After the ambiguities in Tamburlaine, the moral of Doctor Faustus seems painfully clear: “Regard his hellish fall” (Epi.4: 2005). But even here, Marlowe’s use of the medieval convention is colored by his time; Faustus falls prey not only to the devil or to his own self-conceit but also to a distinctly post-Reformation despair. And the nature of that despair may be as ambiguous as Tamburlaine’s presumption.

To view all of Marlowe’s flawed protagonists as Renaissance “overreachers,” men whose aspiring minds are to be admired even as their human limitations defeat them, may be valid, but Faustus’s reach so far exceeds his grasp that even his aspirations seem equivocal. As I have shown elsewhere,¹ he is not only a bad Christian but a bad scholar; he is more concerned with publishable information than with wisdom, seldom fulfills his heroic boasts, and allows himself to be fobbed off with empty spectacle and practical jokes when he should be delving into questions about the nature of the universe—the reason, after all, that he gave for selling his soul in the first place. Even his celebrated paean to Helen is an exercise in self-deceit; having earlier explained that all such apparitions are “but shadows, not substantial” (xii.55: 1259), he surely knows that the answer to his famous question, “Was this the face that launch’d a thousand ships?” (xviii.99: 1768), is very simply “No.”

¹
But Faustus's scholarship (or lack of it) is not at issue here; it is rather his death that concerns us, and his death is unequivocally a bad one. In psychological terms, Faustus never emerges from the bargaining stage of dying; his final soliloquy is filled with impassioned pleas to the heavens, to Christ, to the earth, stars, and clouds, to his own body, and finally to death itself in the person of Lucifer. Like Everyman before him, he begs for progressively decreasing parcels of time in which to repent:

*Faustus:* 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.

(xix.136-41: 1929-34)

And, like Everyman, he feels the relentlessly crushing weight of inexorable Time: “The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike, / The devil will come, and Faustus must be damn'd” (xix.143-44: 1936-37).

But even Faustus’s bargaining is a form of self-deceit. After all his pleading for “a month, a week, a . . . day,” he is given the better part of an hour, and instead of using it to repent, he uses it only to continue bargaining. His offers to endure horrible physical pain for the salvation of his soul are also false bargains; before asking the mountains to fall on him, the earth to swallow him, and the clouds to absorb him and then vomit him forth, he has already shown his fear of pain and his readiness to give up repentance after the first or second pang:

*Faustus:* See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!
One drop would save my soul, half a drop. Ah, my Christ!—
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. . . .

(xix.146-50: 1939-43)

His final plea to God, then, to “Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years, / A hundred thousand, and at last be sav’d” (xix. 169-70:
The Summons to Hell 145

1961-62) is patently worthless. From the beginning of the play to the end, Faustus has shown that he cannot bear even a moment of physical pain, let alone a hundred thousand years of it.

The Old Man shows a better way of dying. Although, as we shall see, he may represent the warning of the Legend, the Good Counsel of the moralities and Artes, or simply the elect soul, in a sense he is also an example of the courageous stoic, the man who “manfully goes to it.” Mephistophilis, at least, seems to recognize in him not only the elect soul but the imperturbable soul; when Faustus asks that the Old Man be tortured, Mephistophilis replies:

His faith is great; I cannot touch his soul;
But what I may afflict his body with
I will attempt, which is but little worth.

(xviii.87–89: 1756–58)

The phrase “which is but little worth” is exactly the note of offhand contempt for afflictions of the body that runs through the new treatises on dying. We have seen it before in Lupset and shall see it again in Guillemand; we shall see it, too, in Hamlet, who goes manfully to meet the Ghost:

_Hamlet:_ Why, what should be the fear?
I do not set my life at a pin’s fee,
And for my soul, what can it do to that,
Being a thing immortal as itself?

(1.4.40–47)

And like the courageous men of the new tracts, the Old Man throws a parting shot at tyrants, although in this case he is taunting the tyranny of Hell:

_Old Man:_ Satan begins to sift me with his pride:
As in this furnace God shall try my faith,
My faith, vile hell, shall triumph over thee.
Ambitious fiends, see how the heavens smiles
At your repulse and laughs your state to scorn!
Hence, hell! for hence I fly unto my God.

