

Doctor Faustus

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

1594

Christopher Marlowe based his play *Doctor Faustus* on stories about a scholar and magician, Johann Faust, who allegedly sold his soul to the devil to gain magical powers. Born in 1488, the original Faust wandered through his German homeland until his death in 1541. In 1587, the first story about his life appeared in Germany, translated into English in 1592 as *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus*.

Exactly dating Renaissance texts can be difficult, but *Doctor Faustus* poses particular challenges. Scholars believe Marlowe heard or read the story of Johann Faust and composed *Doctor Faustus* sometime between 1588 and 1592. London's Stationer's Register entered the play into the official records in 1601, but in 1602, at least two other writers were paid for additions to the text. (Most critics believe that Marlowe wrote the play's tragic beginning and end, while his collaborators wrote much of the comical middle sections.) A theatrical company named the Earl of Nottingham's Men (commonly known as the Admiral's Men) performed the play twenty-four times between its opening in 1594 and 1597. Thomas Busshell published the play in 1604, though John Wright published a different version in 1609. Editors generally combine parts of these and other versions of the text to create the play as it is widely read today.

Contemporary theatre records indicate that in early performances, Faustus may have worn the



cloak of a scholar, decorated with a cross, while the devil Mephistopheles appeared in the costume of a dragon. It has been said that performances of the play were so terrifying that during the 17th century audiences believed that the devil actually appeared among them.

In spite of a literary career prematurely shortened by his violent life, Marlowe profoundly influenced English literature. In particular, scholars credit his play *Tamburlaine* with successfully introducing blank verse into English drama and with developing the Elizabethan concept of tragedy as a way of exploring key moral issues of the Renaissance. Although not a favorite with early audiences, today critics and theatre-goers alike consider *Doctor Faustus* Marlowe's masterpiece.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1564, the same year as fellow playwright William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe's great dramatic achievements appeared on London's stage a few years before Stratford's favorite son (Shakespeare wrote and worked in Stratford) came to dominate the English stage. In their day, Marlowe's plays marked a highpoint in English drama, particularly because he first successfully introduced blank verse into tragedy. Blank verse is written in poetic stanzas marked by Iambic Pentameter (each line has ten syllables with accents on every second beat); the verse is composed without rhyme. In addition, Marlowe's characterization helped develop the Elizabethan concept of tragedy as a way of exploring key moral issues of the Renaissance.

A native of Canterbury, England, and the son of a successful shoemaker, Marlowe received a scholarship enabling him to attend Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and prepare for a church career. He resided at Cambridge from 1581 to 1587, receiving his B.A. in 1584 and his M.A. in 1587. Throughout his life, however, Marlowe provoked controversy. Initially, Cambridge sought to prevent Marlowe from receiving his M.A. after hearing that he had traveled to France with plans to seek ordination as a Catholic priest. Significantly, however, the Privy Council contradicted these reports, stating that Marlowe's travels had been in the service of Queen Elizabeth's government and that he should therefore receive his degree. Though hard evidence does not exist, these circumstances have led some critics to speculate that Marlowe had been engaged by the

government as a spy, on this and subsequent occasions.

Marlowe's wild lifestyle challenged social conventions. Arrested for his involvement in a brawl that led to his opponent's death, Marlowe spent time in Newgate prison. His release followed a legal ruling of the fight as self-defense. In May, 1593, officials arrested Marlowe's roommate, playwright Thomas Kyd for possession of heretical writing. (Kyd wrote *The Spanish Tragedy*, believed to be the first English revenge tragedy.) Kyd insisted the papers involved belonged to Marlowe. The Privy Council issued an arrest warrant for Marlowe, but before the case could proceed, Marlowe died in another fight. The dispute arose over an argument concerning a bill at a local tavern. Officials ruled the death self-defense, though some speculate that Marlowe's companions assassinated him for political or religious reasons.

Despite his short and violent life, Marlowe produced a significant amount of work, much of it of high quality. In addition to *Doctor Faustus* (1594), Marlowe's other famous plays include *Tamburlaine, Parts I and II* (1587-88), *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1590), and *Edward II* (1592-3).

Two related themes run through his works: ambition and Machiavellianism, the latter based on popular interpretations of Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1513), which outlines how monarchs can gain and maintain power by acting with cunning and ruthlessness.

PLOT SUMMARY

Prologue

The chorus enters, explaining that the play tells the story of a scholar named Faustus, who, like Icarus, "his waxen wings did mount above his reach."

Act I, Scene i

Faustus contemplates his accomplishments and plans his future endeavors. He considers, then rejects, philosophy, medicine, law, and theology before deciding to study magic. Significantly, Faustus rejects theology because of a misunderstanding of the relationship between divine justice and Christian mercy.

A good and bad angel appear, urging Faustus to resist and indulge in temptation, respectively. Two

magicians, Valdes and Cornelius, enter, offering Faustus books of spells and agreeing to instruct him in the black arts.

Act I, Scene ii

Two scholars, who wonder what has become of Faustus, ask his assistant, Wagner. He chides the scholars about the logic of their conversation, then informs them that Faustus dines with Valdes and Cornelius. The scholars suspect that Faustus has "fall'n into that damned art."

Act I, Scene iii

Lucifer and four devils appear as Faustus chants his spells. When he asks them if his chants commanded them to appear, they reply that was merely accidental, that they appear whenever anyone "abjures the scriptures and his savior Christ." Faustus asks about the nature of hell but ignores the devil Mephistopheles's reply and agrees to exchange his soul for twenty-four years of "voluptuousness" and power.

Act I, Scene iv

Wagner and the clown Robin joke about what they would do with Faustus's powers.

Act II, Scene i

As Faustus prepares to sign in blood a contract giving Lucifer his soul, the Good and Bad Angels appear, offering advice. After Faustus signs, devils dress him in rich robes and dance around. Again, Faustus asks Mephistopheles about hell, then refuses to believe the devil's honest reply, insisting that "hell's a fable."

Faustus asks and receives from Mephistopheles several books of spells to bring riches, control the elements, and provide knowledge of nature.

Act II, Scene ii

Faustus tells Mephistopheles that when he sees the heavens, he considers repenting. The Good Angel appears, urging Faustus to repent and take advantage of God's mercy, while the Bad Angel tells him he will never repent. Faustus agrees that he cannot ask for forgiveness.

Faustus asks Mephistopheles who made the world, but rather than answer and introduce the subject of God, the devil offers a morality play



Christopher Marlowe

showing the seven deadly sins: Pride, Covetousness, Envy, Wrath, Gluttony, Sloth, and Lechery.

Act II, Scene iii

Robin and Dick joke about the power of magic.

Chorus

The Chorus tells us of Faustus learning the secrets of nature and travelling to Rome.

Act III, Scene i

Bruno, supported as Pope by German Emperor Charles V, is brought before Roman Pope Adrian, to be condemned for heresy. As a joke, Faustus and Mephistopheles put the cardinals to sleep, then impersonate them, telling Pope Adrian they have decided to punish Bruno severely. Delighted, Pope Adrian orders a banquet to be prepared.

Act III, Scene ii

Faustus and Mephistopheles free Bruno, who returns to Germany. When the real cardinals awake, they tell Pope Adrian they had not yet delivered their verdict, and when Pope Adrian learns that Bruno has escaped, he imprisons the cardinals.

Faustus, now invisible, accompanies the Pope, archbishop, and friars to the banquet, stealing food and drink from the Pope's hand. The clergy damn the soul responsible for this mystical behavior.

Act III, Scene iii

Robin and Dick have stolen a cup from the Vintner; when he comes to reclaim it, they conjure up Mephistopheles. Angry at being disturbed, the devil transforms Dick into an ape and Robin into a dog.

Chorus

The Chorus explains that Faustus has arrived at the court of the Emperor.

Act IV, Scene i

The Emperor requests that Faustus conjure up Alexander the Great and his paramour. Skeptical of Faustus's power, Benvolio, a knight with a hangover, insists that if Faustus can bring back Alexander, he will become Actaeon and turn himself into a stag. After Alexander appears, Faustus grows horns on Benvolio's head, which the Emperor, pleading leniency, asks Faustus to remove.

Act IV, Scene ii

Two knights, Martino and Frederick, help Benvolio in a vengeful attack on Faustus. When the magician appears, they cut off his head, but he rises again, telling them he cannot die before his contract expires in twenty-four years. They plead for mercy but various devils punish them and their soldiers.

Act IV, Scene iii

Benvolio, Frederick, and Martino enter, bloody, with horns on their heads. Embarrassed, they decide to hide in Benvolio's castle.

Act IV, Scene iv

Faustus sells his incredible horse to the Horse-courser (dealer) for 40 dollars, but warns the dealer not to ride it through water.

Alone, Faustus, "a man condemn'd to die," remembers that divine mercy led Christ to forgive one of the thieves with whom he was crucified. Still, the thief had repented, and Faustus does not. Instead, he falls asleep.

The Horse dealer returns, wet. His curiosity led him to ride the horse through water, and the animal

has turned into a little wet straw. He comes upon the sleeping Faustus and demands his money back. When he pulls Faustus's leg to wake him, the leg comes off in his hand. Faustus screams murder, and the Horse dealer runs off, holding the leg.

Wagner enters to tell Faustus that the Duke of Vanholt seeks his company.

Act IV, Scene v

In a tavern, Robin, Dick, the Horse-courser, and the Carter (a driver) drink beer, swapping stories about Faustus's tricks. The Carter explains how Faustus came upon him and, claiming to be hungry, asked if he could eat some of the hay the Carter hauled. The Carter said yes, knowing that an ordinary person could eat very little hay, but Faustus consumed the entire wagon-load! The Horse-courser then told how the horse he bought turned into hay when ridden in the water, but how he was revenged on the magician by stealing his leg.

Act IV, Scene vi

The Duke of Vanholt thanks Faustus for erecting an enchanted castle in the air. The pregnant Duchess requests a dish of ripe grapes. As it is January, Faustus sends Mephistopheles to the East to bring the fruit.

The Carter, Horse dealer, and others come to settle accounts with the magician. When they demand beer and question Faustus about his missing leg, he teases them, then sends them off.

Act V, Scene i

Faustus raises the spirit of Helen of Troy for a group of scholars. When the scholars leave, an Old Man appears, urging Faustus to repent. Faustus, believing himself damned, contemplates suicide, and Mephistopheles hands him a dagger. The Old Man advises repentance, but Faustus asks the demon for Helen. Faustus then makes redemption impossible by kissing her spirit, asking as he does, for Helen, not God, to make him immortal.

Act V, Scene ii

Lucifer, Beelzebub, and Mephistopheles come to claim Faustus, whose time has run out. Various scholars, seeing Faustus's sad demeanor, wonder if physicians might cure his ill, but he informs them that his powers came, not from himself, but because he sold his soul to the devil. The scholars advise him

to repent, but Faustus says if he thinks of God, the devil will tear his body to pieces. The Good Angel appears, telling Faustus that the time for repentance is past, while the Bad Angel gloats over the damnation of the magician's soul. The Bad Angel tells Faustus, who refused to repent because his fear of physical pains exceeded his fear of spiritual pain, about the exquisite torments that await him in hell.

