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MEPHOSTOPHILIS: A HUMANIST DOUBLE-DEALER

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Abstract

Marlowe's training in humanist education and his profession as a double spy has given him a unique non-committal position not only in terms of his plays but also in terms of his life. Such non-committed position is best exemplified in the character of Mephostophilis in the play Doctor Faustus. Mephostophilis in relation to both Faustus and Lucifer has betrayed his humanist training as well as his equivocatory position. The paper traces this interesting point and thereby tries to prove Mephostophilis as corresponding to Marlowe's more practical and secular choices whereas Doctor Faustus is just a representative of Marlowe's passion for transcending limits.

In 1551 appeared Thomas More's *Utopia*, one of the most controversial books that addressed various political and social issues of the European Renaissance. A Counsellor-cum Diplomat at the court of Henry VIII and a die-hard humanist, More wrote this treatise in Latin in the form of a dialogue between learned persons who would be debating upon the issues of the state. What is important to us is not just the issues debated, but also the way they were debated and, of course, More's position regarding these issues and debates. According to Jerry Brotton,

> Throughout the book, More refuses to approve or reject the politically contentious issues he discusses…. This was not because he could not make up his mind: politically, he could not be seen to endorse a particular standpoint. As a skilled political counselor More had to display his rhetorical skills in justifying often mutually incompatible or contradictory statements and beliefs in the service of the state. Utopia is a canvas upon which he can debate a range of issues relevant to his own particular world. If his analysis was called into question, he could always point out that he argued for the contrary position, or that Utopia was, after all simply made up: it was nowhere. (56-57)

More's involvement as well as his position in respect of his masterpiece shows one of the peculiar features of the political world of Renaissance—the importance of rhetoric and dialectic in securing access to power and safety.

In its own way, the Renaissance world witnessed the inauguration of a new social structure in which jobs as diplomats, ambassadors and agents had opened up to the aspiring youth enormous possibility of gaining power, prestige and wealth. But such a path was not altogether rosy. More, despite his success in the court, had to finally lose his life. Together with the success in the attainment of power lurks the danger of facing failure and the wrath of the master. So it is necessary for an aspirant to be sufficiently trained to face and successfully mitigate such situation.

To meet these ends, the humanistic education in Renaissance, through its course called *studia humanitatis*, trained the aspiring young men of the time on the curriculum called *trivium*—a combination of subjects in which rhetoric and dialectic seemed to have clear upperhand. The objective of such curriculum was to train the students with a Ciceronian education that wanted to see the simultaneous growth in a learner of the faculties of private philosophical introspection and those of divesting active public responsibility. Rhetoric has a wonderful power to persuade, to satisfactorily drive home a point to the recipient. This is most emphatically argued by Machiavelli who advised his prince to be a powerful orator, a skillful rhetorician. Dialectics extends this skill by means of keeping the subject non-committal to any particular position. It keeps the subject ready to argue for and against a point simultaneously and therefore installs the subject in an ideologically ambiguous position. Thus a subject can argue for the two opposing parties simultaneously, retaining each party's confidence in him and securing himself from the opposition from any side and thereby proves absolutely successful in a politically volatile space. The power of rhetoric and dialectic proves indispensable to a budding diplomat or state-agent because his primary duty is to persuade his recipient. His success in this position as well as the prosperity of his master depends exclusively upon the successful execution of this assignment of persuasion. Rhetoric gives him success in this respect and the ambiguity of dialectic saves him from any threat from any powerful lord.

I

The case of Christopher Marlowe appears very interesting from this point of view. In 1579, Marlowe entered the King's School at Canterbury. After this, he went to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge on a Matthew parker scholarship. In the school he was offered a curriculum that was based on the study of Latin grammar together with Roman history and literature. In the college he was instructed on the *trivium*, that is, grammar, rhetoric and dialectic. The interesting fact in the college-education during this period is that examinations were oral rather than written ones and that a student was expected either to defend or attack a particular proposition in dialectic with his contemporaries. Such a framework of examination-system, therefore, expects a student to remain prepared for simultaneously attacking and

defending a thesis. The relevance of rhetoric and dialectic in this oratorical bout, therefore, is immensely important.

