

RENAISSANCE LITERATURE AND CAPITALISM

OR

GIVE THE DEVIL HIS DUE

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[DRAFT VERSION--NOT FOR QUOTATION]

My contention is that the new sense of freedom in Renaissance literature was related to the freeing up of markets that occurred during this period. In short, in many ways the spirit of the Renaissance *is* the spirit of capitalism. To be sure, capitalism as a fully developed economic system did not yet exist in Renaissance Europe. Indeed the word *capitalism* was not yet in use at the time, and a theory of how free markets function had not yet been developed. But many of the institutions we associate with capitalism do have their origin in the Renaissance--modern banking, for example, began in Renaissance Italy. The freeing up of markets was a long and very gradual process, but we can observe its beginnings in the Renaissance, as a variety of economic forces started to dissolve the complex webs of medieval regulations we associate with the world of feudalism. Perhaps the best place to observe the transition from feudalist principles to capitalist is in the workplace--how people conceived the form of their obligation to work for others. Feudalism was characterized by the institution of serfdom--a man was born into a position of servitude and could not escape it. In general, the medieval world was characterized by a situation where a man's birth determined his lifelong trade.

Basically, if your father was a blacksmith, you became a blacksmith--which is why we have so many people named "Smith" to this day.

The great contribution of the nascent capitalism of the Renaissance was the idea that a man could better his position in the world. You did not have to follow in the footsteps of your father--if you had ambition, you could learn a new trade, learn a better trade, and work your way up in life. Nowhere is this principle better illustrated than in the lives of the Renaissance dramatists themselves. Most of them came from lower middle-class backgrounds and used the world of the theatre to improve their circumstances. Shakespeare's father, for example, was a glover by profession--his son went on to become the most successful dramatist of his day and eventually was able to buy one of the most expensive houses in Stratford. This was typical of the new possibilities offered by Renaissance economic life. You were not tied down to the position you were both into, but could use your talent and above all your education to make your way up the socioeconomic ladder.

This is exactly the issue with which Marlowe chooses to open his play *Doctor Faustus*. We see the learned doctor trying to figure out what to do with his education and above all asking himself what profession he should pursue:

Settle thy studies Faustus, and begin
 To sound the depth of that thou wilt profess.
 Having commenced, be a divine in show--
 Yet level at the end of every art
 And live and die in Aristotle's works.
 Sweet *Analytics*, 'tis thou hast ravished me.

Bene disserere est finis logices.

Is to dispute well logic's chiefest end?

Affords this art no greater miracle?

Then read no more, thou has attained that end.

A greater subject fitteth Faustus' wit.

This is a moment that should be familiar to all undergraduates. Faustus has in effect just graduated from college and is wondering whether all the knowledge he has learned has any use. Notice that when he thinks about philosophy, he does not for a moment consider that a life of contemplation might be valuable in itself. Faustus is too much a modern for that--his knowledge must somehow lead to some kind of financial gain for him. Needless to say, he immediately goes on to wonder whether he should become a lawyer or a physician.

Faustus has to take into account the earning potential of his diploma because, unlike traditional tragic heroes, he does not come from the aristocracy. Marlowe's Chorus in the Prologue points out about Faustus: "Now is he born of parents base of stock." In Faustus, Marlowe is thus portraying a characteristic Renaissance phenomenon--the New Man, the man on the make, what we would call the self-made man. In many respects the idea of the Renaissance man and the capitalist idea of the self-made man come together, and they do so specifically in Faustus. He is using his newfound freedom as a man of the Renaissance to rise in the world, and in particular he is using his wits and his education toward that end. Thus Faustus ends up being a kind of self-portrait of Marlowe. As I suggested, many of the Renaissance playwrights were following a similar course, and, as we will see, Faustus as magician and Marlowe as dramatist have much in common--especially in their ability to stage spectacles for an

audience. There are then reasons why Marlowe identified imaginatively with his creation Faustus. He sympathized with the magician's drive to make something greater of himself. At the same time, though, Marlowe saw the nightmare side to the Renaissance dream of self-betterment. The opening scene of *Doctor Faustus* is a marvelous emblem of the new economic world of the Renaissance. We see the characteristic new activity of the age--getting to choose your occupation. In the Middle Ages, you were told from birth what to make of your life--you lacked freedom, but at least you had security and did not have to agonize over all these occupational decisions--the matter was simply out of your hands. In *Faustus* Marlowe shows the price Renaissance man paid for his new freedom--you might succeed beyond your wildest dreams in making something better of yourself, but you might also fail and be plunged below the level at which you began. In the new economics of the Renaissance, Marlowe found a substitute for the traditional medieval symbol of the turning of fortune's wheel. Now the rise and fall of a man's fortune in the specifically economic sense becomes the focus of Marlovian tragedy. He even wrote a tragedy about a merchant, called *The Jew of Malta*.

