

**UNDERSTANDING MARLOWE:
DOCTOR FAUSTUS**



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First Printing: August 2016

“The Earl of Nottingham's Men and the A Text of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*” first appeared in *The Marlowe Society Research Journal* (September 2005).

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CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

Christopher Marlowe lived a short and wild life. He was criticized for his religious views. He was known to have a violent temper. And he even worked as a spy for Queen Elizabeth. In addition, Thomas Kyd, another playwright of the Renaissance, also accused Marlowe of atheism and treason.

Marlowe died in 1593 at the age of 29. There are several versions about how he died. But sources place his death at the Widow Bull, an inn or tavern where Marlowe apparently had been drinking. During a fight about paying the bill, someone stabbed Marlowe with a knife. A short but promising career thus came to an unfortunate end.

Marlowe was born in Canterbury in 1564, the same year that William Shakespeare was born. Marlowe attended Cambridge University. He received his Bachelor of Arts in 1584 and his Master of Arts in 1587. By the time he had graduated, he had already written a couple of plays and some poems.

Marlowe wrote several plays in his lifetime, but four of them are considered especially noteworthy:

Tamburlaine the Great c. 1587

The Jew of Malta c. 1592

Edward II c. 1592

Doctor Faustus c. 1593

Some critics note that *Tamburlaine* introduced blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) to the stage. This is an error. Actually, *Gorboduc*, one of the earliest English tragedies, has that honor: *Gorboduc* was first performed in 1561.

Although *Tamburlaine* was not the first play to introduce blank verse to the English stage, it was the first play to produce great blank verse on stage. More importantly, the play is important because the central character, Tamburlaine, who was a warrior chieftain in Mongolia during the 14th century, represents two negative aspects of the Renaissance man: ambition and a quest for power. In this respect, he is quite similar to the central character in Marlowe's greatest play, *Doctor Faustus*.

BACKGROUND ON THE PLAY

The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus is undoubtedly Marlowe's most famous play. The story is an old one that has been told and retold throughout the centuries. The oldest known source is a medieval version from Germany. During the Romantic age, another German, Johann Goethe, wrote a poetic version that he completed in 1832. And during the Modern Age, yet another German, Thomas Mann, wrote a novel of the Faust story in 1947. Moreover, there have been a number of variations based on the story, such as the American short story "The Devil and Daniel Webster" (1937) by Stephen Vincent Benet or the novel *The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant* by Douglas Wallop. This novel became even more popular when it was adapted into an American musical entitled *Damn Yankees* (with a stage version produced in 1955 and a movie version in 1958). However, the best known version of the Faust story is the one by Christopher Marlowe.

The story itself concerns a man who desires knowledge and power. He wants more than he is capable of achieving on his own. So, he makes a deal with the devil. He promises to give the devil his soul in exchange for 24 years of power. For 24 years the devil will serve Faustus and grant Faustus any wish that he makes. But at the end of 24 years, Faustus must die, and his soul will belong to the devil.

During the Middle Ages and even during the Renaissance, people believed in devils and evil

magic. Many people back then would believe this story literally. They would believe that such events could actually happen. Today, most people might see this story more figuratively. They would see Faustus's choice of making a deal with the devil as being symbolic of someone choosing evil actions over good. Regardless of which way a person views it, the story is a fascinating one.

Marlowe's version presents an interesting mixture of Medieval and Renaissance ideas. During the Middle Ages, most people believed that they should be content with their circumstances. They should not be too concerned with the earthly world since earthly or bodily existence was merely a temporary situation. All earthly existence was merely a preparation for a life in heaven, a life with God. To want too much, to try to obtain too much, or to believe that one deserved more was linked with the sin of pride. Pride, of course, is one of the Seven Deadly Sins. It is usually considered the worst or most serious of the sins because it is the sin that Lucifer, the chief of the devils, is associated with.

The student might remember the comment made by John, the carpenter, in Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale." John is worried that Nicholas has become crazy by studying too much and by trying to learn the private secrets of God (by studying astrology). The carpenter's comment that such action is wrong reflects the medieval view. Man should place limits on his learning. There are some things that man should not know.

Of course, that notion changed significantly in

England during the Renaissance. The intellectuals of that time viewed their world with man at the center. Man was capable of achieving great deeds through the power of his own mind and abilities. Man could control his own destiny. As noted earlier, such a view had both positive and negative results. On the positive side, the Renaissance was an age of intellectual brilliance where, indeed, great accomplishments occurred in the humanities and other areas. Man learned to enjoy himself and did not feel trapped by the limits of earthly existence. But on the negative side, man could become too proud of his accomplishments and too sinful in his enjoyment of life. Man could become too vain, too proud. Man could become a creature full of sin.

The character of Faustus in Marlowe's play reflects both these positive and negative qualities. In this sense, then, he really is a genuine Renaissance man.

