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Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*: The Post-Renaissance English Tragedy

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This paper is foregrounded in the premise that Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, one of the towering tragic protagonists in English Drama over the ages, is a singular character who embodies in his being the spirit of inquiry and revolt with the purpose to transcend the limits imposed on human life and endeavor by traditional religion and morality. *Faustus* is viewed as an embryonic protagonist for the post-Renaissance English tragedy as the potential of his character is subverted by the preclusion of sin and damnation as necessary contingent conditions for any effort to assert individual will over the established order.

The present paper shall try to present *Faustus* as an embryonic tragic protagonist.¹ Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is the story of a Renaissance scholar, *Faustus*, who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for twenty-four years of absolute power and knowledge. Different critics have interpreted the play variously. Helen Gardner views *Doctor Faustus* as the story of a protagonist who oscillates violently between presumption and despair. Nicholas Brooke reads it as a morality play in which the over-vaulting desire for knowledge and power is punished by eternal damnation in accordance with the Christian world-view. James Smith interprets *Doctor Faustus* as a play, which ultimately upholds and affirms the central Christian values despite *Faustus*' regression or progression into paganism. W.W.Greg describes *Faustus*' damnation as a process of multiple-level degeneration completed by his physical consummation with the spirit of Helen. The play has also been subject to a close analysis from textual and structural points of view.

The character of *Faustus* is a tragic one not merely because he has to suffer damnation, but also because *Faustus*' character could never be evolved fully because of the pre-condition of damnation imposed upon him as soon as he signs his pact with the devil. *Faustus*' story portrays the struggle resulting from a conflict between the aspiring mind of *Faustus* and the restraints of conventional Christian morality. The aspiration of *Faustus* is nothing less than the desire to evolve into godhead by exploring and making use of the unlimited powers gained through the study and practice of the profane art of necromancy. *Faustus*' desire to evolve into godhead has an antecedent in Satan, who, consequent upon his aspiration to rule in heaven was doomed to live perpetually in hell along with his followers. The same paradigm of revolt is also evident in *The Book of Job* in the *Old Testament*, in which Job dared to question God's justice in depriving him of his sons. However, Job is soon intimidated by an over-whelming manifestation of God and he surrendered to the existing order without any resolution of his anguish. Such episodes, when viewed from a non-religious perspective, point towards the self-preserving and regressive character of any socio-religious structure, which seeks to completely root out the factors challenging its existence. Thus, *Faustus* remains an embryonic tragic protagonist also because his character is not allowed to evolve beyond the limits already imposed upon any such personal enterprise by the conventional mode of thought codified in the scriptures, or in the socio-religious matrix, which is a pervasive presence in

Marlowe's play. Further, Faustus may be described as an embryonic protagonist for the post-renaissance English tragedy because the tragic dilemma of Faustus remains unresolved, even unaddressed in the entire gamut of English tragedy.

Doctor Faustus is primarily a scholar, who wants to possess the knowledge of that which is behind the visible, known universe. Indeed, Faustus' opening soliloquy in the play echoes the basic script of his thought and action as a Renaissance man:

Settle thy studies, Faustus and begin
To sound the depth of that thou wilt profess. . .
(I,i, 1-2)

Faustus wants to "level at the end of every art" in order to determine the relative merit of what he already knows. Evidently, he is thoroughly frustrated by the mere mercenary aspect of his extant knowledge. As he exclaims, "Yet art thou still but Faustus and a man."

Thus, Faustus' career as a scholar has already reached a deadlock. His very being longs to achieve super-human status. Ironically, the only medium available to him whereby he can acquire absolute knowledge and power is necromancy or black magic, which is a taboo in Christianity. Even before Faustus can embark upon the study of necromancy, his future existence becomes subject to Christian notion of the pre-destination of man to sin and damnation² unless one repents. Faustus' attempt to evolve into a super-human or a "demi-god" is bound to be an abortive one in such an environment of pre-determination.

