

CULTURAL SCHIZOPHRENIA AND REBELLION IN MARLOWE'S DOCTOR FAUSTUS

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Abstract: Christopher Marlowe remains one of the Renaissance's most intriguing writers. His ability to create subversive characters and his unique depiction of madness give him a special place in the history of English literature. Doctor Faustus, one of Marlow's signature plays, is a prime example of his interest in the theme of madness. This is especially the case because Faustus displays symptoms of what can now be described as schizophrenia (Hopkins 123). Since the latter is usually described as a "culture-bound illness" (Gaines 2), understanding the culture of Elizabethan England and its power dynamics enables us to have a better insight into both the protagonist of the play, Faustus, and the genius behind it. In this paper, the endeavor is not to study schizophrenia as a mental illness but as a phenomenological experience loaded with cultural meanings (i.e. cultural schizophrenia). In other words, I attempt to investigate cultural schizophrenia in Doctor Faustus and how it represents a tool for subverting the dominant norms in Elizabethan England.

Keywords: Christopher Marlowe, Elizabethan drama, cultural schizophrenia, sodomy, subversion

Despite extensive research on his life and work, Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) remains one of the Renaissance's most intriguing enigmas. His unmatched ability to create unique characters that stand in opposition to the dominant moral values of their societies, his captivating representation of the macabre, and his unique, short life marked by well-known atheism and homosexuality all make him one of English literature's most fascinating figures. It is through this proclivity towards the abnormal that Marlowe sets himself apart from other Elizabethan playwrights. Lisa Hopkins touches on this point in her book *Christopher Marlowe: Renaissance Dramatist*, writing that "Marlowe is distinguished among his contemporaries by his interest in unusual states of mind, especially sadism, masochism and madness" (123; my emphasis).

This interest in madness is perhaps most evident in his signature play *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* first published in 1604. This is especially because throughout the play, Faustus exhibits signs of schizophrenia (Hopkins 123), a mental illness that can't be examined in isolation from the protagonist's culture. Examining the cultural aspects of schizophrenia not only enhances our understanding of the play but also gives us an invaluable insight into the Renaissance culture and its power dynamics. The attempt here is *not* to explore schizophrenia as a mental illness as much as a phenomenological experience loaded with cultural meanings (i.e. cultural schizophrenia). That is to say, in this paper, I endeavor to investigate cultural schizophrenia in *Doctor Faustus* and how it represents a tool for subverting the dominant norms in Elizabethan England.

Schizophrenia, as Keefe explains, building mainly on the ideas of Krapelin, Bleuler, and Schneider, is "a brain disorder that is manifested as a disturbance of the self" in the sense that it entails "confusion between what is part of the self and what is part of the world of external stimuli" (142). At the heart of this disorder lies the concept of "autonoetic agnosia;" the latter is marked by the individual's failure to recognize the patterns and thoughts produced by his own mind— meaning "mental events" (Keefe 142).

The lines between reality and fantasy are fully blurred, and the schizophrenic is rendered unable to differentiate between the internal and external. Hence, “poor insight, hallucinations, and various forms of delusions” are all hallmark symptoms of autochthonous agnosia and schizophrenia, as Keefe writes paraphrasing the ideas of Schneider, Carpenter, and Strauss (142-143).

Moreover, schizophrenia has an organic relationship with the culture of those who exhibit its symptoms, for it “is a culture-bound illness, which means that a difference in culture can influence how it manifests” (Gaines 2). Several scholars even go as far as to claim that schizophrenia is merely a pejorative term employed to brand those “who behave in ways outside the cultural norm” (Barlow et al. 480).

While dismissing the existence of schizophrenia as a mental illness remains controversial and does not hold up well against available therapeutic data (Barlow et al. 480), the argument that the symptoms of schizophrenia are displayed differently across cultural lines is indeed well-supported, as “study after study showed a wide variation in how schizophrenia manifests in different cultures” (Gaines 5).

