

The Demonic Character in Elizabethan
Commercial Theatre:
Contemporary Demonology Reflected in *Doctor
Faustus* and *Volpone*

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Introduction

Since the first religious plays in early modern England, stage devils have been a part of English theatre. Originally modelled after the devil and his demons in theatrical adaptations of Biblical stories, stage devils reflected the beliefs of contemporary medieval demonology. After the Reformation, they continued to make their appearance on stage, despite the various changes the Reformation had brought to English religion and culture. In the new, commercial, and secularised plays the stage devils reflected the changed demonological beliefs in Elizabethan England.

This thesis aims to provide an analysis of how the demonic character in early modern English commercial theatre reflects contemporary Elizabethan demonology and the complex views on theatricality and the demonic. A great deal of previous research on early modern English theatre has focused on stage devils and vice-characters. John Cox's *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama* (2000) and Charlotte Steenbrugge's *Staging Vice* (2014), for example, are both extensive works on the matter. While both works provide the reader with an excellent description of stage devils and vice-characters, they do not reflect on the ways in which these characters embody contemporary Elizabethan demonology. It is important to note that Steenbrugge's work focusses on the Morality play and the Saint's life in pre-Reformation theatre and this time-framing explains this omission in her work. Because post-Reformation theatre is heavily influenced by the pre-Reformation morality plays her work is certainly useful to draw information from, since the demonic character and stage devils are partially modelled after the vice-characters and negative characters she discusses in her book.¹ Furthermore, when taking a closer look at some of the commercial Elizabethan plays it seems there is another category of antagonistic characters which seems to have been overlooked in recent studies, the category of the demonic character. This thesis aims to

¹ For a complete overview of the different terms that are used for antagonistic characters on stage, see the Appendix

illustrate how this separate category reflects contemporary Elizabethan demonology in a different but more representative manner than stage devils or vice-characters. By analysing the demonic character one could gain a better understanding of contemporary Elizabethan demonology and the ways in which it influenced theatre and theatrical performances.

In order to be able to analyse the ways in which the demonic character reflects contemporary Elizabethan demonology, this thesis will provide the reader with two close readings of commercial Elizabethan plays: Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1594) and Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1607). These plays were selected because they both represent a different side of commercial Elizabethan theatre. *Doctor Faustus* is a tragedy where demons play an active role in the plot, whereas *Volpone* is a comedy which only employs human characters. As a result of these differences, the reader should be able to gain a better understanding and broader perspective of the demonic character in commercial Elizabethan theatre. Furthermore, the differences between the plays demonstrate the versatility of the demonic character and underline the need for this category to be acknowledged as such.

In the first chapter, the reader will be provided with a critical framework and the introduction of the key terms and concepts that are used throughout the paper. First, the Reformation and its consequences for Elizabethan culture will be discussed. Throughout the rest of the chapter, there will be more specific information on the ways in which the Reformation influenced changes in theatre, stage devils, and demonology. Secondly, using the aforementioned works of Cox and Steenbrugge, as well as Walter Cohen's *Drama of a Nation* (1985), the reader will be provided with a brief overview of the development of stage devils and Elizabethan commercial theatre. Thirdly, using Stuart Clark's extensive work *Thinking with Demons* (1997), the key points of contemporary demonology will be introduced, focussing on the concept of preternaturality and its consequences for the way in which demonic magic was perceived. Fourthly, the concept of the demonic character will be

introduced and the similarities and differences with stage devils will be discussed. The focus will be on the main characteristics of the demonic character, which are grounded in Elizabethan demonology. Fifthly, theatricality and meta-theatricality, both characteristic of stage devils and the demonic character, will be defined and their function in Elizabethan commercial theatre will be discussed. Finally, the reader will be provided with an overview of the contemporary Elizabethan debate on theatricality using Nadia Thérèse van Pelt's "Spielen mit der Wirklichkeit", Andrew Sofer's "How to Do Things with Demons", Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen's *Devil Theatre* (2007), and Philip Butterworth's *Magic on the Early English Stage* (2005).

The second and third chapter contain the close reading and analysis of *Doctor Faustus* and *Volpone* respectively. These chapters will focus on the main characteristics of the demonic character and how the demonic characters in both plays reflect Elizabethan demonology and the theatricality debate. These key characteristics include the hierarchical position of the demonic character in the play, his destructive intentions as the tempter of other characters, his intelligence and deceptive skills which allow him to conceal his demonic nature, and his strong theatricality. The final chapter will summarise the findings of this thesis and offer a conclusion to the research question of how the demonic character reflects contemporary Elizabethan demonology in commercial post-Reformation theatre.

Chapter 1: Theatre, trickery, and demonology

The Reformation greatly influenced the early modern English society and theology because Elizabethan culture, including theatre, was inseparable from the Christian religion. It is, therefore, important to start this chapter with a brief introduction of the Reformation and the changes it brought about. The Reformation in early modern England took place during the sixteenth century, during which the new Protestant Church of England separated from Roman Catholicism. As a result, Catholics came to be seen as a suspicious group of outsiders, and anti-Catholic tendencies arose in the Elizabethan society, which was reflected in theatrical plays as well. Cox creates a clear separation in early modern English drama by taking the Reformation as a turning point, separating the religious plays from the secular and commercial plays (110). The Reformation resulted in an individualization and secularization of the Christian faith. Cox observes in his work *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama* (2000) that the new Protestant affirmations were comparatively secular because, instead of a shift away from religion, they were a shift in the religious focus from the church as an institution with its power over the religious sacraments to the religious individual and the ruling class (94). The theatre reflects this development by creating and performing plays that with individualistic characters instead of Everyman in the morality plays.

This first chapter will focus on creating a historical and cultural framework of the development of stage devils, demonology, and Elizabethan theatre. This framework will help the reader to create a better understanding of two plays that will be analysed in this thesis and the context in which they were created. Firstly, this chapter will sketch a brief historical overview of the development of plays in England in the early modern period, focussing on the commercialisation of the theatres in Elizabethan England. Secondly, the differences between pre-Reformation and post-Reformation stage devils will be discussed, as well as the ways in which they contributed to the commercialisation of the theatre. Thirdly, this chapter will

provide the reader with the key points of contemporary Elizabethan demonology, drawing brief comparisons between the demons in Christian theology and the plays that were performed. This is a vital element of the critical framework because post-Reformation demonology heavily influenced the changes in the portrayal of stage devils. Fourthly, the concepts of theatricality and meta-theatricality, both characteristic of stage devils as well as demonic characters, will be defined. Lastly, the reader will be introduced to the contemporary Elizabethan debate on theatricality and exorcisms as possibly demonic influences because of its prominent place in Elizabethan theatre.

1.1 Historical Overview of Early Modern English Theatre

Even though the secularization process of Elizabethan theatre was influenced by the Reformation, there were several non-religious factors that contributed to this process as well. For example, Cox observes that the establishment of permanent commercial theatres near London resulted in “acting companies [that] had to have a continuously changing repertoire” and an “intense commercial pressure for new plays and new [secular] subjects” (108). This resulted in an increasing demand for plays that would entertain and draw an audience which was answered for by a new generation of playwrights with commercial rather than religious motives and priorities. Consequentially, the older generation of teachers and preachers who used to write the religious plays withdrew from the theatrical scene because their work was not the entertainment the audience, and therefore the theatre, wanted (Cox, 109). Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593) and Ben Jonson (1572-1637) were both part of the new generation of educated commercial playwrights, and their works will be used as case studies in the next two chapters of this thesis. The high commercial pressure on the theatres and acting troupes resulted in rapid development of secular commercial theatre and plays. Playwrights departed from the traditional biblical stories as sources for their plays and started exploring other

themes in which the religious nature was present in a less explicit way. As a result of this development, however, there was a growing opposition to the theatre because of its decreasingly religious nature (Cox, 109). Despite the opposition the actors and the playwrights continued their secular and commercial development of plays and the theatre and kept drawing an audience to their new plays.

The income from a paying audience became increasingly important for the survival of post-Reformation theatres, despite their continuing financial dependence on the court. In 1572, a law banned acting troupes that were not under the patronage of a member of the elite (Cox, 151). Even though this law resulted in a decrease of acting companies, those that found a patron were more certain of their continuing existence. The court was particularly important for the continuation of acting troupes throughout the winter because it provided them with a valuable source of income when the cold weather prevented audiences from going to the theatre (Cohen, 153). Because they were bound to the elite, it is not surprising that the nature of most plays was still religious because of the royal court's affiliation to Protestantism. After all, Cohen observes indicates that there was a correlation between the playwright and the theatre and actors because plays were often composed with a specific theatre or troupe in mind (151, 177). The plays had to appease the patron through traditional and religious elements, while simultaneously containing popular and commercial aspects to draw audiences in the warmer months. Since acting troupes were financially dependent on both the people of the audience and the (royal) patron (Cohen, 155), the playwrights had to create plays that were suitable for both audiences.

