

Dr. Faustus: theist or atheist?

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Abstract

Dr. Faustus is the greatest but the most controversial of Marlowe's plays. Among the causes of controversy, whether Dr. Faustus is an atheist or theist deserves utmost attention. This paper is intended to deal with the issue. Though at various stages of the development of the action, Dr. Faustus abjures Trinity, resorts to necromancy, becomes guilty of demoniality, for which he is called an atheist, the intensity of his later wish for having redemption and the destruction of his self makes him emerge as a theist. Without these qualities, Dr. Faustus is said to be the embodiment of the character of Christopher Marlowe himself, who was an atheist or a member of an atheist group. Therefore, it is also an object of discussion to correlate Dr. Faustus with Marlowe.

Christopher Marlowe's contemporaries give the testimony that both the man and his writings are iconoclastic and profoundly irreverent – both are influenced by charges “monstrous opinions”, “vile heretical conceits” and “diabolical atheism”¹. Una Ellis-Fermor called Doctor Faustus “perhaps the most satanic play in literature”². His name is often linked with so-called “school of night”, a number of intellectuals keeping Sir Walter Raleigh at the center, which had a reputation for dangerous free thinking, and even for atheism³. A manuscript of a heretical treatise “Denying the Deity of Jesus Christ our Savior” was found as one of the belongings in Kyd's room and Kyd, before the interrogators, stated that the blasphemous document was not to him but to Marlowe⁴. Marlowe, later on, was accused not only of holding and producing treasonable atheistic opinions, but also of motivating others to the same beliefs⁵. All these views have developed because of identification of Marlowe the man with the dramatic supermen who are his tragic heroes-Faustus and Tamburlaine for example.

Faustus, the inordinately ambitious hero, denounces God, blasphemes the Trinity and Christian doctrines and sells out his soul to the Devil to gain super human powers and to live a life full of voluptuousness for twenty four years.

He finds out the limitations of formal academic studies. He takes up Philosophy, medicine, law and theology one after another and gradually rejects each of them as unsatisfying. In the very first monologue Faustus tells us:-

“----- Divinity adieu!

These metaphysics of magicians,

And necromantic books are heavenly;” (lines 48-50; scene-1)⁶

“A sound magician is a mighty God;

Here, Faustus, tire thy brains to gain a deity”. (lines 62-63; scene-1)

His rejection of theology (divinity) makes him appear as arrogant and proud. He turns a deaf ear to the earnest appeal of the Good Angel to “lay that damned book aside” (line-70; scene-1) and is won over by the allurements of the Evil Angel who tells him:-

“Be thou on earth as Jove in the sky,

Lord and commander of these elements.” (lines- 76-77; scene-1)

It is Faustus who utters such blasphemous words as:-

“Had I as many souls as there be stars,

I'd give them all for Mephistophilis.

By him I'll be great emperor of the world.” (lines- 102-104; scene-3)

Thus, Faustus abjures God and Trinity willingly and is determined to surrender his soul to the Devil. Faustus utters- “consummatum est” (line-74; scene-5) after signing the bond with his own blood and this expression is nothing but blasphemous irony. In course of discussion with Mephistophilis about hell and heaven Faustus tells him:-

“Think’st thou that Faustus is so fond to imagine
That, after this life there is any pain?
Tush, there are trifles and mere old wives’ tales.” (lines- 133-135; scene-5)

This is blasphemous according to Christian theology. Again, what happens in Faustus- Pope encounter in the first scene of Act-iii is extremely crude, vulgar and blasphemous. Invisible to all, Faustus enters into Pope’s privy chamber, irritates, teases and troubles the Pope and his party and snatches the away cups and dishes from his hand and even manhandles in a nasty manner. Such a scene can come solely from the pen of an abject atheist. In the life of Faustus, the sin of pride is the root of all other sins. Moreover, he commits it formally and deliberately, without the shadow of an excuse or reason. That is, it is not one of the sins committed in actual life, where some excuse, in however small a measure, is always to be found. This sin might be termed as the very fountain of many other sins.

