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Magic and Natural Philosophy in Marlowe's Doctor Faustus

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Introduction

In the late sixteenth century, when theatre production was flourishing and more and more acting companies were being founded, a young actor, Christopher Marlowe, emerged as one of the most brilliant authors of his time. Even though his promising career was abruptly interrupted in 1593 when he was killed during a pub brawl at the age of twenty-nine, in the few years of his activity he managed to write some of the most famous and appreciated English plays of all time. His association with the queen's spies, the accusations of blasphemy, and the mystery surrounding his death all contributed to the creation of a controversial character who, even centuries later, still piques scholars' curiosity.

The idea for this thesis came during an Erasmus experience at the University of Birmingham after having read Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* as part of the curriculum of an introductory English literature course. After some months of literary research, one main question still remained unanswered, for it was unclear where to draw the line between Faustus' legitimate ambitions to pursue knowledge and the excess of pride that led him to his eternal damnation. Not all scholars agree on the exact moment when Faustus' soul is finally won by the devil. It is possible that Faustus was already predestined to damnation as thus had no power in the matter of his salvation, but it is also possible that he actually did; perhaps when he signed the contract with Mephistopheles, or when he committed the sin of demoniality by kissing a succubus under the guise of Helen of Troy. It is also interesting to consider the reception of such a character from an early modern perspective. Even though the audience saw Faustus' fate as well deserved and foreseeable because of his unacceptable *hybris*, and some would even accuse the author of blasphemy and atheism, it is also true that some others would sympathise with his aspiration and desire for intellectual and spiritual independence. Marlowe's accomplishment was, indeed, to create a character who could be relatable despite and thanks to his flaws. Faustus is neither a hero, nor a monster. He is simply a human being made of flesh and bones, and has the possibility to repent and save his soul although he decides to follow the wrong path that will eventually lead him to his tragic end.

This thesis aims to observe the fine line that divides magic from natural philosophy in *Doctor Faustus*, and the differences between acceptable and forbidden magic in relation to a society where modernity and backwardness coexisted in most aspects of daily life. It also takes into particular consideration Faustus' first soliloquy and the dialogue between Faustus and Mephistopheles on the motions of celestial bodies. While the first introduces the protagonist to the audience, the latter perfectly mirrors the development of a new scientific method, the way European scholars interacted among themselves, and the contrast between ground-breaking innovations and a Church unwilling to accept the changes they were bringing.

The research has therefore been divided into three main sections that will then constitute the three chapters of the thesis. The first chapter is an investigation on the social aspects of an early modern England divided between the discoveries linked to colonialism in the New World and the superstitions inherited from the Middle Ages. The second chapter focuses on Doctor Faustus' aspiration and the controversy regarding his fate. Lastly, the third chapter explores the aspects linked to the staging of *Doctor Faustus* and the accusations of blasphemy that the author subsequently had to face. Even though the topic of this thesis is but a fragment of Marlowe's great production, it leaves no doubt to the reader of what an extraordinary author he was. Considering the references both to popular culture and highly specific philosophical matters, and the balance between great monologues and purely entertaining horseplay, it is ultimately possible to consider *Doctor Faustus* a multifaceted play meant to be appreciated for centuries rather than a blasphemous version of a morality play.

1. Magic and natural philosophy in early modern England

The chapter gives an account of the various aspects that witchcraft assumed during the early modern age in England. The proposed analysis mentions in a small part the commonly known brutal aspects of the witch-hunt occurred in this period, but reserves a deeper look to those sides of magic that nowadays would be considered natural sciences. It also aims to show the tolerance area that separated what was formally considered white witchcraft to what was intended as black witchcraft, so as the bond between misbeliefs, superstitions, healing techniques, and the modern sciences during an era of great innovations. Moreover, the influence of Italian Renaissance and the humanist theories that came to England during Elizabeth I's reign will be a key element to this chapter's analysis since they played a major role in the development of a new perspective of the human being in relation with God and the different effects on the society.

1.1 Superstitions in an age of scientific discoveries

Belief in magic and the occult is a relevant political and social factor that needs to be kept in consideration when analysing the history of early modern England. Despite the assumption that this phenomenon interested only poor and ignorant people, it must be recognized that several of the best European intellectuals believed to some extent in spirits, demons and necromancy.¹ Magical practises could be divided into two separate categories, white magic and black magic which respectively corresponded to good and evil practises. This subdivision mostly affected those who performed what was considered low-level magic, such as healing, but it also had an impact on those intellectuals who were experts in natural philosophy, which was regarded as the highest form of magic. In both cases, witchcraft was socially accepted only as long as it was devoted to benevolent actions.

When considering low-level witchcraft, it is fundamental to take into account how much people relied on the help of the so-called white witches. The most important ones were healers, who

¹ Sharpe, James, *Instruments of Darkness, Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997, p. 5.

simply were women with basic knowledge of botany, and who used herbs and prayers to cure wounds. Diviners and midwives too used amulets and prayers to help people,² especially those who thought themselves to be under the influence of an evil witch after an ill-fated event, which could be a sick animal, poor crops or even the death of a child.³ In small towns where outcasts were seen as a cause of disturbance of public order, the first ones to be apprehended for the use of black-magic were widows and old spinsters who relied on people's charity to survive. The fact that, because of their age, many of these women assumed eccentric habits only encouraged people to suspect them of *maleficia*. It is thus possible to understand why low-level magic started being associated with women both in positive and negative cases. Contrary to popular belief, most trials against black witches took place during the Renaissance rather than during the Middle Ages and, even though in Europe the persecutions were not as assiduous as in America, many women suffered the consequences of fear and superstition in multiple degrees, from discrimination, to torture, to death penalty.

Natural philosophy, on the other hand, was the type of magic that belonged to the most cultivated groups of society and, therefore, was overall accepted among people. To a modern reader, the name itself might seem misleading for it merged two fields of knowledge that nowadays are considered as separate entities, natural science and philosophy. It is however true that natural sciences had yet to be developed, and the approach to nature from sixteenth century's philosophers was still extremely bookish for it still relied for the vast majority on the theories of ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato or Epicurus.⁴ It will be only later, thanks to Galileo (1564-1642) and Descartes (1596-1650) that the scientific method as we know it today — and subsequently a new subdivision of scientific disciplines — will be created. Since natural philosophy was strictly connected to God's creation, it can be said that the line between socially acceptable studies and damnable curiosity lied on the philosopher's ego. If a philosopher accepted that his role

2 Sharpe, pp. 19-20.

3 Sharpe, p. 19.

4 Blair, Ann, "Natural Philosophy", Daston, Lorraine, Park, Katharine, eds., *The Cambridge History of Science, Volume 3: Early Modern Science*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 392.

was to help humankind to understand God’s creation, and if he did not question the dogmata of his discipline, his work was to be accepted and praised by the religious and temporal authorities.⁵ On the other hand, if a natural philosopher dared to challenge what was already widely accepted and supported by the Church, he was destined to be marked as a deviant thinker. The consequences could go from a forced abjuration, to exile, to death penalty just like a common witch, for his desire to go beyond what was already known about nature had brought him to commit a sin of pride. Among early modern European intellectuals, the most famous case is probably that of Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), who, after having been twice put to trial – once in Venice in 1592, and once in Rome in 1597 — was at last condemned to burn at the stake in 1600 for heresy, blasphemy, and magical practices.

