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“The Very Saddest Love Story I Ever Hope to Hear”:
Faustian Intertextuality in Kurt Vonnegut’s *The Sirens of Titan*

Kurt Vonnegut’s second novel, *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), is inundated with references to other literature, from the biblical to the classical to more modern texts such as *Alice in Wonderland*. Unsurprisingly, critics have mentioned, at least in passing, the significance of some of these references in *Sirens*. Many of the novel’s allusions are to texts that attempt to be all-encompassing in scope and theme—dealing with humans deciphering their place in a world controlled by forces bigger than themselves, probably most famously the character Malachi Constant’s adoption of the name Jonah and riding in a spaceship named *The Whale*. Vonnegut’s use of one classic text in this novel, however, seems to have remained unexplored. *The Sirens of Titan* abounds with Faustian references. Vonnegut seems to have seen this particular narrative as central to the concerns of *Sirens*. The points of comparison are as significant as the departures from the standard Faustian elements, and both will be examined in this paper. Exploring the Faustian overtones, specifically the general parallels to Part I of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust* will help illuminate postmodern intertextuality and enhance our understanding of Vonnegut’s seminal novel.

One might assume that Vonnegut acquired a knowledge of the great poet Goethe as a result of his German heritage. However, even though Vonnegut’s family was immensely proud of its German traditions and culture, at the same time several family members attempted to shut out a young Kurt Jr. from many aspects of that heritage due to suspicion and hatred of Germans around the time of World War I. Vonnegut later claimed that his family “‘resolved to raise me without acquainting me with the language or the literature or the music or the oral family

histories which my ancestors loved. They volunteered to make me ignorant and rootless as proof of their patriotism” (qtd. in Shields 25). Vonnegut did, however, take two years of high school German (Shields 29), which would often expose students to one of the most significant German authors. Regardless of his parents’ attempts to limit his exposure to German culture when he was young, apparently Vonnegut at some point became acquainted with Goethe’s most significant work, *Faust*, for the title of his 1961 novel, the follow-up novel to *Sirens*, is *Mother Night*, named after a spirit from an early scene in the play in which Faust first meets Mephistopheles (Goethe line 1352). Shields explains the reference to Goethe in *Mother Night*: “The title *Evil, Anyone?* was replaced in favor of *Mother Night*—the personification of darkness in Goethe’s *Faust*. . . . Mephistopheles, the evil spirit in *Faust*, defends himself with fiendish logic: there can be no light, he points out, without Mother Night giving birth to it” (171). So, like most readers of classic literature and as was the case for most liberal arts educated persons in general at that time, Vonnegut had exposure to Goethe’s central work; furthermore, he saw fit to use several of its key elements for his own purposes in *The Sirens of Titan*.

The Faustian connections in *Sirens* are not thorough and comprehensive, but there are a few overall patterns, mainly with the three main characters and with a few plot details. No character of course in *Sirens* makes a literal pact with Satan or sells his or her soul to a devil, nor does any character undergo a threat of being cast into hell. There are nevertheless other key commonalities that I want to establish. The three main characters of Winston Niles Rumfoord, Beatrice Rumfoord, and Malachi Constant roughly parallel the experiences of Mephistopheles, Margarete (or Gretchen, as she is referred to in the second half of in Goethe’s *Faust*, Part I), and Faust.

Winston Niles Rumfoord first of all shares two key Mephistophelean traits: prescience and ubiquity. Rather than being omniscient like God, Mephistopheles in Goethe's play is prescient, knowing many things beforehand. That is certainly the case for Rumfoord, as he arranges Malachi and Beatrice's "very saddest love story" (160). Early in Chapter 1, "The reports . . . in the glass case by the iron door . . . implied that Mrs. Rumfoord's husband could see the past and the future clearly, but they neglected to give examples of sights in either direction" (4-5). It becomes apparent and more significant that Rumfoord can either see into the future or at the very least is able to demonstrate extreme confidence regarding future events. Rumfoord, who is "something else again—morally, spatially, socially, sexually, and electrically" (16), has summoned Malachi to his mansion to inform him confidently that he is "to be mated to Rumfoord's wife on mars" (24). Rumfoord is confident for most of the novel that he is, in a Mephistophelean sense, prescient. Not only has he concocted the plan for Constant to impregnate Beatrice, but he is also "[t]he mastermind behind the Martian suicide" (174). Rumfoord plans that "Mars should lose the war—that Mars should lose it foolishly and horribly" (176). He thrives on the assumption of his prior knowledge, planning the complete mass suicide of Martians and creating The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, whose two main tenets are "Puny man can do nothing at all to help or please God Almighty, and Luck is not the hand of God" (183). Whereas Rumfoord confidently tells others that (if there is a God) God does not care about people, Rumfoord himself paradoxically proclaims the ability to "work the miracle of predicting, with absolute accuracy, the things that the future will bring" (183), and through much of the novel, except for its closing pages, one would have no reason to doubt him.