(xviii.122–27: 1791–96)
This is not to suggest that the Old Man is a purely secular figure; he is as much a religious emblem as the Seven Deadly Sins, the Good and Bad Angels, and Mephistophilis himself. But even the heterodox in Marlowe's audience can see that the Old Man's death has in it all the good things that Faustus's has not: courage, laughter, and victory.

As for those critics who see Faustus's death and damnation as a sort of unjust justice, a striking down of the aspiring human creature who will not give up his aspirations or his "self-sufficiency," it may be interesting to inspect more closely Faustus's final attempts at bargaining. This "self-sufficient" martyr for the scholarly cause, in order to escape a painful death, offers, in turn, to be turned into a "brutish beast," that is, to be less than a man (xix.176: 1968); to dissolve his body into air and his spirit into water, that is, to undergo annihilation of the self (xix.183-87: 1975-78); and finally, in perhaps the greatest irony of all, to burn his books—a scholar's nightmare (xix.190: 1982).

The books that he offers so desperately to the holocaust at this last moment are, of course, his books of magic. But in the context of the play, they are more than books of magic; they are the accumulations of knowledge that he has substituted for wisdom throughout his life. During his opening soliloquy, he has systematically and symbolically discarded books of philosophy, medicine, law, and religion, claiming to have mastered their contents and to have found them insufficient. Later, when he has sold his soul for knowledge and power, Mephistophilis gives him—books! And again, Faustus confuses knowledge with wisdom; for him, as Edward A. Snow points out, "One art follows directly upon another, each beginning precisely where the last left off, each neatly condensed, predigested, and encapsulated within the covers of its own book." The fault lies not in Faustus's books, but in himself, that he misuses them. Consequently, his final pleas become, for the scholar, the last in a long series of abuses to which Faustus has subjected learning, here pitifully mixed with another appeal for more time:
Faustus: Adders and serpents, let me breathe awhile! 
Ugly hell, gape not! Come not, Lucifer; 
I'll burn my books!—Ah, Mephistophelis!

(xix.188-90: 1980-82)

And yet Doctor Faustus is more than a tract on the abuse of learning, just as it is far more than a tract on the perils of overreaching. As Leo Kirschbaum has so aptly noted: “It does not matter what you think of Hell or what Marlowe thought of Hell. What does matter is that in terms of the play, Faustus is a wretched creature who for lower values gives up higher values—that the devil and Hell are omnipresent, potent, and terrifying realities.” Essentially, Doctor Faustus is a morality play that looks back to the pattern of the medieval Moralities: a soul strays into evil practices, is counseled by forces of good and evil, and finally dies, going either to Heaven or to Hell, depending on the choices that it has made. The fact that Faustus, in his weakness, either vacillates in his choices or chooses not to choose does not change the play’s emphasis on choice and free will—at least for the mainstream Anglicans in Marlowe’s audience.

To the very end, Faustus is reminded over and over again that he may still make the correct choice, may still repent and be saved. Even after his Good Angel leaves him and his last hour begins, he is granted the vision of “Christ’s blood stream[ing] in the firmament,” a symbol of both the Eucharist and Christ’s redeeming mercy. In the older Moralities, Faustus might at this moment have cried out for that mercy, and like Humanum Genus, or like the King of Life and the Dyenge Creature, might have been granted it.

In this context, the Old Man and the scholars of the final scenes may be seen as the warning of the Legends and the deathbed companions of the treatises on dying. The Old Man, in particular, is a deliberately enigmatic figure in Doctor Faustus. In Marlowe’s source, The Historie of the Damnable Life, and Deserued Death of Doctor John Faustus, he is identified as “A good Christian an honest and vertuous olde man, a louer of the holy scriptures, who was neighbour vnto Doctor Faustus,” a mundane figure well
known to Faustus. This old man counsels Faustus over a long period of time, and Faustus's enmity toward him grows only gradually, as the old man becomes a constant reminder of his guilty conscience. But in Marlowe's play, the Old Man appears out of nowhere, is almost immediately rejected, and disappears from the play as rapidly as he came into it. Although he does not have the supernatural characteristics of Chaucer's Old Man in *The Pardoner's Tale*, he is a similarly emblematic figure rather than a real person—the Elde of the Legend who prefigures Death.

