Journal of Literary Aesthetics
Volume-4, Issue-1, (January to June), Year-2017
PP: 40-43 ISSN No: 2347-8705

Spirit of Atheism in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*

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Of all the dramas Christopher Marlowe produced, *Doctor Faustus* seems to be the spiritual history of Marlowe himself. In this play, we get an expression of Marlowe's innermost thoughts, feelings, and experiences and his attitude towards God and religion in general. That is why a note of Atheism is vivid and quite explicit in the play. Hence, people often treat it as the work of a confirmed atheist.

It is a known fact that Marlowe lived a boisterous and bohemian life before it was cut short by the cruel dagger of an assassin. He also earned notoriety for his frivolity and skepticism, as he held rationalistic and iconoclastic views, and was skeptical about many a doctrine and dogma of medieval Christianity. This bold, young man bubbling over with unlimited zeal and self-assurance was never afraid of expressing his skeptical thoughts and ideas to his friends and acquaintances. In 1593, when Thomas Kyd's room was searched, some atheistical documents were found among his papers.

Secondly one must not forget that Marlowe was saturated with the spirit of Renaissance, with its new ideas and ideals, with its revival of thought, and with its yearning for limitless knowledge and power. The bold and forceful writings of Machiavelli also greatly influenced Marlowe. Therefore, it is natural that the protagonists of Marlowe's tragic dramas would be his own mouth-piece – expressing his unconventional thoughts, sceptical ideas, and his pungent criticism of dogmatism in religion. In the Prologue to *The Jew of Malta*, Marlowe writes, "I count religion but a childish toy, And hold there in no sin but ignorance."

If we ponder over the theme of the play, we find Doctor Faustus an inordinately ambitious hero, denouncing God, blaspheming the Trinity and Christian doctrines, and selling his soul to the Devil to gain super-human powers and to live a life of voluptuousness for twenty four years. A prey to self-dramatization, like Tamburlaine, Faustus cannot bear the thought of his being a mere man. Reflecting over Philosophy, Law, and Physic, Faustus says, "Philosophy is odious and obscure; / Both Law and Physic are for petty wits" (1.1.7-8). Then he turns to divinity and concludes, "Divinity is the basest of the three" (1.1.9).

Faustus was interested to look for something more sustainable than academia as Marlowe himself was engaged with looking beyond religious pursuits. He goes on picking up conventional subjects one by one and disdainfully flung them aside. His decision that all studies are profitless except necromantic books, lead him to perpetual damnation. Unlimited power is Faustus' desire; his domain must exceed that of kings and emperors. He takes up magic for "a sound magician is a mighty God" (Act I Scene i).

He is struggling to identify his own aspirations. He is Everyman, the free-thinker, trying to break the bonds of convention which confine him. Simultaneously, Faustus, the individual, who through his pride contrives his own downfall, demonstrates that he was condemned by his choice, to take on hell as his "lifestyle," and his hell can be connected with Marlowe's decision to leave academia. Several other allusions to Faustus' rejection of Christianity and God are found in Act I when for the first time Faustus summons a devil to gain super human powers and a life of voluptuousness. Before he begins, his incantation reads as follows: "Within this circle is Jehovah's name / Forward and backward anagrammatized; / The abbreviated names of Holy Saints" (1.3.8-10). It is a direct assault on the rituals

of religion. Marlowe through Faustus, is rejecting rituals and equating it with base magic and his recitation of long Latin incantation lasting for seven lines invoke a spirit is directly connected to Catholic ideas that deal with the same thing. Marlowe subverts the Catholic use of Latin incantation and replaces God with the Devil.

The die is cast when in the very first monologue, Faustus bids adieu to Divinity. He turns a deaf ear to the earnest appeals of the Good Angel to lay that damned book aside and is carried away by the allurements of the Evil Angel who tells him, "Be thou on earth as Jove in the sky, / Lord and commander of these elements" (Act I Scene i). It is Faustus who utters the blasphemous words: "Had I as many souls as there be stars, / I'd give them all for Mephistophilis. / By him I'll be great emperor of the world . . ." (1.3.100-2). Uttering the phrase "Consummatumest" after signing the bond with his own blood is nothing but blasphemous irony. Faustus experiences much power, journeying through space in a chariot driven by dragons to learn "the secrets of astronomy" and to prove "cosmography" through expedition (3. Chorus. 1). In Act III Scene ii, he arrives in Rome to take part in the "Holy Peter's feast" and "to see the Pope and manners of his court." Faustus' statement before the Pope, "How! Bell, book and candle and bell, / Anon you shall hear a long grunt, a calf bleat, and an ass bray, / Because it is St. Peter's Holy day," (3.1.83-7) clearly show that Faustus is making fun of Pope, ritual, and God. Instead of using candles, bells, and Holy book to summon God, he makes a reference to common animals making comical noises like grunting, braying, and bleating. Even the vision of Pope in a giant hat, surrounded by a gaggle of uniformly dressed comrades, wielding candles and waggling bells at a group of laughing animals make us feel bad. This image of pomp and silliness certainly solidifies Marlowe's atheism. Faustus's entry into Pope's privy-chamber, troubling and teasing the Pope and his party, snatching away cups and dishes from his hand, and even manhandling in a nasty manner is blasphemous in Christian theology and can be done only by an abject atheist.