As the clock strikes eleven, Faustus wishes he could stop time, then wishes he were not immortal and doomed to suffer for eternity, but still he fails to repent. Finally, as the clock strikes twelve, he wishes his soul could be turned into drops of water which disappear into an ocean, but still, repentance eludes him as he exits with Mephistopheles.

Act V, Scene iii

The scholars discover Faustus's body torn to pieces. In spite of his end, they agree to give him a proper funeral because of his great learning.

Epilogue

The Chorus tell us that while Faustus was a branch that "might have grown full straight," instead he yearned to learn "unlawful things . . . [and] to practice more than heavenly power permits."

CHARACTERS

Archbishop of Rhelms

When an invisible Faustus creates a stir at Pope Adrian's banquet, all present wonder about the cause. The Archbishop suggests that perhaps a soul, which escaped from Purgatory and wishes the Pope's prayers, causes the disturbance. Ironically, Faustus's contract with the devil has placed him in need of prayers, though the spiritual power of the worldly pope remains in doubt.

Benvolio, Frederick, and Martino

When Faustus arrives at the court of Emperor Charles V to display his magic, Benvolio, a knight, seems too hungover to witness the performance. When the Emperor requests that Faustus conjure up Alexander the Great and his paramour, Benvolio is skeptical of the magician's power and insists that if Faustus can bring back Alexander, he will become

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



- Actor Richard Burton directed and starred in a 1968 adaptation of *Doctor Faustus*. The film is available on videotape from Columbia.
- *Marlowe Leads the Way*. A filmstrip about the life and works of Christopher Marlowe, distributed by Eye Gate House, 1967.

the mythological character Actaeon and turn into a stag. After Alexander appears, Faustus grows horns on Benvolio's head, which the Emperor, pleading leniency, asks Faustus to remove.

Humiliated by these horns, Benvolio plans revenge against Faustus for his trick, and, helped by Martino and Frederick, tries to ambush and kill the magician. When Faustus appears, they cut off his head, but he rises again, telling them he cannot die before the term of his twenty-four-year contract. They plead for mercy, but he has various devils punish them and their soldiers. Later, Benvolio, Frederick, and Martino enter, bloody and muddy from their struggle against the devils. All have sprouted horns on their heads. They agree to hide away from the world at Benvolio's castle while they wait, hoping that in time, their horns will disappear and people will forget their disgrace.

Bruno

Bruno, a rival pope supported by German Emperor Charles V, appears before Roman Pope Adrian, to be condemned for heresy. Conversation between the popes reveal them to be political, rather than spiritual leaders. Faustus and Mephistopheles put the Cardinals to sleep, then free Bruno, who returns to Germany.

Cardinals of France and Padua

The Cardinals must determine the punishment for Bruno, a papal rival supported by German

Emperor Charles V, whom Pope Adrian has condemned for heresy. As a joke, Faustus and Mephistopheles put the Cardinals to sleep, then impersonate them, telling Pope Adrian they have decided to punish Bruno severely. Faustus and Mephistopheles then free Bruno, who returns to Germany. The Cardinals wake and tell Adrian they had not yet delivered a verdict. Adrian learns that Bruno has escaped and imprisons the Cardinals.

Carter

In a tavern, with Robin, Dick, and the Horse-courser, the Carter (a cart driver) explains the trick Faustus played on him. Faustus approached him and, claiming to be hungry, asked if he could eat some of the hay the Carter hauled. The Carter said yes, knowing that an ordinary person could eat only a little hay, but Faustus consumed the entire wagon-load.

Later, the Carter and others confront Faustus at the Duke of Vanholt's palace, only to be humiliated, silenced, and ejected.

Charles V, Emperor of Germany

At a meeting of the Senate, Faustus meets Charles V, Emperor of Germany. The Emperor thanks Faustus for freeing the German supported rival pope Bruno, then asks the magician to conjure up Alexander the Great and his paramour. Skeptical of Faustus's power, Benvolio insists that if Faustus can bring back Alexander, he will become Actaeon and turn into a stag. After Alexander, Darius, and Alexander's Paramour appear, Faustus grows horns on Benvolio's head, which the Emperor, pleading leniency, asks Faustus to remove.

Chorus

The Chorus appears four times, first to establish the heroic nature of the play. Later, the Chorus identifies the places and times of the action. It also judges or comments on that action. As Renaissance texts should "teach and delight," the Chorus ensures that the audience understands the lesson.

In the final scene, the Chorus implies that there are permissible limits for human knowledge, describing Faustus as a branch that "might have grown full straight;" instead, he yearned to learn

"unlawful things. . . . To practice more than heavenly power permits."

Duchess of Vanholt

Faustus provides the Duchess, who is pregnant, with a dish of ripe grapes, which Mephistopheles brings from the East.

Duke of Vanholt

Faustus entertains the Duke of Vanholt by erecting an enchanted castle in the air and supplies the pregnant Duchess with a dish of ripe grapes. As it is January, Faustus sends Mephistopheles to the East to bring the fruit.

They are interrupted by a crowd, including the Carter and Horse-courser, come to settle accounts with the magician. When they demand beer and question Faustus about his missing leg, he teases them, then sends them off. As the scene ends, the Duke says that Faustus's "artful sport drives all sad thoughts away." Ironically, however, the audience knows that Faustus cannot drive away his own sad thoughts.

Faustus

See Dr. John Faustus

Dr. John Faustus

A Wittenberg scholar who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for twenty-four years of power. The Faust myth originates in the story of a 14th century German scholar and magician, Johann Faust, who allegedly sold his soul to the devil.

In many ways, Faustus typifies the Renaissance hero, for this can be seen as the age of the overachiever typified by warrior poet-courtiers like Sir Philip Sidney or Sir Walter Raleigh. Such Renaissance individuals strove for and sometimes attained ambitious military or navigational goals; Faustus sought ultimate power and forbidden knowledge. Overachieving Renaissance individualists like Faustus play significant roles in all Marlowe's dramas.

Faustus's damnation results from his failure to reconcile divine justice with divine mercy. Ironically, this scholar and student of logic ultimately falls

because of his over-reliance on logic and his failure to account for empirical evidence. This becomes evident in Faustus's considerations of sin, mercy, and hell.

Good Angel and Bad Angel

Throughout the play, the Good Angel urges Faustus to acknowledge his error and plead for divine mercy, which repentance would make forthcoming. The Good Angel chastises Faustus for going beyond appropriate boundaries of human knowledge.

The Bad Angel tells Faustus that he has no hope of mercy or forgiveness, that he faces inevitable damnation.

Helen of Troy

Faustus conjures Helen's spirit to impress the Scholars, then later, urges Mephistopheles to bring her back. Faustus kisses her, asking her to "make me immortal." Her lips "suck forth . . . [his] soul," thereby damning Faustus to hell.

Horse-courser

The Horse-courser (or dealer) agrees to buy Faustus's incredible horse for 40 dollars. Faustus warns the Horse-courser that though he may ride the horse over hedges and ditches, he must not ride it through water.

The Horse-courser returns, wet. His curiosity led him to ride the horse through water, and the animal has turned into a wet straw. He comes upon the sleeping Faustus and demands his money back. When he pulls Faustus's leg to wake him, the leg comes off in his hand. Faustus screams murder, and the Horse-courser runs off, holding the leg.

Later, the Horse-courser accompanies the Carter and others to the palace of the Duke of Vanholt to confront Faustus. He finds that Faustus has not lost a leg at all but again played a joke on him. Then, the magician makes of fool of them all before silencing them and having them ejected.

Lucifer

The chief devil and Mephistopheles's master, to whom Faustus agrees to give up his soul in

exchange for twenty four years of "voluptuousness" and power. Lucifer entertains Faustus with the Seven Deadly Sins and claims his soul at the play's end.

Mephistopheles

The devil who primarily serves Faustus, doing his bidding and debating, theological, philosophical, and scientific issues. He entertains and distracts Faustus when he seems to be reconsidering his deal and repenting.

Old Man

The Old Man represents positive spiritual power. He rescues Faustus from his temptation to commit suicide and urges the scholar to repent. After the magician kisses the spirit of Helen of Troy, the Old Man returns, informing Faustus that his actions have made his damnation inevitable.

Pope Adrian

Pope Adrian, the pope of Rome, confronts Bruno, a papal rival supported by German Emperor Charles V. Adrian condemns Bruno for heresy and demands that the Cardinals determine his sentence. As a joke, Faustus and Mephistopheles put the Cardinals to sleep, then impersonate them, telling Pope Adrian they have decided to punish Bruno severely. Delighted, Pope Adrian orders a banquet to be prepared.

Faustus and Mephistopheles then free Bruno, who returns to Germany. When they wake, the real Cardinals tell Adrian they had not yet delivered their verdict. When Adrian learns that Bruno has escaped, he imprisons the Cardinals.

Faustus, now invisible, accompanies Adrian, the Archbishop, and friars to the banquet, stealing food and drink from the Pope's hand. The clergy decide to damn the soul responsible for this behavior—essentially a moot point given Faustus's inevitable fate.

Scholars

In the first act, Wagner teases the Scholars about their understanding of logic. Later, several Scholars ask Faustus to show them Helen of Troy.

In the last act, Faustus confesses to a group of Scholars that his powers come from a Satanic pact. Finally, they discover the remains of Faustus's dismembered body, and agree to hold a proper funeral for him because of his former standing as a great scholar.

Valdes and Cornelius

Two magicians who help instruct Faustus in the dark arts.

Wagner, Dick, and Robin

Faustus's servant Wagner, like Dick and the clown Robin, serves as one of the play's comic characters. In the first act, Wagner teases students about the inadequacy of their logic, introducing the theme of skepticism toward reason. As the play ends, Wagner, the primary beneficiary of Faustus's will, inherits all his worldly possessions.

Wagner and Robin, a clown, joke about what they would do with Faustus's powers. Generally, these and subsequent comic scenes ridicule the arrangement Faustus has made. Robin and Dick steal a cup from the Vintner, and when he comes to reclaim it, they conjure up Mephistopheles. Angry at being disturbed, the devil transforms Robin into a dog and Dick into an ape.

THEMES

As might be expected, a play in which the main character makes a pact with the devil, exchanging his soul for earthly power, raises many interrelated themes. These issues resonate with readers today, though they become more complex when they are situated within the Renaissance, a time in many ways different from contemporary life.

Individualism

The status of the individual during the Renaissance is central enough to have its own name: "Renaissance Individualism." This comes about for a variety of reasons. Most importantly perhaps, during the Medieval Period, the largely church-

dominated society attended primarily to things of the next world. The Renaissance, though still spiritual, brought with it a new focus on seeking happiness and fulfillment in this world. Society's secularization and the invention of printing enhanced people's literacy and political and economic changes made entirely new ways of life possible.

