The Mystification of Christian Salvation: On the Anxiety of Redemption in Renaissance Poetry and Drama

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THE MYSTIFICATION OF CHRISTIAN SALVATION:
On the Anxiety of Redemption in Renaissance Poetry and Drama

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract

THE MYSTIFICATION OF CHRISTIAN SALVATION:
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by

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Adviser: Professor Paul Oppenheimer

The Legend of the Red Crosse Knight, Doctor Faustus, Hamlet, and Samson Agonistes are secular poetic explorations with a common idea: the possibility of Christian salvation. These examples of the redemptive quest seem to reveal the uneasiness of salvation which is representative, if only broadly, of the atmosphere in which their authors were writing. More specifically, the intention of this study is to reveal the possibility and nature of Christian uncertainty as it is firmly rooted in the early modern period. As Christian doctrine proves protean from its beginnings in the first century to Protestant tracts in the sixteenth, these authors are not immune to the conflicting ideologies and shifting beliefs of their time. These four works thus offer insight into the fluctuating and malleable ideologies of Christianity, and ultimately reflect the ongoing development of theological principles.
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Table of Contents

Chapter One: The Uneasiness of Christian Salvation 1
   Platonic Currents 7
   Dantean Echoes 13

Chapter Two: *Divina Commedia* in Spenser’s Red Crosse 21
   The Errour of Fraud 28
   That Bloody Tree 37
   The Fixed Stars in the House of Holinesse 47

Chapter Three: The Pagan Piety in *Doctor Faustus’s* Religion 70
   Setting up an Ancient Schema with Chariots of Ruin 84
   Acheron: River of Redemption 98
   A Final Plea to Nature 106

Chapter Four: The Straight Grave to Salvation: on *Hamlet* 109
   The Gravedigger’s Philosophy 117
   Hamlet’s Foil and Salvation 122
   Beautified Ophelia, Beatified Magdalen 129
   Ophelia’s Tokens of Death and Marriage 141

Chapter Five: The Strongman, the Baptist, and the Holy Spirit: On Milton’s
   *Samson Agonistes* 150
   Samson’s Rousing Motions 153
The Strongman, the Baptist, and the Holy Spirit  163

A Virtue Self-Begotten, a Samson Aquiline  176

Works Cited  190
Chapter One
The Uneasiness of Christian Salvation

_The Legend of the Red Crosse Knight, Doctor Faustus, Hamlet, and Samson Agonistes_

are secular poetic explorations with a common idea: the possibility of Christian salvation. These examples of the redemptive quest reveal the uneasiness of salvation which is representative, if only broadly, of the atmosphere in which their authors were writing. More specifically, the intention of this study is to reveal the possibility and nature of Christian uncertainty as it is firmly rooted in the early modern period. As Christian doctrine proves protean from its beginnings in the first century to Protestant tracts in the sixteenth, these authors are not immune to the conflicting ideologies and shifting beliefs of their time. These four works thus offer insight into the fluctuating and malleable ideologies of Christianity, and ultimately reflect the ongoing development of theological principles. Newton Stallknecht argues that ideas change when they are shared, as they are not “‘units’ in some way comparable to coins or counters that can be passed intact from one group of people to another or even, for that matter, from one individual to another” (122). Because they are transmitted by words, “ideas exist not as ready made commodities but primarily—and here we must step beyond the definition already offered—as the ‘meaning’ latent in human efforts to communicate” (123).¹ The author is not necessarily working to convince his audience of his idea; rather he is “more eager to make clear how an idea affects the life and colors the emotion of the person who entertaines it” (125). This poetic aim seems nothing new. When C. S. Lewis sets out to show the “syncretistic Model” (12) of the universe, adopted and perfected in the Middle Ages, built from “harmonising views of” Platonic,

¹ See Stallknecht 116-52; he claims that “the term idea refers to our more reflective or thoughtful consciousness as opposed to the immediacies of sensuous or emotional experience. It is through such reflection that literature approaches philosophy. An idea, let us say, may be roughly defined as a theme or topic with which our reflection may be concerned” (117).
Aristotelian, Stoical, Pagan and Christian elements, he notices that some admittedly Christian authors, such as Boethius in his *Philosophiae consolationis*, do not use a Christian scheme to expound their subject since it may impose limitations on their ability to relay their point.\(^2\) He suggests that Boethius not only knows where his literary talents lie—with philosophical discussion—but that he has another motive, if one less conscious, for writing his dialogue with Philosophia:

The distinction between Christian and Pagan can hardly, at that moment, have been more vividly present to his emotions than that between Roman and barbarian… This was no time for stressing whatever divided him from Virgil, Seneca, Plato, and the old Republican heroes. He would have been robbed of half his comfort if he had chosen a theme which forced him to point out where the great ancient masters had been wrong; he preferred one that enabled him to feel how nearly they had been right, to think of them not as ‘they’ but as ‘we.’ (78)

Lewis thus claims that Boethius relies on a classical setting and mode of dialogue, rather than a Christian one, because he intends to root his philosophy in the solid foundation of the ancients. His dialogue is suited for, and therefore more successful at, conveying his message of comfort if it can be associated with the ideas found in the writings of Christianity’s Pagan forefathers.\(^3\) The point is not to discover the poet’s religious faith, but to notice that he explores Christian themes within the limits of the settings and characters he invents. Although his message may be theological, his fiction is not Christian. For Spenser, Marlowe, Shakespeare and Milton, religious

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\(^2\) “Christian authors” is here taken to imply the writer’s personal faith. Cf. Lewis, *Discarded Image* 76-91.

\(^3\) I use “Christianity’s Pagan forefathers” to represent the paganism that Christians inherited. For a study of the ancient influences on medieval doctrine, which presents the impact of the “enduring effect of the old [religion] upon the new,” see Lewis, *Discarded Image* 48-9.
affiliations neither hamper nor help the theological concepts which they put forward in their dramas. All four poets examine Christian salvation in some form or other, and it becomes the “meaning’ latent in [their] human efforts to communicate.”

Religion often subscribes to some kind of doctrine that assumes a celestial existence after death for those who have followed its precepts. In late antiquity, Paradise was considered an idyllic place that “had three basic manifestations in religious beliefs: as a primordial region of perfection, as an intermediate locale where virtuous souls awaited resurrection, and as heaven, or the final dwelling place of the righteous” (Bowersock, et al. 635). The etymology of the word “paradise” is from “Old Iranian languages … in which it [is] designated a park surrounded by a wall,” and for Christianity it comes to be associated with the Garden of Eden, and thus “with a spiritual consequence of the Fall—original sin.” Arriving at Paradise, assuming its locale is attainable, therefore, may be the end goal of most religions, and the reason that man has any faith at all. Despite its challenges and pervasive influence, any doctrine of salvation will have a certain appeal if it offers the promise that man need only do such and such to be granted entrance into Paradise. If a man knows how to secure his place in heaven—intended here as the Christian celestial realm to where those granted the grace of God are swept up at their death—he may experience a sense of security, even if false, on a par with nothing else; it may be the closest thing to experiencing immortality. This kind of knowledge, however, which appears to divulge the secrets for earning God’s grace, is undermined by the many paths that are believed to lead to

4 From the state of nirvana in Buddhism to the Hindu concept of moksha to Sufism’s belief in Baqaa as the state of ideal perfection, called Najat in Islam, many traditional religions maintain that a state of being exists beyond death. For a thorough study of the afterlife, see Gregory Shushan 53-142.
5 For a development of the word “paradise” from Zoroastrianism to Judaism to Christianity, see Bowersock, et al. 635-6.
salvation. Other religions aside, soteriological conflicts exist in Christianity. The way to heaven seems murky because the path leading to the gate is contentious. Faith, however, is a common factor among sects, even as the belief that salvation is available to all men is not.

Grace M. Jantzen attempts to make sense of the concept of salvation in Christian theology. She admits that her work is not a comprehensive study of the concept as a whole, or what, if anything, it means in other religions. She claims that it is “important, when we turn to a religious context, that we do not assume without investigation a monolithic concept of salvation, either in terms of its antecedent condition (from what we are saved), its method (how we are saved), or its goal (to what we are saved)” (580). Jantzen claims that the writers of the gospels define the concept broadly, as well as in a myriad of ways, though a clear distinction between future and present salvation is made: “in the present, salvation includes deliverance from death, disaster, demons, and sickness, forgiveness of sins, liberation from the law, and divine acceptance” (580). Future salvation, however, or the kind with which this study is concerned, “includes such things as deliverance on the ‘Day of the Lord,’ deliverance from the wrath of God, and eternal life in the world to come.” Jantzen argues that even though a set definition of salvation is not given, the writers of the New Testament agree on the singular method for attaining salvation, which is that “it comes through Jesus Christ, who is ‘the Way, the Truth, and the Life’” (581). The point is important to the present examination of four early modern poets because I wish to demonstrate the significance of this singular method for attaining salvation,

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6 For a study of the early Christian paradigm of salvation, see Wallace and Rusk; see also Turner; and Bethune-Baker. For a current study of Christian salvation’s meaning as defined by the Vatican and liberation theology, see Min. For recent studies of atonement, see Green and Baker; see also Finlan. For damnation as described in the writings of preachers and theologians of the Counter-Reformation, see Camporesi. For a study of Robert Boyle’s late seventeenth century treatise on the diversity of religions, which suggests the difficult nature of the soteriological question in the early modern period, see Dumsday.

7 See Jantzen 579-92.
and whether each poet’s text emphasizes its importance or glosses over it altogether. The uneasiness of salvation, which seems to inform the early modern period, particularly the ecclesiastical and doctrinal debates of the Protestant Reformation, is related to the fact that while the “Christian teachers after the New Testament period agreed that the Gospel was a message of salvation” (581), since the Patristic age “there was no single dogmatic definition of salvation in the way that there came to be a single orthodox line on the Trinity, the Person of Christ, or even the Sacraments.” The lack of consensus among church authorities on a doctrine of salvation—for even “by faith alone” seems a daunting leap for most believers to take—encourages poets to contemplate the problem and make their own suggestions in their dramas. Late sixteenth-century England is ripe for studying the insecurity bred by specific doctrine, or its lack thereof, since the Elizabethan religious settlement and the Act of Uniformity (1559) led to ambiguity about specific tenets of the Church of England.⁸ As James W. Broaddus suggests,

Salvation for those who had lived prior to the Reformation was a subject of serious concern and controversy in the Church of England during the latter part of the sixteenth century. Subsequent to the establishment of the Elizabethan church, English Catholics maintained that since the Roman church had been sufficient for the salvation of the forefathers, that same church should suffice for the salvation of those presently alive.⁹ (590)

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⁸ For example, the communion service as described in the prayer book of 1559 is a combination of the traditional belief from the prayer book of 1549: “The body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life;” and the Protestant service offered in the prayer book of 1552: “Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving.” Diarmaid MacCulloch considers the blending of the two “a masterpiece of theological engineering” (Later Reformation 27).
⁹ Broaddus refers to Richard Bauckham and his essay “Hooker, Travers and the Church of Rome in the 1580s.” For a study of Hooker’s thought, see Simut.
The controversy over salvation is complicated by suppositions and assumptions which do not necessarily advance its cause. The schismatic effects of the soteriological question driven by constant debates over justification, faith, and reprobation, led to many suggestive possibilities for the road to salvation. If nothing else, the one thing agreed upon is that salvation “comes through Jesus Christ, who is ‘the Way, the Truth, and the Life’” (Jantzen 581), his spilled blood being the necessary satisfaction for man’s redemption. For early modern English theologians like Richard Hooker and Walter Travers, the question of salvation was circumvented by the debate over the Pre-Reformation Roman Church fathers. As Bauckham notes,

> The truth which the Church of Rome did still profess was salvation by Christ alone, the ‘foundation of faith’ without which—as Hooker and Travers agreed—no man might be saved. That the Church of Rome did *profess* this truth was not in dispute, but the common Protestant view was that its effect was wholly nullified by the addition of other, false doctrines, specifically those relating to the role of human merit in salvation. (43)

One of the “false doctrines” called into question was the practice of indulgences, which were believed to lighten a sinner’s punishment in purgatory, a concept promoted by the Roman Church though not accepted by Protestants. The extra-sacramental was said to conflict with the sinner’s ability to properly repent because he could pay for the forgiveness of his sins rather than satisfy those he had wronged. Aside from giving too much power to the prelate, the practice also raised doubts about God’s gift of grace and the belief that “salvation [was] by Christ alone.” Such points of disagreement are the reasons for salvific unease. In his extensive work on the

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10 For a collection of essays about Hooker’s contribution to the Christian community, see McGrade.
11 Catholic indulgences refer to the extra remission of purgatorial punishments that a pope may grant a sinner after he has made a contribution to the Church, i.e., a monetary gift; see Kent.
Reformation, Diarmaid MacCulloch suggests that clerical debates, such as that concerning the Virgin Mary’s birth and her role as the human vessel for Christ, are a “fascinating mixture of scholarly arguments and popular hunger for the certainty of salvation” (22). Debates such as these tend to carry high stakes since, if Christians cannot agree on how the faithful may reach heaven in the afterlife, believers may ultimately doubt their participation in salvation and therefore experience the fear and anxiety that faith is supposed to alleviate.

Platonic Currents

The concept of the soul’s preservation after death is not unique to Christianity since “Christians inherited Graeco-Roman culture and thought” (Christianity 30). As MacCulloch suggests, whenever Christians have expounded their faith and “have tried to make sense of their sacred books” it has been difficult “to avoid doing so in ways already created by the Greeks.” He attributes the Christian outlook on the afterlife to the influence of Plato’s “view of reality and authenticity … [of looking] beyond the immediate and everyday to the universal or ultimate” (31), as exemplified in the Republic’s cave analogy. MacCulloch aptly summarizes the moral of that analogy, making it clear why it is appealing to many Christians:

An individual human soul should do its best to find its way back to the Forms which lie behind the world of our clouded senses, because there we may find arete – excellence or virtue. The path is through the intellect. ‘Excellence [arete] 

12 For a discussion of indulgences in the early modern period, see MacCulloch, Reformation 120-4; and Christianity 555-7.
13 For a discussion of the Torah’s significance to the salvific questions raised by early Christian theologians, see Neusner 25-42; Neusner claims that “the doctrine of salvation, given mythic expression in the picture of the Messiah at the end of times, emerges in rich and full detail in particular in the Talmud of the Land of Israel” (31).
of soul’ is our chief purpose or direction, because beyond even the Forms is the Supreme Soul, who is God and who is ultimate arete. (31)

The sense of a return is evident in MacCulloch’s explanation, as well as the idea that intellectual excellence is the path to virtue and so may bring man out of his clouded state of existence to “ultimate arete.” This is not the only one of Plato’s ideas that offers the earliest seeds of a salvific doctrine.14 As Jantzen points out, church Fathers, such as Clement and Origen, “accepted the platonic principle that like is known by like; thus the illumination presented by Christ is appropriated only by assimilation to the deity” (584).15 Saint Augustine openly argues for the ties between Christianity and Plato’s philosophy, suggesting, “Si ergo Plato Dei huius imitatorem cognitorem amatorem dixit esse sapientem, cuius participatione sit beatus, quid opus est excutere ceteros? Nulli nobis quam isti propius accesserunt” (De civitate dei, Bk. 8, ch. 5) ‘if Plato, therefore, has declared that the wise man imitates, knows and loves this God and is blessed through fellowship with him, why should we have to examine other philosophers? No school has come closer to us than the Platonists’ (Wiesen 23).16 Plato’s philosophy is invaluable to the topic of salvation in the early modern period, as humanist philosophers such as Marsilio Ficino believed that it was accurately presented by Neoplatonists, their ideas influencing medieval theological thinking and much of Christian exegesis up through the Renaissance and after.17 C. S. Lewis suggests that works such as Apuleius’s “De Deo Socratis” are instrumental in conveying the “scraps of Plato—often scraps which were very marginal and unimportant in Plato’s work—[that] trickled down to the Middle ages” (Discarded Image 43). This period saw a

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14 For Socrates’s reasons why man can see the cosmos, see Plato, Timaeus 28c and 29; and cf. Lewis, Discarded Image 52-4.
15 For Origen as a Christian philosopher, see Ramelli 220; see also Jantzen 582.
16 For Augustine and Plato, see Wild 16; and MacCulloch, Christianity 309.
17 Cf. Allen.
“diffused Platonism, inextricably mixed with neo-Platonic elements,” which furnished “the intellectual atmosphere in which the new Christian culture grew up.” For all the Platonic texts that lay bare the beginnings of Christianity, the *Phaedo* offers an early sketch of a salvific doctrine. The dialogue between Cebes, Simmias, and Socrates prior to his death marks the start of a long, dialectical guide outlining the road to salvation—a road that has yet to be mapped out with certainty. Socrates argues for the soul’s immortality and its preservation after the body’s death; his belief in the soul’s eternal existence seems to speak to Christian salvation, whereby the soul is granted everlasting bliss in the celestial realm. On Socrates’s death, he will come to know “all things such as Size, Health, Strength and, in a word, the reality of all other things, that which each of them essentially is” (Grube 65e).\(^\text{18}\) He believes that the real philosopher, the one who does not pursue mere satisfaction of the flesh, hopes that “after death he will attain the greatest blessings yonder” (Grube 64). He claims that the soul cannot discover “the reality of all other things” while it is imprisoned in the body because it is deceived by its senses: “He will do this most perfectly who approaches the object with thought alone, without associating any sight with his thought, or dragging in any sense perception with his reasoning” (Grube 66). Since the “body confuses the soul and does not allow it to acquire truth and wisdom whenever it is associated with it,” Socrates claims that pure thought, unaffected by the senses, will lead to an understanding of things in their unadulterated form. Discovering “each reality pure and by itself” leads one to “ultimate arete,” whose “path is through the intellect.” When the body dies, and man is relieved of his physical senses, the mind can gather into herself and thus “acquire truth and wisdom.”\(^\text{19}\) But Socrates is still speaking hypothetically, cultivating the uneasiness and

\(^{18}\) Plato’s works are cited using Stephanus pagination as a matter of convenience.

\(^{19}\) For a distinction between the ten senses of the Sensitive Soul, see Lewis, *Discarded Image* 161.
uncertainty of attaining “all that is pure, which is presumably the truth” (Grube 67b), since the truth cannot be acquired while man is alive and thus able to confirm its veracity; a certain amount of faith is required here as well. Socrates does not fear death, however, since his faith is sufficient and he is persuaded by the certainty of his soul’s existence outside of the body:

I should be wrong not to resent dying if I did not believe that I should go first to other wise and good gods, and then to men who have died and are better than men are here. Be assured that, as it is, I expect to join the company of good men. This last I would not altogether insist on, but if I insist on anything at all in these matters, it is that I shall come to gods who are very good masters. (Grube 63c)

His assurance and “good hope that some future awaits men after death” becomes conditional when he adds that the “future” is based on a judgment of whether one is good or wicked. He is certain that he is going “to join the company of good men,” suggesting that only better men deserve to be with the “wise and good gods.” Lewis echoes a similar, if not contradictory, sentiment when he claims that “it is not for us to say who, in the deepest sense, is or is not close to the spirit of Christ. We do not see into men’s hearts.” Socrates offers advice for guaranteeing one’s future with “wise and good gods” when he claims that his constant search for wisdom and disciplined life are what make him pure enough to walk with the gods on his death. His soul’s immortality is said to come from his righteous life, and not the absolution of sins, suggesting that no ceremony of purification exists prior to death though living a righteous life seems to imply virtue rather than the absence of vice. Repentance is not a concern for Socrates, at least not in this dialogue, and his assurance of acquiring “truth and wisdom” after death cannot be

20 Elizabeth I, the Supreme Governor of the Church of England and head of a confessional state, takes a similar line when early in her reign she claims that she “will not make windows into men’s souls.” See Wrightson, “The Elizabethan Confessional State: Conformity, Papists and Puritans.”
manipulated by any last minute conversion. When Phaedo tells his friends about Socrates’s final moments, he claims that he died “nobly and without fear” (Grube 58e), that he “appeared happy both in manner and words,” and, to Phaedo, he was “going down to the underworld … with the god’s blessing and … would fare well when he got there, if anyone ever does.”

But Socrates suggests conditionality when he says that the philosopher’s struggle is not for everyone and that some may fall short of the righteousness they are attempting to achieve. The mystics said that “whoever arrives in the underworld uninitiated and unsanctified will wallow in the mire, whereas he who arrives there purified and initiated will dwell with the gods” (Grube 69c). Socrates adds that there are “many who carry the thyrsus but the Bacchants are few” (Grube 69d). The Bacchants, according to him, are those who have in fact “practiced philosophy in the right way,” and are therefore the worthy ones. Socrates uses the mystic rites as an example because, according to Thomas Taylor, for Plato, “the ultimate design of the Mysteries … was to lead us back to the principles from which we descended, … a perfect enjoyment of intellectual [spiritual] good” (44). Socrates explains that wisdom is the only true virtue, and is the reason that the philosopher must not fear death. The initiate will be purified by his knowledge, which he grasps with his limited intellect, and only after he arrives in Hades will he learn whether his understanding has been sufficient for his soul’s placement among the “wise and good gods.” A distinction must be made here between knowledge and understanding. When Lewis explains the “Rational Soul” in his scheme of the medieval Model, he suggests that it exercises two faculties, intellectus and ratio:

*Intellectus* is the higher, so that if we call it ‘understanding,’ the Coleridgean distinction which puts ‘reason’ above ‘understanding’ inverts the traditional order.

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21 For Plato’s belief in one supreme Being, ruling over minor divinities, see Wild 14; Burnet 118; Grube 178 and MacCulloch, *Christianity* 32.
Boethius … distinguishes *intelligentia* from *ratio*; the former being enjoyed in its perfection by angels. *Intellectus* is that in man which approximates most nearly to angelic *intelligentia*; it is in fact *obumbrata intelligentia*, clouded intelligence, or a shadow of intelligence. (157)

He thus relies on Aquinas’s explication of intellect (“*intelligere*”) as representing the understanding of an indivisible and simple truth, “‘whereas reasoning (*ratiocinari*) is the progression towards an intelligible truth by going from one understood (*intellecto*) point to another. The difference between them is thus like the difference between rest and motion or between possession and acquisition.’” Lewis concludes that “mental life is spent in laboriously connecting those frequent, but momentary, flashes of *intelligentia* which constitute *intellectus*.”

The ambiguous suggestion that many carry the thyrsus, but few are the Bacchants, which is interpreted as the true philosophers, assumes that the soul’s placement with the “wise and good gods” after death is neither guaranteed, nor easy to attain. Though man may attempt to satisfy initiation and purification rites, he will not necessarily become like a Bacchant and be able to “practice philosophy in the right way.” In the New Testament, when Christ tells his followers the parable of the wedding banquet, he uses a similar adage. He begins by making a comparison, claiming that the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who gave his son a wedding feast with invited guests who ignored his invitation. When the guests refused to come to the feast, the king told his servants that “the wedding is prepared: but they which were bidden, were not worthy” (*Matt* 22.8). He then ordered them to find others to bring to the marriage. When the servants returned with new guests, the king found one of them inappropriately attired and told his servants to “bind him hand and foot: take him away, and cast him into utter darkness: [where] there shall

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22 Scripture is from *1599 Geneva Bible* unless otherwise noted.
be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (13). The guest’s punishment seems gratuitous since he was not originally invited and therefore does not necessarily have appropriate wedding garments. The anagogical meaning, however, is just as severe. Christ’s moral, provided at the parable’s conclusion, holds that “many are called, but few chosen” (14), by which he means that those called to receive God’s grace are not always worthy of salvation. Man’s participation in the wedding feast, his ability to understand the nature of God—his ratio—is necessary for him to receive God’s favor. If man does not use reason to assimilate himself to God, he will be cast into an infernal, if only metaphorical, darkness. Not only does this parable imply Christianity’s exclusivity, but its conditionality as well. The uncertainty of salvation breeds uneasiness and is a growing concern throughout the early modern period, if one only evinced by the schism between its churches.

Dantean Echoes

Dante’s influence on the early modern period is evident. For C. S. Lewis, Dante is one of the few medieval writers whose work fuses “delighted contemplation of the Model and intense religious feeling of a specifically Christian character” (Discarded Image 19). And in his work on the Latin Middle Ages, Ernst Robert Curtius claims that the Commedia “is the sealing of the bond which the Latin Middle Ages made between the antique and the modern world” (358). By “assigning an Elysian precinct in the other world to the poets and heroes of Antiquity” (238), Dante subsumed the classical world beneath the Christian one. Erich Auerbach admits to the general acknowledgment of critics that “the Renaissance represents a unit in the history of European culture and that the decisive element of its unity was the self-discovery of the human

23 For a study of Renaissance commentary on Dante’s Commedia, see Parker.
personality” (177), one which begins with Dante despite his “medieval view of the world.” The Commedia, a poem about the road to salvation, is no doubt an influence, both poetical and theological, from Spenser to Milton, despite the poets’ ideological religious conflict with the Roman Church. The inspiration is less explicit, however, in Spenser, Marlowe, and Shakespeare than in the well charted admiration Milton held for Dante’s style and subject.24 Werner Friederich surveys Dante’s influence in England, determining that Chaucer brought “the first Dantesque text to England, long before Serravalle’s” (182) Latin translation of the Commedia (1416-7) and Marsilio Ficino “rendered the De Monarchia into Italian (1467)” (78). Friederich claims, however, that Dante’s fame in England “decreased considerably” (190) between Chaucer and Milton even though he is not explicit about why. He relies on the work of Jusserand, Toynbee and Kuhns, among others, to suggest that “the English vision was not in the least influenced by Dante,” bolstering his conclusion that “the dearth of definite knowledge about Dante and the absolute lack of any significant influence of the [Commedia] or the Vita Nuova upon the poets of the English Renaissance are best illustrated by Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare, the three greatest Elizabethans” (195).25 He addresses the work of James Russell Lowell, who “was one of the few critics to believe that the Faerie Queene had been influenced by the [Commedia],” but he also mentions that Koeppel “rejects the assumption that Spenser had been influenced by Dante.” He also claims that E. H. Plumptre acknowledges the similarity of meaning between “Dante’s letter to Can Grande della Scala and Spenser’s letter to Sir Walter Raleigh concerning the hidden meaning behind their allegorical epic.” But it is difficult to

24 See C. H. Herford cited in Friederich 204-5; Herford claims that the aim of the Commedia “as Dante tells us, was to show how man at large might thus escape from misery in this life, and win happiness hereafter.” He also suggests that Paradise Lost “is an intimation, also, to the ruined army of Puritanism, that there was another way which the individual soul could traverse by its own insight and resolution alone.”

25 Cf. Toynbee; Jusserand; and Kuhns, Dante and the English Poets from Chaucer to Tennyson.
confirm his assertion that “Spenser, one of the most learned and most widely read men of his
time, was deeply indebted to Homer and Virgil, to Ariosto and Tasso; yet of Dante he knew not”
(196). In the end, his survey of Dante’s popularity in England during the early modern period is
not specific to textual comparisons between the poets’ works. The present examination, however,
relies on Dante’s texts as comparative components, and takes the poet’s salvific epic as a source,
if only implied, for the soteriological debates that emerge in the early modern period. It is
apparent that the authors of the works explored here do not disregard the medieval road to
salvation but instead attempt to assimilate it, relying on parts of it for their own depiction of
redemption. Because of this, their representations of Christian salvation prove ambiguous, if not
contradictory to the prevailing beliefs both of their time and their faith. As Auerbach suggests,
“although the Christian eschatology that had given birth to this new vision of man was to lose its
unity and vitality, the European mind was so permeated with the idea of human destiny that even
in the very un-Christian artists it preserved the Christian force and tension which were Dante’s
gift to posterity” (178). For him, the poets since Dante’s time were free to treat religious and
mythical subjects “more penetratingly than before” (179):

For they too were drawn into the historical vision we have described; the
traditional fable lost its emblematic rigidity, and from the rich material, which had
been largely obscured beneath dogmatic and spiritualist symbols, the author was
now enabled, by his insight into the unity of character and fate, to select the
perceptions that seemed to offer the fullest evidence and the most essential truth.

26 For discussions of Spenser’s familiarity with Dante’s work, see Tosello 60. See also Dédéyan
180-216; Weinberg; and Wilson, “A Supplement to Toynbee’s Dante in English Literature.”
27 For more critical work on Dante’s influence, see Caeser.
28 See Auerbach 178; for him, the “new vision of man” is Dante’s “historical individual …
reborn in his manifest unity of body and spirit … both old and new, rising from long oblivion
with greater power and scope than ever before.”
Auerbach’s observation holds true for the four poets considered in these pages, as each one has used aspects of the medieval church to expound salvation in a seemingly secular way—with the possible exception of Milton, whose salvific drama is typological and more suggestive of redemption by faith alone than any other. The fate of the hero lies in his ability to use reason to make sense of the intelligence he gains, and each work relies in some way on Fortune, in the Dantean vein, and her gift for complicating man’s road to salvation, if not for guiding him in it.29

In the seventh canto of the *Inferno*, when the Pilgrim asks his guide who is Fortune and “che è, che i ben del mondo ha sì tra branche” (69) ‘what is she like / who holds all worldly wealth within her fists’ (Musa 65), he responds:

Similemente a li splendor mondani
ordinò general ministra e duce
che permutasse a tempo li ben vani
di gente in gente e d’uno in altro sangue,
oltre la difension d’i senni umani;

Vostro saver non ha contasto a lei:
questa proveede, giudica, e persegue
suo regno come il loro li altri dèi.
Le sue permutazion non hanno triegue:
necessità la fa esser veloce;
si spesso vien chi vicenda consegue. (77-90)

For worldly splendors, He decreed the same

29 For Dante’s invention of Fortune as Earth’s Intelligencia, see Lewis, *Discarded Image* 139.
and ordained a guide and general ministress
who would at her discretion shift vain wealth
from nation unto nation, house to house,
without a chance of mankind’s interference;
…………………………………………
Your knowledge has no influence on her;
she provides for change, she judges, and she rules
her domain as do the other gods their own.
Her changing changes never take a rest;
necessity keeps her in constant motion;
men quickly come and go to take their turn. (Musa 65)

Her role is clearly defined and though “ella s’è beata” (94) ‘she is blest’ (Musa 67), she “volve sua spera e beata si gode” (96) ‘turns her sphere and, blest, turns it with joy’ (Musa 67). The Pilgrim’s wisdom, his “saver,” is incapable of denying its desire for heavenly intelligence, or, in Boethius’s sense, intelligentia.\(^30\) Man must therefore submit to Fortune since “ben vani” change hands at her will.\(^31\) She is constantly rearranging the world to alter the fates of men. Boethius echoes this sentiment in *Philosophiae consolationis* when Fortune claims it is impossible for her to remain stagnant:

Nos ad constantiam nostris moribus alienam inexpleta hominum cupiditas

alligabit? Haec nostra uis est, hunc continuum ludum ludimus; rotam uolubili orbe

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\(^30\) See Barolini 48; Dante’s use of the verb “savere” is significant to the poem as a whole, but for this study it is important to know that “wisdom [is] embodied in the noun *savere* and its variants (the adjective *saggio*, the verb *sapere*).”

\(^31\) These empty goods, which may mean idle, futile or fruitless, are in direct contrast to the greatest good in the other world which Socrates hopes to receive on his death.
uersamus, infima summis summa infimis mutare gaudemus. Ascende si placet, sed ea lege ne utique cum ludicri mei ratio poscet, descendere iniuriam putes.

(2.2, 27-33)

Shall the insatiable desire of men tie me to constancy, so contrary to my custom? This is my force, this is the sport which I continually use. I turn about my wheel with speed, and take a pleasure to turn things upside down. Ascend, if thou wilt, but with this condition, that thou thinkest it not injury to descend when the course of my sport so requireth.\(^{32}\) (Stewart and Rand 181)

The significance—if not beauty—of Fortune is her ever-changing nature, which gives men hope that their fate may improve when things are seemingly difficult and hopeless. As Boethius’s Fortune asks, “Quid si haec ipsa mei mutabilitas iusta tibi causa est sperandi meliora?” (2.2, 43-5) ‘What if this mutability of mine be a just cause for thee to hope for better?’ (Stewart and Rand 181) Her punishments of one are often a boon to another, which is one reason that she is symbolized by a wheel that perpetually turns. As Lewis suggests, “by making [the wheel] a sphere Dante emphasises the new rank he has given her” (140), making her like one of the angels, or intelligentia. Fortune’s angelic nature plays a part in each of the early modern works considered in the pages that follow; she determines each hero’s fate. For Spenser’s Red Cross Knight, destiny is decided at the outset and is simply a matter of whether he will rise to the occasion, and fulfill the promise of his being “borne under happy starre” (1.27, 237); for Marlowe, the question of Faustus’s fate seems to hover over the entire action of the drama, and is unresolved until the final moment when the viewer is left to contemplate the hero’s doom; Fate appears to be occupied with Hamlet even as she sweeps Ophelia up in a turn of her wheel to link

\(^{32}\) Cf. Grandgent, *La Divina Commedia* 70.
her destiny with his; and for Samson, fate works in a different way, as Milton relies on his understanding of Christian doctrine to demonstrate the inescapability of God’s calling.

The comparative analyses to follow do not rehash Christianity’s influence on the respective poets; rather they aim to reveal something new about Christianity in their works, or to make explicit what effect, if any, these works may have had on the principles of salvation in the early modern period. The significance of the study lies in its evaluation of each play’s ability to affect the interpretation of Christian dogma through its presentation of contrition. Textual ambiguities, inferences, resolutions, and influences therefore help to clarify what may have been implied in their illustrations of redemption. Secular representations are important to the doctrine of salvation because they are unrestricted by religious precepts which may hinder the poet’s expression. The concerns that the question of salvation raises in the early modern period must have fostered anxiety, as theological conflicts and wars of religion plagued England throughout the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By looking at the complexity of Christian salvation, it becomes evident that at the most basic level of understanding, theological or not, man must be assured of its availability to him, for that will mark the difference between hope and despair. Christian salvation is further complicated by the spirituality rediscovered in the ancient philosophical texts, as Neoplatonists suggest the pre-existence and immortality of the soul. 33

Both those in authority and the Christians who studied the Bible themselves believed in a path to salvation, a process by which man is saved by the blood of Christ. The dissent over the doctrine of salvation suggests that many also believed that grace was conditional and therefore not guaranteed by one’s sole belief in “Jesus Christ, who is ‘the Way, the Truth, and the Life.’” The

33 See Bowersock, et al. 40.
poets, stifled by the limited parameters of the prelate, who question the church’s precepts and thus challenge faith offer hope for some kind of redemption.
Chapter Two

_Divina Commedia_ in Spenser’s Red Crosse

Book One of _The Faerie Queene_ depicts the path to salvation for the elect few as put forth by Protestant doctrine, but Spenser’s poetic sympathies seem also indebted to the medieval church, if only implicitly, for some of the precepts to be found in the Legend of Red Crosse. It is often assumed that Spenser’s epic is an allegory of Reformation principles because the poet publicly adored Queen Elizabeth, and promoted her faith and authority as Supreme Governor of the Church of England. His Catholic characters, figures of ridicule and superstition, seem to suggest that _FQ_ is an allegory with a bias toward Protestant beliefs. James W. Broaddus concludes that Book One of _FQ_ is “an expression of the order of salvation that Protestant theologians found primarily in Romans 8:29–30 and … article 17 of the Thirty-Nine Articles” (573), both of which suggest that God preordains those who are to be made in the image of Christ and are therefore justified freely through grace. Broaddus claims that critical interest in the epic has shifted since the 1960s, and little has been written about its salvific consequences as of late. His argument suggests that the House of Holiness is the central scene in which the knight is both called and justified, assuming that he is inadequate for justification until then. Redcrosse is “a pre-Reformation Christian and consequently Catholic knight newly clad in [the] arms [of a Christian man]” (574), whose spiritual inadequacies are “consonant with sixteenth-century Protestant views on the absence of assurance in the Catholic faith” (577). Broaddus claims that

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34 _The Faerie Queene_ will be abbreviated as _FQ_ as a matter of convenience.
35 Though these pages are not concerned with Spenser’s religious faith, it will be valuable to acknowledge his sympathies. For Spenser’s sympathies toward both Anglican and Catholic doctrine, see Whitaker, _The Religious Basis of Spenser’s Thought_ 5; cf. also Lewis, _Allegory of Love_ 323.
36 For more on Spenser’s religious leanings, see Hickey 491; Lewis, _The Allegory of Love_ 321-33; Collins 190-231; Whitaker, “The Theological Structure of the Faerie Queene, Book I” 151-64; Ricks 322-31; and Nelan.
those critics who find support in the epic for Spenser’s commitment to the Elizabethan Religious Settlement either ignore its Catholic images or dismiss them as superstitious. But he finds that critics such as Emile Legouis, who address the conflicting religious ideas in Spenser, are more apt to offer substantial support for Catholic interpretations. For instance, Legouis suggests, “though averse to the beliefs of the Middle Ages, which to his eyes were only superstition and idolatry, in poetic feeling Spenser remained Catholic to the core” (32). Broaddus contends that Spenser gives his reader “a Protestant look at the Catholic knight” (575) in the opening stanza of the first book:

But on his brest a bloudie Crosse he bore,

The deare remembrance of his dying Lord,

For whose sweete sake that glorious badge he wore,

And dead as living ever him adored. (1.2, 10-3)

As the “bloudie Crosse” evokes the Crucifixion, the crucifix being one of the Catholic emblems that Queen Elizabeth retains when she succeeds to the throne, the red cross on a white background also symbolizes the resurrection flag in early modern iconography and depictions of Christ’s weathering hell. This image does double duty as both the icon of man’s salvation through Christ’s death on the cross, and as the crest worn by fearless warriors, especially those of the Crusades and the thirteenth-century regiments of King Edward I. The blood-red cross is associated with Saint George, the patron saint of warriors, the martyred figure who may or may not have actually existed, and the Golden Legend of Saint George and the Dragon must likewise have inspired Spenser, even as he confirms that “King Arthure” (716) is the model for his

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37 For a discussion of medievalism in literary tastes of the early modern period, see Beatrice Ricks 322; for iconography of Christ in Limbo, see Gaston 41-72.
knights in his opening letter to Walter Ralegh.\(^\text{38}\) The very name of the knight is emblematic of the Passion, the evocative red cross being symbolic of his “remembrance of his dying Lord,” who is alive in spirit despite his physical death. With Spenser’s suggestion that the knight’s Lord is “dead as living ever,” he evokes the image of Christ in Revelation who tells Saint John the Divine, “I am the first, and the last, and am alive and was dead … behold I am alive for evermore” (1.18).\(^\text{39}\) Broaddus claims that Spenser’s use of the verb “adore” in this line—“dead as living ever him adored”—recalls the totems of the Catholic Church and its idol worship.\(^\text{40}\) All of this imagery is supported by the claim that the knight’s mood “seem[s] too solemn sad” (1.2, 17) and though fearful of nothing, he “ever [is] ydred” (18). Broaddus suggests that the knight’s sadness and fearful state are brought on by his Catholic and therefore dead faith in salvation.

