

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) *Dr Faustus* (A, 460-492)

Christopher Marlowe died at the age of 29, tangled in secret agent plots, and living on the borderlines of the underworld. (You will remember that Thomas Mallory, author of *Morte Darthur*, also lived on the borders of lawlessness; evidence that the literary genius is not always Mr. Mainstream.) Yet by the time of his death Marlowe was a highly educated Cambridge graduate, the author of a number of closely admired plays, and a recognized servant of the Queen, running various private anti-Catholic missions for her in Europe. We can trace in the amazingly intense life of this young man his dominant fascination with tragic heroes who will transcend the bonds of normal human existence, becoming “outreachers” of daring power. The characters he portrays clearly emerge from his own life.

Question: The Intersection of Raw Humor with Magnificent Vision

The question, and you have seen it forming in *Twelfth Night* too, is: *how are we to take the blend of raw humor with poetic flights in Elizabethan drama?* (In *Twelfth Night* we saw the exchanges between Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Sir Toby Belch, and followed the wit and lyric flights of Feste, Olivia’s jester. In *Dr. Faustus* we hear the exchange between Wagner and the Clown, and marvel at the blend of wit, learning, grossness, and musicality. This blending of poetic levels, throughout Elizabethan drama, establishes a tone conflict which shocked later dramatic traditions, like that of French classicism in the following century, and still today, in our ready for anything age, we gasp at the blend of the sublime and the harsh which we read in this sixteenth century work. *So how are we to take this blend?* If you can learn to “take it in stride” you will discover secrets of the comprehensive vitality of this great dramatic tradition.

Comparative Literature:

1. Does Marlowe’s concern with the “outreacher” take our minds to other literary images of power: Macchiavelli’s Prince or Nietzsche’s *Uebermensch*. Is there something in common among these power manipulators, and if so what? How are they different? (The Prince, for one thing, is above all a calculator; while the other two figures are passionate extremists.) How does the legend of Faust, in Goethe, play into this tradition? Is Goethe’s *Faust* more conflicted than Marlowe’s, in his search for the power that goes with knowledge?
2. In hurrying to the center of great works written long before our time, we often hurry past the details which explain the text we seek. In the case of Marlowe’s *Faustus* we need to return to the theological strife of Marlowe’s learning years at Cambridge at the end of the 16th century. The Calvinists and anti-Calvinists were in heated strife concerning issues of theodicy, of the justification of God’s ways to man. (Question: is the pervasive pain and suffering in the universe part of God’s plan? This issue of “justification” will still dominate the religious/epic thinking of John Milton.) These issues frame the desire of Faustus for a temporary respite from the human condition, in order to enjoy perfect pleasure. Comparative literature regularly concerns itself with explaining one cultural mindset to another, probing the geography of possible understanding from one century to another.