

Doctor Faustus Revisited

By Samuel L. Blumenfeld

Christopher Marlowe, the great Elizabethan poet and playwright, has been characterized by biographers and scholars as an atheist and blasphemer. But it hard to believe that the man who wrote *Doctor Faustus* was an atheist. In fact, there is nothing in all of Marlowe's writings in which he professed to be an atheist. The accusation is based on hearsay, reports of conversations, and the generally believed allegation that he belonged to Sir Walter Raleigh's famous intellectual circle known as the School of Night.

Marlowe was born in 1564 in Canterbury, the ecclesiastical capital of England with its magnificent cathedral. His father was a cobbler who belonged to the local guild. In 1579 Marlowe was awarded a scholarship to the King's School where he was given a classical education, which included the Bible, Latin oratory, classical rules of verse making, and an introduction to the literature of the ancient world. The headmaster at the school was John Gresshop, a graduate of Oxford, who owned a large private library, which included a Latin Bible (Jerome's Vulgate), a Geneva Bible, a couple of Greek Testaments, another Latin Bible in the version of Sante Pagnino, and another rendered by Sabastian Castallio. His students learned Holy Scripture quite thoroughly.

In 1580, at the age of sixteen, Marlowe received one of Archbishop Parker's scholarships to Corpus Christi at Cambridge University, a stronghold of the Calvinist faith. Corpus Christi was a divinity school training up future clerics. Had the brilliant Marlowe entered the clergy on graduation he might have become a bishop or even archbishop. But he chose to become a poet and playwright.

During his stay at Cambridge, Marlowe was also recruited into Queen Elizabeth's secret service by Sir Francis Walsingham, head of the Queen's spy network. It is believed that Marlowe remained a member of the service for the rest of his life.

Marlowe began writing his poems and plays while at Cambridge. His translation of Ovid's *Amores*, the plays *Dido: Queen of Carthage*, and Part One of *Tamburlaine* were no doubt written at the university. Thus when he left Cambridge in 1587, after eight years of education to become a cleric, he went to London to make his literary fortune.

Although it is difficult to pin down the precise dates when each of Marlowe's plays were written, scholars believe that *Doctor Faustus* was written in 1592, a year before the poet was murdered. Calvin Hoffman, in his book *The Murder of the Man Who Was Shakespeare*, advanced the thesis that Marlowe was not actually murdered, and that a phony murder was concocted by his patron, Thomas Walsingham, to save the poet from the gallows. Serious accusations of atheism and blasphemy had been lodged against him by his enemies, and there was a strong possibility that he would have been convicted and hanged. Religious heretics were being executed. For example, the Puritan pamphleteer,

John Penry, was hanged at about the same time that Marlowe was supposed to have been murdered.

Doctor Faustus is one of the great plays of the Elizabethan era. It tells the story of a university intellectual who sells his soul to the devil for power and earthly riches. Leo Kirschbaum in *The Plays of Christopher Marlowe* writes:

Let us see the play in the terms of the basic Christian values it preaches, for it is, we must recognize, a morality play. ... We must accept, for the occasion, that man's most precious possession is his immortal soul and that what he does on earth will determine whether he goes to Heaven or Hell The premises of basic Christianity are inherent in every line of *Doctor Faustus*. The doctrine of damnation pervades it.

In the play the Devil and Hell are omnipresent, potent, dangerous, and terrifying realities. But the protagonist makes a bargain with Evil, and for the sake of earthly learning, earthly power, earthly satisfaction goes down to horrible and everlasting perdition. As we shall observe, it is actually a poor bargain, for the gains of knowledge and power are largely offset by egocentric self-satisfaction. Marlowe portrays his "hero" as a wretched creature who for lower values gives up higher ones. Thus, the drama is a morality play in which Heaven combats with Hell for the soul of a Renaissance Everyman and, due to the latter's psychological and moral weaknesses, loses. ...

