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Christopher Marlowe , Edited by A. H. Sleight
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English Literature for Schools

MARLOWE
DOCTOR FAUSTUS

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MARLOWE
*THE TRAGICAL HISTORY
OF DOCTOR FAUSTUS*

Edited by
A. H. SLEIGHT



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To E. L. W.

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¶ The text adopted is Sir A. W. Ward's reading of the 1604 Quarto (as given in his *Old English Drama: Select Plays*. Oxford, 1878) with his modernization of the spelling and with his reasoned minimum of emendation and omission. It is here reprinted by permission of his daughter, Mrs A. C. T. Barnes, and the Delegates of the Clarendon Press.

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INTRODUCTION

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE (1564–1593) was one of the four greater “University Wits,” his tragically short career as a dramatist concluding some three years after Shakespeare’s began, and covering seven crowded years, in which he made momentous and revolutionary contributions to English drama, for he gave us genuine blank verse and our first great history play, and founded romantic tragedy—noble achievements for one who died at the age of twenty-nine.

Marlowe was a rebel and a pioneer. His first gesture as a playwright was to raise the standard of revolt against the convention of writing plays in rhyme and against the “clownage” of popular comedy. He seized upon blank verse as the ideal medium for drama. Blank verse was introduced into England by the Earl of Surrey, who used it in his translation of the second and fourth books of the *Aeneid* (c. 1540). The first to use it in tragedy was Thomas Sackville, Lord Buckhurst, whose *Gorboduc* (1561) was written in blank verse. These two wrote for a limited public of courtiers and scholars, and their blank verse—intended perhaps as a compromise between English and classical metres—was wooden and monotonous. Marlowe popularized the newly-invented instrument, and, thanks to high poetic artistry and the “fine frenzy” of real poetic genius, made it respond to every note in the scale of human passion. He gave it such naturalness, such ethereal beauty and suppleness, that it quickly established itself as the perfect metre for English poetic drama. Scorning the “jigging veins of rhyming mother-wits,” he at first made use of “high astounding terms” to compensate for the loss of rhyme, and this led him often into bombast—the “furious vociferation” with which Ben Jonson charges him; but this was on the whole a passing phase: at its best

his verse prophecies Milton, “mighty-mouthed inventor of harmonies,” and attains sublimity.

He was the founder of genuine romantic tragedy, as regards both plot and character. Before him, the characters of plays had too often been mere lifeless puppets: Marlowe informed his central characters and the whole of his dialogue with life and passion. He was an admirer of Machiavelli, whose ideal, as understood by that age, was the superman, who, having decided what his goal is to be, presses on to it regardless of scruples of conscience. Such is the hero of both parts of *Tamburlaine*, who seeks to conquer the world, trampling humanity mercilessly beneath him in his resistless course. Such is Faustus, whose ideal is boundless and lawless knowledge for the sake of universal power; such is Barabas, in *The Jew of Malta*, revelling first in his prodigious wealth and then in the very ecstasy of revenge on those who had deprived him of it; such are Mortimer, in *Edward the Second*, and the Guise, in the *Massacre at Paris*, both monsters of unscrupulous ambition and resolution. One character dominates the stage throughout in Marlowe’s plays. The task of the tragedian Edward Alleyn—who created the part of Tamburlaine—must have been appallingly difficult.

A necessary effect of this quality in Marlowe is that the other characters, vividly drawn as some of them are, tend to be dwarfed; and that, as the masculine element predominates, the feminine characters become mere foils to it. A possible exception is Dido, but she has some of the masculine traits of Marlowe’s hero-villains. The very insignificance of the minor characters, however, serves as an effective contrast, throwing the major characters into high relief.

The ardour and passion which inspire Marlowe’s plays partly account for the absence of true humour. He lived and thought too strenuously to have time or place for this, except when he went to extremes and indulged in, or at any rate tolerated, that same “clownishness” which he had set out deliberately to exclude from his work. His over-seriousness, on the other hand, led him into

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unconscious humour, as in the famous scene of the king-drawn chariot in *Tamburlaine*, at which his fellow-playwrights laughed so heartily. It has to be admitted that Marlowe is sometimes perilously near taking the fatal step from the sublime to the ridiculous, if he does not actually take it. It may have been his consciousness of a lack of humour that led him (as in *Faustus*) to seek collaborators who could supply this ingredient, so essential to an Elizabethan audience.

Marlowe gave us our first great history play, *Edward the Second*, as distinguished from the mere "chronicles," which had consisted of a loosely-joined succession of scenes. The question of Marlowe's influence on Shakespeare is one that could only be dealt with adequately in many pages; and more cannot be said here than that had *Edward the Second* not been written we might not have had Shakespeare's *Richard the Second*; that the Machiavellian picture which Shakespeare gives us of Richard the Third is probably due to Marlowe's influence; that the latter's *Jew of Malta* explains much of the characters of Shylock and Jessica in the *Merchant of Venice*; and that many echoes of Marlowe's thought and music are heard throughout Shakespeare's plays.

Both internal and external evidence show that *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* was probably written and first acted in 1588, and probably first published in 1601, but the first edition extant is the Quarto of 1604. None of Marlowe's plays has come down to us unmangled, this least of all. The 1604 Quarto was several times reprinted. Then came a new version of the play, the 1616 Quarto and its revises: it is about half as large again as the Quarto of 1604, but of the extensive additions only a small fraction can have been Marlowe's work.

