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Macbeth and Faustus: The Comparison between Two Lost Souls

One of the biggest controversies in the history of English comes with the attempted comparisons between Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare. Some critics argue that Marlowe influenced Shakespeare, while others believe that both of these prestigious writers have worked together in the past. However, in any attempt of comparison between the two, one must start by looking at their various works and characters, respectively. If there are any two works that closely resemble each other when it comes to the plays' themes, characters, and motives, they are Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. By comparing the respective characters of *Macbeth* and *Faustus*, their behaviors, key passages, and supporting casts, one might argue that *Macbeth* was influenced by Faustus's play of need and power, but the truth remains that both of these works have many comparisons that readers of both classic works might find hard to ignore.

The themes of both plays, as supported by Henry I. Christ of *The English Journal*, are a great place to start the comparisons which from the surface are too similar to pass by. "Like Faust, who yielded everything for a trivial gain," Christ explains, "Macbeth gives his 'eternal jewel... to the common enemy of man' for ultimately worthless gains."¹ Throughout the entire short article, Christ lists comparisons because he feels that the "parallels are worth pointing out

because they deepen understanding of both plays.”ⁱⁱ Some of these include that both characters “are willing to surrender their immortal souls for temporary gain,” “possess the goal for which they gave so much,” and both “die in agony after protracted spiritual torment.”ⁱⁱⁱ Author Robert A. Logan disagrees otherwise by acknowledging that readers should consider the plays as “studies in damnation”^{iv} and notice the “terribly irony for both characters, whereas they each seek a liberation of sorts, the terms in which they envision it, including the means by which they hope to achieve it, preclude the possibility of ever attaining it.”^v With these observations in mind, themes only work as well as their characters can portray them, and in these two plays, both Macbeth and Faustus do not disappoint.

Macbeth, the main character in the play named after him, changes throughout the entire play from “honest, honorable statism to potentially disloyal, opportunistic, and traitorous.”^{vi} Although he does his acts of evil mainly in part due to the “force of Lady’s Macbeth’s persuasions,” it is “the strength of Macbeth’s thirst for kingship,” that really tells the story about Macbeth’s character.^{vii} In the article, “In Deepest Consequences: Macbeth,” written in the *Shakespeare Quarterly*, it is mentioned that Macbeth “knows clearly what God’s word is and what the general results of Duncan’s murder” would be.^{viii} This means that he knows that if he does murder Duncan, then the result would be damnation. This can be strongly compared to Faustus because he signs away his soul to obtain what he desires; he knows he is going to hell, just as Macbeth knows if he commits the crime. However, “against the awareness of the depth to which the deed that will drive him,” writes Coursen, “is the upward and irresistible surge of his ambition.”^{ix}

Marlowe's main character, Doctor Faustus, whom is also the main character in the play named after him, has very similar traits of ambition, pride, and need compared to the likeliness of *Macbeth*. T. McAlindon states that Faustus's "conception of himself" is one as "a resolute individualist" with a "belief that he will uncover truths hidden from the rest of mankind."^x Instead of wanting to become king like Macbeth, Faustus uses his abundance of knowledge, which he flaunts frequently and arrogantly throughout the play, to "imagine and then act out the part of an imperious interrogator who will get to the heart of the matter and not be side-tracked from his quest for truth."^{xi}

Just as Macbeth is given the choice to repent and stop his actions, Faustus is also given his chance to do so in which he refuses. These are mostly in the form of wishes from a good angel, but despite the chances of repenting, he continues his ways and ignores the angel at every occurrence. Faustus "protects his self-image by inverting the sense of 'resolution': to repent is to waver, to quail before the devils is to be steadfast, to retreat is to advance."^{xii} As stated by Sylvan Barnet, it is his arrogance, his "unwillingness to see things as they evidently are, to see evil as evil."^{xiii} "Faustus makes a choice," he writes, "and is responsible for his choice, but Faustus comes to destruction not through the actions of himself, but through the hostile cosmos that entrap him."^{xiv} Perhaps the biggest supporters of the comparisons between Macbeth and Faustus are these "cosmos," or as most literary critics like to put them, supporting characters, that really make these protagonists what they are and what they become.

The two main contributors toward Macbeth's actions and feelings in *Macbeth* are the three witches (or the weird sisters) and his own wife, Lady Macbeth. Coursen, Jr. argues that "the Weird Sisters are the spur to Macbeth's intent" and that "he is seduced by the witches, clearly

powers of evil, who exemplify the morality doctrine that Satan is a deceiver.”^{xv} These three witches tell Macbeth that he is destined to become king one day. Because of this, it leads him to believe that it is true and he tells himself and his wife that he must obtain it no matter what the cost. Throughout the play, it is these witches that give Macbeth foreshadowing on what will happen and one might argue that their insights drive Macbeth crazy in the way that he always wonders what will happen next and when. However, it is Macbeth that has some morals in the beginning, only to have them transformed to evil because of the push of Lady Macbeth, the true motivator and evil puppeteer behind Macbeth.

