UNIT 7

Doctor Faustus

and the Madness of Knowledge

Marlowe, Doctor Faustus (A-text, 1604), compared in class against the B-text (1616)

Steven Connor, The Madness of Knowledge, Introduction and chapters 1–2

nine things he swears he will do · one faint echo of one of them

He has twenty-four years of unlimited power.

This is what he does with the last of it.

> *“Was this the face that launch’d a thousand ships*
> *And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?*
> *Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.”*
>
> A-text, scene 13

Three facts about the woman he is kissing

1. She has been dead for roughly two thousand years.
2. She is not Helen. She is a spirit wearing Helen, conjured on request — Mephistopheles fetches her the way he fetched the grapes.
3. Faustus has already summoned her once this week, as an after-dinner entertainment for three colleagues.

KEY QUESTION

Is the danger of knowledge that it corrupts, or that it disappoints?

If it corrupts

Then Faustus is a cautionary tale, the play is a morality play, and the moral is: do not reach. This is how the play was read for three hundred years, and the B-text works hard to make it the right reading.

If it disappoints

Then there is no moral, and the play is something stranger: a study of a man who gets exactly what he asked for and discovers he had not thought about it. The tragedy is not that he reached. It is what he reached for.

HOW THE CLASS IS BUILT

Five blocks, and two different jobs

The play gives us a case

We count what Faustus asks for and what he does with it, and then we read a second version of the same play that answers the key question differently. Both are evidence work.

Connor gives us the vocabulary

Without it a reader will reach for “hubris” and stop. Connor supplies a set of terms for the feelings that attach to knowing, which is what the play is actually about.

And then we turn on Connor

A theory that explains everything explains nothing, so we will ask where epistemopathy stops being useful. Somebody has given the book 4/10.

The order

Evidence first, vocabulary second. If Connor arrives before the counting, his terms become a lens you look through instead of a name for something you found — and you will see epistemopathy everywhere, including where it is not. We count first on purpose.

PART ONE

Nine things, and none of them

What Faustus says he will do, against what the play shows him doing



Almost all of it is counting. The interpretation arrives at the end, as a consequence of a number.

SCENE 1

He begins by firing every subject he knows

Logic

“Bene disserere est finis logices”

To argue well is the end of logic. He has mastered it. Mastery is the complaint — the discipline is finished and it got him nowhere.

Medicine

“Physic, farewell”

He can cure, and has. He wants to raise the dead, which medicine cannot do, so medicine is worthless to him.

Law

“This study fits a mercenary drudge”

Justinian reduced to paperwork about inheritance. Too small, too venal, too much about other people’s property.

Divinity

“Divinity, adieu!”

He reads two half-verses, stops, concludes that all men sin and all men die, and shuts the book. The most consequential misreading in the play.

The pattern before the content

He does not reject these subjects for being wrong. He rejects them for being finished — for having nothing left to want. The appetite is not for truth. It is for an unsatisfied appetite, which is a different thing, and Connor will give us a name for it after the first break.

Marlowe, Doctor Faustus, A-text (1604), scene 1. Folger EMED edition.

SCENE 1 · THE PROMISE

Then he says what magic will be for. Nine things.

1. Fly to India for gold
2. Ransack the ocean for orient pearl
3. Search the new-found world for fruits and delicacies
4. Have them read him strange philosophy
5. Tell him the secrets of all foreign kings
6. Wall all Germany with brass
7. Make the swift Rhine circle fair Wertenberg
8. Fill the public schools with silk for the students
9. Levy an army, drive out the Prince of Parma, invent engines of war

Read the list as a list

Wealth, luxury, knowledge, intelligence, civil engineering, national defence. Grand, specific, and — crucially — checkable. He tells us what success will look like.

A-text, scene 1, the "I'll have them" speech. Items condensed; the fruits line is highlighted for a reason you will see shortly.

