**Dr. Faustus**

**(The Tragical History of Life and Death of Dr. Faustus)**

**Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)**

**About the Play**

Christopher Marlowe based his play Doctor Faustus on stories about a scholar and magician, Johann Faust, who allegedly sold his soul to the devil to gain magical powers. Born in 1488, the original Faust wandered through his German homeland until his death in 1541. In 1587, the first story about his life appeared in Germany, translated into English in 1592 as The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus.

Exactly dating Renaissance texts can be difficult, but Doctor Faustus poses particular challenges. Scholars believe Marlowe heard or read the story of Johann Faust and composed Doctor Faustus sometime between 1588 and 1592. London's Stationer's Register entered the play into the official records in 1601, but in 1602, at least two other writers were paid for additions to the text. (Most critics believe that Marlowe wrote the play's tragic beginning and end, while his collaborators wrote much of the comical middle sections.) A theatrical company named the Earl of Nottingham's Men (commonly known as the Admiral's Men) performed the play twenty-four times between its opening in 1594 and 1597. Thomas Busshell published the play in 1604, though John Wright published a different version in 1609. Editors generally combine parts of these and other versions of the text to create the play as it is widely read today.

Contemporary theatre records indicate that in early performances, Faustus may have worn the cloak of a scholar, decorated with a cross, while the devil Mephistopheles appeared in the costume of a dragon. It has been said that performances of the play were so terrifying that during the 17th century audiences believed that the devil actually appeared among them.

In spite of a literary career prematurely shortened by his violent life Marlowe profoundly influenced English literature. In particular, scholars credit his play Tamburlaine with successfully introducing blank verse into English drama and with developing the Elizabethan concept of tragedy as a way of exploring key moral issues of the Renaissance. Although not a favorite with early audiences, today critics and theatergoers alike consider Doctor Faustus Marlowe's masterpiece.

**Plot Summary**

Dr. John Faustus, the renowned scholar of Wittenberg, has closeted himself in his study to decide his future career. Law, medicine, theology, he has mastered them all. And he finds them all dissatisfying.

Faustus wants a career to match the scope of his ambition, a subject to challenge his enormous intellect. So he turns to necromancy, or black magic, which seems to offer him godlike powers. He knows, however, that it involves forbidden traffic with demons.

Faustus summons Valdes and Cornelius, two accomplished magicians, to instruct him in the art of conjuring. That night, in the midst of a crashing thunderstorm, Faustus rises up the demon spirit, Mephistophilis. Faustus proposes a bargain. He will give his immortal soul to the devil in exchange for twenty-four years of magic and merry-making.

Mephistophilis procrastinates. He advises Faustus to reconsider: You really don't know what you are getting into. Besides, Mephistophilis does not have the power to conclude such an agreement. He is only a servant to Lucifer, the prince of hell. Faustus orders him to speak with Lucifer, so Mephistophilis quickly flies off to the nether regions.

While waiting for the spirit to return, Faustus has second thoughts. Is it too late to pull back from the abyss? Never too late, counsels the Good Angel, who suddenly appears before Faustus' eyes. Too late, whispers the Evil Angel, who advises Faustus to think of fame and wealth. Wealth! The very word makes Faustus catch fire. Hesitation flies out the window as Mephistophilis flies in with Lucifer's reply.

The prince of hell will grant Faustus' wish, provided that Faustus sign over his soul in a deed of gift. Lucifer wants a contract to make sure he isn't cheated. The contract must be written in Faustus' own blood. In compliance with Lucifer's demand, Faustus stabs his arm, only to find that his blood has mysteriously frozen in his veins. Mephistophilis comes running with hot coals to warm Faustus' blood, and it starts flowing again. The contract is completed, and the moment of crisis past. Mephistophilis provides a show to divert Faustus' thoughts. He calls for devils that enter with a crown and royal robes. They dance around Faustus, delighting him with the thought that he can summon such spirits at any time.

Now that the bargain is sealed, Faustus is eager to satisfy his passionate curiosity and appetites. He wants answers to questions that surge in his brain about the stars and the heavenly spheres. He also wants a wife to share his bed.

