Doctor Faustus
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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Cover photo: Ben Livingston in Doctor Faustus, 2005.
Doctor Faustus

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Synopsis: Doctor Faustus

Doctor Faustus, a talented German scholar who decries the limits of human knowledge, believes that he has learned all that can be learned by conventional means. What is left for him, he thinks, but magic? He is offered a choice of Christian conscience by a good angel, and the path to damnation by an evil angel.

Two fellow scholars, Valdes and Cornelius, teach him the fundamentals of black magic. Eventually, Faustus summons the devil Mephistopheles and the terms of their pact are agreed upon. In return for his immortal soul, Faustus will be granted twenty-four years of power, with Mephistopheles as his servant.

Faustus begins to have second thoughts, but he rationalizes them away and signs away his soul in his own blood. He receives a warning and is nearly overcome by fear. Mephistopheles distracts him with a dance of devils and gives him a book filled with knowledge.

Faustus, after some time, curses Mephistopheles for causing him to lose any prospect of heaven. He finds he can torment the devil by mentioning the name of deity. The good angel and the evil angel arrive again, one advising him to repent, the other telling him to hold to the course of wickedness. Beelzebub and Mephistopheles return to intimidate him, and he agrees to think of God no more. Meanwhile, Robin the Clown has found one of Faustus's magic books.

Riding in a chariot drawn by dragons, Faustus has explored the heavens and earth and flies to Rome where the feast honoring St. Peter is to be celebrated. Faustus and Mephistopheles make themselves invisible and play a number of tricks before leaving. Faustus returns home where his ill-gotten knowledge and abilities gain him renown. Meanwhile, Robin the Clown has learned some magic of his own.

At the court of Charles V, Faustus delights the emperor with illusions and humiliates a knight, whose attempts to get even result in more humiliation for him.

Faustus continues to use his powers to swindle and humiliate anyone he pleases. Several of his victims, together with Robin the Clown, go to the court of the duke in order to get some justice done, if possible. Faustus wins over the duke and duchess with petty illusions, and toys with Robin.

Time is running out for Faustus. We learn from Wagner that his master is probably preparing for death. Even so, there is no repentance evident as Faustus feasts and drinks the time away with other scholars. He summons a spirit to take the appearance of Helen of Troy and asks Mephistopheles to bring Helen to him so she can give him comfort and love during his remaining time.

Finally, Faustus reveals to his friends that he is a damned soul and that his powers came at a high price. They leave him to his fate.

Mephistopheles taunts Faustus, and Faustus blames him for his damnation. The devil gladly takes credit, as the good and evil angels arrive for the last time. The clock strikes eleven, and Faustus's final monologue reveals his regret. At midnight, the devils enter as Faustus begs God and the devil for mercy, but there is no mercy as Faustus is dragged down to hell.

In the epilogue, the Chorus reveals that Faustus is gone, and all his great potential has been wasted. We are warned to remember his fall and the lessons it affords.

Characters: Doctor Faustus
Chorus: Usually a single actor, the Chorus relates the prologue which introduces much of the plot, tells of Faustus's magical experiences as the devil's promises are fulfilled, and who also offers the final comments at play's end.

Doctor Faustus: A brilliant scholar, Doctor Faustus sells his soul to the devil in exchange for limitless knowledge and powerful black magic, which leaves him yet unfulfilled. Even when repentance is still within his grasp, he is too proud to ask God for forgiveness, and his pride ultimately seals his fate.

Wagner: Faustus's student and servant, Wagner presses Robin the clown into service as his own servant. He and Robin eventually acquire some magical abilities of their own.

Good Angel: Trying to save his subject's soul, the Good Angel attempts to convince Faustus on several occasions that repentance is still possible and that he must turn away from the devil and his enticements.

Evil Angel: The opposing force, the bad angel convinces Faustus that repentance is not possible and that devils will tear him in pieces if he tries.

Valdes: A magician, Valdes instructs Faustus in the art of black magic.

Cornelius: Another magician, Cornelius also instructs Faustus in the art of black magic.

Three Scholars: Students of Faustus, the Three Scholars come in search of Faustus early in the play, only to find that he has fallen into a damned art from which he may not be able to be reclaimed.

At play's end, they find Faustus's remains after the devils have made their claim on him.

