



## ***Dr Faustus - Study Guide***

---

### ***Table of contents***

[Biography and Background](#)

[Synopsis](#)

[Scene Summaries](#)

[The Faustbuch](#)

[Themes](#)

[Essay Plans](#)

[Further Reading](#)

### ***Biography and Background***

Christopher Marlowe was born in 1564 in Canterbury, Kent. His life has been the subject of much speculation and has fascinated scholars through the centuries. He attended King's School, Canterbury, and then Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. While still a student he travelled abroad for the Government, probably as a spy for Walsingham. He left Cambridge for London in 1587 and started to earn a living as a playwright. His first play, *Tamberlaine the Great*, and its sequel, *Tamberlaine the Great, Part II*, were immediate hits. The hero is a brutal murderer, and his ruthless politics anticipates the pride and ambition of Faustus that would follow.

Marlowe's friends were young men like himself, with similar interests, and included the playwright Thomas Kyd, who wrote the first revenge tragedy for the English stage, the hugely influential *The Spanish Tragedy*. Marlowe mixed amongst criminals and spies, intellectuals and men of politics. As well as plays he composed lyric poetry, translated Ovid's *Amores* and Lucan's *Pharsalia*, and wrote *Hero and Leander*, an epyllion (a short narrative poem or 'little epic' fashionable in the 1590s).

At the time of his death from a knife wound, in Deptford, London in 1593, Marlowe was said to have expressed atheistic views. Certainly his religious sympathies have aroused debate. Some have believed him to be a member of the puritan movement; its emphasis on free speech resonates with the idea that he infiltrated the Catholic Jesuit community at Rheims in France when working for Walsingham's secret service. However, he has also been seen as a Catholic sympathizer, and that in France he became a double agent. There were numerous spy networks run by the nobility, and dissent and conflict coursed through political connections. Richard Baines, a Government informer, wrote of Marlowe: "almost into every company he cometh he persuades men to Atheism, willing them not to be afeared of bugbears and hobgoblins, and utterly scorning both god and his ministers". He claimed Marlowe to have remarked that "all they that love not tobacco and boys were fools". Under arrest, Kyd also made accusations against Marlowe. Obviously this evidence cannot be relied upon - it is speculation and could have been the invention of enemies wishing to discredit Marlowe and his friends. However, the notion that Kit Marlowe was an atheist has clung persistently to his reputation, leading some to argue that Faustus is a version of the author himself. Admittedly the play explores the problems of belief, and puts the existence of God under stress, but he is not absent from the play. He may be revengeful and terrifying, but *Doctor Faustus* still points to his presence.

Marlowe's death, arising either from self-defence or murder, has been linked with Baines' accusations and the rumours that were brewing. He was invited to eat at an inn in Deptford. Two witnesses reported an argument between the playwright and a man called Ingram Frizar, resulting in a knife-wound to Marlowe's eye. Critics have been sceptical of the way in which this has been explained away as accidental. Hotson and Nicholl have seen

Marlowe's death and the subsequent tarnishing of his reputation as too convenient. On the other hand, J. B. Steane in his introduction to *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays* (Penguin, 1969), believes that though accounts may be exaggerated, they are rooted in fact: "...atheist or rebel or not, we have to acknowledge that there is no single piece of evidence that is not hearsay - only that there is a good deal of it, that it is reasonably consistent, and that on the other side there is no single fact or piece of hearsay known to us that will rank as evidence against it". Christopher Marlowe produced seven major plays in six years, and at the time of his death he enjoyed prestige among the most highly-regarded playwrights of the day. Simon Shepherd, in his introduction to *Marlowe and the Politics of Elizabethan Theatre* (Harvester, Brighton, 1984) conveys the impact of this for English literature: "I would suggest that had he lived Marlowe might well have produced a set of texts of an artistic quality that would rival if not excel Shakespeare's".

## **Synopsis**

Set in Germany, the play relates the quest of John Faustus for knowledge and power beyond normal human capabilities. Frustrated by his inability to uncover the mysteries of the universe, he makes a contract with a demon, Mephistophilis, in exchange for twenty-four years of luxury, and magical access to illicit secrets. Faustus turns his back on God and embraces a life of little more than dubious shallow trickery. No grand revelations await the doctor.

