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CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE'S *DOCTOR FAUSTUS* AND ITS POSSIBLE ALLUSION TO THE LIFE AND FIGURE OF MARTIN LUTHER

Doctoral Dissertation

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This dissertation is fondly dedicated to the loving memory of my parents, and to the tender memories of my dearest friend and mentor Prof. María de las Mercedes Pereyra, and of Prof. Beatriz Uteda, who guided me through my first reading of Marlowe's tragedy.

Acknowledgements

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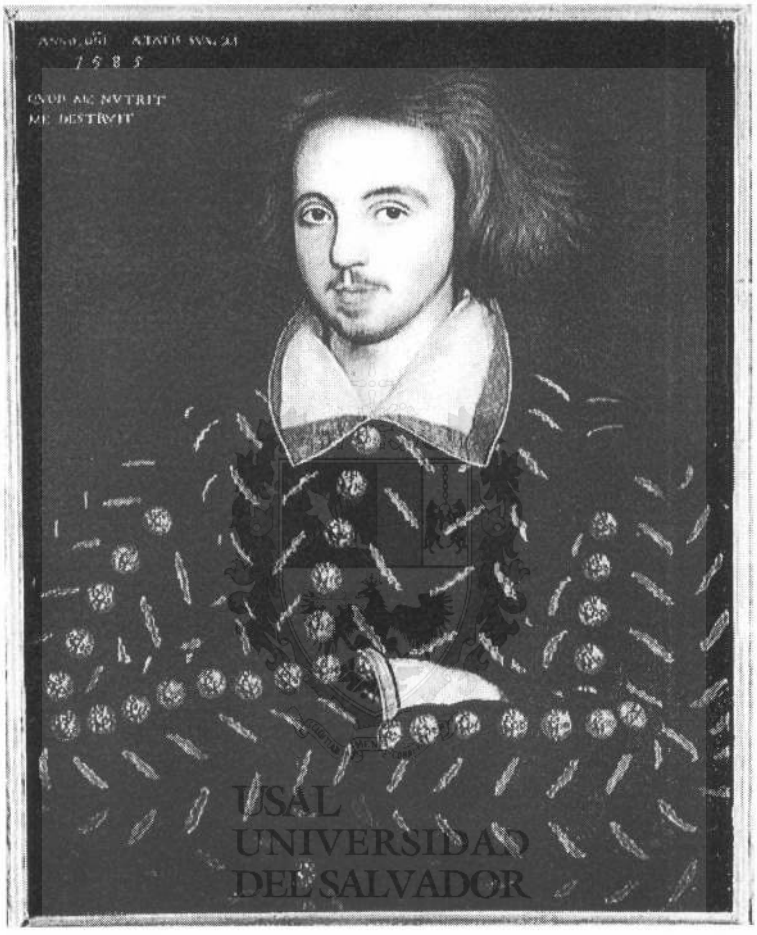
Abstract

Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) has been considered to be one of the greatest English dramatists of all times. In his short life, his genius bequeathed the world a superb treasure of plays and poems, of which his *Doctor Faustus* probably stands as his masterpiece, written not long before the poet was tragically and mysteriously killed in Deptford, not far from the heart of London. A good part of the enigmas surrounding his life and death have not been unveiled yet, as he is said to have worked for the network of spies of Queen Elizabeth I's government. This complex period in the history of England was marked by religious crisis, as the English monarch was bent on the enforcement of the relatively new Church of England, an offshoot —albeit distant— of the Church founded by Martin Luther in Germany. Christopher Marlowe's death occurred at a time when he was being accused of atheism, a charge often filed against Catholic dissenters in Elizabethan times. It is the purpose of the present investigation to associate Martin Luther with Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, bringing into focus the figure of the German renegade priest as secretly and opaquely alluded to by the English dramatist, who very probably intended to condemn the reformer, in an attempt to position himself secretly as a Roman Catholic. The obscure allegorical presence of Luther in the tragedy might, additionally, throw some light on the poet's mysterious death, and bring his murder closer to the theory that Marlowe was too popular to be publicly sentenced to death because of his Catholic faith, and therefore had to be "silenced" more stealthily. A thorough exploration of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* yields remarkable coincidences between the play's protagonist, the well-known scholar-turned-magician, and the life and philosophy of Luther. These concurrences suggest that the dramatist could very well have set out to reconstruct, even falsify, the German reformer's life and death, in a masked attempt to achieve an effect not too dissimilar from that of a traditional morality play, if only to be fully "read" by a minority of Catholic dissidents who were able to "decode" the drama's hidden referents. If this is indeed the case, the route to Marlowe's tragic death may have had very clear signposts, ending in a murder for hire organised in England's highest spheres of power.

