

Marlowe and Prayer: The Forgotten Sources of the Mighty Line

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“Contrition, prayer, repentance – what of these?”² Faustus asks the Good and Bad Angels and receives the answer from the Good Angel that “they are the means to bring [him] unto heaven” (II.i.17). The answer stresses the instrumentality, or the effectiveness of “prayer” as a means to ensure salvation in a way that suggests Roman Catholicism more than the Calvinist doctrines that dominated the Cambridge of Marlowe’s years at Corpus Christi in the early and mid-1580s.³ In point of fact, the act of praying was itself a battleground in early modern English society, and individuals “saw themselves in church too as actors and audience to each others’ prayers; so much that Protestant and Catholic polemicists alike accused the other side of turning churchgoing into mere theatre.”⁴ There are however two kinds of prayer in the play: the one referred to above by the Good Angel is praying *in bono*, that is, devoutly and unselfishly, whereas the one most in evidence in *Doctor Faustus* is praying *in malo*, being a vehicle of selfishness or for show, as when Mephostophilis explains that

the shortest cut for conjuring

Is stoutly to abjure all godliness

And pray devoutly to the prince of hell. (1.3.49-51)

or, when the friars in the second scene at Rome pray “with bell, book and candle” (3.3.94) to exorcise the sacrilegious intruder:

¹ {This article was still a work in progress when Professor Roy T. Eriksen passed away in April 2019. Eriksen was not able to complete his revisions, but we have deemed it fit that the article be published here, in a form which is unfinished but edited for clarity by the editorial team and two peer reviewers. As one of the reviewers said, the article is “learned, thoughtful and rich in its grasp of theological contexts”, and, “despite the extensive attention to aspects of religion in Marlowe’s oeuvre, the aspect of prayer has received relatively little critical treatment, and hence the article is a welcome contribution to the field.” For these reasons, and because we think Roy would have wished it, we publish the article in this form. Editorial revisions are light; occasional notes, clarifications and additions appear in curly brackets.}

² Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus. A- and B-texts (1604, 1616)*, eds. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993, II.i.16.

³ For the contention surrounding Baro, see H.C. Porter, *Reformation and Reaction in Tudor Cambridge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958. For details of Baro’s life see *DNB* I.1185-87.

⁴ Joseph Sterrett, *Unheard Prayer. Religious Toleration in Shakespeare’s Drama*, Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2012, ii.

First Friar. Come, brethren, let's about our business with good devotion.

(The Friars chant)

Cursed be he that stole his Holiness' meat from the table.

Maledicat dominus.

Cursed be he that took his Holiness a blow on the face.

Maledicat dominus.

Cursed be he that struck Friar Sandelo a blow on the pate.

Maledicat dominus.

Cursed be he that disturbeth our holy dirge.

Maledicat dominus.

Cursed be he that took away his Holiness' wine.

Maledicat dominus. (94-105)

The latter ritualised prayer is undoubtedly presented as a case of collective “popish” prayer that Calvinists would consider typical of the theatricality and lack of sincerity that they associated with Catholic prayer, an impression here strengthened by the repetition of a Latin refrain – an example of what Reginald Scot termed rhymed “charmes” used by “[w]itchmongers, papists and poets.”⁵

Sincerity in prayer, then, was a central issue in religious practice. This article argues that Marlowe's persuasive dramatic poetry, the admired but also ridiculed “mighty line,” is closely related to Marlowe's theological training in general and to prayer in particular. The conventions of sincere prayer alluded to in the Good Angel's line to Faustus cited above (II.i.16) seem deliberately to be pitted against the friars' traditional or “Catholic,” prayer-like incantation to expell him.

Marlowe's years in Cambridge coincided with the very height of theological debates on the topics of grace and predestination that raged between the vociferous and radical Calvinist faction and Peter Baro, the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity (1574-96).⁶ Porter points out that Marlowe “went up to Corpus in 1580, two years after William Perkins entered Christ's.”⁷ In 1596, after a long and tenacious campaign

⁵ From Scot's *The Discovery of Witchcraft*, London: 1586, Chapter 4 as cited by Sterret, *Unheard Prayer. Religious Toleration in Shakespeare's Drama*, xxii.

⁶ Porter, *Reformation and Reaction in Tudor Cambridge*, 376-90.

⁷ Porter, *Reformation and Reaction*, 278

against Baro and his supporters, who stressed the possibility and reality of obtaining divine grace, the aggressive champions of the doctrine of election in a rear-guard action managed to drive Baro from his chair in the university by blocking his re-election, after the liberally minded theologian had defended his view on grace publicly in Great St. Mary's.⁸ The former Lady Margaret Professor left for safe haven in the more moderate theological milieu in London, where he died in 1599 and was given a grand burial.⁹ The struggle produced numerous casualties and destroyed many careers but also produced a lasting memory in Marlowe's remarkably successful dramatisation of an early, but no longer extant edition of *The Historie of the Damnable Life, and Deserued Death of Iohn Faustus*, commonly referred to as *The English Faust Book*.¹⁰ The play was most probably written in 1588,¹¹ the very year that Baro's conservative but controversial ideas on grace appeared in English version.¹² The tragedy dramatises the dangers incurred by those who constantly had before their eye Article 17: "Of Predestination and Election" in *The Book of Common Prayer*,¹³ which warns that:

For curious and carnal persons, lacking the Spirit of Christ, to haue continually before their eyes the sentence of God's Predestination, is a most dangerous downfall, whereby the Deuil doth thrust them either into desperation, or into wretchedness of most unclean liuing, no less perilous than desperation.¹⁴

To write a play on such a burning issue – one for which many had died at the stake – was a daring enterprise and quite a balancing act between conformity and transgression, which in cases like that of Peter Baro and William Barrett led to persecution.¹⁵ And the

⁸ Porter, *Reformation and Reaction*, 389.

⁹ Porter, *Reformation and Reaction*, 390.

¹⁰ *The English Faust Book*, ed. J.H. Jones, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. For a brief account of the relationship between the prose source and the play, see David Wootton, Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus with the English Faust Book*, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 2005, xi-xiii.

¹¹ Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean note that "[t]he references to Marlowe make it apparent that *Dr Faustus* was on the stage well before *The Troublesome Reign of King John* was printed in 1591. The question of an early or late date for *Faustus* seems answerable on the early side, i.e. pre-1592 the year of the earliest extant edition of *The English Faust Book* (1592)." *The Queen's Men and their Plays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 156-57.

¹² Roy Eriksen, *The Forme of Faustus Fortunes. A Study of the Tragedie of Doctor Faustus (1616)*, Oslo and Atlantic Highlands N.J.: Solum and Humanities Press, 1987, 31-32.

¹³ Church of England, *The First and Second Prayer Books of King Edward VI*, London: Everyman's Library, 1977 [1549 & 1552].

¹⁴ See Porter's discussion of "Article XVII," 336-43.

¹⁵ Porter, *Reformation and Reaction*, 344-63.

text itself is indeed evidence of Marlowe's remarkable poetic dynamism and a style that embodies prowess and reach of mind.

Russ McDonald in a fine essay on "Marlowe's Style" in *The Cambridge Companion* remarks that Marlowe's "dramatic poetry proceeds from his unique combination of the transgression and the convention."¹⁶ Still, until recently, criticism has emphasised the iconoclast and the uninhibited and subversive thinker Marlowe, thus separating the dramatist from his poetry, rather than on elucidating his use of conventions in the field of style.¹⁷ Although obviously trained in the *studia humanitatis* and the art of arguing in *utramque partem*, Marlowe's goal in his writings appears not to have been to fortify the mind, to secure spiritual tranquility, nor teach his spectators for the greater good of the body politic, all of which were natural ingredients in the programme of the humanists.¹⁸ MacDonald finds Marlowe's so-called "mighty line" to be

marked by irrepressible energy, thrilling sonorities, and dazzling pictures, but it is still a line, an ordering system, and invariable and comforting rhythmic standard that organizes words and ideas.¹⁹

The combination of "irrepressible energy" and the "invariable and comforting" rhythms McDonald finds does not strike me as a particularly helpful description of Marlowe's verse, but MacDonald also lists qualities that we all recognize in it: firm rhythms, exotic vocabulary, the repetitions of sounds and words both within lines and between different texts. What he describes, however, are not features of a particular kind of line, but of what Harry Levin termed "verse paragraphs" or, I would suggest, entire speeches. For in my view, MacDonald underplays another aspect of the mighty line, namely its inherent and necessary placement within larger well-defined units, that is, in carefully designed speeches that function formally like stanzas. The force of the mighty line lies in the collocation of words within the "rooms" of poetry, in the formation of units that

¹⁶ Russ McDonald, "Marlowe and Style," *Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 56 (55-69).

¹⁷ Patrick Cheney attempts to remedy this tendency in "Introduction: Marlowe in the twenty-first century," in *The Cambridge Companion*, 1-23. {See also f.n. 25.}

¹⁸ See e.g. Michael Pincombe, *Elizabethan humanism: literature and learning in the later sixteenth century*, London: Longman, 2001, or the brief account by Alistair Fox, *English Renaissance. Identity and Representation in Elizabethan England*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, 18-37.

¹⁹ McDonald, "Marlowe and Style," 56.

are incantatory or prayer-like in their power to persuade by addition and repetition. In actual fact, such speeches are rhetorically shaped according to the principles of periodicity, what Marlowe himself in *Tamburlaine* refers to as “one poem’s period” – a unit of verse constituted and strung together by a combination of syntactical and rhetorical elements (“the flowers of poetry all combined”). John D. Jump notes in his discussion of the “Nature that framed us of four elements”-speech that in it, “the upward thrust of aspiration is reflected in the very syntax of the sentences.”²⁰ In spite of the dialectic and progressive linearity that naturally inheres in dramatic dialogue, the separate elements in the flow of individual speeches come together in spatially conceived structures with linkage between the beginning, middle, and end. They create motion, or *mozione*, as it were, because by activating our short-term memory by repeating words earlier in the speech, they are “always moving as the restless spheres”, to continue with another line by Marlowe.²¹ Thus these patterns are in every way working against the idea of an “invariable and comforting rhythmic standard.”²² On the contrary, and as explained by Jump, they pull in two directions, remaining “relatively self-sufficient five-foot units, as well as members of ... more complex periodic structures” (vii). This tension contributes to the easily perceived energies and dynamism of Marlowe’s blank verse.

