

Failure of Mythology in Faustus

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Abstract

The use of mythology in renaissance is of utmost importance. The reason for mythology found in the renaissance texts was because renaissance figures thought that it is important to know about these myths and classical philosophes since ancient Greece and Rome were equipped with democracy and civilization. Thus their ideas might be used and welcomed. Marlowe makes ample use of mythology in his tragedies. However, in Faustus we see the failure of mythology. In spite of his love for mythology in this tragedy mythology fails to help Marlowe a lot in bringing it as a candidate side by side with Christianity. Though the giant of Renaissance drama welcomes mythology and proposes necromancy to his hero Faustus at the end of the tragedy it is Christianity which has the upper hand and the hero turns into a pathetic figure who is no longer arrogant and proud and is torn into pieces tragically.

Key words: Faustus; Mythology; Necromancy; Tragedy

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INTRODUCTION

Renaissance is the rebirth of classical ideas. It is littered with references to myth. Marlowe's works are not exception. According to Greenblatt and Christ (2012) "the

achievements of the pagan philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome came to seem more compelling than the subtle distinctions drawn by medieval Christian theologians". He has made a lot of references to mythological figures and philosophies. This is evident from his great tragedies. This is also attested to by a lot of scholarship written on Marlowe. T. McAlindon in "Classical Mythology and Christian Tradition in Marlowe's Doctor Faustus" argues mythology and magic are regarded in Dr. Faustus as pseudo-divinity (McAlindon, 1966). Robert Ornstein in "Marlowe and God: The Tragic Theology of Dr. Faustus" holds in Marlowe's play, as in his source, the hero's disobedient, sacrilegious choice of black magic is an impressive start; his final moments of terror and hopelessness are a commanding conclusion (Ornstein, 1968).

ANALYSIS

Marlowe initially challenges Christianity and welcomes pagan achievements and benefits a lot from classical mythology in Faustus but at the end it is the medieval ideology of Christianity which is genuine and which wins the battle. Faustus starts with questioning Christian aspect of medieval ideology by bringing a lot of candidates to the scene. The candidates he brings are Greek mythology and necromancy. McClendon believes mythology and magic are the forbidden fruits found in books to which Faustus turns when he throws away the book of God (McAlindon, 1966). It is religious view of middle ages which wins at the end against Classical mythology and magic. The result for Faustus of following mythology and magic is punishment promised by the middle ages dominant idea of Christianity. There are two possibilities at the end why Faustus is not saved. The first possibility is that if he is saved then again we should argue that Satan should have also been forgiven when he transgresses the rule of God. Marlowe's story is exactly the same story of transgression

which is found in the Bible. Faustus is Satan incarnation. The story of Faustus's hubris is the exact repetition of the Bible thematically. Both *Faustus* and Bible repeat the idea that those who seriously violate the rule of God should be punished. This is not to say that Marlow is an atheist. In fact, *Faustus* shows that Marlow is not at all an atheist. Faustus's fall resembles that of biblical Satan. He is in search of immortality and permanence through knowledge. Knowledge leads to wisdom while this is not at all the case with Faustus. Wise people understand their own limitation when they know a lot. Knowledge is positive power which can be used for others but for Faustus it is not the case. What he wants out of knowledge is pleasure for which he sells his soul to Mephistopheles.

The highest degree of pleasure is when Faustus asks Mephistophilis to call up Helen of Troy, the famous beauty from the ancient world, and uses her presence as a source of inspiration and intuition. He goes through the description of Helen and is ravished almost by her beauty and appearance:

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.
Her lips suck forth my soul; see where it flies!—
Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.
Here will I dwell, for Heaven is in these lips,
And all is dross that is not Helena.
I will be Paris, and for love of thee,
Instead of Troy, shall Wittenberg be sack'd;
And I will combat with weak Menelaus,
And wear thy colours on my plumed crest;
Yea, I will wound Achilles in the heel,
And then return to Helen for a kiss.
Oh, thou art fairer than the evening air
Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars;
Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter
When he appear'd to hapless Semele:
More lovely than the monarch of the sky
In wanton Arethusa's azured arms:
And none but thou shalt be my paramour (Marlowe,
1998)

The special reference to Helen is according to critics not, as it seems, a simple hymn in praise of a classical heroine and of classical beauty (Greg, 1946), it is in fact right. The special reference to Helen is to ancient mythology as a whole which Christopher Marlow celebrates a candidate against Christianity and even more compelling than Christianity. The ultimate goal of necromancy was the bringing of Helen in front of Faustus for which he is ready to give Wittenberg. However, he is

not saved and is not made immortal by Greek Mythology. There is no salvation at the end suggesting the failure of mythology in Faustus.

Let us consider the second possibility of Faustus's salvation. If he is saved, it will tell the whole hell is a joke and one is free to do anything and then repent. Such a repentance would be a slap in the face of religion. When a person is religious they have to observe certain laws. He has seriously gone against the principles and has met the enemies of Christ and has shaken hands with the seven deadly sins. Faustus, therefore, should not be saved so that the awe of religion should be preserved at the end. Otherwise, the whole play should be considered as complete animosity towards religion. If still Faustus remains arrogant at the end of the play and does not repent, once again Marlowe would be considered an enemy of religion and accused of atheism. The whole play reverberated the idea of punishment for sinners and this is a middle ages' idea. Marlowe is acquiescing to Christ by punishing his hero Faustus otherwise he might be considered a Lucifer. The defeat of Faustus means a lot. His fall and defeat mean what he stood for was nothing in comparison to religion.

Though he begins by questioning the divinity, at the end it is otherwise. He puts divinity aside initially and welcomes magic "And necromantic books are heavenly;/Lines, circles, scenes, letters, and characters Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires./O, what a world of profit and delight, Of power, of honour, and omnipotence,/Is promis'd to the studious artizan!/All things that move between the quiet poles/Shall be at my command: emperors and kings/Are but obeyed in their several provinces;/But his dominion that exceeds in this,/Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man;/A sound magician is a demigod:/Here tire, my brains, to gain a deity." (Marlowe, 1998). What Faustus ends up to be no world of profit and delight and of power and of honor. What he ends up to be a remorseful situation and he seems a pathetic animal. The pagan mythology of ancient Greece and Rome does not seem more compelling than Christianity at the end.

He was seeking the power to raise the dead or to induce immortality, but what he ends up to be a jester serving kings at the courts. In this sense it is a comedy rather than a tragedy.

This is the failure of necromancy and magic. Marlow places himself in a safer position by punishing Faustus tragically otherwise the whole play would be absolute atheism. But it is not at all atheist since the sinner is punished and the audience learns their message. Marlow punishes hubris and hubris is the most important sin in both mythology and Christianity. Characters fall just because of their hubris.

CONCLUSION

Though Christopher Marlow questions the validity of Christianity and welcomes mythology and necromancy, at the end of the play neither mythology nor necromancy is helpful to Faustus and he dies pathetically and tragically. Though there is repentance, there is no acceptance of repentance and he is not saved since such behaviour on the part of Faustus would encourage rebellion and commitment of sin on the part of religion. This is seriousness of Marlow's text which holds religion in awe rather than rejecting it. Marlow starts rejecting Christianity but at the end he welcome religious punishment for Faustus since he has transgressed the principles of religion.

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