A question that might arise here is how could people still be so superstitious in such an age of great social change. It is well known that the Italian Renaissance had a great influence on European scholars who started embracing a more scientific approach in natural philosophy, which involved a constant search for knowledge,⁶ but the belief that humanism existed in opposition to religion is a common misbelief. In most European universities, the two authorities which needed to be respected in any field of research still were the Scriptures and Aristotle. Only few universities (the University of Wittenberg, where *Doctor Faustus* is set, among them) accepted to teach Platonism in addition to Aristotelianism, and, even one century later, most thinkers were still averse to heliocentrism.⁷ This was due to the fact that the main argument against Copernicus’ heliocentric system laid in the Scriptures, for in the Old Testament Joshua asks the sun to “stand still upon Gibeon.”⁸ It is also important to note that natural philosophy was approached differently by dissimilar social classes. While the educated elite had access to higher education and sources written in Latin, the lower classes which had only recently started to become literate could solely

5 Roberts, G., “Necromantic Books: Christopher Marlowe, Doctor Faustus and Agrippa of Nettesheim”, Grantley, Darryl, Roberts, Peters, eds., *Christopher Marlowe and English Renaissance Culture*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 1999, pp. 119-120.

6 *Renaissance*, History.com. (last accessed 10/21).

7 Blair, p. 375.

8 Joshua 10:12, *King James Bible*, biblegateway.com (last accessed 11/2021).

obtain popular and vulgarized versions of those same texts.⁹ A relevant insight about an early modern context, where almost any person could have accessed more or less reliable scientific sources and thus create their own opinion on the matter, is provided by Eugenio Garin, an Italian philosopher and historian

Only a radically different evaluation of the purpose on the man in the world and of the role he has to assume when facing the natural reality could have led him to perceive magic as a *human science*, worthy of humankind, which can be acceptably cultivated. And magic ceases to appear as a subverter of the order of the cosmos, or of the motionless heavenly structures exactly in the moment when that order and that harmony are, for countless reasons, questioned and refused. For this reason, during the Renaissance, magic becomes a cultural factor and, as such, it is defended and glorified not only by those who practice it, but also by men such as Ficino, Bruno and Campanella.¹⁰

1.2 The debate between socially acceptable magic and condemnable practices

When the social impact of the magical aspects behind early modern natural philosophy is analysed, the first theory that needs to be mentioned is that of William Perkins, a cleric and theologian who taught in Cambridge in the same years when Christopher Marlowe was studying there. According to Perkins, there are two categories of witches: the ones who make deals with the devil to obtain power and the ones who do so because they cannot accept the narrowness of human minds. The latter are even more reprehensible than the first, because they fall into the delusion of having somehow earned and deserved their knowledge.¹¹ The fine line between desire for knowledge and damnable *curiositas* is one of the central themes in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and, overall, in the recurring discussion on the limits of the early modern man. One of the main arguments written on this topic is presented by Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, a German theologian and polymath. After several publications on occult philosophy, Agrippa published *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum atque artium declamatio invectiva* (declamation and invective against the uncertainty and

9 Smith, Pamela H., "Science on the Move: Recent Trends in the History of Early Modern Science", *Renaissance Quarterly*, 62, 2009, p. 366.

10 Garin, Eugenio in Rossi, Paolo, *Francesco Bacone: dalla Magia alla Scienza*, Torino, Einaudi, 1974, pp. 25-26.

11 Perkins, William, quoted in Mebane, J.S., *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: the Occult Tradition and Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1992, p. 105.

vanity of science and arts), a treatise against magical practice. Here, Agrippa declared that excessive intellectual pride can only push arrogant minds towards the devil because they will inevitably desire more and more knowledge, which can only be achieved through magic. What needs to be understood is whether Agrippa wrote his *De incertitude et vanitate* as a clarification in order to avoid being wrongfully accused through a misreading of his previous work, *De occulta philosophia* (on occult philosophy), or as a forced recantation of the theories that can be found in it. In fact, despite being an highly-regarded academic, during his life, Agrippa often found himself accused of heresy and witchcraft because of the great interest he had in the occult tradition and in Jewish mysticism. While his *De Occulta philosophia* had been written as a compendium of magical practices, which was the results of many years of studies around Europe, it was not uncommon for people to use it as a grimoire, i.e., a spell book.¹² And it soon earned the reputation of being an actual magic manual, with many more details than any other similar book. So it remains unclear if the statements that can be read in Agrippa's *De incertitude et vanitate* were written out of fear of being persecuted for his ideas, as a parody, as a sincere change of heart that moved him to Christianity, or as a way of retracting his old theories before publishing his updated views in 1533. The main reason behind such allegations against the scholar is that very little books had been published on such controversial topics and the vast majority of them reported copied parts from Agrippa's works. During his years in Cambridge, Marlowe probably became accustomed with the aforementioned theories, especially those proposed by Agrippa since he re-proposed this great contrast between scientific doubt and damnable curiosity in his *Doctor Faustus*.

Even after Marlowe's death, the debate between legitimate desire for knowledge and *vana curiositas* was ongoing, as demonstrated by the philosophical dissertation written by James VI of Scotland. His *Daemonologie, in Forme of a Dialogue, Divided into Three Books* which was first

¹² Roberts, p. 152.

published in Scots in 1597 and then two English editions were published in 1603.¹³ Here, the king had collected his knowledge on the matter of demonology and sorcery in form of a dialogue between two characters named Philomates and Epistemon, who respectively represent philosophy and theology. The purpose was to re-educate people on the rituals and the beliefs of those who had been lured into black magic. The king was deeply involved in witch-hunting, led by the desire to condemn all sorts of magic phenomena, for they were the outcome of a voluntary betrayal of both the authority of God and the King, as his earthly representative. In fact, a central topic of the book is the insatiable curiosity, a sinful practice widely condemned throughout the Renaissance when the search for new explanations to old questions gradually became more and more common thanks to the development of humanist theories. It is thus clear that the staging of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* can be considered as a tiny piece of a bigger puzzle that developed all throughout the early modern period, and that the theories presented in the play — just as all the other pieces — contributed to the great debate which aimed to find the rightful place for intellectuals and authorities in the development of a new scientific system.

1.3 Doctor Faustus' *vana curiositas*

Humanism promoted the search of truth by the principles of doubt. Everything that until then had been taken for granted suddenly could be queried and disputed, and new theories could be developed. This strife for knowledge was disregarded by religion because it was often shown to be pride-driven. Even after Queen Elizabeth I's reign, when James I wrote his *Daemonologie*, he did not condemn all those who sought knowledge, but exclusively those who did not accept human limits and tried to go beyond them.¹⁴ Thus, between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, it became clear that not only was damnable curiosity strictly linked to the original sin — as Eve gave into temptation because of her desire to gain understanding despite God's warnings — but also to the fall of Lucifer caused by his immeasurable hubris. Too much curiosity is what led people to

¹³ Sharpe, p. 48.

¹⁴ Mebane, p.107.

eternal damnation because it denoted putting man almost on the same level as God. As a consequence, the Church started warning people against *vana curiositas* and its infernal consequences. Nonetheless, the pursue of wisdom could not be stopped and it is in these years that scholars began to develop an interest towards magical learning. If until then peasant women were the ones associated with witchcraft, higher forms of black magic were now connected to erudite men, among them necromancy, sorcery and wizardry. Doctor Faustus' uncontrollable thirst for power is *de facto* the cause of his failure and his pride is ultimately what sets him as a flawed character from the very beginning. He has achieved greatness and he is aware of it, but he does not recognise God as the one who allowed him to reach these results, as it would be expected from a Renaissance scholar. Conversely, he strives to know and have more. Here lies Faustus' greatest fault. This is when he crosses the line between the acceptable desire for knowledge and the deplorable *curiositas*. He turns to necromancy in hope to find a way to go beyond the limits of human knowledge but eventually fails to achieve his objective. It was difficult for the audience to fully condemn the protagonist of the tragedy or completely sympathise with him in his "doomed but heroic attempt to gain for humanity some access to the secrets of the universe and some mastery over our fate."¹⁵

There is a strong possibility that Christopher Marlowe, who had been accused of magical and heretic practices as well, knew and had read Agrippa's works, perhaps even indirectly.¹⁶ It is well known that Marlowe, despite his humble origins, had the chance to study at Cambridge. Interestingly, not only does his work present specific information generally available to scholars only, hence showing that he had had access to Agrippa's and Scot's works; but he also used *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Dr. John Faustus*, a cheap piece of street

15 . Bevington, D., Rasmussen, E., eds. *Doctor Faustus, A- and B- Texts (1604-1616), Christopher Marlowe and his Collaborator and Revisers*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1993, p. 15.