1.2 Historical Overview of Stage Devils

In pre-Reformation drama, the stage devils portrayed the role of demons or the devil in theatrical adaptations of biblical stories. Cox observes that pre-Reformation stage devils

played an oppositional role in the plays, which meant they had to “enact whatever opposed individual wellbeing and the sacramental community” (2). Based on the role of demons, their function in the plot was to oppose God and to tempt the saintly or virtuous protagonist of the play. As such, they could be used to warn the audience against the devil and his demons who were believed to be after peoples’ souls. Stage devils were used to teach and warn them about demonic forces. By illustrating how the members of the audience should *not* live their lives, the stage devils were used to educate the audience about the consequences of immoral behaviour and about the difference between a moral and an immoral life. Because the plays were serious, moralizing and didactic in nature, the stage devils in early English drama were, despite their occasional elements of comedy, generally very serious characters. This creates a great contrast between pre- and post-Reformation stage devils since the latter did not have a serious nature and were strongly associated with satirical comedy.

After the Reformation, stage devils continued to make an appearance on the Elizabethan stage, despite the fact that saints, angels, and God no longer appeared in the new plays (Cox, 5). Part of the reason for their extended existence was their adaptability to the Post-Reformation society. Saints were no longer acceptable in Elizabethan drama because of their association with Catholicism. Stage devils, on the other hand, were still appropriate to use in the plays because the devil and his demons were still a part of the new Protestant theology. Even though, in the new plays, the stage devils continued their oppositional roles, the definition of the religious community they opposed had changed. Instead of including all baptized Christians as members of the religious community, it was now more selective and secular, merely including baptized and reformed Christians who were loyal to the British crown (Cox, 82). Not only were Catholics no longer included in the religious community, stage devils were often used to demonize the Catholic faith and its various rituals and beliefs (Cox, 85). By demonizing the Catholic faith in the new Protestant plays the stage devils

remained relevant characters for the playwrights because they were in accordance with the new theology and could be used to spread an anti-Catholic message with the play.

In order to draw the public, the actors were dependent on for their income, playwrights wanted to incorporate elements in their work that were popular with the public. One could argue that stage devils were considered a popular concept, given the amount of post-Reformation plays that contained stage devils. Thus, the commercialisation of secular Elizabethan theatre resulted in the secularization and the commercialisation of stage devils. Cox notes that between 1570 and 1642 there was approximately one new play featuring devils produced a year (150), and that “only humans were staged more continuously” (5). The rivalry among the commercial theatres, their urge to produce new plays, and the creativity of the new generation of playwrights resulted in rapid development of innovations in stage devilry (Cox, 150). Stage devils developed from secondary characters to the most challenging roles for actors to play. Cox observes that stage devils became secularized because they were used to “gain commercial advantage in the theatre by crossing audience expectation” (137). Indeed, their main purpose had become entertainment rather than functioning as a vessel with a religious and moral message for the audience. Their didactic and oppositional function in the play remained but became more implicit and was submitted to the entertainment value of the characters. Even though the stage devils were secularised and used for commercial purposes in plays, their characters were still in accordance with the post-Reformation views in demonology.

1.3 Contemporary Demonology

In order to gain a better understanding of stage devils and the demonic character, it is important to take a closer look at contemporary Elizabethan demonology. Theatre is often a reflection of the society it is based in, and religion and the fear of demons were an important

element of daily life in early modern England. A closer look at demonological beliefs may, therefore, provide the reader with a better understanding of the representation of the demonic on the early modern English stage. In Pre-Reformation England, it was believed that Satan's rebellion and opposition to God accounted for everything that was wrong in the world, including sickness, death, and bad morality (Cox, 11). This meant that the devil's opposition of the religious community was a part of everyday life. As a result, the members of the community were preoccupied with various rituals and the participation in religious activities throughout their entire lives in order to try and defeat the devil, or at least keep him away from them and their community (Cox, 11). It is not surprising that the stage devils in pre-Reformation theatre were antagonistic characters who attempted to sabotage the religious community or religious individual since they functioned as a reflection of actual demons.

Before discussing the main elements of post-Reformation demonology, it is important to define this field and its main theories in the Elizabethan era. Clark defines demonology in his extensive work *Thinking with Demons* (1997), as "the study of a natural order in which the existence of demonic actions and effect was, largely, presupposed" (151). These assumptions were based on the Bible and the new Protestant theology in order to define and describe the devil, demons, and what they were capable of. By opposing God, and the religious community, the devil embodied one side in the primary opposition of good and evil. This opposition was fundamental to the Protestant faith and therefore an essential element of contemporary Elizabethan demonology (Clark, 41). The opposition was important because the definition of evil was not only relevant to Elizabethan scholars in order to gain a better understanding of the devil, it was a necessary component of the definition of the good and sacred as well. These beliefs were grounded in the binary thought system of medieval England, in which two opposites were both necessary to complete the order of things (Clark, 41). Moreover, since it was believed that good and evil depended on the existence of the other

for their own meaning, a knowledge of one was necessary for knowing the other (Clark, 46). Following the same principle were able to define the new social and religious Protestant community through oppositional associations by literally demonizing the other group, the Catholics.

A key element in post-Reformation was the position of the devil in the natural hierarchy, both in relation to humans and in relation to God. According to contemporary Elizabethan theology, the devil should be less powerful than God and stronger than men (Clark, 153). Indeed, on the one hand, in order to be able to tempt humans, he ought to be more powerful than them. On the other hand, as a former angel, he was part of the Creation, and therefore logically less powerful than the omnipotent God who created him. Consequentially, it was believed that Satan and the other demons had to obey the same laws of nature as other creatures (Clark, 152). Since natural beings, humans, and devils could not transcend the laws of nature demonic magic, which was believed to be supernatural, proved problematic to the Elizabethan scholars. The omnipotent God was the only one who was deemed capable of performing supernatural acts such as miracles.

The devil's use of seemingly supernatural magic was accounted for in various ways. Firstly, as Clark observes, in Elizabethan times demons were believed to have enormous intellectual and physical powers. [...] they could still act with extraordinary strength and speed" (161). These powers could account for their sudden appearing, disappearing, and invisibility since they were merely faster than human eyes could observe, which allowed them to fetch items from anywhere on the globe in the blink of an eye. Furthermore, because of their originally angelic nature and the belief that they had existed since the creation of the earth, the devil and his demons were thought to possess a far greater knowledge about the working of nature than humans. This knowledge combined with their intellectual and physical powers was used to explain their 'magic'. As Cox observes, demons were "[t]echnically [...]"

merely superhuman” (11), which placed them higher than humans in the natural hierarchy. Elizabethan scholars used the term preternatural to define these ‘superhuman’ abilities. Clark defines the concept of preternaturality as events that were “abnormal and deviant” (262), despite occurring within the boundaries and laws of nature. As such, demonic activity was merely perceived as magical because it seemed supernatural compared to the natural powers of humans (Clark, 153), which is in accordance with the natural hierarchy from contemporary Elizabethan theology. Despite the ambiguity about the exact boundaries and laws of nature, the concept of demons as preternatural beings held for most of the Elizabethan era and occurs in both case studies that were selected for this thesis.

Another element that allowed the devil and his demons to feign magical abilities was their believed talent for disguising themselves and deceiving others. Clark claims that Satan was allowed “enormous skills as a deceiver” (166), and the Bible profiles him as the “a liar and the father of all lies” (John 8:44), who “can disguise himself to look like an angel of light” (1 Cor. 11:14). If the devil can play the role of an angel of light, a character that is opposite to his fallen nature, he would certainly be able to make preternatural acts seem supernatural to men. Additionally, it was believed that his preternatural powers allowed him to produce a great variety of effects and illusions to distract and deceive people (Clark, 166). The combination of these elements led to an explanation of Satan’s apparent magical abilities as well as an association of the devil with acting. Van Dijkhuizen observes in *Devil Theatre* that the devils’ powers and abilities resulted in the idea of Satan as a quintessential actor and “master of illusion” (155). By comparing the devil and his demons to magicians and actors, this idea diminished the difference between actual demons and stage devils. Both used special effects, which were carried out within the laws of nature, to create the illusion of magic and supernatural events. The main difference was that stage devils created this effect for

entertainment purposes, whereas the actual demons used them to attack the religious community and to attempt to lead the souls of religious individuals to damnation.

1.4 The Demonic Character

When one takes a closer look at the stage devils or vice-characters in Post-Reformation plays, it becomes clear that there is generally one character among them who is an exception to the norm. Cox uses the definition of stage devils to indicate characters who play the role of demons in a play, which can include *the* devil (2). Steenbrugge, on the other hand, uses the term ‘negative characters’ for the antagonistic characters in the play who “instigate the action:(27), such as the Vice, vices, *sinnekens* and stage devils. The exceptional character stands out because, despite his theatricality, his behaviour is atypical for stage devils as well as vice-characters. In this thesis, these characters will be defined as ‘demonic characters’, because of the ways in which they reflect contemporary Elizabethan demonology. This definition does not imply that the character should be a stage devil per se. A close reading of Jonson’s *Volpone*, for example, will illustrate that the role of demonic character could be played by a human character as well. One could argue, therefore that the demonic character is a subcategory of the negative character that partially overlaps with the stage devil (see Appendix). This paragraph will inform the reader about the characteristics of the demonic character and the ways in which it does not adhere to the characteristic behaviour of stage devils.