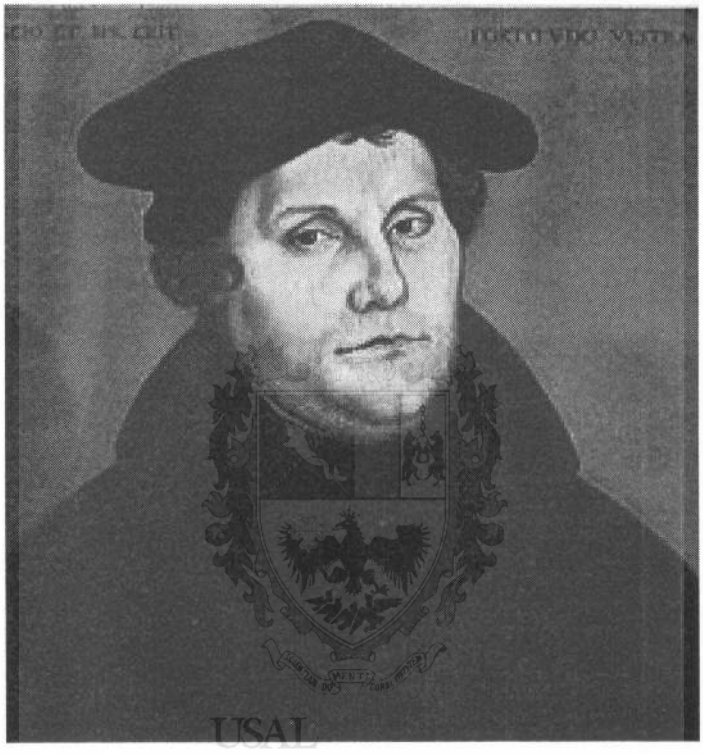
Resumen

Se ha considerado a Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) como uno de los más grandes dramaturgos de todos los tiempos. En su corta vida, legó al mundo un exquisito tesoro de obras teatrales y poemas, de los cuales su *Doctor Fausto* probablemente se destaca como su obra maestra, escrita poco antes de que el poeta fuera asesinado en forma trágica y misteriosa en Deptford, no lejos del centro de Londres. Buena parte de los enigmas que rodean su vida y muerte no se han develado aún, por cuanto se dice que trabajó para la red de espías del gobierno de la Reina Isabel I. Este complejo período de la historia de Inglaterra estuvo signado por crisis de religión, ya que la soberana inglesa pugnaba por implantar en forma definitiva la relativamente nueva Iglesia de Inglaterra, una ramificación —aunque distante— de la Iglesia fundada por Martín Lutero en Alemania. La muerte de Christopher Marlowe ocurrió en un momento en el que estaba siendo acusado de ateísmo, un cargo a menudo presentado contra los católicos disidentes en la época isabelina. La presente investigación propone asociar a Martín Lutero con el *Doctor Fausto* de Marlowe, analizando la figura del sacerdote renegado alemán en alusión secreta y oscura por parte del dramaturgo inglés, quien probablemente se propuso condenar al reformador, en un intento por posicionarse secretamente como Católico Romano. La oscura presencia alegórica de Lutero en la tragedia podría, además, arrojar algo de luz sobre la misteriosa muerte del poeta, y acercar su asesinato a la teoría de que Marlowe era demasiado popular como para ser públicamente sentenciado a muerte por su fe Católica, debiendo ser "silenciado", por ende, en forma más sigilosa. Una exploración exhaustiva del *Doctor Fausto* de Marlowe arroja coincidencias sorprendentes entre el protagonista de la obra, el conocido estudioso universitario devenido mago, y la vida y filosofía de Lutero. Estos elementos concurrentes sugieren que el dramaturgo bien pudo haberse lanzado a reconstruir, e incluso a falsificar, vida y muerte del reformador alemán, en un intento enmascarado por lograr un efecto no muy diferente del de las moralidades medievales tradicionales, aunque más no fuera para ser "leído" por una minoría de Católicos disidentes capaces de "decodificar" los referentes ocultos de la obra. Si esto es realmente así, la ruta hacia la trágica muerte de Marlowe pudo haber tenido claras etapas, terminando en un crimen por encargo organizado desde las más altas esferas del poder inglés.