16 Roberts, G. p. 151.

literature, to create the incidents scenes, marking his play as one of the most rich in detail.¹⁷ His *Doctor Faustus* can consequently be considered a great ensemble of folklore and erudite sources. Taking in consideration the newly found principles of doubt, by the end of the sixteenth century it was possible to find both scholars who firmly believed in the doctrine of puritanism which strictly condemned pushing one's knowledge beyond its limits, and others who had embraced the Reformation and thus did not consider the renewed interest towards curiosity to be a threat, but an added value to their learning process. The coexistence of these two opposite lines of thought perfectly represents the great dichotomy of early modern England.

¹⁷ Summers, M., *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology*, Norfolk, Lowe & Brydone, 1973, pp. 281-284.

2. Doctor Faustus the humanist

It is well known that Marlowe is not the sole author of both the A- and B-texts of *Doctor Faustus*. However, this is not a matter of authorship, but rather a standard practice for Elizabethan drama. Every play was subject to several alterations in order to be approved by revisers and censors, but also to be adapted to the stage since it was not uncommon for written text to sound unnatural when acted out loud. The great differences between A- and B-text are still argued by scholars who cannot agree on which version should be considered the most trustworthy, presumably because it is impossible to simply elect one of them as the definitive Marlovian play. The two text were published respectively in 1604 and 1616 in quartos, both after the Marlowe's death in 1593. However, the play was already popular among the Elizabethan public, for it had already been put on stage between 1592 and 1593. The main difference is the length of the play, in fact the B-text is significantly longer because, despite some minor omissions from the first version, it has 676 new lines.¹⁸ These alterations were originally believed to have been written by editors and publishers and, as a consequence, for years the A-text was considered the closest to its author. However, some of the added lines present the typical features of Marlowe's writing style, especially when it comes to long monologues and, therefore, it is safe to believe that it was Marlowe himself who wrote them.¹⁹

For the sake of completeness, the B-text will be mainly taken into consideration in this chapter with the final aim of understanding the play's role in an ever-changing society. The main focus will be put on Faustus' first soliloquy and its relationship with the scientific and religious beliefs of the average early modern scholar. For what concerns the latter, a deeper insight will be given about the theme of predestination and Faustus' transition from the sin of pride to that of despair.

¹⁸ Bevington, Rasmussen, p. 63.

¹⁹ Steane, John Barry, *Marlowe: a Critical Study*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1964, p. 119.

2.1 Faustus' conflict between science and magic

The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus comes from a merging of many retellings of the German Faust story. It was the story of a man of great intellect who offered his soul to the devil in order to obtain greater power, and it was inspired by the life of a real alchemist, Johann Georg Faust, who is supposed to have lived between the end of fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries.²⁰ It must be noted that, before this legend became popular, many other tales from European folklore dealt with characters who made pacts with the devil or magical creatures. As a consequence, it is possible that the German Faust Story also had influences from these tales and thus consisted of a fusion of their characteristic elements and the most extraordinary aspects of the life of Johann Georg Faust. Marlowe probably got acquainted with the Faust story thanks to a gentleman known as P.F. who, around 1592, had translated into English the popular *Historia von D. Johann Fausten dem weitbeschreiten Zauberer und Schwarzkünstler* (history of dr. Johann Faust the famous magician and necromancer), which had been originally published in 1587.²¹ Beside some changes — generally concerning the protagonist's complexity and inner struggle — Marlowe's version preserves almost all the elements of the original story. With the sole exception of the comic scenes which are written in prose, the play is written in blank verse. Being shorter, the A-text is commonly divided in thirteen scenes, while the B-text is divided in twenty scenes.²² However, some modern texts — such as the one edited by Bevington and Rasmussen which will be used as a primary source in the following chapters — divide the play in five acts, so the play will be mentioned according to this division.

Like a great number of Elizabethan plays, *Doctor Faustus* opens with a chorus that introduces the audience to the protagonist while he is in his study reflecting on his great career as a

²⁰ *Legend of Faust*, faust.com (last accessed 1/22).

²¹ Bevington, Rasmussen, p. 3.

²² *Legend of Faust*, faust.com (last accessed 1/22).

scholar and on the limits of the sciences. From the very beginning, the chorus foretells Faustus' destiny by comparing him to Icarus

His waxen wings did mount above his reach,
And melting, heavens conspired his overthrow (I.i 19-20).

Therefore one of the key elements of the plot is already revealed: just like Icarus who flew too close to the sun, Faustus is destined to be defeated by his own pride. As a first demonstration of such a prevalent aspect of his character, as soon as Faustus begins to talk, he makes a great display of his knowledge, mainly through the use of sentences in Latin. He says “bene disserere est finis logices”, to dispute well is the end/purpose of logic (I.i 7) not only to prove his excellent skills as an orator with a witty use of the double meaning of the word “finis”, but also to remark that, according to this statement, he has already reached that end since he believes to have reached the greatest possible knowledge in all the fundamental disciplines. He is, indeed, disappointed with his knowledge for he desires to go beyond it. Logic, medicine, law, theology, they all failed him. None of these disciplines can go beyond human limits, not even theology which is supposed to bring humans closer to God.

In his critique to theology, Faustus uses Latin to quote two passages from the New Testament, however he mentions them incompletely and, as a result, their meaning is completely altered. The first text he misquotes is from St. Paul's epistle to the Romans. He reads “stipendium peccati mors est”, the reward of sin is death (I.i 37), but he forgets, or simply decides not to mention how it follows, “for the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord”.²³ Immediately after, he reads a passage from the first epistle of St. John

*Si peccasse negamus, fallimur,
Et nulla est in nobis veritas.*
If we say that we have no sin,
We deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us (I.i 40-43).

²³ Romans 6:23, *King James Bible*, biblegateway.com (last accessed 11/21).

He, again, omits the rest of the passage “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”²⁴ Faustus already refuses to consider redemption and therefore allows the audience to understand one of the reasons why he will later decline the help of both the good angel and the old man. Faustus believes that humankind is already doomed since everyone is a sinner, and therefore he refuses the biblical texts. He turns away from God because he fails to accept that heaven is not reached only by few elected ones, but through repentance and God’s mercy. Although the theme of predestination and divine mercy will be further analysed in chapter 2.2, this separation of humans from God is of major significance in order to understand the two great sins of Faustus, pride and despair for “presumption takes away the fear of God and desperation the love of God.”²⁵ In Faustus’ case, pride makes him disappointed by all his studies, especially theology which is the one that has failed him the most, and despair makes him lose any hope of redemption. This is why Faustus bids divinity adieu (I.i 48) and turns to magic which is still unknown, full of potential, and possibly capable of making him surpass the limits of the human mind.

A sound magician is a demigod.
Here, tire my brains to get a deity (I.i 61-62).

As soon as he turns to magical studies, Faustus asks Valdes and Cornelius to introduce him to necromantic books so that he will become “as cunning as Agrippa was” and subsequently obtain the power and the knowledge that no other science has been able to give him (I.i 111). From the first lines of the dialogue between the protagonist and his two friends, the audience can understand that they had already tried to persuade Faustus into joining them in the practice of necromancy, for he welcomes them saying

Know that your words have won me at last
To practice magic and concealèd arts (I.i 100-101).

Here Faustus, by choosing to pursue his studies in dark magic, takes the first step towards his damnation, for he is being driven solely by his immeasurable pride which makes him believe he

²⁴ John, 1:9, *King James Bible*, biblegateway.com (last accessed 11/21).

