

The representation of human weaknesses as a didactic method in Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* (1588-9) and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611)

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Abstract

This essay will discuss the didactic value of *Dr. Faustus* and *The Tempest* through the representation of human feebleness for depravation, in order to raise awareness to the reader about the necessity of saving his soul. For that I will contrast the representation of two patterns of behaviour that take the role of the main character in each work, the representation of the tyranny of the master over the slave, and the importance of repentance and forgiveness to save the souls.

Keywords: English Renaissance, English Literature, English Theater, William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe

Título: La representación de las debilidades humanas como método didáctico en el *Dr. Faustus* (1588-9) de Christopher Marlowe y *The Tempest* (1611) de William Shakespeare.

Resumen

Este ensayo discutirá el valor didáctico de *Dr. Faustus* y *The Tempest* a través de la representación de la debilidad humana por la depravación, con el fin de concienciar al lector sobre la necesidad de salvar su alma. Para eso voy a contrastar la representación de dos patrones de comportamiento que toman el papel del personaje principal en cada obra, la representación de la tiranía del maestro sobre el esclavo, y la importancia del arrepentimiento y el perdón para salvar el alma.

Palabras clave: Renacimiento Inglés, Literatura Inglesa, Teatro Inglés, William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe.

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In the years 1588-9 and 1611 came to light the plays of the Renaissance authors Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare's *Dr. Faustus* (1588) and *The Tempest* (1611). *Dr. Faustus* is a man of letters and science who is condemned to hell, due to the cession of his soul to the devil in exchange for the possibility of any kind of desire and pleasure during 24 years. *The Tempest*, as its name suggests, tells the story of the shipwreck suffered by Prospero and his daughter Miranda, and the revenge of the protagonist when the culprits of his tragedy suffer the same misadventure. Both plays belong to the English Renaissance period; the first belongs to the genre of tragedy, but the second one has received different connotations. The most accurate term is the definition of tragicomedy coined by Beaumont and Fletcher¹⁹ as the union of the tragic genre lacking of deaths and the comedy accompanied by misfortunes. The theory about the influence of Marlowe on Shakespeare, probably takes place again, as both authors coexisted in the same period, worked together and plagiarism was not censored. The historical context places us in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, when many of the political and religious changes occurred. There was also a significant mechanical development which helped to achieve a faster and easier diffusion of knowledge, which was influenced by the classics, and that also tried to distance itself from the immediately preceding ideals of the medieval period. They did not only benefit themselves improving their infrastructures or with the written dissemination of their plays, but in the expansion of their ideological values. In several dramas, important lessons about human morality were hidden behind the actions of the characters. This article will discuss the didactic value of *Dr. Faustus* and *The Tempest* through the representation of human feebleness for depravation, in order to raise awareness to the reader about the necessity of saving his soul. For that I will contrast the representation of two patterns of behaviour that take the role of the main character in each work, the representation of the tyranny of the master over the slave, and the importance of repentance and forgiveness to save our souls.

¹⁹ Barbara Kiefer Lewalski "*Paradise Lost" and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms*". (Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 221.

