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8 One Against All: The New England Past and Present Responsibilities in *The Devil and Daniel Webster*

The Faust myth is the story of a man who, attracted by magic and all it can provide, makes a pact with the devil in exchange for his soul, only to discover the error too late. This sixteenth-century myth, loosely based on a historical figure, has evolved from historical curiosity through innumerable literary derivations as a result of "the lack of finality, the manifest imperfections of all the versions, which have caused so many strange and beautiful variations on a theme which is not exhausted yet" (Palmer 13). In 1897, Melies introduced the Faust theme into the nascent film medium, and before 1913 more than twenty Faust films had been produced (Prodolliet 22). The attraction of the film medium to the metaphysically complex Faust myth encompasses the whole of film history, one of the most contemporary examples being Parker's *Angel Heart* (1987).

The Faust literary theme, with its dramatic and descriptive tradition, is consistently renewed by the presence of four elemental motifs: the Faust/Mephistopheles relationship, the pact ritual, magic, and the relationship between Faust and Helen of Troy/Marguerite (Gretchen). These motifs are redesigned within the film aesthetic to fit the mold of two popular film genres, romance and horror, both of which have always displayed broad box-office appeal. Filmmakers found the element of magic particularly attractive. Film is uniquely visual, and magic is the illusory, the impossible, and the fantastic made visible. The combination of a clever devil, a weak man, a seductive and/or faithful woman, black magic, and a pact against God sells tickets. This proved to be especially evident in the 1941 film adaptation of Stephen Vincent Benet's Faustian short story, *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, also known as *All That Money Can Buy*, which was also made into a folk opera and short dramatic work. The screenplay (co-authored by Benet) expands upon the folkish design of the Faust tale set in 1840s New England. In this adaptation, Jabez Stone, a simple American farmer down on his luck, foolishly deals for material success with Mr. Scratch, a rather appealing devil. The farmer is eventually saved near the end of his time by the

intervention of a true folk hero, Daniel Webster, who makes a successful appeal on Jabez's behalf to a jury of the damned.

The Devil and Daniel Webster is not only a film rich in literary and historical traditions. An equally important cinematic tradition connects it with its Faust film predecessors: Rye's *Der Student von Praq* (1913) and Murnau's *Faust* (1926). A prevailing neo-Expressionist aesthetic is employed by the German expatriate director William Dieterle. The influence of the Expressionist German film on American film production was manifest in forties productions categorized as film noir, which depicts a dark, violent world with flawed characters whose lust, greed, or fear motivates them (Thomas 25). In *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, Jabez's continual moral decline, Scratch's sinister disposition, and the trickery of Belle (the Helen of Troy figure) are all visualized by magic, in elaborate noir lighting and atmospheric set designs. A striking Academy award-winning musical soundtrack by Bernard Herrmann additionally creates an atmosphere precipitating the overall sense of the fantastic—a world in which magic is possible. The 1949 American film *Alias Nick Beal*, directed by John Farrow, was a Faust film conceived in the "black" noir style, which depicts a cruel and dangerous world. In contrast, Dieterle employs a "grey" noir style that examines this world less severely, with humor and fantastic diversions.

Benet's treatment of the Faust theme in his short story and film adaptation is unique in its dramatization of "the conflict between the Powers of Darkness and the powers of an American statesman" (Stroud 117) to demonstrate the range and depth of the myth: "The story's several thematic elements and wide range of tone, from the prevailing broad Yankee humor to the notes of pathos and even nobility, are combined in a superlative tale that comes to far more than humorous fantasy; it is a classic American fable" (117). Benet's appropriation of the figure of Daniel Webster was his unique contribution to the Faust myth. Although Webster was, in reality, a Whig, and certainly not a Jacksonian Democrat or "friend of the common man" populist (Nathans 141), Benet invokes the historical figure—the ambitious, talented-yet-thwarted presidential candidate—for other reasons. Schlesinger has referred to Webster's historical presence as "awe-inspiring" (83): "His intellectual ability was great . . . [especially] under the spur of crisis. In his great speeches inspiration would take charge of his deep booming voice, and he would shake the world" (84). Since there are few greater crises than damnation, the mythic qualities of Webster, his oratorical mastery as demonstrated in Congress and the Senate, and his fame as a lawyer—"When he argued a case, he could turn on the harps of the blessed and the shaking of the earth underground" (Benet, *Devil* 5)—were of greater dramatic value to Benet than the historical figure of Webster, who, "except for a few Yankee farmers in New Hampshire . . . never won the people simply because he never gave himself to them" (Schlesinger 84).

