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Contemporary Reactions to Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*

By: McKenzie Marsh

In the critically acclaimed play, *Doctor Faustus*, Christopher Marlowe defies the status quo of the times when he asserts, "The reward of sin is death. That's hard." The play is radical for the Elizabethan era and for the predominant Protestant and Catholic views of the time. Marlowe's contemporaries, in both their theological and societal views, often condemned the ideas found in his stories such as *The Jew of Malta*, *Hero and Leander*, *Tamburlaine*, and, possibly the most infamous, *Doctor Faustus*. While his work was radical for sixteenth century English readers, Marlowe courageously made fresh and honest contributions to English literature. He said what few would dare say out loud, placing complex feelings about spirituality and religion in a play for characters and audiences to work out. *Doctor Faustus* engages the process of bringing to light doubt as a natural offspring of faith with the central conflicts of the Elizabethan era by the play's expressed opinion of Christianity, its humanist approach to individual morality, and its attention to symbols that bring out elements of conflict.

The Play's Interpretation of Christianity versus Elizabethan Views

During the Elizabethan era, Christianity was already divided between Catholics and Protestants. Christians were fearful of drastic reform within the Church. Too much change and too much discourse, when Christian theology was supposed to be unchanging and concrete, was threatening. Before *Doctor Faustus* was written and then published in 1604, was the Elizabethan Religious Settlement of 1559, which was a more moderate take on the Church after Henry VIII's break from Rome. The Settlement's goal was to establish a unified Church of England, free from

foreign religious influence. However, the Settlement, comprised of the Act of Supremacy in 1558 and the Act of Uniformity of 1559, did not halt religious debate (“Elizabeth I’s Religious Settlement”). It does not matter if Marlowe meant to propose that Christianity should be damned because much of society perceived his work in that way regardless of his intention. However, it is clear that Marlowe affirmed Christian principles by the end of the play. It was only controversial because of the stark honesty by which Marlowe addressed faith. While society viewed his work critically, the ending of *Doctor Faustus* reinforces Christianity’s position on religion and spirituality when Faustus cries out “My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!” (Norton 1163).

It is important to consider if Marlowe’s plays are “Christian” or if they are attacks on Christian orthodoxy. Knoll argues that “Marlowe, being neither a melodramatist nor a preacher, provides a persuasive dramatic statement of what attracts us away from Christianity- even as he shows the dangers of departing from it. In this way he is the prototypical figure of the Renaissance in England” (24). The chorus, throughout the play, serves to reinforce and reflect the commitment to religious values. In the prologue, they set up Faustus’s character as one similar to the protagonist of a moral tale: “The fruitful plot of scholarism grace, That shortly he was graced with doctor’s name, Excelling all whose sweet delight disputes in heavenly matters of theology. Till, swollen with cunning, of a self-conceit, His waxen wings did mount above his reach, And melting heavens conspired his overthrow” (Norton 1129). The narrating perspective describes Faustus with critical judgment to where readers should not equate Faustus rejection of God with the beliefs of Christopher Marlowe, but rather see a character in revelation of the truthful paradox, finding freedom by submitting to God. However, this did not stop Marlowe’s

contemporaries from attributing atheism to Marlowe. Hopkins details the actions of a man named Richard Baines, who wrote a letter to the authorities after the death of Christopher Marlowe “concerning his Damnable judgment of Religion, and scorn of gods word” (310), which led to an investigation into Marlowe’s private life. However, Marlowe was killed in a duel before he could be brought before a court.

Faustus asks Mephistophilis about hell. Mephistophilis answers that “Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed in one self place; for where we are is hell, and where hell is, there must we ever be. And to conclude, when all the world dissolves, and every creature shall be purified, all places shall be hell that is not heaven” (Norton 1141). Mephistophilis heeds warning after warning regarding Faustus’s decisions, believing that being cut off from God eternally is not worth the power and pleasure hell allows presently. Faustus answers him with, “Come, I think hell’s a fable.” Mephistophilis can only warn Faustus so much until he has to acquiesce to Faustus’ desire for power. Faustus exhibits such a great disdain for God’s constraining laws that he rejects them. Kocher explains that “Faustus, in short, is appalled by the injustice of a dogman which consigns all men inevitably to damnation” (105). In other contexts, Faustus partakes in an innocent sort of earnest religious discourse. However, Faustus believes that religion is the source of everlasting death, so salvation is found while here on earth.

