

Paul H. Kocher, Editor

Marlowe Doctor Faustus

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CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

*The Tragical History
of
Doctor Foustus*

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INTRODUCTION



Date, Authorship, and Text. Like many other dates concerning Marlowe's work, the year in which *Doctor Faustus* was written and first performed is uncertain. Conjecture has ranged between 1588 and 1592, but the weight of evidence seems to favor the former date. *Faustus* was, then, probably the second of Marlowe's great plays, coming in 1588 immediately after *Tamburlaine*. The fact that the English translation of the German Faust story, the source from which Marlowe drew most of the material for his play, has survived only in an edition published in 1592 might appear to require a later dating. But the statement on the title page of this 1592 edition that it was "Newly imprinted, and in convenient places imperfect matter amended" suggests an earlier edition, to which, indeed, there are references in contemporary works by Gabriel Harvey, Henry Holland, and others before 1590. Likewise a ballad published in February, 1589, on "the life and death of Doctor Faustus, the great Conjuror" seems to have been based on Marlowe's drama. And the style of the play, together with its frequent allusions to university life and learning, marks it as belonging probably to a period soon after Marlowe's graduation from Cambridge in 1587.

Presumably *Faustus* was first performed in 1588 when it was written. We know also from the diary of the Elizabethan manager and promoter, Philip Henslowe, that it was revived in the autumn of 1594 by

the Lord Admiral's Men with the brilliant tragedian Edward Alleyn in the title role. It was acted again several times during the next few years but not published until 1604, when the first edition was printed by Valentine Simmes. Reprints of this edition came out in 1609 and 1611. Then in 1616 appeared an edition differing in many important respects from that of 1604. It contained many new scenes and many changes in the old ones. The modern editor is obliged to decide which of these two versions represents most closely the play as Marlowe wrote it. The present edition is based primarily on the 1604 text, although in a few individual passages the 1616 reading has been adopted. Not that the 1604 text is anything like perfect. It seems in truth to have been printed from a manuscript which had been badly garbled by actors and revisers during the many performances staged since 1588. But it takes us as close as we can get today to the form Marlowe intended.

That Marlowe ever wrote any of the comic prose scenes in *Faustus* looks extremely doubtful. The blank verse scenes are certainly from his pen, as also is the serious prose of Scene Fourteen, but the comic prose seems to have been written by some other dramatist, perhaps by Thomas Nashe, Marlowe's friend, who also collaborated with Marlowe on the earlier tragedy of *Dido*. Marlowe was perfectly capable of humor, but his vein had a rather heavy, sardonic, intellectual quality not to be found in the comic prose of the play. On the other hand, Nashe's prose pamphlets contain many specific resemblances in content and in nimbleness of style to the scenes of the Pope, the Horse-courser, the Seven Deadly Sins and the rest. If someone other than Marlowe wrote these scenes, the next question is whether they were a part of the original play or were added at some

later date. Perhaps it is most likely that they were not put into the play until it was revived for performance after the plague in 1594. Mention in Scene XI of Doctor Lopez, who was executed in 1594, is strong evidence in this direction. The question, however, can not yet be definitely answered. We know also that in 1602 Henslowe paid the dramatists William Birde and Samuel Rowley £4 "for their additions in Doctor Faustus." But these additions seem not to have been printed in the 1604 text of the play. They appeared instead in the 1616 text, and consisted of new serious blank verse and comic prose scenes of inferior quality. These have been omitted from the present edition.

Sources and Interpretation. In Marlowe's day it was the custom for playwrights to get their plots from old stories or plays previously written. Marlowe founded his drama mainly on the legend of a German magician as told in the *Historia von D. Johann Fausten*, first published at Frankfurt in 1587 and soon afterwards translated into English prose by one "P. F., Gent." as *The Historie of the damnable life and deserved death of Doctor John Faustus*. Marlowe knew only this English translation, not the German original. There had actually lived a scholar named Faust in Germany early in the sixteenth century who, by the usual working of popular superstition, had acquired a reputation for magic because of his learning. Around his name had collected scores of exploits commonly attributed to magicians not only during the Renaissance but during the Middle Ages and back to the classical period. The story of his life was moralized into a struggle between the forces of good and evil in which Faustus, failing to repent of his black art practiced through the Devil, must finally lose his soul.

