

Human Imperfection in Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*

Sylviède Nephtali MOUTATI-KABOU* and Basile Marius
NGASSAKI**

Résumé

Cet article intitulé *L'imperfection Humaine dans l'œuvre de Christopher Marlowe La Tragique Histoire de Docteur Faustus*, porte sur l'argumentaire éducatif qui révèle à l'homme les conséquences néfastes d'un désir sans limite à vouloir se surpasser pour des fins personnelles ; le texte souligne les limites tant qu'être humain et exalte la notion de l'altruisme. Ce qui emmène à dire que l'homme est un animal social.

Mots clés

Imperfection humaine, Débordement excessif, Limites, Animal social.

Abstract

This article entitled "Human Imperfection in Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*", presents a set of arguments in order to help man avoid excess in the burning desire to go beyond boundaries just for personal needs; the text reminds man about his limits as human being and extols the notion of otherness. The article shows that man should not forget that he is a social animal.

Keywords

Human imperfection, Excess, Limits, Social animal.

Introduction

In the German mythology, the legend of Faust is one of the most recurrent stories widely known. The nickname Faust is owed to Johann Georges Sabellicus, a tremendously brilliant student of "supernatural magic" at University of Cracow (Poland), who died tragically between

*Doctorant, Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines, université Marien Ngouabi (Brazzaville, Congo)

**Professeur titulaire CAMES, Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines, université Marien Ngouabi (Brazzaville, Congo)

1540 and 1541. Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (B-text 1616) is a retell of this story in which Doctor Faustus, the protagonist finds himself not competent and not knowledgeable though mastering a certain number of things. In this state of despair which resulted in a warning need to know all, he sells his soul to Lucifer in exchange of worldly power and the services of Mephistopheles for a period of twenty-four (24) years. Power that can make him know all and do everything as well as God can. So is Faustus burning desire to reach the highest level never reached as well as in connection with the myth of Master Faustus who lived in Germany. The purpose of this article is to point out that excessive ambition and imperfection of Doctor Faustus.

1. Complementarity as integral part of human life

Complementarity is seen as "*the fact of filling or to complete*". *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2016) defines the concept complementarity as "*two parts that mutually complete each other*". Complementarity is then opposed to *omnipotence* which suggests the capacity of completing.

Faustus is so interested in magic that he attempts to detain worldly power, to have Kings under his command, while he is an ordinary human being, who needs not omnipotence but completed. If absolute self-sufficiency is similar to omnipotence and if no man can claim to be omnipotent, then absolute self-sufficiency does not belong to human beings. So, man is submitted to the law of complementarity for the achievement of total independence requires complementarity. This analysis, clearly excludes man to think like Faustus.

If Faustus' urge is to command Kings and Emperors, he goes beyond that, because the protagonist affirms that "*a sound magician is a demigod*" (1616, 7). This assertion, suggests that Faustus's urge is to be everything and everyone and everywhere. He lives in everything, he is everything and he is everywhere.

In fact, thanks to others, man manages to know his qualities and for the "other" is a kind of mirror from which man can easily make an analysis of himself. Consequently, if complementarity requires the compulsory intervention of other, this supposes that man needs complementarity, without which he is weak in terms of knowledge. In

L'Être et le Néant, Jean Paul Sartre (1943, 265) underlines the importance of the “other” : Autrui est le médiateur indispensable entre moi et moi-même. J’ai honte de moi tel que j’apparais à autrui.

This statement underlines the notion of otherness, that alterity which means complementarity. Doctor Faustus ignored that notion of complementarity. The famous philosopher Blaise Pascal was not wrong at all to say in his *Thoughts* (1670: 688) that *Ego is hateful*.

If *ego is hateful*, this means to say in other words that the judgment of the other is necessary to know about *myself*. In reality, Faustus lives in two worlds that of humans and that of supernatural. The notion of otherness is neglected for a while and reconsidered after for at first Faustus created a great distance between the world of humans and he for this is not profitable for him. At this moment he ignores the importance of complementarity but soon after reconsider that when he came to terms with the devil. Devil is from that time part of his life, accordingly we can notice here the reappearance of *complementarity*.