The “course and outcome” of the disease are also subject to cultural influence, and diagnoses of schizophrenia are more frequent among marginalized and oppressed social groups (Barlow et al. 480). Hence, analyzing the culture of the schizophrenic and looking into its power dynamics (e.g. domination, marginalization, inequality, and privilege) enables us to better understand the sociocultural aspect of their abnormal behavior.

From a literary perspective, *duality* and *hybridity* are embedded in schizophrenia as a phenomenological experience. Accordingly, we have fantasy against reality, the external against the internal, the normal against the abnormal, and the sane against the insane. It is this hybridity that gives birth to what one can call “cultural schizophrenia.”

Scholar and cultural critic Alicia Gaspar de Alba defines the latter notion as the “presence of mutually contradictory or antagonistic beliefs, social forms, and material traits in any group whose racial, religious, or social components are a hybrid . . . of two or more *fundamentally opposite cultures*” (106; my emphasis).

Although Gaspar de Alba coined the term “cultural schizophrenia” to describe the “psychological effect of colonization” (106), the notion as previously defined remains an indispensable tool to probe into the theme of cultural schizophrenia in *Doctor Faustus* in the present study. This is because the Renaissance social order, its orthodox position on morality, and its intolerance of any dissidence—whether intellectual, sexual, or religious—resemble core aspects of colonial subjugation as we traditionally understand it. In other words, the victimization and subjugation practiced by colonialists against the conquered Other, on the one hand, and the way Renaissance orthodoxy punished deviation and oppressed deviants, on the other hand, share, to a fair extent, the same essence and mechanism.

The life of Christopher Marlowe, the genius behind *Doctor Faustus*, is marked by hybridity and duality— if not multiplicity. Andrew Hadfield describes Marlowe as an “ideal of the Renaissance man” for he was known for being a “playwright, poet, spy, homosexual, blasphemer, [and] atheist” (85-86). In Elizabethan England, homosexuality, blasphemy, and atheism were all considered subversive behaviors that deserved no tolerance. Religion and its institutions ruled over the society with an iron fist during the time of Marlowe. Nevertheless, just like his protagonist Faustus, he never shied away from challenging their authority.

For example, famous playwright Thomas Kyd, a contemporary of Marlowe, described him as “an atheist and subversive heretic” (Hadfield 81). Kyd further alleged that Marlowe usually during “table talk or otherwise, . . . [used to] jest at the divine scriptures, Jibe at prayers, & strive in argument to frustrate & confute what hath been spoken or writ by prophets & such holy men” (Kyd qtd. in Hadfield 81).

Moreover, according to Kyd, Marlowe went as far as to deride Saint Paul and to suggest that Jesus and Saint John the Baptist might have been lovers (Hadfield 81). Although Kyd's statements were likely made under duress and might have been a form of forced confession, which may impact their reliability (Hatfield 81), they are still very useful in helping us understand the contrast (duality) and the hybridity of Marlowe and the Marlovian protagonists who are at their core blasphemous subversives.

When considering Marlowe's sexuality, one must note that during the Renaissance, homosexuality or sodomy was not only a sexual behavior. Goldberg, paraphrasing the ideas of Alan Bray, explains that in Renaissance England, homosexuality lacked proper definition and sodomy was viewed as intertwined with other "discourses, those delineating anti-social behavior - sedition, demonism, [and] atheism" (Goldberg 55).

Sodomy frightened the Elizabethan society and signified the sinister side of man that was to be eradicated; it was the root of all societal evil, a form of "cosmic subversion" (Goldberg 55). Marlowe, who was accused of being a sodomite and a heretic who favored Catholicism over Protestantism and called protestants "hypocritical asses," (Marlowe qtd. in Goldberg 57), was established by the authorities of his time as the ultimate Other, "the negative Other," and the "shadow to [Elizabethan] orthodoxy" (Wilson qtd. in Goldberg 54).

