

Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and the Disordered Will: The Renaissance, Alchemy and Greco-Roman Paganism

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The Renaissance era might be referred to as the time when the Italian city states responded to the events which broke down the Middle Ages. These events comprised, most importantly, the Black Death, the Hundred Years War, the forcible move of the papacy to France and the, slightly less important, major defaults of the English King Edward on his Italian loans. All of these did not dampen the spirits of the Italian capitalists, but in reply, these men created the Renaissance. This movement was both a political and artistic movement that centered in the city state of Florence. But the Renaissance was more than a simple reaction to the destruction of the 14th century. It was considered a reclamation of a heritage, and this heritage was that of pagan Greece and Rome.

The “pagan” part is important, since many of the movements found within this era were pagan oriented, as the resurrection of many of the old Latin classics and the reclamation of alchemy showed. Nevertheless, the Renaissance cannot be understood without the concept of the donation of matter, specifically, the money and patronage of the Medici family, without whom the Renaissance would not exist. At root therefore, the Renaissance was oligarchic in origin and scope which serves to put this entire era into proper perspective. Savonarola was not making up the facts that money now ruled the city state—he spoke a truth obvious to all. First and foremost, the Renaissance was a movement that sought to use the ancient classics of Greece and Rome in order to create a new world. This seems rather paradoxical, since normal university lectures on this subject stress that this period was conservative in scope: the reclamation of the Roman heritage by the Florentines was meant to resurrect the power of Italy. But this era was revolutionary.

The purpose of reclamation was to re-paganize the city states and re-introduce at least some of the features of the ancient Greco-Roman world that interested them in their project of social reformation and revolution. The remainder of this paper, then, will seek to understand the specific features of this world—especially the Greek—that motivated the Florentines towards this apparently conservative but actually revolutionary path. Firstly, the domination of the Medicis in Florence is a necessary, but not sufficient, cause of the Renaissance movement in that city.

Nearly everything that occurred in that city state at its zenith was financed, either openly or secretly, by this powerful merchant banking family. In fact, the eventual power and spread of this movement cannot be separated from the fact that this family was ultimately revolutionary. Possibly trying to imitate the Senatorial oligarchy in republican Rome, the Medicis created the first international banking empire in modern times, creating branch banks in different cities and creating the first currency conversion tables of modern times. But there is no separation of the Medici bank from the desire to resurrect the virtues of Republican Rome. But these virtues are based on the oligarchy of the Senate, as well as the fierce civic pride that Romans took.

The Florentines sought to reclaim this heritage. The expansionist tendencies of early Rome were military, for the Florentines, financial. But, after the revolt of the Ciompi, there was

no way that this domination could be open, so it functioned “privately,” a euphemism for secretly (Godman, 294ff). The papacy as well maintained the Medici clan as its bankers, hence even removing the papacy from an independent source of patronage, as the later Medici popes will prove. Secondly, while the Medici clan sought to imitate the Roman Senate, the political movement of the Florentine world was based loosely on the old Greek polis. The Italian renaissance is known, after its artwork, which after all, were derivative of the financial end of things, for its attempt to resurrect the concept of civic virtue.

The old Roman and Greek city was based around civic patriotism, where the wealthy and literate would serve the city in a military and civic capacity at no charge, this was a matter of volunteerism, occasionally seen as an obligation. But importantly, the central question was an engaged, literate civic population that could take part in the deliberations of the city. From this, the early idea of republicanism and civic engagement took not only from the Greek polis, but also from the developing civic pride and independence of the medieval city (Godman, 293). One might be able to hold that the renaissance in Florence sought to reclaim the oligarchy of the old Roman Senate with the republicanism of the old Greek polis. In the process, the Medici’s also patronized the sciences, including both Galileo as well as the alchemists.

The Renaissance was not content to re-read Ovid and Virgil (certainly had both been read throughout the medieval period), but were far more interested in creating a new world, and using science, that is, the control over the natural order, to help justify it. Matter, rather than spirit, became the new god. Matter was to be the building blocks of the new creation, and hence, manipulating it. This became the province of the newly resurrected and lavishly funded alchemist movement which sought not so much to change lead into gold, but to create a new world and a new population. The old world needed to be melted down through crisis, and the new put back together by the scientific elite. Alchemy was as much a symbol for the development of a new consciousness as the more vulgar concerns for making gold. Alchemy was political and scientific at its root (Faivre, 34-38).

