

Lecture Three

Characters

Doctor Faustus

Doctor Faustus, a brilliant theologian from the university in Wertenberg, Germany, has also mastered the subjects of logic and medicine. An ambitious, inquisitive man of the Renaissance, he is driven to seek beyond the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of the medieval world. His restless intellect leads him to the acquisition of dark knowledge: knowledge of the secrets of the physical universe, as well as the forbidden art of magic and the unlimited power and knowledge it promises. Disregarding God's authority, he arrogantly imagines all the great and noble things he will accomplish with this dark power. However, Faustus's grand visions never materialize. He lacks the moral strength to use magic wisely or for good. The lowest, most petty impulses in his nature emerge, and his sweeping visions of greatness fade. He becomes wealthy and famous for performing mediocre tricks and is prone to use magic to abuse others. Despite his degree in theology, Faustus is a skeptic concerning realms of the spirit. He turns his back on God, labels hell "a fable," and refuses every chance to repent and save his soul.

Mephistophilis

The character of Mephistophilis (spelled Mephistophilis or Mephistopheles by other authors) is one of the first in a long tradition of sympathetic literary devils, which includes figures like John Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* and Johann von Goethe's Mephistophilis in the nineteenth-century poem "Faust." Marlowe's Mephistophilis is particularly interesting because he has mixed motives. On the one hand, from his first appearance he clearly intends to act as an agent of Faustus's damnation. Indeed, he openly admits it, telling Faustus that "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" (3.47–49). It is Mephistophilis who witnesses Faustus's pact with Lucifer, and it is he who, throughout the play, steps in whenever Faustus considers repentance to cajole or threaten him into staying loyal to hell. Yet there is an odd ambivalence in Mephistophilis. He seeks to damn Faustus, but he himself is damned and speaks freely of the horrors of hell. In a famous passage, when Faustus remarks that the devil seems to be free of hell at a particular moment, Mephistophilis insists, "Again, when Faustus blithely—and absurdly, given that he is speaking to a demon—declares that he does not believe in hell, Mephistophilis groans and insists that hell is, indeed, real and terrible, as Faustus comes to know soon enough. Before the pact is sealed, Mephistophilis actually warns Faustus against making the deal with Lucifer. In an odd way, one can almost sense that part of Mephistophilis does not want Faustus to make the same mistakes that he made. But, of course, Faustus does so anyway, which makes him and Mephistophilis kindred spirits. It is appropriate that these two figures dominate Marlowe's play, for they are two overly proud spirits doomed to hell.

Lucifer

Lucifer is the cunning and cruel manifestation of eternal damnation. Mephistophilis introduces Lucifer to Faustus as his master, the "prince of devils." He then relates his history as an angel who grew in pride and insolence until God "threw him from the face of heaven." As an angel, Lucifer was not content to serve God but wished to take his place. His kingdom now is hell, and he works against God, corrupting humans, luring them into sin, and capturing their immortal souls to populate his realm for eternity. The soul of Faustus—an intellectual, a learned scholar, and a theologian—is a prestigious catch, and Lucifer is more than willing to make a pact to ensnare it. The doctor describes Lucifer's countenance as "terrible," or fearful to look upon. Lucifer is a clever and merciless manipulator who wields fear as a tool to get what he wants.

Good Angel

A spirit that urges Faustus to repent for his pact with Lucifer and return to God. Along with the old man and the bad angel, the good angel represents, in many ways, Faustus's conscience and divided will between good and evil.

Evil Angel

A spirit that serves as the counterpart to the good angel and provides Faustus with reasons not to repent for sins against God. The evil angel represents the evil half of Faustus's conscience.

Chorus

A traditional figure in Greek tragedy, the Chorus delivers the Prologue, a monologue in the middle of the play, and an Epilogue that ends the play. Unlike traditional Greek choruses, though, this chorus is a single person. Removed from the action of the play, the chorus helps introduce and set the scene for the main plot, and concludes the play, confirming for the audience that Faustus was damned to hell.

Robin

Robin is a stable-hand who steals a spell-book from Doctor Faustus. He reappears in comic scenes throughout the play. His foolish attempts at magic act as a counter to Faustus' serious, ambitious sorcery. However, at times one may question how different the two uses of magic are: Faustus ends up using his magic to do parlor tricks for wealthy noblemen and to summon a beautiful woman (Helen of Troy); in some ways, then, the ambitious Faustus is really not so different from the lowly Robin.

The Pope

Faustus and **Mephastophilis** visit the pope in his private chambers in Rome. They annoy him and play practical jokes on him. This antagonizing of the head of the Catholic Church is an example of Faustus' rejection of religion, but the duped pope may also have been a source of comedic amusement for Marlowe's Protestant, anti-Catholic audience.

Third Stage