Marlowe had thus become the "articulation of a founding cultural antithesis" (Goldberg 57), torn between the Elizabethan oppressive culture and the theatrical culture where "greatness was mimed; atheists, rebels, magicians, and sodomites could be publicly displayed" (Goldberg 60). The protagonists created by Marlowe, as Greenblatt explains, are deliberately rebellious and go to a great length to show their defiance to the dictates of the absolutism of their times; thus, we see "Tamburlaine against hierarchy, Barabas against Christianity, [and] *Faustus against God*" (203; my emphasis).

Such ambitions were not to go unpunished, for deviancy, in Elizabethan England, was out of the question. In fact, the diastole and systole of "Renaissance orthodoxy" was a cycle of punitive patterns whose goal was to embed in the minds of the individuals "what to desire and what to fear" (Greenblatt 209). Nevertheless, Marlowe was able to create protagonists distinguished by a sense of duality and hybridity, heroes ensnared by a normative culture that they end up rebelling against despite the impossibility of escape.

In this regard, Greenblatt further writes that "the Marlovian rebels and skeptics remain embedded within this orthodoxy; they simply reverse the paradigms and embrace what the society brands as evil" (209). They regard themselves as insurgents leading an all-out onslaught against an oppressive social order without realizing that they are still abiding by its most basic rules (Greenblatt 209).

Despite their tragic failure to fully escape this absolutism, the Marlovian protagonists succeed in emphasizing their hybridity, which is still a form of subverting the ideals of a culture that does not permit anything but uniformity. This hybridity (to belong to where one can't *not* truly belong and embrace what one *can't* truly believe) makes cultural schizophrenia a reality for someone like Marlowe, a reality that he depicts repeatedly—if not almost obsessively—in many of his plays. *Doctor Faustus* is a prime example.

First published in 1604, the play features the story of Doctor John Faustus, a renowned man of science and letters who sells his soul to Lucifer to obtain twenty-four years of forbidden knowledge through the service of Mephostophilis.

From the very onset of the play, Faustus starts behaving in an abnormal manner, as he turns his back on the most admired sciences of his time: medicine, theology, philosophy, etc. "Each of these farewells is an act of deconstruction," and hence "logic, medicine, law, and divinity are not so much rejected as violated" (Greenblatt 198-199). This action, Greenblatt further writes, stems not only from a yearning for "mark[ing] boundaries but [also] from the feeling that what one leaves behind, turns away from, *must* no longer exist" (199).

Faustus is supposed to be a famous scholar who appreciates science and knowledge, yet he seems to the reader like a superstitious person who lacks appreciation for neither. His desire to embrace the superstitious and the magical alternative can then be a form of duality and hybridity, a hybridity that unites the irreconcilables: the rational scientist and the irrational sorcerer. Early in the text, the reader can see signs of Faustus's cultural schizophrenia, as his identity, at its very basic level, is made up of incompatible sets of cultural values and principles.

Also, Faustus's neurotic behavior throughout the play is rooted in duality and hybridity shown through a strong yearning for redemption and a final decision to embrace the forbidden. He "repeatedly moves through a circular pattern, from thinking of the joys of heaven, through despairing of ever possessing them, to embracing magical dominion as a blasphemous substitute" (Barber qtd. in Greenblatt 200-201).

This paradoxical hybridity (believer-blasphemer) does not seem arbitrary. It is a tool of subversion, a way for Marlowe to criticize the dominant values. Through this constant negotiation we see throughout the play, where the protagonist is repeatedly debating redemption and rebellion only to finally favor the demonic alternative, Marlowe shows the reader that his protagonist is a true free thinker whose damnation is born of his own free will.

Rozett, relying on M. M. Mahood's observation, expounds on this point saying that unlike the older *Faustbook*, the first book to feature stories about Faustus where "devils withhold Faustus from repentance by brute strength," in Marlowe's play, "Faustus is always at liberty to repent" (88). Therefore, his inclination towards the demonic is a conscious intellectual choice rather than a tragical mistake in the traditional sense. Rozett remarks that in Act I, scene iii, Marlowe underscores Faustus's conscious determination by juxtaposing his character "with the remarkably human and hesitant Mephostophilis" (88).