The artwork of the renaissance had this same dual background. On the one hand, it sought to resurrection of much older Greek models, but with a revolutionary purpose: to have the material world as the focus of study, rather than that of the spiritual world. Paul Johnson writes: “By using foreshortening and other illusionistic devices, by deploying perspective conjunctions, they contrived to conquer pictorial space, just as in the 20th century we began to conquer astronomic space” (Johnson, 20).

What Johnson has done in this passage is to use symbolic language to connect the new sciences with the “new” art forms.¹ First of all, it should be noted that the creation of a realistic person was done using illusion. But the use of these illusions also served to conquer space, to bring it under the domination of the painter and his wealthy sponsors.

Machiavelli was to say the same about using social illusions to conquer one’s political opponents and Fortuna herself (for more on this connection, cf Godman, 175ff). The very fact that Johnson links this conquering of pictorial space with the 20th century conquest of outer space is meant to be symbolic: Johnson holds that this conquest of space is actually both scientific and political, mirrored in the artwork that gets all the attention. An illusion in itself. The Medici’s used the illusion of the restored republic after the revolt of 1494 to secretly control the state (Villari, 206). Could Mr. Johnson have missed this connection? This is highly doubtful. Even more, could it also be that the science of the time, universally heralded as revolutionary,

1 Perhaps I’m giving him too much credit.

also be more concerned with social and economic power than truth? What Johnson is saying is that by manipulating the methods of perspective, the artist and the sponsors can depict what is actually non-existent. This is no different than the Medici's creating a "populist" mob to sack the homes of the rich to smooth their own way to power (Villari, 208). But near the end of the work, Johnson seeks to link the changes in artistic technique with the concept of progress.

Unconvincingly, Johnson holds that the Greeks and Romans also sought the concept of progress, though offers no proof of the matter (Johnson, 126). Nevertheless, there is a connection between the new artistic techniques, ostensibly seeking to reclaim the Greco-Roman mantle, with progress. The techniques of painting sought to depict the human form as dynamically and realistically as possible to bring about progress. Does this make sense? Only if one seeks to alchemically alter the nature of human perception.

One can use the insights of alchemy to make sense of Johnson's half-articulated idea: the events of the 14th century were the quicksilver: they dissolved the old world. This dissolution was absolutely central to creating the new world, in that the old needed to be destroyed before any progress could be made. The vacuum was filled by the new elite of the Italian Renaissance: the world was put back together by the realistic painting of the era: the world of matter and the human body was now to be the center of the new world. Speaking of the Florentine painters, Johnson writes: "They now had an alternative, and in some ways a more attractive one, one because classical mythology provided many more opportunities for the display of beauty – particularly female flesh – and of *joie de vivre* than the endless Christian stress on piety and the sufferings of the martyrs" (Johnson, 31).

Little more need be said here: the point of such works was to alter the nature of the viewer, to get the view to concern the things of the body, lust and greed, rather than the self-sacrifice so common in Christian work. There is no real step between the worship of money and the worship of kindred lusts such as the sexual kind, regardless of its being couched in its Greco-Roman guise. Such art serves a similar service as modern television: it uses illusion and titillation to change the consciousness of the viewer. How can one bring this all together? It seems that the Medici clan sought to use Florence as an experiment in building their new world. The use of Greco-Roman models was a pretext, legitimate at root, but illegitimate in practice.

The use of Greco-Roman models was a means of providing a new moral basis for social life, as Machiavelli made abundantly clear. The papacy was easily captured by Medici money, and Savonarola was burnt for pointing this out, as well as the obvious consequences. The use of the open, Greek-style forum sought to legitimize the true nature of politics: power and money. The artwork of the era, with plenty of exceptions, sought to materialize the viewer through illusion and the evocation of lust. Alchemy and the new sciences were to place a mathematical stamp on all this, showing that the manipulation of matter by those with the resources and talent can bring tremendous power and eventually conquer Fortune (randomness), something important to Machiavelli's ideas on politics. Money and power were ways of conquering fortune, just as illusion was a way of conquering space, and space travel could conquer the cosmos.