SCENE 5 · THE BOND

What he actually buys

Twenty-four years

Not eternity. A career. Roughly the length of a professorship, which is almost certainly the joke — Marlowe gives a scholar exactly one working life of omnipotence and watches him fill it.

Five articles

That he be a spirit in form and substance; that Mephistopheles serve him; that Mephistopheles bring him whatever he desires; that he be invisible at will; that Mephistopheles appear in any shape he pleases.

One clause against him

That at the end of the term Lucifer may fetch body and soul. He signs in his own blood, and the blood congeals, and he needs fire to keep writing. The play tells him. He keeps writing.

Look at article three again

“Shall do for him and bring him whatsoever he desires.” There is no restriction in that clause. Nothing in the contract prevents the walls of brass or the rerouted Rhine. Whatever goes wrong from here is not a limitation of the power. It is a fact about the man holding it.

A-text, scene 5. Articles quoted in condensed form.

AFTER THE BOND

Everything he does with it, in order

1 Asks for a wife

REFUSED — offered courtesans instead

2 Asks for three books

Spells, planets, plants. Reference works.

3 Asks about the heavens

Gets “freshmen’s suppositions”

4 Asks who made the world

REFUSED — “I will not”

5 Is shown the Seven Deadly Sins

A pageant. “O, this feeds my soul!”

6 Goes invisible at Rome

Snatches the Pope’s meat, boxes his ear

7 Conjures Alexander for the Emperor

A spirit in the shape of a dead king

8 Puts horns on a knight

For heckling him

9 Sells a horse that dissolves

Cheats a dealer of forty dollars

10 Fetches grapes in January

For a pregnant duchess, on request

11 Shows Helen to three scholars

After dinner. She crosses the stage.

12 Asks for Helen himself

“Her lips suck forth my soul”

A-text, scenes 5–13. The B-text adds more of the same: a rival pope, a longer horns episode, more comic business.

THE SAME METHOD AS LAST WEEK

Twelve uses, sorted — and the sort is the finding

4 are conjured images

The Sins, Alexander, Helen twice. Nothing is made, moved or learned. Something is shown, and then it stops being shown.

3 are pranks or cons

The Pope's dinner, the knight's horns, the dissolving horse. Power used to embarrass people who annoyed him.

2 are refusals

A wife, and the origin of the world. One is a joke about marriage. The other is the only moment the play's floor gives way.

3 are errands

Three books, an astronomy lecture, and grapes. Fetched goods. Two of the three he could have got from a library.

Unit 6, applied to a play from 1604

Twelve outputs. Three kinds. A system with unbounded capacity producing a narrow repertoire that reliably pleases its audience — the Pope's court, the Emperor's court, the Duke's court, three colleagues after dinner. Faustus has mode-collapsed, and the thing he collapsed onto is applause.

And last week's warning applies to this week's metaphor. Faustus has no objective function and no critic, and the resemblance is a resemblance.

THE ARITHMETIC

Nine ambitions. Twelve uses. One faint echo.



one of the nine

Gold from India	*Never attempted*
Pearl from the ocean	*Never attempted*
Fruits of the new-found world	*Grapes. In January. Fetched for a duchess, at her request.*
Strange philosophy	*An astronomy lesson he calls "freshmen's suppositions"*
Secrets of all foreign kings	*Never attempted*
Germany walled in brass	*Never attempted*
The Rhine rerouted	*Never attempted*
The students clothed in silk	*Never attempted*
An army, and the Prince of Parma driven out	*Never attempted*

The one thing on his list he partly does, he does as a favour, out of season, for someone else.

BEFORE THE BREAK

Three readings that do not survive the tally

“He ran out of time”

He had twenty-four years and the play skips most of them with a Chorus. Time is not the constraint. The play deliberately shows us the middle of the term, and the middle of the term is horns and grapes.

“The devil cheated him”

Mephistopheles refuses twice in twelve requests, and one refusal is about a wife. Everything else is delivered promptly and without complaint. He is the most reliable servant in Elizabethan drama.