The "real" Webster retained somewhat of an aristocratic demeanor throughout his political life; it is Webster, the legend, who appeals the case of Jabez Stone. Fenton describes Webster as "an ideal folk-hero" (293) for Benet's story, for Webster was "ambiguous enough for productive characterization, less remotely sacred and frozen than Lincoln, majestic in his strengths and weaknesses, national in his values" (293). It is the nationalistic side of Webster's politics that appealed to Benet. Depicting a citizenry faced with a variety of perils, Benet clearly aligns the fate of his Faust character with the fortunes of a nation, as Daniel Webster will exclaim to the disreputable jury in the film adaptation: "Don't let this country [and Jabez] go to the devil." For if it was true that "even the damned may salute the eloquence of Mr. Webster" (Benet, *Devil* 35), then there was hope for salvation.

In addition, *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, set in the mid-nineteenth century, is a film adaptation of astute political perception of twentieth-century America in the midst of crisis; the Depression and imminent world war are manifest in the words and deeds of Benet's screen characters. The nation and its farmers, particularly in New England, have fallen on hard times. Whether owing money to the bank or the greedy loan shark of the town, Miser Stevens, or later to Jabez Stone, Benet's farmers remain patriotic and true believers in heroes like Webster. They attribute special powers of foresight

and salvation to him as if he were a prophet from the Bible or (ironically) a New Deal Democrat.

The working world of these farm communities cannot compete with ill fortune brought about by hailstones of infernal origins and mortgages due on farms that remain unproductive dust bowls. The law seems to be on the side of the creditor and the infernal, not the insolvent. A particularly effective montage sequence juxtaposes the beauty of an open field and running streams with scenes of crop failure and desperate men in a saloon hoping to wash away their sorrows and debts, nonetheless with determined and proud looks, like Frost's farmer who exclaims, "Next to nothing for use./But a crop is a crop./And who's to say where/The harvest shall stop?" (147). Benet later used the "voice" of a typical farmer in one of his scripts, "Letter From a Farmer," during the wartime radio series for the Council on Democracy, to express the individual and collective resolve of a people against another evil foreign "prince": "And we're not a special class or a special interest. We're part of something and working for something that's bigger than any of us––something big as the sky above us and fertile as the earth underfoot. It's called the United States, Adolf" (Stand 20).

This is the sociohistorical milieu of the American Faust, Jabez Stone, who "consarns it." He is not the intellectual, restless Faust seeking deeper experience, but a simple character, decent and hardworking, who would normally settle for a good crop and some rain. Yet he is not like his fellow farmers. He is discontent with his life and its ruined expectations: "He wasn't a bad man to start with, but he was an unlucky man. . . . He had good enough land, but it didn't prosper him. . . . But one day, Jabez Stone got sick of the whole business" (Benet, *Devil* 6). Eager for success and wealth, Jabez is ripe for corruption, which false values would breed within him. He is a simple farmer dazzled by the vision of power and money, ready to be led astray. In his review of the film, Andrew Sarris stated: "This is a Faust without a Faust—Craig [the actor] is much too weak as a man who lusted for gold rather than more crops of scrawny apples" (72). Sarris does not take into account that Jabez's weakness in spirit must be obvious to capture the true nature of his character. For the theme to evolve dramatically, this understated "weak" Faust must be temptable and given to act upon temptation. A strong or clever Faust would not sell his soul for two cents. An even more important reason for Jabez's portrayal as "weak" is that it allows Webster to figure as the third and strongest member of the conflict over Jabez's soul.

Jabez is a failure, at least in his own perceptions. His wife, Mary, an Americanized Marguerite, together with his "Maw," tends to see the brighter side of life and frequently exhorts Jabez to worry less. Mary is the plucky farm wife who is "not afraid of smoke and fire," but who wisely seeks assistance when her husband's despair becomes overwhelming. Her spiritual nature is firmly rooted in the earth; her Bible reading and church going illustrate the source of her faith and courage. In the love that she bears for Jabez, Mary is faithful to the literary Marguerite as she tries to awaken the dormant sense of morality in Jabez before his downfall. Her simple and trusting nature does not prevent her from seeing what dangers lie ahead; it is she who turns to Daniel Webster to save her husband's soul when he cannot resist the temptations of evil any longer. Mary's strength and faith are complemented by the savior-figure, Daniel Webster. Her character provides, with Webster's "earthly" skill as a lawyer, a *deus-ex-machina*, occurring not in the heavens but in the barn.

