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Degeneration and Irony in Doctor Faustus

Yoshiko Imagawa

Marlowe's Faustus has often been described by modern critics as a Promethean rebel enduring agonies under the immediacy of his doom¹⁾ or as a martyr for everything that the Renaissance prized.²⁾ These critics glorify Faustus, a brave and enviable reprobate, and conclude that he rebels and falls into hell courageously. However, I feel the literary tide has recently begun to change. Faustus is now looked upon as a wretched lower creature who gives up the higher value of serving God for the lower value of serving himself. As the play progresses, he degenerates from a proud philosopher, master of all human knowledge, to a trickster, a cowering wretch.³⁾

The critics of Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, with their faith in science and progress, and with expectation of man's potential, chose Marlowe's protagonist as a symbol of the new man, but modern readers tend to dwell on the conflict between religion and reason, and we look for this conflict in Faustus also.

When we want Faustus to be a courageous rebel, Faustus will become one. How we interpret Faustus mirrors the preconceived ideas we have in our mind. But we should get rid of our preconceptions and preoccupations and keep in mind that *Doctor Faustus* was performed on the stage in the late Sixteenth Century.

The purpose of my essay is to clarify that *Doctor Faustus* is conventional in its Christian values and Faustus is depicted as degrading himself. The play is a morality play. His degeneration has two aspects within this morality basis. However, Marlowe's concern is not to preach but to entertain the audience by employing irony as its means.

Doctor Faustus was first performed on the stage in 1594. The first professional English theater was constructed in 1576. From the very beginning the London City Authority, strongly under the influence of Puritanism, opposed professional theaters. The London City Authority had issued a ban on the plays related to religion and politics in 1559.⁴⁾ And it was keeping an eye on theaters because it wanted good cause for banning all plays. Under these circumstances, it would have been impossible to perform a play if it boldly took up the theme of a rebel against God and glorified him.

According to Henslowe's Diary about the performance of *Doctor Faustus*, the play used frightening devils and firecrackers.⁵⁾ Another contemporary wrote:

There indeed a man may behold shaggehayr'd Deuills runne roaring ouer the Stage with Squibs in their mouthes, while Drummers make Thunder in the Tyring-house, and the twelve-penny Hirelings make artificial Lightning in their Heauens.⁶⁾

From the modern view point, *Doctor Faustus* is a serious drama; however the Elizabethan audience might have been amused or frightened to see devils running around to the sound of fireworks and drums. The popularity of the play at that time might have resulted from its direful and at the same time entertaining aspect. His audience would have been surprised if someone had suggested that Faustus is actually a Promethean rebel or a martyr.

In Elizabethan times, publication of a play came after it was performed. Additions and cuts were possible each time a play was performed because there was no authorized edition of the play. *Doctor Faustus* is not an exception: much more, it has one of the most difficult textual problems because of its popularity of the time. There are two surviving texts, and authorship has been questioned. The recent parallel study by W.W. Greg has made clear that the quarto of 1616 and others deriving

from it seem to stem from a fuller and more authoritative manuscript, but the study does not solve the problems of Marlowe's authorship.⁷⁾ The 1604 text is said to have been cut down and simplified for provincial performance on a stage with little equipment and fewer actors. I would like to take up the longer 1616 text.

Though there are problems about texts and authorship, it seems now certain that Marlowe used a source book. The legend of Faustus came from Germany. *Historia von D. Johann Fausten* was published in 1587 in Germany. Marlowe's source was an English translation made in 1592, not the German original.⁸⁾

When we compare *Doctor Faustus* with *The English Faustbook* it is clear that Marlowe adheres somewhat too faithfully to the dramatic sequences of *The English Faustbook*. Based on vague hints in the source, Marlowe associates Faustus with Lucifer and Icarus. According to Christian belief Lucifer was so proud and so presumptuous that he conspired against God, and thus he was thrown into hell. Lucifer wanted to be equal to God. Marlowe finds Faustus' sin rooted in pride. I would like to compare the beginning parts which illustrate the difference between *The English Faustbook* and *Doctor Faustus*. According to *The Faustbook*:

But Faustus being of a naughty minde and otherwise addicted, applied not his studies, but tooke himself to other exercises... he gaue himself secretly to study Necromancy and Coniuration, in so much that few or none could perceiue his profession.

.....

..... and taking to him the wings of an Eagle, thought to flie ouer the whole world, and to know the secrets of heauen and earth.⁹⁾

Marlowe imaginatively transforms the source into his Faustus.

