Richard Westall (1765-1836), *Faust and Lilith (Faust preparing to waltz with the young Witch at the Festival of the Wizards and Witches in the Hartz Mountains),* 1831

Oil on canvas
97 ¾ by 68 ½ inches (248 x 173 cm.)

Provenance: Westall's estate sale, Phillips Son & Neale, London, May 9, 1837, no. 611;
sale Bonham's, London, 1968;
W. A. Martin and Brian Sewell, London;
sold to Peter Langan, London 1972;
Langan's Restaurant, London, until 2012.

Exhibitions: Royal Academy, Somerset House, London, 1831, no. 33.
Paintings by Old Masters and English Artists, W. A. Martin and Brian Sewell, London, November 24, 1970 - January 2, 1971, no. 19.

Literature: M. Passavant, *Tour of a German Artist to England*, London, 1836, (reprint 1978), vol. 1, p. 232.
Algernon Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts: A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and their work from its foundation in 1769 to 1904*, London, 1905 (reprint 1970), vol. 4, p. 230.

Note: Richard Westall, whose brother William was also a painter and engraver, moved from his native Hertford to London in 1772 and first apprenticed with an engraver on silver. He began his studies at the Royal Academy School of Arts in 1785. He became an Associate Member of the Academy in 1792 and was elected an Academician on February 10, 1794. Although he had success as a book illustrator, Westall exhibited paintings annually at the Academy until his death. He treated nearly every type of subject from religious and historical scenes and landscapes to portraits of distinguished individuals such as Milton, Byron, and Nelson. His style in this last field was similar to that of Sir Thomas Lawrence with whom he shared a house. But Westall was also considered an outstanding artist of the picturesque and chose to paint and illustrate many scenes derived from famous literature including Homer, the Bible, Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, Lord Byron, and Sir Walter Scott. Although he suffered financial reversals late in life and had to sell his valuable collection of paintings, he did become in 1827 the drawing-master of the future Queen Victoria. As the official history of the Royal Academy noted, "the beautiful drawings made by our gracious Sovereign and her refined taste in art, evince that good use was made of the instruction which Westall was able to render his Royal pupil."

In 1831 Westall exhibited at the Royal Academy two large paintings derived from the text of Goethe's *Faust*. The first was described as "Margaret at Church, tormented by the Evil One," and the second as "Faust preparing to dance with the young Witch at the Festival of Wizards and Witches in the Hartz Mountains." Unfortunately the first subject has disappeared, but the present work attests to both Westall's originality and knowledge of contemporary cultural trends.

Goethe, who, at his death in 1832, was called in the English press “the most celebrated literary man of modern times,” published his drama *Faust* in 1808. When his *Memoirs* had been published in English in 1824, *The Morning Post* inquired, “Who has not read

his singular and harrowing *Faust*?" And at the time Westall came to paint his scenes from it, the work was described as a "wild and fearful drama." *Faust* had become something of an international phenomenon, inspiring many other art forms. In 1816 both the major German painter Peter Cornelius (1784-1867) and the German illustrator Moritz von Retzsch produced a series of prints taken from scenes in Goethe's drama (figs. 1 and 2). Retzsch's "outlines," as they were known, were then engraved by Henry Moses and published in 1821 and 1832 in an English edition. Both of these German artists did not illustrate the scene of Faust dancing with the Witches, but rather, in the one case Faust and Mephistopheles surrounded by demons and creatures in the mountain setting, and in the other they are seen standing in the midst of the wild orgy but observing the appearance of Margaret in the background.

It was the great poet Percy Bysshe Shelley who first translated key parts of *Faust*, including the Walpurgisnacht in the Hartz Mountains, for an English audience. This was published as "May-Day Night" first in a journal of 1822 and then in the volume *Posthumous Poems* prepared by his widow in 1824. According to a contemporary review of this, "Mr. Shelley from kindred genius and associations was more equal to the task than any man on earth, and did this volume contain nothing else, the world of thought and imagination would exclaim, 'All hail.'" What was supposed to be the first full English translation was made by Lord Francis Leveson Gower in 1823, but it was poorly done and left untranslated many sections, including the Walpurgis Night scene, so it was excoriated by Goethe and others. Gower's second edition of his Faust translation, now complete, was published in 1825. In May of that same, "a Romantic Drama with Music" by various composers entitled *Faustus* was presented at the Drury-Lane Theatre. This was a pastiche using characters from Goethe's *Faust* but a whole different plot. The famous actor Mr. Terry both spoke the Prologue and played the role of Mephistopheles. This would have been of little significance if the great French artist Eugène Delacroix had not seen one of the performances. It inspired him to read the original in French and to produce in 1828 one of his earliest Romantic masterpieces, a series of lithographs for a French translation of Goethe's *Faust*. But Delacroix, following Cornelius and Retzsch, also did not illustrate the scene of Faust dancing, but he chose instead the more ghoulish subject of Faust and Mephistopheles at the Walpurgisnacht fest observing the specter of the deceased Margaret (fig. 3). Also in 1828, The Literary Institution in London presented two free lectures by a German expert on "Goethe's celebrated and magnificent allegory – *Faust*." Then portions of an opera based on *Faust* written by the popular composer Louis Spohr were performed in London in 1830 and 1831. Later a ballet derived from the same source was also staged there in 1833.

