

# From ‘Resolute’ to ‘Dissolved’

## Tracking Faustus’s Decision

MÁRTA HARGITAI

*Abstract: Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus has a lot to offer when interpreted in the context of belief and disbelief. From the beginning, Faustus repeatedly reminds himself that he should be resolute, but at the end of the play, he wishes above all to be like beasts whose souls are soon dissolved in elements—he, however, is convinced that his soul “must live still to be plagued in hell.” This certainty of the existence of hell is the end-point, something we have not only expected but known from the beginning, when Faustus casually and mockingly calls hell a fable. In this paper, I discuss various aspects of the play’s belief-disbelief spectrum, as well as that of fixity and change. I focus on Faustus’s changes of belief-states arguing that he only dismisses old beliefs so that he can find a final saving belief and he only changes to reach a final state where he will need to change no more. The paper suggests that, in a way, he accomplishes both goals, but it is not exactly the way he imagined or hoped for.*

At the beginning of the play’s action, Faustus seems to be rather determined to “try the uttermost magic can perform.” Valdes ensures Faustus that “these books, thy wit, and our experience / Shall make all nations to canonise us . . .” (1.1.121–122),<sup>1</sup> and that he will have omnipotence under one condition: “If learned Faustus will be resolute” (1.1.135). Faustus’s answer comes perhaps too soon,

---

1 Unless otherwise stated, all citations from the A-text of *Doctor Faustus* come from the Revels edition of *Doctor Faustus. A- and B-texts (1604, 1616)*, edited by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen. I accepted Bevington and Rasmussen’s opinion that “the critical verdict has swung strongly in favour of the A-text in recent years” (ix). *Tamburlaine, Edward II*, and *The Jew of Malta* are cited from Bevington and Rasmussen’s *Doctor Faustus and other plays*, and *The Massacre* from Romany and Lindsey’s *Complete plays*, by act, scene, and line numbers. The poems are quoted from Orgel’s edition.

## MÁRTA HARGITAI

“Valdes as resolute am I in this / As thou to live” (1.1.136–7). When Faustus tries to conjure up Mephistopheles and draws a circle holding a book, he encourages himself saying, “Then fear not Faustus, but be resolute, / And try the uttermost magic can perform” (1.3.14–15). At the end of the play, however, he wishes above all to be like beasts, whose souls are soon dissolved in elements, although he is convinced that his soul must live “still to be plagued in hell” (5.2.112):

All beasts are happy, for when they die,  
Their souls are soon *dissolved* in elements,  
But mine must live still to be plagued in hell.  
Curst be the parents that engendered me.  
No, Faustus, curse thyself, curse Lucifer,  
That hath deprived thee of the joys of heaven.  
—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!*  
My God, my God, look not so fierce on me! (5.2.110–120, emphasis added)

The trajectory of his life was already flash-forwarded in the Prologue:

So soon he profits in divinity,  
The fruitful plot of scholarism graced,  
That shortly he was graced with doctor's name,  
Excelling all whose sweet delight disputes  
In heavenly matters of theology;  
Till, swoll'n with cunning of a self-conceit,  
His waxen wings did mount above his reach,  
And melting heavens conspired his overthrow.  
For, falling to a devilish exercise,  
And glutted more with learning's golden gifts,  
He surfeits upon cursed necromancy;  
Nothing so sweet as magic is to him,  
Which he prefers before his chiefest bliss.  
And this the man that in his study sits. (Prologue 15–28)

The parabola shape of Icarus's rise and fall is projected onto Faustus's fall, later to be related to Lucifer's fall as rebel angel. The Icarus-parallel can also be detected

## FROM “RESOLUTE” TO “DISSOLVED”

at the end of the play, where Faustus’s wish to be a waterdrop among myriads in the sea might recall Icarus’s plunge in the sea, thereby drawing a sophisticated parallel between hell and the sea (maybe as a possible momentary reconciliation of fire and water),<sup>2</sup> indirectly commenting upon the impossibility of hiding and finding refuge in the sea—and by extension in nature or anywhere in the universe.

“*Homo, fuge*” (2.1.77), i.e. “Fly, O Man,” is in itself a paradox: an inscription momentarily envisaged to be solidifying on Faustus’s arm. It is doubly paradoxical, indeed, as the letters are formed by his blood—reliquified by Mephistopheles—suggesting that Faustus should escape instead of standing by Satan’s side. Although the inscription appears on his arm in act 2, it only dawns on him at the last moment (when “the clock striketh twelve,” 24 years later) with all its weight of finality that there is nowhere to escape. This paradoxical tension between a desire for fixity and the eagerness and anxiety to change underlies the whole action of the drama. My contention in this paper is that this fixity can be related to belief while change may correspond to disbelief.