Benet was able to develop Mary's character more fully in his adaptation than in the short story, and in doing so, creates a female character for dramatic contrast—the exotic "Belle," whose cunning and sexuality mystify the people as they wonder if she is French. Belle provides another illusion, a "fata morgana," stating when questioned, "I'm not anything." She distracts Jabez and compromises his ill-gotten happiness and moral worth. Her home is the new mansion built by Jabez, while Mary remains in the old farm house. By appropriating both female characters from the literary Faust tradition, Benet's adaptation more fully develops the thematic possibilities as both women seek to affect the life and soul of Faust, only with different motivations. However, Mary's spiritual love was insufficient to assuage Jabez, and Belle cannot fully seduce the vestiges of his better nature. Jabez is "incomplete" without Webster and the devil.

Mephistopheles is represented by Mr. Scratch, who defends his right to be considered as American as Webster: "And who calls me a foreigner? . . . Mr. Webster, though I don't like to boast of it, my name is older in this country than yours" (Benet, *Devil* 23-24). Mr. Scratch, at whom the barnyard dogs instinctively growl, is friendly, folksy, patriotic, chews tobacco and drinks corn liquor like the others. The screen portrayal of Scratch by Walter Huston is exceptionally strong. The audience is quickly taken in by his manipulative charm. Benet's adaptation carefully masks the overtly devilish disposition in Scratch and his magic until later when Jabez's seven years are nearly over.

It becomes evident that the devil is no stranger to New England. The first appearance of Mr. Scratch is quickly followed by magical events that precipitate the pact signing between him and Jabez. Scratch appears at the right moment, just as Jabez is so disgusted that he is willing to trade his soul for some small change. The coins appear in a close-up shot of Scratch's open hand. Outside, as other farmers approach the barn, hoping to join together in a grange with Jabez, Scratch is inside the barn, tantalizing Jabez with additional gold coins he exhumes from the ground. He tries to catch him with a Mephistophelian snare: "You've had a lot of bad luck these days. And yet—it's all so unnecessary. When I think of your opportunities" (Benet, *Screenplay* 958). A series of persuasive actions follow, such as Scratch's allowing Jabez to clutch some coins, and to think he is setting the conditions for the pact signing. Benet has greatly expanded upon the pact ritual motif in his adaptation, especially by its magical visualization. In answer to Jabez's question whether the money is now his property, Scratch proposes the traditional deal:

> Scratch: That's right, Mr. Stone—there is (whipping a paper from his pocket)—just one little formality. I'd like your signature here—see. And when it's done—it's done for seven years.
>
> Jabez: (staring at the paper Scratch holds before him) What does it mean here—about my soul?
>
> Scratch: Well, why should that worry you. A soul—a soul is nothing. Can you see it, smell it, touch it? No!—Think of it—this soul—your soul—a nothing, against seven whole years of good luck! You will have money and all that money can buy. (he starts to put the paper away)
>
> Jabez: No, no! Give it to me! (Benet, *Screenplay* 958-59)

The seductive and clever nature of this folksy, friendly Mephistopheles does not belie his purpose; he is bound to get the soul of Jabez. Scratch is talkative to set Jabez at ease, like an old friend making a business deal. The pact demands Jabez's soul as collateral and, keeping with tradition, is signed in blood. The pact even offers the secondary clause of extending the "grace period." This will later involve the potential assignation of Jabez's son in his stead. Surely, the soul of the incorrupt is worth more than the soul of the foolish. Later, the pact will be put to a legal test as a jury of the damned, all Americans, determines its legality.

Once the pact is formalized and Jabez's fortunes increase, his good qualities start to decline rapidly. Crowther notes, "[Jabez] becomes stingy and mean" (1815), thereby lessening his fellow farmers' sympathy for him while increasing Scratch's delight in his change of personality. For a paltry seven years, Jabez learns what it means to live as a successful New England businessman and employer of his impoverished fellow-farmers. To survive they have to work for him or borrow money on his terms. Jabez turns into an uncaring "soulless" type of businessman, responsible for the others' socioeconomic plight, and resembling Scratch more and more.