The Renaissance applauded those people—explorers, courtiers, traders—who successfully took advantage of these opportunities. This was also the age of the "Renaissance Man," a person who could succeed in a variety of seemingly unrelated projects. Think of men like Sir Philip Sidney and Sir Walter Raleigh, who were warriors, diplomats, courtiers, and poets. Remember that even the king and queen pursued a variety of interests: Henry VIII wrote music, and Elizabeth wrote poetry.

Finally, the Renaissance was an age in which people who had read Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Castiglione's *The Courtier* knew that the image people created for themselves also contributed significantly to their success. In that sense, *Doctor Faustus* illustrates the negative side of Renaissance Individualism, for he gains power but uses it foolishly.

Good and Evil

Ethical issues are central to *Doctor Faustus*. Even Faustus knows that justice demands he be punished for selling his soul to the devil, though his pride blinds him to the fact that divine mercy could in time forgive his transgression. After all, aside from his demonic exchange (admittedly, a big exception) Faustus does not do anything truly evil. He plays a few cruel jokes, but he does not really cause any permanent damage or harm. In Christian terms, Faustus confuses the Old Testament God of justice with the New Testament God of mercy. Faustus experiences a moral corruption and misunderstands that it is possible for him to repent, seek atonement, and earn forgiveness.

Another way to see Faustus's actions is in Platonic terms. Plato believed that, although people obviously did evil, they always believed their actions were for good. This is not to say that they did not know the difference between right and wrong but that they acted out of a mistaken idea of good. This describes Faustus's behavior. In the entire play, though he plays a few cruel pranks, he never

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Characters who sell their souls to the devil are a common plot device in stories such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," novels like William Faulkner's *The Hamlet*, and movies from *Rosemary's Baby* to *Angel Heart*. Compare and contrast the themes raised by these works with themes from Marlowe's play. Despite similar plot element, the significance of these stories differs. What do those different stories say about the societies which produced them?
- Anyone who has spent time with children knows one reason they get into mischief is because of what might be called their natural curiosity. Some thinkers believe curiosity forms the basis of our humanity. What is it that makes people wonder and want to know more? In Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, the desire for knowledge fails to produce happiness. Do you believe that limits should be placed on the pursuit of knowledge? Are there some things people were not meant to know? The Angels and Chorus in Marlowe's play seem to think so—do you? You might study the issues surrounding free speech and censorship, or controversial scientific research, exploring what kinds of things society believes should and should not be thought and communicated.
- Most readers of Marlowe's play feel that Doctor Faustus wastes a wonderful opportunity. We condemn his selling his soul to the devil, of course, but we also condemn the fact that he fails to make significant use of his infinite power. If you had Faustus's power, what would you do?
- Ethicists examine the rights and wrongs of human behavior. One question that comes up relates to goals (ends) and the actions necessary to accomplish them (means). For example, stealing is wrong, but do we condemn stealing from the rich to feed the poor, as Robin Hood did? Wounding someone is wrong, but surgeons "wound" people every day in efforts to heal them. In both these cases, we might be tempted to say the ends justify the means. If you could do infinite good for all the world, would you sell your soul to the devil? Before you answer, read the works of several ethical philosophers. They may help you answer, or they may make your answer even more difficult.

performs any truly evil actions against other people. He does do evil, of course, when he renounces God and embraces Lucifer, but while he knows this is wrong, he acts based on a mistaken understanding of scripture. Believing himself to be damned and alienated from God, aligning himself with the devil seems the best remaining alternative. In that sense, Faustus acts out of a mistaken idea of good.

Knowledge and Ignorance

The issue of knowledge occupied a central place during the Renaissance: what kinds of knowledge should be pursued, how far, by whom, and for what purposes? Faustus seeks knowledge—something we might see as good—though that knowl-

edge only leads him to destruction; this is not the fault of the knowledge but of the knower. Marlowe partially implies, however, that there should be limits to human knowledge. Both the Bad Angel and the Chorus at the play's end seem to suggest that man can only know so much without falling to evil, but other voices in the play suggest that knowledge is good if it is understood and used within proper contexts. The issue seems to be not what should be known but how one distinguishes valuable, accurate knowledge from useless error. Ironically, Act I suggests that Faustus's theological misunderstandings stem from misreading the bible. Faustus's pride prevents him from learning. Instead, he concentrates on what he already knows—or believes he knows—rather than what he has to learn—from the

Bible, from the devil, and from the Good Angels who hope to save him.

Choices and Consequences

Faustus makes one of the most famous choices in literary history—to sell his soul to the devil. He chooses freely, though with faulty knowledge of both his options and the consequences (at one moment in the play, Faustus suggests that the “stars” have caused his downfall, but this seems difficult even for Faustus himself to accept). Failing to see repentance as an option, Faustus misunderstands the nature of hell, which he believes is physical instead of psychological. Actually, though not technically “damned” until the play’s end, he seems in hell right from the moment he separates himself from the divine. Of this, he remains unaware; it is part of his tragedy.

Faustus makes a second choice. Right up to the play’s penultimate act, he has the option of repenting, but because of pride and ignorance, as well as fear of physical punishment, he fails to do so and damnation results. Faustus seems to take responsibility for his actions, though in the final scene, he desperately wishes he had never existed—or existed in a different way that might mitigate his punishment. Right up to the very end, he tries to argue or reason his way out of a situation from which only repentance can save him.

Appearance and Reality

If Faustus learns one lesson before his tragic end, it is that things are not always what they seem. This theme is treated seriously and comically throughout the play.

Faustus’s problem with appearance and reality begins with his basic assumption that he can use magic—something inherently not real—to go beyond appearance and gain true understanding of the natural world. Faustus’s magic makes things happen but nothing true arises from it. When Faustus shows Alexander the Great to the Emperor, Faustus admits that he is not real, but spirit. The Emperor wants to see a mole on Helen of Troy’s neck, to see if the “real” Helen had one. This attention to specific detail creates a kind of “reality-effect,” but the fact is, as they both know, she is not real but a spirit. Faustus’s warning to the Emperor not to touch her suggests the danger of the products

of magic and suggests that the natural knowledge and worldly good that Faustus seeks are not permanent but illusory.

In a broadly comical scene in Rome, Faustus makes himself invisible, and interrupts the papal banquet. The scene’s comedy depends on confusion between what is and what appears to be. The popes and cardinals appear to be religious figures but are in reality political ones concerned more with temporal than spiritual power. Faustus appears to be an otherworldly spirit with magical powers, but he actually only controls the powers of Mephistopheles or in a broader sense, hell. The scene comically reveals temporal power to be insubstantial.

Finally, when Faustus makes love with the spirit of Helen at the play’s end, he knows that she is not real and that contact with a spirit will damn him. This comments on the nature of love and symbolizes the absolute lack of substance involved in sex without emotional and psychological contact.

After Faustus has magically entertained the Duke, he says that Faustus’s “artful sport drives all sad thoughts away.” Faustus appears to have everything. Ironically, however, the audience knows that Faustus cannot drive away his own sad thoughts.

Human Condition

In several scenes, discussions between Faustus and Mephistopheles address the central issues of the human condition: who made the world? What is the purpose of human life? Why does evil exist? The devil’s replies fail to satisfy Faustus, who only wants to hear what he already believes to be true. Those who will not learn cannot be taught, and Faustus learns the truth about the spirituality which underlies the human condition too late to avoid destruction.

Meaning of Life

Throughout the play, Faustus searches for the meaning of life, but his search is inhibited because he believes he knows what life is all about. His search for the truth fails because of his own incorrect preconceptions and beliefs.

Pride

As the world’s greatest scholar, Faustus believes he has nothing to learn from other people and

little to learn even from the devil to whom he has sold his soul. When Mephistopheles tells Faustus about the nature of hell, he does not believe him. Because of pride, Faustus cannot learn from others. Pride in his own knowledge prevents him from evaluating the world around him in a meaningful manner. When he does act, he bases his decisions on prejudice rather than objective and empirical data.

Finally, everything Faustus does is egocentric: he performs no altruistic deed, no humanitarian gesture. His pride motivates him only to seek admiration from others but never to really deserve it—from them or from himself.

Success and Failure

Faustus's experiences illustrate the maxim: be careful what you wish for—you just might get it. He successfully obtains his desires. Ironically, however, his power over the devils and material world leaves him unfulfilled and empty. His material success fails to make him happy, and his pact with the devil makes spiritual happiness impossible. His is an empty success, based on actions which are selfish and immature.

STYLE

Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, a tragedy in five acts, tells the story of the title character's agreement to sell his soul to the devil in exchange for twenty-four years of absolute power.

Chorus

In drama, a chorus is one or more actors who comment on and interpret the action unfolding on stage. In Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, the chorus appears four times. First, it introduces the play's theme. Later, it provides the where and when in the narrative action. Finally, it relates the moral and helps the audience understand the significance of the closing scene.

Allegory

In an allegory, characters represent abstract ideas and are used to teach moral, ethical, or relig-

ious lessons. Marlowe's play contains a Morality Play, in which Mephistopheles orders a parade of the seven deadly sins to entertain Faustus. Sins like Pride, Envy, and Lechery are deadly, according to Christian religions, because committing one of them damns a person to hell.

Antithesis

The antithesis of something is its direct opposite. One example is the Good and Bad Angels who appear to save and tempt Faustus, though other figures which appear to be antithetical are God and Lucifer, Helen and the Old Man, and Faustus and Mephistopheles.

Elizabethan Drama

Elizabethan Drama are English comic and tragic plays produced during the Renaissance, or written during the reign of Queen Elizabeth of England, who ruled from the late-sixteenth to early-seventeenth century. Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* was first produced in 1594.

Comic Relief

The use of humor to lighten the mood of a serious story. In this work, while Faustus has sold his soul to the devil in order to accomplish great things, the comic relief involves Wagner, Robin, and Dick, who use magic mostly for tricks and practical jokes. While not strictly comic, it is a wry irony that Faustus also wastes his powers performing tricks, rather than accomplishing anything worthwhile.

Tragedy

Elizabethan Drama is defined by an adherence to a specific structure—in the case of *Doctor Faustus*, a tragedy. Some critics see the structure of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* as flawed and not conforming to that of a pure tragedy. They believe that, while the play has a tragical beginning and an ending, it fails to have a true middle in which the protagonist grows, changes, or learns something. According to Aristotle's famous treatise on drama, *Poetics*, a tragedy must have a beginning, middle, and end. Some scholars attribute *Doctor Faustus's* lack of a significant middle to the work of coauthors, who, it is speculated, filled in the space between Marlowe's beginning and ending.

By definition, a tragedy is a drama about an elevated hero who, because of some fatal character flaw or misdeed (also known as a hamartia), brings ruin on himself. Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* tells the story of a famous scholar who due to hubris (pride) sells his soul to the devil and ends up damned to hell.

Hamartia

In a tragedy, the event or act that causes the hero's or heroine's downfall. In Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, that act is the contract he makes with the devil, exchanging his soul for worldly power.

