International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)
A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)
Impact Factor: 6.8
Volume-XII, Issue-II, March 2026, Page No. 603-609
Published by Scholar Publications, Sribhumi, Assam, India, 788711
Website: http://www.ijhsss.com
DOI: 10.29032/ijhsss.vol.12.issue.02W.258

And then thou must be damn'd perpetually": On the Devil in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*

Sambuddha Ray
Independent Researcher, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Received: 09.03.2026; Accepted: 13.03.2026; Available online: 31.03.2026

Abstract

The present essay attempts to think about the diabolical in Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus by focusing on one specific aspect of textual reading – Marlowe's rediscovery of the Faustian myth from the English Faustbook. So doing, the essay attempts to establish the theme of a failed transgression, following Jonathan Dollimore primarily, as central to the understanding of the complex presence of the diabolical in Marlowe's rediscovered tragedy. The figure of the devil in Doctor Faustus is seen in historicist, cultural and textual scales to imagine the subverted Manichean relation that the newly fashioned Renaissance Man had with the devil, which bears both material and conceptual connotations. The article eventually attempts to show how the figure of the devil in tragedy assumes a prominent role, as opposed to its minimal scope within the Morality play tradition.

Keywords: Devil, Tragedy, Morality play, Renaissance Man, Faustian myth

Introduction: Why to think about the devil?

The devil has so much of a prominent presence in the Western literary canon that Albrecht Classen argues that the devil, in terms of popularity, equals the God in a 'Manichean-like symmetry' (Classen 257). Such an extraordinarily divided Manichean worlding and the conceptual reworking of the devil contribute to the fundamental problem in Christopher Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus*. The presence of the devil underwent a gradual change both in the society and literature– a distinct presence of the devil in the first Christian millennium; the development of the image into a 'very real entity', similar to that of Jesus in both 'moral and global scale'; turning into a 'terrible and obsessive entity' towards the end of the Middle Ages; 'symbol of human evil' and 'personification of evil' in the present day (López 383). The most notable employment of the idea of the devil can be traced in 'late medieval literature, chronicles, treatises, and even in medical tracts' (Classen 257). Albrecht Classen finds a corresponding relation between the prominence of the devil and the Church's loss of popularity (Classen 257). The more the people got immersed in private devotion, the more they were threatened by the hellish forces. Such a conflict between devotion or asceticism and temptation can be found in the surrealist master Luis Buñuel's *Simon of the Desert* (1965) where a saint Simon is being continuously tempted and interrupted by the hellish forces, i.e., Satan. But the devil became "increasingly present, if not dominant" in both public and private lives when the absolute authority of the church collapsed with the reformation:

> "When the absolute authority of the Roman Catholic Church collapsed during the rise of Reformation, in the fullest sense of the metaphor, all hell broke loose and the devil enjoyed, metaphorically speaking, more freedom than ever before" (Classen 257–8).

There was an increase in the presence of the devil in the literary world, especially in the genre called *teufelsliteratur* (Devil literature) or *teufelsbücher* (Devil book). The devil rose in importance with the rise of anti-clerical sentiments. One of the most important books from this genre is *Historia Von D Johann Fausten* or the *Faustbuch*. The *Faustbuch* was first published by Johann Spies in 1587. Curiously, the author is anonymous, while the first page was signed by Spies. Ian Watt, in his book *Myths of Modern Individualism: Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Robinson Crusoe*, explores the historical relevance of Doctor Faustus and the various sources leading to the development of *Faustbuch*. There are thirteen contemporary references to Faustus which can be divided into the following categories—a) "letters of scholarly opponents"; b) "sundry public records"; c) "tributes from satisfied customers"; d) "other, more noncommittal memoirs"; and e) "reactions of Protestant clerical enemies" (Watt 3). One of the earliest references to the historical Faust can be found in a letter of 1507 by his scholarly opponent Johannes Trithemius (Baron 44). References to Faust have been found in passages of the *Zimmerische Chronicle* dated "after 1539". An active enemy of witchcraft persecutions, Johannes Wier repeated the story of Faust's death in a memoir in 1568. A manuscript composed between 1572 and 1587 and preserved in the library of Saxon town in Wolfenbuttel contains a fuller account of Faustus's life and death (see Watt 3–4). This version is very similar to the 1587 Frankfurt Faustbuch. The pact of "four-and-twenty years" and the terrible end of Faustus's life is introduced in the Wolfenbuttel version (Watt 18). The *Faustbauch* introduced most of the elements which were reiterated in the later literary adaptations of the Faustian myth. Carlos A. Matheus López points out the basic structure of the Faustian theme — "(1) the characterization of Faust based on lack of satisfaction; (2) the pact with the Devil; (3) the results of the pact, such as questions to the Devil, voyages and adventures, feats of magic and sexual satisfactions; and (5) Faust's death, preceded by lamentations before the final moment" (López 384).