Redcrosse is “lacking the assurance generated by Luther’s later illuminations … [and those for which] Martin Chemnitz said of Catholics in his review of the Council of Trent, [that] hope ‘is always connected and coupled with fear and doubt’” (576).\(^\text{41}\) The “soveraine hope, which in his helpe he had” (1.2, 15)—“his” being Christ’s—suggests that the knight does not despair though he is solemn and grave. The word which seems to characterize his unhappy state is “sad,” which may mean serious when used with “solemn” as it is on several occasions. His being “ydred,” which means fearful, seems not to imply dead faith, but faith in salvation—Christ’s first words to Saint John the Divine in Revelation are “fear not” (1.17), fear being a necessary product of one’s justification before God. Broaddus asks how one can “incorporate the Catholic characters and their seriously described Catholic practices into a comprehensive Protestant reading of the symbolic center of the Legend of Holiness” (586), and answers his question by showing how

\(^{38}\) For a summary of the Saint’s well known legends, see Moeller.

\(^{39}\) Scripture is from Tyndale’s Bible unless otherwise noted.

\(^{40}\) See Broaddus 575.

\(^{41}\) See Chemnitz 589.
Redcrosse receives the true knowledge of Christ. After “hearing the gospel preached by Fidelia, God extends the inward calling through the power of the Holy Spirit, and Red Crosse is received into a state of grace, into ‘the perfection of all heavenly grace’ (10.21)” (587). Hearing the word of God, however, is not all that makes him ready for salvation. He must also repent and do penance before his purgation is complete and he is introduced to the figure who represents grace, Charissa. She will bring him to Mercy and “that godly aged Sire” (10.48, 424) on the Mount to see “the new Hierusalem” (57, 505).\textsuperscript{42} In the end, Broaddus concludes that “Redcrosse, having through grace momentarily subjected the flesh to the Spirit, is moving slowly and unevenly toward sanctification and that ‘glorifying righteousness’ or ‘holiness’” (604). In downplaying the significance of the knight’s penance and purgation, however, Broaddus seems to overlook Spenser’s blatant and distinct reliance on the medieval church. These seem to be crucial considerations when one is attempting to reconcile the Catholicism in this ostensibly Protestant epic. That Spenser’s “poetic feeling” (Legouis 32), rather than his faith, is Catholic seems apt.

When discussing the separation of poet from poem, Northrop Frye observes that “a snowflake is probably quite unconscious of forming a crystal, but what it does may be worth study even if we are willing to leave its inner mental process alone” (89). In other words, the poet may be expressing something unintended and wholly unknown to him, and therefore his meaning may be derived from the outward shape of his poem, rather than his inner mental process. Whether the poem is studied through a theological or historical lens, the poet’s intention cannot be determined. I am aware of the critical debate about Wimsatt and Beardsley’s “intentional

\textsuperscript{42} Charissa’s role as grace, not simply charity, will be expounded in the pages below. From her name alone it is easy to see how in English she can be mistaken to personify charity, it being the standard Latin translation for caritas. But the root of Charissa is from the Greek word \textit{χάρις}, charis, which is not only kindness but is used to mean grace and favor throughout the Old and New Testament.
fallacy,” and I agree that an author’s intended meaning is irrelevant to the critic since the finished text conveys its own “meaning, structure and value,” which are “inherent within the finished, freestanding, and public work of literature itself” (Abrams 157). In the pages that follow, I intend to look at the poem and its reliance on tropes of the medieval church, especially in the light of Christian salvation, and specifically in terms of its borrowings from Dante and the medieval images of sin and salvation to be found in his *Commedia.*\(^43\) In doing so, I do not intend to conclude whether Spenser had Catholic sympathies; rather I hope to show that his collusion with the medieval church in Book One of *FQ,* regarding Christian salvation in particular, is due to a poetic influence that is evident when the similarities between the two are shown.

In an essay on the symbolism of Catholic sacramentals in *FQ,* Beatrice Ricks remarks that “there can be little quarrel with the statement that medieval theology and medieval art formed the background for his work, for while Spenser was the first of the great Renaissance poets of England, he was at the same time the last of the medieval” (324). And in Spenser’s letter to Raleigh, he not only offers his friend a little background for each of the first three books of his epic, but also tells him which works have most influenced him.\(^44\) Spenser admits that Homer, Virgil, Ariosto and Tasso have affected his poem, but he does not acknowledge Dante as a poetic muse.\(^45\) I would suggest, however, that his omission of Dante does not imply his having never read or heard of the Italian poet. Spenser seems to borrow certain aspects of the *Commedia,*

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\(^43\) For a survey of the Spenser-Dante connection, see Tosello 59-66. See also Friederich; Hamilton, *The Structure of Allegory in “The Faerie Queene,”* Dédéyan 180-216; Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity* and *The Secular Scripture,* Tonkin 291-301; Giamatti; Rose; MacCaffrey; and King 22-58. For thematic comparisons, see Goldstein 121-9; and Paolucci, “Women in the Political Love-Ethic of the *Divine Comedy* and *The Faerie Queen*” 139-153. For a discussion of the allegorical readings of Frye and Hamilton, see Gottfried 1362-77.

\(^44\) “The Letter of the Authors,” an epistle to Walter Raleigh, is included in most editions of *FQ.* References to the poem itself will here be cited by canto, stanza, and line.

\(^45\) For a discussion of Spenser as influenced by Dante, see Tosello 60-1; and Paolucci 153.
tropes as well as characters, for the Legend of Red Crosse, and uses a “continued Allegory or
darke conceit” (Letter 716) to convey his message, making it tempting to compare the two poets.
The allegorical scheme grants Spenser leeway in expressing religious ideas without actually
confirming them explicitly, and he readily admits that his allegory is open to interpretation and is
intended to be “delightfull and pleasing to commune sence” (717). But he also makes a case for
allegory as a “much more profitable and gratious” example of doctrine than simple precepts
delivered plainly. To show the virtuous and gentle fashioning of his noble personage he argues
that he has conceived a work “most plausible and pleasing, being coloured with an historicall
fiction, the which the most part of men delight to read, rather for variety of matter, then for
profite of the ensample” (716). His suggestion that his poem is “coloured” with a fiction echoes
Dante’s remarks in the second book of Il Convivio, in which the poet claims that the allegorical
is “quello che si nasconde sotto ’l manto di queste favole, ed è una veritade ascosa sotto bella
menzogna” (97) ‘the one that hides itself under the mantle of these tales, and is a truth hidden
under beauteous fiction’ (Wicksteed 63). Significant along these lines is Dante’s explanation of
the four-fold method of allegory in his epistle to Can Grande:

Immo dici potest polysemos, hoc est plurium sensuum; nam primus sensus est qui
habetur per literam, alius est qui habetur per significata per literam. Et primus
dicitur literalis, secundus vero allegoricus, sive mysticus. (173)

Rather the work may be described as ‘polyseous,’ that is, having several
meanings; for the first meaning is that which is conveyed by the letter, and the
next is that which is conveyed by what the letter signifies; the former of which is
called literal, while the latter is called allegorical, or mystical. (Toynbee 199)
Dante seems here to take up the medieval notion of the types of allegorical interpretation discovered by the early Christian followers and laid out in their commentary and biblical exegesis, conflating the allegorical, moral and anagogical, and essentially folding the typological sense of meaning into allegory itself. T. K. Seung claims that Dante’s literal sense teaches the actual deeds with the event, while the “allegory [teaches] what you should believe, the moral sense what you should do, [and] anagogy what you should aim for” (Metaphysics 176). Scripturally speaking, the anagogical sense, however, cannot be put into words because it “transcends all thought, history and language; it is the union of the soul with God” (177). Seung suggests that the Commedia does not distinguish between the theological and poetical because none of its content, what it actually teaches, can be put into words.46 The whole of the epic is the thing in itself because “understanding or revelation is not a set of ideas: it is to awaken to oneself, which is to encompass the world” (180). When C. S. Lewis suggests that FQ “is the lineal descendant not of English allegory but of Italian epic” (Allegory 372), he does not attribute Spenser’s poetic effort to Dante specifically. He does, however, resolve the question of Spenser’s seemingly Protestant epic having Catholic tendencies by claiming that “Catholicism is allegorical” (402) because “allegory consists in giving an imagined body to the immaterial” and the “allegorist’s symbol will naturally resemble” (403) any material body that Catholicism has already claimed for itself. In his work on allegory, Angus Fletcher claims that Spenser’s poem is a major example of the mode of literature that expresses the dualism of good and evil. Fletcher claims that while allegory “does not need to be read exegetically” (7), its literal level often “suggests a peculiar doubleness of intention” that is enriched “if given interpretation.” He concludes that the connections which can be drawn among allegorical and religious figures,

46 Cf. Hede 69-75.
literature and “psychoanalytically observed phenomena” (21) show that allegory is “a human reconstitution of divinely inspired messages, a revealed transcendental language” that attempts to “preserve the remoteness” of divine nature. Fletcher suggests that allegory is a way of keeping the godhead veiled, or maintaining proper reverence so that religious doubt—if not spiritual uncertainty—does not overshadow any transcendental meaning. Spenser abides by this idea of veiling, “knowing how doubtfully all Allegories may be construed” (Letter 716) and suffer from “jealous opinions and misconstructions.” He understands the precarious nature of the rhetorical device, and although his use of an extended allegory marks an explicit similarity between his poem and Dante’s epic, both poems have far more in common and their comparability brings Spenser’s “doubleness of intention” (Fletcher 7) to the fore.

The Errour of Fraud

At the beginning of FQ, the Knight of the Red Crosse and Una find themselves forced into a “shadie grove” (1.7, 56) which results in their losing “that path, which first was showne” (1.10, 85), and lands them in “Errours den, / A monster vile, whom God and man does hate” (1.13, 114-5).47 The dark woods and erring path evoke the Inferno’s opening canto which begins with Dante the Pilgrim finding himself “per una selva oscura” (1, 2) ‘in a darkened forest’ (Musa 3) and “che’ la diritta via era smarrita” (1, 3) ‘wandered off from the straight path’ (Musa 3).48 Similarly, the vile monster whom Redcrosse is forced to kill seems to be an adaptation of Dante’s Furies and Geryon.49 Unlike the Furies in Virgil, birdlike creatures with claws and faces

47 Cf. Rev. 9.7-10; and cf. Dédéyan 189-90.
48 Dante the Pilgrim is used to distinguish the Commedia’s hero from its poet; as a matter of convenience, Dante the Pilgrim will be the Pilgrim.
49 For a comparison between the textual descriptions of Dante’s dragon from the Inferno (canto 25) and Spenser’s dragon from book one (canto 11), see Goldstein 124-6. Virgil’s influence on
of women, Dante’s are not harpies but Medusa-like fiends “di sangue tinte” (9, 38) ‘stained with blood’ (Musa 83),

che membra feminine avieno e atto,
e con idre verdissime eran cinte;
serpentelli e ceraste avien per crine,
onde le fiere tempie erano avvinte. (9, 39-42)
their bodies and their gestures those of females;
their waists were bound in cords of wild green hydars,
horned snakes and little serpents grew as hair,
and twined themselves around their savage temples. (Musa 83)
And Geryon is the representative of fraud, the vice “de l’uom proprio male” (11, 25) which ‘belongs exclusively to man’ (Musa 101); it is the other mode of malice “ch’odio in cielo acquista” (11, 22) that ‘earn[s] the hate of Heaven’ (Musa 101). T. K. Seung suggests that,

Like Christ, Geryon appears in a dual nature. Christ is the incarnation of mercy, and Satan the incarnation of envy. Geryon is known as a three-headed king in the classical legend. One is rather puzzled to see only one head on Geryon until one comes to see three heads on Satan at the center of Hell. Geryon’s one head is in the imitation of Christ who divests Himself of the majesty of the Holy Trinity in order to come singly to earth. (Fragile Leaves 184)

Spenser’s Error is apparent from his description of Scylla in Book Three of The Aeneid: “At Scyllam caecis cohibet spelunca latebris / ora exsertantem et navis in saxa trahentem. / prima hominis facies et pulchro pectore virgo / pube tenus, postrema immani corpore pistrix, / delphinum caudas utero commissa luporum” (424-7) ‘But Scylla a cavern confines in dark recesses, from which she thrusts forth her mouths and draws ships on to her rocks. Above she is of human form, down to the waist a fair-bosomed maiden; below, she is a sea dragon of monstrous frame, with dolphins’ tails joined to a belly of wolves” (Fairclough 401).
Seung bolsters his argument by comparing Virgil’s introduction of this fraudulent creature with John the Baptist’s presentation of Christ to his followers. In the gospel of John, the Baptist announces his arrival, “Behold the lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (1.29), while Virgil tells the Pilgrim, “Ecco la fiera con la coda aguzza, / che passa i monti, e rompe i muri e l’armi! / Ecco colei che tutto ’l mondo appuzza!” (17, 1-3) ‘And now, behold the beast with pointed tail, / that passes mountains, annulling walls and weapons, / behold the one that makes the whole world stink!’ (Musa 157) Dante’s personification of fraud is an epitome of dissimulation, with his human countenance and poisonous tail:

La faccia sua era faccia d’uom giusto,
tanto benigna avea di fuor la pelle,
e d’un serpente tutto l’altro fusto;
due branche avea pilose insin l’ascelle;
lo dosso e ’l petto e ambedue le coste
dipinti avea di nodi e di rotelle.

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Nel vano tutta sua coda guizzava,
torcendo in sù la venenosa forca
ch’a guisa di scorpion la punta armava. (10-27)

His face was the face of any honest man,
it shone with such a look of benediction;
and all the rest of him was serpentine;
his two clawed paws were hairy to the armpits,
his back and all his belly and both flanks
were painted arabesques and curlicues:

His tail, out in the void, he exercises,
twitching and twisting-up the venomed fork
that armed its tip just like a scorpion’s stinger. (Musa 157)

Similarly, Spenser’s creature is “Halfe like a serpent horribly displaide, / But th’ other halfe did womans shape retaine, / Most lothsome, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine” (1.14, 124-6). Like Geryon, Errour’s long tail is “in knots and many boughtes upwound, / Pointed with mortall sting” (15, 129-30), while her surrounding “thousand yong ones” (131) are like the Furies’ girdle of green snakes. Spenser’s “vile monster” of fraud is hated by both “God and man,” just as Dante’s God hates treachery caused by fraud since it is a vice unique to man. Spenser uses the word vile three times in this episode and each time as an adjective or adverb for Errour. Aside from its implication that she is extremely unpleasant, a moral defect is also implied. Errour is a symbol of schism, as is evinced by both the “bookes and papers” (1.20, 177) which she vomits up when Redcrosse strangles her and her myriad of offspring, “eachone / Of sundry shapes,” (1.15, 133) that “sucking upon her poisonous dugs” (132) she “dayly fed” (131). The division of her body into human and snake sections makes her a symbol of schism. The scene in Errour’s den in fact offers more than merely an opportunity for Redcrosse to demonstrate the faith that Una encourages him to add “unto [his] force” (1.19, 165), especially if it is explored with the knowledge that Errour is a figure not unlike Dante’s depictions of fraud. That Redcrosse’s faith is what gives him the strength to behead Errour and slay her young with the poison which her

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50 Cf. Dédéyan 192.
51 See *Inferno*, 11.22-7.
52 For fall and restoration readings, see Broaddus 579.
body exudes, an event that suggests that the knight not only destroys her spewing propaganda but also prevents it from spreading, causes his victory to appear single-handed rather than won with the help of another. At this point on the road to salvation, his ability to summon his faith in Christ against all other faiths—as evinced by the vomitted books—is still being challenged. Shortly after this victory he abandons Una because of the desire which Archimago plants in his dream. His faith, if strong enough to conquer Errour, a physical demon, should be all the more capable of defeating an imaginary one. If Spenser is suggesting here that faith alone defeats fraud, then Errour’s “thousand yong ones” (1.15, 131) need not die from feeding off her poisonous residue. If they are to represent future disseminators of blasphemy against Christianity and the Church, slaying them does not change the strength of one’s faith. Sacrilegious propaganda may in fact test the true believer’s faith since “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). The Protestant view on faith is that it is a blind undertaking which leads one to believe that the blood of Christ is sufficient for salvation. The point worth making is that as one reads Spenser through Dante, one comes to see that something other than the knight’s faith in the balm of Christ, and greater than himself, grants him success along the path to salvation.

In the Inferno, the Furies call upon Medusa to turn the Pilgrim to stone, even as he and Virgil await the heavenly aid sent to unlock the gates of Dis. The allegory’s moral sense of this event is that the Pilgrim must turn away from the reaper of discord so that his heart will not be hardened, and this is what he does. But Dante warns his reader to “mirate la docttrina che s’asconde / sotto ’l velame de li versi strani” (9, 62-3) ‘look now and see the meaning that is hidden / beneath the veil that covers [his] strange verses’ (Musa 85) and notice that as the Pilgrim covers his eyes from the threat of being petrified, “ch’elli era da ciel messo” (85) ‘he
[who] was sent from Heaven’ (Musa 85) arrives. Before Medusa can make an entrance, that heavenly “un ch’al passo / passava Stige con le piante asciutte” (80-1) ‘one who came / walking the Styx, his feet dry on the water’ (Musa 85), pushing away “quell’aere grasso” (82) ‘the putrid air’ (Musa 85) from his face, arrives not only to open the gate, but also to berate the hellish souls who “le fata dar di cozzo” (97) ‘lock horns with fate’ (Musa 87). The Pilgrim is destined and willed by Heaven to enter Dis unscathed and therefore nothing, not even his own human frailty, can stop him. In Spenser, the hero is encouraged by Una to “add faith unto [his] force” (1.19, 165), a suggestion that makes “his gall … grate for griefe and high disdaine” (168), and his anger gains him the upper hand, if only temporarily when he loosens Errour’s grip upon him. When Redcrosse actually beheads Errour, he is in a more awkward position. Spenser suggests that the knight is “fearful more of shame, / Then of the certain perill he stood in” (1.24, 208-9) when he is surrounded by the
cursèd spawne of serpents small,
Deformèd monsters, fowle, and black as inke,
Which swarming all about his legs did crall,
And him encombred sore, but could not hurt at all. (1.22, 195-8)
Spenser emphasizes that these small serpents are a minor irritation to Redcrosse, offering a comparison in the stanza that follows. The knight is there likened to a “gentle Shepheard” (1.23, 199) watching over his flock at night, who is molested by gnats whose “feeble stings” (204) are a mere annoyance rather than actually painful, and easily swatted away by his “clownish hands” (206). The image of the shepherd and his flock invokes the Good Shepherd and his followers, deepening the suggestion that Spenser’s shepherd overcomes a petty nuisance with a simple
brush of his hand and “oft doth mar their murmurings” (207). Like the shepherd, Redcrosse is more annoyed by the snakes, “blacke as inke,” a description that alludes to the books and papers vomitted forth, than fearful of the danger that their attack affords. His shame, therefore, is what urges him on, “resolved in minde all suddenly to win, / Or soone to lose, before he once would lin” (1.24, 211-2). With all the fury of his shame, the knight turns his wrathful energy on Errour and strikes “at her with more then manly force” (213) to “raft her hatefull head without remorse” (215). But he does not sever her head from her body with a haphazard sweep, using his own strength; rather Spenser suggests that his force is “more then manly.” The humiliation of being entangled and associated with fraudulent doctrine, the products of vile books and papers, give him an infusion of spiritual power, rather than physical vigor, which helps him slay the source of the fraud that takes all others with it, “making her death their life, and eke her hurt their good” (1.25, 225). In an inverse image of the Good Shepherd and his flock, the brood of baby serpents “flockèd all about her bleeding wound, / and suckèd up their dying mothers blood” (223-4). As Spenser puts it, “His foes have slaine themselves, with whom he should contend” (1.26, 234). The knight no longer needs to fight the enemies of his one true faith since their life source, the personification of discord and schism, has itself been split and therefore destroyed. Redcrosse essentially cuts the schism in half, he “rafts” it, or binds one thing to another, and fastens all other faiths together causing them to spring from the same fraudulent source.

The trope of the heavenly messenger who comes to help the chosen one, like the angel who opens the gates of Dis for the Pilgrim, is implicit in Redcrosse’s use of a force that is “more then manly,” but it is also hinted at when Una congratulates her knight on his victory, telling him that he is “borne under happy starre” (1.27, 237), an epithet that echoes the fifth canto of

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Paradiso. When the Pilgrim meets various shades in the Sphere of Mercury, they tell him, “O bene nato a cui veder li troni / del triumfo etternal concede grazia / prima che la milizia s’abbandoni” (115-7) ‘O bliss-born soul, to whom God grants the grace / to see the thrones of the eternal triumph / before abandoning the war of life’ (Musa 58).\(^{54}\) When Redcrosse finds his way out of the dark woods in which he is lost, he goes “forward on his way (with God to frend)” (1.28, 250), and it is understood that he has overcome his first impediment on his way toward salvation. The figure of schism which Redcrosse conquers in this opening canto is necessary for his journey toward God, for he must abolish all other religious doctrine before he can submit to God and rectify his position as champion of Una, or the one true faith. In this respect, defeating Error is the prerequisite that brings him from one spiritual place to another, just as Geryon is the physical transporter who takes the Pilgrim to the tormented depths of the Eighth Circle. He is forced to ride on the back of “quella sozza imagine di froda” (17, 7) ‘that repulsive spectacle of fraud’ (Musa 157) to get to the place where the sinners of schism are punished. As noted above, the schismatic nature of Error is confirmed with her decapitation, which puts an end both to her discord and her fraudulent multiplicity. Her punishment mirrors that of the schismatics in the ninth bolgia of the Eighth Circle, where Mohammed is

rotto dal mento infin dove si trulla.

Tra le gambe pendevan le minugia;

la corata pareva e ’l tristo sacco

che merda fa di quel che si trangugia. (28, 24-7)

ripped open from his chin to where we fart.

Between his legs his guts spilled out, the heart

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\(^{54}\) This scene recalls Spenser’s tenth canto, in which Redcrosse climbs the Mount of Contemplation with Mercy and sees the heavens.
and other vital parts, and the dirty sack
that turns to shit whatever the mouth swallows. (Musa 267)

When the tortured shade sees the Pilgrim, he spreads his own chest with his hands and says,

Or vedi com’ io mi dilacco!
vedi come storpiato è Mäometto!

........................................

E tutti li altri che tu vedi qui,
seminator di scandalo e di scisma
fuor vivi, e però son fessi così. (30-6)

You see how I am split!

See how Mahomet is deformed and torn!

........................................

The souls that you see passing in this ditch
they all were sowers of scandal and of schism,

and so in death you see them torn asunder. (Musa 269)

The punishment of a split body befalls not only Errour, but her brood, whose swollen bellies
“with fulnesse burst, / And bowels gushing forth” (1.26, 230-1). The inky snakes explode from
the poison and are like the one whose “gambe pendevan le minugia.” But the greatest example of
contrapasso in this canto of the Inferno is that of Bertran de Born who approaches the Pilgrim
with his head in his hand, telling him, “Perch’ io parti’ così giunte persone, / partito porto il mio
cerebro, lasso!, / dal suo principio ch’è in questo troncone” (139-41) ‘Because I cut the bonds of
persons joined / I bear my head cut off from its life-source / which is back there, alas, within its
trunk’ (Musa 275). The image of the headless betrayer whom Dante believed instigated Henry the Young’s rebellion against his father, Henry II, is grotesquely emulated in Spenser by Errour’s decapitation. The separation of the body from its head is a provocative image, a metaphorical representation of the schism between the head of the church and its body of believers.

That Bloody Tree

Schism, or division, becomes a recurring theme when Redcrosse is separated from Una by the fraudulent Archimago. It cannot be a coincidence that the seemingly Catholic representative is the cause of the rift, both physical and emotional, between the Red Crosse Knight and his one true faith. He is another example of fraud, a sorcerer disguised as a priest, confirmed by his “long blacke weedes” (1.29, 254), the belt around his waist from which hangs “his booke” (256) of prayer, his incessant “Ave-Mary[s]” (315) and his stories about “Saintes and Popes” (314). When the magician’s cunning ways see “divided into double parts” (2.9, 74) Una and her knight, he “devis[es] himselfe how to disguise” (10, 82), settling upon the mirror image of Redcrosse. Not only are Una and her knight separated, but Redcrosse is also seemingly split in two. Spenser, however, shows us that the schism forced on them by Archimago, or fraud disguised as Catholicism rather than Catholicism masking fraud, does not rob Redcrosse of his faith despite his disillusionment with Una. When Redcrosse flees his “gealous feare, / Will [is] his guide, and griefe [leads] him astray” (12, 102-3). The invocation of “will” is ambiguous, for Spenser may have in mind the knight’s free will, his determination, his desire, or God’s will,

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55 For a discussion of Dante’s use of contrapasso and its ability to provoke rational thought, see Auerbach 111.
56 Although the appearance of Archimago dressed as a Catholic hermit may suggest that Spenser is mocking the faith, it is important to acknowledge that Archimago’s sorcery is quickly revealed and that he is only posing as a Catholic rather than a corrupt follower of the faith.
which in a sense harks back to his being “borne under happy starre” and a chosen one. That “will” guides him, even though his grief leads him astray, reminds the reader that he is sustained by something other than his own faith, just as he slays Errour with “more then manly” force, and it keeps him on the straight path despite his having “wandred far away” (12, 101). When Redcrosse is brought to the House of Holinesse in canto ten, he learns that “both power and eke will” (10.1, 9) are goods that are God’s, and man should never “ascribe [his success] to his skill” (6) because grace is always the victor. It may be concluded that the “will” which guides him does in fact belong to God, but the question remains whether he really is separated from his one true faith, whether Archimago’s discord succeeds in shattering his belief in Una. His defeat of Sansfoy would suggest that he does in fact still have faith. Allegorically speaking, he is able to quell the faithless Sarazin, as he does the fraudulent religions embodied in Errour, because he is still wearing the armor of a Christian man, the same protective covering that Una has given him at the beginning. “‘That Crosse,’ quoth the Sarazin, / ‘That keepes thy body from the bitter fit” (2.18, 154-5) is what saves the knight from falling under the blow of false religion. But it also reminds the reader of the knight’s faith in Christ’s resurrection, for the emblem signifies that bloody cross as well. And though Fidessa/Duessa, not Una, is his reward for his defeat of faithlessness, she is most relevant to the knight’s adventure because she is another personification of fraud. She is undoubtedly emblematic of Catholicism, “Borne the sole daughter of an Emperour, / He that the wide West under his rule has, / And high hath set his throne, where Tiberis doth pas” (2.22, 196-8). Although masquerading as a daughter of the Roman Empire, Duessa is just like Archimago. She is not a true representative of the medieval church; rather she merely cloaks her deceptive nature in the garb of a Catholic. She wears the
disguise to hide that she is a “false sorceresse” (2.34, 305) using her magic to dissemble and
entrap the knight.

In accord with her dissembling nature, Duessa proves to be another impediment along the
hero’s path to salvation, but most remarkable is that she leads us back to Dante. One of the
pivotal scenes in FQ is an episode that recalls the Inferno, as well as an important moment in
Purgatorio, and that comes on the heels of Redcrosse’s having met Duessa. Similar to an
Arcadian vignette, the knight and his Lady find themselves in a shady grove,

Where grew two goodly trees, that faire did spred

Their armes abroad, with gray mosse overcast,

And their greene leaves trembling with every blast,

Made a calme shadow far in compasse round. (2.28, 246-9)

When Redcrosse decides to take his repose with Duessa beneath the trees, he does not know that
the ground is “unlucky” (252) and that “the fearefull Shepheard” (250) shuns it. Despite its
pastoral tone, this scene pays homage to antiquity by imitating Virgil’s Aeneid. In Book Three,
Aeneas plucks “lentum vimen” (3, 31) ‘a tough shoot’ (Fairclough 375), causing “sanguis” (3,
33) ‘blood’ (KPA) to flow “de cortice” (3, 33) ‘from the bark’ (KPA), and thereby initiates a
conversation with the tree that has entrapped the spirit of his fallen compatriot Polydorus. In
Spenser, Redcrosse “pluck[s] a bough” (2.30, 269) intending to fit his Lady with “a girlond for
her dainty forehead” (268), and from the “rift there [comes] / Small drops of gory bloud, that
trickled down the same” (2.30, 269-70). The intention of the trees in both scenes is to warn the
hero that he may also fall victim to a similar fate. For Aeneas, the threat is the “scelerata terra”
(3, 60) ‘guilty land’ (Fairclough 377) where Polydorus was impaled and covered with “ferrea
texit telorum seges” (3, 45) ‘an iron harvest of spears’ (Fairclough 375) that “iaculis increvit
acutis” (3, 46) ‘grew up into sharp javelins’ (Fairclough 375). Besides the warning that Aeneas should leave, Virgil uses the incident to remind his reader that the sanctity of interment must be maintained. Polydorus cannot walk with the shades in Hades until his body is given “funus” (3, 62) ‘fresh funeral rites’ (Fairclough 377) with proper libations. For Redcrosse, the warning is less obvious. The knight does not realize that Fradubio’s curse emanates from the same sorceress with whom he has become enamored, and that the confusion between Fradubio’s being both a man and a tree, while being neither at the same time, emphasizes the obscurity of dissimulation by which the knight seems too easily fooled. Despite the similarities to Virgil’s scene, Fradubio’s situation is more precarious than that of Polydorus since his freedom depends on his being “bathèd in a living well” (2.43, 382) after “the terme prescribèd by the spell” (383). He and his lover will be restored only after a certain period of time, and at the bidding of “suffisèd fates” (386), although it is not apparent to which state of existence they will be restored. Spenser’s imitation of Virgil’s scene is not about proper burial nor about the soul’s fate after death; rather it is another example of fraud’s ability to entrap. That Fradubio has been deceived and is the victim of the fraudulent Duessa seems in keeping with Spenser’s theme, for even when Fradubio “chaunst to see her in her proper hew” (2.40, 357) his description of her recalls that of Geryon in the *Inferno*:

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Her neather partes misshaped, monstrous,
Were hidd in water, that I could not see,
But they did seeme more foule and hideous,
Then womans shape man would beleeve to be. (41, 361-4)
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The half of the “filthy foul old woman” (40, 359) that is hidden below the water is left to the imagination, just as the Pilgrim imagines Geryon “si come torna colui che va giuso / talora a
solver l’àncora ch’aggrappa / o scoglio o altro che nel mare è chiuso” (16, 133-5) ‘like one returning who has swum below / to free the anchor that has caught its hooks / on a reef or something else the sea conceals’ (Musa 155). Seeing the regrettable image of the real Duessa, or uncovering the fraud, is what brings about Fradubio’s punishment until “bathèd in a living well”—the same well, perhaps, that saves Redcrosse in his battle with the Dragon in the eleventh canto. In contrast to the salvation that Fradubio will eventually enjoy when enough time has passed and the fates are satisfied, the suicides in Dante’s Seventh Circle are afforded no relief at all.

Despite Dante’s having written this scene in emulation of Virgil, he does not intend the punishment of the suicides to be alleviated. Clearly the shades trapped in trees will never be freed, even if the Pilgrim returns to speak of their fate to the living and prayers are offered in their name. This punishment, as with all punishments in the Inferno, is a seemingly perfect contrapasso for the sin of self-murder because it aptly demonstrates the desecration of the body. And as in Virgil and Spenser, the spirits trapped in trees in the wood of suicides speak only after their branches have been torn, evincing that a specific, if not identical, action is needed to awaken the ensnared soul or body in each of these three poets’ scenes:

Io sentia d’ogne parte trarre guai,

e non vedea persona che ’l facesse;

per ch’io tutto smarrito m’arrestai.

..................................................

Allor porsi la mano un poco avante

e colsi un ramicel da un gran pruno;

e ’l tronco suo gridò: “Perché mi schiante?”
Da che fatto fu poi di sangue bruno,
ricominciò a dir: “Perché mi scerpi?
non hai tu spirto di pietade alcuno?” (13, 22-36)
Around me wails of grief were echoing,
and I saw no one there to make those sounds;
bewildered by all this I had to stop.

………………………………………….

Then slowly raising up my hand a bit
I snapped the tiny branch of a great thorn,
and its trunk cried: “Why are you breaking me?”
And when its blood turned dark around the wound,
it started saying more: “Why do you rip me?
Have you no sense of pity whatsoever?” (Musa 119, 121)

Virgil encourages the Pilgrim to break off the branch because he never trusted the scene in the
Aeneid, “la cosa incredibile [lo] fece / indurlo ad ovra ch’a [lo] stesso pesa” (50-1) ‘but the truth
itself was so incredible, / [he] urged [the Pilgrim] on to do the thing that grieves [him]’ (Musa
121). Dante’s handling of suicide falls in line with the Church doctrine emphasizing its
irreparable sinfulness. The fate of a suicide is hopeless and is the reason for eternal punishment
in hell, but Dante’s bloodied trees also seem contrary to the Christian iconography which
suggests that the tree is an emblem of the Crucifixion, an emblem that Spenser is all too ready to
invoke. For the English poet, the victim changed into a tree has not committed an unforgiveable
sin, and will be released from his sentence over time.\footnote{Cf. Spenser, \textit{FQ} 9.34, 298-301; 9.34, 302-3; and 10.57, 510.} But the fate of Pier delle Vigne in

\footnote{Cf. Spenser, \textit{FQ} 9.34, 298-301; 9.34, 302-3; and 10.57, 510.}
Dante’s hell is irredeemable and the sinner in the wood tells the Pilgrim, “Come l’altre verrem per nostre spoglie, / ma non però ch’alcuna sen rivesta, / ché non è giusto aver ciò ch’om si toglie” (13, 103-5) ‘Like all the rest, we’ll come back for our bodies, / never again to wear them—wrong it is / for man to have what he himself cast off” (Musa 125). 58 Despite Dante’s curious choice to use the tree in this way, or with a rather different outcome than Spenser’s imitation of Virgil, he does not altogether abandon the tree as a salvific icon. In Book Twenty-Two of Purgatorio, the Pilgrim comes across a tree that is “così quello in giuso, / cred’io, perche’ persona sù non vada” (134-5) ‘tapered down, / to keep the souls from climbing’ (Musa 240), and “con pomi a odorar soavi e buoni” (132) ‘laden with fruit whose fragrance filled the air’ (Musa 240). The fruit of the tree is out of reach for those who are still purging their sin, as says the “voce per entro le fronde / gridò: ‘Di questo cibo avrete caro’” (140-1) ‘voice / that shouted at [them] from within the tree: / ‘This fruit and water is denied to you’’ (Musa 240). This tree is surrounded by “un liquor chiaro” (137) ‘clear water’ (Musa 240) falling “de l’alta roccia” ‘from the high rock’ enclosing the path around it, and “si [spandeviando] per le foglie suso” (138) ‘sprinkling the topmost leaves in its cascade’ (Musa 240). It emulates the Tree of Life, as the voice within it tells the Pilgrim that the Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ, may act as intercessor for him. The food and water from the tree are not to be consumed because they are sacred and are meant only for those in Paradise. 59 And just as Eve is the woman who aids in man’s downfall, so Mary is the woman who helps in his redemption. The appearance of the tree in Purgatory may be a reminder for the purging souls to continue to strive for eternal life, but that idea can become apparent only when the Pilgrim sees the second tree, in Purgatorio, two books later. In Book Twenty-Four, the Tree of Grace, an offspring of the Tree of the Knowledge of

58 For a perspective on suicide’s profane nature that goes back to antiquity, see Plato, Phaedo 90.
Good and Evil, is laden “rami … vivaci / d’un altro pomo” (103-4) ‘with verdant … boughs’ (Musa 260). The Pilgrim learns from the angel whose appearance “si lucenti e rossi” (138) ‘so radiantly red’ (Musa 261) blinds him that this tree is out of reach for the spirits of the gluttonous who are purging themselves of their sin:

Beati cui alluma
tanto di grazia, che l’amor del gusto
nel petto lor troppo disir non fuma,
esuriendo sempre quanto è giusto! (151-4)
Blessed are those in whom
grace shines so copiously that love of food
does not arouse excessive appetite,
but lets them hunger after righteousness. (Musa 261)

These two trees, markers of purification and salvation, are more in line with the “two goodly trees” that Spenser evokes in his homage to Virgil, but Dante’s third tree, which appears in the “l’alta selva vòta, / colpa di quella ch’al serpente crese” (Purg. 32, 31-2) ‘high wood, empty now / because of her who listened to the snake’ (Musa 344), is most similar to Spenser’s Tree of Life. For Dante, Adam’s Tree, “dispogliata / di foglie e d’altra fronda in ciascun ramo” (38-9) ‘whose every branch was stripped of leaf and fruit’ (Musa 344), continues to grow higher and wider as time moves on. The tree represents renewal and salvation, and in it “si conserva il seme d’ogne giusto” (48) ‘thus is preserved the seed of righteousness’ (Musa 345). The Pilgrim witnesses how the tree, “men che di rose e più che di viole / colore apendo, s’innovò … , / che prima avea le ramora si sole” (58-60) ‘whose boughs had been so bare, / renew[s] itself, and bloom[s] with
color not quite / roselike but brighter than a violet’ (Musa 345). Adam’s Tree, the marker of hope in Purgatory, mirrors the Tree of Life which the Pilgrim will eventually find in Paradise.

The “two goodly trees” in Spenser’s second canto, used to imprison Fradubio and his Lady who have been ensnared by Duessa’s fraud, not only remind the reader of the two trees of the Garden of Eden, the one of Life, the other of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, but also that the restorative “living well” needed to set them free foreshadows the balm of the Tree of Life which rejuvenates the singed and burning Redcrosse in the eleventh canto. For Spenser, the “living well” in which the tree-bound Fradubio must bathe to relieve him of his tormented state seems to imply a baptism of sorts that is received only after proper and sufficient purification. As Broaddus has noted,

he would have been at the point of death had he not, by the grace of God, fallen under the Tree of Life where he is restored by the flowing balm. This event is less like the Eucharist to which it is often referred than the immersion is like a baptism. The bread is missing altogether, and the balm is not drunk. However, as Williams says, the balm is directly evocative of the blood flowing from the body of Christ nailed to the cross; and the cross, because it supported that sacrifice, became the Tree of Life. (600)

This evocation of the Tree of Life and its conflation with the Crucifixion is suggested in this early scene with Fradubio. When Redcrosse first hears the “piteous yelling voyce” (2.31, 271), he wonders if it is not the “voyce of a damnèd ghost from Limbo lake, / Or guilefull spright wandering in empty aire” (284-5). Though Fradubio confirms he is neither ghost nor sprite, implying that he is still living, he is not confused by Redcrosse’s mention of “Limbo lake.”
Limbo is a formulation of the Roman Church, considered limbus patrum in Catholicism. In *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Stephen Greenblatt finds that sixteenth-century theologians disputed the reality of places such as Limbo, citing Tyndale as his source for this conclusion:

Tyndale writes that ‘every man to maintain his doctor withal, corrupteth the scripture, and fashioneth it after his own imagination, as a potter doth his clay … of what text thou Hell provest, will another prove Purgatory; another limbo patrum; and another the assumption of our lady; and another shall prove of the same text that an ape hath a tail.’ (35)

Remarking on the tension between the “medieval theologians [who] wished to assert that all souls were purged in the prison house of Purgatory … [and those who] wished to acknowledge and to lay claim to at least some of the many reports of ghosts who appeared on earth” (289), Greenblatt turns to Noel Taillepied’s *A Treatise of Ghosts* (1588):

[The great Schoolmen] are unanimously agreed and plainly write that there are four places or states whereunto the souls of men at death repair: Heaven, Hell, Limbo (for unbaptized infants), and Purgatory … Now besides this realm of Purgatory it sometimes pleases the hidden counsels of God that for certain mysterious reasons disembodied souls endure their Purgatory, either among mountains or in waters, or in valleys, or in houses, and particularly are they attached to those spots where on earth they sinned and offended God. (qtd. in Greenblatt 289)

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60 For Limbo, see Toner.
Aside from the fact that Limbo is considered one of the four states, or places, to which a soul may be bound, it is especially fitting that Taillepied mentions the natural realm as another state suitable to the soul’s purgation. Prior to salvation, the dead may be trapped in mountains, waters, valleys, and perhaps even in forests and trees. For Dante, Limbo, forged in one of the upper sections of his Inferno, not only houses unbaptized infants, but the righteous. Those who lived before Christ, such as Virgil, will remain there until the Second Coming. That Redcrosse guesses that the voice is a ghost from Limbo upholds the proposition that his faith is in fact in line with that of the medieval Church. This is also supported by the claim that Fradubio is waiting a certain term before he can be “bathèd in a living well,” which most certainly refers to both the blood of Christ and the sinner’s purgation before the Last Judgment. The entrapment in the tree is more suggestive of Purgatory than any kind of hell, and the eventuality of Fradubio’s redemption confirms this. If Spenser’s explicit allusion to a temporary state of suffering—a purgatory of sorts—is not obvious in the scene with Fradubio, it is taken up again in the House of Holinesse.\textsuperscript{61} Although the conclusion of The Legend of Red Crosse Knight seems to imply that redemption comes only through the “living well” that is Christ’s blood, and that faith is the first step along the path to receiving that balm that springs from the Tree of Life, proper penance and schooling are also essential measures of man’s salvation.

