



The Inevitable Fall: Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and the Icarus Myth

LI Li^{[a],*}

^[a] Foreign Studies College, Hunan Normal University, Changsha 410081, China.

* Corresponding author.

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Abstract

With the application of the renowned Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye's theory of archetype, this thesis attempts to analyze the Icarus myth in *Doctor Faustus*. It compares the experience and temperament of the protagonist Faustus to those of the Greek mythological figure Icarus. The Icarian plots or scenes appear resoundingly in this drama. By analyzing these plots or scenes, this thesis tries to reveal the basic pattern in the play, and to probe into Christopher Marlowe's allusion to the human weakness.

Key words: Christopher Marlowe; *Doctor Faustus*; The Icarus myth

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INTRODUCTION

Christopher Marlowe, an unorthodox personality, allegedly atheistic, allegedly homosexual, is acknowledged as one of the greatest dramatists in the Renaissance period because of the invention of English blank verse and the creation of English tragedy. Eliot termed him "the most thoughtful, the most blasphemous (and therefore probably the most Christian) of his contemporaries" (Schuchard, 1999, p. 140). Besides, Algernon Charles Swinburne (1916) said that among his contemporaries, "Marlowe stands high, and will stand for ever" (p. 742).

Born in Canterbury in 1564, Marlowe was an actor, poet and playwright during the reign of Britain's Queen Elizabeth I. Educated at Corpus Christi College at Cambridge University, he received BA and MA degrees. Though Marlowe achieved the excellent classical attainments, he was often drawn into the brawls on the street. After leaving Cambridge, Marlowe moved to London, where he became a playwright and led a turbulent, scandal-plagued life. On May 30, 1593, Marlowe became involved in a tavern brawl and was killed during the quarrel over the bill. After his death, rumors and scandals were spread accusing him of atheism, treason and homosexuality, and some people believed that Marlowe was the victim of a political murder. However, little evidence could support these allegations. Marlowe's death thus has become an enigma.

Marlowe's plays, characteristically challenging, unsettling and unconventional, are distinctive for their shifting quality and their refusal to allow for moral certainties. Among his plays, *The Tragic History of Doctor Faustus* is the most well-known one which contains these qualities. *Doctor Faustus* was probably written in 1592, although the exact date of its composition is uncertain, since it was not published until a decade later. The idea of an individual selling his or her soul to the devil for knowledge is an old motif in Christian folklore. In this drama, Faustus, the protagonist, enters into a pact with the devil for the purpose of seeking genuine knowledge. He calls up Mephistopheles and makes a compact to surrender his soul to the devil after twenty-four years, during which time Mephistopheles will supply him with anything he demands. As the hour approaches, Faustus is unable or unwilling to take the advice of others and repent of his sins, thus causing his hellish fall, the Icarian tragedy. This thesis compares the experience and the temperament of Faustus to those of the Greek mythological figure Icarus and tries to discuss the Icarian plots or scenes in *Doctor Faustus*.

1. THE ICARUS MYTH AND NORTHROP FRYE'S THEORY OF ARCHETYPE

Icarus was the son of the master craftsman Daedalus. King Minos of Crete imprisoned Daedalus and Icarus in the Labyrinth to punish Daedalus for helping the hero Theseus to kill the monster called the Minotaur and to escape with Minos' daughter, Ariadne. Daedalus knew that Minos controlled any escape routes by land or sea, but Minos could not prevent an escape by flight. So Daedalus used his skills to build wings for himself and Icarus. He used wax and string to fasten feathers to reeds of varying lengths to imitate the curves of birds' wings. Finally, Daedalus succeeded in his escape; however, Icarus fell into the sea and died since he flew so high that the sun melted his wax wings. The Icarus myth runs through *Doctor Faustus*, which tells us the inevitable fall of the poor scholar.

