

Tim de Graaf

S1043455

Dr.mr. L.E.M. Fikkers

Literature 2

21 March 2017

Dr. Faustus and the power relationship between Mephistophilis and Faustus

Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, commonly referred to simply as *Doctor Faustus*, is a tragic play about a man with a great lust for power, which ultimately leads to his downfall. The protagonist, Faustus, is willing to go as far as to sell his soul to the devil in return for control over a demon. Indeed, he does so, and becomes the master of the demon Mephistophilis, hereby obtaining the power to, amongst others: Summon dead persons, become invisible, and grasp forbidden knowledge. One might argue that Faustus, who wants to reign supreme, has actually bound himself, and is less free than he was before. That his lust for power has blinded him and made him an easy victim for Mephistophilis to abuse, whose superior master is, of course, Satan. The contract that he signed is actually being broken by Mephistophilis, as Mephistophilis does not obey his every command. Furthermore; Mephistophilis stops him whenever he tries to repent, showing that Mephistophilis holds power over Faustus. Therefore Faustus is not free, but trapped by his contract with the devil. In the master-servant power relationship between Mephistophilis and Faustus; Mephistophilis is the one who is in control.

Faustus' does not possess the qualities to be a good master. He shows a great

desire for power and is willing to do everything for it. In the first scene, before summoning Mephistophilis, he openly states his desire for power:

O what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honor, of omnipotence
Is promised to the studious artisan!
All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command: emperors and kings (Scene 1. ll. 53-57)

Faustus is so motivated by his desire for power that he refuses to acknowledge the obvious. He refuses to accept the existence of hell even when he is confronted by the supernatural being of a demon; Mephistophilis, which should be sufficient proof for the existence of hell. Before signing the contract with Satan the reader is informed of Faustus' opinion on hell:

This word damnation terrifies not him,
For he confounds hell in Elysium:
His ghost be with the old philosophers. (Scene 3. ll. 58-60)

This is a great example of Faustus' ignorance and stubbornness. While he professes this opinion he is interrogating Mephistophilis, however, the questions he asks are irrelevant and the answers to them are common knowledge, it seems he is challenging Mephistophilis. "Tell me, what is that Lucifer thy lord?" (Scene 3. ll. 62). "Was not that Lucifer an angel once?" (Scene 3. ll. 64). "Where are you damned?" (Scene 3. ll. 73). Faustus is quite demanding in this interrogation. This interrogation shows that Faustus is a childish person and does not possess the qualities to be a good master.

The contract Faustus signed with the devil is being broken by Mephistophilis, because he does not obey Faustus every command, thus; Mephistophilis' powers and therefore also Faustus' powers are limited because Mephistophilis has to obey his superior master Satan. There are some commands that Mephistophilis is not able to

obey. The first thing Faustus asks for is a wife. Mephistophilis is not able to produce a wife, because marriage is holy. "How a wife? I prithee Faustus, talk not of a wife." (Scene 5. ll. 141). Again, this signifies, that Faustus is not as omnipotent as he wishes to be through signing the contract, and that his powers are limited. When Mephistophilis does summon a woman for Faustus, this is a devil dressed like a woman. Again, Faustus does not get what he wants. Mephistophilis did not inform Faustus of these restrictions to his abilities before Faustus signed the contract. With a proper contract; the one signing the contract should be informed of all the specificities, and these specificities should be included in the contract. But Mephistophilis did not inform Faustus, which implies that he wanted Faustus to sign the contract and make it seem as favourable as he could. Later on, Faustus asks another question which shows the limits of Mephistophilis as a servant and thereby also the limits of Faustus' powers. He asks: "Well, I am answered. Tell me who made the world? / Mephistophilis: I will not." (Scene 5. ll. 240-241). What the contract really states about Mephistophilis' obedience is the following: "Thirdly, that Mephistophilis shall do for him, and bring him whatsoever." (Scene 5. ll. 99-100). He does not bring him or do for him whatsoever and thus breaks the contract. Faustus seems to be aware of this breach of the conditions of the contract: "Villain, have I not bound thee to tell me anything?" (Scene 5. ll. 244). However he does not make a point out of it, which is his right to do. Mephistophilis just answers calmly: "Ay that is not against our kingdom; but this is." (Scene 5. ll. 245). The contract did not say anything about limitations. Mephistophilis has outsmarted Faustus in this way. He is the one in control.