The Fixed Stars in the House of Holinesse

\textsuperscript{61} For a discussion of the simultaneous creation of hell and purgatory, as described in Dante’ Inferno, see Hede 19. The explanation which Virgil gives the Pilgrim leaves little room for the Protestant notion of Christ’s sacrifice as sufficient for man’s redemption. One wonders why Purgatory is necessary if it was created at the same time as Hell, which was prior to Adam and Eve and thus before original sin had scarred human nature.
Redcrosse’s visit to the House of Holinesse in canto ten is a necessary step before his submersion in the well of the Tree of Life and his ultimate defeat of the Dragon. His purgation and redemption are made explicit and, just as the spirits in *Purgatorio* are denied the tree’s fruit, Redcrosse is subjected to a rigorous fast while purging himself of the impurities which prevent him from going up the Mount of Contemplation:

In ashes and sackcloth he did array
His daintie corse, proud humors to abate,
And dieted with fasting every day,
The swelling of his wounds to mitigate,
And made him pray both earely and eke late:
And ever as superfluous flesh did rot
Amendment readie still at hand did wayt,
To pluck it out with pincers firie whot,
That soone in him was left no one corrupted jot. (10.28, 226-34)

In the “sad house of Penaunce, where his spright / [will pass] the paines of hell, and long enduring night” (10.32, 287-8), Redcrosse’s acts of penitence are initiated by a rigorous induction into the faith for which he is doing battle. His sanctification in the House of Holinesse is guided by the same Christian icons and figures invoked by Dante in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, and the most obvious comparisons to make between the two poets are with their characters. Beginning with Una and Beatrice, both women lead the hero back to the straight path, and do so with the intent of saving his soul. Broaddus considers Una to be an embodiment of Christian charity and suggests that “God uses Una’s quest for a knight to kill a dragon as a way of setting Redcrosse on the path to salvation and uses Una’s love for Redcrosse to bring him back to that
path when he departs from it” (578). In Dante, the Virgin Mary and Saint Lucia choose Beatrice to help the Pilgrim, “t’amò tanto, / ch’uscì per te de la volgare schiera” (Inf. 2, 104-5) ‘whose love was such / it made him leave the vulgar crowd for [her]’ (Musa 19). Beatrice tells Virgil,

l’amico mio, e non de la ventura,
ne la diserta piaggia è impedito
si nel cammin, che vòlt’ è per paura;
e temo che non sia già si smarrito,
ch’io mi sia tardi al soccorso levata,
per quel ch’i’ ho di lui nel cielo udito. (61-6)
my friend, who is no friend of Fortune, strays
on a desert slope; so many obstacles
have crossed his path, his fright has turned him back.
I fear he may have gone so far astray,
from what report has come to me in Heaven,
I may have started to his aid too late. (Musa 17)

She seems at a point of desperation, fearful that the Pilgrim is on the brink of irreparable sin, and so takes greater measures to set him straight. Virgil, the Pagan and poetic mentor, becomes her ally because he can lead the Pilgrim through hell. Similar to Beatrice, Una must also recruit the help of others to bring her beloved back to the path from which he has strayed. When realizing that Redcrosse is “feeble, and too faint” (10.1, 11) to battle the Dragon, she brings him to the House of Holinesse and puts him in the hands of others, where he can be instructed, tested and

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62 For a discussion of Beatrice as Christ in this scene, see Brandeis 128.
purged of his sins. As noted above, Una in fact first gives Redcrosse the armor of a Christian man, and so it is fitting that she leads him to the “sacred lore” (3, 20) of “Dame Caelia” (4, 28) when she sees his wavering at the hands of Despair. Since the act of self-murder can never be redeemed, one of the greater sins known to the medieval Church is despair as evinced in the *Inferno* with its wood of suicides. Forgiveness, even under the aegis of the blood of Christ, is unavailable to one who destroys his body and takes his own life. When Redcrosse is tempted by Despair and barely overcomes his hopelessness, Una is forced to bring him to the one place where he will recover and be fully restored.

Dame Caelia points out that Redcrosse is the exception among most errant knights:

So few there bee,
That chose the narrow path, or seeke the right:
All keepe the broad high way, and take delight
With many rather for to go astray,
And be partakers of their evill plight,
Then with a few to walke the rightest way. (10, 84-9)

The heavenly mother of the House of Holinesse seems a figure not unlike the Virgin Mary in *Paradiso*, especially since she and her daughters nurse Redcrosse back to spiritual health, just as Mary orchestrates the Pilgrim’s sanctification. Beatrice tells Virgil, “Donna è gentil nel ciel che

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63 That Spenser’s Dragon is emblematic of Satan is taken for granted. Fall and restoration readings of this book will assume that the final three-day battle is a contest to defeat the embodiment of Christ’s adversary, and sin altogether.

64 When Una gives Redcrosse his armor, she is essentially encouraging him to wear the “bloodie crosse” of the Passion to invoke its saving power, as well as to mark him as the chosen one. See Bonaventure 119.

65 See Plato, *Phaedo* 90.

66 For a discussion of the female characters’ prayers as imperative for the heroes’ success and redemption, see Paolucci 143.
si compiange / di questo ’impedimento ov’ io ti mando, / si che duro giudicio là sù frange” (Inf. 2, 94-6) ‘A gracious lady sits in Heaven grieving / for what happened to the one I send you to, / and her grief breaks the stern decree of Heaven’ (Musa 19), and thus Spenser invents the matron of Holinesse, as one

whose onely joy was to reliefe the needes

Of wretched soules, and helpe the helplesse pore:

All night she spent in bidding of her bedes,

And all the day in doing good and godly deedes. (1.3, 24-7)

Not only is Spenser’s image of the saintly Dame Caelia an earthly parallel to Dante’s vision of Mary in Paradiso, but her title and position are also similar. When the Pilgrim sees “quei candori” (23, 124) ‘all those radiances’ (Musa 275) stretching the tip of their fire to reach the Virgin Mary, “la coronata fiamma / che si levò appresso sua semenza” (119-20) ‘the crowned flame as it rose, / higher and higher, following her Son’ (Musa 274), he admires “l’ubertà che si soffolce / in quelle arche ricchissime che fuoro / a seminar qua giù buone bobolce!” (130-2)

‘abundant grace [that] is stored up [there] / inside those richest coffers who below / in our world sowed the land with their good seed’ (Musa 275). As the flames ascend heaven, they chant “Regina celi” (128) ‘Regina celi’ (Musa 275), an ancient Marian Catholic hymn. Regina coeli is sung during the Easter season to celebrate Christ’s Resurrection and man’s salvation through it. For the visitors to the House of Holinesse, Dame Caelia is “thought / From heaven to come, or thither to arise” (4, 28-9) and her “broad-blazèd fame / That up to heaven is blowne” (11, 94-5) is common knowledge to all of Faerie Land. Spenser’s Latinization of the name for the mistress of the House of Holinesse seems too similar to Regina coeli, Dante’s Queen of the Heavens, to dismiss its potential for being a poetic appropriation. When the famed matron greets Redcrosse
and Una, “her hart with joy unwonted inly swel[s]” (10.8, 71) for beholding “that fairest Una … Whom well she knew to spring from heavenly race” (69-70). The reciprocal familiarity of Spenser’s female characters mirrors the relation between Mary and Beatrice in Paradiso.

In the House of Holiness, the chivalric code of courtesy, courtly love and honor is replaced by the theological virtues of faith, hope and love as represented in the figures of Fidelia, Speranza and Charissa. Spenser, however, does not forget the seven deadly sins of the medieval Church, whose contrary virtues are also included among the characters tending to Dame Caelia’s house. The porter who opens the door for Una and her knight is named “Humilta” (5, 44), an old sire who embodies the opposite of pride with his “lookes full lowly cast, and gate full slow” (42-3) and his guidance through the “streight and narow” (45) way that causes them all to “passe in stouping low” (44). The second figure they meet is the “francklin faire and free” (6, 49), “Zele” (51), who greets them in the courtyard and “entertaines with comely courteous glee” (50). He is an energetic and pleasant contrast to the slothful sinner, his clear counterpart. The gentle squire who takes them to see Dame Caelia, “Reverence” (7, 60), honors them with “speeches meet” (62). He represents a virtue absolving men of their gluttony and shows a restraint and temperance that is most becoming of “a Squire so great persons to greet” (63). The sins of envy, wrath, greed, and lust are subdued when their opposing virtues, kindness, patience, charity and chastity, are brought to life in the figures of Mercy, Patience, the seven Bead-men, and the two “goodly virgins” (12, 101) Fidelia and Speranza. The process of Redcrosse’s purgation begins with his schooling at the request of Una, “To have her knight into [Fidelia’s] schoolehouse plaste, / And heare the wisedome of her words divine” (10.18, 157-8). Only Fidelia can read from her “sacred Booke, with bloud ywrit” (19, 163), suggesting that she is in fact an allegorical figure of the medieval Church. She is described using icons which evoke Saint John the Evangelist:
She was araièd all in lilly white,
And in her right hand bore a cup of gold,
With wine and water fild up to the hight,
In which a Serpent did himself enfold,
That horrour made to all, that did behold;
But she no whit did chaunge her constant mood:
And in her other hand she fast did hold
A booke, that was both signd and sealed with blood,
Wherein darke things were writ, hard to be understood. (13, 109-117)

The significance here is that the Evangelist is assumed to be the disciple “who [bears] witness to and [writes]” the gospel’s message, and is therefore the human translator of the Word of God.67

Just as he is the vessel who receives the message and translates it for man, so Fidelia thereout [does] preach,
That weaker wit of man [can] never reach,
Of God, of grace, of justice, of free will,
That wonder [is] to heare her goodly speech. (10.19, 166-9)

This formulation is in keeping with the medieval practice of the Word being passed on to the faithful through an intercessor. Redcrosse does not pick up the book himself and decipher its meaning; rather the figure who embodies faith transmits the message to him. In stanza twenty, Spenser displays the power of Fidelia, and faith, when he describes the miracles she can perform. Using biblical examples, the poet relates how she is able to command the sun to stay or make it turn backward, part “the flouds in tway” (176), and move mountains just as Christ claims the

67 For source work on the writings of the Evangelist, see Theissen and Merz 33-7.
faithful can do in the New Testament. In his exegetical work on *FQ*, A. C. Hamilton also acknowledges that the description of Fidelia is in keeping with depictions of Saint John the Evangelist, and he suggests that the “booke” that she holds is the New Testament, and that its “darke things” that “are to be understood” are related to Paul’s epistle in the second book of *Peter*:

> Almost in every epistle speaking of such things: among which are many things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable, pervert, as they do other scriptures unto their own destruction. Ye therefore beloved, seeing ye know it beforehand, beware lest ye be also plucked away with the error of the wicked, and fall from your own steadfastness: but grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ. (3.16-18)

Paul’s warning to avoid perversion of the sacred book’s message and to beware of “the error of the wicked” is implied in Spenser’s emphasis on the dangers of fraud and despair for those of weaker faith. As the keeper of the Word, Fidelia is ripe for comparison with the one who holds the keys to the Gates of Heaven, for she also gives keys to the “agèd Sire” guarding the Mount of Contemplation, while at the same time holding onto the “sacred Booke,” the secrets that stand between man and his entrance into heaven, which only she may teach with “celestiall discipline” (10.18, 161), opening “dull eyes, that light mote in them shine” (162).

Dante links the Evangelist to Saint Peter by praising him for writing down “che scriveste / poi che l’ardente Spirto vi fë almi” (*Par.* 24, 137-8) ‘[what was] once kindled by the Holy Spirit’s tongue’ (Musa 287). In *Paradiso*, Saint Peter answers Beatrice when she calls upon the spirits to “roratelo alquanto: voi bevete / sempre del fonte onde vien quel ch’ei pensa” (24, 8-9) ‘bedew [the Pilgrim] with a few drops, for [they] drink / forever from the Source of this man’s
thoughts’ (Musa 283). She invites the saint to “tenta costui di punti lievi e gravi, / come ti piace, intorno de la fede, / per la qual tu su per lo mare andavi” (37-9) ‘test this man on questions grave or light, / as pleases [him], pertaining to that faith / by means of which [he] once walked on the sea’ (Musa 284), and the spirit of Peter complies by asking the Pilgrim, “fede che è?” (53) ‘what is Faith?’ (Musa 285) The Pilgrim responds with the quintessential answer, “fede è sustanza di cose sperate / e argomento de le non parventi” (64-5) ‘Faith is the substance of those hoped-for things / and argument for things we have not seen’ (Musa 285), and Dante evokes the Bible, the book sealed with Christ’s blood, when the Pilgrim says,

… ma dalmi
anche la verità che quinci piove
per Moïsè, per profeti e per salmi,
per l’Evangelio e per voi che scriveste
poi che l’ardente Spirto vi fè almi. (134-8)

but of that truth which rains down from this realm
through Moses, through the Prophets, through the Psalms,
and through the Gospel and through you who wrote
once kindled by the Holy Spirit’s tongue. (Musa 287)

This canto of Paradiso emphasizes the hope that is associated with faith. The Pilgrim tells Saint Peter that the things he is seeing in Paradise are hidden below, “che l’esser loro v’è in sola credenza, / sopra la qual si fonda l’alta spene” (73-4) ‘that they exist there only in belief; / on such a base is high hope built’ (Musa 285). Hope for Redcrosse is a necessary facet to his
education, and Speranza is there to support him in his learning.⁶⁸ She “[gives] him comfort sweet, / And [teaches] him how to take assured hold / Upon her silver anchor, as [is] meet” (10.22, 190-2). The concluding line of Paul’s epistle, to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ,” seems a fitting tie to Dante’s Saint John in *Paradiso*. In canto twenty-six, the spirit of the Evangelist meets the Pilgrim after his examination on hope, and tests him on the third and greatest Christian virtue, which is love. The Pilgrim tells Saint John,

Tutti quei morsi
che posson far lo cor volgere a Dio,
a la mia caritate son concorsi:
ché l’essere del mondo e l’esser mio,
là morte ch’el sostenne perch’ io viva,
e quel che spera ogne fedel com’ io,
con la predetta conoscenza viva,
tratto m’hanno del mar de l’amor torto,
e del diritto m’han posto a la rive. (55-63)

All of those teeth with strength
to move the heart of any man to God
have bitten my heart into loving Him.
The being of the world and my own being,
the death He died so that my soul might live,
the hope of all the faithful, and mine too,

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⁶⁸ Speranza is Italian for “hope,” whereas Fidelia is of Latin origin and Charissa of ancient Greek.
joined with the living truth mentioned before,
from that deep sea of false love rescued me
and set me on the right shore of true Love. (Musa 308)
The Pilgrim’s charity, his love, comes from his hope, his faith, and his knowledge in that faith.
Together this faith, hope and love constitute the grace that God gives the believer in return. In
Spenser’s allegory, Charissa is the embodiment of love and the grace to which it subscribes. She is

Of wondrous beauty, and of bountie rare,
With goodly grace and comely personage,
That was on earth not easie to compare;
Full of great love, but Cupids wanton snare
As hell she hated, chast in workes and will. (10.30, 263-8)
And while the image of Charissa proves a direct contrast to Errour, she evokes her still with her
many children hanging about her and “playing their sports, that joyd her to behold, / Whom still
she fed, whiles they were weake and young, / But thrust them forth still, as they wexèd old” (31,
271-4). This inverted vision of this fraudulent creature reminds the reader that Redcrosse has
overcome the impediments to faith and proved himself worthy of the type of love that Charissa
offers. Similar to Fidelia, she “teaches [Redcrosse] the ready path” (33, 297) but only after he
has purged himself of all sin. Once he has undergone the rituals of his contrition, as administered
by the doctor, Patience, to rid himself of the “festring sore” (25, 220) that “rankle[d] yet within, /
Close creeping twixt the marrow and the skin” (220-1), he finds himself amid the nurturing
hands of grace. Shown Spenser’s contrast between Charissa and Errour, the reader also recalls
love’s maternal nature and its ability to rear and spread the good. This image of the nursing
mother is theologically iconic, and in a diagram of the Tree of Life found in Beinecke MS 416, “based on Bonaventure’s 1260 meditation manual *Lignum vitae*” (Simpson 1), a pelican feeding her young is included at the very top of the tree:

In the medieval tradition, the female pelican was thought to accidentally kill her young by striking them, then to mourn them for three days before piercing her body and letting her blood spill over the dead chicks, thus reviving them. The popular conception of the bird led to its association with Christ, who was assaulted by his people, then was pierced and bled to save them. (9)

A nursing Charissa is emblematic of the living well that springs from the Tree of Life, and she not only abounds in “goodly grace” but is abundant with the love that is in direct contrast to the erotic love aroused by Cupid, whose “wanton snare / As hell she hated.” She is an image of agape, and her maternal role is emphasized when she delivers Redcrosse into the hands of Mercy.

Spenser’s allegory of mercy, which is essentially the pardon that Redcrosse seeks with his acts of penance, suggests the necessity of forgiveness and its ability to convey the sinner to salvation. Mercy carries Redcrosse part of the way up the Mount of Contemplation, just as Saint Lucia transports the Pilgrim from Ante-Purgatory to the base of his climb in canto nine of *Purgatorio*. Saint Lucia, similar to Mercy, shows the Pilgrim the way, helping him to embark on the trip through Purgatory that will eventually lead him into Paradise. Virgil tells him when he awakes, “qui ti posò, ma pria mi dimonstraro / li occhi suoi belli quella intrata aperta” (9, 61-2) ‘Before she set you down, her lovely eyes / showed me the open entrance’ (Musa 98). And Dante’s entrance to Purgatory is not without its own iconic bloody cross. When the Pilgrim and his guide meet the gatekeeper on the steps, he remarks on their different colors:
… lo scaglion primaio
bianco marmo era si pulito e terso,
ch’io mi specchiae in esso qual io paio.
Era il secondo tinto più che perso,
d’una petrina ruvida e arsiccia,
crepata per lo lungo e per traverso.
Lo terzo, che di sopra s’ammassiccia,
porfido mi parea, si fiammeggiante
come sangue che fuor di vena spiccia. (94-102)

White marble was the first,
and polished to the glaze of a looking glass:
I saw myself reflected as I was.
The second one was deeper dark than perse,
of rough and crumbling, fire-corroded stone,
with cracks across its surface—length and breadth.
The third one, lying heavy at the top,
appeared to be of flaming porphyry,
red as the blood that spurts out from a vein. (Musa 99)

The blood red atop the mangled purple and clear white steps evoke the image of the purified and tortured body of Christ and his sacrifice for man. But the greatest similarity between Mercy and Saint Lucia is that both are heavenly intercessors. When Mercy arrives with Redcrosse, the “agèd Sire” keeping the gate allows the knight to enter because he is accompanied by her: “And had he not that Dame respected more, / Whom highly he did reverence and adore, / He would not once
have movèd for the knight” (1.10, 436-8). Dante submits to a similar obstacle when Virgil is forced to tell the angel guarding the gate of Purgatory that “Donna del ciel, di queste cose accorta, / … pur dianzi / ne disse: ‘Andate là: quivi è la porta.’” (9, 88-90) ‘A while ago, a lady sent from Heaven / acquainted with such matters,’ … / ‘told me: Behold the gate. You must go there’” (Musa 99). Once the angel guarding the gate knows that Saint Lucia has sent the Pilgrim, he says, “Venate dunque a’ nostri gradi innanzi” (93) ‘come forward now up to our stairs’ (Musa 99). Spenser uses a similar scene for his knight’s entrance to the “highest Mount” (1.10, 469). His gate is guarded by a “godly agèd Sire, / With snowy lockes adowne his shoulders shed” (424-5) whose “mind [is] full of spirituall repast” (431). This figure is not unlike Dante’s angel of God, cloaked in an ash-colored robe and guarding the gate of Purgatory. The two figures are gatekeepers in possession of keys that are given to them by another. For Dante, his angel holds the keys “Da Pier” (9, 127) ‘from Peter’ (Musa 100) who taught him, “ch’i’ erri / anzi ad aprir ch’a tenerla serrata, / pur che la gente a’ piedi mi s’atterri” (127-9) ‘Admit too many, rather than too few, / if they but cast themselves before your feet’ (Musa 100). And, as noted above, Fidelia entrusts the “godly agèd Sire” with the keys to the gate that leads “to that most glorious house, that glistreth bright / With burning starres, and everliving fire” (1.10, 446-7). 69 Both the Pilgrim and Redcrosse are being shown the image of heaven that will instill in them the desire for lifelong penance. The angel in Purgatorio warns the Pilgrim not to look back after entering, and tells him that he must wash away the seven P’s that he traces with his sword’s point upon his forehead before entering. For Spenser, Redcrosse needs no warning not to look back, but in fact desires nothing more than going up to the “new Hierusalem, that God has built / for those to dwell in, that are chosen his” (10.57, 506-7). He tells the gatekeeper as much when he says,

69 The similarities between Fidelia and Saint Peter have been discussed above.
‘O let me not,’ quoth he, ‘then turne againe
Backe to the world, whose joyes so fruitless are;
But let me here for aye in peace remain,
Or streight way on that last long voyage fare,
That nothing may present hope empare.’ (10.63, 559-63)

Because the Red Crosse Knight has not finished his assigned task of freeing Una’s parents from the Dragon, he is not ready for heaven though it is understood that he is chosen to be saved. He must still experience the balm from the Tree of Life and slay the Dragon—Spenser’s embodiment of Satan—since he has not been purged of original sin. The purging of his venial sins, however, which must be washed away before going up the Mount of Contemplation, is indicated by his fasting and praying in the “holy Hospitall” (10.36, 316). To prepare him for his journey up the mount, Mercy first schools him “in every good behest / And godly worke of Almes and charitee” (10.45, 399-400), which she manages by introducing him to the seven Bead-men. These men “had vowèd all / Their life to service of high heavens king / Did spend their dayes in doing godly thing” (36, 318-20). Spenser is generous with his seven Bead-men, giving each one a stanza of his own. A. C. Hamilton finds that “their life of good works fulfils Caelia’s life … [as] all seven traditional corporal works of mercy are fulfilled” (136). Despite these works of charity occurring under the patronage of Mercy, Charissa is “their chiepest founderesse” (10.44, 396), and so they are also guided by charity, as she is the foremost virtue of charitable love. These seven types of giving not only insinuate types of need but also different stages of purgation. Their number also recalls the seven sins and virtues, the seven terraces of Purgatorio, the seven pennants, and the seven handmaids of Beatrice, as well as the seven candelabra (that the Pilgrim fittingly mistakes for “sette alberi d’oro” (43) ‘seven trees of gold’
(Musa 310) in canto twenty-nine) likened to seven stars of the Empyrean. The seven Bead-men represent the seven P’s to which Dante exposes his Pilgrim before he can reach the baths of Lethe and be submerged in preparation for his entrance into Paradise.

The most fitting comparison between Redcrosse’s trip up the Mount of Contemplation and the Pilgrim’s preparation for heaven, however, may lie in the prophetic words that each is given after seeing Paradise. For Dante, Beatrice prophesies the Pilgrim’s future when she says, “qui sarai tu poco tempo silvano” (Pur. 32, 100) ‘A short time you shall dwell outside the walls’ (Musa 346) but tells him that when he returns he must “fa che [il] scrive” (105) ‘put into writing’ (Musa 346) what he has seen. The scene that she reveals to him is straight out of Revelation, though accompanied by Dante’s own interpretation. The eagle that swoops down from heaven like lightning to strike the chariot and cover it in its feathers opposes the dragon that emerges from the earth:

Per lo carro sù la coda fisse;

e come vespa che ritragge l’ago,

a sé traendo la coda maligna,

trasse del fondo, e gissen vago vago. (132-5)

Driving its tail up through the chariot;

then, as a wasp withdraws its sting, that thing
drew back its poison tail, tearing away

part of the floor—gloating, it wandered off. (Musa 347)

The dragon and the wrecked chariot morph into a whore riding a four-headed monster before it disappears altogether. This is the image that the Pilgrim must decipher when Beatrice claims that he is destined to transmit it to “segna a’ vivi / del viver ch’e un correre a la morte” (33, 53-4)
‘those who live / that life which is merely a race to death’ (Musa 359). Any misgivings about Dante’s metafiction are eradicated when the reader is reminded of his salvific message. Beatrice ultimately advises the Pilgrim to write about Adam’s Tree and its ability to renew itself. “Due volte dirubata quivi” (33, 57) ‘despoiled, not once but twice, here on this spot’ (Musa 360), the tree has been created by God for the sole purpose of revealing holiness, and because Adam and Eve tasted its fruit, “in pena e in disio / cinquemilia anni e più l’anima prima / bramò colui che ’l morso in sé punio” (61-3) ‘more than five thousand years in pain [they] yearned / for Him Who paid the penalty Himself’ (Musa 360). The Pilgrim’s submersion in the river Eunoe, like his baptism in Lethe, prepares him for his voyage to heaven as it enriches his memories of good deeds. The symbology of the tree and the renewing power of its surrounding rivers does not go unnoticed. The simile in the last stanza of the final canto of Purgatorio is a nod to man’s potential for redemption:

Io ritornai da la santissima onda
rifatto si come piante novelle
rinovellate di novella fronda,
puro e disposto a salire a le stelle. (33, 142-5)

From those holiest waters I returned
to her reborn, a tree renewed, in bloom
with newborn foliage, immaculate,
eager to rise, now ready for the stars. (Musa 362)

Like the Pilgrim, Spenser’s knight is granted an earthly vision of heaven when he reaches the peak of the Mount of Contemplation, and like Dante’s hero, the English poet’s hero cannot go to

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70 For the image as an allegory of fraud, see Auerbach 124.
the New Hierusalem until he has fulfilled his destiny on earth. The agèd Sire tells him that only after he has won his victory, his “suit of earthly conquest [will shine], / And … [his] hands [will be washed] from guilt of bloody field” (10.60, 538-9), may he seek the path “which after all to heaven shall [him] send” (542). His prophecy for the knight is not unlike that of the Pilgrim’s:

For thou amongst those Saints, whom thou dost see,

Shalt be a Saint, and thine owne nations frend

And Patrone: thou Saint George shalt callèd bee,

Saint George of mery England, the signe of victoree. (546-9)

Just as Dante the Pilgrim will return to the world of the living and become Dante the poet, Redcrosse will leave Faerie Land and become “Saint George of mery England.” The agèd Sire’s prophecy confirms that the knight’s cross symbolizes the Crucifixion first and the warring saint second, for Redcrosse will not become Saint George until after he has slain the Dragon. At the beginning, he wears the armor of Christ, represented by the red cross, as Saint Bonaventure suggests that all Christians should do in his Lignum Vitae.71 The prophecy for Redcrosse, similar to Beatrice’s for the Pilgrim, is preemptive to his submersion in the “trickling stream of Balme” (11.48, 425) flowing from the Tree of Life to save him from death. The baptisms of both heroes, medieval pilgrim and Arthurian knight, are emblematic of their being washed in the blood of Christ and thus purged of sin, saved by grace, and slated for heaven after death.

The similarities between the Commedia and the first book of FQ are innumerable. For instance, one may discuss Duessa’s descent into hell, where “the damnèd ghosts in torments fry” (5.33, 292) in the “fiery flood of Phlegeton” (291), as the vengeful sinners boil in the blood-red rivers of Phlegethon in the twelfth canto of the Inferno; or that Spenser’s “house of endlessse

71 For the call that every Christian must carry the cross of Christ, see Bonaventure 119.
paine” (295) is guarded by Cerberus, and is most certainly evocative of Dante’s Third Circle, where the three-headed dog “graffia li spiriti ed iscoia ed isquatra” (Inf. 6, 18) ‘rips the spirits, flays and mangles them’ (Musa 53). Spenser’s borrowings of classical icons, whether conscious or not, are not only from Homer, Virgil and Ovid but also Dante, and these pages attempt to make “contributions toward a larger understanding which should be the aim of literary scholarship” (Gottfried 1370). Spenser begins Redcrosse’s journey to salvation with an obstacle that is representative of fraud, a sin which continues to plague him even after he has been cleansed in the House of Holinesse. For Dante, fraud is punished in the Eighth and Ninth Circles of hell; for Spenser, it is also a significant sin and appears to be the greatest impediment standing in the way of one’s faith. The dissembling Duessa does not receive her final blow until the twelfth canto of Book One, but Spenser’s choice to disguise fraud in a Catholic frock offers not so much a commentary on the Church as on the ease with which duplicity may assume the one true faith. As noted above, C. S. Lewis takes up the issue of catholicity in Spenser’s epic, arguing that it is an unavoidable side-effect of allegory:

> With the ‘House’ of Holinesse no Christian doubts that those who have offered themselves to God are cut off as if by a wall from the World, are placed under a regula vitae, and ‘laid in easy bed’ by ‘meek Obedience;’ but when the wall becomes one of real bricks and mortar, and the Rule one in real ink, superintended by disciplinary officials and reinforced (at times) by the power of the State, then we have reached that sort of actuality which Catholics aim at and Protestants deliberately avoid. (322)

The figures’ concreteness makes them representatives of Catholicism. Spenser’s Catholic characters are, however, anything but concrete. They are little more than allusions, in fact,
disguised to resemble the very thing that they are not. Lewis suggests that Spenser’s catholicity is a result of his choice to use allegory for his meditation on salvation, rather than any belief in the tenets of the medieval Church. He claims that an ongoing tension may be discerned between that which is real, such as the reinforced actions of the disciplinary officials of the Catholic Church, and that which is abstract and merely suggestive, such as the allegorical forms included in Spenser’s epic. In the end, the poet’s sentiments are not conclusive one way or the other. If one relies on Spenser’s letter to Ralegh to find clues to the meaning of his poetic venture, it can be called a vision of a “Poetic historical” (717). Spenser admits that his goal is to “direct [the reader’s] understanding to the wel-head of the History, that from thence gathering the whole intention of the conceit, [he] may as in a handfull gripe al the discourse, which otherwise may happily seeme tedious and confused” (719). As in Dante’s poem, Spenser’s allegory suggests that a template lies beneath, a lesson for his reader, a process hidden among the fictions and fabrications that make up the cantos, even if it is interpreted as something other than what the poet himself intended. Spenser’s religious leanings are not to be confused with his poetic feeling. The spiritual salvation of the Red Crosse Knight is disguised beneath the allegorical adventure that he is destined to take, and for this Spenser’s soteriological bias is ambiguous. That Redcrosse is actually saved by the blood of Christ alone—the balm that springs from the Tree of Life—is difficult to establish because he is also put to a rigorous test of repentance and schooled in his faith before seeing the vision of the heaven that awaits him. If he takes nothing else away from his stay in the House of Holinesse, at least he leaves it knowing that he is not strong enough to slay the Dragon by his own merits. Like the Pilgrim, Redcrosse wanders from the straight and narrow, but is eventually led back to it by a love that can only come from the one true faith. That Spenser’s epic relies on the Commedia as poetic muse is thus evinced, if only by the clear and
explicit borrowings that the English poet makes from the Italian epic. But what exactly can that mean? For Dante, the Commedia is about salvation, based on a Trinitarian scheme, as is all medieval theology. According to Seung, Dante uses Beatrice and Virgil as representations of the Holy Spirit and the Son respectively, emphasizing their salvific mission. "In support of his reading, Seung argues that Dante highlights this allegorical significance of Vergil’s and Beatrice’s missions of salvation by using two words, mia salute (my salvation), in his final description of the two guides (Purg. 30:15 and Par. 31: 79-81)” (Hede 152):

By this unmistakably stringent poetic device, Dante is trying to tell us that Virgil and Beatrice allegorically stand for the Son and the Spirit, the only two agents of salvation known in Christianity. To hand over the missions of salvation to either natural reason or revealed theology would be an act of heresy or lunacy in any part of Christendom. (qtd. in Hede 152)

The trope of the guide, whether it be a person of the Trinity or a representative of the one true faith, seems a fitting characteristic for the medieval Church rather than Protestant theology because the latter assumes that man is free to come to Christ of his own volition, as the Scriptures teach him not to be led by anything other than his own faith. Because Redcrosse is led by Una, and eventually guided by the myriad of allegorical figures that make up the House of Holinesse, Spenser’s epic seems to be modeled on a medieval scheme of theology, and is therefore more like Dante’s allegory of salvation than any Protestant design. In canto nine, Una proves to be the knight’s salvation when she “snatch[es] the cursèd knife” (52, 463) from his hand and prevents his falling into despair. Spenser foreshadows the salvific balm of the Tree of Life when Una’s blood runs cold at the sight of Redcrosse’s temptation to obey Despair: “When

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72 See Hede 146.
73 Ibid. 145.
as Una saw, through every vaine / The crudled cold ran to her well of life, / As in a swowne” (461-3). She is an allegorical figure of the one true faith, while at the same time a champion of the knight’s salvation. *Mia salute* also seems an appropriate apostrophe for Una. Seung claims that “for Dante, the touchstone of salvation, and the resolution of the mystery of life, consists in the capacity to recognize Christ, which means either to be awake to (to expect), or to awaken to, the revelation of the infinite in the finite, the divine in the human, that is Christ” (*Metaphysics* 174). For Spenser, the only appearance of Christ is offered via his blood, the balm from the Tree of Life in which the knight is bathed and revived, and essentially empowered to defeat the Dragon:

I wote not, whether the revenging steele

Were hardnèd with that holy water dew,

Wherein he fell, or sharper edge did feele,

Or his baptizèd hands now greater grew;

Or other secret vertue did ensew. (11.36, 316-20)

The double meaning of “vertue” here—of power and purity—is redolent of the allegory as a whole; its meaning is always twofold, if not ambiguous. The “holy water dew,” “sharper edge,” baptizèd hands,” and “secret vertue” taken together seem to suggest Spenser’s attempt at making the ambiguity clear. For reasons such as these, the first book of *FQ* achieves its implicit aim of revealing Christ to man and awakening his faith so that he may know the one and only road to salvation. Redcrosse slays the Dragon after being baptized with the balm of the Tree of Life—the blood of Christ—and this may be the message embedded in the allegory. In the end, the knight returns to “his Faerie Queene” (12.41, 368) and “Una [is] left to mourn” (369). He no longer needs his guide, the figure that represents the one true faith, because he has been taught how to
pay penance for his sins, and has been baptized in the blood of Christ, defeating sin with his "secret vertue," that one true faith which now lives within him.
Chapter Three

The Pagan Piety in Doctor Faustus’s Religion

When Lucifer offers to show Doctor Faustus the splendor of the Seven Deadly Sins, he tells the devil that such a sight “will be as pleasing unto [him] as Paradise / was to Adam, the first day of his creation” (100-1). His words remind the audience of the Fall, as well as his inevitable damnation, and the devil chides Faustus for mentioning Paradise. The parade of deadly sins, however, does not serve the function for which it is most fitting: to divulge the sin that Faustus commits. Though Faustus is privy to these living embodiments of sin, those for which man may spend an eternity in hell, the hero’s reason for damnation at the end of Marlowe’s tragedy remains ambiguous. That Marlowe relies on a medieval Christian aspect of devotions adds to the ambiguity of the scene. In the pages that follow, however, I do not delve into the well charted territory of sin since many critics have examined it, some having been led to assume that his union with the spirit of Helen, or his communion with the devil, is what brings about his eternal suffering. Others have argued that his despair, his lack of repentance, as well as his denial of being fit for salvation, are the cause of his hellish downfall. More have posited that the transgression in Doctor Faustus is brought about by the hero’s unholy pursuit of knowledge, and within a Christian context, his consignment to the depths of hell is comparable to the Fall. Free to choose, Adam is ultimately led to commit the act that causes his expulsion

74 See Pontico 11-12; “the modern concept of the seven deadly sins is linked to the works of the 4th century monk Evagrius Ponticus, who listed eight evil thoughts in Greek as follows: Γαστριμαργία (gastrimargia) gluttony, Πορνεία (porneia) prostitution, fornication, Φιλαργυρία (philargyria) avarice, Υπερηφανία (hyperēphania) hubris, Ακηδία (akēdia) acedia (dejection).” For John Cassian as having translated the deadly sins into Latin, and as such guaranteed their inclusion in the Catholic devotions, see Refoule 644-5.
75 See Campbell 219-39; Cox 119-37; Greg 97-107; Hamlin 257-75; Honderich 1-13; Kirschbaum 225-41; O’Brien 1-11; Sachs 1-11; James Smith 36-55; Snow 70-112; and Westlund 191-205.
from Eden. His awakening is not necessarily his transgression; rather his disobedience and
disregard for the law of Paradise prove to be his sinful deed.\textsuperscript{76} Unable to be redeemed on his own
merits, Adam is sent out of Eden, no longer immune to death. The Bible does not say explicitly
whether Adam and Eve are saved, but the apocryphal gospels suggest that they were brought up
to heaven after Christ was crucified.\textsuperscript{77} Similar to Adam, Faustus is unable to resist the object of
temptation that will cut him off from God, the occult knowledge which he wishes to acquire. But
that knowledge, just like the fruit on the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, is as readily
available to him as it is to Adam, suggesting that he is also free to choose. Adam eats of the fruit
and knows sin, and although he is punished, according to the apocryphal gospels, he is also
saved by the blood of Christ. One may argue that Faustus is simply using the intellect bestowed
upon him by God, and because he is a learned man and an intellectual explorer—both important
aspects of his character—to toil and study are his nature. But Faustus does not have the divine
clarity to know God’s commandments despite his knowledge of Scripture, unlike Adam, who
disobeys God knowing full well what he is doing since he has been given a direct order not to eat
the fruit of that specific tree.\textsuperscript{78} For Marlowe to showcase the damnation of a man for his pursuit
of knowledge, however, speaks against the acquisition of certain types of knowledge.\textsuperscript{79} Faustus’s
desire for answers to questions beyond his scope—“who made the world?”—suggests an interest
not only in the cosmos but in the natural world, even as his curiosity tests theological boundaries

\textsuperscript{76} Cf. Lewis, \textit{Preface} 70; he claims that “the Fall is simply and solely Disobedience—doing what
you have been told not to do.”
\textsuperscript{77} For an account of Adam’s salvation, see “Gospel of Nicodemus,” \textit{Apocryphal} 485.
\textsuperscript{78} Cf. \textit{Genesis} 3.6; Eve knows what the fruit represents, and though it cannot be determined
whether Adam also knows it, one may assume that she does not deceive him but tempts him as
she was tempted. Scripture is from \textit{1599 Geneva Bible} unless otherwise noted.
\textsuperscript{79} One must not forget the very different approaches of the Catholic and Protestant churches
during the Reformation; the latter encouraged Christians to read the Scripture for themselves,
while Catholic priests interpreted the verses for believers, keeping the Bible on the pulpit.
and knowledge as transgressive. If Faustus’s actions are meant to be compared to the Fall, or the onset of original sin, he is damnable either way, but unlike God’s angels, he can be saved by the blood of Christ, as can every man, including Adam. The requisite for man’s salvation is faith in the redemptive power of Christ’s crucifixion and his succeeding resurrection. If the laws of Christianity govern Faustus’s world, his faith in the blood of Christ must suggest his redemption. The question is whether Marlowe’s secular tragedy limits itself to such theological parameters.