Note on the Historical Faustus:

Quite interestingly, it is possible to trace a genealogy of the otherwise Faustian *myth*. The historical Faustus was likely born in 1480 (although some sources date it as 1466) in the small town of Knittlingen of northern Wurttemberg and was active in the first four decades of the sixteenth century. Known by the name of George Faust or Faustus (German "Jörg" and Latin "Georgius") or sometimes simply as Doctor Faustus, the historical man supposedly died in 1540 at Staufen, a small town at Wurttemberg (see Watt 3; see Baron 43). Initially, as Karl Schottenloher has shown, Faustus also used the name Georg Helmstetter (see Baron 43). He gained academic qualifications from the University of Heidelberg and proudly called himself "*magister*, philosopher and doctor"— he began his studies in the University of Heidelberg in 1483, wherefrom he gained an academic degree as a bachelor in 1484 and as a master/*magister* of philosophy in 1487 (see Baron 43). A Paris manuscript shows that Faustus, who then used the name Helmstetter, quickly took interest in "foretelling the future" which made his career controversial. Baron writes that "Faustus was an astrologer, but he also gained a reputation from dabbling in magic" (Baron 43). Faustus was not a victim of witch-hunting. However, after his death in 1540, the political situation underwent a rapid

change. Witch-hunting in Germany was particularly carried out by the Lutherans (Watt 18). Owing to these developments, the legend of Faust gained importance during this period. Spies's *Historia Von D. Johann Fausten* (1587) was Lutheran in every sense. Initially, Luther thought of ecclesiastical reform in educational terms, that every person— both students of theology and ordinary people— should engage with the original documents of Christianity and the Bible. Later, in 1517, when the reformation began, he contested the selling of indulgences by the Church. Luther's movement can be analyzed from two different perspectives— a) "last and most cataclysmic of a number of medieval movements … concerned with informing secular life with Christian attitudes"; b) "radical attempt to deal with the problem of guilt, anxiety and despair with which the late medieval society was ridden" (Datta 7). Luther's reform of education led to an increase in the reading public in Germany and it was required to guard the uneducated people against the hellish activities of the devil. Thus, the *Faustbauch* was composed. As Kitty Datta argues, Faustus has been presented as an antithesis to Luther (8). Insofar as the textual history is concerned, the main source of Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* (hereafter, *Doctor Faustus*) was the 1592 translation of the *Faustbuch* by P.F. Gent— *The Historie of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus* (hereafter, English *Faustbook*). While the *Faustbuch* roughly belongs to the genre of morality literature, Marlowe's play, as the title suggests, is a tragedy with elements of morality plays being incorporated within it (however, several critics have questioned the play's success as a tragedy). Deviating from his source, Christopher Marlowe has insightfully engaged with the so-called tragic protagonist. The episodes of the original source have been rearranged to generate a tragic effect. In *Poetics*, Aristotle defines "tragedy" as a serious drama which affects "through pity and fear the *katharsis* of such emotions" (9). Needless to say, these emotions can only be evoked when the protagonist faces a disastrous consequence that is more than due. Marlowe's Faustus faces a *tragic* end and not a *deserved* one.

