

'A sound magician is a mighty god': Dr Faustus and the Renaissance

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ABSTRACT

The spirit of humanism prevalent during Renaissance caused human beings, with their potential and limitation, to become the centre of interest. Marlowe as a major playwright of the age is not an exception to this. Most of his protagonists very powerfully reflect the spirit of the Renaissance and Machiavellian ideals. Dr Faustus, the hero of the play with the same title is torn between his over ambition and limitation as an ordinary mortal being during the course of the play. An eternal damnation is inevitable on the part of the tragic protagonist for human existence is nothing but a constant interplay between 'glorification' and 'nullification' of mankind.

Keywords: Renaissance, Humanism, Overreacher, Conflict, Damnation

The entire interest in a Marlovian tragedy centers round the personality of the hero who is in a certain way the projection of Marlowe, the dramatist who was greatly overwhelmed with the time but simultaneously saturated with the spirit of Renaissance with its great faith in individual, with its sky kissing ambition to gain limitless knowledge and power with its revolt against the tyrannies and dogmas of the feudalism and the church and with its love of beauty and hankering after the sensual pleasures of life. He was also inspired by the Machiavellian ideals of human conduct and desires, the doctrine of complete freedom to gain one's end by any means, fair or foul.

Indeed, in the Renaissance a special stress is laid on the individual. In Italy *Fichino*, Jacob Burckhardt and specially Giovanni Pico della Mirandola in his book *Oration on the Dignity of Man* began to glorify the man. Thus, in the Renaissance, the age of 'Studia Humanitatis' - 'the study of humanism', not only Marlowe but Shakespeare also perceives 'man as the paragon of all creation' through his magnificent creation of the character like Hamlet. With a spirit of individualism and inspired by Machiavellian ideals they are all dominated by some uncontrollable passion for gaining some ideal or finding the fulfillment of some intemperate ambition and hence the common moral conventions and the established religious sanctions can never thwart them from striving to gain their end. Marlowe's Tamburlaine, thus, defies all authorities on earth as well on heaven for limitless power; the stone hearted Barabas in *The Jew of Malta*, dominated by a senseless lust for gold throws to the wind all common morals conventions and does not shrink from committing the most cruel type of crimes to achieve his heinous end and his Edward II and Mortimer play the most terrible price; the former for his passion and base minions and the latter for his lust for power.

In *Dr Faustus* the hero is a true representative renaissance individual and yearns for limitless knowledge, power, sensual pleasures of life, defying spirit of atheism and above all a spirit of revolt against the conventional religious doctrines and Christian theology. As a true Marlovian hero Dr Faustus desires for 'absolute in the real world' which somehow may be equated with the Shelleyan 'desire of the moth for the star'. In this sense Dr Faustus is an 'over eacher', similar to Macbeth who tries to wear a 'giant's robe' which is not his own. As an embodiment of the Renaissance, Dr Faustus longs for an 'infinite knowledge' and with his inordinate ambition he soars beyond the petty possibilities of humanity, leagues himself with superhuman powers and rides through space in fiery chariot exploring the secrets of the universe. Interestingly, "like Tamburlaine Faustus is also low born but endowed with the natural gift of a brilliant mind. The mention of Icarus, a prey like Phaethon and the Titans to a fatal ambition, prepares us for the appearance of a second Promethean hero:

Till swollen with cunning, of a self-conceit,

His waxen wings did mount about his reach,

And, melting heavens conspir'd his overthrow; (Prolouge.19-21)

and the speech ends with the clear statement that once again we are to hear the story of misdirected desire and this theme of 'misdirected desire' "(Bluestone & Rabkin105) is sustained all through the opening soliloquy. Like Icarus, Faustus desires a godlike power over life and death. As he aspires to be more than man, he therefore repudiates his humanity and rebels against the ultimate reality. He surpasses his moral

codes to be as powerful on earth as Jove in the sky. He finds some hope only in Necromancy and therefore turns to black magic again:

All things that move between quiet poles / Shall be at my command: emperors and kings /
Are but obeyed in their several provinces, / Nor can they raise the wind, or rend the
clouds! / But his dominion that exceeds in this, / Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man;
/ A sound magician is a mighty god.(1;1, 54-62)

Knowledge is power no doubt: but Faustus who is the embodiment of the dreams and desire of the rising bourgeois of his age forgets in his fit of passion that there is a limit to man's power and that knowledge may also become a sense of ruin and destruction if it is absurd. Puffed up with his vast knowledge and learning he ignores the fact that to make an attempt to fly too near the sun with waxen wings means certain doom and destruction. Hence, just like other tragic heroes of Marlowe, Faustus, also with his limitless lust for power ultimately finds with horror how the flush and glory of his temporary success brings about his doom and eternal damnation.