TWO VERSIONS OF MARLOWE'S PLAY

The student should also note that Marlowe's *Faustus* exists in two different versions. The older version, known as the A text, is shorter than the other. The longer version is the B text. Both versions were printed after Marlowe's death. The student should note that plays were not originally written for publication. Acting companies would often add or delete scenes and make other significant changes to suit their own purposes. However, for some of the plays from the Renaissance, edited or "changed" copies may be the only versions that exist. The editors of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* have selected the shorter **A text** printed in 1604 for their anthology. However, many serious scholars of Marlowe's work indicate that the longer **B text** of *Faustus* printed in 1616 appears to reflect Marlowe's original more closely. Nevertheless, the lesser A text still contains all of the pertinent themes and concepts of the play; and the following comments are in direct reference to that A text.

THE PROLOGUE

At the beginning of the play a single actor walks out on stage and speaks directly to the audience. This actor is the Chorus. During the Classical Age of Greece, the chorus was actually a group of actors who would sing or chant lines that often summarized the story of the play or perhaps even offer comments upon the action. By the Renaissance the chorus has become a single actor, but he serves a similar purpose to the chorus of the Classical Age. William Shakespeare, Thomas Kyd, and Christopher Marlowe, among other playwrights, included a chorus in several of their plays.

The Prologue to *Faustus* contains two parts. The first six lines inform us what the play is not about. This may seem strange to the modern reader. But there is a reason for it.

The subject ("our Muse") and the verb ("intends") of the first six lines can be found in the sixth line. We might loosely revise this as follows:

Marlowe's Muse inspired him to write
proudly ("to vaunt") in poetry about ...

The first five lines then complete the rest of this sentence. The reader should note the negatives, though ("not" and "nor"):

- 1) not war (lines 1-2)
- 2) nor the love of kings or princes (lines 3-4)
- 3) nor heroic deeds (line 5)

So, Marlowe will not be writing about any of these three topics. Marlowe's topic will be much different.

The reason why Marlowe begins this way concerns the definition of tragedy, the form of drama that he is writing. Simply defined, a tragedy is a play where (1) the protagonist is a figure of high estate (usually a king or prince) and (2) the protagonist experiences a fall from power and prestige. Often, tragedies would include the topics of war, love, and heroic action. Playwrights considered these as fit or proper subject matter for a tragedy. Marlowe is, therefore, telling us that his play is going to be different. It may be a tragedy, but it will not be about a king and his fall from power.

Marlowe's central figure is a scholar. Given the traditional definition of this type of work, Marlowe's play would not even be considered a tragedy. Faustus is not in a high enough position and is not politically powerful enough to fall. Marlowe is experimenting with the definition of tragedy here. Even Shakespeare's protagonists in his tragedies (Lear, Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello, and Julius Caesar) are kings or other figures of national importance. The fall of the king or a prince affects the entire nation.

But what happens when a scholar falls? Such a loss is not a matter that concerns an entire nation.

However, during the Renaissance, scholarship was important. Attaining intellectual brilliance defined the great men of the age. On the one hand, it may seem that Marlowe is praising the scholar by linking him with the kings and princes of the past. Of course, Marlowe was a scholar himself. On the other hand, Marlowe may be criticizing the scholar whose quest for knowledge and desire for greatness brings him ruin and shame.

The rest of the Prologue, though, clearly reveals Marlowe's view (or theme).

The remainder of the Prologue (1) summarizes the events prior to when the action of the play itself begins. It also (2) describes the personality of Faustus. The play begins with Faustus, still a young man, having received his doctoral degree from the University of Wittenberg (in Germany) and deciding what career to pursue. The Prologue notes that Faustus excelled over all others (line 18) during his exams to earn his doctorate. Faustus is, then, the greatest of scholars; and because of this, he has become proud. The Prologue describes Faustus in several negative terms: "swollen with cunning" (line 20), full of "self conceit" (line 20), and "glutted" (line 24). Faustus is just too full of pride, and the Prologue uses the mythological allusion to Icarus to describe what will happen to him. In Greek mythology Icarus is a young man who is in prison with his father. In order to escape, Icarus and his father make giant wings out of wax and bird feathers. Icarus flies out of the prison, but he becomes so excited and proud of himself that he flies

too close to the sun. The wings melt, and Icarus falls to his death. The story serves as a warning to anyone who becomes too proud and thinks he can ignore the advice of others. It is a warning to anyone who feels he is above (superior to) all others. Faustus is a Renaissance version of Icarus. He soars too high (intellectually), and so he falls.

The importance of choice is also suggested in the Prologue. Faustus is an individual who can choose from a wide variety of occupations and pursuits. He is educated enough and brilliant enough to be successful in any field. However, he chooses magic (line 26) as his chief pursuit. Magic, here, means black magic. It is the magic associated with the devil. Thus, Faustus is actually choosing evil as his pursuit. He is choosing the devil over God.

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