Passing the Holy Buck:

Blameworthiness and Religion in *Dr. Faustus* and *Eve’s Apologie in Defense of Women*

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1. Introduction

The question of blameworthiness is rarely an easy one. Even where the circumstances may appear cut and dry, there are always arguments, loopholes, and excuses for why a person may not be fully responsible for their actions. Accompanying the question of whether one is blameworthy is the question of why (or why not, as the case may be). In literature, the discretion is usually in the hands of the author to decide who may or may not be blameworthy and why or why not. However, it can also be in the minds of the readers. Christopher Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* is all about magic, and the devil, and whether Faustus is responsible for his own actions, and thus his own downfall. Aemilia Lanyer’s “Eve’s Apology in Defense of Women” is a new understanding of an old story that also explores to what degree an ignorant person can be considered responsible for their own actions. Marlowe and Lanyer come to very different decisions about who might be to blame, and this difference is the result of them taking up very different goals. Lanyer uses blame, in conjunction with Christian theology, to clear her sex of responsibility for the fall of humanity. Taking a hard stand on who is to blame is essential to making a strong and supportable point. Marlowe’s goal is not to assign blame, nor clear any names, but to examine whether someone can be blameworthy in a specific Christian theological context. Marlowe does not tell the audience who is to blame for the downfall of Faustus because it would defeat his purpose of questioning what blameworthiness is when God determines all of humanity’s actions. The differences in the method and result of these two works can be understood by taking into account the authors’ varied contexts and motivations. It is necessary then to determine the biographical situation of each work, in addition to looking closely at the texts in and of themselves, to understand the role of blame and responsibility in each. Where Lanyer’s goals are best served by working within Christian theology to clearly assign blame, Marlowe’s goals require the assignation of blame to remain difficult and ambiguous, and this is what leads to the major differences in how each work uses blame.

2. Aemilia Lanyer and Blame without Agency

Susanne Woods’ edition of Aemilia Lanyer’s *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (*Salve*) offers some insight into the life of Lanyer, and why she would aim to clear Eve of blame in the Fall of humanity. Aemilia Lanyer (née Bassano) was well educated in the household of the Countess Dowager of Kent (Woods xvii). She was also known to be beautiful, and was taken up as the mistress of Queen Elizabeth I’s Lord Chamberlain, Henry Cary, Lord Hunsdon (Woods xviii). She led a life of relative luxury during their relationship, and seemed pleased with the arrangement, despite the extensive age gap (Woods xviii). In 1592, at age 23, she married Alfonso Lanyer and shortly thereafter gave birth to a son, named Henry after his real father, Henry Carey (Woods xviii). According to the notes made by Simon Forman, with whom she consulted, after Henry she had many miscarriages (Woods xx). The only other known child that she carried to term was a daughter, who died nine months after being born (Woods xxiv). Her husband died in 1613, and she was left without much financial support (Woods xxvii). After several failures with a school she was attempting to start, due in part to litigation she was pursuing on behalf of her deceased spouse, Aemilia Lanyer died in 1645, having outlived her remaining child by 12 years (Woods xxvii-xxviii).

Lanyer’s life was clearly not a happy one in many respects. She looked back on the time she spent with the Countess of Kent fondly, but was reportedly unhappy later on in her marriage (Woods xviii). She endured repeated physical trauma in the form of many miscarriages, and emotional trauma in losing both her infant child, her husband, and later, her only adult offspring. She was not able to access much of what she seemed to desire, namely the higher court life she had seen both in her youth, and in her affair with the Lord Chamberlain. Many of her trials and tribulations were directly or indirectly tied to her status as a woman, and therefore, at this time, a person with limited agency.