Initially, *resolute* in the play means what it meant around 1500: “determinate, decided, absolute, final” (*OED* III.6). This is the usual meaning to be found elsewhere in Marlowe’s works, e.g. in *Edward II*, *The Massacre at Paris*, and *The Jew of Malta*. The underlying notion behind the phrase, however, is only to become explicit at the end of the play, where Faustus wants to be *dissolved* in the elements. There, the early fifteenth-century meaning of *resolute* to mean “dissolved” (*OED* a. I.1) returns.<sup>3</sup>

This reading seems to be confirmed by the same meaning of *resolve* appearing in *Tamburlaine Part I*, where Cosroe complains to Menaphon:

Ah, Menaphon, I pass not for his threats.  
The plot is laid by Persian noblemen  
And captains of the Median garrisons

---

2 Cf. what Pinciss and Lockyer write about the Renaissance world view, that beside the optimistic, “comforting, tidy and logical” beliefs “other views of the universe were being heard ever more loudly, and these postulate nothing so permanent, rational, and optimistic. Fortune was ever fickle, change could be chaotic as well as orderly, humanity had fallen and all things beneath the moon were subject to decay. Eden was lost like the Golden Age of classical myth that was followed by an Age of Iron. The four elements might be held in balance, but they were always ready to resume their permanent opposition, fire with water and earth with air. These, according to some, were as irreconcilable as matter and spirit” (2).

3 Also “of loose structure;” “friable” (*OED* a. I.2) and “morally lax, dissolute” (*OED* a. I.3).

To crown me emperor of Asia.  
 But this it is that doth excruciate  
 The very substance of my vexed soul:  
 To see our neighbours, that were wont to quake  
 And tremble at the Persian monarch's name,  
 Now sits and laughs our regiment to scorn;  
 And *that which might resolve me into tears,*  
 Men from the farthest equinoctial line  
 Have swarmed in troops into the Eastern India,  
 Lading their ships with gold and precious stones,  
 And made their spoils from all our provinces. (Part I 1.2.109–122, emphasis added)

The word is used in the same meaning in Tamburlaine's praise of Zenocrate's beauty:

Ah, fair Zenocrate, divine Zenocrate!  
 Fair is too foul an epithet for thee  
 That, in thy passion for thy country's love,  
 And fear to see thy kingly father's harm,  
 With hair dishevelled wip'st thy watery cheeks,  
 And, like to Flora in her morning's pride,  
 Shaking her silver tresses in the air,  
 Rain'st on the earth *resolved pearl in showers.* (Part I 5.1.135–142, emphasis added)

The English word *resolute* comes from Latin *resoluere*; *luere*, perhaps derived immediately from the Greek *luain*, “to lose” appears in Latin mostly as “*soluere*, to ‘detach, set loose or free’” (Partridge 1859).<sup>4</sup> So, from his initial resoluteness (i.e. his determination), at the end of his life, Faustus wants something very different: to be lost in the universe, something the word *resolute* used to mean earlier; all this a result of his loose, negligent, morally or religiously lax, i.e. *dissolute* nature.

Although this meaning of dissolute was never linked to *resolute* or *resolve*, *dissolution* does stem from the same root as *resolute*, and it frequently resurfaces in the literature of the period with very rich connotations. In one more literal sense, it signifies an ending or dismissal (as in the *dissolution of monasteries*), separation into parts, melting,<sup>5</sup> liquefying, or disintegration, therefore, death. It derives from the Latin

4 Partridge adds, “*so* – is a variant of the privative or separative *sē-*”; the Sanskrit word is “‘*lunati*’ meaning ‘he cuts off,’ *lavīś, lavitram*, a sickle” (1859). “The IE root, clearly, is \**lū* – or \**leu* – (both with vowels now long, now short), to detach, set free” (Partridge 1859).

5 Cf. Falstaff in *Merry Wives of Windsor*, “Think of that, a man of my kidney—think of that—that am as subject to heat as butter; a man of continual dissolution and thaw: it was a miracle to ‘scape

## FROM “RESOLUTE” TO “DISSOLVED”

*dissolutus* (meaning “loosed,” “taken asunder on all sides,” “prodigal,” “lascivious,” “too indulgent,” and also “cleared from,” “dissolved,” cp. Dumesnil 402–403). According to the Middle English Dictionary, *dissolucion* meant 1. laxity in behaviour or in the observance of religious rites or practices; frivolity, dissipation, dissoluteness; 2. disintegration, weakening of the body. *Dissolute* (adj.) in ME signified 1. of persons: morally or religiously lax or negligent, frivolous, lascivious; of conduct: immoral, licentious; of actions: unruly, unrestrained; 2. feeble, weakened, severed, disrupted, absolved, free (from trouble). *Dissolven* (v.) meant a, to break up or dissolve (a solid) to (a liquid), liquefy; b, (of a solid) to break up or melt; c, (of dew) to evaporate; of a cloud: to break up, vanish. Kurath adds that the term was also used figuratively (1166).