Marlowe took his BA in 1584 and proceeded for the three-year MA degree with the same scholarship. The extension of this scholarship to a student pursuing his MA after the bachelor-degree was granted on this expectation that the student might pursue his education in theology so that he could enter the church after the completion of the post-bachelor degree. In Marlowe's case, we do not notice any intention in him to enter the church after his MA; rather these three years of his education were spent by him in acquiring the skills of an author beside being involved in some occupations which are shrouded in mystery still. The point that is necessary to remember here at least for the study of the present topic in this essay is that Marlowe's education enabled him to learn the tricks of rhetoric and dialectic which would later be proved to be extremely important in shaping his journey as an author as well as a man of his time.

From the third year of his MA in Cambridge till the last days of his life, Marlowe bears a very controversial life---a life whose journey was beset with mystery and enigma. One of the controversial labels that started to get associated with his name and have lasted till today is that he was a spy. This label is controversial because there were a lot of accusations against him to establish his identity as a spy but there was hardly any direct evidence to confirm these accusations. But even though these accusations may not be based on any direct documentary evidence, they are still to be yoked out of Marlowe's name because there are a huge number of circumstantial evidences whose credentials are very hard to ignore. Marlowe's identity as a spy came to surface during the later part of his study at Cambridge when the Cambridge authority objected to his prolonged absence from the institutional residence as permanent residence was obligatory for every student. Rumour was it that he had gone abroad to convert himself to Catholicism during these days and therefore at the end of his study, the authority decided not to confer upon him the degree on the apparent objection of his non-conformity to the university rule of residence with the actual cause however being the rumour about his possible conversion to the enemy side. Such a rumour about Marlowe's possible conversion to Catholicism was nothing unusual in such circumstances because it was a time when the international conspiracy under the political leadership of the Spanish king aided by the religious leadership of the Jesuits attempted to destabilize the peace and prosperity of the nation. The target of this conspiracy was to assassinate Elizabeth and enthrone in her place the rebel and imprisoned Mary, Queen of Scots thereby turning the country into a Catholic nation. In this situation, the official institutions of the country had legitimate right to feel against any citizen who attempted to favour or aid the enemy camp. The Cambridge authority's decision to deprive Marlowe of his due degree therefore had nothing unusual in itself. But surprisingly, the Privy Council came forward in Marlowe's defence and forced the university to award him his degree. The argument or explanation of the Council in this respect is significant and needs to be reproduced below for understanding Marlowe's position,

> Whereas it was reported that Christopher Morley was determined to have gone beyond the seas to Rheims and there to remain, their Lordships thought good to certify that he had no such intent but that in all his actions he had behaved himself orderly and discreetly, whereby he had done her majesty good service, and deserved to be rewarded for his faithful dealing; their Lordships' request was that the rumour thereof should be allayed by all possible means, and that he should be furthered in the degree he was to take this next Commencement; because it not her Majesty's pleasure that any one employed as he had been in matters touching the benefit of his country should be defamed by those that are ignorant in the affairs he went about. (Qtd. Sales.9)

Marlowe's battle with the college was over because after this, his degree was cleared. But the whole episode starting from the rumour about his possible conversion and the subsequent Privy Council-note attesting to his engagement in matters "touching the benefit of his country" rakes up serious debate about his role during the absence from the college. How is his absence explained? Had he really gone to Rheims as a converted Catholics in order to spy on the Catholics there and submit the report of the Catholic activities against England to his masters as it is believed? Or was he just in Cambridge and watching over the Catholics here under the pretension of being converted? A man like Marlowe who has hardly any religious inclination was not expected to be serious about a religious conversion. If conversion were not the reason, then how could the allegation against him of his association with Catholicism be explained? Was it purely the job of a spy that was the real case? And this suspicion grows stronger considering the fact that he had Thomas Walsingham as his patron whose uncle Francis Walsingam was the main mastermind in Elizabeth's secret service.

But such a question about the suspected role of Marlowe gets another dimension when Marlowe was assassinated in 1593 in an apparently casual tavern brawl. Held for a long time as the tragic outcome of an accidental tavern brawl, the case of Marlowe's death, after being reopened in the last century by some enthusiastic scholars and after some seriously path-breaking facts coming out of their research has led us to believe that it was not at all an accident in which Marlowe had cost his life. It was rather a pre-planned murder by a few persons whom Marlowe thought his friends but they proved to be hired assassins. The suspicion then points at the very secret service whose work was earlier done by Marlowe. If the very secret service whom Marlowe served as a spy assassinated him, the question that naturally comes to our mind is what precisely Marlowe had done that he had to suffer the fatal blow from the agents of the secret service whom he served. Was he a double agent? Was he playing with both the Elizabethan secret service and the Catholics? Was his death then a murder that was deliberately orchestrated by that very secret service which he served? The suspicion that he might be a double agent and that his death might be a result of his being a double-spy may not be altogether unfounded since such instances of double-dealing and the perils of such professions were rather a very usual phenomenon in the Elizabethan England. The very act of constantly switching one's allegiance and service between different and opponent parties without committing to any one lies at the heart of that humanistic education