The scholars who leave Faustus to his doom are also familiar figures. They are the friends about the deathbed who must help the dying soul in his struggle, and if they are somewhat ineffective in their ministrations, they at least know what *should* be done at this moment. "Look up to heaven and remember God's mercy is infinite," says the Second Scholar (xix.39-40: 1835-36); and "Call on God," insists the Third Scholar (xix.54: 1848), even after Faustus has told them that he is deep in deadly sin. And, most significantly of all, the scholars do not reject Faustus as damned when he tells them that he has abjured God and given his soul to the devil; in fact, upon receiving this news, they become more insistent that he pray to God, and now offer to join their prayers with his. Obviously, they have not lost confidence in deathbed repentance, or in the power of communal prayer. Weak they may be, and failures in their duty to stay with the dying man until the end, but they do not accept Faustus's despairing evaluation of his destiny. It is Faustus who sends them away:

2 Scholar: O, what may we do to save Faustus?
Faustus: Talk not of me, but save yourselves and depart.
3 Scholar: God will strengthen me. I will stay with Faustus.
1 Scholar: Tempt not God, sweet friend; but let us into the next room and pray for him.
Faustus: Ay, pray for me, pray for me; and what noise soever ye hear, come not unto me, for nothing can rescue me.
2 Scholar: Pray thou, and we will pray, that God may have mercy on thee.
Faustus: Gentlemen, farewell. If I live till morning, I'll visit you; if not, Faustus is gone to hell.

(xix.75-84: 1868-79)
It is not entirely true, then, as Pauline Honderich suggests, that "the old dispensation... no longer has its old efficacy" in the world of Doctor Faustus. The "old dispensation" is offered time and time again to Faustus: by the Good Angel, by the Old Man, by the (admittedly weak) scholars, and finally by the vision of Christ's redeeming blood—the last of which, we must remember, appears to Faustus while the scholars are praying for him in the next room. And that most of Marlowe's audience would have been happy to see Faustus accept the offer is evident from the way in which a similar audience had demanded a "happy" new ending to The Conflict of Conscience, an ending based on repentance at the very last moment. It is Doctor Faustus the character, not Doctor Faustus the play, that refuses all these offers of the old dispensation; it is Faustus, not his world, that is the fatalist.

To be sure, Faustus claims that his damnation proceeds from his blasphemy against God; and the Old Man, in contrast, says that his own faith will save him. But to contend, as David Kaula does, that the play is therefore a "distinctly post-Reformation play because the hero's destiny hinges entirely on the question of faith, a question which does not enter into Everyman," is to ignore, first, both Everyman's second set of temptations and the fact that the medieval Ars gives infidelity as the first deathbed temptation; and second, that repentance was considered, even after the Reformation, as an act of will. Even Lily B. Campbell, in an otherwise brilliant analysis of Faustus's despair, states that Protestants of the time would have seen his sin as final and irredeemable by any "good works." In fact, "good works" are not in question in Doctor Faustus; it is Faustus's repentance that matters. And Faustus will not repent.

The Anglican view of repentance is clearly laid out in the book of homilies designated for reading in Elizabethan churches. The penitent must take four steps: contrition of heart, confession of sins "unto GOD," faith in God's promises of salvation, and amendment of life. Even at the last moment, when amendment has become an academic question, it may still be possible to substitute the intent for the deed. Myles Coverdale, we recall,
insisted on the soul’s obligation to struggle toward salvation no matter how bleak the prospect might seem, and Lewis Bayly was to add that the dying man’s emotional state is not to be taken as a sign of his spiritual state, that “the truest faith hath oftentimes the least feeling, and greatest doubts.”