²⁵ Donne, John, *LXXX Sermons*, quoted in Gardner, Helen, “The Theme of Damnation in Doctor Faustus”, Jump, John, ed., *Marlowe: Doctor Faustus; A Selection of Critical Essays*, Glasgow, The University Press, 1969, p. 96.

will promptly master this art thanks to the aid of his friends. Some critics such as Helen Gardner hold Faustus fully responsible of his choice, for he willingly decides to become a necromancer,²⁶ while Walter Greg directs the reader's attention to the characters of Valdes and Cornelius. He observes that the two German necromancers are "no deeply versed magicians welcoming a promising beginner, but merely the devil's decoys luring Faustus along the road of destruction."²⁷

The question that rises thereupon is whether Faustus can be considered to be free and, if so, to what extent. He abandons his religious beliefs because he feels oppressed by the limits of his humanity but, by signing a pact with Mephistopheles, he seems to obtain a master more than a servant. The first instance of Mephistopheles' lack of loyalty towards Faustus can be found in I.iii, when Faustus asks his absolute obedience, but the devil answers him that his first master is still Lucifer, and therefore he "may not follow thee [Faustus] without his leave" and "no more than he [Lucifer] commands must we perform" (I.iii 39-40). Hence Faustus has to face the first external limit imposed to his expectedly almighty power. Nevertheless, he accepts the devil's conditions and signs the pact with his blood anyway. Another proof of Faustus' limited powers is found in II.ii, shortly after the hellish pact is signed, when Faustus ask Mephistopheles for a wife. At first his request is mocked by his servant, who fetches him a devil dressed as a woman and with fireworks attached to the back of its body. Seeing that Faustus is serious in his request, Mephistopheles then proceeds to explain him why he cannot give him a wife, for marriage and everything it represents belong to God and his domain only. Faustus could have all the courtesans he wishes for, but he shall never again ask for a wife (II.ii 151). But the greatest example of the fallacy of the devil's power comes only later, when in II.iii Faustus asks his servant to "reason of divine astrology" (II.iii 32). This scene embodies one of the core elements of the play for the explanation that follows provides an account of one of the most controversial disputes for humanist scholars.

26 Gardner, Helen, "The Tragedy of Damnation", Kaufmann, Ralph J., ed., *Elizabethan Drama: Modern Essays in Criticism*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1961, pp. 322-323.

27 Greg, Walter Wilson, "The Damnation of Faustus", Jump, John, ed., *Marlowe: Doctor Faustus; A Selection of Critical Essays*, Glasgow, The University Press, 1969, p. 72.

Although the play had been written and staged in the late sixteenth century, it is interesting to notice how Mephistopheles' description of the cosmos relates both to the Ptolemaic and Copernican models rather than just the Ptolemaic one. He begins by describing the motion of the planets in a way that was already widely accepted among most astronomers, by saying that they are separated, but revolve around the same axletree (II.iii 39). He later adds that the only existing spheres are nine: "the seven planets, the firmament, and the empyreal heaven" (II.iii 58-59), while the *coelum igneum* and the *cristallinum* are "but fables" (II.iii 61). As previously mentioned, during his formative years in Cambridge, Marlowe had the possibility to read Agrippa's *De incertitudine et vanitate*, which already presented some elements of Agostino Ricci's theories on the motion of the spheres and might have led the young Marlowe to read *De motu octavae sphaerae* (on the motion of the eighth sphere). Agostino Ricci was an Italian mathematician and philosopher who, together with Cornelius Agrippa, was at the court of the Marquis of Monferrato in 1513. He developed an astronomical theory which contemplated the existence of only the first eight spheres, i.e, the spheres of the seven planets and the fixed stars, and the firmament. These were the only observable spheres and, therefore, their existence was not questionable because it was achievable through rational and perceivable inference.²⁸ According to this system, the existence of the *coelum igneum* and the *cristallinum* — which could only be supposed through mathematical reasoning — was not even considered. However, he argued on the existence and the role of the *primum mobile*. While Aristotle considered the *primum mobile* to be the eighth sphere, Ricci stated that, supposing that there actually was a *primum mobile*, it was "rather the aggregate of all eight spheres which receives its motion from a supreme intelligential being."²⁹ Considering his background, it is therefore possible to assume that Marlowe had a basic knowledge of astronomy, but it is unlikely that he might have brought his studies to a deeper level. Therefore, Mephistopheles' description of the cosmos and Faustus' previous knowledge of those same theories perfectly represent the author's acceptance of nonconformist views. The cosmos that the devil describes to his master is Ptolemaic, but when

28 Johnson, Francis R., "Marlowe's Astronomy and Renaissance Skepticism", *ELH*, 13, 1946, p. 247.

29 Johnson, p. 249.

Faustus tries to point out a fallacy in this system by asking him “why are not conjunctions, oppositions, aspects, eclipses all at one time, but in some years we have more, in some less?”

(II.iii). the answers he receives is rather elusive “*per inequalem motum respectu totius*”, because of an unequal movement in respect of the whole (II.ii 65). As Gabrielle Sugar explains,

Faustus here indicates one of the most difficult issues for astronomers of the late sixteenth century: the problem of retrograde motion. Retrograde motion is the astronomical phenomenon in which a planet appears to change direction in its orbit and travel backwards. This phenomenon was difficult to explain in the Ptolemaic universe, which incorporated Aristotle's belief that all celestial bodies must have an orbit of the perfect shape, the circle.³⁰

Interestingly enough, Sugar also points out that when the A-text was published in 1604, a supernova had recently been discovered. According to Aristotle's conception of the cosmos, the appearance of a new star was considered impossible.³¹ Marlowe's audience was thus left with a doubt concerning the intentions of the author. None of the characters directly mentions the Copernican system, but Faustus' dissatisfied reception of Mephistopheles' answers gave the audience the impression of a failed attempt to deceive the scholar. His final “I am answered” is not sincere, but comes from the awareness of the fact that he will not receive further explanations on this matter.

2.2 Faustus' fate

The fate of doctor Faustus and thus the ending of the play have been topics of discussion among scholars for centuries since it is not fully clear whether the protagonist was predestined to damnation or Marlowe gave him free will. Many theories have been written in order to try to answer this question — some of them providing a religious and Calvinist approach, such as Streete's ‘*Consummatum est*’³², and others, like Mahood's ‘*Marlowe's Heroes*’³³, providing a more sociological and humanist point of view. However the debate is still open since a definitive answer cannot be found. In this chapter, the various hypotheses concerning Faustus' fate and his

³⁰ Sugar, Gabrielle, “‘Falling to a Diuelish Exercise’: The Copernican Universe in Christopher Marlowe's ‘Doctor Faustus’”, *Early Theatre*, 12, 2009, p. 144.

³¹ Sugar, p. 146.

³² Streete, Adrian, “‘Consummatum est’: Calvinist Exgenesis, Mimesis and Doctor Faustus”, *Literature and Theology*, 15, 2001, pp. 140-158.

³³ Mahood, Molly Maureen, “Marlowe's Heroes”, Kaufmann, Ralph J., ed., *Elizabethan Drama: Modern Essays in Criticism*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1961, pp. 95-122.

relationship with God will be analysed while being put in contrast with the limits of the human mind.

