How do Renaissance playwrights attempt to lend psychological depth to their characters?

In post-Freudian modernity, the notion that characters are more than their visible performed actions, that they are, like audience members, tormented by hidden desires and anxieties, is often a presupposed tenet of literary criticism. The very name of the Oedipus complex implies that works created before the advent of psychoanalytic study can be subject to it – much discussion of Shakespeare’s ‘Hamlet’ relies upon this. Yet the idea that the psychological depth or complexity of a character heightens the import of the drama is not an intrinsic one to theatre, only truly appearing alongside the growing humanism and secularisation of the Renaissance. As humanity and rationality moved to the centre of public discourse, man’s mentality became increasingly significant in dramatic representations. Christopher Marlowe, seen as a highly subversive playwright, certainly marks a decisive move away from the medieval plays populated by characters more akin to moral props than mentally complex individuals. Marlowe both inhabits and manipulates theatrical traditions, constructing ambiguous plays that concern the conflict between an omnipotent cosmological order and human free will, revealing inner conflicts within his protagonists common to all mankind. In Doctor Faustus, Marlowe presents a divided and mentally fascinating central individual, whose struggling decisions and motivations are crucial to understandings of the play. Arguably the psychological layers to Faustus render the entire drama in fact a psychology: it is often viewed as “primarily a study of the mind of Faustus himself”. (Bradbrook 143)

Marlowe’s plays display clear awareness of theatrical traditions. Finding dramatic forms “stiff and inflexible”, his pieces attempt to blur conventional models – not abiding to the “simple and rigid moral framework” of early Elizabethan drama. (Bradbrook 131, 64) In Marlowe’s representation of The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus he appears to follow the classical model. The very fact it is explicitly deemed ‘tragical’ connects the piece to Aristotelian definitions of drama, where characters are of secondary
importance to the action of a piece. Formally, in the use of an opening Chorus, and in the early allusion to the Icarus myth, Faustus’ story is immediately constructed as a classical tragic fall from respectability to damnation. Aristotle’s focus on a precise accumulation of occurrences, driving high status persons low, appears to be shared by Marlowe in his tracing of “the form of Faustus’ fortunes good or bad”. (Marlowe) Marlowe immediately constructs his protagonist as a paradigm – the tragic hero.

Yet, Faustus is more complex than this – both his heroism and his tragic status can be questioned. While the notion of a hero as somewhat “superhuman” holds true, Aristotle’s definition of the tragic crime as one “committed unknowingly” is less clear, through Faustus’ apparently willing surrender of his soul to Lucifer. (Bradbrook 51; Eccles, 7) Despite “superhuman” qualities Faustus has human impulses (Bradbrook 51); he engineers his destruction, offering himself in return for secret knowledge and prowess. Like Lucifer, his fall stems from “aspiring pride and insolence”, from a psychological flaw and an inner yearning for power. (Marlowe) Faustus’ “damnation” is also his “despair” – the action and ‘resolution’ of the drama are also interior, emotional states (Marlowe). As John Cox has written, “what nourishes and destroys him is his competitive ambition”. (Cox 110) In this portrayal of ambition, “an unusual motivation for a Greek tragedy”, Marlowe connects his drama to the Morality plays popular in the early Renaissance period. (Eccles 24). The “world of profit and delight” that Faustus “most desires” to possess and exploit is material and a contrast to the intangible, intellectual rewards he has previously been bestowed. (Marlowe) It is the “honor” and “wealth” imagined by the Evil Angel that is Faustus’ focus, and it is “pleasant fruits and princely delights” he seeks through magic. (Marlowe)

