

## Seeking Salvation, Exploring Evil and Salvaging *Doctor Faustus*

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### Abstract

Doctor Faustus is probably the best known play of Christopher Marlowe. The play has been used in the classrooms around the world to discuss the main features of Renaissance and Doctor Faustus as a representative of Renaissance era. He has been shown as a man who sells his soul to Devil for gaining knowledge. Other interpretations of the play have been coloured by biography of Christopher Marlowe who was believed to be an atheist in his life time. The author's biography has overpowered the interpretations so much that Doctor Faustus has been treated as representation of the author himself. This has removed the focus from Doctor Faustus the character and the play. The current paper is an attempt to read Doctor Faustus objectively.

**Keywords:** Faustus, evil, atheist, Catholic, biography.

A few decades back interpretation of literary works was closely dependent on the biography of the writer. Many of the works were misinterpreted because of the mischievous practice of the critics trying to find the answers to the riddles of the text in the biography of the writers.

Many poets/writers suffered due to this erroneous practice and they were lost in the annals of time because the critics were not impressed by their biographies or personal achievements. Metaphysical poets, for instance, were ignored in their life time because their innovative poetry was linked to their learning (Johnson). Even the novels like *Sons and Lovers* by D.H. Lawrence were treated as thinly veiled autobiographies. This not only lead to the misinterpretation of text, but also discredited the authors. The authors were believed to be narrating their lives only instead of creating something new.

Similar is the case of Christopher Marlowe. According to Lisa Hopkins: "Marlowe has suffered more than most authors from the attempt to read his works in simple biographical terms" (Hopkins1). During his life time Marlowe was accused of "diabolic atheism" (Cited in Hamlin 257). His contemporary writer Thomas Kyd testified about his blasphemous thoughts:

Moyses was but a Jugler and .... One Heriots being Sir Walter Raleighs man can do more that he .... It was an easy matter for Moyses being brought up in all the artes of the Egyptians to abuse the Jewes being a rude and grosse people (Snyder 565).

Similarly Richard Baines testified that Marlowe called Christ "a bastard" (Baines 36). All these statements were used to prove that Marlowe was an atheist; and atheism in Elizabethan age was the gravest crime. So Marlowe became a controversial figure in his age and the controversies regarding his atheism also colored the interpretation of the texts written by him.

How Marlowe's personal beliefs coloured the interpretation of his text is clear from the famous anecdote in William Prynne's *Historio-mastix*:

The visible apparition of the Devill on the stage at the Belsavage Play-house, in Queen Elizabeth's dayes, (to the great amazement of both of the Actors and spectators) whiles they we prophanely playing the History of Faustus (the truth of which I have heard from many who now live, who well remember it) there being some distracted with that fearful sight. (Bakeless 1938, 146-7)

These rumors added to the supposedly sinister character of Christopher Marlowe as this anecdote proved that Marlowe was indeed a priest to the devil, who had found the incantation to call the Devil in person on the stage. Marlowe in his life time was considered a "proselytizing atheist" and "a consumer of boys and tobacco" (Riggs 24) by his contemporaries. Due to his atheism and unconventional beliefs Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* was incriminated by the Protestant clergy and his death was celebrated as an act of "divine vengeance" (Guenther67).

Various interpretations of Doctor Faustus have emanated from the biography of Christopher Marlowe. For example John C. McCloskey has commented on the tragedy of Doctor Faustus:

Neither fate nor the forces of nature have anything to do with it. It is through a defect in character that he becomes entangled in his difficulties, but it is through a defect in faith that he ultimately succumbs. (Mc Closey 110)

The phrase "defect in faith" obviously refers to the "defect in faith" of Marlowe himself. Irving Ribner also suggested that crisis in *Dr. Faustus* manifested the personal beliefs of Christopher Marlowe and described the play as a mirror of "agnostic intellectual confusion" (Ribner 1960). Another important aspect of Marlowe's life was that he was an intellectual who had developed a rational attitude towards religion and knew that religion was invented by man to "keep men in awe" (Baines 1593). Similarly his keen intellect also forced him to question the date of Adam's arrival on the planet:

That the Indians and many authors of antiquity, have assuredly written of above 16 thousand years ago, whereas Adam is proved to have lived within six thousand years (Hopkins 15).

Even Ribner commented on his rationality: "His plays give evidence that he did not accept without question the ordinary Tudor notions of man's relation to society and God (Ribner XVIII). *Dr. Faustus* has also been described by the critics as a typical Renaissance man who has an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Without any doubt all these interpretations of the play can be linked to biography and character of Marlowe. The most surprising thing to note is that all these interpretations of Doctor Faustus have sustained even in modern times. Even in 1964, Ellis-Fermor describes the plays as "perhaps the most notable satanic play in literature" (142)

Though, it must be admitted that there are critics who have admired the role of Marlowe in refining the art of Drama:

In this period accordingly fall the efforts of the predecessors of Shakespeare's maturity as a dramatist, typified in the creations of him who overtopped them all, the great Marlowe whose influence upon the first period of Shakespeare's dramatic productivity would have to be pronounced unique, even if it were possible to prove it to have more stimulus of example (254).

