

Spring 2005

Atheist, Anglican, or Recusant: Marlowe's Revolt From Unorthodox in The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus

Sean Labbe
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai>

Recommended Citation

Labbe, Sean (2005) "Atheist, Anglican, or Recusant: Marlowe's Revolt From Unorthodox in The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus,"
ESSAI: Vol. 3, Article 20.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol3/iss1/20>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@COD. It has been accepted for inclusion in ESSAI by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@COD. For more information, please contact koteles@cod.edu.

Atheist, Anglican, or Recusant: Marlowe's Revolt From Unorthodox
in The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus

by Sean Labbé

(English 220)

The Assignment: A brief study of the many tensions in forming Marlowe through his play, Doctor Faustus.

Faced with Marlowe's Faustus, the reader confronts the perennial dilemma of how much the author drew on himself in depicting his protagonist. Given Marlowe's alleged 'Atheist Lecture,' it is easy, though not necessarily accurate, to confuse the playwright with the damnable doctor. In the lecture, Marlowe, if indeed it is Marlowe, exhibits the very soul of atheism. Yet we all know how wary we should be of 'interpreting particular works in the light of general notions imputed, on various grounds, to their author' (Knights, 97), i.e., 'intentional fallacy.' It is far safer, I believe, to interpret authors in the light of their works. Accordingly, the portrait that emerges of Marlowe through an examination of Faustus resembles less the 'learned blasphemer' (Leech 4) of the lectures, and more a rather orthodox, if slightly disingenuous, critic of the newfangled notions and purported freedoms of the Reformation and the soi-disant 'Renaissance spirit,' a critic who, through the play, imparts much of the unease and many of the tensions inherent in his society and era.

It hardly needs underlining that in 16th century England, when the word 'Atheism' cropped up in connection with Marlowe, it carried with it a much heavier charge, one tinged with treason to the Elizabethan 'via media' (Boas 109), than it does today. The term, as Boas goes on to point out, had 'much of the sweeping sinister associations that 'Bolshevism' ha[d] in the twentieth [century]'" (109). Indeed, in my various readings on Marlowe and his various plays, the word 'Atheist' is bandied about with little precision, so much so it seems almost a stock allegation of anybody one disagreed with, and with connotations ranging from heathen to heretic to occultist. Tamburlaine, who was a Muslim Mongol, is as much an 'Atheist' as the apparently 'godlesse' Marlowe (109).

Accusations of Marlowe's atheism rest largely on the alleged 'Atheist Lecture.' The text, supposedly a record of Marlowe's own utterances, includes such pearls of insight as 'Christ was a bastard,' and that 'Gabriell' pimped for the 'holy ghost, because he brought the salutation to Mary' (Kocher, 160). With these and the many other witticisms before us, it is tempting to take Marlowe at face value as we read through Faustus. It would be easy for us, when Faustus, for example, dismisses theology, to see this is an accurate representation of Marlowe's own mind. We could likewise view the scene of buffoonery involving the Pope as flowing quite naturally from Marlowe's irreverent pen. Yet, as Pinciss writes:

The Baines document, a note to the Privy Council accusing Marlowe of heresy and treason, is also of questionable reliability. [...] And, what is of more importance, if Marlowe uttered heretical or treasonous remarks they may well not have been said in sincerity. (9)

Marlowe, he goes on to state, was truly a ‘bright, high-spirited’ sort ‘with theological training’ who delighted his friends ‘with arguments that exercised their wit,’ but which ‘were not held with any conviction’ (9-10). In short, even if the lectures are made up of Marlowe’s actual words, how far we are to take them as his own views is a contentious matter. I agree with Pinciss, and would even say, in light of my own analysis of Faustus, that the lecture no more confirms that Marlowe was an atheist than the play does. I will say, however, while the ‘Lecture’ seems so tongue-in-cheek that I can scarcely imagine Marlowe’s keeping a straight face, the play is deadly serious business indeed.