Rumfoord, usually with his dog Kazak, has the ability to "materialize . . . to appear out of thin air," and as such shares one of Mephistopheles's other main characteristics, that of ubiquity.

In Goethe's play Mephistopheles has the ability to travel rapidly and be many places quickly, having seeming omnipresence, yet he is not a fully omnipresent deity. Likewise Rumfoord is able to transport himself through "materializations." "Winston Niles Rumfoord and his dog Kazak existed as wave phenomena" and are able to take advantage of the "chrono-synclastic infundibula" to travel vast amounts of space, very often between Earth and Mars (8). In Chapter 12, however, "[a]n explosion on the Sun had separated man and dog. . . . Kazak had been sent ahead of his master on the great mission to nowhere and nothing" (300-01). Rumfoord and his dog arrive as "wave phenomena" in the final chapter (271), one in which they meet with Salo, and in which Rumfoord discovers that he is not the controller, but the controlled, in a universe without mercy.

The Sirens of Titan has one scene in particular that echoes a similarly important one in *Faust*. In Malachi Constant's first meeting with Winston Niles Rumfoord in the Rumfoord mansion in the first chapter of *Sirens*, Rumfoord slips Constant the photograph from which the novel's title is derived:

. . . It was no ordinary photograph, though its surface was glossy and its margins white.

Within the margins lay shimmering depths. The effect was much like that of a rectangular glass window in the surface of a clear, shallow, coral bay. At the bottom of that seeming coral bay were three women—one white, one gold, one brown. They looked up at Constant, begging him to come to them, to make them whole with love.

Their beauty was to the beauty of Miss Canal Zone as the glory of the Sun was to the glory of a lightning bug.

Constant sank into a wing chair again. He had to look away from all that beauty in order to keep from bursting into tears. (33-34)

This scene is pivotal for Malachi's future, for it is Rumfoord's plan to have Malachi Constant and Beatrice, Rumfoord's wife, have a child, named Chrono, together. Later we find out that this child is a consequence of Constant's raping Beatrice. Donald L. Lawler is in a way correct in

describing this scene as “another one of Vonnegut’s calculated letdowns” and the sirens as “symbols of Constant’s desire at the beginning of his odyssey for ultimate wish-fulfillment” (79); nevertheless, this episode in Constant’s life does propel him on to his adventures to coincide with Rumfoord’s plan. In Goethe’s *Faust*, Part I, there is a famous scene—similar to the one just discussed in *Sirens*—in which Mephistopheles reveals ideal beauty to Faust in the Witch’s Kitchen:

What am I seeing in this magic mirror?
A form whose beauty is divine!
O lend me, Love, your fleetest wings
and lead me to Elysium!
Alas, that when I leave this point
and venture any closer to her,
I see her only in a sort of haze!—
A picture of a woman of surpassing beauty!
Can any woman be so lovely?
Am I allowed to see, in this recumbent form,
the essence of all paradises?
Does earth contain its counterpart? (lines 2429-40)

The result of this vision of beauty in the Witch’s Kitchen scene is that Faust can now “see / the paragon of womanhood in person. / . . . / in every woman a Helen of Troy” (lines 2601-04). For Malachi Constant, his vision of beauty provided him by Rumfoord is a catalyst quite similar to Faust’s. Just as Faust pursues the objectively ordinary Margarete upon seeing ideal beauty in the Witch’s Kitchen scene, Malachi Constant, according to Winston Niles Rumfoord’s plan, has relations with the “rather plain” Beatrice after a vision of the beauty of the sirens (163).

