

Dr Faustus by Christopher Marlowe

INTRODUCTION

The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus, published in 1604, is a tragedy in blank verse and prose by the Elizabethan playwright Christopher Marlowe. Even though the later edition of 1616 is considered to be more reliable, yet, in fact, both the editions are faulty. The 1604 text, known as A-Text, was published by Thomas Bushnell and the 1616 text was published by John Wright which is known as the B-text. The play is about the medieval legend of the bargain of Faustus with the Devil and the tragic consequences of this act of overreaching. It shows the dreadful consequences of a man's deliberate commitment to evil for gratifying his own pride, ambition, and lust. Doctor Faustus is based on the German story of Faust, in which a man sells his soul to the devil in exchange for all things powerful.

The play was performed by the same company which produced Marlowe's other play Tamburlaine, the Admiral's Men. These men were now (MEG103-British Drama I: Beginnings to Restoration Page 71) called the Earl of Nottingham's Men, recognizing their patron's new eminence. In this unit, we are going to discuss the context of the play Doctor Faustus.

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE: LIFE AND WORKS

Christopher Marlowe was a famous playwright born in Canterbury in 1564. His father, John, was a shoemaker, and a member of the shoemakers' and tanners' guild. It is interesting to note that one of the greatest playwrights and poets of the world, William Shakespeare, and one of the greatest astronomers the world has known, Galileo Galilei were born in the same year as Marlowe. He entered Corpus Christi College of Cambridge on a scholarship in 1580 and took his BA degree in 1584 and MA degree in 1587. It is probable that while in the university, he became an agent of Francis Walsingham, the principal secretary to Queen Elizabeth I of England, who was a great schemer and remembered as her "spymaster". Marlowe became a favourite of Walsingham's brother Thomas, and although the details of the missions that he undertook in the secret service are not known, yet it can be speculated that his activities as an agent might have a possible link to his death by violence. 1587 was also the year in which Parts I and II of Tamburlaine the Great was successfully performed in the London Theatre, giving the London stage "pageantry and a spectacle of amoral aspiration sweeping all before it, with death as the only enemy to whom the hero became subject" (Datta 1). The lead actor of the

Lord Admiral's Men, Edward Alleyn, gave a just deliverance of the play's superb rhetoric. It will interest you to know that Thomas Kyd's Spanish Tragedy (1587) was also performed about this same time. Although Marlowe might have already written Dido, Queen of Carthage (1593) in collaboration with Thomas Nashe, yet it was Tamburlaine which established him as a playwright in his own right. The play was published in 1590. Incidentally, it was the same year when Books I-III of Spenser's Fairie Queene was published. Marlowe was a man-about-town with a 'reputation' of a man with a notorious private life, coupled with accusations of atheism, blasphemy, homosexuality and the like. Owing to lack of evidence, the chronological order of Dido cannot be dated with certainty, but the play, even with all its shortcomings, is a proof that Marlowe applied the playwright's craft seriously. It also shows his careful apprenticeship in the classics. The poem is drawn mostly from Book IV of Virgil's Aeneid, but Marlowe's familiarity with the entire poem can very well be understood from his writing. The Jew of Malta, another of Marlowe's greatest plays was performed in 1589. In the same year, he was arrested and imprisoned for taking part in a street fight, but after trial at the Old Bailey, he was discharged. The Jew of Malta is a tragedy, or rather, a grotesque comedy which MEG103 British Drama I: Beginnings to Restoration Page 73 deals with how "murderous excess and inflated rhetoric parody statesmanship and the posturing of Christian authority" (Ousby 595). The hero is obviously the villain here – the Jew Barabas – and the play belongs to this utterly unscrupulous man. In fact, after Tamburlaine, Marlowe "continued to dramatize the careers and aspirations of overreaching heroes whose bold defiance of social, political and religious morality invites admiration at the same time as it deserves condemnation" (Ousby 595). It is possible that Doctor Faustus was performed circa 1592-93, but the years 1588 and 1589 are also a matter of conjecture.

