

**Faustian Bargain in
Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer***

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Abstract

According to the famous *Faustbuck*, published in Frankfurt by Johann Spies in 1587, the Doctorate of Divinity that the German scholar Faust holds does not satisfy his insatiable thirst “to know the secrets of heaven and earth;” therefore, he, using magic, has recourse to the Devil and strikes a written-and-signed-with-blood bargain with him according to which the Devil has Faust’s high aspirations and desires accomplished. But Faust must hand his soul over to the Devil when the term of the bargain expires. It can be said that the Faustian bargain launches from this Lutheran book to be one of the most aspiring legends in European culture. To say nothing of the cinematic and musical works it inspires, many writers have adopted the Faust legend in their literary products. They have done some amendments to the original story in agreement with their genres, opinions, and times. Charles Robert Maturin (1782–1824) manages to tame the motif of the Faustian bargain, which is encircled by legendary and superstitious anecdotes, in his masterpiece *Melmoth the Wanderer*. He comes up with a new change in the traditional story of Faust to achieve certain aims of his own.

This paper is a part of an M.A. thesis entitled “Faustian Bargain in Irish Fiction: A Study in Charles Robert Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” prepared at the University of Al-Qadisiya, College of Education, Department of English.

Keywords: Faust, bargain, Maturin, Melmoth, Wanderer, victim, Devil, soul, Catholic, exchange, proposal.

In August, 1820, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (henceforth *MW*) was published, and it remains today the one work for which Charles Robert Maturin (1782–1824), an Irish Protestant clergyman, playwright, and novelist, is best known.¹ Maturin bases his masterpiece *MW* on the Faust legend in a time when a number of other Romantic authors have already treated this legend in a variety of popular works, most notably M. G. Lewis’s (1775-1818) *The Monk* (1796), William Godwin’s (1756–1836) *St. Leon* (1799), and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s (1749–1832) *Faust I* (1806). Though his adaptation of the story of Faust undoubtedly owes much to these works, as well as to other works such as the Book of Job,

the English *Faustbuch* (1587), Christopher Marlowe's (1564–1593) *Doctor Faustus* (1592), and John Milton's (1608–1674) *Paradise Lost* (1667), yet *MW* stands as Maturin's most original work because he has chosen to examine the Faust legend from a point of view different from that taken by these other, more traditional, presentations of the Faust story.² Robert E. Lougy points out that Maturin in *MW* "creates a unique work of art sharing only the broadest and most general similarities with its sources."³ At any rate, Maturin has adapted in *MW* a story of contemporary interest to achieve his own purposes.⁴

MW consists of six interwoven tales, set in Ireland, Spain, other parts of the Continent, and even India. The tales are centred on the damned Melmoth and his five intended victims. As it is revealed in the last pages of the novel, Melmoth barter his soul with the Devil in exchange for one hundred and fifty years of youth and supernatural powers. But, he can emancipate himself from eternal torment if he finds a substitute victim, one who will succumb to his temptations, accept the terms of his Faustian bargain, and exchange destinies with him.⁵ Thus, references⁶ aver that Melmoth is Faust and Mephistopheles in one, traversing the earth in search of his reprieve. In his preface to the 1820 version of *MW*, Maturin explains the theme upon which he chose to build his story, the theme which is in part responsible for the originality of his adaptation.⁷ He states that "the hint" of this novel

. . . was taken from a passage in one of my Sermons, which . . . I shall here take the liberty to quote. The passage is this.

"At this moment is there one of us present, however we may have departed from the Lord, disobeyed his will, and disregarded his word—is there one of us who would, at this moment, accept all that man could bestow, or earth afford, to resign the hope of his salvation?—No, there is not one—not such a fool on earth, were the enemy of mankind to traverse it with the offer!"

This passage suggested the idea of "Melmoth the Wanderer."