By Marlowe’s time, such encouragement was being preached weekly from the pulpits of the Church of England:

Whereby it followeth necessarily, that although we doe, after we bee once come to GOD and grafted in his Sonne Jesus Christ, fall into great sinnes (for there is no righteous man vpon the earth that sinneth not, and if wee say wee haue no sinne, we deceiue our selues, and the trueth is not in vs) yet if wee rise againe by repentauence, and with a full purpose of amendment of life doe flee vnto the mercie of GOD, taking sure holde thereupon, through faith in his Sonne Jesus Christ, there is an assured and infallible hope of pardon and remission of the same, and that wee shall bee receiued againe into the fauour of our heauenly Father. (2: 262)

Marlowe’s audiences must have heard this passage ringing in their ears when they listened to Faustus misquoting—or, rather, half-quoting—the Scriptures in his opening soliloquy:

Faustus: Jerome’s Bible, Faustus, view it well. Stipendium peccati mors est. Ha! Stipendium, etc. The reward of sin is death: that’s hard. Si pecasse 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.

Ay, we must die an everlasting death.

(i.38-45: 65-73)

Faustus has quoted the well-known homily almost verbatim up to the point at which it contradicts him, and Elizabethan audiences would have been arrested by his omission as one is shocked by the absence of an expected sound. Indeed, there can be little doubt that here Marlowe was employing the rhetorical trope of aposiopesis: the deliberate omission of an expected phrase or word in order to force the audience into both completing the thought and noting its lack of completion. Faustus, the audience knows, is very simply wrong.
The Homilies caution against such misreading of the Scriptures, and in no uncertain terms:

Whereupon we do not without a just cause detest and abhor the damnable opinion of them which do most wickedly go about to persuade the simple and ignorant people, that if we chance after we be once come to GOD, and grafted in his Sonne Jesus Christ, to fall into some horrible sinne, shall be unprofitable to vs, there is no more hope of reconciliation, or to be received againe into the fauour and mercy of GOD. (2: 261)

A “damnable opinion,” indeed—one that Mephistophiles constantly reiterates to Faustus, who in this context may be considered one of the “simple and ignorant people” who believe it. The result is one that the Homilies had predicted:

For as in all other things mens hearts doe quaile and faint, if they once perceiue that they trauell in vaine: Euen so most specially in this matter, must we take heede and be ware that we suffer not our selues to bee perswaded that all wee doe is but labour lost: For thereof either sudden desperation doeth arise, or a licencious boldnesse to sinne, which at length bringeth unto desperation. (2: 260)

As we have noted, the Protestant insistence on man’s utter depravity seems to have encouraged such dangerous temptations to despair. True, Martin Luther had denounced such misconceptions as Faustus’s in terms similar to those of the Homilies: “[The Devil] can fashion the strangest syllogisms: ‘You have sinned: God is wrathful toward sinners; therefore despair.’ ” But he had also insisted that the soul must experience a sort of despair in order to attain salvation; that is, man must recognize that he is utterly sinful, capable of no good, and deserving of damnation, before he can accept his dependence on God and cry wholeheartedly for mercy. So far, so good; Faustus certainly has many moments when he is persuaded that he is worthy of damnation. But why can he not proceed from this conviction to an equal conviction of God’s redeeming mercy? The Protestant doctrine was certainly adamant about man’s “assured and infallible hope of pardon” (Homilies, 2: 262), and in fact maintained it steadfastly against
the Catholic insistence that “none is certayn, yf he be dygne or worthy to haue deserued the loue of god, or the hate of god”:  

Certentie of faith, is whereby any thing is certenly beleued: and it is either generall or speciall. Generall certentie, is to beleue assuredly that the word of God is truth it selfe, and this both we and Papists allow. Speciall certentie, is by faith to apply the promise of salvation to our selves, and to beleve without doubt, that remission of sinnes by Christ and live ever lasting belong to us. This kind of certentie we hold and maintaine, and Papists with one consent deny it; acknowledging no assurance but by hope.

The problem with such assurance is, of course, the double bind that we have seen before, a double bind exacerbated by Calvin's doctrine of perseverance in grace, and by the new position given to good works—as not a means to salvation but a sign of salvation. Calvin had agreed that despair is necessary before the soul can turn to God; but, he added, once the soul has turned to God, any recurrence of despair is a sign that the turn was never made in the first place, that the soul is not among the elect. Doubt, therefore, is a sign of damnation. Futhermore, since the elect demonstrate their status by manifesting the will of God (that is, by performing good works), the more sins a man commits, the more he may assume that he is damned. True, he may repent of his sin; but recurrence of sin, like recurrence of despair, is a sign that the repentance was not genuine in the first place.