Edward the Second, Marlowe's most accomplished play was performed in 1592. It is a historical tragedy in blank verse published in 1594. The play is more personal than historical, but the history, however, is very well handled. It depicts in a new and plain style the defeat and murder of a homosexual king by powerful barons. It is the best constructed of all Marlowe's works, with the focus shifting from Edward to his lover Gaveston, and from his Queen Isabella to her lover Mortimer. The Massacre at Paris was performed in 1593, and the poem Hero and Leander was also written. The protagonist of the former play, the Duke of Guise, is similar to Barabas of The Jew of Malta in his villainy. The satirical treatment of the horrific St. Bartholomew massacre of 1572 was distasteful and disturbing in the contemporary Protestant England, and Marlowe's indiscretion was also risky at the time. The logic that the Marlovian

over-reacher comes to a seemingly logical conclusion in Doctor Faustus may have contributed to its being claimed by scholars and critics as the last of Marlowe's plays. As mentioned earlier, the play survives in two editions, 1604 and 1616. On 12 May, 1593, MEG103-British Drama I: Beginnings to Restoration Page 74 Thomas Kyd was arrested and he revealed under torture that certain sacrilegious and unorthodox documents denying the divinity of Jesus Christ found in his possession actually belonged to Marlowe; a warrant was subsequently issued for Marlowe's arrest on 18 May on charges of atheism and blasphemy. But his life was cut short when Marlowe was stabbed to death by Ingram Frizer in a brawl in a Deptford tavern. No one can predict what greater plays Marlowe might have gone on to write or what heights of literary excellence he might have achieved. London was reeling under the Great Plague, and Marlowe spent the last months before his murder writing *Hero and Leander*, which was published in two editions in 1598. The lyrical poem *The Passionate Shepherd* is another well-known poem by Marlowe. In 1599, printed copies of Marlowe's translation of Ovid's *Elegies* into heroic couplets were publicly burnt on orders of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London because of the alleged licentiousness of the work. In 1600, his translation of Lucan's *Pharsalia*, Book I was published, but the work was probably completed in Cambridge.

After his violent death, Christopher Marlowe was finally laid to rest in the churchyard of St. Nicholas at Deptford.

About the play:

The hero of the play, Doctor Faustus, is a highly educated scholar who is not satisfied with the knowledge he already has. He wants greater power and wisdom, so he makes an agreement with Lucifer through the demon Mephistophilis. In exchange for his soul, Faustus receives magical powers and the service of Mephistophilis for 24 years.

As time passes, Faustus does not use his powers wisely. Instead, he wastes them on magic tricks, pleasure, and selfish activities. When the 24 years come to an end, he realizes his mistake and fears the punishment awaiting him. However, he is unable to truly repent and is finally taken to hell.

The play deals with themes such as ambition, power, knowledge, temptation, sin, repentance, and the struggle between good and evil. It is both a tragedy and a morality play, showing that excessive ambition and ignoring moral values lead to destruction. Written mainly in blank verse, *Doctor Faustus* is one of the greatest works of English Renaissance drama.

The main action of the play Doctor Faustus can be divided into three parts. A Chorus introduces the Prologue and says that this play is about the “fortunes” of a man born of parents “base of stock” in a town called Rhode in Germany, a scholar of theology, but who, consumed with a “self-conceit” and a complete arrogance, decided to overreach himself, because of which “heavens conspired his overthrow”. Faustus became a glutton of learning and MEG103 British Drama I: Beginnings to Restoration Page 77 overindulged himself in necromancy, preferring it over true religion. After the Chorus exits, we find Faustus sitting in his study. We find him weary of scientific study and therefore he bids adieu to philosophy, medicine, law and divinity, claiming them as “odious and obscure” and turns to “heavenly” book of magicians and necromancy, excited about the “world of profit and delight,/Of power, of honour, of omnipotence” that it has to offer. Faustus invokes the aid of the Devil, but the Good Angel pleads with him to keep aside the “dammed book” and read the scriptures instead. However, the goading of the Bad Angel’s was more powerful and attractive, and Faustus became satisfied by imagining the possibility of black magic, and contemplates on the adventurous enterprises that can be performed with it. He is rapturous as he contemplates on the unlimited powers that will enable him to accomplish whatever he desires.

“O what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence,
Is promis’d to the studious artisan!
All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command...”

A sound magician is a demi-God.” (I. i)

Marlowe in these lines wonderfully portrays the flights of fancy of Faustus’ eager mind indicating his confidence and daring. He welcomes his German friends Valdes and Cornelius who know the technicality of black magic and who will teach him the “concealed arts”. They tell him that once he masters black magic, more people will frequent him than the “Delphian oracle”. You should remember that the ultimate decision to commit himself to MEG103-British Drama I: Beginnings to Restoration Page 78 evil is Faustus’ own and like all tragic heroes, he must be responsible for the choice that he makes. The Evil Trinity constitutes Lucifer, Mephistophilis and Belzebub. When Faustus calls upon the Devil in his quest for power, he sends his agent Mephistophilis in the form of an ugly beast. Faustus charges him to change his

