

## 21A.201/21L.013/21M.013 Topics for Essay 2.

We would like to propose three possible topics for your second essay, which will be focused on the Faust material from Marlowe through Murnau. While Goethe's *Faust* should be central to the essay, we would like to see a comparative element in the essay, which may range simply from reference to alternative handlings of key moments, speeches, or characters to a full-on comparison between two treatments of the material.

1. We began this section of the class with readings and lectures focusing on the history of learned magic in Europe: alchemy, astrology, and necromancy in particular. What is the role of learning in the Faust material we've read and heard – do these various versions of the story really engage with the idea of the learned magician, and how? (NOTE: If you think Faust's learning simply a pretext to get the story going this probably won't be the right topic for you). What are the possibilities attached to learning? What are the constraints? Where is learning positioned in society? What are the trade-offs associated with learning? Then there's magic. Is it reliable or not? Real or illusory? Natural or demonic? Permitted or forbidden? Obscure or easy? You might also think about how the figure of the learned magician has evolved over the intervening centuries: what issues and questions from Medieval and Renaissance magic are still present for us today, particularly in the techno-scientific context we inhabit at MIT?

2. Liszt, like Verdi, condenses a complex literary text into the interplay between three rich characters: here, Faust, Mephisto, and Gretchen/Marguerite. Pick a piece of text that you feel sums up something important about one of the characters. Begin with that exercise: explain (of course) *why* this passage strikes you as important, and use close reading as a way into talking about the ingredients that make up the character you've chosen as your focus. As this character moves through the story, and migrates from Goethe to Murnau or Liszt, what changes and what stays the same?

3. Does the Gretchen material simply hijack the story about ritual magic, and turn it into something else? Perhaps there's a way of thinking about Gretchen as the "outside" of learned magic – and thus, in relation to it, helping define it in terms of what it excludes. As we learned from Tara Nummedal, not all alchemists were male. Yet the social context of Renaissance education in its communal and public forms (schools, monasteries, and universities) was almost entirely masculine. Perhaps Benvenuto Cellini's request to the demons that they enable him to be reunited with his distant girlfriend (Maxwell-Stuart, 14) was not the hasty, random idea he thought it was! Throughout the Faust material, we see the idea that learned magicians use their painfully acquired magical power in order to summon or pay court to women. Indeed, we might say that learned magic excludes women only to summon them back through art. What kinds of things do the female figures that appear in the Faust materials -- Helen, Gretchen, the various witches and servant girls in Goethe – represent? What do they allow the narrators to talk about or make happen? (Note: if your answer is "love", or "sex," what do *those* represent or make happen?) Consider also the conclusion of Part II, incorporated by Liszt as the choral conclusion to his Faust symphony: "the Eternal Feminine leads us ever higher." What in the world does *that* mean?

Due Friday, 11/15 (extensions to 11/18 by prior request only). Length: 6 pp./ 1600 words.

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