In this optic Jean Paul Sartre in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946) declares:

Pour obtenir une vérité quelconque sur moi, il faut que je passe par l’autre. L’autre est indispensable à mon existence, aussi bien d’ailleurs qu’à la connaissance que j’ai de moi.

This short quotation underlines the necessity of being two.

2. Self-centeredness as expression of failure

Self-centeredness is synonymous to self-interest, self-concern or egocentrism; it is opposed to altruism or selflessness. *Harrap’s Chambers Student Dictionary of Contemporary English*¹ defines self-centeredness as *a concern for your own interests and welfare*. Obviously, Faustus is endowed with the feeling of self-interest to the extent that in his monologue he uses the first person singular to indicate his needs and objectives; *All things that move between the quiet poles shall be at my command* (1616, p. 7). Gisèle de Souchon condemns egocentrism through the study of *L’Unique et sa Propriété* by Max

¹*Harraps Chambers Student Dictionary of Contemporary English*. London: Chambers Harraps Publisher, 2010.

Stirner born Johannt Caspar Schimdt. Souchon enlightens Stirner's egocentrism in the magazine "Philomag"² (2012, p. 3) declaring:

L'égocentrisme consisterait à se prendre pour le centre du monde, c'est-à-dire se considérer que chacun devrait voir mon intérêt personnel comme le plus important comme le but à poursuivre.

If we shift to the last chapter of *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, we see Faustus regretting the consequence of the way he chose and does feel alone, he attempts to dissipate that feeling of singularity by a kiss from Helen of Troy for at that very moment all that he needed was not power but somebody's presence; this explains clearly that no man is an island.

Is it to say that Faustus is commanded by a spirit of laziness? Believing Blaise Pascal. Let us see Doctor Faustus finding comfort in the words of an old man conversing with him, what he could not accept time before, what expresses his failure due to his egocentric spirit; In scene 13 Faustus declares "Ah, my sweet friend, I feel, thy words do comfort my distressed soul..." (1616, p. 66).

Before these words, Faustus does tend to make himself the center of humanity. He wants to be the one who controls and commands everything in every parts and corners of the globe. In this way, Faustus pretends to know perfectly well the others on the basis of the knowledge that he has for himself. This way of doing does not satisfy Nicolas de Malebranche who thinks that the simple fact of knowing oneself excludes the idea that it is also to possess the total knowledge of the other.

As an illustration, Nicolas de Malebranche writes, in *De la recherche de la Vérité* that "La Connaissance que nous avons des autres hommes est fort sujette à l'erreur si nous n'en jugeons que par les sentiments que nous avons de nous-même" (1674, p. 265).

3. Ignorance as a mark of imperfection

Harrap's Easy English Dictionary (1988) defines the term ignorance as follows: a lack of information or knowledge about something. The

² Philomag, a magazine available online on September 25th 2012, published in 2008.

same dictionary defines the verb to ignore as the fact of not paying attention to something or somebody willingly or unwillingly. Indeed Faustus shows his ignorance for the first time in Act 1, Scene 1 when he asks Wagner to bring Valdes and Cornelius, his sweet friends, so that they help him learn the art of magic. Just before their arrival, a good angel and an evil angel visit Faustus and both are confronted into a verbal duel, each of them intending to persuade Faustus.

The good angel urges him to set aside his book of magic and to read the Scriptures instead; the evil angel encourages him to go forward in his pursuit of the black arts. Then they went away. Faustus is not convinced by the words of the good angel; consequently, his attention is kept by the evil spirit, for the reason that spirit exults at the great powers that the magical arts will provides to him.

So, Faustus's imagination goes far to the extent he dreams of sending spirits elsewhere in the world and at all corners of it doing whatever he wants. Here is the dialog between the good and the bad angels :

Enter GOOD ANGEL and EVIL ANGEL G. ANG: O Faustus! lay that damned book aside, And gaze not upon it lest it tempt thy soul, And heap God's heavy wrath upon thy head. Read, read the Scriptures: that is blasphemy. E. ANG: 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. [Exeunt Angels]. FAUST: How am I gluttet with conceit 24 of this! Shall I make spirits fetch me what I please, Resolve me of all ambiguities, Perform what desperate enterprise I will? I'll have them fly to India for gold... (Marlowe, 1616, p. 7)

