

Zeitschrift: Études de Lettres : revue de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Lausanne
Herausgeber: Université de Lausanne, Faculté des lettres
Band: - (1987)
Heft: 4

Artikel: Heavenly Helen
Autor: Forsyth, Neil
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-870635>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 10.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

HEAVENLY HELEN

Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed.

Dr. Faustus, 2.1.120

Mélange curieux d'éléments divers, l'image traditionnelle de la belle Hélène est pleine de contradictions. Le dramaturge anglais Christopher Marlowe exploite cette tradition ambiguë dans sa pièce *Dr. Faustus*, afin de pousser plus loin encore les paradoxes de la beauté à la fois séduisante et destructrice — beauté des femmes, mais aussi des mots. C'est l'évocation de l'ombre d'Hélène vers la fin de la pièce qui rend inévitable la damnation de Faustus, mais dans sa passion pour ce qui est absent ce héros de Marlowe devient en même temps le représentant (un peu parodique) de l'esprit de la Renaissance.

The doubling of Helen began early in the literary tradition. Euripides makes her stay in Egypt and sends a simulacrum to Troy with Paris to start the Trojan War. Gorgias writes an encomium filled with paradoxes about destructive beauty. This traditional ambivalence Marlowe used for his own purposes, and I want to suggest in this essay that he pushed it farther than has normally been noticed. The radical instability of allusive context and language that we shall find in this scene gives to the play as a whole its disquieting power, and even threatens the terms in which all human judgment is formulated. Faustus' humanist quest to transcend limits probes the very notion of *limit* or *term*.

Helen's appearance on stage near the end of *Dr. Faustus* is the moment that confirms the hero's damnation. He begs for "heavenly Helen" as his paramour in order, as he puts it, that her "sweet embracings may extinguish clear" his thoughts of repentance. Having watched the scene, even the kindly character called Old Man has no further hope: "Accursed Faustus, miserable man, That from thy soul excludst the grace of heaven."¹ Helen may be heavenly, but she damns her lover to hell. Heaven itself in

the world of this play carries two opposed meanings. Indeed, almost everything about the Helen scene is (at least) doubled.

To begin with, Helen herself appears twice in the play. The first time at the request of his students Faustus offers the vision as a sign of his power. One of these scholars responds:

*No marvel though the angry Greeks pursued
With ten years war the rape of such a queen
Whose heavenly beauty passeth all compare.*

(5.1.27-29)

The three-line speech echoes the well-known reaction of the Trojan elders on the Skaean gate in *Iliad* III, 156-58:

*No blame on Trojans or well-greaved Achaeans
That for a woman like that they suffer long hardships
For she is terribly like immortal goddesses in the face.*

The echo is explicit, even if Marlowe's English condenses the Homeric violence — the anger, the rape, the war. When the apparition is repeated, Marlowe again alludes to the Homeric scene. Homer's Helen is attended by two handmaidens, as convention dictates, when she appears on the walls of Troy, but Marlowe's, says the stage direction, enters again, "passing over between two Cupids." Behind this image is the classical picture of Aphrodite-Venus attended by the Graces, but Marlowe has added a Renaissance eroticism².

The Roman allusion clearly shows the doublesidedness of the Helen figure in the literary tradition. In Virgil's *Aeneid* II, 567-87 occurs a famous scene in which Aeneas catches sight of Helen as Troy burns all around. She is cowering beside the altar of the temple of Vesta (of all places) and in a sudden frenzy Aeneas thinks of avenging his burning homeland by killing the cause of it all, Fury and unholy³ as she is. Only Venus, Aeneas' mother and the source of Helen's grace, can restrain his rage — and she has to appear to him in her full glory as a goddess in order to do so.

Faustus' reaction to Helen's second appearance picks up this traditional ambivalence and extends it further.

*Was this the face that launched a thousand ships
And burned the topless towers of Ilium?
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.*

It was her beauty as "that peerless dame of Greece" that Faustus' students had wished to see — and they were content to contem-

plate it briefly. But Faustus wants her now, not simply as a face but as the stimulus of all that action and agony — and he wants her as his paramour. In fact the natural stress on “Was *this* the face...” implies almost disappointment, and Faustus typically presses for more, for sexual union beyond death, trying as always “To glut the longing of my heart’s desire” (5.1.88). Immediately he loses his soul to this consuming succuba of a Helen, and has to beg for it back:

*Her lips suck forth my soul: see where it flies!
Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.
Here will I dwell, for heaven is in these lips,
And all is dross that is not Helena.*

The patriotic fury of Aeneas has flipped back to the sexual fascination (and fear) it concealed. And a metaphysical conceit is here acted out on stage, as if the extravagance of lovers’ language has become literal truth.