Between the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, thanks to new humanist theories, the question of free will and its dramatic implications became more and more eradicated among people. This change also influenced those plays that were staged, for old morality plays — with their linear plot and commonly shared moral values — started being replaced by new and more articulated plays that also explored these revolutionary themes. The first known example of this passage is Nathaniel Wood's *The Conflict of Conscience*, published in 1581, but allegedly never performed.³⁴ The main character, Philologus — who is the literary alter-ego of the Italian Francesco Spiera, who was put to trial for heresy in 1548³⁵ — finds himself in a situation similar to that of Faustus by being torn between his faith and his despair. In the final act, Philologus' friends struggle to convince him that salvation is still possible if only he decides to repent. Wood wrote two different endings to his play: in the first the protagonist perishes as a sinner just like Faustus, while in the second one he accepts God's mercy and gains a typical morality play happy ending. It is fundamental to notice how the doubt that follows the protagonist in the play perfectly embodies the doubt of the early modern thinker.³⁶ In the same way, Faustus often finds himself questioning his choice and wondering whether it is too late for him to atone or if he still has a chance at redemption. Faustus faces this struggle five times (I.i 69-76; II.i 1-21; II.iii 12-30; II.iii 79-107; V.i 35-93) throughout the play, but every time he seems to be persuaded to repent, his fear and despair eventually force him back to a sinful life. The first four times Marlowe is offered to repent by a good angel who is opposed to an evil angel who, instead, tells Faustus that he has already made his choice and, as a consequence, there is no escape. The fifth time Faustus faces doubt is because of the old man who begs him to have faith in God's forgiveness via the good angel, who

34 Wine, Celesta, "Nathaniel Wood's Conflict of Conscience", *PMLA*, 50, p. 661.

35 Wine, p. 664.

36 Gardner, p. 341.

with a vial full of precious grace
offers to pour the same into thy soul (V.i 58-59).

According to Bevington and Rasmussen, the rewriting of the old man's speech in the B-text — which is one of the parts of the play that went through the greatest alterations — is due to a desire to make an example out of Faustus' poor choices, rather than maintaining the A-text's emphasis on the salvation of mankind thanks to Christ's sacrifice.³⁷ Nevertheless, it is hard to consider *Doctor Faustus* a mere morality play even though it surely has some of their distinctive features, such as the presence of good and evil beings fighting over the soul of the protagonist.³⁸ The greatest difference between Marlowe's plays and the tradition of morality plays can be found in their protagonists. While old morality plays presented flat characters which were either good or evil, from the second half of the sixteenth century it is possible to notice a growing number of round, complex characters not only in Marlowe's plays with Faustus and Tamburlaine, but also in Shakespeare's tragedies with Titus Andronicus and, later, with Othello and Macbeth. None of these characters is completely good or evil, none of them was created with the sole purpose of setting an example for the audience. All of them present elements of the intellectual revolution that the Renaissance had spread throughout the continent, especially Marlowe's heroes who are great exempla of overreachers, failed by their excessive aspirations.³⁹ Surely, the playwright owes certain aspects of the structure of his play to the tradition of morality plays, mostly because the original story of Faustus had become popular for its moral implications, but it is also true that Marlowe borrows these elements — such as the display of the seven deadly sins, and the fight over the protagonist's soul — in order to use them in a provocative and almost satirical way.⁴⁰

Creating a character as complex as Faustus and putting him in a world of predestination can probably be considered the true tragedy of the play. God has created him as a man of great

37 Bevington, Rasmussen, p. 274.

38 De Santis, Giorgia, "L'Eredità Medievale di Christopher Marlowe: Doctor Faustus e The Conflict of Conscience", 2021, Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata, tesi di dottorato, p. 9.

39 De Santis, p. 154.

40 Brooke, Nicholas, "The Moral Tragedy of Doctor Faustus", Jump, John, ed., *Marlowe: Doctor Faustus; A Selection of Critical Essays*, Glasgow, The University Press, 1969, p. 110.

ambitions, and has given him the ability to desire, but baffled him with the limits of humanity. Faustus seems to fall into Aristotle's definition of the great-souled man (μεγαλόψυχος), "who is superior to all the limitations of lesser men"⁴¹ and therefore cannot be put under the control of anyone else. However, Faustus' aspiration is far superior of those of any human, for he endeavours to accomplish much more than possible. Before him, Lucifer had been punished for his excessive audacity which he manifested by trying to surpass God. Both these titanic figures estrange God for the sake of a freedom neither of them obtains. Whether this was their destiny or the punishment for not having fulfilled it remains unclear. It is, therefore, necessary to understand to which extent it is possible to talk about predestination when talking about *Doctor Faustus*. Allegedly, one of the reasons behind the differences between A- and B-texts is Marlowe's interest in Luther's theories which, contrary to Calvin's theory of predestination, stated that no one is born an elected or a reprobate because their final judgment relies on their actions.⁴² Of course, this concept went along perfectly with the humanist principle of *homo faber fortunae suae* which, contrary to a popular misconception, did not separate mankind from God, but rather gave a meaning to human life because the destiny of each person was — as stated by Greenblatt — "separated from the imitation of Christ"⁴³ and therefore it did no longer depend on the mediating role of Christ only. However, Marlowe takes this concept to the extreme by making Faustus' death a twisted parody of Christ's death. The first instance of this inversion can be found in II.i, when Faustus offers his blood in sacrifice to Lucifer to sign the deed, just as Christ offered his blood to God and humanity before his death. It is hence possible to assume that the offer of blood might be a prediction of the gruesome death that awaits the scholar. In fact, in V.ii, Faustus calls for a saviour — Lucifer — who has abandoned him to his destiny, imitating thus Jesus's final cry "eloi eloi lama sabachthani" (my god, my god. Why hast thou forsaken me?).⁴⁴ But "whereas Christ was able to transcend death because

41 Brooke, p.119.

42 De Santis, p. 22.

43 Greenblatt, S., *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare*, quoted in Streete, Adrian, "'Consummatum est': Calvinist Exegesis, Mimesis and Doctor Faustus", *Literature and Theology*, 15, 2001, p. 152.

44 Mark 15:34, King James Bible, biblegateway.com (last accessed 11/21).

of his *homoousia*, all that constitutes Faustus is Faustus”.⁴⁵ For this reason he is forced to face his humanity one last time, and the battle between the good and the bad angel is finally ended by Faustus’ eternal damnation. The final sentence is decided by his own actions, for the whole duration of the play he had had many opportunities to repent, but in the end the lord he decides to call and to beg for mercy is Lucifer rather than God. As Brooke puts it, “Faustus’ self-damnation is wholly positive, achieved by an assertion, not a failure of his will”⁴⁶ and therefore it is possible to say that he inevitably becomes *faber fortunae suae*.

45 Streete, p. 154.

46 Brooke, p. 118.

3. Staging and controversies

During the Elizabethan era, the theatre became a symbolic marketplace of information that contributed to people's interaction with social changes and discoveries brought to England by the queen's explorers. If up until 1576 theatre had been a sporadic form of street performances, it was now becoming a regular activity thanks to James Burbage who built the Theatre, the first stable playhouse of London.⁴⁷ Even the themes of the plays started changing from vernacular retellings of ancient legends and biblical episodes to newly written plots depicting early modern society. Theatre became such a relevant aspect of early modern life that, by the time Charles I died in 1649, there were approximately twenty-three playhouses in London.⁴⁸ Although some companies benefitted from the advantages of a Lord's patronage, the figure of the actor was still perceived negatively in society, for performers were seen as vagabonds who engaged in morally ambiguous activities, such as cross-dressing.⁴⁹ Presumably, it was thanks to the fusion of elements coming from a low social background with new and revolutionary concepts that the theatre managed to flourish during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In an age of reformation and discoveries, theatre was a form of entertainment suitable for anyone, from the commoners to the nobility.

This chapter aims to describe the reception of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* in a society which had entered modernity without leaving behind its old superstitions and beliefs. Particular attention will be given to Marlowe's staging methods and the accusations of blasphemy and atheism that followed some of his performances of *Doctor Faustus*, which not only represented early modern society, but dared to question its beliefs for what concerned natural philosophy and theology.

47 Scott-Warren, Jason, *Early Modern English Literature*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2005, pp. 102-103.