According to Alan Watts (1971), "Myth is to be defined as a complex of stories – some no doubt fact, and some fantasy – which, for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life" (p. 7). In this regard, myth is equivalent to archetypes since many critics see archetypes as linked to real life – to universal human experience, the human psyche, and the human culture. Moreover, they claim that archetypes import powerful ideas to works of literature, ideas that resonate subliminally and emotionally with readers. Then what is archetype? Northrop Frye (1912-1991), the preeminent advocate of archetypal criticism, defined archetype as "the recurring use of certain images or image cluster" in literature (Frye, 1971, p. 23). But, broadly speaking, archetypes can be defined as any repeated patterns in literature, whether of plot, character, themes, settings, or images. In Frye's best-known work, *Anatomy of Criticism*, he "attempts to show that all of literature is bound together by a structure of archetypes, which arise from human experiences, wishes, and needs" (Griffith, 2006, p. 175). In Frye's system, the organizing principles that give literature coherence and structure are derived from the archetypal imagery found in the Bible and the myths of ancient Greece. He suggests that all literature is based on displacements of these myths. Archetypes are the socially-concerned organizing forms and patterns of literature that originate in myth and which unify and reveal literature as an imaginatively-inhabitable world. Therefore, archetypes come from human experiences and reflect human life. It can be argued that at the heart of all works of literature are certain simple patterns which embody fundamental human concerns, the primary concern being the place of people in the natural world (Peck & Coyle, 1993, p. 136). In this sense, the Icarus myth in *Doctor Faustus* can be regarded as an archetype to help us see the informing concerns of the play, how similar problems are returned to again and again; furthermore, it let us find the underlying pattern of

Doctor Faustus and appreciate what Marlowe added to the basic pattern in order to make his work distinctive.

2. THE ICARIAN PLOT IN FAUSTUS' EXPERIENCES—FOUR TIMES FALL

At the beginning of the play, the prologue links Doctor Faustus to the Greek myth of Icarus. Here, the Chorus not only gives us background information about Faustus' life and education but also explicitly tells us that his swelling pride will lead to his downfall. More importantly, it compares Faustus' desire to Icarus' doomed attempt to fly. Icarus did not heed his father's warning and flew too close the sun, causing his wings melt and sending him plunging to his death. In the same way, the Chorus tells us, Faustus will "mount above his reach" and suffer the same fate. As a matter of fact, the Icarus story spreads through the whole play and the Icarian plot recurs resoundingly throughout this drama. Faustus rejects the limitations of the external world and experiences excessive frustration and distress. And finally, he gets his inevitable fall, which is not formed in one time, but decided by his many wrong steps. Every time when Faustus makes a wrong decision or determines to sell his soul to the devil at the risk of his life, there is always somebody, the good angel or the old man, who may persuade him out of that terrible idea; nevertheless, he does not believe there is a point of return and refuses to repent and rejects to look for God's help. In this way, his every misstep leads to his every fall, and finally, to his last perdition. Throughout the five acts, actually, the Icarian plot recurs four times and Faustus has gone through four times fall and is doomed to death. Let us discuss the four times fall and the process of his damnation in detail.

To begin with, the scene shifts to Faustus' study, where he takes his first wrong step in his life, which leads to his first fall. He says:

These metaphysics of magicians,
And necromantic books are heavenly. (Griffith, 2000, p. 163)

In the opening soliloquy, Faustus reflects on the most rewarding type of scholarship. He rejects Aristotelian philosophy, medicine, law and religious orthodoxy, finding a constraint at "the end of every art" (Griffith, 2000, p. 162). He then dismisses these arts and fixes his mind on magic, which, when properly pursued, he believes will make him "a mighty god" (Griffith, 2000, p. 163). When Faustus asks Wagner, Faustus' servant, to bring Valdes and Cornelius, Faustus' friends, to help him learn the art of magic, a good angel and an evil angel visit him.

