

# DOCTOR FAUSTUS

by Christopher Marlowe



## THE AUTHOR

Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) was born in Canterbury, the son of a shoemaker. He received a fine education there, then went on to Cambridge. He lived an adventurous life, including a stint as a spy in Elizabeth's secret service. In the rough-and-tumble life of the London stage, he gained a reputation as a roisterer and freethinker. He was widely admired as a poet and playwright in his day, but his career was cut short when he was stabbed in the eye in a tavern brawl at the age of 29. His most notable plays include *Tamburlaine* (1587-88), *The Jew of Malta* (1588-89), and *Doctor Faustus* (1592-93). He is also remembered for introducing the use of blank verse to the stage - an idiom perfected by Shakespeare after Marlowe's death.

The Faust legend is based on an actual person. Johann Faust (1480-1540) was a contemporary of Luther. He was a noted skeptic and sought to duplicate the miracles of the Gospels by studying magic at the University of Cracow. It was said that he gained his magic powers by selling his soul to the devil. Luther and Melanchthon deplored the heretic, and Melanchthon is one of the sources of the story that Faust traveled in the company of the devil, who took the form of a dog. Within fifty years of his death, the first versions of the Faust legend appeared in print. The various versions of the story reflect the ages in which they were written; in each Faust sells his soul for what the age values - knowledge for Marlowe, experience for Goethe, and a pennant for the Washington Senators in *Damn Yankees*. Note that the comments below are based on what is called the B text of Marlowe's play.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Doctor Faustus - A German scholar from Wittenberg who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for infinite power and knowledge.
- Wagner - Faustus' assistant.
- Valdes and Cornelius - Friends of Faustus who explore the realm of magic with him.
- Robin and Dick - Two clowns, used for comic relief.

- Mephistophilis - The prince of demons, who tempts Faustus with knowledge and power in order to gain his soul.
- Lucifer - The Devil, he appears periodically to make sure Faustus keeps his bargain.
- Adrian VI - The pope, who is ridiculed, beaten, and tricked by Faustus.
- Bruno - A German antipope who is released from the pope's custody by the deceit of Faustus.
- Charles V - Holy Roman Emperor who welcomes Faustus to his court.
- Benvolio - Sarcastic courtier of Charles V who briefly grows horns on his head as a punishment for mocking Faustus, then unsuccessfully tries to kill the magician and is then tortured by demons and left with horns on his head.
- Frederick and Martino - Courtiers of Charles V who assist Benvolio in his schemes and share his punishment.
- Good and Bad Angels - Appear periodically to warn or entice Faustus with regard to his determination to seek what is unlawful for man to know.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Philosophy is odious and obscure;  
 Both law and physic are for petty wits;  
 Divinity is basest of the three,  
 Unpleasant, harsh, contemptible, and vile:  
 ‘Tis magic, magic, that hath ravish’d me.” (Faustus, Ii)

“... where we are is hell,  
 And where hell is, there must we ever be.” (Mephistophilis, Iii)

“Why this is hell, nor am I out of it;  
 Think’st thou that I, that saw the face of God,  
 And tasted the eternal joys of Heaven,  
 Am not tormented with ten thousand hells,  
 In being depriv’d of everlasting bliss?” (Mephistophilis, Iiii)

“Is this the face that launched a thousand ships,  
 And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?” (Faustus, Vi)

“I’ll burn my books! - Ah, Mephistophilis!” (Faustus, Vii)

## NOTES

**Act I, scene 1** - After a brief prologue that speaks of Faustus' upbringing, education, scholarly attainments and prideful seeking after magic, the play opens in the study of the protagonist. Faustus ruminates about the studies he has pursued, and concludes that all but magic are worthless. Two angels visit, the good angel warning him against pursuing the unholy arts, while the bad angel encourages his desires. Soon two friends arrive, Valdes and Cornelius, and the three men speak of the unlimited knowledge, wealth, and power that will be theirs when they master the magic arts.

