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The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus

Christopher Marlowe · *c. 1592 (printed 1604) · 1604 quarto (A-text), Alexander Dyce edition*

A German scholar, swollen with cunning, turns from divinity to magic and sells his soul for twenty-four years of power. Marlowe's A-text (the 1604 quarto, in Dyce's edition hosted here) is a short, fierce play: Good and Evil Angels, a clown's parody, Helen's kiss, and a last hour in which Faustus sees Christ's blood in the firmament and cannot reach it.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What is left of a man who will not repent while there is time, and who would give his soul for power, knowledge, and a kiss?

"Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it … Think'st thou that I, who saw the face of God, / And tasted the eternal joys of heaven, / Am not tormented with ten thousand hells, / In being depriv'd of everlasting bliss?"

Mephistophilis · Faustus's first conjuring

Mephistophilis, who saw the face of God and lost it, tells Faustus that hell is not only a place to come. Faustus hears, and goes on. In the last hour he would leap up to his God and cannot. The Chorus ends with a cut branch and a warning to wonder at unlawful things, not to practice them.

KEY CHARACTERS

Faustus
A doctor of divinity who sells his soul for a term of power, and postpones repentance until there is no term left

Mephistophilis
The devil who serves him, and who still remembers the face of God

The Good Angel
The voice that bids Faustus lay the book aside and repent while he may

The Evil Angel
The voice that bids him go on, and tells him it is too late

The Old Man
A late, holy counselor, whom Faustus will not follow and would have hurt

Helen of Greece
A spirit in a famous shape; the last and loveliest snare

Wagner
Faustus's servant, who catches the habit of magic

Lucifer
The master who comes to hold Faustus to the deed when he wavers

HELL PRESENT, AND A BRANCH CUT

"Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it … Think'st thou that I, who saw the face of God, / And tasted the eternal joys of heaven, / Am not tormented with ten thousand hells, / In being depriv'd of everlasting bliss?"

Mephistophilis · Faustus's first conjuring

"Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight,"

Chorus · Closing Chorus

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01 The Scholar's Turn

CHORUS AND FAUSTUS IN HIS STUDY

A man at the height of learning finds it not enough.

- The Chorus tells of a scholar whose waxen wings mounted above his reach, and who fell to necromancy
- Faustus, in his study, dismisses logic, medicine, law, and divinity; he will be a magician
- He reads that the reward of sin is death, and that if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves—and twists the texts toward despair
- Valdes and Cornelius encourage him; the Good Angel and the Evil Angel already contend for his ear

> *"His waxen wings did mount above his reach,"*
>
> **Chorus** · Opening Chorus

02 The Bargain

THE CONJURING AND THE DEED OF GIFT

A devil is raised, and a deed is signed in blood.

- Faustus conjures; Mephistophilis appears, first in a friar's shape at Faustus's command
- The spirit tells him that hell is where he is, having seen the face of God and lost everlasting bliss
- Faustus, unshaken in talk, offers his soul for twenty-four years of service
- The deed is written in his blood; the wound dries, and the words "Homo, fuge" appear on his arm

> *"Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it … Think'st thou that I, who saw the face of God, / And tasted the eternal joys of heaven, / Am not tormented with ten thousand hells, / In being depriv'd of everlasting bliss?"*
>
> **Mephistophilis** · Faustus's first conjuring

03 Wonders and a Fool's Echo

THE MIDDLE OF THE PLAY

Power is spent on spectacles, and clowns steal the same book.

- Faustus questions Mephistophilis about the heavens, and will not be led to repentance
- He is carried to the papal court, and later to the Emperor, for shows and jokes that shrink the bargain
- Wagner, Robin, and Ralph parody the same magic in a lower key
- The Seven Deadly Sins are presented as a pageant; the entertainment is a picture of the path he is on

04 Helen and the Old Man

NEAR THE END OF THE TWENTY-FOUR YEARS

A saintly warning, and a kiss that sucks forth a soul.

- An Old Man begs Faustus to repent; Faustus almost does, then asks a devil to torment the old man
- He bids Mephistophilis raise Helen, to glut the longing of his heart
- Seeing her, he asks whether this was the face that launched a thousand ships, and begs a kiss to make him immortal
- The kiss is the play's last false sacrament: her lips suck forth his soul, and he asks it back only to lose it again

> *"Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships, … Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss."*
>
> **Faustus** · Helen

05 The Last Hour

FAUSTUS ALONE, AND THE CLOSING CHORUS

The clock strikes, and a branch is cut.

- The scholars find Faustus in terror; he tells them the deed, and they withdraw to pray
- In the last hour he would leap up to his God; he sees Christ's blood stream in the firmament, and cannot reach a drop
- He offers to burn his books; the devils enter and take him
- The Chorus: cut is the branch that might have grown full straight; regard his hellish fall

> *"Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight, / And burned is Apollo's laurel-bough, / That sometime grew within this learned man. / Faustus is gone: regard his hellish fall,"*
>
> **Chorus** · Closing Chorus

Repentance · Pride of Knowledge · Damnation · Temptation · The Soul · Time

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The hosted text is the 1604 quarto (the A-text), edited by Alexander Dyce, who notes some later-quarto readings. It is not the longer 1616 B-text. Name the edition.
2. Dyce's footnotes appear as bracketed numbers in the Gutenberg file. Quotes here avoid those marks; the words themselves are in both the Gutenberg text and the hosted EPUB.
3. Mephistophilis (so spelled in this text, not Mephistopheles) says hell is present. Faustus treats it as a future place. The play judges that error.
4. The comic scenes are a parody, not a relief only: the clowns want the same book.
5. The last hour is built on the clock. Watch how close Faustus comes to prayer, and what he still will not do.
6. Helen's line is "launch'd" in this edition, and "Ilium" is followed by a dash, not a period, before "Sweet Helen."

Quotations are verbatim from the 1604 quarto (A-text), Alexander Dyce edition, Project Gutenberg #779, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/marlowe-doctor-faustus/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.