

Dr. Faustus
Summary and Analysis Scene 12

Summary: Faustus enters with scholars discussing who is the most beautiful woman in the world. The scholars think it is Helen of Troy. Because of their friendship for him, Faustus promises to raise her from the dead and let the scholars see her in all her pomp and majesty. Music sounds and Helen passes across the stage. The scholars exclaim wildly about her beauty and thank Faustus for allowing them to see this "paragon of excellence."

As an old man enters, the scholars leave. The old man prevails upon Faustus to repent of "thy most vile and loathsome filthiness" so he can come under the grace and mercy of God and be saved. Faustus fears that hell has him trapped but asks the old man to leave him alone for a while and he ponders his sins.

Mephistophilis then threatens Faustus for disobedience to Lucifer, and Faustus agrees to reaffirm his contract to the devil in blood again. After he writes the second deed, he tells Mephistophilis that he desires Helen for his own paramour. When she appears, Faustus decides that Helen's beauty shall make him immortal and thus, he will not need salvation:

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships,
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.
Her lips suck forth my soul; see where it flies!
Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.
Here will I dwell, for heaven be in these lips,
And all is dross that is not Helen.

After Faustus exits with Helen, the old man re-enters and expresses his disappointment in Faustus, but he also sympathizes with him because he too has been tempted but has won victory by turning to God.

Analysis: In this scene, we see that Faustus performs his last act of conjuring. Again at the request of a friend, Faustus conjures up the image of Helen of Troy.

Note the manner in which Marlowe handles the two appearances of Helen of Troy. During the first appearance, Faustus says nothing about her, and only after the three scholars have left do we hear what Faustus' impression is. The comments of the scholars indicate something of her beauty; one calls her the majesty of the world, another refers to her as a paragon of excellence, and the third calls her a

"heavenly beauty." Faustus gives the most complete and memorable description of her later in the scene.

The appearance of the old man again brings back into focus the conflict between good and evil that was expressed earlier by the Good Angel and the Evil Angel. Just before the old man's appearance, Helen, who represents the beauty of the classical world, appeared upon the stage. The old man comes to remind Faustus of the faith of the Christian world. The old man, who offers himself as a type of guide who will conduct Faustus to a celestial happiness, constantly refers to the blood of Christ, which has saved him. This blood contrasts with the blood which was used earlier to sign the contract with Lucifer and the blood which Faustus will use in a few minutes to renew the pact.

The old man appears at this point because he, along with Faustus, is approaching death. Faustus at this time still has the body of a young person, owing to the magical incantations, but has a blackened soul. The old man is ugly physically but has a beautiful soul and faith in Christ. As Mephistophilis says of the old man:

His faith is great, I cannot touch his soul;
But what I may afflict his body with
I will attempt, which is but little worth.

After a wavering in his soul, Faustus firmly resolves to keep his contract with Lucifer and offers to sign another bond in blood. We must remember that Faustus has just seen the most beautiful woman in the world and desires her. Thus, he makes the second contract to assure himself of getting Helen as his paramour. Originally, he had wanted power and knowledge, but now he is only interested in satisfying his baser appetites. Furthermore, by having Helen, he thinks that her "sweet embracings may extinguish clean / These thoughts that do dissuade me from my vow." Furthermore, in his moments of despair, there has always been something to divert him so that he will never have to think about his damnation. As the old man tempts him to turn to the paths of righteousness, the memory of the beautiful and desirable Helen intrudes upon his consciousness and causes him to think only of possessing her.

Through the poetic descriptions of Helen, we are convinced that she is the epitome of beauty and the most desirable woman in the world. It is ironic that Faustus thinks that this classical beauty can make him immortal through a kiss more readily than he could achieve immortality through belief in Christ. He thinks that she will be a paradise for him, and ironically he gives up all hope of eternal paradise.

The ending of the scene is a contrast to the final scene. The old man re-enters and announces that he has undergone great temptations during life and has overcome his temptations. He notes that he feels that he has triumphed over Mephistophilis and the fiends. In the final scene, Faustus, who has the same opportunity, fails to triumph over the satanic powers and is carried away to damnation. Thus, the appearance of the old man, who announces his triumph, reminds the audience that Faustus could have repented at almost any point and achieved salvation. The fact that Faustus never does repent suggests that Faustus intellectually wills his own damnation.