Doctor Faustus: Limit and Transgression:

It can be said that Mephistophilis is a catalyst in Faustus's damnation, if not responsible. If damnation bears an unnecessary tinge of moral judgment in this case, one may replace this with the concept of *transgression* and Faustus's transgression, as Jonathan Dollimore has argued, "is identifiably Protestant in origin: despairing yet defiant, masochistic yet wilful" (Dollimore 115). To speak of Faustus's transgression is to identify a necessary addendum to the concept of the *devil*. The theme of transgression is introduced in the prologue of the play with an allusion to the Icarian myth. Icarus, whose wings were made of wax, flew so close to the sun that his wax wings melted and he fell down into the sea. In literature and Western culture, Icarus is an archetype of the "overreacher". Such a familiar motif of Icarus forebodes Faustus's unfettered self-will and destructive ambition. Seeing the play as an adventure of a Renaissance man breaking free of the medieval constraints, situates the protagonist within the limiting structure of Christian Humanism. While limit does not remain a limit "if it were absolutely uncrossable", transgression would seem to be annulled "if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows" (Foucault 34). In other words, there *is* a materiality to an otherwise conceptual fashioning and transgression of the limit. Thus, Faustus must be seen located at the center of a Manichean-like division of Heaven and Hell, God and Lucifer and Good Angel and Bad Angel whose "axes pass through and constitute human consciousness" (Dollimore 111). Such an utterly divided world speaks less of the world as a

geographical entity and more in conceptual terms to rethink the very idea of worlding. So, Hell, for Mephistophilis, is consciousness: "where we are is hell" (2.i.123). Informing this are the restrictions and limitations of Christian Humanism. In Act I of the play, one sees Faustus taking up various subjects, *viz*. divinity, law, or medicine, only to reject them. Faustus's displeasure with medicine owes to the latter's inability to "make men live eternally." In the latter part of the scene, Faustus finds philosophy to be "odious and obscure", law and physic as the discipline of "petty wits", and divinity to be the "basest." Ultimately, he decides to explore the necromantic skills: "A sound magician is a demi-god" (see 1.i; esp. lines 77–117). Faustus's desire to emulate God initiates the course of his transgression. Dollimore argues that Faustus's transgression is "rooted in an *impasse* of despair" (Dollimore 112). Likewise, Helen Gardner identifies despair as Faustus's "final sin" by pointing out the thirteen occurrences of "despair" and "desperate" in the play (see Gardner 95–100). Faustus desires to transgress the limiting structure but fails to do so entirely, thanks to the conflict in which he has got stuck. He is not secured with the idea that "existing forms of knowledge are inadequate", whereas his desire to transgress is rooted in a "search for security" (Dollimore 113). Such an understanding of *insecurity* is inherent in the Renaissance views of predestination— God has created Hell to "punish His own misdeeds in His victims as though He took delight in human torments" (Erasmus 41). Therefore, the act of breaking free from the orthodox structure intensifies his insecurity. Jonathan Dollimore contends that Faustus's "hedonistic recklessness" and "self-forgetful delight" negotiates with his "initial desperation and insecurity" (Dollimore 113). Faustus is symptomatic of "human-kind as miscreated" (Dollimore 114).

A Failed Transgression and the Diabolical Moment:

Despite the initial introduction of the theme of transgression in the play, Faustus's pact with the devil is, arguably, the *moment* of his transgression. He proposes a treaty with Lucifer for "four and twenty years", to allow him to "live in all voluptuousness", in spite of knowing that this will bring him "eternal death" (1.iii.90–4). Faustus writing the bill with his own blood is symbolic of a new beginning. Michel Neill suggests that the "horror of endlessness" that Faustus had dismissed as "a fable" (2.i.131) must embrace the "dispensation of God" at the end when "one drop", even "half a drop [of] Christ's blood" (5.i.148–9) becomes unattainable (see Neill 201–15). By then, i.e., by the end of the play, Faustus has turned down every opportunity to repent. There seems to be no alternative to a perpetual damnation. He is well aware of the fact that he will be damned as soon as the devil arrives but Faustus desires to "leap up to my God." Going by the conventions of tragedy, Marlowe fashions his protagonist as a Christian, torn between the worlds of Christian theology and Renaissance Humanism, at the face of an impending damnation— the final words of Faustus in Act V, "My God, my God! Look not so fierce on me" are quite reminiscent of Psalm XXII, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?" (see Neil 201–15). Thus, Faustus's pact with the devil, symptomatic of the Renaissance anxiety, as argued earlier through Dollimore, is "despairing yet defiant, masochistic yet wilful." An important moment during Faustus's entire process of overreaching is his pronouncement of "*Consummatum est*" as he finishes writing the diabolical bill: "*Consummatum est*: this bill is ended" (2.i.74). *Consummatum est*, translated as "it is finished", is Christ's last words on the cross: "After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished … he said, it is finished [*consummatum est*]: and he bowed his head

and gave up the ghost" (St. John's Gospel, 19:28–30; see Greenblatt 193–221). Stephen Greenblatt succinctly argues that Faustus's uttering of Christ's last words is an "archetypal act of role-taking" (Greenblatt 214). The pronouncement, suggestive of Faustus's desire of an end, consequently speaks of "suicide"— a diabolical parody of Christ's act of self-sacrifice. Such a subversion of "culture's metaphysical and ethical certainties" is a "haunting instance" of "self-fashioning" in Marlowe (Greenblatt 213).

In the English *Faustbook*, Faustus's motives for coming in contact with the devils are not explored beyond the terms of the pact much. But, in Marlowe's play, the powerful reinvention of the human, identifiable with the Renaissance aspirations, drives the main character, Doctor Faustus. The dramatic ploy solely creates Faustus as "the only human figure with real dramatic importance" (Cole). The most important dramatic device by means of which Marlowe surpasses his source is the abundant use of monologues. For a considerable amount of time in the play, Doctor Faustus is talking to himself. Moreover, the plentiful use of monologues highlights the conflict between ambition and conscience. This brings us back to the fundamental problem of the protagonist, symbolizing a Renaissance mannerism— failure of transgressing the limiting structure, or, to borrow from Dollimore again, a "transgression rooted in an *impasse* of despair" (see Dollimore 110–2). In the essay "*Doctor Faustus*: From Chapbook to Tragedy", Sara Munson Deats writes that in Marlowe's play, the protagonist "first requests material rewards, then knowledge, finally dominance"— although the first two demands bear similarity to certain episodes from the English *Faustbook*, the source does not contain any mention of the protagonist's political ambition (see Deats 213–4). Dominance is a quality generally attributed to God and Faustus, in all probability, desires to gain a God-like authority, given his desires for dominance. Marlowe succeeds in exploring the internal conflicts of the protagonist through an ample use of monologues. Harry Levin writes that "when we notice how many of his speeches are addressed to himself, the play becomes a kind of interior monologue" (Levin 150).

The Devil in the Tragedy:

Marlowe's Doctor Faustus is also a sharp break from the morality tradition. The Good Angel, the Bad Angel or the Seven Deadly Sins which can be traced back to the English morality tradition are used very unconventionally in *Doctor Faustus*. The Good and the Bad angels are successfully used as an extension of Faustus's desire and conscience to heighten his inner conflict. Douglas Cole writes that "[n]owhere in the extant morality plays dated after 1500 do good and evil angels contend for the soul of man" (Cole 307). The usage of Seven Deadly Sins speaks of the early morality plays prior to 1500. Interestingly, the Seven Deadly Sins are not used as "destructive agents" which are "plotting the downfall of Faustus" but "as a delight and gratification to him, not in any ameliorating disguise, but in the raw vulgar expression of their true natures" (Cole 309). Vice, the chief agent of temptation in the morality plays, is absent in *Doctor Faustus*. However, an important position is given to the devil which had a "negligible place" in the English morality play tradition. The devil is Faustus's "chief aggressor" and it has a little similarity with the Vice of the morality plays (Cole 309). Mephistophilis's activities in *Doctor Faustus* are not that of mere threats and spectacular appearances but it enjoys unprecedented "seriousness and intensity." He brings forth the suffering of hell and warns Faustus against damnation. The pain of suffering is given "intense and lucid expressions… in the words of Mephistophilis." Therefore, Mephistophilis's "is closer to the theology of the diabolic and of damnation." Since Marlowe

