

## CONFLICT AND CONTRADICTION IN CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE'S

### *THE TRAGICAL HISTORY OF DR. FAUSTUS'*

Anthony Nazombe

At a time when literature departments in most African universities are increasingly turning their attention to the literature of Africa and the black diaspora, it might seem somewhat odd to find an African critic being so fascinated with an item from the Elizabethan era of mainstream English literature as to devote an entire paper to it. There are several reasons for the choice of this topic, all of them related in one way or the other. The first one is personal, dating back to this writer's undergraduate encounter with Marlowe's play. Over the years, he has come to identify himself closely with the tragic hero, Dr. Faustus, sharing both the boundless ambition that leads the German scholar to make a pact with the devil and the profound despair that makes it impossible for him to repent. The second explanation is that the Faust legend on which Marlowe draws in the play is so strikingly "modern"; it is as relevant to the 20th century as it was to Renaissance Europe. Versions of it can be found in Western man's imaginative attempts to come to terms with all kinds of scientific discoveries. It is present in Thomas Mann's long and obscure novel *Doctor Faustus*, and there are traces of it in Soyinka's play, 'The Road' 2, and Steve Chimombo's poem 'Obituary' 3.

The most important reason for selecting the present topic is the way in which it touches on many of the issues covered by the history of ideas course, 'Currents of Thought in Western and Black African Literature' offered to its Third year students by the Department of English in the University of Malawi. The enduring influence of classical civilization on western culture is evident in the fact that Marlowe's play is described as a tragedy, a literary genre invented and perfected by the Greeks. It is also apparent in the references and allusions to such legendary and historical figures as Icarus, Alexander the Great, and Helen of Troy. Finally, the influence is clear from Faustus' resort to Latin in matters academic and necromantic.

Marlowe's debt to medieval culture is best illustrated by his use of the conventions of the Morality play. Powerfully dramatized in the *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* is the battle between the forces of good and evil in the human soul. Such characters as Lucifer, Belzebub, Mephistophilis, the Evil Angel, and the seven Deadly Sins obviously stand for evil whereas the Old Man and the Good Angel clearly represent good. All this evidence of the impact of earlier epochs notwithstanding, the play is essentially Renaissance in spirit. It evokes that period in the history of the West

which was characterized by freedom of thought and action, the refinement of social intercourse, and the frank enjoyment of life. In such a milieu, someone like Faustus, the possessor of unusual and original talent became a man of recognized importance. Seen in this light, **The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus** comes across as a heroic play which celebrates power, beauty, riches, and knowledge 4.

The purpose of this paper then is to show that the drama of Faustus contains at least three areas of conflict and contradiction. In the first place, Faustus has lofty dreams of the "profit and delight" to be gained from magic. Yet the delights he actually gets hardly seem great: they are either shallow or strident. Secondly, Mephistophilis, the devil's agent, does not hide the truth about his own condition, commenting "why this is hell nor am I out of it" (p.128). Despite that, the devils are the most serious and formidable negotiators in the play - they control and manipulate Faustus. In the third place, Faustus' sad realisation of his loss and the grave violence he has done to himself grows and urges him to repent: "O would that I had never seen Wertenberg, never read book" (p.155). However, his cowardice and pride forbid him to repent, and drive him rather to self-delusion and self-destruction. These and other elements, it will further be shown, lead up to the last scenes of the play and its final climax.

In Faustus, Marlowe presents a protagonist of heroic proportions, who, unlike his counterpart in **Tamburlaine the Great**, aspires to divine power through the force of his brain rather than that of his sword. He is described by the Chorus as an Icarus-figure, rising above his reach until "heavens" conspire his overthrow. The movement of the lines said by the chorus mirrors the rise and fall of Faustus, enacting in brief the image which the play is to enact in full. The measured quietness, with which the passage begins, is disturbed by the swelling movement of the Icarus Lines, as the natural order is by Faustus' unlawful aspiration. The construction (main clause arrived at only after subordinate phrases) involves the reader in a crescendo coming to a climax at "mount above" and dropping back again in the next line, "And melting heavens conspir'd his overthrow".

