

THE EMPORIA STATE

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Una M. Ellis-Fermor to W. W. Greg on
"The Damnation of Faustus":
An Unpublished Letter

by

Charles E. Walton*

A few years ago, it was my good fortune to come into possession of a letter written by Professor Una M. Ellis-Fermor to Professor W. W. Greg on the occasion of the latter's brilliant monograph on Marlowe's *Faustus*.¹ At the time of her death in 1958, Professor Hardin Craig paid tribute to her as a scholar who ". . . possessed the rare ability to form sound generalizations in the area of aesthetic feeling and to use these as bases for the higher levels of abstraction."² Encouraged by many of my associates in Renaissance studies to publish this document, I offer it in memory of a gentle, renowned scholar whose contributions to our knowledge of Elizabethan drama are lasting achievements.

Sept. 12.

12 Abbey Road Mans.

1946.

NW 8.

Dear Walter,

I ought to have written long ago to thank you for your article on *The Damnation of Faustus*, but I wanted to wait until I had thought it out, and I hoped you would forgive me if I did that.

You have made a point I never thought of—perhaps that I hadn't the necessary scholarship to think of. At least, as far as 'demoniality' is concerned, I wasn't a good enough medievalist to get the technical sense. The significance of Marlowe's use of 'spirit' and the necessary inferences from that, I was in a position to think of for myself—but the blunt fact is that I just didn't.

Not only have you driven home firmly those two points, that have been overlooked in a shocking way by "those who profess and call themselves" scholars, but you have done something else that does not always go with that—let down a shaft of light into the essential obscurity of the plot. For the theme of the play (as distinguished from the story or subject) remains a piece of Elizabethan parochialism until one can find something in Faustus's conduct which is *sin* in some universal and enduring sense. And whatever Marlowe was, he was not parochial in philosophy.

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¹W. W. Greg, "The Damnation of Faustus," *MLR*, XLI (1946), 97-107.

²Hardin Craig, "Una M. Ellis-Fermor (1894-1958)," *The Shakespeare Newsletter*, VIII:3 (May, 1958), 19.

And as one batters at that point—and I have been doing so since I was an undergraduate—one's dissatisfaction resolves itself into the question, 'After all, what *did* Faustus *do*? At what point does he commit something that is a sin for his age and also for all time? Something comparable, in this way, with the sins of Agamemnon and of Macbeth?' That it is comparable is guaranteed by the appalling finality of the tragic effect. Marlowe felt that, with all his faculties, as an artist and as a man, and he communicates it to every sympathetic reader to this very day.

Very well, then. Given high tragedy, there cannot be childish superstition as the main-spring. Therefore the crucial sin must *mean* something (now and always, as well as for Elizabethan theologians) and my effort has been to find that something. I had practically resolved upon the practice of magic itself. (For I studied modern and Elizabethan magic a little to try to get to the bottom of it.) For the practice of magic is a 'ghostly' sin. It attempts to put man in God's place, and that, according to the Catholic Church to this very day, is the archetype of all sin—perfectly logical, when one considers it.

Now your argument, as I see it, not only clinches that, but defines it better. It shows Faustus committing the ultimate blasphemy, something which is a type (a symbol, if we must) of all spiritual sin, intelligible in terms of Elizabethan theology in the first place, but also (which was what we needed) in terms of man's knowledge of the life of the spirit at all times. It is not so familiar an outward action as Agamemnon's sin against natural piety in the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, but it is, equally with that, the outward manifestation of an inward state. Perhaps one should also admit that Faustus's sin is one degree further removed from universal and common experience in that it is manifested in terms of so special a social code as to need reading today partly as symbolism. But the important thing is that, when we have so read it, it re-appears as sin in terms also of our reading of life.

This point is essential to me. I back my sense of tragedy and of poetry and know that *Faustus* is one of the world's great tragedies. And that would be impossible with any weakness in the logic of the plot. And all my effort has been to define and isolate that spring which made the logical and theological argument of the play as inevitable as the emotion is overwhelming.

Forgive me for being so lengthy, but I feel excited by an interpretation which seems to put into my hand the means of making this reconciliation.

There are all sorts of minor points I would like to take up, but I must not keep you any longer.

With many thanks for so acute and illuminating an analysis of a formidable problem—and with all good wishes.

Very sincerely yours,
Una Ellis-Fermor