This lengthy introduction is needed because the modern reader often has no idea of the origin of the concepts in this play. Faustus, in other words, requires a through knowledge of the basic concepts of Renaissance alchemy. Though written at the end of the 16th century, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is a critique of "metaphysics," or the occult² sciences, seeking to control and

2 The term "occult" is used here in its normal sense, denoting something hidden away from the "profane" or the

replace nature. The purpose of alchemy was to gain power over reality through the knowledge of nature's ultimate foundations. The arcana seeks to dissolve all “normal” relations into their ultimate components, and then to coagulate them into something new, according to the “wisdom” of the magus. In Elizabethan England, this was typified by John Dee, organizer of the British secret service, whose code name was .007.³ The problem that Marlowe had was that all the discoveries of the arcana were projections of the will and had no relation to reality at all.

Alchemy was not about turning “lead” into “gold.” Such terms were for the profane. These “metals” are symbols for, among other things, the souls of people. The “leaden” were sunk in superstition while the golden were the natural rulers of mankind.⁴ Faustus was a direct attack on Dee and his projects for a British empire. Alchemy become the bedrock of modern science when Issac Newton gave it credibility a generation later. Prior to him, the Medici clan in Florence was the main financier of the alchemical movement, including such luminaries as Marsilio Ficino and Galileo (cf both Borchartd and Mendelsohn, entire).⁵ It is not an exaggeration to say that without the Renaissance’s obsession with alchemy, there could be no modernity.

The main issue in this play is the disposition of Faustus' will, which is saturated with purely trivial and worldly concerns. Due to this, it cannot tell image from reality. Faustus' desires projects their own disorder onto the external from which Faustus becomes increasingly alienated. The world is no longer real, but merely a pathetic series of representations all confirming his desires, yet satisfying none. Putting the thesis here briefly, this paper will try to show, using Doctor Faustus, that the will conditions what the mind perceives. Epistemology is thus a product of will.

Nothing about Faust is logical. The play begins with his rejection of God and Christ based on his contention that none can become righteous.⁶ By ruminating on sin to the exclusion of redemption, the reader is being “initiated” into the world of pure phenomena without substance. His desire for power, women and social acceptance leads his enslaves intellect down dangerous paths. In his first conversation with Mephistopheles, the reader might ask some obvious questions: Why would any demon “enslave” himself to a man? On what grounds does a mere mortal have the power force a spirit to act? The simple answer is that demons manipulate man through images generated through man's own desire, as they can create nothing. Since this desire stems from pride, spirits then act as if they are “subject” to his “all-powerful” will.

The power that Faustus seeks (“metaphysics”) is not creative, but, like the demons, can manipulate only what is already present. By keeping this knowledge a secret (“Lines, circles, scenes, letters, and characters”), perceptible only to an initiated elect (the “studious artizan”), this

uninitiated. It is not the same as “arcane,” which refers to their complexity that only the “golden” mind can grasp (Nizida, 80). In short, this is the knowledge that allegedly existed in Atlantis before God flooded it out of existence (Nizida, 65).

- 3 See Dee's writings, edited by Geoffery James, 2011. Dee claimed that the secret knowledge of the universe was given to him by angels (all demons are angels), clearly referenced in Marlowe's play. Dee was also a high ranking councilor to Queen Elizabeth, helping to build the empire, also mirrored in Faustus' conversations with Holy Roman Emperor Charles V.
- 4 Gold was associated with Apollo, god of reason and sunlight, while lead was associated with Saturn. Quicksilver, the universal solvent, was connected with Hermes (Mercury), the god of deception, contract law and merchant life.
- 5 These two papers contain the basic claims made in this first paragraph. Since this paper is about the play and not Renaissance history, this contentious issue will not be explored further.
- 6 “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and there's no truth in us. Why, then, belike we must sin, and so consequently die. . .”

elect then becomes the rulers of the world (“power and omnipotence”):

These metaphysics of magicians,
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, of omnipotence,
Is promis'd to the studious artizan!