We are introduced to Faustus as he sits in his study, calmly reviewing and rejecting one by one the subjects of the university curriculum. He has mastered all of them but none has helped him rise to the superhuman status to which he aspires. What is surprising here is that the man who wishes to "level at the end of every Art" shows incredible superficiality. He makes his fateful decision to turn to magic as the only sure way to "get a deity", reflecting that "a sound magician is a demi-god." Christopher Marlowe makes Faustus' initial choice very notably an act of will, uninfluenced even by the usual tempters. His decision is dictated by his will to power, a will that is not satisfied with the limitations of his humanity, but by his aspirations towards divinity.

Faustus is encouraged in his decision by the Evil Angel, who is crafty enough to refer to God as Faustus himself does, in terms of a classical or pagan deity rather than of the Christian God. The Good Angel tries to inject a note of realism by warning that he (Faustus) will “heap God’s heavy wrath” upon his head thereby. But Faustus simply ignores him. He breaks into lyricism, taking up the childish delight expressed in “And necromantic books are heavenly;/lines, circles, scenes, letters, and characters;/ Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires.” (p.122) There is vigour and violence in the following lines where Faustus contemplates the power he will have over the spirits he is going to raise:

I’ll have them fly to India for gold,  
Ransack the ocean for orient pearl,  
And search all corners of the new-found world  
for pleasant fruits and princely delicates. (p.123)

The same impatience leads to the denunciation of philosophy, law, physics, and divinity, which Faustus describes as the “basest of the three”. This boyish enthusiasm is underscored by his desire to conjure that very night, expressed as an invitation to dinner extended to his friends Valdes and Cornelius, both of them well known magicians:

Then come and dine with me, and, after meat  
We’ll canvas every quiddity thereof;  
For ere I sleep, I’ll try what I can do;  
This night, I’ll conjure, though I die therefore (p.125)

Faustus’ hopes are extreme. The world seems to open before him. Finally, he has “settled” his studies.

The scene involving Faustus’ servant Wagner and the Clown holds up a mirror to the scholar’s situation. The Clown shows that even by human standards, Faustus’ action is foolish:

How~ my soul to the devil for a shoulder  
of mutton, though ‘twere blood-raw~ not so,  
good friend: by’r lady, I had need have it well  
roasted, and good sauce to it, if I pay so dear (p.129)

The gifts of the devil neither satisfy nor last. Power and wealth, all that Faustus

has already obtained, are not in themselves good or bad. But once the attempt is made to use them, disillusion sets in. Because of his inexperience, Faustus thinks that, having sold himself into hell, he will be allowed to retain a portion of his integrity: to seize the opportunity, for example, of new found wealth to set up a family. He asks for a wife and one is brought. But she is stuffed with fire-works and goes up in smoke. The obviously disappointed Faustus exclaims, "A plague on her for a hot whore~". But Mephistophilis, the devil's "minister", retorts, "Tut, Faustus,/marriage is a ceremonial toy".

Faustus' fleshly desires are satisfied ("I'll cull thee out the fairest courtesans") but the result is that his spiritual desires, as they are more isolated, become the more insistent. Mephistophilis is summoned to discuss "divine astrology." The joy of learning, however, is no more permissible to Faustus than that of marital bliss; for if pursued in due order and in the proper spirit, it can lead to one thing only - the knowledge, the love and ultimately the vision of God. And all these, along with goodness, Faustus has renounced.

However, as Faustus' mind cannot be left completely blank, he is offered, as a substitute for the vision of God, that of the Seven Deadly Sins: Pride, Covet, Wrath, Envy, Gluttony, Sloth and Lechery, in that order. He watches them with detachment, but not without interest. He exchanges witty remarks with one or two and at the end he exclaims: "Oh this feeds my soule" (p.140). This exclamation shows clearly the abysmal situation in which the scholar now finds himself; for he has begun to collect sensations without judgement or order, not as an aid to right living but merely for their own sake.