48 Scott-Warren, p. 103.

49 Scott-Warren, p. 109.

3.1 *Doctor Faustus* on stage

As previously stated, early modern English society was in turmoil because of an extraordinary advance in discoveries in all fields of natural philosophy thanks to the explorers of the so-called ‘new world’, but also thanks to the development of new theories by academics in the old continent, all while Christianity was going through changes. The Reformation — which had already caused a separation between the Church of England and the Pope — was developing new ramifications that differed from the main protestant belief, such as Calvinism and Puritanism. It is in this climate of changes that humanists started questioning the two main authorities which had dominated the scene up until then, the Church for theology and Aristotle for natural philosophy. European universities eventually had to face new discoveries and contradictions that the old dogmata could not explain. The transition, however, was not immediate since most universities, Oxford in particular, were extremely defensive of their methods and their dogmatic Aristotelianism.⁵⁰ It is in this context of bipolar coexistence of blind dogmatism and rational reasoning that Marlowe decided to stage his sensationally controversial *Doctor Faustus*.

A characterising feature of Elizabethan drama, which can also be seen in Marlowe’s plays, was the fusion of tragic and comic elements within the same play. This stylistic choice was mainly due to a combination of “the elite culture of humanism, the academy, and the court with the ordinary culture of piazza performance, seasonal ritual, and public performance,”⁵¹ but also as a way to remind the audience that what they were watching was not real, as a sort of early version of the *Verfremdungseffekt* (estrangement effect) that would characterise Brecht’s theatre in the twentieth century.⁵² As inconceivable as it might sound to a modern audience, it often occurred that the public needed to be reminded about the fictionality of the play and its characters, especially

50 Camerlingo, Rosanna, *Teatro e Teologia - Marlowe, Bruno e i Puritani*, Napoli, Liguori Editore, 1999, p.114.

51 Henke, Robert, ed., *A Cultural History of Theatre in the Early Modern Age, Volume 3*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, p.2.

52 For more information on the topic, see: Mittner, Ladislao, *Storia della Letteratura Tedesca: III, vol. 2 - Dal realismo alla sperimentazione (1820-1870). Dal fine secolo alla sperimentazione (1890-1970)*, Torino, Einaudi, 1978, pp. 1347-1349.

when a marriage or, in *Doctor Faustus*' case, a conjuring were staged, for these scenes employed words related to Christianity and religion. The average Elizabethan audience knew the significance of words like "marry", "swear" etc., believed in their performative value and, thus, found it difficult to separate their regular use from their theatrical use.⁵³ Marlowe — being a controversial writer who enjoyed experimenting with his plays — in all likelihood used the power of performative language in his *Doctor Faustus* so much that, after a performance in Exeter, a passage written by someone identified only as G.J.R. mentioned what was thought to be a real conjuring on stage that had caused panic among both the actors and the audience.

As a certain number of devils kept everie one his circle there, and as Faustus was busie in his magicall invocations, on a sudden they were all dasht, every one harkning other in the eare, for they were all perswaded there was one devell too many amongst them; and so after a little pause desired the people to pardon them, they could go no further with this matter; the people also understanding the thing as it was, every man hastened to be first out of doors. The players (as I heard it) contrarye to their custome spending the night in reading and in prayer got them out of the town the next morning.⁵⁴

It is hence possible to understand the strong impact that performative words had on the audience and, more remarkably, the ingenious techniques employed by Marlowe to exploit this power on stage. Despite this one occasion where the spectators were frightened by the appearance of an additional devil, the actors who played the devils in *Doctor Faustus* were usually the same who engaged in horseplay for the amusement of the audience, especially through the use of fireworks.⁵⁵ An instance can be found in II.ii when Faustus asks Mephistopheles for a wife and only manages to obtain a devil dressed in women's clothing with fireworks stuck on his back.

Fireworks and squibs were among the few available 'special effects' of early modern theatre, which still strongly relied on the power that words had to stimulate the public's imagination. Moreover, it was impossible to use background panels because most theatres were round in shape and therefore people could stand and watch a play from all around the

53 Scott-Warren, p. 119.

54 G.J.R. in Steane, p. 15.

55 Steane, p. 14.

stage. Indeed, very few props were used in Elizabethan times, and thus when Faustus travels to Rome or to the Emperor's court, the only means available for the audience to know what was happening were what the chorus told them to imagine, otherwise they had to deduce it through the words of the actors.

It is no surprise, then, that a play such as *Doctor Faustus* relies on words to such a great extent. The word 'despair/desperate', which is so relevant for the development of the tragedy of Faustus, can indeed be found eleven times in the B-text of the play (I.i 80; I.iv 88; II.i 4, 5; II.iii 29; IV.iv 25; V.i 56, 60, 66; V.ii 93, 102). Moreover, the prophetic power of performative words finds its climax in II.i. When Faustus says "*consummatum est*" (II.i 74) imitating Christ's last words on the cross, he initiates his twisted parody of Christ's life, which will continue until his final moments when, just like the prophet, he will call for mercy. However, while Christ calls for God, Faustus calls for Lucifer. The detailed attention on the choice of words in Faustus' first soliloquy, the deliberate misquotations of biblical passages, the parallels with Christ, together with the succession of cheap horseplay with intense monologues makes Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* the early modern play par excellence.

3.2 Cross-dressing and Helen of Troy

In the Elizabethan age, one of the elements that influenced the Church's disapproval of actors and, more generally, of the theatre was the matter of cross-dressing. Since in England — but not on the continent⁵⁶ — acting was forbidden to women, all the female characters had to be played by young boys who could mask their already high-pitched voices in order to sound more feminine. Moreover, their facial features were usually perceived as more delicate than those of grown men and so the result seemed more believable to the audience. The Church was worried about the moral impact of this phenomenon for it could not only bring actors to feminization, but also lead the male audience to feel attracted to those women who were not

⁵⁶ Scott-Warren, p. 115.

actually women, but rather boys in disguise.⁵⁷ Despite being officially disapproved, all theatres employed cross-dressing in the absence of an alternative solution. This is also the case of *Doctor Faustus*, which, despite being a play centred on a male protagonist, also presents two feminine, rather than female, characters. Apart from the aforementioned horseplay in II.ii when Mephistopheles provides a devil in women's clothing to answer to Faustus' request for a wife, there is another feminine figure that appears on stage, Helen of Troy.

In IV.i the emperor of Germany, Charles V, asks Faustus to present to him Alexander the Great and Helen of Troy. The two figures who then appear are, as the scholar explains, not the real Alexander and Helen, but rather images of them, probably succubi in disguise. Nevertheless Faustus is charmed by the sight of the beautiful Helen and makes her appear again when he is on his own in V.ii. He is so overwhelmed by her beauty that cannot help himself from proceeding with a monologue that reflects the standards of courtly love tradition. He depicts himself as a sort of novel Paris, willing to fight any enemy to gain the favours of his beloved (V.ii 101). Most scholars — such as Cheney⁵⁸ and Golden⁵⁹ — argue that Faustus, at this moment, is so bewitched that he cannot come to reason and understand that the Helen he is talking to is just a succubus in disguise. Interestingly enough, Marlowe decides to let the spirit remain silent the whole time it is on stage. The first time Helen appears, the only ones who talk are the emperor and Faustus, and the second time Faustus talks to her without receiving — but also without expecting — an answer. The protagonist even warns the emperor to “demand no questions of the king, but in dumb silence let them come and go” (V.i 95-96). The encounter between Faustus and Helen of Troy can be considered a crucial scene for the denouement of the play, for she is not simply a beautiful woman, but the quintessence of beauty and femininity, even though her presence is just one of

57 Scott-Warren, p. 116.

58 Cheney, Patrick, “Love and Magic in Doctor Faustus: Marlowe's Indictment of Spenserian Idealism”, *Mosaic: an Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 17, 1984.