The language of the scene epitomizes the magical idea at the heart of the play. According to W.H. Auden, “poetry makes nothing happen,” but in the dream of magic words have immediate effect. Indeed words are themselves the event, as the pun in the word “spell” reminds us. Magic answers the desire to abolish the gap between sign and referent, to make the sign become itself the signified. The bread — and the word — becomes flesh. But this time the flesh is to be female, and pagan.

In its non-magical aspect, Renaissance culture may be seen as a series of efforts to establish relations, however incomplete and unsatisfactory, between the two poles of its own historical present and the classical past. In a letter to Pico about philologists, Poliziano says that they are “worthy of eternal honours who in whatever degree have succeeded in understanding things so remote and forgotten.” Commenting on this passage, Thomas Greene remarks that Poliziano “embodies with singular clarity that rage for contact with the past which remains unblinded by its partial success and recognizes any mitigation of its estrangement as an achievement.” But, he goes on, in practice “the satisfaction of learning is repeatedly subverted by the confrontation with its tragic limits.” To illustrate, Greene quotes a letter from the scholar and architect Fra Giocondo to Lorenzo de Medici: even if the texts of classical authors were not corrupt, their writings “would not sufficiently fill our desire unless we could see the things which they saw.”⁴ What troubled Renaissance humanists such as Valla,

Poliziano or Fra Giocondo was the central problem of history, the pastness of the past. This difficulty the complex Renaissance system of imitation and textual allusion was intended both to recognize and in some degree to mitigate. So the impact of an allusion to Helen will depend to a certain extent on her remoteness as a Greek.

It is this necessary humility that Faustian ambition would violate. In his magical world, Faustus would collapse the two poles of past and present and himself *be* Paris. It is the *reductio ad absurdum* of Renaissance allusiveness, at once astounding aspiration and self-annihilation, the wish both to assert and to lose the self.

*I will be Paris, and for love of thee
Instead of Troy shall Wittenberg be sacked,
And I will combat with weak Menelaus
And wear thy colours on my plumed crest,
Yea I will wound Achilles in the heel
And then return to Helen for a kiss.*

(5.1.103-108)

Faustian magic thus has this diachronic aspect, in that it would abolish the sense of the past on which the Renaissance recovery of history depended, just as Faustus would deny, synchronically speaking, the twosidedness of the Saussurian piece of paper which figures for us the relation of sign and signified.

The paradoxical result of the denial of doubleness is an increased insistence upon it. The hard consonants make up the aggressive emotions of the scene (*combat, colours, crest*) and alternate through the speech with the sybillants and other soft sounds of love (*sweet, soul, see / face, flies*). The essential paradigm of this dialectic is given by the reversal of sounds in the two words *kiss*: *suck*, and in a more complex way by the sequence that extends from *suck* through *sacked* to *kiss* again in line 108 ("return to Helen for a kiss"). The emotions generated by Helen were traditionally both sweet and violent, but in this speech the two aspects are intensified to the point of desperation.

In the sharp clarity of Homer's world, love and war define and reinforce each other even when the narrative switches rapidly between them. Paris proposes single combat to Menelaus but the duel is cut off by the anxious concern of Aphrodite for her favourite. She snatches Paris from the battle and returns him, wrapped in a mist, to his perfumed bedroom. Then she fetches

Helen to him, also in secret. Helen taunts him with cowardice, but Paris responds simply: "Come, let us go to bed and turn to love-making. For never before has passion so inflamed my senses."⁵ In Marlowe, Faustus would do combat with Menelaus wearing Helen's colours, like a medieval knight, and Marlowe collapses this allusion with the lush Ovidian scene in which Paris, of all people, is responsible for Achilles' death. Faustus-Paris would go out "to wound Achilles in the heel And then return to Helen for a kiss." Just as Faustus gave all the active verbs to Helen in his first words, so now he shifts the point of victory from the battle to the bedroom, or rather to a lingering and unsatisfied eroticism. Behind this Paris lies Ovid's "womanish man" who is contrasted with the Amazon Penthesilea, a manly woman. So the great conqueror, Ovid comments (meaning Achilles), was conquered by a coward and seducer⁶.