Equally shallow delights are Faustus' antics in the Pope's private chamber and in the Emperor's palace. A papal banquet is interrupted by invisible food-snatching, and Faustus enjoys the dubious privilege of giving the pontiff a box on the ears. In the latter scene, Faustus raises the spirits of Alexander the Great and his paramour for the benefit of Emperor Carolus the Fifth and his attendants. Thus the man who earlier on expressed his lofty desires in such terms as:

All things that move between the quiet poles  
shall be at my command: emperors and kings  
Are but obeyed in their several provinces  
Nor can they raise the wind, or rend the clouds;  
But his dominion that exceeds in this,  
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man;  
A sound magician is a mighty god: (p.122)

seems to be no more than an honoured entertainer, a point driven home by the denigratory comments of the emperor's knight.

Unlike Faustus, Mephistophilis, called from hell by means of magical incantations, has no time for illusions. He starts by deflating Faustus: "I am a servant to great Lucifer/And may not follow thee without his leave:" (p.127). As the dialogue progresses, we discover that Mephistophilis' sin of excessive pride parallels Faustus' own, and the punishment he describes, the hell of being cut off from God and heaven, foreshadows the anguish Faustus will come to experience:

Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it,  
Think'st thou that I, who saw the face of God,  
And tasted the eternal joy of heaven,  
Am not tormented with ten thousand hells,  
In being depriv'd of everlasting bliss? (p.128)

However, Faustus consigns his knowledge of divinity to the same impersonal sphere as his other studies. Having been told plainly that Lucifer shows him favour in order to make him a fellow sufferer, he protests, "Come, I think hell's a fable". (p.134). This is the man who boasts "This word 'damnation' terrifies not him/For he confounds hell in Elysium" (p.127)

It is the confusion of hell with classical myths that Faustus is going to regret later on in the play. Mephistophilis hides nothing from him. To Faustus' quip about hell being a fable he answers, showing a measure of understanding, "Ay, think so still, till experience change thy mind." And when Faustus says "these are trifles and mere old wives' tales" Mephistophilis is quick to point out, "But, Faustus, I am an instance to prove the contrary, for I am damn'd, and am now in hell." (p.134).

Mephistophilis makes it clear that far from receiving the omnipotence with which he flatters himself, Faustus is to obtain nothing but at a price. The scholar mistakes the price, his soul, for "vaine trifles". This is the kind of remark Faustus makes each time Mephistophilis asks him to consider the bargain he wishes to conclude: "But may I raise up spirits when I please?/ - Then there is enough for ten thousand souls." (p.133) The devils are serious. They entertain no illusions. For Faustus to get favours from the devil there must be a legal contract. In this way he becomes involved in the "petty case of paltry legacies" which he denounced when he sat down to "settle" his studies. The bloodletting is a formal seal of the friendship between Faustus and the devil as well as a commitment to Lucifer. From this point onwards, we see how faustus

gradually plays into the hands of the devils. For as Brockbank points out

. . . but Faustus for all his command of manner  
is only pretending to dictate terms that are of  
the devil's making; Mephistophilis's compliance  
is his triumph, and Faustus is left alone to  
amplify his fantasies of power and glory in  
consolatory hyperboles 5.

After the signing of the contract, the devil's puppet-show begins. Faustus must not be allowed to go back on his words. His heroic illusions must be sustained above evil. Says Mephistophilis, "I'll fetch him somewhat to delight his mind" (p.133). The devil's part of the bargain is to give Faustus crowns and rich clothes, to satisfy his lust and desire, to reveal secrets of astronomy to him; to enable him to make fun of papal dignity, and finally to enable him to perform magic in the Emperor's court and before scholars. In short, the devil satisfies Faustus' appetite for "curiosity and novelty."

