

Pyokyeong Son

Prof. A. Giugni

English 190FS-2

19 Sept. 2019

A Literary Analysis of Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragic History of Doctor Faustus*

The role of religion in one's values has never been more conflicted than during the Renaissance, as the surge of humanistic values encouraged, and even demanded a focus on the individual *person*. While the immature and often times humorously incorrect information the academics of the time produced leads us to dismiss their ideas entirely, it is only in this period that an in-depth exploration of faith and ethics, knowledge and evidence can be done—as modern sciences prefers concrete contributions to the ever-growing list of academic frontiers at the cost of such abstract, seemingly meaningless discussions. From this perspective, Christopher Marlowe's masterpiece *The Tragic History of Doctor Faustus* portrays, through a character embodying exactly such a dilemma, the rejection of traditional authority or faith in the process of gathering knowledge, and despite the high price the crucial part of individual exploration and evidence-based construction of our knowledge; a value that we in contemporary society, take for granted. It is then Marlowe's intention to deliver an encouragement of the constant process of doubt and *skepticism* in the process of gathering knowledge that Faustus—the hero of the modern academic—displays in the first scene with his iconic deal with the devil as well as its invocation in the final act—yet with an essential caution of the cost of such pursuits regarding

the weakness of the human soul, the easy degradation of values that occur with a lack of a core anchor of *faith* in divinity.

Faustus's explicit rejection of medieval means of gathering knowledge clearly exemplifies his humanistic and individualistic values in the pursuit of knowledge that builds a character independent yet ignorant of God, representing through him the importance and danger of rejection of such ideas. To Faustus each field of study is shallow and meaningless; the "end of physic is our body's health," the "petty case of paltry legacies [is the] subject of the institute, / And universal body of the law" while logic, the most fundamental of all disciplines, appears simply to exist for bettering one's argument: "Is, to dispute well, logic's chiefest end?" Such doubt, while apparently shallow and prideful, are true statements and dilemmas one must face in the pursuit of knowledge. Such considerations are often belittled as overly prideful or self-indulgent; yet Marlowe, with an extensive monologue opening the play, proposes them to us as the central themes of the play: the melancholy of the polymath who realizes the extent of all human knowledge, which, in Faustus's world, was very limited. There was a notion that we, with the correct tools and disciplines, could measure, quantify, and theorize everything there is to know; everything there was to know could be known, yet not with authority of an abstract figure—as Faustus exemplifies the masters of each discipline: Galen in Medicine, Pythagoras in Mathematics, Aristotle in Science, and God in Divinity—but rather a strict evidence-based approach that leaves nothing unknown unknown. Nihilism, then, is the Faustus's sole savior, suggesting: "et art thou still but Faustus, and a man," and even challenging the christian notion of sin: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us. / Why, then,

belike we must sin, and so consequently die.” This is a dangerous proposition, especially to a medieval crowd whose identity would be questioned by such a notion, but possibly not during the Renaissance, as the shift of focus from the divine to the human necessitated a consideration in fundamental values of rights and wrongs offered unconvincingly by the religion to the skeptic 17th century person. In light of such perspectives, we can reasonably deduce Marlowe’s intention to portray Faustus as a hero—standing at the pinnacle of all human knowledge, ready to challenge the authority of God.

Despite such projections, however, Faustus quickly devolves into an appreciation of magic—a devilish and sinful art at the time—, revealing to the audience the risks of such lure, the danger of casting an easy doubt in divine faith. Christian beliefs still reign in throughout Marlowe’s play in the portrayal of the Good and Bad Angels that continue to advice Faustus throughout the play. To Faustus, the skeptic nihilist, the Good Angel’s demands are an impossibility; to “lay that damned book aside, / And gaze not on it, lest it tempt thy soul” is a rejection of his views condemning many fundamental meaning in the gain of knowledge—to him divinity is simply a meaningless ponder, as he exclaimed, “Divinity, *adieu!*” His hedonist views are justified, and the notions of sin are turned simply as weaknesses of the soul, something to be rid of in the rigidity of his philosophy: “How am I gluttred with conceit of this! Shall I make spirits fetch me what I please, Resolve me of all ambiguities” However Marlowe questions such easy acceptance of materialistic pleasures as an answer to the apparent meaninglessness of all academic studies; all manner of negative imagery and diction is used to depict Marlowe’s condemnation Faustus’s conclusion, the thunder with Faustus’s cacophonized speech and incantations—“the gloomy shadow of the night, / Longing to view Orion's drizzling look, /