Ellis Fermor quotes, "In Marlowe's great tragic fragment the conflict is not between man and man, the protagonists are men and the spiritual powers that surround them and the scene are not set in the physical earth but in the limitless regions of the mind and the battle is fought not for kingdoms and crowns but upon the questions of man's ultimate fate. Before him lies the possibility of escape to spiritual freedom or a doom of slavery to demonic power".(Ellis-Fermor 87) The same is the case with Dr Faustus. As we see Dr Faustus is afire with an indomitable passion and therefore discards all moral codes and ethical principles and plunges headlong to achieve his end, he rejects Christian values and so there arises in his mind a deep conflict between the pull of tradition, the will of God and the desire to learn more and more to taste the fruits of the forbidden tree. Thus, here is a modern man, torn between the faith of tradition and faith in himself resembling the heroes of Dostoyevsky because they are (such as Raskolnikov and three Karmazovs) also caught between the old world of orthodox belief and new world of intense individualism, each with its insistent claims and justifications. The heart of Faustus thus turns out to be the battlefield where the forces of good and evil are trying to overwhelm each other. Faustus is a modern man whose conscious self is opposed by the subconscious self and dogmas of Christian theology makes his own choice to take to the black art of magic deliberately and then sells his soul to the Devil of his free will.

Throughout the play, Faustus staggers between doubt and faith symbolized by the warnings of the good Angel and the seductions of the Bad Angel, as he moves towards his inevitable doom. He has been told by Mephistophilis the meaning of Hell, but in his blind arrogance, he refuses to really grasp the implications of his action. Indeed, before the end of the play Faustus undergoes the mental torture torn out of the opposing pulls of his rational and emotional selves. However, the spiritual conflict takes the most acute turn in the first scene of Act V after Faustus has raised the spirit of Helen and when the Old man, the symbol of the good and divine in him, appears before him. His was the last attempt to guide his steps 'unto the way of life'. The acute mental tension is revealed forcefully in the following lines:

Where art thou, Faustus? wretch what hast
thou done?

Damn'd art thou, Faustus, damn'd, despair and die ! (V;1, 48-50)

Out of desperation, Faustus is just going to commit suicide; but it is the same Old man who prevents him from taking this desperate step with a fervent appeal 'to call for mercy, and to avoid despair'. But alas! Faustus ultimately seals his own fate by surrendering himself into the arms of sweet Helen to make him 'immortal with a kiss' just to forget the intense agony of his troubled and despairing soul. By now, Dr Faustus who was so unaware, so ignorant of what he is doing that he might almost be called innocent, has come morally alive, intensely aware of good and evil. In other words, "if to the orthodox it is more a sinner's fate than a hero's, there is something of the classic apotheosis in Faustus's final moments. He transcends the man he was. He goes out no craven sinner but violently, speaking the rage and despair of all mankind who would undo the past and stop the clock against the inevitable reckoning." (Sewall 66)

In the closing scene we find the climax culminating into a terrible catastrophe. Faustus has realized that he is doomed to eternal damnation without the least hope of redemption. Accordingly, the most poignant soliloquy of Dr Faustus just before an hour of his final doom reveals forcefully the deep agony of a horror-struck soul. His last minute appeal to the 'ever-moving spheres of heaven' to stand still or to the sun to rise again to 'make perpetual day'. "That Faustus may spent and save his soul!" - is absolutely of no avail. Thus, when the final power strikes the Devil's disciples snatch away the agonized and trouble torn soul of Faustus to hell to suffer eternal damnation. Helen Gardener in this point perceives, "at the beginning Faustus wishes to rise above his humanity, at the end he would sink below it, be transformed into the beast or 'into little water drops'. At the beginning he attempts to usurpation on God, at the close he is an usurper upon the

devil".(Gardener 50-51)Almost in the same vein Harriet Hawkins in his book *Poetic Freedom and Poetic Truth* says like Shakespeare, Marlowe knew that 'the very substance of the ambition is merely the shadow of a dream' (*Hamlet*). Pointing to the cause of Faustus's fall Hawkins remarks that unlike Tamburlaine's, Faustus's dreams of power and glory never correspond to the facts. Indeed, the last dream of beauty, for which he forfeited his soul in that fatal kiss, never had the true, substantial body of Helen of Troy. Thus, Faustus struggles back and forth, to the very end, between an imaginative conception of himself whereby he retains the freedom to repent and the opposite conception of himself where by he cannot repent.(Hawkins 91)

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