

Notes and discussion questions for Dr. Faustus by Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)

Introduction to Marlowe 2/16 and Dr. Faustus, Feb. 18, 23, 25.

FEB 18 Dr. Faustus : Prologue & Scenes I-IV

Chorus' "Prologue"

Medieval beliefs about Lucifer and Mephistopheles

According to Christian tradition, Lucifer and his devils were originally denizens of Heaven and sinless. They were thrown out of Heaven and cast into Hell for rebelling against God and the Good. At that point, Lucifer and his fallen angels became God's arch-enemy.

Mephistopheles is a soldier in Lucifer's demonic army. He collects human souls for his boss (Lucifer) or Prince, whose purpose is to increase the population, power and influence of his kingdom, Hell, and gain victory over God in the universal struggle between good and evil. Humans are virtual pawns in this struggle though the more learned, proud, and un-god-fearing a person is, the more likely s/he is to be tempted by evil.

The Devil was traditionally perceived by believers as friendlier to humans and more approachable when they needed help or wanted something than God. As for Dr. Faustus he desires to be above the limitations of his humanity, that is, like a god, but he also wants all the pleasures of the flesh that only humans have a capacity for.

NOTE: Faustus often speaks to himself as if he were a second person.

SCENE I. (How and why Faustus decides to become a magician after rejecting other fields of knowledge.)

How many learned subjects has Dr. Faustus tried and why, specifically, has he rejected each one?

Who are Cornelius Agrippa and Valdes and what is their relation to Faustus?

SCENE II. Before Faustus' House. (Comic relief.)

What do the two scholars find out about Faustus?

SCENE III. A Grove. (Faust conjures Mephistopheles who tries to persuade him not to continue with magic.)

Why won't Faustus heed Mephistopheles' advice to give up magic?

SCENE IV. A Street (Comic relief)

Who is Wagner and how does he provide comic relief in Scene 4?

NOTE: In the late Middle Ages, clowns or jesters were entertainers and often attached to the households of the elite, for whom they provided entertainment. In Marlowe's comic relief scenes, the characters are commoners for two reasons: 1) in Elizabethan times each type of literature was marked for class – tragedy had to present characters of noble birth while comedy was appropriate for characters of mixed birth and lower class standing; 2) sociologically, the scenes between comic characters allow Marlowe to reveal how the doings of an elite man like Faustus are perceived by and influence the masses. Such scenes broaden the scope of the tragedy and provide different points of view on the issues brought up in the play.

Third class on Dr. Faustus (Feb. 23) scenes V-IX

SCENE V (Faustus' inner doubts, pact with Lucifer, questions about Hell, desire for a wife)

How are Faustus' inner doubts and conflicts expressed?

SCENE VI (Faustus continues to regret his pact but cannot repent, discusses astrology with Mephistopheles, is visited by Lucifer who shows Faustus the 7 deadly sins.)

Why can't Faustus repent?

Why does Lucifer himself visit Faustus?

How does Lucifer finally please Faustus?

What are the seven deadly sins and how is each defined?

NOTE: Since Faustus is a great sinner but there is not enough time for him to act out all the sins, the introduction of the seven deadly sins to him by Lucifer serves to dramatize in one short scene how Faustus enjoyed and committed all of the worst sins a mortal can commit. The audience is to understand that Dr. Faustus came to know these seven deadly sins not all at once or just this once, but over and over in the period of 24 years, as often as they provided food for his sinning soul. In signing over his soul to the Devil, Dr. Faustus gets to sin as much as he desires, without punishment, for the term of his pact.

SCENE VII The Pope's Privy-chamber. (Faust visits Rome with Mephistopheles. Chorus ends the scene with news that Faust returns home and becomes famous).

What is this scene with the Pope meant to illustrate about Faustus' pact with Mephistopheles?

SCENES VIII and IX.

What is the function of these two scenes?

FOURTH CLASS ON Dr. Faustus, FEB 25 SCENES X-XIV

SCENE X The Court of the Emperor

What magic does Faustus do for the Emperor?

SCENE XI The Green; Afterwards, the House of Faustus

What seems to be the point of Faustus' horse sale?

SCENE XII The Court of the Duke of Van Holt

What magic does Faustus do for the Duchess?

SCENE XIII. A Room in the House of Faustus

SCENE XIV. The same

What is Faustus damned for? How does Faustus attempt to bargain with God?

Mar. 2 Open-book test on Dr. Faustus

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