Thus Westall, who was apparently the first English artist to treat the Faust story, had a number of sources on which to draw for inspiration when he came to paint his large canvas. It is Gower's translation which is credited as the source of Westall's scenes in the Royal Academy catalogue, but the more poetic version by Shelley may also have been known to him, so here follows the translation of the relevant passage by both:

Shelley:

Faust: What is that yonder?

Mephistopheles: Mark her well. It is Lilith.

Faust: Who?

Mephistopheles: Lilith, the first wife of Adam.
Beware of her fair hair, for she excels
All women in the magic of her locks;
And when she winds them round a young man's neck,

She will not ever set him free again.

Faust: There sit a girl and an old woman -- they
Seem to be tired with pleasure and with play.

Mephistopheles: There is no rest to-night for any one;
When one dance ends another is begun;
Come, let us to it. We shall have rare fun.

[Faust Dances and Sings with a Girl, and Mephistopheles with an old woman]

Gower:

Faust: What female form is that?

Mephistopheles: Remark her well:
Lilith her name, first wife of him who fell –
Your parent Adam. Look that you beware
Her glancing toilette and her flowing hair:
If with that guise the sorceress lure
The passing youth she holds him sure.

Faust joins the dance.

There is thus a bit of confusion or ambiguity in the text as to whether Faust actually dances with Lilith or with a different young witch. In either case, Westall was clearly intrigued by the subject and sought to make Faust's partner the most seductive of women. Other aspects of his painting also adhere to information supplied in the original text, most especially the musical back drop against which the scene of unbridled lovemaking takes place. As related by Mephistopheles in Shelley's version:

A sound of song
beneath the vault of Heaven is blown!
...The witches are singing!
The torrent of a raging wizard song
Streams the whole mountain along.
...See yonder, round a many-coloured flame
A merry club is huddled altogether;...
I hear them tune their instruments -- one must
Get used to this damned scraping.
...An hundred bonfires burn in rows, and they
Who throng around them seem innumerable;
Dancing and drinking, jabbering, making love;
Now tell me, friend,
What is there better in the world than this

Westall derives from this a whole raucous orchestra performing in the glowing light at the upper left above dancing revelers. The painter freely invented such aspects of the composition. Certain details, like the plumed beret for Mephistopheles, he might have derived from either Retzsch's or Delacroix's illustrations. Likewise the prominent foreground presence of the snakes, salamanders, and snail described in Goethe's text are also evident in those sources. But Westall, adhering again more closely to the original source, also included an owl and a bat to enhance the macabre setting. In addition, while not making it his chief subject, as had Delacroix, Westall indicates the next key incident of the text -- the disturbing apparition of Margaret to Faust -- by placing her in a

penumbra of light just visible above the bat wing-like veil of Lilith at the upper right edge of the painting.

To achieve his composition, Westall made a detailed preparatory sketch (fig. 4). This focuses on the close proximity of the two central figures, their two profiles suggestively touching. In critiques of Westall, it was rightly noted that "one may always discern the artist by the expression of his figures' eyes," and that is certainly the case here. To indicate Lilith's seductive power over the human, she is placed standing on a rock, so that she seems to tower over and be about to envelop Faust. The crux of the painting is Faust, in all his elaborate well-painted finery including brilliant red leggings, set against the white, otherworldly nudity of the beautiful witch. In keeping with the text, Westall emphasizes her elaborate tresses. Cast in shadows, Mephistopheles, wrapped in a great cloak, observes the attempted seduction with glowing red eyes.

One of the criticisms of Westall was that he often repeated his figure types, and here the Faust is certainly much like his King Henry IV (fig. 5). And he is also not too dissimilar to Westall's *Wild Huntsman* (fig. 6) painted in 1831 and given in 1834 by the Duchess of Kent to Queen Victoria. The striking, balletic figure of the nude witch is a bit more unusual for Westall, who did not often paint nudes, but a similarly rare and chaste nude by him had appeared earlier, also as part of a pair of pictures in his *Flora Unveiled by Zephryrs* (fig. 7). He employed a nearly identical figure of Eve for his illustration to Milton (fig. 8).