Faustus' will manifests in making transaction with the image of Mephistopheles, an agent of Lucifer. Mephistopheles sets the terms of the contract and has the power to eventually take Faustus' soul. Yet, Faustus retains his megalomaniacal idea that the demons are subject to his will. “Reason” is not part of the equation since, for the disordered will, it serves only to rationalize decisions already made. Desire forces logic to do its bidding, which is a demonic inversion of the normal order.

Faust is presented as a scholar. It cannot be the lack of knowledge that brings him to these decisions. It is the demands of the will that possess him. A. N. Okerlund's (1977) analysis only goes part of the way. He admits that the play is about puerile illogic, but does not mention its source. Sin and its effects on the soul are the clear cause, but the secondary literature in general is loathe to mention it. The only thing that makes any sense of Faustus' sudden inability to reason at any level is sin, which slowly poisons the soul.

Honderich (1973) goes to great lengths to avoid the issue. She argues that Faustus is a Calvinist/Puritan tract on predestination, this being the cause of Faustus' inability to repent. This interpretation cannot explain why God, who is in charge of the entire production, would give him so many thoughts of repentance, even in the worst of times. Faustus is a parody of the Puritan revolutionaries. The English bourgeoisie is Faustian, and its desire for money (itself alchemical, “metallic,” and unnatural) is the cause of its growing power. Whoever controls the money controls the state; whoever controls the definition of what is “real” controls everything, including its own opposition.

Once the contract is signed, Faustus asks about Hell while simultaneously declaring it a “fable.” The fact that he is speaking with a demon has failed to convince him otherwise. It does not take long for Faustus to change the subject to what he really wants, which is a woman to do his bidding. Sex, called “lechery” in the parade of mortal sins, is yet another powerful weakness that makes Faustus easy to manipulate. Demons bring him a “wife” who can take different forms, serving any fantasy of the moment. This is only to feed his narcissism in that it gives the illusion that women see Faustus as desirable. Demons cannot create life, which means that he is left to copulate with the concept of a woman. These are images controlled by demonic forces that give the impression of satisfaction. The connection to our own time is obvious.

“Science” is rationalized magic. Halpern (2004), dealing with Faustus and science, colossally misses the point:

Faustus. . . appears as the contrary to [Francis] Bacon,⁷ not his anticipation. But

7 The quote being referenced is the speech by Valdes: “Then haste thee to some solitary grove, And bear wise Bacon's and Albertus' [Albert the Great] works, The Hebrew Psalter, and New Testament; And whatsoever else is

perhaps he reveals instead an antithetical element in Bacon himself, whose project of science as power is predicated on annihilating the wayward and incorrigible subjectivity of the scientist. For Bacon, the human mind is a source of endless error, and it must be subjected to the severe orthopedics of an impersonal method if it is to produce reliable observations and axioms (Halpern, 486).

The problem with Halpern's account is that, in taking the reference to be Francis Bacon (d. 1626, a contemporary), rather than Roger (d. 1294), he fails to grasp the reference. Roger Bacon was a medieval founder of scientific empiricism, while Francis was both an alchemist and a utopian, holding that science will soon be omnipotent and the ruler of all (Gaukroger, 6-10). Hence, either Marlowe is claiming that Valdes is not being honest (that he is deliberately confounding the two English scientists with the same last name), or Halpern has not made the connection between Marlowe's clear contempt for utopianism and Francis Bacon's advocacy of it (Gaukroger, 8-15).⁸

Nevertheless, Halpern is correct when he mentions restraining the arrogance of the scientific mind. This was Marlowe's point of view (against the dominance of John Dee in England). In Faustus' many attempts to repent, he states: "The god thou serv'st is thine own appetite, Wherein is fix'd the love of Belzebub: To him I'll build an altar and a church, And offer lukewarm blood of new-born babes." This statement says three things. First, it is confirmation of the thesis here, that appetite is the cause of his illogic. Second, it is appetite that binds him to demons who can manipulate desire. Thirdly, the reference to child sacrifice references the ancient child sacrifices to Moloch, patron god of Tyre. Tyre was a merchant city, as England was becoming, and demanded child sacrifices to guarantee profit and pleasure (Tarbox, 105-106). Hence, any claim that Marlowe was sympathetic to the Puritans is bizarre. Early British industrialization, still a time off, will show an entirely new side to child sacrifice.