Doctor Faustus, then, dramatizes the problematic freedom of the new world of Renaissance economics, the world of nascent capitalism. Consider the terms of Faustus' famous pact with the devil:

I, John Faustus of Wittenberg, Doctor, by these presents, do give both body and soul to Lucifer, prince of the east, and his minister Mephostophilis, and furthermore grant unto them that, four and twenty years being expired, and these articles above written being inviolate, full power to fetch or carry the said John Faustus, body and soul, flesh, blood, or goods, into their habitation wheresoever.

What is most striking about this passage is the legalistic language. It must have been fascinating to the

contemporary audience, just as legal dramas fascinate TV audiences today. The world of law and business was something new and exotic to the Renaissance theatre-going public. Above all, what happens here is that Faust and Mephistophilis enter into a contractual relationship. This is our best emblem of how the Renaissance world replaced the medieval, how capitalism replaced feudalism. The Middle Ages was not a contractual world--people were not free to establish relationships between themselves by mutual consent. Indeed, that is exactly what feudalism means--peasants were tied to the land as serfs. They did not contract to do labor for their lords; by virtue of where they were born, they were legally bound to do certain forms of service. This is the system that capitalism worked to dissolve--based on the new principle that anyone is free to contract with anyone else--the famous movement from status to contract Henry Maine originally described. One no longer had to work for the lord of the manor; one was free to sell one's labor to the highest bidder--this was the great advance of capitalism over feudalism. Many literary critics romanticize the Middle Ages and view capitalism as a falling off from the feudal ideal. But even Karl Marx recognized that capitalism was an advance beyond feudalism--an advance toward greater freedom in contractual relationships.

But there is a potentially demonic side to this development and that is what Marlowe captures in the tragedy of Faustus. Contractual relationships can create bonds people live to regret. Indeed Dr. Faustus enters into the all-time nightmare bad contract. Marlowe's play gives us a sense of how strange and even devilish the new world of Renaissance capitalism looked to the majority of people at the time--who were in effect still living in the Middle Ages. Friedrich Hayek tells us in *The Fatal Conceit* that the normal behavior of businessmen and merchants can look magical and somewhat sinister to people who do not understand how an economy functions. Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is a

wonderful illustration of that point. Most critics put the emphasis on the fact that Faustus makes a contract with the *devil*. I like to put the emphasis elsewhere--on the fact that he *makes a contract* with the devil. That is what is really new in the play--the magical and somewhat suspect power of contracts, the new power of capitalism and free markets. After all, most of Marlowe's audience were quite familiar with the devil. But most of them had never seen a contract before. They could hear about the devil every Sunday in church. But to learn about this new thing called the contract--for that they had to go to Marlowe's theatre.

The new world of markets created all sorts of new opportunities--for example, to get grapes out of season--one of Faustus' more impressive magical accomplishments. But Marlowe portrays a demonic side to these developments as well. We see the whole new world of contractual relationships encapsulated in one dialogue between Mephostophilis and Faustus:

Faustus. Now tell me, what saith Lucifer thy lord?

Mephostophilis. That I shall wait on Faustus whilst he lives,

So he will buy my service with his soul.

Faustus. Already Faustus hath hazarded that for thee.

Mephostophilis. But now thou must bequeath it solemnly

And write a deed of gift with thine own blood,

For that security craves Lucifer.

If thou deny it I must back to hell.

Faustus. Stay Mephostophilis and tell me

What good will my soul do thy lord?

Mephostophilis. Enlarge his kingdom.

This exchange reflects a whole complex of ideas characteristic of the new capitalism--buying services, taking risks, the need for security, the notion of written law, and finally the principle of infinite acquisition, which Marlowe explores in his other plays *Tamburlaine* and *The Jew of Malta*--whose hero Barabas speaks of his dream of "Infinite riches in a little room." The notion of buying services is so familiar to us today that it is hard for us to realize that it was ever something new and daring. But it was so in the Renaissance--a break from the feudal world where services were dictated by birth. In Faustus' view, his soul belongs to him and not to some feudal lord, and hence he is free to dispose of it as he wills. As Faustus asks himself at one point: "Is not thy soul thine own?" This is exactly the emancipation of the individual that Jakob Burckhardt viewed as at the core of the Renaissance. In the Middle Ages, your soul was *not* your own--it belonged to some corporate group--your Church, your nation. As Burckhardt described the distinction between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance:

In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness--that which was turned within and that which was turned without--lay as though dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation--only through some general category. It is in Italy that this veil dissolved first; there arose an *objective* treatment and consideration of the State and of all the things of this world, and at the same time the *subjective* side asserted itself with corresponding emphasis. Man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognized himself as such.

In Faustus' question "Is not thy soul thine own?", one can see the new individualism Burckhardt

speaks of and it provides the basis for capitalism. And the idea that your soul is your own is linked to the new spirit of Protestantism. Perhaps it is no accident that Faustus goes to school in Wittenberg, a city associated with Martin Luther. One can even find intimations of Max Weber and his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*.

