

Doctor Faustus by Christopher

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First published: 1604

Type of work: Drama

Type of plot: Tragedy

Time of plot: Sixteenth century

Locale: Germany

Principal Characters

- Faustus, master of all knowledge
- Wagner, his servant
- Lucifer, the fallen angel
- Mephostophilis, a devil
- Good Angel,
- Evil Angel,

The Story

Faustus is born to a common family in Rhodes, Germany. In his maturity, while living with relatives in Wittenberg, he studies theology and becomes a doctor as well. However, Faustus is so swollen with conceit that, like Daedalus, the ancient Greek inventor, he strives too far, becoming glutted with learning. He conspires with the Devil and falls, accursed to Hell.

At the outset of his downward path, Doctor Faustus finds himself complete master of three fields of knowledge—medicine, law, and

theology. As a medical doctor, he achieves huge success and great renown. After obtaining good health for his patients, he faces no challenge except achieving immortality for them. He concludes that law is nothing but an elaborate moneymaking scheme. He thinks that only theology remains, but that it leads to a blind alley. He knows that the reward of sin is death and that no one can say that he or she is without sin; all people, guilty of sin, consequently die.

Necromancy, or black magic, greatly attracts Faustus. Universal power would be within his reach, the whole world would be at his command, and emperors would lie at his feet, if he could become a magician. Summoning his servant, Wagner, Faustus orders him to contact Valdes and Cornelius, believing they could teach him their black arts.

The Good Angel and the Evil Angel each try to persuade Faustus. Faustus is in no mood to listen to the Good Angel. He exults over the prospects of his forthcoming adventures. He will get gold from India, pearls from the oceans, tasty delicacies from faraway places; he will read strange philosophies, cull from foreign kings their secrets, control Germany with his power, reform public schools, and perform many other fabulous deeds.

Eager to acquire knowledge of the black arts, he departs to study with Valdes and Cornelius. Before long the scholars of Wittenberg begin to notice the doctor's prolonged absence. Learning from Wagner of his master's unhallowed pursuits, the scholars lament the fate of the famous doctor.

Faustus's first act of magic is to summon Mephostophilis. At the sight of the ugly Devil, he orders Mephostophilis to assume the shape of a Franciscan friar. The docile obedience of Mephostophilis elates Faustus the magician, but Mephostophilis explains that magic has limits in the Devil's kingdom. Mephostophilis claims that he does not actually appear at Faustus's behest but comes, as he will to any other person, because Faustus curses Christ and abjures the Scriptures. Whenever someone is on the verge of being damned, the Devil will appear.

Interested in the nature of Lucifer, Faustus questions Mephostophilis about his master, the fallen angel, and about Hell, Lucifer's domain. Mephostophilis is cagey. He claims that the fallen spirits, being deprived of the glories of Heaven, find the whole world to be Hell. Even Mephostophilis urges Faustus to give up his scheme. Faustus, however, scorns the warning, saying that he will

surrender his soul to Lucifer if the fallen angel will give to Faustus twenty-four years of voluptuous ease, with Mephostophilis attending him.

While Faustus indulges in an intellectual dispute concerning the relative merits of God and the Devil, the Good Angel and the Evil Angel, symbolic of Faustus's inner conflict, appear once again, each attempting to persuade him. The result is that Faustus is more determined than ever to continue his course.

Mephostophilis returns to assure Faustus that Lucifer is agreeable to the bargain, which must be sealed in Faustus's blood. When Faustus tries to sign his name, however, his blood congeals, and Mephostophilis has to warm the liquid by fire. Significantly, the words "Fly, man" appear in Latin on Faustus's arm. When Faustus questions Mephostophilis about the nature of Hell, the Devil claims that Hell has no limits for the damned. Intoxicated by his new status, Faustus disclaims any belief in an afterlife. In this way, he assures himself that his contract with Lucifer will never be fulfilled, in spite of Mephostophilis's own warning that he himself is living proof of Hell's existence.

Faustus, eager to enjoy the promise of the Devil's offerings, demands books that will contain varied information

regarding the Devil's regime. When the Good Angel and the Evil Angel come to him again, he thinks that he is beyond repentance. Again, the opposing angels incorporate themselves into Faustus's mind, until he calls on Christ to save him. Nevertheless, as he speaks, wrathful Lucifer descends upon his victim to admonish him never to call to God. As an appeasing gesture, Lucifer conjures up a vision of the Seven Deadly Sins—Pride, Covetousness, Envy, Wrath, Gluttony, Sloth, and Lechery.

Faustus travels extensively throughout the world, and Wagner marvels at his master's rapid progress. In Rome, at the palace of the pope, Faustus, becoming invisible as a result of his black arts, astounds the Roman Catholic pope by snatching items from the holy man's hands. Like a gleeful child, Faustus asks Mephostophilis to create more mischief. When Faustus returns home, the scholars eagerly question him about many things unknown to them. As Faustus's fame spreads, [Charles V](#), emperor of Germany, asks him to conjure up the spirit of [Alexander the Great](#). A skeptical knight scoffs at such a preposterous idea, so Faustus, after fulfilling the emperor's request, spitefully places horns on the head of the knight.

Foreseeing that his time of merriment is drawing to a close, Faustus returns to Wittenberg. Wagner senses that his master is about to die because Faustus is giving him all of his worldly goods. As death draws near, Faustus speaks with his conscience, which, taking the form of an old man, begs him to repent before he dies. When Faustus declares that he will repent, Mephostophilis cautions him not to offend Lucifer. Faustus asks Mephostophilis to bring him Helen of Troy as a lover to amuse him during the final days of his life.

In his remaining hours, Faustus converses with scholars who love him, and the fallen theologian reveals to them his bargain with Lucifer. Alone, he utters a final despairing plea that he be saved from impending eternal misery, but in the end he is borne off by a company of devils.