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Blame and Innocence in *Faust*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's play *Faust: The First Part of the Tragedy* and two musical adaptations of it—the opera *Faust* by Charles Gounod and Franz Liszt's *Faust Symphony*—tell a story of human fault, corrupted innocence, and salvation. The play's protagonist, Heinrich Faust, is an aged scholar who, dissatisfied with his academic success, seeks satisfaction from the supernatural instead. Faust initially simply desires to undergo a wide range of experiences for an intellectual purpose. To serve this end, he makes a wager with the devil, named Mephistopheles (or Mephisto for short), that allows him to utilize the devil's supernatural powers while on earth, though with the risk of eternal service in hell, should he lose the bet. The wager, however, turns catastrophic when Faust becomes infatuated with a naïve young woman named Gretchen. In the course of seducing Gretchen with the help of the devil, Faust directly and indirectly causes Gretchen's brother and mother to die, and Gretchen to be imprisoned and sentenced to death for infanticide. Who deserves blame and who is innocent, and to what degree, are significant questions in the story, and each version of the tale offers a competing interpretation.

The assignment of blame is more easily discernable. In Goethe's play, it is clear that Faust is to blame for the tragedies that occur. In this version of the story, Faust deliberately chooses to consort with the devil, and furthermore initiates the affair with Gretchen and commands the devil to help him woo her. In fact, Mephisto tries to prevent Faust from pursuing Gretchen due to her purity, but Faust threatens him, saying, "If that

sweet thing this very night/Doesn't lie in my arms, then you and I/Go our separate ways” (In 2636-9, Goethe 92). Faust is completely driven by his lusting, passionate emotions when he makes this demand. Though he initially leaves Gretchen after a brief courtship, he allows the devil to convince him that he is “wanted in [his] sweetheart's bedroom” (In 3343, Goethe 120) and that he should return to sleep with her, an event that sets off the chain of losses for Gretchen. Goethe makes it unequivocal that Faust consciously gives in to Mephisto's urgings, as Faust announces, “I must/Undermine her too, her peace./So she is hell's demanded sacrifice./[...] Let her fate break around my head,/Let her come to perdition as I do” (In 3359-3365, Goethe 120-121).

Similar conclusions can be drawn from Gounod's opera *Faust* and Liszt's *Faust Symphony*. In Gounod's opera, Faust curses his life, then calls directly to the devil, singing, “Come to me now, mighty Satan!/I call to you! I call!” (Gounod). A difference in the opera is that the devil uses an image of Gretchen to lure Faust to sign a contract with him. The fact remains, though, that Faust initiates the agreement with the devil, though his blame for choosing Gretchen, a particularly innocent girl, may be lessened by the fact that the devil first shows her to him, making their meeting seemingly fated. In Liszt's *Faust Symphony*, Faust is represented by the first movement, which is dominated by chromatic themes, a common musical indication of the supernatural. More importantly, the themes in the Faust movement are heard again in the third movement, titled Mephistopheles, but in modified form. Faust's “doubt” theme, for example, returns as a violent fugue. The fact that the devil's music is a twisted version of Faust's clearly associates the two characters. The musical sharing between the devil and Faust suggests that Faust has become corrupted and is now joined with the devil. Liszt does not seem to

excuse Faust in any way; Faust is not described by any simple themes to suggest innocence, as Gretchen is in the second movement of the symphony.

Faust's perceived faults in each of these versions reflect common western beliefs of the sixteenth century about dealings with the supernatural. It was believed that it was dangerous and immoral to use ritual magic to attain more knowledge than humans were supposed to have, and that there would be negative repercussions. Martin del Rio, a Jesuit, wrote in the sixteenth century that, "The desire to know is natural to everyone, but this should be restrained by the reins of God's law [...] we should not wish or try to know those things we cannot know by the light of nature and which can be known only because God has revealed them to us" (qtd. in Maxwell-Stuart 28-29). This "wish" describes Faust's desires exactly—he wishes to know more than what his mortal, natural life has allowed him to learn. There were "moral, spiritual, and physical" dangers to ritual magic, including the breeding of "arrogance and a delusive self-confidence, which may lead the magician to think that because he has survived his contact with superior and inherently unstable forms or entities, he can do so again and again" (Maxwell-Stuart 29). Faust does experience this arrogance, since he believes that he can win his wager against the devil and remain in control of their relationship; in reality, the devil still manages to psychologically manipulate Faust, particularly when goading him to return to Gretchen. Finally, it was believed that "the enterprise [of ritual magic] is potentially corrupting not only to the morals of him who acts as principal, but also to those of any who assist him" (Maxwell-Stuart 30). This is certainly true for Gretchen, who unintentionally helps with Faust's plan to experience a wide range of emotion, and in the process loses some of her purity. Given these period beliefs about interaction with the supernatural, it is not

surprising that Goethe and the creators of adaptations of *Faust* would cast blame on Faust.