Calvinist writers of Marlowe's day seized upon the potential in Calvin's doctrine to create a circular argument whose circularity was almost unbreakable. Among these writers was Richard Greenham, whose teachings, described in chapter 2, were prevalent at Cambridge when Marlowe was attending. Arthur Dent, too, in The Way to Everlasting Life (1583), having made election dependent on repentance, next made repentance dependent on election:

Reason: But haue the children of God any assurance in this world of their election?

Religion: Yea, verily, for from whence commeth Repentance and the fruits thereof, but from the Regeneration by the faith of Christ,
but this faith is given to the elect only; Ergo only the elect do repent and give themselves to obey the commandment of God, the rest have not the will to think a good thought, much less to do any good.\textsuperscript{18}

According to this view of repentance, in order to repent one must have been saved in the first place; but if one thinks, as Faustus does, that one has been damned, one is constrained to believe that repentance is impossible. For someone already in the state of despair, which both Luther and Calvin had posited as the first step toward repentance, there is in fact very little way into that repentance except through an act of faith of which the despairing are usually incapable—an emotional surge of assurance, or, in other words, a cessation of despair.

Furthermore, even the sense of assurance, said many Calvinist divines, may be deceptive. According to William Perkins, “many persuade themselves of God’s mercy & yet are deceived; nevertheless all such as doe truly beleeve are not deceived” (Discourse, 62). How, then, is a person to know that he has truly repented and is truly of the elect? The mass of sixteenth-century treatises on the subject seem to agree on three signs of election: first, the repentance must be accompanied by a grief that very closely resembles despair itself: “So that it is not enough to saie I haue sinned, but to say I haue most traiterously sinned, I haue most obstinatly, carelessly, and rebelliously sinned, I haue monstrously offended in such a place, in suche a house, in suche company, in such a daie.”\textsuperscript{19} Second, in the midst of this grief, there must come a sudden sense of comfort, an unquestioning faith in God’s mercy accompanied by a conviction that one is personally, definitely, and irreversibly saved. No “guiltie sinner,” says Perkins, can feel this “confidence and boldness” in his heart (Discourse, 52). And third, the repentance (or conversion, as it is now called) must lead to a complete change in the person; no matter how upright he has seemed before, he must become a completely new person living a completely new life. If he is not conscious of this marked change in himself, he has not repented and is damned. Perkins further explains that the act of doubting is itself sin:
“[N]ow it is the will of God to which he hath bound us in conscience, to believe the remission of our owne sinnes: and therefore rather not to doe it, is presumptuous disobedience” (Discourse, 21). Just as Everyman’s penance itself was a good deed, so the Calvinist’s doubt about his salvation adds to his store of sins.

If Marlowe was indeed reacting against these doctrines, to which he had been so constantly exposed at Cambridge, what better rebuttal could he find than to demonstrate that the doctrines themselves carried the seeds of Faustus’s failure to repent—or, rather, to persevere in repentance? According to Calvinist doctrine, the elect will be comforted when they call on God; but Faustus, when he calls on God, is mocked or threatened by Mephistophilis, Lucifer, and the Bad Angel. The fact that the Good Angel always accompanies and contradicts the Bad Angel is almost irrelevant; the presence of the Bad Angel is in itself a sign to the Calvinist that his faith is not complete.

Significantly, the only time that Faustus seems to feel even a touch of the necessary assurance is in his meeting with the Old Man, who does appear to draw Faustus through the first stages of repentance. The Old Man begins with motivation by fear: a warning that deathbed repentance is not to be trusted:

   Old Man: Yet, yet, thou hast an amiable soul,
        If sin by custom grow not into nature:
        Then, Faustus, will repentance come too late,
        Then thou art banish’d from the sight of heaven.