GOOD A. O, Faustus, lay thy damned book aside,
And gaze not on it lest it tempt thy soul,
And heap God's heavy wrath upon thy head!
Read, read the Scriptures – that is blasphemy.
EVIL A. Go forward, Faustus, in that famous art
Wherein all Nature's treasure is contain'd:
Be thou on earth as Jove is in the sky,
Lord and commander of these elements. (Griffith, 2000, p. 164)

The good angel urges Faustus to set aside that book of magic and read the Bible instead; on the contrary, the evil angel encourages him to go forward in his pursuit of the black arts. Here Faustus must make a choice between these two pieces of advice. On the one hand, provided he defers to the good angel's opinions, he will not be satisfied with the existing knowledge. On the other hand, if he takes the evil angel's suggestion, he may achieve his ambition. Obviously, Faustus is going to heed the evil angel since he exults at the great power that the magical arts will bring to him. In this case, Faustus is led astray by the dark arts and makes his first fall. He imagines sending spirits to the end of the world to fetch him jewels and delicacies, having them teach him secret knowledge, and using magic to make himself king of all Germany; he offers a long list of impressive goals, including the acquisition of knowledge, wealth, and political power, and he believes that he will achieve these once he has mastered the black arts. Although it seems glorious, Faustus does not know that he is losing his way in the pursuit of dreams, thus causing the Icarian fall and being doomed to failure.

Another fall of Faustus appears in Act Two, Scene One. This time, Faustus commits the most serious error in his life – he sells his soul to the devil for seeking infinite power. Before the bargain, the good and evil angels appear again.

GOOD A. Sweet Faustus, leave that execrable art.
 FAUSTUS. Contrition, prayer, repentance – what of them?
 GOOD A. O, they are means to bring thee unto heaven!
 EVIL A. Rather illusions, fruits of lunacy,
 That makes men foolish that do trust them most.
 GOOD A. Sweet Faustus, think of heaven and heavenly things.
 EVIL A. No, Faustus, think of honour and of wealth. (Griffith, 2000, p. 174)

Faustus wavers in his conviction to sell his soul and the good and evil angels enter into another controversy. The good one tells him to give up his plan and think of the “heavenly things”, but he dismisses the good angel's words, saying that God does not love him. The evil one let Faustus think of “honour and wealth”, and he believes that it is worthy dealing with the devil since he can gain much wealth through it. Faustus then calls back Mephistopheles, who tells him that Lucifer has accepted his offer of his soul in exchange for twenty-four years of service. Hereto, Faustus totally loses his correct direction in achieving his goal and makes his second Icarian fall.

Faustus decides to make the bargain, and he stabs his arm in order to write the contract with his blood; however, his blood congeals, which seems to rebel against the choice that he has made. The inscription *Homo fuge* (*Man fly*) appears on his arm. In fact, *Homo fuge* is an advice warning to fly unto God. Though Faustus feels some hesitation in signing the infernal pact and wonders if his own blood is attempting to warn him not to sell his soul, he still makes the wrong choice at last. Faustus wants to repent repeatedly but each time runs in the opposite

direction. Sometimes it is his yearning to knowledge and wealth that prevents him from turning to God; but some other times it seems to be the instigation of the evil angel and the manipulation by Mephistopheles that let him loses confidence to be rescued. After signing the compact of selling his soul, Faustus degenerates thoroughly.

The third time that Faustus falls from heaven comes after his resolutely severing relations with God. In fact, Faustus laments his state after signing with devil. He finds reverence for the glory of creation but also grief at his loss of it:

When I behold the heavens, then I repent
 And curse thee, wicked Mephistopheles,
 Because thou hast depriv'd me of those joys. (Griffith, 2000, p. 180)

Faustus once again wavers and leans toward repentance. The good and evil angels make their third appearance and enter into the verbal duels. Faustus begins to believe that “Ay, God will pity me, if I repent” (Griffith, 2000, p. 180). Mephistopheles immediately tempts Faustus to stop the repentance. Although Faustus' heart is “hardened” and he apparently “cannot repent” and the bad angel's words seem all too true that “Faustus never shall repent” (Griffith, 2000, p. 180), the minute Mephistopheles leaves Faustus alone, he turns his mind to God and again he wonders if it is too late for him to repent. The good and evil angels enter into once more, and the good one tells him “never too late” if he can repent. Faustus begins to appeal to Christ for mercy: “Ah, Christ, my Saviour, / Seek to save distressed Faustus' soul” (Griffith, 2000, p. 182). This repentance is such a threat to the pact that Lucifer, making his first appearance, decides to handle the breach of the rules with a deception by telling Faustus that “Christ cannot save thy soul, for he is just” (Griffith, 2000, p. 182). Faustus believes Lucifer and rejects the good angel's kind exhortation. Then Lucifer orders Faustus to cease thinking about God and think only of the devil. Afraid and frightened, Faustus once again pledges satanic fidelity:

Nor will I henceforth: pardon me in this,
 And Faustus vows never to look to heaven,
 Never to name God, or to pray to him,
 To burn his Scriptures, slay his ministers,
 And make my spirits pull his churches down. (Griffith, 2000, p. 182)

Hereto, Faustus breaks off the relations with God completely. He once again misses the chance of repentance and salvation, which brings about his third Icarian fall. As a matter of fact, all the worldly knowledge, which Faustus has so strongly desired, points inexorably to God. The omniscient and omnipotent God masters the whole world. More ironically, the pact he has signed with devil detaches him from God thoroughly. Faustus has nowhere to go but down.

The last Icarian fall of Faustus appears in the last act. Twenty-four years pass remarkably quickly. Faustus'

magical ability seems more and more like cheap hocus-pocus. Meanwhile, he loses interest in the study of astronomy, the universe and the earth gradually. By the end of the play, his main pleasure is to play practical jokes and to produce impressive illusions for nobles, which is a far cry from his ambitious pursuit that he has said before. He just puts his power in the place of no consequence. In the last act, before his doomsday, Faustus still plays magic tricks with those scholars. He let "the admirablest lady that ever lived" – Helen crosses the stage to delight the scholars. At this moment, an old man enters and tries to persuade Faustus to repent:

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,
Whose blood alone must wash away thy guilt. (Griffith, 2000, p. 199)

Faustus is greatly perturbed. Mephistopheles finds it and immediately gives him a dagger. However, the kind old man still persuades Faustus to appeal to God for mercy. Therefore, Faustus takes time "to ponder on" his sins. The result is his another attempt at repentance: "I do repent; and yet I do despair" (Griffith, 2000, p. 199). Even though Faustus' repentance is extremely shallow, there is a chance that Faustus will be truly saved even at the end of his life. For this reason, Mephistopheles threatens that Faustus will be torn into pieces if he does not reconfirm his vow to Lucifer. Having no choice, Faustus agrees to rewrite the pact. Mephistopheles intensifies the urgency of the second contract: "Do it, then, quickly, with unfeigned heart, /Lest greater danger to attend thy drift" (Griffith, 2000, p. 200). The final union of Faustus' soul with sin has occurred and "sin by custom" has decidedly grown into Faustus' nature. Hereto, he degenerates completely, which leads to his final downfall, beyond redemption. Then Faustus asks Mephistopheles to punish the good old man for trying to dissuade him from continuing in Lucifer's service, and what is worse, in his extreme moments, Faustus thinks of the illusion of Helen rather than his own life. At this moment, any further attempts at repentance will only be "idle fantasies" produced by a "laboring brain" trying to "over-reach the devil". Both the good angel and the bad angel depart, and Faustus is left with the ultimate horror: the terrible fall which will make him never come back from hell.

Hereto, Faustus has gone through the Icarian fall for four times. It is himself who makes his way toward hell step by step. One false step may bring eternal remorse. However, in the Christian doctrine, we know that "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:9). No matter what terrible things one has done, as long

as he/she can repent genuinely, God will save him/her. Obviously, Faustus does not know this and he just reads the lines that "the reward of sin is death," and that "if we say that we have no sin, /We deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us" (I John 1:8). Faustus misunderstands that the purpose of religion is to try to forgive rather than to punish. In this way, on the one hand, he attempts to repent again and again; on the other, he is afraid of not being forgiven. Consequently, Faustus does not pluck up his courage to mend his ways and saves himself from hell. Finally, he falls down from the heavens like Icarus.