The consistency of *dissolved* (5.2.111) with “O soul, be changed into little water drops, / And fall into the ocean, ne’er be found” (5.2.118–119) is thus established—the fabric woven tight with the multiple meanings of the term recalling the original meaning of *resolute*. Here, we can find an organic and meaningful frame established in the play-text between the last wish for change (*dissolved*) and his initial desire to be *resolute*, thereby relativising his original wish for permanence, fixity, and finality.

Turning something solid, like his body, into liquid can hardly be the real solution, although it did work once before: when Faustus’s blood congealed, Mephistopheles offered, “I’ll fetch thee fire to dissolve it straight” (2.1.63), i.e. he volunteered to liquefy Faustus’s coagulated blood. Thus, whereas the congealing blood is obviously a divine portent, the devil’s volunteering to dissolve Faustus’s blood stands for diabolical dissolution, and by extension, I argue that it confirms the basic opposition between the two ways Faustus could choose: God’s or Lucifer’s.

As Bevington and Rasmussen point out in their comment on Faustus’s desperate words, Marlowe provides no solid ground of meaning for his protagonist, “even the Christian assurances that seem so absolute in the world of the play—eternal joy and felicity, pardon, penitence—dissolve before his eyes and leave in their wake an angry God stretching out his arm and bending his ireful brows” (*Doctor Faustus* 40).<sup>6</sup> In his reply to the third scholar urging him to call on God, Faustus laments:

---

suffocation” (3.5.105–107).

6 “The stars move still; time runs; the clock will strike; / The devil will come, and Faustus must be damned. / 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!

## MÁRTA HARGITAI

On God, whom Faustus hath abjured? On God, whom Faustus hath blasphemed?  
Ah, my God, I would weep, but the devil draws in my tears. Gush forth blood instead  
of tears, yea, life and soul. O, he stays my tongue! I would lift up my hands, but see,  
they hold them, they hold them! (5.2.29–34)

In this late expression of grief and regret, the idea of diabolical dissolution is revisited, inverted, and used against itself: tears, a natural bodily fluid that is supposed to be flowing when in agony, is “drawn in,” or stopped by diabolical machination, which is a “common sign of spiritual reprobation” (*Doctor Faustus* 193). That this reverberation is not accidental is corroborated by the images of the second half of the passage: the wish for his blood to flow repeats the motif of making his congealed blood run again to be able to sign the pact. Finally, at the end of the passage, the inversion of the contrast between fixity standing for God and change symbolising Satan is brought full circle in the picture of Faustus’s tongue being tied and his arms being held by devils, proving the deceptive nature of his earlier resolution.

Bevington and Rasmussen note that *resolute* is as important a word for Faustus as it was for Tamburlaine, and that his repeated pleas to be resolved of ambiguities will only result in his disintegration and dissolution (40). Bevington and Rasmussen also cite McAlindon’s astute point in his discussion of *Doctor Faustus* that *resolute* in one sense means its antonym. McAlindon adds that “fundamental to Faustus’s conception of himself as a heroic individualist is the belief that he will uncover truths from the rest of mankind: at his command, servile spirits will ‘resolve’ enigma and mystery” (129).<sup>7</sup> McAlindon concludes that “the truth, of course, is that the spirits resolve nothing of importance (129), adding that just before signing the pact, “resolute Faustus is [now] married to the spirit of change and dissolution” (130).

Bevington and Rasmussen cite *The Damnable Life*’s description of “[h]ow Doctor Faustus set his blood in a saucer on warm ashes,” “which evidently suggests the stage action that Marlowe has in mind, though that source says nothing about Mephistopheles bringing the fire and only implies that the blood coagulates,” and quote Greg, who concludes that this is “certainly no earthly fire, that will

---

/ 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! / Mountains and hills, come, come, and fall on me, / And hide me from the heavy wrath  
of God!” (5.2.75–85).

7 Cf. “Resolve me of all ambiguities” (1.1.77–79); “And then resolve me of thy master’s mind” (1.3.99–100); “Resolve me then in this one question” (2.2.63).

## FROM “RESOLUTE” TO “DISSOLVED”

liquify coagulated blood” (141). Bevington and Rasmussen also call attention to the “pattern of dissolution” ending in the B-text “in a literal dismemberment of Faustus’s body by devils” (40).