Periodic structure, of course, is a compositional ideal of Classical provenance, first described in the West by Aristotle and his successors in Greece and Rome, such as Demetrius and Cicero. This structure reminds us – in the words of Ethel Seaton— that Marlowe was “a sound classical scholar, using to his advantage his classical reading, both Greek and Latin, as source and poetic inspiration, especially Virgil, Ovid, Lucan, Seneca, and Musaeus.”²³ Recent studies by Patrick Cheney and Georgia E. Brown have addressed this omission in criticism and highlighted Marlowe’s active use of the Classics, his training in Erasmian and Ramist precepts, as well as his possible editorship in seeing his dead friend Thomas Watson’s *Amintae gaudiae* through the press.²⁴

²⁰ *Tamburlaine the Great*, ed. John D. Jump, London: Edward Arnold, 1974, xvi.

²¹ See Eriksen, “‘What Place is This’: Time and Place in Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* (B),” *Renaissance Drama*, XVI (1985), 49–74.

²² McDonald, “Marlowe and Style,” 56.

²³ Ethel Seaton, “Marlowe’s Light Reading,” *Elizabethan and Jacobean Studies Presented to Frank Percy Wilson in honour of his seventieth birthday* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1959), 17–35 (17).

²⁴ Patrick Cheney, *Marlowe’s Counterfeit Profession. Ovid, Spenser, Counter-Nationhood* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1997), 221–58, and Georgia E. Brown, “Marlowe’s Poems and Classicism,” *The Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe*, 106–126.

However, the innovative and understudied aspect of Marlowe’s main contribution to dramatic poetry is not limited to his imitation of classical poets. His tightly knitted verses and speeches depend to no little degree on an equally influential formal template found in the Middle East, in the Hebrew Old Testament and works written in biblical style.²⁵ For the aesthetic model of periodicity²⁶ importantly shares with biblical style – as explained by David R. Howlett – the systematic use of three basic patterns of iteration: “the first and basic pattern is parallelism”, the second “but still basic pattern ... is chiasmus, a statement followed by a restatement in reverse order”, and “the third pattern combines parallelism and chiasmus.”²⁷ Howlett underlines and illustrates in a number of analyses that the combined pattern of parallelism and chiasmus is carefully observed when Hebrew is translated into Greek and Latin, and that practice is of course continued into the vernaculars during the early modern period.²⁸

²⁵ {At the time of his passing, Professor Eriksen was working on incorporating perspectives from other scholars writing on matters related to prayer in the works of Marlow. These included R. M. Cornelius, *Christopher Marlowe’s Use of the Bible* (1971); Paul Kocher, *Christopher Marlowe: A Study of His Thought, Learning and Character* (1962); Dena Goldberg, “Whose God’s on First? Special Providence in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe”, *ELH* 60.3 (1993): 569-587; and John D. Cox, “Stage Prayer in Marlowe and Jonson”, *Comparative Drama* 50.1 (2016): 63-80, which focuses on other examples from *Tamburlaine* and *Faustus* than the current article. Also relevant is David K. Anderson, “The Theater of the Damned: Religion and the Audience in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe”, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 54.1 (2012): 79-109.}

²⁶ See “Latin Paraclausithyra: The Period as an Aesthetic Ideal,” in Roy Eriksen, *The Building in the text, Alberti to Shakespeare and Milton*, University Park, Pa.: Penn State Press, 2001, 25-48.

²⁷ David R. Howlett, *British Books in Biblical Style*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997, 3-5.

²⁸ Howlett draws attention to the repetitions of words and syntax in the Latin rendering of Amos II: 14-16, noting that “Jerome has reproduced both chiasmus and parallelism well.” (6)

et peribit fuga a ueलोce
Et fortis non obtinebit virtutem suam
Et robustus non saluabit animam suam
 Et tenens arcum non stabit
Et ueलोx pedibus suis non saluabitur
 Et ascensor equi non saluabit animam meam
Et robustus corde inter fortes
 Nudus fugiet et die illa dicit Dominus. (Amos II: 14-16; cited from Howlett, p. 6).

Compare The Vulgate text with the version in The Geneva Bible, where much of the above pattern is faithfully preserved:

14 Therefore the flight shal perish fro(m) the swift,
 and the strong shal not strengthen his force,
 nether shal the mightie saue his life.
 15 Nor he that handeth the bowe, shal stand,
 and he that is swift of fote, shal not escape,
 nether shal he that rideth the horse, saue his life.
 16 And he that is of mightie courage amo(n)g the stro(n)g men,
 shal flee away naked in that day, saith the Lord. (II. 14-16; p. 370v).

