
UNIT 4 THE RENAISSANCE AND REFORMATION IN *DOCTOR FAUSTUS*

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit focuses on the content of the play. The interpretations of the play have been, at times, diametrically opposed to each other. *Doctor Faustus* is called essentially a Christian play by virtue of its medieval form. On the other hand; it is called inevitably a Renaissance play, for the aspirations of *Doctor Faustus* are those of the Renaissance. The Christianity the play presents is that of the division between the Catholics and the Protestants and the Renaissance the play illustrates is that of the English mind divided between religion and secular ambitions. The tragic complexity of *Doctor Faustus* has to be understood in terms of the interacting influences of these divisions.

4.1 INTRODUCTION: TRANSCENDING MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY

The medieval morality form *Doctor Faustus* assumes is simply exhaustive for it explains, minutely, the dramatic and thematic thrust of the play. As the morality

form exhausts the play, the question that inevitably arises is, where was the need for Marlowe to write about a dramatic tradition that was subject to so much of repetition for more than a century. Obviously, *Doctor Faustus* is not the facile hero of the morality play even if the play exhausts him as such. The justification to interpret the play in terms of medieval Christianity could be the dramatic existence of *Doctor Faustus* at that level. The play is the thing, Leo Kirschbaum asserts:

What does matter is that in terms of the play, Faustus is a wretched creature who for lower values gives up higher values. That the devil and Hell are omnipresent, potent, and terrifying realities - these are the values which govern the play. You must temporarily accept them while you watch the play. You need not ultimately accept them. But you should not interpret the play in the light of your philosophy, or religion or absence of religion. You cannot do so if you hear it properly as a play, as an entity, as a progressive action, as a quasi morality in which the characters in the play accept, which the playwright advances and accepts in his prologue and epilogue and which hence the audience must understand and accept.¹

While 'the play is the thing', it is not the total thing as well. Nicholas Brooke argues:

the play is not just
putting the Faust book on the stage. . . Faustus is,
and is not in control of the events that destroy him;
but Marlowe does not clarify his thought on the matter,
and if at one moment he seems to imply one attitude,
at another he equally clearly implies the opposite.²

4.2 RENAISSANCE ASPIRATIONS

At any rate, for Nicholas Brooke, a totally Christian conclusion of *Doctor Faustus* is not convincing since he dies seeking not the mercy of God but the extinction of the human state that has come to be invested with boundless aspirations and self-awareness. What the play puts into dramatic action and predicament is the Renaissance inspired idea of secular virtue which ultimately goes back to Aristotle.

The conception, for instance, of Tudor king or Italian prince was compared to Aristotle's description of the magnificent man, or even of the great souled Man, he who excels in all worldly 'goods' wealth, dignity, popularity and so on, who is a great patron of the arts, and who is superior to all the limitations of lesser men, . . . he must be wholly resolute in his pursuit of greatness. . . he will tolerate no rival within his sphere of influence. . . an understanding of Aristotle greatly illuminates what it is that Faustus is trying to achieve; the subjective aim of self expansion is equated with the objective ideal of Aristotelian greatness, and not only are Mephostopheles and Lucifer treated as rival magnificos, but Faustus himself is aiming at that state.³

Marlowe brings in the Renaissance attitude into the Elizabethan world dominated by the medieval values of Christianity. Whether Marlowe ascribed to this attitude or not is a moot point, for he chose to be a dramatist keen on enlarging the dramatic cosmos by the tide of the new influences taking root in the Elizabethan world. *Basically, it was a conflict of attitudes - the rigidly limited and defined world of medieval thinkers and the Renaissance world of natural law and human ideas, based on demonstrable*

truths. The change could be seen from the shift from the old scholastic studies of logic, natural philosophy and medicine for jobs in Law, Medicine and Theology to the Studia Humanitatis consisting of Grammar, Rhetoric, History and Ethics focussing on human abilities required for several societal duties. The emphasis of the new studies is mainly on the linguistic and rhetorical human skills rather than on the unalterable divine truths. Many Renaissance thinkers, Erasmus being the foremost among them, sought the reawakening of human self-consciousness and his awareness of the universe around him. In the immediate context of the Elizabethan world, their concern is to stop the institutional decay of Christianity reeling under the burden of outworn traditions and the despotic church power. Along with the revision of the scholastic curriculum, they wanted to reform Christian society through a revival of classical learning. In fact, for Erasmus, the revival of classical learning was a prelude to the restoration of piety.