3. THE REASONS – FAUSTUS' ICARIAN TEMPERAMENTS FOR THE FOUR TIMES FALL

Faustus is a contradictory character, full of ambition but lack of proper action. In order to get knowledge, wealth and power, he is willing to pay the final price – his soul – to Lucifer in exchange for supernatural strength. His ambitions are so grand that we cannot help being impressed. However, Faustus is unable to embrace his dark path wholeheartedly but is also unwilling to admit his sins, constantly wavering about whether or not to repent. Ultimately, he cannot escape the same fate like Icarus. It is his swelling pride, endless desire and willful blindness which lead him to his four times fall.

First and foremost, it is Faustus' Icarian pride which brings about his final damnation. At the very beginning of the play, the prologue tells us that "Till swoln with cunning, of a self-conceit, /His waxen wings did mount above his reach" (Griffith, 2000, p. 161). Despite all of his advanced studies and perceptive questions, Faustus is completely unaware of his ignorance and blinded by his self-conceit. In his opening soliloquy, Faustus talks about various fields of knowledge. He considers that logic is not scholarly enough for him and rejects Aristotelian logic as a subject worthy of his attention. Then Faustus could be satisfied as a physician only if he had the god-like power to grant immortality – to "make men to live eternally, /Or, being dead, raise them to life again" (Griffith, 2000, p. 162). However, he thinks that medicine is too restrictive for him with his ambitious goals. And, after thinking about it, Faustus believes his disposition is also unsuited for the law, for he has neither the patience nor the interpretative skills to interest himself in what he calls "paltry legacies". The law is too petty, dealing with trivial matter rather than larger ones, so he dismisses it. Theology, the study of the presence and attributes of god and religious doctrines, seems to offer wider vistas, but when Faustus reads "The reward of sin is death" (Griffith, 2000, p. 163), he rejects it and concentrates his attention on magic. Faustus believes that he has commanded every art and these arts do not meet his needs, only supernatural strength can bring him great joy. In this way, with swelling pride,

Faustus has embarked on a road of no return. Because of his self-conceit, Faustus often uses the magic power to play tricks on and take revenge on other people. For instance, a knight, named Benvolio, does not believe that Faustus can perform the feat as that the goddess Diana has transformed Actaeon into a stag. Out of pride, Faustus conjures a pair of antlers onto the head of Benvolio and tells him to have more respect for scholars in the future. These are many such examples. Faustus is such a tragic character, who rejects God because of his Icarian pride but suffers for it eternally.

In addition, Faustus' endless desire for knowledge, power and sex is the second reason for his inevitable fall. We know that Icarus could have escaped from Crete, but he did not listen to the advice of his father, Daedalus. Desire prompted him to raise the height of his flight. Consequently, he fell down into the sea and died. Faustus is the same. Because of his infinite desire, he overindulges in necromancy. First, in order to get genuine knowledge, Faustus studies the magic books carefully and constantly, hoping that he can acquire the truth that he seeks for through the supernatural power, but when Faustus knows that Mephistopheles cannot answer his philosophical questions, he feels disappointed, thus causing his hesitation in repentance to God. Furthermore, desire for power makes Faustus take a series of actions via magic. He plays tricks on people, conjures up grapes, and explores the cosmos on a dragon. He thinks that he is a demigod, and wishes to reshape the map of the world. However, gaining absolute power corrupts Faustus by making him mediocre and by transforming his boundless ambition into a meaningless delight. Finally, Faustus' sexual desire makes him lost in the trap of necromancy. Before the end of his life, Faustus begins to realize the terrible nature of the bargain he has made. Although he has a sense of foreboding, Faustus still uses magic to meet his libido and conjures up Helen. He looks for transcendence in a woman, who is just an illusion and not real flesh and blood. He seeks heavenly grace in Helen's lips, which can, at best, offer only earthly pleasure. What is worse, when he hopes for escaping damnation, he even cries "make me immortal with a kiss" (Griffith, 2000, p. 200). Faustus' desire has become his moral guidance which brings him into the dilemma. In the end, Faustus makes the tragic choice and follows his misfortunate desire to the place of his own demise.

