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Doctor Faustus: An Examination of his "manly fortitude"

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Abstract: Doctor Faustus is the tragedy of a man who misdirects great gifts of the mind and spirit and consequently loses his soul to the torment of Hell. It is the first major Elizabethan tragedy; the first to explore the dramatic and tragic possibilities of the contraries of Renaissance compulsions with its new enquiring and aspiring spirit, come in collision with traditional received medieval and Christian moral equation. A Renaissance scholar endowed with learning's golden gifts, Faustus audaciously desires dominion as far as the mind of man stretches. In a deed signed in his own blood he pledges his soul to Lucifer for a bargain to live in all voluptuousness for twenty-four years to fulfil his audacious desires. His bargain requires him to reject Heaven and abjure God. When the time is up and the Devil comes to claim his soul, Faustus writhes in agony realising the futility of his aspiration for omnipotence. Faustus' soliloquies are a mirror of his mental landscape and vividly convey his chaos of Will-power and Impotence. Is Faustus a martyr to everything the Renaissance valued—curiosity, enterprise, knowledge, power, emancipation from the old order, or, an account of the first modern man; a contemporary displaying 'hubris' in marvellous technological achievements, revealing an agnostic intellectual confusion? 'Dr Faustus' embodies the tension between the medieval Morality framework of the play and the new dynamics of the Renaissance. Marlowe, the innovator, made Blank Verse as the new imaginative and superbly expressive idiom of Elizabethan drama. Marlowe's rhetoric of enticement is a glorification of the mind which is courageous and invincible.

Key Words - mighty rhetoric, Renaissance impulse, predestination, free will, individualism

I. INTRODUCTION

Marlowe's "Mighty Line" :---

The **famed "University Wit",** the most significant of Shakespeare's predecessors, Christopher Marlowe's poetic excellence was hailed by his contemporaries as "divine", "translunary", and celebrated by Ben Jonson, in the Shakespeare Folio of 1623, as Marlowe's "mighty line".

Marlowe **raised the subject matter of drama to great heights by creating heroic protagonists** who appealed to the imagination : Tamburlaine, a world conqueror; Faustus in pursuit of power-knowledge; Barabas in quest of fabulous wealth; Edward III with his mingling nobility and worthlessness. Though *Arden of Feversham* and *The Spanish Tragedie* were brilliant, yet, they upheld traditional morality where crime calls for punishment. Blazing a new path, Marlowe claimed admiration for the most bloodthirsty of conquerors, Tamburlaine, and made him into a sort of demigod who despises the Gods and men: "I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains, / And with my hand turn Fortune's wheel about; /And sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere/ Than Tamburlaine be slain or overcome." (I,i.). *Tamburlaine* is the story of an adventurer, who, from an ordinary shepherd became the most powerful man in all the world. He massacres men, women and children, laughs callously at the blood he sheds, cruelly imprisons the vanquished Emperor Bajazet in a cage, has his own chariot drawn by kings whom he humiliates, burns a town in honour of the funeral of his wife, Zenocrate, and yet remains supremely admirable, situated beyond human judgement. *Tamburlaine* appeared in two parts, 1587 and the second in 1588 and astonished its audience with a spectacular extravaganza and its extraordinary spirit of defiance and revolt.

Marlowe's characters are the embodiment of the Renaissance spirit of enthusiasm, vigour, discovery. Barabas desires "infinite riches in a little room". Faustus desires "to practice more than heavenly power permits" and laments the limitations of being an ordinary man : "Yet art thou still but Faustus, and a man". He wants his name "eterniz'd". Marlowe's characters have unbridled appetite for glory and represented dazzling possibilities to his audience, and mirrored the exaltation of a nation catapulted onto the world stage in its triumph over rival powers and the gain in wealth and prestige. Slater discusses how Marlowe used "otherness" and foreign settings and foreign heroes, like Tamburlaine, Barabas, Dido, Queen of Carthage, to **explore "taboo themes"** of unbridled ambition and contempt for authority. Their actions held the audience in awe of such bold and unique perspectives, and represented the dazzling possibilities of self-transformation and high achievement of the Renaissance impetus. Cartelli too stresses on the exalting experience the Elizabethan audiences felt when they beheld the bold exploits of the Marlowean hero, how it resonated with their own national aspirations for power, glory and wealth.