In th' heavenly matters of theology:
Till swoln with cunning, of a self-conceit,
His waxen wings did mount above his reach

And, melting, heavens conspir'd his over-throw;
 For, falling to a devilish exercise,
 And glutted now with learning's golden gifts,
 He surfeits upon cursed necromancy;
 Nothing so sweet as magic is to him,
 Which he prefers before his chiefest bliss.

prologue, 18—28.¹⁰⁾

Marlowe sets Faustus, his character, and his doom before us in clear, emphatic terms. Faustus is presented as a man who is swollen with pride in his attainments, and comes to a deserved end because he has preferred forbidden pursuits to "his chiefest bliss." The image of "waxen wings," "above his reach," "melting," and "overthrow" are associated with Icarus, who is equated with Lucifer. The words "glutted" and "surfeits" present Faustus negatively. Marlowe's interpretation of pride is based on standard Christian belief.

Marlowe also employs the idea of pride negatively at other places in the play. When Faustus tries to play a prank on the Pope, who sticks unfairly to his authority, Faustus refers to the Pope as "proud pope." (III, i, 77) Saxon Bruno, who is captured in the court of the Pope, compares the Pope to "proud Lucifer." (III, i, 93) The Pope himself condemns the Emperor, who is against the Pope, with the words "he grows too proud in his authority, lifting his lofty head above the clouds." (III, i, 133—134) It is clear that pride is not glorified. Being proud means being disobedient to God.

All sins begin with pride. Man has to be obedient in order to be saved. This is the rule of moralities. In the epilogue of *Everyman*, one of the masterpieces of moralities, a doctor appears and makes its moral clear:

Ye hearers, take it of worth, old and young,
 And forsake Pride, for he deceiveth you in the end.

The characters of moralities are personified abstractions of moral and social types. These characters are logically related to each other as parts of an allegory in order to illustrate the salvation of an individual.¹¹⁾ However, by the Sixteenth Century vices began to have no relation with what they were meant to allegorize. The juxtaposition of comic scenes and tragic ones in *Doctor Faustus* should be considered in this context. *Doctor Faustus* does not have personified abstractions any more, but its main concern is still the salvation of man and the presentation of God's righteousness.

When we enter the world of *Doctor Faustus*, we have to take it as a morality play, just like the audience of the time would have done. We must accept that man's most precious possession is his immortal soul and that what he does on earth will determine whether he goes to heaven or hell; whether after his worldly life he will enjoy perpetual bliss with God or perpetual pain with the Devil. Faustus is a sinner in terms of morality. He is guilty of the sin of pride. If he does not repent, he will be damned, and devils are knowingly and cunningly trying to get hold of Faustus' soul. The audience can tell what will happen next to Faustus. Only Faustus on the stage does not know his fate.

At the very beginning of the play Faustus is disillusioned by Mephistophilis;

Faust. Did not my conjuring raise thee? speak;
 Meph. That was the cause, but yet *per accidens*;
 For when we hear one rack the name of God,
 Abjure the Scriptures and his Saviour Christ,
 We fly, in hope to get his glorious soul;
 Nor will we come, unless he use such means
 Whereby he is in danger to be damn'd.
 Therefore the shortest cut for conjuring
 Is stoutly to abjure the Trinity,
 And pray devoutly to the prince of hell.

(I, iii, 47-5)

Faustus is very proud of his learning, and wants to believe that nobody other than himself can conjure up the spirit. But ironically enough, the audience is told that conjuring has nothing to do with Faustus' knowledge. But Faustus does not want to accept the truth. The image of a proud scholar begins to degenerate. Faustus reads a lot of books and utters difficult words, which the audience cannot understand, in order to try to conjure up spirits. But the fact is that the shortest way to conjuring the spirit is to blaspheme Scriptures. Thus, Faustus becomes a clown figure. This kind of irony is Marlowe's best. Dramatic irony, or tragic irony means:

A figure of speech in which what is said by the characters in a play has a different and more serious meaning to the audience who are more aware than are the characters concerned of catastrophe which is either impending or has occurred.¹²⁾

Marlowe's usage of irony is directly towards the audience. We find clearly his simple and direct irony in Faustus deteriorating another step:

Faust. I think hell's a fable.

Meph. Ay, think so, till experience change thy mind.

Faust. Why, dost thou think that Faustus shall be damned?

Meph. Ay, of necessity, for here's the scroll

In which thou hast given thy soul to Lucifer.

Faust. Ay, and body too: but what of that?

Think'st thou that Faustus is so fond to imagine

That, after this life, there is any pain?

No, these are trifles and mere old wives' tales.

Meph. But I an instance to prove the contrary;

For I tell thee I am damn'd, and now in hell.

