

## Renaissance Humanism and Tragic Heroism in Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Dr Faustus*

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### Abstract

This paper purports to explore and analyze the issue of humanism and tragic heroism in Christopher Marlowe's play *Dr. Faustus*. The main contention of this article is to show that the play celebrates the spirit of humanism by placing Faustus at the center of the play and focusing on his quest for knowledge and power. Dr. Faustus works outside the framework of moral and religious world view and tries to reach beyond the boundary of normal human limits. He behaves as if he is his own god and pushes himself in the direction of relentless pursuit of knowledge. Though he fails to use his power for the betterment of mankind, his unbridled passion for mastery can be interpreted as a celebration of spirit of humanism. That he is determined to pursue his goal without any heed to the entreaties of other people shows his heroic spirit. However, his misuse of power and pathetic condition during the moments of remorse and repentance robs him of the tragic height that befits a true hero. When the period of twenty four years comes to an end he behaves frantically and acts like a coward which tends to compromise his heroic stature. Thus, both his humanism and heroism are compromised.

**Keywords:** Humanism, tragic heroism, hamartia, compromise, repentance

### Introduction

Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* is a typical renaissance play that gives immense value to humanist concerns and celebrates the potential of human being. The middle ages, regarded as the dark period in European history put religion and god at the center of the universe and marginalized human beings as sinful creatures who are damned by birth and can't rise above the dust they came from. Science and free inquiry were fettered by the chains of theological world view. Man was conceived as incapable of redemption as he carried some burden of the original sin committed by Adam and Eve, the first parents of the followers of Christianity. Opposed to this denunciation of the purity and capability of man, the renaissance removes god from the center of the universe and then replaces the divine authority from that position of power and glory. Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* has to be read in the light of this knowledge as the playwright frees the central character from the shackles of religious authority and allows him to pursue his own heart and choices. However, his over confidence and misuse of power tend to compromise both his humanist position and tragic heroism and creates a situation of confusing ambivalence. This paper analyzes the play along this line and for that purpose it employs some ideas about humanism and tragedy developed by some scholars.

The tragic protagonist of the play *Dr. Faustus* comes from a humble origin and acquired great degree of knowledge from a reputed German university. This is an example of how an ordinary person from a humble background can scale height of success and renown through his own individual efforts. Faustus believes in his power and ability so much that

the traditional curriculum consisting of logic, theology, law and grammar cannot satisfy him and he is determined to explore new domains of knowledge. Finally, he settles for the study of necromancy which he believes will satiate his hunger for knowledge and power. This is a kind of artistic worship at the alter of humanity, though Faustus fails to put the power he gains to the good of humanity. His response to his own situation towards the end of the play seems to weaken his own position as a hero as we see him burn miserably in the fire of regret and repentance. What made him look like a hero presents him as a weakling by what he does in the end.

### **Theory and Textual Analysis**

Dr. Faustus is a self-educated and a self-made hero. He obtains highest degree of education from a German university and raises himself greatly in social and intellectual position. He loses his humility very soon and becomes arrogant, “Till Swoll’n with cunning of a self-conceit, his waxen wings did mount above his reach” (2). Striving for something great is appreciable but one invites his own downfall if he tries to cross the limits beyond which lies down fall. This very arrogance and pride is the causes of his own destruction. A true hero is resolved to pursue his own heart’s choice but he must know what is within and beyond natural human limits. The fascination for magic blinds him to the value of traditional course for him, “These metaphysics of magicians and necromantic books are heavenly (3). It is natural to be fascinated by new domain of knowledge but one must not forget what one is really capable of. Man cannot be all powerful but his, “on what a world of profit and delight, of power, of honor of omnipotence (3) demonstrates his craze for unlimited power without any regard to the dangers and horrors that may come attached with that power.

Faustus forgets that the power one gets from magic is illusory. He forgets his limitations and has a wrong dream of outsmarting god as he thinks that, “A sound magician is a mighty god (4). Pride has a fall and Faustus’s blindness to his own position as a human being blinds him to the trap into which he is going to fall very soon. Miracles are not a part of real life but he is spellbound by his friend’s remark that “the miracles that magic will perform will make thee vow to study nothing else (5). Once he sets his mind on mastering the miracles that magic can do, he does not turn back and condemns other subjects as inferior and unworthy of him. This illustrates his belief in his own power as well as his ambivalent heroism. It is praiseworthy that he is resolved to follow something great but this decision also results from his irrationality which makes him ignore even the possibility of death and destruction as he exclaims that, “for ere I sleep I will try what I can do, this night I will conjure, though I die therefore (6). He does not seem to realize the futility of any achievement that costs him his own life. Success and achievement are for enhancing life but any gain that results in your own death has no value and meaning at all.