Marlowe **established the supremacy of Blank Verse as the appropriate metre for dramatic works**. He had an astonishing instinct for the dramatic. He **gave unity to the drama**. Plays before him were somewhat formless being a succession of isolated scenes tenuously linked. He had a **remarkable sense of form**, form in a single line, in a scene, in the play as a whole. Critics like W.W. Greg eulogize **Marlowe's poetic achievement as "immortal verse",** while Una Ellis-Fermor praises his dramatic output as "residing in beauty, in form" emanating from **"the poet's vision"** (Casebook, pp.88; Twentieth Century Views, pp.111). D.J. Palmer praises Marlowe's poetic achievement as if "the elemental powers of the universe seem to attend at the summons of **this mighty rhetoric**…spectacular showmanship, and expressed with that vividness and brilliance which the Elizabethans termed *enargia*" (Casebook, pp.192). The symbolic world of poetry engages with material desire and Marlowe makes wonderful **use of Soliloquy** to lay bare the mind. *Doctor Faustus* is the "vivisection of a ruined man", writes J.A. Symonds (pp.506).

II. DISCUSSION

Dr. Faustus: A Blend of Tragedy, Morality, of the Psychological, of Renaissance Compulsions, of Popular Appeal

1. As a Tragedy:

E.M.W Tillyard in **'The Elizabethan World Picture'** explains **the "Great Chain of Being"** as an hierarchical linkage and gradation of creation from the lowest order to the highest, from inanimate stone to the animate order of beings, culminating in Man, and ascending to Angels and ultimately God. Whenever man tries to break this chain, there is tragedy.

In *Doctor Faustus*, Marlowe reveals for the first time in English Drama, **the full possibilities of psychological tragedy, the anguish of a mind at war with itself and the universal authority as a new dramatic frontier**. Marlowe infused into his Titanic characters a fiery spirit of revolt against the given order of things and they thirst for the forbidden. Una Ellis-Fermor states: "man's relation to God and to the universe was Marlowe's whole concern" (*C Marlowe*, pp.133). Dr Faustus is caught in the whirlpool of Christian dogma and the cosmic dogma.

Dr Faustus's **tragic flaw is his inordinate desire and ambition "to practise more than heavenly power permits"** (Epilogue, l.8) and the play presents the fall and ruination of an ardent if erring spirit. Faustus is the Renaissance man aspiring for "learning's golden gifts"(Prologue, l.8). But the intellectual aspiration is only a part of his greater ambitions: "a world of profit and delight, / Of power, of honour, of omnipotence" (J.D. Jump ed. sc.1,l.52-3).

In **his first soliloquy** he runs through all the branches of human knowledge: logic, medicine, law and finally divinity, which is the greatest disappointment for it is rooted in the realization and understanding of man as a mortal being and as susceptible to fallibility. He wants **to be "on earth as Jove is in the sky, / Lord and commander of these elements"**(sc. I, l.75-6)**.** Instead, he despairingly feels **"Yet art thou still but Faustus, and a man"** (sc.1,l.23). Necromancy is the only study that can give his ambition scope to "reign sole king of all our provinces" (sc.i,l.93). This is a deliberate choice of Faustus and **his "sin…. is Presumption, the aspiring above his order, or the rebellion against the law of his creation"** (H. Gardner, Casebook,pp.95).

The tragedy is one of choice and responsibility. Faustus's aspiration to be "great emperor of the world" makes him barter his soul to Lucifer in return for twenty-four years to " live in all voluptuousness" with Mephostophilis at his constant service. Mephostophilis warns Faustus to leave these "frivolous" demands but Faustus announces with bravado "this word 'damnation' terrifies not him" (sc.iii,l.61-94). He advises Mephostophilis to take heart from **"Faustus' manly fortitude"** (sc,iii,l.87). His conscience too, warns him to "abjure this magic, turn to God again!" But Faustus is a man dazzled by the unlimited possibilities of magic, yet alive enough to his own weakness to exclaim **"the God thou serv'st is thine own appetite"** (sc.v,l.8-11).

