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Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and the Equilibrium of Tragedy

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In *Dr. Faustus* Marlowe chooses a religious subject and concentrates on the theoretical side of religion, taking the case to its logical extremes. But unfortunately, down the centuries the play has evoked more controversy than admiration from the critics. To most of the people, it is still a confession on the part of the dramatist, of his atheistic views and bohemian life; and to others a medieval play very much in the tradition of *Everyman.* Miss Una Ellis-Fermor, however, undertook to discuss the intellectual part and the tragic pattern of the play and her remarks show a great understanding of the nature of tragedy, though not of Marlowe's tragedy. Nonetheless she accepts Marlowe as a tragic tinker even though she wants to reject him in the conclusion. She writes, "Marlowe, whose tragedy appears at its height and characteristic form in Dr. Faustus, takes up a unique position as a tragic thinker, because of the implacable paradox on which his reading of the universe rests; man's innate fallibility on the one hand and on the other hand the infallibility demanded by the inflexible law. To this paradox, there is only one conclusion, 'why then belike we must sin and consequently die.'" She accepts that this paradox is a good spot for the working of a tragedy, but she rejects *Faustus* on the plea that "In his drama the spirit of man is set against the universe, but there is no equilibrium between two worlds of thought. For Marlowe, at the time of Faustus, did not question the nature of the world-order. He saw it steadily and saw it evil." This remark is more applicable to the *Jew of Malta* than to *Dr. Faustus* because to think that Marlowe is a convinced Satanist is to start with the pre-conceived notion that Marlowe was the writer of an "Atheist Lecture" also. I hope my analysis will show that in the play Marlowe nowhere upsets the equilibrium of tragedy but rather keeps the balances even and as a thinker goes deeper than it is often admitted, in the field of religion.

Faustus by the very nature of its subject matter is a great tragedy in two respects, first, because it shows not only the physical and material fall of the hero, but the fall of his soul also; secondly it is a tragedy which deals not only with the hero's failure to achieve wish fulfilment, but it shows by the very realization of the ambition of the hero, how much realization falls short of expectation.

The framework that Marlowe uses for his play is thoroughly Christian, and in it is cast Dr. Faustus, the hero who has inherited a Christian conscience, but whose mind has been widened and made sceptic by the intellectuality he has developed. Here Marlowe gets a chance to present many religious opposites: damnation and salvation; despair and faith; man's sin and the infinite divine mercy; and the problem of good and evil.

Marlowe starts the play where the hero is busy in viewing the means and ends, profit and loss in the material sense, in different branches of study. His conscience, it is revealed, is religious, but his mind is broadened and empowered by the awareness its own potentialities. Religion is basically a matter of faith, which Faustus unconsciously and unknowingly has inherited, but his conscious self lives and wants to live in the sphere of the intellect, and wants "to confound hell in Elizium." His discerning intellect has furnished him with a capacity to judge the material world. About the spiritual, he consciously and deliberately becomes sceptic, rather despaired because "the reward of sin is

death", and "if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and there is no truth in us."

Naturally he derives the conclusion, "Why belike we must sin and consequently die." So Faustus decides that the path of religion is hard and unprofitable, particularly when one branch of study, necromancy, with the help of powers of hell, promises a sort of demi-godhead on this earth. In another way too, Faustus is doubtful about the promised land. "Why hell is a fable" he tells Mephistophilis, to his own disadvantage, and thinks it is one of the "old wives' tales", and conversely show a doubt about the existence of God and Heaven. He rejects the counsel of the Good Angel who is his conscience, because it frightens him from choosing his path, which, he thinks, will bring material prosperity and power for him. As it may be very clearly discerned by the careful at this juncture, that the decision he takes is taken with material eyes open but the spiritual shut and the tragic implication lies in the fact that by being assured of the existence of the devil, he can, rationally speaking, become assured of the existence of God too. It is true that good and black are not exactly labelled as black and white in life, but when Faustus had become aware of the powers of the black magic, what good can he expect out of evil, which, certainly in the form of devil, is painted in pure black? But dramatically, it is a true tragic decision, in the manner of Macbeth's and it tempts and prompts him to sign a bond with the devil, giving him power over the elements for 24 years.