Marlowe came across the English translation soon after it was published. He saw in it the possibilities for high dramatic tension, his imagination leaped to the wonder and terror of the deeds of magic, and the religious conflict drew powerfully on feelings which he was undergoing in his own life. It was for him the perfect theme. He set to work on it with a grasp of intellect and a controlled splendor of poetry which he showed in no other play. The English translation—call it the English Faust Book—presented him with a large number of short chapters detailing the events of Faustus' temptation, fall, and traffic with the demons, a narrative not altogether wanting in power but long-winded, disorganized, and without any supreme touch of imagination or insight into character. Marlowe made no alterations in the larger outlines of the plot. But his changes in depth of conception and in the handling of details afford the best of lessons in the art of dramaturgy. Thus he omitted altogether many incidents like those relating Faustus' journeys to hell, to the garden of Eden, to numerous foreign lands; other incidents he compressed; a few he expanded. His choice in every such case was determined by the degree of dramatic point in the incident and its adaptability to the resources of the Elizabethan stage. Succinct dialogue, lacking in the source, he supplied with that fine terseness which always marked his best work. On the debit side, however, too faithful a following of the thread of events in the source seems to have betrayed Marlowe into the major weakness of his play. As in the English Faust Book, so in the play, there is a falling off in dramatic interest between the time of Faustus' signing of the contract and the expiration of its twenty-four years. Faustus wastes the time away in miscellaneous trivialities, and the central theme of

his struggle for salvation falls so far into the background as to be almost forgotten. The trivialities are entertaining enough in themselves, and they stage well, but they are digressions from the unity of the action. Nevertheless, at the end of the play Marlowe notably improved on the structure of his source. The English Faust Book made Faustus' last despairing soliloquy come *before* his final farewell to his scholar friends, whereas Marlowe reversed the order. This change in position avoided anticlimax and gave the play one of the greatest endings in all English drama.

Hand in hand with such betterments in plot construction went Marlowe's much more profound and poetic realization of the central religious conflict. In the English Faust Book this had been expressed merely as frequent and naive moralizing addressed to the reader directly, warning him how wicked Faustus was and advising him to avoid a similar fate. This technique Marlowe retained only in the opening and closing choruses, which stand as solemn portals of entrance to and exit from the drama. For the rest, he usually preferred to keep this meaning deeply implicit in the whole course of the plot, and when he brought it to the surface he gave it a superb dramatic context in the speeches of Mephistophilis, the Old Man, and the Good and Evil Angels. The latter are Marlowe's additions, derived in the last analysis from his knowledge of the medieval morality plays. He probably wished them to be considered, for the purposes of his play, just as objectively real and external to Faustus as, say, Mephistophilis, but they serve also as vivid symbols of the internal warfare in the soul of Faustus. Everywhere the dramatist has elevated and amplified the traits of Faustus' character, given them new passion, higher poetic reach, closer relation to the

theme of his temptation and agony. For the difference in sheer poetry one cannot do better than compare Faustus' famous rhapsody to Helen of Troy beginning "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?" with the commonplace details of Helen's physical beauty which are all that are offered by the English Faust Book (chapters 45 and 55). Yet it is significant that Marlowe followed his source in the fundamental matter of interpreting Helen as a decoy used by the devils to seduce Faustus from the path of salvation. Examine in the same way the final soliloquy. Many of its ideas came to Marlowe straight out of his source, but he transfigured them with a poet's more poignant passion. He drew also upon a number of Biblical texts and upon his theological training at Cambridge for an understanding of what was to the Renaissance the most dreadful of psychological conditions, the suffering of the human soul in its last moments of despair before damnation. Not least, perhaps, he drew upon introspection into his own perplexities.

Into the architecture of his play, too, Marlowe built more of contemporary thought and learning than may be visible at first glance. As recent scholarship has discovered, the dialogue on astronomy between Mephistophilis and Faustus in Scene VI pictures not the then orthodox world system of Ptolemy and Aristotle but a somewhat radical departure from it proposed by Agostino Ricci, an Italian scientist, in 1513. Ricci retained the geocentric theory but denied the existence of fiery and crystalline spheres rotating around the earth, since these were not perceptible to the senses. Writing at a time when the new heliocentric theory of Copernicus was not yet widely known in England, Marlowe was attracted to Ricci's

innovations by his own natural bent toward searching and iconoclastic thought.