The apocryphal portrait of Christopher Marlowe at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. The legend reads: 'anno domini aetatis suae 21 / 1585 / quod me nutrit / me destruit'[1]

[1] 'Aged 21 in the year of our Lord 1585: That which nourishes me, also destroys me'



Martin Luther, in a painting by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1535)

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PROLEGOMENON

It is often said that ideas come at the oddest moments and in the oddest places. This was literally so in my case, as most of what is here exposed comes of endless conversations with my friend and mentor María de las Mercedes Pereyra, an expert in literature and in life, who for the first time drew my attention to the possible parallelism between Christopher Marlowe's accursed scholar and Martin Luther. This happened in the late 1970s, at a time when the city of Buenos Aires scintillated with small cafés and bookshops open until the smallest hours. In the midst of this bohemian setting, I remember going into books, articles and essays, yet I knew little of the nature of discoveries in general, and the whole Faustus-Luther affair took the form of a planned essay that I, of course, never got down to writing. The plan was to remain an unelaborated, perhaps sterile mental blueprint for years.

Time went by, and I was faced with the task of writing my doctoral dissertation about this topic. The first thought that crossed my mind was to tell my friend and mentor. Yet this was a fake reflex, an instantaneous movement of live tissues that are neither responsive to actual physical stimuli nor anchored in reality: my friend had gone already. She had left this world, perhaps to be able to verify and attest in heaven all that she had spoken, thought and taught about. I learnt there and then that I had to write about all that we had so long ago discussed, and promised each other to write about.

Very unfortunately, we are part of a culture that does not really foster much writing among teachers, and many a brilliant Argentine lecturer has died without thinking of the potential legatees that might have profited from the vast experience accrued over years of work. Unfortunately, María de las

Mercedes never channelled through writing the immense wealth that her privileged brain possessed.

I will now try my hand at delving into what she once encouraged me to explore.

Juan Ferretti

Buenos Aires, 2012.

"When a man's verses cannot be understood, nor a man's good wit seconded with the forward child, understanding, it strikes a man more dead than a great reckoning in a little room."

William Shakespeare

As you Like It (III.iii.11-12)

1.- GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Some time before sunset, on May 30 of the year 1593 a group of four men met at a house in Deptford, a flourishing Royal Navy dockland area not far from the heart of London. This rather strange meeting seems to have ended in an equally strange incident, which resulted in the death of one of them (Hotson, 1925; Cheney, 2004; Honan, 2005). Practically no one at that place, except the three men alive after the incident, knew that the victim happened to be perhaps the greatest English dramatist ever, a writer whose talent would very probably have surpassed William Shakespeare's had his life not been severed at the young age of twenty-nine years. The coroner's words were simple but definitive: a person by the name of Christopher Marlowe had been fatally stabbed in the right eye by a man called Ingram Frizer in an act of self-defence, after a supposedly heated argument over a bill, or a 'recknynge', in the sombre official's own words. Two men, Nicholas Skeres and Robert Poley, stood as eye-witnesses and agreed that Frizer could not but defend himself after the said Marlowe had snatched the former's knife in an attempt

to stab him. Frizer obtained the Queen's pardon four weeks later (Nicholl, 1992).

The death of Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593, sometimes also spelt Marly, Marley, Morley, Marloe or Marlow, and also known as 'Kit' Marlowe) has always been shrouded in mystery, as the meeting itself was a really odd occurrence. Interestingly, the men that Marlowe met were very well known to high government officials, at a time when Queen Elizabeth's rule was awash with secret agents (Honan, 2005). These "intelligencers", who usually acted at the behest of Sir Francis Walsingham (Her Majesty's Spymaster), went to the extent of orchestrating themselves acts of high treason in order to cause the arrest and subsequent conviction —that is, the incarceration or beheading— of their perpetrators, whether they were real or framed. These often unscrupulous entrepreneurs of the Queen's secret service could also act as double agents, working for two opposing sides at the same time (Nicholl, 1992). It is a known fact that Marlowe could very well have been one of them, and that his death can hardly be called a "tavern brawl over a reckoning", as some suggested later. However, to many people, a fight at a tavern surely rang a romantic note that made the story be remembered in that light for centuries to come. Indeed, the Deptford incident has been exhaustively analysed by historians who have particularly focussed on the complex Elizabethan period, and the mystery definitely points to the figure of

Marlowe rather than to a mere wrangle. As many have affirmed, it was definitely a case of murder (Nicholl, 1992).