Lucifer demands a contract, and shows such an insecure grasp on Faustus' loyalty that it has to be signed twice. It is clear that this contract, the ultimate symbol of commercial society, is only conditional, since repentance would invalidate it (which, of course, means that God remains in total control of the proceedings). Since presumably Faustus is already baptized, it would take a mere moment for Faustus to repent of the whole thing, which explains Lucifer's insecurity.

Faustus again makes reference to his disordered state of will: "My heart's so harden'd, I cannot repent. ." is Faustus' admission that the truth is irrelevant, he is a prisoner of desire. Later in the play, the Old Man, the archetype of true wisdom, says to Faustus:" 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."

Yet, Faustus, given his internal obsession with power, can only comprehend formal, legal relations, which of course, exclude grace, love and forgiveness. Legality is all demons can understand, and the developing absolute state will express this violently. The fact that a sacrifice of Christ made 1600 years earlier can expunge his present actions is incomprehensible to all concerned, regardless of the old man's entreaties. The concept of mercy (which nullifies the law)

requisite; We will inform thee ere our conference cease." Albert the Great was reputed to be an alchemist, and the word "grove" has occult connotations, partly from the Old Testament, which is where the pagan priests performed their magic.

8 The Gaukroger book, in Chapter 1, provides an excellent summary of the relation between alchemy and Bacon's social utopia, called the "New Atlantis." Alchemy and early modern science differed neither in method nor purpose, only in its exposition.

is not part of his thought process, and just shows Faustus' continued mental degeneration. His "hardened heart," can no longer make sense of anything. The demons too, are only images. He shouts that he cannot be saved, even as the Serpent, which is Lucifer himself, can be. There is no logic here, since there is no reality. Lucifer, referring again to strict legality, says that God is "just," which, in his case, is accurate.

The Old Man's speech, again, is the final ode to Faustus' condition. It is all about his will, not about the intellect or understanding. Primarily, the Old Man is concerned about the effect of this arcane knowledge on his soul.⁹ What Faustus has done creates a vicious circle: he desires power and all that goes along with it. The demons, sensing that weakness, give him a strong taste of this power, which only whets his appetite, which leads to more indulgence from Lucifer until Faustus is completely incoherent.

In Faustus' final outburst before he is taken to hell, this incoherence could not be more vivid. His ranting makes no sense, but its pathetic appeal lies in the fact that Faust has fallen apart as an individual. He has two personalities: the first is pure desire; it comes from the will. It has taken on a life of its own. However, he also has a residual intellect that continually, by God's prompting, tells the truth. At the very end, given the unvarying victory of the will over understanding, he no longer can grasp what repentance is, or how much God desires his salvation, or who he is.

Doctor Faustus is tragic because, at one time, he was possessed of a well developed reason. Rather than having desires shaped by this reality principle, the intelligence is perverted in his desire for power. Ultimately, both are acts of will. The first, one that leads to salvation, is the act of will guided by grace. Grace never forces the will, but shows the world for what it really is. Man can accept it or reject it. The second option, rejecting it, is what Faustus does, and what England was about to do in building its Empire on the basis of "progress," largely given institutional reality by Dee and Elizabeth.

Doctor Faustus put his faith in images of spirits who clearly had power, and they used it to convince Faustus that only he did, which adds the comic element. Throughout the play, Marlowe is showing that God is the only force in charge, permitting the demons to tempt Faustus. Love of God, repentance and ultimately, salvation, however, is based on an act of will. This will is not autonomous, but must be connected to an integrated personality based on the clear apprehension of things as they are, not as they appear. This is the falsity of alchemy: it is the claim to objective knowledge, but contradicted by the fact that it is supported on the passionate desire to dominate others. Their power will provide them with coercive might that is strictly formal, but never real.

9 Part of the problem is that Faustus did not learn anything, he used demons as substitutes. This is explicitly mentioned in the occult tract by Nizida (105) as the cause of the amateur's destruction. However, it is clear that Faustus was beginning his slow decline prior to his meeting with Mephistopheles.

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