Benet's sentimentalized tale of this misguided farmer, who makes a deal to obtain "all that money can buy" without realizing he had been hoodwinked into a loan he could never pay off, personalizes the socioeconomic Depression-era plight of the New England farmer.

However, in fact, the farming sector of New England was largely ruined earlier, prior to World War I (Benedict 88-89). In *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal*,

Campbell asserts that even during the "golden age" of American agriculture, 1909-14, the Northeast was "a region which was then threatened by farm abandonment, a trend which has already engulfed much of New England" (4), and that "by 1932 even farmers who were usually prosperous were in desperate straits as they faced the likelihood of the loss of their farms through mortgage foreclosures" (29). One problem with *The Devil and Daniel Webster* is that the metaphor is wrong for the historical period; perhaps a factory worker might have been more timely a visual image than a ruined farmer. The film's nostalgic mood is reminiscent of the earlier Will Rogers film *David Harum* (1934) and its little city of Homeville, where "unlike the impersonal settings of land companies, banks, and distant corporations, forces that operate in Homeville always have a human face and heart. . . . In a treacherous world which seemed to be out of control, here stood a sympathetic personality, completely unselfish, concerned with warding off harm rather than amassing power" (Rollins 63). This sounds like an idealized description of Jabez's New England and Benet's humanitarian Webster.

Still, who will save poor Jabez, who is not so unlike his fellow countrymen except that he made a poor decision? This typical New England farm society must be defended by a strong, fatherly voice when confronted by manipulative evil. Neither Jabez nor Mary possess the subtlety of wit to confront this challenge to their freedom. Benet needs a character who not only plays horseshoes and drinks, but whose own innate virtue, however sorely tested, can rise to the occasion so he may speak on behalf of one man, one town, and one nation. This is the type of man Scratch would truly desire to add to his collection. The Faustian struggle for Jabez's soul pits the interests of Webster, played with stentorian pomp and real screen energy by Edward Arnold, against "wolves in sheep's clothing," Mr. Scratch, who works against America's best interests. Webster is a truly well-wrought creation assuming not only historical but necessary mythic dimensions. Ever faithful to his constituency—"I'd fight ten thousand devils to save the soul of a New Hampshireman"—Webster appeals for relief and compassion for these farmers, reflecting a New Deal platform. Webster thus represents on screen the positive powers that protect the impoverished and errant from sinister, anti-democratic forces. This is a positive affirmation of the powers of government, and any parallels between the characters of Webster and FDR would not be too exaggerated. The description of Roosevelt in Benet's poem "Tuesday, November 5th, 1940"—which addresses the issue of aristocratic lineage and alienation from the masses—could equally apply to Webster: "And they say you went to Groton and Harvard/ And they say you don't know the people" (*Last Circle* 110); however, Benet resolves this alleged breech of faith as he goes on to describe the character of the individual rather than the biographical data: "A man who knows the tides and ways of the people/ . . . And never once stopped believing in them/ . . . A country squire from Hyde Park with a Harvard accent" (111). If New Hampshire and Dartmouth are substituted for Hyde Park and Harvard, the description of Webster is evident. Webster exclaims, "I'm not here to be licked"; America and Jabez are down but not out.

Benet's contexture of sociohistorical developments involving the faith and fortunes of late 1930-40s America employs the economic crisis and ensuing world war as an external conflict in which farmers represent the human side of the political dilemma. However, film was not the only medium through which Benet explored these issues; Benet addressed these conflicts as a wartime propagandist, writing topical poetry, prose, and especially radio scripts. Winkler describes the wartime broadcast conditions in America: "Radio was ready-made for propaganda, for with sixty million receivers scattered throughout the nation, 90% of the American people could easily be reached in their homes" (60).

Benet's role as a willing propagandist for democracy was diligently assumed: "He felt that such energy [writing] as he could spare from making a living belonged to whatever services the government asked of him" (Fenton 353), and, in fact, "By the time the United States went to war in December 1941 he had been active for months, writing material for both private and governmental agencies" (155). Fussell asserts

"Because in wartime the various outlets of popular culture behaved almost entirely as if they were the creatures of their governments, it is hardly surprising to find that they spoke with one voice. . . . For those at home the sound of the war was the sound of the radio" (180-81), and one of the loudest voices belonged to Benet. As Webster assumes the voice of the conscience of America's nationalist interests and its ideals, Scratch, forever negative, assumes the role of provocateur, whose appeal to the mercenary and self-interests of one man contrasts with the welfare of a nation. In the midst of a Depression and at the beginning of a world war, the situation demanded side-taking. Benet's message is that the individual cannot always stand alone. Law and the government work in concert to protect the individual's rights against oppression. The mythicized figure of Webster is even quoted in Benet's posthumously published wartime propaganda text, *America*: "Justice is the great interest of man on earth" (121), and the pursuit of justice for Jabez Stone depends on Webster's oratorical magic versus Scratch's black magic.