When he is first mentioned in the play, Paris is in fact called by his regular Homeric name, Alexander (2.2.27). And what is stressed is his death at the feet of Oenone, the woman he loved before meeting Helen. His namesake, Alexander the Great, actually appears on stage, summoned by Faustus at the behest of the Emperor, and what is more he too has his "paramour" (4.2.29). We may assume a deliberate pairing of the two Greek warriors for the sake of the ironic contrast between them. And Faustus, in that scene, has to stop the Emperor from trying to embrace Alexander and his woman, since "these are but shadows, not substantial" (4.2.55). By now, though, Faustus is ready to cross the barrier himself into the world of the shades.

These insubstantial pageants of Faustus take their places as instances of that rich Elizabethan reflection on the paradoxes of theatre itself. A dramatic performance exploits the desire of the audience that the actors incarnate their roles, that the dialogue and action be the real presence, that secular playgoing be, at least in this respect, sacred ritual⁷. Here, as often in Shakespearean theatre, we have an actor who, whether playing Emperor or Faustus, represents the audience of the spectacle and wants to leap the gap from crowd to stage, ravish the apparition and partake in the rite. The drama would abolish itself and become magic. It is clear that Faustus is intended actually to kiss the Helen figure, even more, and his own earlier refusal to allow the Emperor to "embrace" the spirits must give an extra frisson for the audience now, as its own separation from the action threatens to evaporate. The eroticism of the scene gives further emphasis to the

desire for magical union. Like the figures in Prospero's masque, these actors are spirits and shall dissolve like the baseless fabric of this vision — but in this play the word *spirit* means “devil”. As the language of the speech suggests, Helen is actually a succuba,⁸ and no different from the devil who earlier in the play when Faustus asked for a wife (2.1.147), entered fizzing and exploding with fireworks. Or to put it another way, these our spirits are but actors: the lovely woman before us is really a boy dressed up.

A deliberate sexual ambivalence plays around the figures of the scene. In Marlowe's early play, it was Dido who first used the famous conceit, “He'll make me immortal with a kiss,” and who also compared herself to Helen⁹. Now Faustus takes over the female part, and the sexual and psychological ambivalence continue in the rest of the speech. Faustus invokes for comparison the appearance of Jupiter to Semele, but it is he himself who, according to the logic of the analogy, becomes “the hapless Semele,” utterly consumed as she was by the brightness of flaming Jupiter.

*O thou art fairer than the evening's air
Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars:
Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter,
When he appeared to hapless Semele;
More lovely than the monarch of the sky
In wanton Arethusa's azured arms;
And none but thou shalt be my paramour.*

Helen, here, is also the sun, and Faustus the watery nymph in whose arms he (the sun) lay. The two comparisons reverse the apparent sexes of the speaker and his beloved, and connect the violence and destructiveness of this passion with instability of sexual identity.

Other aspects of the scene's language contribute to this sense of instability. The text of the play survives in two quite different versions, and the subject of the play as well as its popularity seem to have made for sharp differences of interpretation between the versions. For example, in the Helen scene, the Old Man is omitted from the B-text, reducing the distance between audience and hero. And in the first appearance of Helen, the scholar's reaction which points the allusion to the Homeric original is present only in the A-text, while the stage direction announcing that Helen is attended by two Cupids is given only by the B-text. In general the

A-text is shorter and requires less elaborate staging, so it could be performed in more primitive theatrical conditions. So we might account for this particular difference by suggesting that Marlowe wanted the Homeric allusion clear whichever kind of audience was watching the play.

Even when the two texts are more or less identical, as in Faustus' Helen speech, the language hides various threats to its integrity. There is much play with sounds and names, as in the phrase "wanton Arethusa's azured arms," but especially around the name of Helen herself. In the middle of the speech, Faustus imagines he will "wound Achilles in the heel, And then return to Helen for a kiss." Heel-Helen. Beneath the contrast of wounded Achilles and safe, consoled Paris, the homophony suggests something else: just as Achilles is vulnerable only in his heel, so Faustus is to be wounded in his Helen. And this word-play opens another possibility, given the sexual ambivalence, for the name of the woman, sliding over to "heel," contains the word *He*. In *Dr. Faustus*, word magic generally is stressed, and in writing as well as sound. "Lines, circles, signs, letters, characters — Ay these are those that Faustus most desires," he claims early on (1.1.50-51); he delights in finding Jehova's name in a circle, "Forward and backward anagrammatized" (1.3.9); and he signs his name to a written contract which is both the source of his power and his damnation. Given the flexibility and play of the verbal texture, that fixed and unchangeable text written in congealed blood is doubly ironic.