The devils' control and manipulation of Faustus can best be seen in the few instances where he threatens to repent. Commenting on heaven, Faustus tells Mephistophilis: "If it were made for man, 'twas made for me:/ I will renounce this magic and repent" (p.136). But the Evil Angel points out, "Thou art a spirit; God cannot pity thee." The next time Faustus mentions repentance, the Evil Angel threatens, "If thou repent, devils shall tear thee in pieces" (p.137). Faustus' attempt is so strong that Lucifer must intervene with a pageant of the Seven Deadly Sins. Faustus must not "talk of Paradise nor Creation" but "talk of the devil and nothing else" (p.138).

It is significant that Faustus' most serious attempt to repent comes about immediately after Mephistophilis has left for Lucifer with the message that the scholar has qualified to join him by his "desperate thoughts against Jove's deity." This is the point at which Faustus fully appreciates his loss. So far, he has conceived of the living god in non-Christian terms, avoiding the word 'God' altogether. Now he uses it six times in one short soliloquy:

Now, Faustus, must  
thou needs be damn'd, and cans't thou be saved:  
what boots it, then, to think of God or heaven?  
Away with such vain fancies, and despair;  
Despair in God, and trust in Belzebub; (p.131)

As Pauline Honderich rightly observes, the God whom Faustus thus at last confronts

is a God cast in an uncompromisingly Calvinistic mould. Man is seen as naturally depraved and sinful and destined to death 6: "To God? He loves thee not;" (loc. cit.). Faustus' sadness and sense of loss grow. He now takes his sin for what it really is: "A surfeit of deadly sin, that hath damned/both body and soul" (p.155). . Further on he reflects, "for vain pleasure of twenty-four years hath Faustus lost eternal joy and felicity" (p.156).

In his efforts to repent Faustus is aided by the Good Angel and the Old Man. The latter comes much closer to dispelling Faustus' Calvinist despair than does the former. In his opinion, Faustus is not irretrievably wicked; his nature is still capable of good:

Break heart, drop blood, and mingle it with tears  
Tears falling from repentant heaviness  
Of thy most vile and loathsome filthiness,  
The stench whereof corrupts the inward soul  
With such flagitious crimes of heinous sin  
As no commiseration may expel,  
But mercy, Faustus, of thy Saviour Sweet, (p.153)

To Faustus' visions of hell and damnation the Old Man opposes his own contrasting vision of salvation:

I see an angel hover o'er thy head,  
And with a vial full of precious grace,  
Offers to pour the same into thy soul: (loc.cit.)

For a few moments the two conceptions of God hang in the balance, but even here, though obviously moved by the Old Man's words, Faustus can only maintain that the grace necessary for faith is absent in him: "I do repent, and yet I do despair" (loc. cit.)

Faustus' capacity for fear and doubt is stronger than his capacity for trust. Mephistophilis' threat to tear him apart has him pledging loyalty to the devils:

Sweet Mephistophilis, entreat thy Lord  
To pardon my unjust presumption,  
And with my blood again I will confirm  
My former vow I made to Lucifer. (p. 154)

Faustus appears to take a perverse pride in the conviction of his own extraordinary

depravity. To his colleague, the second Scholar's attempt to remind him of the infinite mercy of God he replies:

But Faustus' offence can ne'er be pardoned,  
The serpent that tempted Eve may be saved  
But not Faustus. (p. 155)

In his fear the scholar begins to imagine things. He hears "fearful echoes" thundering his damnation and imagines the devil tormenting him. This is the same man who a while ago tried to shake off his fear and despair by having Helen of Troy brought before him. Yet after the release into lyricism comes the depression and the realisation that the end is at hand: "but now I die eternally. Look/comes he not? Comes he not?" (Loc. cit.)