Sadowski describes Lady Macbeth as an “endodynamic, masculinized woman”^{xvi} who spurs “her husband toward action by playing on gender stereotypes.”^{xvii} This is shown when Lady Macbeth questions her husband’s masculinity and courage, “a virtue which seems to be of high value” to him.^{xviii} She does this by appealing “to his ambition and pride to goad him on to action.”^{xix} Even before Lady Macbeth throws her psychological persuasion toward her husband, Macbeth has a thought of murder in his head but realizes there is a “reflexivity of action.” “To undertake an evil deed is to give that deed authenticity, to assign it a status in the world of values and the world of deeds dependent on those values.”^{xx} In the beginning of the play, Macbeth shows his “willingness to listen to the voices of his ambition and to think of ways to obtain the crown promised by the witches’ predictions.”^{xxi} Having this in mind, Lady Macbeth then tries to persuade her husband, only to end in “the evil of Macbeth arising from thoughtlessness; he is persuaded, despite his earlier moral thinking.”^{xxii}

The point is then brought up by Sadowski again that, “Lady Macbeth’s domination and determination were crucial in convincing Macbeth to commit the first murder,” but makes a good

point later on that “he does not go to her for the next murders.”^{xxiii} This goes to show that Lady Macbeth left a lasting impression on her husband and his actions, much like how Mephostophilis and Lucifer himself have a major role in Faustus’s continuing actions toward his goals and desires.

Mephostophilis acts as the messenger between Lucifer and Faustus throughout most of the Christopher Marlowe play. Whatever Lucifer has to tell Faustus, he tells Mephostophilis to deliver the message to him as quickly as possible, and whatever Faustus has to say in response or in question back to Lucifer, he sends Mephostophilis right back to do the deed. Even more importantly, it is Mephostophilis that tells Faustus about all the things that hell has to offer, most of the time in Doctor Faustus’s favor. However, it is through Faustus’s actions of signing his name in his own blood on a deed that sells his soul to the devil to “enlarge his kingdom,” (DF 2.1.41) as Mephostophilis so loyally states it.

Although in the beginning it seems that Mephostophilis is Lucifer’s servant yet humble toward Faustus, only after Faustus signs his soul over to the devil does Mephostophilis’ true side come out. As McAlindon explains in his article, “The Ironic Vision,” “Mephostophilis’ behavior clarifies and develops the significance” in his signature in blood and “ensures that Faustus will have no second thoughts about the miraculous ‘inscription’ by distracting his attention with the first of many glittering and inherently meaningless shows.”^{xxiv} Once he signs the deed, Mephostophilis asks, “Speak, Faustus, do you deliver this as your deed?” (DF 2.1.118-119) asking Faustus if he takes full responsibility for his actions. Macbeth also has to take full responsibility of his actions to himself in the middle of obtaining his kingship when the ghost of

Banquo appears and asks Macbeth why he killed him. As readers later find out, the responsibilities taken by both characters lead to tragic endings.

Just as most dramatic tragedies seem to do towards the very end, it is usually the main character that “gets what was coming to him,” so to speak. When it comes to both Macbeth and Faustus, this certainly does ring true as both lives are ended because of personal hells and actions that were delivered throughout the plays. The comparisons of their endings are shown with the closely related punishments and similar final soliloquies that are given by both Macbeth and Faustus who “each have feelings of guilt and repentance.”^{xxv} Logan mentions that “for both Faustus and Macbeth, the wrenching pain of the punishments they experience is as horrifying as the crimes that initiated their retribution” and that “they experience hell as a state of mind.”^{xxvi} In some respects, it is their “fears of the quickness with which time passes and destruction approaches” that becomes each man’s “psychological hell that each man experiences.”^{xxvii} This “time” is something that both men take advantage of because they both try to get ahead in their own lives as fast as possible with no “awareness of the destructiveness of passing time and of fears of their own morality.”^{xxviii} Besides the common themes, characters, and supporting characters that are closely compared within these two plays, it is the final soliloquies given by Macbeth and Faustus at the end of each play that are the most similar and raise the most questions of possible influence.

When it comes to the words in which Shakespeare and Marlowe respectively use in their final soliloquies, both characters use the same sort of tone and voice, as well as shouts of dissolution, feeling of being lost, and full of repent. In Faustus’s last soliloquy “he imagines at first that the resolution of his body into the component elements of earth, air, and water that

would save him from the horrors that begin at midnight^{”xxix} or his damnation into hell. However, the main point about his soliloquy is that “he dies longing in vain for the dissolution of his soul.”^{”xxx} This compares to Macbeth’s last words because he talks about how he is “sick at heart, / When I behold” (M 5.3.19-20). Coursen begins to explain this line by questioning, “what was to be the object of behold?” and then continues by making the point, “the rest of the soliloquy concerns what Macbeth has lost, it may be that he was about to mention the soul he has lost.”^{”xxxi} As it is shown by the words and quotations used, both characters are upset about the same entity: the loss of their souls.