The first defining characteristic of the demonic character is his hierarchical position in the play. In Elizabethan demonology, the high hierarchical position of demons allowed them to manipulate humans, who were lower in the natural hierarchy. At the same time, however, they also had to answer to God, who occupied the highest place in this hierarchy. Similar to demons in the natural hierarchy, one finds that, on the one hand, the demonic character is

generally in a higher position than the other characters in the play, which allows him to deceive and manipulate them. On the other hand, he has to answer to a higher power in the play that they cannot overthrow, similar to the demons in the natural hierarchy who had to answer to God. This higher power does not have to be a character that is present in the play, but it can be an implied presence, such as God or Justice, as well. The demonic character generally occupies a place of power in the play, for example in the social hierarchy, and strives to maintain his superior position by manipulation the characters who are below him.

Another defining characteristic of the demonic character is his destructive drive to tempt and control the other characters, who are below him in the hierarchy, for his own gain. His intelligence, manipulative skills, and theatrical talent enable him to do so, which could be traced back to the Elizabethan beliefs about demons. Stage devils typically fulfil the role of tempter in plays, but the demonic character is different because of his ability to conceal his true nature and his destructive intentions. This concealment separates the demonic character from stage devils, who are openly out to destroy the saint's virtuous lifestyle in the morality plays, and connects it to the demonological concept of Satan as a deceiver.

1.5 Theatricality and Meta-theatricality

Theatricality and meta-theatricality were defining characteristics of both stage devils and the demonic character. By drawing the attention of the audience, playwrights were able to get their message about the demonic across. In *Staging Vice* (2014), Steenbrugge uses a working definition of theatricality as “the quality of attracting (above-average) attention from the audience” (89-90) through a strong “visual and verbal prominence” (90) on stage.² For example, through a strong rhetorical performance or physical comedy playwrights could make stage devils the centre of attention. Other than drawing the attention of the audience,

² It should be noted that this prominence is not the primary indication of theatricality but rather a countable fact. For example, counting the amount of lines of a character in a play could be very useful when looking into the theatricality of that character.

theatricality could fulfil several functions. The didactic function, teaching the audience a (moral) lesson, and the comic function, entertaining the audience, were most often employed by playwrights for the characters of stage devils (Steenbrugge, 40). Even though Steenbrugge mentions various different theatrical functions, they are often difficult to distinguish separately in plays because they often overlap and blend together. One could argue that the intention of the playwright often results in one dominant theatrical function which is supported by the others. In pre-Reformation theatre, for example, comedy would be used by the playwright to educate the audience on the matter of morality (Steenbrugge, 136). Post-Reformation plays, with their focus on entertainment, could still serve a didactic and moral purpose, but were predominantly comic in nature in order to draw a large public. As a result, the comic function of theatricality became the main feature of stage devils and the demonic character in Elizabethan theatre.

The physicality of stage devils was one of the main elements of their theatricality and could be expressed in various ways. This association of physicality with the demonic was grounded in the medieval binary thought system, in which body and soul were considered to be complete opposites (Steenbrugge, 94). As a result of this thought system, there was a distrust of the body and physical desires and a strong association with the devil and the physical. It is therefore not surprising that stage devils were often characterized by their use of “obscene and crude language” (Steenbrugge, 106), their “abnormally energetic” (Steenbrugge, 107) behaviour, and their obsession with sexuality (Steenbrugge, 107). Another example of the association of the devil and the physical can be found in the references towards Hell and its corporal punishments that occur in early modern English plays. These references mainly served as a didactic warning to the audience about the consequences of living an immoral life. Thirdly, physicality could be acted out through an “excessive display of emotions” (Steenbrugge, 109), which lent itself well for a strong theatrical emphasis on

verbal and physical acting. This negative association was not merely about the display of emotions, but rather about the excess and extremity in which they were portrayed, since it emphasizes the stage devils' lack of virtues as self-control and moderation. Some playwrights endowed the stage devils and demonic character with misplaced emotions instead. For example, by showing anger at justice or pleasure at another character's suffering they would highlight their immoral nature by drawing the attention of the audience.

Another theatrical element of theatricality that stage devils were often endowed with was meta-theatricality. Steenbrugge defines meta-theatricality as the ability of stage characters to "to suspend the illusion of the play, to go against the conventions of acting, and to distance themselves from the action on stage" (157). Two common examples of meta-theatricality in plays are a direct addressing of the audience by one of the characters, or breaking the fourth wall, and the performance of a play within the play where the characters portrayed by actors become actors themselves. Since meta-theatricality demands the attention of the audience by either directly addressing them or by going against the theatrical conventions, it often functions as an enhancement of a character's theatricality (Steenbrugge, 157). Jonson's *Volpone*, in particular, demonstrates this theatrical enhancement of the demonic character through his meta-theatrical performances. Through theatrical shows and meta-theatrical performances by stage devils, playwrights were able to spread the new ideas about the preternatural nature of demons by illustrating their theatrical abilities. Playwrights had to be careful, however, since demons were still believed to pose an actual threat to the religious Protestant community. Whereas meta-theatricality would remind the audience of the influence and deceiving abilities of the devil, the use of satire with stage devils might reduce their fear to the point where the audience would no longer take the spiritual threat of demons serious anymore, which could result in a spiritual threat to the community.

The demonic character, similar to stage devils, is recognizable by his theatricality and meta-theatricality. The difference, however, is that the demonic character combines his theatricality with deception, by applying it to manipulate the other characters to achieve his diabolic schemes. On the other hand, in order to be able to manipulate the other characters, he has to conceal his demonic theatricality in order to create the illusion of being benevolent to them. It is therefore not surprising that the theatricality of the demonic character is often expressed in a more subtle manner than the theatricality of the stage devils. For example, demonic characters are often not distinctively physical or extremely emotional such as stage devils. Rather, their theatricality is expressed through their strong rhetorical qualities, which allows them to manipulate others around them. Their strong yet subtle theatricality defines his demonic nature to the audience while concealing it from the other characters in the play.

1.6 Stage Trickery or Demonic Magic

Before the association of the theatre with the demonic, acting and its theatrical illusions were already considered ambiguous. This ambiguity was partially caused by the theatre's supposed influence of the audience as well as a disagreement on the nature of acting. In his article "Things to do with Demons", Sofer argues that, in the early stages of commercial theatre, commentators "struggled to develop a vocabulary to describe what they thought actors actually did onstage" (7). Theatrical performance was not rejected as lying or deceit but the art form did raise questions about the nature of theatre and roleplaying. There was a general consensus that actors were charismatic people with an "uncanny ability to blur the boundary between seeming and being" (7) in the perception of the audience. Van Pelt discusses the influence of drama on the audience in "Spielen mit der Wirklichkeit". She observes that one of the main theories concerning the role of the audience in drama focusses on the physiological effects of the theatre on the audience through the *spiegelneuronentheorie*. This theory states

that the movement and acting on stage is mirrored in the brain of the audience members, which results in a temporary experience where the audience member experiences himself as part of the world of the play (284). As a result, actors could indeed make that what *seemed* to be the reality on stage temporarily become a part of the audience's reality. Butterworth writes in *Magic on the Early English Stage*(2005) that there was a "tacit agreement" between the actors and the audience where both parties were aware of the pretence involved in acting but accepted it as a temporary reality (Butterworth, 2). The combination of this agreement and the *spiegelneuronentheorie* results in a situation where actors are able and allowed to create a new temporary reality through their acting.

The ways in which the roles of stage devils were portrayed blurred the lines of theatre and reality even more. Firstly, the actors who played the roles of stage devils were not recognizable as humans because of their costumes and masks, especially when they engaged in physically driven behaviour as part of their role. Secondly, in order to make their roles more convincing, they would often suddenly appear on or disappear from the stage, in addition to the use of special effects. Butterworth explains that appearances and disappearances on stage "[b]y their very nature [...] happen suddenly" (75). He stresses that the actual appearing or disappearing of the actor, however, can take place in a short amount of time, as long as the audience perceives it as instantaneous (75). This illustrates again the ability of the actors to blur the lines between seeming and being, since the appearing and disappearing take place in a short amount of time but *seem* to occur instantly. The actors on stage would strategically distract the audience to ensure all eyes were on them, the actors playing the stage devils could swiftly go on stage and then either they or others could suddenly make their appearance known to the audience.

The performance of stage devils influenced the way in which demons and demonic magic were viewed (Cox, 152). Since actors were able to create a convincing performance as

stage devils, the difference between stage devils and demons and the difference between demonic ‘magic’ and theatrical illusions became unclear, which placed drama in a controversial position. In addition to the association of demons and the theatrical, the theatrical now became associated with the demonic (Van Dijkhuizen, 156). The choice of entertainment over moral education of the audience, combined with the ambiguous nature of theatrical illusions, resulted in a condemnation of the theatre as a place of demonic activity by some critics. Additionally, these critics emphasized the plays’ effects on the audience whom they feared might become demonically corrupted by visiting the theatre (van Dijkhuizen, 157). The members of the audience, however, continued to visit the plays and the theatres continued to create and perform new plays with stage devils, despite the efforts of the anti-theatrical critics.