First of all, it is important to analyse and contrast the nature of the two main characters: Dr. Faustus and Prospero. The first of them, whose name comes from Latin and means lucky, is a man whose hunger for knowledge leads him: 'to gain a deity'²⁰ through sorcery. Reason why he decides to deal with the devil even if it means his eternal condemnation to hell. The witch craze, as is well explained by Goode and Ben-Yehuda²¹ was a phenomenon that took place mostly in Europe since the 15th to the 17th century. They especially repeat the idea that the moral panic that the men had about themselves moving away from the kingdom of God, was the reason for its expansion and fear, but they also concern the Catholic Church to promote the accusations of witchcraft practices among the individuals of a same region. These practices consisted of a conspiracy with Satan against God. As we can see, Dr. Faustus would be one of the human beings who actually would be guilty of this religious crime, since he surrenders his soul to the devil for witchcraft and he also dishonours the Christian values. Goode and Ben-Yehuda²² also take back to the Greco-Roman era when the first rituals took place. In this play the pact between man and Satan, is sealed with an element which represents a total obedience and subordination to Lucifer: blood: 'with my proper blood assure my soul to the great Lucifer's Chief lord and regent of perpetual night'²³. However they suffer a major setback, which predicts what will happen at the end of the work: 'My blood congeals, and I can write no more'²⁴. Reason why Faustus wonders 'What might the staying of my blood portend? Is it unwilling I should write this bill?'²⁵. However, Mephistopheles uses fire to defrost the blood, so the sale of Faustus' soul could be carried out. Just as Faustus believed that the freezing of the blood could have been a sign, in the second scene we are witnesses of how he hesitates about the deal: 'something soundeth in mine ear: 'abjure this magic, turn to God again'²⁶, Faustus is accompanied by black magic, outwitting the head of the catholic church, giving life to the deadly sins and even making Charles V's wishes come to life. However, his power goes against him at the end. Then, Marlowe opens the eyes of the protagonist with his solemn soliloquy, in which the reader learns how if in earthly life we are fulfilled of Luciferian pleasures, we won't enjoy the eternal glory of heaven. Faustus character is, as he says: 'Yet art thou still but Faustus, and a man'²⁷. The fact that he defines himself as earthly, makes the reader sympathize and identify himself with him, and show how the natural greed of human beings can lead them to their destruction. However, Hopkins and McEvoy²⁸ make reference to this character, theorizing about the possibility that he suffers a mental disorder. They take back to the first scene of the second act in which he drastically cuts his own arm instead of making a small cut to sign the pact. Moreover, the character of Prospero, whose name also means happy or lucky in Latin, sympathizes with the reader in his imperfect humanity. We are facing a father figure, whose daughter, Miranda, having been his moral support: 'Thou wast that preserve me [...] which raised in me an undergoing stomach to bear up Against what should ensue'²⁹, means to him his most precious treasure. Because of that, throughout the play, he is moved by the happiness of his daughter, but also for quenching his thirst for revenge. As well as Faustus, we meet a man of learning: 'Me, poor man, my library was dukedom large enough'³⁰ but also of magic: 'rapt in secret studies'³¹, who lost the government of his dukedom not only by

²⁰ Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine, parts I and II ; Doctor Faustus, A- and B- texts ; The jew of Malta ; Eduard II*, ed. by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Oxford University Press, 1998), I. 1. 65

²¹ Eric Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral panics*, (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 169-170

²² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

²³ *Dr. Faustus*, II. 1. 55-56.

²⁴ *Dr. Faustus*, II. 1. 62.

²⁵ *Dr. Faustus*, II. 1. 64-65.

²⁶ *Dr. Faustus*, II. 1. 7-8.

²⁷ *Dr. Faustus*, I. 1. 23

²⁸ Lisa Hopkins, *Christopher Marlowe, Renaissance dramatist*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press., 2008), p. 127

²⁹ William Shakespeare, *The tempest*, edited by Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), I. 2. 153-157.

³⁰ *The Tempest*, I. 2. 109-110.

³¹ *The Tempest*, I. 2. 77.

the treachery of his brother, but also because of being: 'dedicated to closeness and the bettering of my mind'³². However, in the island he continues making use of his sorcery knowledge, to subdue the supernatural creatures of the island, to provoke the initial shipwreck, to arrest the young Ferdinand and to take revenge on his brother and the rest of the crew. However, despite their similar use of magic, and their refusal to it at the end, both are motivated by two different views of ethics. Bevington highlights that "The debt of Faustus to the morality has long been acknowledged"³³. This means that he was motivated only by filling the vacuum produced by the thirst for knowledge, whereas if compared to Prospero, and although he has also devise some ruses, he shows a more righteous and settled character. The presentation of Faustus and Prospero's individual values aims to undercover the ulterior motives of human beings to prevent them from committing and also falling into the same temptations.