It is complicated and troublesome to confirm that Doctor Faustus relies on religious doctrine for its outcome despite its explicit references to Christianity. Even if it borrows principles from the medieval church (the seven deadly sins, for instance), while maintaining Protestant ideology, the tragedy is not fully in keeping with the notions of the just and fair deity of the Christian faith. Faustus, who clearly seeks salvation in the end, is not saved. That his appeal to God in his final moments goes unanswered is impossible to reconcile with the fundamental Christian tenet claiming that Christ died for all of man’s sins. Christianity assumes that Christ’s redemption is man’s as well, and the New Testament asserts that God hears the repentant’s call for salvation even as he takes his last breath. The best example of this is to be found in the passages in which Christ forgives the sinner hanging on the cross beside him at his crucifixion. Faustus’s final monologue is a prayer of poetic language and imagery which intimates a direct conversation with God and ultimately shows that he is in fact repentant. In the end, he confesses his sinful and corrupt nature to God, evincing remorse and sorrow for his unrighteous behavior and evoking undeniably his faith in the blood of Christ. If any Christian leanings are to be assumed, they must be those of the medieval church, for Faustus’s lack of redemption can only be justified by his inability to enter into the sacrament of penance. Or

perhaps Calvinist tenets are at play—it can be concluded from God’s denial of Faustus’s plea for salvation that he is predetermined for damnation. Despite these possibilities, and the myriad allusions to both the beliefs of the medieval church and Protestant ones as well, textual evidence supports the conclusion that Marlowe’s tragic figure is hoping for salvation in the end even if “Faustus live in hell a thousand years, / A hundred thousand, and at last be saved” (5.2, 95-6).81 And because textual proof indicates that Faustus does repent, as well as shows that God’s gift of forgiveness does not immediately follow, the religious atmosphere of Doctor Faustus is murky.82 Its allusions to Christianity therefore may veil a soteriology that is outside its design.

Faustus’s pursuit of knowledge is not uncommon. A real life early modern figure, dating from before Marlowe’s time, seems a fitting role model for this tragic hero, as his intellectual pursuits are worthy of attention. A Swiss German by birth, Paracelsus (1493-1541) was a doctor, an alchemist, an astrologer, a chemist, an occultist, and a faithful Christian. He was famous for his attraction to necromancy, having been described as “a true example of the Faustian man” (Jacobi lxx), and a complete collection of his writings appeared just fifty years after his death. He was also a Neoplatonist who believed that the spirit, making a distinction between it and the soul, “contains man’s judgment of the soul, of the body, and of everything else” (Guterman 200).83 The spirit is immortal and exists even after “man’s body rests in the earth, when he is relieved of

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81 Since it is difficult to know which version of the play may be Marlowe’s original, I have decided to work with the 1604 text only. Despite inconclusive evidence about its originality, the record from Philip Henslowe’s account book of the payment to two dramatists for providing new material for Doctor Faustus, and the addition of some 600 lines to the 1616 version, seem sufficient to dissuade from using the later edition. See also Rasmussen 40.
82 For the ambiguity of Christian doctrine, see O’Brien 1-11; Golden 202-10; and Hamlin 257-275.
83 For the Spirit as the “tertium quid, this phantom liaison-officer between body and soul,” see Lewis, Discarded Image 166. Cf. Plato, Timaeus.
labour and immersed in sleep until his awakening” (Guterman 200).\(^8^4\) Paracelsus saw illness in the body as a battle between good and evil, and therefore believed that “the material-elemental body cannot sin, but only the sidereal body, i.e., the soul … is subject to the last ‘judgment’ and thus has a hope of resurrection” (Jacobi lxvi). He was a staunch advocate of learning, and writes that “there is nothing on earth or in the sea, in chaos or in the firmament, that does not become manifest at the appointed time” (Guterman 109). He believed that everything in nature, having been created for man by God, is knowable since man “walks in the light of nature” (Guterman 109). Man’s pursuit of knowledge brings him closer to God since God has made a distinction between what is visible and what is knowable. For example, Paracelsus claimed that the spiritual Christ was intended to be a mysterious figure, one that must be discovered, if not uncovered, by man. When the man known as Jesus walked the earth, he was easily understood as a figure of flesh and blood because he was not yet known as the second branch of the Trinity—“what He actually was remained invisible” (Guterman 109). Man pursues knowledge so that he may manifest what God has given him, so “that the unbelievers may see what God can achieve through man” (Guterman 110). For Marlowe, whose education consisted of subjects such as astronomy, divinity, and poetry, learning was an eclectic venture. His comprehensive course of study included the practice of magic.\(^8^5\) David Riggs claims that “Marlowe’s work on astronomy and mythology prepared him for the occult science of astrology” (173) and that though “astrology had no formal place in the university curriculum, MA candidates routinely studied it and kept notebooks of occult learning” (174):

Conjuring was not a freak diversion at Oxford and Cambridge; as Henry Barrow recognized, it was a foreseeable outcome of the MA course. ‘When first a

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\(^8^4\) For his distinction between the spirit and the soul, see Paracelsus 199-200.

\(^8^5\) For more on Marlowe’s MA curriculum, see Riggs 173-85.
Graduate,’ according to an early biographer, William Perkins ‘was much addicted to the study of natural Magic, digging so deep, in nature’s mine, to know the hidden causes and sacred qualities of things, that some conceive that he bordered on Hell itself in his curiosity.’\(^86\) (178)

MA candidates at Oxford and Cambridge, experimenting with necromancy, were, at the same time, preparing for a career in the Church.\(^87\) Examples such as these must have provided Marlowe with models for his Doctor Faustus, especially his protagonist’s seemingly common curiosity about magic.

When it comes to the art of magic, Paracelsus claims that it is “the most secret of the arts and the highest wisdom concerning the supernatural on earth” (Guterman 137). He justifies the New Testament’s inclusion of the Magi, traveling from the East to visit the child who is born in Bethlehem, concluding that “they did not misuse their art and their occult wisdom” (Guterman 139). To use one’s knowledge of magic without faith “can give rise to sorcery.” He claims that magic reaches beyond human reason and is one of the paths to wisdom that God offers man, but he is adamant that it must only be used for good:

As soon as something is kindled in us by the light of nature, the devil pretends to be our guide and makes bold to falsify all things that God has given us, to slander them, and to make them deceptive … he seduces those who are weak in their faith.

\(^86\) For a discussion of the inheritance of ancient and medieval astrology in the early modern period, see Lewis, *Discarded Image* 103.

\(^87\) See Wrightson, “Witchcraft and Magic;” witchcraft was never prosecuted as a heresy in England. The first act passed against it in 1542 made it a felony to practice it for unlawful purposes, and any felonious crime at the time carried the death penalty. The act was repealed five years later, and there was no law against witchcraft for nearly twenty years. In 1563, a new act was passed, and another in 1604, which elaborated on the 1563 act by making it a felony to bewitch anyone to the point of either their injury or death. English witchcraft trials during the time, however, rarely made reference to demonic pacts.
and leads them astray in order to make them desert God and cultivate false arts and grievously affront Him. They spend their time in lies, and although they too brood, and inquire and explore, they nevertheless must die without finding the truth. (Guterman 138)

Paracelsus’s warning that the devil may get hold of one’s desire for knowledge and twist it to fit his own fancy is exemplified in Doctor Faustus. When Faustus asks Mephistopheles if his conjuring has forced him to appear, he says that it is not conjuring per se, but his rejection of God and Christ that has led him to visit Faustus. From philosophy to medicine, covering both the mind and the body, Faustus rejects the conventional paths to human knowledge. He wants a “greater miracle” (1.1, 9) than to be able simply to argue well. He wants to be able to raise dead men to life again, and “make men to live eternally” (24), admitting his desire to become a god himself. Prior to picking up the Bible, he reads a line from Justinian’s Institutes that may speak to his plight. “Exhaereditare filium non potest pater nisi, etc.” (31) ‘the father cannot disinherit his son unless, etc.’ (KPA). Although Faustus’s Latin is not a verse found in the Institutes, the section it may be referring to is one that speaks about the father’s legacy. According to Roman law, a father is obligated to specify in his will whether a son is to be disinherited before being passed over at the time of inheritance. The wording is precise about the father’s having to name specifically, and specially, his son as the disinherited one. This verse from the Institutes may support those who argue for the play’s Calvinist leanings, suggesting that Faustus’s acknowledgment of the maxim, even if bastardized, foreshadows God’s having named him for

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88 Marlowe confirms, however, that Faustus does conjure up something with his incantation when he draws a parallel to Robin, Rafe and Vintner. Robin reads gibberish from Faustus’s conjuring book, seeming to make Mephistopheles appear. Marlowe may be showing his audience how dangerous conjuring can be, even if done by fools, but his suggestion that Robin’s gibberish has in fact called the devil forth makes the scene unreliable as an analogy for Faustus’s situation. See Doctor Faustus 3.2, 39-41.
damnation—as a disinherited of Heaven.\textsuperscript{89} But perhaps even that is to read too much into Marlowe’s tragedy. Faustus’s corruption of the Justinian verse may simply suggest that the Roman law, designating the son as heir to the father’s kingdom, is no longer significant in the early modern world. If that is the case, Faustus’s dismissal of the verse is symbolic of his disregard for the law that binds father and son. Now that Christ is considered the pathway to salvation, every man is an heir to the Kingdom of God. When Faustus reads from Jerome’s Bible, he turns to the verse about sin and death in \textit{Romans} and ignores the second half that says that salvation comes through Christ.\textsuperscript{90} When he reads the first book of \textit{John} and discovers the need for confession to pardon sin, he insists that “if we say we have no sin / We deceive ourselves, and there’s no truth in us” (1.1, 43-4). To receive forgiveness, man must first confess and purge himself of his sin, but because of original sin, he will never really be free of his sinful state whether he confesses or not. According to the Bible, man can never be without sin, and so in trying to rid himself of it, he falls into a redundant cycle. Faustus is making a rather deft observation here, claiming that the very idea of confession confirms man’s sin and therefore leads him to greater sin.\textsuperscript{91} The type of knowledge which Faustus gains from these verses is one that relies heavily on his ability to interpret what is given, something Marlowe suggests by having the tragedy open with Faustus in his study making unconventional claims about the subjects which he is glossing. If nothing else, his mode of learning, as well as his skepticism, are exemplified in this scene, and it is obvious that, at this point, his faith in the Christian God is waning. He appears to be more like Adam at the moment of the Fall, contemplating his decision to taste the fateful fruit.

\textsuperscript{89} Cf. Levin 113.
\textsuperscript{90} Cf. Kocher 106.
\textsuperscript{91} For repentance as a denial of our will, see Montaigne 1088-1107.
When the devil admits that Faustus’s blatant rejection of God is what draws him near, Marlowe suggests that his character’s desire for a “greater miracle” is tied to the knowledge that he already possesses and that which he desires to attain. Mephistopheles tells Faustus that he is not capable of himself raising a devil despite the guidance his books and peers may give him:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Nor will we come unless he use such means} \\
\text{Whereby he is in danger to be damned.} \\
\text{Therefore the shortest cut for conjuring} \\
\text{Is stoutly to abjure the Trinity} \\
\text{And pray devoutly to the prince of hell. (1.3, 50-4)}
\end{align*}
\]

To show his lack of faith in God is a sure way to find the devil at his door—a veiled threat for all Christians if there ever was one—and Faustus does this when he first conjures up Mephistopheles. But even more important is that the devil tells Faustus that he is not yet damned, but only “in danger [of being] damned.” So what of Faustus’s knowledge? When Mephistopheles first appears, Faustus believes that he is a “conjuror laureate / That canst command great Mephistopheles” (1.3, 32-3). He believes that he is the one creating all the mischief and pulling the devil’s strings, and yet all his knowledge and conjuring are nothing but empty musings, for in fact he does nothing. Mephistopheles makes Helen’s spirit appear, brings the Duke’s ancestors to life, puts horns on the soldier’s head, fetches grapes from the other side of the world, makes the horse-courser’s horse turn to a pile of string, and tricks Faustus into selling him his soul. In truth, Faustus does not appear to receive any greater knowledge than that which he has already attained through his own study. When he asks Mephistopheles about “divine astrology” (2.3, 34), the devil tells him what he already knows and Faustus says, “Tush, these slender trifles Wagner can decide. / Hath Mephistopheles no greater skill?” (49-50) Mephistopheles claims that an angelic
influence moves the planets though this is simply a confirmation of what some men already believed to be true at the time. When Faustus asks him “why we have not conjunctions, oppositions, aspects, eclipses, all at one time” (61-2), he says that it is due to unequal motion with respect to the whole, a tautological reason that does not answer the question posed, nor explain the phenomena about which he is inquiring. Faustus is satisfied, however, with the devil’s answers, telling him, “Well I am answered” (64). He is fooled again and again into believing that he is privy to some new knowledge that he did not have before, the most blatant example of which is when he wants to know who made the world:

FAUSTUS. Sweet Mephistopheles, tell me.

MEPHISTOPHELES. Move me not, for I will not tell thee.

FAUSTUS. Villain, have I not bound thee to tell me any thing?

MEPHISTOPHELES. Ay, that is not against our kingdom; but this is. Think thou on hell, Faustus, for thou art damned.

FAUSTUS. Think, Faustus, upon God that made the world. (66-71)

Mephistopheles’s “move me not” mocks the notion that the world and its surrounding planets, and essentially everything in it, are in constant motion. Faustus’s assertion that he has “bound” the devil to tell him “any thing” is another rejection of the notion that everything is moving and nothing is bounded by any other thing. To imply that the world is in perpetual motion—a supposition that Faustus encounters again at the end of his twenty-four years of devilry when he begs time to stop moving—is controversial because it suggests that it has no end or beginning.  

92 For Lucretius’s notion of perpetual motion in Montaigne, see Montaigne 1088; and for the notion that something motionless initiates the motion of all other things, see Lewis, Discarded Image 113. For the Epicurean notion that heavenly bodies are not divine beings but simply a part of the natural order, see Greenblatt, Swerve 74.

93 For the difference between eternity and perpetuity, see Lewis, Discarded Image 89.
Their cosmological exchange, based on the Ptolemaic system in which the Earth is at the bottom, may pique the interest of some for what it does not suggest.\textsuperscript{94} Copernicus and his heliocentric notion, an idea that was permeating Marlowe’s environment at the time, are discarded by both Mephistopheles and Faustus.\textsuperscript{95} If anyone seems most fit to challenge the cosmological beliefs held by the medieval church and the geocentric world that the devil claims to inhabit, it is a “learnèd scholar” like Faustus. This exchange proves that Faustus already knows the thing that he thinks he does not, that God made the world. This seems to be an ongoing theme throughout: he already possesses what it is he is seeking. No secrets are divulged to Faustus, nor is evidence given contrary to what he already believes. His innocence, in fact, may be justifiable since Mephistopheles and Lucifer are the conjurers and responsible for all the tricks played.

Triviality marks the feats that Faustus accomplishes with Mephistopheles, and they appear to be empty uses of occult knowledge. As Paracelsus suggests,

\begin{quote}
Only from knowledge, and because of knowledge, does faith arise. Through this knowledge, which comes from philosophy and precedes faith, a man can be either blessed or damned; damned, though he know and believe in all God’s signs and marvels, if for example the fruit of his knowledge fails to mature, and dies away. For he who knows much should bear much fruit. And if he does not, he may be regarded as a liar and not a philosopher. For first comes knowledge, then faith, and then the fruit; this is the ground on which the philosopher must stand. (160)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{94} For the nine spheres of Ptolemy, see \textit{Doctor Faustus} 2.3, 59-60; and 38-40. Cf. Plato, \textit{Phaedo} 147. Cf. also Lewis, \textit{Discarded Image} 96-9.
\textsuperscript{95} For Giordano Bruno in Oxford and London at the same time as Marlowe, see Greenblatt, \textit{Swerve} 238.
It seems that Faustus’s knowledge does not bear fruit, but it is questionable whether he gains a greater understanding of the world and God from his consort with the devil.\textsuperscript{96} If wisdom brings faith, it is difficult to argue that Faustus does not have a certain measure of faith and wisdom in the end when he repents, asking for salvation. The knowledge that he accrues over the course of his “four-and-twenty-years” (1.3, 91) from his demonic alliances does in fact lead him to admit his faith in God. His final turn to God in his closing monologue is the only moment in the play when nothing prevents him from repenting. It is here that Faustus seeks God’s mercy and that his faith is exemplified. His plea for the clock to cease ticking is a final appeal for everlasting life with God.\textsuperscript{97} Faustus calls on Christ though Mephistopheles and “the devil / threatened to tear [him] in pieces if [he] named God, to fetch / both body and soul if [he] once gave ear to divinity” (5.2, 45-7), and the Evil Angel warns him against repenting, for the “devils shall tear [him] in pieces” (2.3, 77). But when Lucifer hears his plea, “Ah, Christ, my savior, / Seek to save distressèd Faustus’ soul” (2.3, 79-80), he himself appears, telling Faustus that “Christ cannot save [his] soul, for he is just” (2.3, 81). Lucifer is the father of lies, however, and is no doubt lying to Faustus, and in that last hour of his life, Faustus feels the persuasive, all-consuming domination of hell. He tells the scholars that Lucifer “stays his tongue” (5.2, 31) and holds back his hands from rising up to God. With this fear of the devil engulfing him, he avoids a direct display of calling on God for salvation, and starts his final monologue by lamenting the “bare hour” he has left to live before perpetual damnation, calling to the heavenly spheres:

\begin{quote}
Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{96} As discussed in my first chapter, Boethius distinguishes between intellectus and ratio, the former being “obumbrata intelligentia, clouded intelligence, or a shadow of intelligence;” cf. Lewis, \textit{Discarded Image} 157.

\textsuperscript{97} Faustus, on the brink of non-existence, requests “perpetual day” (5.2, 67) as an invocation of God. For Augustine’s conception of time, see \textit{Confessions} 230-1.
That time may cease and midnight never come.

Fair Nature’s eye, rise, rise again, and make

Perpetual day; or let this hour be but

A year, a month, a week, a natural day,

That Faustus may repent and save his soul. (5.2, 64-9)

His request for the spheres of heaven to stand still recalls his conversation with Mephistopheles on the workings of the universe when he asks the devil whether the heavenly spheres each have an angelic influence or intelligence and Mephistopheles confirms that they do. When Faustus appeals to the heavenly spheres in his final monologue, he is most certainly crying out to those angelic influences and God himself. 98 Perhaps it is unmitigated desperation that causes him to do so, but despair is not a worthless reason to call on God. When he solicits the heavens to “stand still,” he seems to be asking shrewdly for an intercession. Since he cannot call on God directly without experiencing painful repercussions from the devils, he uses metaphysical language, rather than biblical verse, to make his plea, citing imagery such as the ever-moving spheres of heaven and fair Nature’s eye to appeal to God in the heavens. 99 When Faustus sees that his plea goes unanswered and that the “noctis equi” disobey his request to “currite lente,” in desperation he says, “O, I’ll leap up to my God” (5.2, 73) though the devil pulls him down. It is only then that he sees the blood of Christ, “one drop [of which] would save [his] soul” (5.2, 74), and he quickly asks that his heart not be ripped asunder “for naming of [his] Christ!” (5.2, 76) It is important to acknowledge Faustus’s use of the first person possessive here—“my Christ!”—because it suggests rather clearly that he believes that he has a claim on Christ as his Savior, and

98 For the Christian poet’s belief in the planet as cosmic matter, source of influence and god, see Lewis, Discarded Image 105.
99 Cf. Ibid. 113.
that he is no longer excluded from the grace of God. His use of the informal “thou” in his final monologue suggests a renewed intimacy with God: “There is an informal ‘you’ that one uses with those one knows, and a more polite, reserved ‘you’ that one uses in other company. Thou and you at some point in Middle English operated the same way … Thou implied intimacy; you implied a polite reserve” (Pressley). Faustus uses “thou” not only to refer to himself but also to God when he says, “O God, if thou wilt not have mercy on my soul” (5.2, 92). Faustus’s language emulates that of the devoted and prayerful Christian, who engages in an intimate conversation with God. Faustus’s fear of his wrath seems to be another indication of his turning toward heaven, as this fear supersedes that of the devil. Faustus’s desire to be hidden from God’s threatening arm that “bends his ireful brows” (5.2, 79) recalls his “Wither should I fly” (2.1, 76) of the initial pact. He knows that he cannot hide because God is everywhere, and with his plea for the Earth to fall on him and conceal him from “the heavy wrath of God” (5.2, 81), he shows little concern for his physical being though he is averse to suffering any kind of physical torment. He calls to God through the “stars that reigned at [his] nativity, / Whose influence hath allotted death and hell” (5.2, 84-5), to draw him up into the atmosphere from whence he came, and he desires that his flesh dissolve so that his “soul may but ascend to heaven” (5.2, 90).

As the clock strikes its last half hour, Faustus evinces his faith in Christ, invoking God’s sacrificial lamb and soliciting an intercession: “Yet for Christ’s sake, whose blood hath ransomed me, / Impose some end to my incessant pain” (5.2, 93-4). Since Faustus cannot rid

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100 Savior is capitalized for its Christian significance.

101 During the medieval period, both in monasteries and convents, many Christians practiced flagellation and self-induced physical punishment to emulate the suffering that Christ experienced on the cross, as well as to repay the sins of Adam and Eve in Paradise. By contrast, Faustus is fearful of any kind of physical pain from the devil’s razings to the physical punishment of God, so much so that he curses the parents “that engendered [him]” (5.2, 106) and wishes to be free of his physical body.
himself of his body, wishing that Pythagoras’s metempsychosis were real, he longs for his soul’s salvation even if it is to come after a hundred thousand years in hell. It is tempting to disregard Faustus’s plea for God’s help as desperate manipulation, to consider it the mere fancy of a frightened man, but mistrusting his words, believing they are empty, puts the entire question of tragedy to the test. His downfall is only tragic if his position is changed by the time his end is come. If Faustus were merely whimsical in his plea for salvation, if he still had little faith in God and his redemptive power, Marlowe’s ensuing finale, “Exeunt [DEVILS] with him,” implying that Faustus is not in fact saved by God, would not make for a tragic end. That Faustus is sincere in his final appeal to partake in the atonement of Christ’s blood, and that he sees the error of his ways, mark the anti-hero of Marlowe’s play as a figure to be pitied. Like Oedipus, he does not learn what he needs to until it is too late. Faustus’s regret, and his attempt to repent for his actions, do not make the play a tragedy in the formal sense of the genre, but his final realization and desire for redemption make him a tragic figure. His faith, whether it comes by “intellectus” or “ratio” or out of fear for what is to come, is undeniably evinced in these final moments. It is his lack of redemption, such that can only come through God, that makes the doctrinal contradictions of Marlowe’s play difficult to reconcile.

Setting up an Ancient Schema with Chariots of Ruin

The Manichean dynamic between the Good and Evil Angels certainly evinces Faustus’s ability to know the difference between the two. He hears the warnings of each clearly though he only heeds those of one. These two characters reinforce Faustus’s status as a post-Fall Adam, and the emphasis on good and evil here is surely evocative of the Edenic tree. This theatrical device becomes a symbol of the conscience and Marlowe reminds his audience that the ability to
make a moral distinction is readily available to man. Paracelsus argues that when a child is born “a word from God enters this carnal conception, which gives the flesh its soul … The body is the house of the soul, but the soul is the house of the good and evil spirits which dwell in man” (199). Man has both good and evil tendencies in him at birth, but it is not until he learns to distinguish between the two that he makes choices that will either be right or wrong in the eyes of God. This system of oppositions, in which Faustus is being given advice by the Good and Evil Angels, marks his ability to choose one or the other, which again evinces his freedom of will. Whether Faustus is predetermined and predestined to heed only the words of the Evil Angel is impossible to know. That he is easily tempted, just as Eve is led to taste of the fruit by the cunning serpent, does not necessarily admit to some kind of moral failing or weakness on his part. Marlowe, nevertheless, makes a clear distinction between the two angels when they first appear and warn Faustus of what he will get if he follows Mephistopheles. The Good Angel cautions him against letting his soul be tempted by the devil, for he will “heap God’s heavy wrath upon [his] head” (1.1, 72) if he does. The Evil Angel, however, tells him to go forward in that famous art

Wherein all Nature’s treasury is contained.

Be thou on earth as Jove is in the sky,

Lord and commander of these elements. (74-7)

The two sides of the same coin are clear: on the one hand God will punish Faustus for practicing magic, and on the other Faustus will gain so much power from it that he will be like a god

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102 For a discussion of morality as knowledge in Plato, see Lewis, Discarded Image 160.
103 If redemption is impossible for Faustus because God has preordained him for damnation, the Good and Evil Angels have no purpose in the action and their dialogue is superfluous. These two dramatis personae are clearly intended to carry some of the weight of Faustus’s wavering. Perhaps the reason for their inclusion in the action is to emphasize the unknowability of one’s destiny after death. Cf. Kocher 108.
himself. Faustus conflates the Christian God with the classical Jove when he relishes the idea of commanding the spirits and elements, and having them “fetch [him] what [he] please[s]” (79). But being commander of the elements is not equivalent to being the sole God and creator of the Christian world, and Faustus is no longer dealing in ills contrary to the Bible when he challenges ancient deities. Marlowe’s references to the classical world are relevant to Faustus’s salvation, and they seem to suggest that the tragedy is something other than a simple Christian morality play or tale warning against the worship of devils.¹⁰⁴

The play opens with a Chorus, a beginning that evokes Greek tragedy and essentially suggests a pre-Christian world. The Chorus claims that its muse intends to tell the story of a simple and rational man:

Not marching now in fields of Trasimene,
Where Mars did mate the Carthaginians,
Nor sporting in the dalliance of love
In courts of kings where state is overturned,
Nor in the pomp of proud audacious deeds,
Intends our muse to daunt his heavenly verse.
Only this, gentlemen: we must perform
The form of Faustus’ fortunes, good or bad.¹⁰⁵ (1-8)

Having his Chorus claim that its muse will “daunt his heavenly verse,” Marlowe calls on the ancient world. From Hesiod and Homer to Virgil, Ovid, Catullus and Dante, and even more recently Chaucer, who evokes Cleo in the second book of his *Troilus and Criseyde*, Marlowe

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¹⁰⁴ For a different type of discussion of Marlowe’s use of antiquity in *Doctor Faustus*, see McAlindon 214-23.
¹⁰⁵ For a discussion of Faustus not being an “Everyman,” see Levin 24.
carries on a tradition begun by the ancient poets when he summons a muse of his own. That Marlowe’s Chorus is seeking some kind of authority is clear, but its calling on a male muse not only suggests divine inspiration itself, but is an early invocation to Mephistopheles even if textual evidence to support such a claim is lacking. Curtius refers to a male muse when he suggests that Milton’s protestant Muse in Paradise Lost is “an invocation of the Christian (Davidian) Muse” (243), but perhaps Marlowe’s muse is the medium—or the daemon—needed to commune with God; it is the tertium quid, or spirit, that intervenes between the soul and the body. Lewis’s medieval Model introduces the “Demogorgon,” which may be the same one Faustus appeals to in his incantation for raising Mephistopheles:

In the fourth Book of the Thebaid [Statius] alludes to a deity he will not name—‘the sovereign of the threefold world’ (516). The same anonymous power is probably meant in Lucan’s Pharsalia (vi, 744) where the witch, conjuring a reluctant ghost back into the corpse, threatens it with Him … Lactantius in his commentary on the Thebaid says that Statius ‘means … the god whose name it is unlawful to know.’ This is plain sailing: the demiurge (workman) being the Creator in the Timaeus. But there are two variants in the manuscripts; one is demogorgona, the other demogorgon. (39)

Faustus names the nameless deity, Statius’s “sovereign of the threefold world,” after he dismisses the “numen triplex / Jehovae” (1.3, 16-7) ‘threefold spirit of Jehovah’ (KPA), imploring

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106 For a survey of the Muses in the medieval period, see Curtius 228-46.
107 The nine Muses are the daughters of Mnemosyne and Zeus, and would if anything be referred to as female. The gender of Marlowe’s muse, therefore, stirs up curiosity even if little is to be gained by knowing the poet’s intention. Cf. Levin 111.
108 See Lewis, Discarded Image 40-4; and 166-7.
“Demogorgon” (18) to make Mephistopheles appear. But Marlowe’s muse remains nameless and one may only conjecture about his identity. When the Chorus insists that it is to enact “the form of Faustus’ fortunes, good or bad,” that it is simply performing a show of what his fortunes appear to be, what his present situation looks like rather than what it actually is, it is telling the audience that Faustus’s fate is still undecided, and that the world they are about to enter is a skeptical one. It appeals to the audience’s “patient judgments” (9) because the ending of their story is still undetermined. Putting the audience in the seat of adjudication, the Chorus expects them to pass their judgment as they deem fit. In *Theogony*, the Muses of Olympos speak to Hesiod and say, “Listen, you country bumpkins, you pot-bellied blockheads, / we know how to tell many lies that pass for truth, / and when we wish, we know to tell the truth itself” (Athanassakis 40). His Muses admittedly withhold truth at times because man must decipher the meaning of things for himself. What is truth for one may not be the same for another, and is therefore a matter of perspective, as every story contains a certain amount of falsity. From the outset, Faustus’s fate can go either way, and the audience is asked to be patient with his judgment—another remarkable line that seems to dispel the notion of his being predetermined for damnation. The Chorus expects the audience to interpret the facts and discern whether Faustus is worthy of damnation in a way that is emulated in the play’s opening scene by Faustus, who is found toiling in his study, questioning authoritative precepts as they have been put forth.

When the Chorus uses Icarus as an example of Faustus’s predicament, “Swoll’n with cunning, of a self-conceit, / His waxen wings did mount above his reach, / And melting heavens conspired his overthrow” (20-22), it seems to suggest that Faustus stumbles in his overreaching

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109 In Book One of *FQ*, Spenser refers to “Daemogorgons hall” (5.22, 194) as the place where the Olympian gods were born. For the suggestion that it is taken from Boccaccio’s etymology, see Hamilton, *FQ* 78.
for power. Since the heavens plotted Icarus’s fall, however, the example does not fit the Christian context, in which Faustus’s will is free and he is responsible for his own damnation.\footnote{For a discussion of Marlowe’s overreachers as attractive, amoral pleasure-seekers, see Grande.} While Marlowe’s choice to use “overthrow” in this line is difficult to reconcile with the doctrine of free will, the image of Icarus falling back to earth is certainly evocative of Christianity’s most famous overreacher. Icarus’s melted wings and plunge to the ground are bound to be reminiscent of Lucifer’s fall from heaven. Lucifer, or Satan, similar to other angelic sinners, will never be granted forgiveness because he sins despite his knowing God. But Faustus is a man, and as a man is granted grace through Christ’s redemption—even his overreaching falls within the purview of God’s forgiveness. The Chorus therefore alludes to Icarus, foreshadowing Faustus’s fall, for another reason. Ovid’s version of the Icarus myth is about a son and his father, Daedalus, who gives him the instrument that causes his fall. Despite Daedalus’s instructions to Icarus that he follow him in his flight, his son cannot resist the urge to test the limits of his newfound ability. In Metamorphoses, “puer audaci coepit gaudere volatu / deseruitque ducem caelique cupidine tractus / altius egit iter” (8, 223-5) ‘the boy began to rejoice in his bold flight and, deserting his leader led by a desire for the open sky, directed his course to a greater height’ (Miller 421). When Daedalus prepares the wings for the two of them, Ovid foreshadows Icarus’s deadly curiosity:

\begin{quote}
Puer Icarus una
statab et ignarus, sua se tractare pericla,
ore renidenti modo, quas vaga moverat aura,
captatabat plumas, flavam modo pollice ceram,
mollibat lusuque suo mirabile patris
\end{quote}
impediebat opus. (195-200)

His son, Icarus, was standing by and, little knowing that he was handling his own peril, with gleeful face would now catch at the feathers which some passing breeze had blown about, now mould the yellow wax with his thumb, and by his sport would hinder his father’s wondrous task. (Miller 421)

The son’s spirit of inquiry and his disobedience to his father eventually lead to his downfall, but his punishment may seem excessive. In a Christian universe, since God cannot be responsible for Faustus’s damnation, it may be concluded that his eternal condemnation is best explained by a scheme in which it is typical for fathers to punish their sons for eternity.111

When Lucifer pays Faustus a visit and takes him on a trip into the sky to see the cosmos, Wagner, acting as the Chorus, tells the audience about Faustus’s latest dalliance:

Learnèd Faustus to know the secrets of astronomy
Graven in the book of Jove’s high firmament
Did mount himself to scale Olympus’ top,
Being seated in a chariot burning bright,
Drawn by the strength of yoky dragons’ necks. (3, 1-5)

111 From Ouranos to Kronos to Zeus, successive Greek gods have attempted to kill their children to retain power. According to Hesiod, when Ouranos learns that his children will eventually seize power over him, he buries each of them as they are born. Kronos, son of Ouranos, castrates his father and succeeds to his reign with the help of his mother Gaia. Kronos himself swallows each of his children when they are born for fear that his patriarchal rule will be challenged. Zeus, son of Kronos, eventually saves his siblings and usurps his father’s position with the help of his mother Rhea. In fear of the rise of his own children, Zeus attempts to put an end to the Heroic race by starting the Trojan War. Zeus in fact orchestrates Helen’s abduction at the marriage of Thetis and Peleus. According to the Kypria, an epic after Homer that appears at the end of the epic cycle, Zeus is forewarned that any son he has with Thetis will usurp his own position, and he therefore marries her to Peleus instead. The patriarchal paranoia in the line of Greek gods is perhaps not to be overstated.
Prior to Faustus’s being swept up into the sky on a burning chariot and taken to see the stars and the planets up close, he receives a book from Mephistopheles that explains “all the characters and planets of the heavens” (2.1, 166). His visit to the cosmos with Lucifer furnishes him with firsthand knowledge and physical evidence of the planets that were merely theoretical up until then. Marlowe’s description of Faustus’s flight is a subtle mix of Christian lore and classical myth since the chariot is not only pulled by several dragons but is also “burning bright,” an homage to the burning chariot that brings Elijah up to heaven in the Old Testament: “Behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and did separate them twain [and] so Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven” (2 Kings 2.11). The marginal note on the “whirlwind into heaven” claims that it marks man’s possibility for resurrection, and that “God [has] left a testimony in all ages (both before the Law, in the Law, and in the time of the Gospel) of our resurrection.”

Faustus’s ascension into the firmament on a chariot of fire is a blasphemy befitting Lucifer. His rise into the heavens is ironic, if not also both apt and inappropriate, since Lucifer cannot be resurrected. His being in possession of a flying chariot vulgarizes the icon while reminding the audience that a fallen angel is more profane than man since the closest he may come to God is by false imitation, not genuine emulation. Perhaps the chariot is meant to evoke the one from Revelation which will be pulled by the four horsemen sent to warn of the apocalypse coming with the return of Christ. Lucifer’s chariot, however, is not pulled by horses of fire; rather it is yoked to dragons, reminding the viewer of the biblical Satan and his exile:

And I saw an Angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit, and a great chain in his hand. And he took the dragon that old serpent, which is the devil and Satan, and he bound him a thousand years: And cast him into the

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112 See 1599 Geneva Bible.
bottomless pit, and he shut him up, and sealed the door upon him, that he should
deceive the people no more till the thousand years were fulfilled: for after that he
must be loosed for a little season. (Rev. 20.1-3)

The angel, leaving heaven to punish the fallen one for a specified period of time, invokes both
the image of Christ coming down to Earth as a man, and the impermanency of Satan’s
punishment. The devil’s imprisonment, though in “a bottomless pit,” is limited because he will eventually be subject to release even if it is “for a little season.” The first thousand years falls upon the times of

that wicked Hildebrand, who was called Gregory the seventh a most damnable
Necromancer and sorcerer, whom Satan used as an instrument when he was
loosed out of bonds, thenceforth to annoy the Saints of God with most cruel persecutions, and the whole world with dissensions, and most bloody wars.113

It seems fitting for Marlowe’s dragons, alluding perhaps to Satan and Revelation, to precede the scene that finds Faustus in the papal chambers in Rome where he challenges the power of the priests. It may simply be a coincidence, if not a creative necessity, that Faustus’s mockery of the Catholic Church falls on the heels of his chariot ride into the sky, but it makes a suitable bookend nonetheless with the parade of Seven Deadly Sins that announces Lucifer’s arrival.114

113 In 1075, Benno the Bishop of Meissen in Germany opposed Gregory VII for his challenge to imperial authority of bishopric investiture. Benno accused the Pope of many heinous crimes, such as plotting assassinations, excommunicating and torturing innocent people, as well as practicing the art of necromancy. Cf. note on Rev. 20.1-3.

114 The visit, taking place on the day of “holy Peter’s feast” (3.1, 50), recalls the first Pope and apostle of Christ, Simon Peter. The feast day is a celebration of the martyrdom of Saint Peter and is sacred to the Catholic Church. Faustus’s pranks, though seemingly childish, are ironic since three times Faustus snatches the dish or cup from the Pope, and three times the Pope crosses himself with Faustus boxing him on the ear on his third sign of the cross. The reference to threes continues with the “bell, book and candle” (83) and the sound of “a hog grunt[ing], a calf bleat[ing], and an ass bray[ing], / Because it is Saint Peter’s holy day” (86-7). Even the friars’
Marlowe’s contempt for Catholicism is evident in his comparison between it and the lower depths of the pagan world. Mephistopheles describes Rome as they arrive:

Just through the midst runs flowing Tiber’s stream
With winding banks that cut it in two parts,
Over which four stately bridges lean,
That make safe passage to each part of Rome.
Upon the bridge called Ponte Angelo
Erected is a castle passing strong (32-7)

The Ponte Angelo leads to Saint Peter’s Basilica, which in the fourteenth century was connected to the Castel Sant’Angelo. The “castle passing strong” is the Mausoleum of Hadrian that once housed the dead bodies of non-Christian emperors, guarded by the statues and icons of the Roman gods. The placement of the castle on the Ponte Angelo, once a place of pagan worship, is appropriate since Faustus’s visit to the temple, where the Roman god was once worshipped on Earth, falls on the heels of his trip to Jove’s firmament. Rome is the center to which the four bridges lead, and the Tiber may be crossed only by one of these overpasses. The Tiber is described as having “winding banks that cut it in two parts,” an image evocative of the one Plato uses to describe the waters in the underworld:

As [Stygion] waters fall into the lake they acquire dread powers; then diving below and winding round it flows in the opposite direction from the Pyriphlegethon and into the opposite side of the Acherusian lake; its waters do not dirge is a multiple of three verses, with “Amen!” (99) the third verse to close the six-verse lament. The repetition of threes in the opening ninety-nine lines of Act 3 recall the three times that Saint Peter denies Christ. See John 13.36-8, Matt. 26.33-5; Mark 14.29-31; and Luke 22.33-4.
mingle with any other; it too flows in a circle and into Tartarus opposite the Pyrphphegeon. The name of that fourth river, the poets tell us, is Cocytus.