When by the powers of his black art, Faustus succeeds in inviting Mephistophilis, he discusses with him the very problem of hell, and the evil associated with it. For man's temptation and even damnation alone the inner evil would have been quite sufficient, given the inherited sin and the free will to choose. But religion advocated an external evil also and associated it with the arch rebel Lucifer. Mephistophilis' confusing answers are Marlowe's genuine concerns also. Here is a part of Faustus' discussion with Mephistophilis:

> Faust: Where are you damned?
>
> Meph: In hell.
>
> Faust: How comes it then, that thou art out of hell?
>
> Mephi: Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it,
>
> Thinkst thou that I who saw the face of God,
>
> And tasted the eternal joys of heaven,
>
> Am not tormented with ten thousand hells,
>
> In being deprived of everlasting bliss?

Here let us view the answer of Mephistophilis. He means that he has come out of hell, that is, a different place from the earth, and unseen by those living on the earth. Then he says that where he is there is hell. And, according to him, the loss of heaven is hell. This is the problem of evil or devildom, if you please. If the devil can walk on the earth, the earth itself can be hell and evil is not only an inner human weakness, but an external force also.

> After the bond is signed and the discussion renewed, Mephistophilis again tells him:
>
> Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscrib'd
>
> In one self-place; for where we are is hell
>
> And where hell is, there we must ever be.

This is reaffirming his previous stand and what the devil says here cannot be doubted even by a truly religious man. The devil here is not only putting on the garb of a holy friar but speaking like one also. But when Faustus expresses his intellectual doubt: "Come hell is a fable," he at once replies: "I am an instance to prove to the contrary". He certainly means the external hell. But Faustus is equally right: "How now in hell! Nay, an' this be hell. I'll willingly be damned here: what walking, disputing, etc?"

Taking advantage of this complication, Marlowe is furthering the play: If evil is both internal as well as external, if the devil is given a free movement and the power to tempt with beautiful and cherished material things, and man on the other hand has not only a free will to choose but a propensity for evil, because of the innate fallibility and by making the forbidden fruits more sweet, the fate of a man like Faustus is not difficult matter to foresee and forecast.

The religious answer to this problem will probably be "divine mercy" which is infinite. So when the bond is signed, the only question remains: Will Faustus repent, and even if he repents, will divine mercy be accessible to him, when he has signed the bond with the devil, giving him his soul and rendered himself somewhat incapable of repentance? Satan, for instance, is an embodiment of pride which is a great hindrance in repentance, and the other fallen angels, like Mephistophilis are with him, despaired about their redemption. Has not Faustus, unconsciously, got these two by his contract with the devil and by signing the damnation bond? But Marlowe is not in a hurry to settle the question here at this stage. When Marlowe in the very beginning takes advantage of a logical extreme by juxtaposing the two quotations from the scriptures and making Faustus the sort of character he is, he might seem to be the devil's advocate. It is rather putting religion to an extreme test, even though quite logical. Now Marlowe will make amends by giving a legitimately extreme scope to divine mercy; he will bring the hero to a stage when even the very religious will say that nothing except damnation can await Dr. Faustus.

The two angels, good and bad, make their appearance even before the signing of the fatal bond with the devil and there the evil angel wins. But after the bond is signed they reappear and debate the question of repentance:

Good Angel: Faustus repent; yet God will pity thee

Evil Angel: Thou art a spirit, God cannot pity thee.

