

Doctor Faustus

by Christopher Marlowe

Performance Study Guide

for the Atlanta Shakespeare Company adaptation by Jeff Watkins

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for

The Atlanta Shakespeare Company
at The New American Shakespeare Tavern

Background on Marlowe: His theatre, his audience, ‘Original Practices’ and Atlanta Shakespeare Company performances:

Here at the Shakespeare Tavern we have spent a good number of years investigating what we call ‘Original Practices.’ For us ‘Original Practice’ means, in a nutshell, the active exploration and implementation of Elizabethan stagecraft and acting techniques. As a particularly important example, our actors are trained in the Elizabethan convention of speaking directly to the audience, rather than ignoring them through the modern convention of acting with an invisible “fourth wall” dividing the audience from the world of the play.

What does all this information have to do with attending a play by the Atlanta Shakespeare Company as you study Doctor Faustus? To enjoy the play fully, we believe it’s important to back up and go more in-depth into what it meant to see a play in Marlowe’s time. For starters, it’s useful to know that his original audience didn’t go to “see a play”--they went to “hear” a play. In fact, it might be helpful to think of Marlowe’s intended audience as interactive players in the drama rather than passive observers of a 2-dimensional entertainment. Think sports events, not the movies!

The Elizabethan audience was rambunctious, loud and opinionated about their theatre. The Rose theatre, where Doctor Faustus was originally performed by the Admiral’s Men (the acting company that bought the play from Marlowe,) was located on the south bank of the Thames River because it was illegal for players or theatres to exist within the confines of London itself. Near theatres such as the Rose and the neighboring Globe Theatre (home to Shakespeare’s company) you could find the Clink Prison, bear-baiting pits, brothels, and all manners of ‘lowlife.’ It’s really no surprise that the Puritan element in English society and the government often tried to close down the theatres altogether during Marlowe’s career. For a complete discussion of Elizabethan theatres and the new Globe theatre in London, do a web search on Shakespeare’s Globe or visit www.shakespeares-globe.org.

For our version of Doctor Faustus, we have focused on the particular ‘original practice’ of live, actor-created sound effects. Elizabethan actors and directors could not rely on recorded sound effects blasted through loudspeakers to create the mood, as often happens in modern theatre and movie productions—it was up to the actors themselves to use various items and vocal techniques to create the sounds of demon cries and Faustus’ descent into hell, for example. Similarly, Elizabethan special effects were simplistic and were often created using symbolic and suggestive props, and we have deliberately taken our cue from the Elizabethans.

For a more in-depth exploration of Original Practice go to our website and check out these resources:

Artistic Director Jeffrey Watkins’ award-winning essay on Original Practice:

<http://shakespearetavern.com/opp.htm>

Dr. Cynthia Bower’s essay on the impact of Original Practices on Shakespearean

Criticism: <http://www.shakespearetavern.com/oppcritic.htm>

Doctor Faustus

Character list and Synopsis

Who’s who in Doctor Faustus:

Doctor Faustus—A brilliant scholar, but also a bit of an arrogant showoff, whose hunger for knowledge and power sways him to sell his soul to the devil in return for power on earth.

Mephistopheles—A demon henchman to Lucifer who successfully tempts Faustus toward damnation. He becomes Faustus’ temporary servant and constant companion as part of the latter’s pact with the devil.

Lucifer—Also known as Beelzebub (or Satan) Lucifer appears to intimidate Faustus when the latter continues to think of repentance even after signing away his soul.

Good Angel—The Good Angel attempts (unsuccessfully) to talk Faustus out of selling his soul, encouraging him to think of Heavenly bliss and repentance.

Pope Adrian—The pampered and gluttonous Pope gets quite a surprise when Faustus, made invisible by Mephistopheles’ magic, plays tricks on him.

Emperor Carolus V—When Faustus is a guest in his court, the emperor asks him to conjure the spirits of Alexander the Great and his Paramour, and pays Faustus handsomely for completing the magic. In history known as Charles V.

Scholars—Faustus' fellow scholars are amused by and full of admiration for his magic, but they become horrified when they learn the price he must pay for his power.

The story:

Mephistopheles enters the room with Faustus and, unseen by Faustus, silently sets the stage for the Doctor's downfall.

Doctor Faustus, a respected and brilliant German scholar, discusses the wide range of knowledge that he has gained in his studies, listing in particular philosophy, medicine, law, and religion. He discards these fields one by one, confiding in us his boredom with each subject and his frustration that—at least as he sees it—he has learned all that mortal knowledge has to offer.

Faustus decides that nothing remains for him to explore except magic. He wavers on the idea of practicing black magic for a moment, contemplating how 'that way lies damnation,' but his hunger for knowledge and power gets the best of him and he resolves himself to try.

Faustus recites a Latin incantation to summon a devil named Mephistopheles (who is not Lucifer himself—think of him more as Lucifer's errand man.) The devil appears first in demon form and then, once Faustus complains that form is too ugly, next in the form of a man. Mephistopheles informs Faustus that he is already ripe for damnation from this one spell. Faustus questions the devil about the nature of hell. A good angel appears to Faustus, advising him to think of Heaven and to go no further with the pact, but Faustus thinks only of power and ignores her.

Faustus agrees on a contract with Mephistopheles: in return for 24 years of power and having Mephistopheles as his constant servant, Faustus will give his immortal soul to Lucifer. Mephistopheles makes him write and sign the agreement with his own blood. During the signing Faustus has second thoughts, but Mephistopheles distracts him with a chest full of gold, and Faustus signs the pact.

The two argue over whether or not Faustus will be able to repent and receive divine forgiveness now that he has signed the pact. Mephistopheles hands Faustus a book filled with all of the knowledge the latter desires. Faustus questions his new servant about matters of science and divinity...and is somewhat disappointed with the mundane answers he receives.