Catharsis

At the end of a tragedy, the audience is supposed to experience a release of energy, because they have felt pity and fear; pity for the person suffering the tragic fate, then fear that a similar fate might happen to them. In many instances, playwrights will attempt to evoke catharsis in their audiences as a way of cautioning them, a means of instructing them to avoid the unfortunate fate of their protagonists.

Suspense

Marlowe maintains the audience's attention by making them wonder when, if ever, Faustus will repent and what consequences his actions will have. Until the last act, there is still a possibility that Faustus will appeal to God for forgiveness. This "will he or won't he" scenario—combined with the question of whether God would actually accept the Doctor's penance were it offered—keeps the viewer guessing.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In many ways, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* reflects the extensive intellectual, economic, and political changes taking place in sixteenth century England, changes sparked by the Renaissance and the Reformation.

The Renaissance began in Italy during the 14th century, and in the next two centuries, spread new

ideas throughout Europe. Generally, this intellectual and aesthetic rebirth resulted from the recovery and translation of many lost ancient Greek and Roman texts and from the new ideas which people developed after studying the work of earlier thinkers.

Politics and religion came to be intricately interwoven with national identity because of the association between the Protestant Reformation and England's Renaissance culture. Exploration of Asia, Africa, and the Americas, pioneered by Spain, led to changes in Europe's political and social structure. Imperial economies developed that linked European nations with their colonies, contributing to the rise of the modern nation state by creating a heightened sense of national identity.

During the reign of Henry VII as king of England, which began in 1485, government centralization and efficient bureaucracy brought England political stability. This allowed Renaissance ideas to flourish.

Henry VIII became king in 1509. His inability to conceive a male heir with his wife Catherine of Aragon led him to demand a divorce. When Pope Leo X refused that demand, largely due to the political pressure of Spain, Henry broke with the Roman Catholic Church. The Act of Supremacy in 1534 established the Church of England, with the monarch as its head. This initiated in England an era of serious religious strife, though not as bloody as similar struggles in other parts of the world. After Henry VIII's death, Edward VI, who continued England's Protestant course, ruled for a short period. At his death, Mary Tudor, a half-Spanish Catholic became queen and attempted to return England to Catholicism. Religious persecution earned her the name "Bloody Mary," and her marriage to her cousin Philip II of Spain raised concerns about England coming under the political and religious influence of Catholic Spain. Mary's death led to the crowning of Queen Elizabeth, who reversed England's Catholic drift but maintained a largely centrist position regarding religion and politics. Spain's preeminent role on the world stage, fueled by gold from its conquest of the Americas, led to England's continued anxiety about that country's Catholicism and the effects it might have on England. This concern was eased by a large military failure incurred by the Spanish Armada in 1588.

Readers of Marlowe's plays may want to keep this history in mind, for it helps to explain Faustus's

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1590's:** People were anxious about the "New Science" of Galileo, Copernicus, and Bacon. They also were intrigued by the explorations of the "New World" of the Americas by Christopher Columbus and by the discoveries of maritime adventurers like Sir Frances Drake.

Today: Scientific advances in genetic engineering and cloning both intrigue and frighten people, as does the discovery of possible life in new worlds in space.

- **1590's:** People feared those who were different from them. Protestants feared Catholics; Catholics feared Protestants, and both feared Jews and Muslims.

Today: In spite of advances in education and literacy, people today remain anxious of those who are of different races, creeds, and colors.

- **1590's:** Theatre audiences respond to plays that take them to magical places or allow them to meet incredible beings like the demons in *Doctor Faustus*.

Today: Modern audiences are bored by straight narrative tales; they now demand spectacles such as the prop- and effect-heavy *Phantom of the Opera*. Special effects play a significant role in most successful Broadway shows and in many

films. The advent of computer generated animation—which created life-like dinosaurs in the films *Jurassic Park* and *The Lost World*—has upped the ante on what constitutes entertainment.

- **1590's:** Audiences respond positively to plays about heroes like kings and warriors, and enjoy plays like *Doctor Faustus* which poke fun at academics.

Today: Then as now, people admire those who achieve great things—especially when they must also overcome adversity—such as the title character in the film *Forrest Gump*. Films such as *Back to School* and television shows like *3rd Rock from the Sun* satirize inflexible, "by the book" teachers and academics.

- **1590's:** Monarchy is the dominant form of government throughout the world. Though some monarchies have legislative branches that allow group decision-making, most of the power is concentrated in the executive branch.

Today: Very few absolute monarchs exist today, though several constitutional monarchies (such as England) function with royal figureheads and government power concentrated in the hands of a legislature and ministry.

mockery of the Pope and even Faustus's damnation. Remember that, as the play begins, Faustus contemplates pursuing the black arts. He rejects study of theology instead of magic because of his reading of Jerome's bible, a much-revised edition negatively identified with Catholicism by England's Protestant majority. Reading the "wrong" version of the bible contributes to Faustus making his fatal decision.

The Renaissance placed a new focus on Humanism. Generally, medieval religious attitudes emphasized the next, spiritual world instead of this, the material world. Medieval society prized collective values over those of the individual. The Renais-

sance changed this way of thinking, validating individual worth and emphasizing the potential for happiness and accomplishment in this world.

Several factors contributed to the rise of Humanism. First, Martin Luther and the Protestant reformation weakened the hold Roman Catholicism held over European religion during the middle ages. Translations of rediscovered classical texts as well as contemporary continental writers increased the general trend toward secularization. Previously, books were hand copied, but the invention of printing by Johann Gutenberg in 1445 and its introduction into England by William Caxton in 1476 made

books more readily available. The style and content of education also changed. Tutors and universities added the study of newly recovered classical texts to the subjects taught during the medieval period. Students read these texts not only to improve language skills but also to understand their ethical, social, and political content. Classical values influenced English society, as did those of contemporary Italian texts like Niccolo Machiavelli's 1513 *The Prince* and Baldassare Castiglione's 1528 *The Book of the Courtier*. Not only the elite but professionals, artisans, and merchants recognized the value of education, both for its personal and economic value. Literacy increased.

By freeing intellectual inquiry from the confines of theology, a scientific revolution known as the "New Science" began to take place. In the wake of astronomical discoveries by Galileo and Copernicus, thinkers like Francis Bacon privileged observation of nature over the study of traditional writings about nature, developing what we recognize today as the scientific method. Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* satirizes both the New Science and Humanism, which lie behind Faustus's unquenchable desire to know more about the natural world. The play questions what limits, if any, should be set on human knowledge and scientific inquiry.

Columbus's travels to the Americas late in the 15th century inaugurated an age of maritime exploration among Spain, France, Portugal, and England. The demand for financing to support this exploration and trade led to the beginnings of modern banking and commerce, particularly crown-supported monopolies. Organizations like the Senegal Adventurers (1588) and the East India Company (1600) enabled entrepreneurs to sell stock to finance various businesses, in particular trade with Asia, African, and the Americas.

Political and economic changes affected not only how but where people lived. The industrial and agricultural revolutions that came to fruition during the eighteenth century have their roots in the Renaissance. Under Queen Elizabeth, the enclosure movement led to more efficient agriculture, but it displaced rural workers, who migrated from the city. England, up to this point a wool exporting country, began manufacturing and exporting cloth. Increases in trade drew people to urban population centers, where trade-related industries flourished. Such commerce enriched the country as a whole,

and city dwellers who provided these goods and services became increasingly prosperous. That prosperity sped the growth of England's professional and artisan-based middle classes that began in the late middle ages and that Geoffrey Chaucer represented in his *Canterbury Tales*. In addition to being a political and economic center, London became a cultural center as well, providing the necessary ingredients for great theatre like Marlowe's: patrons, artists, and audiences.

Students of Marlowe must pay particular attention to these shifting social structures, which allowed people without titles or inherited wealth to advance to prominence. Increased social mobility, coupled with renewed emphasis on secular education, led to the rise of the strong, ambitious personality type that exemplifies Renaissance Individualism. Marlowe's heroes epitomize this type, aspiring to greatness in the military, political, or spiritual realm. In *Tamburlaine*, for example, a shepherd becomes a warrior-king. Not all shepherds became kings, but economic opportunities broadened horizons for many people. The over-reaching of Marlowe's characters, often combined with the ruthlessness of their efforts, leads to their downfall. In that sense, their personal ambitions reflect those of society at large and serve as a warning not to sell one's soul for material advancement.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

When Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* appeared on the London stage in 1594, audiences did not name it an overwhelming success. Today, however, critics and theatre-goers alike consider it Marlowe's masterpiece. Contemporary critical debate focuses on several, related critical issues: what motivates Faustus's character? When does his damnation occur? And does the play have a "middle?"

Critics interested in assessing the play's quality consider the unity of *Doctor Faustus*'s structure to be central. For some, it has a beginning—Faustus's contract with the devil—and an end—Faustus's damnation—with little of consequence in between. The frivolous ways Faustus uses his powers sup-

ports this position, suggesting that the hero learns or changes little as the narrative action progresses. As Wilbur Sanders wrote in *Shakespeare's Contemporaries: Modern Studies in English Renaissance Drama*, the "unity of *Doctor Faustus* is . . . something that we have to create for ourselves."

The play's complex textual history further complicates the issue. Two different published versions of the play appeared in 1604 and 1616, and theatre manager Philip Henslowe contracted revisions from other writers. This leaves the authorship of the play's middle sections open to debate, though Marlowe certainly wrote the play's beginning and end. Few believe Marlowe wrote the middle of *Doctor Faustus* alone, and some believe he had little part in it at all.

Audiences and critics agree that Faustus seems an essentially selfish, superficial man who uses infinite power foolishly. In *Further Explorations*, L. C. Knights saw Faustus's motivations as essentially immature, driven by "the perverse and infantile desire for enormous power and immediate gratifications." This does not trivialize that desire, however, for "we should see the pact with the devil and the magic . . . as dramatic representations of the desire to ignore that 'rightness of limitation', which, according to Whitehead, 'is essential for the growth of reality' [from *Religion in the Making*]." While Faustus's efforts to transcend limits distract him from understanding reality, the audience gains insight from the magician's errors. Faustus's excessive ambition must be condemned, whether in terms of Renaissance Aristoteanism, which validates moderate behavior, or Freudian psychoanalytic theory, in which the ego's reality principle must negotiate between the pure desire of the "id" and the absolute law of the "superego." The audience learns to question immoderate behavior, but the play leaves a viewer unsatisfied about Faustus's motivation. Perhaps Faustus will realize what the audience already knows, that eternal suffering is a high price to pay for the power to perform a few, trivial practical jokes.

If Faustus's agonizing over whether or not to repent forms the play's dramatic middle, the play's dramatic unity depends on the timing of his damnation. If he can seek mercy until the last moment—an option open to him theologically, though one he fails to see—then the play has suspense until the end as audiences wonder if Faustus will see his error

and repent. If, on the other hand, Faustus seals his fate in the first act, when signing the deed, then, as Cleanth Brooks wrote in *A Shaping of Joy: Studies in the Writer's Craft*, all that follows would be merely "elegiac." The play falls flat, absent of actual dramatic conflict.