His turn to necromancy appears to trace the Morality plays’ central narrative arc of “man blinded and destroyed by his pursuit of material temptations”. (Eccles 24) However, Marlowe’s Faustus surpasses the sin of material fixation and desire. It is the entire realm of man that he wishes to have dominion over, not merely its riches. Marlowe introduces a new dimension to Morality plays’ wicked, earthly sinners; Faustus does not overlook spirituality and the supernatural but is intensely aware of their
power. Faustus voices his aspirations “to make the moon drop from her sphere, / Or the ocean to overwhelm the world”. (Marlowe) The Oedipus complex diagnosed in Hamlet is paralleled in the form of the God complex in Marlowe’s Faustus, as he extravagantly yearns to “gain a deity” and explicitly imagines becoming “a mighty god”. (Marlowe) His “aspiring pride and insolence” is apparently created as insatiable. (Marlowe) Faustus is constructed as the supreme ‘over-reacher’ – a more intricate and extreme Icarus in his conscious attempt to transcend the world of man and “go beyond the bounds of received knowledge”. (Cox 111) While this dismissal of human achievement and learning serves the dramatic purpose of extending the scale of Faustus’ fall it also extends the sense of Faustus’ psychological complexity. Far from a paradigm or “personified abstraction”, Marlowe writes his central character as narcissistic, blasphemous and ambitious – both tragic hero and wicked sinner. (Cox 107) His simultaneous use and subversion of recognised customs create multi-layered dramas that, in their ambiguities, reflect the intricacies of the human condition. In the tension between hero and villain Faustus is made a recognisable man, with “human folly, inconsistency and hypocrisy”. (Eccles 46)

Into this historical hybrid of classical and theological dramatic traditions, Marlowe places a uniquely Renaissance intellectual concern: the conflict between Calvinist pre-determinism and the notion of man as “self-fashioning”. (Greenblatt, Stephen qtd McAdam 14) This conflict is embodied in Faustus and his inconsistent mental states. “Swinging constantly between repentance and damnation”, Faustus struggle to “be resolute” can be seen as an attempt to assert himself and construct a united, functioning identity, within a religious framework that demands self-surrender. (Bradbrook 145; Marlowe) That Faustus is striving to exercise his free will and personal agency, but is nevertheless psychologically split, is immediately clear from the outside perspective he takes for himself. Speaking in the third person, the protagonist creates “Faustus” as a distinct entity – his inner mental states and his acting image are disintegrated. (Marlowe) Marlowe disguises Faustus within his own skin, in a further twist of dramatic conventions. Faustus explicitly tries to fashion his character as “resolute” and full of “manly fortitude” (the ideal ‘Renaissance man’) yet through this self-consciousness he others himself. (Marlowe) Far from
integrating his mental and his acting selves, Faustus separates them further. The aggrandizing of his identity ironically appears to increasingly undermine it, as he becomes an object of study and an extension of the academic books he rejects as “too servile”. (Marlowe) It is this othering of his self that leads to his disbelief in the “despair” of damnation. (Marlowe) In the tradition of tragedy as “an experiment where the protagonist tests reality by trying to live a hypothesis”, Faustus’ hellish bargain and consequent “heinous sins” are constructed in his split mind as intellectual exercises. (Barber 116) Despite Mephastophilis’ assertion that the “experience” of hell will convince him, for Faustus it cannot be conceived of as more than “a fable”: all experiences are experiments. (Marlowe)

The disintegration and confusion of Faustus’ psychology is exhibited in his behaviour. Although his major fall is that into damnation, arguably Marlowe makes him suffer a parallel plummet in his earthly existence, as his standing as “learned” scholar transforms into that of a trickster. (Marlowe) In his search for absolute control and knowledge – for maturity and self-realisation – Faustus becomes “boor, buffoon and sensualist”. (Brown 82) His childish nature is encapsulated in the episode at the Vatican. At the side of the Church’s leader who is the wielder of all Christian theological power on earth, and is able to perform any action or realise any desire, Faustus resorts to “sport” and “merriment”. (Marlowe) His snatching of food and wine most succinctly expresses his possessive longings – like a child he apparently cannot see past immediate cravings and cannot restrain his acquisitive urges. His cloak of invisibility conceals his public persona but reveals his deep, private self as undeveloped. Marlowe creates a character unable to both fully reconcile his private and public selves and unable to fully mature. As Stephen Frosh has discussed this “infantile narcissism” is representative of the “conflict between actual impotence and dreams of omnipotence”. (Barber 24) The divine power bestowed by Mephastophilis only reinforces Faustus’ weak humanity; a humanity that is conflicted not coherent, eternally caught between angels and clowns.