The Reader will find that idea developed in the following pages, with what power or success he is to decide.⁸

In developing this theme, Maturin chose to twist the Faust legend somewhat. While most treatments of the legend are concerned with the Faust figure's decision to exchange his soul for knowledge and his subsequent realization of his tragic error, *MW* presents the reader with a figure who has already given up his soul and learned to regret his decision well before the novel begins. Further, Maturin varies his story on "such a fool on earth" by adding two things to the Faustian bargain Melmoth strikes with the Devil. First, the Wanderer is allowed to seek out someone to take his place. Second, Melmoth cannot escape his earthly torment by calling upon Satan to take him. He is bound out to live his

hellish existence on earth fully—for a period of 150 years beyond the time of his natural death.⁹

“The story which Maturin thus develops,” says Judson Taylor Monroe “is that of Melmoth’s search for a victim, for some other fool—faced with torture, death, or despair—who will relinquish his soul for relief and thus release the Wanderer from both this bond and his extended but unhappy life.” At first blush at least, this is not a mainly difficult tale; in execution, however, “it is the most intricate of Maturin’s novels” and has often bewildered critics who have tried to explain its power to fascinate readers. Monroe points out that *MW* is “difficult because it is concerned with a subtle analysis of both the Wanderer and his intended victims—and analysis which, in the end, is designed to make clear the theme of the book.”¹⁰

MW has a story-within-a-story structure and is framed by the story of John Melmoth’s attendance at his uncle’s deathbed in 1816. The stories contained within this frame narrative vary in length and complexity. First comes the tale of an Englishman from Restoration England named Stanton, who learns of Melmoth while travelling in Spain in 1677, encounters him after four years in London but refuses his Faustian bargain to escape from the lunatic asylum to which he has been confined by a greedy relative in exchange of Stanton’s soul. When free, Stanton spends the rest of his life fruitlessly trying to locate Melmoth once more.¹¹ John has read Stanton’s tale in a manuscript handed over by Stanton himself to the Melmoths (M, 1: 356).

Next comes the story of Alonzo de Moncada, an illegitimate son of strictly-Catholic parents, whose resistance to monastic life involves him in a series of adventures and adversities.¹² This tale is told by Alonzo himself to John while the former resides in the Melmoths’ castle after surviving from a shipwreck (M, 1: 109). As Alonzo narrates, the convent authority “accused [him] of sorcery, fratricide, and plunging an illustrious and affectionate family in despair” (M, 2: 108). Melmoth visits him in the Inquisitional prison and offers him an escape in exchange for his soul. Alonzo says, “while proving to me that he had the power of effecting my escape from the Inquisition, [he] proposed to me that incommunicable condition which I am forbid to reveal” (M, 2: 115-6). This “condition” reminds John of “the *incommunicable condition* proposed to Stanton in the mad-house” (M, 2: 116). Muriel E. Hammond points out that Alonzo rejects Melmoth’s Faustian bargain even when “death at the stake is the alternative.”¹³

Embedded in Alonzo’s story is that of Isidora, which is narrated, with the stories embedded within it, to Alonzo by a Jew named Adonijah. Isidora is separated from her Catholic Spanish family as an infant, survives on an Indian island where she is worshiped as a goddess. She

becomes attached to Melmoth the Wanderer, whom she encounters again when she is finally returned by a ship Captain to Spain as a young woman. She secretly marries him and conceives a child.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Isidora is like Goethe's Gretchen. She is actually the Gretchen-figure of *MW*. Syndy M. Conger points out that Isidora is, like Gretchen, "passionate, gently aggressive, and morally complex." Nevertheless, she is "a unique creation of Maturin's mind with Gretchen in her blood."¹⁵ Melmoth causes her brother's death (M, 3: 296), her infant's death (M, 3: 313), and her own eventual death (M, 3: 318). In her final days in prison, Isidora refuses Melmoth's Faustian bargain to save her from her murky situation while she must relinquish her soul to him because she knows that he is an agent of the Devil.¹⁶