Certain surface issues in the play belie atheism in Marlowe, but not Faustus, straightaway; since, as Boas claims, for an atheist, Marlowe sketches a very convincing idea of hell (210). Hell is, as Mephostophilis describes it, ubiquitous, everywhere, encompassing all save God and those, as I understand it, in His grace. Mephostophilis, in response to Faustus’ query on how he managed to get out of hell, states:

Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.
Think’st thou that I that saw the face of God
And tasted the eternal joys of heaven,
Am not tormented with ten thousand hells
In being deprived of everlasting bliss? (Faustus 1.3.75-78)

Actual fire and brimstone may not burn the damned, Mephostophilis says, but the loss of heavenly bliss is as painful, indeed, more painful, ‘ten thousand’ times more painful. Though this view of hell as more of a spiritual dimension as opposed to a physical location may not have been orthodox in the strictest sense of the word in Marlowe’s day, it has an astoundingly orthodox ring about it to modern ears. Whatever his views on the actual composition of hell, Marlowe in no way denies its existence: if anything, he makes it seem worse than the fable Faustus would reduce it to.

Faustus, at least early on, appears more an atheist in the more modern sense of the word: damnation holds no fear because, if there is no God in heaven, there is no Lucifer in hell either. When the doctor meets Mephostophilis for the first time, he says: ‘The word “damnation” terrifies not me, / For I confound hell in elysium. My ghost be with the old philosophers’ (Faustus 1.3.57-58). Yet we can see that Faustus still holds out for something after death, and perhaps is even more naïve than the average churchgoer in that he not only believes in a hereafter, a pagan Elysium, but thinks he will be able to spend eternity conversing with the likes of Plato, Aristotle, and the other great thinkers of old. (We see this idea in Dante’s Inferno: the great philosophers all belong to a circle in Limbo, which as my former Italian Professor termed it, was sort of a ‘Hell, First-Class,’ reserved for the classical masters who had the misfortune to be born prior to Christ’s coming.)

To my mind, as well as to Pinciss’, a great irony in this drama is that Faustus lives and works in Wittenberg, Germany (73). As we all know, this is where Martin Luther spearheaded the Reformation by legendarily nailing his 95 theses to the Wittenberg cathedral door. One major bone of contention in the Reformation is that churchmen wanted to replace the ‘Infallible Church’ with the idea of the ‘Infallible Book’ (Boas 258), namely the Bible. Adherents firmly believed this should be read in the vernacular so that the reader would have a more direct rapport with divinity, with far fewer meddlesome intercessors. This sounds like a fine idea in theory, but

Marlowe highlights problems with such an approach. When Faustus quotes from Jerome's Vulgate, and then translates the verse, he does what we students are often prone to: quoting out of context, or using what Pinciss terms 'choplogic' (76). I checked the two quotes against my own Bible, The New English Bible. In both quotes, Faustus truncates a text which in its entirety refutes what he claims. Let us compare. Faustus says,

"The reward of sin is death." That's hard. (Faustus 1.1.40).

But the quote continues:

For sin pays a wage, and the wage is death, but God gives freely, and his gift is eternal life, in union with Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6. 23-25)

Then, a few lines down, Faustus misrepresents again:

"If we say that we have no sin
We deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us."
Why then, belike, we must sin,
And so consequently die. (Faustus 1.1.42-45)

According to Pinciss, Faustus is a better logician than theologian for his syllogism only makes sense if we skip the 'next line in the epistle' (73). The text of the original, in full, reads:

If we claim to be sinless, we are self-deceived and strangers to the truth. If we confess our sins, he is just, and may be trusted to forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrong. (1 John 1.8-10)

Another irony, and a rather bitter one at that, here is how the attempt by Protestants to eliminate the so-called middle-man and, thus, bring man closer to God has in effect resulted in the opposite. Faustus, free to understand the text in his own way, and to his own ends, has perverted its original message and distanced himself even more.

The irony, however, does not stop there. Faustus, who, in his prideful attempt to assume Godlike proportions, would reenact the sin of Lucifer, misses the very chance that would have made him more, in a theological sense, Godlike. When a person confesses his sins, which are superabundantly obvious to God, that person, merely by recognizing the sin, brings himself closer to God. In other words, when we see sin in ourselves, we are seeing ourselves as God sees us, and this, rather paradoxically, aids in effecting a rapprochement between us and God.

