

## ENGLISH 1102

**Student: Rebecca Kopp**

**Teacher: Mr. Jared Johnson**

### **Satan and Economics**

The appeal of evil and the devil to society in Europe's early modern period extends beyond moral issues. Not only did characters of this period's literature make pacts with evil or allow evil beings to aid their power and success, as seen in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, but the leaders of the day also used accusations of witchcraft and evil acts as a means of social advancement. The economic influences of Satan impacted not only the plots of literature, but also the behavior of the society represented in the literature. Literature reflects the behavior of the society that went to be entertained by the plays, and in some cases the literature exaggerates the society through drama. *The Bible* sets the framework for the early moderns' view of Satan, and throughout the early modern period parallels can be drawn from society's desire for power in *Macbeth*, as well as in the rigid social ladder in *Doctor Faustus*.

In order to understand how early modern Europeans understood Satan and his impact on economics, the history of Satan and his temptations in Christian theology should be examined. In 1560, the *Geneva Bible* was published allowing every common citizen to read the Bible in vernacular English. Thus, by the 1500s most of Christian society was able to read the Bible and be familiarized with its contents and doctrine. McGrath points out that this translation made the Bible a highly influential tool in early modern society (99). In the earlier Hebrew text, according to Elaine Pagels, Satan was not an evil dragon-like monster with an army of demons, but one of God's angels under God's control and authority who is sent to hinder human activity (39). As seen in *Genesis*, even in the beginning of the earth, Satan tempts man. From the first man in the Garden of Eden, evil lures God's creation into material desires and dreams of fame, glory, and power. Although the snake lures Eve to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, as Pagels argues, over time the snake was indwelt by Satan. Satan's first role in the *Hebrew Bible*, later known as the *Old Testament*, is in the book of *Job*. In the *Old Testament*, God allows Satan to test Job by taking away all his possessions (Pagels 42). Also, the Israelites accuse King David of taxing the people out of the will of Satan (Pagels 43). Since the kingdom does not approve of the new taxation, they argue that David's new taxation laws must be a temptation of Satan; for no man, unless driven ambitiously by the Devil, would allow such a tax. In this example, society accused David of witchcraft and wanting more money, thus taxing the people. Early views of Satan by the Israelites make Satan as being under God's control and command, similar to the Angel of Death. Satan is not liked, but necessary in God's plan. Toward the end of the traditional Old Testament, the view of Satan shifts from an agent of God to the Christian belief of God's opponent (Pagels 44).

Early modern society did not distinguish this Old Testament theology and representations of Satan and the New Testament's Satan; both were viewed as an evil being causing separation from God. Satan's fall becomes the story of how sin and ambition for power or glory draws the faithful away from God. According to the Gospel of Luke, even Christ, the son of God, is

tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Satan first tempts Christ by saying, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread” (Luke 4:3). In response, Christ answers, “Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word of God” (Luke 4:4). Similar to the people of the past such as Job, Satan tries to appeal to Christ’s human desires. However, Christ shows that these earthly goods are not necessary for the soul to live. Again in Luke, Satan leads Christ to the top of the temple, shows him all the kingdoms of the world, and offers “all the authority I give to You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish” (Luke 4:6). Again and again, Christ rejects the offers of Satan and at last declares, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God” (Luke 4:12). The devil is deceitful in pronouncing that he is given the ability to give man all human desires, for that which is in the earthly kingdom is nothing compared to that of the heavenly kingdom. Although Satan fails at tempting the Son of God, he does not stop trying to lure others away from the love and grace of God in exchange for earthly desires. As Christ faces the temptations of Satan and defeats him, the common man has the free will and ability to choose another path.

Historically, especially in Europe’s witch trials held by King James, Satan has been used to accuse others of treason or attempting to gain power within a country. When James’s fiancé, Anne of Denmark, could not travel to Scotland, it was assumed that some witchcraft was responsible for the perilous weather (Normand and Roberts 32). James himself then traveled to Denmark to escort his bride-to-be. He leaves Francis Stewart Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell, as deputy in command, second in power only to Lennox, the president of the Council (Normand and Roberts 33). Normand and Roberts suggest that “had James not survived [ . . . ] Bothwell would have had some claim to the throne” (40). Bothwell was Lord Admiral, or officially in charge of the ships traveling to Denmark, and knowing that at the time James had no heir to the throne, Bothwell had the opportunity to become king. Upon the return of James, Bothwell was accused of “treasonable magic” against the king in regards to the failure of the ships to bring the royal family home. This delay of James returning from Denmark, although now obviously attributed to natural causes, was then assumed to be the work of Evil. Bothwell was the perfect scapegoat for the act because he had an ambition to succeed to the throne. If, in fact, Bothwell had made a pact with the Devil to try and keep the royal family from returning, the only evidence that would support this would be Bothwell’s confessions, which were most likely forced.