Embedded in Isidora's story are two more; that of the Guzman's family and that of Elinor and John Sandal. The story of Guzman family is about the German Protestant family of Walberg who is nearly torn apart by alternating bouts of poverty and wealth in Catholic Spain.¹⁷ Walberg, his wife, and their children are deprived from their lawful inheritance due to a conspiracy of the Catholic Church and the Court.¹⁸ While begging for their food by the meanest ways in Spain, Melmoth appears and proposes a Faustian bargain to Walberg according to which he provides an escape from poverty for Walberg and his family while Walberg must give his soul to Melmoth. However, Walberg refuses the Faustian proposal despite the fact that, he, unlike other intended victims of Melmoth, comes closer to accepting this Faustian proposal due to the fact that he is responsible not only for himself but for his entire family.¹⁹

Next comes the story of Elinor and John Sandal, which is narrated by Melmoth himself to Isidora's father, Francisco. Elinor and John Sandal are Protestant lovers, who, shortly after the Restoration of Charles II to the throne, are separated by John Sandal's mother. The mother, named the widow Sandal, wants her son to marry another for the sake of an inheritance.²⁰ While death has stolen everybody around her from her family leaving, temporarily, her invalid lover John Sandal, Elinor, under the heavy impact of the material pain of poverty and the spiritual pain of her melancholy love, refuses Melmoth's Faustian help. He offers her a solution to her ordeal while she has to hand her soul over to him. She discloses to a neighbouring clergyman "the awful proposal, and the scarcely less awful name of the unholy intruder" (M, 3: 255). The story closes with the tragic death of both lovers (M, 3: 262).

When Alonzo utters the end of Elinor's story to John, Melmoth enters the room. At this moment in particular, the reader has become so completely familiar with the Wanderer and so thoroughly fascinated by him that his presence in the real world of John's estates is accepted without a thought. Reality and vision thus merge that the impact of the

last scenes becomes quite intense.²¹ However, when John and Alonzo recognize Melmoth, they sink into a “delirious terror.” After a death-like silence, Melmoth addresses them,

“Mortals—you are here to talk of my destiny and of the events which it has involved. That destiny is accomplished, I believe, and with it terminate those events that have stimulated your wild and wretched curiosity. I am here to tell you of both!—I—I—of whom you speak, am here!—Who can tell so well of Melmoth the Wanderer as himself, now that he is about to resign that existence which has been the object of terror and wonder to the world?— [John], you behold your ancestor . . . before you” (M, 3: 323-4).

Then, Melmoth declares that “his wanderings are over” and confesses his guilt, (M, 3: 326) unlike Godwin’s St. Leon who asserts his innocence with aristocratic arrogance.²² He reveals the truth of his Faustian bargain with the Devil, some of the favours bestowed upon him according to which, and his failure to convince a substitute victim to exchange destinies with him. His confession goes as follows,

“I obtained from the enemy of souls a range of existence beyond the period allotted to mortality—a power to pass over space without disturbance or delay, and visit remote regions with the swiftness of thought—to encounter tempests without the hope of their blasting me, and penetrate into dungeons, whose bolts were as flax and tow at my touch” (M, 3: 326-7).

““This power,”” he continues,

“enabled [me] to tempt wretches in their fearful hour of extremity, with the promise of deliverance and immunity, on condition of their exchanging situations with me. . . . No one has ever exchanged destinies with Melmoth the Wanderer. *I have traversed the world in the search, and no one, to gain that world, would lose his own soul!*—Not Stanton in his cell—nor you, [Alonzo], in the prison of the Inquisition—nor Walberg, who saw his children perishing with want—nor—another” (M, 3: 327).

Melmoth here declares evidently that he is permitted only “to tempt wretches.” This declaration aligns him with the Devil of the Book of Job. Fowler points out that “Maturin draws richly and creatively” from the Book of Job; “the tale of the archetypal sufferer undergoing temptation, which is the most significant subtext to his collection of narratives about suffering and temptation.”²³ In the Biblical text, Job is an innocent sufferer tempted by Satan to curse God. It is important to note that Satan is permitted by God to tempt Job in order to prove Job’s righteousness. Similarly, Maturin only allows Melmoth to tempt the righteous, the Job-like figures.²⁴