Thus, Faustus remains an embryonic protagonist, as the inherent potential in his character, the ability to reach beyond the limits of his earthly existence, is never allowed to unfold itself. The environment in which he can grow and emerge as new, more accomplished and powerful human being is denied to him by the regressive and subversive nature of the system, which Faustus desires to overcome. While Renaissance humanism opened up the possibilities of fresh and decisive action for Faustus, it is at the same time countered by the restraining and crippling force of conventional religion and morality. The chorus at the beginning of Act-III provides a detailed description of the rare exploits of Faustus accomplished through his new knowledge and power gained from necromancy:

Learned Faustus
To find the secrets of astronomy
Graven in the book of Jove's high firmament
Did mount his up to scale Olympus' top. . .
(III, 1-4)

Faustus travelled from the lowest to the highest of the moving spheres to view

. . . the clouds, the planets, and the stars,
The tropics, zones and quarters of the sky,
From the high circle of the horned moon
Even to the height of the Premium Mobile.
(III, 7-10)

He is always attracted by “new exploits” and he moves out “to prove cosmography.”

The above exploits of Faustus may be linked to the growth and evolution of human psyche beyond the mundane physical. In his quest for knowledge and perfection, he desires to know and profess/possess not only that which is immanent, but also that which is hidden and mysterious. He longs to consolidate and synthesize his knowledge of the subtle as well as the gross that comprised the cosmic. This is also inherent in his desire to study necromancy. However, even according to the extant views about magic, it was viewed as comprising a positive and a negative aspect.³ Faustus seeks to work out wonders by conjoining superior logic with inferior concepts to evolve such concepts beyond the limited signification ascribed to them by their fixed contexts. A ‘trace’ [Remember Derrida who said that meaning existed in traces?] of this desire may be read in Faustus’ apparently egotistic declaration about hell:

This word ‘damnation’ terrifies not him,
For he confounds hell in Elysium;
His ghost be with the old philosophers!
(I, iii, 59-61)

If Faustus’ first meeting with Mephistophilis is reviewed, the reader finds that it is a mere consequence of the formers’ experimentation with designs and figures in the magic books. However, the unfettered curiosity and imagination of Faustus finds a natural satisfaction in exploring the numerous fresh vistas of knowledge, with its adage of power, promised to him by Mephistophilis. Mephisto’s appearance on the scene as soon as Faustus begins to work on the geometrical figures in the book on magic indicates that even while Faustus is impelled by the desire to accomplish super-human feats, his own thought is pre-conditioned by Christian morality. Thus, he too believes, that he is damned. Nevertheless, this extraordinary Renaissance scholar even risks damnation, a real threat posed to him and goes on to sign the pact with the devil in his own blood.

Thus, Faustus’ accomplishment of the possible is already thwarted by an inherent contradiction in his individual psyche: the archetypal contradiction between the desire to taste the forbidden fruit and the contingent threat of damnation associated with it. Faustus, as an embryonic protagonist has the seeds of growth and evolution inherent in his being. However, the socio-religious matrix into which he must evolve refuses to provide a viable environment for the formative unfolding of Faustus’ being. Moreover, the flux of Faustus’ emerging consciousness is also partly thwarted by his humble origin. Thus, “at the personalistic level, Faustus’ psyche is deprived; he is of plebian stock and has worked his way up. As a result he is Adlerian in his psychology. Consequently he falls for mundane fame and power”. Fame and power have a psychological compensatory value for Faustus and Mephistophilis is “a shrewd observer of Faustus’ psychological compensatory mechanism” (Ranchan 63). As such, the would-be “demi-god”, the least that Faustus hopes to become, is reduced to a mere juggler entertaining the Emperor and the Duchess or playing pranks upon the Pope and the knight. However, if one tries to view Faustus’ jugglery in a metaphorical sense, it is a device that helps him to cut through the persona of the Pope and to expose the greed, pride and covetousness, which form the bane of human nature. The same is true of his encounter with the ‘Seven Deadly Sins’, which makes him aware of the evil in the world.

