

Faustus

A brilliant man, who seems to have reached the limits of natural knowledge. Faustus is a scholar of the early sixteenth century in the German city of Wittenburg. He is arrogant, fiery, and possesses a thirst for knowledge. As an intellectual, Faustus is familiar with things (like demon summoning and astrology) not normally considered academic subjects by today's universities. Faustus decides to sell his soul to the devil in exchange for earthly power and knowledge and an additional 24 years of life. He proceeds to waste this time on self-indulgence and low tricks.

Faustus is the absolute center of the play, which has few truly developed characters.

Mephostophilis

From the Hebrew, mephitz, destroyer, and topheh, liar. A devil of craft and cunning. He is the devil who comes at Faustus' summoning, and the devil who serves Faustus for 24 years. In lore, Mephostophilis (also spelled Mephistopheles, or Miphostophiles, and also called Mephisto) seems to be a relative latecomer in the recognized hierarchy of demons. He possibly was created for the Faustus legend.

In Marlowe's play, Mephostophilis has layers to his personality. He admits that separation from God is anguish, and is capable of fear and pain. But he is gleefully evil, participating at every level in Faustus' destruction. Not only does Mephostophilis get Faustus to sell his soul; he also encourages Faustus to waste his twenty-four years of power.

Wagner

Servant to Faustus. He steals Faustus' books and learns how to summon demons. At the end of the play, he seems concerned about his master's fate.

Good Angel and Evil Angel

Personifications of Faustus' inner turmoil, who give differing advice to him at key points. Their characters also reflect Christian belief that humans are assigned guardian angels, and that devils can influence human thoughts.

Valdes

Friend to Faustus, who teaches him the dark arts. He appears only in Act One.

Lucifer

Satan. "Lucifer" original meant Venus, referring to the planet's brilliance. In Christian lore, Lucifer is sometimes thought to be another name of Satan. Some traditions say that Lucifer was Satan's name before the fall, while the Fathers of the Catholic Church held that Lucifer was not Satan's proper name but a word showing the brilliance and beauty of his station before the fall. He appears at a few choice moments in Doctor Faustus, and Marlowe uses "Lucifer" as Satan's proper name.

Belzebub

One of Lucifer's officers. A powerful demon.

The Seven Deadly Sins

Personifications of the Seven Deadly Sins, not acts but impulses or motivations that lead men to sinful actions. They array themselves in a pageant before Faustus, although scholars think now that this section was not written by Marlowe.

The Pope

Yeah, that Pope. In a move that would have pleased his Protestant audience, Marlowe depicts him as cruel, power-mad, and far from holy. Faustus plays some cheap tricks on him.

Benvolio

Knight in the court of the German Emperor. Friend to Martino and Frederick. When Faustus humiliates him, he seeks revenge.

Saxony

A man attending at the court of the German Emperor.

Duke of Vanholt

A nobleman. Faustus performs illusions at his court.

Duchess of Vanholt

A noblewoman. Faustus fetches her grapes in January.

An Old Man

A holy old man. He tries to save Faustus by getting him to repent, and for his good deed, Faustus initially thanks him. But later, Faustus sends devils to harm the Old Man.

ACT I, SCENE I

Dr. Faustus is in his study, lamenting the fact that he has achieved all he can in medicine and divinity. Acknowledging the fact that all men are sinners, Faustus says adieu to divinity in favor of the “heavenly” art of necromancy, or black magic. Vowing to be in command of emperors and kings, Faustus bids his servant Wagner to fetch fellow magicians Valdes and Cornelius. Meanwhile, a good angel and an evil spirit each argue their positions as to Faustus’ future course of action. Further convinced that his new vocation will reward him with riches and powers, Dr. Faustus asks his fellow magicians to teach him all they know. Faustus vows to conjure for the first time that night.