Considering the context of the occurrences of the word *dissolve* and its derivatives in Marlowe’s other works, it is perhaps safe to say that *dissolution* can be used both as a synonym for death and the end of the world. *The Massacre at Paris* starts with Charles’s blessing:

Prince of Navarre, my honourable brother,  
Prince Conde, and my good Lord Admiral,  
I wish this union and religious league,  
Knit in these hands, thus joined in nuptial rites,  
*May not dissolve till death dissolve our lives . . .* (1.1–5, emphasis added)

It is soon followed by the Queen Mother’s aside: “Which I’ll dissolve with blood and cruelty” (1.25). This repetition clearly emphasises the importance of the phrase while at the same time highlights its dual connotations of human and cosmic destruction. The collocation “death dissolve our lives,” confirms on several plains that death is dissolution, disintegration; moreover, death itself plays an active role in liquefying life.

In his translations, Marlowe also uses the word *dissolve* twice—once in *The First Book of Lucan*:

So when this world’s compounded union breaks,  
Time ends, and to old Chaos all things turn,  
Confused stars shall meet, celestial fire  
Fleet on the floods, the earth shoulder the sea,  
Affording it no shore, and Phoebe’s wain  
Chase Phoebus, and enraged affect his place,  
And strive to shine by day and full of strife  
*Dissolve the engines of the broken world.* (73–80, emphasis added)

Here, in place of “[d]issolve the engines of the broken world,” in the original Latin text we find “totaque discors machina divolsi turbabit foedera mundi” (79–80). More closely, “the whole discordant machine will overturn the laws of a universe ripped apart” (translation by Roche 59), which shows that Marlowe’s choice

of words recalls the first line's image of *conpage solute*, i.e. the structure of the cosmos being completely dissolved.

In his translation of Ovid's Elegia XV in *Book I of Amores*, Marlowe writes,

What age of Varro's name shall not be told,  
And Jason's Argos and the fleece of gold?  
Lofty Lucretius shall live that hour  
That *nature shall dissolve this earthly bower* (21–24, emphasis added)

whereas Ovid's original ran as follows: "carmina sublimis tunc sunt peritura Lucreti, / exitio terras cum dabit una dies," more closely, in Showerman's translation, "[t]he verses of sublime Lucretius will perish only then when a single day shall give the earth to doom."

Although I am not at all qualified to discuss classical-philological subtleties here, it seems evident to me that Marlowe could have used other words and phrases than *dissolve* in his translations. If he chose this word out of many other possibilities, it might indicate that he may have been impressed by the end-of-the-world, cataclysmic connotations of the word to be used in his own works as well.<sup>8</sup>

This is the meaning of the word also used by Mephistopheles in *Doctor Faustus*:

FAUSTUS. First will I question with thee about hell.  
Tell me, where is the place that men call hell?  
MEPHIST. Under the heavens.  
FAUSTUS. Ay, but whereabouts?  
MEPHIST. Within the bowels of these elements,  
Where we are tortur'd and remain for ever:  
Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscrib'd  
In one self place; for where we are is hell,  
And where hell is, there must we ever be:  
And, to conclude, *when all the world dissolves*,  
And every creature shall be purified,  
All places shall be hell that are not heaven. (2.1.119–129, emphasis added)

---

8 Interestingly, Shakespeare uses the same idea in *The Tempest*: "And, like the baseless fabric of this vision, / The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces, / The solemn temples, the great globe itself, / Ye all which it inherit, shall *dissolve* / And, like this insubstantial pageant faded, / Leave not a rack behind" (4.1.151–154).



Bevington and Rasmussen gloss, “Mephistopheles’ description draws on 2 Peter iii.10–11: ‘the elements shall melt with heat . . . all these things must be dissolved;’ and Daniel xii.9–10: ‘. . . till the end of time. Many shall be purified, made white, and tried’” (144). This nicely dovetails with a sermon by John Donne from 1630, *Death’s Duel*, in which he writes about his own death.<sup>9</sup> Donne proclaims that, until Christ’s second coming, no man is exempt from the rule that one’s flesh is to see corruption, and experience dissolution of body and soul. At that moment, though, we shall see a mystery, he ensures us, when “we shall all be changed in an instant, we shall have a dissolution, and in the same instant a reintegration, a recompacting of body and soul, and that shall be truly a death and truly a resurrection, but no sleeping in corruption” (Donne 406). Faustus is not to survive until then; therefore, he can only be one of us who “die now and sleep in the state of the dead;” therefore, “we must all pass this posthume death, this death after death, nay, this death after burial, this *dissolution after dissolution*, this death of corruption and putrefaction, of vermiculation and incineration, of dissolution and dispersion in and from the grave . . .” (Donne 408, emphasis added).