We see further, implicit criticism of the Reformation's effects through Faustus's inability to repent. I have a not entirely radical explanation for why Marlowe has Faustus damned, and keeps him that way. Let us briefly return to the 'Atheist Lecture.' Among all the blasphemy and the suggestion of homosexuality, one statement catches my eye, probably because it seems slightly less tongue-in-cheek than the rest. It reads as follows:

That if there be any god or any good Religion, then it is in the papists because the service of god is performed with more Ceremonies, as Elevation of the mass, singing men, Shaven Crownes, et cetera. That all protestantes are hypocritical asses. (Kocher 160)

Again, we are left to wonder how seriously Marlowe meant such a claim, and again if he actually even said it. But I am not alone in seeing wistfulness for the old days of Catholicism in the play: at least then one knew where one stood. Nobody states this case quite as well as Pinciss:

The Protestant sinner or penitent now addressed God directly himself. Though some may have thought communication vastly improved, others, no doubt, found the distance between them and their God greatly increased. A priest granting absolution and a panoply of saints offering spiritual support were, for some, comforts of Catholicism that found no replacement in Protestantism. (73)

Where the Catholics of old have their confessors, saints, crucifixes, their rituals and prayers, Faustus has only himself to turn to, and he is not left, as any Jesuit worth his salt would be, with any 'theological loopholes' (Levin 53) to exploit. Indeed, contrition, for hard-line Protestants like Luther, smacked far too much of 'casuistry' (53).

At this point, I may sound uncannily like a Counter-Reformation Catholic apologist. And it is true that Marlowe, in addition to being accused of atheism, had also 'incurred ... the suspicion of intending to join the Roman Catholic recusants abroad' (Boas 109). Along with Pinciss, however, I hardly see Marlowe's Faustus as 'pro-Catholic,' or even simply 'anti-Protestant' (74). Such a notion would entail assuming a large degree of orthodoxy on Marlowe's part (Levi 53), and would mean reducing the play to so much propaganda, which it belies by its very complexity: there is too much irony to function as overt propaganda for either camp.

Taking the points set forth above into account, and perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, I would like to focus now on the scenes involving Pope Adrian. To my mind, Marlowe is having it both ways here. On the one hand, the audience is presented with just the kind of image of a cruel, vicious Pope that would have titillated their anti-clerical fancies. We have the spectacle of a Pope who positively delights in dispensing harsh justice, ever ready to bestow his 'dreadful curse' (Faustus 3.2.161) on all who lag in doing his bidding. When the cardinals duped by Faustus plead ignorance regarding Bruno, the Pope inveighs heavily:

By Peter, you shall die
Unless you bring them forth immediately.
... False prelates, for this hateful treachery,
Cursed be your souls to hellish misery. (Faustus 3.3.50-51, 53-54)

Then, in an even more telling exchange, he is ready to invoke the same when Faustus snatches his wine glass. Again, unless the bishops and friars, or 'lubbers,' as the Pope deems them, find who did the 'villainy,' then by his 'sanctitude,' they will most assuredly die (Faustus 3.3.78).

Reading over these lines, I am ever reminded of the phrase 'the man you love to hate.' If Marlowe truly had Catholic sympathies, one would be hard-pressed to find incontrovertible evidence of it here. Yet, at the same time, we can hardly side wholeheartedly with Faustus, for what he gets up to is little more than tomfoolery. Boas goes even so far as to state that these 'childish tricks' are absolutely 'unworthy' of Faustus as well as of the object of his pranks (212). I believe they were inserted partly as a crowd-pleaser, and yet even as such they transcend such a function: Marlowe is taking advantage of a commonplace among the people and turning it on its head, as having Faustus, who is in league with Lucifer, put in a position where the crowd might cheer him, likewise puts the audience in an awkward position. Faustus, at least in theory, is in cahoots with the quote-unquote bad guys, Mephostophilis, and Lucifer, and if the Pope and his ilk are truly to be seen as evil, then presenting connivance between the parties concerned, rather than a division, would have been more efficacious in conveying this idea. Simply, it is

problematic to read the scene as strictly anti-Catholic, since to do so makes for demonic, as it were, bedfellows.