“He was always going to be damned”

Possibly. But damnation does not explain the repertoire. Being doomed does not make a man steal a meal from the Pope, and the play spends four scenes on exactly that.

What is left

The power was real, the time was ample, the servant was obedient, and the result was parlour tricks. If none of the external explanations hold, the explanation is internal — which means the play is not about what knowledge does to a man. It is about what a man turns out to have wanted, once wanting is no longer an obstacle.

PART TWO

The passions of knowing

Connor, Introduction and chapter 1



Forty-five minutes on a vocabulary. This the diagnosis, or at least the diagnostic language.

A different question about knowledge

EPISTEMOLOGY ASKS

What can we know, and how do we know that we know it?

Two and a half thousand years of work. Truth conditions, justification, scepticism. The question is about the relation between a mind and a fact.

EPISTEMOPATHY ASKS

What do we feel about knowledge, and what do those feelings do?

Connor's coinage. In his words it "tries to get a fix on what we feel about knowledge." The question is about the relation between a mind and its own wanting.

Significance

Connor's claim in the Introduction is not that feelings accompany knowing, decorating an otherwise cool operation. It is that feelings are themselves forms of understanding — that thought and feeling are not opposites, and that an account of knowledge which leaves out longing, dread, envy and triumph has left out most of what knowing is actually like for anyone who has done it. He calls the whole project "a psychopathology of the intellectual life," which is a joke with a serious hand inside it.

Connor, The Madness of Knowledge (Reaktion, 2019), Introduction; phrasings from Connor's own account of the book.

THE SENTENCE THAT MAKES THE BOOK INTERESTING

> *Epistemopathy names both the obsessions knowledge provokes and the study of them — and the study is "by no means immune from mutating into the former."*

There is no outside

A study of the passions of knowing is itself a passion of knowing. Connor does not resolve this and does not pretend to; he writes the book from inside the condition it describes.

Which is why Faustus is his case

Connor says the will-to-knowledge is embodied "in particular in the Faust myth." Not as an illustration bolted on afterwards — the myth is where the structure of the appetite is most visible.

And why the readers are implicated

We are in a humanities seminar on a Thursday afternoon arguing about a play. Whatever Connor is describing, we are doing it right now.

CONNOR · CHAPTER 1

The will to know, and its lineage

Schopenhauer

Will comes first and intellect is its servant. What looks like disinterested enquiry is appetite wearing a gown. Knowledge does not precede wanting; it is organised by it.

Nietzsche

Pushes it further: the will-to-knowledge is not a drive toward truth but a drive toward mastery. We want to know in order to have, and the two are harder to separate than philosophy pretends.

Freud

The Wisstrieb — the drive to know — rooted in infantile curiosity about origins and bodies. Connor describes the resulting epistemophilia as "the often incontinent love of knowledge," and wants a term broader than it.

Connor

Keeps the lineage and widens it. Not only the love of knowing but the dread of it: "epistemophilia (the love), and epistemophobia (the dread), of knowledge." Both are appetites. Both distort.

The phrase to keep

"The power of wanting that always seems to be at work in knowing." If that is right, then a satisfied knower is a contradiction, and the interesting thing about Faustus is not that he wanted too much. It is what happened to the wanting once there was nothing left to obstruct it.

Connor, The Madness of Knowledge, ch. 1, on the will-to-knowledge; Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are Connor's own named sources for the phrase.

APPLY IT

Scene 1, read a second time

FIRST READING

A brilliant scholar has exhausted the curriculum and reaches past it. Ambition, overreaching, hubris. The waxen wings in the Prologue tell you how to read it, and they are the oldest reading there is.

Problem: it does not explain the grapes.

If the engine is ambition, the middle of the play is inexplicable. Ambitious men do not spend a decade on practical jokes.