   (xviii.43-46: 1712-15)

The refrain “too late!” we have heard before, in the Judgment plays; and in this medieval sense, the Old Man is warning Faustus about the moment after Judgment. But in the Calvinist sense, the Old Man may be echoing the doctrine of predestination: that there is a type of soul that cannot repent, and the longer the soul waits to attempt repentance, the more it is confirmed in its damnation. According to Perkins: “Neither will it alwaies boote a man after many yeares to say at the last cast, Lord be mercifull to me, I have sinned. Though some be received to mercy in the time of death, yet farre more perish in desperation, that live in their
sins wittingly and willingly against their owne conscience” (Discourse, 77).

Faustus responds to the Old Man’s first plea by entering that state of despair in which the soul is convinced that it has merited damnation: “Where are thou, Faustus? wretch, what hast thou done? / Damn’d art thou, Faustus, damn’d; despair and die!” (xviii.55-56: 1724-25). It is at this point that Mephistophilis, like the Vice Despair of the moralities, hands him a dagger; and it is at this point that the Old Man stays Faustus’s hand from suicide and offers him assurance of salvation. The Old Man’s assurance, it must be noted, is given in the indicative mood—not “if you repent you will be saved” but “salvation is at hand”—and is presented in the visual terms that the forces of evil have hitherto used to tempt Faustus to sin:

Old Man: I see an angel hovers o’er thy head
And with a vial full of precious grace
Offers to pour the same into thy soul:
Then call for mercy, and avoid despair.
(xviii.61–64: 1730–33)

For the first time, Faustus does feel “comfort” of a sort:

Faustus: O friend, I feel
Thy words to comfort my distressed soul.
Leave me awhile to ponder on my sins.
(xviii.65–67: 1734–36)

It is significant that, in feeling this comfort, Faustus now speaks of his sins in the plural; up to now, he has spoken only of his “sin,” the sin of trafficking with the Devil. This is the moment of proof; if Faustus will acknowledge his sins to God, will say, “I haue monstrously offended in such a place, in suche a house, in suche company, in such a daie,” he may yet repent and be saved. But in sending away the Old Man, he has sent away his comforter, and left alone with Mephistophilis, he immediately relapses into doubt:

Faustus: Accursed Faustus, where is mercy now?
I do repent, and yet I do despair;
Hell strives with grace for conquest in my breast.
What shall I do to shun the snares of death?

(xviii.70-74: 1739-42)

This last question is the same one that Everyman asked in his first throes of denial and bargaining, ignoring the fact that he had already been told what he must do. And at the mention of the word death, Mephistophilis steps forward and addresses Faustus like Death—the Death of the Dances, of Herod, of the Castle, and of Everyman itself: “Thou traitor, Faustus, I arrest thy soul / For disobedience to my sovereign lord” (xviii.75-76: 1743-44).

To the Calvinist mind, this is an almost unquestionable sign of damnation. Not only has Faustus begun to doubt after what he thought was assurance but, according to Calvinist divines, he must now assume that his “assurance” was in fact presumption, and therefore yet another sin. “Presumption wil give a man the slippe in the time of sickenesse and in the houre of death; and the testimonie of good conscience stickes by him to the end.”20 He is indeed caught in a double bind; since he is afraid of damnation he must be damned, and since he must be damned he is afraid of damnation.

If most audiences of Marlowe’s day and our own deplore Faustus’s error and, with the scholars, hope to the very end that he will still manage to repent like Philologus or Humanum Genus, Puritans (of Marlowe’s day and our own) would long ago have given Faustus up for lost and would have taken this “arrest” by Mephistophilis as merely one more sign of his predestined end. Has he not from the beginning shown an unregenerate conscience and a lack of that “speciall certentie” of his own salvation that every elect soul must feel? Is not the Old Man, in contrast, an example of how the elect bear witness to their faith? Why, as early as Faustus’s first pact with the Devil, he has blasphemed the words of God by using them to speak of Hell: “Consummatum est: this bill is ended, / And Faustus hath bequeath’d his soul to Lucifer” (v.74-75: 463-64). Again and again he refers to his traffic in necromancy as “resolution,” one of the terms used by theologians to signify perseverance in grace:
Valdes, as resolute am I in this [magic]
As thou to live; therefore object it not.

(i.133–34: 161–62)

Then fear not, Faustus, to be resolute
And try the uttermost magic can perform.