Humanist approach to Individual Morality

Faustus does not view religion as a valid barrier to keep him from his ambitions because he maintains an individualist approach to morality and understanding of the world. The play is not just a comedy but could be argued to be a Moral and Heroic Tragedy. Faustus and his

destruction are a product of the aspiring mind. Faustus quests for knowledge, wealth, and power. Brockbank argues there is a part of “our nature which is dissatisfied with being merely human and tries vainly to come to rest in fantasies of omnipotence and omniscience” (119). Faustus is arrogant and in want of power. He values human nature above its place in creation. Faustus cannot accept the powerlessness and irrelevance of man. Marlowe knew from his own education that the Church taught that root of all sin is pride- an intellectual sin. Poirier seems to think that Marlowe was a deist: “A rationalist and an insurgent, indifferent to the Gospel’s ideal of love, Marlowe rejected a religion which he felt no need of and wherein he saw only hypocrisy and coercion” (69). Marlowe framed Faustus in the contexts of religious England being a setting that he is familiar with. Poirier explains that “While still a student, he ceased to believe in Christianity and began to rail at religion, although he retained a belief in God. In 1588 he was not yet fully confirmed in his unbelief. Later on ... he became more sceptical or at least more hostile to Christianity” (70). If Marlowe leaned toward atheism, Faustus is the character by which Marlowe looks for alternatives to Christianity, such as humanism. Knoll writes that “Faustus sets himself up as a god qualified to judge merit absolutely. ‘A sound magician is a demi-god.’ He is the ultimate humanist, for he evaluates actions only as they affect him now” (75). Faustus equates his power and ability that to God’s. His humanist philosophy leads him to a self-absorption that causes his destruction. Poirier argues that “egotism lies at the very centre both of his life and works” (70). Poirier believes that these attributes of Faustus translate over to characterize Marlowe: “In this self-centred man, whose personality is one of the strongest and strangest--if not one of the most attractive--- of the Elizabethan world, there is an exceptionally intimate connection between temperament and the ideas” (70). If Marlowe wrote his own

characteristics and beliefs into Faustus, then that is what makes Faustus's death and damnation at the end of the play so much more tragic and affecting.

Symbolism that Highlights Elements of Conflict

Faustus acts entitled to knowledge and power due to the ever-promising sacrifice he made to the devil. Faustus speaks of himself in the third person, "If I live till morning, I'll visit you; if not, Faustus has gone to hell" (Norton 1161). In turn, pride is the most overarching theme found throughout, Faustus being representative of fatal pride and arrogance. He travels from Germany, France, Italy, and Turkey to make his fame known. The scenes in Wittenberg, Germany are the most important allusion as Wittenberg was known for its nontraditional ways of thinking that contrasting with the values of the Renaissance period. Faustus and Mephistophilis impersonate two cardinals in order to meet with the Pope. By the end of the scene, Faustus and Mephistophilis torment a room of friars having dinner with the Pope after they suspect a ghost is in the room. The friars sing a dirge to ward off the evil presence. The friars represent a symbol of conflict within the play, whereas they are presented as good and holy but also are a symbol of what is wrong with the Church. Faustus conjures a major circle comprised of four devils and Lucifer. He commands one devil (Mephistophilis): "I charge thee to return and change thy shape, Thou art too ugly to attend on me; Go and return an old Franciscan friar, that holy shape becomes a devil best" (Norton 1135). He views the friar to be on the same moral level as that of a devil.

A development in the Elizabethan era was John Calvin's theory of predestination, where salvation is decided by God in advance. The Good Angel and the Old Man serve as allegories that

associate the dichotomy between fate and free will. The Old Man is representative of Faustus's ability to choose, as he asks for Faustus to cry out for mercy as he is able to see an angel lingering above Faustus's head. But Faustus has Mephistophilis torment the Old Man.

