

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Dr Faustus 1592 **Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)**

Elizabethan Poetic Drama

The genius of poetic creation in Elizabethan culture assumes multiple forms: the epic of *The Faerie Queene*, in which Spenser dazzles us with original stanzaic strategies; the Platonic romanticism of Sir Philip Sidney, who in *Astrophil and Stella* and in his *Defense of Poetry* gives heart and soul to the expressions of love; the sonnets of Shakespeare, unparalleled for their blend of passion with perfect subtlety. (The theatrical legacy of Shakespeare is of course the world summit of the British gift to culture.) The British tradition of poetic eminence is fully launched well before the advent of what we later called the Metaphysical, in the early Jacobean Age. By that point, the moments of Donne, Herbert and Crashaw the dramatic lyric impulse, such as we find it in Marlowe, has largely replaced the grandiosity of tone to which Marlowe had leashed his sensibility.

The Young Marlowe

Christopher Marlowe was one of the generative forces in Elizabethan poetic drama.. He was not high born. He was born to John Marlowe and Elizabeth Archer, in Canterbury, in 1564. His father was a shoemaker, and an aggressive one, who had a volatile temper like his son, and early became familiar with street fighting. In 1589, when he was twenty five, the younger Marlowe was involved in a violent confrontation, in which a man was killed. Marlowe was briefly imprisoned, but not dissuaded from engaging not only in further fights but in behaviors that had his downfall inscribed upon them. Whether through calumny or his own recklessness, Marlowe managed to create around him a sturdy reputation for blasphemy and atheism—particularly scorn for Islam-- and for including a furious burning of the *Koran* in the play *Tamburlaine*-- for homo-eroticism, for street brawling, and above all for espionage, of which he was accused by his enemies, whose constant charge was that Marlowe was a crypto-Catholic, in league with Queen Elizabeth's sturdy army of Protestant agents, who were scattered throughout Western Europe.

Marlowe no street ruffian

All of which is not to say, however, that Marlowe entered his culture at a ruffian point, a sensibility of the streets, for in fact he was indebted to Cambridge University for a much needed scholarship, for which he had made use, in order to position himself for a broad education in Greek and Latin. One thinks, in the Marlowe case, of Francois Villon, and of the wonderful if gross ballads he wrote straight off the streets of Paris, a century earlier; another scholar-lyricist, who was far from the elegance of literary salons. Both men seemed able to pick diamonds out of the mud, and in Marlowe's case, in poetic drama, it meant being able to open in full throttle pentameter and to sustain a vast panorama onto the human condition.

PLOT

The field of imagination from which Marlowe takes off, into the following excursion onto the human condition, is from the outset high lyrical--dramatic. We open into the voice and mind of Faustus himself, a seasoned academic deeply immersed in learning of all the mediaeval sciences:

And live and die in Aristotle's works
Sweet Analytics, tis thou hast ravished me...

This obsessed academician comes before us at just the moment when his life crisis overwhelms him, and, like Goethe's *Doctor Faustus* (original; 1808)) arrives through soliloquies to see that he must change

his life. He must drink at the wellsprings of life. He knows he has come to a break point in the continuity of being-here. (The vehicle of this elevated discovery is unfolded, in multiple punctuated scenes of blank verse, which are significantly punctuated both by soliloquies and by plot-informing contributions by the chorus; like an ancient Greek chorus, which frames a play, managing to generate new perspectives onto the action.) For Marlowe's *Faustus*, unlike Goethe's, the turn inward is to magic and the powers it confers, rather than to the fruits of lust and eternal youth. Thus from the start of Marlowe's play this learned scholar, who though of lowly birth had schooled and studied himself, could call on the highest powers of necromancy to give him empire over the world. Nietzschean he is in the sense that he exemplifies mysterious and dangerous powers, without input from any creator of the universe.

Faust's quest for magic power begins by a request to his servant Wagner, to fetch a couple of local magicians, Cornelius, a good angel and a bad angel Valdes, who have for some time been touting to Faust the grandeur of magical power. A good angel and a bad angel flutter by, urging Faust in their two opposed directions, toward magic or toward god. The battle for Faust's soul is at this point fully engaged.

Faust's familiarity with the diabolic crew--Lucifer and Beelzebub join in--grows increasingly potent; Faust agrees to a contract with Mephisto, and signs it with his own blood, agreeing that Mephisto will serve him for twenty four years, at which time Lucifer, the master of Mephisto, will reclaim and possess Faustus' body and soul. In the following scenes Faust begins to waver, wondering whether he was right to abjure God, but regularly reassured by Mephistopheles, and ultimately threatened by Lucifer, who reminds him of his contract. An interview with the Seven Deadly Sins reminds Faust of his strong Christian past, and yet at the same time of his contractual obligation. The widening of the tale breaks loose from this point, Faust and Mephistopheles setting out on an extensive trip around Europe, in the course of which they visit and play tricks on the Pope, on an obstreperous horse dealer, and at the court of the Holy Roman Emperor, where they conjure up the ghost of Alexander the Great. In other words the Faustian pact with the devil digresses off into that blend of dead seriousness with roughshod horseplay, which is Marlowe's persistent relation to the mediaeval as it lies latent in the early modern.