Lucifer: The prince of devils, Lucifer convinces Faustus, through various enticements, to give up his prayers to God once and for all and to agree to a pact with him.

Mephistopheles: Lucifer's henchman, he serves to satisfy Faustus's wishes and demands. He occasionally torments and is tormented by Faustus and becomes his constant companion.

Robin: A servant and clown to Wagner and a sometimes magician.

Beelzebub: A devil.

Pride, Covetousness, Envy, Wrath, Gluttony, Sloth, Lechery: The seven deadly sins, they are led by a piper and appear before, even delighting, Faustus with the prospect of what he might find in hell.

Dick: A clown.

Pope Adrian: Having grown arrogant and abusive in his power, Pope Adrian becomes a prospect for humiliation at the hands of Faustus and Mephistopheles, who disguise themselves as cardinals and cause mass confusion.

Friars: Assigned by Adrian, they curse, with bell, book and candle, the “spirit” which has upset the pope’s banquet.

Vintner: He accuses Robin and Dick of stealing a cup from the tavern.

Charles V: The German emperor, Charles V is responsible for appointing Bruno as a rival to Pope Adrian. He admires Faustus's ability as a conjurer and enjoys the tricks played on his courtiers.

Horse-Courser: A clown, the Horse-Courser makes the mistake of buying a horse from Faustus.

Duke of Vanholt: Faustus performs his conjuring tricks for the duke’s amusement.

Duchess of Vanholt: She also is amused by Faustus's magical tricks.

Old Man: Appearing at the play’s end, the Old Man attempts to convince Faustus that there is still time to repent and save his soul from hell.

Various Mute Characters, including Alexander the Great, Alexander’s Paramour, Helen of Troy, Devils, Friars, Attendants, Soldiers, and Servants

About the Playwright

By Marlo M. Ihler
Christopher Marlowe, dramatist and poet, was born in Canterbury, England, February 6, 1564, the same year as William Shakespeare. Generally considered the founder of English drama and the father of dramatic blank verse, he prepared the way for Shakespeare and other Elizabethan poets and dramatists.

Details of his early life are limited: he was raised in a middle-class family as the son of a shoemaker. Just prior to his fifteenth birthday, he secured a coveted opening at the prestigious King’s School in Canterbury where he attended on scholarship. Here he received a rigorous education, receiving highly-rated training in religion, music, Latin, Greek, classic literature, writing, and history.

He continued his education at Corpus Christi College (then Benet College) in Cambridge where he received his B.A. in 1584 and his M.A. in 1587. According to school records, his normally consistent attendance was often interrupted by frequent absences during his last years of school, jeopardizing his master’s degree. This, in addition to his refusal to take holy orders into the Anglican Church as his scholarship required, resulted in the university officials’ refusal to award his degree. However, Queen Elizabeth’s Privy Council intervened in his favor, and the degree was finally granted.

Due to the Queen’s special intervention on his behalf, it is believed that Marlowe was affiliated with her secret service, an intelligence and diplomatic operation and the most successful espionage network of the day (http://www.marlowe-society.org, 2005). He assisted in uncovering plots against the queen by the Catholics who wanted her off the throne, the most famous being the Babington Plot.

Marlowe moved to London following his schooling, where, again, little is known about his life. It is known that here he began his career as a playwright and actor for the Lord Admiral’s Company, and may have continued as a spy in the service of the queen. He also became associated with a colorful and intellectual social circle that called themselves The School of the Night or Free-Thinkers. Sir Walter Raleigh and the young earl of Northumberland, Henry Percy, led this group of “advanced-thinking” noblemen, scientists, travelers, philosophers, and poets (http://www.marlowe-society.org, 2005). They met secretly to discuss forbidden topics and thus were considered atheists by many.

In 1593, following torture by the Queen’s Privy Council, a one-time friend and fellow playwright, Thomas Kyd, accused Marlowe of heresy and atheism, a most serious crime. But before he could be brought before the council, the twenty-nine year old poet and playwright was stabbed to death at an inn in Deptford in an argument over the bill. There is reason to believe, however, that Marlowe may have been deliberately provoked and murdered in order to prevent his arrest, which could have led to the implication of important men such as Raleigh (http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/elsc24.html, 2005).