The play ends back in Wittenberg. Faustus shows his friends a vision of Helen of Troy. An Old Man tries to make him repent, but Faustus refuses. As the time draws near for Mephistophilis to take him to hell, Faustus grows more desperate, his anguish propelling him to an understanding of what heaven means. However, whether incapable or unwilling, he turns away from God and is dragged screaming to hell.

## **Scene Summaries**

### **Prologue**

The Chorus tells us that the play is about an ordinary man, a scholar called Faustus. His intellect has made him arrogant, and extremely ambitious. The story will open as he embarks on a study of magic, the only domain of knowledge he has yet to conquer.

### **Scene 1**

Faustus is seen sitting amongst his books, and he begins to tell us about the authors. He derides them, rejecting each of their disciplines in turn. Theology is his last hope, but labels it useless, declaring it is inevitable that all men must sin and die. But Faustus believes that applying his considerable intellect to the study of magic will make him immortal. Admitting that he is still a novice in the subject, he sends his servant, Wagner, to fetch the magicians Valdes and Cornelius. They will teach him how to gain power over the spirit world.

The Good and Evil Angel appear. The Good Angel threatens Faustus with God's anger if he continues; the Evil Angel counters this by telling Faustus his course will lead to greater power on earth. This prompts Faustus to aspire and dream, and he shares his ideas with Valdes and Cornelius. The two magicians promise to help him achieve his ambitions and the scene closes with Faustus attempting his first spell.

### **Scene 2**

Two of Faustus' old friends are seen wondering where he is now. Wagner, Faustus' servant, passes them, and makes fun of typical scholarly discourse. Eventually he tells them that Faustus is dining with Valdes and Cornelius. The two men realize their friend is learning black magic and resolve to help.

### **Scene 3**

Faustus has learned the art of magic and conjures up a devil called Mephistophilis. Faustus is arrogant but when he gives orders to the demon, he is told that his requests will only be granted if Lucifer, Mephistophilis' master, consents. They discuss Lucifer and the account of his exile from heaven. Faustus proposes a contract with the devil -

in exchange for his soul Lucifer should give him twenty-four years where he may live "in all voluptuousness". They arrange to meet and confirm the agreement after Mephistophilis has consulted his master.

#### **Scene 4**

Wagner meets a "clown" in the street and bribes him to become his servant. When the man hesitates, Wagner conjures up two devils, Baliol and Belcher, who frighten him into submission.

#### **Scene 5**

We see Faustus in his study, thinking about damnation. The Good and Bad Angel appear and plead with him. When they leave, Mephistophilis enters and tells Faustus that Lucifer has agreed to the bargain as long as the contract is signed in blood. The doctor questions Mephistophilis about hell, and then attempts to write his name. However, the blood will not flow, and when a message appears on his arm urging him to flee, the demon distracts him from hesitation by a group of dancing devils.

When the bargain is sealed, Faustus at once begins to pester Mephistophilis for the secrets of the universe. All of his requests are met with dissatisfaction. He thinks of heaven, and the Good and Bad Angels appear again. Faustus declares that he cannot repent, and calls on Mephistophilis to discuss the nature of the world. The information given seems limited, and the devil is not allowed to talk about theological matters. Faustus dismisses him and the Angels return. Just as the doctor seems to be on the verge of repenting, the most powerful devils, Lucifer and Belzebub, appear with Mephistophilis and issue threats with a display of the Seven Deadly Sins. Faustus is impressed and decides to visit Hell.

#### **Scene 6**

Time passes and Faustus is now famous. Two ostlers, Robin and Rafe, plan to use one of the doctor's book of spells to seduce a kitchen woman and get free drink.

#### **Chorus 2**

Wagner describes how Faustus is proceeding in his study of black magic. He tells us that the doctor has ridden in a chariot pulled by dragons to the top of Mount Olympus, the home of the Ancient Greek gods. Faustus will next try out his new powers at a papal feast in Rome.