Secondly, both plays reflect the roles of master-slave either in divine or social order. First, in the case of Marlowes' play, there are different hierarchies: On the one hand, Christian Catholic and society heads such as the Pope or the Emperor Charles V appear, and similarly, supernatural characters as Lucifer or the repeatedly mentioned but absent presence of God. The existence of heads also involves the lower ranks characters'. As one of his conditions, the protagonist calls Mephistopheles at his service. However, he is simultaneously serving Lucifer, whose orders take precedence over Faustus', which demonstrates that the divine order is above human beings'. In act I scene 4 Robin and Wagner talk about the low rung of society in which Robin is and joke about the possibility of ascending thanks to the intervention of Lucifer, option which roundly denies Robin. The scene concludes with the acceptance of the proposal of Wagner as his master, asking God's forgiveness in his last speech, thus repeating the teaching that God is above any human hierarchy. The representation of the oppression of some men over others proves how slaves have to serve their owners helpfully while they mine their existence. This case is also well represented in *The Tempest*, we have been able to prove it when Prospero takes the control of the island by force, and enslaves Ariel, Caliban and even Ferdinand. Caliban's work consists of collecting wood for Prospero, however, he punishes him through spirits who torture him, reason why, when Caliban has the opportunity, decides to ask Stephano to be his slave, offer that he accepts. Shakespeare once again represents the figure of the tyrannical master. His new master Stephano taunts him by calling him: 'Servant monster'³⁴, 'man-monster'³⁵, 'Monsieur Monster'³⁶, 'mooncalf'³⁷; insults to which he responds by calling him 'thy honour'³⁸ and 'my noble lord'³⁹. However, as the scene progresses, and Caliban explains the situation of the island and as he has to do to take it, Stephano sets aside the mockery, representing then one of the multiples vices of men: the hunger for power and richness. Equally, Ariel is the servant of Prospero, who promises him during the whole play his freedom if he carries out his orders to avenge his past. Nevertheless, the fact that he decides to forgive them when his plan has been accomplished, reveals the humanist Renaissance trend, which not only consists in the recovery of the Greco-Roman classics, but, as Helen Hackett⁴⁰ acknowledges, also intended to aware about the individual abilities of each man under the watchful eye of God. In *The Tempest* is more than evident the critic to the oppression produced by those who hold the highest positions in terms of wealth and power. However, if we take for example the first scene of the first act of *The Tempest*, Gonzalo shouts: 'Good, yet remember whom thou hast aboard'⁴¹ referring to the presence of the monarch, however he answers:

³² *The Tempest*, I. 2. 89-90.

³³ Cited in: Lisa Hopkins, *Christopher Marlowe, Renaissance dramatist*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press., 2008), p. 60

³⁴ *The Tempest*, III. 2. 3.

³⁵ *The Tempest*, III. 2. 11.

³⁶ *The Tempest*, III. 2. 17.

³⁷ *The Tempest*, III. 2. 20.

³⁸ *The Tempest*, III. 2. 22.

³⁹ *The Tempest*, III. 2. 36.

⁴⁰ Helen Hackett, *A short history of English Renaissance drama*. (n.d.), p. 7

⁴¹ *The Tempest*, I. 1. 19.

'None that I love more than myself'⁴², meaning that death comes equally for a monarch and a sailor and that the divine power is the only one that holds the ultimate power.