Marlowe’s untimely death brought an end to his short but brilliant career. His writings include seven plays, the four most important being Tamburlaine the Great (Parts 1 and 2) (1586-87), The Jew of Malta (1589), Edward II (1592) and Doctor Faustus (1592-93). Other works include translations of the Latin poets Ovid and Lucan, and the mythological poem Hero and Leander (1593), which was completed by George Chapman. His education shaped him into an innovative genius who first conceived and created blank verse drama. This is why Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote: “If Shakespeare is the dazzling sun of this mighty period, Marlowe is certainly the morning star” (http://www.marlowe-society.org, 2005).

Marlowe’s dramas consist of heroic themes that usually focus on characters who are destroyed by their own ambitions and passions. Tamburlaine the Great caused the greatest
excitement among his contemporaries. Its gallant theme, splendid blank verse, and the color and scale of its pageantry led to its constant revival, with the great English actor Edward Alleyn of the Lord Admiral’s Company taking the role of Tamburlaine. Alleyn also played the lead roles in *The Jew of Malta* and *Doctor Faustus*.

The Jew of Malta may be considered the first successful tragi-comedy, and provided inspiration for Shakespeare’s Shylock. Most authorities detect influences of Marlowe’s writings in other works of Shakespeare, specifically *Titus Andronicus* and *Henry VI*.

Edward II is considered probably the earliest successful historical drama. It contains superior verse and the compelling portrayal of a flawed and weak ruler. This play paved the way for the histories of Shakespeare, such as *Richard II*, *Henry IV*, and *Henry V*.

Of all of Marlowe’s works that made him one of the most prominent Elizabethan dramatists, *Doctor Faustus* has remained the most famous. The story of Faust is a prevalent and an important one in literature, having been told and retold throughout the centuries. Marlowe’s Faust powerfully exemplifies the intellectual aspirations of the Renaissance, but he recognizes and is haunted by their vanity and sinfulness. In his thirst for knowledge and power, he discards orthodox methods and turns to magic and less reputable means to satiate his desires, eventually selling his soul to the devil. The outcome is ruin, tragedy, and damnation (The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces, fifth edition, Vol. 1, p. 1829).

Marlowe’s writings are important, not only because of the skill with which he wrote, but also for his artistic and imaginative genius. He returned high poetry to its rightful place on the stage and left us characters as fiery and passionate as their creator, preparing the way for other great dramatists to follow (http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc24.html, 2005).

**Doctor Faustus: “His Waxen Wings Did Mount above His Reach”**
“All men possess by nature a craving for knowledge,” Aristotle observed in the first chapter of the first book of his Metaphysics. The common label for our species presumes the capacity for knowledge: Homo sapiens, Latin for man + wisdom. At least since the Renaissance we have considered knowledge and the quest for knowledge to be positive pursuits leading to wisdom. We send our children to school to gain knowledge and, we hope, make good use of it. Some of us make careers of fostering, spoon-feeding and jack-hammering the intake of knowledge, certain that our contributions improve the human lot, but fearful that rising generations may not absorb enough to make wise decisions in our feeble years.

At the same time, we use “egghead,” “brain,” and “know-it-all” as slurs of mistrust toward those who know too much. Ordinary schoolchildren, who know “enough,” carry their scorn for the intellectually gifted into adulthood. We humans crave knowledge, as Aristotle noted, but also fear it. Herein, perhaps, lie the fascination and terror we find in Faust’s relentless quest. Christopher Marlowe presents a Faust of magnificent capacity and achievement who lets his superior knowledge dictate a downward path, the fruits of his bargain being a few petty practical jokes and a kiss from Helen. Liking Faust is difficult, yet he pulls us toward him with the force of our ambivalence toward knowledge.

The opening Chorus expresses great admiration and high hopes for the learned doctor: “So soon he profits in divinity, / The fruitful plot of scholarism graced, / That shortly he was graced with Doctor’s name / Excelling all whose sweet delight disputes / In heavenly matters of theology” (Chorus 16-20). Marlowe loads these lines with religious terminology, associating divinity with profit (“good ends”); “scholarism” and “Doctor’s name” with grace; and Faust’s excellence above all others in discussing heavenly theology with delight.