Faustus' demands are met in typically hellish fashion. Mephistophilis' revelations about the stars turn out to be no more than elementary assumptions of medieval astronomy. And the wife provided Faustus by the spirit is a female demon who bursts onto the stage in a hot spray of fireworks.

Faustus becomes wary. He suspects he has sold his soul for a cheap bag of tricks. The disillusioned scholar falls into bitterness and despair. He curses Mephistophilis and ponders suicide. Faustus makes a futile stab at repentance. He prays desperately to God, only

to have Lucifer appear before him. As a confirmation of Faustus' bondage to hell, they watch a parade of the Seven Deadly Sins. Pride leads Avarice, Gluttony, and the rest, as each brandishes his own special weakness of the soul or flesh.

Casting aside all further thoughts of repentance, Faustus gives himself up to the distractions that Mephistophilis puts in his way. Through travel and visits to foreign courts, Faustus seeks to enjoy himself in the time he has left on earth.

Mephistophilis takes Faustus to Rome and to the private chambers of the Pope. The two become invisible and play practical jokes until a planned papal banquet breaks up in disarray. Then it's on to the German Emperor's court, where they entertain his majesty by raising the ghost of Alexander the Great.

At the Emperor's court, a skeptical knight voices his doubts about Faustus' magic powers. The magician takes revenge by making a pair of stag horns grow on the knight's head. Faustus follows this prank with another. He sells a crafty -dealer a demon horse which vanishes when it is ridden into water.

In the meantime, Faustus' experiments with magic are being imitated by his household staff. Faustus' servant, Wagner, tries his own hand at conjuring by summoning two comic devils who force the clown, Robin, into Wagner's service.

Not to be outdone, Robin steals one of Faustus' conjuring books. In his dimwitted way, he tries to puzzle out the spells. The real magic is that Robin's spell works! A weary Mephistophilis, summoned from Constantinople, rises up before the startled clown. In anger, the spirit turns Robin into an ape and his sidekick, Dick, into a dog.

The transformed clowns and the horse-dealer meet in a nearby tavern, wher they swap stories about the injuries they have suffered at Faustus' hand. Tipsy with ale, they descend on the castle of Vanholt, where Faustus is busy entertaining the Duke and Duchess with his fabulous magic tricks. The magician produces for the pregnant Duchess an out-of-season delicacy she craves- wintertime grapes.

Faustus wins an easy victory over the rowdy crew from the tavern, striking each of them dumb in turn. He then returns to Wittenberg, in a more sober frame of mind, to keep his rendezvous with fate.

Faustus' mind has turned toward death. He has made a will, leaving his estate to Wagner. Yet he still holds feverishly onto life. He drinks and feasts far into the night with the dissolute scholars of Wittenberg. And, in a last magnificent conjuring trick, he raises the shade (spirit) of the most beautiful woman in history, Helen of Troy.

At the end of his career, poised between life and death, Faustus undergoes a last crisis of conscience. An Old Man appears to plead with Faustus to give up his magic art. God is merciful, the Old Man promises. He will yet pardon Faustus and fill his heart with grace.

The magician hesitates, visibly moved by the Old Man's chastening words. But Mephistophilis is too quick for him. The spirit threatens Faustus with torture, if he reneges on his contract with Lucifer. At the same time, Mephistophilis promises to reward Faustus with Helen of Troy, if he keeps faith with hell. Faustus collapses under the pressure. He orders Mephistophilis to torture the Old Man. And he takes the insubstantial shade of Helen for his lover. In doing so, he is lost.

The final hour approaches. As the minutes tick away, Faustus tries frantically to stop the clock. Give him one more month, one more week, one more day to repent, he cries. But the hours chime away. Midnight strikes. The devil arrives through billowing smoke and fire, and Faustus is led away to hell.

In the morning, the scholars of Wittenberg find Faustus' body. They deplore his evil fate, but honor him for his learning. For the black magician who might have been a light unto the world, they plan a stately funeral.