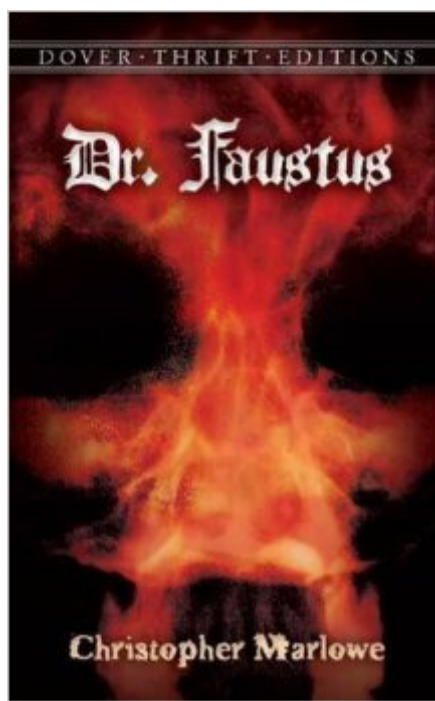


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# Dr. Faustus (Dover Thrift Editions)



## Synopsis

One of the most durable myths in Western culture, the story of Faust tells of a learned German doctor who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge and power. Early enactments of Faust's damnation were often the raffish fare of clowns and low comedians. But the young Elizabethan playwright Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593) recognized in the story of Faust's temptation and fall the elements of tragedy. In his epic treatment of the Faust legend, Marlowe retains much of the rich phantasmagoria of its origins. There are florid visions of an enraged Lucifer, dueling angels, the Seven Deadly Sins, Faustus tormenting the Pope, and his summoning of the spirit of Alexander the Great. But the playwright created equally powerful scenes that invest the work with tragic dignity, among them the doomed man's calling upon Christ to save him and his ultimate rejection of salvation for the embrace of Helen of Troy. With immense poetic skill, and psychological insight that foreshadowed the later work of Shakespeare and the Jacobean playwrights, Marlowe created in *Dr. Faustus* one of the first true tragedies in English. Vividly dramatic, rich in poetic grandeur, this classic play remains a robust and lively exemplar of the glories of Elizabethan drama.

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## Customer Reviews

Not everybody knows Faust(us). But a lot do. Most readers know this tragic personage who allied himself with the devil and finally paid the price for his betrayal of God from a famous play written by

J.W. Goethe. It was him who wrote the most famous version of Faust's history. (If you want to know more about Goethe's work, please visit my reviewer page.) But he wasn't the only dramatist who considered this lost magician worth a tragedy. Exactly 2 centuries and 1 year before Goethe published his work, a play by the Englishman Christopher Marlowe saw the light of the world. Marlowe and Goethe are different personalities living in completely different times so that it's no wonder their plays vary in character. Goethe lived in prosperity and had all his life to think about subjects like human nature, social relationships, history and its influence on the present, love, religion and much more. He was a philosopher, and that's the reason why Goethe's "Faust" is sometimes difficult to understand because you have to dive under the surface of things to understand their true nature. Marlowe's work is different: This man was certainly very intelligent and knew a lot about the forces that moved the world, but, unlike Goethe, he didn't have a lifetime to think about one single play. You can imagine that Marlowe's "Faust" became more shallow, but still not shallow enough to be ignored by this imaginary institution we call World Literature. As a compensation, Marlowe's work contains more life and action in it, something I can't say about Goethe's. Both men were geniuses. In this review, I'd like to pay my tribute to the Englishman. As stated above, the play tells the story of a medieval scientist who allies himself with the devil.

In the Faust legend, a man by the name of Faust or Faustus sells his soul to the devil for twenty-four years of worldly power. This legend has been told many times over by such writers as Goethe and Mann, but no doubt the most famous retelling, and probably the best, is the play, Doctor Faustus by Christopher Marlowe. The most prominent influence on Marlowe's version of the Faust legend was the social upheaval during the time period in which it was written. Doctor Faustus was probably first performed in 1594, a time of tremendous change in Europe. The Medieval times were over and the Renaissance was beginning, however, influences of both times can be found in the play. Doctor Faustus is a transitional play where beliefs from both time periods intermingle, sometimes with disastrous results. Doctor Faustus, himself, is a man torn between two traditions. He is a man with medieval beliefs, but renaissance aspirations. When he first attempts to conjure Mephistopheles, Faustus believes that Mephistopheles was forced to come by his (Faustus's) words. In response, Mephistopheles says, "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." Mephistopheles has, of course, come of his own accord, because he feels that there is a soul to be had. He states this blatantly, yet Faustus is clouded by his old beliefs and also by his desires. From a medieval point of view, Doctor Faustus can be looked upon as a morality play; a play about one man who aspires beyond his God-given

place in the world. On the other hand, from a renaissance perspective, this play is a tragedy. The Renaissance was a time of individuality unlike the Middle Ages where a man was trapped in whatever social class into which he was born.

I do not feel Marlowe's "Faustus" is quite as good as his "Massacre at Paris" or "Edward II," but I still consider it an outstanding play. "Faustus" is very true to life in that many people can not stay behind the 'this far and no further point.' The opening is quite chilling as Faustus decides that the legitimate knowledge of this world is not good enough and he immediately decides to cross into forbidden territory even at the expense of his soul. To this day, I never have forgotten the chills I felt in 2.1 when Faustus signs the unholy contract. It is interesting that even after Faustus signs the contract, that he is presented with several opportunities to escape his fate: "Faustus, repent; yet God will pity thee" (2.2.12). But he can not give up the fruits of the contract. (His powers, having Mephostophilis at his command, etc.) After the chilling tension of the first 2 acts, Marlowe releases the tension for the next two acts by having Faustus perform several practical jokes (of an evil nature to be sure), but nevertheless it offers a release of tension while at the same time we can see how malignant Faustus has become. I once read that many people feel the 3rd and 4th act are way too silly and that they drag the play down. But I don't think this is the case at all. I can not help but think Marlowe was trying to point out that in all honesty, there was a worthless aspect of the fruits Faustus sold his soul for. Furthermore, Acts 3 and 4 help us to see the mentally disturbed side of Christopher Marlowe himself. In 5.1, Faustus has 1 final chance to avoid his fate, but he resolves himself to damnation after enjoying Helen of Troy.

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