**Act I, scene 2** - Two scholars come seeking Faustus, but after some banter are told by his assistant Wagner that he is having dinner with Valdes and Cornelius. The scholars, knowing the reputations of the two men, fear that Faustus is seeking magic powers.

**Act I, scene 3** - Faustus, alone, surrounds himself with occult symbols, curses God, and summons up Mephistophilis, the prince of demons. He demands that the demon, whose form he finds displeasing, change his shape and appear as a Franciscan friar, then orders that he become his servant, giving him whatever he wishes for twenty-four years, and in exchange Faustus will gladly yield up his soul, believing that he will enjoy eternity in the Elysium with the philosophers of old.

**Act I, scene 4** - In a scene of comic relief, Wagner asks Robin, the clown, if he would sell his soul to the devil for a shoulder of mutton. Robin says he would do so only if it were roasted. Wagner then offers him petty occult powers if he will serve him for seven years, and Robin agrees.

**Act II, scene 1** - Faustus, in his study, is having second thoughts about his bargain, and the two angels again render their counsel. Putting all doubts behind him, Faustus summons up Mephistophilis, and the latter requires him to write a contract with the devil in his own blood, which Faustus does. Faustus then tells Mephistophilis he cares little for the loss of his soul, since he doesn't believe in life after death anyway. Mephistophilis assures him of the reality of the afterlife, then offers him courtesans and gives him a book through which he may summon armed soldiers, acquire wealth, and even control the weather for his benefit.

**Act II, scene 2** - Faustus, in his study, is again having doubts, despite the fact that he has already enjoyed the pleasure of hearing Homer sing for him, and considers repentance, wondering whether it is too late. The two angels come again with their contrary messages. Faustus and Mephistophilis then discuss astronomy, but the discussion ends when Faustus asks about the Creator - a question Mephistophilis refuses to answer. Lucifer then appears with Belzebub and chides Faustus for speaking of Christ, contrary to their contract. Lucifer then summons up the Seven Deadly Sins, which delight Faustus with their descriptions of evil. The doctor then asks for permission to visit hell and return.

**Act II, scene 3** - Another comic relief scene, this time between Robin and his friend Dick. Robin has Faustus' magic books and is trying to cast a spell, though he cannot read. He and Dick finally decide to weave a spell that will allow them to go to the local tavern and drink all they want without having to pay for it.

**Act III, scene 1** - A brief prologue speaks of Faustus traveling on the back of a dragon to see the celestial spheres, then learning cosmology, visiting the great cities of France and Italy, and arriving finally in Rome, where he finds himself in the Papal Palace. In a scene that badly confuses the history of the period, Raymond the king of Hungary brings Bruno, a German prince who conspired with the Holy Roman Emperor to gain the papal chair, before Pope Adrian VI in chains. Mephistophilis uses his magic to put the cardinals to sleep, then he and Faustus masquerade as cardinals and advise the pope to declare Bruno a heretic and burn him at the stake. The pope agrees and entrusts Bruno to the two deceivers, who then take him outside and let him go.

**Act III, scene 2** - Prior to a papal banquet the next day, Faustus asks Mephistophilis to make him invisible. After the pope demands what the cardinals have done with Bruno (they know nothing of his disappearance), he angrily dismisses them, then he and the Archbishop of Rheims sit down to dinner. During dinner, Faustus keeps stealing their food and wine, making rude comments, and finally striking the pope in the face. The pope then orders the curse of excommunication to be laid upon the ghost who is perpetrating such indignities upon him. Friars enter to pronounce the curse, but are beaten by the invisible Faustus and Mephistophilis.

**Act III, scene 3** - Comic relief again; this time Robin and Dick have stolen a cup from a tavern, and the vintner tries to retrieve it, but searches Dick while Robin holds the cup and searches Robin after he passes it to Dick. The two amateur conjurers then call upon Mephistophilis, who is irritated because they have summoned him all the way from Constantinople; he threatens to turn Dick into a monkey and Robin into a dog.