This willingness on Faustus's part, however, should not blind the reader to the fact that his struggle is manifested in schizophrenic symptoms loaded with cultural references:

FAUSTUS. My heart's so hard'ned; I cannot repent.
Scarce can I name salvation, faith or heaven,
But fearful echoes thunder in mine ears
'Faustus, thou art damn'd'; then swords and knives,
Poison, guns, halts and envenom'd steel
Are laid before me to despatch myself.
And long ere this I should have done the deed,
Had not sweet pleasure conquer'd deep despair . . .
Why should I die then, or basely despair?
I am resolv'd, Faustus shall ne'er repent.
Come, Mephostophilis, let us dispute again,
And reason of divine astrology . . . (Marlowe 2.2)

In the above lines, for example, Faustus's abnormal behavior is obvious. He is confused; he cannot decide whether to repent or not; he suffers from a sense of impending doom; his heart is distressed; and, most importantly, he admits hearing voices that forcefully echo "thunder in [his] ears," telling him that he is "damn'd."

His behavior here seems to cross the boundaries of the abnormal and become clearly psychotic. Lisa Hopkins notes that in the play "Faustus's hearing of voices which no one else can hear might now look to us like schizophrenia" (123). The main symptoms of the illness are "delusions, *hallucinations*, disorganized speech and behavior" (Gaines 8; my emphasis). Faustus clearly exhibits all these signs throughout the play. Talking to angels, hearing voices in his head, and interacting with supernatural beings can all be interpreted as schizophrenic hallucinations with undertones related to the dominant religious culture of his time.

As argued earlier, schizophrenia is a “culture-bound illness,” and the way it is usually displayed is culture-specific (Gaines 2). Rebecca Gaines, citing the works of Murphy et al., explains that there is a “strong link between culture and type of hallucinations” (8).

Doctor Faustus was written during a time where religion and piety were synonymous with social order and national unity, and therefore, the culture of Elizabethan England was saturated with imagery of heaven, hell, redemption, and struggle for salvation— Christian salvation of course. Expectedly, the manifestations of Faustus’s schizophrenia were culture-specific. For example, in the above lines, he refers to redemption, “salvation, faith, . . . [and] heaven” and claims to hear dreadful voices telling him that he is “damn’d.”

In explaining Jung’s views on psychosis (especially schizophrenia), Sharp writes that such mental issues “result[] from an *abaissement du niveau mental* and an ego too weak to resist the onslaught of unconscious contents” (108). The schizophrenic voices can thus be interpreted as residues in Faustus’s unconsciousness. They are the product of the rigid orthodoxies of the Renaissance embedded in the psyche of Faustus by default. Once, he loses his grip on reality and drifts into psychosis as an outlet, they surface to intimidate him into submission (i.e. redemption) via images of hell and torture.

Yet, Faustus defies these schizophrenic voices and declares that he “shall ne’er repent.” He then invites his devilish aid Mephostophilis to “dispute again” and reason. Here, one can find yet another instance of Faustus’s cultural schizophrenia, as we witness the “presence of mutually contradictory or antagonistic beliefs,” to borrow from Gaspar’s definition of the concept (106). The contrast here is between the belief in the Christian idea of redemption as dictated by Elizabethan religiosity and the unwavering intent of a free thinker not to conform.

Faustus’s rebellion is multifaceted. First, he, like all Marlowe’s protagonists, stands against all the moral paradigms and ideals of Elizabethan England (Hopkins 129). Second, by depicting Faustus as a hero, Marlowe “threatens the values of . . . [his] own society” (Hopkins 129).