The sixteenth century witnessed England going through a period of considerable internal and external unrest, mostly caused by a recently reformed church, which divided a once all-Catholic social body, and added the subsequent pressure from the part of the European continent still under the aegis of the Vatican (Elton, 2008). Queen Elizabeth stood firm in her conviction that the monarch had to be the sole head of the English Church, such as had been planned and engineered by her father Henry VIII, and she had to face various fierce opposition fronts. The struggle for political power, the conspiracies, both real and imaginary, and the stealthy moves made by the network of spies working for the Crown had only one enemy word: Catholicism (Trevelyan, 1959). It is not surprising to find that Christopher Marlowe was not too far from the world that this term represented.

There have been several sources that have supplied a wealth of elucidating elements regarding the life of Christopher 'Kit' Marlowe in general, and his unfortunate death in particular. Much has been said about his supposedly blaspheming nature, his atheism and his dissipated life (Nicholl, 1992; Honan, 1995). Yet, although the unsurpassable body of literary works he has bequeathed to the world might add further complexities to any attempt to reconstruct his personality, they may contain several hidden elements that might shed light on what is still a mystery today. The works created by this

notable dramatist, as well as those produced by most writers working under difficult social and historical circumstances, may contain hidden "encapsulated" elements that may be construed as direct or indirect allusions to their surrounding world. What is more, entire literary texts may contain features that may transform them into obscure or veiled political pamphlets or religious tracts. This may indeed be the case of Marlowe's literary corpus, and these seemingly mysterious, clouded elements, once uncovered, may help clarify important facts regarding the life (and perhaps the death) of its creator.

Most critics have agreed that *The Tragicall History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* (written probably around 1590) —hereinafter *Doctor Faustus*, as it is usually referred to— can be regarded as Marlowe's most highly accomplished literary piece (Kastan, 2005). Based on a German text published in 1587 and supposedly about a real scholar-turned-magician who lived in the early sixteenth century in Wittenberg, this "chapbook" was anonymously translated and published in England as the *English Faust Book* (probably between 1588 and 1589). The tragedy tells the story of the ill-famed and accursed scholar of Wittenberg who decides to bargain his soul away to the devil in exchange for twenty-four years of boundless pleasure and absolute power over the world of mortals. Faustus is condemned to the flames of hell, as he cannot, or does not want to, accept a possible redemption upon confession and contrition. The once brilliant German scholar wastes his

"four-and-twenty years" performing clownish, self-demeaning acts. His soul is reclaimed by the devil and flares from hell engulf his body at the end of the play. An essential text in the universal history of human letters, *Doctor Faustus*, together with the German legend, have inspired numberless artistic products, such as the literary works by Goethe, Mann (to mention but two), and the celebrated opera composed by Gounod.

The above drama has had multiple interpretations in the course of the centuries to come. Many critics have affirmed, not without reason, that the tragedy presents the audience with the complex mindset of the Renaissance scholar, his ever-increasing thirst for knowledge and his impossibility to see limits or limitations either human or divine. In this respect, Kastan (2005: xi) affirms:

> *Doctor Faustus* has long been recognized as one of the towering achievements of the Renaissance imagination, even if critics have not always been able to agree about its meaning. If it is a tragedy that clearly shows the Reformation sense of human depravity overwhelming the Renaissance dream of human perfectibility, much about its Reformation context remains at once uncertain and unsettling. Is it finally an orthodox play, powerfully testifying to the inevitable and appropriate destruction of one who dares to challenge the enduring moral laws of the universe, or is it a far more disturbing drama, in which those laws are themselves revealed as oppressive? Is grace indeed always available

to Faustus, as the Good Angel insists, or is Faustus damned from the first, predestined to reject what is seemingly offered? As Alan Sinfield asks, are we not forced at least to "entertain the thought that Faustus is not damned because he is wicked, but wicked because he is damned?"