(Phaedo 113 c)

That Marlowe’s description of Rome is similar to the ancient underworld, whether intentional or not, is bolstered by Faustus’s response to Mephistopheles’s description of it:

Now by the kingdoms of infernal rule,
Of Styx, of Acheron, and the fiery lake,
Of ever-burning Phlegethon, I swear
That I do long to see the monuments
And situation of bright, splendent Rome. (43-52)

The kingdoms of hell are used in the same breath as “bright, splendent Rome,” which conjures up a parallel, while the four rivers of infernal rule echo the four bridges that cross the Tiber’s stream to reach the center of Rome.

As the dragons pulling Faustus’s chariot remind us of Christian lore that depicts the “ancient serpent” who tricks Eve in the garden and brings about man’s downfall, the chariot itself symbolizes the ancient world. The quadriga is a chariot pulled by four horses that are yoked to it, and, in ancient Rome, it was used for racing, becoming a symbol of triumph and fame. In mythology, it is the vehicle of gods and heroes, and is the implement that brings about the downfall of several characters. In the Aeneid, Salmoneus is in the pits of Tartarus: “Quattuor hie inventus equis et lampada quassans / per Graium populos mediaeque per Elidis urbem / ibat ovans, divumque sibi poscebat honorem” (6, 587-9) ‘Borne by four horses and brandishing a torch, he rode triumphant through the Greek peoples and his city in the heart of Elis, claiming as his own the homage of deity. Madman, to mimic the storm’ (Fairclough 573). When Jove sees
his display of hubris, he knocks him down with a bolt of thunder “[praecipitatque] immani
turbine” (6, 594) ‘and [drives] him headlong with furious whirlwind’ (Fairclough 573). The
chariot in this case is the means by which Salmoneus can speed over his bridge of brass to
emulate the roar of thunder, an action that inevitably causes his demise. For Phoebus Apollo, the
chariot is the direct cause of his despair when his son, Phaethon, overreaches in his attempt to
prove that he is the child of his sun-god father. Like Faustus, Phaethon tests his maker and
receives a death blow though Apollo warns him of the danger:

Non est tua tuta voluntas!
magna petis, Phaethon, et quae nec viribus istis
munera conveniant nec tam puerilibus annis:
sors tua mortalis, non est mortale, quod optas. (Met. 2, 53-6)
What thou desirest is not safe. Thou askest too great a boon, Phaëthon, and one
which does not befit thy strength and those so boyish years. Thy lot is mortal: not
for mortals is that thou askest. (Miller 65)

Apollo advises Phaethon that even the greatest of Olympian gods, the mighty Jove, cannot
control his team of horses, nor would he ever ask to do so. Phaethon’s desire to exceed his
abilities, to toy with things beyond his comprehension, is similar to the need Faustus displays by
his pursuit of magic. For Faustus, “a sound magician is a mighty god” (1.1, 62), and that belief,
as well as his overt self-confidence, seem to be the cause of his downfall. The most significant
commonality between these two circumstances is that pride prevents both heroes, Faustus and
Phaethon, from salvation. Apollo, just like Daedalus, gives his son the chance to remedy his
error when he asks him to recant his request, but Phaethon cannot see that his choice to drive the
chariot is a “poena, / non honor” (98-9) ‘bane instead of blessing’ (Miller 67). Similarly, Faustus
is incapable of seeing his chance for redemption when the Old Man tells him that “an angel hovers o’er [his] head / And with a vial full of precious grace / Offers to pour the same into [his] soul” (5.1, 53-5). Accursèd Faustus cannot call for mercy, avoiding the despair that is to come, and is left to lament a sense of false abandonment, cursing his chance for grace.

In *Georgics*, Virgil asks the Muses to show him the heavens and the causes of the earth’s many events:

Me vero primum dulces ante omnia Musae,
quarum sacra fero ingenti percussus amore,
accipiant caelique vias et sidera monstrent,
defectus solis varios lunaeque labores;
unde tremor terris, qua vi maria alta tumescant
obicibus ruptis rursusque in se ipsa residant,
quid tantum Oceano properent se tinguere soles
hiberni, vel quae tardis mora noctibus obstet. (2, 475-82)

But as for me—first may the Muses, sweet beyond compare, whose holy emblems, under the spell of a mighty love, I bear, take me to themselves, and show me heaven’s pathways, the stars, the sun’s many eclipses, the moon’s many labours; whence come tremblings of the earth, the force to make deep seas swell and burst their barriers, then sink back upon themselves; why winter suns hasten so fast to dip in Ocean, or what delays clog the laggard nights.\(^{115}\) (Fairclough 171)

As the poet desires the knowledge that is hidden from him, he is nonetheless aware that it may not be within his grasp. He understands that learning about things beyond his scope of reason

\(^{115}\) For a discussion of Marlowe’s introduction to Virgil’s pastorals, as well as Silenus and Epicurus, see Riggs 169-73.
may be impossible, and so he praises those parts of nature that he can experience. Piety is the foremost virtue for Virgil because it evinces a reverence for knowledge, including the things that he cannot know.\textsuperscript{116} He suggests that a religious devotion to learning is the only way one may forego the fear that comes with the unknown. That is not to say that Virgil does not wish to attain the knowledge of the heavens, for several lines later he says, “Felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas, / atque metus omnis et inexorabile fatum / subiecit pedibus strepitumque Acherontis avari” (2, 490-2) ‘Happy is he who is able to learn the nature of things, and throw under his feet every fear and inexorable fate and the din of ravenous Acheron’ (KPA). “To learn the nature of things” is not limited to the natural world but is suggestive of being cognizant of the meaning and purpose of everything, including death. Only those who know what becomes of man when he dies are truly happy while they are alive despite the paradoxical dilemma this seems to present. The ancient Greeks show a similar pious desire for omniscience. In the \textit{Phaedo}, Plato imagines the conversation that Socrates has with his friends in the last few hours before his death.\textsuperscript{117} What becomes striking about their discussion is Socrates’s belief in his salvation, the preservation of his soul. He believes that upon his death he will come to know “all things such as Size, Health, Strength and, in a word, the reality of all other things, that which each of them essentially is” (Grube 65 e). That, for him, is true happiness. The real philosopher, the one who does not pursue mere satisfaction of the flesh, hopes that “after death he will attain the greatest blessings yonder” (Grube 64). Socrates does not fear death because he is convinced that salvation, his soul’s existence after his body’s death, is inevitable, and that his constant search for wisdom, and his disciplined life, have made him pure enough to walk with the gods on his

\textsuperscript{116} For the \textit{Aeneid} as an alternative to Lucretius’s \textit{De rerum natura}, see Greenblatt, \textit{Swerve} 52.

\textsuperscript{117} For a discussion of Plato’s relevance to salvation, see the first chapter of this study, “The Uneasiness of Christian Salvation.”
death. He goes to it eagerly, therefore, reassuring his friends that it is what he has been waiting for. The philosopher’s faith in salvation is substantiated by his vigilant pursuit of knowledge, both intellectus and ratio. If Virgil is read alongside Plato, it becomes evident that the Roman poet may also be addressing life after death when he speaks of knowing the cause of everything, a concept that he elaborates on when Aeneas visits the underworld.

Acheron: River of Redemption

William Rose claims that despite Doctor Faustus’s being “in all probability on the stage as early as 1589” (43), Marlowe’s play was based on the English Faust Book (1592). He also suggests that throughout the seventeenth and early half of the eighteenth centuries, the popular drama which developed from Marlowe’s Faustus kept the legend alive more than the various editions of Faust books. He attributes this to the English acting companies that had begun touring the Continent at the end of the sixteenth century, performing some rendition of Marlowe’s tragedy. Eventually the stage work of the “English Comedians” (50) caught on in Germany and troupes of German actors began performing their own versions of English plays. With regard to these, Rose writes that “the main points which the popular drama possessed in common with Marlowe’s tragedy were the expository opening monologue, the appearance of the good and evil angels, and the presaging of Faust’s impending end by the striking of the clock” (49). Rose offers as example a program for a performance by the Neuber troupe in Hamburg in 1738:

The wicked Life and fearful End of the World-famous Arch-sorcerer D. Johann Faust. The following scenes will be presented, among others: A great outer court in the underworld Palace of Pluto, by the Rivers Lethe and Acheron. On the River

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118 By contrast, since Mephistopheles does not apprise Faustus of any such wisdom, or give him any cause to live an obedient life, he is fearful of death to the very end.
comes Charon in a Boat, and to him Pluto on a fiery Dragon, followed by the whole of his underworld Retinue and Spirits. Dr. Faust’s Study and Library, etc. (50)

The program continues with scenes, such as dancing shoes, a court-menial who mocks Faustus and is endowed with horns, some version of the scene with the horse-courser, a rainstorm of money, Helena who sings an aria to presage Dr. Faust’s doom, Spirits who fetch him to the accompaniment of fireworks, and finally “the underworld Palace of Pluto is seen once more. The Furies have Possession of Dr. Faust and dance a ballet round him, because they have brought him safely into their Domain” (51). While neoclassicism may account for the references to Roman antiquity, as well as the omission of a Christian deity or devil, this program suggests that Marlowe’s tragedy offers a little more than seeds for its adaptation.

In the English Faust Book, when Faustus asks Mephistopheles about the kingdoms in hell, the devil lists Acheron as the tenth (87), and after Marlowe’s Faustus visits Jove’s high firmament in a burning chariot, it is “by the kingdoms of infernal rule” (3.1, 43), one of which is Acheron, that Faustus “long[s] to see the monuments / And situation of bright, splendent Rome” (46-7). Lucretius mentions Acheron twelve times in De rerum natura, and each time it is interchangeable with Hades, the pits of Tartarus, and the Underworld itself. The “Acherusia templae,” is made up of the temples and consecrated halls of Acheron, and is nothing more than the place where empty shades roam. Lucretius encourages man, suggesting that he is capable of attaining the knowledge that he seeks and therefore should not fear Acheron, or death. He claims that those who waste time fearing what happens after death are submitting themselves to a torture that may only be alleviated by learning about the natural world and the cosmos. Without knowledge, he claims, man cannot know his own soul, and “hic Acherusia fit stultorum denique
vita” (3, 1023) ‘here, the life of the fool is made of Acheron’ (KPA). For Marlowe, the knowledge that Faustus seeks will not only keep him from bliss but guarantee his living in hell eternally. When Mephistopheles warns Faustus to give up his “frivolous demands, / Which strike a terror to [his] fainting soul” (1.3, 81-2), he assures him that as one damned with Lucifer he suffers since he is deprived of the everlasting bliss that he once knew. When he asks Faustus whether he does not think that he “who saw the face of God, / And tasted the eternal joys of heaven, / [is] not tormented with ten thousand hells” (1.3, 77-9), he suggests that he lives in a world in which Acheron is all around him: “Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed / In one self place, for where we are is hell, / And where hell is, there must we ever be” (2.1, 117-9).

Unrestricted by the constraints of worldly time, devils come and go on Earth, appearing and disappearing without recourse to physical travel, and so Mephistopheles suggests that his relegation to the depths of hell is defined by the limits of his mind—the place that houses the soul—rather than any physical restrictions. His words echo Origen here, who “held that every soul has a guardian, a paidagogos, which is commonly called the conscience” (Bowersock, et al. 76-7), an idea that is similar in Plotinus and comes from Plato’s δαίμων, or guiding spirit, which guides the soul even after death. “Origen was skeptical of the notion that conscience is a separate and substantial organ” (76); rather, in De principiis, he claims it is an inner judgment that brings “to memory through divine power all things the signs and forms of which it had impressed upon itself at the moment of sinning” (Butterworth 142). Every sinner therefore “kindles for himself the flame of his own fire, and is not plunged into a fire which has been previously kindled by some one else or which existed before him” (Butterworth 142). Origen also claims that “outer

119 For the limited interests of Milton’s Satan, see Lewis, A Preface 102; “Satan’s monomaniac concern with himself and his supposed rights and wrongs is a necessity of the Satanic predicament … the Hell he carries within him is, in one sense, a Hell of infinite boredom.”
darkness” (Butterworth 145) is a condition of the soul, not a place, and that perhaps “the ‘gloom and darkness’ should be taken to mean this coarse and earthly body, through which at the end of this world each man that must pass into another world will receive the beginnings of a fresh birth” (Butterworth 145). St. Jerome, in his translation of *De principiis*, adds that Origen clearly supports Plato and Pythagoras’s doctrine of transmigration. Mephistopheles, therefore, is cut off from the light of God and thus the angelic knowledge he once possessed. His conclusion, “where we are is hell, / And where hell is, there must we ever be,” challenges Lucretius’s notion that with the mind man can stop the haunting of hell. Since the devil is now banished from God’s presence, just as Adam was when he was sent out of Paradise, hell is not circumscribed in one same place but is a condition that he experiences for all time. This description, and in a sense definition, of hell is in opposition to Faustus’s earlier claim that “he confounds hell in Elysium” (1.3, 59) and believes that “his ghost [will] be with the old philosophers” (60) on his death. Although Mephistopheles and Faustus seem to be referring to two different kinds of hell, both come from Plato.

Plato names the Acheron, one of the four rivers that flows through the underworld, as the river on whose bank the dead seek purgation. Acheron therefore ties the ancients’ praise for knowledge to Faustus’s pursuits, which are seemingly unholy and profane. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates claims that the Acheron flows into the Acherusian lake, “to which the souls of the majority [go] after death” (Grube 113a). He emphasizes regeneration and absolution when he claims that the cycle of purification is ongoing until the dead are absolved:

> When the dead arrive at the place to which each has been led by his guardian spirit (δαίμον), they are first judged as to whether they have led a good and pious

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120 This angelic knowledge may perhaps be the “intelligentia” that Boethius refers to in his *Consolationis*. See Lewis, *Discarded Image* 157.
life. Those who have lived an average life make their way to the Acheron and embark upon such vessels as there are for them and proceed to the lake. There they dwell and are purified by penalties for any wrongdoing they may have committed; they are also suitably rewarded for their good deeds as each deserves.

(Grube 113d)

From the Acheron to the Acherusian lake, “to which the souls of the majority [go] after death,” the dead await their appointed time before being sent back to the world of the living. The most heinous of crimes, “great sacrileges or wicked and unlawful murders and other such wrongs” (Grube 113e), are excluded from this process, and those souls are “hurled into Tartarus never to emerge from it,” suggesting that some deeds are in fact unforgivable. This theory of purgation and rebirth also appears in the Phaedrus, and book ten of the Republic with the Myth of Er, and so it is not surprising that Virgil borrows what Ernest Sihler calls a “half-mythic Platonism,” or a similar system of reincarnation, for Book Six of the Aeneid.121 When the shade of Anchises describes the process of rebirth to Aeneas, he tells him that once a man is dead, he is “non tamen omne malum miseris nec funditus omnes / corporeae excedunt pestes” (736-7) ‘not entirely freed from all evil and all the plagues of the body’ (Fairclough 585). His soul is, therefore, “exercentur poenis” (739) ‘schooled with punishments’ (Fairclough 585), and he must pay penance for his “malorum” ‘intended evil’ (KPA), or ‘sins’ (Fairclough 585). Anchises describes the type of punishments which the souls receive, such as some being stretched out in the empty winds, others washed with floods or burned with fire, for “longa dies perfecto temporis orbe” (745) a ‘length of days, when time’s cycle is complete,’ and the “concretam … labem” (746) ‘hardened defect’ (KPA) is expelled. Finally, Anchises says that the punishment cleanses the soul so that

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121 For a discussion of Virgil’s reliance on the ideas of Plato in the Aeneid, see Sihler 72-82.
the only part left is the “aurai simplicis ignem” (747) ‘unadulterated fire of the soul’ (KPA), or
“quisque suos patimur manis” (743) ‘each his own character as formed in life’ (Charlton Lewis 491).

In the ancient world, in which Christ is not the way to man’s salvation, purgation is necessary for
rebirth if in fact the soul is granted a new body. In Virgil’s scheme, once a shade has satisfied its
term of punishment, it is sent to the fields of Elysium where “pauci laeta arva tenemus” (744)
‘the few attain joyous shores’ (KPA). Anchises tells Aeneas that those he sees in Elysium, after
they “mille rotam volvere per annos” (748) ‘have turned the wheel for a thousand years’ (KPA),
will be called forth to partake of Lethe to erase their memories in preparation to “supera ut
convexa revisant / rursus, et incipient in corpora velle reverti” (750-1) ‘revisit the air above once
more and desire to return to bodies’ (KPA). The thousand years of which Virgil speaks is also in
Plato. In book ten of the Republic, when Er describes the souls that were coming to that
“marvellous place” (Grube and Reeve 614c), he says that “the souls who were arriving all the
time seemed to have been on long journeys, so that they went gladly to the meadow, like a crowd
going to a festival, and camped there” (Grube and Reeve 614e). Er listens to the souls exchange
their stories with one another, and claims that the ones coming up from below were “weeping as
they recalled all they had suffered and seen on their journey below the earth, which lasted a
thousand years” (Grube and Reeve 615). And in the Phaedrus, “in the thousandth year [the
souls] arrive at a choice and allotment of second lives, and each soul chooses the life it wants”
(Nehamas and Woodruff 249b). When Faustus says that he hopes to “live in hell a thousand
years, / A hundred thousand, and at last be saved” (5.2, 95-6), I hear the echo of Plato’s mythic
journey for the soul, the one which Virgil seems to have adopted.

In Pseudomonarchia Daemonum (1577), Johann Weyer suggests to the reader that his list
of demons is “ex Acharonticorum Vasallorum archives subtractam” ‘taken from the archive of vassals in Acheron’ (KPA), and after a thorough biography of each demon, Weyer details the process of incantation for raising these devils. He emphasizes that the conjuror must know the name of the one he is calling up, and that he must first appeal to the protection of the Holy Trinity. He suggests that the conjuror begin with: “In nomine Domini nostri Jesu Christi + patris & + filii & + spiritus sancti: sancta trinitas & inseparabilis unitas te invoco, ut sis mihi salus & defensio & protectio corporis & animæ meæ, & omnium rerum meorum” ‘In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit: I call upon you, the Holy Trinity and inseparable unity, that you may be my safety and defense and protector of my body and soul and my everything’ (KPA). In as contrary a manner to this as possible, Faustus blatantly abjures the Holy Trinity when he tries his hand at conjuring with, “Valeat numen triplex Jehovae!” (1.3, 17) ‘Farewell, threefold god of Jehova’ (KPA). After Cornelius and Valdes instruct him, he invokes the spirit of Mephistopheles with a Latin incantation that appeals to the gods of Acheron: “Sint mihi dei Acherontis propitii!” (1.3, 16) ‘May the gods of Acheron be favorable to me!’ (KPA) His submission to the gods of Acheron may be a significant moment in Marlowe’s tragedy since Faustus performs his demonic incantation without first submitting to the protection of the Trinity, and thus abandons the Judeo-Christian framework altogether. One may ask whether his path to salvation is guided by his appeal to ancient gods. Faustus’s call to the Prince of the Orient, Beelzebub, who may or may not be Lucifer himself, reveals little since, according to Weyer, Baël, not Beelzebub, is “Primus Rex, qui est de potestate Orientis.” When

122 Despite Faustus’s knowing his devil’s name, Mephistopheles is not on Weyer’s list.
123 The stage direction implies that Lucifer and Beelzebub are in fact two separate entities, “Enter LUCIFER, BEELZEBUB, and MEPHISTOPHELES,” though only Lucifer addresses Faustus in this scene. “Orientis princeps” is not easily deciphered since it may be referring to Beelzebub as the rising sun, in reference to Lucifer, or as the prince of the lustrous and precious,
Baël is “conjured up, [he] appeareth with three heads; the first, like a tode; the second, like a man; the third, like a cat [and] he speaketh with a hoarse voice, he maketh a man go invisible and wise, he hath under his obedience and rule sixtie and six legions of divels” (Scot). Weyer does not list Beelzebub though that may be because his name is believed to be a combination of Baël and Zebul or Zebub, the simplest definition of which has come to be the Lord of the Flies. He is at times taken for Lucifer, as Dante shows in his *Inferno*, but others, such as Milton, give him a separate identity and high rank in the hierarchy of devils who call Lucifer their chief. In both Kabbalah and Christianity, Beelzebub is “prince of the devils” (*Matt. 12.24*), but is separate from Satan, and in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, an apocryphal text, when Christ descends into Hades to converse with the ruler of the underworld, it is apparent that Hades is also a separate entity from both Death and Satan. Hades in fact admonishes Satan for putting Christ on the cross and thus allowing him to redeem the souls of the saints that have been living in hell:

> Hades took Satan and said to him, ‘O Beelzeboul, heir of fire and torment, enemy of the saints, why were you compelled to arrange for the King of glory to be crucified, so that he could come and strip us of our power? Turn and see: none of the dead is left in me. But everything you gained through the tree of knowledge you have lost through the tree of the cross. (Ehrman and Plese 485)

or the Orient may be suggestive of the biblical Magi from the East who come to witness the birth of the Messiah. Cf. Kastan 14.

124 One may imagine that this is the horror that Faustus sees when Mephistopheles first appears and he says to him, “I charge the to return and change thy shape; / Thou art too ugly to attend on me” (1.3, 23-4).

125 The biblical Beelzebub is mentioned as a warning about worshipping false idols, and keeping faith in the one true God. See *2 Kings* 1.2; the marginal note on “Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron,” claims that “the Philistines which dwelt at Ekron, worshipped this idol, which figureth the god of flies, thinking that he could preserve them from the biting of flies: or else he was so called, because flies were engendered in great abundance of the blood of the sacrifices that were offered to that idol.”

126 For Beelzebub as an icebound Lucifer, see Dante, *Inf. 34.127-9.*
This translation conflates Satan and Beelzebub, or Beelzeboul, but for Marlowe the conflation may be irrelevant since Faustus names a demon, Mephistopheles, who does not exist in recorded demonology, and claims that “there is no chief but only Beelzebub / To whom [he] doth dedicate himself” (1.3, 56-7). When Robin and Wagner call upon Biali and Belcher, two devils appear despite their not having spoken any kind of incantation to raise them, or their being the names of actual devils. One may recall Lewis’s explanation of the demogorgon, mentioned in Statius’s *Thebaid*, as the “deity he will not name—‘the sovereign of the threefold world!’” and “‘the god whose name it is unlawful to know’ … [which] is plain sailing: the demiurge (workman) being the Creator in the *Timaeus*.” Faustus’s submission to the gods of Acheron, his appeal to “Orientis princeps Beelzebub, inferni ardentis monarcha, et Demogorgon” (1.3, 17-9), may in fact suggest the spiritual domain to which his soul is condemned, especially since Marlowe’s religious scheme has proved to be ambiguous with regard to Christianity, and murky at best overall. Faustus’s redemption is perhaps not lost, but may come after his thousand years of purgation.

A Final Plea to Nature

In Plato’s schema of death—eternal judgment, sentencing, and soul purification—Faustus, whose crimes and insults never amount to anything more than venial sins, is a formidable candidate for redemption and regeneration. His pursuit of knowledge, an example of pagan piety, is a venerable quality rather than a sin. Instead of being sentenced at the gates of Saint Peter, Faustus may hope to face the judgment of infernal gods, who send him to the banks of Acheron for purgation, and then to the fields of Elysium, where he may be called forth to

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127 Baliol is similar to Belial, who is listed in Weyer’s *Pseudomonarchia*, but also appears to be a fabrication of Marlowe’s.
Lethe after turning “the wheel of time for a thousand years.” Faustus’s final monologue is an intimate plea for salvation from the devil’s grip. He appeals to Christ, recalling that his blood was ransomed for every man, including him.\(^\text{128}\) He laments God’s omniscience and his wrathful nature, fearing punishment for his sins, and begs him to “look not so fierce on [him]!” (5.2, 113) But he also refers to the natural world and the elements to which he first made his offer and sacrifice at the play’s opening. With “but one bare hour to live,” (62) Faustus begs the spheres of heaven to cease moving, knowing full well that the planets and stars are in perpetual motion since he has visited the cosmos in the devil’s chariot. He has seen Jove’s firmament up close and is therefore begging for its motion to cease so that time may come to a stop. His admission that he “must be damned perpetually” (63) is mocked by his petition that “fair Nature’s eye, rise, rise again, and make / Perpetual day” (66-7). Whether damned or saved from death, he is suggesting his desire for a constant and everlasting state of being. He cannot escape his descent into the vaults of Acheron even if time ceases to exist and the Earth stops turning about the sun, but his request for the “stars that reigned at [his] nativity, / Whose influence hath allotted death and hell” (84-5), to take up his physical form and make it as airy as a mist recalls his incantation and the reverence he shows for the spirits of fire, air and water. He appeals to the mist, air, and smoky mouths a second time when he pleads for his body to “turn to air” (109) and his soul to “be changed into little water drops” (111) that may be lost among the ocean’s waves. He greets fire anew when he offers to burn the books that he believes have condemned his soul and caused his damnation. His desire for his body’s evaporation is driven by his fear of physical death, and for all his learning, in the end, Faustus seems to be experiencing that which Lucretius warns: “Here, the life of the fool is made of Acheron.” His hope for his soul’s transmigration recalls the wheel

\(^{128}\) Christ is mentioned four times in this final monologue, which is equivalent to the number of times Faustus names Lucifer.
of time and the souls that are purged and purified before being sent to drink from the waters of
Lethe. When God denies Faustus his promise of grace, therefore, and he is sent to hell for “a
thousand years, / A hundred thousand” (95-6), his salvation may not be lost if his soul is in fact
roaming the vaults of Acheron.
Chapter Four
The Straight Grave to Salvation

Edwin Moseley suggests that when a drama is written in earnest, it “treats the fact and the mystery of life and death—that is, man’s physical birth, his rise into manhood, his physical death, his spiritual rebirth—regardless of the particular moment, the particular tradition, the particular roots, literary or religious” (163). Though he is not addressing Hamlet specifically, the passage is applicable since many of Shakespeare’s characters, some of which are not killed off in Amleth, face death without the assurance of spiritual rebirth. For a secular drama rife with religious recognition, Shakespeare’s tragedy shows a conscious and blatant disregard for spiritual salvation. Because the bodies in Hamlet accumulate in an almost grotesque fashion, and by the end, nine characters have succumbed to the very thing which the plot warns its audience to fear, one wonders whether Shakespeare is suggesting that his audience should ignore the possibility of life after death. Death looms within and without the walls of Elsinore and yet heaven seems nothing but a phantasmagoric impossibility. From the beginning, when the ghost of Old Hamlet slips out of purgatory or crawls up from the bowels of hell or simply appears in the men’s imaginations, the viewer is asked to contemplate life after death, only to be shown in the end that to do so is a fruitless and futile exercise.¹²⁹ One is inclined to assume that nothing lies beyond the world’s hell though such a conclusion is contradicted if only in Hamlet’s representations of funeral rites and burial improprieties. The tragedy, nevertheless, seems to be asking its audience to consider a world beyond this one, a world that may be designed of dreams, or of “the undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns” (3.1, 80-1). The famous—perhaps

¹²⁹ For some of the varying theories on the meaning of the ghost in Hamlet, see Whitaker, Shakespeare’s Use of Learning; J. Dover Wilson; West; Roland Mushat Frye; and Greenblatt, Hamlet in Purgatory.
now infamous—speech, in which this phrase occurs, can be dissected to assign the tragedy a
certain fatalistic bent on the meaning of life and the emptiness of death. But what were its
religious implications for its Christian audience? Does the contemplation of suicide not speak
directly to the damnation that follows the act of self-murder? Damnation, or any spiritual
consequence of suicide, is seemingly of no concern to Hamlet even as it is of great concern to
Ophelia, whose funeral is marred by the transgressive nature of her act. In essence, it is not only
the skull of Yorick that acts as a memento mori in Hamlet, but all the corpses that warn the early
modern viewer of death’s assault on their faith in Christian salvation—or the hope to which they
cling.

In the twelfth canto of Dante’s Inferno, the Pilgrim and his guide are led by Nessus along
the banks of a moat of boiling blood. When they reach the place where the sinners’ heads are
floating above the gory ichor, Nessus points to “un’ombra da l’un canto sola, / dicendo: ‘Colui
fesse in grembo a Dio / lo cor che ’n su Tamisi ancor si cola’’” (118-20) ‘a shade off to one side,
alone, and [says]: / ‘There stands the one who, in God’s keep, murdered / the heart still dripping
blood above the Thames’’ (Musa 115). Simon de Montfort, to avenge his father’s death, killed
his cousin Prince Henry, the heir of Cornwall. John Edgar describes the event, claiming that
arriving at Viterbo, Simon de Montfort, “understanding that Henry was in the city, resolved on
an assassination and induced Guy [de Montfort] to take part in the project” (352).¹³⁰ Though a
seemingly banal tale of revenge and murder, it is enhanced by the detail that Henry was slain
while kneeling at the altar in the church at Viterbo: “When the heir of Cornwall was at his
prayers before the high altar, he heard a well known voice exclaim, ‘Henry, traitor, thou shalt not
escape!’ and looking round he saw his cousin Simon, completely armed and brandishing a

¹³⁰ See John George Edgar 352-3.
sword” (353). Simon quickly lunges at Henry, killing him and the two priests who jump in front of him to protect him. Dante emphasizes the repercussions of a soul punished for vengeance by placing Montfort among the wrathful, and even though he is an example of the consequences of revenge, it is unclear whether he is punished because the act is unforgiveable or because it takes place “in God’s keep.” Dante does not address Henry’s soul either, the victim of vengeance, and it is up to the reader to decide whether he is being tormented in hell, purged in the fires of purgatory, or floating in the virtuous realms of paradise. That Henry is at prayer at the moment of his death seems only consequential to his murderer, not his salvation. Influenced by the Roman Church, Dante uses the act of vengeance as an example of irreparable sin, and while it is impossible to know whether Simon de Montfort repented before his own death, one may assume that Dante does not believe that forgiveness was granted.\textsuperscript{131}

In \textit{Hamlet}, with its similar scene, salvation and damnation are not as easily assigned. If anything, Shakespeare marks the sin and the sinner clearly when Claudius says, “Oh, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven; / It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t, / A brother’s murder” (3.3, 36-8). He attempts to repent, kneeling and praying to God with words to which the audience is not privy, but when he says that “words without thought never to heaven go” (98), it is clear that he is not praying to make amends. As he prays, he is unaware of being spared Hamlet’s sword, which he is in fact spared only because he is in conversation with God. Were Hamlet a character who did not ruminate on his task, he might avenge his father’s murder without a second thought. Claudius’s claim that his “words fly up, [his] thoughts remain below” (97) cannot be more fitting for a man whose death is delayed. He is wholly bound to the flesh, the material world, where he sleeps in an incestuous bed, rules a kingdom that is unrightfully his, and prays to a God that

merely serves as a symbol like the crown he wears. Claudius, a seemingly Protestant character, makes a show of faith in this scene, knowing that he does not intend to actually repent of the murder that marks him for damnation. The irony, however, is that his show of faith saves him at this moment since it is enough to prevent his death at the hands of his brother’s avenger. When Hamlet passes up the opportunity to kill Claudius, he does so with the intent of keeping his uncle from salvation, an outcome that is as unknowable to Hamlet as it is privy to the audience. The strategy of avoiding to kill Claudius while at prayer, however, is suggested by the ghost of King Hamlet when he comes to seek revenge at the hand of his son, telling him that he has been “cut off even in the blossoms of [his] sin, / Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled, / No reck’ning made, but sent to [his] account / With all [his] imperfections on [his] head” (1.5, 76-9). His having died without confession, seemingly doomed to spend his days confined in purging fires, may suggest that he is paying for his sins in some kind of purgatory though making the distinction between hell and purging fires is difficult in this case. But what is most striking about Hamlet’s hesitation to revenge his father’s death is that he assumes Claudius is capable of being absolved of his sin of murder with a simple prayer. In his hesitation, Hamlet sees Claudius kneeling and knows “’a is a-praying” (3.3, 73). He argues that he cannot kill the king when he seems so unfit for damnation, and is determined to wait for

When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,

Or in th’incestuous pleasure of his bed,

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132 Several facts mark Claudius as having Protestant leanings, some of which will be taken up in the pages that follow. Cf. Greenblatt, Hamlet in Purgatory 247.
133 That Old Hamlet does not ask his son for prayers to soften his way from the purging fires to eternal bliss may be justified since on the early modern stage it was forbidden to show Catholic sympathies. This scene, however, seems to confirm the unlikelihood of his being in purgatory, especially since his message is directed at revenge and murder. This alone suggests his having been relinquished to the purging fires of hell. Cf. Roland Mushat Frye 22; and West 57.
At gaming a-swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in’t—
Then trip him that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damned and black
As hell, whereto it goes. (89-95)

The audience is given explicit confirmation that Hamlet intends to send Claudius’s soul to hell, but he will not risk taking his life if the chance remains for it to be saved. For Hamlet, the soul is assigned a place after death, one that is determined by a person’s actions while alive. Hamlet’s belief that neither he nor his father will be avenged if he kills Claudius “in the purging of his soul, / When he is fit and seasoned for his passage” (85-6), is more important than his faith in godly judgment. This simple assumption, that Claudius can be absolved of his sin by praying to God without actually making amends to the one he has wronged, evinces a Protestant leaning with regard to repentance rather than a Catholic belief in absolution. This claim is reinforced by Claudius’s belief in a similar mode of salvation, for he, a king no less, does not attempt to buy Catholic indulgences or chantries to cleanse himself of the sin he has committed. He freely admits that he will not be exonerated if he cannot sincerely repent and give up the benefits that he has reaped by murdering his brother, a confession that echoes Marlowe’s Faustus who refuses to give up his demonic associations to save his soul. Claudius’s confession hints at the soteriology to which Shakespeare’s play may ascribe, a doctrine that is enlightened by William Tyndale’s definition of repentance.

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134 For the “treasury of merit” available to Christians for repentance, see MacCulloch, *Christianity* 555.
135 For the importance of Tyndale’s Bible for the English Reformation, see ibid. 627.
In his translation of the New Testament, Tyndale expounds the Protestant tenet of salvation, detailing the act of repentance and how the process demonstrates a sincere Christian attitude of contrition. He claims that there are four parts to repentance, or “to turn to God with all the heart” (9) and be obedient to his doctrine. Confession is the first part and requires an admission that the Christian is a “sinner and sinful, and that [his] whole nature is corrupt and inclined to sin and all unrighteousness, and therefore evil, wicked and damnable.” Contrition follows confession and should show the sinner’s sorrowfulness at being “inclined to sin still.” Faith is the third part, which is the Christian’s belief that God will forgive him for “Christ’s sake” and grant him “mercy.” The fourth condition of repentance is satisfaction, or amends-making, which the sinner must do not only “to God with holy works” but also to those he has sinned against. As is evident, Tyndale ascribes complexity to the act of repentance, stating that it involves several conscious choices, each sincerely undertaken. Confession, contrition and faith are internal acts involving sentiment and honest self-reflection, and all three are unrestricted by temporal limits since they may occur instantaneously and simultaneously. Amends-making, however, appears to be bounded by definite limits because it requires giving satisfaction to those injured, a step that Claudius is admittedly unwilling to take. And while Hamlet is unfazed by the fate of his own soul, that he may be condemned to hell for the murder of his uncle at prayer, he is rightfully worried about the absolution of his enemy. This scene suggests that Hamlet’s religious faith relies on his believing that a sinner may repent and receive salvation simply by praying for it. The New Testament asserts that Christ’s atonement is sufficient for all of man’s sins, and Tyndale addresses last-minute conversion, whereby death is at the penitent’s door and no opportunity for worldly restitution is possible. The clearest example of this kind of salvation is the parable about the thief on the cross, in which a sinner is assured of his place in heaven.
despite his inability to make amends. In Luke, the repentant thief warns his companion who mocks Christ:

Neither fearest thou God, because thou art in the same damnation? We are righteously punished, for we receive according to our deeds: But this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus: Lord remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him: Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in Paradise. (23.40-43)

The thief’s faith in Christ is understood as sufficient for redemption despite his not having the opportunity to seek satisfaction for those he has wronged. The New Testament writings suggest that faith alone rectifies the rupture between God and man, as “faith in Christ’s blood is counted righteousness and a purging of all sin before God” (Tyndale 10). One need only have faith in Christ as his Savior to make amends with God and fulfill the fourth condition of repentance, which is satisfaction. Amends-making, therefore, may be considered unbounded by the limits of time, as it is a direct consequence of one’s faith in Christ.

Although an astute concern for contrition is upheld throughout the play, none of the characters in Hamlet mentions having faith in Christ or that his death is sufficient for their salvation. Whether explicitly or implicitly, several characters address the ritual of repentance and appeal to forgiveness. When one considers Claudius’s ambiguous plea for grace as he kneels, Hamlet’s urging of Gertrude to repent, his own wishes to repent of Polonius’s murder, and Laertes’s exchange of forgiveness with Hamlet before their deaths, the desire for exoneration is clearly one of the tragedy’s themes. One of the most compelling scenes invoking contrition occurs when King Hamlet’s ghost comes calling for revenge. In this early scene, the apparition claims that his lack of repentance is the cause for his perpetual purgation—whether he be in hell
or purgatory. Redemption, and not vengeance, is at the forefront of Shakespeare’s tragedy, for even in Ophelia’s funeral the characters seem desperate to see her buried properly, in accordance with the laws of the Church, despite her suicide. The redemption which most of the characters are seeking, however, is not one that finds them in heaven; rather it saves their reputation in some way or another as the appearance of piety becomes more important than its sincerity.\(^{136}\)

One of the more blatant examples, showing that Shakespeare’s characters are concerned for their mortal reputations, is when Hamlet requests that Horatio live to tell his story. His dying plea for the events to be shared with Fortinbras suggests his desire to remain in a world from which he is being exiled. And even as he says his last words, he spins the truth about man’s existence after death: “The rest is silence” (5.2, 332). Hamlet’s “silence” has several meanings; not merely the end of his speech or his show of reverence for the dead, it suggests something mysterious and secretive about “the rest” to which he is referring—that ineffability of the moment of death.\(^{137}\)

Silence and death are well paired, and Hamlet’s “rest” may be both the sleep that is to come and the life to be lived in that dreamlike world that lies beyond this one. Or, perhaps less likely, Hamlet’s “rest” is Christian and evocative of Saint Augustine’s suggestion that death leads to a reunion with the creator who has made “nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te” (1) ‘us for [him]self, and [for whom] our heart is restless until it rests in [him]’ (Chadwick 3). It may be concluded, nonetheless, that seeing any kind of salvation for Shakespeare’s characters is a matter of subjecting his tragedy to a reading that unveils the implicit dogma invoking contrition rather than the vengeful spirit. And to make the leap from revenge to salvation, the reader must examine the corpse that marks the way.

\(^{136}\) As Polonius says, “with devotion’s visage / And pious action we do sugar o’er / The devil himself” (3.1, 47-9).

