The Character of Mephastophilis and the Concept of Hell

Mephastophilis is the second most important dramatic personage in the drama. He appears in most of the scenes with Faustus. When he is first seen by Faustus, he is horrendously ugly. Faustus immediately sends him away and has him reappear in the form of a Franciscan friar. The mere physical appearance of Mephastophilis suggests the ugliness of hell itself. Throughout the play, Faustus seems to have forgotten how ugly the devils are in their natural shape. Only at the very end of the drama, when devils come to carry Faustus off to his eternal damnation, does he once again understand the terrible significance of their ugly physical appearance. As Faustus exclaims when he sees the devils at the end of the drama, "Adders and serpents, let me breathe awhile! / Ugly hell, gape not."

In his first appearance, we discover that Mephastophilis is bound to Lucifer in a manner similar to Faustus' later servitude. Mephastophilis is not free to serve Faustus unless he has Lucifer's permission. Then after the pact, he will be Faustus' servant for twenty-four years. Consequently, the concepts of freedom and bondage are important ideas connected with Mephastophilis and Faustus. In other words, no person in the world is entirely free, and what Faustus is hoping for in his contract is a complete and total physical, not moral, freedom. It is paradoxical that the brilliant Dr. Faustus does not see this contradiction in his views about freedom and bondage.

In most of the scenes, Mephastophilis functions as the representative of hell and Lucifer. Only in a few fleeting moments do we see that Mephastophilis is also experiencing both suffering and damnation because of his status as a fallen angel. In the third scene, he admits that he is also tormented by ten thousand hells because he had once tasted the bliss of heaven and now is in hell with Lucifer and the other fallen angels.

Upon Faustus' insistence to know about the nature of hell, Mephastophilis reveals that it is not a place, but a condition or state of being. Any place where God is not, is hell. Being deprived of everlasting bliss is also hell. In other words, heaven is being admitted into the presence of God, and hell, therefore, is deprivation of the presence of God. As the devils appear in the final scene and as Faustus contemplates his eternal damnation, there are strong suggestions and images of a hell consisting of severe punishment and torment, where ugly devils swarm about and punish the unrepentant sinner.