Yet, Lanyer was the one of the first self-proclaimed female poets in England, and remarkably, her work was accepted for publication during her lifetime (Woods xxxi). She even dared enter the sanctum of religious poetry, perhaps one of the genres most likely to reject her efforts, without making any apology for her gender. Aemilia Lanyer wrote a poem about the Passion of Christ, and in it defended the entire female sex by assuming interpretive authority over the Bible. By positioning herself as “God’s poet,” Lanyer claimed her writing had greater authenticity than any other (Woods xli). She uses this assumed power to assert that women are no more blameworthy than men for the evil in the world. She places women at the centre of the story, and emphasizes their lack of contribution, and active opposition to, the death of Jesus. She casts her eye back even farther and reaches out to pull Eve from the clutches of blame as well, claiming her as a figure who was tragic, but not responsible.

Lanyer’s portrayal of blameworthiness in the section of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* entitled “Eve’s Apology in Defense of Women,” is markedly different than that traditionally attributed to the story of Genesis. At the time that Lanyer was writing, the common view held that Eve’s taking of the apple from the serpent in the Garden of Eden was seen as a prideful, ambitious, and ultimately sinful act (Woods xxxvii). Eve is solely blamed for the downfall of mankind and their expulsion from Eden and all women carry that blame on her behalf. Lanyer adopts aspects of some Renaissance thinking, which aimed to free women from responsibility by emphasizing Eve’s lesser knowledge of God’s will, and thus her ignorance (Woods xxxvi). However, Lanyer also takes it a step further, and places the blame more heavily on Adam as the more knowledgeable one, for not being able to resist the apple from Eve, nor prevent her from taking it. Adam, who in Lanyer’s words was “lord and king of all the earth,/ before poor Eve had either life or breath” (l. 39-40) is charged by Lanyer as being the one more capable of making the correct choice, given that he was made by God’s own hands to be perfect. He was also told by God’s own mouth the consequences of eating from the tree of knowledge and yet all it took for him to disobey God was for Eve to offer him the fruit (Lanyer, l. 43, 49-55). Adam knowingly chooses disobedience, but Eve cannot do so even if she wanted to, given her position of ignorance, and so is less culpable. Lanyer also takes this moment to point out that this act of Eve giving Adam the apple also positions her as the original knowledgeable person. She subtly subverts the idea that men are inherently more logical or intelligent by reminding the reader that Eve, not Adam, is the sharer and primary holder of knowledge. Thus, Lanyer takes what has been historically attributed as a sinful and shameful moment for women, and turns it into a moment of agency and intelligence that predates men’s.

Lanyer further lays out a few other problems she has with the blaming of Eve and women. For example, this section of her greater work is narrated by the wife of Pilate, who tried to stop her husband (Pilate) from crucifying Jesus, whom she saw as a saviour. Lanyer makes reference several times to his great sin in killing the saviour of humanity. She explicitly states that “if one weak woman simply did offend,/ this sin of yours hath no excuse nor end” (Lanyer, l. 87-88). While she acknowledges that the action committed by Eve may have been wrong (while still admitting to no blameworthiness on the part of Eve) she places altogether more fault at the feet of Pilate for his sin, which she claims was greater by far. If Eve’s mistake is held against all women, she argues, Pilate’s far greater mistake should be held against all men, especially considering a woman, his wife, tried to persuade him not to kill Jesus (Lanyer, l. 7-8). This attempt of the wife of Pilate to save Jesus’ life is weighed against the original sin committed by Eve, and they come to a balance. Women are cleared of sin and blame because they are party only to the lesser offence, so called because it stemmed from ignorance, rather than malice as the Crucifixion did. In that view, they did less wrong overall than did men, and Lanyer argues that this ignorance erases the blameworthy aspects of the act entirely (Mueller 123). The combined sins of Pilate and Adam place men more sinfully on the moral scale than women.