Faustus's ambitions are terribly poignant; this can be seen after the two angels have whispered in his ears. As a matter of fact, they offer him a list of impressive goals, in which there is the possibility to acquire knowledge, wealth, and political power, that he strongly and undeniably trusts he will achieve all once he has mastered the dark arts. He seems unmovable from this position. But it is an evidence of ignorance;

Apart from ignorance, Faustus let himself impressed by Mephistopheles's behavior who did obeyed him when the devil appears before him He commands him to depart and to return dressed as a

Franciscan friar. Mephistopheles did so, as it can be read in Scene 3 of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* :

Enter [MEPHISTOPHILIS] a DEVIL I charge thee to return and change thy shape; Thou art too ugly to attend on me. Go, and return an old Franciscan friar; That holy shape becomes a devil best. I see there's virtue in my heavenly words; Who would not be proficient in this art? How pliant is this Mephistopheles, Full of obedience and humility! Such is the force of magic and my spells. (1616, p. 12).

The illustrious saying that comes to explain this case is that of Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) when he quotes in his *La Peau de Chagrin* what follows: Le Malheur se cache souvent sous de trompeuses apparences de luxe (1831, p. 248).

Indeed, Mephistopheles is the first angel that Faustus conjured and is deductively the first result of his magic attempt. What strikes him first is his obedience; it shines but it is just an appearance that should not be normally a sufficient element to make a general judgment. Faustus ignored that. In fact, Faustus judgment is a true encouragement for himself to carry on in the way of magic.

Faustus ignorance is recurrent. As an illustration, he asks Mephistopheles questions about Lucifer and hell and in return the latter tells him that Lucifer and all his devils were once good angels who rebelled against God and have been damned to hell forever. However, Faustus does not seem totally persuaded that they live in hell but on earth; Mephistopheles insisted, however, that he and his fellow demons are always in hell, even when they are on earth, because being deprived of the presence of God, which they once enjoyed, is hell enough. Faustus categorically rejects that and judge Mephistopheles as having a lack of fortitude then declares that he will offer his soul to Lucifer in return of Mephistophilis's service for twenty-four years. We can read in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* :

FAUST: How comes it then that he is Prince of devils?
MEPH: O, by aspiring pride and insolence; For which God threw him from the face of Heaven. FAUST: And what are you that you live with Lucifer? MEPH: Unhappy spirits that fell with Lucifer, Conspir'd against our God with Lucifer, And are for ever damn'd

with Lucifer. FAUST: Where are you damn'd? MEPH: In hell. FAUST: comes it then that thou art out of hell? MEPH: Why this is hell, nor am I out of it. Think'st thou that I who saw the face of God, And tasted the eternal joys of Heaven, Am not tormented with ten thousand hells, In being depriv'd of everlasting bliss? O Faustus! leave these frivolous demands, Which strike a terror to my fainting soul. (Marlowe, 1616, p. 13-14).

4. Singularity as a weakness for man

Singularity taken as *loneliness* is a very great weakness for man. It is provable in the New International Version of the Bible in the book of Genesis 2: 18 The lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him " (2011, p. 5). Deductively, if it is not good for a man to be alone, which is somehow a weakness, the solution for him is to be in company of another human being. Seemingly, this would be good for him.

Remaining in this perspective; Faustus singularity is, henceforth, a weakness being human. Of course Faustus wants to be unique in a dimension he would no longer depend on help from outside. The main reasons are: to be able to do things by himself, that is to say without any outside help of any genre, to make things happen according to his will, whatever he likes, to go wherever he wants, in one word to master everything. Marlowe pinpoints these ambitions as follows :

Faustus ambitions are clearly mentioned, and analyzing this passage, he tends to achieve this level but paradoxically, at the beginning of his training he benefits from outside help, which prevents him to act in a singular way. As a case in point, he was given magical books by two of his best friends Valdes and Cornelius, what is a sort of help that set things correctly that no one can manage do something by himself. Another help is invisible, it comes from Mephistopheles, the demon that serves as intermediary between Faustus and Lucifer, and he benefited from Mephistopheles help.

