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ENGL 3400
22 March 2023

Products of Marlowe and Shakespeare's Societies

In the confines of genre, Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is a tragedy and William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* a comedy, which make their narratives fundamentally different. The genre of each play determines the extent to which its protagonist is connected to his society. Faustus, who lives in the town of Wittenberg, maintains a distance between himself and his circle of fellow scholars. His tragic story ends in death, a product of his culture's focus on the individual battle. Antonio of Venice confides in his dear friend Bassanio and nurtures trustworthy relations in the commercial field. His story concludes, as typical for comedies, with the coming together of every happy acquaintance's puzzle pieces. That said, Marlowe's play could have ended otherwise had Faustus lived in a more collectivist community, like Shakespeare's Antonio, and been similarly saved by colleagues.

The narrative of *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare circles around the unbreakable bond between the merchant Antonio and his closest confidante Bassanio. At the start of the play, Shakespeare provides a first look into their friendship dynamic with each expressing his care for the other. This scene flows smoothly into the bond Bassanio takes out under Antonio's name, at which point Bassanio tells Antonio to not feel obligated to sign off on Shylock's harsh demands — "You shall not seal to such a bond for me!" — saying he would rather remain without the money than have to see his friend suffer on his behalf (1.2.166). Upon receiving Antonio's letter about his wrecked ships, Bassanio says to Portia: "I should [...] have told you That I was worse than nothing; for indeed I have [...] Engaged my friend to his mere enemy To feed my means" (3.2.269-74). He feels truly sorry for his friend's loss, but more so for

having had something to do with Antonio's doom. Later in court, Bassanio reiterates his loyalties to Antonio by saying, "The Jew shall have all my flesh, blood, bones, and all Ere thou shalt lose for me one drop of blood!" (4.1.114-5). In the play's final mention of the friendship in Act 5, Scene 1, he and Antonio say they are "infinitely bound" to one another (148). Shakespeare consistently provides evidence of the immeasurable amount of trust between Antonio and Bassanio, who support one another with the purest intentions and would readily give their life to save the other.

In the mercantile sphere of Venice and beyond, Antonio's acquaintances have nothing but good words to say about him. Gratiano refers to him as a "royal merchant" and "good Antonio" (3.2.248). In Act 4, Scene 1, both Bassanio and Gratiano claim they would sacrifice their wives if that would spare Antonio from death at the hands of the Jew (296-304). Salarino shares how he "wished in silence" that the argosies which sank at sea were not Antonio's and says that "A kinder gentleman treads not the earth" (2.8.34,37). Even Portia, heiress of Belmont, after hearing the news of Antonio's lost ships and how much he means to Bassanio, offers her own wealth to save the man she has never met: "Pay [Shylock] [...] Before a friend of this description Shall lose a hair through Bassanio's fault" (3.2.314-5). Antonio's companion Lorenzo values the gesture and says to Portia, "But if you knew to [...] How true a gentleman you send relief, How dear a lover of my lord your husband, I know you would be prouder" of having sent the aid (3.4.5-8). Antonio has built a reputation in his collectivist society, based on the genuine connections he has with his best friend Bassanio and companions Salarino, Gratiano, and Lorenzo, to the point where the immense support from his community saves him from being killed for a broken bond.

Calling for a reconsideration, Oxford scholar Graham Midgley argues that on the other side of Antonio's connections to society lies his personal story of loneliness. Midgley urges us to consider how Antonio's willingness to put his life on the line to help his friend Bassanio in courting Portia signals a lack of interest in pursuing his own ambitions and love interests. Yet this scholarship further develops the opposition between Shakespeare's Antonio and Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, since Faustus' greedy ambitions are what lead him on his solitary path to damnation. Moreover, Faustus signs his soul away for exclusive access to information while Antonio is content with having his final act be selflessly helping Bassanio find love.

Whereas Antonio's active participation in Venetian community comes back around to grant salvation, the more involved he gets, the more Faustus seems to anger the Wittenberg area. At the start of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, in Act 1, Scene 1, Valdes and Cornelius encourage Faustus to continue with his sorcery research, seeing it as the next big breakthrough and unwilling to consider any negative consequences such research may bring upon the scholar. Once he starts showing off his skills, resentment grows in his community to the point where irate Benvolio, Martino, Frederick, and soldiers all try to kill Faustus, who describes the feelings of "hated treachery" emanating from the soldiers ambushing him (4.2.104). Not long after, upon receiving news that the horse-courser has left Faustus with only one leg, making him easier to take down, Robin comments "excellent," still seeking revenge for the scholar conjuring him horns (4.5.53). The initial societal push to pursue research, given by Cornelius and Valdes, rapidly transforms into despise from the guinea pigs on whom Faustus demonstrates his powers.