Blood is present throughout the play. In Faustus's hedonistic, self-serving mentality, says that "The god thou serv'st is thine own appetite, Wherein is fixed the love of Beelzebub, To him I'll build an altar and a church, And offer lukewarm blood of new-born babes" (Norton 1152). Brockbank examines that "Even without appeal to Christian symbolism, the play has made the streaming blood emblematic of eternal life" (117). Blood is first used when Faustus signs his signature in blood to promise his soul to the devil. Then his blood refuses to flow when Faustus cuts his arm because internal damnation robs him of his mortal ability to turn back to God: "As Faustus pleads that 'one drop' then 'half a drop' would save his soul, he confesses his barren littleness of life in the vastness of the moral universe" (117).

In Faustus's wavering between repentance and delving deeper into evil, he is caught between the good and evil angel, being two symbols of morality: one of societal expectation and the other choosing. The Good Angel pleads Faustus to "leave that execrable art" as contrition, prayer, and repentance are the means to enter into heaven. The Evil Angel interjects with, "No, Faustus, think of honor and of wealth" (Norton 1139). While he questions repentance time and time again, he chooses to go on blindly to advance in his power and pleasure.

The dramatization of the play serves as its own symbol for good and evil, where witchcraft and magic are explored through special effects. Before significant controversy about the play, researcher Roger Sales explains there were two versions of *Doctor Faustus*. The first one, known as A-Text, was published in 1604 as a reprint on one published in 1601. It was

considerably shorter, and it was speculated that it was because it was censored for having radical opinions. The second version was the B-Text published in 1616. Some of the added material increased the comic effect, allowed Faustus to display more of his magical powers, and called for more elaborate stage effects (133). The stage effects were well-received by the Elizabethan audience. However, the special effects were thrilling to some people and demonic to others, who criticized the magical and anti-Christian aspects of the play. The Norton Anthology explains that “The story’s power over its original audience is vividly suggested by the numerous accounts of uncanny events at performances of the play: strange noises in the theater or extra devils who suddenly appeared among the actors on stage, causing panic” (Norton 1127). The special effects often pointed to sorcery and meant more to the audience then than they do today. However while some people were frightened by the effects, they attracted another audience, who enjoyed the more supernatural moments. Wilson examines the adaptations of the play and the effect of the changes on the audience and key scenes such as the interaction with the Seven Deadly Sins. He explains that in a reconstruction of the play in 1604, the piece was “shortened for provincial acting, occasionally interpolated, and the clowning parts expanded to suit the taste of a vulgar audience and the taste and capacity of a declining company of players” (71).

The Aftermath

It could be argued that if Christopher Marlowe would have lived, he would have gone onto create works comparable to the sophistication, diversity, and fame of Shakespeare. Part of Christopher Marlowe’s defamation was because he addressed the conflict between ambition and responsibility, power and morality, and questioned religion’s power. Robert Knoll writes that a

Richard Baines delivered a note to the Privy Council “concerning this ‘atheist’ Marlowe.” “It contained a good number of startling charges based on hearsay: ‘Almost into every Company he cometh he persuades men to Atheism willing them not to be afeard for bugbears and hobgoblins’” (22). Baines also wrote that Marlowe was skeptical of some important details in the Old Testament and thought that the New Testament was “filthily written.” Marlowe was accused of saying that “all protestants are hypocritical asses.” Before Marlowe could answer these accusations or could be tried for them, he died on May 30, 1593 in a bar brawl. However, some question if his death was truly a bar fight or an assassination of a problematic, dissenting voice in society. Poirier believes that Marlowe starts his dramas in a revolutionary spirit; he concludes them in full conformity with the opinions commonly accepted. Frightened by his own daring, he recoils” (71). Marlowe has objections to his own amoralism and atheism, possibly because he is uncomfortable with a faith but is not comfortable with faithlessness. However, the epilogue does heed warning to its readers: “Regard his hellish fall, Whos fiendful fortune may exhort the wise Only to wonder at unlawful things: Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits To practice more than heavenly power permits” (Norton 1163).

Doctor Faustus has endured throughout the years because of its tie to universal and timeless themes. While it is a tragedy, it has moments of comedy that serve to culminate the ridiculous and ostentatious ambitions of Faustus. Its 1592 name, “Historie of the Damnable Life, and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus” condemns the radical thought expressed within the play. It is summed up well in the 1967 film adaptation of *Doctor Faustus*: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and then there is no truth in us. And so then we must sin and so

consequently, die.” For Faustus and possibly Marlowe, the struggle is recognition of sin and the unsettling difficulty to acknowledge damnation as its consequence. And that is hard.

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