Based on an immense sense of human worth and possibility, the Renaissance mind explored the cosmic reality beyond the factual terms. For them, the aesthetic dimension is as central to man as the factual or the rational. In fact, the exclusion of the aesthetic undercuts the basic being of man, and as, the search for truth is invariably the search for beauty, the one cannot be divorced from the other. A sense of enquiry towards everything that concerns man and a spirit of revolt against anything that seeks to deny human reality characterizes the renaissance mind.

4.3 RENAISSANCE SCEPTICISM

Significantly, Renaissance presents also a countervailing sceptical attitude of mind towards its own inclinations of intellectual and aesthetic curiosity and passion. As described by Erasmus in his *The Praises of Folly*, the Renaissance cherished sceptical perspectives as well on the boundless enthusiasm about human possibilities. In its enthusiasm to strain its farthest limits, the human mind could undo itself instead of realizing its potentialities.

The failure is tragic given the strong sense of human self-confidence and possibilities. The Renaissance makes the human tragedy possible for the first time as the medieval Christian thought never admitted any human possibilities other than his total insignificance and impotence.

4.4 THE HISTORICAL CHARACTER OF *DOCTOR FAUSTUS*

Doctor Faustus reflects the division in the English mind during the Elizabethan period between the traditional religious ethos and the new ambience of critical and aesthetic values. The religious providentialism the church presented was ideologically acceptable to the Elizabethans but provided no practical guide in coping with the desires of the emerging secular culture. Marlowe makes Faustus a product of historically and culturally determined desires, and history, no matter what it might portend for the intensely self conscious Renaissance man, is a part of Marlowe's dramatic statement and tragedy of *Doctor Faustus*.

4.5 *DOCTOR FAUSTUS*: CATHOLIC AND PROTESTANT SCHISM

In fact, history for the Elizabethans did not simply entail a division of religious and secular concerns for there is a greater schism within the Christian religion in Elizabethan England that Marlowe's play does not totally escape, though under the

broader conflict of religious and secular values, the former does not gain serious dramatic cognizance. The ideological conflict between the Catholics and the Protestants was a part of Marlowe's learning at Cambridge. Critical perception of *Doctor Faustus* largely centered around the ideology of the medieval morality but the possibility that Faustus's religious revolt could ideologically have been shaped by English Protestantism, not merely by Renaissance aspirations, was not seriously considered. The movement of the Reformation synchronized with the Renaissance in opposing the dehumanization implicit in the ideological formulations of institutional Christianity. English Protestantism, deriving inspiration from John Calvin, besides opposing several religious practices of the orthodox church, propounded the rebellious doctrine of justification by Faith or conscience as against the institutional mediation or determination of the individual's faith. Further, Protestantism believed in absolute predestination and in the notion of the elect. Though the concept of human sin, as a flight from God in exercise of choice, is the same to the Protestants as it is to the orthodox Church, Calvinist Protestants and anti-Calvinist champions of the Roman church differed diametrically in the possibility of divine mercy for the sinner. The orthodox Church presented the idea of an ever benevolent God waiting to save the repentant at any time, Protestantism advocated the idea of a sinner as being a born reprobate through predestination whose predicament is one of endless despair from which there is no escape.

In his ruminations about the possibility of divine grace to him after he signs the pact with the devil, *Doctor Faustus* reflects the divergent positions of the Catholic and the Protestant positions. The religious controversy was so near Marlowe at Cambridge where he was a student when the defenders and opponents of the Calvinist faith like William Parkins and his follower, William Barret, on the one hand, and opponents like Peter Baro on the other, entered into endless polemics. Lily B. Campbell calls *Doctor Faustus*' despair a case of a torturous Protestant conscience while the possibility or impossibility of divine grace for Faustus holds the dramatic tension in the play:

It is the continuing struggle of conscience, the conflict between hope and despair, where hope would lead him to God again and despair would keep him from salvation, that makes the suspense of the play. The outcome remaining in doubt till the eleventh hour, the tension continues throughout the play and gives it its peculiar dramatic compulsion.⁴

In fact, Faustus' despair, either in itself or in juxtaposition with his religious hope or Renaissance aspirations presents the rich complexity of the Elizabethan mind fluctuating among several alternatives without being able to affirm or reject anything decisively.