shape and return as an “old Franciscan friar”; upon doing so, Faustus gloats on how “pliant” and humble Mephistophilis is. Faustus tells the Devil that he shall do whatever he commands, whether it be “to make the moon drop from her sphere,/Or the ocean to overwhelm the world” (I. iii). Mephistophilis cannot experience the prospects of hope because he is eternally damned. He acknowledges the fact that there is a heaven and that he and Lucifer rebelled against God and therefore they were damned till eternity, and a soul that is eternally damned will always experience despair no matter where it goes. When the Good Angel exhorts Faustus to leave the “execrable art”, he seems to yield for a moment but the Bad Angel draws him back to his arrogant ways by encouraging him to think of the “honour and of wealth” that now lie within his power. Faustus makes his bargain with the Devil thus: Lucifer will give him twenty-four years of life, and Mephistophilis will be his servant and do his bidding, and shall “appear to the said John Faustus at all times, in what form or shape soever he please”, but at the end of the stipulated period, he will give both body and soul to Lucifer, Prince of the East. This is sealed by a deed in Faustus’ own blood as a security. Interestingly, when Faustus cuts his arm to draw blood, it congeals, perhaps a sign of God telling Faustus to back away from his damnable pursuit, but Mephistophilis brings a chafer of fire to make his blood flow again. Upon signing the deed, MEG103-British Drama I: Beginnings to Restoration Page 79 Faustus gives him the scroll, “a deed of gift, of body and of soul” (II. i).

The contract gives Faustus everything he asks for. He questions Mephistophilis about hell, and he says that “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.” (II. i) Mephistophilis tries to excite Faustus’ hedonistic instincts by saying that “marriage is a ceremonial toy” and he will produce the “fairest courtesans” and bring them to his bed every morning. However, he also refuses to answer certain questions like when Faustus asks him who made the world, Mephistophilis says he will not tell him because “Thou art damn’d, think thou of hell”. Faustus’ guardian Angel tries to make him repent so that he may redeem himself, but the Bad Angel goes on saying that he should never repent because he is already damned. The Good and the Bad Angel serves to externalize Faustus’ internal struggle with his conscience. Faustus himself says that “My heart’s so harden’d I cannot repent”, but also calls upon Christ, the saviour to help “save distressed Faustus’ soul”. Lucifer, Belzebub and Mephistophilis enter and say he should not think of God, but of the Devil and Faustus vows “never to look to heaven,/Never to name God or to pray to him.” The Devils show him the pleasures of the Seven Deadly Sins who appear in “their own proper shapes and likeness”, a sight which will be as pleasant to him “as Paradise was to Adam

the first day of his creation". You may perhaps be aware that the Seven Deadly Sins are Pride, Covetousness or Greed, Envy, Wrath, Gluttony, Sloth and Lust. MEG103-British Drama I: Beginnings to Restoration Page 80

Chorus I introduces the second part of the play wherein Faustus will arrive at Rome to "see the Pope and manner of his court,/And take some part of holy Peter's feast". The Pope, the Cardinals and Bishops, the Monks and Friars, Raymond, King of Hungary enter with Bruno, the Rival Pope led in chains. Faustus urges Mephistophilis to haste so that he may "restore this Bruno to his liberty/And bear him to the states of Germany". After a confrontation with the Pope and Cardinals in Rome where Faustus was cursed with "bell, book and candle", Faustus invokes the spirit of Helen of Greece, "the admirablest lady that ever lived... that peerless dame of Greece, whom all the world admires for her majesty" (V. i). An Old Man pleads with Faustus to "leave this damned art,/This magic that will charm thy soul to hell", pleading with him to step back from the brink because there is still hope that his

"amiable soul" can achieve mercy.

"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:

Then, Faustus, will repentance come too late,

Then thou art banish'd from the sight of heaven;

No mortal can express the pains of hell." (V. i)

The Old Man suggests the reality of time in moral consequences. But Faustus is in despair because he cannot be absolutely humble, and the Old Man leaves with "grief of heart", fearing the ruin of Faustus' "hapless soul". Feeling bereft, Faustus cries out that he does repent and does despair, and wants to escape the "snares of death", but MEG103-British Drama I: Beginnings to Restoration Page 81 Mephistophilis brands him a traitor for trying to disobey his "sovereign Lord", and threatens to tear him apart. Faustus, fearing retribution, volunteers to reconfirm his bond with Lucifer. He makes his choice and calls upon the spirit of Helen once again, who enters, passing over between two Cupids. Faustus embraces her and exclaims his famous apostrophe,

“Was this the face that launch’d a thousand ships

And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?

Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss:

Her lips suck forth my soul, see where it flies.

Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.

Here will I dwell, for heaven is in these lips,

And all is dross that is not Helena.” (V. i)

When Faustus implores Helen to make him “immortal”, he uses the Platonic language of love, but in a grim, desperate situation. As a consequence of this final hedonistic activity, Faustus has to suffer eternal damnation.

The Old Man enters again and tells Faustus that his soul will never acquire the “grace of heaven”. The appearance of the Old Man suggests that Faustus is still in the world of Time.

In the last scene of the play, we see Lucifer, Belzebub and Mephistophilis entering to claim the soul of Faustus, bringing with them “lasting damnation”. The climax of the play is Faustus’ monologue expressing his states of mind and feeling and anticipating the terrifying ordeal that awaits him once his soul is forfeited. He has by now learnt to think about others and a sense of morality and humanity has entered into his character. The clock striking MEG103-British Drama I: Beginnings to Restoration Page 82 eleven creates the atmosphere of doom and portends the horror in his last hour of mortal life.

“Now hast thou but one bare hour to live,

And then thou must be damn’d perpetually.” (V. ii)

Time is the substance and essence of the monologue and the momentum of the language follows the movement of the mind of the protagonist.

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

The devil will come, and Faustus must be damn’d.

O I’ll leap up to my God! Who pulls me down?

See, see, where Christ’s blood streams in the firmament!

One drop would save my soul, half a drop.

Ah, my Christ!” (V. ii)

His speech shows us a mind that is completely broken, as he comprehends the enormity of eternity. Faustus admits that he had committed sins of the flesh and also realizes that hope is forever lost for a damned soul. All tragic heroes must in the end take responsibility for their situation and Faustus does the same. In his final moments of anguish, Faustus hopes for extinction:

“O soul, be chang’d into little water drops

And fall into the ocean, ne’er be found.” (V. iii)

The last Chorus sings of moralistic sentiments typical of the Morality plays, but it seems to be redundant as the Chorus does not enhance the play in any way. Nevertheless, Doctor Faustus is a magnificent play with a MEG103-British Drama I: Beginnings to Restoration Page 83 great theme that is expressed in a language which rises equal to it.

EXERCISE

1. Write a short note on the life and works of Christopher Marlowe
2. Is the thirst for knowledge at the root of the tragedy of Doctor Faustus? Discuss on the basis of your reading of the play.
3. Examine how Marlowe represents the conflicts in Doctor Faustus’s mind?

Themes

1) Doctor Faustus as a Morality Play

Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus can be considered a Morality Play because it contains many important features of the medieval morality tradition. A morality play teaches a moral and religious lesson through the struggle between good and evil.

Faustus represents a human being who is tempted by power, knowledge, wealth and pleasure. He chooses necromancy and makes a pact with Lucifer, knowing that it is against Christian teachings. The Good Angel and Evil Angel represent the two opposing forces working on Faustus. The Good Angel encourages him to repent, while the Evil Angel encourages him to continue his sinful path.

The play also contains other morality-play elements such as Heaven, Hell, Lucifer, Mephistophilis, the Seven Deadly Sins, the Old Man and the Chorus. The Seven Deadly Sins are presented before Faustus and show the dangers of sinful pleasures. The Old Man represents faith, goodness and repentance and advises Faustus to return to God.

The Chorus gives moral comments at the beginning and end of the play. At the end, Faustus is punished for his pride, ambition and rejection of God. His tragic fall teaches the audience that human beings should not cross the limits set by God and should avoid sinful desires.

Thus, Doctor Faustus contains the essential characteristics of a Morality Play: Christian morality, temptation, sin, repentance, Good versus Evil, and punishment for wrongdoing. Therefore, it can be studied as a Renaissance Morality Play with strong tragic elements.

2) Doctor Faustus as a Tragedy

Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus is mainly considered a tragedy because it presents the rise, fall and destruction of a great man. Faustus is a highly educated scholar and Doctor of Divinity, but his excessive ambition, pride and desire for unlimited knowledge and power become the cause of his downfall.

3) Dr. Faustus as a Tragic Hero

Faustus is an extraordinary man with great knowledge and ability. However, he is not satisfied with ordinary human knowledge. He wants to know everything and gain supernatural power. His ambition makes him a suitable tragic hero.

Faustus's main tragic flaw is his pride and excessive ambition. He wants to go beyond the limits of ordinary human beings. He knowingly chooses black magic and makes a contract with Lucifer.

Faustus makes his decision consciously. He knows that selling his soul is sinful, but he still chooses it. Therefore, he is responsible for his tragic fate.