The controversy of exorcisms in the Elizabethan era contributed to the debate surrounding theatre and the demonic. Demonic possession and exorcisms were considered to be impossible, despite the contemporary belief in demons, since possession was considered to be an act of magic. Because demons, as preternatural creatures, could not perform magic, the main concern with regards to demonic possession was the deceiving of the general public through a complex performance of “theatrical fraud” (Van Dijkhuizen, 151).³ Some of the critics of exorcism and demonic possession took their criticism further by claiming that actors were performing in a similar fashion to the charlatan demoniacs. Van Dijkhuizen observes that the contemporary debate on fraudulent demonic possession and theatrical exorcisms “represented an indirect critique of the theatre” (158). Indeed, by comparing actors to fraudulent demoniacs the critics condemned the theatre and its performative illusions, similar to the way in which some critics compared the actors to demons with their theatrical abilities. It is not surprising that the theatrical world responded to these critiques by including the

³ It must be noted that, as is the case with many controversial subjects, there was no general consensus with regards to exorcism, but rather a spectrum of stances on the matter (Van Dijkhuizen, 9).

debates on the demonic, theatricality, demonic possession, and exorcism in their plays. By addressing this debate on stage the playwrights and actors could participate in the discussion and defend themselves, their art, and the nature of theatricality. Both exorcisms and stage devils were easily adaptable to the stage because of their theatrical nature and could therefore be used to entertain an audience as well as to engage them in the contemporary debates on theatricality.

Chapter 2: Stage devils and *Doctor Faustus*

The first case study for this thesis is *Doctor Faustus* (1594), a tragedy written by Christopher Marlowe and first performed by the Admiral's Men at the Rose Theatre (Halpern, 458). In the previous chapter, it was mentioned that *Doctor Faustus* had an impact on the development of stage devils in commercial theatre that was comparable to the impact of the Reformation. Cox argues that Marlowe was the first playwright to exploit the newly secularised society through stage devils (110) and that *Doctor Faustus* functioned as a link between religious and secularised, commercial theatre (127). Because of the connection with religious theatre, it is not surprising that the demonic character in the play is a demon. Consequentially, the demonic character reflects contemporary demonology as a remnant of the earlier religious plays as well as the theatrical elements of commercial stage devils.

The main character of the play is Faustus, an accomplished scholar from Wittenberg who wishes to explore the dark arts. He succeeds in summoning a demon, Mephistophilis, whom he asks to serve him in return for his soul. Mephistophilis explains that he needs permission from his lord Lucifer and returns later with a contract that states that Mephistophilis will serve Faustus for 24 years if Faustus sells his soul to the devil. Faustus signs the contract with his own blood and uses Mephistophilis's powers to travel the world, perform magic and acquire knowledge. His main characteristics in the play are his indecisive nature and doubtful thoughts about damnation and repentance. Mephistophilis is the demonic character in the play and continuously tries to distract Faustus from seeking redemption through theatrical performances and magical illusions. The plot ends when the 24 years from the contract are over and stage devils appear to drag Faustus to hell. Marlowe's play contains various subplots that support the message of the main plot by mimicking them in a comic manner (Halpern, 464)

Firstly, the anti-Catholic tone of the play will be discussed as well as the ways in which Marlowe conveys this message through a comic scene in the main plot. Secondly, this chapter will analyse the natural hierarchy in the play, which adheres to the hierarchy in contemporary demonology. Thirdly, this chapter will discuss Mephistophilis's role of demonic character, focussing on his theatricality and rhetorical dominance. The distraction and deception of Faustus are central to the play, and Mephistophilis's ability to conceal his demonic identity is an essential element in this process. Fourthly, the association of theatricality and the demonic that Marlowe puts forward in his play will be discussed. Theatricality is important in the play because of its continuous use to distract Faustus from his damnation. Lastly, this chapter will discuss the ambiguity of Faustus's damnation and Mephistophilis's role as tempter. Even though the role of tempter is one of the characteristics of a demonic character it will be discussed in a separate paragraph because of its importance in the ambiguity of Faustus's damnation, which was part of a contemporary Elizabethan discussion in the field of demonology. Altogether these chapter sections will provide the reader with an insight on how Marlowe's work reflects contemporary demonology. For the purpose of this chapter, the A-version of *Doctor Faustus* will be employed, because it contains more comic and satirical elements which emphasize the theatricality of the demonic character.

2.1 Anti-Catholic Tendencies: Mocking the Pope and his Power

Marlowe emphasizes the protestant nature of *Doctor Faustus* by mocking Catholicism in the play. After the conjuring scene, for example, Faustus demands that Mephistophilis takes on the appearance of "an old Franciscan friar, [because] that holy shape becomes a devil best" (Marlowe, 3.25-26). This mocking statement demonizes a sub-group of the Catholic church and sets the anti-Catholic tone of the play. Another example can be found in scene 7, where Faustus and Mephistophilis visit the pope in his palace in Rome. While they are on their way

Faustus ridicules the pope and the friars by claiming that their “*summumbonum* is in belly-cheer” (Marlowe, 7.52). By suggesting that the highest good of the Catholic officials is their appetite rather than their god, Faustus implies that neither the officials nor their religion ought to be taken seriously. He expresses this when he says that their folly will provide him and Mephistophilis with entertainment (Marlowe, 7.54). Both examples indicate that the Catholic church and her officials are not taken seriously in the play, which is confirmed during the rest of scene 7. Even though the main plot is generally serious and tragic, the scene in Rome is characterized by its use of slapstick comedy. At Faustus’s request, Mephistophilis casts a spell on him so that he is invisible to others (Marlowe, 7.57). This invisibility enables Faustus to play tricks on the pope and his friars by snatching their food and drinks for his own entertainment. His invisibility makes him bold enough to box the pope on the ear, thus reducing the head of the Catholic church to the laughing stock of the audience.

Not only does the scene in Rome mock the Catholic faith, it also seems to suggest the friars’ lack of power and the ineffectiveness of their ritual language. In reaction to Faustus’s tricks, the friars prepare an exorcism ritual to curse and banish what they perceive to be an evil spirit attacking the pope (Marlowe, 7.74). As Halpern points out in “Marlowe’s Theatre of Night”, the only effect of the friars’ chanting is that they are physically attacked by Faustus and Mephistophilis instead of protected against them (464). Indeed, as the friars try to curse ‘the evil spirit’ they find their cursing to be ineffective. Instead of being left alone, they are physically attacked by Faustus before he leaves them (Marlowe, 7.99). Their attempted exorcism demonstrates that their religious language is powerless because it fails to control or ward off a demon. Their failed attempt, however, does serve another purpose in the plot. Their curses may not be able to stop Faustus from attacking them, but they do foreshadow his faith through dramatic irony since the play ends with Faustus’s damnation.

2.2 Hierarchy in the Play

Doctor Faustus reflects the natural hierarchy of contemporary demonology as well as the hierarchy that defines the demonic character. The main point of natural hierarchy in Elizabethan demonology was that the devil was more powerful than humans but less powerful than God (Clark, 153). It should be noted that Mephistophilis is not *the* devil, but rather *a* devil. In the play, he states that he serves Lucifer the Prince of Hell and that he, consequentially, cannot serve Faustus without Lucifer's permission (Marlowe, 3.40-1). One could, therefore, argue that Lucifer is the higher power to whom the demonic character has to answer. As a demon, however, Mephistophilis stands lower than God in the natural hierarchy. God's superior position is implied by the behaviour of Mephistophilis and Lucifer. For example, when Faustus calls on God to save him, directly after signing his contract with the devil, Lucifer appears and tells him that "thou dost injure us. / Thou talk'st of Christ, contrary to thy promise" (Marlowe, 5.263-4). This comment can be understood in terms of a battle of power over Faustus's soul between Lucifer and God. It is not clear whether Faustus could have been saved if he had wholeheartedly repented, but it is telling that Mephistophilis, Lucifer, and other devils make sure to distract him before he can fully repent. It could be argued that the devils would not have put that much effort in distracting Faustus if they were sure that the contract could not be overruled, which implies God's higher position in the natural hierarchy.

Even though Faustus is the main character and the conjuror of Mephistophilis, he is not in control of the demonic character. This lack of power on Faustus's side has been apparent for the audience from the beginning, although it seems that Faustus never realises the actual magic and power of the contract lie with Mephistophilis throughout the play. After all, it is Mephistophilis who performs magic at Faustus's request which implies that Faustus's language in itself is impotent without the magic acts of the demon (Halpern, 464). Because Faustus does not perform the magic himself, Mephistophilis is placed in a position of power

which gives him the opportunity to deceive Faustus by blurring the lines between magic and theatre. Halpern argues that, as a result of the contract, Mephistophilis is “subjected to Faustus’s every whim for the next twenty-four years” (465). Although Halpern’s claim reflects the tone of the contract, which states that Mephistophilis will serve Faustus, one could argue that Mephistophilis gains more from the deal than Faustus because his distractions and manipulation prevent Faustus from asking for impressive magic. The key here is that Mephistophilis is not the demonic character of the play because he is able to dominate Faustus, but because Faustus is oblivious to being dominated because of Mephistophilis’s distraction and deception.