\(^{137}\) Cf. Grene 213; in *Antigone*, the Chorus claims it sees “Antigone making her way / to her bed—but the bed / that is rest for everyone.”
The Gravedigger’s Philosophy

In the early days of Christianity, as rituals and ceremonies were established, a claim to proper burial was something carried over from the traditions of the ancient world and adopted by the Christian faith. As Diarmaid MacCulloch claims, “It may be that the first official status for a Christian Church community was a registration as a burial club” (160). Second century Roman catacombs evince the importance of a common burial for Christians, as bodies of the poor were consecrated alongside bodies of bishops. By the early modern period, Christian burial had become more exclusive, and choice plots were assigned to those from the upper echelons of society—the poor were no longer buried alongside the rich. To be buried properly was a necessary step toward salvation and for that reason gravediggers were considered members of the Christian Church. When Shakespeare writes the scene between his two clowns, one of which is a gravedigger, he invokes the prosaic speech of a simple man giving voice to the commonly held belief that proper burial was of the utmost importance for the soul’s journey to heaven. In this instance, the significant and lofty discussion of Christian salvation is reduced to a conversation between two rustics of unknown faith, and the complexity that suicide presents for the salvation of the soul amplifies the incongruity of this choice. That these two clowns cannot resolve the argument whether Ophelia deserves a proper burial is deemed inconsequential because they are common folk and not expected to have the answer. They wrestle with the matter nonetheless, and the Gravedigger asks his companion whether she is “to be buried in Christian burial when she willfully seeks her own salvation” (5.1, 1-2). Aside from Hamlet’s ruminations

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138 In 1850, the catacomb of Callixtus, outside of Rome, was rediscovered. The area consists of some ninety acres and houses the burial sites of some half a million people, beginning in the third century, including that of Pope Cornelius who died in 253; see also Reardon 291.

139 See MacCulloch, Christianity 160.
on killing Claudius, the only character who mentions salvation is one who prepares the plot for burial. To end her life, rather to give up her will to live—for that is what she essentially does when she refuses to save herself from drowning—is regarded as sacrilegious and as guaranteeing a place in hell. The Gravedigger wants to know therefore how she can be buried with Christian rites if she has committed the profane act of self-murder. His companion, another rustic, though not explicitly designated a gravedigger, replies, “I tell thee she is; therefore make her grave straight. The crowner hath sat on her and finds it Christian burial” (3-4). Unlike the Gravedigger, his companion does not question whether the cause of Ophelia’s death will prevent her from a proper burial. The Christian pulpit, represented by the coroner, has decided that it will, and is reason enough to “make her grave straight.” As noted, “straight” means straightaway, but more than one meaning may be at play here. Can “straight” also imply that her burial plot should not be turned awry or made corrupt, just as any other Christian burial plot should not be? In Dante’s opening lines of the *Inferno*, “straight” is given a meaning that associates it with salvation: “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, / che la diritta via era smarrita” (1, 1-3) ‘While halfway through the journey of our life / I found myself lost in a darkened forest, / for I had wandered off from the straight path’ (Musa 3). The implied meaning is that the straight path leads a faithful Christian to salvation through faith, and eventually heaven. Since proper burial in the early modern period is counted most significant for the soul’s journey after death, so is the need for a straight grave. One of the clowns concludes that since Ophelia is “a gentlewoman” (22), she ought to be granted a Christian burial. The gravediggers’ ability to reason, however, has proved weak from the beginning. When one says to the other that “he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life” (17-8) and that she “drowned

140 For a discussion of Ophelia’s being granted a Christian burial because she is mad, see Roland Mushat Frye 299.
herself wittingly” (11), his companion asks him whether this is the law. The question surely suggests his confusion about Christian faith, or at the very least his disbelief in Ophelia’s having committed a profane act. It bears repeating that he is not himself designated a gravedigger—Shakespeare does not call them Gravedigger One and Gravedigger Two; rather he is listed as Other, a companion or neighbor to the Gravedigger, and therefore not necessarily recognized by the Church as such. He gives voice, nevertheless, to those who obey and submit to the decrees of ecclesial authority. Although the way to Christian salvation is not satisfactorily explained in this scene, the guaranteed assignment of heaven or hell for the deceased offers another perspective on life after death, and one that is in direct opposition to Hamlet’s. One may argue that since it is contemplated by a simple rustic who mistakes “argal” (18) for ergo, a certain futility in man’s grappling with salvation is assumed, reinforcing Hamlet’s argument, but the intended comic relief of this scene in prose is nonetheless trumped by the Gravedigger’s need to justify Ophelia’s burial. Like a philosopher, he argues that action and intent are the only ways to reason about whether she is ripe for Christian burial:

Here lies the water—good. Here stands the man—good. If the man go to this water and drown himself, it is, will he, nill he, he goes. Mark you that. But if the water come to him and drown him, he drowns not himself. Argal, he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life. (13-18)

For the Gravedigger, intent is everything and his reasoning is plain. Because Ophelia went to the water and drowned herself, she is unworthy of salvation, and should not be given a proper interment. He conflates Christian burial and salvation, and his logic echoes the thinking of thirteenth century theologians who argued for a change in the process of Christian repentance
from a public display of confession to a private act of penance. Peter Abelard, for instance, taught that

works in fact, which as we have previously said are common to the damned and the elect alike, are all indifferent in themselves and should be called good or bad only on account of the intention of the agent, not, that is, because it is good or bad for them to be done but because they are done well or badly, that is, by that intention by which it is or is not fitting that they should be done. (45)

In discussing Mary Magdalen, Katherine Ludwig Jansen suggests that “these theologians established a distinction between the culpa (the guilt which signified the sinner’s fall from grace and the possibility of eternal damnation) and the pena (the temporal punishment due, which could be mitigated in purgatory), both of which resulted from sin” (203). For Shakespeare’s Gravedigger, Ophelia’s intention to drown is as culpable as the act itself, and therefore makes her worthy of punishment. What is interesting about his reasoning is that it echoes Hamlet’s famous soliloquy. The Gravedigger’s argument is founded on man’s freedom to choose whether or not to act; “will he, nill he” resounds with Hamlet’s “to be, or not to be,” a speech that is spoken in Ophelia’s presence.¹⁴¹ Both the Gravedigger and Hamlet ruminate on death, and specifically self-murder, and the degree to which a man is free to take his own life. In Hamlet’s contemplation, he weighs the burden of life’s torments against the unknowns that man may face in the world beyond the living. His conscience is heavy with the fear of what may come after death, and that it may be a worse fate than his current one. His argument is not against suicide; rather it is against death’s unknowns. If any speech in Hamlet denounces salvation, it is this one:

¹⁴¹ See the stage direction just before Hamlet’s speech: “Ophelia pretends to read.” She may, therefore, hear his soliloquy.
“To be or not to be—that is the question” (3.1, 57), to act or not to act—that is the dilemma. If man is to end the suffering he experiences while alive, if he is to take action against the pain he endures, he will, in a sense, design a new fate for himself, but that fate, perhaps a more harmful condition than the one he suffers while alive, is one from which he cannot return. Hamlet does not speak of hell or heaven in this speech and yet he implies that death, “to sleep” (66), may in fact bring about a torture from which man may never awake:

To die, to sleep,
To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there’s the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause. There’s the respect
That makes calamity of so long life. (64-70)

Unknowns are what keep men from committing suicide, not the fear of hell. For Hamlet, there is no God to turn to in the face of suffering, no heaven to suffer for, and no hell to which he will be resigned if he decides to take his own life. Fear, however, a staunch and resilient terror that prevents man from tempting his fate on the other side of life, is always present. It is the “dread of something after death, / The undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveler returns” (79-81) that keeps Hamlet from ending his own life, and somehow prevents him from taking Claudius’s as well. Since Hamlet does not refer to heaven and hell when he contemplates man’s existence, only the faith of the coarse Gravedigger reminds the audience that the willful act of suicide keeps him from salvation.

142 In 1.2, Hamlet speaks to the sacrilegious nature of suicide when he says: “Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew, / Or that the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter” (129-32).
143 Two scenes later Hamlet is fearful of sending Claudius’s soul to heaven, not hell.
Hamlet’s Foil and Salvation

The burial is thus everything to the common man, for it shows the soul’s designation after death by marking the physical space of the remains in a way that evinces its passage to heaven. Neither Ophelia’s nor Polonius’s funerals are proper burials with obsequies. Polonius is buried quickly without a service, and Ophelia’s is stark and hints at the dogma on which it leans. The Doctor of Divinity’s refusal to “sing a requiem and such rest to her / As to peace-parted souls” (5.1, 215-6) since doing so would profane the “service of the dead” (214) is suggestive of a Catholic funeral. At the beginning of a service, a requiem, “the opening phrase sung or spoken as the service began, ‘Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine’, ‘Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord’” (Christianity 357), is offered up to God in the hope of easing the dead’s journey to heaven.144 In Hamlet, the “churlish priest” (219) condemns the “virgin crants” (210) granted Ophelia because he believes she is deserving only of having “flints and pebbles … thrown on her” (209)—her interment therefore is a reminder of the sin she has committed. Returning to the question of her act’s intention, can one not assume that she had been seeking her own salvation? Were she to contemplate damnation while considering suicide, despite her state of mind, she would not have the courage to let herself drown. Her sanity, however, is not in question here, for whether she is in her right mind has no bearing on her soul’s entrance into heaven—who can say that her madness is not suggestive of some kind of religious ecstasy? Though one cannot determine her reasons for committing suicide, her desire for death is certain. Her escape from her life, whether self-inflicted or not, may suggest her desire to follow her father into the afterlife. Before she drowns herself she passes out flowers of mourning and sprigs of rosemary, both of

144 Cf. Greenblatt, Hamlet in Purgatory 246.
which were used in medieval churches to mask the smell of death from the decaying bodies buried in the walls. Her ceremonial act is twofold. It marks some kind of funeral procession for the fallen Polonius, whose stench Hamlet warns may soon reveal his hiding spot in a passageway up the castle stairs. His lack of funeral and improper burial, “done but greenly / In a hugger-mugger to inter him” (4.5, 82-2), are the consequences of Claudius’s wanting to keep Hamlet’s guilt a secret.\textsuperscript{145} The second ceremony that Ophelia emulates is the bride’s walk down the aisle. Ophelia does not mention Hamlet directly in her distressed state, unless he is understood to be “the false steward that stole his master’s daughter” (4.5, 167-8), but seems to know that their marriage is no longer a possibility since he has proved himself to be her greatest abuser.\textsuperscript{146}

Ophelia is thus forced to play a role in Hamlet’s scheme of madness. Although she is instructed to “repel his letters” (107) and deny “his access to [her]” (108), she is pulled into his ruse nonetheless. As she sits sewing in her closet, she is abused by the feigning Hamlet who comes to see her “with a look so piteous in purport / As if he had been loosèd out of hell / To speak of horrors” (2.2, 80-2).\textsuperscript{147} And though he does not say a thing to her but with “so piteous and profound” (92) a sigh behaves as though he were dying, she tells her father about what has happened. Polonius therefore takes one of the love letters which Hamlet gives her and reads it to the Queen. While consulting her, Polonius accuses Ophelia of being the cause of Hamlet’s “defect” (101) and the reason for his madness. He tells the Queen that he has “a daughter—[has] while she is [his]— / Who, in her duty and obedience, mark, / Hath given [him] this” (106-8), meaning Hamlet’s letter. It is telling that Polonius mentions having a daughter “while she is

\textsuperscript{145} In 4.7, Claudius gives Laertes two reasons for not accusing Hamlet of Polonius’s murder: his love for Gertrude is so great that he does not want to hurt her; and the people love Hamlet.
\textsuperscript{146} “The false steward” line is one that has evaded critical analysis. See Burnett 48.
\textsuperscript{147} Ophelia’s suggestion that Hamlet looked like one who had come up from hell to speak of its horrors recalls Old Hamlet’s situation, hinting at where he may be spending eternity. If he is not in some kind of purgatory, he is most certainly in hell.
[his],” especially in light of Ophelia’s enigmatic line about “the false steward,” and one may argue that Death, or perhaps the devil, is the thief who will rob Polonius of his daughter.\textsuperscript{148} His love letter seems to suggest his having made her his Petrarchan Laura, and the object of his unwavering desire. The opening line thus reads: “To the celestial, and my soul’s idol, the most beautified Ophelia … In her excellent white bosom, these, etc.” (109-12). The comparison of the lover’s beauty to superlative qualities is common for the Petrarchan sonnet, and so may not seem out of the ordinary, but it is the prose that follows at the end of the letter that proves more evocative of Hamlet’s desire: “Oh, dear Ophelia, I am still ill at these numbers. I have not art to reckon my groans. But that I love thee best, oh, most best, believe it. Adieu. Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him, Hamlet” (119-23).\textsuperscript{149} After a brief attempt at poetry, Hamlet concludes that he is incapable of expressing his love in verse, and therefore is utterly ill at the number of groans that he has no means to satisfy. His “groans” may suggest his attempt at satire, as well as a mocking tone, but to assume that he is insincere does not mean that his verses are intended to reveal it so blatantly. It seems it would be in his best interest to play his role of madness, if he is in fact playing at being lovesick, as convincingly as possible. Whether intended or not, these few lines recall Shakespeare’s Sonnet 131 in which the lover’s groans are tallied at a thousand and taken to be serious expressions of passion: “A thousand groans, but thinking on thy face, / One on another’s neck, do witness bear / Thy black is fairest in my judgment’s place” (9-12). The poet is not expressing admiration for the lover’s unconventional beauty, but esteems her unseemly behavior, for “in nothing art [she] black save in [her] deeds” (13). These black deeds may very well be unsavory acts, wicked and calumnious enterprises, as

\textsuperscript{148} Hamlet calls Polonius Jephthah, reminding him and the audience of the unintended sacrifice that the Old Testament character’s daughter becomes; see Hamlet 2.2.

\textsuperscript{149} For Hamlet’s lines, cf. Shakespeare, Sonnet 130.
when Lord Chamberlain speaks to Lovell about Wolsey in Henry VIII, saying, “He had a black mouth that said other of him” (1.3, 58). But a spiritual context may also be considered since the black deeds may also suggest sins, as blackness implies the absence of its exact opposite—whiteness, or purity. Hamlet’s letter suggests that Ophelia is “most best,” but recalling his crude behavior at The Mousetrap, before the players put on their dumb show, puts that to the test:

HAMLET. Lady, shall I lie in your lap?
OPHELIA. No, my lord.
HAMLET. Do you think I meant country matters?
OPHELIA. I think nothing, my lord.
HAMLET. That’s a fair thought to lie between maids’ legs.
OPHELIA. What is, my lord?
HAMLET. Nothing. (3.2, 105-11)

Hamlet’s “nothing” is suggestive of female sexual organs, especially as it falls after Hamlet’s reference to country matters, which also has a lewd connotation for its play on words—“country” evoking that cruder name for the vagina. Hamlet’s crude remarks seem to echo the sonnet’s penultimate line, “in nothing art thou black save in thy deeds.” As noted above, this line suggests that the beloved is physically and morally tainted in some way. The tallied “groans” seem to emphasize that the mistress is a sexual temptress who reduces her lover to mere uttering’s, tantalizing his animalism, the uncontrollable and instinctual behavior that is surely echoed in Hamlet’s admission: “Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him.” Carrying a flame for her while his body, his mechanical functions, are still under his control suggests that his love is not eternal but will in fact die with his body. Hamlet’s lewdness is amplified when he

150 See Callaghan 237.
confronts Ophelia and condemns her gender in the scene that forms the climax of his abuse. His infamous command, “Get thee to a nunnery,” seems to destroy Ophelia’s hope for marriage to Hamlet because she acknowledges, and seems to accept, his lunacy, as well as her being fooled by his “music vows:”

And I, of ladies most dejected and wretched,
That sucked the honey of his music vows,
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason
Like sweet bells jangled out of time and harsh,
That unmatched form and stature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy. (3.1, 154-9)

The din of his “sweet bells jangled out of time and harsh” seems to quell, if not override, the sound of his loving sighs and groans still echoing in her ear. If one questions whether Ophelia is thinking about her marriage to Hamlet at this moment, it seems her use of the word “vow” gives a strong hint that she is. Having read Hamlet’s words, and having believed them, she assumes that he did in fact love her and may fear that she is the cause of his madness. But Ophelia may be missing the subtle if not implicit hint hidden in the following lines:

Doubt though the stars are fire,
Doubt that the sun doth move,
Doubt truth to be a liar,
But never doubt I love. (115-18)

It is almost as if he is telling her that she may question any number of things which she knows to be true, even truth itself, but that his love for her is as unwavering as the preceding cosmic and
philosophical certainties. Though she witnesses his madness with her own eyes, it may be a lie—a truth to be doubted. Unfortunately, she does not live to learn the truth, and thus only the King, Queen, Laertes and Horatio are witness to the constancy of Hamlet’s love for her, expressed by his remorse at seeing her cold body lying on the bier.

Hamlet’s reaction to Ophelia’s death is sincere since it pulls him from his mad posturing—a posturing that Ophelia seems all too capable of emulating with an honesty that makes hers a “document in madness, thoughts and remembrance fitted” (4.5, 172-3). Ophelia is thus a foil to Hamlet. Her bravery in rushing headlong into the unknown of “what dreams may come” is a stark contrast with his cowardice. Some have remarked that Hamlet is different when he returns from England, unscathed, in the fifth act. He is altered, his feigned madness replaced by a newfound vitality. Before seeing his Ophelia in the ground, he mocks death and reminds the viewer that he believes nothing exists beyond the worldly humiliations man is intent to suffer. He expounds the physiological metamorphosis that befalls the body when it dies and is buried: “Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer barrel?” (5.1, 187-90) Hamlet uses an example of human excellence to reinforce his argument that no matter how great man is while alive, in the end his body will become as insignificant as the loam that corks a barrel. He refers to the decaying body prior to this, but when he does, he emphasizes how a king may become food for maggots, and thus “may go a progress through the

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151 Interpreting anything that Hamlet says is complicated since he is inconsistent, making his intentions elusive. Unless a critic trusts his words at face value, however, knowing what little she does about his scheme, nothing she presumes about him will hold value since it can be countered. My goal is to read Hamlet consistently throughout with the words that Shakespeare has given.

152 For the disappearance of Hamlet’s “antic disposition” when he returns from England, see Bloom, *Shakespeare* 390.
guts of a beggar” (4.3, 29-30). In this earlier scene, the argument still assumes a faith in the circle of life, the biological optimism that sees man’s decayed body feeding the organism that in turn feeds man: “A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm” (27-7).\textsuperscript{153} But Hamlet’s speech in the graveyard suggests a pessimistic outlook on death that also emphasizes the futility of life—a fitting perspective for what is to come at the end of the play. Until he witnesses death in the beshrouded figure of Ophelia, he does not fully grasp it. His trivializing of the body, as well as his overt disregard for any kind of salvation after death, seem to be subverted when he sees Ophelia’s body set for burial.\textsuperscript{154} Hamlet’s need to one-up anyone who claims that their dearth is greater than his suggests the impact that her loss has on him: “Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum” (5.1, 249-51). When Hamlet challenges Laertes to prove that his love is greater, he insists that he will “rant as well as” (264) he. This moment evinces Hamlet’s genuine feelings for Ophelia and that his desire to marry her may have been legitimate, while his impropriety had been a put-on. Ophelia’s death, therefore, is the catalyst for Hamlet’s revelation since he sees the significance in absolution after she dies. Before fighting Laertes, he asks him for forgiveness for killing Polonius: “Give me your pardon, sir. I have done you wrong, / But pardon’t, as you are a gentleman” (5.2, 195-6). This act of confession, exhibiting remorse and the admittance of wrongdoing, seems befitting the situation. Hamlet cannot know if he is going to fall at the hands of his “brother” (212), as he calls him, but the request for forgiveness is amplified when Hamlet returns the gesture to Laertes. Moments before Laertes’s death, he says to Hamlet, “Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet. / Mine and my father’s death come not upon thee, / Nor

\textsuperscript{153} When Hamlet talks about maggots, a beggar and fish, he also tells the king that Polonius is in heaven, which seems to support an optimism about life after death.\textsuperscript{154} Hamlet decides to participate in the funeral for Ophelia only after he realizes that she is in fact the one being buried. Cf. Roland Mushat Frye 243.
thine on me” (303-5). Hamlet, absolved of the murders for which he is guilty, grants Laertes the same in return by asking that, “Heaven make [Laertes] free of” (306) the murder which he is coerced to engender. This exchange of forgiveness is the only one in all the tragedy that marks the moment of death as being on the cusp of something greater, and Hamlet’s bit of wisdom, offered to Horatio before the duel, “the readiness is all” (5.2, 192), is implied in this final parting. Both Laertes and Hamlet ready themselves for whatever is to come after death by cleansing themselves of their venial sins. Exoneration for the two “brothers” (212), the men who are bonded by nothing if not their love for Ophelia, is only possible after her death. She is therefore the tragedy’s salvific representative, if not its symbol of salvation, because only after her death—her sacrifice as the martyred suicide—does Hamlet see the straight and ready way to heaven.

Beautified Ophelia, Beatified Magdalen

To enrich Ophelia’s role in Hamlet, I have compared her with a Catholic model to which she may fittingly allude. In the gospels of the New Testament, Mary Magdalen is said to be one of Christ’s most dedicated followers, as well as the first to witness his resurrection. She is canonized by the Catholic Church, and considered the second most important female figure next to the Virgin Mary. Both the mother of Christ and the Magdalen are believed to “bring about salvific symmetry [because both women] represented the new Eve, paralleling Christ’s role as the new Adam” (Jansen, 31); it was Mary Magdalen who “proclaimed that salvation was at hand when she announced his resurrection” (32). 155 The vitality of her message was confirmed when her body was recovered in 1279 in Aix-en-Provence, and her remains offered a sign that they were in fact hers, “a tender green shoot was found growing from Magdalen’s tongue” (18).

155 For extensive studies on Mary Magdalen, see Jansen; Garth; Malvern; and Haskins.
Jansen examines writings and sermons from the medieval period to uncover how this apostle of apostles became “the medieval model of penitence … [and] the paradigmatic symbol of hope for all sinners in the later Middle Ages” (15). Though a seemingly composite character, made up of several historically questionable life stories, the legend of Mary Magdalen became the perfect embodiment of both sin and salvation, and thus the ideal representative and intercessor for repentant sinners. The real life Magdalen is in fact more elusive than her saintly figure. Little historical evidence of her life as a follower of Christ has been found, except in the gospels of Matthew, Luke, and Mark, and their stories do not concur. One of the more commonly held beliefs about the persona of the Magdalen, however, is that she was a prostitute who was saved by the grace of Christ and began following him after hearing his word. In Luke, Mary of Bethany is described as having sat at Christ’s feet, listening to him speak as her sister, Martha, prepares a meal. When scolded by her sister for not helping, she is praised by Christ for having spent her time in a more worthy manner. Because of this, she is sometimes depicted as a contemplative figure in works of art, holding a book or sitting at the feet of the crucified Christ. When Christ appeared to Mary after his resurrection, it is widely believed that she was absolved of her sins, and thus was remade pure and ripe for salvation. Because of her impure past, she is often the patron saint of nunnery and women’s refuges; preachers have transformed “her into a mirror for contemplative nuns” (119) and a figure of both sin and salvation. Despite the tensions between Catholic and Protestant beliefs, as well as their distinct differences, her penitential figure was not unknown in England in the early modern period. Jansen claims that “by the fifteenth century,

156 For apostolorum apostola, apostle of the apostles, an epithet given to Mary Magdalen in the twelfth century since it was believed that she “announced to the other apostles that Christ had risen from the dead and that subsequently she had preached to the pagans,” see Jansen 19.

157 In Catholic medieval tradition, the Magdalen and Mary of Bethany are conflated; see Pope. Caravaggio suggests this conflation in his Martha and Mary Magdalene (1598), which depicts the moment when Martha persuades her sister to follow a life of virtue in Christ.
two English colleges dedicated to the Magdalen were founded in order to house university men: one at Oxford and one at Cambridge” (118). In the 1540s, Lord Chancellor Audley “refounded and dedicated [Magdalen College in Cambridge] to the saint” (118). In the early seventeenth century, in Provence, the cult of the Magdalen experienced a revival, and she was exulted for being the human being to be “sinful in both nature and deed” (Thuillier, 152), and “elevated through love, without any need of doctrine or argument, to God.” Because of this, “in the great tradition of mystical thought in the early part of the century the Magdalen represented pure love.” The fascination with the Catholic figure of pure love, who adheres strongly to truth and God and is therefore placed just under the Virgin in the Christian hierarchy, led to a myriad of paintings of Magdalen in a repentant and remorseful state. Many images of the period depicted the penitent Mary with a skull propped beside her, the memento mori being an essential symbol of the saint. In the paintings of Georges de La Tour, the repentant Magdalen looks as if she were not necessarily contemplating death but merely accepting its inevitability. The skull in his depiction serves as a reminder not to dwell on the transitoriness of life, even as man faces death, but to set our gaze on something beyond, as Magdalen does. In some of his later nocturnes, the artist includes a mirror, evoking the distance between the skull and Mary’s gaze, but also reminding the viewer that she is to be mirrored in her contemplation. In his portrait, “The Repentant Magdalen,” also known as the “Fabius Magdalen,” the subject’s gaze is drawn into a mirror in which the skull takes up most of the frame of the glass. The Magdalen has her left hand loosely propped up on the face of the skull, as though resting her fingers in the empty eye sockets which once gazed out at the world, and her other hand is holding her resting head. The

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158 For a discussion of the relevance of the skull as an attribute to the saints in early modern iconography, see Roland Mushat Frye 207.
159 This original painting, named for the Fabius Collection in Paris, is currently hanging in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C.
symmetry of the image is suggested in the living head whose chin is cupped in the right hand and is supported by Mary’s own strength, while the death head in turn supports her left hand and thus seems to absorb some of the weight of her contemplation. Though the viewer sees only her profile, her look is soft and seemingly engrossed in the skull’s mirror image. She gazes downward at a forty-five degree angle, looking at the reflection of the skull. The viewer is privy to the profiles of both Mary and the skull—its entire side view only visible to him through the mirror, as it is for her. Given this choice, she looks at the reflected image rather than the object at her fingertips. A sole candle whose light seems to give the skull an eerie glow lights her. The lines and grooves of the skull in the reflection are accentuated by the glow of the flame burning on the other side of it, and the large volume on which the head is placed is visible in the mirror only because of the light from the candle. The skull, which consumes the foreground of the painting, hides the candle but the tip of the flame hovers just above it and provides the illusion of dancing in front of Mary on the dressing table. The candle acts as a votive, a consecration of the saint’s devotion to God, but it also symbolizes the transitoriness and fragility of life. That the skull blocks the flame from the viewer not only helps to emphasize the looming death that consumes the light of life, but also reminds the viewer that Mary, who sits directly in front of the flame, acts as an intercessor for the living. Most of Mary’s figure is absorbed in the darkness that surrounds a good portion of the canvas, but the viewer can see hints of her billowing white robe, a reminder of those sober, white garments worn by nuns and converts. The chiaroscuro of the canvas shrouds most of her image, leaving the viewer only a few telling bits of the scene. The skull, its profile in the mirror, and her gazing at its reflection come together as a portrait of life beyond death. The obscurity of her figure in the nocturnal ambiance of the scene, as well as the casual and foreboding image of the skull, recall the ephemeral nature of the human body and life
itself. La Tour’s portrait of Mary Magdalen, the Christian figure of pure love, redemption, and hope, forms a complement to the embodiment of purity which is Shakespeare’s Ophelia.

It is fitting at this point to return to the love letter that Polonius reads to the Queen: “To the celestial, and my soul’s idol, the most beautified Ophelia …” (109-10). Polonius stumbles over the word “beautified,” calling it “an ill phrase, a vile phrase” (110-1). Whether Polonius is correct in thinking it vile and an ill phrase is insignificant; that he pauses on the word is more important. The simplest meaning of “beautified,” although perhaps not Hamlet’s, is that she has become one who is beautiful. By stumbling over the word, Polonius complicates its meaning and emphasizes its negative connotation, as though her beauty is adorned, ornamental or embellished, and Hamlet is insulting Ophelia with it rather than paying her a compliment. Polonius’s knack for misconstruing the meaning of Hamlet’s words has already been proved—one must merely recall his telling tête-à-tête with Hamlet, following his discourse with the Queen, in which he cannot make literal sense of anything Hamlet is saying. Shakespeare therefore uses Polonius to linger over the word, “beautified,” having him question the phrase and judge it something foul. The intent of such a pause may not be to emphasize the character’s foolishness and corrupt view; rather it may be to focus attention on the word itself. To make something beautiful, to beautify, is a mid-fifteenth century term, but the first use of the intransitive sense of the word, to become beautiful, is recorded in the 1590s. The word is similar to, although with different nuances and at times confused with, “beatified,” an early sixteenth-century term that originated in the French “beatifier” from the late Latin word “beatificare.” The literal meaning is to make blissfully happy, but the word has a Roman Catholic sense as well. The Pope may declare any deceased person who has exhibited extraordinary holiness while

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160 This makes sense if at one time he did not see her as such.
living to be considered blessed, and thus canonized or sainted by the Church. This epithet for Ophelia may not just refer to her beauty, but also be evocative of her purity though making such a suggestion requires a religious interpretation of Shakespeare’s apparently secular play. When read alongside Hamlet’s opening address, “To the celestial, my soul’s idol,” the play on words works. Granted, this seems an imaginative stretch, especially since Hamlet’s letters are often taken by critics as satirical and mocking, but the value of considering a religious connotation lies in its ability to widen the audience’s perception of Ophelia and her seemingly martyred—or sacrificial—life in *Hamlet*. If one can read the tragedy, ignoring most of its nuances, and still make sense of its action, reading it while making over-subtle connections serves the meaning as well. If a critic can find significance in Hamlet’s words because he or she believes they are said in jest, then the inverse must also be true. Taking Hamlet’s letters and words as sincere, therefore, the “celestial” most certainly invokes the heavenly, and the idolatry of his soul may in fact evoke the sainted totems of the Catholic Church. One calls upon the saints of the Church for prayers of intercession against their sins, and Hamlet does as much when he asks Ophelia to remember his sins in her “orisons” (3.1, 90). Hamlet’s request that his sins be remembered appeals to the authority of her sacredness and is suggestive of Catholic traditions and observances, just as is the sinner’s prayers to Mary Magdalen to act as intercessor for their sins.\(^1\) As noted above, the very idea of an indulgence invites a faithful believer to pray for a sinner to lessen his or her stay in purgatory. Hamlet thus seems to associate Ophelia with someone who may act as his advocate before God.

When Hamlet finishes his soliloquy on the dilemma of action against one’s own life and the fear of following death into the unknown, he notices Ophelia reading the book that Polonius

\[^1\] For Mary Magdalen as an advocate for sinners, see Jansen 233.
has given her to show “devotion’s visage / And pious action” (3.1, 47-8). Hamlet remarks, “Nymph, in thy orisons / Be all my sins remembered” (3.1, 90-1); and the address is telling since the appellation “nymph,” even if sarcastic, is suggestive of nuptials and consecration. The word is a cognate of the Latin verb “nubere,” which is to veil oneself or be married. In the fourteenth-century, both the Greek nympha and the Latin nympha denoted a young mistress or bride. Hamlet’s remark is swift, as though off the cuff, and even she does not acknowledge his request. If Hamlet is mocking her devotional posture, he fails since she does not hear it, but if he is sincere in his plea, the fact that she does not acknowledge it is all the more tragic. The dialogue that follows speaks to the unequal union between Ophelia and her seemingly greatest abuser. When Hamlet tells her, “that if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to beauty” (3.1, 108-9), she responds with a most heartfelt question: “Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?” (110) Her query, seemingly rhetorical, evinces her own belief in the marriage of beauty and truth despite Hamlet’s remark that “beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness” (112-4). For Hamlet, beauty not only corrupts virtue but beauty in and of itself is unchanging—a contradiction to his written epithet, the “beautified Ophelia.” But it seems as though more can be made of this exchange when considered in light of Ophelia’s overall contribution to the play and the suggestion that she is a foil to Hamlet.

162 “The Magdalen Reading” is another iconic figure of the Catholic revival. In the mid-fifteenth century, Rogier van der Weyden painted an altarpiece that depicted her reading a devotional or holy book. The central figure is a young woman, presumably Mary Magdalen, who is in a contemplative pose that emulates her sitting at Christ’s feet and listening to his Word; see fn. 157.
At the time that *Hamlet* was being composed, Shakespeare had contributed “The Phoenix and the Turtle” to Robert Chester’s 1601 publication of *Love’s Martyr*. The allegorical poem about an ideal love between a phoenix and turtledove has garnered many interpretations, and although it hints at its Catholic leanings, poets and critics have struggled to confirm its allusions. One of the more convincing conclusions, however, made by John Finnis and Patrick Martin in their essay “Another Turn for the Turtle” suggests that it refers to the real life couple Anne and Roger Line, he being exiled and she martyred for their Catholic beliefs. As Finnis and Martin rightly conclude, “the invocation to a requiem suggests a Catholic rite” (12), and the poem’s final line, calling the reader to “sigh a prayer” for the dead, “emphasizes the poem’s detachment from the official reformed Church’s rejection of all prayer or intercession for the dead.” They agree that the allegory is “more reticent, artificed, opaque and resonant than [their] discussion may suggest [because] it makes no display of Catholic belief, or even of common Christian hope for life beyond death” (13), but they also bolster their argument by reading the poem alongside scenes from *The Merchant of Venice* and *Titus Andronicus*. They believe that Shakespeare may have been “interested in persons pursued by government even to death” (12) and that such a conclusion can be drawn from the “poem’s echoes of two passages” in the above noted plays. Whether they are correct in their deduction about the poem’s two birds, their solid examples supporting the poem’s Catholic spirit and their association between it and his contemporaneous work are fruitful methods to follow. In the poem’s Threnos, chanted by the character of Reason, the two birds assume the forms of Beauty and Truth, and as I. A. Richards suggests, the Truth being referred to here is “chiefly loyalty, faithfulness, and constancy, which

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163 For Shakespeare’s writings in the year 1599, see Shapiro 303.
164 For critics and poets who have struggled with the subject’s historicity in “The Phoenix and the Turtle,” see Speaight 220; and Richards 93.
165 See Finnis and Martin 12-14. See also Everett 13-15; and Asquith 14-15.
as with Troilus, the true knight, the true lover, is truth spelled Troth” (93). Ophelia, Hamlet’s betrothed, if only in her and the Queen’s hopes, suggests that marriage between beauty and honesty—what she knows to be truth—is best when she tells Hamlet, “Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?” (3.1, 110-1). Considering her role as Hamlet’s truth and troth alongside Shakespeare’s commemoration poem, I would suggest that she is like the Phoenix and he the Turtle. Like the chaste bird who sacrifices herself for rebirth, sitting perched on the sole Arabian tree where she calls her avian mourners to the requiem, Ophelia climbs the willow’s branch to pluck the flowers for her funeral posy. And as the Phoenix dies in a bath of her own flames, so does Ophelia drown in an immersion that is self-made if not self-induced. The self-immolation of both her and the bird is a sacrifice that is deemed worthy of the revelation it inspires. Just as the Phoenix’s ashes bring about rebirth, Ophelia’s perverted baptism also regenerates another. Her death prepares Hamlet for his own because only after he sees her body in the grave does he claim that “the readiness is all” (5.2, 191) and “since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is’t to leave betimes? Let be” (192-3). This revelation of Hamlet’s seems to echo Ophelia’s bit of wisdom in her madness when she says, “Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be” (4.5, 43-4). His “let be” reminds the viewer of his earlier ruminations on the unknowns of death, and his questioning whether it is better “to be or not to be.” It seems that through Ophelia’s death Hamlet is made ready for his own demise and

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166 The Queen openly admits that she had intended for Ophelia to be her son’s bride; see 5.1, 222-4.
167 Although this comparison may seem a stretch, the text supports at least the beginnings of such an argument. I am not suggesting that Shakespeare’s poem is about the characters in Hamlet, but I am trying to discover something new about the play by reading it alongside, if not through, the poem.
168 Cf. The Phoenix and the Turtle 1-4.
169 This line falls on the heels of her reference to the baker’s daughter who did not recognize Christ and give him a generous portion of bread to eat; cf. ibid. 5-7.
perhaps even ready for the same heaven that he wishes upon Laertes.\textsuperscript{170} The turtle, or dove, is mentioned several times in \textit{Hamlet}, but first in Ophelia's mad scene. When she comes in singing about the man who is carried “barefaced on the bier” (4.5, 161) to his grave, presumed to be her father, the second Quarto’s punctuation, its em dash, indicates that she stops singing abruptly and addresses someone in the room. She says, “Fare you well, my dove” (163). Since this is no welcome but a form of goodbye, it may be concluded that she is not addressing the newly arrived Laertes. The most obvious recipient of her farewell is the dead Polonius, whom she has not had the chance to send-off properly with obsequies.\textsuperscript{171} But can she not be saying goodbye to another? Hamlet is also missing from the scene and has been recently sent away to England. Although Ophelia may be caught up in grief over her father’s death, she may also be writhing in sadness at the loss of her admirer. Her mad scene is a rumination on the death of her father and the disappearance of her betrothed, a suggestion that will be expounded in the pages below. The flowers she distributes, however, are also suggestive of the dove, for the recipient of the columbines offered in conjunction with the fennel may be an imaginary Hamlet. Fennel is an ephemeral flower that wilts shortly after it is plucked, and the columbine invokes the dove with its name, the root of which is the Latin word for dove, “columba.” The second time that the dove is mentioned occurs at Ophelia’s funeral. The Queen compares Hamlet to the patient female dove who awaits the hatching of her baby birds, “Anon, as patient as the female dove, / When that her golden couplets are disclosed, / His silence will sit drooping” (5.1, 265-9). Hamlet’s outburst at the grave will eventually pass, and when it does he will become as quiet as the dove awaiting her couplets. In symbolic relation to the Turtle of the poem, Hamlet offers to die and be buried with his beloved. Although Laertes is the first to make the sacrificial plea for them to pile

\textsuperscript{170} For Hamlet’s forgiveness of Laertes, see 5.2, 306.
\textsuperscript{171} For a discussion of the indecorum of burial without a coffin, see Roland Mushat Frye 245.
dust “upon the quick and the dead / Till of this flat a mountain [they] have made” (229-30), it is Hamlet who suggests letting “them throw / Millions of acres on [him and Ophelia] till [their] ground, / Singeing his pate against the burning zone, / Make Ossa like a wart!” (260-3) The immolation, suggested by his use of “singeing” and “burning,” recalls the Phoenix. It seems fitting for Claudius to suggest that Ophelia’s “grave shall have a living monument” (277) when considered in light of Hamlet’s offer to be sacrificed with her.

Ophelia’s role is heavy with religious symbolism, for she appears to be the only character who has a sincere and enduring faith in heaven. One of the most overt examples of her religious faith can be found when she sings a version of the Walsingham ballad as she first appears to the Queen in her state of madness. Shakespeare’s verses are unique to him though enough evidence suggests that they allude to songs in the tradition of Walsingham. Ophelia hints at, if not explicitly hopes for, absolution through pilgrimage when she sings, “How should I your true love know / From another one” (4.5, 23-4), answering, “By his cockle hat and staff / And his sandal shoon” (25-6). These symbols of recognition suggest the pilgrim’s shoes and walking staff, but also specify the hat that has a shell on it. The image of a “cockle hat” is evocative of the shells worn by the pilgrims who walk the Way of Saint James to his shrine in Santiago de Compostela. Saint James the Greater, the patron saint of Spain, was one of Christ’s first Apostles, and was designated the first Christian martyr when he was beheaded at the hands of Herod Agrippa. A pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint James was considered a form of Catholic

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172 Walsingham is a village in Norfolk, where, in 1061, Richeldis de Faverches, a devout woman, claimed to have had a Marian vision, one of the earliest recorded. She established the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in devotion to the Virgin Mary. The Holy House in Walsingham became a major pilgrimage site until it was destroyed in 1538 under Henry VIII.