Pinpointing the exact moment of Faustus's damnation can be difficult. Some believe that his damnation follows his signing the deed, uttering as he does the same words that Christ said before he died: "*Consummatum est*"; it is finished. "On a purely legalistic basis, of course, Faustus's case is hopeless," wrote Brooks. "He has made a contract and he has to abide by it."

The play offers other options, however, and Brooks notes that even after Faustus has signed the bond, the Good Angel appears, urging him to "Repent, yet God will pity thee." Also, at various points in the play, it seems important to Mephistopheles to distract Faustus from repenting, so some form of reconciliation between Faustus and God must be possible. Finally, the Old Man appears just in time to prevent Faustus from committing suicide, at Mephistopheles's instigation, and he too holds out the possibility of mercy. In each case, though, Faustus fails to believe that mercy can mitigate his offence, which he realizes deserves punishment.

According to Peter Davison, the exact moment of Faustus's damnation comes as he kisses the spirit of Helen of Troy. When Faustus first conjures up her spirit, he warns the spectators neither to speak with nor touch her, for, as Davison noted in *International Dictionary of Theatre-1: Plays*, "verbal or physical intercourse with spirits is unforgivable." Later, however, Faustus makes his redemption impossible by kissing the spirit of Helen. As he does, he asks Helen, not God, to make him immortal. As they kiss, he says, "Her lips suck forth my soul." By doing so, Faustus exchanges the "heaven" of Helen's lips for the heaven of spiritual delight. Davison wrote: "Faustus has triumphed in going beyond man's terrestrial limits, but he has been simultaneously damned and it is as a damned soul that he will be 'eternalized.'" The Old Man appears before Faustus kisses Helen still holding out the possibility of salvation, but when the Old Man returns after the kiss, he says: "Accursed Faustus, miserable man/That from thy soul excludest the grace of heaven."

Like the Renaissance itself, which mixed ancient and modern ideas, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*

constructs desire in ways both medieval and modern. The morality play in which Faustus sees the parade of the Seven Deadly Sins presents a medieval notion of sin. For Sanders, "Marlowe's introduction of devils who are medieval in temper . . . [revives] the earlier psychomachia form (the 'battle for a soul' of which *Everyman* is the best example)." The more modern idea that punishment may be psychological comes from Mephistopheles's description of hell as not a place but a state of mind. According to Brooks, Marlowe's use of demonic apparatus to externalize emotional states—and in that sense, his model of temptation—seems essentially modern and psychological. Brooks wrote: "the devils . . . are always in some sense mirrors of the inner states of the persons to whom they appear." These two positions share common ground, however. Brooks would no doubt agree with Sanders when he wrote: "Marlowe is studying the collision between the old wisdom of sin, grace and redemption, and the new wisdom of humanist perfectibility."

CRITICISM

Arnold Schmidt

Schmidt holds a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University and is an author and educator. His essay discusses Marlowe's play as both entertainment and edification.

Most people have wanted something so badly that, in moments of desperation, they imagined they would do anything to have it. Most learn to balance their desires with reality while a few people act on those desperate imaginings. Still, drama offers the possibility of exploring the implications of such impetuous actions, at least as experienced by characters in the play. In Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, the main character decides to sell his soul to the devil in exchange for twenty-four years of absolute power. Part of the pleasure of reading or seeing the play comes from the viewer putting themselves in Faustus's predicament and imagining how they would respond to similar temptations. Marlowe's story also illustrates the Renaissance's prevalent belief that art should "teach and delight," that is, be entertaining while simultaneously presenting a morale.

Stories of people who bargain with the devil in exchange for worldly goods abound. These can be literal exchanges, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown" or W. B. Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*. This concept can also be treated thematically, as it is in such works as William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. These tales illustrate, without evoking supernatural deals, characters whose obsessions drive them to sacrifice all the goodness in their lives.

In many ways, Marlowe's plays typify attitudes in Renaissance England. The intellectual and aesthetic rebirth known as the Renaissance began in Italy during the 14th century and, in the next two centuries, spread new ideas throughout Europe. Three aspects of Renaissance culture—Humanism, Individualism, and the New Science—figure as prominent themes in Marlowe's play.

Rejecting medieval social and religious attitudes, Renaissance Humanists privileged individual over collective values. Humanism encouraged people to realize their happiness and potential in this, the material world, rather than focusing solely on eternal happiness in the afterlife. By freeing intellectual inquiry from the confines of theology, a scientific revolution known as the "New Science" took place. The influence of Galileo and Copernicus spread. Thinkers like Francis Bacon, who emphasized the observation of nature over study of traditional writings about nature, developed what we recognize today as the scientific method.

Finally, the era's social, political, and economic changes meant that even people without a title or inherited wealth could advance in society. This led to the rise of the strong, ambitious personality type that characterized an upwardly mobile Renaissance individual. Marlowe's heroes epitomize this character type, aspiring to a greatness that extends beyond their current status. This overzealous ambition often results in ruthless and irrational actions; they have the power to make their own choices, yet those choices lead to their downfall. In this sense, Marlowe's work serves to caution the viewer against this kind of behavior.

In many ways, the Renaissance can be seen as a period of the over-achiever, of individuals who aspire for great things which they then struggle to reach. Consider men like Sir Philip Sidney or Sir Walter Raleigh, admired by their age as courtiers, warriors, and poets. Renaissance individuals strove for and sometimes attained ambitious goals: Sir

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- Perhaps the most natural play to read next would be Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust*, published in two parts in 1808 and 1828. If Marlowe's play epitomizes Renaissance ideals Goethe's represents the unique values of the Romantic period. While both plays tell broadly similar stories, they have very different endings which warrant comparison.
- In general, any works by Nathaniel Hawthorne would make compelling follow-up reading to *Doctor Faustus*, but several short stories seem particularly appropriate. In "Young Goodman Brown," a newlywed walks off into the forest to discuss selling his soul to the devil. Though he decides against consummating the deal, he fears his wife has and spends the rest of his life unhappily aware of the corruption that seems to surround him.
- Two other Hawthorne short stories raise the theme of forbidden knowledge, suggesting that the blind sacrifice of everything of value for science resembles a compact with the devil. In "The Birthmark," a man causes the destruction of his beloved by endeavoring to remove a tiny imperfection from her otherwise perfectly beautiful body. In "Rapaccini's Daughter," a father's efforts to create a daughter who is beautiful but poisonous also leads to the downfall of all involved.
- In one of the first gothic novels, Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, the main character completes a deal with the devil, exchanging his soul for escape from the Inquisition, though not escaping eternal punishment. Scandalous when published during the eighteenth century, in part because of its for-the-time explicit sex and violence, in part because Lewis was at the time a sitting member of Parliament and indicated so on the book's title page. Overall, fast-paced and suspenseful reading.
- *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare. In plotting to kill their king, Macbeth and his wife metaphorically "sell their souls" in exchange for political power. Both *Doctor Faustus* and this play successfully explore the psychology of transgression, guilt, and punishment. Students also might compare the images of Shakespeare's witches with Marlowe's representations of sorcery.
- In Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, scientist Victor Frankenstein's search for the secret of human life leads to his destruction at the hands of the creature he creates. Here too, Victor exchanges everything of value in his life—friends, family, fiancée—in a figurative deal with the devil that grants him the secrets of life.
- In *The Countess Cathleen*, the title character exchanges her soul with the devil for food to feed the starving Irish. This short play by William Butler Yeats raises intriguing ethical issues. After all, a person who sacrifices all for humanity is a saint, not a sinner—but what if that sacrifice involves selling one's soul to the devil? In the end, despite Cathleen's bargain, heaven intervenes, and she ultimately eludes the devil's grasp.

Francis Drake sailed around the world and returned with abundant riches. The period was the first to advance the concept of the self-made man; a person could achieve considerable status through his actions, could raise his social standing through ability and determination. When readers of Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Castiglione's *The Book of the Cour-*

tier realized the important role a person's image played in attaining success, they sought to fashion impressive images for themselves either through actions or fabrication. If Faustus typifies the Renaissance hero, *Doctor Faustus* shows the problems with unbridled individualism. Though Faustus has unlimited power, his actions are juvenile and self-

ish. He does no good deed, no charitable action, no feat for the good of his fellow human.

Marlowe's first stage success, the two-part *Tamburlaine*, probably appeared on the London stage in 1587 or 1588. It relates the story of the rise to power of a shepherd who uses military and political strength to dominate an empire. *Tamburlaine* personifies a Renaissance ideal. The play recounts the story of a self-made man who achieves greatness not through a birthright or inheritance but through skill, determination, and character. The shepherd Tamburlaine's success also stems from his Machiavellian attitudes, however. Though the first part of the play ends with him triumphant, the second part concludes with the hero paying the price for his pride. Still, as an individual, Tamburlaine embodies the expansive optimism of Renaissance society, offering a heroism that fails to acknowledge limitation.

Marlowe's next major play, *The Jew of Malta*, appeared in 1593. Barabas, the protagonist, resembles Tamburlaine in his intense desire for wealth and revenge. In representing the struggle between Barabas, a wealthy Jew, and Malta's Catholic elite, Marlowe offers a world in which values are corrupted by materialism and a ruthless, scheming manner of human relations. In Marlowe's day, religious conflict permeated English society, which viewed Catholics and Jews with suspicion. Though the two plays differ, scholars believe that *The Jew of Malta* influenced Shakespeare's treatment of similar themes in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Marlowe continued to blend ambition and Machiavellianism in *Edward II*, recognized by many as the first great history play written in English. Different from earlier works, the play shifts focus from a single character to several complex relationships, a sign of Marlowe's advancing skill at weaving numerous plot threads. Marlowe telescopes more than two decades of history into the play, which alternates tragedy with comedy and lyricism. Echoes of *Edward II* appear in Shakespeare's *Richard II*.

Marlowe based *Doctor Faustus* on tales of a scholar and magician, Johann Faust, who allegedly sold his soul to the devil so that he might gain immense power. Marlowe found in this tale a parallel to the themes he explores in his previous three plays. In *Faustus*, however, he found a character whose thirst for power results in the most terrible price—the loss of his eternal soul. The story also

offered Marlowe a framework with which to examine the society in which he lived.

During the Renaissance, people realized that education offered economic opportunities. Still, then as now, professors and pedants were often sources of comedy, and some critics see *Doctor Faustus* as a satire of popular images of Humanist scholars. In some ways, *Faustus's* strengths as a scholar actually contribute to his downfall as a man. In that sense, the play can be seen not only as a critique of Humanism, but also of empiricism and the New Science generally.

Ironically, the fall of *Faustus*, a scholar and student of logic, comes in the end from his narrow understanding of logic in general and of the syllogism in particular. A syllogism consists of two statements which, if both true, make a third true. The most famous syllogism is "Socrates is a man; all men are mortal; therefore, Socrates is mortal." If either of the first two statements is not universally true, the conclusion must be false.