Last but not least, blindness serves as one of Faustus' defining characters throughout the play, which is the third reason for his Icarian downfall. For one thing, when Faustus meets Mephistopheles for the first time, he thinks that Mephistopheles is too ugly to attend on him, and he insists that Mephistopheles should reappear as a Franciscan friar, which is a symbol of his escape from reality. Then Mephistopheles tells Faustus the horrors of hell and urges him not to sell his soul, but Faustus

dismisses Mephistopheles' words and accuses him of lacking "manly fortitude". For another, after selling his soul to the devil, Faustus attempts to repent repeatedly. Therefore, Lucifer comes into our sight to prevent Faustus from repentance. Meanwhile, he shows Faustus the seven deadly sins. When Faustus sees the parade of them, he feels satisfied and even cries "O, this feeds my soul! /How happy were I then" (Griffith, 2000, p. 184). He just treats these as sources of entertainment rather than of moral warning. These scenes show Faustus' willful blindness, and it will persist until the end of his life. Perkins describes him in a sermon delivered in 1593:

a sinner in his first estate ... hate a veil before his face so that he seeth nothing. ..., the night of impenitence and the mist of ignorance so blinding his eyes that he seeth not the narrow bridge of this life, from which if he slide he falls immediately into the bottomless pit of hell. (Princiss, 2002, p. 256)

These words depict Faustus' existing state of affairs and his irreversible terrible fate exactly. All of his encounters and predicaments are due to his willful blindness. No wonder Faustus has suffered the same fate like Icarus, who did not know the wax wings might be melted by the sun and raised the height of flight blindly, thus causing the unnecessary death.

To conclude, the Icarian tragedy of Faustus is a consequence of his characters: proud, blind and greedy. The force of his own nature compels him to the study of magic, and he is unable to resist. Though the good angel and the pious old man dissuade Faustus from necromancy, he does not follow their advice and signs the evil compact with the devil. During his twenty-four year odyssey, Faustus has to learn what Mephistopheles already knows. He must pay for his pride, blindness and greediness. In fact, the good angel or the old man, and the evil angel are reflections of Faustus' own mental processes. These allegorical figures objectify the inner conflict in Faustus and reflect the state of mind of him. Maybe they are the good or bad judgment in Faustus' mind, symbolizing his divided will, part of which wants to do good and part of which is sunk in sin. In this sense, Faustus' character determines his destiny. Like Icarus, he falls down from the heavens and is doomed to death.

CONCLUSION

Through analyzing the details and reasons of Faustus' four times fall, we know that the Icarus myth can be a archetype in this drama, expressing the fatal weakness of human beings that they can find a pattern in human life that resembles the pattern of nature. The Icarus story, serving as a archetype, determines the form of *Doctor Faustus*. Furthermore, the Icarian plot recurs resoundingly throughout the play and tells us the basic pattern that a man is doomed to death because of the fatal weakness in his character. Hereto, we can call archetypal criticism

myth criticism. The Icarus myth acts as a guide to let us have a better understanding of *Doctor Faustus*.

Faustus is a contradictory character, capable of tremendous eloquence and possessed of awesome ambition, yet his overly pride, willful blindness and endless desire make him go astray. He rejects all the medieval authorities – Aristotle in logic, Galen in medicine, Justinian in law, and the Bible in religion – and decides to strike out on his own. To some degree, he is regarded as the first character on the Renaissance stage. However, this Renaissance man cannot escape the terrible fate and falls down to the hell. Is Faustus' fate inevitable or is he given free will which he fatally misuses? In fact, Faustus represents the common people. Everyone is Faustus. To watch him on progress through his life is to reincarnate in him the desires, conflicts, and temptations which confront modern man as well. For us, we must be aware of our meager abilities, our imperfect intellect and our inadequate knowledge. By proper methods, we can achieve our own values. *Doctor Faustus* is of great importance in literature and it continues to enrich our horizons. That is why it still compels many critics' attention with such intensity.

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