Frankly speaking, he receives diabolic visits and he is going to be dragged down to hell and Mephistophilis informs him Solamen miseris socio habissus doloris (line- 41; scene- 5). He shows defiant outlook:-

“Come, I think hell’s fable” (line: - 127; scene:-5)
“This word damnation terrifies not him” (line -58; scene- 3)
He further says-
“For he confounds hell in Elizium.
His ghost be with the old Philosophers.” (lines- 59-60; scene- 3)

His pride is at such a point that he refuses to bow to external authority of any kind.

Mephistophilis, who along with Lucifer and Beelzebub, is already damned in hell, feels tormented “in being deprived of everlasting blisse” (line -80; scene -3) and experiences “terror” in his “fainting soul” (line-82; scene- 3).

But Faustus, like an atheist, which may arouse either hatred or contempt, mocks:-

“What is great Mephistophilis so passionate?” (line-83; scene- 3)
“Learn thou of Faustus manly fortitude,
And scorn those joys thou never shalt possess” (line-85; scene-3)

Marlowe’s Faustus is damned. He is living on the earth only to exemplify, to show in reality, in part, the sufferings of the damned. He has made himself one with the devils as far as he possibly can. To an extent, he is one with the Devils. He maintains relation with hell, association with Devil, exactly as they are: not by browbeating and prohibitions, but by his own free will. He feels drawn to evil. The Devils have put themselves in such a way that they can desire only what brings them misery. If they had, for example, the scope to escape from hell they would not welcome it. It is a place only of suffering, which happens because of the loss of heaven. A state of violent discord and disorder prevails in Faustus’ soul. The following passages convey such feelings allegorically. It is not only Lucifer who drags a reluctant Faustus from thoughts of heaven:-

“Faustus: - Ah Christ my savior! Seek to save
Distressed Faustus’ soul!
Lucifer:-Christ cannot save thy soul, for he is just.
There’s none but I have interest in the same.

Faustus: - O who art thou that lookst so terrible?
Lucifer: - I am Lucifer” (lines- 258-263; scene-5)
“Lucifer: - We come to tell thee thou dost injure us.
Thou talkst of Christ, contrary to thy promise:
Thou shouldst’t not think of God; think of the devil,
And his dam too.” (lines-265-268; scene-5)

Faustus also drags himself. Lucifer is here playing a double role: he is devil, but also he is part of Faustus, who is thus an agent as well as victim in his own torment. It is not, for example, only Lucifer and Beelzebub who forbid him to continue the study of “Astrologie”; it his own evil will, which has already determined not to embrace the truths to which astrology is leading.

Faustus craves a wife and gets one. But she proves stuffed with fireworks and ends up in smoke: “A plague on her for a hot whore”, he cries, and must therefore content himself with the “fairest courtesans”.

Faustus’ fleshy desires are satisfied, but the result is that his spiritual desires, as they are the more isolated, become the more insistent. The devil, having already supplied a book of spells, of planets and of herbs, is summoned to dispute of ‘divine astrologie’. The joy of learning, however, is no more permissible to Faustus than that of domestic bliss; for, if pursued in due order and in the proper temper, it can lead to one thing only- the knowledge, the love and ultimately the vision of God. And all these, along with goodness, he has renounced.

He no longer feels the need to review and prove into the sciences so that he may discover how and where to employ and place himself. He is distracted in his outlook and enterprise. He has denied external authority. His conscience is put to sleep. Using the useful arts, he will become a magician and will enjoy-
“a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence”.
He will be not only king or Emperor, but a “mighty god.