Marlowe, I argue, is perhaps presenting in Mephistopheles’ “when all the world dissolves, / And every creature shall be purified, / All places shall be hell that are not heaven,” the image of *dissolution after dissolution*, which Faustus cannot skip, although he wishes to experience such death and resurrection, a reintegration (Donne’s *reintegration*) of body and soul, but just like Macbeth, he cannot “jump the life to come.” *Dissolution*, *solution*, *absolve*, *resolute*, and many other words stem from the IE \**lū-* or \**leu-* – “to detach, set free” (Partridge 1859).<sup>10</sup> Does Faustus’s wish to be transformed into small waterdrops and to be lost in the sea mean that he hopes for *absolution* (from sin), *release or detachment* from Satan? Will his *solvency* (also from \**leu*) or fluidity

9 Previously Donne expounded: “And if no other deliverance conduce more to his glory and my good, yet he hath the keys of death, and he can let me out at that door, that is, deliver me from the manifold deaths of this world, the omni die, and the tota die, the every day’s death and every hour’s death, by that one death, the final dissolution of body and soul, the end of all. But then is that the end of all? Is that dissolution of body and soul the last death that the body shall suffer (for of spiritual death we speak not now). It is not, though this be exitus à morte: it is introitus in mortem; though it be an issue from manifold deaths of this world, yet it is an entrance into the death of corruption and putrefaction, and vermiculation, and incineration, and dispersion in and from the grave, in which every dead man dies over again. It was a prerogative peculiar to Christ, not to die this death, not to see corruption” (Donne 406).

10 Other words stemming from the same root include *solve*, *solvable*, *solvate*, *solvency*, *solvent* (adj, hence n)

save him, or will it prove fatal? Would he or his sin (or both) be cleared, filtered, liquidated, liquefied, or melted (perhaps recalling Icarus's wings once again)? Is it death that is being described here or a new life to come? Would the problem be *solved* with this new *solution* (Faustus merging with water), or would that mean that he wishes to be left, abandoned, liquidated, and therefore, annihilated? Would the case be thereby closed, or would it be the beginning of another alliance, this time not with Satan but with God?

We cannot be entirely sure of the answers to these vexing questions, but perhaps it is worth stopping here to recall Ovid's metamorphosed characters, who keep their human mind and soul. These characters continue suffering on the basis that both authors seem to experience a gap between mind and body, therefore, making it possible to postulate that, although the body can change—either gradually decay or radically metamorphose—the mind does not transform substantially.

Mythological references abound in Marlowe's play; let me now recall only two characters who metamorphose in Ovid as well, Semele and Arethusa:

Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter  
 When he appeared to hapless Semele,  
 More lovely than the monarch of the sky  
 In wanton Arethusa's azured arms . . . (5.1.106–109)

Bevington and Rasmussen note that “Semele urged her lover, Zeus or Jupiter to appear to her in his full splendour as a god. When he did so, she was consumed by lightning, thereby becoming (for some Renaissance mythographers at least) the emblem of presumptuousness punished by divine fury” (191). As we can see in Ovid (iii.316–396), Juno gulls the credulous Semele not unlike how Mephistopheles gulls Faustus in Marlowe's play, the “poore sielie simple soule” that he was;<sup>11</sup> as the scholar also presumptuously believed that he can play god or that he can be God's or Satan's equal, and as such he can be master of Mephistopheles. As a consequence, he will finally be consumed by everlasting

---

and soluble, solute (adj, hence n), *solution*: cf the cpds *absolve*, absolvent, and absolute (whence absolutism, absolutist), absolution—dissoluble, *dissolute*, dissolution, *dissolve*, dissolvable, dissolvent—insoluble, insolubility, insolvent (whence insolvency)—irresoluble, irresolute, irresolution—resolute, resolution, resolve (v, with pa resolved; hence also n), resolvent (Partridge 1858).

11 “And she poore sielie simple soule immediately on this / Requested Jove to graunt a boone the which she did not name” (Ovid: Bk. III.360, trans. Golding).

## FROM “RESOLUTE” TO “DISSOLVED”

fire in hell, comparable to the lightning that struck Semele—despite his penultimate utterance, in which Faustus pledges to burn his books instead, a burn for a burn. However, this conventional form of abjuring magic comes manifestly too late (cf. Bevington 197).

It is easy to see why Arethusa is mentioned next by Marlowe. “The nymph fled from the river god Alpheus, whose lust she had awakened by bathing in his stream, and was transformed by Artemis into a fountain, adding that the story was sometimes allegorised into the soul’s pursuit of truth” (Bevington 191). As Arethusa’s case proves in Ovid,<sup>12</sup> there’s no escape from God’s love; and as Faustus would later learn, there is no escape from his wrath either: Arethusa would be taken by Alpheus whether or not she be transformed into waterdrops and by analogy we could argue that Faustus would not be much better off either should he be turned into waterdrops. “Every metamorphosis,” concludes W. C. Carroll, “is partly a loss,” a version of death; “the ultimate change that awaits us all,” and thus metamorphosis can be used as a synonym for death (26). It is as foolish to ask for dissolution into waterdrops in a Christian framework as to wish for transformation into a non-human shape in an Ovidian metamorphic world.