Dieterle visualized the world of this New England farm society most successfully in the depiction of alternately frightening and humorous screen magic. Two specific scenes, the party at Jabez's mansion and his trial, illustrate the film's noir stylistics. The party to celebrate Jabez's good fortune is a variation of the Walpurgisnacht gathering of the damned. Believing he is secure in his wealth, Jabez peers out his new mansion's window, searching for his late guests. He sees, framed in the window, close-up shots of the estranged outsiders who want to know how he lives. They are poor and look like refugees in their own country. These were the same type of people, who in a superimposed and slightly out-of-focus close-up of a mocking Scratch, walked over the ruined fields of wheat. The effect of focusing on the frame of the whole window with these worn and strange faces pressed against the pane highlights, with its soft lighting effect, the alienation and distance between Jabez and the "others." Predictably, Jabez's invitation is ignored by the best people in town, whom he had hoped to impress with his money. Yet, one citizen, the unpopular loan shark Miser Stevens, does arrive. Apparently, Jabez is not alone in his dealings with Scratch. Stevens, like Jabez, is tied to the devil with a pact and dances with Belle in a fast-motion dance of the dead. This sequence is parallel-edited with Jabez's heated exchange with Webster over the former's social indifference. Herrmann's eerie musical accompaniment speeds up or slows down depending on the state of visual chaos. Belle laughs in frenzied ecstasy until Stevens drops dead from exhaustion. Later, a moth, in reality, Steven's soul, with a tiny voice that cannot be helped any longer, flies out from Scratch's clutches to the horror of Jabez. A sinister looking Scratch reveals a more devilish nature by his uncanny smiles, while close-up shots of Jabez reveal his fear.

Belle's preferred guests, the legion of damned souls, appear suddenly in the ballroom in a misty and diffuse lighting; this *mise-en-scène* affects a sense of strangeness and fear by editing between their unnatural dancing and the reactions of Jabez and Belle. They dance in fast-motion time sequences to sped-up musical accompaniment. The gathering of rural spirits not only expands upon the supernatural theme, it also provides a visual link with Jabez's future. With Steven's body slumped in the chair, Jabez must now decide which party he wishes to join—the living or the dead. In a moment of fierce realization, Jabez lashes out in a desperate search for Webster and Mary. Webster agrees to help him and the trial follows.

If ever there was a tainted jury that warranted dismissal, it is the jury that rises from the depths of hell to judge Jabez. In the barn, sparsely lit to provide shadows and soft lighting for a supernatural effect, Scratch kicks the ground and the members of the jury emerge in single file from below. Their faces are edited between close-ups or wide shots which, as a result of the affected lighting, creates a sense of despair. They all look grim and do not even sound natural; a distant and strange voice-over communicates most of their feelings. The damned are judging the damned. Close-up shots among all the participants—Scratch, the jury, Webster, and Jabez—create a montage of dramatic and expressive proportions as the camera frames each face frozen in time. Yet, Jabez is not destined to join the damned. After Webster's impassioned

and patriotic plea for mercy, stating that "He [Jabez] is your brother," the jury finds the pact null and void and disappears as a cock crows. It is a new day, complete with natural light and farmyard sounds, as Webster throws Scratch out of the barn. The soul of an American Faust, one foolish New Englander, has been saved.

Thomas Mann's evaluation of Genet's film adaptation, which he described as "a splendid picture . . . an American fairytale, patriotic and fantastic, and excellently acted" (Prodolliet 54), seems particularly appropriate. Benet's highly original linkage of the Faust theme to the real life yet mythic figure of Daniel Webster in *The Devil and Daniel Webster* contextualizes the sociopolitical crisis of the Depression and World War II within the genre conventions of Dieterle's noir stylistics, thus demonstrating the polymorphic quality of the Faust legend.

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