SECOND READING, WITH CONNOR

He does not reject the four disciplines for being false. He rejects them for being finished. What he cannot tolerate is a completed appetite — and so he goes looking for a wanting large enough never to close.

This explains the grapes.

A man in love with wanting has no use for having. The moment the power is real the appetite has nothing to push against, and what is left is twenty-four years of a man killing time in the most expensive way ever arranged.

That is what epistemopathy buys: a reading that covers the boring middle of the play instead of excusing it.

PAIRS

Find our own epistemopathy

Name a feeling

Pick one moment in the play where Faustus plainly feels something about knowledge — not about damnation, about knowing. Quote the line. There are more of these than you expect and several are in the comic scenes.

Name the shape

Is it love or dread — epistemophilia or epistemophobia? Or is it something your pair needs a third word for? If you need a third word, invent it. Connor invents constantly and the book half-invites it.

Test it against the tally

Does your feeling explain anything in the twelve uses? A reading that explains only the famous speeches is not yet a reading of this play.

PART THREE

The agon and the quiz

Connor chapter 2, and the astronomy scene

Roughly fifty minutes. Thirty on Connor's argument and the scene it explains, twenty on being suspicious of it.



CONNOR · CHAPTER 2

Knowledge as a fight

The disputation

The medieval university's central exercise. Two people argue a question with no settled answer, in public, at length, under rules. Something is genuinely at stake — reputation, doctrine, a career — and the outcome is not known in advance.

Connor's claim

That learned discourse has never stopped being adversarial, and that its style carries aggression and triumph inside it. The seminar, the peer review, the conference question that is not a question. Knowing is something people do at each other.

The quiz

Connor calls it "a comically debased version of the medieval disputation." The form survives — question, answer, adjudication, winner — and the stakes evaporate, because the asker already knows.

Where the chapter is going

Connor sets the quiz beside the catechism and the inquisition — three forms in which someone who already knows the answer asks you for it. He is interested in what the form does to the feeling: the pleasure of a quiz is the pleasure of being tested, which is not the pleasure of finding out. They are different appetites wearing the same costume.

Connor, The Madness of Knowledge, ch. 2; "general knowledge" and the catechism–inquisition–quiz sequence are his own framing.

SCENE 6

The oracle gives correct answers

What Faustus asks

— Are there many heavens above the moon?

— Are all celestial bodies one globe?

— Why are planetary motions not uniform?

— How many spheres are there?

— Why do we not have eclipses more often?

Every answer is correct. Every answer is also in a textbook he already owns.

What Faustus says back

“Tush! These slender trifles Wagner can decide;
Hath Mephistopheles no greater skill?”

“These are freshmen’s suppositions.”

Wagner is his servant. The complaint is that the Devil knows what an undergraduate knows — and he is right.

He has built a perfect question-answering machine and discovered that a perfect question-answering machine returns the answers that already exist. The disappointment is not a flaw in the oracle. It is what an oracle is.

A-text, scene 6.

THE READING THIS BLOCK EXISTS FOR

The greatest disputant in Wittenberg finally meets someone who was present at the creation — and runs a quiz.

1

Five questions with known answers

Not one of them is a question Faustus could not have answered himself, and the Prologue has already told us he is “graced with doctor’s name” for exactly this material.

2

Asked to test, not to find out

The form is adjudication. He is checking whether Mephistopheles knows, and his complaint when the answers come is about the Devil’s standard, not about the cosmos.

3

The stakes are gone

He has the one interlocutor in the universe worth disputing with — an immortal eyewitness — and he converts him into a general-knowledge round.

Connor’s word for the quiz is “a comically debased version of the medieval disputation.” Marlowe stages the debasement, in a scene most editions treat as filler.

AND THEN THE ONE REAL QUESTION

FAUSTUS Tell me who made the world.

MEPHISTOPHELES I will not.

FAUSTUS Sweet Mephistopheles, tell me.

MEPHISTOPHELES Move me not, for I will not tell thee.