**Act IV, scene 1** - A brief prologue tells of Faustus' return from his travels and the fame he achieved through his knowledge of the earth and the universe. He is now invited to visit the court of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. In this scene, three courtiers banter while discussing "Pope" Bruno's return from Rome.

**Act IV, scene 2** - Charles V welcomes Faustus and asks him to conjure up Alexander the Great and his mistress. Benvolio, one of Charles' courtiers, makes sarcastic comments from a window above, and Faustus magically puts horns on his head. After Alexander and his retinue leave, Faustus removes the horns and Charles expresses his gratitude.

**Act IV, scene 3** - Benvolio is furious at the mockery to which Faustus exposed him and is determined to kill the conjuror. He and his fellow courtiers set an ambush. When Faustus arrives, they stab him and cut off his head, then gloat about all the indignities they intend to practice on the severed member. Faustus soon arises, however, and informs them that, because of his bargain with the devil, he cannot be killed for twenty-four years. He then summons Mephistophilis and his demons to torture the three courtiers, and when the soldiers hiding in ambush attack him, calls other demons to drive them away.

**Act IV, scene 4** - The three courtiers reappear, dirty and with scratched faces and all bearing horns on their heads. They decide to avoid the shame of their treatment at the hands of Faustus and their appearance by retiring to Benvolio's castle.

**Act IV, scene 5** - Faustus sells his horse to a horse-trader for forty dollars, but warns him not to ride the horse into the water. While Faustus contemplates his coming fate, the horse-trader returns, soaking wet, and tells Faustus that he rode the horse into the water, thinking that the magician was concealing from him some magic property, and that the horse had promptly turned into a bale of hay. He then pulls off Faustus' leg, which of course is immediately restored. Wagner then arrives to summon Faustus to an audience with the Duke of Anholt.

**Act IV, scene 6** - In an inn, Robin, Dick, the horse-trader and a carter trade stories about tricks the magician has pulled on them. The carter tells them that Faustus asked him to give him as much hay as he could eat. The carter agreed, thinking that could not amount to much, but Faustus had then proceeded to eat the whole wagonload.

**Act IV, scene 7** - Faustus has just performed conjuring tricks for the Duke and Duchess of Anholt when Robin, Dick, and the others knock at the door. Thinking they are still in an inn, they demand refreshments, which Faustus supplies. As they complain of their treatment at the hands of the magician they provide entertainment for the Duke and the Duchess, who mock their folly.

**Act V, scene 1** - Wagner opens the scene by announcing that Faustus' death is near, and that he has been named the beneficiary in the doctor's will. Faustus has just finished a celebration with three scholars, and they ask to see Helen of Troy. He obliges, and she is more beautiful than they imagined her to be. An old man then enters and begs Faustus to repent; Faustus is sorely tempted, but in the end summons Mephistophilis to torture the old man. He then asks for Helen to return and become his mistress. She does, and her kiss throws him into raptures of delight.

**Act V, scene 2** - Lucifer, Belzebug, and Mephistophilis arrive for the soul of Faustus. His fellow-scholars plead with him to repent at the last, and he tries, but to no avail. The good and bad angels come to tell him of his fate and reveal the gaping mouth of hell. As the hour approaches, Faustus begs for mercy, asks that his stay in hell be of limited duration, and finally is carried off by Mephistophilis.

**Act V, scene 3** - The scholars return to Faustus' apartment the next day and find nothing but mangled limbs, which they are determined to give a decent burial. The chorus then comes on and speaks the epilogue, warning the audience against presuming to seek unlawful knowledge.

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Compare and contrast the treatments of the Faust legend penned by Christopher Marlowe and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In what ways do the two treatments reflect the eras during which the playwrights lived?
2. In Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, to what extent do the good and bad angels serve as visual representations of Faustus' conscience? Use evidence from the text to support the idea that both angels speak ideas that belong to Faustus himself.