In the last scene we have the most intense and sustained expression of the conflict between Faustus' agonised desire to trust in God's mercy - a desire that stems not from fear but from a genuine spiritual need to be once more at one with God - and his paralysed inability to do so in the face of his despairing conviction of his own damnation and of the wrath of God. In this powerful and horrifying scene, Marlowe conjures up and pits against each other the images both of the benevolent God of the Catholic dispensation and of the harsh and revengeful God of Christian doctrine. Conflicting expectations are aroused in us by the sense of the predestined damnation which Faustus sees symbolized in the stars: "Yon stars that reign'd at my nativity / whose influence hath allotted death and hell," (p.157). In his agonised pleading with God, Faustus employs the traditional symbol of atonement, the image of Christ's blood, the least drop of which was considered sufficient satisfaction for all mankind's sin. But the image of Christ's blood is replaced by a vision of the angry and vengeful God of Calvinism: "and see, where God/Stretcheth out his arm, and bends his ireful brow~" (loc. cit.)

Finding himself helpless in the face of ineluctable Destiny, Faustus longs for the ever moving spheres of heaven to stand still. He turns in vain for refuge to the sky, the earth, the sea, but nothing now can hide him from the "heavy wrath of God" which the Good Angel warned him of. Another point to note in this scene is that in his fatalistic despair, Faustus renounces even the humanity which he despised ("Yet art thou Faustus, only a man"). He sinks to the level of beasts: "Why wert thou not a creature wanting/soul?" (loc. cit.). It is also worth pointing out that for once Faustus' magic words ("O lente, lente currite noctis equi") don't work. For once his wish is not fulfilled.



Lucifer berates Faustus for each attempt to appeal to Christ, but as throughout the play the Evil Angel's work had been made easy by Faustus' conception of a stern and unforgiving God, so here the obstacles placed in his way by Lucifer are but an added torment to a Faustus who already feels totally rejected by a God determined to destroy him. We realise at this point that Faustus has already shown himself to be in hell, the kind of hell described by Mephistophilis, a hell of spiritual deprivation. For Faustus' damnation comes entirely from within. He is damned because he believes he has always been so; and in that belief lies the experience of damnation.

The structure of the play greatly contributes to the overall effect. Scene succeeds scene, not in any order, but one which is more of psychological than chronological significance. The scenes illustrate various aspects of a man's state of soul, rather than events in his history. However, towards the end references to time begin to multiply: Faustus must go back to Wertenberg, he must have "a quiet sleep"; soon sleep won't be enough and he is driven to riot and debauch. With every scene we see that the pace of the drama accelerates, reaching a climax with the final monologue, which reduces an hour to fifty-nine lines. We share the suspense of Faustus whose contract ends at midnight.

The play has the form of a closed circle; it ends where it begins; it leaves Faustus when and as it found him. The twenty-four years which have gone by suggest a temporal allegory. It is as if time has flown so fast that all those years could be syncopated into the twenty-four hours that constitute a day. The impression thus created is that Faustus is hastening his doom. In fact we get this feeling right from the opening monologue where Faustus rushes upon the act from which the doom results. The play has symmetry. It starts with a monologue and rising hope of power and ends with delusion and despair which also culminate in a monologue. As Levin has observed, the soliloquy isolates the speaker. Tragedy, he further notes, is an isolating experience<sup>7</sup>. The tragic intensity and the dramatic tension in the play depend, to a great extent, on the skilful interplay of the Calvinist and the more moderate conception of spiritual destiny.

## NOTES

1. All page references are to Christopher Marlowe, "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus" in *Marlowe's Plays and Poems*, ed. M.R. Ridley, (London: Dent, 1967), pp. 120-158, and are included in the text.
2. For a discussion of this aspect of the play see R.N.C. Okafor, 'Wole Soyinka's 'The Road' and the Faustian Dimension', *Presence Africaine* No.111, 1979, pp. 80-89.

3. See Steve Chimombo, **Napolo Poems**, (Zomba: Manchichi Publishers), 1987, pp. 19-20
4. J.P. Broackbank, **Marlowe: Dr. Faustus**, (London: Edward Arnold, 1962 rpt 1971), p.23.
5. **Ibid.**, p.38.
6. Pauline Henderich, 'John Calvin and Dr. Faustus', **Modern Language Review**, Vol.68, No.1, 1973, pp. 1-13.
7. Harry Levin, **Christopher Marlowe: The Overreacher**, (London: Faber and Faber, 1961 rpt 1967), p.151.