A **gradual degradation sets in the character of Faustus** after he signs the bond with his blood. He uses his newly granted power for scholarly pursuits in the study of astronomy, cosmography and the history of civilization. But he also indulges in the prostitution of his "black art" as in the grotesque hobgoblin pranks he plays on the church clergy in Rome, the knight and the horse courser.

As a Christian Tragedy:

Faustus commits the **Sin of Presumption**, the impulse of Icarus to rise above his order of creation.

The nature of Faustus's sin is "curiosity". He falls through the spiritual **Sin of Pride** in aspiring to be greater than God. Thereafter sensuality is the pervasive element of his character. But it is curiosity that determines his actions and links these intellectual and sensual aspects of his sin. He has the typical Renaissance striving for knowledge infinite, but it is misdirected lust for knowledge (J.C. Maxwell, Casebook pp92-3). He begins to collect sensations without judgment and without order, not as an aid to right living but merely for their own sake. The unrealism of his insatiable curiosity is evident in his wish: **"O, might I see hell and return again safe, /how happy were I then!"**. His comment on the Spectacle of the Seven Deadly Sins expresses his irresponsible curiosity: "O, how this sight doth delight my soul!" (sc.vi,l.170-72). He gluts on experience for its sake. Curiosity is the reigning motivation and mediates between his spiritual pride and direct sensuality to which he succumbs when he has bodily contact with the devil appearing as Helen. The first appearance of Helen of Troy is meant to satisfy the deep curiosity of the scholars; she then returns to pander to Faustus's sensual desires. Faustus then **commits the Sin of Demonality or physical relationship with demons, indulging in a black mass, when Helen's "lips suck forth my soul" and he is irredeemably damned.** According to W.W. Greg it is **"the direst sin of which human flesh is capable"** and is the physical manifestation of his spiritual sin of bartering his soul to Lucifer (Casebook, pp.88).

Marlowe "fashioned a play that is thoroughly Christian in conception and import", but also shaped his material along "philosophical and theological concepts of evil", explains Cole (pp194). Faustus seals his bond with the Devil with the deeply ironic words: "Consummatum Est"—the last words of Christ in St. John's Gospel. This scholar of Divinity subverts the Deed of Mercy signed by the blood of Christ nailed to the cross. There are **Christian concepts of Heaven, Hell, God and Redemption**. The allegorical machinery of Good and Bad Angels externalizes the spiritual struggles of Faustus. **The pageant of the Seven Deadly Sins** and Faustus's sin is a re-enactment of Adam's Sin of Pride, which is regarded as the form and fount of all other sins. The Chorus makes this quite plain: "swollen with cunning of a self-conceit" Faustus enters into a pact with the Devil. The Old Man presents the idea of Christian Redemption: "call for mercy, and avoid despair" (sc.xviii;l.64). But Faustus commits the **Sin of Despair** thinking his sin is too great for God to forgive. Ultimately, he commits the Sin of Demonality by his bodily submission to the Devil in the guise of Helen of Troy. Faustus now cuts himself off from all hope of Salvation through Christ and cries out in agony: "See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament! / One drop would save my soul, half a drop. Ah, my Christ!" (sc.xix,l.146-7).

Tragic Pity and Fear:
Faustus's deep anguish at his "hellish fall" excites **Pity and Fear.** He moves from presumption to despair; from doubt of the existence of Hell "I think hell's a fable" (sc.v,l.128), to the reality of nothing else; from haste to sign the bond with Lucifer to an urgent need to stop the irrevocable march of Time when Lucifer would come to claim ownership of Faustus; the **Tragic Irony** of his journey is stark --- from a desire to usurp Divine power to a grovelling wish to sink below human and be transformed into a beast or turn into "little water drops" (sc.xix,l.185); **Dramatic irony** is evident--- instead of master he becomes the subjugate of Mephostophilis. He has not gained freedom but merely exchanged one set of limitations for another.

Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* portrays damnation as spiritual suffering rather than physical torment. Drawing on the Christian theological concept of '**poena damni'** (punishment of loss), the damned are eternally separated from God. Faustus' tragedy lies in his repeated choices against God, logically causing his own damnation and cast out to eternal spiritual anguish through deliberate moral decisions. "Such ironical justice lies at the heart of Faustus' tragedy, and Marlowe has given it dramatic viability by stressing the Doctor's repeated choices of the not-God and by giving to his suffering the quality of 'poena damni'" (Cole, pp.192-3).

Faustus' soliloquies are the "lifeblood" of the play, are a live transcript of inner turmoil of his spiritual state and dramatize his own conflicting views about the fundamental issues of human life-- of the relation of the Individual and the Cosmos. They are a seismograph of his impulse to the fabulous unattainable, the doubts, the irresolution, the self-communion and the personal judgements he arrives at for himself: "Faustus shall not repent" his aspiration to be Jove in the sky (sc.vi,l.32). His words evolve keeping pace with his thoughts and are a record of his **"spiritual tragedy"** (W. Clemen, pp.146-154). The passionate intensity of his last soliloquy is described by W.W. Greg as "spiritual drama keyed to its highest pitch" (pp.10).

2. **As a Morality Play**:
Faustus's damnation can also be interpreted in Morality drama tradition where Good and Evil battle for man' s soul. **The Prologue** announces the play as a "spectacle" of a clever man who comes to a bad end and **tells the tale of Christian Humility and denial of self in the presence of God**. Good and Evil angels and forces periodically make visitations to warn or threaten him. **The Epilogue** closes the play with morals painting: "cut is the branch...hellish fall". The erring man/protagonist (Everyman, Mankind) after atoning for his sins, is welcomed to Heaven, his soul escorted by a host of Angels. But Faustus goes to Hell carried away by an army of Devils.

An Inversion of the Morality:
Critics like Nicholas Brooke and **J.B. Steane are of the view that Marlowe deliberately inverted the Morality which was old-fashioned by the late 1580's**. Brooke opines that Marlowe used the Morality framework to present an unorthodox idea : why God made man in his own image and yet denied him, as much as Lucifer, fulfilment of that image. According to him: **"Faustus's self-damnation is wholly positive, achieved by an assertion not a failure of his will"**. Faustus's course is to damn himself and "his temptation, his weakness is in offers of repentance" (N.Brooke,Casebook, pp.118). **Faustus is the Renaissance free-thinker who stresses on Empirical Knowledge. He voluntarily chooses Hell** because it is the absence of Heaven or subjection of self before God. **Hell is not a place of pain but an assertion of self and individuality.** Mephostophilis warns Faustus that Hell is a direful place and he suffers pain and that "All places shall be hell that is not Heaven". When Faustus dismisses these words as old wives' tales, Mephostophilis' rejoinder is ironic: **"Ay, think so still, till experience change thy mind'** (sc.v,l.122-139). This is the Renaissance free thinker who cannot even take the Devil's word as true. But experience changes his view. The scholarly Faustus who wanted his name "eterniz'd for some wondrous cure", acquires, through his deeds, the bitter knowledge that he is "damn'd perpetually". He yearns for half a drop of Christ's blood to save him, to put "Some end to my incessant pain". Faustus appears to be "a chaos of will and impotence", writes Steane (Casebook,pp180).

Ultimately the Renaissance compulsions--- the spirit of fervent aspiration, glorification of individuality and free play of the mind, leading to the emancipation from the old limiting and constricting order—these make Faustus much more psychologically complex than the simple Morality figure caught between Heaven and Hell. His tragedy lies in the tortured awareness of the hollowness of his bargain with Lucifer: "Where art thou, Faustus? wretch, what hast thou done? / Damn'd art thou, Faustus, damn'd; despair and die!" (sc.xviii, l.55-56). He expresses a series of regrets: "God forbade it, indeed; but Faustus hath done it: for the vain pleasure of four-and-twenty years hath Faustus lost eternal joy and felicity…nothing can rescue me…Faustus is gone to hell"; "the serpent that tempted Eve may be saved, but not Faustus…O, would I had never seen Witttenberg, never read book!"; the pathos of his offer to the Devil: "I'll burn my books!". Burial in Earth becomes a privilege-- he appeals to Nature to make it perpetual day; to Earth, to mountains and hills to fall on him and bury him; to the stars that reigned at his nativity to vomit him into a higher dimension so that his soul may ascend to heaven; appeals to Pythagorean 'metempsychosis' to change