59 Golden, Kenneth L., “Myth, Psychology, and Marlowe's Doctor Faustus”, *College Literature*, 12, 1985.

the many illusions created by black magic. Seeing how relevant Helen's presence on stage is, and Marlowe's dedication into bringing a myth to life in V.ii, I could not help but investigate the possible reasons behind the author's choice of keeping such a character silent. The first possibility could simply be the desire to emphasise the fact that both Helen and Alexander are but spirits and, therefore, unable to talk. An alternative reason might be due to Marlowe's notorious irreverence which could have led him to mock the ideals of courtly love tradition since they always present a perfect and idealised woman who is the object of the protagonist's desire, but cannot be anything more than that. Marlowe, indeed, seems to take into consideration the elements that characterised the main *topoi* of the medieval theatre — e.g. the presence of a good and an evil angel fighting over the protagonist's soul — when he writes his *Doctor Faustus*. He owes much to medieval tradition, but, at the same time, he subverts it by removing the protagonist's conversion and its subsequent happy ending. This alteration of courtly love might be one of those cases since there is a beautiful woman and a lover who declares his devotion to her in the most heartfelt way possible, but at the same time the beloved is not the perfect and innocent damsel who used to be depicted by medieval troubadours. It is a demon who deceives Faustus by hiding behind a false veneer. The last possible reason is linked to the tradition of cross-dressing. It is not unlikely that Marlowe wanted to make the actor on stage give as believable a rendition of Helen as possible. However, being only allowed to have her played by a young boy, the best way to ensure that the audience was as bewitched as Faustus, was perhaps to avoid making the actor disclose himself for what he truly was. By making Helen stay silent, Marlowe presumably chose to draw the audience's attention to her appearance and let them share the sorcerer's overwhelming feeling of lust. Not only is Helen the personification of all of Faustus' desires⁶⁰, but "Faustus' attraction to the mythical figure of Helen of Troy clearly involves the

⁶⁰Cheney, p.105.

archetype of the anima”⁶¹ that will be presented by Carl Jung at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to Jung, Anima and Animus respectively constitute the feminine nature in men and the masculine nature in women, and rule over each individual’s unconscious.⁶² One of the types of Anima presented in his theory is Helen who symbolises “a secret knowledge or hidden wisdom”.⁶³ It thus becomes automatic for a modern reader to connect this figure to the strife for knowledge that follows the protagonist for the entirety of the play. By asking Helen to give him his soul again (V.ii 98) with a kiss, Faustus is trying to reconnect his Anima. By making her his paramour, he tarnishes himself with the sin of demoniality. Interestingly enough, according to Elizabethan canons, lust and sensuality — which are the moving reasons behind Faustus’ sin of demoniality — are not separated from the sin of pride, but rather its products.⁶⁴

The kiss between Faustus and Helen potentially defines the final act that brings the scholar to a point of no return. If up until that moment, there was still a possibility — as slight as it could have been — for his soul to be saved, when he has intercourse with a demon, he reaches the final destination of his journey down the path of damnation. At last, as the chorus tells us in the epilogue, “cut is the branch that might have grown full straight” (Epilogue, 1) for Faustus had all the possibilities to become a well-respected and conscientious scholar, but each time he had the chance to choose, he chose to go towards damnation.

3.3 Accusations of blasphemy

When it comes to its reception, Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* places itself between two clashing worlds, one that came from a Christian tradition of superstition and viewed witchcraft and necromancy as a menace that needed to be eradicated from early modern society, and the

61 Golden, p. 207.

62 Farah, Stephen, ‘The Archetypes of the Anima and Animus’, *Centre of Applied Jungian Studies*, 2015, (last accessed, 01/22).

63 Jung, *Basic*, 315 in Golden, p.207.

64 Maxwell, p. 91

other which considered the theories of alchemists such as Agrippa as an opportunity to renovate science.⁶⁵ The same supernatural that was widely accepted when it implied an act of faith, was considered dangerous when it came through magic rituals. At the same time, natural philosophy was stretched between mere learning of what had already been studied by Aristotelians, and a new humanist wave of curiosity which aimed to discover more. Marlowe, who was aware of this dichotomy, saw it as an opportunity to write a play that would have caught the attention of as wide an audience as possible. His goal was unlikely that of educating people, but rather combining his theories within a story capable to quickly gain popularity thanks to the widespread interest of the Elizabethan public in the supernatural. Neither Faustus nor Mephistopheles ever directly mention the Copernican system, for the play needed to be understood by a vast audience and there was no use in trying to explain such concepts to those who did not know anything about astrology.⁶⁶ However, Faustus' disappointment at Mephistopheles' answers gives a clear hint of what more there could be to those among the spectators who were accustomed to the studies of natural philosophy.

Because of his plays — both *Doctor Faustus* and *Tamburlaine the Great* depicted an atheist protagonist — and his controversial ideas, in addition to his alleged relations with Sir Walter Raleigh and the 'School of Night' — a group of English intellectuals who shared subversive opinions on both science and religion⁶⁷ — in 1593 Marlowe was accused of blasphemy and atheism. The charges against Marlowe were divided into nineteen accusations according to which he had slandered several biblical figures. According to the source — an informer named Richard Baines⁶⁸ — Marlowe had called Moses “but a jugler,” considered the origin of religion as a form of social control, and publicly expressed his disrespect towards Christ, his apostles and his mother.⁶⁹ These accusations were evidently exaggerated and

65 Brooke, p.102.

66 Camerlingo, p. 117.

67 Steane, p. 18.

68 Scott-Warren, p.148.

69 Scott-Warren, p.149.

flawed, mainly because finding someone who was truly an atheist in early modern Europe was substantially impossible. The term atheist was, indeed, used to describe a blasphemer. Moreover it is true that Marlowe depicts Faustus as an atheist in a modern acceptance, but at the same time, he makes him face the consequences of his arrogance. If, at first, Faustus refuses to believe in hell even though Mephistopheles — who, together with the good and the bad angels, is the living proof of the existence of heaven and hell — warns him, at the end of the play he eventually has to acknowledge the reality of hell. As soon as he understands his time has come, he finally starts to worry about what will happen to him: “Hell, O, hell for ever! Sweet friends, what shall become of Faustus, being in hell for ever?”(V.ii 54-56). It is, therefore, not possible to define *Doctor Faustus* as an atheist play despite the presence of an atheist protagonist. And even if some of Marlowe’s enemies hoped to attack him on the basis of his discourse on celestial matters, they could have had no ground to successfully push charges expressly for the fact that all the notions explicitly mentioned in the dialogue between Faustus and Marlowe agree with the Ptolemaic model.

Conclusions

Doctor Faustus is a multifaceted play that perfectly embodies the dichotomy of the early modern society divided between an ancient world made of authorities and superstitions, and an age of discoveries that had led to the creation of new, subversive theories in all fields of knowledge. The play can be placed between these two worlds from a structural point of view, since it owes much of its structure to medieval morality plays — such as the fight for the protagonist's soul, the *divertissement* provided by the devils on stage, the seven deadly sins, and the descriptions of the chorus — but it also presents a main character who perfectly embodies the humanist intellectual in his background, and who subverts courtly love by declaring his devotion to a succubus rather than a woman. Moreover, the play explores the theme of the supernatural which was a heated topic in early modern England, where witch hunts were perpetrated while explorers sailed towards a new world that was providing the kingdom novelties and riches. Some intellectuals, as Bruno, Ficino and many others were already laying the foundations for scientific reasoning as we know it today, but society was still far from ready to accept such changes and the Roman Church surely contributed to delay them, as it will become obvious in 1633 with Galileo's abjuration. Christopher Marlowe's play is none the less ground-breaking in its exposition of controversial matters such as the reality of the afterlife, magic practices, and cosmology. It is thus safe to consider Marlowe as a humanist intellectual who knew how to wisely use his knowledge to create innovative plays, rather than a blaspheme and an atheist.