Faustus' society has been hardwired into not going to great lengths for anyone unless guaranteed individual benefit, and since nobody sees any such benefit from solitary and ambitious Doctor Faustus, they leave him to his own vices. Faustus' supposedly closest

colleagues, the three scholars, prompt him to continue practicing dark magic for their selfish gain in Act 5, Scene 1 on the premise of their benevolent friendship. Under the surface, the scene says the exact opposite about the scholars' attitude, showing them asking a favor and giving nothing in return while Faustus convinces himself that their friendship is unfeigned and, therefore, feels obligated to grant the "just request of those that wish him well" by using the sorcery that will send him to hell (5.1.17-9). Right after Faustus complies with the three scholars' request, an Old Man shows the first hint of caring about Faustus and first warns him to leave the "damnèd art" (5.1.34). The man offers a glimmer of hope for future salvation, then retreats with the words, "Faustus, I leave thee, but with grief of heart, Fearing the enemy of thy hapless soul," succumbing to what seems to be personal fear of the devil (5.1. 62-3). The questionable nature of his scholarly friendships aside, Faustus nonetheless admits that the distance between himself and society has played a major role in the downward trajectory of his life when he says to the second scholar, "had I lived with thee, then had I lived still" (5.2.28-9). When the scholars visit Faustus in his final hours and discover his terrible state, the third scholar comments on the circumstances, reflecting on how, "He is not well with being over-solitary" (5.2.33). As Faustus' meeting with the devil inches closer, he says to the scholars, "Talk not of me, but save yourselves and depart" (5.2.75). In doing so he pushes the three scholars away for the final time while propagating individualistic ideals by telling them to take care of themselves and not think of him, a repetition of the already ingrained understanding of his society.

Scholar Clarence Green provides context for *Doctor Faustus*' extreme individualism. He mentions the Renaissance's experimentalism and detachment from old ideas, including religion, and highlights the emergence of humanism. The crisis of humanism consists of its clash with Catholic doctrine, more specifically, as he explains, "with the belief, that is, that the individual,

despite possible worldly success, cannot, by splendidly isolated action, achieve success in eternity" (Green 277). Faustus, therefore, embodies the first wave of humanists who, in pursuing individual interests, reject the Church and the basis on which those doctrines are constructed. With this perspective, it becomes clear that by choosing to have humanistic happiness on earth with the quenching of his thirst for prohibited knowledge, Faustus immediately gives up his chance at happiness in the afterlife.

It is aimless to claim that one genuine companion would have saved Faustus. The scholar does find a partner in Mephistopheles for the greater part of Marlowe's play, who serves Faustus for the latter's remaining years, but not so much willingly as out of necessity. At the signing of Faustus' deed of gift, Mephistopheles makes it clear that his servitude is in exchange for Faustus' soul with his direct aside, "What will not I do to obtain his soul?" (2.1.71). The spirit clarifies that he will carry out anything Faustus asks of him if it will bring Mephistopheles closer to the goal of seeing Faustus damned and acquiring his soul for personal use.

The differences in the factors leading up to merchant Antonio's salvation and Doctor Faustus' damnation are numerous, but the one that stands out most is the extent to which each is assimilated into society and whether a structure exists to allow such assimilation to occur. Antonio, a beloved merchant of Venice, is supported throughout his narrative by a close friend and empathetic fellow Venetians. The fact that Bassanio remains friends with Antonio out of his free will and both are willing to risk everything to come to each other's aid gives greater credibility to their connection. It appears even more authentic since neither man is driven by ulterior motives, unlike Mephistopheles, who serves Doctor Faustus against his will and steers him toward decisions that inevitably bring him to hell. While Antonio's immediate community wishes the best for him and expresses this in both words and actions, the scholars in Marlowe's

Doctor Faustus hesitate to help the protagonist out of fear and, outside the scholarly realm, the Germans are content with watching and contributing to Faustus' struggle. Had the character plotline and environment for Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* been different, with elements of the selfless, fearless collectivism depicted in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, then the community effort would have saved Faustus from his tragic end.

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