Others have focussed on the complex theological issues that the play contains, such as the nature of sin, the importance of faith and the denial of redemption:

> Out of the ancient myth of the magician who sells his soul to the Devil for occult powers, Marlowe has fashioned a veritable fable of Renaissance man —of his dreams and aspirations and, more particularly, his failures and illusions. For in Faustus we find the elements most suggestive of the Renaissance innovations in European thought. He is partly an artist, who wishes not to glorify God, as his medieval predecessors did, but to applaud and please man; he is partly a scientist and philosopher, whose hope is to make man more godlike and not to justify his miserable state on earth; and, most significantly, he is a Protestant, a Lutheran by training, who has attempted through the Reformation to escape the evils he associates with the Roman Catholic Church, only to become obsessed with the pervasive evil he sees in man's nature: an inability to avoid sin, an inborn depravity that makes damnation inescapable. (Masinton, 1972: 1)

Many a critical voice has even associated the accursed German scholar with the figure of Marlowe, and his alleged blasphemous nature, supposed atheism and proven violent personality.

The philosophical and theological disputations present in the tragedy, as well as in the extensive body of criticism that the play has generated to the present day, might not have existed at all had this text not been written at a moment when the Western world, as has been mentioned above, was being revolutionised by a key event in history: the Protestant Reformation. This religious upheaval shook the very roots of human knowledge and faith, as the European continent, a once powerful bloc under the rule of the Pope —with only the "Muslim peril" to face and fear— was now violently rocked by strong menacing forces coming from the very heart of its geography (Elton, 2008). Indeed, most authors agree that its starting point could be traced to the moment a monk[2] by the name of Martin Luther (1483-1546) is said to have pinned his now famous ninety-five theses against the Vatican's indiscriminate sale of indulgences (or so the story goes, without much solid historical evidence) in the year 1517 on the doors of the Castle Church in the city of Wittenberg, in Saxony (present-day Germany). From that moment onwards, a chain of events questioned and partially obliterated the power of

[2] The term 'monk' seems to have a generic sense in this context, as several historians have affirmed that Luther was really a 'friar', as will be explained in Section 5.1.5.

Rome, dividing the once rock-solid Christian world into several different groups, over which the Vatican could no longer rule supreme.

The central figure of Martin Luther is believed to have ignited the first revolutionary moments of the Reformation (Marchall, 2009). Although it must be conceded that there had been several reformers before his day, no one ever reached such a general public or caused such political turbulence as Luther's preaching and writings did. To the actions of this German monk must be added the power of a relatively recent European acquisition: the printing press, which undoubtedly spread Luther's written word fast enough all over a continent soon to be split forever into differing conceptions of Christianism. The omnipresence of this key reformer of the Church, as well as the consequences that his ideas brought upon the world, can be felt in almost every piece of writing that transcended its moment of creation in the history of Western culture (Elton, 2008).

It is the purpose of this study to associate Martin Luther with Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, bringing into focus the figure of the German monk as alluded to, not without a necessary dose of strategic opacity (Greenblatt, 2004), by the English dramatist to lay his indictment on the reformer's figure, in his attempt to position himself, albeit secretly, as a Roman Catholic. The blurred, obscure presence of Luther in the allusional world surrounding the tragedy might, additionally, throw some light on the poet's seemingly inscrutable death, and bring his murder closer to the theory that Marlowe

was perhaps too popular a figure —or too solidly protected— to be taken to the rack, the block or the gallows because of his secretly professed Catholic faith. Therefore, he had to be "silenced" in a stealthier manner.

The exploration that follows is based on two central hypotheses:

(a) Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* presents a strategically opaque, hidden allusion to the life and figure of Martin Luther.

(b) The presence of Luther in the above tragedy may strongly support the postulation that Marlowe was a Roman Catholic, and this fact might help explain his mysterious death.

It should be clearly established that the present examination brings into focus a close relationship between a text and its author, as well as that between the author, his life and his sociohistorical reality. In this respect, it would perhaps not be wrong to assert that this dissertation delves into (a) the thin line dividing literature from biography, and (b) the complex intersection area that brings together biography and history. In this light, *Doctor Faustus* is not to be treated in strict structuralist terms, especially after Roland Barthes and his followers pronounced the death of the author in the 1970s. A Barthesian or Foucauldian analysis of the drama may undoubtedly entail the noble and lofty endeavour to explore the play as it simply stands, to examine the way audiences can "re-read" it and to describe the complex patterns of meaning that can be derived from it. Instead, this