When talk of religious topics makes Faustus start to question the wisdom of his immortal contract yet again, Lucifer appears and joins with Mephistopheles to intimidate Faustus, warning him that he has agreed to be an enemy to God and never again to think on divine forgiveness. To distract Faustus from Heaven, Mephistopheles plays a guessing game with Faustus by enacting each of the ‘seven deadly sins.’

Mephistopheles accompanies Faustus on adventures to use his newfound power. First they travel to Rome, where Pope Adrian is enjoying a feast in honor of St. Peter. Mephistopheles makes Faustus invisible, and Faustus finds great amusement in repeatedly playing tricks on the Pope and knocking the food out of his hands. The Pope runs away, and we soon get a glimpse of the friars he has asked to chant curses to the ghost that ruined his feast.

Next they visit the Emperor Carolus V, who is impressed with Faustus’ powers and knowledge. When the emperor asks Faustus to summon Alexander the Great and the latter’s paramour (an Elizabethan word for ‘mistress,’) Faustus asks Mephistopheles to conjure spirits in their shape, and is promised a rich reward from Carolus in return for this marvel.

Time passes, and Faustus’ 24 years of power draw to a close. Back home, Faustus entertains his fellow scholars by showing them an illusion of the beautiful Helen of Troy.

Later, Faustus is feeling lonely and asks Mephistopheles to conjure Helen of Troy in the flesh to be his mistress to comfort him during his remaining time on earth. When Mephistopheles does so, upon seeing Helen Faustus recites the most famous lines Marlowe ever wrote (‘Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?...’) But when he goes to embrace her, he embraces only Mephistopheles: reminding Faustus (and us) that Helen is nothing but an illusion, whereas Faustus’ pact with the devil is still very real indeed.

At the final hour Faustus begins to regret his pact with the devil, and he blames Mephistopheles for leading him to damnation. Mephistopheles, happy and proud to take the blame, gloats and leaves Faustus to his torment.

Faustus reveals to his fellow scholars the terrible price that he will soon be paying for his power, and they pity him, offering to pray for him. They advise him to think of God and Heaven before leaving him.

As midnight of his final night on earth approaches, Faustus agonizes over his pact with the devil. He attempts to pray to God, asking at least for a lesser sentence of damnation if total forgiveness is not possible. But his prayers are unsuccessful, and at midnight Faustus finally endures the torment of damnation., his final soliloquy revealing his agony. His last cry is for Mephistopheles, but the latter has abandoned him to his fate.

Doctor Faustus
Activities, Questions, Resources

Before a Performance, Think about This:

That immortal poetry:

- Christopher Marlowe is widely considered the greatest Elizabethan playwright next to Shakespeare, and Doctor Faustus has remained by far his most popular play. In your opinion, what has made this particular play so enduring? Is it special to you or not? What made it so? Think of your favorite/least favorite line and write or speak it in your own words.

Physical Actions Revealed:

- Suit the deed to the word, the word to the deed. Where are there examples of the text itself (i.e. characters' lines) telling the reader what the physical action on stage should be?

During a Performance, Watch And Listen For This:

Good, Evil and the Morality Play in Doctor Faustus:

Elizabethan drama gradually evolved out of the religiously-themed plays frequently performed during the medieval period. These religious plays, the most popular of which were called 'morality plays,' were usually sponsored by the church and depicted battle between good and evil forces for men's souls (the most famous of these plays is the anonymously-penned play Everyman, in which a good angel and evil angel try to convince the lead character, Everyman, to join their respective sides.)

Marlowe clearly draws on conventions from traditional morality plays in Doctor Faustus. Yet Marlowe, a self-proclaimed atheist (Queen Elizabeth ordered his arrest for being an atheist in 1593,) makes this struggle between good and evil more complicated.

-Which characters attempt to influence Faustus in the play, either to keep or renounce his pact with Lucifer? How are those characters portrayed? Does the line between good characters and evil characters seem pretty cut and dry? Does the outside characters' persuasion have the strongest effect on Faustus, or does something within his own character seem to propel him toward damnation?

After a Performance, Talk about This:

Faustus and Casting Choices:

- In our small-cast production of Doctor Faustus, the same actor who plays Mephistopheles also plays most of the other roles. How did this 'doubling' affect your experience of the play? Did it help you to notice any connections between the characters,

and if so, which ones? Did it interfere with your ability to follow the play? Did it increase or decrease your sympathy for any of the characters?

For More Research:

- Find out more about the morality plays in medieval England, and perhaps read one (Everyman is a good example, but there are others out there.) Which elements of the morality plays does Marlowe adopt for Doctor Faustus? Which ones does he change, and which does he keep pretty much intact? How do these elements affect the way the play is structured (the order of events, when characters enter and leave stage, etc?)

- Research the 'University Wits,' a name for the group of playwrights with university degrees that Marlowe belonged to (Shakespeare did not.) How does Marlowe approach the practice of study and attaining knowledge in this play? Is Faustus' quest for knowledge portrayed sympathetically, or condemned?

For Further Information/Exploration of Elizabethan Theatre:

Websites:

Mr. William Shakespeare and The Internet: <http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/> this site contains excellent resources and is a great portal site to numerous other information sources.

For information about Elizabethan performance and performance spaces, check out the Shakespeare's Globe website: www.shakespeares-globe.org

Books:

Shakespeare and Company by Stanley Wells

The Elizabethan World Picture by E.M.W. Tilyard

Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human by Harold Bloom

Staging In Shakespeare's Theatres by Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa

Shakespeare A to Z by Charles Boyce

Movies:

A 1967 movie adaptation starring Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor is available on DVD.