Faustus’ essentially split mentality is embodied in the form of the two angels that repeatedly appear before him. For Bradbrook, these supernatural characters act as “projections of Faustus’ own
contrary impulses”. (144) As representations of conscience, the presence of the Good Angel alone complicates any idea of Faustus as irretrievably beyond salvation. His own claims that his “heart’s so hardened [he] cannot repent” appear self-deceptive, formed from the same illogical rationality that focuses on damnation rather than salvation and leads him to dismiss all theology as “Che sara, sara”. (Marlowe) Again, his humanity is reinforced through his very denial of it, as the need to fashion himself as resolved, to be “hardened”, reveals initial distress and mental malleability. (Marlowe) Marlowe’s supernatural characters, unlike those of Greek drama, do not generate decisions in their human subjects but are manifestations of indecision and moral dilemma. Their supernatural appearances paradoxically create a naturalistic drama of mental torment.

This technique of physically embodying inner conflicts is repeatedly used by Marlowe, perhaps most dramatically in the alternating appearances of Helena and the Old Man. The Old Man acts as a spiritual guide – like the Good Angel he offers and represents the “sweet path” to “celestial rest”. (Marlowe) In psychoanalytic terms this character can be seen as Faustus’ ‘superego’, attempting to restrain his impulsive drive to “flagitious crimes” and “heinous sins”. (Marlowe) This message of spiritual “mercy”, despite offering a relief from the “desperate steps” taken towards damnation, is essentially repressive in its call to “wash away” Faustus’ human vices of “guilt” and pride. (Marlowe) The mind and soul is left “distressed”, as Faustus is unable to reconcile “in his single nature most magnificent aspiration, most basely earthbound satisfaction”. (Marlowe; Brown 82) Carnal longings overwhelm the intellect, as Marlowe re-introduces Helena as Faustus’ “heart’s desire”, or ‘id’. The tension at the core of Faustus, which gives him psychological depth, is made vividly apparent through this alternating of stage presences. The character of the Old Man leads to a need to “glut the longing” of his animalistic self, while the apparent fulfilment of this leads to “a renewed sense of the lost heavenly joys” this self must suffer. (Marlowe; Barber 97) The earthly satisfaction of Helen is ironically relayed through religious language: “heavenly Helen”, “here will I dwell, for heaven be in these lips”. (Marlowe) Helen’s kiss is presented as a form of communion, able to grant Faustus the immortality he seeks. While
this is blasphemous, it also signals Faustus’ continued need for the divine. Faustus appears unable to commit fully to purely sensual experiences; the “magical dominion and pleasures of Dr Faustus ambiguously mingle”. (Barber 101) However this mingling does not provide a reconciliation of these aspects instead it causes Faustus’ downfall. Marlowe’s presentation of the “effort to find in carnal situations an incarnation” seems to suggest that this heroic effort may be inevitably futile. (Barber 106)

Doctor Faustus can essentially be read as a portrayal of the conflicts between body and soul, mind and matter, and rationality and faith. Through a series of formal and stylistic oppositions, Marlowe creates a simultaneously grand and intimate drama, concerning both the power struggle of the cosmos and the inner turmoil of a human mind. In the blurring of traditions Faustus is able to be hero and fool, sinner and victim. Human folly and vice are exposed but equally so are man’s high ideals and aspirations. Despite supernatural characters and magical occurrences Marlowe’s piece is resolutely human, showing as it does man’s attempt at self-assertion and the mental turmoil this endeavour can generate. The warring over Faustus’ soul by higher powers “provides a frame for the inner drama” within his psychology. (Peter Donaldson qtd McAdam 25) Marlowe’s protagonist is far from two dimensional; he is deep, damaged and divided.
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