So, from believing that Hell is a fable and the conviction that the joys of Heaven are not to be hoped for, cf.

What, is great Mephistopheles so passionate  
For being deprived of the joys of heaven?  
Learn thou of Faustus manly fortitude,  
And scorn those joys thou never shalt possess. (1.3.85–88)

he eventually arrives at the exact opposite: the poignant certainty of hell and the heart-felt frustration of being deprived of the joys of heaven,

And what wonders I have done, all Germany can witness, yea, all the world, for  
which Faustus hath lost both Germany and the world, yea, heaven itself—heaven,  
the seat of God, the throne of the blessed, the kingdom of joy—and must remain  
in hell for ever. Hell, ah, hell for ever! Sweet friends, what shall become of Faustus,  
being in hell for ever? (5.2.21–26)

---

12 “A chill colde sweat my sieged limmes opprest, and downe apace / From all my bodie steaming drops

He, however, never questions the terms of the deal, “[f]or vain pleasure of four-and-twenty years hath Faustus lost eternal joy and felicity” (5.2.39–41). In the end, one of his final lines also reiterates the anguish of deprivation, “[n]o, Faustus, curse thyself. Curse Lucifer, / That hath deprived thee of the joys of heaven” (5.2.114–115).

Faustus’s oscillation as to what to believe in, heaven or hell, can also be seen to be drawn in the coordinates of belief and disbelief; the play-text thus opens up a range of perspectives on scepticism as well. The word *belief*, however, is never used, neither is *disbelief* or *disbelieve*. *Believe* is, but it only appears three times, in much the same context, always used by the Duke and Duchess of Vanholt, e.g. in the Duke’s “[b]elieve me, Master Doctor, this merriment hath much pleased me” (4.2.1–2). Yet the play, at least on one level, is about this: about the trajectory from the initial disbelief of hell to the conviction that only Hell exists, or as Helen Gardner puts it, “from doubt of the existence of hell to the belief in the reality of nothing else” (104).

The question, however, is if this belief is any better than the initial doubt. The word *belief* ultimately seems to originate from the PIE *\*leubh-*, whose English meaning is “to care for, love” (Pokorny 1908). According to Pokorny, OE *leaf* originates from this PIE root and its derivatives include OE *liefan*, *ä-liefan* “allow,” and *geliefan* “believe” (1908).

Faustus deliberates before signing the pact with his own blood:

Now, Faustus, must thou needs be damned,  
 And canst thou not be saved.  
 What boots it then to think of God or heaven?  
 Away with such vain fancies and despair!  
 Despair in God, and trust in Beelzebub.  
 Now go not backward. No, Faustus, be resolute.  
 Why waverest 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.  
 The god thou servest is thine own appetite,  
 Wherein is fixed the love of Beelzebub.

---

did fall of watrie hew. / Which way so ere I stird my foote the place was like a stew. / The deaw ran trickling from my haire. In halfe the while I then / Was turnde to water, that I now have tolde the tale agen. / His loved waters Alpey knew, and putting off the shape / Of man the which he tooke before bicause I should not scape, / Returned to his proper shape of water by and by / Of purpose for to joyne with me and have my companie” (v.716–789).

## FROM “RESOLUTE” TO “DISSOLVED”

To him I'll build an altar and a church,  
And offer lukewarm blood of new-born babes. (2.1.1–14)

So, if God does not love him, he will love, i.e. believe (in) Beelzebub instead. The phraseology of the above passage in the play-text is most interesting: the god to be served is inside oneself, where there is also the love of Beelzebub fixed. This emphasis on a fixed place is revealing: something permanent should be found in an ever-changing soul, best represented by its own changing appetite, which now craves this, then something else, etc. This fixity is further emphasised by the image of building an altar and a church, and the blasphemy is completed with the satanic black mass offer of the blood of new-born babes.

Ironically, however, the new-born babe can be seen to be Faustus himself: newly born in Satan; he is just about to offer his own blood to Lucifer. This sacrifice of Faustus taking his own blood, therefore, metaphorically suggests the idea of suicide. *Lukewarm* likewise anticipates his own congealing blood, obliquely confirming that blood is a liquid that normally keeps flowing, and thus it is also contrasted to the permanent settlement of Beelzebub in the church that Faustus promises to build.

Belief and disbelief thus seem to go hand in hand, but the question is why the belief in something automatically triggers the disbelief of its opposite. Why not doubt both? Why does Faustus end up accepting the reality of hell and give up on the chance to get to heaven?