#### **Scene 7**

Mephistophilis informs Faustus about the layout of Rome. He makes Faustus invisible and when the Pope enters with the Cardinal of Lorraine and attendant friars, the doctor plays tricks on them, disrupting the feast. Some friars curse Faustus, causing him to set off fireworks and beat them.

#### **Scene 8**

Robin and Rafe use the book of magic to steal a silver goblet. They accidentally call up Mephistophilis, and he transforms them into an ape and a dog for having brought him all the way from Constantinople.

#### **Chorus 3**

Faustus returns home to Wittenberg and immerses himself in his old friendships and entertainments. His skill is noticeable, and he is summoned to the court of Emperor Charles V.

#### **Scene 9**

The Emperor tells Faustus that he may practise magic safely in his court, and the doctor is humble towards him. He gives a magic show, invoking devils in the image of Alexander the Great and Alexander's Queen. A knight is sceptical, and leaves the stage, but everyone else believes the show to be genuine. Faustus asks for the knight to be

sent for, and when he appears we see that the doctor has caused horns to sprout from his head. The Emperor and his court leave, and Faustus tells Mephistophilis that his twenty- four years of power are nearly over. He will spend the close of his life in Wittenberg.

### **Scene 10**

Faustus proceeds to play tricks on a horse-trader. He turns a bundle of hay into a horse and sells it to a horse-courser for forty dollars, warning him not to ride the horse into water. The man accidentally insults Faustus by suggesting that he would do well as a horse-doctor. This prompts him to doubt his identity.

The horse-courser returns soaking wet and tells us that the horse turned into hay when rode into a pond. He tries to wake the sleeping Faustus to get a refund, shouting and pulling on his leg. This comes off in his hand and Mephistophilis lets him escape as long as he pays a further forty dollars. When he leaves we find out that the detachable leg was a trick. At the end Wagner appears with news of an invitation from the Duke of Vanholt.

### **Scene 11**

Faustus is in the middle of entertaining the court of Vanholt. The pregnant Duchess craves grapes, and despite it being the middle of winter Faustus provides her with a bunch from the other side of the world. He is promised a reward and they depart to continue the conversation elsewhere.

### **Chorus 4**

Wagner reminds us of Faustus' imminent death. He is back in Wittenberg enjoying a drunken life of revels. Wagner is unable to understand why the doctor should still choose to go to these student parties.

### **Scene 12**

Three scholars have been arguing over who was the most beautiful woman ever. Faustus conjures up a vision of Helen of Troy and she crosses the stage in silence. The scholars praise her beauty and the skill of Faustus, and leave. An Old Man unexpectedly enters and declares these actions to be evil. He urges the doctor to repent, and when Faustus despairs, he prevents his suicide.

The departure of the Old Man sees Mephistophilis appear with threats of torture if the doctor does not fulfil the bargain made. Faustus gives in and asks two favours - for devils to torture the Old Man and to be able to sleep with Helen of Troy. The Old Man enters as Faustus is kissing Helen. They leave the stage together and devils torment him. We see him defy hell and welcome death.

### **Scene 13**

Faustus is wretched, and miserably greets his scholarly friends, informing them that he must soon go to hell. They tell him that he should repent, but he says that invisible devils hold his tongue and hands. They go to an adjacent room to pray for him. The play ends with a long anguished monologue by Faustus. He longs for time to stand still, alternately resolving to call on God and then hide from his wrath. He ends with wishing that he had not been born with a soul. Faced with God's rejection and Lucifer's embrace, Faustus is taken to hell.

### **Epilogue**

The Chorus describes the tragedy of *Doctor Faustus* as a lost opportunity for honour and education. We are asked to learn from the story and not try to rebel against divine law.

## **The Faustbuch**

Sources:

The main source Marlowe used when writing his play was an English translation of the *Faustbuch* ('Faust Book'), a collection of stories in German. The English version is titled *The Historie of the Damnable Life, and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus*, and the earliest known edition is dated from 1592. The *Faustbuch* relates the semi-mythical tales surrounding a real-life German scholar and magician, Georgius of Helmstadt, also known as Georgius Faustus. The three-part structure of the *Faustbuch* also underlines the foundation of Marlowe's play. First there is a bargain with the Devil and scientific investigation, then traveling and conjuring, and finally death, regret and damnation. The play was later rewritten and expanded to form the B-text, with additional episodes of magic inserted from the *Faustbuch*. However, the three-part structure was kept intact.