The argument can be made that in *Salve* Eve’s lack of blame seems to stem from her lack of agency. Lanyer repeatedly asserts that Eve’s eating of the apple is an act born of ignorance. That she, the secondary of God’s creatures, and therefore less perfect than Adam, did not have the same capability to make the moral choice that he did. Any evil in Eve comes from her, “being made of [Adam], [as] he was ground of all,” (l. 66) Lanyer says, and she appears to be making the claim that Eve could not be any worse than he is. However, seeing Eve as someone who lacks agency, in this case, seems to be the wrong perspective from which to view this argument. While Lanyer does assert that Eve was ignorant and Adam was not, she also claims that ignorance is better than wilful disobedience to God (Mueller 123). Lanyer aims to change the narrative that frames women as the source of immorality, and so places Eve in the morally superior position. The constraints of the story mean that this superiority can be born only from ignorance, as there is no other explanation for Eve’s actions that could even begin to exonerate her. As mentioned, Lanyer even points to Adam being the source of all evil, given that Eve was made from him. If Eve has any immorality in her, Lanyer contends, it started with Adam, and it must be greater in him.

Aemilia Lanyer uses Christian theology to argue in favour of greater equality between the sexes. Using theology gives her authority: she is interpreting, and even as she does so, she is asserting that her interpretation is at least as valid as any other (Woods xxxii). The history and weight behind the stories that she is interpreting place her argument in a much greater context, lending it meaning beyond her experience or ideas. She uses this established framework to convey a radical message that women are free from blame for the actions of Eve. Ultimately, her arguments are convincing. While modern standards of feminism might declare Lanyer’s work a failure, for her time and circumstances she is wildly innovative in her thinking. She acquiesces on certain points that would seem to contradict her message, but within the context of her time, even her concessions are fairly radical. Lanyer’s clear assignation of blame is necessary to make her point, and her appeals to morality and Christianity lend her argument a necessary weight given its radical nature.

3. Christopher Marloweand The Theological Trap

Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* also considers the sliding scale of blameworthiness. Faustus has a complex relationship with the concept of blame. The text seems to suggest, all at once, at least three different entities on whom the blame or responsibility for Faustus’ actions can fall: Faustus himself, the Devil, and God. Faustus is the most obvious of those on whom to lay the blame, and Constance Brown Kuriyama considers why this might be in her chapter on Omnipotence. Kuriyama takes a biographical and psychoanalytic lens, and uses it to consider why Faustus seems both unable to accept responsibility, and so prone to claiming his downfall is his own fault.

Christopher Marlowe was a homosexual at a time when being one was seen as inherently sinful (Kuriyama ix). He was living in a very religiously combative period, and he was, at times, placed in morally ambiguous situations (Keefer 16). In *Dr. Faustus,* Faustus is having issues with a holy sort of father, and Kuriyama links this through the psychoanalytic lens to Marlowe having his own paternal issues. Marlowe thinks he can never find harmony with his father because he is something that his father cannot forgive (Kuriyama 103). Faustus thinks he can never feel the mercy of God, because it is precluded by something inherent within him (Kuriyama 102). Whether it is a problem with something essential to either person, or a problem resulting from a failure of sympathetic love, neither feels that any positive outcome is possible (Kuriyama 107). Faustus’ thirst for knowledge has outstripped his faith, and because he does not see himself as someone to whom God might be inclined to grant mercy, he makes a deal with the devil.

Kuriyama also raises free will as something that is essential to how blame is considered in *Dr. Faustus*. She points to free will being as ambiguous as blame in the play, and this link is not coincidental (Kuriyama 99). Whether Faustus has any free will is essential in considering whether he can be held responsible for his actions. Kuriyama claims that it is never clear whether Faustus could have turned away from his fate and made different, or any, choices (Kuriyama 99). She points to the use of words like “fortunes,” to describe Faustus’ situation, which indicate links to chance or fate more than choice (Kuriyama 97). Faustus may be to blame for his actions, Kuriyama maintains, but the way he is presented also shows him as a victim (Kuriyama 134). Salvation may be a theoretical possibility for some, but never for Faustus, who is presented as being unworthy of salvation because of who he is, not what he does (Kuriyama 114). She ties this to a deep uncertainty in Marlowe as well, stemming from his own inability to reconcile his free will with God’s will, and his salvation with his character (Kuriyama 120). This conflict is exacerbated by the Calvinistic school of theological thought, with which Marlowe was familiar, and seems to have taken up for this play.