The world-old tale embodying the belief that almost the only condition on which a mortal man can obtain supernatural power is by selling his soul to the devil culminated in the sixteenth century in the legends which crystallized round Doctor Faustus, a real person who lived about 1500-1545. This wandering scholar made himself

notorious as a necromancer, braggart, and super-quack, who cynically abandoned the disinterested pursuit of knowledge in favour of its worldly exploitation, with some temporary success but—it was believed—with final disaster. After his death, his adventures, real and supposed (for stories belonging to “magicians” who lived long before him were fathered upon him), were detailed in the famous *Faustbuch*, published at Frankfort-on-the-Main in 1587. It was translated into English almost immediately, but the only edition extant is a later one, with the title: *The Historie of the damnable life and deserved death of Doctor John Faustus. Newly imprinted and in convenient places impertinent matters amended: according to the true copie printed at Franckfort and translated into English by P. F. Gent. [i.e. “Gentleman”] 1592.* Marlowe must have taken his material either from an early edition or from the manuscript translation, for it is certain that he used the English version,—he may have had the German edition as well. Marlowe has the distinction of being probably the first in any country to see the dramatic possibilities of this striking story, which was destined in Germany to start a long series of Faustus plays—many of them tinged with low comedy—until Goethe gave us its perfect serious expression in *Faust*, which in its turn was to inspire great painters and composers. Marlowe’s play was not the model for Goethe’s drama: the two works have little more than the subject-matter of Marlowe’s first scene in common, but both derive from the *Faustbuch*.

Marlowe’s play follows the *Faustbuch* closely only in the general theme and in the low comedy scenes. The latter were probably by Dekker: at any rate it is Dekker’s humour at its worst and at its best. Marlowe idealizes the character of Dr Faustus, the serious scenes of the play being a sublimation of the vulgar sensationalism of the original. The serious and the comic scenes together form such an incongruous alternation as would have served Victor Hugo as an extreme illustration—had he sought one—of his theory that romantic literature is characterized

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by the presence of the sublime and the grotesque side by side. But the evil spirits in Marlowe's work are no longer the grotesque gargoyle-types in which mediaeval architecture and the Mystery, Miracle, and Morality plays loved to embody them: Mephistophilis and Lucifer are fallen angels, conceived in the spirit of Milton, for in this play, Marlowe, like Gray's Milton,

rode sublime
Upon the seraph-wings of Ecstasy,
The secrets of the Abyss to spy.

Doctor Faustus marks a distinct advance on *Tamburlaine*. The characters are more life-like; the hero and the minor characters are less sharply contrasted. The verse is quieter and sweeter. In the sombre dialogues between Faustus and Mephistophilis there is an almost Aeschylean austerity and reticence, well suiting the tremendous theme. The barbaric cymbal-clash and drum-beat which perhaps befitted *Tamburlaine* would have been out of place here. In *Faustus* (as also in *Edward the Second* and, in a lower degree, in *The Jew of Malta*) there is also a deeper conception of tragedy: there is something of the Shakespearean demonstration that evil deeds "return to plague the inventor," and there is a sense of the interplay of character and circumstance. In inspiring awe and terror in the beholder the play fulfils one of the true functions of tragedy. The play thrills us because there is something of the "desire of the moth for the star," of Faustus's desire to conquer human limitations, in all of us, and we are fascinated by the audacity with which he persists in his desperate courses.

Technically, *Edward the Second* is Marlowe's best play. It embodies a historic sequence of events, skilfully welded into an organic whole. *Faustus* is a phantasmagoria, a series of heterogeneous scenes strung loosely together, and having little more unity than a string of beads has. The action is spread over twenty-four years—the time destined to elapse between Faustus's signature of the bond which was to deliver his soul to the devil and

the fulfilment of that bond in the supreme last scene of the play, a scene of such tragic intensity that it is unsurpassed even in Shakespeare.

Doctor Faustus is Marlowe's greatest play, undoubtedly, but its greatness lies rather in single scenes and in its general suggestion or promise of greatness than in what it actually is. In some sense Goethe's famous remark, "How greatly is it all planned!" is true, but the play is little more than a framework, and the scenes attributed to Marlowe alone could not possibly have sustained a whole play. It cannot be said for certain that the comic parts are entirely due to Dekker. No play would have satisfied the Elizabethan "groundlings" unless it had some comic relief. Some of this may therefore be due to Marlowe's desire to please an audience which we know to have been exacting in such matters, and it may be due partly to a desire to adhere to the original.

Rebel and pioneer though he was, Marlowe is yet a product of his own age, as revolutionaries always are. His works form a natural landmark in English literature. The introduction of the Good and Bad Angels, of the minor devils, and of the Seven Deadly Sins in *Faustus* links him with the drama of the later Middle Ages. Faustus's inexhaustible thirst for knowledge, the worship of beauty, the passion for the classics, visible throughout Marlowe's work, his scepticism, his interest in sorcery and magic, his admiration for Machiavelli and for super-human ambition and will in the pursuit of ideals of beauty or power, or whatever they may be, prove the author to be a man of the Renaissance. His revolutionary dramatic practice foreshadows a new epoch in English drama.

We cannot say on what lines his genius would have developed had he lived. He seldom re-attained the majesty of *Faustus*, but his work does as a whole show definite progress in all its elements—verse, plot, character, and dialogue. His central characters come down to the level of ordinary human beings. There are fewer of those long tirades which fill so much of *Tamburlaine*:

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the dialogue is more evenly distributed between the characters. The plots of *Edward the Second* and *The Jew of Malta* are admirably constructed. The lyrical and oratorical aspects of his genius become more and more subordinated to the dramatic. Yet full as his plays are of memorable scenes and haunting passages, he would never have equalled Shakespeare, whose calm-eyed moral vision and whose universality Marlowe lacked.