The subplot touches on the power balance between Mephistophilis and Faustus by mimicking Faustus’s willingness to sell his soul in return for Mephistophilis’s service. In scene four Wagner tries to convince a ‘Clown’ to serve him for a period of seven years by threatening him. At the beginning of the scene, Wagner remarks that the clown looks so hungry that “he would give his soul to the devil for a shoulder of mutton, though it were blood raw” (Marlowe 4.8-9). The clown’s hunger reflects Faustus’s willingness to sell his soul in order to satisfy his hunger for power. The clown, unlike Faustus, has second thoughts: “I had need have it well roasted, and good sauce to it, if I pay so dear” (Marlowe 11-12). The irony here is the ambiguity of the word ‘roasted’ since it could both refer to the mutton and to the Clown’s soul as a reference to damnation and hell. Both contracts have the same essence, despite the contrast between the Clown’s physical hunger and financial need and Faustus’s metaphorical hunger for power and his desire to acquire more riches. Both contracts reduce the soul to an object of value that can be exchanged for other goods (Halpern, 460), whether those goods are food or wealth and magical powers. In the second half of the scene, Wagner threatens to let the Clown be torn to pieces by demons if he does not comply (Marlowe, 4.26), a threat similar to the threats made by Mephistophilis when Faustus shows hesitation with

regards to maintaining his deal with the devil (Marlowe, 12.57-59). As a result of the mirroring of Faustus's contract in the comic subplot, the reader is lead to question whether Mephistophilis is serving Faustus or vice versa.

Even though Mephistophilis has to appear when he is summoned, his ability to control those who summon him as soon as he appears proves his superiority as a demonic character. According to contemporary Elizabethan beliefs, the words of a conjuring spell in themselves had the power to summon a demon (Sofer, 9). Faustus believes his knowledge of magic conjured Mephistophilis and he confidently declares himself "conjurer laureate" (Marlowe, 3.32) because of his achievement. Mephistophilis, however, reveals that he did not come because he was compelled by Faustus's spell but out of free will (Marlowe, 3.44), because he "spotted a vulnerable soul ripe for the picking" (Halpern, 464). His claim is challenged in the comic subplot when Robin, a stable boy, successfully summons Mephistophilis with one of Faustus's magical books (Marlowe, 8.23-5). Mephistophilis answers to the summoning and appears behind Robin and his friend Rafe and uses firecrackers to panic between them. This comic indication that he does not take them seriously as conjurers is confirmed when he reappears in front of them and threatens to change them into animals, furious that he was summoned "only for the pleasure of these damnèd slaves" (Marlowe, 8.39). The play seems to suggest that Mephistophilis cannot control being conjured because he has to answer to the summoning, but that it also appears that he is able to react and manipulate the situation as soon as he appears. Robin, Rafe, and Faustus eventually all end up as victims of Mephistophilis's cruelty, but since Mephistophilis could gain something from his deal with Faustus he deceives him by allowing him to believe that he is the superior one in their contract.

2.3 Mephistophilis as the Demonic Character

Paradoxically, Mephistophilis can be identified as the demonic character of the play because the characteristics of stage devils or vice-characters cannot fully be applied to him. For example, Steenbrugge argues that language defines a character and its morality and that the use of transgressive language, in particular, serves as a characteristic of a negative character (119). Mephistophilis's language, however, appears to be relatively neutral. Despite his occasional verbal threats to Faustus, his language does not contain insults, curses, or an inappropriate use of foreign and liturgical languages, which are some of Steenbrugge's examples of transgressive language (119, 123). Another characteristic of stage devils and vice-characters was their excessive physicality (Steenbrugge, 94). This characteristic does not apply to Mephistophilis either. He does not dance, run or jump on the stage but appears calm and calculating rather than excessively physically active. After all, in order to be able to distract Faustus he needs to conceal his true demonic nature. It is, therefore, his deceptively neutral language and physicality that characterise him as a demonic character.

As a demonic character, Mephistophilis is mostly defined by his theatricality. One of his main theatrical aspects is his ability to perform magical special effects. Mephistophilis uses fireworks, for example, when he brings Faustus a wife at his request (Marlowe, 5.146), when he returns with the vices who are about to perform a show (Marlowe, 5.273), and when he brings Helen back to Faustus (Marlowe, 12.75). These three examples were not merely preceded by the distraction of the fireworks, they were themselves designed to distract Faustus from repenting. Ironically, Mephistophilis's preternatural ability to create fireworks do not remind Faustus of his contract with the devil but actually distract him from seriously considering the consequences of this agreement. Thus, Mephistophilis's distracting theatricality contributes to the damnation of Faustus.

Apart from the use of fireworks and special effects, his rhetorical skills demand the attention from the audience as well. His rhetorical talent allows him to control and dominate

Faustus (Cox, 116). Whenever Faustus is about to act on his doubts with regards to his contract with Lucifer, Mephistophilis subtly distracts him. For example, when Faustus blames Mephistophilis for denying him the pleasure of heaven because of his damnation, he slyly responds: “Why Faustus / Think’st thou that heaven is such a glorious thing? / I tell thee ‘tis not half so fair as thou, / or any man that breathes on earth/ [...] It was made for man, therefore man is more excellent” (Marlowe, 5.180-5). This initially flattering tone, however, changes to verbal violence near the end of the play when he asserts his rhetorical power over Faustus by threatening to “arrest thy soul for disobedience to my sovereign lord. / Revolt, or I’ll in piecemeal tear thy flesh” (Marlowe, 12.57-59). Faustus, obviously terrified, immediately apologizes and pledges his allegiance to the devil again (Marlowe, 12.60-61). When asked, at the end of the play, why he never mentioned his contract with the devil to the other scholars so they could have prayed for his salvation, Faustus answers that he was unable to do so because of Mephistophilis’s threats to physically harm him (Marlowe, 13.42-4). His terror serves as another indication of Mephistophilis’s power and dominance over Faustus which eventually resulted in Faustus’s damnation.

2.4 The Demonic Nature of Theatricality

An important element of the theatricality of the stage devils and the demonic character in *Doctor Faustus* is their use of magic. In accordance with contemporary demonology, the play demystifies magic by presenting it as relatively simple trickery. Rather than performing impressive miracles, Mephistophilis uses his magic to prank and trick people. For example, when Mephistophilis and Faustus visit the pope in Rome he casts a spell on Faustus, at his request, so that he is invisible to others (Marlowe, 7.57). They use their invisibility to play pranks on the pope and his friars by posing as evil spirits. Another example is when Mephistophilis and Faustus trick a horse-courser who requests them to conjure a horse for

him. Even though the ‘horse’ they give him resembles a real horse in any way, when it enters the water it is transformed back into a bundle of hay (Marlowe, 10.38), revealing the illusion that Mephistophilis’s magic created. Both examples illustrate the demystification of magic because of its banal use for pranks and trickery.

In *Doctor Faustus*, the stage devils and Mephistophilis distract Faustus by creating illusions and performing acts instead of performing magic. By blurring the lines between magic and theatre in his play, Marlowe incorporates the demonological concept that magic appears miraculous by preternatural illusions. For example, when he has just signed his contract with Lucifer and seems to realise the gravity of the fate he condemned his soul to, Mephistophilis says he will “fetch him somewhat to delight his mind” (Marlowe, 5.82). The stage directions indicate that he returns with demons who adorn Faustus with various riches. The response of Faustus indicates that he is aware of Mephistophilis’s intentions: “Speak, Mephistophilis, what means this *show*” (Marlowe, 5.83, emphasis added). Despite his initial suspicion, however, the distraction appears to be effective because Faustus does not seem to question Mephistophilis’s distractions later in the play.

Later in the play, when Faustus commands Mephistophilis to bring him a wife, the demon returns with “a devil dressed like a woman” (Marlowe, 5.145). Hammil rightfully observes in “Faustus’s Fortunes” that there is a great discrepancy between that what Mephistophilis promises to bring Faustus and that what he actually receives (327). Indeed, Mephistophilis did not bring a wife, he brought the *illusion* of a wife: a devil dressed as a woman similar to an actor dressed up for a play. Sofer argues that the devils are able to “equate magic with theatrical entertainment [...] because Faustus is such an unimaginative man” (16). As a result of the devils’ continuing efforts to blur the lines between theatre and magic Faustus is not only distracted from his impending damnation, but he also can no longer tell the difference between magic and theatre.

The point of the play is not that magic is always theatre, but that Faustus's tragedy is his inability to tell the two apart (Sofer, 17). It seems that as the play progresses Faustus is less able to tell the difference between reality and illusion, despite Sofer's claim that Faustus is consistent with this inability throughout the play (Sofer, 17). As a result of Mephistophilis's continuing efforts to distract him he continuously chooses illusion over reality. When the Emperor asks Faustus to show him Alexander the Great and his paramour, Faustus does warn him that he is not capable of presenting the "true substantial bodies [...]which long since are consumed to dust" but that he will summon spirits who could lively resemble Alexander and his paramour in great detail instead (Marlowe, 9.40-45). This shows that Faustus is able to distinguish between reality and illusion in this scene. Later in the play, scholars ask Faustus to show them Helen of Greece and they praise him when the Helen he shows to them confirms her legendary beauty. The question is, however, whether that was indeed the real Helen. Contrary to his visit to the emperor, he did not warn the scholars that the Helen they saw was a demonic illusion. After the scholars are gone, Faustus asks Mephistophilis to bring Helen back to him and he even asks her for a kiss. This request illustrates that Faustus has fully lost the ability to distinguish between illusion and reality. Theatricality is, therefore, a great danger to his soul because it keeps him oblivious to the actual demonic threat of damnation.