(iii.14–15: 242–43)

Now go not backward; no, Faustus be resolute;
Why waver'st thou? O, something soundeth in mine ears,
“Abjure this magic, turn to God again!”
Ay, and Faustus will turn to God again.
To God? He loves thee not. . . .

(v.6–10: 394–98)

Even Wagner, Faustus’s comic foil throughout the play, unwittingly points up his master’s unregeneracy at the end. Commenting on Faustus’s preparations for death, Wagner says:

I think my master means to die shortly:
He has made his will and given me his wealth,
His house, his goods, and store of golden plate,
Besides two thousand ducats ready coin’d.
I wonder what he means. If death were nigh,
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.21

(xviii.1–9: 1674–80)

The making of wills, although encouraged by the new treatises on dying, was not to be substituted for spiritual preparations for death, and yet Wagner makes it clear that Faustus’s will is his only preparation. Marlowe’s audience would no doubt have remembered the Protestant Morality Enough Is as Good as a Feast, in which the unregenerate Worldly Man’s last act is to reject the physician’s call to repentance and to begin making a will instead. As Ignorance says of him after his death, “All his study was who should have his goods when he died” (1413).22
According to the extreme Calvinist position, then, and especially the Puritan position, Faustus has demonstrated his unregeneracy over and over. And if these signs were not enough, he shows yet another sign of being reprobate: he delights in watching plays.

Mephistophilis, indeed, is a hellish impresario in *Doctor Faustus*. He presents an almost endless series of pageants and shows for Faustus—not the least among which is the Pageant of the Seven Deadly Sins—with all the roles played by devils. Calvinists like William Perkins were most adamant about the noxious effects of such shows, and included “Playes and Enterludes” among the “sundrie kindes of recreations [that] are to be neglected”: “Playes and Enterludes, that stand in the representation of the Vices, unless it be in the way of dislike, . . . much lesse is it warrantable to gesture and represent vice in the way of recreations & delight” (*Discourse*, 46). Mephistophilis specifically tells first the audience and then Faustus that the first show (containing, by the way, a dance—another recreation that Perkins condemns) is meant to “delight” Faustus’s mind (v.82–84: 471–73); and Faustus declares that the Pageant of the Seven Deadly Sins “doth delight my soul” (vi.170: 712). He is obviously in a bad way, spiritually speaking, and can be expected to come to no good.

Arieh Sachs has speculated, from the printed editions of *Doctor Faustus*, that Puritans of the seventeenth century were not averse to reading the play, and most likely did read it, as an exemplum of the reprobate’s fate. But these readers were not part of Marlowe’s sixteenth-century audience, and Faustus’s conformity to Puritan ideas of reprobacy may have served quite a different dramatic purpose for the Anglican who watched him despair and die.

The disputed ending to *Doctor Faustus* may cast some further light on that purpose. Whether Marlowe wrote the scholars’ final speeches, outlined them for others to write, or would heartily have wished the speeches to perdition, their inclusion indicates that playgoers of the time demanded such an ending. And it is therefore interesting to note that the scholars are determined to
give Faustus an honorable burial in spite of the evidence they have of his wrongdoing:

2 Scholar: Well, gentlemen, though Faustus' end be such
As every Christian heart laments to think on,
Yet, for he was a scholar, once admir'd
For wondrous knowledge in our German schools,
We'll give his mangled limbs due burial;
And all the students, cloth'd in mourning black,
Shall wait upon his heavy funeral.


This "due burial," so often a mark of approval in Marlowe's work, does not necessarily mean that we must agree with the scholars and accept Faustus as scholar par excellence, any more than we necessarily agreed with Orcanes about the state of Sigismund's soul when Orcanes refused Sigismund "due burial." We have seen, as their deathbed attendants have not, both Sigismund's repentance and Faustus's lack of genuine scholarship. It is the scholars' response itself, rather than the response's validity, that must interest us.