ACT II, SCENE II

Dr. Faustus curses Mephostophilis for depriving him of heaven’s joys, to which the devil reminds Faustus that it was Faustus’ “own seeking” that led him to this point. Faustus once again considers repenting, and the two angels vocalize his conflicted thoughts. But Faustus believes his “heart is hardened” and cannot turn back. He questions Mephostophilis about the movement of the moon and planets and asks the devil to name the maker of the world.

As in the case of marriage, the devil cannot deny the realm of God, and Faustus is again filled with fear and doubt. The two angels reappear, the good angel advising Faustus to repent, the bad angel threatening to tear Faustus in pieces shall he dare to do so. Faustus cries aloud for Christ to help him, but Lucifer himself appears with Mephostophilis and Belzebub. They advise Faustus to think not on God, but on the devil. Faustus vows “never to look to heaven,” and the devils reward him with a show of the Seven Deadly Sins. The sight delights Dr. Faustus, to whom Lucifer promises, “in hell is all manner of delight.” Faustus returns home with Mephostophilis to study his conjuring book.

ACT III, SCENE I

Faustus and Mephostophilis recall their recent visits to Paris, Naples, and Venice, and discuss the topography of Rome. While Faustus wants to see the city’s monuments, Mephostophilis urges him to seek an audience with the Pope in order to cross the church and “dash the pride of this solemnity.” The Pope and the King of Hungary arrive, attended by bishops and cardinals, as well as Bruno, the Pope Pretender, appointed by the Emperor. Bruno attempts to ascend the throne, but the Pope prevails. Sending the cardinals away to decide Bruno’s fate, the Pope remains with King Raymond. Faustus sends Mephostophilis to charm the cardinals to sleep while he plots to fool the Pope. As Bruno and the Pope move aside to discuss the Emperor’s audacity, as well as other historical challenges by the government against the church, Dr. Faustus and Mephostophilis return disguised as cardinals. Faustus advises the Pope that the decision has been made to burn the heretic Bruno at the stake, and the Pope releases Bruno to their charge. The Pope orders a banquet.

ACT IV, SCENE II

The Emperor welcomes Dr. Faustus to his court and vows to spread Faustus' fame and honor throughout Italy. Faustus thanks him and asks the Emperor's command. When Charles responds that he wishes to see Alexander the Great and his Paramour, Faustus orders Mephostophilis to conjure the couple. From his window, the sleepy Benvolio casts aspersions on Faustus' ability, joking that he would be turned into a stag before Faustus could achieve success. When the couple appears, along with King Darius, the Persian King, Emperor Charles tries to embrace them, but Faustus reminds him that the two are merely conjured images. The Emperor is delighted nonetheless, and then notices the horns on Benvolio's head. The Emperor urges Faustus to remove the horns, and when Faustus complies, Benvolio vows revenge.

ACT IV, SCENE V

Dr. Faustus sells a horse to a horse-courser, but warns him not to ride the horse into water. Now Faustus reflects on his impending death with despair and doubt, and before falling asleep, recalls Christ's promise to the thief that he would be with Christ in paradise. The horse-courser returns wet and attempts to awake Faustus for the purpose of recouping his forty dollars. Unable to awake the doctor, the horse-courser pulls Faustus' leg off his body, Faustus cries murder, but then laughs and replaces the leg. When Wagner enters and advises Dr. Faustus that the Duke of Vanholt wishes an audience with him, Faustus sets out.

ACT V, SCENE I

Back in Faustus' study, Wagner advises Mephostophilis and other devils that his master means to die soon, and that he has left his fortune to Wagner. Meanwhile the Doctor is dining with two scholars who request to see Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in all the world. Faustus asks Mephostophilis to conjure her, and Helen appears. After the scholars leave, an old man appears and urges Faustus to repent. He asks to be alone to contemplate his sins. When he voices his dilemma, Mephostophilis once again threatens to tear Faustus' flesh. Faustus curses the old man and asks to see Helen of Troy again. When she appears, the Doctor reflects on "the face that launched a thousand ships," and pledges that Helen shall be his paramour.