Faust. Nay, and this be hell, I'll willingly be damn'd.

(II, i, 128-136)

Faustus denies the existence of hell and damnation, while Mephistophilis tells Faustus the truth from his experience. The audience knows which

is right. Faustus' blasphemous words are not accepted against Christianity, but they clearly show Faustus' ignorance of the truth. Ironically the enemy of Christianity gives him the truth of Christianity. Faustus is so ignorant that he will have to experience hell and damnation for himself in order to recognize their existence. Faustus boasts "this be hell, I'll willingly be damn'd." The audience understands this world is definitely separated from hell. Sinners have to suffer bodily pain, not in this world, but in hell, a fundamental belief in terms of salvation.

Faustus progressively degenerates into such a wretched sinner that he repents that he has repented and offended Lucifer.

Faust. I do repent I e'er offended him.

Sweet Mephistophilis, entreat thy lord

To pardon my unjust presumption,

And with my blood again I will confirm

The former vow I made to Lucifer.

(V. i. 85-89)

Faustus, a disbeliever in God's mercy, easily yields himself to the threats of Mephistophilis. Faustus utters the words such as "repent", "offend", and "presumption" in the opposite way, which he does not notice. The audience can know from his words uttered completely in the reverse context how he is deteriorating himself. This is Marlowe's irony.

Though Faustus is presented as a wretched sinner, we feel a kind of sympathy for him. He is almost a clown or a sacrificial figure to Lucifer.

Meph. I do confess it, Faustus, and rejoice;

'Twas I, that when thou wert i' the way to heaven,

Damm'd up thy passage; when thou took'st the book,

To view the Scriptures, then I turn'd the leaves,

And led thine eye. —

What, weep'st thou? 'tis too late, despair, farewell!

Fools that will laugh on the earth, must weep in hell.

(v. ii. 96-102)

He is trapped in the snares of the Devil, a convention with moralities. From the beginning to the end devils are manipulating Faustus. Mephistophilis and Lucifer are enemies of God, but they accept that God is righteous. They support Christianity and give ignorant Faustus its truth. They only pretended to be very pliant and obedient, for they approached him with the expectation of stealing his soul. Proud Faustus is caught in their snares.

Faustus' degeneration has two aspects; Faustus becomes a wretched sinner and at the same time makes an ignorant sacrifice of his soul to the Devil. Mephistophilis' words "Fools that will laugh on earth, must weep in hell" rightly expresses Faustus' degeneration as an ignorant sacrificial figure. On the other hand, the Chorus in the epilogue is right in describing the fate of Faustus:

chor. Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight,
 And burned is Apollo's laurel-bough,
 That sometime grew within this learned man.
 Faustus is gone: regard his hellish fall,
 Whose fiendful fortune may exort the wise,
 Only to wonder at unlawful things,
 Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits
 To practise more than heavenly power permits:

(Epilogue)

The Devils in the play as well as the audience watching support the Christianity. The contrast between ignorant Faustus and the other characters in the play shows the irony of the play. Under the severe assault of The London City Authority, this ironical presentation would have been necessary to avoid the censorship of the time.

NOTES

- 1) A. C. Swinburne, *Doctor Faustus: A Selection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Jump (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 38.
- 2) George Santayana, *Doctor Faustus*, ed. J. Jump (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 40.
- 3) Leo Kirschbaum, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Doctor Faustus*, ed. Willard Farnham (London: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), p. 77.
- 4) 玉泉八州男『女王陛下の興行師たち』芸立出版 p. 34.
- 5) F.S. Boas, "The Stage History of Doctor Faustus," in *Doctor Faustus* ed. F. S. Boas (N. Y.: Gordian, 1966), p. 48.
- 6) F.S. Boas, p. 49.
- 7) W. W. Greg, "Nature of the B-text," in *Doctor Faustus*, ed. W.W. Greg (London: Oxford, 1950), p. 97.
- 8) F. S. Boas, "Date and Source of The Play," in *Doctor Faustus* ed. F. S. Boas (N. Y.: Gordian, 1966), p. 6.
- 9) "Source passages for The English Faust Book" *Doctor Faustus*, ed. F. S. Boas, p. 177.
- 10) All the quotations are hereafter from *Doctor Faustus* edited by F. S. Boas (Gordian, 1969)
- 11) L. G. Salinger, *Elizabethan Dramas*, ed. R. J. Kaufman (London: Oxford, 1970) p. 209.
- 12) "Dramatic Irony," *The concise Oxford Dictionary of English Literature*, 2nd ed., 1970, p. 156.