Beatrice Rumfoord shares several characteristics of Goethe’s Margarete character. In Goethe’s play Mephistopheles cannot physically touch Gretchen because of her purity—“over that girl I have no power” says Mephistopheles to Faust (Goethe line 2626)—and in *Sirens* Winston Niles Rumfoord has not had sexual relations with Beatrice nor is that even desired in their very odd marriage of convenience. Perhaps even if Rumfoord were to desire Beatrice it

would not matter, for we know that early in the novel Rumfoord tells Constant that ““You can reproduce and I cannot”” (17). According to Rumfoord, ““when the hot-shot lieutenant-colonel [Malachi Constant] got to her there in the space ship bound for Mars, she was still a virgin”” (166). What the Mephistophelean Rumfoord cannot accomplish sexually with Bee he must have Malachi Constant accomplish, not that what the latter two have together has anything to do with romantic love. Rumfoord, like Mephistopheles, cannot even understand of the meaning of true love. Beatrice even blames the ““chrono-synclastic infundibula”” for ““kill[ing]”” Rumfoord’s ability to love (51). For all of Rumfoord’s apparent power and control, he must concoct a plan to have Malachi impregnate Beatrice to have the child Chrono.

In Goethe’s *Faust*, the character Margarete becomes the embodiment of what Goethe calls *das Ewig-weibliche*, or the “eternal womanly.” Margarete is not an objectively beautiful woman, but her simplicity, lack of education, and even homeliness make her an ideal in Goethe’s philosophy. As a result of seeing the vision of pure beauty in the Witch’s Kitchen scene, Faust is able to conceptualize Margarete as subjectively lovely. Then as the play progresses and Faust takes advantage of her, Margarete demonstrates an ideal goodness by the end of Part I. In *The Sirens of Titan*, Beatrice, as a Margarete parallel, is not very physically attractive either, yet by the end of the novel, in spite of her miserable experiences with Malachi, all of which have been to fulfill the plan of Winston Niles Rumfoord, she still displays a “grandeur within her” on the “Great Day of the Space Wanderer” in Chapter 10 that is quite similar to Margarete at the end of *Faust* (235): “But what brought the pilgrims to her booth and made them [“Malachi” dolls, religious icons] buy was her aura. The aura said unmistakably that Bee was meant for a far nobler station in life, that she was being an awfully good sport about being stuck where she was” (236). The novel ends, interestingly, with Malachi Constant’s best friend, Stony Stevenson,

whom Malachi had been forced to kill earlier, ready to take Malachi in a “golden space ship” to be with Beatrice in “Paradise,” where she “is already there, waiting for you” (326). As a comparison, Margarete goes to Heaven at the end of Part I of Goethe’s *Faust*; Faust at the end of Part II. In *Sirens*, the potential for eternal happiness seems tantalizingly close—““somebody up there likes you”” are Stony’s famous closing words of this novel—yet one must note this final brief scene is just a concoction of Salo’s. Malachi Constant has been hypnotized by a machine. Like everyone this novel, Malachi is simply being used again. Eternal paradise is no certainty in Vonnegut’s worldview.

The characteristics Malachi Constant shares with Faust are several. Most notably, Faust, the *ausnahme mensche*, or exceptional individual, suffers the tragedy of Titanism—that is, rather than serving, he struggles to be on par with God. It is true that on the surface Malachi Constant can hardly be considered to be undergoing such a struggle. He appears in Chapter 1 in a response to a summons by Winston Niles Rumfoord. Though this is Rumfoord’s summons, not Malachi’s seeking out help, it is important to note that whereas in Goethe’s *Faust*, the titular character has achieved all knowledge, seeing the vanity of scholastic achievement, Malachi Constant has achieved all earthly wealth, acquired through family inheritance from his father Noel Constant, and sees its vanity. In addition to acknowledging the vanity of earthly wealth and pleasure, as he becomes the victim in Rumfoord’s plan, he comes to have dissatisfaction with being a pawn in others’ control. When Malachi is on Mercury, he—now renamed “Unk”—“had come to regard his environment as being either malevolent or cruelly mismanaged. His response was to fight it with the only weapons at hand—passive resistance and open displays of contempt” (203). Boaz tries to prevent Malachi from fighting the powers that be and indicates that ““all I can do is be

friendly and keep calm and try and have a nice time till it's all over” (205), but Malachi in Faustian fashion has resolved to fight the system as best he can.

So how do to these Faustian intertextualities enhance our understanding of *Sirens* or perhaps adjust our interpretation of this novel? I will take Lawler's 1977 summation of this novel as fairly typical of traditional criticism of this text: “human history is absurd if we assume the existence of an objective, divine consciousness. . . . Vonnegut's intention in offering us this burlesque of metaphysics and theodicy is to ridicule mankind's obsession with finding an answer to the mystery of existence in superhuman agencies” (67). Lawler also asserts, “If Vonnegut is critical of metaphysics and theology, he is prepared to affirm that there are certain ethical absolutes” (68). A careful examination of the Faustian allusions in *Sirens* does not so much establish an entirely new interpretation as to reinforce or perhaps add nuances to the reading of *Sirens* as an anti-metaphysical treatise that nevertheless posits moral truths. We must not forget that Goethe's *Faust* likewise mocked traditional metaphysical ambitions of scholars while affirming general values of goodness. But would Vonnegut agree with Faust's famous explanation of his belief system that he expounds to Margarete?

