

THE CERTAINTY PARADOX: HOW DESPAIRING OVER UNCERTAINTY LEADS TO THE CERTAINTY OF DESPAIR

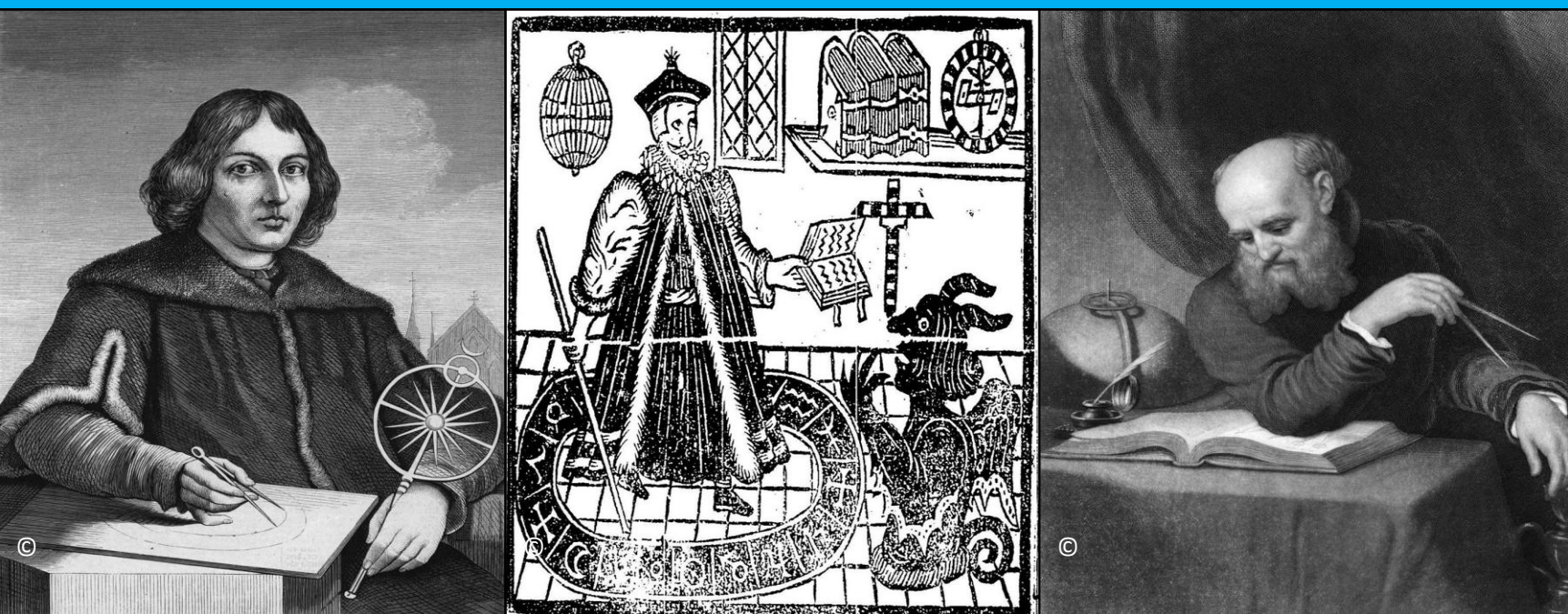
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THESIS



Mankind should accept the unanswered questions – the uncertainties in the cosmos – as opposed to narcissistically overreaching by trying to become the all-knowing God. This is because ambiguity leads to spiritual explorations whereas despairing over discovering certainty leads to the certainty of despair.

ABSTRACT



A close analysis of Christopher Marlowe's play "Doctor Faustus" (1604) and how it relates to the "Scientific Revolution" illuminates this theme.

The play is not only an examination of the state-of-mind of individuals in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – where mankind despaired after learning from Copernicus and Galileo that earth was not the centre of the cosmos – but is also an examination on the human condition; it is an examination on how mankind's narcissistic need for absolutisms is not something that should be yearned for.

This Research Project will show why this is so.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Half a century after the publication of Copernicus' most revered work "On the Revolution of the Celestial Spheres" (1543), mankind experienced its first of three blows (the other two being from Darwin and Freud) to its pride due to a scientific discovery. Copernicus proved that the earth was not in the centre of the cosmos and, as such, the creation of mankind is perhaps not as important to God as mankind previously thought.

Christopher Marlowe, through the character of Doctor John Faustus, captures this collective sense of despair in his play about a man who desires to know about everything below the sun. Faustus' narcissistic thirst for God-like knowledge regarding the certainty of the cosmos ironically leads to a certainty of despair. For Faustus, like the devil before him who "fell" due to his pride, metaphorically falls himself. Indeed, Marlowe's play can be used and expanded on to illuminate a warning to mankind regarding their prideful nature.