At this stage, we might begin to conclude that in Faustus, there is something to offend everyone. The skirmish between the Pope and Faustus degenerates, despite the earnest intonations of the friars, into complete foolishness, with Faustus shooting fireworks at the clerics. A devout Catholic could be offended by the flat characterization of his coreligionists, while the devout Protestant could be dismayed at the juvenile antics for which Faustus utilizes his eerie powers. Yet, as Kirschbaum writes,

Marlowe's play is no way destructive to the basic tenets of Christianity. On the contrary, it enforces and illuminates those very tenets. (77)

He concludes, as do I, that the play is doctrinally 'conventional,' and claims that even theologians as far-flung as St. Thomas Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin all would have approved of the play as 'an exemplum to teach the correct Christian path to God' (77).

So, where does that leave us with regard to Marlowe and his beliefs? Needless to say, we face considerable odds in attempting to erect a stable image of Marlowe amidst such instability. How can we decisively settle the argument over whether Marlowe, insofar as his image emerges in Faustus, was an atheist, which I doubt, or, in his heart of hearts, a Protestant, which I doubt, or even a recusant, or covert Catholic, which I lastly also rather doubt? Should we concur with Bloom, as quoted on page one, that Marlowe the nihilist believed in nothing, and merely affected an orthodox persona to add layers of depth to his play? What is most likely is that Marlowe, as Pinciss's quote on page one states, sought to create drama out of contradiction--and here I paraphrase the old dictum--not to provide the right answers, but to pose the right questions. As a man of his time, a period of religious turmoil with switches back and forth between Catholicism and Protestantism, with one form of religious orthodoxy and another vying with the great aspirations of the Renaissance, Marlowe probably could not have avoided being influenced, no matter what camp he was in, by the other camps. Even as a Protestant, let alone an atheist, he would have been aware of the weight of the Catholic religious tradition Protestants had eagerly shuffled off. At the same time, he, as an extremely bright young man, might have wished to shirk the weight of all religious tradition, especially one which probably appeared ossified, dead weight.

In the end, then, we can view Marlowe as similar to Faustus, though not necessarily in terms of religion or lack of religion. Marlowe resembles Faustus, in that, while Faustus was literally torn to pieces by demons, Marlowe appears torn in a much more metaphorical sense. He questions religious orthodoxy, even belittles it, but at the same time holds up a scholarly person, which many take as a cipher for the author, for scrutiny and criticism. Marlowe may judge, even scorn, but he is not above putting himself in a position where he may be judged as well, though, as shown in this paper, Marlowe, more than Faustus, resists exegesis.

Works Cited

- Bloom, Harold. The Western Canon. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994.
- Boas, Frederick S. Christopher Marlowe: A Biographical and Critical Study. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940.
- Knights, L.C. 'The Orthodoxy of Faustus.' Twentieth Century Interpretations of Doctor Faustus. Edited by Willard Farnham. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969. 97-100.
- Kirschbaum, Leo. 'Religious Values in Doctor Faustus.' Twentieth Century Interpretations of Doctor Faustus. Edited by Willard Farnham. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969. 77-87.
- Kocher, Paul H. 'Marlowe's Atheist Lecture.' Marlowe: A Collection of Critical Essays. Edited by Clifford Leech. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964. 159-165.
- Leech, Clifford. 'Introduction.' Marlowe: A Collection of Critical Essays. Edited by Clifford Leech. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964. 1-11.
- Levin, Harry. 'The Design of Doctor Faustus.' Twentieth Century Interpretations of Doctor Faustus. Edited by Willard Farnham. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969. 43-53.
- Marlowe, Christopher. The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus. The Longman Anthology of British Literature, Volume One. Edited by David Damrosch, et al. New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, 2003. 1143-1191.
- Pinciss, Gerald. Christopher Marlowe. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1975.