Encompassing all,
sustaining all,
does He not hold, sustain
you, and me, and Himself?
. . .
And when I look into your eyes
does not all being press
upon your heart and mind,
an unseen presence stir,
visibly, beside you?
Imbue your heart with this immensity,
and when you wholly feel beatitude,
then call it what you will—
Happiness! Heart! Love! God!
I have not name to give it!
Feeling is everything,

name is but sound and smoke
that damp celestial ardor. (lines 3438-41, 3446-58)

Like Faust, commonly assumed to be a philosophical spokesperson for Goethe in these lines, Vonnegut would mock traditional religious or metaphysical schemes to explain humanity's existence. Vonnegut would certainly not be comfortable with the eclectic Romantic deity that Goethe posits, but as Lawler and the Vonnegut critical community to this day are well aware, this author is not without ethical precepts, though they are not derived from one stable understanding of a general metanarrative or deity.

Allusions to Goethe's *Faust* are potentially problematic. The most prominent troublesome aspect of Goethe is the author's infamous misogyny, an aspect of the great German author that is been duly noted by feminist critics. In Goethe's play *Margarete* undergoes what appears to be a quick change of character when seduced by Faust. Up until the seduction *Margarete* has been depicted as a pure, devout maiden, but her proclamation to Faust understandably seems, for some feminist critics at least, contrived for the plot: "Dearest, I only have to look at you, / and something makes me do whatever you desire" (lines 3517-18). In *Sirens*, *Beatrice*, like *Margarete*, appears to be there only for the plot, in a sense used by other characters, and by the author. It may even look like a more blatant case—*Beatrice* is after all raped, rather than tricked or seduced, on the space ship by *Malachi Constant*, an action for which *Constant* feels, in *Rumfoord's* words, "'wretched'" (163) (interestingly, the exact same emotion felt by *Faust* after his seduction of *Margarete*). Yet a closer examination may reveal that, in a sense, being used is just Vonnegut's point—all people are used, and *Beatrice* becomes a character who recognizes this important notion. As already stated, Vonnegut makes it clear in this novel that all attempts to find ultimate, all-encompassing meaning will come up empty handed and may even be dangerous to others, but there are still common values humans can

share. In the Epilogue (“Reunion with Stony”), Beatrice informs Constant that ““The worst thing that could possibly happen to anybody . . . would be not to be used for anything by anybody. . . . Thank you for using me”” (317). This is a lesson that Winston Niles Rumfoord learns as well, though it is a much tougher lesson for him to admit. After all, for most of the novel he has been in apparent control, yet he must come to the realization that Salo, a machine, has been in more control of his destiny. Though Beatrice becomes in a sense Vonnegut’s spokesperson for the idea that it may indeed be inevitable, or even best (?), to be used for others’ purposes, Vonnegut’s portrayal of Beatrice, like Goethe’s of Margarete, remains at least partially problematical.

To conclude, I would like to indicate that although this paper has established connections to one of the so-called masterpieces of the western literary tradition, *Sirens* nevertheless demonstrates postmodern intertextuality. Vonnegut has after all used the genre of science fiction, not a genre associated with high art. In his famous essay concerning intertextuality, “From Work to Text” (1971), Roland Barthes indicates that “the Text does not stop at (good) Literature; it cannot be contained in a hierarchy. . . . What constitutes the Text is, on the contrary (or precisely), its subversive force in respect of the old classifications” (1367). Intertextuality posits the lack of closure in a Text, in contrast to the closed nature of a Work, and the concept of intertextuality likewise allows for a breaking of all the supposed boundaries between genres and any distinction between “high” versus “low” literature. Tamás Bényei argues that Vonnegut employs science fiction in *Sirens* so that “the text may be reinscribed into high culture as a mock heroic exposure of the vanity and futility of rivalling textual versions of the universe and the fate of human beings in it” (74). It does not hurt that in his use of science fiction Vonnegut also alludes to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe—a writer of high culture if there ever was one!—to reinforce the postmodern, intertextual nature of his seminal novel, *The Sirens of Titan*.

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