

# DOCTOR FAUSTUS

BY CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

## **CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE'S DOCTOR FAUSTUS**

### **Christopher Marlowe**

Christopher Marlowe (1564-93) has been described as 'the father of English tragedy'.<sup>1</sup> In his short, eventful life, he transformed the English theatre, deploying the 'torrential imagination' for which he was admired by T. S. Eliot to open up new possibilities for the stage.

The son of a Canterbury shoemaker, Marlowe won a scholarship to the University of Cambridge, becoming trained in the classics which were so influential in his work. University life also introduced him to more contemporary political affairs, and he signed up as a government spy, charged with infiltrating Catholic circles in order to thwart plots against Queen Elizabeth.

Marlowe moved to London, where his first popular play, *Tamburlaine the Great*, was performed around 1587, achieving sufficient success to merit the production of a sequel. Staging the exploits of a Tartar warlord, the first part of the play presents a magnificently charismatic leader whose brutal desire for world domination does not meet with any noticeable punishment.

It is in the subsequent *Doctor Faustus*, however, that Marlowe's stature as a playwright and a poet become fully apparent. 'There had been no great blank verse before Marlowe', claimed T. S. Eliot: 'Marlowe's mighty line', as Ben Jonson famously described it, had a startling impact both on audiences and on his fellow playwrights.<sup>2</sup> In content as well as in form, *Doctor Faustus* marked a turning point, forging a new kind of tragedy for the English stage.

Marlowe pursued a colourful life in London. In 1589 he and a friend duelled with William Bradley, the son of a pub landlord, resulting in the latter's death. After 12 days in prison, Marlowe was released on the grounds of self-defence. Continuing to write both poetry and plays, he had repeated brushes with the law. In 1592 alone he was arrested twice (once for coining money in the Netherlands and once following a street fight), as well as being bound over to keep the peace. Alongside a volatile temper, Marlowe was rumoured to hold controversial and heretical views, including atheism. Around the time of his death, a note detailing his supposed 'damnable opinions' was delivered to the authorities, stating, among wilder claims, that he believed 'that the first beginning of Religion was only to keep men in awe'. It is difficult to gauge the veracity of these claims, particularly since Marlowe's accusers often stood to benefit from making the charges.

Christopher Marlowe died in a fight on 30 May 1593, at the age of 29. After dining with three friends at a house in Deptford, he reportedly got into an argument with Ingram Frazier over the bill. In the ensuing brawl, Marlowe was stabbed above the right eye, dying instantly. In death as in life, however, Marlowe remains something of an enigma, and it is possible that his death was in some way linked with his role as a spy.

## **Faustus: Hero or Villain?**

Staging a complex and ambiguous portrait of a man who sells his soul in return for knowledge and power, *Doctor Faustus* eschews simple moral judgements, exploring instead the human implications of one man's agonised quest to reach beyond the limits of the possible. Articulating his at once noble and narcissistic desires in speeches of often astonishing beauty, Faustus both bravely and foolishly flies in the face of conventional morality. As a recent biographer comments, the play's openness to paradox is one of its key achievements.<sup>3</sup>

How are we to respond to Faustus's downfall? On one level, the play can be interpreted as a cautionary tale. Driven by pride, Faustus appears to be given many opportunities to repent, sealing his own doom by his refusal to do so. His aspirations, however, are undeniably compelling, complicating a straightforward moral reading of the play. Possessed by a characteristically Renaissance compulsion to push the boundaries of human knowledge, Faustus's desires appear, from one perspective at least, heroic rather than reprehensible.

Whether we applaud or condemn his decisions, Faustus seems to be in control of his own destiny. The good and bad angels repeatedly spell out the alternatives with which he is faced, differing only in their view of which path he should take. Yet the play raises troubling questions about human freedom and our ability to choose our ultimate fate. Protestant teaching in this era insisted that no individual was capable of saving his or her own soul. The influential theologian John Calvin emphasised the doctrine of predestination, namely, that God has already chosen those he will save and, inevitably, those he will not, without any reference to the virtue or otherwise of those individuals. Understood in the light of this belief-system, Faustus is not damned because he sells his soul to the devil, but sells his soul to the devil because he is already damned. At several points in the play he seems potentially willing to repent but is apparently unable to do so. A powerful sense of tragic inevitability pervades the drama, suggesting perhaps that *Doctor Faustus* stages the desperate fate of those who are powerless to escape damnation. Through engaging the empathy of the audience with a figure in such a plight, does *Doctor Faustus*, as some critics argue, subtly undermine Protestant doctrines, revealing the terrifying implications of Calvinist teaching?

To argue that the play's theological context means that Faustus has no responsibility for his own downfall is nevertheless to over-simplify Protestant teachings on human freedom and accountability. While stating that only God is able to offer salvation, Calvin, along with other leading Protestant thinkers, continued to stress the importance of choosing to follow Christ, insisting that God will not reject anyone who seeks him. Inhabiting a Protestant universe which itself embraces paradox, Faustus both lacks and refuses grace, as the play explores the mental and emotional implications of a belief-system in which the individual is accountable for his own damnation at the same time as he is powerless to bring about his own salvation. Faustus is at once entirely responsible for and utterly unable to avoid his terrible destiny, a paradoxical position which generates much of the psychological tension in the play.