He explains that because Jews and Greeks believed that, as described in Sapiaientia 11:21, “[c]reation had been a mathematical act,” they favoured compositions “in mathematically determined forms”.²⁹ By choosing the compositional formula of “one poem's period” as the aesthetic template for his speeches, Marlowe combines the fruit of his studies in the pagan Classical tradition with that of the Bible and theological literature written in imitation of the Bible, such as prayers, that are especially noted for their iterative and formulaic nature. This comes particularly well across in the parts of the New Testament where Christ teaches the congregation how to pray, that is, in The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), or in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5.3-10), and in The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6.9-13).³⁰ These are model prayers where Christ actually provides a paradigm for imitation.

In a study of The Sermon of the Mount, Hans Dieter Betz makes the following observation on Matthew's elocutionary artifice of the Pater Noster, one of Christ's model prayers: “In regards to its composition, the Lord's Prayer in Greek is a literary masterpiece. Intentionally concise in the extreme, it has three parts, a pattern that conforms to the usual forms of hymns and prayers.” This tripartite structure consists of an *invocatio* addressed to God, followed by a main section consisting of two sets of three petitions, and concluding with an epilogue.³¹ Formally, then, the prayer displays rhetorical patterning similar to the patterns favoured by Marlowe in his periodic speeches, as I have documented elsewhere.³² It is thus interesting to see that Faustus refers to his conjuring as prayers on two occasions. In his first attempt to conjure he underlines that he has “prayed and sacrificed” (1.3.7) before he draws a magical circle within which “is Jehova's name / Forward and backward anagrammatized (1.3.8-9). Then he can begin his incantation proper, which as will be apparent exhibits some

²⁹ Howlett, *British Books*, 5.

³⁰ Hans Dieter Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, translated by Laurence Welborn. Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1985. To St. Augustine in his *Commentary on Sermon on Mount* (Matthew 4-7) the Sermon provided a model of teaching and praying, as he affirms at the outset. Cf. St. Augustine of Hippo, translated by William Findlay. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 6, edited by Philip Schaff, Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1888.

³¹ Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount. A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3 and Luke 6:20-49)*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, 375. See also his “The Sermon on the Mount. Its Genre and Function,” *Essays on The Sermon on the Mount*, passim.

³² *The Forme of Faustus' Fortunes*, 207-21; 224-26, and “Ars Combinatoria: Marlowe's Humanist Poetics,” in ed. Dominique Goy-Blanquet, 111-26.

words and verbal repetitions that are typical of the first part of Pater Noster, and reveals a certain relationship to it:

Sint mihi di Acherontis propitii!
Valeat numen triplex Jehovae!
Ignei, aerii, aquatici, terrenti, spiritus, salvete!
Orientis princeps Lucifer, Beelzebub,
infernus ardentis monarcha,
et Demogorgon, propitiamus vos,
ut appareat et surgat Mephistophiles.
Quid tu moraris?
Per Jehovam, Gehennam,
et consecratam aquam quam nunc spargo,
Signumque crucis quod nunc facio,
Et per vota nostra, ipse nunc surgat
Nobis dicatus Mephistophiles!³³

If we compare this incantation to the Vulgate Lord's Prayer, we note some similarity of vocabulary (*Valeat numen triplex Jehovae! Ignei, aerii, aquatici, terrenti, spiritus, salvete! versus PATER NOSTER, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum. . . ., sicut in caelo et in terra*):

PATER NOSTER, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum. Adveniat regnum tuum. Fiat voluntas tua, sicut in caelo et in terra. Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie, et dimitte nobis debita nostra sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris. Et ne nos inducas in tentationem, sed libera nos a malo. Amen.

Following upon its opening triple salutations Faustus's speech resembles a perverse petitionary prayer to Jehovah, the gods of Acheron and the elemental spirits, and alludes to the Pater Noster by means of the phrase "valeat numen triplex Jehovae" which plays

³³ Editors all print the incantation as one block of prose, see Bevington and Rasmussen [Doctor Faustus (B), I.iii.16-23], whereas I have chosen to print it in the manner of the text of the Vulgate to bring out its similarity with the Pater Noster.

on “nomen” as in “Hallowed be thy name”. (There is also a distinct possibility that “numen” should be corrected to “nomen” due to the phrase “*Jehovah’s* name” immediately preceding the incantation.) We note that the prayer is in two parts, divided by a brief exclamation of impatience (*Quid tu moraris?*), and is bound together by marked iterations of names (*Jehovah ... Mephostophilis* vs *Jehovah ... Mephostophilis*) and words (*aquatici ... surgat* vs. *aquam ... surgat*). Also, the mention of three devils in the first part is balanced by three holy signs (*consecratam aquam, signum crucis* and *vota*), and the occurrence of *nunc* (“now”) three times in the second part all underscore the formal properties that Faustus’ heretical “prayer” shares with scriptural style in general and the *Pater Noster* and the other New Testament model prayers in particular.³⁴ The complete desecration and transformation of the original communal prayer into a selfish demand also extends to Faustus’s mixture of first person singular and plural forms (cf. *nos/nostra/nobis*). The original communal plural of Jesus’s prayer in the incantation becomes the *pluralis majestatis* of Faustus himself.