Thus, Marlowe the dramatist and craftsman was much better admired than Marlowe the man. His skill in dramaturgy could not be denied- just like the man himself, the writing or thought informing his writings could be hated but not ignored. The theme of his dramas was also used to incriminate him for his personal beliefs.

Due to Marlowe's personal beliefs and his personality, much focus has been laid on the personality of Doctor Faustus in the play. The other important themes have remained hidden under the weight of Marlowe's atheism and personal thoughts. However, it must be understood that Doctor Faustus is not entirely based on Marlowe's thoughts and personality. Many scholars have traced the source of Doctor Faustus to Italian Lawyer Francis Spira who died in 1548 after despairing of the possibility of salvation (Hopkins 27). Spira's case started introspection in Europe that was already battling between Catholicism and Protestantism. Marlowe also participated in the debate by writing Doctor Faustus.

If Francis Spira's story provided skeleton to Marlowe then Protestant theology of the time provided flesh and blood for the same. The protestant clergy of the time brought "remarkably corrosive skepticism to bear on the essentialist linguistic assumptions underlying the beliefs that devils could be conjured with per formative language while simultaneously maintaining or even buttressing theological justifications for the idea that devils and Satan in particular, intervened in people's lives via the instrumentality of the magician" (Guenther 47). It is important to note that during his life time Marlowe was also believed to have nurtured Catholic sympathies and rumoured to have visited "catholic seminary in Rheims" (cheney 4).

It was another offence in protestant England. If the drama contains biographical elements that it must be understood that he did not cultivate any Catholic affiliations. This is clear in invisible Faustus's encounter with Pope:

Faustus: that are you crossing of yourself? well use that trick no more. It would advise [The POPE] cross [es himself] again. Well, there's second time 'Aware the third. I give you fair warning.

[The POPE] cross [es himself] again.

Well, there's the second time 'Aware the third.' I give you fair warning.

[ The Pope] cross [es himself] again, and and Faustus hits him a box of the ear; and they all run away. (67-68).

The scene clearly undermines the authority of the Pope. Marlowe clearly espouses Protestantism here and panders to the popular beliefs of the already protestant English public, where Catholics were a hated minority.

No doubt, the scene contributes to the debate between Catholicism and Protestantism and tries to tell the public that when Pope is unable to defend himself, he cannot be expected to defend the common man. However, the theme of the play should not be restricted to the debate between the two denominations of Christianity, rather the theme of the play is to inquire or establish the nature of evil. It is important to mention *Macbeth* here. *Macbeth* was first performed in 1606 ("Macbeth, Wikipedia) and was hailed as the maturest vision of evil. On the other hand Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* was performed much before and addressed the same theme; but was interpreted in totally opposite manner. There are differences in both the plays, for instance in *Macbeth* evil seeks the human beings, *Macbeth* to be precise, to wreak havoc in the world. On the other hand in *Doctor Faustus* the evil has to be sought and the man has to work hard to call the evil and the evil obliges the people who are extraordinarily talented like Doctor Faustus. The readers in the play come across Cornelius and Valdes (33) two magicians who had practised the art form long time but were not obliged by the Devil. The plays may be different but the theme of the plays remains the same: equivocation of evil.

Doctor Faustus calls the evil in the play because he is convinced: "A sound magician is mighty god" (30). And he hopes to be like God with the help of Devil. This is what is his expectation of Mephistopheles:

I charge thee wait upon me whilst I live,  
To do whatever Faustus shall command,  
Be it to make the moon drop from her sphere,  
or the ocean to over whelm the world. (39)

Cornelius, friend of Doctor Faustus, also assures him about the prowess of the Devil:

The spirits tell me they can dry the sea  
And fetch the treasure of all foreign wrecks,  
Ay, all the wealth that our forefather hid  
Within the massy entrails of the earth. (32)

In the beginning, Faustus is thus lured by the false promises of the devil.

Doctor Faustus promises to give his soul to Devil because he is convinced of the powers of Devil. He wants to live his life to the full for at least twenty four years. He lays his conditions before Mephistopheles:

Say he surrenders up to him his soul  
So he will spare him four and twenty years  
Letting him live in all voluptuousness.  
Having thee eve to attend on me,  
to give me whatsoever. I shall ask,  
to tell me whatsoever I demand (32)

It is clear that Faustus has great hopes from the twenty four years for which Mephistopheles will remain under his servitude. Evil appears more attractive when compared to divinity which is "unpleasant, harsh, contemptible and vile" (32).