## **Dates and Sources**

Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* was probably written around 1588-9, although the exact date of its composition and first performance are difficult to establish. The earliest recorded performance was on 30 September 1594 but contemporary references suggest that it had been performed long before this point. A ballad written in early 1589, for example, seems to indicate knowledge of Marlowe's play.

The existence of two distinct printed versions adds to the confusion surrounding the play's origins. Both texts were published long after Marlowe's death, making it difficult to say with

certainty which version, or which parts of which version, he actually wrote. Actors, theatre companies and other playwrights often altered and elaborated on existing plays in this era. The playwrights William Birde and Samuel Rowley were paid £4 in 1602 for their 'adicyones [additions] in doctor fostes', but we can only speculate about the nature of these additions, since no edition of the play survives from before this point.<sup>4</sup> The earliest surviving edition was published in 1604 (known as the A-text). A much longer version of the play was published in 1616 (the B-text). The comic middle section is extended in the B-text, which enhances the anti-Catholic elements of the play by including additional scenes in which the pope is taunted. The B-text also plays more overtly to the contemporary taste for the grotesque, including, for example, more explicit references to Faustus's violent end. Critics in the past tended to argue that the B-text represents a more authentic version of the original play, but the A-text is often viewed today as offering a closer glimpse of Marlowe's vision. Much depends, clearly, on our perceptions of Marlowe the man and the artist, as well as our sense of what Faustus himself should represent. Critical discussions of the play as well as the reactions of audiences turn on individual and cultural responses to its towering central character, a figure well placed to become a potent embodiment of whichever contemporary issues and anxieties we choose to project upon him, as the many different productions of the play since the Elizabethan era testify.

*Doctor Faustus* is based on accounts of a real-life magician. The legendary exploits of Johann Faust had been elaborated and fictionalised in the bestselling German text, the *Historia von D. Johann Fausten* (1587), translated into English as *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus*. Marlowe used the *English Faust-book*, as the English translation is known, as his main source for the play. Critics have agonised over the apparent inconsistencies of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, a poignant tragedy which nevertheless has a lengthy middle section involving the protagonist in childish pranks. The *English Faust-book* can nevertheless be said to set the tone for the mixed approach of the play. Faust was associated in the popular imagination with comic accounts of trickery as well as with the terrors of damnation, such that it would be difficult for any play about the magician in this era to ignore the less high-minded aspects of the legend.<sup>5</sup>

Marlowe is no slave to his source, however. The good and bad angels, for instance, do not appear in the *Faust-book*. Relics from medieval morality plays, they offer jarringly simplistic perspectives that serve only to enhance the tortured ambiguities of Faustus's position. For the translator of the *Faust-book*, moreover, the moral conclusions of the tale are clear: Faustus is a 'fearful example' set before us 'that we not go astray, but take God always before our eyes ... defying the devil and all his works'.<sup>6</sup> In Marlowe's play, however, the chorus more equivocally laments the tragic downfall of 'the branch that might have grown full straight', punished for reaching beyond that which 'heavenly power permits'.

### **Sensationally spooky: *Doctor Faustus* in performance**

From their first performances, Marlowe's plays were sensational affairs, and *Doctor Faustus* was no exception. Faustus was first played by the legendary and physically striking actor Edward Alleyn, dressed in a white surplice marked with a large cross. Special effects enhanced the frisson of witnessing forbidden acts of conjuration and blasphemy on stage, and the early performances were raucous occasions. One spectator described 'shagge-hayr'd Devils' running 'roaring over the Stage ... while Drummers make Thunder in the Tying-house, and twelve-penny Hirelings make artificiall Lightning in their Heavens'.<sup>7</sup>

The thrill created by visual and sound effects was soon eclipsed, however, by spine-tingling rumours of active demonic involvement in the play. At one performance, the 'olde Theater crackt and frighted the Audience', demonstrating the readiness of early audiences of the play to be spooked.<sup>8</sup> Before long, *Doctor Faustus* had accumulated a series of supernatural legends.

Perhaps the most notorious of these was the account of a performance in which Faustus was 'busy in his magical invocations' when the actors realised that 'there was one devil too many amongst them'. Abandoning the performance in terror, the cast were reportedly driven, 'contrary to their custom', to spend the night 'in reading and in prayer.'<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Contemporaries of Shakespeare* (1919), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (1969), p. 120; Ben Jonson, 'To the Memory of My Beloved, The Author, Mr. William Shakespeare'.

<sup>3</sup> See Park Honan, *Christopher Marlowe: Poet & Spy* (2005), pp. 216-18.

<sup>4</sup> *Henslowe's Diary*, ed. W. W. Greg, Vol. I (1904-08), p. 172.

<sup>5</sup> See Vivien Thomas and William Tydeman, *Christopher Marlowe: The Plays and their Sources* (1994), p. 174.

<sup>6</sup> *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus* (1592), Thomas and Tydeman, p. 238.

<sup>7</sup> John Melton, *Astrologaster* (1620). See Honan, p. 219.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Middleton, *The Blacke Booke* (1604).

<sup>9</sup> See E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* Vol. 3 (1923), pp. 423-4.