Calvinism is a fairly circular system of reasoning about free will and responsibility, which was popular in Marlowe’s time as a way of reading and interpreting Christian theology. Calvinism claimed that God determined who would be saved through the granting of his mercy before they were born (Keefer 283). God was omniscient in such a way that he knew all that people would do in their lives, because he determined all that they would do in their lives. Due to this foreknowledge, he was able to save those he chose, and leave the rest for damnation (Keefer 287). People could never know if they had been one of those chosen for salvation, and nothing they did, even things done with the intention of pleasing God, would change their fates (Keefer 284). Yet, people are still said to have free will in the evil that they do, despite all things being ultimately controlled by God’s will. Wickedness is therefore supposed to exist inherently in people, and God can see it, so he uses these people in their wickedness for his own ends (Keefer 283). God then, can determine all but apparently not remove all wickedness from humanity, and so employs it, while also damning those who are supposedly wicked before they commit any wicked act. It is a system of thinking that does not hold up well to close secular scrutiny, but which has the power to inspire a constant religious anxiety in those who believe in its doctrine.

Marlowe was known to study Calvinism in his time at university, and there are clear elements of it in *Dr. Faustus.* Keefer, in his edition of *Dr. Faustus*, includes an appendix of selected Calvinist writing, which he claims will aid in understanding why Marlowe might have rejected Calvinism (and Christianity) so strongly (Keefer 283). These readings all point back to the concept of predestination, or God determining the fates of all people before they are born. In the play, Faustus struggles with accepting his own role in his downfall. Any time he approaches responsibility, he backtracks to place the blame somewhere else. Assuming Calvin is correct, Faustus is responsible for his own damnation because he was inherently wicked, and thus would not be saved by God. His repentance late in the play does not matter, but realistically neither do his sinful actions. Reconciling Faustus’ free will with God’s ultimate power is next to impossible, and it is this conflict that seems to prevent Faustus from truly accepting that he is to blame for his own downfall. In a Calvinist version of Christianity, his downfall was decided before he did anything at all, at which point one might as well deal with the Devil. The state of his free will is ambiguous, and thus so is any blame attributed to him. Marlowe seems to suggest that without true free will, there can be no responsibility on the part of humanity, and yet somehow God cannot be said to be responsible either.

Norma Engberg considers the ambiguity of blame in *Dr. Faustus* through looking at how the language in the play avoids identifying an agent of Faustus’ damnation. She argues that truncated passives “allow the speaker to hide the doer of the action from his hearer(s)” (Engberg 3). The truncated passive takes a sentence in the passive voice (“The cake was eaten by Tim”) and shortens the phrase by removing the agent entirely (“The cake was eaten”), thus hiding the agent and attributing the action to no one in particular (Leech 80). This mode is usually employed in the play when talking about damnation and being cursed, and obscures the identity of the agent responsible for the damnation taking place (Engberg 3). Engberg questions why this form might be employed by Faustus, and considers whether he is avoiding calling himself the architect of his own destruction, or whether he knows who the agent is at all (Engberg 5). Most often, God is implied to be the doer of the action when the truncated passive is used (Engberg 6). However, Faustus also lists throughout the play different people or things that he blames for his damnation. The link between these things is their relationship to him – many of them are things over which he has theoretical control. When he finally tries to accept responsibility at the end of the play, it is too late; he has been fooled by the truncated passive for too long, and he cannot truly see himself as the one at fault (Engberg 11). Though Engberg does not consider this in depth, her work suggests that Faustus cannot escape damnation because he cannot accept responsibility. That is to say, because he had refused to accept responsibility throughout the play by failing to clearly indicate who the agent of his downfall was, he cannot address the cause, and so becomes unable to change anything about his fate.