As *Faustus* nears the end of his 24 year commitment, he bequeathes his possessions to Wagner, ample evidence of the tapering off of his desires. Nonetheless he must venture once more into the hell hole of desires; for a group of curious students he conjures up the image of Helen of Troy and falls in love with her, begging Mephistopheles to allow him to make love to Helen. The circuit of the Fall is complete.

The unity of *Dr. Faustus* is rough edged and anecdotal. There are, for example, recurring soliloquies in which *Faustus* reviews his condition and the ultimate prospects awaiting mankind. These reflections--jovial, cynical, scatological, bombastic--hold the entire drama together by tone.

CHARACTERS

The Pope, on whom Faust plays antic tricks

Cardinal of Lorraine
The emperor of Germany
Duke of Vanholt

Faustus; Marlowe's name for his world figure, and archetype of world search. The German tale of *Dr. Faustus* was circulating in England in Marlowe's time, and perfectly fitted the author's questing imagination. Having contracted a 24 year pact with Mephistopheles. *Faustus* spends the according me time in world travelling, and fooling around, with Mepstopheles. The tale of *Dr. Faustus*, of course, was to thrive in later European culture. For Goethe *Faust* was foremost a symbol of the eternal longing for life, sensuality, the passionately secular, while for Thomas Mann *Faust* was a German intellectual swept into the decisions and positions of second World War Fascism.

Valdes. Local magician
Cornelius. Local magician

Wagner, servant of Faustus; a wit.
Clown; a rustic and yokel, after the Shakespearean model

Robin
Ralph
Vintner
Horse courser
A Knight
An Old Man
Scholars, Friars, Attendants
Duchess of Vanholt

Lucifer; the master Devil, proper owner of Faust's body and soul, after the blood pact has been signed.

Beelzebub
Mephistophilis, the devil who first comes to Faust with the proposal for a blood contract; the diabolical force most intimate to Faustus.

Good Angel
Evil Angel

The Seven Deadly Sins

Spirit shapes of Alexander and Helen; by products of Faust's nimble gift for calling up mind forms as personal presences.

THEMES

Power and Temptation Already tempted by the prospect of power, Dr. Faustus is haunted, from the start, by the temptation to take over, for himself, the powers offered to him by Mephisto and assorted devils. He is already--the moment he first appears as voice-- tempted by the prospect of power, and arguably considers trading his soul for such power. (Do the names of Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump, and Elon Musk fit the character type we are talking about?) When he concludes his bargain with Mephistopheles he believes that he will exercise all power--although in fact, when you come down to it, the nature of this power is hard to define.

Bargaining and Betting The play is riddled with the notion of the gamble which Faust makes with Mephistopheles, to acquire absolute power in his life. This gamble is at least loosely related to the famous *pari*, or bet, which Pascal makes, on the likelihood that there is a god. For Pascal there is a preponderant likelihood that god exists; while for Faustus there seems reason to count on Mephistopheles. Faust is still a mediaeval figure, torn between bustling ambition and daring; Pascal is modern and risking, but still faithful to the hands of god.

Fate and Free Will It was a burning question, in Marlowe's time, whether or not mankind is doomed by predestiny, or has the choice, along the course of his life, to make free and independent choices. Dr. Faustus is deeply entangled with this issue, which he embodies in such a way as to universalize it. So deep is this embodiment in Faustus that we must think of him as a living question mark, poised between brash Renaissance individualism and the mediaeval respect for spiritual authoritarianism.

Knowledge and Learning Faustus opens the play by declaring his lasting desire to learn, to study Aristotle. To thrive on scholarship is his entire life, though on the other hand he has come to find learning useless, to give him neither power nor riches. He thus generates the universal question, what is to be gained from knowledge? Can knowledge, say of the history of mankind or of the earth save us, or, lowering the demand, help us to care for ourselves? Faustus seems to be putting that crucial question to himself, and coming up with doubt, at least until he comes up with his alternative answer, that knowledge

may be a pathway to power and riches. He seems never to return to the perspective in which we initially meet him, as a distinguished professor in a purely academic setting.

EVENTS

Interspersed through the play are flights both of wild fantasy and of rusticity which stand out as trademarks of Marlowe's unique imagination. Robin and Rafe, the clown, the unfortunate beneficiaries of horns, antics galore in the realms of the Vatican--this play arguably devoted to the starker topics of pre destination and free will finds ample room to prance, play and cut up. These points, at which the mediaeval rough and ready meets the pre modern speculative, characterize the drama of Marlowe.

On the high serious end Marlowe strives to formulate the mood of unlocking the heavens and speaking with the directive powers of the universe. He delves constantly into questions of free will, the diabolical, and grace. By giving play to his passion for magic he also aligns himself with those for whom the religious issue of transubstantiation lay at the heart of one's worldview. While Faustus is not a religious man he is hungry for power, a bit different from salvation, but still part of our repertoire of paths to life everlasting.