William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, performed in 1606 under the rule of King James, draws similarities to the accusations made against Bothwell. Macbeth adheres to the witches’ prophecy that he “shalt be king hereafter” (1.1.51). Upon the pressure of Lady Macbeth and the influence of the prophecy, Macbeth sets out to rid the country of any opposition to his power. Macbeth considers that the witches “win us with honest trifles,” meaning that the idea of either power or glory is traded for the soul. Macbeth’s judgment is minimized, and his soul reduced to the value of a mere token for the chance of great power. Macbeth’s acts mirror the accusation made towards Bothwell; Macbeth consorts with evil for the chance to gain political and economical standing.

Also during the sixteenth century, pacts with Satan and accusations of witchcraft were associated with society’s scarcity and desire to improve social class and conditions. In Tudor and Stuart England, the peasant class was struggling to maintain harmony between people because of a growing population, greater birthrate, and lower death rate (MacFarlane 147). On a social level, those who were “involved in agricultural work” were most likely to be accused of

witchcraft, and those of skilled trades were more “likely to become victims of witchcraft” (MacFarlane 149). Economically, the people who had considerably fewer material goods, as well as means of advancing their social status through education and political power were the people who were accused of associating with Satan when something unfortunate happened. Seemingly, those who were considered to be of the poorest class “would feel envy, an emotion which easily led to witchcraft” (MacFarlane 150). As MacFarlane plainly states, “witches seem to have been poorer than their victims” (1150). Since the victims of witches came from a “slightly higher level” of social structure, the victims had more political standing and authority to accuse a witch in the current courts (MacFarlane 151). There is little wonder why those of lower classes did not try any means to improve their standings since by being classified as “poor,” they had little say in any matter of society, even to charges brought against them. This inability to move in society because of the threat of accusations of witchcraft illustrates the limited social mobility in the period. Because of this rigid class structure, many artists of the early modern period articulate the view of society in the system.

Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, performed in the 1590’s, dramatizes the struggle of the poor and their desire to do anything “[for] power, [for] honor, [for] omnipotence” (A-Text.1.1.54). Dr. Faustus is born of “parents base of stock” or of a low social class (A-Text.1.1.10). He pursues the study of magic to enhance his material desires, and he conjures the demon Mephistopheles. Even though Faustus is already an established doctor of theology, because of his birth in a lower social class, he is constantly open to temptation. Therefore, Faustus sells his soul to the devil and accepts eternal servitude for a chance at earthly power and glory:

Say he surrenders up to him his soul  
 So he will spare him four and twenty years,  
 Letting him live in all voluptuousness,  
 Having thee ever attend on me,  
 To give me whatever I shall ask,  
 To tell me whatsoever I demand  
 To slay mine enemies and aid my friends  
 And always be obedient to my will. (A-Text. 1.1.90-97)

Faustus is guaranteeing eternal servitude to Satan in return for twenty-four years of service from Satan. Coming from a lower class, Faustus cannot see the negative consequences of his actions but only the menial, short term effects. Marlowe had a diverse audience for his play. Therefore, he is not only putting on an exaggeration of the temptations of Satan, but is also voicing an opinion of the social classes. The lower classes viewing the play would see the exaggeration and scoff it off, whereas the upper class would see the derogatory message. Once he signs away his soul, Faustus is given the power to cause havoc. As with the accusations of witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England, Faustus brings his magic against those of higher social standing. In one hoax played on the pope and his priests, he is “content to compass then some sport / and by [the Pope’s] folly make us merriment” (A-Text.3.1.54-55). For another game, Faustus entertains the emperor and abuses his powers on a disbelieving knight. He gives horns to the knight, and once he is “content to release [the knight] / of his horns” (A-Text.4.1.89-90), the emperor tells Faustus to “expect from me a bounteous reward” (A-Text.4.1.95). Not only does Marlowe dramatize through Faustus’ behavior typical of the accusations of witchcraft in the period, but he also

interjects commentary on how incisive Satan is to the common man. Even Faustus's servant comments on how an ostler would "give his soul to the devil for a shoulder / of mutton" (A-

Text.1.4.18). Just as in the persecution of those accused of witchcraft in society, Faustus meets defeat and a resolution that no material good extends the worth of his soul.

The temptation of Satan was more than just experienced as a myth. Accusations of witchcraft and pacts with Satan were used in the early modern period to gain economic or political status, as seen with Bothwell against King James. James also used his power as King to quell any threats to his throne by making an accusation of witchcraft. Witchcraft was used to persecute those of a lower class and find a class to blame for any unfortunate event, whether it be a natural disaster or accidental harm to a person. Because witchcraft was only possible to prove through a confession, it was easy to draw the charge.

The literary works of the period further illustrate the power that the devil had in advancing one's social status. Furthermore, society used Satan to accuse anyone of a crime. Economically, the upper class had the power to accuse the lower class of dealings with a fictitious Satan. But for the lower class, Satan was a real figure urging them toward power and glory for what seemed a very small price, their soul. This price was really paid to the upper class in the form of the witch hunts. One conclusion that can be drawn from both history and literature is that literary works of a period reflect the society of the time. In the case of the early modern period, the class levels were set and very hard to move. The lower class wanted more, but the upper class used accusations of witchcraft, which were made without evidence to suppress ambition.

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