Combined with the same meanings behind their soliloquies, both protagonists are paired up with repetitive last cries for salvation, followed by ironic and backstabbing lines by supporting characters. In *Macbeth*, after one of his final soliloquies, Macbeth shouts out “Seyton!” and repeats it three times, “linking Seyton appropriate with the Weird Sisters.”^{”xxxii} After more repetitive shouts, his cries are then answered by Seyton as she enters the scene and asks with what Coursen ironically states in “Mephistophelian irony,”^{”xxxiii} “What’s your gracious pleasure?” (5.3.29). Not only is Macbeth about to die, but with that question being asked, it does nothing less than rub salt in an already ruptured wound.

Compared with Faustus’s final experiences in the play, right before he is about to be damned to hell, he shouts out repetitively “O God!” and “My God!” but unlike how Seyton appeared to her name, He does not show up. Instead, it is Mephostophilis who shows up and states cold heartedly his last lines, just as Seyton did, “Fools that will laugh on earth, must weep in hell.” (DF 5.2.105). Just as Macbeth loses his soul and is killed right after an ironic comment by one of the main supporting characters, Doctor Faustus receives the same fate.

As it was shown with the comparisons between Macbeth and Faustus, their supporting characters, the themes, key passages, and monologues, there is a strong bond between the two works of *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus* that shows that perhaps Marlowe had indeed an influence on Shakespeare and his writings. Many Shakespearean scholars have spoken their belief in this possible influence. T. McAlindon states his belief of Marlowe's influence by ending his article with the idea that it "was probably Marlowe alone who prompted Shakespeare to focus his imagination on the appalling peripeteia whereby the undoing of a bond which has come to seem intolerable (the fatal deed) results in a state of claustrophobic confinement or degrading servitude."^{xxxiv} Robert A. Logan reported that "eight Shakespearean texts actually quote lines from Marlowe's works."^{xxxv} However he does state that "Macbeth was not one of them," yet there was still a good chance that Marlowe had a "continuing impact on Shakespeare's psychology as he composed his works."^{xxxvi}

So as Henry I. Christ began his article "Macbeth and the Faust Legend" with the question, "Did Shakespeare have the Faust Legend in mind when he wrote Macbeth?"^{xxxvii} the answer might never be known. But with the continuing research done by Shakespearean scholars on the texts themselves diving deep into hidden themes, different meanings of lines, or even different views on the characters, then maybe one day that answer will be answered truthfully giving respects to both Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare alike. The truth is, as Christ explains, "despite the similarities, the differences are, of course, all embracing."^{xxxviii} The embracement of the works as a whole is what makes both *Macbeth*, written by Shakespeare, and *Doctor Faustus*, written by Marlowe, two of the most legendary pieces of literature in the history

of literary theory and the truth will always remain that their stories will never lose their luster in the “souls” of the readers who have the privilege to read them.

- ⁱ Henry I. Christ, "Macbeth and the Faust Legend," The English Journal 46 (1957) 212.
- ⁱⁱ Christ 212.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Christ 212
- ^{iv} Robert A. Logan, Shakespeare's Marlowe (Vermont: Ashgate, 2007) 197.
- ^v Logan 198
- ^{vi} Piotr Sadowski, Dynamism of Character in Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies (Massachusetts: Rosemont Printing, 2003) 279.
- ^{vii} Herbert R. Coursen, Jr, "In Deepest Consequence: Macbeth," Shakespeare Quarterly 18 (1967) 375.
- ^{viii} Coursen, Jr. 379
- ^{ix} Coursen, Jr. 379
- ^x T. McAlindon, "The Ironic Vision: Diction and Theme in Marlowe's Doctor Faustus," The Review of English Studies 32 (1981) 131.
- ^{xi} McAlindon 131
- ^{xii} McAlindon 131
- ^{xiii} Christopher Marlowe, Doctor Faustus (New York: Signet Classic, 1969) xvii.
- ^{xiv} Marlowe xvii
- ^{xv} Coursen, Jr. 380
- ^{xvi} Sadowski 279
- ^{xvii} Sadowski 288
- ^{xviii} Gregory J. Keller, "The Moral Thinking of Macbeth," Philosophy and Literature 29 (2005) 53.
- ^{xix} Keller 50
- ^{xx} Keller 43
- ^{xxi} Keller 49-50
- ^{xxii} Keller 55
- ^{xxiii} Sadowski 289
- ^{xxiv} McAlindon 136
- ^{xxv} Logan 199
- ^{xxvi} Logan 202
- ^{xxvii} Logan 202
- ^{xxviii} Logan 204
- ^{xxix} McAlindon 133

xxx McAlindon 132

xxxix Coursen, Jr. 385

xxxii Coursen, Jr. 385

xxxiii Coursen, Jr. 385

xxxiv McAlindon 139

xxxv Logan 8

xxxvi Logan 8

xxxvii Christ 212

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