As we look at the beginning and the end of the play, we find a mismatch between two versions of the protagonist because, “Faustus, the foolish, deluded, profoundly overmatched victim, as opposed to the arrogant, overarching Faustus of the play’s first two acts, is the final version of the character . . . (612). A tragic hero gains stature if there is unity in his action or

consistency in his behaviour. This doesn't apply to Faustus and it compromises his height as tragic hero. That arrogance is defeated is made clear when he says ". . . mountains and hills, come, come and fall on me, and save me from the heavy wrath of God" (35). This is a great irony that a hero who is so adamant in the beginning acts like a defeated weakling when he realizes that his fate is sealed and there is no way out. He asks for help with the same god whom he didn't regard at all at the time of making his own choices in the first part of the play. The desperation with which he cries to Christ for rescue teases the hero in him as he seems to surrender to God for mercy. His, "see, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament, one drop would save my soul, half a drop. Ah, my Christ" (7), reveals his helplessness and sorry state of life. He had to be aware of it when Mephistopheles had warned him, "therefore, the shortest cut for conjuring is stoutly to abuse the trinity and pray devoutly to the prince of hell" (8). This shows the contradiction in his own position.

It is acceptable if a hero endeavors for excellence but selling one's soul for earthly joy and comfort doesn't make one a hero. The lines, "say he surrenders Mephistopheles up to him his soul, so he will spare him four and twenty years" (10) is a clear indication that he was willing to trade his soul for a transitory power and joy of twenty four years. His remark, "That I shall wait on Faustus whilst he lives, so, he will buy my service with his soul (12) tells to what irrational extent a man can go to satisfy his desire for material comfort and temporary pleasure. Joy and achievement have value only when you are alive and soul can never be a price for any gain no matter what that may be. Marriage is a holy institution and it guarantees the continuity of creation through procreation. To go against marriage is to go against the law of nature and god. He shuns marriage at the provocation of the devil Mephistopheles. That his inconsistency mars his heroic status is made clear when he remarks about heaven that, "if it were made for man, it was made for me. I will renounce this magic and repent" (11). This vacillation in his resolve makes him look like an unheroic figure. If he were to repent so soon, then why had he to be so hell bent on pursuing necromancy.

Faustus was not intelligent enough to decipher the meaning of the devil's refusal to answer him when he asked Mephistopheles about who made the world. To answer this question is to utter the name of God and a disciple of Lucifer would rather die than respect god by pronouncing his name. When asked to reply to the question the devil says, "I will not" (16). Faustus had to understand this disrespect towards god but his blind passion for knowledge prevented him from realizing the gravity of this refusal. Faustus, thus shunned heaven and chose hell no matter how enticing it may have looked to him. Immediately after this he realizes that he is on the way to damnation and asks Christ for mercy and Salvation when he says, "Ah, Christ, my savior, seek to save distressed Faustus soul" (16). He has begun to have misgivings about his own choice. He knows how he is going to be condemned to hell but it is too late or he is not very serious about his own realization.

He chose to master necromancy for knowing the hidden truths of the universe and we have to appreciate it to that extent. However, once he gains knowledge of magic he uses it for trivial purposes instead of using it for higher goals. He steals meat from a pope's table for the merest purpose of showing his power and troubling other people. It is beneath a hero

to stop so low as to use his knowledge for such lowly aims. Even a knight hates this act of Faustus when he comments, “How dar’st though thus abuse a gentle man? Villain, I say, undo what thou hast done”(27). This is sheer misuse of the power he has obtained through magic. He could have used it for higher purpose to elevate the destiny of mankind but he never had time to think about the meaning of his own crazy actions and cheap tricks. This again, compromises his heroism and brings him down to the level of a disgraceful joker and villain.

At least Faustus realized his wrong doing and repented for it and this belated awareness of his own tragic flaw makes us pity him. We know that to err is human and are willing to forgive him for his mistakes because “The tragic hero may realize what it is that he has done wrong... He may realize the gravity of his act of shame. Just how many people he may have inadvertently harmed...” (104). After all, Faustus is a human being and we have to appreciate his realization and plea for forgiveness. It is natural that man recently released from the chains of Christian orthodoxy of the medieval era wants to transcend normal limits in the open and free cultural environment of the renaissance. The brimming energy to revolt against tradition could lead one to make such crazy choices as...”when Faustus sets himself against convention he slips into an arrogant self-justifying fantasy of his invincibility” (152). This irrational decision of Faustus could be understood as a consequence of the intoxication of freedom from the control and domination of religion during the medieval period. It is the same misleading power of sudden freedom that brings the “demonic/satanic power”(63) in Faustus out. Slowly and gradually, the effect of his own choice begins to dawn on Faustus, but he is already in the grip of Mephistopheles’s power and there is no going back. The following conversation between Faustus and the devil brings this to light:

Faustus: Accursed Faustus, where is mercy now?

I do repent, and yet I do despair. Hell strives with grace for conquest in my breast.

What shall I do to shun the snares of death?

Mephitopheles: Thou, traitor, Faustus, I arrest thy soul.

For disobedience to my sovereign lord.

