

Lecture Two

Themes of (Dr. Faustus's play)

The Renaissance

In the 1300s European civilization began its transition out of the church-dominated middle Ages into a period that embraced a secular, more humanistic view of the world. This period, called the Renaissance, was a cultural, intellectual, and artistic movement beginning in Italy and spreading across Western Europe over the next few hundred years. It ended with the religious Thirty Years' War in central Europe (1618–48). There's passion for classical-based art and learning was sparked by rediscovery of the literature of Greece and Rome. The Renaissance reached England around 1550 and hit its peak during the reigns of Queen Elizabeth (1558–1603) and King James I (1603–25).

Christopher Marlowe was born in the early years of the English Renaissance. His life and work were profoundly influenced by its historic wave of new ideas and discoveries in science, art, religion, and philosophy. He became a Free-Thinker, part of a group of intellectual's noblemen, courtiers, and commoners—who formed an underground club, the School of Night that embraced new ideas and rejected old ones. Passionate in pursuit of knowledge often dangerously in conflict with church dogma—for example, pointing out inconsistencies in the Bible the Free-Thinkers were labeled *atheist* and targeted for suppression and death. *Doctor Faustus* was written in and for this time, reflecting this darker side of the period's boundless pursuit of knowledge. In the spirit of the Free-Thinkers, Faustus is a skeptic and intellectual Who goes too far to acquire forbidden knowledge, violates heaven's laws, and disdained for it.

The Religious Climate

Doctor Faustus reflects contemporary controversies over religious faith. During the Renaissance in Europe, there was a great upheaval within the Roman Catholic Church called the Protestant Reformation. Throughout the Middle Ages (5th century to the Renaissance), the Catholic Church governed the lives of people throughout western and central Europe. The calendar year revolved around religious rituals and observances, and church teachings were the sole guide in matters of ethics, the meaning of life, and what to expect in the afterlife. Heresy or disagreement with dealt with harshly. However, in the swiftly changing world of the Renaissance,

the Roman Catholic Church struggled to maintain a stable and unifying framework for people's spiritual and material lives.

Individuals within the church were questioning certain practices and doctrines. Among the most outspoken and influential was a German theologian named Martin Luther. He was deeply troubled by church doctrine that accepted money in exchange for traditional acts of penance performed by a sinner as atonement. These exchanges were called indulgences. In 1517 Luther tried to spur debate on the issue in his famous document the *Ninety-five Theses*. To spread his ideas, he made clever use of a new device: the printing press. Unexpectedly, his protest against church doctrine snowballed into a zealous call for reform that split the church into warring factions: Protestants and Catholics. In Marlowe's England this split was keenly felt by the majority of people. Catholicism had held sway in England until 1534, when King Henry VIII launched his own religious revolution, broke with the Roman Catholic Church, and established himself as the head of the Church of England. Between Henry's death in 1547 and Elizabeth I's rise to the throne, England first tilted violently toward Protestantism and then as violently toward Catholicism. At last Queen Elizabeth cast the church as an independent, "middle ground" entity.

It leaned toward Catholicism in structure but blurred the doctrinal lines between Protestantism and Catholicism and recognized the monarchy—not the pope in Rome—as its leading authority. As a result, numerous plots were hatched, backed by Rome, to dethrone the queen by force. This included excommunication from the church by the pope in 1570—a grave step that made supporters of the papacy automatic enemies of the queen.

In his pursuit of knowledge, Faustus rejects reliance on earlier, accepted authorities, including the Bible and divine revelation. He strikes out on his own, to discover dark, hidden knowledge.

However, in the play's closing moments, Faustus realizes that his skeptical questioning of sacred doctrine and rejection of religion have damned him to a fate he cannot escape. Also woven into the play is the issue of human free will versus predestination—a hot subject of religious debate, advanced by Protestant theologian John Calvin (1509–64). Calvin preached that salvation comes through divine grace alone and that, for each person, the outcome is predetermined by God. An individual's choices and actions merely fulfill what has already been divinely fixed. In the character of Faustus, Marlowe hints at the possibility that the doctor is unable to choose a different path, that his God-given nature shapes his choices and actions. For example, in Act 2, Scene 3 the Evil Angel states

with certainty, "Faustus never shall repent." Yet Marlowe keeps the fundamental question open by inviting sympathy for a man who may have chosen his own wicked path but refuses to repent. He states in the epilogue, "Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight."

Magic and Religion

Religion was eventually banned from the Elizabethan stage because of its sensitive nature. *Doctor Faustus* was the last play from this period to deal directly with a religious topic. However, as the play demonstrates, Elizabethans blurred the line between religion and magic. Religion involves faith or belief in the supernatural and the existence of good and evil. In Elizabethan England, as well as in much of Europe, this went hand in hand with the belief in witches and witchcraft. Renaissance interest in alchemy, astrology, and magic tended to support this belief. Furthermore, the first printed books were religious in nature, and many circulated ideas about witches, deals with the devil, and magical abilities. In parts of Europe witches were hunted, tortured, and killed by the thousands. The hysteria did not reach these heights in England, though Queen Elizabeth passed a harsh witchcraft law in 1562. The character Doctor Faustus, who makes a pact with a devil and becomes a magician, was seen as a witch by Elizabethan audiences. Yet his downfall and fate were viewed in light of redemption, salvation, and eternal damnation, all of which are Christian ideas.

Mephistophilis's Name

Mephistopheles, also spelled Mephistopheles or Mephistopheles, is a devil in medieval German mythology. The character appears in Marlowe's English-language play with the name spelled Mephistopheles. German author Johann Goethe, inspired by Marlowe's and other Faustus stories, gave the evil spirit to whom Faust sells his soul the name Mephistopheles in his play *Faust* (1808–1832). Noting that the names of devils in the middle Ages were often based on Hebrew words, a Goethe scholar believes the name is made up of the Hebrew words *mephitz*, meaning "destroyer," and *tophel*, meaning "liar."

Second Stage