Furthermore, Marlowe represents Faustus as someone towards whom the reader can have different, and sometimes contradictory, attitudes. He is “both the most admirable and the most pitiable” of all the Marlovian protagonists (Hopkins 137). Nevertheless, Marlowe cunningly succeeds in “set[ting] him up simply for us to condemn, calling into question the very concept of a tragic hero” (Hopkins 137). It can be argued, therefore, that Faustus’s identity, at its core, is a hero-villain amalgam. This mystifying fusion is not only a testimony to his cultural schizophrenia but also an outlet for Marlowe to practice his deviation from the norms.

Marlowe was definitely aware of the details of the first legend of Faustus, and therefore must have been mindful of the fact that the latter is a “sodomite” (Hopkins 135-136). Yet, Marlowe strives to present his protagonist throughout the play as “aggressively heterosexual” (Hopkins 136). This might have been a bid by Marlowe to make his audience more sympathetic towards Faustus and his plight. Because the reader can identify with Faustus, his tragedy becomes Marlowe’s tool to assault the status quo and the dominant morality. Instead of resorting to depicting his protagonist as a triumphant sodomite who challenges the norms, Marlowe uses heterosexuality, the *only* accepted form of sexuality in Elizabethan England, to make his subversion more palatable— especially for the Renaissance audience.

A Protestant physician from Germany who shared the English animosity towards some of their European rivals, Faustus “represents many things that the English admired and valued” (Hopkins 136). Early in the play, Faustus’s accomplishments (which include curing diseases and saving entire cities from the ravages of the plague) are paraded as an object of legitimate admiration, especially since they contain “some notable benefactions to humanity

as a whole” (Hopkins 136). Faustus’s decision then to stand against God is a subversion of all what the Elizabethan society admired, turning the learned protagonist into “the ultimate ‘other,’ deliberately embracing damnation in a blasphemous parody of Christ’s sacrifice for man” (Rozett 81).

Even more interestingly, at a certain point in the play, Faustus and Mephostophilis exchange roles, as Mephostophilis, who is supposed to be the agent of Lucifer, seems to be more concerned about Faustus’s fate than Faustus himself:

MEPHOSTOPHILIS. Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.

Think’st thou that I that 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.

FAUSTUS. What, is great Mephostophilis so passionate

For being deprived of the joys of heaven?

Learn thou of Faustus manly fortitude,

And scorn those joys thou never shalt possess (Marlowe 1.3; my emphasis)

In the dialogue above, it is clear that Faustus is not only indifferent to his own fate and eager to give his soul to Lucifer, but is also active in keeping Mephostophilis’s allegiance to Lucifer strong, telling him to “learn . . . of . . . [his] manly fortitude” and “scorn those joys . . . [he] never shalt possess.”

As noted by Waith, when discussing the issue of hell, it is Mephostophilis rather than Faustus “who has the orthodox and sensible scale of values and, [and who] in shocked tones, accuses Faustus of frivolity” (75). By reversing the roles of Faustus and Mephostophilis (i.e. making the latter the voice of morality), Marlowe exposes the hypocrisy of what his society views as admirable.

When nearing his end, Faustus exhibits signs of deep remorse, wishes that he was not even born, and curses the “parents that engender’d [him]” (Marlowe 5.2). He also begs for another chance at salvation even after a “a thousand years” of hell and torture (Marlowe 5.2). His only true wish in his final speech is to be “at last be sav’d” (Marlowe 5.2).

Once more, Faustus’s hybridity is at display, as he moves from being willingly heretical to being deeply apologetic and from being Lucifer’s advocates to being his victim. His character is the site where the irreconcilables clash. He is the “most blasphemous . . . [and] most orthodox” (Rozett 82), the worthiest of praise and of condemnation (Hopkins 137), the ultimate hero and the ultimate villain, and the terrifying Other and the commendable familiar. But most importantly, Faustus is the prime example of cultural schizophrenia used to insidiously attack the status quo and the dominant norms. Thus, his last utterance was not that of the divine name but of his former demonic companion— “Ah, Mephostophilis” (Marlowe 5.2).

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