Fowler states that Melmoth's intended victims, who represent "a host of Jobs" from "all ranks of society and with a variety of religious beliefs and cultural backgrounds," all endure intense misery yet maintain their faith even when near despair. They are the righteous, who are tempted by Melmoth to blaspheme and to renounce God, and the Jobs of later generations, whom Melmoth is exclusively constrained to tempt. Thus, Melmoth is remarkably not stupid in selecting his targets. Many characters in the novel, such as Stanton's relative who put him in the madhouse; the monks of the convent who torment Alonzo; Francisco; the priests who conspire against Walberg's family; the surgeon-barber who makes Walberg's son, Everhard, swap his blood for food; the widow Sandal; and others, will make easy victims for him. But, as Fowler believes, those characters "have already bargained away their souls." In this regard, it is useful to cite Melmoth's contemptuous dismissal of Francisco as a potential victim for Satan,²⁵ "'You!—oh, there's metal more attractive! Satan himself, however depraved, has a better taste than to crunch such a withered scrap of orthodoxy as you between his iron teeth'" (M, 3: 160). Fowler concludes that Melmoth's errand "is to seek out those who, like Job, have maintained their integrity in prosperity and then to test their steadfastness in the face of adversity. Like Job's Satan, Melmoth fails to part his victims from God not because he is weak, but because they are strong."²⁶

Nevertheless, after his confession, Melmoth asks John and Alonzo to quit the room so that he can repose especially after "his appointed period of 150 years" has expired (M, 3: 327). He sleeps profoundly and, in a foreshadowing to his fate, he dreams of Hell consuming him (M, 3: 327-30). The next day, John and Alonzo, like the students of Faust of the *Faustbuch* who were frightened to look into their master's room,²⁷ do not "dare to approach the door till about noon." They enter it "slowly and irresolutely." They find Melmoth "sleeping in his chair." When they approach, he half-starts up (M, 3: 331). They notice that "the lines of extreme age were visible in every feature. His hairs were as white as snow, his mouth had fallen in, the muscles of his face were relaxed and withered" (M, 3: 332). Like Faust of the *Faustbuch* who, after revealing his Faustian bargain with the Devil, bids his students farewell and enters his room to meet his fate,²⁸ Melmoth asks John and Alonzo to quit the room again, saying, "Leave me, I must be alone for the few last hours of my mortal existence. . . . Whatever noises you hear in the course of the awful night that is approaching, come not near this apartment, at peril of your lives" (M, 3: 332).

At night, John and Alonzo hear sounds coming from the room of Melmoth. "These noises were of the most mixed and indescribable kind. They could not distinguish whether they were the shrieks of supplication,

or the yell of blasphemy” (M, 3: 333). Similar to Faust’s cries which do not stop until it is day,²⁹ Melmoth’s noises stop towards morning. John and Alonzo enter the room again, “it was empty—not a vestige of its last inhabitant was to be traced within.” In an allusion to the presence of Satan who came through the coastal line the previous night, they trace footsteps “of a person who had been walking in damp sand or clay” till they ascend a “precipice which overhung the sea.” They notice, “through the furze that clothed this rock, almost to its summit, there was a kind of track as if a person had dragged, or been dragged, his way through it a down-trodden track, over which no footsteps but those of one impelled by force had ever passed” (M, 3: 334-5). It is apparent that the Devil dragged Melmoth and Melmoth was struggling to free himself. “Maturin here,” says Monroe, “wraps his vision of Melmoth’s awful . . . fate in a cloak of ‘real’ and concrete details.” He scrupulously develops his scene, mentioning the cottagers, describing the process by which John and Alonzo follow the track through the moist grass and heather, and then he adds the suggestion of the supernatural. In a word, Maturin adds “a veneer of the supernatural to a carefully realistic description.”³⁰ However, like Lewis’s Faust figure, Ambrosio, Melmoth seems to be dashed by the Devil on the coastal rocks. Kennedy points out that the end of Melmoth “is a variation of the fate of Ambrosio in *The Monk*, but Maturin handles it with an artistry that Lewis lacked.”³¹

What remains from the Wanderer is “the handkerchief which [he] had worn about his neck the preceding night.” John and Alonzo pick up this “last trace of the Wanderer!” They exchange “looks of silent and unutterable horror” and return home (M, 3: 335). However, Melmoth’s efforts to find a substitute victim appear to be in vain. Neither Stanton, nor Alonzo, nor Walberg, nor Elinor, nor Isidora accept to exchange destinies with him, and the expiration of his 150-year hourglass ends the novel.³²