However, the great scholar, who even over-looked the threat of damnation to explore the possibility of the evolution of the human psyche towards a cosmic consciousness, is subverted into despair, which characterizes the traumatic anguish of a being whose potential existence is badly mangled now by two contradictory ethos represented by heaven and hell, God and Lucifer. Such a culmination of Faustus' potential is bound to have a subversive effect on his being. As Jonathan Dollimore remarks, they "are polar opposites whose axes pass through and constitute human consciousness." Indeed, in Faustus' final soliloquy, "both God and Lucifer are spatially located as the opposite which, between them, destroy him" (Dollimore 276). However, even before the final moment of his doom, Faustus never relinquishes his desire to evolve beyond the delimiting and regressive environment into which he is thrust. Faustus seeks to overcome his over-riding despair through the consummation of his passions with the spirit of Helen, the supreme beauty described in Greek mythology. Significantly, Faustus does not feel that he is committing a sin when he kisses Helen. It rather has a liberating effect on his imagination and he goes on to describe his experience in profound poetic terms. It may also be remarked here that according to C.G. Jung's typology of the feminine, Helen represents an individual woman, who enjoys an aesthetic and romantic status over Eve, the biological mother. As such, Faustus' desire to cohabit with Helen also points towards the desire to evolve into an individual in his own right.

The foregoing analysis of Faustus' character thus attempts to present him as an embryonic tragic protagonist. This leads us to focus on the existential predicament of Doctor Faustus vis-à-vis its manifestations in the post-Renaissance English tragedy. Faustus remains an embryonic prototype of a tragic protagonist in the entire gamut of English tragedy, as his character does not find any conceptual and structural development in subsequent drama. Even the other tragic protagonists, like Tamburlaine, in Christopher Marlowe's own plays, while they are driven by ambition and desire for power, do not make such an extreme choice as Faustus does.

Faustus' character fails to find any contextual development in Shakespeare either, although Shakespeare is singularly marked for his empathetic and objective portrayal of his tragic protagonists-Lear, Hamlet, Macbeth, and Othello. Only Macbeth comes somewhat close to Faustus in the sense that Macbeth's character also explores the subversive and de-humanizing impact that ambition has on a person through Macbeth's association with the witches. However, Shakespeare was essentially a status-quoist, who never made his protagonists challenge the socio-religious-political system to the extent to which Marlowe's Faustus did. Moreover, unlike Faustus, the protagonists in Shakespeare do evolve into better human beings as a result of the tragic incidents in their lives. The malcontented and disgruntled protagonists of Jacobean drama do not come even close to Faustus in any respect.

The subversion of the human-will to outgrow the limitations imposed upon it by dogma and convention remained unexplored in the three centuries of subsequent English drama. Bernard Shaw does talk with conviction about the evolution of man into superman in the context of his Life Force theory. However, even a potential rebel-reformist like Joan of Arc in Shaw's canon is easily canonized as a saint and co-opted by the system she had tried to resist. To a certain extent, the same may be remarked of Thomas Beckett in Eliot's *The Murder in the Cathedral*. Again, as constituting the paradigm of a tragic protagonist, who is acutely aware of the crisis of one's existence, Faustus is never out of context in Modernist-Absurdist tragedies. Although the characters in such a tragedy find themselves badly mangled by the apparent lack of any order or purpose in this universe and are

utterly incapable of reaching beyond their absurd environment in search of new truth or values of existence like Faustus did, yet they reflect the tragedy of Faustus in a quintessential way. Faustus' dilemma is precisely this: he is a man fully dressed but with nowhere to go. The same existential dilemma is manifested, for instance, in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The unresolved doubt about the coming of Godot is subtly linked with the evolution of a new world-order, which can perhaps never be realized. Thus, in Modernist-Absurdist drama, human existence tends to become an absurd, unfulfilled agony of being alive as in the last scene of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*.