Faustus might learn a lesson, if he would listen, that far from receiving the power of “mighty God” (line-62; scene-1) with which he flattered himself and made himself virtually blind. There are still situations to which he must be humbled and submitted. He is to receive nothing but a price. As it is reflected, as his soul is capable of glory, it is capable of sin and damnation. Both suggestions are brushed aside; the price, he makes it clear, is to him as little as no price, for men’s souls are “vain trifles” (line-61; scene-3). These or similar words he repeats on all occasions. When Mephistophilis seems to bargain with him- bids him to consider the bargain, Faustus wishes to conclude-

“But may I rise up spirits when I please?” (line-86; scene-5)
“Then there’s enough for a thousand souls.” (line-88; scene-5)

The first six and half lines of scene -5 employ the rhetorical technique of second person self-address, a technique which Marlowe frequently uses in the play, particularly in those speeches where heavy is put upon Faustus’ inner turmoil. And , while it is agreed with W. W. Greg⁷ , Michael Keefer⁸ , that the question mark at the end of line 2 in the A text is probably intended not as an interrogative but as an exclamation point- thereby contributing to the emphatic statement of Faustus’ present condition- even if the mark means interrogation, the resulting rhetorical question only contributes to the development of the speaker’s persona.

It is a persona characterized by confidence, keen observation, frequent resort to the imperative mood and presumption. He presumes to know Faustus’ state of imminent and irrevocable damnation, and thereby constructs a superficially logical critique of Faustus’ tendency to cast doubts to turn his thoughts toward God:-
What boots it then to think of God or heaven? (line-3; scene-5)
which is followed by the preemptory
“Away with such vain fancies and despair!
Despair in God and trust in Beelzebub” (line- 4-5; scene-5).

This command makes it clear that within the implied mental world of this persona, thoughts of God are mere “fantasies” when conceived by an abandoned soul, and should be replaced with acts of “trust”: specifically, trust in demonic beings such as Beelzebub, who is like Mephistophilis and Lucifer, but unlike God and Christ and do in fact appear during the play. Unstated but implicit is the understanding that it does “boot”- it does avail to think of and trust in demons. This sort of notion gives the implication of atheism in the life of Dr. Faustus.

Again the sin of demoniality is seen in his intimate cravings addressing Helen- “Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss” (line-83; scene-12) and
“Here will I dwell, for heaven be in these lips,
And all is dross that is not Helena!” (lines- 86-87; scene-12).

Thus Marlowe is an atheist and Dr. Faustus, also for all these causes, is branded as an atheist. But, though Marlowe was an atheist, Dr. Faustus, if looked at minutely and differently, it is found that, was not an atheist’s work. “Richard Hooker could have used it as and exemplum to teach the correct Christian path to God. Luther, Calvin, Knox- the founders of European Protestantism- have not found anything inflammatory in it. Marlowe’s play is in no way destructive of the basic tenets of Christianity. On the contrary, it enforces and illuminates those very tenets.”⁹

It is true that Faustus puts his will against that of God. He plays this role because of temptation- “Is that the reason he tempts us thus? (line-4; scene-5)” But as he is in this state, Mephistophilis, knowing his victim, states in an aside- “I’ll fetch him somewhat to delight his mind”. (line-81; scene-5)

Thus, Mephistophilis, deliberately offers Faustus sensual satisfaction in order to divert his attention, distract his mind from spiritual concern, which might, of course, lead to repentance. This is a basic one in the play, and an understanding of it will eventually enable us to interpret truly the episode of Helen of Troy. Whenever there is danger from the Devil’s viewpoint, Faustus turns to God’s mercy. The powers of Hell deaden and crush their victim’s conscience by providing him with some forms of sensual satisfaction.

By the end of the fifth scene, Mephistophilis tells Faustus- “thou art damn’d. Think thou of Hell! (line-248; scene-5)” . And the magician once more characteristically blames Lucifer’s servant for his plight- “Tis thou hast damn’d distressed Faustus’ soul. (line-252; scene-5)”. Again the protagonist is in spiritual distress. The Good Angel tells him there is still time to repent, to be back to God. But, the Bad Angel threatens, “If thou repent, devils will tear thee in pieces.” (line-256; scene-5). Whenever Faustus calls upon his Savior for help, Lucifer, Beelzebub and Mephistophilis enter. Lucifer appears in a menacing, frightening and dreadful mood. “O, who art thou that look’st so terrible?”- asks Faustus. (line-262; scene-5).