Mephistophilis holds power over his master's decision making, this is evident whenever Faustus tries to turn back to God. The first instance of this is in scene 5 after

Mephistophilis has given him a book with the information of all plants, herbs and trees that grow upon the earth. Faustus suddenly begins to think about redemption:

When I behold on the heavens, then I repent,
And curse thee, wicked Mephistophilis,
Because thou hast deprived me of those joys. (Scene 5. ll. 177-179)

Mephistophilis immediately responds by trying to draw his attention away from heaven. Telling him that heaven is not so great at all, and that man is greater.

Why Faustus,
Think'st thou that heaven is such a glorious thing?
I tell thee 'tis not half so fair as thou,
Or any man that breathes on earth. (Scene 5. ll. 180-183)

Although Mephistophilis is the servant of Faustus, he does not act like one. He does not act submissive but rather dominant by influencing Faustus like this. In the same scene Faustus begins to think about redemption again, when Mephistophilis has denied to answer the question of who is the creator. Mephistophilis immediately tries to aim his attention back to the devil. "Think thou on hell, Faustus, for thou art damned." (Scene 5. ll. 246). Faustus then dismisses Mephistophilis and there appear a good angel and an evil angel, representing Faustus' inner conflict. Faustus cries out to Christ: "Ah Christ my Savior! seek to save / Distressed Faustus' soul." (Scene 5. ll. 256-257). But Lucifer appears together with Beelzebub and Mephistophilis. Lucifer accosts Faustus and they have a chat wherein Lucifer turns Faustus attention away from God. Lucifer succeeds in doing so, he gives Faustus a show of the seven deadly sins, and gives Faustus a book that he can use to transform himself in any shape. Faustus has forgotten all about his damnation. Instead he thanks the devil. "Great thanks, mighty Lucifer; this will I keep as chary as my life." (Scene 5. ll. 337-338). Again he is being misled and controlled. Faustus is clearly not as omnipotent and in control as he wishes

to be. In scene 12 there is another example of Faustus being controlled by Mephistophilis. It happens after an old man enters the play and talks with Faustus about repenting. The old man leaves for Faustus to ponder his sins but then Mephistophilis appears and he is very aggressive in his persuading of Faustus.

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?

MEPHASTOPHILIS: Thou traitor, Faustus: I arrest thy soul
For disobedience to my sovereign lord.
Revolt, or I'll piecemeal tear thy flesh.

FAUSTUS: Sweet Mephistophilis, entreat thy lord
To pardon my unjust presumption;
And with my blood again I will confirm
My former vow I made to Lucifer. (Scene 12. ll. 53-63)

The language Mephistophilis uses is clearly not the language of an obedient servant; his language is aggressive: He threatens to tear his master to pieces. It is clear that Mephistophilis' loyalty is with Lucifer and not with Faustus. Faustus is just a lesser master and Mephistophilis only obeys him in order for Lucifer to obtain his soul.

Faustus longing for power is answered, he wants to obtain power, and he does. He signs a contract with Satan and gets control over the demon Mephistophilis. Faustus does not make a very good master; he childishly interrogates Mephistophilis and asks him questions of which the answers are common knowledge. He is blinded by his desire for power and refuses to acknowledge the existence of hell, even when he is faced by the prove of it; a living demon. According to his contract this demon shall do for him whatsoever and fetch him whatsoever. It turns out this demon does obey his orders but with constraints. Mephistophilis is not able to fetch Faustus a wife, and

when he gets a woman; it is a demon dressed as a woman. Mephistophilis is not able to tell him who made the world. These constraints were not included in the contract like they should have been. Mephistophilis has intentionally made the contract seem more favourable than it is; Mephistophilis is in control. Whenever Faustus thinks about repenting, Mephistophilis diverts his attention, or even threatens his master. He is controlling his master in this way and serving his superior master; Lucifer, who wants to have Faustus' soul. In the master-servant power relationship between Mephistophilis and Faustus: Mephistophilis is the one who is in control.

Works Cited

Marlowe, Christopher. *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt. 9th ed., Vol. B. New York: Norton, 2012. pp. 1128—2012.