In the fields of witchcraft and theology there is plenty of reason to think that Marlowe personally was equally a rebel and sceptic, but he treated them in an orthodox light in *Faustus*, for reasons which will presently be discussed. Thus the play presents as true the current Elizabethan beliefs that aspiration for illicit knowledge and power might lead the ambitious mind into black magic, that wonders might then be done through the agency of demons, and that such intercourse, if unrepented, would surely bring on damnation. In passage after passage portraying Faustus' dreams of magic, his incantations and remorse, and his whole behavior as a necromancer Marlowe culled details from the vast contemporary literature on witchcraft, in which these subjects were systematically discussed. To be sure, he refined somewhat the crasser popular superstitions. For example, Mephistophilis is made to say that not the words of Faustus' incantation but the desire to win Faustus' soul summoned him from the deep. And hell becomes for him less a place of fire and brimstone than a lonely separation from God. But both these ideas had often been voiced by the better theologians of the age. What is new is Marlowe's heightening of them into magnificent poetry.

In a theological sense, the basic doctrine of the play is that Faustus is at all times free both to resist the temptation to evil and to repent after he has fallen. This holds true even after he has signed the contract selling his soul, even during the hour of the last soliloquy, and up to the moment when the clock strikes twelve. He could repent if he would accept the grace which God always offers him, as the

Old Man sees in his vision. But Faustus, unlike the Old Man, does not believe strongly enough in God's mercy and protection. He, who in the early scenes took so much pride in being resolute in defying God, is not, ironically enough, sufficiently resolute to defy the devils when he wishes and needs to do so. Hence he despairs and is lost. At times he reaches for repentance but achieves only remorse, which is regret not wholly committed to a plea for forgiveness. All this doctrine, though not in the learned yet poignant form given it by Marlowe, underlies also the account in the English Faust Book. And it has ample precedent in the non-Calvinistic Protestantism of Marlowe's day.

This theology in the play poses an interesting biographical problem since it is quite the opposite of what all the surviving evidence indicates as to Marlowe's own convictions about Christianity. Robert Greene, Richard Baines, Thomas Kyd and other contemporaries who knew Marlowe were unanimous in saying that he became a blasphemous scoffer at the religion in which he had been brought up. In the face of their mutually corroborated testimony and the absence of anything definite to the contrary, it is hard to see Marlowe as other than a bitter enemy of the Christian faith. This view is borne out also by many strands of thought in *Tamburlaine* and *The Jew of Malta*. The question is perhaps somewhat complicated by the mystery which still hides the nature of Marlowe's services for the Government and the sinister circumstances of his death. If he was a spy, if he was assassinated for political reasons, these facts may conceivably have some sort of connection with the anti-Christian ideas he uttered. The connection, however, seems slight and not likely to change

the conclusion that when Marlowe went about London scorning the Bible and defaming Christ he meant what he said.

How, then, can his personal irreligion be reconciled with the more or less orthodox theology of *Faustus*? Perhaps by remembering that a dramatist does not necessarily sponsor as his own the ideas which his drama parades on the public stage in an age of religious intolerance. But the problem goes deeper. Marlowe's other dramas tend to be indirect yet highly subjective expressions of his own grandiose aspirations and defeats. Tamburlaine, Faustus, Barabas, Gaveston, the Duke of Guise are so much alike in their gigantic longings after unpermitted ends as to seem only projections of one man, one spirit, and that one is Christopher Marlowe. Faustus is in some sense Marlowe. The truth may be that for all his overt and ostentatious gibing at Christianity Marlowe sometimes experienced a dark hour when he was overwhelmed by fear of his own apostasy and by need for the love of God. Or perhaps it is best to say that these feelings were latent in him but available at the call of his poetic inspiration. *Faustus* is in part the dramatic record of such an hour or of such buried terrors. Hence Faustus' dreams of knowledge and power, which were those of Marlowe; hence his blaspheming, his sense of the loss of God, his agonized despair. These are, after all, the gist of the play, almost the entire play. The other people in the action have virtually no character, and no function save to help Faustus towards good or evil. To be sure, the comic scenes afford welcome relief from the tautness of the march of the main theme and even, by their contrasting parody, a kind of second accentuation of it. Essentially, though, it can be said truly that the

play deals with only one man and only one theme: Faustus, who gained the pleasures of the whole world and lost his soul. Its uniqueness as a tragedy emerges most clearly when we remember that it was written when Elizabethan drama was still young, and before the plays of Shakespeare. *Faustus*, the first of the major Elizabethan tragedies, was nothing short of an artistic revolution in its day.