More important, and more obvious, is the other word-play in Helen's name. She is not simply a devilish sprite, she is herself Hel. Marlowe spells it thus, although he probably did not know that Hel was the name of the old Norse goddess of the underworld. Nonetheless, a certain play with personifications and sexual ambivalence is apparent in the uncertainty of the pronoun in the following sixteenth-century version of Wycliffe's Bible at Isaiah 5.14: "Therefore helle spredde abroad his soule, and openede her mouth withoute any terme."¹⁰ And indeed a hellmouth, an obsolete stage property from the mysteries, was revived for *Dr. Faustus* and is discovered on stage at the words of the Good Angel, "The jaws of hell are open to receive thee" (5.2.115). The language of this play is frequently oral-narcissistic,¹¹ but we should not miss the obvious and specific parallel between this hellmouth and those devilish lips of Helen that suck forth Faustus' soul.

Hell, indeed, has several meanings in the play, and is a much discussed topic. Mephostophilis defines it in the famous non-localized terms that Milton later emulated: "Why this is Hell, nor am I out of it" (1.3.78). His language anticipates Faustus' own longing for a face: "Think you that I who looked upon the face of God, And tasted the eternal joys of heaven, Am not tormented with ten thousand hells?" And his second version of this speech makes the terrifying possibility even clearer: just as the meaning of words cannot be kept firm, and puns show how they can spill into each other, so

*Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed
In one self place; but where we are is hell,
And where hell is, there must we ever be.
And to be short, when all the world dissolves,
And every creature shall be purified,
All places shall be hell that is not heaven.*

(2.1.122-26)

As here Marlowe frequently stresses the opposition of heaven and hell, and this makes the "heavenly Helen" of the key scene, demon that she is, that much richer in ironic suggestion.

Marlowe's metaphysical punning is similar to, though not so pervasive as, that Shakespearean quibbling which Samuel Johnson, developing a parallel idea, called "the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it."¹² The idea is recurrent that there is something female and seductive about puns, and once one becomes aware of this aspect of Marlowe's work it is hard to know where to stop. Faustus' great plea "Resolve me of all ambiguities" (1.1.79) produces its opposite, a radically unstable language where the boundaries between words constantly shift. Probably there is no conscious suggestion of Helios when Helen is compared to "the monarch of the sky," yet the punning mania seems generally to affect the products of hell. Lucifer introduces Beelzebub, his "companion prince in hell" (giving a physical population to a local hell again), and then he adjures Faustus to think on the devil. "And his dam too," adds his witty companion (2.2.94).

Even one of those staid medieval characters, the seven deadly sins, introduces herself as the "one that loves an inch of raw mutton better than an ell of fried stockfish: and the first letter of my name begins with lechery." "Away to hell, away," says Lucifer

(2.2.160-63). An *ell* is a large extent of something, in this case of dried up bits of cod (which suggests sexual impotence), but it is also a letter of the alphabet, as the joke acknowledges, and in some dialects would sound the same as “hell” — hence the appropriateness of Lucifer’s dismissal (a hellish prayerbook).

One of the more touching aspects of the constant punning with “hell” is the irony of Faustus’ brazen assertions of the “I think hell’s a fable” kind. The first of these occurs when Mephostophilis tells him the shortest way of conjuring, to “pray devoutly to the prince of hell.” Faustus replies, speaking of himself in the third person, that “This word ‘damnation’ terrifies not him, For he confounds hell in Elysium: His ghost be with the old philosophers” (1.3.58-60). Overtly the confusion Faustus boasts of is to mix the classical and Christian afterlife, but the words themselves, not just their meanings, are mixed up. The word *hell* spills into the first syllable of Elysium, and this word in turn was Eli-*zium* in Marlowe’s spelling, or the manuscript’s, suggesting a further play with another female name, and a highly evocative one for a contemporary audience. No wonder Marlowe’s contemporary and rival, Thomas Nashe, complained of those writers who thrust Elysium into hell¹³.