To conclude, Faustus is an embryonic tragic protagonist in the sense that the conception of his character as a Renaissance man potentially capable of scaling new heights of power and glory, and enabling the human race to evolve into godhead remains unformed and unaccomplished. In purely textual terms, it is because the conception of Faustus' character was not a viable one within the socio-religious matrix, which forms the background of Marlowe's play. It is only when Goethe "strip[s] the legend of Faustus of its regressive Christian obscurantist morality" that Faustus can be viewed as "a great visionary, seeker par excellence who made it to heaven" (Ranchan 65). Goethe's presentation of Faustus also reiterates his status as a paradigmatic character as it powerfully delineates the subversion of any human enterprise by the autonomous and the delimiting structure of any ethos. Faustus' predicament is therefore the predicament of humanity down the ages and not restricted to any temporal or spatial configuration. As such, Faustus may aptly be regarded as an embryonic tragic protagonist for the post-renaissance English tragedy.

Notes:

¹This paper is based upon some of the insights gained in the course of the classroom discussions about Marlowe's play. However, the position adopted in this paper is a purely tentative one and needs to be explored further. The present writer seeks to promulgate it for response and evaluation by the scholars of English drama. The term 'post-Renaissance' has been used here to include English drama since the Renaissance to the present times.

²The Christian doctrine of man involves the doctrine of original sin: that Adam had implicated all his descendants in his original act of disobedience to the Creator. Consequently, all subsequent generations were deserving of God's wrath from the moment of birth. Added to this is the guilt they later acquire by their own sins. "Being thus a Fallen Race, man-kind was predisposed to Evil. This meant. . . . that man was not only unable to absolve himself of the state of perdition into which he was born, but he could not even desire to repent without God's grace". *Encyclopaedia of World Religions* (London: Octopus Books Limited, 1975), 153.

³The following excerpts from *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: A Young Philosopher Defends His Right to Dispute in Public (1486)* on the nature and function of magic deserve attention in this context:

I have also proposed theorems dealing with magic, in which I have indicated that magic has two forms, one of which depends entirely on the work and authority of demons, a thing to be abhorred, . . . a monstrous thing. The other, when it is rightly pursued, is nothing else than the utter perfection of natural philosophy. While the Greeks make mention of both of them, they call the former [*gohteia*], in no wise honouring it with the name of magic; the latter they call by the characteristic

and the fitting name of [*mageia*], as if it were a perfect and most high wisdom. . . . Moreover, . . . the disparity and unlikeness between these arts is great, nay, rather the greatest possible. The former not only the Christian religion but all religions and every well-constituted state condemn and abhor. The latter all wise men, all peoples devoted to the study of heavenly and divine things, approve and embrace.

From *Henry Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim: The Vanity and Uncertainty of the Arts and Sciences (1530)*:

Natural magic reveals the active side of natural philosophy. . . . its public manifestations are exceedingly wonderful. This magic was much cultivated by the Egyptians and the Indians, where there was an abundance of herbs, stones and other pertinent things. . . . And this is the sort of magicians those Magi were, who went to worship Christ when he was born and presented him with gifts. . . .

Magic, then, is natural when, after considering well the powers of all natural and celestial things and having found their pattern by careful inquiry, the magician brings into the open the hidden and the secret power of Nature . . . when he entices it out by coupling the inferior things with the qualities of the superior and by a natural joining of them together. Remarkable wonders frequently arise in this way. . . .

[**Source:** *Culture and Belief in Europe 1450-1600. An Anthology of Sources*, ed. D. Englander et al.; excerpts quoted here have been reprinted in Suroopa Mukherjee ed. *Christopher Marlowe: Doctor Faustus* (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2001), 195-99.

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