The tragic story of Faustus is paralleled by the comic subplot of the clown Robin. He is offered the prospect of entering into the service of Faustus' student and servant Wagner, and their dialogues is filled with echoes of Faustus' dealings with the devil:

Wagner. Alas, poor slave! See how poverty jests in his nakedness. I know the villain's out of service, and so hungry that I know he would give his soul to the devil for a shoulder of mutton, though it were blood-raw.

Robin. Not so, neither! I had need to have it well roasted, and good sauce to it, if I pay so dear, I can tell you.

Wagner. Sirrah, wilt thou be my man and wait on me?. . . for sirrah, if thou does not presently bind thyself to me for seven years, I'll turn all the lice about thee into familiars and make them tear thee in pieces.

Robin. Nay say, you may save yourself a labor, for they are as familiar with me as if they paid for their meat and drink, I can tell you.

Wagner. Well sirrah, leave your jesting and take these guilders.

Robin. Yes marry sir, and I thank you too.

Wagner. So, now that art to be at an hour's warning whensoever and wheresoever the devil shall fetch thee.

Robin. Here, take your guilders, I'll none of 'em!

Many scholars have questioned that Marlowe wrote the comic scenes in *Doctor Faustus*. There are good reasons for believing that they are the product of a nameless collaborator, hired to fill out the play, perhaps after several scenes were censored out of existence. Many critics feel that the comic scenes are not up to the level of artistic quality manifested elsewhere in the play. But no matter who wrote the comic scenes, at least some of them seem to show an understanding of the larger themes of the play. The comic scenes in effect parody the tragic scenes. In Robin's exchange with Wagner, we see the comic equivalent of Faustus' pact with the devil. In a way, one might say that this scene demythologizes the great pact scene with the devil in the play. All the same issues are there--the exchange of money for services rendered, the contractual obligation, the issue of education and new occupations, the larger question of transformation in the play. Confronted with the same choices Faustus faces, Robin in the end rejects the demonic bargain. He is ultimately suspicious of ceasing to be an apprentice and becoming a wage-earner. Robin wants to stay in the Middle Ages and refuses to enter the Renaissance. Faustus, by contrast, willfully steps out of the Middle Ages and enters the Renaissance, and that means the new capitalist world of freedom of contract. That is why Faustus is heroic and tragic, whereas Robin remains a merely comic figure.

If one is searching for evidence that Marlowe did identify with his Faustus as a tragic hero, one need only look at the parallels between the magician and his creator. Indeed a fundamental principle of the play is that the power of magic and the power of the theatre are one and the same. Doctor Faustus is constantly staging shows for people. Indeed, like his creator, he earns his money by pleasing an audience. Here is how the Duke of Vanhold responds to Faustus' art:

Thanks master doctor, for these pleasant sights. Nor know I how sufficiently to recompense your great deserts in erecting that enchanted castle in the air, the sight whereof delighted me, as nothing in the world could please me more.

Faustus' reply is saturated with theatrical vocabulary:

I do think myself, my good lord, highly recompensed in that it pleaseth your Grace to think but well of that which Faustus hath performed.--But gracious lady, it may be that you have taken no pleasure in those sights.

The language of the theatre is even more evident earlier in the play, when Faustus says "in this show let me an actor be" and Mephostophilis speaks to him of the "cunning in thine art." Marlowe points to the Faustian character of his own art more specifically when he has the Emperor, Charles V, ask the demonic magician to raise the figures of "Great Alexander and his paramour" as entertainment for the imperial court. Faustus in fact prides himself on his ability to raise classical shades from the dead:

Have not I made blind Homer sing to me
 Of Alexander's love and Oenon's death?
 And hath not he that built the walls of Thebes
 With ravishing sound of his melodious harp
 Made music with my Mephostophilis?

If the ability to raise spectres from the classical past is the mark of a magician's art, then Christopher Marlowe is the greatest sorcerer of them all. The most famous moment in the play comes when Faustus evokes the spirit of Helen of Troy:

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships

And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?

Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.

Judging by the number of times these lines were echoed and parodied by Marlowe's contemporaries, they are among the most famous in all Renaissance drama. It is Christopher Marlowe who is raising the shade of Helen here--with his magnificent poetry. He is providing his audience with a spectacle fit for a king--indeed they can come to the theatre and witness the same magic that delighted no less than the Holy Roman Emperor. Like Faustus, Marlowe knew how to put on a good show. And he knew how to capitalize on that ability as well--how to make money from his ability to summon up captivating illusions. He was still sufficiently in touch with the ethos of the Middle Ages to suggest a demonic side to Faustus' conjuring and indeed to create a tragedy out of this story of a new man of the Renaissance. But in the very process of portraying Faustus as a tragic hero, Marlowe managed to convey a sense of the potential grandeur of the new economic world of the Renaissance. Though he leaves us with a warning against Faustus' overreaching, he also provides a final image of his greatness:

Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight

And burned is Apollo's laurel bough

That sometime grew within this learned man.