

Lecture 11: *Dr. Faustus*

Both a very late medieval morality play and a very early early modern tragedy.

A sort of inverted *Everyman*—
a tragic rather than a comic exposition of pride.

Begin by looking at the picture of St Bartholomew. [1
Why would an artist represent himself in such a horrifying and self-tormented way?

Three Versions of Marlowe's *Faustus*. (B 1143-91)

VERSION 1: *Faustus* is *Everyman* as tragedy rather than comedy. The very popular Medieval Morality play is about Everyone's encounter with Death and the struggle to achieve salvation—successful in that case. Its hero is a universal type. The play is comic.

Dr. Faustus is a tragic version of the same universal, typical story. Based on a medieval folktale—the Magus who lost his soul to the devil; it reflects the same underlying Christian value system, with a difference. *Everyman* is Catholic, communal. The hero is a member of a community and is accompanied to heaven by his Good Deeds. *Dr. Faustus* is Protestant & Calvinist: salvation is by faith, not works, and solely by the grace of God (not according to any human merit).

VERSION 2: The Tragedy of a distinctive (i.e., atypical)
Renaissance hero —

The Overreacher (according to Harry Levin).

Faustus is not Everyman but a kind of Superman,
seeking to reach, proudly, beyond ordinary human
limits; doomed to fail, but gloriously. [3

“The end of Physicke is our bodies health.”

Why Faustus, hast thou not attain'd that end?

Are not thy bils hung vp as monuments, 1.1.20

Wherby whole Cities haue escap't the plague

And thousand desperate maladies beene cur'd?

Yet art thou still but Faustus, and a man.

Couldst thou make men to liue eternally,

Or being dead, raise them to life againe, 25

Then this profession were to be esteem'd.

Physicke farewell.

According to VERSION 1, Faustus falls victim to Pride &
becomes evil:

So much he **profits** in Diuinitie, . . . Pro. 15

That shortly he was grac'd with Doctors name,

Excelling all, and sweetly can dispute

In th'heauenly matters of *Theologie*,

Till swolne with cunning, of a selfe conceit, 20

His waxen wings did mount aboue his reach

And melting, heauens conspir'd his ouer-throw:

Those “waxen wings” allude to a well-known classical myth. What is an allusion (not an illusion)?

To what myth (story) do the wings allude?

Notice how the pagan allusion subtly interjects a different frame of reference, and a different value system, into the orthodox Christian condemnation of Faustus. Pride is valued rather than despised, even when it has tragic consequences. (Remember Beowulf?)

The Christian condemnation continues:

For falling to a diuellish exercise,
And glutted now with learnings golden gifts,
He surfets vpon cursed Necromancie: 25
Nothing so sweet as Magicke is to him;
Which he preferres before his chiefest blisse,
And this the man that in his study sits.

A major irony here is that Faustus’ study of Divinity has taught him, not the way to Heaven, but the way to Hell: “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Matt. 16:26)

VERSION 2—Faustus as heroic Overreacher— assimilates and transforms such ironies by placing a positive value on human aspiration. Pride is not a sin but a virtue, a kind of Magnanimity. Magic represents, not vile necromancy, but the consummate expression of the god-given desire to extend human control over nature. [4

Faustus become quintessentially human precisely because he struggles to *transcend* human limits.

These Metaphisicks of Magitians,
And Necromantick bookes are heauenly,
Lines, Circles, Letters, Characters. 1.1.50

Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires.

O what a world of profite and delight,
Of power, of honour, and omnipotence,
Is promised to the Studios Artizan?

All things that moue betweene the quiet Poles 55

Shall be at my command: Emperors and Kings,
Are but obey'd in their seuerall Prouinces:

But his dominion that exceeds in this,
Stretcheth as farre as doth the mind of man: 60

A sound Magitian is a Demi-god,
Here tire my braines to get a Deity.

If God wills our meek submission to ignorance, why are we created with “thoughts that wander through eternity”? (PL 2.148). Milton’s Fallen Angels are condemned to eternal pain. But do we not sympathize deeply with Belial when he asks: “Who would lose, / Though full of pain, this intellectual being?” (147)

So Faustus inspires both awe (terror) and pity (as Aristotle suggests) and becomes a tragic figure of human aspiration.

Ultimately, the Fall of Dr. Faustus may come to seem both necessary and FORTUNATE.

Both of these versions of *Dr. Faustus*, moralistic and existential, let us say, can be proved by selective readings of the play. They are both true, in fact.