him into a soulless beast, curses his parents for bringing him to life, curses himself, curses Lucifer. At the irrevocable hour of midnight when the Devil comes to carry him to Hell, Faustus wishes his body to be changed to air, or even "little water-drops/ And fall into the ocean, ne'er be found" either by God who looks so "fierce on me" or be found by "ugly hell, gape not! Come not Lucifer;" (sc.xix).

3. Faustus caught in Dilemma: **Hell vs. Heaven; Calvin vs. Pico**
Doctor Faustus embodies the new enquiring and enterprising spirit of the Renaissance. Marlowe expresses in this play, a fervent sympathy with this new spirit and questions Man's place in the Universe. **Faustus is caught between the narrative of Heaven and Hell and those of Calvin's dogma of "Predestination" and Pico's "Free Will".**

John Calvin, (an influential French theologian;1509-1564), was of the view that God is in complete control of the universe and not the slightest thing can occur without His Will and that man "is predestined either to life or to death". Predestination is the "eternal decree of God" where man is predestined to salvation or damnation and he need not comprehend God: "should not apprehend but adore" the "sublimity" of God's wisdom (Chapel Library, pp.3-5).

The Italian Humanist and philosopher (1463-1494), **Pico Della Mirandola's 'Oration on the Dignity of Man'** is a key text of Renaissance Humanism, infact, often called the **'Manifesto of the Renaissance',** a time of the reawakening of knowledge, the discovery of the world and a discovery of Man. It freed man of the shackles of Medieval Scholasticism, the essentialist point of view of God-Man binary. The Anti-essentialist views of Pico, Machiavelli, Castiglione, Montaigne, Bacon were of momentous impact. Pico was of the view that **man is "the most fortunate of creatures",** "a great miracle and a wonderful creature" whom God "the supreme Architect" has "set thee at the world's centre", has given him "free will" so "thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer". He could either descend to the lowest of beasts or ascend to the level of the Divine. Man is "constrained by no limits" and shall be **able to "determine for yourself your own nature"** since God "the Craftsman" has endowed him "the seeds of all kinds and the germs of every way of life", has given Man limitless capabilities and potential to fashion himself as he chooses (Oration: pp223-5). **Faustus caught between the views of Calvin and Pico, lodges his protest by preferring extinction: "O soul be changed into little water drops".**

The way for repentance is always open to Faustus, but to repent is to reject those human aspirations which had led him to make the existentialist choice and live by exerting his will. He has dismissed Divinity yet there is always the lurking sense of damnation: "O Christ my saviour, my saviour, / Help to save distressed Faustus' soul" (sc. vi.l.85-6). In his soliloquies there is oscillation from repentance to remorse to an assertion of stubborn pride: "Faustus shall ne'er repent". **Faustus makes the climax of his fortunes "a moral assertion beside which the theological looks as trivial as it is meant to be",** writes Nicholas Brooke (Casebook, pp.129).

4. Carnivalesque elements in the play:
The irreverent disregard of theological matters is presented in the Papal scenes at Rome where Faustus disrupts religious and social ritual, order and hierarchy. The play has popular appeal and grotesque realism of folk culture. The grotesque hobgoblin pranks that Faustus plays on the Pope, the Knight, the ostler Robin and the horse courser -- these evoke laughter that subverts, parodies and ridicules official culture. Vaught analyses how Marlowe incorporated Elizabethan traditional festivities and this endowed the play with popular appeal and dramatic success.

5. Postmodernist view of the Play
Alan Sinfield states that Dr Faustus incorporates **both Predestination and Free Will** and these are simultaneously present. The play presents " an unease with Reformation theology" and **"that divine purposes appear.... incoherent"** ('Reading Faustus's God', pp.232-37).