Thus, in the same way that we are able to identify the clear imprint of Marlowe the humanist and classicist poet in his verse, it is also possible to find traces of Marlowe the student of theology throughout his *oeuvre*, and as we shall see later perhaps where we least expect to find them. However, the obvious place to expect Marlowe to use prayers is the play about Doctor Faustus, the theologian who went astray. Not only in the initial conjuring scenes, but also at various other points in the play does Faustus attempt to communicate with and appeal to heaven and Christ, first indirectly (2.3. 1-2 and 10-11) and then more openly.

In the final soliloquy Faustus first turns to Christ indirectly by addressing the sun/son of God (“Fair Nature’s eye”), imploring him to intercede in his capacity as “*sol iustitiae*”³⁵ and, then, in a series of short prayer-like apostrophes that all fail:

Stand still, thou ever-moving spheres of heaven,
That time may cease and midnight never come!
Fair Nature’s eye, rise, rise again, and make
Perpetual day; ...
O, I’ll leap up to heaven! Who pulls me down?

³⁴ See the works by Betz cited above at note 29, for the status of these prayers as models.

³⁵ See St. Augustine on the point of Christ as the sun of justice (*sol iustitiae*) on Judgement Day in *De libero arbitrio doctrina*, cf. *The Forme of Faustus’ Fortunes*. 49-51; 57-58.

See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!
One drop of blood will save me: O my Christ!
Rend not my heart for naming of my Christ!
Yet will I call on him. (5.2.135-38; 144-47)³⁶

These attempts fall short of their aim because Faustus no longer can be steadfast and withstand the threats of Lucifer, or the mental pain he experiences. He is unable to confess his sins in the manner of St. Augustine, here cited from *Certaine Select Prayers Gathered out of S. Augustines Meditations*. In this work, which was published in 1565, we hear the saint confessing to God that

my sins, thoughts and wretchednes haue put a partition between me & thee,
betweene the darknes the light, between the Image of death and life, betweene
vanitie and truth, betweene this wavering life of mine, and the endlesse life of
thine. (p. 50)

Even though St. Augustine wavers in his confession, he repents and manages to break loose from the habit of vacillation, whereas in the case of Faustus “sin by custom” seems already to have grown into “nature” (5.I.40).

That the Wittenberg theologian Faustus prays to Christ is only to be expected, but he is not the only Marlowe character that calls on Christ to intercede in the hour of need. In *Tamburlaine Part Two* Orcanes, King of Natolia, also addresses and petitions Christ directly:

Thou, Christ, that are esteem'd omnipotent,
If thou wilt prove thyself a perfect God,
Worthy the worship of all faithful hearts,
Be now reveng'd upon this traitor's soul,
And make the power I have left behind,
(Too little to defend our guiltless lives)
Sufficient to discomfit and confound

³⁶ I have inserted the line “See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament” (5.2.70) into its correct place in the B-text, where it is missing.

The trustless force of these false Christians!

(2.2.55-62)

Although he himself is a Muslim, Orcanes both venerates and challenges Christ to punish the “treacherous” Christians and his own former allies.

Nor are we surprised that the Hebrew Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* prays to God for help although he does so blasphemously because his invocation is made in the hope that his daughter Abigail will succeed in stealing back a gem of fabulous value, hidden in his now confiscated house, where she lives as a nun:

O Thou, that with fiery pillar led'st
The sons of Israel through the dismal shades,
Light Abraham's offspring; and direct the hand
Of Abigail this night; ... (2.1.12-15)

It is highly characteristic of Marlowe's black humour in the play that Barabas appeals for divine help purely for material reasons. We also note that Marlowe here carefully uses the parallelism and antitheses so typical of Old Testament style: The sons of Israel ... Abraham's offspring ... Abigail [Barabas's daughter]; fiery pillar ... dismal shades: light ... this night. The poet playfully and expertly deploys this typology to achieve a comic effect.

Then, too, the biblical style of iterated antitheses and parallelisms focused on “the difference of things” is the fruit of the particular “experience” that Mephostophilis alludes to early in *Doctor Faustus* (“Ay, think so still, till experience change thy mind,” 2.1.128), and it crops up again in *The Jew of Malta* in Abigail's confession when she has finally converted to Christianity:

Then were my thoughts so frail and confirmed,
And I was chained to the follies of the world;
But now *experience*, purchased with grief,
Has made me see the difference of things.
My sinful soul, alas, hath paced too long
The fatal labyrinth of misbelief,
Far from the Son that gives eternal life. (3.3.59-65; emphasis added)

Abigail has overcome the partition between a “wavering life” and “the endless life of Christ,” that Faustus is unable to in his final broken prayer. He merely catches a glimpse of the Son/sun that can make “perpetuall day,” whereas Abigail embraces “the Son that gives eternal life” (65).