Thus, soon after he thinks of holy things, all kinds of instruments for self-destruction are placed before him. For which and for the lack of strong stability of his mind, he cannot show the intrinsic nature of repentance.

The line “Hell strives with grace for conquest in my breast!” (line-55; scene-12) ventilates the internal conflict of Faustus’ mind and shows the existence of grace, repentance and faith in God.

In the last scene of the play Faustus asks “Who pulls me down?”. The question is never answered. Perhaps it is the Devil. Perhaps, it is Faustus himself. Probably, a struggle is going on between Faustus and “something else”, but whether that “something else” is external or internal is not made clear. It prevents him from searching his pictured vision of Christ. When he utters the cry of despair-

“See, see where Christ’s blood streams in the firmament!

One drop would save my soul, half a drop: ah my Christ” (line-70-71; scene-13)

we can not think that we are watching an atheist.

In the last scene, Faustus movingly tries to call on Christ to save him. He is clearly being tormented physically by Lucifer. “Rend not my heart for naming of my Christ;” (line-72; scene-13) he cries, and then summons up all his strength and all his determination: “Yet will I call on him:” (line-73; scene-13) and exactly at the moment where we expect to hear the name of Christ, at the moment when it looks as though Faustus will succeed in seeking Christ’s mercy, the effort collapses. He can not seek salvation. He fails in his attempt for redemption. His strength and his determination fail. It turns into “O spare me Lucifer!” and the cry poignantly indicates spark of faith in Faustus.

Through the question “Whither should I fly?”. Faustus looks now for places to hide from the wrath, not of Lucifer, but of God. The image of the martyred and compassionate Christ, whose “blood streams in the firmament” (line-70; scene-13), has been replaced by the image of wrathful Jehovah who “stretches out his arm, and bends his ireful brows” (line-75; scene- 13). As Faustus’ desperation increases, he tends to think of dissolution. When he finds that he is not capable of leaping up to God, he desires to stand still and let the mountains fall on him. Again, finding that it does not work, he wants to follow a downward motion- “headlong into the earth” (line-79; scene-13), but that too lets him fail. So he asks to become like a foggy mist, sucked up into the entrails of cloud so that his soul and body can be separated and the former gains access to heaven. He thinks of every possible way that his imaginative as well as terror stricken mind can think of. In a self addressed manner he asks why he was not “a creature wanting soul” (line-95; scene-13). He thinks all these, because he does not want to be damned, he wants to escape damnation. All his attempts to escape are here predicted with this view in mind that somewhere there might be some place where Faustus might be safe. As the half hour strikes, Faustus is reminded of the inexorable progress of the last hour of his life. It is to ideas of time that he returns in his attempt to escape. Against his awareness of the terrible reality of eternity, he attempts to have some kinds of limits:-

“Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years

A hundred thousand, and at last be saved”. (lines-92-93; scene-13)

The desperate attempt not to be damned is thought in terms of physique, time, place and the like. The thought of “at last be saved” is the innate expression of a true Christian. When The Second Scholar asks him to repent, depending on the belief that “God’s mercies are infinite” (line-14; scene-13), Faustus replies-
“O, would I had never seen Wittenberg, never read book. And what wonders I have done, all Germany can witness, yea all the world! For which Faustus hath lost both Germany and the world, yea, Heaven itself- Heaven, the seat of God, the throne of the blessed, the kingdom of joy and must remain in Hell forever! Hell, O Hell forever! Sweet friends, what shall become of Faustus being in Hell forever?” (line-20-25; scene-13).