The question of innocence in the story of Faust is one with a more complex answer. Innocence is surely embodied by Gretchen, for the three above versions of Faust all agree that Gretchen is initially very pious and pure. However, the degree of that innocence varies in the play and its musical adaptations.

The Gretchen character in the play by Goethe seems to be the most at fault of the three. She is certainly initially pure, as Mephisto says right after seeing her for the first time that, “She’s a very innocent young thing/And nothing at all in her confessions./I have no power over her” (In 2624-6, Goethe 92). After meeting Faust in the street, Gretchen begins to stray, however. She takes an interest in him even before she feels any effects from Mephisto’s magic; at home, she says to herself, “I’d give a lot to find out who/That gentleman could have been today./I could tell [...] that he/Was forward in his way with me” (In 2678-83, Goethe 94). Later on in the courtship, Gretchen gives her mother a sleeping potion so that she can spend a night with Faust without danger of being discovered, but the potion ends up killing her mother. Though unintentional, Goethe’s Gretchen does directly contribute to her mother’s death through her actions. In this version of the story, Gretchen is condemned by her community. First, her brother Valentin, who loses a duel with Faust over his sister’s honor, curses her before he dies. Then she is imprisoned and sentenced to death for killing the baby that she had with Faust. Goethe offers Gretchen the most societal disapproval.

In the musical adaptations of *Faust*, the composers seem to have worked to reduce the degree of Gretchen’s culpability. In Gounod’s *Faust*, many details are altered as

compared to Goethe's play. The libretto for Gounod's opera is based on the play *Faust et Marguerite* by Michel Carré, which focuses much more on the relationship between Faust and Gretchen and discards much of her personal misfortune, and is also influenced by the French translation of Goethe's play by Gérard de Nerval. First, in this version of *Faust*, Gretchen is a more helpless a victim because she appears to have less free will. Mephisto shows Faust an image of her to convince Faust to sign a contract with him. In that one scene, it seems that the devil has plans for Gretchen, whether or not she wants to be a part of them. Mephisto later casts a spell on the garden that Faust and Gretchen meet in so that they will fall in love. Second, here, Gretchen is not guilty of killing her mother because her mother has died before the opera begins. Third, when Valentin dies cursing Gretchen, the townspeople gather around him and urge him to forgive her so that he may attain salvation. However, in Gounod's opera, Gretchen is still guilty of killing her baby. Thus Gounod puts Gretchen in a middle zone of innocence.

Liszt assigns Gretchen the least blame of all. His depiction of Gretchen in the second movement of his *Faust Symphony* is reminiscent of a folk melody because it is simple and beautiful, a musical depiction of Gretchen's innocence. Importantly, there are no traces of irony similar to the twisting of Faust's themes in the third, Mephistopheles movement. Gretchen's music returns in the middle of the third movement, but it is unadulterated, unlike Faust's themes. This represents the fact that Gretchen has untouchable innocence, at least in Liszt's version of *Faust*.

Despite the differences in the amount of blame assigned to Gretchen, she is ultimately saved in all three versions of the story. In fact, a greater level of guilt may make her salvation all the more remarkable. Her salvation is explicit in the Goethe and

Gounod. In both works, Gretchen refuses to follow Faust as he tries to rescue her from prison, where she awaits execution for killing her baby. Instead, she appeals to God and is granted salvation. Her refusal is highlighted in the performance of the Gounod opera by her repetition of her appeal to heaven, each time starting from a higher tone than the time before it. The rise in tone ratchets up the intensity of her lines, making them more emphatic each time, and solidifies her decision against following Faust. In the Liszt, her salvation is signified by the choral section at the end of the final movement. The symphony originally ended without this choral section, and its addition represents Liszt's desire to emphasize Gretchen's salvation. The fact that it cuts off the "Mephisto" section of the third movement, which is the main subject according to the title, represents Gretchen's triumph over Mephistopheles, the ultimate triumph of goodness over evil.

Faust's character, through his fateful wager, demonstrates that dealings with the devil end in tragedy. His character deserves the majority of the blame, which is corroborated in several different versions of the story, including the play by Goethe and musical adaptations by Gounod and Liszt. Gretchen's innocence is interpreted differently in these versions. But despite variations in the degree of blame assigned to Gretchen, the fact that she is saved in all three of them unifies the different tellings. Significantly, in the Goethe play, which casts Gretchen as the most guilty, Gretchen's purity is still sufficient to save herself and even Faust. The message here is that there can still be hope for those who have gone astray if there is still some purity in the world. Goodness, even if battered, can still overcome sin.

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