Marlowe approaches the mode of “normal” vocal prayer most consistently in the two *Tamburlaine* plays and *Edward the Second*, but already in his first play, *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, prayer is used. In a private prayer the rejected suitor of Dido prays to Jove in tones that again are reminiscent of the *Pater Noster*:

Eternal Jove, great master of the clouds,
Father of gladness and all frolic thoughts,
That with thy gloomy hand corrects the heaven,
When airy creatures war amongst themselves,
Hear, hear, O hear Iarbas’ plaining prayers,
[...]
Now if thou be’st a pitying God of power,
On whom ruth and compassion ever waits,
Redress these wrongs ... (4.2.4-8; 19-21)

The personal prayer is passionate (“Hear, hear, O hear Iarbas’ plaining prayers,”) and is possibly an ironic echo of “the outward speaking or singing of prayers” that Thomas Becon found “not discommendable” in acts of devotion.³⁷ For whereas Anna, who hears him praying, takes the prayers to be sincere and devotional, asking whether he “would partake with [her] the cause / Of this devotion” (27-28), Iarbas’s prayers are not communal but selfish and spring from his jealousy and rivalry with Aeneas.

A sincere and selfish version of such an “outward” prayer, is found in Marlowe’s unorthodox chronicle play, when Edward piously addresses God:

Now, sweet God of heaven,
Make me despise this transitory pomp,

³⁷ Cited from Ramie Targoff, “The Performance of Prayer: Sincerity and Theatricality in Early Modern England,” *Representations*, 60 (1997), 49-69 (67). See also Sterrett, *Unheard Prayer. Religious Toleration in Shakespeare’s Drama*, xv.

And sit for ever enthronéd in heaven,
Come death, and with thy fingers close my eyes,
Or if I live, let me forget myself. (sc. 18, 107-11)

The meek Edward is executed cruelly, putting up no resistance or show of defiance whatsoever. Having already said farewell to the world and its horrors, he dies reconciled with his God. In a related manner, in the long plea to the Scythian conqueror in *Tamburlaine Part One* (5.1. 74-105), another prayer-like speech is delivered immediately before the speaker is killed. The speaker is the First Virgin pleading on behalf of the inhabitants of Damascus before they are all to be butchered by Tamburlaine's lancers. It is a communal speech in the manner of the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6: 9–13) in being at the same time a prayer of veneration, submission, and petition. The opening seven verses display a series of epithets that characterise multiple iterative devices and parallelisms typical of the "mighty line":

Most happy king and emperor of the earth,
Image of honor and nobility,
For whom the powers divine have made the world
And *on whose* throne the holy Graces sit,
In whose sweet person is compris'd the sum
Of nature's skill and heavenly majesty,
Pity our plights! O, *pity* poor Damascus!
Pity old age, ...

(5.1. 74-81; *emphases added*)

The speech is moving on several levels, and although exhibiting many end-stopped lines it also includes in all nine run-on lines within a chiasmic frame to compact the speech into "one poem's period," a formal feature that clearly increases its rhetorical efficacy and appeal, though the prayer fails to move Tamburlaine.

Zenocrate is a special case in Marlowe because she appears from the very beginning in *Tamburlaine Part One* to be set up as a virgin-bride. The imagery chosen to describe her seems designed to recall both the bride in Canticles and the Virgin Mary, who of course are typologically related in exegesis. Also, she has aspects of the *mater dolorosa* in the way she reacts with compassion to her lover's brutality. She appeals to

Tamburlaine to show mercy, mourns his victims, and prays that “mighty Jove and holy Mahomet, / Pardon [her] love ... and his contempt.” She does so in a speech that is shot through with a repeated line of verse, giving it the character of a prayer with a refrain (5.1.346-70). Nevertheless, it is Tamburlaine’s long lament to the dying Zenocrate (“Black is the beauty of the brightest day” in *Tamburlaine, Part Two* [2.4.1-38]), that bears all the marks of being a rhetorical masterpiece influenced by the biblical style. The speech, which is in three parts where each part is concluded with a couplet, parallels the style of biblical model prayers in being chiasitic and shot through with repetitions at word and sentence level, rendering it ritual-like.³⁸ Additionally, Marlowe also imports into a cluster of closely-knit verses elements of the private genre of contemplative prayer when Tamburlaine imagines how Zenocrate will be received in heaven as *regina coeli*, or the Mother of God:

Now walk the angels on the walls of heaven
 As sentinels to wan the' immortal souls
 To entertain divine Zenocrate.
 Apollo, Cynthia, and the ceaseless lamps
 That gently looked upon this loathsome earth
 Shine downwards no more, but deck the heavens
 To entertain divine Zenocrate.
 The crystal springs whose taste illuminates
 Refinèd eyes with an eternal sight,
 Like tried silver, runs through Paradise
 To entertain divine Zenocrate.
 The cherubins and holy seraphins,
 That sing and play before King of Kings,
 Use all their voices and their instruments
 To entertain divine Zenocrate.
 And in this sweet and curious harmony
 The god that tunes this music to our souls

³⁸ The speech is tripartite: an introduction in the form of a prose “sonnet” with a final couplet (1-14), a vision of Zenocrate’s reception in heaven, marked by a refrain repeated 5 times (16-33), and a concluding petition by Tamburlaine to be allowed to ascend to heaven in a “trance” (34-38). The verbal repetitions link the beginning, middle and end of the speech (day[1] / heaven[2] // heavens[20] // heaven[35] / days[37]).