THE PRINCIPAL DATES IN MARLOWE'S LIFE



- 1564 (Feb. 26) Christopher Marlowe born in Canterbury, one of nine children of John Marlowe and Catherine Arthur.
- 1579 (Jan. 14) Marlowe received a scholarship at King's School in Canterbury.
- 1580 (Autumn) Entered Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, being elected soon afterwards to a scholarship on the Archbishop Parker foundation.
- 1584 (Spring) Awarded the B. A. degree and continued his studies towards the M. A. but with extensive periods of absence during 1585 and 1586.
- 1587 (June 29) The Queen's Privy Council wrote to the Cambridge authorities stating that rumors of Marlowe's having gone abroad to join the Catholics should be silenced as false and that, on the contrary, he had been "employed in matters touching the benefit of his country."
- 1587 (July) Marlowe was awarded the M. A. degree by Cambridge. In this year Part I of *Tamburlaine* was staged by the Lord Admiral's Men, who likewise staged Part II either late in 1587 or in 1588.

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- 1588 *Doctor Faustus* probably written. Staged presumably by the Lord Admiral's Men.
- 1589 (Sept. 18) Marlowe and William Bradley fought with rapiers in Hoglane in the London suburbs. Thomas Watson, poet and friend of Marlowe, intervened, was attacked by Bradley, and killed him. Marlowe and Watson imprisoned in Newgate.
(Sept. 19) Coroner's jury found that Watson acted in self-defense.
(Oct. 1) Marlowe released from prison on bail.
(Dec. 3) Watson and Marlowe freed of all charges after a court hearing.
- 1589-91 *The Jew of Malta*, *Edward II*, and *The Massacre at Paris* written and staged probably in that order during these years, but precise dates unknown.
- 1590 First edition of *Tamburlaine*, Part I, printed.
- 1592 First edition of *Tamburlaine*, Part II, printed.
- 1593 (May 12) Thomas Kyd, the dramatist, accused Marlowe of blasphemy and atheism.
(May 18) Marlowe summoned by the Privy Council to answer these charges. Similar charges filed against him by one Richard Baines at about this time.
(May 30) Marlowe spent the day at the inn at Deptford near London. Was stabbed to death by Ingram Frizer, who contended that Marlowe attacked him first in a quarrel over the bill.
(June 1) Coroner's jury found that Frizer acted in self-defense, and he received the Queen's pardon on June 28.

PRINCIPAL DATES IN MARLOWE'S LIFE xvii

- 1594 First editions of Marlowe's *Dido* and *Edward II* published.
First edition of *The Massacre at Paris* also appeared soon afterwards.
- 1598 Marlowe's unfinished poem, *Hero and Leander*, completed and published by George Chapman.
- 1599 Marlowe's translation of Ovid's *Elegies*, published at some unknown time before this year, called in and burned by the censors in London.
- 1600 His translation of Lucan's *Pharsalia*, Book I, published.
- 1604 First extant edition of *Doctor Faustus* published.
- 1616 A considerably different text of the same play published, including new verse and prose scenes added by Rowley and Birde.
- 1633 First edition of *The Jew of Malta* published.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE



JOHN FAUSTUS, doctor of theology
MEPHISTOPHILIS, a lord of devils
VALDES }
CORNELIUS } magicians
Three SCHOLARS, friends to Faustus
OLD MAN

THE POPE
CARDINAL OF LORRAINE
CHARLES V, Emperor of Germany
KNIGHT
DUKE OF VANHOLT
DUCHESS OF VANHOLT

GOOD ANGEL
EVIL ANGEL
LUCIFER
BELZEBUB
SEVEN DEADLY SINS
ALEXANDER THE GREAT }
PARAMOUR OF ALEXANDER } Spirits
HELEN OF TROY }

WAGNER, servant to Faustus
CLOWN
ROBIN, the ostler
RALPH, a servingman
VINTNER
HORSE-COURSER

CHORUS

Friars, Devils, Attendants