Now, it can be said that Maturin attempts to make the experience of reading *MW*, within the formally realistic context which he establishes for his story, as nearly approximate the experience of an actual vision or dream as it is possible to do in a work of fiction, thus giving *MW* a psychological validity along with the illusion of verisimilitude. He does this, primarily, by weaving his tales together so that the reader loses all sense of time and place and by intensifying his characters’ experiences with Melmoth so that, soon, neither they nor the reader can distinguish between what is really happening to them and what is merely a function of their imagination. However, the power of *MW* to fascinate its readers can be explained in terms of its interrelated construction, its development of a realistic context for an imaginative experience, its intense and detailed analysis of the ordeals of Melmoth’s intended victims, its

cumulative development of the fate of the Wanderer, and its vividly conveyed imagery.³³

To sum up, Melmoth the Wanderer, the seventeenth-century scholar, yearns for some privileges which are beyond his human reach. He conjures up the Devil by his magic and strikes an explicit Faustian bargain with him according to which he gives up his soul in exchange for occult knowledge, supernatural powers, and an extra of 150 years of lifetime. Though the Devil does not permit him to quit his extended lifetime until it is expired, yet he allows him to find a substitute victim to exchange destinies with him. However, Melmoth fails in his demoniac errand and returns home to meet his fate. But in the Wanderer's span of 150 years of traversing the world, Maturin creates for himself a good room to pass his opinions on psychological, social, political, and religious issues.

Maturin attempts to prove that evil does not necessarily exist outside man, embodied in the Devil. He propounds that evil may exist inside man, elucidating that the ordeals of Melmoth's intended victims are caused by other fellow humans who do evil not because the Devil instigates them but because they have evil buried within the recesses of their psyche. "That man is his own devil," says Conger, "is the central insight Maturin wishes to convey in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, and it is implicit in his half-Faustian, half-Mephistophelean villain-hero."³⁴

Maturin also attempts to attract the attention of his readers to some social problems. He talks about the abject poverty of the Walbergs and the later-poverty of Elinor, the greed of Stanton's relative and of the widow Sandal, in addition to inequality and injustice that all of Maturin's five protagonists suffer from on the hands of different institutions such as family, Church, and law.

In the same way, Maturin comments on some historically recorded political events and their impact on their contemporary individual and society respectively. He speaks of the destructive influence of the English Civil War upon the Mortimers and its role in sending people to madhouses. He also speaks of the English Reformation, the Restoration, the European colonization of India, and the English invasion of Ireland by Oliver Cromwell where the native Irish are exiled and their lands are confiscated. If the novel is read as a historical and political allegory, then Melmoth stands for the landlords of the Protestant Ascendancy who have sold their country, Ireland, in accordance to a Faustian bargain, represented by the 1802 union with Britain, in order to gain titles and possessions.

At last, Maturin criticizes the sectarian prejudices against Protestants especially in the tale of the Walbergs. He also lashes severely upon the heavy hand of the Catholic Church especially in the form of the

Spanish Inquisition. In the tales of Isidora, Alonzo, and the Walbergs in particular, the anti-Catholic Maturin delineates an awful image of the atrocities of the monks, priests, Inquisitors, and Catholics in general that exceed those of Satan and his agents and that even Melmoth, being an agent of Satan, feels shame to commit.