In the play's first act, as *Faustus* plans future subjects for study, he rejects several—philosophy, law, medicine—before considering theology. He quotes the scripture of John, which indicates that the wages of sin is death (damnation), then realizes that all people sin and therefore that damnation is inevitable. "We must sin, and so consequently die./Ay, we must die an everlasting death." He terms this "hard," and then decides, if damnation cannot be avoided, to seek power from the devil.

Logically, *Faustus's* thoughts construct a syllogism. His two general statements—"sin leads to damnation" and "all people sin"—leads to his third—"all people are damned." *Faustus* has read the quote from John about the wages of sin out of context, however, for the rest of the quote promises mercy for those sinners willing to repent. Further, *Faustus* is reading (as he notes) Jerome's bible. Protestant Elizabethan England saw this edition, associated with Catholicism, as an erroneous text that altered or eliminated key elements of the Bible. Ironically, then, *Faustus*, the world's greatest scholar, comes to ruin because of faulty research methods: he misreads an important quote from a source that is untrustworthy.

As the narrative unfolds, *Faustus's* demands for learning teach him little, and his failure to reconcile empiricism with faith precipitates his downfall. *Doctor Faustus* is a play about an individual's



Scene from a 1974 production at London's Aldwych Theatre

knowledge of the world and how it relates to his knowledge of himself; it examines knowledge that serves as a means to an end and knowledge that is an end unto itself. This concept can be explained in two parts.

First, Marlowe's play is about knowledge of the world and of the self. For example, Faustus repeatedly demands from Mephistopheles information about natural and spiritual phenomenon, from facts about the planets to facts about hell. *Doctor Faustus* becomes a play about self-knowledge when the viewer considers Faustus's responses to Mephistopheles's lessons. When Faustus says, "First I will question thee about hell," Mephistopheles defines hell not as physical but psychological, not as a place but "a state of mind." Although Faustus receives this information from an authority (a devil of Hell), he refuses to believe Hell exists, clinging to the notion that Hell is an "old wives' tale." The devil gives Faustus a lesson in the scientific method, which emphasizes learning through direct experience. When Faustus clings to his existing prejudices, Mephistopheles replies, "Ay, think so still, till experience change thy mind."

Secondly, the play can be thought of as being about knowledge as a means to an end and knowledge that is an end. Here too, Faustus's understand-

ing is flawed. Faustus's questions of means—such as how the planets move?—lead him to inquire about ends—who created the planets and for what purpose? But when Faustus demands, "Now tell me, who made the world?" Mephistopheles replies, "I will not." Faustus knows the answer and says, "Think, Faustus, upon God, that made the world." Try as he might, though, Faustus cannot repent to this God. Consequently Mephistopheles's information regarding nature cannot give Faustus answers about God that are any different from what he already knew before selling his soul. Faustus's fixation with amassing as much knowledge as he can is not in the service of any goal; he is not learning to accomplish anything.

As a failed practitioner of the scientific method, Faustus refuses to evaluate evidence and experience objectively and instead relies on the prejudices of traditional, and in a sense superstitious, medieval religion. Just as medieval scholars resisted questioning Aristotle's natural science, so Faustus relies on medieval church doctrine. Faustus seeks a physical hell rather than taking Mephistopheles at his word that hell is psychological. If knowledge comes from observation, however, the devil's empirical evidence should be superior to Faustus's book learning. Still, he does not believe.

Source: Arnold Schmidt, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1997

W. W. Greg

In the following essay, Greg examines several aspects of the hero's downfall in Doctor Faustus, particularly how Faustus's pact with Mephistopheles leads not to a rise in grandeur and power, but to mere worldly gratification. Ultimately, the critic claims, Faustus "commits the sin of demonality, that is, bodily intercourse with demons." The quotations are taken from Greg's own collation of the 1604 and 1616 quarto editions of Doctor Faustus.

An English literary scholar and librarian, Greg was a pioneer in establishing modern bibliographical scholarship. Combining bibliographical and critical methods, he developed an approach to editing Shakespeare and other Elizabethan dramatists.

When working lately on the text of *Doctor Faustus*, I was struck by certain aspects of the story as told in Marlowe's play that I do not remember to have seen discussed in the editions with which I am familiar. I do not pretend to have read more than a little of what has been written about Marlowe as a dramatist, and it may be that there is nothing new in what I have to say; but it seemed worth while to draw attention to a few points in the picture of the hero's downfall, on the chance that they might have escaped the attention of others, as they had hitherto escaped my own.

As soon as Faustus has decided that necromancy is the only study that can give his ambition scope, he seeks the aid of his friends Valdes and Cornelius, who already are proficient in the art—

Their conference will be a greater help to me/Than all my labours, plod I ne'er so fast

Who they are we have no notion: they do not appear in the source on which Marlowe drew—'The historie of the damnable life, and deserved death of Doctor John Faustus . . . according to the true Copie printed at Franckfort, and translated into English by P. F. Gent.'—and Cornelius is certainly not the famous Cornelius Agrippa, who is mentioned in their conversation. But they must have been familiar figures at Wittenberg, since on learning that Faustus is at dinner with them, his students at once conclude that he is 'fallen into that damned art for which they two are infamous through the world'. The pair are ready enough to obey Faustus' invitation, for they have long sought to lead him into forbidden ways. 'Know', says Faustus—

Know that your words have won me at the last/ To practise magic and concealed arts

At the same time, though they are his 'dearest friends', he is anxious not to appear too pliant, adding, a little clumsily (if the 1604 text is to be trusted)

Yet not your words only, but mine own fantasy,

and he makes it plain that he is no humble seeker after instruction, but one whose personal fame and honour are to be their main concern—

Then, gentle friends, aid me in this attempt,
And I, that have with concise syllogisms
Gravelled the pastors of the German church,
And made the flowering pride of Wittenberg
Swarm to my problems, as the infernal spirits
On sweet Musaeus when he came to hell,
Will be as cunning as Agrippa was,
Whose shadows made all Europe honour him

His friends are content enough to accept him on these terms. Valdes, while hinting that common contributions deserve common rewards—

Faustus, these books, thy wit, and our experience
Shall make all nations to canonize us—

paints a glowing picture of the possibilities before them, adding however—in view of what follows a little ominously—

If learned Faustus will be resolute.

Reassured on this score, Cornelius is ready to allow Faustus pride of place—

Then doubt not, Faustus, but to be renowned,
And more frequented for this mystery
Than heretofore the Delphian oracle—

but only on condition that the profits of the enterprise are shared—

Then tell me, Faustus, What shall we three want?

However, it soon appears that for all their sinister reputation the two are but dabblers in witchcraft. They have, indeed, called spirits from the deep, and they have come—

The spirits tell me they can dry the sea
And fetch the treasure of all foreign wracks,
Yea, all the wealth that our forefathers hid
Within the massy entrails of the earth—

but they have made no use of this knowledge, they have never become the masters—or the slaves—of the spirits. Even to raise them they must, of course, have run a mortal risk—

Nor will we come unless he use such means/Wherby he is in danger to be damned—

but they have been careful not to forfeit their salvation for supernatural gifts; they have never succumbed to the temptation of the spirits or made

proof of their boasted powers. Nor do they mean to put their own art to the ultimate test. When Faustus eagerly demands,

Come, show me some demonstrations magical,

Valdes proves himself a ready teacher—

Then haste thee to some solitary grove,
And bear wise Bacon's and Albanus' works,
The Hebrew Psalter, and New Testament,
And whatsoever else is requisite
We will inform thee ere our conference cease—

and guarantees to make him proficient in the art—

First I'll instruct thee in the rudiments, /And then wilt thou be perfecter than I

Knowing the depth of Faustus' learning, and satisfied of his courage and resolution, they are anxious to form a partnership with one whose potentialities as an adept so far exceed their own. But Cornelius leaves us in no doubt of their intention to use Faustus as a cat's-paw rather than run into danger themselves—

Valdes, first let him know the words of art, /And then, all other ceremonies learned, /Faustus may try his cunning by himself

The precious pair are no deeply versed magicians welcoming a promising beginner, but merely the devil's decoys luring Faustus along the road to destruction. They serve their purpose in giving a dramatic turn to the scene of his temptation, and except for a passing mention by the students, we hear no more of them.

Faustus goes to conjure alone, and alone he concludes his pact with the devil. What use will he make of his hazardously won powers? His dreams, if self-centred, are in the heroic vein.

Oh, what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, and omnipotence,
Is promised to the studious artizan!
All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command, emperors and kings
Are but obeyed in their several provinces,
But his dominion that exceeds in this
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man:
A sound magician is a demi-god!

More than mortal power and knowledge shall be his, to use in the service of his country:

Shall I make spirits fetch me what I please?
Resolve me of all ambiguities?
Perform what desperate enterprise I will? . .
I'll have them read me strange philosophy
And tell the secrets of all foreign kings;
I'll have them wall all Germany with brass, .
And chase the Prince of Parma from our land .

Whatever baser elements there may be in his ambition, we should, by all human standards, expect the fearless seeker after knowledge and truth, the scholar weary of the futilities of orthodox learning, to make at least no ignoble use of the power suddenly placed at his command.

Critics have complained that instead of pursuing ends worthy of his professed ideals, Faustus, once power is his, abandons these without a qualm, and shows himself content to amuse the Emperor with conjuring tricks and play childish pranks on the Pope; and they have blamed this either on a collaborator, or on the fact of Marlowe's work having been later overlaid and debased by another hand.

The charge, in its crudest form, involves some disregard of the 1616 version, which is not quite as fatuous as its predecessor, but in broad outline there is no denying its justice. As to responsibility: it is of course obvious that not all the play as we have it is Marlowe's. For my own part, however, I do not believe that as originally written it differed to any material extent from what we are able to reconstruct from a comparison of the two versions in which it has come down to us. And while it is true that the middle portion, to which objection is mostly taken, shows little trace of Marlowe's hand, I see no reason to doubt that it was he who planned the whole, or that his collaborator or collaborators, whoever he or they may have been, carried out his plan substantially according to instructions. If that is so, for any fundamental fault in the design Marlowe must be held responsible.

The critics' disappointment is quite natural. Although it is difficult to see how any dramatist could have presented in language and dramatic form the revelation of a knowledge beyond the reach of human wisdom, there is no question that much more might have been done to show the wonder and uphold the dignity of the quest, and so satisfy the natural expectation of the audience. Marlowe did not do it; he deliberately turned from the attempt. Instead he showed us the betrayal of ideals, the lapse into luxury and buffoonery.

And what, in the devil's name, would the critics have? I say 'in the devil's name', because all that happens to Faustus once the pact is signed is the devil's work: 'human standards' are no longer relevant. Who but a fool, such a clever fool as Faustus, would dream that any power but evil could be won by a bargain with evil, or that truth could be wrung from the father of lies? 'All power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,' is indeed

an aphorism to which few Elizabethans would have subscribed; but Marlowe knew the nature of the power he put into the hands of his hero and the inevitable curse it carried with it.