Faustus was criticized because he wanted himself to be the greatest and most powerful. He has been accused of "insolence and Pride" by many critics (McCloskey 110). He has been accused deviating from the way of the God and Salvation for his personal ambition. In this regard St. Augustine has commented:

Scripture teaches nothing but charity, nor condemns anything except cupidity, and in this way shapes the minds of men. (88)

Augustine further explains these terms:

I call "charity" the motion of soul toward the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and of one's neighbor for the sake of God; but "cupidity" is a

motion of the soul towards the enjoyment of one's self, one's neighbor or any corporal thing for the sake of something other than God. (88)

After reading this distinction between "charity" and "cupidity" one wonders if Doctor Faustus sold his soul only for his selfish motives. There are subtle hints in the text which prove that Doctor Faustus was not entirely motivated by his personal gains. There are some lines in the text that have been ignored by the critics. Faustus in the lines given below appears to be an altogether different man:

I'll have them fill the public schools with silk,  
Where with the students shall be bravely clad. (32)

Here Faustus is not concerned about himself, rather he is concerned about those school children who are poor, who study in public school and cannot afford silk clothes but this aspect of Faustus has been ignored so far. So it is at least clear that Dr. Faustus at least does not suffer merely from what Augustine calls "cupidity."

This is not the only positive aspect of Doctor Faustus's character though. In the same utterance he appears as a patriot who appears very worried about his country Germany. He invokes Devil for the benefit of Germany:

I'll have them wall all Germany with brass  
And make swift Rhine circle fair Wurttemberg. (31)

He is also worried about the invaders who have invaded Germany:

I'll levy soldiers with the coin they bring,  
And chase the Prince of Parma from our land. (31)

In all these lines uttered by Doctor Faustus he does not appear as a self-centred man, rather as a kind-hearted person who is worried for the welfare of poor children and his country.

In the beginning of the play Faustus rejects money and fame:

Be a physician, Faustus; heap up gold  
And be eternized for some wondrous cure (28).

The obvious inspiration is power:

O, what a world of profit and delight,  
of power, of honor of omnipotence  
Is promised to the studious artisan. (30)

So Faustus wants to become omnipotent. And the devil assures him of that power. The other thirst that is shown by Doctor Faustus is that of knowledge. He wants knowledge about all the subjects which only Devil can provide Mephistopheles assures him:

And I will be thy slave, and wait on thee,  
And give thee more than thou has wit to ask. (48)

Thus promises him greatness: “And then be thou as great as Lucifer” (48). This brings us to the theme of equivocation of evil. Mephistopheles promises greatness to Faustus but Faustus soon realizes the hollow promises:

Tush these slender trifles Wagner can decide  
Hath Mephistopheles no greater skill?  
Who knows not the double motion of plants? (56)

In the play, Marlowe unravels the workings of evil, how evil entices people and plots their downfall. This too is shown through the character of Doctor Faustus, a man of towering intellect and immense knowledge. If a man of Doctor Faustus can fall to the hollow promises and enticements then common man is very vulnerable. In the beginning, when Doctor Faustus signs the bond, he is served very well by Mephistopheles. This is very important because in the initial stages if Doctor Faustus had realized the equivocation of evil, he would have repented and shunned Lucifer. This also brings to forefront the psychological game of the evil. Evil is not physical, it is psychological. So initiation into evil is the biggest step. In the beginning only, the conscience of the prey has to be numbed and Mephistopheles understands this. This is why he says after signing the bond: “I’ll fetch him somewhat to delight his mind” (50). In the beginning, Mephistopheles not only delights Doctor Faustus but also seems to fulfill his aspirations:

The iterating of these lines brings gold;  
The framing of this circle on the ground  
Brings whirlwinds, tempests, thunder and lightning.  
Pronounce this thrice devoutly to thyself,  
And men in armor shall appear to thee.  
Ready to execute what thou desir’st. (53)

All these things seems to fulfill the desires of Faustus but soon the readers can find that Devil is not what it seems.

The audience and the readers can find the difference in the attitude of Devil of the beginning of twenty four years and towards the end of the period. Look at the first journey of Doctor Faustus and Mephistopheles for instance:

Having now my good Mephistopheles,  
Passed with delight the stately town of Trier,  
Environed round airy mountain tops,  
With walls of flint and deep entrenched looks. (63)

The description makes clear that Mephistopheles has taken Doctor Faustus through air route. The technology available during Elizabethan age could not show them flying, so Marlowe makes it clear through the utterance of Doctor Faustus. This is in the beginning of Faustus’s affair with the evil but later in the play when Faustus urges Mephistopheles to make haste to Wurttemberg, Mephistopheles asks: “what, will you go on horseback or on foot? (77)

This clearly establishes the real character of evil. It entices people by showing something else and when the mortals are fully in its grip then it shows the truth. In other words Marlowe establishes that evil is a lie and God is the truth.