2.5 Faustus's Damnation

Because the influence of the devil and the possibility of damnation were real spiritual threats to the religious Elizabethan community, the matter of Faustus's damnation was an important part of the play for the contemporary audience. Sofer observes that the plot is constructed in such a way that one cannot "say for sure at any given moment that Faustus is or is not damned" (19). It is not clear, for example, whether Faustus was damned before he conjured

Mephistophilis, at the moment he signed his contract with Lucifer or at the moment his twenty-four years were over and it was too late to repent. As the main character of the play, Faustus is the most influenced by Mephistophilis, which seems to play a part in his damnation.

Overall it seems that Faustus is caught between salvation and damnation, never fully committing to either side. Steenbrugge claimed that a character's increased use of transgressive language indicated a change in their morality (120). Looking at the possible change in Faustus's language might provide the reader with a possible answer to the question of his damnation. Faustus's use of language throughout the play, however, shows no visible change. His only use of transgressive language in the play is when he first conjures Mephistophilis by swearing off the Holy Trinity (Marlowe, 3.14), and by calling upon the spirits of the elements and "Belzebubinferniardentismonarcha" (Marlowe, 3.16-7). Despite pledging his allegiance to Lucifer at several times in the play, after threats from Mephistophilis, his language is neither sacred nor transgressive which emphasizes his doubtful nature and reinforces the ambiguity of his damnation. The play does seem to suggest that he could have been saved if he had repented. Had he fully embraced his choice to sell his soul to the devil, however, his damnation would be unchanged but he would have profited from the full scope of Mephistophilis's powers and magic for 24 years. As a result of his lack of determination, his tragic fate is to be left with nothing but his damnation.

Faustus's indecisive state is reflected by his change of ambitions and actual magical achievements in the play. At the beginning of the play, Faustus expresses the desire to control nature and to be omnipotent (Marlowe, 1.54). His actual achievements once he sells his soul to the devil, however, are few and unimpressive. Halpern observes that "Faustus never embraces this evil with any consistency" (478). Because he never makes a committed choice for either good or evil he never acts on his initial ambitions and, despite having magical

powers and the service of Mephistophilis, he does not “accomplish anything really dastardly or glorious with his powers” (Halpern, 478). During the 24 years of his contract with the Devil, Faustus uses his magic powers to travel the world, acquire knowledge, play tricks on various people including the pope, and to please royalty by performing for them. Instead of becoming godlike as he originally intended (Marlowe, 1.62), when facing the emperor he expresses his “content to do whatsoever your majesty shall command me” (Marlowe, 9.14-15). Throughout the rest of the play, he neither expresses grand wishes nor high ambitions, as if he has forgotten his reasons for engaging in a pact with the devil. It is not clear whether this is caused by the continuing distractions of Mephistophilis and the devils, but the play does seem to suggest that they enhanced his tragic flaw of being indecisive through their distracting theatrical performances which eventually led to his damnation.

Chapter 3: Possession and Theatricality in *Volpone*

The second case study for this thesis is Ben Jonson's comedy *Volpone* (1607) which was first performed by the King's Men in 1606. The fact that all the characters are fully human and the devil and his demons do not appear in the play does not exclude the presence of a demonic character. As Cohen argues, Jonson's work is strongly influenced by the morality play (292), which becomes mostly visible through the prominent presence of the vice of avarice in the various characters. Even though Jonson has internalised this vice in his play as character traits rather than a separate character, avarice has an important function in the plot because it allows Volpone to exert his manipulative power over the other characters who are blinded by their greed.

The plot centres around the cunning main character, Volpone, and his parasite, Mosca, who successfully enrich themselves by deceiving and manipulating most of the citizens of Venice, where the play is set. Volpone has been feigning illness for several years and has convinced several characters that he is about to die. Each of them brings him expensive gifts in the hope that he will include them as his sole heir in his will, which is not Volpone's intention at all. Volpone is the demonic character of the play, despite being fully human, and is assisted by the equally cunning Mosca in his diabolic schemes. The main characters who are after his wealth are Voltore, a corrupt lawyer, Corvino, the jealous husband of the innocent Celia, and the old Corbaccio, who disinherits his own son Bonario in order to stand a better chance of inheriting Volpone's riches. Volpone's schemes are nearly revealed when he attempts to seduce Celia, but Voltore, influenced by Volpone and Mosca successfully convinces the *Avocatores* of Volpone's illness and innocence.

Firstly, this chapter will discuss how Jonson incorporated anti-Catholic views in the play through the setting of the plot and by engaging in the contemporary exorcism debate. Secondly, this chapter will analyse the hierarchy of the characters in the play because it is

essential for the plot and the identification of the demonic character. There is no natural hierarchy in the play since all characters are fully human, but it is clear that Volpone has a superior position compared to the other characters. Thirdly, this chapter will discuss Volpone's role as the demonic character, focussing on his manipulation and theatricality, which enable him to maintain his superior position. Finally, this chapter will focus on the ways in which Jonson presents theatricality as an element of the demonic through the characters and the use of the exorcism debate. Altogether these chapter sections will provide an insight on how Jonson's work reflects contemporary demonology.

3.1 *Volpone* as Anti-Catholic play

The anti-Catholic tone of *Volpone* is implicitly present throughout the play and can be noted in various ways. The play is set in Venice, Italy, where Catholicism was the dominant religion. It is striking that the majority of the characters are portrayed in a negative manner through their greed and corruptness. Even though the few good characters are spiritually virtuous similar to the morality plays, in *Volpone* they are not saved by their faith. For example, when Celia is forced to sleep with Volpone she calls on heaven and the saints for help (Jonson, 3.7.54; 242) but still has to suffer the injustice of a false accusation. When asked for her testimony in court to redeem herself from false accusations she is scorned by the *Avocatores* when she says that heaven is her testimony (Jonson, 4.6.16), but they reply that heaven does not qualify as a testimony (Jonson, 4.6.17). Furthermore, in the end she is not saved through a godly intervention but as a result of evil conquering itself. This creates the idea that there are no winners in this play and that justice, rather than good, conquers evil. Altogether this seems an implicit suggestion of the corrupt nature of the Catholic community as well as a warning that God will not help those who call on the Catholic saints.

The second courtroom scene, in which Voltore feigns demonic possession, criticizes Catholicism by confirming the contemporary beliefs about demonic possession and exorcism. Despite the contemporary belief in and fear of demons, demonic possession and exorcism were highly controversial in Elizabethan times. Both Clark and Bhogal observe that the Protestant community was suspicious towards Catholic exorcists because their powers were considered to be either magical (Clark, 417) or part of the false miracles of the Antichrist (Bhogal, 164). Both views thus contributed to a demonized vision on the Catholic church and its rituals. Additionally, there was a concern that demonic possession was a deception of the general public through a complex performance of “theatrical fraud” (Van Dijkhuizen, 151), which resulted in an association of Catholics with fraud. By portraying the demonic possession scene in *Volpone* in an ironic and theatrical manner Jonson mocks Catholic rituals and the Catholic church.⁴

3.2 Social Hierarchy in *Volpone*

Despite the fact that all the characters in Jonson’s *Volpone* are fully human, there is a clear hierarchical order in the play which places Volpone as the demonic character above the others. Through his wealth and theatricality, he is able to manipulate the other characters, which allows him to remain in this superior position. Their avarice grants Volpone the opportunity to manipulate them by feeding their illusion that they will inherit his fortune if they bring him expensive gifts on his deathbed. They are unaware, however, that Volpone’s deathbed is a theatrical performance to expand his own riches through their gifts, without the intention to share his wealth with them. Because of their greed and desire to become Volpone’s sole heir, the men are willing to do everything Volpone, or Mosca on behalf of Volpone, tells them to do. Their willingness bears similarity to servants obeying their master,

⁴ It should be noted that, even though Jonson does not take demonic possession seriously and instead condemns it as theatrical trickery, he does warn the audience against the threat of metaphorical demons that could do real demons by ‘possessing’ them.

or even to demons obeying the orders of Satan. In the final courtroom scene of the play one of the *Avocatores* states that, in order to be capable of committing the crimes they have committed, the men must have been possessed by greed (Jonson, 5.12.101). If greed is a demon in this play that possesses the majority of the characters, Volpone is comparable to the Prince of Hell, controlling greed as Satan controls his demons. Because of his human nature, however, he himself is also 'possessed' by greed. This does not interfere with his status as demonic character because it enforces his hierarchical position and destructive theatricality rather than affecting it in a negative way.

The exorcism scene is a clear example of Volpone's hierarchical position as the demonic character because it emphasises his power over other characters as well as his theatricality. During the feigned possession, Volpone is the charlatan exorcist who instructs the acting demoniac, Voltore, to create a realistic performance. He is able to convince Voltore to perform the possession by reigniting his hope to inherit Volpone's riches, which illustrates his power as a demonic character. Since Voltore performs the possession, one would be inclined to argue that this scene contains the only meta-theatrical scene in *Volpone* where neither Mosca nor Volpone is the meta-theatrical character. It is Volpone, however, who is heavily involved through instructions, distracting of the court and creating illusions, emphasising to the court and the bystanders that Voltore's actions are the result of demonic possession (Jonson, 5.12.25-7). As a result, one could, therefore, argue that, despite Voltore's meta-theatrical performance, Volpone is the meta-theatrical character of the scene. After all, without his instructions and his distraction of the court the act would not have succeeded, nor would Voltore have performed without Volpone's manipulation. His meta-theatricality enhances the theatricality of this character which, as a result, emphasises his demonic nature. Through his manipulation and theatricality, Volpone is thus able to maintain his hierarchical position.