4.6 FAUSTUS: THE RENAISSANCE ASPIRATIONS AND RHETORIC

From the beginning, *Doctor Faustus* explores religious and human dilemmas characterising the Elizabethan mind. Marlowe begins Faustus' story in a duality of Renaissance ambitions and religious values. There is Faustus' craving for classical learning, "Sweet Analytiks", "live and die in Aristotle's works" "who has ravished" him and a craving for a "world of profit and delight, of power, of honour, of omnipotence". The extent and depth of ambitions could only be expressed in liturgical images like "heavenly" for the delights of necromancy and the reach out of the worldly power could only be like "jove in the sky" and hence the dissatisfaction with the human state, "Yet art thou still but Faustus, and a man". Though divine power is the ultimate test of human achievements, pursuit of divinity, according to

Faustus, is self-defeating, for human aspiration in a world of sin, and man cannot deceive himself by denying sin or ambition. "Why, then, belike we must sin and consequently die". He would ignore the eternal possibility of divine grace that the Catholic church promises and would rather go by the Calvinist argument that a sinner, a man of ambitions like him, is a born reprobate, his sin resulting from his predestined state.

Faustus gives necromancy the thrust and power of scientific method through which the Renaissance scholars attempted to understand nature's treasure as well as the aesthetics of human beauty.

Shall I make spirits fetch me what I please,
Resolve me of all ambiguities,
Perform what desperate enterprise I will?
I'll have them to fly to India for Gold,
Ransack the ocean for orient pearl,
And search all corners of the new-found world
For pleasant fruits and princely delicates;
.....
....sometimes like women, or unwedded maids,
Shadowing more beauty in their airy brows
Than has the white breasts of the Queen of Love.
From Venice shall they drag huge argosies,
And from America the golden fleece
That yearly stuffs old Philip's treasury ⁵..... I, i 75-130.

"Nature's treasure" is an obsession with the Renaissance scholars since from nature proceeds human nature and the diversity of its desires, and taste for jewels, food, gossip, fashion, etc. Along with the gluttony of desires, there is a rhetoric of words. In fact, words play a greater role, for words have a thrust that impel desires rather than vice versa. Bartlett Giamatti writes:

Renaissance man felt he had the power to transform himself because he had the power of language. Words were units of energy. Through words man could assume forms and aspire to shapes and states otherwise beyond his reach.⁶

With a Renaissance focus on linguistic and rhetorical skills, Marlowe "wrestled with the multiform angel (or demon) of language".

... he expanded the limits of the stage by writing of human mind in its battle to surpass human limitation. He used soaring words as symbols of man's aspiring mind. And he used the lurking dangers in words to image the terrors of aspiring too far.⁷

In a characteristically Renaissance attitude, Faustus chooses to be impulsively rhetorical, driving himself into a state of aspiration beyond his abilities. Rhetoric drives Renaissance man towards knowledge, beauty and material power. There is an impatient blending of the intellectual, aesthetic and the material resulting in the overturning and undoing of the inherent strength of all three urges. Thus, the multivalent urges of the Renaissance display human magnificence as well as the tragic entrapment of man in his own self-exalted state of being. After rhetoricizing the possibility of manifold human grandeur, Faustus begins his tragic undoing with "waxen wings" of words "mounting above his reach."

Words fly past ideas as Faustus dismisses one discipline after another to convince himself that only necromancy fits his genius. What Faustus does not realize is that in the very name of human excellence he is flying away from human excellence into

areas that have not done any credit to man. He signs a pact with the devil who is the very antithesis of the moral being of man. Ironically, he is not frightened of damnation but would confound hell in Elysium and would allow his ghost to rest with the old Greek philosophers forgetting that heaven and hell are human inventions made to ennoble human life. The classical mythology is used not to elevate himself intellectually but used self-deceptively for self aggrandisement. The rhetoric of learning becomes a medium, not of self-elevation but of unlearning and degradation. The apostrophe to Helen in the final act is Faustus' finest rhetoric of learning and taste but all that Faustus gains is a self-deluding exercise to overcome the tormenting fears of damnation.

4.7 FAUSTUS' RENAISSANCE TRAGEDY

Phoebe S. Spinard sums up Faustus' tragic undoing as that of an accomplished scholar choosing the ways of a "diletante" who uses learning superficially, and causes a yawning gap between what he says and what he is led to. Bartlett Giamatti sums up Faustus' Renaissance tragedy

Where at the outset Faustus was a creator, at the end he is a creature; where before he dreamed of unlimited power and glory now he is assured of limitless torment. The words by which he reshaped himself into a demigod at the beginning have now exploded into a horror all about him. What we see on stage are the contents of his head - the Hell he will possess forever, the heaven he will shortly lose. He brought it on himself, this deformed world, when he converted, when he turned to magic from God, when he turned the power of words from God's praise to his own.⁸

Faustus fails as he is simply carried away by the Renaissance aspirations instead of understanding the spirit of these aspirations that looked forward to human excellence and splendour. With all his accomplishments, Faustus fails tragically as a Renaissance hero, but the question arises as to whether Faustus deserved the tormenting suffering he had to experience. What is the nature of Faustus' sin that invites so much of divine wrath? The answer again lies in the humanist aspirations, though of a different kind. If the Renaissance posited man at the center of a secular world, the religious movement of the Reformation posited man in a direct relation with God bypassing the institutional authority of the church and its liturgical practices. Faustus' inability or refusal to repent may, in one sense, be his Renaissance pride but, in another sense, it is a protestant's admission of conscientious suffering and a despairing awareness that he is not the elect of God and, is thus, a reprobate.