Riassunto

Il *Doctor Faustus* di Christopher Marlowe è un'opera di contrasti poiché in essa coesistono le principali contraddizioni tipiche del XVI secolo in Inghilterra, non solo perché era difficile tracciare una linea in grado di separare la magia dalla filosofia della natura, ma anche perché entrambe le categorie potevano essere a loro volta suddivise in sottogruppi sulla base di quanto questi ultimi fossero socialmente accettabili. Ecco, dunque, che si iniziò a condannare coloro che praticavano la magia nera, la quale derivava inevitabilmente da un patto con il diavolo, mentre si lodava chi era in grado di utilizzare la cosiddetta magia bianca per beneficiare il prossimo. Allo stesso modo, lo studio della filosofia naturale era ben visto fintanto che era limitato al fine di avvicinare gli umani alla comprensione del creato, ma diventava esecrabile nel momento in cui gli studiosi pretendevano di andare oltre i confini della conoscenza umana. La filosofia naturale — che oggi definiremmo semplicemente scienza naturale sebbene in periodo rinascimentale lo studio della natura avesse un approccio assolutamente filosofico — era, perciò, approvata solo se non sfidava i dogmi imposti dalla Chiesa i quali godevano anche del pieno supporto delle università europee.

Avendo studiato a Cambridge, Marlowe aveva conoscenze basilari di astrologia — la quale racchiudeva sia le conoscenze di natura astronomica che astrologica poiché considerate egualmente importanti e dipendenti l'una dall'altra — e, dunque, del sistema tolemaico. Ciononostante, egli era sicuramente a conoscenza dell'esistenza dei dubbi che il sistema copernicano aveva fatto emergere e li riportò nella sua opera in forma di quesiti lasciati senza risposta. Dichiarare pubblicamente di supportare delle teorie così distanti dai dogmi biblici avrebbe automaticamente causato la censura dell'opera e potenzialmente una condanna dell'autore.

In questa tesi vengono, dunque, prese in considerazione le differenze tra antico e moderno, magia e scienza, bene e male, redenzione e predestinazione etc. che si riflettono nell'opera teatrale di Marlowe ponendo particolare attenzione al soliloquio iniziale del protagonista e al dialogo tra Faust e Mefistofele. Fondamentale è, comunque, sottolineare che, per ragioni di completezza, il presente elaborato considera come fonte primaria l'edizione proposta da David Bevington ed Eric

Rasmussen e, nello specifico, si concentra sul B-text qui diviso in cinque atti anziché in venti scene come in testi meno recenti.

Sebbene *Doctor Faustus* derivi da una storia popolare tedesca del XV secolo, il personaggio creato da Marlowe è l'archetipo dello studioso rinascimentale. Avvezzo a ogni forma di sapere e indicibilmente colto, Faustus è tuttavia insoddisfatto della propria conoscenza e mira all'ottenimento dell'onniscienza che, per tradizione cristiana, spetta solo a Dio. Egli chiede aiuto a Valdes e Cornelius nella speranza di raggiungere nuove forme di sapere a lui finora negate tramite l'uso della necromanzia. Ciò che, invece, ottiene è un nuovo tipo di prigionia in cambio di poteri limitati al volere del diavolo e una conoscenza volutamente incompleta. Mefistofele non risponde mai totalmente alle domande di Faustus ma gli fornisce, piuttosto, spiegazioni banali e mezze verità. Il celebre momento in cui, in seguito a un dialogo sui corpi celesti in II.iii, il protagonista dichiara "I am answered" mostra l'insoddisfatta consapevolezza di non poter ottenere il sapere tanto agognato e la rassegnata accettazione dei limiti per cui egli ha ceduto la propria anima al diavolo.

Uno degli aspetti analizzati in questa tesi è, difatti, la relazione tra le aspirazioni di Faustus e il concetto di *vana curiositas* condannato dalla Chiesa poiché tipicamente associata a coloro che, volendo più di quanto potessero ottenere, si ritrovavano a sprofondare inevitabilmente verso un destino di disperazione. Ne sono esempio non solo Adamo ed Eva ma, prima di loro, anche Lucifero il quale ambiva ad avere gli stessi poteri di Dio. Una questione che resta, tuttavia, irrisolta è la predestinazione di Faustus. Se, da un lato, è vero che il protagonista viene condannato perché eccede in aspirazioni, non ci è dato sapere se le scelte che compie durante il corso dell'opera e il suo rifiuto del pentimento siano il frutto del suo libero arbitrio o l'inevitabile conseguenza di una predestinazione divina. *Doctor Faustus* ha, infatti, molte influenze derivanti dalle *morality plays* medievali in cui il tema principale era il destino del protagonista e la relativa possibilità di salvarne l'anima. Marlowe riprende alcuni elementi delle cosiddette moralità —tra cui la presenza di un angelo buono e un angelo cattivo in lotta per l'anima del protagonista e la presenza dei sette peccati capitali — ma elimina una caratteristica fondamentale: il lieto fine. Faustus si ritrova in più

occasioni sul punto di pentirsi e redimersi ma alla fine le sue scelte, individuali o predestinate, lo portano alla dannazione eterna. Un altro scostamento dalla tradizione delle moralità medievali sta nella complessità del protagonista; non vi sono più i tradizionali protagonisti piatti, rigorosamente suddivisibili in buoni e cattivi, ma un protagonista umano e, perciò, imperfetto. È pertanto doveroso interrogarsi su fino a che punto Faustus coincida con la riscoperta rinascimentale del concetto di *homo faber*.

Doctor Faustus, pur essendo stato pubblicato postumo nel 1604 e poi nel 1616 in formato in-quarto, aveva già guadagnato molta popolarità tra il pubblico elisabettiano grazie alle messe in scena avvenute tra il 1592 e il 1593. L'ultima parte di questo elaborato propone, dunque, un'analisi delle controversie e delle accuse di blasfemia legate alla percezione pubblica del teatro elisabettiano e dell'opera marloviana nella quale vi è un ampio uso di atti performativi. Questi ultimi potevano, infatti, creare confusione e scompiglio tra il pubblico il quale faticava a discernere l'uso quotidiano di giuramenti e riti magici dal loro utilizzo sul palco. Marlowe, in quanto desideroso di innovare le proprie opere, sperimenta spesso l'uso di atti performativi nel suo *Doctor Faustus*, ragione per cui si annovera addirittura un'occasione in cui tra il pubblico si scatenò il panico a causa di quel che si riteneva essere un diavolo evocato per sbaglio.

Viene inoltre proposta una breve riflessione sul personaggio di Elena di Troia, il quale non poteva che essere interpretato da un ragazzo visto che nell'Inghilterra elisabettiana recitare era vietato alle donne. Ne consegue, dunque, un'ulteriore critica da parte della Chiesa — la quale condannava già il teatro in quanto distrazione dalla preghiera e considerava gli attori alla stregua di vagabondi — dovuta alla preoccupazione crescente che gli spettatori di genere maschile potessero provare attrazione per quegli attori che si mostravano al pubblico in vesti femminili. Sebbene tale problematica fosse legata a molte altre opere dello stesso periodo, nel *Doctor Faustus* l'illusione di essere realmente al cospetto della più bella tra le donne non viene mai interrotta poiché, nei brevi momenti in cui fa la sua comparsa sul palco, Elena non parla.

Nonostante gli studiosi presi in considerazione nella stesura di questo elaborato abbiano suggerito sempre nuove teorie circa le intenzioni dietro all'opera di Marlowe, non vi sono sufficienti fonti storiche per fornire una risposta univoca. Si può, tuttavia, supporre che l'autore, essendo notoriamente eclettico, abbia semplicemente deciso di fornire un'interpretazione più affine al proprio tempo di una leggenda dalle forti connotazioni morali.

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