Near the end of the plot, Mosca challenges Volpone's superior position by changing his own theatrical strategy. Instead of verbal acting, he starts physically acting out his constructed lies when he pretends to be Volpone's sole heir. He prances around the city of Venice in wealthy robes to further ignite the jealousy of the other characters (Jonson, 5.8-9) and makes up the inventory of the Volpone's possessions in front of them (Jonson, 5.3.30-1). However, when Mosca starts taking precautions to maintain his newfound wealth and status by changing the locks on Volpone's mansion (Jonson, 5.5.11-18), performance and reality start to blend together. Because of the convincing performance, Volpone is believed to be dead and because of the signed contract Mosca is therefore believed to be the sole heir. Even though Mosca possesses many character traits of the demonic character, his hierarchical position is below his master Volpone. This construction could be seen as a variation on the demonic character, where a subordinate assists the demonic character in carrying out his diabolic schemes. When Volpone finds his position challenged by Mosca in this way he is confronted with his lack of power as a natural human, as opposed to a preternatural demon. This leaves him with no other option than revealing his schemes in an attempt to regain his wealth (Jonson, 5.12.82-3).

The play ends with the announcement of the punishments of all characters involved in Volpone's schemes. These punishments illustrate that Justice takes the highest place in the natural hierarchy of the play and that all characters, including the demonic character, eventually have to adhere to her rules. Instead of an explicit threat of damnation and hell with its believed corporeal punishments, Volpone and Mosca have to physically suffer for their crimes during the rest of their lifetime on earth. The corporeal punishments remind the audience of the humanness of the demonic character, for a demon could not be physically punished, and strip him of his manipulative and theatrical powers by imprisoning him. Van Dijkhuizen claims that Mosca ends "with a final identity as "perpetualprisoner" (172) as

punishment for his theatrical roleplaying. One could also observe, however, that Mosca's punishment to serve as a slave on the galleys (Jonson, 5.12.113) is a result of his attempt to change the hierarchy and take the place of his master. Volpone himself is punished for his demonic theatricality and is forced to experience the illnesses he used to imitate. Additionally, he is to be held captive by justice (Jonson, 5.12.121-4), in the same way he held the other characters captive with his deception and manipulation. Through their physical punishments, the demonic character and the other characters who used theatricality for their own gain are reduced to their bodies. This punishment counterbalances the pride they took in their wit, talents and imagination with regards to their acting and performance.

3.3 Volpone as the Demonic Character

Apart from his hierarchical position in the play, Volpone can be identified as the demonic character in other ways as well. 'Volpone' means fox in Italian, and his name is a good indication of his cunning and deceiving nature. The other characters are named after birds of prey, hunting after his money, but he successfully outwits them all. Because Volpone controls and manipulates the other characters in the play, and is therefore in a higher hierarchical position he is clearly identifiable as the demonic character. The other characters in the play, however, are oblivious to his diabolic nature. Because of their greed, Volpone is able to conceal his diabolic schemes as well as his true demonic nature. At the end of the play Mosca's attempt to challenge his master's hierarchical position forces Volpone to confess his schemes. Blinded by their greed, the other characters were not able to discover his true intentions on their own.

It is not surprising that Volpone, as the demonic character, is the most theatrical and meta-theatrical character in the play. He expresses his theatricality through his continuous acting and performing within the play, which focusses on the accurate imitation of physical

signs. In the play this manifests itself in two ways: feigning illness and taking on someone's identity. His talent to mimic physical signs and symptoms enables him to successfully convince others that he is terminally ill. For example, by creating a pale complexion and feigning weak breathing he leads Corvino to believe that he is on his deathbed (Jonson, 1.4.55) and with this same act he is even able to convince the *Avocatores* in court, who are "sorry that our credulity wronged him" (Jonson, 4.6.55). Not only is he capable of successfully feigning the symptoms of a disease, he takes delight in his ability to do so (Van Dijkhuizen, 171). After the first court scene, for example, Volpone is so enamoured with his and Mosca's successful performance in front of the *Avocatores* that he claims he enjoyed it "more than if I had enjoyed the wench! The pleasure of all womankind's not like" (Jonson, 5.2.10-11). This narcissistic pleasure entices him to increase the theatricality of his performances. At the beginning of the play he is content with performing as an ill version of himself, whereas he starts to pretend to be other people as the plot progresses. Volpone is able to take on the identity of a *commendatore* (Jonson, 5.3.114) and of Scoto the Mountebank (Jonson, 5.2-3) by successfully imitating their appearance, speech patterns, and mannerisms. Mosca even claims that Scoto himself could not have told the difference between himself and Volpone's disguise (Jonson, 2.4.35).

One of the aspects of the demonic character is the role of tempter, which becomes most visible in Jonson's play during Volpone's attempt to seduce the married Celia. He and Mosca succeed in manipulating Corvino to voluntarily offer his wife to Volpone in the greedy hope of becoming his sole heir. As soon as Volpone is alone with Celia, he reveals his lustful intentions in an attempt to seduce her with eroticized versions of some of the characteristics that define him and his demonic character. Firstly he attempts to seduce her by stressing his fertility and youth, proclaiming himself to be a better lover than her husband is to her (Jonson, 3.8.185). This illustrates Volpone's belief to be more superior than the other characters, which

underlines the hierarchy in the play. Secondly, he attempts to seduce her through the promise of various treasures: valuable jewellery (Jonson, 3.8.180-200), expensive baths (Jonson, 3.8.212-215) and luxurious food (Jonson, 3.8.200-204), a reflection of his own desire to acquire more wealth. Finally, he attempts to seduce her with the prospect of sexual roleplay, an eroticized parody of his own theatrical talent and his obsession with acting and performance. The first few roles he mentions are characteristic of the way in which he views his position in the hierarchy of the play since he wishes to take on the role of Jove (Jonson, 3.8.221), or Mars (Jonson, 3.8.222), both powerful gods in Roman mythology.

3.4 Theatricality as Demonic Character Trait

Throughout Jonson's play, there is a strong correlation between the theatricality and morality of the characters. For example, the good and innocent characters, Bonario and Celia, are not theatrical at all. All other characters in the play do possess a certain degree of theatricality. None of them, however, stand out in a more theatrical way than the demonic character Volpone and his parasite Mosca. Since their theatricality is consistently present throughout the play compared to the sporadic performances of the other characters. In fact, when reading the play it becomes clear that both only cease their roleplay when interacting with each other. Their conversations generally consist of either discussing their previous theatrical achievements or planning new performances. Therefore, they are still theatrical in nature, despite the characters' lack of acting during the conversations. Moreover, it is clear that their acting is intended to purposefully mislead others for their own entertainment and financial gain. This greedy and narcissistic delight that Volpone and Mosca both take in their own theatrical cunning as well as their pleasure in others' suffering underlines their immorality. Their destructive intentions with their theatrical abilities, therefore, create a negative association with theatricality.

Since Mosca's and Volpone's theatrical performances are only directed at their own gain through the downfall of others, Jonson leads the audience to associate theatre and acting with immorality and evil. Van Dijkhuizen observes that Jonson "persistently condemn[s] successful role-playing" (175) throughout the play. Indeed, it seems that Jonson consistently creates a negative association with theatricality, for example through the aforementioned correlation between theatricality and an evil morality and the destructive ways in which it is used by the demonic character. The arrest and punishment of the theatrical characters could be seen as the most explicit expression of condemnation within the play. It is striking that Jonson critiques theatricality and roleplaying, despite the fact that his view on theatricality was not uncommon in his time. After all, as a playwright Jonson depended on professional actors and their theatrical talents for his income. The fact that he expresses these thoughts on theatricality in a play makes the matter more ambivalent since he uses the medium of theatre to condemn the same medium. As part of the play's theatricality, it is relevant that this paradox is brought to the attention of the reader. However, it is not within the scope of this thesis to explain or elaborate on Jonson's personal views on theatricality and theatre as a playwright. Rather, it is more relevant for the purpose of this thesis to analyse how theatricality is presented than to answer the question why it is presented in this way.

One of the examples of a negative association with theatricality can be found in Corvino's violent fantasies about his wife. Driven by jealousy towards other men Corvino expresses his envy through sketching extremely violent scenarios with Celia as the object of his aggression, intended to threaten his wife into complete chastity and obedience. These fantasies are theatrical because of their graphic, violent description but mostly because of the element of public humiliation. For example, for giving attention to the mountebank and allowing herself to be seen by the people around him Corvino scolds her and threatens to publicly dissect her body and analyse it on the *plaza* (Jonson, 2.5.70-2). A more detailed

fantasy occurs when he attempts to convince Celia to sleep with Volpone and becomes infuriated when she refuses. Again, his threats centre around the mutilation of her body: he threatens to slice open her face (Jonson, 3.7.97-9) and to burn accusations in her flesh with acid (Jonson, 3.7.103-4). Moreover, his second threat focuses on public humiliation as well. He claims that he will make her body a public attraction by tying her, presumably naked, to the body of a murdered slave before hanging them both from his window (Jonson, 3.7.100-3). Corvino's envy blinds him for his hypocrisy of the ways in which he treats Celia. On the one hand, he threatens to punish her for appearing in public while on the other hand, he threatens her in the next act when she refuses to commit the immoral act of adultery at his request, a further indication of the intensity of Corvino's evil morality expressed through his theatricality.