It is the only question with stakes

The first thing he asks all afternoon that is not a quiz item. The asker does not know the answer. Something turns on it. By Connor's definition this is the only disputation in the scene.

The refusal is not inability

Mephistopheles knows. He was there. He cannot say it because the answer is God, and naming God is the one thing a devil cannot do for you.

Faustus drops it in ten lines

He is distracted by a pageant and says "O, this feeds my soul!" The one locked door in the play, and he walks away from it to watch a show.

THE SUSPICION

Where does epistemopathy stop being useful?

1

It explains everything

Any behaviour can be redescribed as an appetite about knowing. A theory that cannot fail is not doing work. Ask of any application: what would the play have to contain for this reading to be wrong?

2

The vocabulary may be doing the arguing

Connor coins constantly — epistemopathy, epistemophobia, exopistemology, truthing. A new word can crystallise a real distinction, or it can supply the feeling of an argument without the argument.

3

It is a psychology without a subject

Faustus is a character in a play, written to be performed. Attributing an appetite structure to him may be a category error dressed as a reading, and the same goes for a trained model.

4

Somebody gave it 4/10

A reviewer called the prose “a deft combination of banal and ridiculous” and the terminology extraneous. Read the objection carefully: almost all of it is about style. Decide whether that is the same as being about the argument.

The skill, not the verdict

Separating “I dislike how this is written” from “this argument fails” is most of what intellectual maturity consists of, and it is harder than it sounds because bad prose really can hide a bad argument. Decide which one you are holding before you put it in an essay.

Jordan Penney, review of The Madness of Knowledge, PopMatters (4/10).

PART FOUR

Two plays with the same name

A-text against B-text

A revision we can read, because both versions survived.



THE TWO TEXTS

The 1616 quarto is not a correction. It is a rewrite.

A-text, 1604

1,485 lines
13 scenes

Printed eleven years after Marlowe's death. Shorter, bleaker, stranger, and the one you read.

B-text, 1616

+676 lines
−36 lines
20 scenes

Roughly a third longer. New comic business, a rival-pope subplot, an extended revenge on the heckling knight.

Which is Marlowe?

Disputed

Neither is simply his. A was printed after his death, B was expanded for a company that had paid for additions. Editors have argued both ways for a century.

The number that matters

Six hundred and seventy-six lines added, thirty-six removed. A reviser who only wanted to fix a text does not add a third of one. Somebody re-saw this play and decided it should mean something different — and today we can read the decision, because both versions survived. That almost never happens, and it is why we are spending fifty minutes on it.

Line and scene counts as standardly reported for the 1604 and 1616 quartos. Bevington and Rasmussen's Revels parallel-text edition prints both.

SIX PLACES TO LOOK

Find these in your edition · fifteen minutes, in pairs

	A-TEXT	B-TEXT
Act 5 opens differently	A: Faustus and the scholars.	B: adds Lucifer, Beelzebub and Mephistopheles, above, discussing the suffering to come.
Mephistopheles confesses	A: no such speech.	B: he claims he turned the pages of the Bible and led Faustus's eye.
The Angels return	A: they do not.	B: a new Good and Bad Angel scene, both agreeing on what is coming.
One auxiliary verb	A: "Never too late, if Faustus can repent."	B: "… if Faustus will repent."
The last line of the appeal	A: "O God, if thou wilt not have mercy on my soul…"	B: shifts toward "if my soul must suffer for my sin…"
The body	A: devils carry him off. No one sees anything.	B: the scholars return at dawn and find him torn limb from limb.

Readings as reported in standard A/B comparisons; verify each against your own parallel text — that verification is the exercise.

THE B-TEXT'S BIGGEST ADDITION

"'Twas I that, when thou wert i' the way to heaven,
Damn'd up thy passage; when thou took'st the book
To view the Scriptures, then I turn'd the leaves
And led thine eye."