Leaps from th' antartic world unto the sky, And dims the welkin with her pitchy breath"—serve to cast a negative auditory light unto his actions, while the visual imagery of the “gloomy“ room, the “anagrammatiz'd, Th' abbreviated names of holy saints,” and the ugliness of the ultimately conjured devil, Mephistophilis, —“Thou art too ugly to attend on me”—indicates with visual cues Marlowe’s condemnation of his act. Through such internal dialogue and external images Marlowe shines a pitiful and respecting light in Faustus’s dilemmas—the impossibility of acquiring true meaning in the arts and sciences, to paint him as an skeptical and doubtful ideal academic; yet disagrees with his denigration of the divine, the folly lack of Faustus’s faith in God.

While the opening of the play paints still a respectable yet morally doubtful character, the play’s final scenes show a morally degraded, emotionally unstable Faustus, lacking a clear ground for morality, thus emphasizing the role of faith in the divine even in the search for humanly knowledge. Faustus’s inherently nihilistic character degrades gradually into an increasingly hedonistic one, as his desires change from intellectual curiosity to simple mockery and humor, lacking any dignity as an academic he once prided himself as. As Faustus final scene with the Scholars bring back an image of Helen of Greece—a symbol of beauty, the pinnacle of all earthly pleasures—yet his “love” is not meaningful nor true; it serves simply as a distraction for his unstable emotions, and serves noone other than himself, while his previous magic served at least, a pleasure of another. Faustus’s speech increases in its exclamation and emotional intensity as he realizes “Now hast thou but one bare hour to live, / And then thou must be damn'd

perpetually!”, realizing the consequences of his choice which that now dawns upon him as reality.

Such a consequence, however, can be seen as an inevitable conclusion of Faustus’s world view; his pursuit of knowledge without faith that required him to make the deal with the devil—the conclusion damning Faustus to hell, further emphasizing the consequences of those with curiosity but without faith. Marlowe appears to suggest such an ending has already been decided from the first Chorus, as only his scholarly cunning: “That shortly he was grac’d with doctor’s name, / Excelling all” and his eventual damnation with an analogy: “His waxen wings did mount above his reach, / And, melting, heavens conspir’d his overthrow” are plainly put, as if the former implicated the latter. Faustus, with his pursuit of all knowledge yet lacking respect of God, had no other path than the one to eternal damnation—thus there is no possibility of him repenting for his sins as for him, he does not understand where they lie—not in his actions but rather his lack of faith, apparent as the Good Angel approaches him not in moments of his actions but rather faithless decisions. While he understands the notion of sin, of how “my soul must suffer for my sin,” his continuous focus only on the consequences, “the incessant pain“ of them rather than his character that caused such actions reveals that he is unable to understand the concept of repention; his failure to acknowledge that pursuit of knowledge without a moral compass, so simply offered to him even as to have an Angel speak to his ear: “O Faustus, if thou hadst given ear to me,” will cause damnation. It is then evident the reason for Mephistophilis’s mockery of the Pope fairly early in Faustus’s twenty-four year contract—it acts to seal in Faustus’s disrespect for faith in God. Thus Faustus’s action of confirming vow with Lucifer with his blood can also be understood, as not simply of fear as Mephistophilis ’s threatening “Revolt, or I’ll in piece-

meal tear thy flesh.” but rather a more fundamental, and increasingly desperate clinging to his academic, rational and nihilistically practical nature, accepting his own part of the contract—“Hell claims his right, and with a roaring voice Says, "Faustus, come; thine hour is almost come; And Faustus now will come to do thee right.”—yet unable to emotionally process its reality. This is a parallel to his previous lines when Mephistophilis describes his misery of living in hell: “Learn thou of Faustus manly fortitude, And scorn those joys thou never shalt possess.” Such fortitude is not of emotional character nor the strength of the soul, but rather better described as a stubbornness in his character and the failure to change the nihilistic views he knows not how to change.

While the modern reader may scorn Faustus for making such short-sighted decisions—a lifetime of pleasure for eternal pain—we must understand his actions in the context of his contemporaries; Marlowe’s portrayal of Christianity as a compass for knowledge acquisition is a parallel to the ethical principles of modern science, and the arising questions regarding the methods of knowledge acquisition is often overlooked in our focus on the empirical details. Thus Faustus’s decisions, actions and their consequences are of especial significance in our world, constructed upon the humanistic ideas of the Renaissance, to anybody who seeks knowledge, who must pause to ponder “The form of Faustus' fortunes: good or bad / And now to patient judgments we appeal.”