Another example of the negative association of theatricality in the play is the exorcism scene, in which Voltore feigns demonic possession in court by following the instructions of a disguised Volpone. It is the only scene in the play that explicitly touches on devils and the demonic even though there is no actual demonic threat (Van Dijkhuizen, 119). The demonic is mentioned with regards to the feigned possession and Voltore's odd behaviour but does not actually occur in the scene. Rather, the demonic is used as part of a juridical strategy to preserve the wealth of the demonic character. Even though the contemporary debate with regards to exorcism is not explicitly discussed in this scene, Jonson does convey his stance on the matter during Voltore's 'demonic performance'. As Van Dijkhuizen points out, Jonson's depiction of demonic possession and exorcism in *Volpone* bears similarities to the anti-theatrical writers of his time (Van Dijkhuizen, 175). By portraying the exorcism scene as a strategic theatrical performance, the demonic becomes a theatrical trick or a role to be performed, rather than a realistic threat (Van Dijkhuizen, 169). By reducing demonic possession to physical symptoms that can be created at any moment Jonson confirms the

general Elizabethan suspicion towards the ritual which claims that demonic possession is merely elaborate fraud.

Conclusion

Post-Reformation commercial theatre depended on the audience for their income and therefore the plays became entertainment rather than education. Because of their popularity with the audience, stage devils, and the demonic character, continued to make their appearance on the stage in commercial theatres after the Reformation.

The demonic character is modelled after the devil in Elizabethan demonology and reflects its key aspects. The key points of Elizabethan demonology centre around the position of the devil with regards to God and humans. The concept of preternaturality was used by Elizabethan scholars to define the hierarchical position of demons as well as to explain their apparent magical abilities. The idea of the demons as preternatural rather than supernatural beings was a post-Reformation creation. Only God was believed to be supernatural, and above nature, in Protestant theology. All his creations, including the devil and his demons, consequentially fell within the laws of nature. Preternaturality was an exceptional category within the natural, which was not achievable for humans and therefore seemed magical to them. Furthermore, the demons' superior physical strength and intelligence, in comparison with humans, resulted in the illusion that their 'magical' acts appeared supernatural to humans. Additionally, the devil was ascribed great skills as a deceiver and illusionist, which allowed him to make his preternatural acts seem supernatural as well.

The devil's ascribed theatrical and deceptive skills resulted in an association of the theatre with the demonic by some critics. Some compared Satan to an actor, and consequentially condemned theatre and acting as demonic activities. This criticism did not stop the public from visiting the plays, nor did it stop the playwrights and theatres from producing new plays, with or without stage devils. The theatre became a medium to address the theatricality debate, because of the theatrical nature of stage devils the lent themselves well as vessels for this discussion on stage.

The demonic character is a subcategory of Steenbrugge's category of negative characters or vice-characters. Despite the great resemblance it bears to stage devils, the demonic character is a subcategory of the negative character because it is not necessarily a demon (see Appendix). Similar to the stage devils the demonic character is very theatrical and is out to tempt and destruct the other characters. What sets him apart, however, are his deceptive skills and ability to conceal his true intentions from the other characters, which makes him recognizable as the demonic character for the reader. As a result of the concealment, the theatricality of demonic characters is often expressed through strong rhetorical skills, which allow them to distract and manipulate others, rather than a distinctly physical or emotional performance. Another characteristic of the demonic character is his hierarchical position in the play. In accordance with contemporary demonology, the demonic character is higher in hierarchy than most other characters in the play but does have to answer to a higher power.

The plays that were selected for this thesis, Jonson's comedy *Volpone* and Marlowe's tragedy *Doctor Faustus*, share several similarities despite their opposite styles. Both plays are anti-Catholic: Marlowe mocks the pope and his friars by stressing their incompetence when they are faced with a demon, and Jonson associates Catholicism with corruptness and fraud through Voltore's false testimony in court. Secondly, the demonic characters conceal their demonic nature from the other characters and successfully deceive and manipulate them by making them believe to be on their side. Mephistophilis, for example, maintains Faustus's illusion of controlling him, whereas Mephistophilis only serves himself and his lord Lucifer. *Volpone* feigns illness and pretends to be willing to grant his fortunes to the other characters in his will, whereas his only intentions are to increase his own wealth. Finally, both characters are in a higher hierarchical position than the other characters, either in the natural hierarchy, Mephistophilis, or in the social hierarchy, *Volpone*.

There are more differences between the play than their comic or tragic nature. Firstly, Volpone is fully human, unlike the demon Mephistophilis, despite their common identity as the demonic character. Furthermore, the devil and his demons do not even occur in *Volpone*, although God appears in neither of the plays. Secondly, Volpone is the main character of the play, whereas Mephistophilis plays the role of antagonist to the main character Faustus, although one could argue that his role is more theatrically appealing for the audience and plays the second lead role in the play. As the main character, Volpone grants the audience an insight into his strategies and destructive intentions. This illustrates the discrepancy between his true demonic nature and the façade he keeps up in front of the other characters. Thirdly, Volpone fails to complete his diabolic schemes, whereas Mephistophilis succeeds in his goal to bring Faustus to damnation. It is unclear whether the outcome of a demonic character's schemes is an essential part of his character. Volpone's failure can be explained because of his human nature, which made him fallible for greed, similar to the other characters. Another explanation could be that, because the demonic character has to answer to a higher power, this can sometimes result in the interference of this higher power in the demonic character's plans. Despite these differences, both plays illustrate the function and characteristics of the demonic character in different ways. This demonstrates the versatility of the demonic character and underlines the need for this category to be acknowledged as such.

In conclusion, the demonic character reflects contemporary Elizabethan demonology in commercial post-Reformation theatre through its hierarchical position in the play, his deceptive and manipulative skills, his antagonistic role and destructive intentions, and his concealed theatrical nature. Both *Doctor Faustus* and *Volpone* illustrate these characteristics, despite the differences in the style of the play, tragedy and comedy, and the identity of the demonic character, human and demon. Since this thesis was limited to the analysis of two plays, it would be recommended to analyse other commercial Elizabethan plays as well in

order to make more inclusive statements and to draw more definite conclusions.

In order to be able to make more conclusive statements, other plays will have to be analysed as well. For example, Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass* (1616) could serve as comparative material to his play *Volpone*. Other suggestions could include *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621) by William Rowly, Thomas Dekker and John Ford, because of the demonic devil-dog who is determined to lead to the other characters to destruction, and William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1599 -1606), because of the existence of a demonic character without the presence of a (stage) devil.

Appendix: List of Terminology

This appendix can be used by the reader as a tool to navigate the various terms that are used in this thesis with regards to the devil and the demonic on stage. This list is deliberately not in alphabetical order, but rather organised from broadest to most specific term. Moreover, a distinction is made between the various stage characters and the ‘real’ demonic characters that were believed to exist in the Elizabethan era, according to the Protestant faith and the Bible.

1. Theatrical characters

These characters were roles on stage that were performed by actors. Some of these roles are modelled after the ‘real’ demonic forces, whereas others are less specific.

1.1 Negative character

This character fulfils the antagonistic role in the play but is not necessarily demonic. It is a broad term that could, for example, include the devil as well as king Herod. This term is often used by Steenbrugge in her work as an all-inclusive term but is not very suitable for this thesis because they are not necessarily related to stage devils or demonic characters.

1.2 Vice-character

The vice-character is a subcategory of the negative character and it includes, but is not exclusive, to stage devils. Vice-characters are modelled after the vices in the early modern English Morality plays. They were embodiments of the cardinal sins of the Catholic church and they were defined by their opposing and tempting of the main character. They are therefore quite similar to stage devils, but they are more abstract characters that are not meant to represent the demonic.

1.3 Stage devil

This term is used to indicate characters on stage that represent the devil, but they most often portray his demons, which can cause a terminological confusion for the reader. Even though they are very similar to the vice-character, they are a separate category because they are defined by their impersonation of demons. They are, therefore, less abstract and modelled after the way people believed real demons looked and behaved.

1.4 Demonic character

The demonic character is central to this thesis and is a subcategory of the vice-character that bears great similarities to the stage devil. Its characteristics are modelled after the devil and his demons, and the demonic character, therefore, reflects contemporary Elizabethan demonology. A more detailed and elaborate description of the demonic character and its characteristics can be found in section 1.4 on page 12 of this thesis.

2. Real demonic characters

Real demonic characters are the characters that were believed to exist in real life in the Elizabethan era. They are discussed in contemporary Elizabethan demonology and were used to base the theatrical characters on.

2.1 Devil

The term 'devil' in this thesis is specifically used to either indicate *the* devil or stage devils. Lucifer and Satan are used interchangeably when referring to the devil, generally depending on the name that is used in the primary or secondary text that is discussed at that point.

Although the name Lucifer is generally used to refer to the devil in his angelic, unfallen state,

this difference is not explicitly made in this thesis, because in the primary and secondary sources both names were used.

2.2 Demon

Demons are fallen angels that serve the devil in Hell. Confusions can arise between stage devils and demons since the former are modelled after the latter. This thesis uses the term 'demons' to indicate the 'real' demons that are discussed in contemporary Elizabethan demonology and demons that were believed to interfere with everyday life. Characters on stage that represent demons will be referred to as stage devils.

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