This long prosaic statement of unstable Dr. Faustus envisages the moving experience and utmost realization for what he has committed so far. This shows his realization and his predicament over losing heaven. This is very near to the beliefs of a theist. The line in the prologue of the play- “And melting heavens conspired his overthrow” (line-22) suggests that God Himself is aligned against Faustus. Is it not almost perverse to assume the guilt of a man whom God Himself has damned?

In line with the mechanically judged orthodox religious framework, Faustus has sinned and so he is punished. But, there are some factors which make Faustus appear in a new character.

Doctor Faustus undergoes a sea change. He has acquired self realization, realizes his error, repents and grows out of his despair and internal conflict.

He believes that God exists not only for the rest of humanity but also for a sinner like him. His soul has received God’s grace. Christ “hath ransomed” (line-90; scene-13) Faustus’ sin, hence God is bound to accept him. He has had a glimpse of God. He sees God with buoyancy and hope.

Faustus is not totally devoid of Good thoughts. The intense mental conflict is portrayed through the appearance of the Good and Bad Angels. The Good Angel, like the Bad Angel, is a projection of conscience of Faustus, who comes to Faustus to remind him of “contrition, prayer, repentance” (line-16; scene-5). He has not completely forgotten God and at the depth of his heart, he still remembers God’s greatness. James Smith correctly states,- “the more prominent role which in the earlier scenes fell to the Evil Angel, is in the later assumed by the Good Angel and his associates; the Old man and Faustus’ conscience”¹⁰. Cleanth Brooks agrees that “on a purely legalistic basis, of course, Faustus’ case is hopeless” but nevertheless he believes “redemption is possible for Faustus”¹¹.

The fact that God is stretching out His arm and is looking down at Faustus indicates the presence of God. God is angry with his creation but He does not turn His face away. He does not excommunicate Faustus. As the devils enter amidst thunder and lightning in the final moment when Faustus’ God is very much present. According to the Christian concept of grace, saint or sinner will be accepted into the heavenly folds of God¹². Hence, the fact of Faustus’ being damned which is indicated at the end of last scene is not a plausible conclusion. It is true that Faustus has sinned, but he has also repented and has had a vision of God. God does not have to come physically. He “never appears in tangible bodilines like man, but reveals Himself in visions or dreams or makes known His will by a voice out of the unseen”¹³ –

“My God, my God! Look not so fierce on me!
Adders, and serpents, let me breathe awhile!
Ugly Hell gape not! Come not Lucifer;
I’ll burn my books.” (lines-110-113; scene- 13)

“I’ll leap up to my God” (line-69; scene-13) reveals Faustus’ intended closeness to his God. The fact that God is near to him and is keeping a watchful eye presents God as a protective guardian figure. God watches over Faustus and corrects him. In the last scene, Faustus believes that even half a drop of Christ’s blood can save his soul. A few lines later he cries out again to his God for mercy for the sake of Christ, His beloved Son, who has repented not only for the sins of millions but has also “ransomed” Faustus’ sin with his blood. God never deserts Faustus and not being deserted definitely suggests hope. But most of all Faustus avails peace and satisfaction spiritually on the verge of his death because he has experienced the vision of God.

The contrition mandatory for all Christians is fulfilled by Faustus internally and spiritually. Faustus’ God accepts this inner contrition. If one has a genuine and pure love for God, the outward declaration of it becomes unimportant. As the romanticists believe, “it was a question less of reason than of feeling, less of argument than of experience”¹⁴. Hence, though C. Marlowe himself was an atheist and Dr. Faustus also- for abjuring the Trinity, defiant attitude towards God, for resorting to necromancy and for committing the sin of demoniality- is branded as an atheist. But in the light of the above discussion it can be concluded that he has been involved in all these activities as a brow beaten and threatened man rather than as a self willed man. He is self willed and spontaneous in a few cases. But, his later earnest, instinctive and intense desire for redemption, his moving

appeal for salvation, realization of sin, fait in Christ's ransoming of sin and vision of God give a new coloring about the identity of Dr. Faustus as a theist.

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