173 For a discussion of the Walsingham ballad in early modern England, see Waller 101-111.
penance. In the first verse, Ophelia may be questioning how to know God’s “true love,” as opposed to the love of an admirer or parent, for it is arguable that, speaking in Christian terms, the only “true” love is God’s and that to receive that love one must be admitted to heaven. Perhaps it is the case that she will know God’s true love when she sees her father, not her lover, dressed as one whose pilgrimage marks his way to heaven. Confused by the hymn that Ophelia sings, the Queen asks her “what imports this song” (27), insinuating that she does not get the reference to Saint James. To explain her reason for singing as she does, Ophelia claims that her ballad is simply a dirge, recalling the imagined body that is to be buried rather than explicate her religious sentiment. The pious thread of the first stanza, however, is carried over into the second,

He is dead and gone, lady:

He is dead and gone;

At his head a grass green turf,

At his heels a stone. (29-32)

Ophelia’s inversion of the body in the grave, whereby the headstone marks the feet instead of the head, seems to confirm her mad state, her confusion and disbelief at Polonius’s death. But perhaps the second stanza also refers to the pilgrim alluded to in the first. When Ophelia clarifies her song’s subject matter to the Queen by referring directly to Polonius’s burial, she brings to mind again the idea of witnessing God’s “true love,” for only through proper burial of the body can the soul find its way to heaven. She moves from the spiritual nature of death to its physical reality when she chants twice that her father is both “dead and gone,” but her inversion of his burial, which may simply recall the hurried interment he was given by the King, may also suggest something more than improper obsequies. If one takes the martyred Saint James to

174 For Catholic indulgences, see Kent.
symbolize all the martyred saints, Ophelia may be upending Polonius’s burial for reasons other than the impropriety of his shoddy interment. When Saint Peter was crucified, he insisted on being turned upside down because he was not worthy to hang on the cross in the manner of Christ. Ophelia may be associating this act of martyrdom with her father’s interment as a way to quell the misery she experiences at his improper burial. Her ballad’s final stanza seems to be a remark on the starkness of her father’s death, as if she is woken to a reality that causes her to express her regret at the obsequies that were never performed, forcing her to invent the funeral that he should have had:

White his shroud as the mountain snow—
………………………………….
Larded all with sweet flowers;
Which bewept to the ground did not go
With true-love showers. (36-40)

Once again she invokes the “true-love” that seems more celestial than earthbound, and conjures up imaginary flowers, the same ones that she will eventually distribute in the company of the King, Queen, and Laertes, to symbolize the mock funeral procession that is both a tribute to her forgotten nuptials and an augury of her impending death.

Ophelia’s Tokens of Death and Marriage

Ophelia mourns not only Polonius’s death, but his improper burial, which suggests that she is concerned about funeral rites and requiems. Similar to Antigone, her madness and desperation are brought on by the knowledge that her loved one is left to rot unceremoniously without prayers to lead him to heaven. Both characters use their act of suicide to protest the
sanctity of the dead, and to journey down to the bridal chamber where Death alone is the 
bridegroom. In *Hamlet*, the floral train that Ophelia offers, flowers that seem plucked from an 
imaginary bouquet that is at once shared with wedding guests and is a marriage token for the 
bride-to-be, marks her mad scene.\(^{175}\) It was common for preachers to cite “the properties of 
flowers in the wedding bouquet—primrose, maiden’s blush, violets, and rosemary—to 
recommend obedience, mild patience, and faithfulness to the wife, and wisdom, love, and loyalty 
to the husband” (Cressy 365). That rosemary was common to either marriage or death cannot be 
a simple coincidence. Considering the complexity of that scene, in which Polonius’s death 
haunts the stage, Ophelia’s spectacle seems a mock funeral procession. The solemn march for 
Polonius thus foreshadows her own unceremonial cortège to the grave. With her father at the 
heart of her exhibition, confirmed by her ballad to the pilgrim, she says that she cannot give out 
any violets since “they withered all when [her] father died” (177-8). The “violets” are mentioned 
again by Laertes when he hopes that from Ophelia’s “fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets 
spring” (5.1, 218-9). Shakespeare does not specify to whom Ophelia offers the blooms of her 
nosegay, or if they only exist in her imagination, but one might want to associate Laertes’s 
sobriquet for his sister, “O rose of May” (157), with the “rosemary” she may be offering him for 
“remembrance” (170). With each flower, Ophelia impresses a specific meaning upon its 
recipient, but it is only the rue for both her and another that is the “’herb of grace’” (175) of 
Sundays, which may be worn “with a difference.” Whoever receives the rue is expected to repent 
in a way that is markedly different from her.\(^{176}\) Since Ophelia says that she will keep some rue 
for herself, and thus holds on to her own portion of the herb of grace, she may also be in need—

\(^{175}\) For the importance of flowers as wedding ornaments in the early modern period, see Cressy 
363.

\(^{176}\) Cf. Miola 98.
or soon will be in need—of forgiveness. This small token of repentance looms large as a symbol of contrition when one knows the outcome of Ophelia’s despair. Laertes’s fright at his sister’s behavior and his comment that she is “a document in madness, thoughts and remembrance fitted,” seem to suggest that the flowers exist only in her mind. Despite this, however, when the Queen relates how she comes to fall into the brook, it is apparent that they play an important role in her death:

There is a willow grows askant the brook,
That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream;
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of cornflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men’s fingers call them.
There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
Clamb’ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. (5.1, 165-174)

The Queen’s description of how she came to her death does not tell the audience who actually witnessed the fall and did nothing to save her. It may be assumed that the clues were pieced together when her body was found, but the Queen says that the crown of flowers she was attempting to hang on the bough fell into the water with her, and that no evidence remains. It is possible that the branch that broke, allowing her fall, offered proof enough to reconstruct her death, but how could witnesses know that she simply sat amidst the water singing as

Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and endued
Unto that element. (174-9)

Her suicide is a “muddy death” (182) though not in terms of a body that drowns and drops to the silt of a brook; rather the circumstances of her death are opaque, if not speculative. Shakespeare’s diction, however, gives the audience hints nevertheless; the flowers in this scene are real, as well as telling. The cornflowers, nettles, daisies and long purples carry meanings just as do the violets, rosemary and rue from the faux funeral scene. In folklore, the cornflower, also called bachelor’s button, was the flower worn by young men in love. If the flower died too soon, it was believed that his love was not requited. In this way, paired with the ephemeral fennel, it may be symbolic of her estranged lover. The daisy has a mournful connotation; its name is found in Old English and is the “day’s eye” because its petals opened in the morning and closed at night, and “in Medieval Latin it was solis oculus ‘sun’s eye’” (OED). Ophelia’s flowers are meaningfully selected; with the daisy and cornflower alone, the crown that Ophelia makes is a mix of marriage and death. The long purples are a type of orchid and despite the suggestiveness of their “grosser name” (5.1, 169), they have another significance. John Gerard claims that the “Orchis is called in Latine, Palma Christie” (221), the palm of Christ, which alludes to the orchid’s healing properties, as well as the meaning of its name, hand of God. But the most telling bloom among the four is nettles, a herb with jagged leaves covered in stinging hairs. The verb “nettle” evolves from the pricks associated with the herb, meaning to irritate and annoy, and

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177 See Howard 126.
178 The Greek word orchis means testicle, and thus the flower is given its name because its roots have the appearance of male genitalia; for confirmation that the long purples are in fact orchids, see Otten 397-402.
there may be no image quite like a crown of nettles, or thorns, to evoke a sacrificial act.

Ophelia’s “crownet weeds / Clamb’ring to hang” on the willow’s “pendent boughs” evokes the image of another hanging crown of thorns. It is begging a point to associate Ophelia with Christ, but it is seemingly impossible to ignore the image evoked by the Queen’s description of Ophelia’s crown and her death. She falls into water, after all, in a rather perverse baptism that engulfs her and robs her of the life she had already surrendered. Perhaps, as the stolen “master’s daughter” (4.5, 168), she is not referring to Polonius at all, but Christ, considered as the head of the Church, rather than the king or head of a household. One recalls that the clown in the graveyard scene says, “the crowner hath sat on her and finds it Christian burial” (5.1, 4). His “crowner,” intended to mean coroner, recalls Ophelia’s “crownet weeds” of nettles that may have “sat on her” head.

The flowers, symbolic of both death and marriage, as well as the transitoriness of life, are not only significant to Ophelia’s madness and drowning, but also speak to her chastity. Before Laertes departs for France, he advises his sister on affairs of the heart and tells her frankly that in his opinion Hamlet’s intentions are not pure. The brother’s investment in his sister’s chastity attests to his character—a character that proves honorable when he returns to avenge his father’s death, claiming “that drop of blood that’s calm proclaims [him] bastard” (4.5, 118). It also suggests an aspect of her character that may not have been obvious before. Laertes seems especially interested in keeping his sister from falling into sexual traps, suggesting that she is vulnerable to impropriety. He implies that flirtatious trifles can lead to more damning behavior if they are taken as signs of true love. He warns her not to lose her heart to Hamlet, or let her “chaste treasure open / To his unmastered opportunity” (1.3, 30-1). His sense of urgency and

179 Master is a common name for Christ; for early uses of the term, see Jansen 118.
concern are punctuated by their almost direct affect, which could be misconstrued as a warning against the impulsive behavior of men altogether. He pleads with her to stay away from Hamlet, whose wanton desire is unruly, saying, “Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister” (32), insisting that she is in fact in some kind of danger. “Best safety lies in fear” (42), he says, even as he warns her to “fear [him] not” (50) when she reminds him to “reck not his own rede” (49). The siblings’ affection for one another is not missed in this exchange. The scene, however, is also suggestive of Ophelia’s potential for unseemly behavior. The floral references here are telling, foreshadowing the cortège that is to come. When Laertes first warns Ophelia about Hamlet’s flirtatious conduct, he says that she should hold it like “a violet in youth of primy nature, / Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting, / The perfume and suppliance of a minute— / No more” (7-9). His choice of flower here seems ironic since the violet is a symbol of faithfulness, as is shown later in the play when Ophelia claims that she has no violets to give, for they are all gone with her father’s death, and Laertes hopes that violets bloom again with his sister’s “fair and unpolluted flesh” sweetening the ground. Laertes’s proverbial warnings to protect her chastity are reminiscent of flowers for the metaphorical blooms they engender:

'The canker galls the infants of the spring’

Too oft before their buttons be disclosed,

And in the morn and liquid dew of youth

Contagious blastments are most imminent. (38-41)

The new blooms are susceptible to affliction such as pests and caterpillars, which infect and consume the flowers before they can grow. The bloom is evocative as a metaphor for a woman’s sex, its very nature being fit for pollination and thus fertilization. The flowers are reproductive organs adorned with brightly colored petals meant to attract other organisms, and their reliance
on the sun to coax their petals open, such as the daisy that opens by day but closes at night, is
certainly suggested in Hamlet’s warning to Polonius to keep Ophelia safely inside: “Let her not
walk i’the sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive, friend, look to’t”
(2.2, 183-4). Here, Ophelia is in fact the flower which may open in the sun and so be vulnerable
to impregnation by “the liquid dew of youth.” In a manner that seems to reinforce her piety and
purity, however, Ophelia uses the same floral metaphor to describe to her brother the thorny way
that leads to the path of righteousness:

    Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
    Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven
    Whiles, a puffed and reckless libertine,
    Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads. (1.3, 46-9)

She warns him not to play among the pleasure groves instead of heeding his own advice and
taking the netted and austere path to heaven. In this scene, an association can be made between
Ophelia’s chastity and the flower, but another parallel which can be drawn between Laertes and
Hamlet is worth noting. Laertes tells his sister that “‘Virtue itself scapes not calumnious
strokes’” (37), which seems similar to the cursed words that Hamlet offers her, “Be thou as
chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny” (3.1, 136-7). Both men warn her
that virtue and chastity are not enough to keep her from vilification. Hamlet and Laertes imply
the same thing though Laertes is simply citing an adage while Hamlet is intent on injuring
Ophelia with his own words—his verbal “plague for [her] dowry” (135). These warnings,
comparable in their meaning, suggest Ophelia’s potential for concupiscence despite her intention
to remain virtuous; her purity is not enough to shield her from the smear of sin.
Similar to Mary Magdalen, whose past is a patchwork of most likely fabricated and certainly calumnious stories, Ophelia falls victim to the trappings of a stained reputation in the accusations of others. When Hamlet insists that she get herself to a nunnery, it remains ambiguous, or a matter of theatrical interpretation, whether he is referring to her consecration or necessary conversion. Whether pure or foul, the slander leaves its mark. But like Mary, Ophelia may be saved. The Saint is a figure of salvation because her conversion and newfound sacredness are believed to lead the sinner to redemption. Her post-conversion state is represented by “a lush and flourishing garden, not unlike the paradisiacal garden evoked in the [Song of Songs]” (Jansen 241). Her newly salvaged and virginal ground is no longer barren. Just as the Virgin Mary is represented by the hortus conclusus, Mary Magdalen is transformed from “terra inculta, a desolated and deserted land, into a garden abounding in delights” (241). “The quadruple crown, one tier of which [is] the virgin’s floral coronet” (242) marks her purity of mind and body. The floral imagery of Mary Magdalen is a fitting link to Shakespeare’s Ophelia who succumbs to death while holding a crown of nettles. From Polonius to Hamlet to the Queen, Ophelia is a mere instrument to be used in the service of others; she is fit to be Hamlet’s bait in the eyes of Polonius, a good excuse to feign madness for Hamlet, and a future daughter-in-law who will salvage the Queen’s son. An icon, an idol, a totem—all befitting the “beautified” and beatified Ophelia. Her suicide is a sacrifice, one serving the tragedy as a whole, as if prompting other sinners to follow the straight and ready path, for it marks the beginning of the regretful deaths that accumulate in the finale, making them self-conscious expressions of salvation. But it is also a sacrifice in service of salvation, for only through her death is the audience’s faith renewed and Hamlet’s restored. Her suicide is suggested but not explicit, and therefore is as muddy as the silt of the brook into which she falls. Ophelia is martyred because she is the only
character whose death is seemingly unwarranted by anything she does while alive, and therefore she is burdened with *Hamlet’s* salvific iconography. She is a figure of redemption, from the crown of nettles to the rue she keeps for repentance to the image of death from the willow’s branch “that shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream” just as the skull shows its face in the mirror’s image of La Tour’s “Fabius Magdalen.” Her drowning invokes a baptism that washes away her sin, and as the Queen remarks, she gives herself to the brook, letting the water overcome her. Ophelia’s death, her plunge into the water, a fall that occurs because she is ostensibly collecting more flowers, is the tragedy’s icon of lamentable loss. Because of her role as sacrificial lamb in this salvific-conscious problem play, she may be considered saintly for being its only symbol of purification and redemption. Like the Phoenix, she sacrifices herself for another’s regeneration and calls the mourners to her requiem. Ophelia’s role in *Hamlet* is summed up in her very name. Ophelia comes from the Greek verb “ophelein,” which is to help, aid or assist. She is the one who—some may suspect—leads the hero to salvation, or at least to his belief in some sort of heaven beyond death. One can hope that his newfound faith is echoed in Horatio’s parting words: “Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest” (5.2, 333-4).
Chapter Five
The Strongman, the Baptist, and the Holy Spirit

*Samson Agonistes*, the latest among the works studied here, is arguably written in a different vein from those explored in the previous chapters. As C. S. Lewis suggests, “Milton lived too late to be direct evidence for medieval beliefs” (*Discarded Image* 123). His work, however, contributes to the theme at hand since his dramatic representation of Christian salvation is considerably more typological than that of Spenser, Marlowe and Shakespeare. Milton is indebted to Dante for much of his poetic heritage and is therefore also undoubtedly influenced by medieval theology even as his dramatic portrayal of redemption is clearly biblical.¹⁸⁰ In *On Christian Doctrine*, Milton emphasizes his wish for all those who profess the Christian faith to recognize the truth of God and to find eternal salvation in both the Father and Christ.¹⁸¹ He believes that God has opened a way to eternal salvation through each man’s individual faith in Him. With a markedly Protestant spirit, Milton asserts that every Christian must do his own work to understand the Holy Scripture, and not simply take the word of others as truth. But having written a treatise evinces his desire to share what he has learned with others. Milton, however, assures his reader that he does not intend to force anything on him, but expects him to turn to the Old and New Testaments himself and seek his own justification and proof. Both his biblical exegesis and his attempt to clarify the meaning of scripture mark his rigor at finding the essence of God’s message in the sacred texts. He admits that his “faith from divine revelation” (Sumner 2) and his exegetical work “by the most careful perusal and meditation of the Holy Scriptures themselves” will guide him in his treatise on the Christian faith. Turning to the Holy Scriptures for vindication of his actions and words is not a practice Milton came to late in life. In *Of Civil

¹⁸⁰ For Dante’s influence on Milton, see Friederich 199-210.
¹⁸¹ Terms such as these with capital letters are used as Milton uses them.
Power in Ecclesiastical Causes (1659), he tells his readers that what he argues will “be drawn from the Scripture only; and therein from true fundamental principles of the gospel, to all knowing Christians undeniable” (CPW 7, 241). He believes that as long as he follows scripture he cannot commit heresy, naming the New Testament specifically to emphasize his reliance on the gospels to furnish him with the answers he seeks.\(^{182}\) He claims that “on the introduction of the gospels, the whole of the preceding covenant, in other words the entire Mosaic law, was abolished” (412). Samson Agonistes, therefore, one of his most tenacious poetical works, is enriched if not opened to a better understanding when considered alongside this intellectual and faithful pursuit. Milton’s poem is not about the old law, but about the new dispensation of redemption.\(^{183}\) Joseph Wittreich suggests that Milton “tells the Samson story anew, writing against its grain, looking at the underside of the tale as it is usually told, thus exposing its occlusions” (Shifting Contexts 218). The poet is testing biblical typology, increasing the possibilities of uncovering truth, and knocking down the boundaries that keep one meaning from overlapping and obscuring another. “Milton comprehends that there will be interpretive disputes or ‘disagreements;’ and in the face of such knowledge, [he] urges that those disagreements be tolerated until a new revelation allows for their resolution” (186). He himself interpreted the New Testament in reference to the Old, and therefore “it is fully in keeping with everything we know about Milton that, for him, coherence involves, and perhaps necessarily contains, systematic contradictions” (186). It seems, therefore, that Milton is attempting to clarify, and perhaps expose, some of those scriptural contradictions when he writes his version of the strongman’s tale. With an emphasis on biblical investigation, it is worth noting the significant

\(^{182}\) See Milton, Christian Doctrine 7.

\(^{183}\) Jason P. Rosenblatt, whose introduction to “Samson Agonistes” in Milton’s Selected Poetry and Prose (2011), is the ground from which I subconsciously plucked the idea for these pages. Cf. Rosenblatt 156.
changes that Milton makes in the Samson story, not the least of which is the addition of a Danite chorus.\textsuperscript{184} This study attempts to add to the discussion, if not dispute, regarding God’s will in Samson’s destruction.\textsuperscript{185} As has been shown by others, Samson’s silence before pulling down the temple is crucial to understanding his seemingly irrational behavior.\textsuperscript{186}

Milton’s dramatic poem is a synthesis of Greek tragedy and Jewish legend, admittedly influenced by the tragic poets of antiquity, as well as the early Church fathers and commentators. As one separated from all sectarian forms of Protestantism, and a staunch dissenter from the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, he maintains a continued belief in the promise of salvation for anyone with faith in Christ.\textsuperscript{187} Keeping in mind \textit{Samson Agonistes}’ publication alongside \textit{Paradise Regained}, readers probably find it difficult to dismiss the Christian notions embedded in the Jewish theme, and yet the tragedy’s choral feature does not fit either scheme. Milton’s Chorus, when considered a character, seems to justify Samson’s actions from the outset when it announces, “I bear thee witness” (239).\textsuperscript{188} This phrase echoes Christ’s words to the Jews in \textit{John} when they persecute him for having healed a man on the Sabbath: “If I should beare witnesse of my selfe, my witnesse were not true. There is another that beareth witnesse of me, and I know that the witnesse which he beareth of me, is true. Ye sent unto John, and he bare witness unto the trueth” (5.31-33).\textsuperscript{189} When Milton’s Chorus claims to bear witness to Samson’s acts, it suggests

\textsuperscript{184} The Chorus will be treated as a collective noun throughout the work, and therefore will be referred to in the third person singular rather than the plural.
\textsuperscript{185} For a discussion of the debate over whether Samson’s final action is the will of divine authority, see Rogers 651.
\textsuperscript{186} For a discussion of the will of God, see Kerrigan 217-32.
\textsuperscript{187} For predestination being used by some for both election and reprobation, see Milton, Christian Doctrine 44.
\textsuperscript{188} For discussions on the Chorus’s spiritual insight, see Huntley 132-45; and Low, Blaze of Noon. For discussions on the Chorus’s spiritual deficiencies, see Martz 115-34; Baruch 319-39; and Samuel 250.
\textsuperscript{189} Scripture is from the 1599 Geneva Bible unless otherwise noted.
that he is like Christ and cannot testify to his own Godly inspiration. The Chorus is analogous to the Holy Spirit since it is the vessel for the hero’s thought and action, and the purveyor of Christian theology in a Jewish tale, attesting to Samson’s regeneration and his possible redemption. This is not to suggest, however, that Milton’s Samson is representative of Christ; rather that he is Christ’s forerunner, the prophet of repentance, who prepares the way for man’s redeemer. As one reads the poem alongside scripture, it seems clear that Milton, whether intentionally or not, makes a direct correlation between his strongman and John the Baptist.

Samson’s Rousing Motions

Milton’s rewriting of the story engages with New Testament theology by assigning Samson full responsibility for his own destruction, and by acknowledging the hero’s repentant and redeemed nature that leads up to it. When the Messenger comes to Manoa and the Chorus at the end of *Samson Agonistes*, he reports on what he has witnessed. Manoa asks him what cause has brought his son to the act of self-violence, wondering what prompted him to turn against himself. The Messenger tells him that “Inevitable cause / At once both to destroy and be destroyed” (1587–8) is the reason. Samson’s death is unavoidable; to defeat his foes, he must also destroy himself. Weighing his greater purpose against the sacrifice of his life, the strongman concludes that the former is worthy of the latter; and this is where Milton veers away from the Old Testament, removing all presumption that God plays a part in Samson’s final act of destruction.190 In *Judges*, “Samson called unto the Lord, and said, O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes” (16.28). When Samson pulls the pillars down, killing himself

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190 Although “Old Testament” is a Christian phrase, it is meant to refer to the Hebrew Bible, and is being used thus as a matter of convenience.
and his enemies, it appears that God grants him the strength that he has prayed for and thus sanctions his deed. His prayer to God resounds with a line from the Deuteronomic code, “Thine eye shall not pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (Deut. 19.21), as well as one from the law of Exodus, and Leviticus that says, “If any of you injure another person, whatever you have done shall be done to you” (24.19-21). In the Old Testament story, the law suggests that Samson should seek God’s help to avenge his enemies—the hand of God is expected to bring vengeance for the mistreated and abused. By eliminating Samson’s prayer before he pulls down the temple, however, Milton dismisses the old codes, suggesting that under the new dispensation of grace such laws are obsolete. Samson’s silence in the moment before his destruction is more in line with Christ’s counsel to his disciples in the New Testament when he says, “Ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth … but I say unto you, resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt. 5.38-9). Perhaps Samson has gone to the temple to offer his other cheek though his destructive act suggests it is unlikely. Samson’s silence, however, evinces his having acted alone and of his own volition when bringing down the temple. The Messenger tells Manoa and the Chorus that he stood with his eyes fixed and head inclined between the pillars “as one who prayed, / Or some great matter in his mind revolved” (1637-8). The conjunction of comparison suggests that the Messenger is limited by his eyewitness account, and can only surmise what is going on in Samson’s mind, making conclusions based on what it looks as though Samson is doing. To the Messenger, a follower of Mosaic law, Samson looks to be in a prayerful posture with his head bowed, an assumption justified by his reasoning that a man standing with his head down and arms outstretched could only be calling on the God he worships. Milton, however, admits in Christian Doctrine that in his own exegetical work he
finds that “no particular posture of the body in prayer was enjoined, even under the law” (Sumner 566), and “to offer private prayer in public is hypocritical” (Sumner 567). It seems out of character for Milton to dismiss his own biblical findings when writing his version of the Samson story. He uses the Messenger therefore to another effect: as “an Ebew” (1540), from the tribe of Dan, he makes projections about what he sees based on what he knows to be true of Mosaic law. Since Milton does not believe in a particular posture for prayer, he does not make it explicit that Samson is in fact praying. The Messenger’s assumption about Samson’s act may immediately be discounted as simply a guess, or at least an inconclusive and empty observation. If the reader, however, concludes that he is praying, or presumes that the Messenger is correct, can he really know what Samson is praying for? To assume that Milton’s Samson prays to God for vengeance because the Old Testament hero does is inaccurate, or at least not supported by the text since Milton has deliberately changed the biblical story to tell a different one, suggested by the adjustments that he has made. If anything, Milton does this to suggest the opposite. The Messenger’s second proposal as to what Samson’s posture demonstrates is more redolent of his plight. That he appears to be contemplating a “great matter” in his mind evokes the seriousness of the feat that Samson is considering—a seriousness that is justified when his own death becomes evident. Ultimately, the only thing incontrovertible about the Messenger’s description of Samson’s posture between the pillars is that neither he nor the reader will ever know what Samson is actually thinking or doing at that moment. The situation remains ambiguous, and Milton neither confirms nor denies Samson’s final supplication.

In the third chapter of Christian Doctrine, Milton argues that man is a free agent and because his natural state is a sinful one it follows that his free will is not something forced upon him:
God of his wisdom determined to create men and angels reasonable beings, and therefore free agents; at the same time he foresaw which way the bias of their will would incline, in the exercise of their own uncontrouled liberty. (Sumner 40)

Milton lays out the argument for man’s liberty even as God has foresight. He uses salvation as the crux, for if man believes he is chosen to be saved, despite his behavior, he will not perish. Milton’s argument for free will supports the claim that Samson acts on his own in the end to pull down the temple and destroy the multitude. This is one of the distinct ways in which Milton veers from the Old Testament Samson, in wanting to reinforce man’s independent action and the liberty with which he must choose to act. Man is always free to act on his own, and because God is immutable and prescient, his decrees are never absolute, but can only be fulfilled by man. Milton concludes that “the liberty of man must be considered independent of necessity” (Sumner 38), and, therefore, Samson’s silence is meant to symbolize God’s passivity in the face of the slaughter. Milton claims that “God knows all future events but he has not decreed them absolutely, lest he should be blamed for all sin and men and spirits be excused from sinning” (Sumner 41). Which is not to say that God’s prescience imposes the necessity of any particular behavior upon man; rather man’s free will determines the outcome of an action already foreseen because he is free to act as he chooses.191 “Consequently the issue does not depend on God who foresees it, but on he alone who is the object of his foresight” (Sumner 41) since knowing about a future event does not prevent it from happening.192

Samson’s role as his people’s liberator, to which he believes God has appointed him, is

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191 For a discussion of foreknowledge of the indeterminate as possible, see Lewis, Discarded Image 88.
192 Milton uses the example of the prophet Elisha from 2 Kings 8.12, who foresaw the evil that Hazael would wreak upon the children of Israel. Hazael enacted his malevolence despite Elisha’s having foreseen it.
unrelated to the apocalyptic destruction he wreaks on the stadium. Unlike the Samson of *Judges*, Milton’s hero announces to the crowd: “Now of my own accord such other trial / I mean to show you of my strength, yet greater, / As with amaze shall strike all who behold” (1643-5). Not only does Samson absolve God of any guilt for the act he is about to perform by explicitly declaring that it is to come about of his “own accord,” but he gives his victims a veiled warning of the pending assault, telling them that his feat of strength will “strike” all who behold it. Barbara K. Lewalski has suggested that this scene “forces characters and readers to distinguish between what is necessarily opaque – Samson’s motives, his spiritual condition, his regeneration – and what they can know clearly: that God has again enabled Samson to strike a blow for Israel’s liberation” (534). Because Samson’s strength has returned long before the destruction in the stadium, however, can one really know that God has restored Samson for that purpose? He does not need to call upon God for the strength to crush his enemies since, at that moment, he is capable of destroying them without him. This alone seems to acquit God of all involvement in Samson’s destruction, or at least make it ambiguous. Samson tells the Chorus that his vow is renewed, and that he will do nothing “that may dishonor / [Their] Law, or stain [his] vow of Nazarite” (1385-6), admitting his recommitment to God. The return of his strength suggests that he has been absolved of his previous sins even if he misreads its meaning as something else. According to Milton’s exegetical understanding of foreknowledge, God, having foreseen what Samson will do, restores his strength so that he is given the choice to use it or not. Samson therefore may act independent of necessity and with absolute free will, not as the vessel for God’s decrees.

In *A Common-Place Book* (1637), Milton engages with Lactantius when addressing the problem of evil:
Cur permittit deus malum? ut ratio virtuti constare possit. virtus enim malo arguitur, illustratur, exercetur. quemadmodum disserit Lactantius 1.5.c.7 ut haberet ratio et prudentia in quo se exerceret, eligendo bona, fugiendo mala. lactan. de ira dei. c.13. quamvis et haec non satisfaciunt. (1)

Why does God permit evil? So that reasoning and virtue may be known. For the good is shown, is made clear, and is exercised by evil. As Lactantius says, Book 5. chapter 7, that reason and intelligence may have the opportunity to exercise themselves by choosing the good, and by fleeing from evil. Lactantius “On the Wrath of God,” chapter 13. However much these things fail to satisfy. (KPA)

Without his strength, Samson cannot evince the choice that he makes between good and evil. Milton posits the same logic for all created beings in Paradise Lost when God tells Christ,

Such I created all th’ ethereal Powers

And Spirits, both them who stood and them who failed;

Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.

Not free, what proof could they have giv’n sincere

Of true allegiance, constant faith or love,

Where only what they needs must do, appeared,

Not what they would? What praise could they receive? (3.100–6)

When Samson confesses to the “rousing motions” (1383) within him, arranging his thoughts for something extraordinary, he confesses to a stirring that may plant the seed for his act of destruction though it is not conclusive that this rousing can be equated with the act itself. At this point in his exchange with the Chorus, he divulges his plan to go along with the Philistine’s request that he appear at their festival. I will argue in the pages that follow that these “rousing
motions” are in fact indicative of the Holy Spirit, but for now it is important that this stirring does not implicate God.¹⁹³ When the Chorus questions Samson as to why he is able to use his strength to serve the Philistines in the mill but refuses to entertain them with it at their festival, Samson emphasizes the difference between using God’s gift for idol-worship and using it for honest, lawful labor that earns his keep with his captors. The Chorus seems to concur when it says, “Where the heart joins not, outward acts defile not” (1368-9). Although not a maxim to be found anywhere in the New Testament, their words are reminiscent of Matthew:

> But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are the things which defile a man: but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man. (15.18-20)

The verse seems to imply that man is not desecrated by his actions; rather he can only be considered profane in God’s eyes for what he has is in his heart. In Christian Doctrine, Milton addresses this verse when he discusses original sin, concluding that the general depravity of the human mind makes it prone to sin though faith may remove the guilt that accompanies sin:

> “Guiltiness is not properly sin, but the imputation of sin, which is also called the judgment of God” (Sumner 268). Those who are regenerated are freed from their guiltiness, but never original sin, which is defined as man’s inclination to sin. Milton distinguishes between original and actual sin, determining that the latter is the crime itself. Actual sin implies a defect in some act, word, thought, or omission of good action. “For every act is in itself good; it is only its irregularity, or deviation from the line of right, which, properly speaking, is evil. Wherefore the act itself is not the matter of which sin consists, but only the … subject in which it is committed” (Sumner 269).

¹⁹³ For his exegetical investigations of God as having no part in man’s sin, see Milton, Christian Doctrine 206.
The heart therefore can be faithful, in turn alleviating the sinner of his guilt and bringing about his regeneration. One may consider here that Paul lists Samson as one of God’s faithful in the New Testament:

And what more shall I say? For the time would be too short for me to tell of Gideon, of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthah, also of David, and Samuel, and of the Prophets: Which through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained the promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, of weak were made strong, waxed valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. (Heb. 11.32-34)

Paul is suggesting that these Old Testament prophets were granted salvation because of their faith, it being “the grounds of things which are hoped for, and the evidence of things which are not seen” (Heb. 11.1). According to the New Testament, Samson is infused with faith by God’s grace, which helps man attain the three Christian virtues, hope, faith and charity. Milton’s Chorus implies as much when it tells Samson that his actions cannot defile him if his heart remains pure. He will be absolved of his guilt if he has faith in God’s redemption. Samson agrees with the Chorus’s maxim, but suggests that it is only valid under one condition: if he is forced into the act that defiles him in the eyes of God. Because he is not dragged by force into the stadium, and is merely commanded to appear, he believes that free will allows him to choose to obey the Philistines or to hold firm to his commitment to God. If he chooses to obey man over God, he believes that he will never be absolved of his sin or granted forgiveness. Knowing that such an act of disobedience would be irredeemable in God’s eyes, Samson says, “Yet that he may dispense with me or thee, / Present in temples at idolatrous rites / For some important cause, thou need’st not doubt” (1377-9). Rosenblatt claims that Samson is implying that God may grant
him a special dispensation to be present at idolatrous rites, but Milton’s use of the word “dispense” runs deeper since God may wish to use Samson for a greater purpose, in an act of divine providence. Samson’s revelation is contrasted with his earlier speech, wherein, while still wallowing in spiritual blindness, he laments not knowing God’s plan for him: “I must not quarrel with the will / Of highest dispensation, which herein / Haply had ends above my reach to know” (60-2). Before experiencing “rousing motions” (1383), Samson believes that his purpose cannot be revealed to him, and that he cannot know the “will of highest dispensation.” But since he has been regenerated, with his spiritual blindness cured, he is made aware of God’s will. This second use of “dispense” seems to turn on Samson’s inclusion of the Chorus in his request. “That he may dispense with me or thee” means, perhaps, that all are subject to his gracious dispensation. In Christian Doctrine, Milton argues that the Jews are chosen for a specific purpose, to be those who lead others to the promised salvation: “They, and in process of time all other nations, might be led under the Gospel from the weak and servile rudiments of this elementary institution to the full strength of the new creature, and a manly liberty worthy the sons of God” (Sumner 402). But more specifically, “dispense” here may allude to the divinely ordained order of a particular time in history, suggesting the change from the Dispensation of Law to the Dispensation of Grace. As Samson is deemed liberator of his people from the Philistine yoke, he is also deemed deliverer from the law that keeps them in bondage. Samson’s “rousing motions” to some extraordinary act are ignited by his belief that the time of

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194 See Rosenblatt 195.
195 For a discussion of Milton’s claim that the Israelites are chosen to live under the Law, see Low, Blaze of Noon 120. For a recent study of the role of Jews in Christian salvation, see Shoeman.
196 Several different schemes of dispensations, or historical periods, exist, whereby God reveals himself and his plan for salvation. In chapter 27 of Christian Doctrine, Milton refers to the Dispensation of Grace as that of the new covenant set out in the Gospels.
dispensation has arrived, whereby he and his people are asked to break the constraints of the Mosaic law and walk in the faith of a new covenant with God.

Since Samson has already been reconciled to God, the proof of which is the return of his strength, he does not go into the stadium with a hardened heart, but enters it under a new accord and with faith in his redemption. His refusal to flaunt his strength for idol worship at the festival of Dagon evinces a repentant attitude, and Samson is most certainly convinced of God’s forgiveness, and his own redemption. Though he is not forced into the temple, his choice to go is still virtuous in the eyes of God because it becomes an example of his enduring forgiveness. Milton lets the reader know that Samson is aware of this grace when he apprises Harapha of it:

“Yet despair not of his final pardon / Whose ear is ever open, and his eye / Gracious to readmit the suppliant” (1171-3). Is it therefore not possible that the “great matter revolving” in his mind just before he pulls down the pillars in the stadium is his supplication to God for forgiveness? Samson is prepared for his death: he knows it is an inevitable consequence of his assault on the temple and he has ample time to repent his coming deed. Though Samson’s motives are not made explicit, the text suggests that Samson Agonistes relies on the New Testament, rather than the Old, for its theology. The dispensation Samson believes that God has granted him to enter the stadium and entertain the Philistines with his feats of strength is symbolic of the overall message of Milton’s dramatic poem: to put off the old law and embrace the new dispensation of salvation through Christ. In Christian Doctrine, he claims that “under the definition of Christ are also comprehended Moses and the Prophets, who were his forerunners, and the Apostles whom he sent” (Sumner 10). As such, Milton’s hero emulates Christ’s Nazarite forerunner, John the Baptist.
The Strongman, the Baptist, and the Holy Spirit

The similarities between John the Baptist and Samson extend beyond the simple acknowledgment that both were Nazarite and prophets proclaiming an end of Mosaic law. Suggestive of Samson’s act of destruction in the temple, John uses apocalyptic language to relay his message of pending judgment and hellfire. In Matthew, the Baptist warns the Pharisees:

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.\(^{197}\)

With a sense of urgency and impending doom, the Baptist imparts the importance of immediate repentance and the personal responsibility a man must take with regard to his salvation. He asserts that neither the law, nor biblical lineage, guarantee one’s place in heaven. Many have written on the apocalyptic end to Samson’s story, the tragic destruction of the multitude in the stadium, but few, if any, have made a connection between the Old Testament judge of Milton’s poem, and the New Testament prophet. As though a prophet, Samson predicts his end, telling the Chorus, “If there be aught of presage in the mind, / This day will be remarkable in my life / By some great act, or of my days the last” (1387-9). And like a destroyer, John the Baptist’s death wrecks havoc on a people. Flavius Josephus describes John’s execution in his *Antiquities of the Jews*:

Herod decided therefore that it would be much better to strike first and be rid of

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\(^{197}\) Cf. Milton, *Samson* (999-1003); Samson calls Dalila a viper when she leaves: “God sent her to debase me, / And aggravate my folly who committed / To such a viper his most sacred trust / of secrecy, my safety, and my life.”
[John] before his work led to an uprising, than to wait for an upheaval, get involved in a difficult situation and see his mistake. Though John, because of Herod’s suspicions, was brought in chains to Machaerus … and there put to death, yet the verdict of the Jews was that the destruction visited upon Herod’s army was a vindication of John, and God saw fit to inflict such a blow on Herod. (Whiston bk. 18, ch. 5)

The Jews believed that God avenged the execution of the Baptist when Herod’s army was slain “by the treachery of some fugitives, who, though they were of the tetrarchy of Philip, joined with Aretas’s army.” Destruction therefore follows the death of both the Baptist and the strongman, the one having caused it by his own physical force, the other having been the catalyst for it in his death. The two bring different kinds of destruction: one figurative, the other literal. Just as Samson pulls down the temple to wreak physical havoc on the Philistines, the Baptist warns that the heavenly kingdom is coming and thus those who do not repent will be destroyed, prophesying the figural destruction that will strike those who do not receive baptism. In Luke, John’s warning to the heathens is clear: “He will make clean his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner, but the chaff will he burn up with fire that never shall be quenched” (3.17). In his extensive study of the Baptist, L. von Rohden argues that John “sought to crush [the obdurate and the haughty] with the whole power of his pious earnestness” (Duncan 115), and that “he was a hammer and a stone which cast them down with crushing violence from their high estate and hurled them to earth” (Duncan 261). John announces the coming of the dispensation of grace with words that strike and threaten to destroy the unrepentant, just as Samson did with his great physical force.

