‘What doctrine call you this?’ An Inquiry into Christopher Marlowe, Doctor Faustus and Hermetic Thought 1583-1593

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Volget nun das dritte Theil von Doctor Fausti Abentheür was er mit seiner Nigromantia In Potentaten höfen gethan und gewirckht

Ain History vom Kayser Carolo Quinto, Unnd Doctor Fausto:

Kayser Carolus ward mit seiner Hofhaltung gen Yn, prugg kommen, dahin Doctor Faustus sich auch verfuegt, von vilen frey herren unnd Graven, auch Adels personnen wol erkanndt, die seine Kunst, unnd geschicklichait mehr gesehen, sonnderlich dauon So er mit Artzneyen unnd Recepten von vilen schwachen unnd Kranckhaiten geholffen, Dise herren, unnd Adelspersonen so Ine gen hof zum Essen geladen, geben Ime das glaith gen hoff, welliches der Kayser Carolus ersehen dasselben nachgefragt, wer Er sey, der, unnd Ime anzaigt Es wer Doctor Faustus, daruff Kayser Carolus schwig biß nach Essens, unnd das geschach umb Sommers Zeitti

Contents

Abstract

This study examines Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragicall History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* for evidence of the playwright's familiarity with the Hermetic thought circulating in Europe during the Renaissance.

I begin with a discussion of Marlowe's life, the origins of the Faust legend, and the sources of the play. Comparison of the conflicting and inadequate answers provided in the sources and the play to contemporary questions about creation and cosmology reveals the choice between faith and reason which Christians faced when God's word, revealed in the book of Scriptures, conflicted with God's work revealed in the book of Nature. The Hermetic texts offered both a heliocentric cosmos that was compatible with the new cosmology and a new path to salvation. The study asks if Marlowe's alleged 'Atheism' could more accurately be termed Hermeticism.

To explicate Hermeticism I outline the several religions which influenced early Christianity and trace the beliefs which 'Hermes Trismegistus' syncretised in the *Hermetica* in the first centuries of the common era. I note the interest in the Hermetic texts in Europe following the fifteenth century Latin translation made by Marsilio Ficino, and his harmonising of Platonism with Christianity. I provide an overview of the subsequent philosophical attempts to assimilate Jewish Kabbalah to Christianity and both to the Hermetic philosophy, culminating in Giordano Bruno's idiosyncratic Hermetic-Cabalism. In order to establish the complex religious context in which Marlowe was writing, I outline the disputes within the Church of England after Elizabethan Settlement and find evidence in *Doctor Faustus* of Marlowe's familiarity with those disputes, with the Hermetic texts, and with the London works of Giordano Bruno.

My contention is that Marlowe, in dramatising his prose sources, is deliberately catering for the spectrum of religious beliefs held by the diverse audiences to be found in the Elizabethan playhouse. What modern critics have interpreted as ambivalent and conflicting doctrines in *Doctor Faustus* reflects a conscious strategy on Marlowe's part to stimulate debate about the various contested doctrines of salvation, including those of the *Hermetica*. I argue that a Kabbalistic hermeneutic enables an interpretation of the play as a gnostic ascent from the literal to the allegorical and mystical. Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* thus simultaneously invites the spectator to an entertaining visual feast, the auditor to a thought-provoking debate of disputed doctrines, and the reader to a silent recognition of the spiritual possibilities and occult mysteries of Hermeticism.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Marion Jane Nelson and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Whatever flaws remain I must acknowledge as my own.

A Note on the Texts

Bevington, David and Eric Rasmussen, eds. *Doctor Faustus, A-and B-Texts (1604, 1616). Christopher Marlowe and his Collaborator and Revisers.* Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993.

The play survives in two quite different texts: *The Tragicall History of D. Faustus,* known as the A-Text and published in 1604, and the considerably longer B-Text, *The Tragicall History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* With new Additions, published in 1616. The debates pertaining to the authenticity of the two texts, to the possibility of collaborative authorship and to the dates are summarised in Appendix I. Sources are discussed in Chapter Two. For a time editors conflated the two texts, and current scholarship argues for the authenticity and superiority of the A-text. In this study I will cite from both A-and B-Texts using the 1993 Revels edition. I refer to the A-text for the purposes of comparison with the B-Text or when a particular line is omitted from the B-Text. Some scenes and lines relevant to my inquiry occur only in the B-Text: they introduce the schismatic Pope Saxon Bruno (III i; III ii; IV i 48-70[B]).

Jones, John Henry, ed. *The English Faust Book. A critical edition based on the text of 1592*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

The 1592 text is the earliest extant edition of the English translation and was undertaken by a gentleman known only as 'P.F.'. Usually known as *The English Faust Book* (*EFB*), its full title is *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus.* According to the title page, it was 'Imprinted at London by Thomas Orwin', 'to be sold by Edward White, dwelling at the little North doore of Paules, at the signe of the Gun'. It was translated from a German chapbook – *Historia von D. Johann Fausten dem weitbeschreyten Zauberer und Schwartzkünstler* – which was published in Frankfort by Johann Spies in September 1587. Sometimes called the *Faustbuch*, the Spies *Historia* is referred to here and elsewhere as (*SH*), to distinguish it from another similar MS discovered in the nineteenth century in the Herzog August Bibliothek (HAB) in Wolfenbüttel, which is referred to as (*WH*).

A Note on Hermetism and Hermeticism

Both 'Hermetism' and 'Hermeticism' derive from the name 'Hermes' which denotes both the mythical Greek God, Hermes (Thoth to the Egyptians and Mercurius to the Romans), and also an historical figure, Hermes Trismegistus believed for centuries to have been the author of numbers of ancient treatises, both magical and philosophical. A body of seventeen of the philosophical texts, known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and a book addressed to Asclepius are known collectively as the *Hermetica*. As Roelof van den Broek observes, it is the 'teachings and doctrines found in the so-called philosophical *Hermetica*' that the term 'Hermetism' usually calls to mind; he notes, however, that 'the central concern of these writings is not philosophical but religious' (van den Broek, 5). Antoine Faivre points out that the term 'Hermetism' also refers to the literature inspired by [the *Hermetica*] during the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and even thereafter' (1998, 109).

Faivre notes 'a welcome tendency' since the 1960s 'to distinguish "Hermetism" in this [religious] sense from "Hermeticism" ', a term 'which has come to designate other traditions as well' (1998, 109). These traditions stem from that other Hermes, Hermes-Mercurius. Not only is he 'the god who stands at the crossroads . . . the interpreter of signs, of texts', he also 'makes transmutations possible, which is why he frequently appears in alchemical texts under the name Mercurius' (Faivre, 1998, 110). Throughout the sixteenth century, 'a variety of teachings and traditions that official theology had ignored, namely Hermetism, alchemy, Kabbalah and *magia*' were gradually brought together in Europe (Faivre, 1998, 111). It is this ensemble of traditions, termed 'Hermeticism', which Faivre identifies as the origin of modern Western esotericism.

In this paper I employ the term 'Hermetism' when the notion of the religious philosophy contained in the *Hermetica* is uppermost, and 'Hermeticism' when that notion connects with other traditions such as astrology, Cabala, alchemy and *magia* (or natural philosophy), as happened during the Renaissance.