And so is a third version that complements the first 2.

VERSION 3:

Noting that Faustus’s magical insight into and power over nature consists primarily of cheap parlor tricks (fruits out of season) and tawdry practical jokes, we might be led to conclude that **The play is a tragic Farce**, in which Faustus’ pretensions are seen to be ludicrous—not because they damn him to Hell, but because they are simply absurd:

Faustus cannot be forgiven **only** because he has convinced himself that he cannot be: “Faustus offence can ne’er be pardoned. The serpent [i.e., Satan!?] that tempted Eve may be saved, but not Faustus” (5.2.38-39).

When his friends suggest that he might ask others to pray for him, he responds in a way that reflects an abysmal cowardice, more physical than spiritual, that is patently absurd: “Oft have I thought to have [repented], but the devil threatened to tear me in pieces if I named God; to fetch me body and soul if I once gave ear to divinity, and now ’tis too late” (61-63).

Faustus will be torn in pieces anyway.

He will *knowingly* endure an eternity of torment because he will not endure a few moments of physical anguish.

In these terms Faustus seems almost idiotic, neither Everyman nor Superman, but sub-human.

(However like us he may seem at times)

NOW,

If all of these versions of *Dr. Faustus* are in some sense true, and complementary (that is, contrary rather than contradictory), and if none actually precludes the others, how can we account for the existence of such a strange play?

Recall the picture with which I began:



It certainly looks as if Michelangelo thought he was going to hell. Why?

Because he was what used to be called a sodomite, that is a homosexual? Probably.

It is also likely that he was not wholly orthodox in his religious thinking; he was publicly accused of heresy. He clearly suffered from melancholy (depression) and a fear of dying: *"I am a poor man and of little worth, who is laboring in that art that God has given me in order to extend my life as long as possible"* (Jan. 29th, 1542). [5

Marlowe was a freethinker (i.e., an atheist); he did not believe in God. Like Michelangelo, Marlowe was a homosexual. And, as I read his character (from relatively slight evidence) he was demon possessed—guilty, deeply anxious about his sexual identity, and driven to self-hatred

[6

So I suggest that *Dr. Faustus* is exactly the sort of play that might be written by a self-tormented unbeliever if he had ceased to believe in God and Heaven but continued to believe in Hell and the Devil.

NOTES

1] Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*. Detail: *St. Bartholomew* carrying a flayed skin. The head of the skin is a self-portrait of the artist. These images have been borrowed from The Web Gallery of Art:

<http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/index1.html>

2] My favorite image of Hell and Damnation comes, not from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but from a famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," by the American Puritan preacher, Jonathan Edwards (1793-1758) at <http://www.jonathanedwards.com/>:

Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness, would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock. Were it not for the sovereign pleasure of God, the earth would not bear you one moment; for you are a burden to it; the creation groans with you; the creature is made subject to the bondage of your corruption, not willingly; the sun does not willingly shine upon you to give you light to serve sin and Satan; the earth does not willingly yield her increase to satisfy your lusts; nor is it willingly a stage for your wickedness to be acted upon; the air does not willingly serve you for breath to maintain the flame of life in your vitals, while you spend your life in the service of God's enemies. . . . There are black clouds of God's wrath now hanging directly over your heads, full of the dreadful storm, and big with thunder; and were it not for the restraining hand of God, it would immediately burst forth upon you.

The sermon goes on in the same vein for some time; it reaches a kind of climax in the famous image of a spider held in the palm of God's reluctant hand:

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night; that you were suffered to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell.

3] Some passages from Dr. Faustus are taken from Marlowe's *The Tragedie of Doctor Faustus* (B text) (ed. Hilary Binda), online at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=1999.03.0011>

4] According to Genesis 1: 28. "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."

5] *Michelangelo Buonaratti*, "Final Days – 1536-1564"
<http://www.michelangelo.com/buon/bio-index2.html>

6] Although it does not exactly “derive” from her work, and she is not to be held responsible for it, my reading of *Dr. Faustus* owes a great deal to Constance Brown Kuryama’s psychoanalytic study of Marlowe: *Hammer or Anvil: Psychological Patterns in Christopher Marlowe’s Plays* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1980). Although some elements in Professor Kuryama’s reading of Marlowe’s homosexuality now seem misguided—nearly a quarter century later—her fundamental insights into Marlowe’s psyche have proven enormously fruitful for my own thinking about the play.