But the similarities of their births are even more remarkable. Josephus claims that before
Samson’s conception, his barren mother is visited by an angel of God, who “brought her the good news that she should have a son, born by God’s providence, that should be a goodly child, of great strength” (Whiston bk. 5, ch. 8). She was not only told that her son would grow up to be strong and bring affliction to the Philistines, but she was warned to uphold God’s commandment by leaving his locks long, and not letting him partake of strong drink. For Josephus, the Nazarite observances are indications of Samson’s being favored by God and thus chosen for a prophetic calling:

So the woman proved with child, and was careful to observe the injunctions that were given her; and they called the child, when he was born, Samson, which name signifies one that is strong. So the child grew apace; and it appeared evidently that he would be a prophet, both by the moderation of his diet, and the permission of his hair to grow. (Whiston bk. 5, ch. 8)

In Judges, Samson “shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines” (13.5), implying that Samson will not finish the work of delivering his people, but only begin it. This alone may suggest his similarity to the forerunner of Christ, rather than Christ himself.

The New Testament claims that John the Baptist is foretold to be the one to call Israel to repent, that “he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1.17). This passage not only emphasizes the designation of the Baptist as a forerunner to Christ, who begins the work of delivering Israel from their state of sin, but also aligns the Baptist with the Old Testament prophets, establishing his place as the bridge between the old law and the new dispensation. As the forerunner, he is the messenger who comes
to prepare the way for salvation.\textsuperscript{198} His birth story takes a similar turn to Samson’s when the angel Gabriel announces his birth to his father, Zechariah, proving his wife’s fertility despite her having been barren until then.\textsuperscript{199} The angel tells Zechariah that “he will be great in the sight of the Lord” (Luke 1.15), and “he [also] must never drink wine or strong drink,” the very same Nazarite observances that Samson is to uphold, and that “even before his birth, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit,” a reference often associated with the prophets. Unlike the Holy Spirit that is later associated with the Holy Trinity by some sects, the term here refers to the Spirit that comes upon the prophets to speak the Word of God through them. Rohden explains the difference between the Holy Spirit that is in Christ and the Spirit of God within the prophets. He suggests that the Baptist is called to the service of God just as the Old Testament prophets are since “the word of the Lord came unto him, urging him to a certain course” (Duncan 92). He claims that the Spirit given to him is like that of Samson’s revelation, or command. It is not an enduring Spirit, one that can only come during the Dispensation of Grace with the death of Christ; rather it is one that moves the prophet from time to time to hear the voice of God. It is important to keep in mind that though the Baptist is a New Testament figure, he died before Christ, and therefore as Samson lived during the time of the old dispensation even as he was preparing for the new. Rohden argues that since “the principle of love had not yet appeared in the flesh” (Duncan 102), people were still too taken with the external to be enlightened about the idea of repentance. Fear was more often the motivator, and this perhaps is why the Baptist spoke in metaphors to relay the coming destruction if they did not repent of their sinful behavior—even he could not have fully understood the redemption that was to come. As Augustus Neander writes, “the least among those who understand the nature and process of development of the

\textsuperscript{198} See Mal. 3.1; and Isa. 40.3.

\textsuperscript{199} Manoah and his wife experience the same miracle after years of infertility.
divine kingdom, in connection with Christ’s redemption, is in this respect greater than the
Baptist, who stood upon the dividing line of the two spiritual eras” (215).

To bring the comparison back to Milton, the Chorus evokes prophetic words the moment
after Samson enters the temple when it says,

Go, and the Holy One
Of Israel be thy guide
To what may serve his glory best, and
spread his name
Great among the heathen round. (1427-30)

The allusion is evident when considered alongside Malachi, in which the prophet relays God’s
message to the people: “From the rising of the sun unto the going down of the same, my Name is
great among the Gentiles, and in every place incense shall be offered unto my Name, and a pure
offering: for my Name is great among the heathen, saith the Lord of hosts” (1.11). The prophecy
here seems to suggest an ending of the law and a commencement of the period of grace. Rohden
claims that “Malachi, with whom the brilliant series of the prophets was brought to a close, made
mention, at the end of his prophecy (4.5,6), of the forerunner [Elijah] who was to prepare the
way of the Lord” (Duncan 23).200 Some have suggested that it is impossible for John the Baptist
to be this Elijah since Christ is the forerunner of the impending day of judgment, but Rohden
challenges this notion, claiming that Malachi’s prophecy with regard to the coming of the Lord
refers both to Christ’s physical appearance as a man, and his arrival at the day of judgment. He
remarks that in the Old Testament the prophets describe the coming Messiah as “a powerful and
fear-inspiring king, [then] as a lowly and despised servant of God; and his appearances spoken

200 See Mal. 4.5-6.
of, now as a day of terror and revolution, now as drawing near amid a calm and cheerful peace” (Duncan 23). The inconsistency with which the Messiah is described can only be resolved if he is seen in the light of his overall spiritual coming, whereby his appearance is undivided and single, and outside the laws of time. Rohden argues that “the judgment begins with the first appearance of Christ, though it may be not at all visible to the bodily eye” (Duncan 24) that this first appearance marks the beginning of the “great and terrible day of the Lord.” He solves the problem of the forerunner named Elijah in Malachi by showing that Elias, named in the New Testament, refers to John the Baptist.

In the Old Testament, Elijah was a prophet who defended the worship of God over idols. In Kings, he raises the dead, brings fire down from the sky, and is taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire upon his death. Despite his denial in John that he is Elijah, the Baptist uses imagery similar to that in Malachi to preach the coming of the day of judgment, and is therefore often associated with the Tishbite Elijah. In both Matthew and Luke, the Baptist preaches a baptism by fire, a fire that will consume and destroy. Rohden writes about this two-fold baptism in Christ, claiming that “the one [is] a baptism of the Holy Spirit, only for his disciples and companions in the heavenly kingdom; the other [is] a baptism of destruction and consuming fire for the enemies and hardened sinners who he will exterminate and destroy” (Duncan 134). In his birth announcement, Gabriel evokes Malachi when he says that John the Baptist “shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias,” and in Matthew, Christ declares twice that he is the expected Elias. Christ’s words may have been suggested by the writer of Luke to vindicate the Baptist’s calling as the Messiah’s forerunner, but Rohden remedies this by concluding that John is not actually a reincarnation of Elijah—he is a prophet like Elias, just as Jesus is a king like

201 See John 1.21.
202 See Matt. 11.14; and 17.12.
David. For Milton, these kinds of typological connections are important. As noted above, he read the New Testament with reference to the Old. The prophets’ similarities continue with their names. Yohanan, given to the Baptist from God, means “God has shown favor,” which not only signifies his prophetic calling but may also delineate his promise to God as a Nazarite. The name Elijah means “my God is Yahweh,” also symbolizing a dedication to God. But further comparisons can be made between Samson and Elijah. In the second book of Kings, Elijah’s claim that he is a man of God causes the death of fifty men who question his authority: “If that I be a man of God, let fire come down from the heaven, and devour thee and thy fifty. So fire came down from the heaven and devoured him and his fifty” (1.10). By contrast, one may recall Milton’s “cloudless thunder bolt[s] on [the Philistine’s] heads” (1696) when Samson pulls down the temple. The poet’s thunder precedes its lightning, its fire, which is also suggested in his use of “bolted” to describe how the thunder arrives. Though Milton avoids an explicit reference to fire in the sky, his allusions are clear enough. In the second book of Kings, Elijah is brought up to the sky in a chariot: “And as they went walking and talking, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and did separate them twain. So Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven” (2.11). The chariot of fire, pulled up in a whirlwind to heaven, is implicit in Milton’s poem. When the Chorus recalls the angel who, following his announcement of Samson’s birth, “rode up in flames after his message told” (1433), its description seems to echo Judges: “For when the flame came up toward heaven from the altar, the Angel of the Lord ascended up in the flame of the altar” (13.20). The Old Testament uses the word “ascended” when describing how the angel returned to heaven, whereas Milton’s Chorus claims that the angel “rode up” to heaven on the flames, alluding to the chariot of fire. But Samson’s “fiery virtue” (1690), which is roused

203 See the Bible’s marginal note on this whirlwind in heaven: “Thus God hath left a testimony in all ages (both before the Law, in the Law, and in the time of the Gospel) of our resurrection.”
“from under ashes into sudden flame” (1691), also evokes the chariot. That Samson’s strength, his gift from God, is awakened and erupts into fire and thus is spontaneously regenerated speaks to that which is foretold in Isaiah, that “[God] will come with fire, and his chariots like a whirlwind, that he may recompense his anger with wrath, and his indignation with the flame of fire” (66.15). The fire serves God’s wrath, and comes to bring destruction even though fire may not always be symbolic of havoc.

When the Chorus appeals to the “shield of fire” (1434) as protection for Samson, not only is purification evoked but also the fire is emblematic of the Holy Spirit. For Milton, scripture is ultimately silent on the nature of the Holy Spirit and the manner in which it exists and how it came to be. In Christian Doctrine, therefore, he cautiously concludes, even with scriptural evidence, that the mission of the Holy Spirit is as “the Spirit of truth, who proceedeth or goeth forth from the Father” (Sumner 153). The Bible is ambiguous about the nature of the Spirit since, as Milton remarks, the Son is also said to go forth or to proceed from the Father. Milton finds that the Holy Spirit is most variously interpreted in the Old Testament, in which it “sometimes … signifies God the Father himself,—as Gen. vi.3. my Spirit shall not always strive with man; sometimes the power and virtue of the Father, and particularly that divine breath or influence by which everything is created and nourished” (Sumner 154). He also concludes that sometimes the Spirit means an angel, sometimes Christ, or the light that was shed upon him, sometimes “that impulse or voice of God by which the prophets were inspired” (Sumner 155), and at times it signifies “the spiritual gifts conferred by God on individuals, and the act of gift itself” (Sumner 156). More specifically, Milton suggests that it is “that light of truth, whether ordinary or extraordinary, wherewith God enlightens and leads his people” (Sumner 155). Milton appropriates “extraordinary” and puts it in Samson’s speech when he speaks of the “rousing
motions” within him. He tells the Chorus, “Be of good courage, I begin to feel / Some rousing motions in me which dispose / To something extraordinary my thoughts” (1382-4). Putting stock in Milton’s choice of words, proven to be relevant to his work, this extraordinary thing brought on by the rousing motions may be conceived of as inspiration from the Holy Spirit.204

The first point to make here is with regard to the “rousing motions,” which may easily be assumed to indicate inner stirrings or movement. The movement of the Spirit is quite common among the prophets, and Rohden acknowledges a similarity between John the Baptist and Samson when he refers to the New Testament prophet as having had “the Spirit of God wrought upon him and within him” (Duncan 39). He suggests, however, that “though Samson is not said to have been filled with the Spirit of God as it was promised John should be, the operations of this Spirit upon him are represented as being of a peculiar character” (Duncan 39). Rhoden cites Judges, in which “the Spirit of the Lord began to strengthen him in the host of Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol” (13.25). The translators of the Geneva Bible use the word “strengthen” in their translation, which is meant to evoke more than his physical strength. The King James Bible, however, translates the original as “move,” which is the verb Rhoden picks up on:

We are to understand the words to move in the sense of to impel, and drive on, an expression occurring in the Old Testament only here; the idea being that the Spirit began to move him with irresistible power, in spite of himself as it were,—a stronger expression, in one point of view, than that used by the angel when speaking of the Spirit’s connection with the Baptist. (Duncan 39)

The “rousing motions” which enlighten Samson about his spiritual state, therefore, indicate the Spirit of God. It is important to distinguish between the Holy Spirit before Christ and after. The

204 For another explanation of the “rousing motions,” see Rogers 669. For work on Milton’s word choice and style, see Christopher Ricks; and Patterson.
prophets were not imbued with God’s Spirit as was Christ, they were not in constant
communication with God; rather they were stirred from time to time by the Spirit to hear God’s
voice. The reason given in the New Testament is that “the prophecy came not in old time by the
will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the holy Ghost” (2 Peter 1.21).
The movement of the Holy Spirit before the time of Christ is an occasional communication
between God and the prophets. For the Samson of Judges, the Holy Spirit moves him and
strengthens him in the camp of Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol. This is also true for Milton’s
Samson, whose Chorus recalls his infusion of the Holy Spirit:

   We come thy friends and neighbors not unknown
   From Eshtaol and Zora’s fruitful vale
   To visit or bewail thee, or if better,
   Counsel or consolation we may bring,
   Salve to thy sores; apt word have power to swage
   The tumors of a troubled mind,
   As are a balm to festered wounds. (180-6)

Milton’s allusion to the Spirit here is further justified by the suggestion that an “apt word,”
perhaps evoking the Word of God, has the power to assuage “the tumors of a troubled mind, / As
are a balm to festered wounds.” As Milton concludes in Christian Doctrine, the Spirit of the New
Testament also signifies “a divine impulse, or light, or voice, or word, transmitted from above
either through Christ, who is the Word of God, or by some other channel” (Sumner 158). The
Chorus’s use of the word “balm” is significant to its role as the Holy Spirit. A balm is mentioned
twice in the poem, once by the Chorus, and once by Samson. Scripturally speaking, a balm may
bring to mind the balm of Gilead in Jeremiah. The people of Israel used to heal their physical
wounds and ailments with a turpentine resin that came from a tree in Gilead, but when God brings destruction on the Jews for committing sinful acts and disobeying the law, Jeremiah laments having no balm to heal their spiritual wounds.\footnote{See Jer. 8.22.} Samson also laments the hopelessness of his situation, believing it is without remedy, when he tells the Chorus, “This one prayer yet remains, might I be heard, / No long petition—speedy death, / The close of all my miseries, and the balm” (649-51). In his despair, Samson hopes for death to act as the balm to heal his afflictions. It cannot be assumed, however, that this despair remains with him when he brings down the temple. It will be shown, in fact, that he is anything but hopeless in his final moments. When the Chorus hears his plea for relief, it suggests that the ancients who “extol patience as the truest fortitude” (654), and consolatories whose writings intend to soothe “grief and anxious thought” (659), are useless unless the wretched “feel within / Some source of consolation from above, / Secret refreshings that repair his strength, / And fainting spirits uphold” (663-5).\footnote{For Milton recalling Boethius here, see Lewis, \textit{Discarded Image} 81.} The Chorus’s references to a source of consolation, refreshings, and fainting spirits foreshadow the rousing motions that will come over Samson just before he enters the temple, and the Chorus will petition for Samson at the end of its speech on God’s seemingly unjust ways to those he elects for greatness. The Chorus asks God to “Behold him in this state calamitous, and turn / His labors, for [He] canst, to peaceful end” (708-9). In a sense, the Danites intercede for Samson in his hopelessness and ask God to show him mercy by turning his sins into a worthy service. When the Chorus introduces the “balm” that heals “festered wounds,” it does so as a metaphor for the “apt word” that may ease the troubled mind. Its use of “balm” here alludes to the spiritual wounds to which Samson is being subjected, while its suggestion for a “salve to [his] sores” might also intend to indicate the spiritual blindness that Samson is suffering. In the New
Testament, the poor, blind and naked are counseled to “anoint [their] eyes with eye salve, that [they] mayest see” (Rev. 3.18). For Samson, the irony is that though the Chorus suggests that it has the power to ease his troubled mind, he believes that nothing will bring him relief since his illness is a spiritual one.

When the Chorus says that it comes as “counsel or consolation [so that it] may bring, / Salve to [his] sores,” Milton alludes explicitly to the New Testament promise that Christ makes of sending the Spirit of God as a comforter. In Christian Doctrine, Milton relies on several passages from the New Testament to support the claim that the Spirit comes as a comfort to mankind. When he concludes that the Spirit “proceedeth from the Father,” as does Christ, he is expounding John, in which Christ tells his disciples, “the Comforter, whom [he] will send unto [them] from the Father, … which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of [him]” (15.26). The notion that the Holy Spirit, “the Comforter,” will testify to Christ recalls the Chorus’s declaration a mere sixty lines after it mentions the balm, that it will “bear [Samson] witness” (239). The Chorus testifies to his having provoked the Philistines, an act that was a “just occasion” (237) that he was not remiss to take, which not only confirms his calling but also justifies his actions. Milton’s Chorus, with an apt word that has the power to assuage Samson’s tumors, represents the Holy Spirit who comes to offer a balm for mental turmoil and a salve for spiritual blindness, a blindness for which the hero is eventually healed. That the Chorus acts as Samson’s physical eyes emphasizes its role in the dramatic poem. Whenever someone appears, the Chorus enlightens Samson to their arrival: “But see, here comes thy reverend sire / With careful step, locks white as down, Old Manoa: advise / Forthwith how thou ought’st to receive him” (326-9). The Chorus not only offers its guidance for how Samson should greet his aging father, but it embellishes the vision of Dalila, emphasizing the manner in which the hero should
receive his wife:

But who is this, what thing of sea and land?
Female of sex it seems,
That so bedecked, ornate, and gay,
Comes this way sailing
Like a stately ship
Of Tarsus

Some rich Philistian matron she seem,
And now at nearer view, no other certain
Than Dálila thy wife. (710-24)

The Chorus shares its perspective with Samson and offers him counsel, but only after he accepts it as his spiritual adviser. His confession that he is unable to hear the Chorus’s opening speech confirms this: “I hear the sound of words; their sense / the air / Dissolves unjointed ere it reach my ear” (176-8). As soon as the Chorus invokes the Spirit, telling him that it is a group of friends and neighbors “not unknown” that have come from the very place where the Spirit had once moved him, the fruit vales of Eshtaol and Zora, to offer counsel and comfort to him, he is able to understand the Danites.

When the Chorus refers to the camp of Dan a second time, now mentioning it by name, it seems to bolster its role as the representative of the Holy Spirit:

That Spirit that first rushed on thee
In the camp of Dan
Be efficacious in thee now at need.
For never was from Heaven imparted
Measure of strength so great to mortal seed,
As in thy wondrous actions hath been seen. (1435-40)

The Chorus’s prayer to “that Spirit” is offered as soon as Samson leaves to go into the temple. In the lines that precede these, the Chorus mentions the angel who prophesied Samson’s birth and “rode up in flames after his message told” (1433). It is as if the Chorus calls upon that same angel, “that Spirit,” to “be now a shield / Of fire” (1434-5) for Samson as he faces his enemies in the temple. This prayer seems to evoke the chariot of fire that whisks Elijah up to heaven, as the Chorus mentions Samson’s gift of strength “from Heaven imparted” after recalling the Holy Spirit that moves him from time to time in the camp of Dan, reminding us of his calling. It is significant that this supplication comes after Samson’s “rousing motions,” which dispose him to some greater purpose and thus relieve him of his spiritual blindness. Perhaps Samson is resolved in his final act of destruction only after experiencing the stirrings of the Holy Spirit, its having enlightened him on the dispensation of grace. It is plausible, therefore, to assume that Samson knows what he plans to do before going into the temple. He warns the Chorus that its “company along / [he] will not wish” (1413-4), suggesting that the Spirit of God, and God himself, are exonerated. His excuse for not wanting the Chorus to follow him into the temple, that his being surrounded by his brethren will offend the Philistines, is merely confirmation that he knows about his impending destruction and that this day shall be his last.

A Virtue Self-Begotten, a Samson Aquiline

In *Christian Doctrine*, Milton wrestles with the Holy Spirit and engages in scripture to support his argument that the Trinity is a false premise. He posits that “our eternal salvation is
owing to the Father, our redemption to the Son, and our sanctification to the Spirit” (Sumner 167). A marginal note to Hebrews, “for the holy Ghost also beareth us record” (10.15), remarks that although sin remains within us, “the work of our sanctification which is to be perfected, hangeth upon the selfsame sacrifice which never shall be repeated,” and therefore “we must rather take pains, that we may now through faith be partakers of that sacrifice.” As has been suggested, the Chorus consecrates Samson by attesting to his downfall, his renewed strength, his faith and his spiritual awakening. The Chorus in fact tells the reader about Samson’s enlightenment, testifying to his sanctification. After the deed in the temple is done, the Chorus breaks into two parts, one of which discusses spiritual darkness, the other spiritual enlightenment. The first Semichorus speaks to the ignorance of the Philistines in the temple:

So fond are mortal men
Fall’n into wrath divine,
As their own ruin on themselves to invite,
Insensate left, or to sense reprobate,
And with blindness internal struck. (1682-6)

The unfaithful Philistines are steeped in inner darkness that is void of any spiritual enlightenment, and therefore are compelled to suffer because of it. This spiritual emptiness and degenerate nature are contrasted with Samson’s physical blindness and spiritual abundance. The speech of the second Semichorus is even more indicative than the first:

But he though blind of sight,
Despised and thought extinguished quite,
With inward eyes illuminated
His fiery virtue roused
From under ashes into sudden flame. (1687-91)

Milton’s use of the word “rouse” here surely reminds the reader of Samson’s “rousing motions” leading him to something “extraordinary.” Inner light and “virtue roused” recall Milton’s discovery of the Spirit in *Christian Doctrine*, in which it may be “that light of truth, whether ordinary or extraordinary, wherewith God enlightens and leads his people” (Sumner 155). When the Semichorus refers to the “virtue” having been roused in Samson, it is not only referring to his strength and courage, but also his faith in God, one of the three Christian virtues. That his virtue is more than merely strength is suggested by the Danite men when they first arrive and find Samson suffering: “But thee whose strength, while virtue was her mate, / Might have subdued the earth, / Universally crowned with highest praises” (173-5). Only when Samson’s strength is accompanied by virtue—his faith—can he fulfill the promise of beginning to deliver Israel. When Samson’s strength is separate from his virtue, and therefore in separation made profane, he is unable to wield it in the name of God. It is useful to turn to Dante here, whose *Commedia* Milton would surely have valued as an artistic influence.\(^{207}\) In *Purgatorio*, the violent against nature, those purging their wrathful souls, are forced to walk through thick smoke, which prevents them from seeing the outside world.\(^{208}\) The penitents experience delusional visions which show them both wrath and its opposite virtue, temperance. According to a connectionist reading of the *Commedia*, the violent against nature end up in the Third Sphere of Paradiso once they have purged themselves of the sin of wrath. In this section of Dante’s *Paradiso*, two of the Pilgrim’s meetings seem to be congruent with Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*. First, Dante meets Folquet de Marseilles, who condemns Florence for having corrupted the Church with its

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\(^{207}\) For the similarities between *Paradise Lost* and the *Commedia*, see Kuhns 1-6.

\(^{208}\) For the associations used here between the circles of hell, the terraces of purgatory, and the spheres in paradise, which are suggested by T. K. Seung in “The Metaphysics of the *Commedia*” (1988), see Hede 66.
introduction of money and material wealth. This passage professes the danger of being led by anything other than scripture, including the prelate, when it comes to understanding the ways of God. Second, with the inclusion of Rahab, a prostitute from the Old Testament, in this sphere of Paradise, Dante implies that forgiveness is available to all those who have faith, even those who lived and died before Christ.\textsuperscript{209} In the New Testament, Rahab is said to be an ancestor of Jesus and a faithful believer, as professed in \textit{Hebrews}, and she is justified as being a person of good works in \textit{James}.\textsuperscript{210} One cannot assume that, for Dante, Rahab symbolizes all those who are faithful in the Old Testament, but the presence of a sinful figure from before the Dispensation of Grace in Paradise may intimate that hope is available for the faithful who lived and died under the law. For Milton, Samson’s blindness purges him of his wrath, leading him to temperance and eventually redemption. As noted above, in the New Testament Paul includes Rahab with Samson among the faithful rewarded in heaven after the coming of Christ, and Milton echoes his sentiments in \textit{Christian Doctrine}:

\begin{quote}
The ultimate object of faith is not Christ the Mediator, but God the Father; a truth, which the weight of scripture evidence has compelled divines to acknowledge. For the same reason it ought not to appear wonderful if many, both Jews and others, who lived before Christ, and many also who have lived since his time, but to whom he has never been revealed, should be saved by faith in God alone. (Sumner 357)
\end{quote}

Those who lived before Christ and believed in God alone as the source of salvation would receive the absolution that came with the death of Christ as if they too had believed in him as their Savior. Milton refers to \textit{Hebrews} here, and, like Paul, uses the patriarchs as examples of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{209} See Dante, \textit{Paradiso} 9.122-26. \\
\textsuperscript{210} See \textit{Heb.} 11.31; and \textit{Jas.} 2.25. See also R. K. Phillips.
\end{flushright}
those who are saved by faith. Milton therefore believes that this saving faith is one of the effects of regeneration. His acknowledgement of Samson in this way may suggest that he is regenerated and redeemed by his faith, a faith that is undoubtedly roused by the stirrings of the Spirit and reborn out of the purifying fire.

Much has been written about the second part of the Semichorus’s speech, especially its reference to the self-begotten Arabian bird, which Rosenblatt aptly calls a phoenix.²¹¹ Some assume that the phoenix is representative of Samson, but the self-begotten, regenerated bird is in fact his virtue:

So virtue giv’n for lost,

Depressed, and overthrown, as seemed,

Like that self-begotten bird

………………………………………………

From out her ashy womb now teemed,

Revives, refloresces, then vigorous most

When most unactive deemed,

And though her body die, her fame survives,

A secular bird ages of lives. (1697-1707)

“Virtue,” which was considered wasted and lost, is reborn, “as seemed” like the phoenix that goes up in flames only to be regenerated once again so that her fame may survive through the

²¹¹ Cf. Rogers 670; Slights 395-413; Hardison 322-7; and Kezar 295-336.
This feminizing of virtue tends to coincide with the female gender of the phoenix which virtue is described as having resembled in that moment of loss: “From out her ashy womb … and though her body die, her fame survives.” Previous to this speech, Samson’s “fiery virtue [is] roused / From under ashes into sudden flame,” which bolsters the argument that virtue is the phoenix, not Samson. The ashes and sudden flame here refer to the self-begotten bird from whom “lay erewhile a holocaust” (1702). It is with his inner light illuminated, his spiritual enlightenment, that Samson’s virtue, both his strength and his faith, are awakened. To the discussion of his virtue being “self-begot,” therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that it is a reference to Satan in Paradise Lost, who tells his consort that the angels were “self-begot, self-rais’d, / By their own quick’ning power” (5.860-1). Looking at Satan’s use of the word “quick’ning,” which may be defined as a rousing or stirring within the angels, that the angels have their own quickening power may imply their contact with the Holy Spirit and so the voice of God. In Christian Doctrine, Milton finds the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of God, to mean the Father himself in the New Testament, the virtue and power of the Father, and thus “Christ was raised by the power of the Father, and thereby declared to be the Son of God” (Sumner 156). That Satan boasts about his ability to raise himself by his own quickening power does not make it a fact. The words of a fallen angel, especially Satan’s, cannot be trusted. Milton himself writes that the angels cannot “do anything without the command of God” (Sumner 223), and cites as evidence that “Jehovah said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power” (Job 1.12). Satan’s words in Paradise Lost inform the passage in Samson Agonistes nevertheless. Evoking

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212 The Greek word for virtue is “arete,” and according to notes in Robert Fagles translation of The Odyssey, “arete” is related to the Greek word for prayer, which is “araoai.” In Ancient Greece, Arete is personified as a goddess, sister of Harmonia, and daughter of Praxidike, who is the goddess of judicial punishment and the exactor of vengeance. In Greek mythology, she is Queen Arete, wife of King Alcinous and a descendant of Poseidon. Cf. “The Uneasiness of Christian Salvation” 10.
the fallen angel who boasts about his “self-begotten” nature, which is proven to be a lie, reminds
the reader of the Fall, but since the flame rises again and virtue is regenerated, Samson’s fate is
not the same as Satan’s, and therefore symbolizes man’s salvation through Christ. Just as
Samson is nothing like Satan, neither is his virtue, for grace is offered to him because of his
enduring faith. In Christian angelology, virtue represents the seventh highest order of the
ninefold celestial hierarchy, and therefore a connection may be made between the virtue that is
destroyed—as in a holocaust and risen once again from the ash—and the angel at Samson’s
birth—who ascends “in a fiery column” (27) on flames from the sacrifice at the altar. The two
visions of virtue represent purity, both moral and spiritual, embodied by the fire. They both
ascend with the flame to their place of origin, evoking the purifying fire that comes from God
and is emblematic of regeneration. The ascension of virtue may represent Samson’s redemption
at the coming of Christ though assuming that Samson ascends as the phoenix rises from the ashes
is illogical to both Milton’s belief in monism and Samson’s having died before the Dispensation
of Grace. If virtue is the phoenix, Samson is the eagle that hurls thunder on Philistine heads:

And as an evening dragon came,

Assailant on the perchèd roosts

And nests in order ranged

Of tame villatic fowl; but as an eagle

His cloudless thunder bolted on their heads. (1692-6)

The eagle is mentioned numerous times in both the Old and New Testaments, but the New
depicts eagles in a negative light, as for example unclean beasts that hover around the dead as do

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214 See Fallon 81.
vultures.\textsuperscript{215} This may be because, after the coming of Christ, a swift destroyer, or a renewal of strength, is no longer needed—Mosaic law is dead, and the eagle is left with the carcass. In 
\textit{Samson Agonistes}, it seems most fitting to look at what the eagle represents in regard to God bringing about destruction and judgment. In \textit{Hosea}, which speaks of the destruction of Judah and Israel for their idol worship, a warning is given to: “Set the trumpet to thy mouth: he shall come as an eagle against the House of the Lord, because they have transgressed my covenant, and trespassed against my Law” (8.1). Though “he” is here unknown, the image of the eagle as a swift destroyer is clear enough. The second reference to eagles evokes a pair. In \textit{Ezekiel}, God offers this parable and prophecy to the house of Israel:

\begin{quote}
The great eagle with great wings and long wings, and full of feathers, which had diverse colors, came unto Lebanon, and took the highest branch of the cedar, and brake off the top of his twig, and carried it into the land of merchants, and set it in a city of merchants. He took also of the seed of the land, and planted it in a fruitful ground: he placed it by great waters, and set it as a willow tree.\textsuperscript{216} (17.3-5)
\end{quote}

The “great eagle” is Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, who brings King Jeconiah and his descendants to Babel, eventually swearing an oath to Zedekiah, to whom he promises protection and growth in abundance. When Zedekiah’s kingdom flourishes, though not enough to stand on its own, he breaks his covenant with Nebuchadnezzar and forms an alliance with the King of Egypt: “There was also another great Eagle with great wings and many feathers, and behold, this vine did turn her roots toward it, and spread forth her branches toward it, that she might water it by the trenches of her plantation” (17.7). God warns the people that the first eagle will come not only to retrieve what is his, but also wreak havoc and destruction upon the ones who broke his

\textsuperscript{215} See \textit{Rev}. 8.13 and 12.14; \textit{Exod}. 19.14; \textit{Deut}. 32.11; \textit{Hab}. 1.8; and \textit{ Isa}. 40.31.

\textsuperscript{216} The “land of merchants” is Babylon.
oath. God says to them: “Shall it prosper? shall [Nebuchadnezzar] not pull up the roots thereof, and destroy the fruit thereof, and cause them to dry? all the leaves of her bud shall wither without great power, or many people, to pluck it up by the roots thereof” (17.9). The meaning of the parable is clear, those who break their covenant with God shall reap the consequences. In Jeremiah, the destruction of Moab and Bozrah is also said to come by one who “shall flee as an eagle, and shall spread his wings over Moab” (48.40), and “shall come up, and fly as the eagle, and spread his wings over Bozrah” (49.22). Biblical scholars have concluded that these also refer to Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king who loses his sanity and lives in the wild like an animal for seven years. In Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar has a dream about a tree abundant with fruit, whose shade is populated by animals, and which is cut down at the command of a heavenly messenger. Shortly thereafter the king is “driven from men, and did eat grass as the oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown as eagles feathers, and his nails like birds’ claws” (4.30). The dream refers to the withered vine of Zedekiah’s kingdom, symbolizing Israel. When Nebuchadnezzar’s sanity and station are restored, he praises God for having regenerated him despite the havoc he wreaked.

From the story of Nebuchadnezzar, it is apparent that the eagle comes in service to God, as a messenger and exactor of revenge, to punish those who have betrayed him. Nebuchadnezzar is clearly chosen for this task—the dream given by God marks him as such—and he is redeemed after a specified period of exile and punishment. Dante makes brief mention of Nebuchadnezzar in Paradiso when he aligns himself with the great Babylonian king: “Fé si Beatrice qual fé Danîello, / Nabuccodonosor levando d’ira, / che l’avea fatto ingiustamente fello” (4, 13-15)

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217 See Calvin, Calvin’s Bible Commentaries: Jeremiah and Lamentations 168.
218 Milton briefly mentions Nebuchadnezzar in Christian Doctrine, once when speaking on external service, referring to the verse about his hypocritical worship, and once when speaking about false oaths. See Sumner 559 and 583.
‘Then Beatrice did what Daniel did / when he appeased Nebuchadnezzar’s wrath / that drove him to such unjust cruelty’ (Musa 43). Beatrice is compared to Daniel, “who through God’s revelation disclosed the dream and its interpretation, thus saving the lives of the wise men whom Nebuchadnezzar had condemned to death for their inability to divine the mystery” (Hollander 639). Robert Hollander posits that “despite his unlikely candidacy,” Nebuchadnezzar was chosen by God to receive “divine revelation” (639).219 In its entry on Nebuchadnezzar, the Dante Encyclopedia cites the Epistle to Can Grande to explain why the poet refers to himself as the Babylonian king in the Commedia:

Si vero in dispositionem elevationis tantae propter peccatum loquentis oblatrarent, legant Danielem, ubi et Nabuchodonosor invenient contra peccatores aliqua vidisse divinitus, oblivionique mandasse. Nam ‘Qui oriri solem suum facit super bonos et malos, et pluit super iustos et iniustos,’ aliquando misericorditer ad conversionem, aliquando severe ad punitionem, plus et minus, ut vult, gloriadam suam quantumcumque male viventibus manifestat. (192)

But if on account of the sinfulness of the speaker they should cry out against his claim to have reached such a height of exaltation [sic.], let them read Daniel, where they will find that even Nebuchadnezzar by divine permission beheld certain things as a warning to sinners, and straightway forgot them. For He ‘who maketh his sun to shine on the good and on the evil, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust,’ sometimes in compassion for their conversion, sometimes in wrath for their chastisement, in greater or lesser measure, according as He wills, manifests his glory to evil-doers, be they never so evil. (Toynbee 209)

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219 For his explanation on the connection between the Epistle and Paradiso 4.14, see Hollander 639.
Dante here justifies God’s use of a sinner to exemplify his grace, and when considered together—the passage from *Paradiso* and the epistle—the allegorical, moral and analogical senses become evident. As forgetful of his divine vision as Nebuchadnezzar, he becomes an imperfect, or sinful, vessel through which God exemplifies his forgiveness, making manifest “his glory to evil-doers, be they never so evil.” Allegorically speaking, Dante is able to see the divine vision only with the help of a divine interpreter, such as Beatrice, because similar to the Babylonian king he is also a sinner; the moral sense suggests that the passage represents the revelation of God to the sinner through the intercession of Christ, and that the soul’s salvation can only be achieved through divine grace. Milton’s strongman should not be conflated with the Babylonian king, however, nor is this discussion of *Paradiso* replicated in Milton’s dramatic poem; rather the parallel between Nebuchadnezzar and Samson may be found in the restoration that Nebuchadnezzar receives from God after his seven years of living in madness. Since God shows him favor by providing him with a revelatory dream, and then extending that favor beyond his trials, ultimately granting his regeneration, Samson’s fate may be closer to that of Nebuchadnezzar than to any other biblical character in the Old Testament. The favor which God shows Samson, in turn causing his suffering, renewing his commitment, and initiating his regeneration, suggests a restoration similar to that of the king, especially as both are described as an eagle coming with swift destruction in service to God.

Though at times the eagle represents judgment and punishment, it also symbolizes the hope of God’s grace. In *Christian Doctrine*, Milton mentions the eagle when referring to how children should conduct themselves in regard to their parents, and when discussing the virtues belonging to the service of God. He cites *Isaiah* to support his argument for the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love: “But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew [their] strength; they
shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; [and] they shall walk, and not faint” (40.31). This passage recalls the story of Nebuchadnezzar, who became animal-like and lost his reason but found it was restored because of his hope and faith in God—he praises God for the restoration, attributing the miracle to nothing else. But the verse in Isaiah also recalls the eagle in Samson Agonistes, which also speaks to the Christian virtues of hope, faith and love. In Christian Doctrine, Milton claims that “hope is that by which we expect with certainty the fulfillment of God’s promises” (Sumner 550), and lists Job, along with Isaiah, as those who trusted unwaveringly in God. When Milton mentions doubt and despair, “to which the pious are sometimes liable, at least for a time” (Sumner 550), he uses the example of Judas, as one who despairs so greatly that he hangs himself in shame. For Milton, Samson’s destruction seems not an act of despair but a leap of faith. The strongman’s address to Harapha about God’s forgiveness supports this claim. Milton relies on Hebrews when he expounds the virtue of faith, “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (11.1), with this verse coming from the same chapter in which Paul lists Samson as one of the faithful. When Milton appropriates Paul’s word, “substance,” he explains it as

understood as certain a persuasion of things hoped for, as if they were not only existing, but actually present … Hence implicit faith, which sees not the objects of hope, but yields belief with a blind assent, cannot possibly be genuine faith, except in the case of novices or first converts, whose faith must necessarily be for a time implicit, inasmuch as they believe even before they have entered upon a course of instruction. (Sumner 354)

As noted above, Milton follows Paul in listing Rahab as an example of one who has faith in salvation prior to the Dispensation of Grace, and also considers Samson a disciple “who
believe[s] in Christ long before [he is] accurately acquainted with many of the articles of faith.” Faith is a result of trust even as the one may be equated with the other. Milton distinguishes between the three types of faith, which are knowledge of the Word of God, assent, and persuasion or trust, with the first two encompassed in the third. Trust, or persuasion, is marked by a faith that is spiritual rather than temporal. Samson’s faith in God is therefore evinced from the moment when he enters the temple, assuring the reader that his act of destruction is not intended to show irreverence. Like an eagle, Samson brings swift justice and condemnation to those who he believes are profane in the eyes of his God, even as God is not a party to his destruction. If anything, Samson’s act evinces God’s ability to foretell the incident, while granting man the freedom to choose whether he will carry out the actions. In the poem’s final lines, the Chorus relinquishes its position as witness to Samson’s deeds:

Oft he seems to hide his face,
But unexpectedly returns
And to his faithful champion hath in place
Bore witness gloriously. (749-52)

God is now witness to Samson, rewarding him for acting in accordance with his own free will and through faith. And though the strongman may have lived before Christ, as did John the Baptist, salvation is offered and freely accepted by him in his final show of faith. The Chorus’s closing lines speak to this fact:

His servants he with new acquist
Of true experience from this great event
With peace and consolation hath dismissed,
And calm of mind, all passion spent. (1755-8)
Samson is shown to be a servant of God, possessing the knowledge of “true experience,” the trust in God that may only come from suffering. His regeneration is thus the “great event” and he is dismissed with forgiveness and reward. Samson’s conscience is clear, and he knows that he has exerted all his force to honor God. The poem’s closing lines befit a chorus who embodies the Holy Spirit, “the Spirit of truth, who proceedeth or goeth forth from the Father,” and who guides the faithful hero to “rousing motions” which allow him to hear God’s voice, and thus lead him to something extraordinary.
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