From this perspective, then, what is threatened by Faustus’ games with language seems to be not only the separation of pagan and Christian, or of the medieval distinction of hell and heaven, but the idea of limit itself, that which gives us the very word *term*. Terms as essentially different as *heaven* and *hell* blur together in the figure of the play’s “Heavenly Helen.” So language keeps escaping from the constraints in which we would place it, and scandalously welcomes the instability of hell: word-mouth, hell-mouth, Helen-mouth would all suck forth the soul of their lovers.

How we feel about such confusions will depend on more than this play, of course. But readings of the play tend to follow the critic’s desire to enforce the limit or to celebrate its Bacchanalian overthrow, to be orthodox or heretic. And in fact, there is yet another Helen present to the scene, and the one who made a Helen scene *de rigueur* in the play. One source of the name *Faustus* is the Latin cognomen given to Simon Magus. He went about, they tell us, accompanied by a whore from Tyre named Helena. According to his Gnostic religious system, she was, he claimed, the Thought of God, the Ennoia or general soul abducted and dragged down into the material creation. He, Simon, was come to redeem her¹⁴. In the eyes of the church fathers, however, this new

incarnation of the Helen topos was a sign of her lover's damnation through his devil-inspired heresy. In his own eyes he was God, or his representative, but the context in which the name of Simon Faustus survives damned him. The radical ambivalence of the Helen tradition could not be taken further than with this whore who was also the real heavenly Helen.

Neil FORSYTH

NOTES

¹ Christopher Marlowe, *Dr. Faustus*, 5.2.119-120. I use the New Mermaid edition of Roma Gill (London: Ernest Benn, 1965; reprinted A. & C. Black, 1985). Subsequent references are incorporated in the text. The problem of the different texts of the play is discussed briefly below. Modern editions are all indebted to W. W. Greg, *Marlowe's 'Dr. Faustus' 1604-1616: Parallel Texts* (Oxford, 1950); a useful review of the question is in the introduction to The Revels Plays edition by John Jump.

² I have discussed these Homeric allusions in "The Allurement Scene: A Typical Pattern in Greek Oral Epic," *California Studies in Classical Antiquity* 13 (1979), pp. 107-120, and "Homer in Milton: The Attendance Motif and the Graces," *Comparative Literature* 33 (1981), pp. 137-155.

³ *Nefas*, literally "unspeakable", *Aeneid* II, 573, 585, cf. 337. The scene is clearly unfinished, and its authenticity, aptly for a Marlovian source, is in dispute. It was preserved not in the manuscript tradition but only in Servius' commentary. See the argument of R. G. Austin in the Oxford edition, p. 218.

⁴ Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1982), p. 9.

⁵ Homer, *Iliad* III. 441-442. The translation is my own.

⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 12. 608.

⁷ See especially the various forms of Stephen Greenblatt's case for a link between the rise of Elizabethan drama and the banning of exorcism: "Shakespeare and the Exorcists," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartmann (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), pp. 163-187, and "Loudun and London," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986), pp. 326-346.

⁸ W. W. Greg, "The Damnation of Faustus," *Modern Language Review* 41 (1946), pp. 97-101, first made this point clear to all.

⁹ Marlowe, *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, 4.4.123, 5.1.148. In *Edward II*, the "Greekish strumpet" Helen is compared to the king's homosexual lover, Gaveston (2.4.15).

¹⁰ Cited in *OED*, s.v. Hell, 3a.

¹¹ Edward Snow, "Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* and the Ends of Desire," in *Two Renaissance Mythmakers*, ed. Alvin Kernan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977), pp. 86-89.

¹² Samuel Johnson, *Preface to The Plays of William Shakespeare* (1765), in *Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism*, ed. R.D. Stock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Regents Critics, 1974), p. 151.

¹³ Thomas Nashe, *Preface to Greene's Menaphon* (1589), widely quoted, for example in Roma Gill's New Mermaid edition of *Dr. Faustus*, p. 18.

¹⁴ A convenient account is Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), pp. 103-111. Marlowe and his contemporaries could have known these traditions in a variety of sources; see Judith Weil, *Christopher Marlowe*, pp. 190, 195.

N. F.