At the end of the debate the evil angel simply avoids the question by saying that: "Faustus never shall repent." In the speech quoted above he actually reminds Faustus of the implications of the bond and when the good angel proves stronger, he simply avoids the issue. Marlowe, thus, is giving greater scope to repentance. Later, when Faustus is again revisited by these two parts of his split self, I think, the angels are as subjective as Mephistophilis is objective, and the good angel reasserts the power and infinity of divine mercy. Faustus does cry:

"Ah, Christ, my Saviour,

Seek to save distressed Faustus' soul"

And the stage direction follows: Enter Lucifer, Belzebub and Mephistophilis. What a cruel irony! To the simple, religious minded, it may seem that the Saviour did not come because of Faustus's having signed the bond with the devil, but that would be to limit the scope of divine mercy. In all probability, again the same issue, which concerns the residence and power of the devil, comes. The devil has a free movement and because of the inner evil, he is more near to man than heavens are. Talking in a symbolic way, we can say that evil is more approachable than good. But Marlowe does not decide the question of divine mercy even here. He is giving Marlowe a chance to damn himself in the world and also to realize the hollowness of the bargain. Mephistophilis refuses to fulfil some of Faustus' demands. Faustus becomes lustful and demands a wife, but he cannot have one because marriage is a sacrament, not merely a physical contact of two persons belonging to two opposite sexes. He cannot get answers to the questions which can compel him to undo the bond. But the poison has started working. Faustus is satisfied with a "hot whore" for a wife, with the juggler's tricks that he performs with the help of Mephistophilis and no longer asks the questions about heaven and God. Rather he is delighted with the Seven Deadly Sins, because they are not only external

but have also become a part of his own self also. The learned scholar in the beginning of the play, while he thirsted for knowledge and power, gets only a limited power within a limited time and limited knowledge and that too at a great price. What a great fall for one who in the past "graced the fruitful plot of scholarism!" But even now divine mercy is not ruled out. Even when the Good Angel becomes silent, Marlowe leaves Faustus's damnation unattested. The old man is still hopeful if Faustus repents. Real damnation is sealed when even the old man leaves him himself having been tortured by the devils for his faith. This happens when Faustus has rendered himself completely damned by a physical contact with the devil, in the form of Helen. The beautiful lyric that is put in the mouth of Faustus on the appearance of Helen intensifies the tragedy by its implied cruel irony. It shows the bright side of Faustus, his love for art, beauty and classical learning, but the irony contained therein makes it more pointed and poignant. He wanted to confine "Hell in Elizium", and the wish is here fulfilled ironically. Helen is a beautiful legacy of Greek civilization, history and literature, but this paragon of literature was a flirting adulteress too. Faustus does not get even this adulterous Helen, but only a devil disguised as she, and when he kisses her and says: "Sweet Helen make me Immortal with a kiss", she does make him immortal, with a vengeance, because by having a physical contact with the devil in the form of Helen, he has committed demoniality, the worst sin against the Holy Ghost. Even the hopeful old man leaves him now, because mercy for him is out of question, though the religious logicians may still find the issue left in doubt. But I think, from Marlowe's point of view the issue is settled now. Faustus' damnation is irrevocable now, and even if Faustus is despaired, I think, he is right when he tells the scholars that he is suffering from "a surfeit of deadly sin, that hath damned both body and soul" and that "Faustsus' offence can never be pardoned: the serpent that tempted Eve may be saved, but not Faustus." The only thing left for him is a clear realization of the situation. He is now certain that he is incapable of repentance. He becomes awfully clear in his vision before his death but the tragedy is that Faustus sees "the blood of Christ freezing in the firmament" and realizes that "one drop of it would have saved his soul", only when he is no longer capable of it because of the rottenness his soul, in contact with the devil, has undergone. And after such knowledge, what forgiveness?

The above discussion of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* has hopefully demonstrated the intellectual stature of Marlowe by showing how successfully he presents the fall not of the hero's fortunes, but of his soul, and takes the religious issues to their logical extremes, without being partial either to God or to Satan. By way of conclusion, we may say that Marlowe succeeds in presenting certain controversial contemporary issues, with an insight which is both keen and objective. Also, he handles his dramatic material very skilfully and maintains the delicate equilibrium of tragedy and thus takes a unique position as a tragic thinker.

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