Of course, Faustus' corruption is not a mechanical outcome of his pact with evil. In spite of his earnest desire to know truth, and half-hidden in the Marlowan glamour cast about him, the seeds of decay are in his character from the first—how else should he come to make his fatal bargain? Beside his passion for knowledge is a lust for riches and pleasure and power. If less single-minded, he shares Barabbas' thirst for wealth—

I'll have them fly to India for gold,
Ransack the ocean for orient pearl,
And search all corners of the new-found world
For pleasant fruits and princely delicates . . .

Patriotism is a veil for ambition: he will

chase the Prince of Parma from our land
And reign sole king of all our provinces . . .
I'll join the hills that bind the Afric shore
And make that country continent to Spain,
And both contributory to my crown:
The Emperor shall not live but by my leave,
Nor any potentate in Germany.

His aspiration to be 'great emperor of the world' recalls Tamburlain's vulgar desire for

The sweet fruition of an earthly crown.

But Faustus' ambition is not thus limited; the promptings of his soul reveal themselves in the words of the Bad Angel:

Be thou on earth, as Jove is in the sky/Lord and
commander of these elements.

If there is a sensual vein in him, it is hardly seen at this stage; still his demand to 'live in all voluptuousness' anticipates later desires—

Whilst I am here on earth let me be cloyed
With all things that delight the heart of man;
My four and twenty years of liberty
I'll spend in pleasure and in dalliance—

and it may be with shrewd insight that Valdes promises 'serviceable' spirits,

Sometimes like women or unwedded maids/Shadow-
ing more beauty in their airy brows /Than in the white
breasts of the Queen of Love.

But when all is said, this means no more than that Faustus is a man dazzled by the unlimited possibilities of magic, and alive enough to his own weakness to exclaim:

The god thou serv'st is thine own appetite . . .

After Faustus has signed the bond with his blood, we can trace the stages of a gradual deteriora-

tion. His previous interview with Mephostophilis struck the note of earnest if slightly sceptical inquiry with which he entered on his quest:

This word Damnation terrifies not me,/ For I con-
found hell in Elizium: /My ghost be with the old
philosophers!

He questions eagerly about hell, and the spirit replies:

Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it:
Think'st thou that I who saw the face of God
And tasted the eternal joys of heaven,
Am not tormented with ten thousand hells
In being deprived of everlasting bliss? . . .
FAU: 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.

After the bond is signed the discussion is renewed, but while the devil loses nothing in dignity of serious discourse, we can already detect a change in Faustus; his sceptical levity takes on a more truculent and jeering tone. Asked 'Where is the place that men call hell?' Mephostophilis replies:

Within the bowels of these elements,
Where we are tortured and remain for ever.
Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed
In one self place, but where we are is hell,
And where hell is, there must we ever be:
And to conclude, when all the world dissolves
And every creature shall be purified,
All places shall be hell that is not heaven.
FAU: Come, I think hell's a fable.
MEPH.: Ay, think so still, till experience change
thy mind. . .
FAU.: . . Think'st thou that Faustus is so fond to
imagine
That after this life there is any pain?
Tush! these are trifles and mere old wives' tales.
MEPH.: But I am an instance to prove the
contrary;
For I tell thee I am damned and now in hell.
FAU.: Nay, and this be hell, I'll willingly
be damned:
What? sleeping, eating, walking, and disputing!

In the next scene there follows the curiously barren discussion on astronomy. It has probably been interpolated and is not altogether easy to follow, but the infernal exposition of the movements of the spheres calls forth an impatient,

These slender questions Wagner can decide
and at the end Mephostophilis' sententions
Per inaequalem motum respectu totius
and Faustus' half-satisfied
Well, I am answered!

leave in the mouth the taste of dead-sea fruit. The quarrel that follows on the spirit's refusal to say who made the world leads to the intervention of Lucifer and the 'pastime' of the Seven Deadly Sins. There seems to me more savour in this than has sometimes been allowed; still it is a much shrunken Faustus who exclaims:

Oh, this feeds my soul!

He had been no less delighted with the dance of the devils that offered him crowns and rich apparel on his signing the bond: we do not know its nature, but from his exclamation,

Then there's enough for a thousand souls!

when told that he may conjure up such spirits at will, we may perhaps conclude that it involved a direct appeal to the senses. That would, at least, accord with his mood soon afterwards; for while it would be rash to lay much stress on his demanding 'the fairest maid in Germany, for I am wanton and lascivious' (this being perhaps an interpolation) we should allow due weight to Mephostophilis' promise:

I'll cull thee out the fairest courtesans
And bring them every morning to thy bed;
She whom thine eye shall like, thy heart
shall have,

Were she as chaste as was Penelope,
As wise as Saba, or as beautiful
As was bright Lucifer before his fall.

So far Faustus has not left Wittenberg, and emphasis has been rather on the hollowness of his bargain in respect of any intellectual enlightenment than on the actual degradation of his character. As yet only his childish pleasure in the devil-dance and the pageant of the Sins hints at the depth of vulgar triviality into which he is doomed to descend. In company with Mephostophilis he now launches forth into the world; but his dragon-flights

To find the secrets of astronomy /Graven in the book
of Jove's high firmament,

and

to prove cosmography, / That measures coasts and
kingdoms of the earth,

only land him at last in the Pope's privy-chamber to

take some part of holy Peter's feast,

and live with dalliance in

the view /Of rarest things and royal courts of kings .

It is true that in the fuller text of 1616 the rescue of 'holy Bruno', imperial candidate for the papal throne, lends a more serious touch to the sheer horse-play of the Roman scenes in the 1604 ver-

sion, and even the 'horning' episode at the Emperor's court is at least developed into some dramatic coherence; but this only brings out more pointedly the progressive fatuity of Faustus' career, which in the clownage and conjuring tricks at Anhalt sinks to the depth of buffoonery.

If, as may be argued, the gradual deterioration of Faustus' character and the prostitution of his powers stand out less clearly than they should, this may be ascribed partly to Marlowe's negligent handling of a theme that failed to kindle his wayward inspiration, and partly to the ineptitude of his collaborator. But the logical outline is there, and I must differ from Marlowe's critics, and believe that when he sketched that outline Marlowe knew what he was about.

Another point to be borne in mind is that there is something strange and peculiar, not only in Faustus' situation, but in his nature. Once he has signed the bond, he is in the position of having of his own free will renounced salvation. So much is obvious. Less obvious is the inner change he has brought upon himself. Critics have strangely neglected the first article of the infernal compact: 'that Faustus may be a spirit in form and substance'. Presumably they have taken it to mean merely that he should be free of the bonds of flesh, so that he may be invisible at will, invulnerable, and able to change his shape, ride on dragons, and so forth. But in this play 'spirit' is used in a special sense. There is, of course, nothing very significant in the fact that, when the 'devils' dance before him, Faustus asks:

But may I raise such spirits when I please?

that he promises to

make my spirits pull His churches down

and bids Mephostophilis

Ay, go, accursed spirit to ugly hell!

or that the latter speaks of the devils as

Unhappy spirits that fell with Lucifer—

though it is noticeable how persistently devils are called spirits in the play, and it is worth recalling that in the *Damnable Life* Mephostophilis is regularly 'the Spirit'. What is significant is that when Faustus asks 'What is that Lucifer, thy lord?' Mephostophilis replies:

Arch-regent and commander of all spirits

which Faustus at once interprets as 'prince of devils'; and that the Bad Angel, in reply to Faustus' cry of repentance, asserts:

Thou art a spirit; God cannot pity thee

—a remark to which I shall return. And if there could be any doubt of the meaning of these expressions, we have the explicit statement in the *Damnable Life* that Faustus' 'request was none other than to become a devil'. Faustus then, through his bargain with hell, has himself taken on the infernal nature, although it is made clear throughout that he still retains his human soul.

This throws a new light upon the question, debated throughout the play, whether Faustus can be saved by repentance. Faustus, of course, is for ever repenting—and recanting through fear of bodily torture and death—and the Good and Bad Angels, who personate the two sides of his human nature, for are ever disputing the point:

FAU.: Contrition, prayer, repentance: what of these?

GOOD A.. Oh, they are means to bring thee vnto heaven.

BAD A : Rather illusions, fruits of lunacy

and again:

GOOD A Never too late, if Faustus will repent.

BAD A If thou repent, devils will tear thee in pieces.

GOOD A Repent, and they shall never raze thy skin

There are two passages that are particularly significant in this respect: and we must remember, as I have said, the double question at issue—Faustus' nature, and whether repentance can cancel a bargain. First then, the passage from which I have already quoted:

GOOD A. Faustus, repent; yet God will pity thee.

BAD A : Thou art a spirit; God cannot pity thee.

FAU.. Who buzzeth in mine ears, I am a sprit?

Be I a devil, yet God may pity me;

Yes, God will pity me if I repent.

BAD A. Ay, but Faustus never shall repent.

The Bad Angel evades the issue, which is left undecided. Later in the same scene, when Faustus calls on Christ to save his soul, Lucifer replies with admirable logic:

Christ cannot save thy soul, for he is just:/ There's none but I have interest in the same

Thus the possibility of Faustus' salvation is left nicely poised in doubt—like that of the archdeacon of scholastic speculation.

It is only when, back among his students at Wittenberg, he faces the final reckoning that Faustus regains some measure of heroic dignity. Mar-

lowe again takes charge. But even so the years have wrought a change. His faithful Wagner is puzzled:

I wonder what he means; if death were nigh,
He would not banquet and carouse and swill
Among the students, as even now he doth . . .

This is a very different Faustus from the fearless teacher his students used to know, whose least absence from the class-room caused concern—

I wonder what's become of Faustus, that was/ wont to make our schools ring with *sic probo*.

One good, or at least amiable, quality—apart from a genuine tenderness towards his students—we may be tempted to claim for him throughout: a love of beauty in nature and in art:

Have not I made blind Homer sing to me
Of Alexander's love and Oenon's death?
And hath not he that built the walls of Thebes
With ravishing sound of his melodious harp
Made music—?

and the climax of his career is his union with the immortal beauty of Helen, to measure admittedly the most lovely that flowed from Marlowe's lyre. Is this sensitive appreciation something that has survived uncorrupted from his days of innocence? I can find no hint of it in the austere student of the early scenes. Is it then some strange flowering of moral decay? It would seem so. What, after all, is that 'ravishing sound' but the symphony of hell?—

Made music—with my Mephostophilis'

And Helen, what of her?

Here we come, if I mistake not, to the central theme of the damnation of Faustus. The lines in which he addresses Helen are some of the most famous in the language:

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss! . . .
Here will I dwell, for heaven is in these lips,
And all is dross that is not Helena
I will be Paris, and for love of thee
Instead of Troy shall Wittenberg be smoked;
And I will combat with weak Menelaus,
And wear thy colours on my plumed crest:
Yes, I will wound Achilles in the heel,
And then return to Helen for a kiss.
Oh, thou art fairer than the evening's air
Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars,
Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter
When he appeared to hapless Semele,
More lovely than the monarch of the sky
In wanton Arethusa's azured arms;
And none but thou shalt be my paramour!