3. To what extent is the protagonist in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* self-deceived? Use his conversations with Mephistophilis to illustrate his rationalizations concerning the direction in which he has chosen to go with his life. How does the Bible lead us to expect such self-justifying arguments on the part of one who is in rebellion against God?
4. In Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, the protagonist often considers repenting and seeking the mercy of God. In your opinion, why does he never do so? When he tries in his closing speech, why is his effort futile? How would you evaluate his condition in the light of Scripture?
5. Do you consider the protagonist in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* a tragic hero? Why or why not? If you believe him to be a tragic hero, what is his tragic flaw?
6. Analyze the character of Mephistophilis in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Is he a deceiver whose lone goal is to obtain Faustus' soul, or is he one who has himself been deceived and is doing all within his power to keep Faustus from following his footsteps? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
7. In Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Faustus seems unable to use his powers for any grand purposes, but instead spends his time playing tricks on people. Why do you think this is so? Why does he never fulfill the grand ambitions outlined in his early speeches?
8. Compare and contrast the characterizations of Mephistophilis in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Goethe's *Faust*. Which character do you consider the more impressive literary creation? Which is more persuasive in his arguments? Why do you think so?
9. Compare and contrast the characterizations of Mephistophilis in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Satan in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Which character do you consider the more impressive literary creation? Which is more persuasive in his arguments? Why do you think so?
10. In analyzing Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, R.M. Dawkins described it as "the story of a Renaissance man who had to pay the medieval price for being one." Evaluate this description of Marlowe's protagonist. To what extent is Faustus a Renaissance man? Is the Renaissance therefore pictured in the play as being contrary to Christianity? What is the significance of his final words, "I'll burn my books"?
11. Evaluate the theology of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Give special attention to his understanding of salvation and how one may obtain it. Use both specific quotations from the play and passages from Scripture to support your argument.
12. The England of Christopher Marlowe was fiercely anti-Catholic. In what ways is that attitude reflected in his *Doctor Faustus*? Do you consider the play a legitimate critique of Catholicism or a mocking caricature? Use details from the play to support your assessment.

13. Discuss the changes in the protagonist presented in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Are the changes you see more related to his character or to his powers and the uses he makes of them? Is the alteration in Faustus one of growth or decline? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
14. To what extent does Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* suggest that the search for knowledge can be a dangerous one - indeed, one that places a person's soul in peril? Evaluate this assertion using both ideas from the play and the teachings of Scripture.
15. Writers who live in societies dominated by a Christian worldview often incorporate that worldview into their writings despite any lack of personal profession of Christian faith. To what extent is this true of Christopher Marlowe in his play *Doctor Faustus*? Examine the major themes of the play and discuss the extent to which it reflects a Christian view of the world.
16. Discuss the comic figures in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Are they present in the play for nothing more than comic relief, or does their behavior help to bring out the leading themes of the play by setting them up as foils for the protagonist? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
17. In Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, is the protagonist the agent of his own damnation, or is he merely the dupe of clever demonic agents? To what extent is he to blame for the disastrous outcome of his fatal bargain? Support your argument with details from the play.
18. The protagonists in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* are both men consumed by ambition. Compare and contrast the two, being sure to consider the nature of their ambitions, the ways in which they pursue them, and the outcomes of their respective failures.
19. Discuss the extent to which Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is like medieval morality plays such as *Everyman*. What characteristics do the plays have in common? In what critical ways are they different? Do the differences help to clarify the distinctive characteristics of the Renaissance in its rebellion against the Middle Ages?
20. In Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, does Faustus get more or less than what he bargained for? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
21. Compare and contrast Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* with *Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe. Does Frankenstein bring about his own destruction because of his craving for knowledge? Is the message of the Gothic novel the same as that of the Renaissance tragedy? Why or why not? Support your arguments with quotations and specific incidents from both works of literature.
22. Compare and contrast the view of demons found in C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* with that found in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Which is more biblical? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with details from both books.

23. Compare and contrast the portrayals of the corrupting nature of power in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Consider both the nature of the power that is in view and the effects of that power on the ones who possess it. Which tale most effectively illustrates the inevitably evil nature of unfettered power? Support your conclusion with specifics from both works.