Jonathan Dollimore in 'Radical Tragedy' writes that **"in the Renaissance God was in trouble"** (pp. xxix); heavenly power was questioned and God in the form of 'arbitrary will omnipotent' could not keep men in awe. Faustus, argues that man can never claim to be sinless "why, then belike (it may be) we must sin, and so consequently die: Ay, we must die an everlasting death / What doctrine call you this?"(sc,I,l40-47). Faustus rejects the philosophy of 'Che sera sera' or 'what will be, will be', or Predestination -- in favour of Renaissance spirit of enterprise and empirical proof inspired by Curiosity about the nature of the world and of man. "God forbade it, indeed; but Faustus hath done it" (sc,xix,l.64). He indulges in "transgressive desire" like the Devil. It is a transgression that reveals the limiting and constricting structure of his world without any possibility of escaping it, escaping 'heavenly power'. Because of such questioning, heavenly power was soon to lose credibility and **"Faustus registers a sense of human-kind as miscreated". This "conscious and deliberate transgression of limit" makes Dr Faustus "subversive".**

Elizabethan censorship resulted in 'Dr Faustus' being one of the last plays of its kind---it was then forbidden to interrogate religious issues. **'Dr Faustus' involves a strategy of "inscribing of a subversive discourse within an orthodox one, a vindication of the letter of an orthodoxy while subverting its spirits"** (pp.109-19).

William Empson's *Faustus and the Censor* explores how Marlowe's play was altered and constrained by Elizabethan and Jacobean censorship. Drawing on critical evidence, Empson shows how the Master of the Revels interfered with the play's religious themes, highlighting a growing restriction on such forms of inquiry.

Catherine Belsey in *The Subject of Tragedy*, analyses the crisis of knowledge, how the play is weighed between two conflicting and contradictory thrusts---- of 'discursive' knowledge which does not lead to power, and an 'empirical' knowledge which is

nascent, is not yet certain of its own project or its authority. In *Critical Practice*, Belsey calls it an "interrogative text" that questions God (pp.92).

Stephen Greenblatt's '*Renaissance Self-Fashioning'* finds in Marlowe's work "a subversive identification with the alien", one which "flaunts society's cherished orthodoxies, embraces what the culture finds loathsome or frightening" (pp.203).

Contemporary relevance of the play:
Robert N. Watson explains 'Dr Faustus' as a play that "records the seismic collision of medieval and modern segments of Western spiritual history". It is a "parable about spiritual loss in the modern world". Marlowe "puts the morality formula in the service of a devastating cultural critique". It is more than a Christian tragedy, and in fact reflects the universal situation of the present day world----"pride in individual status and technological achievements of our species, a world haunted by religious uncertainties and irrational denials of mortality". The Devil today, is "egotistical appetites, all the choices we will look back on at the hour of our death (as individuals, or perhaps as a species in nuclear war) scenario---and we will then "wonder what we have so proudly, blindly, spent our souls on" *(A Theory of Renaissance Tragedy: Dr Faustus,* pp.325-328) Cambridge Companions Online, CUP,2006.

III. CONCLUSION

Marlowe offers us **a scintillating "poetry of ideas",** writes Una Ellis-Fermor; further that "Marlowe is, of all Elizabethans, the truest explorer. His career is a long voyage of discovery. His America is always just beyond the horizon". **He endeavours "to map new territory; new thought and truths ascertained by thought; new dreams, visions and ecstasies, created by the imagination" (pp. 81;142).**

Ellis Havelock writes that "Marlowe was the first to spiritualise as well as to dramatise" the Faust legend. "Marlowe's *'Faustus'*, revealing the conflicting stress of new and old, remains a chief **artistic embodiment of an intellectual attitude dominant at the Renaissance"** (pp xli).

J.A. Symonds examines how Marlowe's dramatic style evolved and led to his creative and artistic **"epoch-making tragedies"** (pp. xiii). They are a vital contribution to the development of English Renaissance drama.

Marlowe created vital dramatic experience: by his genius for transforming thought into action; by his poetic genius for transforming a stiff Blank Verse into a supple, sinewy, flexible medium of poetic utterance; by his highly developed sense of irony: thus creating a theatrical fusion and fruition in tragic drama which, though rooted in tradition, was unmistakably powerful and original.

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