Linked to this social critique, the importance of religion plays an important role for the salvation of human beings. On the one hand, references to the Bible are numerous throughout the whole work of Marlowe. A wide range of Latin sentences are used, for example: 'Cosummatum est'⁴³, (last words of Christ on the cross, now used to seal the deal with Lucifer), the choice of characters (angels, demons ...) and the end of the days of Faustus, condemns into the everlasting fire after all the success and goods obtained. In the last of his interventions it is when he expresses his repentance, and beseeches Christ to free him from such unfortunate end. He also repudiates his own creditor: 'Curse Lucifer, that hath deprived thee of the joys of heaven'⁴⁴. Other celestial figures are represented throughout the work, such as the good angel and the bad angel, who play the role of the conscience of Faust. Furthermore, it should be noted the apparition of the old man character whose mission is to advise the protagonist to 'call for mercy and avoid despair'⁴⁵. He does not appear more than once in the work, his origin is unknown, and he is only described by his elderly appearance, so that, the reader can believe that this it is God in disguise, who does not intervene in all the work but as the scriptures stipulate, he manifests himself through others' appearance; although his appearance is a total mystery to mankind, in the revelations of the Holy Writ, it is counted how his physical appearance is identified with an old person: 'The hairs of his head were white, like white wool' (Revelation 1:14)⁴⁶ which may lead the reader to think that is him. On the other hand, William Shakespeare begins his first act with a reference to religion. In the shipwreck of the first scene they combine their fight against the raging sea with prayers to heaven, the end we check how, instead of being desperate, the character of Gonzalo, among others says: 'The wills above be done'⁴⁷, representing a complete trust in God and a courageous acceptance of the arrival of death. In any case still it represented the idea of an unsympathetic and unfair God: 'Had I been any god of power, I would have sunk the sea within the earth'⁴⁸. We found a reasonable likeness, between Faustus' quote: 'I'll burn my books'⁴⁹ and Prospero's: 'I'll drown my book'⁵⁰. The two plays present two similar visions, but different, of divine power and the importance of repentance. In the work of Marlowe, we found a passage in which the main character is identified with the crucified man who accompanied Christ in the last hour of his passion, because he saved his soul in the last of his own: 'Thus! Christ did call the thief upon the cross; then rest thee, Faustus, quiet in conceit'⁵¹. That gives Faustus some assurance about the possibility of being saved. However, the sacred justice condemns Faustus in his attempt to redeem his soul at the end of the play. Contrary to Prospero, who is redeemed by his merciful action of forgiving those who caused him all his tragic occurrences. These two plays promote an evolution of the religious understanding, as Blum defends: 'The dialectical relationship between philosophy, theology and religion, which involves human intellectual life and world is the achievement of the Renaissance thought'⁵². This means that they tried to move away from certain values excessively autocrats that the theocentric medieval society had. In *Dr. Faustus*, Marlowe attacks to some extent the Catholic religion, to show the reader his conservatism and extremism. On the other hand, Shakespeare shows us how, despite the existence of God, human beings have the ability to act freely, following its premises, but also enjoying earthly life. It is important to mention that both plays were addressed to the largely Protestant English society, whose head of the

⁴² *The Tempest*, I. 1. 20.

⁴³ *Dr. Faustus*, II. 1. 74.

⁴⁴ *Dr. Faustus*, V. 2. 182.

⁴⁵ *Dr. Faustus*, V. 1. 56.

⁴⁶ Bible Gateway. *Bible Gateway passage: Revelation 1:14 - English Standard Version*. (2016) <<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+1%3A14&version=ESV>> [Accessed 4 May 2016].

⁴⁷ *The Tempest*, I. 1. 67.

⁴⁸ *The Tempest*, I. 2. 10-11.

⁴⁹ *Dr. Faustus*, V. 2. 115.

⁵⁰ *The Tempest*, V. 1. 57.

⁵¹ *Dr. Faustus*, IV. 1. 130-131

⁵² Paul Blum, *Philosophy of religion in the Renaissance*. (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2010) preface.

church was the same as the state, and although, as in the case, Christopher Marlowe was an atheist, both authors tipped their works in favour of Protestantism.

In short, these two plays are not only important in the career of these authors, but in the history of the English literature. As we have seen, the influence of the period is more than evident, but not only the Renaissance, as ravages of medieval times still remains. This essay has tried to demonstrate how one of the purposes of this plays was to educate the society, not only through religion, but representing the weakness of human beings and capturing their minds in the play. For this purpose, a reference to the main characters has been made as they carry the course of both plays, showing how they really are and splitting them up to understand the answer that was expected from the reader. Also, through the representation of slavery, a rejection of the hierarchical society has been displayed encouraging the freedom of human beings to allow the deployment of their knowledge. Finally, religion has had an important role in the plays, rather than the divinity itself, the values that they promulgate like forgiveness and repentance have carried more weight and they have been identified as the weapons needed for reaching the kingdom of heaven.

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