If the modern mind, for example, sees Marlowe's main character as the noble victim of a tyrannical Deity, it is simply being blind. On the contrary, God is exceedingly good in his gifts to the "hero," until the latter becomes the victim of his own insatiable desires—and even then God is willing to forgive if the magician repents. But Faustus willfully refuses all aid—and so goes down to damnation.

This is an exceptionally powerful play that should be revived and performed by Christian drama groups, particularly in Christian schools, colleges, and universities. It is an excellent introduction to Elizabethan drama, on a subject as relevant now as ever. Today, when the world offers so many temptations to young and old alike, it is good to be reminded of the price that must be paid for making worldly choices that separate us from God.

Faustus, wallowing in intellectual pride and self-importance, thinks that he can raise Mephostophilis by the use of his magical skills. So when Mephostophilis appears, Faustus says: "Did not my conjuring raise thee? Speak."

Meph. That was the cause, but yet *per accidens*:
For when we hear one rack the name of God,
Abjure the Scriptures and his Savior Christ,
We fly in hope to get his glorious soul.

Nor will we come unless he use such means
Whereby he is in danger to be damn'd.
Therefore the shortest cut for conjuring
Is stoutly to abjure all godliness
And pray devoutly to the Prince of Hell.

Believe it or not, there is also a great deal of humor in the play. Wagner, Faustus' assistant supplies much of the comic relief with Robin the Clown. Then there are the Seven Deadly Sins—Pride, Covetousness, Envy, Wrath, Gluttony, Sloth, and Lechery—who come before Faust and explain themselves in hilarious ways. Then there are the tricks that Faustus performs on the Pope, using the great powers he has acquired. While the humor adds to the enjoyment of the play, it in no way detracts from the play's serious theme.

Commenting on Marlowe's skill as a playwright, Kirschbaum writes:

Marlowe's powers of compressed dramatic irony can be tremendous. As soon as Faustus has signed [his pact with the Devil], he says "*Consummatum est*," the last words of Christ on earth according to St. John. What an insight into the twisted mind of the magician! And what a blasphemy! Jesus died that Faustus' soul might live; Faustus flings away this priceless gift for a mess of earthly pottage!

Throughout the play, Faustus is torn between God and the Devil. He is pulled back and forth by the Good Angel and the Bad Angel. In a tortured moment of reflection, he says:

Now, Faustus, must thou needs be damn'd, canst thou not be sav'd!
What boots it then to think on God or Heaven?
Away with such vain fancies, and despair—
Despair in God and trust in Belzebub!
Now go not backward. Faustus, be resolute!
Why waver'st thou? O something soundeth in mine ear,
"Abjure this magic, turn to God again...."
Why, He loves thee not—
The god thou serv'st is thine own appetite
Wherein is fix'd the love of Belzebub!
To him I'll build an altar and a church
And offer lukewarm blood of newborn babes!

The allusion to abortion is quite clear. In his translation of Ovid's *Amores*, Marlowe wrote this commentary on abortion in Elegia XIV:

Who unborn infants first to slay invented,
Deserved thereby with death to be tormented. . . .
Had ancient mothers this vile custom cherished,
All human kind by their default had perished; . . .
Had Venus spoiled her belly's Trojan fruit,

The earth of Caesars had been destitute. . . .
Myself, that better die with loving may,
Had seen, my mother killing me, no day. . . .
Why with hid irons are your bowels torn?
And why dire poison give you babes unborn? . . .
Armenian tigers never did so ill,
Nor dares the lioness her young whelps kill.
But tender damsels do it, though with pain;
Oft dies she that her paunch-wrapt child hath slain;
She dies, and with loose hairs to grave is sent,
And whoe'er see her, worthily lament.

There is much to be learned from the great literature of the past. Elizabethan England dealt with the same spiritual problems we deal with today. Their language may be different, but the conflicts are the same. It's hard to believe that the man who wrote *Doctor Faustus* and Elegia XIV was an atheist. Perhaps some day scholars will be able to determine the truth.