reverts to tradition older than liturgical drama, his theology is "indeed orthodox", but his originality in employing the theological knowledge through the dramatic form is a sign of "genuine heterodoxy" (see Cole 310)

Christopher Marlowe's attempts at rearranging the episodes of the English *Faustbook* and rewriting the Faustian myth in *Doctor Faustus*, opens up a broad scope to rethink the coexistence of the Renaissance man and the devil in an almost Manichean imagination during the Renaissance. A celebratory statement would sound thus— the *Faustbuch*, an essentially Lutheran text, which was composed to educate the audience, turned into a universal text dealing with the tragedy of the Human, the "overreacher", in an organized society. Yet, the several finer aspects in such a transition from one tradition to the other, allows one to rethink not only the ruptures but also the continuation of history in *Doctor Faustus* and the figure of the devil is symptomatic of these nuanced discussions.

References:

1. Baron, Frank. "Faustus of the Sixteenth Century: His Life, Legend, and Myth." *The Faustian Century: German Literature and Culture in the Age of Luther and Faustus*. Edited by J.M. van der Laan and Andrew Weeks, Boydell & Brewer, 2013, pp. 43–66.
2. Classen, Albrecht. "The Devil in the Early Modern World and in Sixteenth-Century German Devil Literature." *The Faustian Century: German Literature and Culture in the Age of Luther and Faustus*. Edited by J. M. van der Laan and Andrew Weeks, Boydell & Brewer, 2013, pp. 257–84.
3. Cole, Douglas. "*Doctor Faustus* and the Morality Tradition." *Doctor Faustus*, by Christopher Marlowe, edited by David Scott Kastan. W.W. Norton & Company, 2005, pp. 304–12.
4. Datta, Kitty. Introduction. *Doctor Faustus*, by Christopher Marlowe, edited by Kitty Dutta. Oxford University Press, 1986, pp. 1–47.
5. Deats, Sara Munson. "*Doctor Faustus*: From Chapbook to Tragedy." *Doctor Faustus*, by Christopher Marlowe, edited by David Scott Kastan. W.W. Norton & Company, 2005, pp. 209–25.
6. Dollimore, Jonathan. *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*. 3rd ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
7. Erasmus, Desiderius. "On the Freedom of the Will: A Diatribe or Discourse." Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation. Translated and edited by E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson, Westminster Press, 1969, pp. 35–97.
8. Foucault, Michel. "A Preface to Transgression." *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, edited by Donald F. Bouchard, Cornell University Press, 1977, pp. 29–52.
9. Gardner, Helen. "The Theme of Damnation in *Doctor Faustus*." 1948. *Marlowe: Doctor Faustus*. Edited by John Jump, Palgrave, 1969, pp. 95–100.
10. Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. The University of Chicago Press, 1980.
11. Levin, Harry. *The Overreacher: A Study of Christopher Marlowe*. 1952; repr., Faber and Faber, 1954.
12. López, Carlos A. Matheus. "About the Devil, Literature and Arbitration." *Law & Literature*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2015, pp. 383–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/1535685X.2015.1024922.
13. Marlowe, Christopher. *Doctor Faustus*. Edited by Kitty Datta, Oxford University Press, 1986.
14. Neill, Michael. *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy*. Oxford University Press, 1997.
15. Watt, Ian. *Myths of Modern Individualism: Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Robinson Crusoe*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.