whose prioritization of rhetoric and dialectic carries this germ of double-dealing. Such an education coupled with the easily available professions in the Elizabethan age such as espionage and diplomacy might have led Marlowe to that perilous end from which he could not return. This is even more emphatically demonstrated in his plays where the habitual practice of deception and dissimulation that a double dealer usually resorts to is one of the central concerns. Both in his life and art, Marlowe seemed to have committed himself to that form of existence that revels at the act of the perilous deceiving of power—a deception that allows him to remain non-committal and free but at the same time at the edge of life. This dangerous game has coloured his life and coloured his connection with the central concern of his art.

II

The critical reception of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* often suggests that the hero of this play embodies his creator's own desire for limitless power and knowledge. But if the life of the eponymous hero of the tragedy is shaped by his creator's abstract and metaphysical passion for the unattainable, then Mephistopheles, another important character of the play, carries a career on the stage that seems to have been moulded by the mundane and secular choices of Marlowe. The story of the play is about the scaling of the limits of knowledge and power by its eponymous hero who for this reason seals a pact with Lucifer and sells his soul to him in return for a twenty-four year life of knowledge, power and pleasure. In this context, Mephostophilis plays a role that has multiple dimensions. He first appears in the play as Lucifer's agent. "Pliant" and "Full of obedience and humility" (I.i.31-32), Mephostophilis explains his relationship with Lucifer in a very clear term,

> I am a servant to great Lucifer,
> And may not follow thee [Faustus] without his leave:
> No more than he commands must we perform.(I.iii.42-44)

His duty is to enlarge the kingdom of Satan by fetching and incorporating human souls. He emulates here the profession of those 16th century religious agents who enlarged the population of a religious community by persuading others to be converted to his religious clan. In this case he parallels to a large extent the career of a secret agent in the Elizabethan secret service much like Christopher Marlowe himself. This becomes clearer even when he defines his role vis-à-vis Faustus.

> That I shall wait on Faustus whilst he lives,
> So he will buy my service with his soul.(II.i.31-32)

This whole vocation of waiting on Faustus is premised upon the act of arranging a proper set-up whereby Faustus, already a man of profound learning, can fulfil his desire of transcending the socially valid limits of knowledge, power and pleasure and Mephostophilis can keep a constant vigil over Faustus during the entire period of the contract-time to ensure that Faustus may not go out of his grip. To keep this set-up running effectively, the play allots Mephostophilis a network of power and knowledge in which the strategy of the secret service gets coagulated with the Renaissance humanism. It is not difficult to surmise that Marlowe's

own training in humanistic learning and his experience in the secret service do shape the modalities of action that Mephostophilis will follow in successfully securing Faustus's soul.

In his initial encounters with Mephostophilis, Faustus throws questions about the origin of the world, the maker of the world and the place of man in this world and thus leads him to a debate over knowledge. Mephostophilis's answers to these questions fall on a flatly theological line, drawn exclusively from the pages of the scripture. Even though by answering Faustus's questions on a theological line, Mephostophilis betrays his sound knowledge of the scripture and this was quite natural in the context of the 16th century Europe, the answers fail to win Faustus's conviction. Faustus knew quite well these theological answers since he himself is a Doctor of Divinity at the Wittenburg University. What therefore he does with these answers is that he rejects them with utter disdain. His sarcasm that "These slender questions Wagner can decide!"(II.ii.49) clearly indicates this. Obviously he has expected a different set of answers from Mephostophilis-- answers that will not refer back to the scripture, and will rather justify his pact with the devil because he joins Lucifer's side on the expectation of getting unorthodox answers to the questions about the fundamental issues related to the world, God, human being. It is his desire and constant effort to transcend the limit of the scripture. But the more he tries to go beyond theology, the more surely Mephostophilis pulls him back. This is not to suggest that travelling outside the scripture is not evident in Marlowe's time, but the scripture is where Mephostophilis resides. Outside the scripture Mephostophilis has neither existence nor identity. So the kind of knowledge Mephostophilis has served to Faustus has the ironic predicament of being confined to the scripture only. Faustus's impatient argumentation does display his impatient search for an order of discourse that will only be available in the 18th century after the establishment of the epistemological order which will solve the riddles faced by Faustus with the answers Faustus looks for. In the 16th century context, this episteme was just burgeoning.