Revolt or I’ll in peacemeal tear thy flesh.(32)

Once Faustus is in Mephistopheles’ power he wouldn’t let him go. He is sunk into a dungeon of hell from where it is not possible to swim back to the surface. Though it sounds unheroic for Faustus to lament for what he has lost it at least cleanses him from the sin he committed by disobeying God and violating the norms of the moral universe. Faustus himself realizes that forgiveness is not easy for him because he has committed a grave sin by falling into the trap of temptation laid by the evil devil. He discloses, “But Faustus’ offence can never be pardoned. The serpent that tempted Eve may be saved, but not Faustus” (34). We understand that his situation is hopeless. He makes this remark when the scholars ask him to turn towards heaven and ask for Christ’s forgiveness. He is aware of the gravity of his own offence against god and knows that there may be no room for forgiveness for him in God’s heart. He is painfully aware that his crime is beyond correction. Faustus is tormented by the awareness of impending doom. “Ah, Faustus, now hast thou but one bare hour to live, and

thou must be damned perpetually” (35). Faustus is horrified by the prospect of approaching damnation and this recognition is the greatest punishment for his own shameful act of defying the law of nature. It is his own over ambition that ultimately brought about his own downfall.

Faustus tries to fly above the boundary of human limits and comes crashing down to the ground of reality as “. . . Doctor Faustus sets up the trajectory of its hero in terms of the tragic paradigm of Icarus, displaying a heroic ambition that soars above human limits and which is punished by the “heavens”(Bushnell 303). This helps to establish Faustus’ ambivalent heroism. In celebrating the spirit of human potentials, he sets on a grand quest, but the quest is beyond the capabilities of a human being and he is doomed to fall from a great height. It is understandable that one who rides, falls and there is no gain without taking risks. That his fall is a great lesson to us all is revealed by what the chorus remarks in the very end of the play. “. . . Faustus is gone. Regard his hellish fall, whose mindful 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” (37). His failure to understand his own limits and his defiance of divine order resulted in the kind of punishment that the divine lord meted out to him. Though, Faustus can’t use this lesson to reform himself, we as audience come to know the consequences of our decisions taken in haste without consideration of our own limits and the power of moral and divine order.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Friedrich Nietzsche assigns tragic spirit to the impact of dionysiac impulsiveness and intoxication. Man loses his power of rational thinking and is in the grip of emotional drunkenness. He asserts, “If we add to this horror the blissfull ecstasy which arises from the innermost ground of man, indeed, of nature itself, whenever the breakdown of principum individuationis occurs, we catch a glimpse of the dionysiac, which is best conveyed by the analogy of intoxication” (56). A tragic hero is in the grip of madness and he loses his power to think logically. Faustus is so much intoxicated by his emotion of ambition that he shuns all other thoughts from his mind and tries to reach crazily for the unattainable thereby inviting his own ruin and disintegration. For Adrian Poole, even Aristotle’s concept of hamartia is not adequate to describe the intensity of guilt that a tragic protagonist may experience. He comments, “Aristotle’s conception of Hamartia is distinctly limited. It doesn’t begin to address the intensity and complexity of guilt . . . such guilt is far more indiscriminately contagious than the notion of hamartia allows” (62). No matter how guilt ridden Faustus maybe we can measure the intensity of his emotion both when he ambitiously sets on his quest and when he realizes the folly of his own choice and decision. Only a hero is capable of such deep emotion. It lends great authenticity to his experience of tragic downfall though it tends to compromise his stature as a great tragic hero.

Despite the argument that Faustus heroism is compromised by his cowardice and guilt, Marlowe is able to offer us a tragic vision of human life. In the words of George Steiner, “. . . a tragic poet does come very near to giving an explicit summary of the tragic vision of life”(15). After all, Faustus is a human being like us and we understand his own ambition and limitations. We are moved by his fall and sympathize with him despite our awareness of the folly of his choices made without acknowledging the limits of human potential. It hints

at the incomprehensibility of the divine will and the fact that the chaos and cruelty of the cosmos is beyond human understanding as, “The tragic word view, set forth by Aeschylus and Sophocles, courageously and honestly faced with the world as it truly is: “Chaotic, cruel, and ultimately impenetrable to human reason” (2). Faustus made the choices he did because he may have had no inkling of his own limitations as a human being and the wrath of divine lord. He had had no clue to how unfeeling, cruel and anarchic the cosmic power could turn out to be.

## Conclusion

Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus stands high as a canonical renaissance tragedy. The play is a celebration of the unbounded potentials of man. It places human beings at the centers of the universe and sets them on a quest for power and knowledge. Despite this celebration of human spirit, it presents a hero whose humanism is compromised due to his lack of awareness of his own true potentials. The misuse of power he exercises and the cheap use to which he puts it make his position as a humanist questionable. He is a noble character and determined to explore the novel domains of knowledge through a mastery of black magic. His heroism is also compromised because of his misuse of knowledge and a weak position as seen in the act of remorse and repentance.

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