As before, the scholars are correct in theory, if infirm of purpose. Most Anglican theologians insisted that although the state at death might very likely signify the state of salvation, no person was to presume to judge another person's state of salvation from his manner of dying. Indeed, John Donne was later to point out that Christ himself had died a violent and shameful death, and that therefore: "Still pray we for a peaceable life, against violent deaths, and for time of repentance against sudden deaths, and for sober and modest assurance against distempered deaths, but never make ill conclusions upon persons overtaken with such deaths." And in 2 Henry VI, which may have run concurrently with Doctor Faustus, Shakespeare surrounds the deathbed of Cardinal Beaufort with the right and wrong sorts of visitors:

King Henry: Lord Cardinal, if thou think'st on Heaven's bliss,
    Hold up thy hand, make signal of thy hope.
    He dies, and makes no sign. O God, forgive him!
Warwick: So bad a death argues a monstrous life.
King Henry: Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all.

(3.3.27-31)

Warwick, we know, is correct in his estimation of the Cardinal's life; but Warwick, who is given the Puritan moral to speak, will himself prove a conspirator and murderer. King Henry, on the other hand, is a fool; but he is a holy fool who follows (anachronistically) the Book of Common Prayer and the Arts of Dying at the dying man’s bedside. We must assume, therefore, that Henry's is the morally correct response, even as we pity his naivété.

What then of Faustus's death? He has sinned, has died, and has been carried off to Hell, still denying and bargaining with Death at his last hour. In reality, he has not changed very much from his opening scene, when he bade "On kai me on farewell" (refusing to consider "being and not being") and with fitting irony prophesied his own doom along with that of humankind:

Faustus: Yet art thou still but Faustus, and a man.
        Couldst thou make men to live eternally
        Or being dead raise them to life again,
        Then this profession were to be esteem'd.
        Physic, farewell!

(i.23-27: 51-55)

In both Christian and classical tragedy, the most important question is "Who am I?" Faustus unwittingly answers this question—and then discards the answer—in his farewell to physic: he is "but Faustus, and a man." It is God who can "make men to live eternally / Or being dead raise them to life again." In turning away from self-knowledge, Faustus has turned away from the ability to repent and be saved; he has denied his relationship to God, and has thus closed down communication between himself and God's grace. As Mephistophilis tells him, he was always "in danger to be damn'd" (iii.53: 279).

But this does not mean that Faustus was always incapable of being saved. Mephistophilis, it is important to notice, does not say "damn'd," but rather "in danger to be damn'd," implying a
free choice on the part of Faustus as to what he will do. Indeed, when Mephistophilis admits that it was he who threw temptations in Faustus’s path even before the conjuration (xix.90-96: 1885-89), he is begging the question. Even to Calvinists, temptations were not sins unless the mind entertained them. Faustus was always “in danger,” but he also always had the option of escaping the danger by saying no.

A strict Calvinist might say the I am now begging the question, that the soul predestined to damnation cannot say no. But as I have shown, Marlowe could hardly have expected the strictest Calvinists to attend his play, as their own beliefs would have kept them from the theater. We must assume, then, that he was writing for an audience that was inclined to see Faustus’s despair, not as a natural function of his predestined state, but as a headstrong refusal to acknowledge his sin, turn to God, and amend his life.

In this sense, Mephistophilis’s famous, “Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it” (iii.77: 304) may stand as Faustus’s motto during life. His is a self-created hell, one in which he is never satisfied, because his refusal to accept his own limitations forces him, ironically, to accept the paltry rather than continue grappling unsuccessfully with the important. He will watch a pageant rather than explore on kai me on; and he will go to perdition rather than ask for help of God or man. He has been sinful and boastful; he has even been vindictive; but, above all, like so many tragic heroes before him, he has been colossally wasteful and catastrophically blind.

Faustus, who has scrambled away from self-knowledge throughout the play, is, like Everyman in his early stages, un­equipped to ask the right questions, and is therefore, like Every­man, unequipped to face death. Still scrambling at his last hour, he dies screaming his denial of Death, and yet we can hardly im­agine a Hell worse than the one that he has created for himself on earth. His self-imposed despair and all such double binds, Marlowe seems to suggest, lead not only to a denial of death, but to a denial of life itself. Only in this sense is Warwick’s obser­vation valid: “So bad a death argues a monstrous life”—and so bad a life argues a monstrous death.