The *Faustbuch* presents a simple tale of recompense for sin; Marlowe, on the other hand, creates a tragedy in which Faustus makes an informed choice for reasons the audience can empathize with.

### **Morality Plays**

The morality plays were extremely popular from the early 1400's to the 1580's, continuing to impact upon the Early Modern period through to about 1630. References to typical Morality Play characters and events gives some indication of how familiar and widespread they were.

Each play has a common basic narrative structure underlining it. The central character is an ordinary person with whom the audience can identify - Everyman, or the mankind figure. He has obligations, works hard, becomes bored with his life, and tired. Tempters, known as Vice and his vice-crew, then enter and suggest he takes a break and accompany them for food and drink. Following their lead, Everyman's life gradually goes into decline, deserting his responsibilities for debauchery and recklessness.

Various well-meaning characters attempt to get Everyman to reform, reminding him of the need to live a life of virtue. He obeys until the vice-crew returns once more, and the good characters are scorned and made fun of. This pattern is repeated throughout until the mankind figure realizes that he has wasted his life and is in danger of despair. In Christian doctrine this sin is defined as losing one's belief in God's capacity to forgive. It was considered to be the worst, because irretrievable. In relation to the story of Faustus, his failure to repent is as culpable as his pact with the devil. Suicide was seen as the result of despair. It was treated seriously not because it was seen a type of murder, which would be forgiven by God, but because it indicated loss of faith in God. It was also regarded as a type of Pride, wanting to take decisions about one's destiny out of God's control. This explains why Mephistophilis offers Faustus a dagger in Scene 12. In the morality plays, the vice-crew offer to help Everyman commit suicide. At the last minute an advisor appears to drive off the evil crew and the mankind figure returns to embrace God. Whether he dies or not, the audience knows that he will go to heaven.

The narrative pattern of *Doctor Faustus* clearly resonates with that of the Morality Plays. A central character falls into evil ways but continues to regret his actions and consider repentance. The devils' flamboyant tactics in distracting Faustus from returning to God, as well as the presence of good and evil advisors, is evident of the influence of the Morality Play. And as mentioned above, Mephistophilis' attempt to assist Faustus in suicide is reminiscent of this tradition.

However, while *Doctor Faustus* resembles the Morality Play form quite distinctly, the two are also considerably different. Almost all the characters in Marlowe's play have names, whereas in the Morality Play the characters are given allegorical names such as 'Everyman', 'Ignorance' and 'Mercy'. But Marlowe also revised the morality play form in a more radical way. The mankind figure was meant to learn as he grew older, but Faustus obviously doesn't. He continues to behave youthfully even as he nears death. Old age and death were supposed to propel an individual towards prayer and pious thought, but Faustus opposes this in his rejection of the Old Man in Scene 12. The most obvious departure from the form, though, is in Marlowe's decision to let Faustus be damned at the end. It could be argued that he is not an 'Everyman', but then all people have been tempted to rebel against authority and act in a self-important

## **Themes**

### **Belief**

The conflict between belief and unbelief dominates Marlowe's play. In the sixteenth century the concept of atheism could be defined as both a denial of the existence of God and also a denial of the goodness of God. Faustus uses the idea of 'a mighty god' as an alternative to the Christian God. So while modern audiences wouldn't consider him an atheist, an Elizabethan audience would. In addition, while he is sceptical about God, he seems to believe that he has a soul. Paradoxically this aligns him with some aspects of conventional theology but not others. His belief system is shaky and suspect; he is constantly moving from one opinion to another, unable to root himself. His sense of identity wavers, shown in his use of his own name instead of the personal pronoun, as if he is standing outside himself looking helplessly on.