Engberg clearly understands the role of free will in *Dr. Faustus* differently than do Kuriyama or Calvinism. She seems to presuppose that free will is theoretically possible in *Dr. Faustus,* and therefore some blame might actually lie with Faustus. Yet, she acknowledges that Faustus may not think he has the free will to change his own fate (Engberg 2). More accurately, Engberg seems to point to Faustus having a role in his downfall, without being blameworthy. Somewhat like Lanyer, Engberg, in part, uses the defense of ignorance, as she supposes that Faustus simply did not know that salvation was actually possible because of a misunderstanding of scripture (Engberg 2). Regardless of the differences between approaches, none seem to identify, clearly, and without hesitation, any blameworthy figure or figures in *Dr. Faustus.* All understand that the text is purposefully ambiguous, and resists assigning blame to any one party.

In the text, Faustus, in his last moments before being dragged down to hell, places the blame on himself, cursing himself for causing his own deprivation of heaven (Marlowe, 13.104-5). He could be seen as being responsible for starting the ball rolling, but it becomes less clear who is in control and who is responsible for later events. He desires ever more knowledge and turns away from God in his pursuit of it. However, this is not clearly *his* choice. He indicates that he felt he was damned before he ever accepted his deal with Mephistopheles, at which point one must consider whether God first turned from him, as Kuriyama suggests. Furthermore, in the Calvinistic view, he *was* damned before he did anything at all. Faustus may be both responsible and to blame for his actions, but regardless of what he says, what happens in the play does not seem to support this.

Assuming Faustus is cleared of blame, there are others that Marlowe seems to point at that could, and perhaps should, shoulder some of the responsibility. The Devil is another fairly apparent figure of blameworthiness. Faustus may have made that initial decision, but it was the Devil and his demons who helped him on his way. They appeared whenever he tried to repent, and promised him all he could ever want in return for him turning away from God. They pull Faustus down to hell, literally, at the end of the play. Even as Faustus is cursing himself for his own choices, he is cursing Lucifer as well for getting him there (Marlowe, 13.104-5). Clearly Faustus, at least, is placing some of the blame on the Devil and his compatriots. That said, this placing of blame would require a different theological foundation than the Calvinistic one that seems most present in the play. Faustus could only have dealt with the Devil if God intended it to happen, and vice versa. This shifts the blame yet again, this time onto the ultimate figure of power, God.

Marlowe seems be placing no small amount of blame -- indeed, perhaps all of it -- at the feet of God. Where Lanyer allowed for God to be an unfailing righteous figure, Marlowe’s Calvinistic God seems deeply disinterested, and perhaps wrong for so being. When Faustus tries to repent early in the play, there is no answer from God. There is never any answer from God. There is, however, answer from the Devil. The Devil is more present in the lives of men (or at least Faustus’) than God is, and his absence seems to implicate him. The missing and abstract God fails to stand up against the present Devil, who is clearly able to provide what Faustus desires. The last scene particularly drives home the complicity of God in the events that have occurred. As Faustus is bemoaning his fate, he cries out, “[...] and see where God/ Stretcheth out his arm, and bend his ireful brows” (Marlowe, 13.74-5). He had just seen the blood of Christ streaming down from sky and exclaimed that even one drop could save him, when it disappears and is replaced with God’s angry visage (Marlowe, 13.70-5). He fears the mighty wrath of God for what he has done, and yet still he calls upon God to save him, in what some might consider the ultimate show of faith in God and his power to overrule the Devil and save Faustus’ soul. But he is not saved. No true chance of redemption is ever afforded to him before he is dragged into hell.

All of this falls in line with the Calvinistic interpretation of Christianity, where all that occurs does so within God’s plan for humanity. If God did not want Faustus to sign a contract with the Devil, he would not have made him as he did. If he wanted to put a stop to Faustus’ fall, he, in his ultimate power, could have done so at any time. Throughout the play Faustus receives the message, over and over again, that he is not one of the few granted God’s mercy. His attempts at redemption mean nothing when he has been damned all the while. There is still some ambiguity concerning who is to blame – if Marlowe were to truly adopt the Calvinist view, even God would escape responsibility here. That God does not seem to escape it, and instead is pointed at as a figure on whom the blame could rest, is interesting. Marlowe critiques this very absolute view of God’s power and humanity’s predestination, by pointing out how hardhearted this would make God, and how tragic it would make humanity. Faustus is not a straightforwardly “good” character who has done absolutely nothing wrong, but the audience is not meant to believe that he deserves what he gets. Faustus remains sympathetic, and so God is not righteous, but wrong for sending him to Hell after he repented, and for allowing this to happen at all. Faustus’ lack of blameworthiness (or reduced blameworthiness) comes from shifting that blameworthiness to God, and to some extent the Devil, who has powers over him which he cannot fight. Perhaps Faustus made one poor decision, but it is equally likely that he made no decisions at all, doomed from the start to his fate.