For his dancing witch Westall had a number of possible sources of inspiration. One may have been a famous Titian -- *Perseus and Andromeda* (fig. 9). This was originally painted for Phillip II of Spain but had come via France to England in 1795 and entered the collection of Lord Yarmouth, later third Marquess of Hertford, who in 1819 lent it to the British Institution whereafter it was in his residence at Dorchester House which was eventually to become The Wallace Collection. However, Westall has characteristically lessened the sensual nature of Titian's nude to create something cool and more reminiscent of marble sculpture than flesh. It could hark back to a classical prototype, such as the relief of Perseus and Andromeda in the Capitoline Museum, Rome, or to more recent British neo-classical sculptures of standing nudes, such as Richard Westmacott's *Nymph and Cupid* of 1827 (fig. 10). Another frequent source of Westall's imagery, as pointed out by contemporary critics, like the German painter Johann David Passavant, who had in fact seen the Faust paintings in the 1831 exhibition, was the Swiss-born artist Henry Fuseli. One thinks particularly of the "gravity-defiant" Titania (as Robert Rosenblum described her) in his painting of ca. 1790 now in the Tate (fig. 11).

Naturally such a major pair of paintings made an impression at the Royal Academy exhibition. The critical reaction ranged from appreciation of Westall's elegance and originality to criticism of his hard, inflexible style [see the full texts in the Appendix]. As Samuel Redgrave noted of Westall in 1878, "his large pictures in oil did not find purchasers and are now little known." The Faust paintings did indeed remain unsold in Westall's lifetime, and following his estate sale, this painting did not emerge until the later 20th century, when there was more openness to the painter's unique blend of erotic, Romantic ardor and cool, Neo-classical form to illustrate one of the great works of 19th-century literature. The theme of Goethe's Lilith was later to reappear in English art in several works by the Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Appendix -- Critiques of Westall's "Faust":

The Standard, May 4, 1831:

[Both works] "have the same excellence and the same faults. The grand and fantastic imagery of the poet is worthily presented in the design, but the stiffness and mannerism of the artist are very injurious to the effect of the principal figures. Those of Margaret and the Evil One in the first picture, and that of Faust in the second, are especially liable to the objection. The figure and the horrid physiognomy of Mephistopheles are powerfully introduced."

The Examiner, May 15, 1831:

“Mephistopheles is seen standing apart, contemplating with malignant joy the approaching fate of Faust, who, subdued by the charms of the fair witch, is going to waltz with her. The tender look of soul and body abandonment which the seduced youth bestows upon her, his graceful form and air, are all in Mr. Westall's best manner. Some of the minor figures and groups are highly elegant."

The Morning Post, May 24, 1831:

"In both these compositions we have to complain of a hard, inflexible outline, and a tone of coloring which wants the sobriety of truth to recommend it."

The Morning Chronicle, May 16, 1831:

On Margaret at Church "What could have induced Mr. W to throw away so much time and canvass on such a subject and with such anti-Fuseli powers as he possess, or used to exhibit? Faust preparing to waltz with the Young Witch is for its indelicacy, still more to be reprobated. What Mr. W or Lord Gower means by 'her glancing toilette,' we do not know, for in the naked Witch we can see none at all, and the pas de deux, which her next step with Faust promises to exhibit, must be very startling and edifying to the Boarding-school Misses, who in this month of love, though 'Winter lingers in the lap of May,' visit the Royal Academy. A naked figure is perfectly beautiful and innocent in the hands of the stern and moral genius of Michael Angelo; but not so when trusted to a voluptuous pencil."

Library of the Fine Arts, Exhibition of the Royal Academy, June 1831, p. 417:

“And now what can we say of Mr. Westall? It is strange that, paint what he may, we always appear to have seen that very identical work before. In illustration of Goethe's Faust, we have here two pictures; the one No. 1, representing the appearance of the Demon to Margaret in the church, which we should say is finely conceived and not badly painted, and yet the eye is offended with the hardness of its outline, as also with its finish, - with, in fact, Mr. Westall's besetting sin, his unreality, and his repetition of himself. The other, 33, "Faust leading the young Witch to waltz at the festival in the Hartz Mountains:" the Faust is as badly conceived as the female is graceful; but in both there are the same chalky tones, the same forms, the same faces, the same drapery, the very folds which we have noticed in Mr. Westall's pictures at any time within these twenty years, and we feel pained that with all the artist's painstaking it should be so.”

The Morning Chronicle, May 7, 1832:

“Mr. W.’s picture last year – his *Devils and Dr. Faust* – we could not like, but we were perhaps a little unjust to circumstances – they were *commissions*, and an artist now-a-days, has the compliant genius of Juvenal’s : “Send him to hell, to hell he goes.”