, the infernal domain remains distant, for he professes to have made the journey “from hell to show [Faustus] some pastime” (97). But heaven seems even further away, and scriptural teachings concerning “Paradise” and “creation” (102) do not settle within the

⁸¹ Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 10–11; Alfred J. Freddoso, “Introduction,” in *The Existence and Nature of God*, ed. Alfred J. Freddoso (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 3.

⁸² Freddoso, "Introduction," 3.

frameworks of an everyday world. In this respect, Lucifer inverts the omnipotence of a cosmic master, and representations of vice, who “[e]nter” (104 s.d.) after Lucifer concludes his speech, “[c]ome away” from offstage, intruding on proceedings in ways that make their presence within the mundane world evident (104). Faustus’s study thus becomes a microcosm where infernal authority structures the world of the play, so that those within this chamber encounter its full force.

Conclusions: A Satire Of Salvation?

In some respects, the A-text of *Doctor Faustus* invokes a familiar oppositional structure, staging the struggle between benevolent and maleficent agency in accordance with established theatrical tradition.⁸³ For the Good Angel, Faustus’s repentance will grant him the “pity” of a cosmic agent (2.3.12), while its infernal counterpart does the opposite, tempting the scholar towards damnation. In some cases, benevolent agency may prevail, and the final speech of the *senex* supplies a “cry for victory” over those nefarious forces that advance towards him.⁸⁴ Yet the spatial logic of the play unsettles this apparent victory. The “furnace” that shall “try [his] faith,” for example, does not manifest as a portal to celestial reward but as another site of consuming flame, visually and theatrically indistinguishable from infernal punishment. Those heavens that allegedly smile upon his endurance, moreover, remain distant and impassive, never materially intervening within the space of the stage (5.1.116). In this respect, the drama sustains the language of redemption while withholding its theatrical realisation. Benevolent agency may be invoked, but it does not decisively structure the world Faustus inhabits. Instead, the play’s spatial economy privileges an infernal immanence: hell is visible, audible, and theatrically operative, while heaven recedes beyond representation. The result is not the abolition of salvation, but its displacement beyond the limits of the stage, leaving Faustus confined within a dramatic world governed by the immediate and ambient presence of the infernal.

Such a configuration would not have been lost on those who regarded the theatre with suspicion. For John Northbrooke, Philip Stubbes, and later William Prynne, the playhouse supplied an unstable and dangerous environment, and those who ventured into their auditoriums met moral corruption within it, venturing away from the scriptural discipline of

⁸³ See Pamela M. King, “Morality Plays,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁸⁴ John D. Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350–1642* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 113.

the pulpit and towards “bawdy speeches” and “wanton gestures.”⁸⁵ Their anxiety hinged on proximity: theatre did not merely depict vice; it made vice immanent. In this respect, the A-text of *Faustus* seems uncannily aligned with the logic of its detractors. For, if hell is no longer a distant abyss but an ambient condition coextensive with theatrical space, then attendance at the play becomes a participation in a spiritually compromised environment. For Mephistopheles, the theatre becomes “hell,” and those who settle in the galleries and in the yard become residents within it (1.3.76). He delivers a statement that acquires an unsettling reflexivity when spoken within the walls of the playhouse, for this line collapses the distance between dramatic fiction and architectural reality, implicating the auditorium in the infernal domain it beholds. What Puritan polemic imagined metaphorically – that the theatre nourished idolatry and sin – the A-text stages structurally. Hell begins not apart from the dais but within the shared space of performance itself, where spectators, like Faustus, find themselves resident in a world where transcendence remains perpetually out of reach. Even the play’s comic exchanges register this permeability. When Wagner calls upon others to “bear witness” (1.5.42), his appeal exceeds the immediate scene, momentarily drawing the audience into its social and verbal economy. The theatre’s infernal condition is thus not confined to moments of high tragic intensity, but persists across the full range of dramatic action, articulating a perversive infernal immanence that erodes the boundary between observer and participant.

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⁸⁵ Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre*, 20.

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