Mephostophilis, finding Faustus's dissatisfaction at his answers and too sure about his inability to provide answers Faustus wants, reverts to another strategy. He goes for some strange pastimes to placate Faustus's aggrieved mind. He introduces a theatrical show of the seven deadly sins to amuse him and thereby divert his mind from the path of questions. The show is successful in assuaging Faustus's discontent. This shows Mephostophilis's wonderful practical sense, a quality that is often expected of a humanist in the 16th century world. Therefore in the combination of theoretical knowledge and practical sense, Mephostophilis echoes Marlowe's own humanist training.

This practical sense is evident in Mephostophilis in some other points in the play too. Like a typical diplomat in a 16th century European court, he negotiates the contract with Faustus. The knowledge of law, alacrity in making all arrangements and of course the skill in handling a client are all evident in Mephostophilis when he gets the coveted signature of Faustus over the deed of gift. Before the pact being signed, the rule of the game is made clear to Faustus,

> The shortest cut for conjuring
> Is stoutly to abjure all godliness,

And pray devoutly to the Prince of Hell (I. iii, 54-56)

Faustus agrees to this condition as he vaunts,

So Faustus hath
Already done; and hold this principle,
There is no chief, but only Belzebub,
To whom Faustus doth dedicate himself. (I. iii, 57-60)

After this, the process of signing the bill starts and in the course of this, we hear certain legal terms such as bill, security, deed of gift etc being thrown abundantly like coins on the stage. This makes the stage a place of transaction and negotiation and underlines Mephostophilis's sound knowledge of law by which he gives the contract an unbreakable tie. The practical humanist comes before us as jostling with the theoretical humanist and the former simply has an upperhand over the latter in the bout because glued with promise the latter finally seals the pact with his own blood. The play henceforth subjects Mephostophilis to the role of an ever-vigilant supervisor over the conduct of Faustus. Mephostophilis remains always ready to serve Faustus, provides him the desired objects, entertains him whenever the latter feels inpatient and leads him to spend the twenty-four years after which the soul can be claimed. The initial aside of Mephostophilis, "What shall not I do to obtain his soul" (II. i. 73) was therefore not just an opportunistic rhetoric; it was actually a verbal projection of that action that Mephostophilis has strictly followed. The tenacity and the zeal with which he completes his assignment are noticeable only in a practical humanist.

But the most important point about Mephostophilis's affiliation to humanistic framework of thinking and parallelism to Marlowe is, of course, his commitment. That he is committed to his *work* is already substantiated. But his commitment in terms of his *ideology* is a point that shows the decided imprint of humanism on his mind and brings him closer to Marlowe. He appears to the audience as well as Faustus as an agent of Lucifer. In that case he is expected to remain committed to Lucifer. But despite maintaining a comprehensive allegiance to Lucifer throughout the play, he has also his moment of weakness a moment when he seems to put off his professional mask and discloses the tension there. This is evident in a moment when he bursts with this acknowledgement,

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,
It being deprived of everlasting bliss?
O Faustus! Leave these frivolous demands,
Which strike a terro to my fainting soul. (I.iii.79-84)

Faustus's response to this passionate revelation,

What, is great Mephostophilis so passionate
For being deprived of the joys of heaven? (I.iii.85-86)

is the response of the audience too, since they must now want to know which side Mephostophilis actually serves? Is he Satan's agent or God's? Is he not a double-spy who seems to hoodwink his masters under the mask of a professional player with the duty of

negotiation and surveillance? This question seems to take another term in the final point of the play when Mephostophilis gives another slant to his position in response to Faustus's violent accusation,

> I do confess it, Faustus, and rejoice.
> 'Twas I that, when thou were't i' the way to heaven,
> Damm'd up thy passage; when thou took'st the book
> To view the scriptures, then I turn'd the leaves
> And led thine eye. (V.ii.94-98)

The positions Mephostophilis takes at different parts of the play establish him as a skilled equivocator, much like Thomas More as we see it in the beginning of this essay. This equivocation is also the mark of Marlowe's ideological posture, as we have shown it in the portion of this essay on Marlowe's education as a humanist and occupation as a double spy. It at once confirms his professional commitment as an agent but keeps open his ideological position vis-à-vis religion. He may be very serious and sincere in his responsibility and successful too unlike Marlowe, but his attitude to religion is nothing but dubious in the manner of Marlowe, although ironically he works within the scripture and never steps beyond it.

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