Then Faust appears. He has acquired enviable knowledge in diverse fields, but finds them all lacking. What are the rewards for his brilliance, he wonders. He could be a theologian, but his true passion is secular philosophy (i.e., Aristotle) (1.3-5). Yet, since he already knows philosophy inside out, “[a] greater subject fitteth Faustus’ wit”: maybe medicine (1.10-12). Still, the most “wondrous cure” falls short of raising the dead to life, thus leaving Faust mortal and therefore ordinary; perhaps law would offer a worthier challenge (16-30). On the contrary, such “study fits a mercenary drudge / Who aims at nothing but external trash, / Too servile and illiberal for me” (1.35-37). Divinity likewise leads nowhere: “If we say that we have no sin / We deceive ourselves, and there’s no truth in us. / Why then belike / We must sin and so consequently die, / Ay, we must die an everlasting death” (1.45-49). Note the circle that begins with theology and ends with divinity, outside which Faust places himself.

We still identify with him, however. Faust wants more challenge, more reward for his intellectual prowess—as others certainly do. Do we change jobs or even professions? Do we accept or maneuver advancements? Do we leave the disciplines for administration—at the peril of our souls? How many of us have sighed, “What I wouldn’t give for—whatever”? So Faust chooses necromancy as a means to extend his reach: “O what a world of profit and delight, / Of power, of honor, of omnipotence[1]” (1.56-57). “[H]is dominion that succeeds in [necromancy]/ Stretchest as far as doth the mind of man./ A sound magician is a mighty god:/ Here, Faustus, try thy brains to find a deity!” (1.63-66). The language of theology—profit and delight, which the Chorus introduced earlier, omnipotence, dominion, god, and deity-reappears, but now appropriated by Faust to himself-not God. Faust chooses pride and power over wisdom as his purpose.

Faust is a troubled—and troubling—character, especially for lovers of knowledge. My
greatest pleasure is learning. I even know things I wish I didn't. Nevertheless, knowledge is not of itself either good or evil; it may be about good or evil matter (hence, questions of censorship) or it may be applied to good or evil ends (hence, questions of individual freedom). Research and discovery tell us that all knowledge is not as yet available; and questions of faith—such as Job's or Boethius's or Rabbi Kushner's—tell us that some knowledge is inaccessible to, perhaps unattainable by, the finite human mind. Some knowledge—the occult, for instance—is flatly taboo (if we moderns can acknowledge prohibitions in what we say, do, or entertain).

Faust, indulging his pride and wallowing in his power of free will, deliberately and stubbornly, despite warnings and omens, boldly chooses to sacrifice his eternal soul for forbidden knowledge, specifically those otherworldly powers inaccessible to human intellect without infernal aid. The Renaissance celebrated intellectual curiosity and trusted the potentialities of the human mind, but witchcraft lurked and thinkers who probed secrets of God's divine universe suffered punishment. The same ambivalence about knowledge survives even now—though we believe we are beyond superstition (knock on wood). We want to know everything—without going too far.

Thematically, Faust belongs with Eve and Adam, Prometheus, Pandora and other transgressors from western mythologies who sullied life for the rest of us by exercising their curiosities beyond proscribed bounds and releasing evil (i.e., knowledge) into the human community. Even so, the sin of these ancients was disobedience, not arrogance. Faust, however, is a modern man—one of us—belonging also with Columbus (who ventured beyond the horizon), Galileo (who pried into God's design), Edison (who destroyed God's division of night and day), Fermi (who split the atom), and others who deliberately seek to understand and harness secrets of nature. Science and technology, some outside Science Departments sometimes say, certainly encroach upon forbidden knowledge, despite their apparent benefits to comfort and plenitude.

Stories and puppet plays about bargaining with the devil for secret knowledge originated in the late Middle Ages, just as secular learning was emerging as a viable, though not entirely acceptable, alternative to authority. During the 1500s these stories became associated with a minor German scholar, Johann Faust, who dabbled in the black arts and was immortalized, ironically, in a ferocious Lutheran Faustbuch of 1587. Faust thus becomes a cautionary tale, warning the world of the infernal consequences of knowledge ill-chosen, ill-gotten, and ill-used. If we are to seek knowledge, the lesson goes, we must do so with humility, responsibility, and generosity toward our fellow creatures. And please, Faust's end reminds us, please, stay within the proper bounds!