4. The Blame Game: Conclusions

Aemilia Lanyer uses *Salve* to point a finger of blame that Marlowe deftly avoids in *Dr. Faustus.* Both authors are deeply concerned with Christianity, and what it means to be blameworthy in a Christian framework. The differences in their willingness to assign blame stem from both differences in the doctrine being applied, and in what they are trying to say about what it means to be blameworthy. Aemilia Lanyer wants to clear women of blame and responsibility, but employing Marlowe’s methods of ambiguity would not help her do that. She is advocating a radical reinterpretation of an ancient and beloved text, and remaining ambiguous would leave too much room for her implications to be ignored. As someone in a position that is already not afforded much respect, nor the benefit of the doubt, Lanyer needs to claim authority, and make claims authoritatively. She has to set herself up as the most correct, and assert that her arguments are absolutely true. In her case, the blame she needs to shift off of women has to go somewhere, and in the theological framework she is using, it is not practical to try and shift that blame onto God as Marlowe tends to. Her God is not distant and cold, and making him blameworthy, particularly in the greater context of *Salve* being about the Passion of Christ, would not work. The serpent cannot be made to blame without inviting responses once more claiming that Eve should have known better, regardless of temptation, and so that leaves only Adam. It is particularly fitting for her to assert that Adam is to blame; she also sees men as being the ones who have blamed women over the years, and so inverting this claim has a certain poetic justice. In Lanyer’s case, the blame must fall, and the circumstances beg it to fall on Adam.

Marlowe needs ambiguity in his play because he needs people to ask questions about blameworthiness. In a religious doctrine that gives people credit only for their sinful actions, Marlowe seeks to challenge the way people think about Christianity. In a more general sense, he wants people to consider what blameworthiness can be in a more general sense, and with that, what it means to be responsible. He uses Calvinism because its aggressive stance on the omnipotence of God is an easy way into talking about God as figure to blame. In *Dr. Faustus,* it is arguably unimportant who is truly to blame for Faustus’ downfall. There is evidence to support multiple interpretations, and no one interpretation can be definitive. What is important is the idea that blame is not straightforward or simple, but complicated in a variety of ways. Personally, as suggested, Marlowe may have had his own reasons for wanting to complicate straightforward ideas of responsibility for one’s actions. *Dr. Faustus* is his way of considering what he has been told about who he is, and questioning whether he has to accepts these assertions. How can it be, he seems to say, that God made me as I am and yet hates who that is? *Dr. Faustus,* like Marlowe, does not reach a definitive answer. Maybe God is to blame, or maybe Faustus, or maybe even the Devil, but the opening of debate allows for some answers that may free him of his presumed fate, or at least the responsibility for it. Ambiguity could save his soul.

Eve may be freed of all blame, and with her all women, for the fall of humanity from the Garden of Eden. Faustus may be freed of blame, but God may not be, for his fall to damnation. Who is to blame is a complicated question, and the way it is answered depends largely on the context. There are times when it is essential to assign blame, and other times when assigning blame would serve no purpose. To differentiate between these two instances, it is necessary to consider the goal and position of the person making the argument. Lanyer chooses to use the blame assigned to women as a way to secure their blamelessness, but in doing so has to place it somewhere else. Marlowe chooses to avoid assigning blame at all, finding more use in providing questions, but no answers about the role of free will and God in the blameworthiness of humans. Both works are well-written, and well-argued, and ultimately succeed in fulfilling their similar and yet wildly variant goals in answering the question: Who is to blame?

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