At the beginning of act 2, scene 1, Faustus speaks to himself: confirmed that he is damned and cannot be saved, he warns himself against thinking about God and heaven, calling them vain fancies and despair. Then he continues:

Despair in God and trust in Beelzebub.  
Now go not backward. No, Faustus, be resolute.  
Why waverest thou? O, something soundeth in mine ears:  
'Abjure this magic, turn to God again.' (2.1.5–8)

Despair is another one of the key-words of the play, a theme on which Helen Gardner has beautifully elaborated. Let me briefly recall the etymology of the word here: *de* – “without” and *sperare* “to hope.” So, when Faustus exclaims, “[d]espair in God, and trust in Beelzebub,” he commands himself to give up hope in God and believe (in) Satan instead. Why one must lead to the other is not entirely clear, though: for practical reasons, for material gain, for dramaturgical/theatrical purposes, it is clear;

but why does losing ground on one side necessarily lead to fixing our position on the other extreme?

Maybe the real question is not why this is the case, but what it tells about the world of Faustus, and by extension, Christianity itself. In such a world, you must choose sides, as remaining neutral is not an option. For someone full of doubt and disbelief, however, it might seem tempting to try to overcome this dichotomous way of thinking, defying set norms and trying the utmost this kind of logic can perform.

Taking this logic to its extreme, however, seems to prove self-defeating: Faustus decides to sign the pact with Lucifer out of fear of losing his trust in Beelzebub. It is as if he forces himself to do the more daring thing to avoid a lesser problem: his emerging doubts. When you give up or lose hope, it means that you no longer have faith in something, but can you *order* yourself to lose hope as implied by Faustus's imperative, "[d]espair in God and trust in Beelzebub?"

*Doubts* (from PIE root *\*dwo* – “two”) are exactly what he does *not* need, what he wants to get rid of forever; and since God has never offered such firm ground for him as God never appeared to him, never reassured him, never answered his questions, he has only one chance to find this solid basis he so sorely requires: Lucifer. And for this new fixed position to gain he would give anything, no matter the price.

The problem with this is that by doing so, he marries himself “to the spirit of change and dissolution” (cf. McAlindon 130). McAlindon could be right again: the first time Faustus manages to conjure Mephistopheles, he appears too ugly to attend on him, so as a probable anti-Catholic joke, he charges the devil to return as an old Franciscan friar. This shapeshifting, Russell argues, identifies the spirit with the traditional Devil (61); therefore, if Faustus wants to change, he inevitably needs to follow Lucifer. Note that Faustus first refers to Beelzebub, then conjures Mephistopheles, who leads him to Lucifer; i.e. even the representatives of Evil change.

In the play-text, there is further confusion as to who is Mephistopheles' lord, Lucifer or Beelzebub, which may be owing to the fact that in the Bible (Matt xii.24–28, Mark iii.22–26, Luke xi.15–20) the names *Satan*, *Lucifer* and *Beelzebub* are all used for the chief devils (Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus* 129). Bevington and Rasmussen also refer to Robert West, who claims that demonology generally ranks devils when they are tempting and overthrowing souls but dissolves such distinctions when the soul is taken off to damnation (129).<sup>13</sup>

13 Russell also points out that Mephistopheles' name, which appears first in the 1587 Faustbook, seems to be “a brand new coinage,” the chief elements being Greek *me-*, “not;” *phos*, *photos*, “light;”

The unholy trinity of Satan, Lucifer, and Beelzebub, however, is very different in nature from the Holy One, as the three-person God and the three personifications of Evil symbolise two very different notions: God stands for constancy and permanence, whereas Satan represents change, division and dissolution.<sup>14</sup>

So, if Faustus despairs—the exact reason is very ambiguous: is it God’s power in general or God’s power to forgive Faustus’s sin that he cannot trust?—he has no hope for constancy either. His predisposition to change, therefore, necessarily pushes him towards Satan.

When he starts to disbelieve God, he begins to *un-love* him.<sup>15</sup> Belief and disbelief are not absolute antonyms: disbelief does not simply mean the lack of belief. Like resolute meaning both determined, solid and fixed *and* dissolute, dissolved, broken into its parts; belief and disbelief are dialectically mutual and often oscillating points of view even within the soul of one man, every man, Everyman, or Faustus. He *un-loves God, loves apart, loves another*.

In the final estimation, however, belief seems to win albeit only by subverting morality play anticipations: convinced that he has forfeited his salvation once and for all, he finally overcomes his doubts and accepts his eternal stay (fixity) in hell. This, however, is only possible for him by continuing to disbelieve in the *power* of heaven. So, although in the final hour he does acknowledge (believe in) the existence of both heaven and hell, he only trusts in the power of the latter, thereby relativizing God’s omnipotence, postulating that His redemptive power is limited.