Mephistopheles, B-text only, Act 5

What this does to scene 1

The misreading of Romans and Ezekiel — the half-verses, the dropped promise of mercy — stops being Faustus's misreading. A hand moved the page. In the A-text, the most damning thing in the play is a man's own careless eye.

What this does to the key question

Four lines convert the play from disappointment to corruption. The B-text Faustus is a man acted upon by an external agent. The A-text Faustus is a man who had everything and wanted parlour tricks. Same plot, opposite argument.

WHAT THE COMPARISON EARNS

The revision has a thesis

THE A-TEXT PLAY

A brilliant man buys omnipotence, cannot think what to do with it, spends it on applause, asks one real question, is refused, and is bored within ten lines. No one intervenes. No one watches him die. The horror is that the appetite was always this small.

Answers: it disappoints.

THE B-TEXT PLAY

A man is worked on by devils who turn the pages of his Bible, watched from above by three of them discussing his torment, warned by angels, and finally torn apart in a way the scholars can verify at dawn. The machinery of damnation is visible and it is external.

Answers: it corrupts.

Neither text is confused. Each is coherent. The B-text is what the A-text looks like after somebody decided the audience needed a villain other than the hero.

PART FIVE

What we are holding

Synthesis, the course so far, and the exit ticket



Forty minutes. Twenty on where this sits, ten on the rhyme, ten on paper.

WHERE THIS UNIT SITS

The same question, asked differently

Unit 1 · Pygmalion

He makes an image and it comes alive. Faustus conjures an image and kisses it and it takes his soul. Same wish, opposite grant — and Marlowe's version is the one that does not lie about what an image is.

Unit 2 · Frankenstein

Victor gets exactly what he asked for and is disgusted within a paragraph. Shelley asks what a maker owes. Marlowe asks something harsher: whether the wanting was ever worth honouring.

Unit 6 · Mode collapse

Twelve uses, three kinds, optimised for applause. You counted forty outputs last week and found twenty-two of one thing. This week you counted twelve and found the same shape in 1604.

Unit 9 · Connor again

The later chapters reach what he calls exopistemology — knowledge without a knower — and he links it directly to artificial intelligence. That is the chapter this whole course has been walking toward.

Someone wants a mind, gets an artefact, and has to decide what the difference was worth.

THE RHYME

We have built the thing Faustus bargained for.

Ask it anything. Receive a competent answer. Discover that competent answers to questions you already knew how to ask do not change your life.

Three things Marlowe gets right that the current discourse mostly misses

1. The oracle works. Nothing in this play fails technically — every answer is correct, every conjuring succeeds. The disappointment is downstream of the capability, not caused by a defect in it.
2. The failure is in the asking. What limits Faustus is the quality of his questions, and no amount of power improves that. He gets a quiz because he brought a quiz.
3. And the one real question is refused. There is a question the machine cannot answer, he finds it in ten minutes, and then he lets it go to watch a pageant. That is the part worth being afraid of.

SOURCES AND EDITIONS

Everything quoted today, and where to check it

Marlowe, Doctor Faustus, A-text (1604)

All Faustus quotations today. Folger Shakespeare Library, Early Modern English Drama edition (emed.folger.edu), which prints the 1604 quarto.

Marlowe, Doctor Faustus, B-text (1616)

The Act 5 Mephistopheles speech and the six comparison points. Any parallel-text edition prints both; Bevington and Rasmussen (Revels Student Editions) and Kastan (Norton Critical, two-text) are the usual classroom choices.

Steven Connor, The Madness of Knowledge

Reaktion Books, 2019. Introduction and chs. 1–2 for today. Quoted phrasings — epistemopathy, “the power of wanting that always seems to be at work in knowing,” the quiz as “a comically debased version of the medieval disputation” — are Connor’s own, several from his published account of the book rather than from the printed Introduction; check them against your copy.

Two things to verify, not trust

Two of the six A/B comparison points are contested in their details.