NOTE

- (1) Robert E. Lougy, *Charles Robert Maturin* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1975), 70-1.
- (2) Judson Taylor Monroe, *Tragedy in the Novels of the Reverend Charles Robert Maturin* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 151
- (3) Lougy, 71.
- (4) Monroe, 151.
- (5) Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 99.
- (6) Syndy M. Conger, *Matthew G. Lewis, Charles Robert Maturin and the German* (New York: Arno Press Inc., 1980), 164. See also; Donna Heiland, *Gothic and Gender: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 49; Veronica M. S. Kennedy, "Myth and the Gothic Dream: C. R. Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*," *Pacific Coast Philology* 4 (Apr., 1969): 42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1316542> (accessed October 31, 2012); Kreilkamp, 99.
- (7) Monroe, 151.
- (8) Charles Robert Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Company, 1820), iii-x. All further references are taken from the three-volume-without-preface version, Charles Robert Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1892) where some misprints in the four-volume text of 1820 are corrected; henceforth, these references are referred to parenthetically as (M, volume number: page number). All italics in the quotations cited here are Maturin's.
- (9) Monroe, 152.
- (10) *Ibid.*, 152-3.
- (11) Heiland, 49-50.
- (12) *Ibid.*, 50.
- (13) Muriel E. Hammond, "C. R. Maturin and *Melmoth the Wanderer*," *English* 11, no. 63 (1956): 100. <http://english.oxfordjournals.org/content/11/63/97-b.short> (accessed November 15, 2012).
- (14) Heiland, 50.
- (15) Conger, 170, 190.
- (16) *Ibid.*, 185.
- (17) Heiland, 50.
- (18) John Lees, "The Wanderer's Guilt-Burden" (PhD diss., University of Wollongong, 2004), 225.
- (19) Jerry Jennings Alexander, "Power and Identity in Three Gothic Novels: *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *Caleb Williams*, and *Melmoth the Wanderer*" (PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 2011), 177.
- (20) Heiland, 50.
- (21) Monroe, 193.
- (22) Lees, 199.
- (23) Kathleen Fowler, "Hieroglyphics in Fire: *Melmoth the Wanderer*," *Studies in Romanticism* 25, no. 4 (Winter, 1986): 526. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25600620> (accessed October 31, 2012).
- (24) Lees, 221-2
- (25) Fowler, 526-8.
- (26) *Ibid.*, 528.
- (27) Rose, 206.
- (28) *Ibid.*, 203.
- (29) *Ibid.*, 205-6.
- (30) Monroe, 195.
- (31) Kennedy, 45.

(32)Ashley Marshall, "Melmoth Affirmed: Maturin's Defense of Sacred History," *Studies in Romanticism* 47, no. 2 (Summer, 2008): 123. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25602138> (accessed October 31, 2012).

(33)Monroe, 195-6, 198-200.

(34)Ibid., 184-5

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الخلاصة

بحسب كتاب فوست الشهير الذي نشره جوهان سبايز في فرانكفورت سنة ١٥٨٧ لم تشبع دكتوراه اللاهوت التي حملها العالم الألماني فوست توفقه النهم "المعرفه اسرار الأرض والسماء". لذا لجأ الى استخدام السحر والى الشيطان وعقد معه صفقة دونها ووقعها بدمه يحقق الشيطان على وفقها طموحاته و رغباته الواسعة. لكن على فوست ان يسلم روحه للشيطان بعد انتهاء مدة الصفقة. يمكن القول ان الصفقة الفاوستية هذه قد انطلقت من هذا الكتاب اللوثري لتكون واحدة من الاساطير الأكثر الهاماً في الثقافة الغربية. وبصرف النظر عن الاعمال السينمائية والموسيقية التي الهمتها هذه الأسطورة، فقد تبني الكثير من الكتاب اسطورة فوست في نتاجاتهم الأدبية حيث قامو بأجراء بعض التعديلات عليها بما يتلائم مع الجنس الادبي لاعمالهم و آرائهم و عصورهم. أستطاع جارلز روبرت ماترن (1782-1824) ان يروض ثيمة الصفقة الفاوستية التي تُحيطها الكثير من الحكايات الأسطورية والخرافية في رائعته (*ملموث الجوال*) حيث جاء بتغيير جديد في قصة فوست التقليدية ليحقق غايات معينه خاصه به. هذا البحث مستل من رسالة ماجستير بعنوان «الصفقة الفاوستية في الرواية الأيرلندية: دراسة في (*ملموث الجوال*) لجارلز روبرت ماترن و (*صورة بورين غري*) لأوسكار وايلد» مقدمة الى جامعة القادسية ، كلية التربية ، قسم اللغة الانكليزية.