Yet, belief seems to be stronger in another and more general sense as well: disbelieving might very well mean that you do believe, just in something else, in another

---

*philos*, “lover,” probably an “ironic parody of Lucifer, ‘lightbearer’” (61). That the servant should be parodying his master is yet another sign that Satan is divided against Satan.

14 As we read in *The Geneva Bible*, “[w]hen was brought to him one possessed with a devil, both blind, and dumb, and he healed him, so that he which was blind and dumb, both spake and saw. And all the people were amazed, and said, Is not this that son of David? But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, This man casteth the devils no otherwise out but through *Beelzebub the prince of devils*. But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them, *Every kingdom divided against itself, shall be brought to naught, and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand. So if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself; how shall then his kingdom endure?*” (Matt 12.22–26, emphasis added).

15 The word *disbelief* is a Latin-Germanic mixture; the prefix originating from PIE *\*dis* – “apart, asunder, in two” (Partridge, 3904). Partridge adds that “the general meaning is ‘separation,’ as in dismiss; hence, deprivation, reversal, negation . . .” then comments that “the Greek *dis* means twice, doubly, double” (3904), and Pokorny calls *duis* – “twice” and *duis* – “divided, asunder” identical in numerous old languages (788).

(direction). If you are sceptical, you likewise do *believe* in or entertain the possibility of simultaneous truths. In this manner, I hope that at least some of the readers of this paper will allow for the possibility of a truth or some truth in what has been presented above.

## WORKS CITED

- Carroll, W. C. *The Metamorphoses of Shakespearean Comedy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- Donne, John. "Death's Duel." *The Major Works: Including Songs and Sonnets and sermons*. Ed. Carey, John. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 401–417.
- Dumesnil, Gardin, J. B. *Latin synonyms, with their different significations and examples taken from the best Latin authors*. Trans. J. M. Gosset. London: Taylor and Co., 1809.
- Gardner, Helen. *A Reading of Paradise Lost*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965.
- The Geneva Bible*. 1599. Bible Gateway. Web. 10 July 2017.
- Lucan. *The Civil War. Books I-X*. Eds. Page, T. E., et al. London: Heinemann, 1962.
- Marlowe, Christopher. *Doctor Faustus. A- and B-texts (1604, 1616)*. Eds. Bevington, David, and Eric Rasmussen. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995.
- . *Doctor Faustus and Other Plays*. Eds. Bevington, David, and Eric Rasmussen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- . *The Complete Plays*. Eds. Romany, Frank, and Robert Lindsey. London: Penguin, 2003.
- . *The Complete Poems and Translations*. Ed. Orgel, Stephen. London: Penguin Books, 2007.
- McAlindon, Thomas. *English Renaissance Tragedy*. London: MacMillan, 1986.
- Middle English Dictionary, Part 4*. Ed. Kurath, Hans. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1998.
- Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Trans. Arthur Golding. 1567. In *Shakespeare's Ovid Being Arthur Golding's Translation of the Metamorphoses*. Ed. Rouse, W. H. D. London: The De La More Press, 1904.
- . *Amores*. Trans. Grant Showerman. *Loeb Classical Library*. n. d. Web. 19 Feb 2019.
- Partridge, Eric. *Origins. A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*. London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2006. e-book.
- Pinciss, Gerald M., and Roger Lockyer. *Shakespeare's World: Background Readings in the English Renaissance*. London: Continuum, 1989.



## FROM “RESOLUTE” TO “DISSOLVED”

- The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Pokorny, Julius. *An Etymological Dictionary of the Proto-Indo-European Language. A Revised Edition of Pokorny's Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Indo-European Language Revival Association, 2007, Web. 19 Feb 2019.
- Roche, Paul. “Righting the Reader: Conflagration and Civil War In Lucan’s *De Bello Civili*.” *Scholia: Studies in Classical Antiquity* 14 (2005): 52–71.
- Russell, Jeffrey Burton. *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World*. Ithaca, USA: Cornell University Press, 1986.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Ed. Craik, T. W. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- . *The Tempest*. Ed. Orgel, Stephen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

### CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Márta Hargitai is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at ELTE, Budapest. She holds a PhD in Early Modern English literature. She has a major academic interest in Renaissance drama, philosophy and theology, as well as in film adaptations and the methodology of teaching/using literature in the secondary classroom. Her publications include articles on the notion of time and space in *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*, the special affinities of Hitchcock’s films with Shakespearean theatre and dramaturgy, and most recently on masters or servants in *Doctor Faustus* and *Macbeth*, in *Things New and Old: Essays on the Medieval Period and the Renaissance*, published by Cambridge Scholars.