Holds out his hand in highest majesty
To entertain divine Zenocrate. (2.4.15-33)

In a hyperbolic description of metaphysical wit and ingenuity, the speaker envisages how the celestial bodies withdraw their light from earth and bend it upwards to shine on Zenocrate, leaving the entire sublunary world black. The astonishing imagined act of cosmic reversal occurs at the textually central point of transition in the speech (18-20), that is, the opening verses of its second part, functioning as its “volta,” as it were. The short climactic third part of the speech (34-37), is a mixture of a petition and contemplative prayer when Tamburlaine himself wishes to ascend to heaven in an act of contemplation:

Then, let some holy trance convey my thoughts
Up to the palace of th’ empyreal heaven
That this my life may be as short to me
As are the days of sweet Zenocrate. (2.4.34-37).

The long passionate speech renders oral the practices of silent prayer, but the solemn atmosphere with which the paean ends does not last and is immediately contrasted by Tamburlaine’s question to the attending physicians: “will physic do her no good?” (38). Still, the lament on Zenocrate is important because it brings to light the classical and scriptural models that underpin the effect of the mighty line. For instance, the speech also sheds light on the equally suggestive contemplative passage on Zenocrate in *Tamburlaine Part One*, where Zenocrate also is the queen of heaven, from whose

shining face

Where Beauty, mother of the Muses, sits
And comments volumes with her ivory pen,
Taking instructions from thy flowing eyes—
Eyes, when that Ebena steps to heaven,
In silence of thy solemn evening’s walk,
Making the mantle of the richest night,
The moon, the planets and the meteors, light. (5.1.147-50).

This is a solemn passage that makes one recall Dante's contemplation ("l'alta fantasia") on divine light that concludes the *Commedia*.³⁹

A similar religious contemplation also lies at the heart of Orcanes' prayer-challenge to Christ to punish the treacherous Christians in *Tamburlaine, Part Two*:

Open, thou shining veil of Cynthia,
And make a passage from the empyreal heaven
That he that sits on high and never sleeps,
Nor in one place is circumscribable,
But everywhere fills every continent
With strange infusion of His sacred vigor,
May in His endless power and purity
Behold and venge this traitors perjury. (2.2.47-54)

Behind the vision lie the orthodox images of God both as an ever-vigilant judge and as a sphere whose circumference is nowhere and whose centre is everywhere.⁴⁰ It seems, therefore, that part of the explanation of the contemporary reaction to the *Tamburlaine* plays, and its author as a blasphemer, is his daring and clever balancing act of joining scriptural language and the common forms of prayer. This calculated blend created unease in audiences otherwise stunned by his robust and dynamic verse. As a result "[d]uring the late 1580s and 1590s, Marlowe was the most admired, envied, and widely

³⁹ Ma già volgeva il mio disio e il velle,
Sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,
L'amor che move il sol e l'altre stelle. (*Paradiso*, XXXIII.143-45)

[...] Like a wheel in perfect balance turning,
I felt my will and my desire impelled
By the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.

I cite Dante in Italian from ed. Alberto Chiari, *La Divina Commedia*, Sesto S. Giovanni: Bietti, 1974. The translation into English is that of Mark Musa, *The Portable Dante*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003, 585.

⁴⁰ George Puttenham observes on the circle that "his ample capacitie doth resemble the world or vniverse, & for his indefinitenesse hauing no special place of beginning nor end, beareth a similitude with with God and eternitie." Ed. G.D. Willcock and A. Walker, *The Arte of English Poesie*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970[1936], 98.

imitated playwright in London.”⁴¹ He was a veritable engine of change and remained so decades after his death.⁴²

One particularly inflammable use of convention was his deliberate transformation of the Christian topos of contemplation of the creation, based on Psalm 19. To illustrate this, I wish to end this brief investigation of Marlowe’s use of biblical style and types of prayer by returning to *Doctor Faustus*. The dissatisfied theologian rejects the shallow knowledge of astronomy as explained by Mephostophilis: “When I behold the heavens, then I repent / And curse thee”, thus giving us the orthodox version of the topos, which is different from the versions found in *Tamburlaine* where we repeatedly see the Lucretian or Brunian use of the same.⁴³ In *Doctor Faustus*, Marlowe returns to the conventional use of the topos, only to show its inadequacy when attempted by Faustus, and he does so in the final soliloquy where he also breaks away from the established and efficient medium of the mighty line in its display of *figura velox* (the figure of speed).