The Other Side of the Picture

To prove Marlowe's atheism through Faustus, let us throw light on the concept of atheism in the sixteenth century. In sixteenth century, the concept of atheism was not clearly defined. It could be broken down into two categories – one denying the existence of God and the other denying the goodness of God. At many places Faustus asserts that there is no such thing as either God or Heaven. In Act 1 Scene iii, he says, "There is no chief but only Beelzebub, / To whom Faustus doth dedicate himself."

He also frequently uses the concept of "a mighty God" as an alternative to Christian God. No wonder in the first part of the drama Faustus' intellectual pride and inordinate ambition lead him to abjure God and denounce Christianity to make a blasphemous bargain with the devil and invite his tragic end. Though Faustus meets tragic death, the play seems a belated morality as it vindicates humility, faith, and obedience to the law of God. It marks the culmination of the English tradition, presenting conflict between good and evil. The basic beliefs of Christianity are inherited in it and the doctrine of damnation pervades. Apart from this the play can be called a play of medieval theology. Faustus' abjuring the scriptures, Trinity, and Christ, the omnipresence of the devil and the hell, and bargaining with the devil to attain earthly learning, power, and satisfaction go down to horrible perdition.

The opening scene of Doctor Faustus presents Faustus rejecting Divinity because it emphasizes man's sinful inheritance but what oppresses him here is his own positive Christian inheritance – a sub-conscious belief in God and Christianity. As soon as he begins to draft the fatal bond with his own blood, something in him revolts, and his earlier resolution begins to wave. His Christian blood congeals, until it is artificially heated with hell-fire. The bond is completed with Christ's last words in the Gospel, according to St John "Consummatumest." This is a supreme blasphemy, but it also reveals a sub-conscious remorse.

In Act II Scene ii, Faustus is found in the grip of spiritual conflict, the Good and Bad Angels – reminders of the medieval psychomaniac – who begin to confound and confuse Faustus. "Thou art a spirit," says the Bad Angel, so "God can't pity thee." Faustus is somewhat irritated and replies that if he were to repent, "God may pity me." He also admits that "his heart is hardened" and "he cannot repent," he even thinks of committing suicide and raises the ultimate question: ". . . who made the world." The Devil has not made the world and he cannot have "omnipotence," though like God, the devil too enjoys powers over man. On hearing the Good Angels' words, "it's not too late to repent," and the Bad Angels', "the devil will tear thee in pieces," Faustus utters, "O Christ, my saviour, my saviour Help to save distressed Faustus' soul." His words: ". . . see, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament" confirms his faith in God and Christianity.

Nowhere in the play does Faustus say anything against Christ though he has his grudges against God. Even Lucifer is not so afraid of Faustus' uttering the name of God as he is of his uttering the name of Christ. In fact Marlowe seems to have seen human affinity between Christ and Faustus. Christ chose God's way through humility and surrender to Good and came to a bad end. Faustus' following the Devil's way through pride and temptation to evil is equally disastrous. "Humility is endless," says T.S. Eliot in Four Quartets, so is pride and both are human. Humility was Christ's way of creating a superman, pride is Faustus's way. Marlowe, in his conception of Faustus as a dramatic protagonist, has not created him as anti-Christ, though he may be anti-Christianity. The important problem in the play is the action and inter-action of a Christian attitude and a spirit of enquiry. Rejection of religious values merges with a deep-seated faith in God and makes the play not merely the tragedy of a man who has, through an act of folly, lost himself for eternity. It is a story of Humanism verses Religion. No one who hears Faustus' cry in his last hour (Act V Scene ii):

> O God
>
> If thou will not have mercy on my soul,
>
> Yet for Christ's sake whose blood hath ransomed me,
>
> Impose some end to my incessant pain . . .

can say with complacence that Marlowe or his protagonist Doctor Faustus was an atheist.

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