Marlowe is a conscious artist who through the course of the play brings out the truth about evil. Faustus offered his soul to Lucifer to accomplish great feats:

By him I'll be great emperor of the world  
 And make a bridge through the moving air.  
 To pass the ocean with a band of men;  
 I'll join the hills that find the Afric shore  
 And make that land continent to Spain,  
 And both contributory to my crown.  
 The Emperor shall not live by my leave,  
 Nor any potentate of Germany. (42)

It is clear that Faustus wanted to be an emperor and do unimaginable things with the help of devil, but he is betrayed by the devil. Rather than becoming an emperor he ends up becoming a magician who performs petty tricks with the help of Mephistopheles to win some gifts from the emperors.

For instance in Act 4 scene 1, he shows Alexander and his paramour to the Emperor. His fame as a magician has spread in "every land" (73). The person who has once hoped to become a great emperor" is reduced to the level of a magician who performs his tricks to get "bounteous reward" (77). As if this is not enough to establish the character of evil Marlowe presents another difference. In the beginning, Faustus dreamed of getting immense wealth with the help of Mephistopheles but towards the end he is seen cheating a man for forty dollars:

What, is he gone? Farewell he: Faustus has his leg again,  
 And the horse-courser- I take it- a bottle of hay for his  
 Labour! Well, this trick cost him forty dollars more. (80)

It is obvious that a wealthy man would not cheat a person of forty dollars. So it is clear that the dreams that were cultivated by Faustus have been crushed.

It is clear that Marlowe follows a plan to expose the evil. Marlowe is not satisfied with exposing the evil, he brings forth the finer realities of the evil.

The choice of character of Doctor Faustus is very important in this case. In the beginning of the play, Marlowe establishes a quality of Doctor Faustus: his rationality and his ability to argue. In the beginning Faustus rejects Divinity, Law, Medicine and other disciplines in favour of necromancy (29). The scene establishes the ability of Doctor Faustus to look at the finer details of things and successfully argue in favour of or against the thing he want to but when devil fails to fulfill his promises why Faustus is unable to argue against the "deed". Marlowe used the expression "deed of gift" (48) to accentuate the legal importance of the document. Deed itself refers to a bond between two parties where both the parties have to fulfill some condition. If condition from a party remains unfulfilled then the other party is free from the obligation and can walk out of the deed. Even Faustus declares the legal status of the deed:

A deed of gift of body and of soul,  
 But yet conditionally that thou perform.

All articles proscribed between us both. (49)

Towards the end, the readers can easily realize that Mephistopheles has not fulfilled this promise yet Faustus fails to use his extremely sharp intellect to move out of the deal with evil. Marlowe warns the audience that the advances of the evil have to be thwarted in the beginning only. If evil makes inroads into one's life then it is impossible to get rid of the evil. While trying to win mortals evil showcases itself as very obedient and impresses human beings with sincerity.

Look show Faustus is impressed:

How pliant is this Mephistopheles,  
Full of obedience and humility? (39)

When Faustus becomes a captive, evil overpowers and shows its true colours to Faustus:

Thou traitor, Faustus, I arrest thy soul.  
For disobedience to my sovereign Lord  
Revolt, or I'll in peacemeal tear thy flesh.(85-86)

If taken as a text inspired by Marlowe's biography then it may be taken as a text that signifies Marlowe's journey from atheism to theism. Marlowe cannot be labeled as an atheist only because he questions Christian doctrine and Biblical stories. In the beginning of the play, Faustus rejects God and Christ as "Vain trifles of men's souls" (40) and heaven as "Vain fancies"(47).Faustus has faith in the power of devil:

When Mephistopheles shall stand by me,  
What God can hurt thee, Faustus? (48)

Here Faustus has faith in the power of devil but indirectly he acknowledges the existence of God. In Christian discourse God and Devil exist as binary oppositions. Doctor Faustus realizes that if Devil exists then God also surely exists. In heart of hearts he also realizes that Satan has deceived him, Lucifer and Mephistopheles are only capable of deception and gross dissimulation, so God is the ultimate truth; a super being that has tremendous ability by to show benevolence to his Children. Thus the play is a sort of cathartic realization for so called "atheist" Marlowe.

Thus the play is not about Faustus rather it is about the nature of evil. The choice of character of Doctor Faustus is also deliberate as Marlowe wants to convey a message that while dealing with evil even a bit of laxity can prove disastrous. Evil has nothing to offer to human beings; it can only deceive and equivocate.

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