This makes us say that in the light of Faustus, no man can claim to be independent in the strict sense of the term, we are all dependent each other, we like it or no. Self-sufficiency is egocentric a word. Regarding its meaning it is synonymous to *isolation*, *aloneness*, *solitude*; and in numerology these words correspond to the number 1. 1 is singular and has no friend. It lives alone in its world, so whenever it will call for a

friend it will come out of its isolation. After observation, this number is not the case of man for :

No man can live by himself. Someone cannot stand to live alone completely. Everybody will always need someone to make things happen. Life is a give and take form of living. As we need someone, something or even each other to have for. Voidness and emptiness or being completely alone will not need each other for love, guidance, support and from efforts to live building a worthy and fulfilling life.³

This comment is a reaction to the statement of the pre-eminent representative of the metaphysical poets John Donne (1572 ; 1631), an English poet and cleric in the Church of England who declared: no man is an island a famous line from *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624).

In order to be an island, a man would have to be isolated, this means cut off from the rest of mankind. This can never happen because man is born and grows up with others.

Conclusion

This study on human imperfection in Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, has been done in four stages. As a reminder, this paper builds a bridge between fiction and reality by the way the story of Faust is first a legend before being written. first, it places man (Faustus) in a social context to show the necessity of being completed by an outside help. The second stage combats the idea that man is the center of everything, which is not feasible; the third stage is a reminder for it tackles with ignorance which shows the limit of man, so prevents him to be called a "almighty". The fourth and last stage puts Faustus in a state of singularity though living in world shared with others and aims at showing that no man is singular. Having done so, the article shows the limits of man as well as reminds that he is a social animal.

³ This short comment is borrowed from Wikipedia on the date of June 12th 2017 at 12 :43

Bibliographical References

- MARLOWE Christopher, 1587, *Tamburlaine*, London, Dover Thrift Editions.
- MARLOWE Christopher, 1590, *The Jew of Malta*, London, Stephen J. Lynch.
- MARLOWE Christopher, 1593, *The Massacre at Paris*, Paris, Nouvelles Éditions, *Edward the second*, London, Charles R. Forker.
- MARLOWE Christopher & NASH Thomas, 1594, *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, London, The Tudor Facsimile texts MCMXIV.
- MARLOWE Christopher, 1616, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, London, John Wright.
- BALZAC Honoré de, 1855, *La Peau de chagrin*, Paris, Alexandre Houssiaux,
- BASSI NIRPJIT, 2012, "Performing Anti-Catholicism in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*" Masters of Arts in History, Carleton University, Ottawa (Ontario).
- DONNE John, 1987, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- KOSTIC Milena, 2009, "The Faustian Motif in Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus", *Facta Universitatis, Series: Linguistics And Literature*, Vol. 7, n° 2, p. 209-222.
- LI Li, 2012, "The Inevitable Fall: Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and the Icarus Myth", *CSCanada*, Vol. 5, n° 3, p. 24-29.
- MALEBRANCHE Nicolas, 1674, *De la Recherche de la Vérité*, Paris, Ed. Vrin.
- MARION Jane Nelson, 2012, "What doctrine call you this? An inquiry into Christopher Marlowe, Doctor Faustus and Hermetic Thought 1583-1593". A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of University of Adelaide, June.
- MOHAMMAD SHAH Fawiz Fathema & ABDUL Hakim, 2015, "Dr. Faustus:Theist or Atheist?", *Bangladesh : Journal of Education and Practice*, Vol. 6. n°6.
- OSMAN İşçi, 2010, "Martyrdom for knowledge in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*". A thesis submitted to the

Graduate School of Social Sciences of Çankaya University,
September.

SARTRE Jean Paul, 1943, *L'Être et le Néant*, Paris, Gallimard.

SARTRE Jean Paul, 1946, *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Paris,
Gosselin et Canel,

TAYLOR Clark, 2015, "Angels and Demons : The Effect of Dr. John
DEE's On Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus". Wilkes
Honors College of Florida Atlantic University, April

The New International Version of the Bible, New York, 2011

WION K. Philip, 1980, "Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, the Oedipus
Complex, and The Denial of Death", *Colby Library
Quarterly*, Vol. 16. n° 3.

YEGAR Daniel, 1995, "Marlowe's Faustus : Contract as Metaphor ?",
The University of Chicago law School Roundtable, Vol. 2, n°
10.