In these lines Marlowe's uncertain genius soared to its height, but their splendour has obscured, and

was perhaps meant discreetly to veil, the real nature of the situation. 'Her lips suck forth my soul', says Faustus in lines that I omitted from his speech above. What is Helen? We are not told in so many words, but the answer is there, if we choose to look for it. When the Emperor asks him to present Alexander and his paramour before the court, Faustus (in the 1604 version) laboriously explains the nature of the figures that are to appear:

My gracious lord, I am ready to accomplish your request so far forth as by art and power of my spirit I am able to perform. . . But, if it like your grace, it is not in my ability to present before your eyes the true substantial bodies of those two deceased princes, which long since are consumed to dust. . . . But such spirits as can lively resemble Alexander and his paramour shall appear before your grace in that manner that they best lived in, in their most flourishing estate

He adds (according to the 1616 version).

My lord, I must forewarn your majesty That, when my spirits present the royal shapes Of Alexander and his paramour, Your grace demand no questions of the king, But in dumb silence let them come and go.

This is explicit enough; and as a reminder that the same holds for Helen, Faustus repeats the caution when he presents her to his students:

Be silent then, for danger is in words.

Consider, too, a point critics seem to have overlooked, the circumstances in which Helen is introduced the second time. Urged by the Old Man, Faustus has attempted a last revolt; as usual he has been cowed into submission, and has renewed the blood-bond. He has sunk so low as to beg revenge upon his would-be saviour—

Torment, sweet friend, that base and aged man,/ That durst dissuade me from thy Lucifer, /With greatest torments that our hell affords

And it is in the first place as a safeguard against relapse that he seeks possession of Helen—

One thing, good servant, let me crave of thee To glut the longing of my heart's desire; That, I may have unto my paramour That heavenly Helen which I saw of late, Whose sweet embraces may extinguish clear Those thoughts that may dissuade me from my vow,

And keep mine oath I made to Lucifer.

Love and revenge are alike insurances against salvation. 'Helen' then is a 'spirit', and in this play a spirit means a devil. In making her his paramour Faustus commits the sin of demoniality, that is, bodily intercourse with demons.

The implication of Faustus' action is made plain in the comments of the Old Man and the Angels. Immediately before the Helen episode the Old Man was still calling on Faustus to repent—

Ah, Doctor Faustus, that I might prevail/To guide thy steps into the way of life!

(So 1604:1616 proceeds:)

Though thou hast now offended like a man, Do not persevere in it like a devil: Yet, yet, thou hast an amiable soul, If sin by custom grow not into nature

But with Faustus' union with Helen the nice balance between possible salvation and imminent damnation is upset. The Old Man, who has witnessed the meeting (according to the 1604 version), recognizes the inevitable:

Accursed Faustus, miserable man, /That from thy soul exclud'st the grace of heaven/ And fliest the throne of his tribunal seat!

The Good Angel does no less:

O Faustus, if thou hadst given ear to me/ Innumerable joys had followed thee /Oh, thou hast lost celestial happiness . .

And Faustus himself, still haunted in his final agony by the idea of a salvation beyond his reach—

See, see, where Christ's blood streams in the firmament! /One drop would save my soul

— shows, in talk with his students, a terrible clarity of vision:

A surfeit of deadly sin, that hath damned both body and soul. Faustus' offence can ne'er be pardoned: the Serpent that tempted Eve may be saved, but not Faustus.

and Mephostophilis echoes him:

Ay, Faustus, now hast thou no hope of heaven!

It would be idle to speculate how far the 'atheist' Marlowe, whom gossip accused of what we call 'unnatural' vice, may have dwelt in imagination on the direst sin of which human flesh is capable. But in presenting the fall and slow moral disintegration of an ardent if erring spirit, he did not shrink from depicting, beside Faustus' spiritual sin of bartering his soul to the powers of evil, what is in effect its physical complement and counterpart, however he may have disguised it in immortal verse. (pp. 97–107)

Source: W. W. Greg, "The Damnation of Faustus," in the *Modern Language Review*, Vol. XLI, No. 2, April, 1946, pp. 97–107.

Brooks Atkinson

In the following review of a 1937 production of *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*, which origi-



DR. FAUSTUS HAS THE
VITALITY OF A MODERN PLAY'

nally appeared in *The New York Times* on January 9, 1937, Atkinson illustrates how the manner in which the play is staged enhances its effectiveness. Atkinson maintains that the result of the masterful staging in this production "is a *Dr. Faustus* that is physically and imaginatively alive, nimble, active—heady theatre stuff."

As drama critic for *The New York Times* from 1925 to 1960, Atkinson was one of the most influential reviewers in America.

Although the Federal Theatre has some problem children on its hands, it also has some enterprising artists on its staff. Some of them got together at Maxine Elliott's Theatre last evening and put on a brilliantly original production of Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*, which dates from 1589. If that sounds like a schoolbook chore to you, be disabused, for the bigwigs of the Federal Theatre's Project 891 know how absorbing an Elizabethan play can be when it is staged according to the simple unities that obtained in the Elizabethan theatres. Every one interested in the imaginative power of the theatre will want to see how ably Orson Welles and John Houseman have cleared away all the imposing impedimenta that make most classics forbidding and how skillfully they have left *Dr. Faustus*, grim and terrible, on the stage. By being sensible as well as artists, Mr. Welles and Mr. Houseman have gone along way toward revolutionizing the staging of Elizabethan plays.

Although *Dr. Faustus* is a short play, consuming hardly more than an hour in the telling, it is not a simple play to produce. It is the story of the eminent German philosopher who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for universal knowledge. Like most Elizabethan plays, it has an irresponsible scenario; it moves rapidly from place to place, vexing the story with a great many short scenes; it includes several incidents of supernaturalism and, of course, it is written in verse.

If the directors had tried to stage *Dr. Faustus* against descriptive backgrounds it would be intolerably tedious to follow. But they have virtually

stripped it of scenery and decoration, relying upon an ingenious use of lights to establish time and place. In the orchestra pit they have built an apron stage where the actors play cheek by jowl with the audience. The vision of the seven deadly sins is shown by puppets in the right-hand box. Upstage scenes are unmasked by curtained walls that can be lifted swiftly. Entrances are made not only from the wings, but from the orchestra pit and from trap doors that are bursting with light and that make small incidents uncommonly majestic.

The result is a *Dr. Faustus* that is physically and imaginatively alive, nimble, active—heady theatre stuff. As the learned doctor of damnation Orson Welles gives a robust performance that is mobile and commanding, and he speaks verse with a deliberation that clarifies the meaning and invigorates the sound of words. There are excellent performances in most of the parts, notably Jack Carter's Mephistopheles, Bernard Savage's friend to Faustus and Arthur Spencer's impudent servant. There are clowns, church processions and coarse brawls along the street. Paul Bowles has composed a score which is somewhat undistinguished in itself, although it helps to arouse the illusion of black magic and diabolical conjuration.

Not that Elizabethan dramas have never been staged before under conditions approximating the conventions of Elizabethan theatres. Most of those experiments have a self-conscious and ascetic look to them. But Mr. Welles and Mr. Houseman have merely looked to the script and staged it naturally. In the first place, it is easy to understand, which is no common virtue. In the second place, it is infernally interesting. *Dr. Faustus* has the vitality of a modern play, and the verse sounds like good, forceful writing. For this is a simple experiment that has succeeded on its merits as frank and sensible theatre, and a good many people will now pay their taxes in a more charitable frame of mind.

Source: Brooks Atkinson, "Faustus Put On by the Federal Theatre" (1937) in *On Stage: Selected Theater Reviews from The New York Times, 1920-1970*, edited by Bernard Beckerman and Howard Siegman, Arno Press, 1973, pp 185-86.

FURTHER READING

Brooks, Cleanth. "The Unity of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*" in *A Shaping of Joy: Studies in the Writer's Craft*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972, pp. 367-80

Brooks responds to those critics who fail to see the unity of *Doctor Faustus*. Brooks realizes that if Marlowe's agreement with the devil damns his soul to hell, then the play, in structural terms, has no conflict, offers no possible dramatic development, and becomes merely "elegiac." Admitting the weakness of the play's middle section, Brooks believes that the sheer force of Marlowe's poetry holds the play together. Thematically, Brooks sees the play as exploring various types of knowledge: of the self, of the natural world, and of the divine. While Marlowe's treatment of this theme has medieval elements, Brooks describes his use of demonic apparatus in essentially psychological terms, noting that "the devils . . . are always in some sense mirrors of the inner states of the persons to whom they appear"

Davison, Peter "Doctor Faustus" in *International Dictionary of Theatre-I: Plays*, edited by Mark Hawkins-Dady, St James Press, 1992, pp. 187-89

In a short but focused commentary, Davison identifies the exact moment of Faustus's damnation as that in which he kisses Helen of Troy. Davison also usefully discusses the role of the Good and Bad Angels and of the Old Man.

Keeble, N. H. In *Reference Guide to English Literature*, edited by D L Kirkpatrick, St James Press, 1991, pp. 1548-49

Keeble provides background on the historical origins of the Faustus myth and shows how Marlowe may have been introduced to the original German story. Agreeing with critics who believe that Marlowe did not write the play's comic interludes (the middle acts), Keeble sees the subplots as the work of another writer, most likely Samuel Rowley. Keeble perceives as mistaken those who read *Doctor Faustus* as an anti-Christian play and views Faustus's self-deception as his tragic flaw. The play's fine ending contains Faustus's final soliloquy, which Keeble sees as "one of the most powerful in all Renaissance drama."

Knights, L. C. "The Strange Case of Christopher Marlowe" in *Further Explorations*, Chatto & Windus, 1965, pp. 75-98.

Knights sees Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* essentially as a play about desire and limitation. These can be destructive, as they are for Faustus himself but balanced properly, they result in a true understanding of reality. Knights describes Faustus's motivations as essentially immature, driven by "the perverse and infantile desire for enormous power and immediate gratifications." Knights does not trivialize this desire nor see it as inherently evil, for when it leads to a recognition of human limitation, this balance of desire and limit produces a mature understanding of reality. Faustus's fall results not from his desire, but from his refusal to accept human limitation.

Maxwell, J C Introduction to *Complete Plays and Poems of Christopher Marlowe*, Everyman, 1996, pp. vii-xxvi.

In a short but thorough overview of Marlowe's writings, Maxwell presents biographical information, as well as thematic analyses of the author's work

Sanders, Wilbur In *Shakespeare's Contemporaries: Modern Studies in English Renaissance Drama*, edited by Max Bluestone and Norman Rabkin, second edition, Prentice-Hall, 1970, pp. 112-27.

Sanders sees Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* as a great, though flawed play with structural, aesthetic, and thematic inconsistencies. The "unity of *Doctor Faustus* is . . . something that we have to create for ourselves," wrote Sanders, who has difficulty reconciling the play's strong opening and closing sections with its formless middle. Audiences must appreciate the magnificent poetic moments, which overlooking other poetry of "baffling banality, if not narvety." Finally, Sanders believes that the play mixes without successfully blending medieval and modern theological elements, particularly in regard to its conflicting images of Hell