FAUSTUS' WAVERING SPEECH (v. 1-14)

"Now, Faustus, must thou needs be damned,
And canst thou not be saved.
What boots it then to think of God or heaven?
Away with such vain fancies and despair!
Despair in God and trust in Beelzebub. 5
Now go not backward. No, Faustus, be resolute.
Why waverest thou? O, something soundeth in mine ears:
'Abjure this magic, turn to God again!
Ay, and Faustus will turn to God again.
To God? He loves thee not. 10
The god thou servest is thine own appetite.
Wherein is fixed the love of Beelzebub
To him I'll build an altar and a church,
And offer lukewarm blood of new-born babes." 14

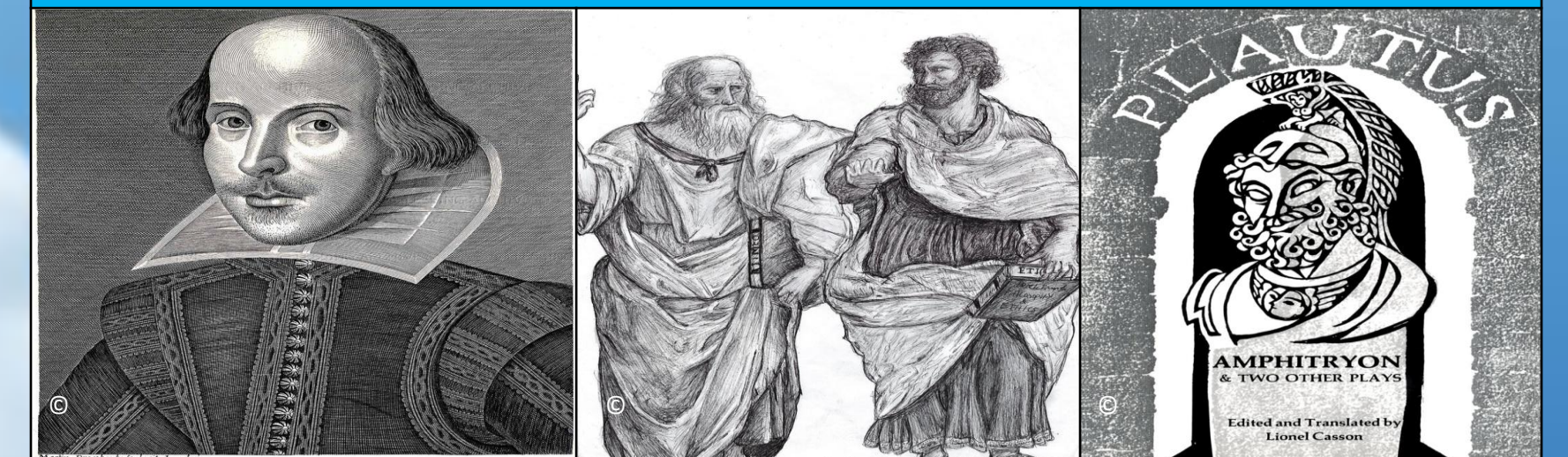
ANALYSIS OF POETICS

The play's fourteen scene circular structure mirrors Doctor Faustus' fourteen line wavering speech, where, in both the overall play and the speech, Faustus creates a destiny for himself that leads to never-ending madness.

In this speech, Marlowe alternates from a messy rhythm (when Faustus is uncertain, e.g. line 1-3) to perfect iambic pentameter (when he is certain, e.g. line 4-5). He has made a deal with the devil to sell his soul for certainty and, as such, line 11-14 -- where he has chosen the certainty of despair -- are in perfect iambic pentameter.

To add to this, the alliteration "blood of new-born babes" is used at the speech's conclusion to express how appealing this certainty is for both Faustus and the reader.

MORE MATERIAL & METHODOLOGY



In a similar fashion to Shakespeare and Plautus, playwrights of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have used a circular structure to symbolize unity, as the playwrights saw the circle as denoting the perfect form.

This came from Aristotle who, like all Ancient Astronomers and Philosophers, believed that the circle was pure and since (in their opinions) the celestial spheres circled around the earth, the earth and the cosmos were divinely created. The Orthodox church also believed this, advocating strongly that mankind is at the centre of God's creation.

The thesis for this project started here, as this belief in the circle changed with Copernicus' book. Marlowe also uses a circle as the form to structure his play, but innovatively uses it to symbolize never-ending madness in order to parallel Faustus to mankind in his era. Indeed, the dangers of certainty are most strongly illuminated here.

CONCLUSION

The certainty paradox that defined the Renaissance Era is an eternal problem; it is a problem that is still prominent today as mankind tries to prove itself to be important by acquiring knowledge. We must not find happiness in absolutisms, but rather should find happiness in ambiguities, as it is the unanswerable paradoxes that make us reflect, not the seeming truths that answer our being for us.

It is now up to each individual to reflect on this nature of truth and find contentment in ambiguities..