### **Religion**

The succession of Queen Elizabeth to Mary in 1558 saw Catholicism outlawed in England. The Pope was described as the Antichrist, the Catholic Church as the 'Whore of Babylon', and Catholic forms of worship, in particular the Latin Mass, treated with disgust and terror. Repressive laws and taxes were introduced in order to re-educate the public and turn them towards Protestantism. The fear of invasion and the war with Spain intensified the revulsion. Priests who failed to attend Protestant services were arrested - if they were caught administering the forbidden Catholic rites they could be tortured to death. However, the reign of Elizabeth did not feature more violence than Mary's; religious dissent was met with execution in both.

Marlowe placed Faustus in the Martin Luther's home university of Wittenberg, whose teachings were the basis for the formation of early sixteenth century Protestant Anglicanism. That Faustus should mock the Pope suggests Marlowe is satirizing Catholicism; an Elizabethan audience would quickly be ready to laugh at these jokes. His use of Latin in his spells suggests the Latin of the Catholic Mass, and that Marlowe is setting up the idea that Catholicism is no more than a trick of the Devil's. In consideration the play certainly seems to be a diatribe against the Catholic religion.

The dominance of mainstream Anglicanism during Elizabeth's reign was put under stress by the Puritan religion. The Puritan sect, with its emphasis on free speech and independent thought, undermined the officially prescribed homilies and services set down in the Book of Prayer, ordained by Elizabeth's Government. Rather than conformity to authority, the religion preached individual obedience to one's own conscience instead. This was deemed dangerously subversive, and was a source of anxiety to those in positions of power. Shepherd draws attention to the way Marlowe's plays "often show scenes or stories in which ...individual speech is repressed or in which official speech making is viewed critically". Faustus is seen as struggling between an ideal of Puritan individualism, and the need to conform to imposed structures.

### **Essay Plans**

#### **1) 'Is not thy soul thine own?' (Scene 5, line 68). How do you think the play resolves this?**

Look at the conflict between Puritanism and the conformity to authority. Does *Doctor Faustus* advocate independent thought above external structures? Does the play place free will under stress? Consider the consequences of Faustus's belief that he is above God's law. Marlowe presents Protestantism in a positive light but also puts its dictates under stress. Consider the influence of the Morality Play form and how the character of Doctor Faustus is a dark subversion of the Everyman figure.

#### **2) Explore Marlowe's treatment of time in *Doctor Faustus*.**

Time moves at different rates in *Doctor Faustus*, and gradually accelerates as the play progresses. The Prologue presents a short biography of Faustus, summarizing his life in less than a paragraph, and then we meet him in the continuous present: "And this the man that in his study sits" (Prologue, line 28). At this point the play's time and natural time are synonymous. However, then time speeds up towards the end of scene 1 - he begins his meal here, but by the first moments of scene 2 he has finished and has learned all these is about magic, ready to embark on his conjuring at midnight by the start of scene 4.

The opening and closing monologues are crucial in considering the theme of time in the play. Faustus reaches the last evening of his life in scene 13. As the clock strikes eleven he begins to consider the passage of time and its significance for humankind:

"Ah Faustus,

Now hast thou but one bare hour to live...

The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike,

The devil will come, and Faustus must be damned..." (lines 59 - 70)

The first half of his monologue is thirty lines, and measures out thirty minutes. The second half hour passes at a faster rate, taking only seventeen lines. He is desperate to hold time back, but it passes more quickly as he grows more obsessed. Compare his final speech with his first - how he rushes and pauses repeatedly, inevitability hanging over his review of the learning he rejects in favour of the doomed course of magic.

Look at how time takes several forms in the play. Marlowe depicts the span of a human lifetime, the endless series of repetitions by which he fails to learn from his mistakes and abandon his conjuring, eternity, and the duration of the play. Faustus attempts to control the difference between human time and eternity, failing to notice that his contract with the devil has meant that he has absolved even the little control humans have over linear time. His lease of twenty-four years is a submission to time. Tragically, Faustus is unable to see that the devils do not have ultimate power. Mephistophilis hints that beyond the contract he is impotent when he fetches the Duchess her grapes by travelling to the other side of the world. Time is godly; Faustus' failure to understand this points to his greater failure to understand the might - and glory - of God.