4) The play shows Faustus's inner conflict between:

Good and Evil

Faith and Doubt

Repentance and Sin

Heaven and Hell

Knowledge and Religion

The Good Angel and Evil Angel represent this struggle.

After making the agreement with Lucifer, Faustus enjoys magical powers, but he gradually experiences fear, regret, loneliness and despair. His twenty-four years of power cannot give him true happiness.

At the end, Faustus realizes his mistake. He understands that he is only a mortal human being and that God is more powerful than he is. He desperately wants to save his soul.

Faustus finally meets a terrible death and is condemned to Hell. His fall creates fear and pity in the audience, which are important effects of tragedy.

Conclusion

Thus, Doctor Faustus is a Renaissance tragedy because it shows the tragic fall of a great man due to his pride, ambition and wrong choices. Marlowe presents not merely a battle between Good and Evil but the inner struggle and suffering of a human being who wants to exceed his limitations.

1) Significance of the Chorus in Doctor Faustus:

The Chorus in Doctor Faustus acts as a narrator and commentator. It introduces the story and gives information about Faustus and his background. It tells us that Faustus is a great scholar and Doctor of Divinity. It explains Faustus's pride, ambition and desire for unlimited knowledge. It compares Faustus with Icarus, who falls because of excessive ambition.

The Chorus connects and explains important events in the play. It sometimes creates curiosity and suspense by leaving events for the audience to watch. It provides the moral message of the play.

The final Chorus warns people not to seek knowledge or power beyond God's limits.

Thus, the Chorus helps create the tragic atmosphere and makes the meaning of the play clear.

2)Significance of Comic Scenes

The comic scenes in Doctor Faustus provide comic relief and reduce the tension of the tragedy. The main comic characters are Wagner, Robin and Dick, who imitate and parody Faustus's magical activities. Robin even wants to sell his soul to the Devil for a roasted shoulder of mutton, which makes Faustus's serious bargain look foolish. Robin and Dick also try to use magic for petty purposes and are later turned into an ape and a dog by Mephistophilis. These scenes show that Faustus, who initially dreams of becoming a "demi-God," gradually uses his magical powers for small and meaningless activities. Thus, the hero and the clown become similar in their misuse of magic. Therefore, the comic scenes not only entertain the audience but also criticize Faustus's pride, ambition and misuse of supernatural power.

3)Doctor Faustus as a Renaissance Man

Doctor Faustus represents the Renaissance man because he breaks away from traditional restrictions and believes in the power of human knowledge and individual freedom. He is a curious humanist, adventurous thinker and lover of beauty, art and knowledge. His great ambition is to gain unlimited knowledge, wealth and power through magic. He rejects traditional subjects such as philosophy, medicine, law and theology because he feels that they cannot satisfy his desire for greater knowledge. He wants to become almost a "demi-God" and dreams of controlling nature and the world. His interest in classical literature, beauty and Helen of Troy also reflects Renaissance culture. However, his pride and excessive ambition become the cause of his downfall. Thus, Faustus represents both the great possibilities and the dangers of the Renaissance spirit. He is a Renaissance man because he represents the new spirit of freedom, curiosity, individualism, ambition and the desire to explore the unknown.

4)Stages of Damnation of Doctor Faustus

The damnation of Faustus is a gradual process of moral and spiritual decline. His first and greatest sin is pride and self-conceit. He rejects traditional subjects such as philosophy, law, medicine and theology and turns to black magic to gain unlimited knowledge and power. He knowingly makes a pact with Lucifer and sells his soul for twenty-four years of pleasure and magical power. During this period, instead of achieving his great ambitions, he wastes his powers on petty tricks, jokes and selfish pleasures. He ignores the advice of the Good Angel, the Old Man, his conscience and even Mephistophilis. His moral decline becomes clearer when he uses his powers for cruel and foolish activities. His relationship with Helen of Troy further shows his movement away from redemption. The Old Man offers him hope of repentance, but

Faustus rejects it and chooses despair. Finally, he realizes that he has lost his chance for salvation, but this realization comes too late. In his final soliloquy, he desperately asks for God's mercy, but he is unable to escape his fate and is taken to eternal damnation. Thus, Faustus's damnation moves from pride → sin → pact with Lucifer → moral decay → despair → final damnation.

Task

1. Discuss, in your own words, whether Doctor Faustus is a Morality play or a Tragedy.
2. Is Faustus a Renaissance man? Discuss with relevant Examples.
3. What are the tragic flaws of Faustus which leads to his Ultimate destiny? Discuss with reference to the play.
4. Write a short note on the history of the moral decay in The character of Faustus.