This speech has often been taken to be among the last speeches Marlowe wrote because it is felt to be so different and “modern”, whereas we today know that it is most likely written prior to 1590 by being extensively echoed and imitated in the final speech of the King in Shakespeare’s *King John*. That Marlowe was capable of writing in different stylistic registers should not surprise anybody, although many critics do not seem to be willing to admit that fact, or only reluctantly do so while contrasting him with the superior qualities of Shakespeare. If we briefly consider Marlowe’s successful deployment of the *figura velox* in Zabina’s last speech in *Tamburlaine, Part One* (5.1.305-17) (a model for Ophelia’s prose in suicide speech in *Hamlet*) or the powerful prose in Faustus’s last confessional conversation with his scholar friends in the B-Text, his deployment of the same style in verse in the final soliloquy to underline the urgency of the situation seems only natural. Here in Faustus’s failed prayer for mercy and divine intercession Marlowe deliberately disintegrates the “invariable and comforting

⁴¹ Constance Kuriyama Brown, *Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2002, 80.

⁴² Wilbur Sanders’s seminal study, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968) is a classic in this respect, but a more balanced account is found in Wells, *Shakespeare and Co.* London: Penguin, 2007, 61-105. See also Robert A. Logan, *Shakespeare’s Marlowe. The Influence of Christopher Marlowe on Shakespeare’s Artistry*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007, and Lisa Hopkins, *Christopher Marlowe, Renaissance Dramatist*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.

⁴³ James Robinson Howe, *Tamburlaine, Magic and Marlowe*, Athens Ohio, Ohio University Press, 1976.

rhythmic standard”⁴⁴ of the more familiar mighty line and the measured patterns common to prayer. The pattern that he disrupts here is not limited to a breach of the iambic pentameter line of Tamburlaine, but also appears to be a deliberate rewriting of the topos of the devout Christian’s nightly contemplation of the heavens which was inspired by the celebratory Psalm 19: *Coeli enarrant Gloria dei*. This is what Petrus Damianus (1007-72) so movingly described in a “*Dominus vobiscum*,” which amounts to a contemplative prayer in praise of God:

O quam pulchra rerum species, cum frater in cellula constitutus nocturnas peragit psalmodias, et quasi pro divinis castris militares custodit excubias: contemplatur in coelo cursus siderum, decurrit etiam per os ejus ordo psalmorum. Et sicut praecedentes ac subsequentes stellae ad diem suas vicissitudines alternando perveniunt, ita psalmi, qui ex ore ejus tanquam ex quodam oriente procedunt, ad suum finem paulatim velut parili cum sideribus convectione decurrunt. Iste suae servitutis exhibet ministerium; illae delegatum sibi exsequuntur officium; iste psallendo intrinsecus ad lucem tendit inaccessibilem, illae sibi invicem succedendo, ejus exterioribus oculis visibilem reparant diem.⁴⁵

“It is a most beautiful thing, when in his humble cell, the friar spends the hours of the night chanting the Psalms, almost like a sentinel guarding the soldiers’ quarters outside God’s castle. He contemplates the course of the stars in Heaven, and from his lips descends the order of the psalms. And in the manner that the stars one by one bring forth the day with their alternating motions,

⁴⁴ MacDonald, “Marlowe and Style,” 56.

⁴⁵ Peter Damianus, *Liber qui dicitur “Dominus vobiscum” Opuscula*, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 452, col. 0248c-d

Continue ever, thou celestial sun;
Let never silent night possess this clime.
Stand still, you watches of the element;
All times and seasons rest you at stay,
That Edward may be still fair England’ s King.

Edward II, sc. 20, 64-68.

Now, sweet God of heaven,
Make me despise this transitory pomp,
And sit for aye enthronizéd in heaven,
Come death, and with thy fingers close my eyes,
Or if I live, let me forget myself.

Edward II, sc. 20, 107-11.

similarly the Psalms issue from his mouth; while the stars issue from the east, he moves towards his hidden end in consonance with the movements of the stars. The friar performs his service and the stars perform their designated task. He tends in his soul towards the inaccessible light by way of his chanting, the others follow one by one, each bringing with him visible light to corporal eyes.”
[Author’s approximate translation]

The topos of the faithful monk who recites his nightly prayers in harmony with the stars that cross the heavens is echoed in Tamburlaine’s contemplative prayer on the death of Zenocrate, where angels walk on “the walls of heaven / As sentinels” (2.4.15-16). In the last soliloquy Faustus fails to make his prayer harmonise with the movement of the stars. He is incapable of halting their relentless motion, and is therefore seized by the servants of the fallen angel at the appointed time.

Why there has been little focus on this aspect of Marlowe’s grounding in biblical style is hard to tell, especially when there has been such interest in contemporary theological issues in general. This may be so because of Marlowe’s preference for daring topics and because of his reputation as a “reckless” young man about town and a figure associated more readily with the spectacular accusations launched by Robert Greene or John Baines, than with his years of study in theology and related subjects at Corpus Christi in Cambridge. These, however, are associations for which there is little actual biographical or documentary support.⁴⁶ The important sub-genre of prayer, then, is an understudied element in his formation as the poet of the mighty line.

⁴⁶ Lukas Erne, “Biography, Mythography and Criticism: The Life and Works of Christopher Marlowe,” *Modern Philology*, 2005, vol. 28-50.

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