4.8 DOCTOR FAUSTUS: CATHOLIC FAITH AND PROTESTANT DESPAIR

In the dramatic conflict between faith and despair in *Doctor Faustus*, the possibility of a strain of Protestant faith in Marlowe's making of Faustus, makes Faustus' despair all the more acute. The possibility of divine grace that Faustus is alternately hopeful of, in the immediate context of the schism, in the Church becomes a Catholic proposition but Faustus' despair triumphs in the play making his hope of salvation ineffectual and giving the protestant faith an edge over its Catholic rival.

Marlowe gives Faustus, for his rejection of divinity, the initial motivation of Renaissance aspirations. However, very soon *Marlowe qualifies Faustus' motivation by the latter's awareness of eternal damnation having already taken place by his "desperate thoughts against Jove's deity" even before he sold his soul to the devil.* The Pact with the devil is yet to come, despair precedes it:

Now, Faustus, must thou need be damn'd?
And canst thou not be sav'd.
What boots it then to think on God or heaven?
Away with such vain fancies, and despair
Despair in God, and trust in Belzebub.

However, Faustus has not removed all traces of hope

...O, something sounds in my ears,
Abjure this magic, turn to God again
Ay, and Faustus will turn to God again

The hope is ineffectual

To God? He loves thee not;

There is also the self-loving Renaissance man in the despairing Protestant.

The God thou serv'st is thine own appetite.
Wherein is fixed the love of Belzebub
(II, i 1-15)⁹

Faustus' blood congeals as he signs the bond with the devil but his faith is not that strong, the blood flows on just being warmed by fire. What is strong is his despair.

Homo fuge! Whither should I fly?
If unto God, he'll throw me down to hell. (II, i, 75-76)¹⁰

Repentance is an impossibility to Faustus the way he is made

My heart's so harden'd, I cannot repent;
Scarce can I name salvation, faith or heaven,
But fearful echoes thunder in mine ears
'Faustus thou art damn'd'
(II, ii, 18-20)¹¹

Faustus does cry for God's mercy although he knows that it is impossible to get it. Lucifer makes the nature of Protestant faith clear to Faustus: He chooses people for His Mercy, who would never sin in the first instance and only those outside his grace would sin and, these are outside his justice too.

Christ cannot save thy soul, for he is just. (II, ii, 87)¹²

Until the end, Marlowe dramatizes the ineffectual possibility of divine grace for Faustus.

See, see, where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!
One drop would save my soul, half a drop: Ah, my Christ.
(V, iii, 77-78)¹³

But there is no escape from Faustus' predicament:

If thou wilt not have mercy on my soul,
Yet for Christ's sake whose blood hath ransom'd me,

Impose some end to my incessant pain. . . .
O, no end is limited to damned souls!(V, iii 100-108)¹⁴

Lily B. Campbell likens Faustus' predicament to that of Fancis Spira in Italy who out of conviction professes the Protestant doctrines of justification by faith. He is summoned to papal Legate at Venice for heresy and is forced to recant his utterances. Under the threat of severe punishment, he makes both a private and public recantation. After the first recantation, Spira felt God's presence who tells him not to abjure Him and at the same time, tells him not to recant. Having been convinced of his sin of deserting god, Spira experiences an intense despair in God and would not accept the advice of several learned people to seek divine mercy for he is convinced that his sin has resulted from his not being the elect of god and that despair is his lot. Finally, he dies unable to cope with his despair.

For Campbell, *Doctor Faustus* is, basically, neither a tragedy of medieval Christianity nor of the Renaissance but specifically that of the Protestant faith uppermost in the sixteenth century English mind.

We see Faustus confirmed in sin more disastrously by yielding to the counsels of despair urged by Mephistophilis and the Bad Angels than by yielding to the enticements of pleasure. And we see him consequently rejecting the mercy of God promised in the words of the Good Angel and the old Man as he cast off faith and Hope. The Faust Book certainly left open the way for Marlowe's development of the story of *Doctor Faustus* as a case of Conscience. My contention is that the "medieval" elements of Marlowe's play are not medieval but of the Reformation and that they constitute the essential dramatic unity of the play culminating in the speech of Faustus as he faces his doom, so that theme and plot and poetry come together in the diapason of that final grandeur.¹⁵

4.9 SUMMING UP : DOCTOR FAUSTUS: A TRAGEDY OF THE RENAISSANCE AND REFORMATION

The confluence of the influences of Renaissance and Reformation, the Reformation particularly sought by English Protestantism of the times, immensely enhances and sophisticates the dramatic cosmos of Doctor Faustus. Marlowe's use of Renaissance and Reformation aspirations is neither axiomatic nor ideological but one of perceptive intellectual sensitivity. In the possibilities of Faustus' multivalent conflict, Marlowe makes *Doctor Faustus* acquire a historical character without making the play an interplay of historical forces. Without the Renaissance, and the Reformation, *Doctor Faustus* would have remained a simple morality play. The Renaissance makes it a human tragedy of Christian morality, the tragedy that was missing from the morality dramatic tradition. The Reformation and English Protestantism make the human tragedy of *Doctor Faustus* emanate from a deep sense of religious conviction and conscience and from an individual's right to a particular kind of religious experience which is vehemently and tragically asserted.

4.10 REFERENCES

1. Leo Kirschbaum. "Doctor Faustus: A Reconsideration" *Critics on Marlowe* Judith O'Neill ed. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1969. pp. 80-1

2. Nicholas Brooke. "The Moral Tragedy of *Doctor Faustus*" "*Critics on Marlowe*" pp.93-94.
3. Ibid. p.105.
4. Lily B. Campbell. "*Doctor Faustus*: A Case of Conscience"*PMLA* 67.2 1952. pp. 223-24.
5. Christopher, Marlowe. *Doctor Faustus*. Madras, Macmillan. 1976. pp.6-8.
6. Bartlett, Giamatti. "Marlowe: The Arts of Illusion." *Review* pp.532.
7. Ibid. pp. 534.
8. Ibid., pp. 543-44.
9. Christopher Marlowe. *Doctor Faustus*. pp.16-17.
- 10: Ibid. p. 19.
11. Ibid. p.23.
12. Ibid. p.25.
13. Ibid. p. 50.
14. Ibid. p.51.
15. Lily B. Campbell. "*Doctor Faustus*: A case of Conscience."*PMLA* 67,2,1952. P.239.

4.11 KEY WORDS

Protestantism: Sixteenth century religious reformation movement consisting of distinct mainstream strains like Lutheran (Martin Luther) Calvinist (John Calvin) and the Anglican. Despite differences, the different strains of Protestantism believed in the concept of justification by grace through faith and reject the primacy of the Pope, emphasize the individual faith and accept the Bible as the prime authority. These mainstream Protestant movements stress the supreme authority of The Bible and the possibilities of salvation only to those who accept Christ and practice infant baptism. The radical groups like the Baptists, and the Quakers practice adult baptism limiting faith to those who practise it and believe in a critical understanding of religious faith.

4.12 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss *Doctor Faustus* as essentially a Renaissance tragedy.
2. Examine *Doctor Faustus* as a study in the duality of Christian faith.
3. Illustrate the ideas in *Doctor Faustus* that present a meeting point for the movements of Renaissance and Reformation.

4.13 ANNOTATIONS

Annotate the following passages with reference to the context.

- a) I'll have them fly them to India for gold Ranasack the ocean for orient pearl and search all corners of the new found world. For pleasant fruits and princely delicates.
- b) Sometimes like women or unwedded maids, shadowing more beauty in their airy brows than have the white breasts of the Queen of Love.
- c) 'Twas made for man, therefore is man more excellent
- d) Christ cannot save thy soul, for he is just;
- e) I do repent: and yet I do despair

4.14 SUGGESTED READINGS

- 1) Campbell B. Lily. "*Doctor Faustus*: A case of conscience." PMLA 67,2, 1952. pp. 219-239. Campbell discusses, *Doctor Faustus* as a Protestant play illustrating Protestant doctrines of justification by faith, predestination and election.
- 2) Giámatti, Barlette. "Marlowe: The Arts of Illusion." Yale Review Giammotti, discusses the Renaissance inclination to rhetoric and how *Doctor Faustus* becomes a victim of rhetoric.
- 3) Pinciss G.M. "Marlowe's Cambridge years and the writing of *Doctor Faustus* ." Studies in English literature, 88, 1993. pp. 249-264. Pinciss traces the ambiguity of Faustus' hope and despair to Marlowe's sensitivity to the polemical controversy between Calvinists and anti-Calvinists at Cambridge when Marlowe was a student there.