

DRAMA *Works*

Plays Through Practice

DOCTOR FAUSTUS
by
CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

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EXTRACT

CONTENTS

	PAGE
BRIEF OUTLINE OF MARLOWE'S LIFE AND TIMES	4
PLOT OUTLINE	7
BRIEF CHARACTER NOTES	10
ASTRONOMY, SCIENCE & EDUCATION	12
BRIEF NOTES ABOUT GROTOVSKI + ARTAUD'S TOTAL THEATRE 16	
PRELIMINARY CHORUS WORK	20
PRACTICE IN SPEAKING IAMBIC PENTAMETER	20
WORKING THROUGH THE TEXT IN A PRACTICAL WAY	22
FIRST CHORUS	22
ACT ONE, SCENE ONE	26
ACT ONE, SCENE 2	31
ACT ONE, SCENE 3	34
ACT ONE, SCENE FOUR	39
ACT TWO, SCENE ONE	43
ACT TWO, SCENE TWO	
49	
ACT TWO, SCENE THREE	51
ACT THREE, CHORUS	57
ACT THREE, SCENE ONE	58
ACT THREE, SCENE TWO	60
ACT FOUR, CHORUS	62
ACT FOUR, SCENE ONE	63
ACT FOUR, SCENE TWO	69
ACT FIVE, SCENE ONE	70
ACT FIVE, SCENE TWO	75
FINAL CHORUS	78

Extract

WORKING THROUGH THE TEXT IN A PRACTICAL WAY

PRELIMINARY NOTES

As with all the Plays Through Practice, it is important that all students have read the play before working through the following practical approaches. If the language of the play is too off-putting for a full read-through before starting work, then, at least, everyone should have read the plot break-down given earlier in this book. Throughout, the practical work assumes a certain level of knowledge of the play.

It is important that students keep full records of the practical work undertaken and any decisions made throughout.

I have tried not to dictate my own opinions or be proscriptive in any way throughout this study guide. It is important that each student comes to his/her own decisions throughout. It must also be recognised that interpretation choices I offer throughout are usually limited to two or three; students may well come up with other interpretations which, providing they make sense within the context of the play, is good.

CHORUS

As with a Greek Chorus, we are told of Faustus's past life and brought to the moment where he is about to commit his first sin against God.

The verse starts with a reminder of the more usual areas with which plays of the time dealt: heroic acts on the battle-field, tales of the loves of kings or rebellions against the state. But this play is different. It is the story of one man and his downfall. So immediately we are taken from the usual to the unusual. It is usual to tell of kings or generals and people in high places - especially in tragedy - for the tale of an ordinary man would be perhaps the stuff of comedy but would otherwise not be considered suitable stage-fodder.

Yet Marlowe 'must' tell this tale. This compulsion should be emphasised. More than battlefields and kings, this tale should affect every person in his audience, for it is the battle within a man for his own soul.

Carefully, from the beginning, Marlowe does not judge. He gives little away. He will tell the story of Faustus 'good or bad,' and proceeds to sketch in his early life, carefully showing Faustus's ordinariness - born of 'base stock' - and his upbringing. Thus far his Everyman qualities are stated; the link with every person in the audience is made.

As for a tragedy hero, the Chorus outlines Faustus's particular 'hubris': he is 'swoll'n with cunning' so that he punches beyond his capacity and must be brought down for it: 'heavens conspired his overthrow.' 'Hubris' is the Greek word for the fatal flaw in the tragic hero. It is a form of pride in which the hero thinks he can challenge the will of the gods. Thus Oedipus in Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex*, for example, tries to escape the fate that is predicted for him by the gods through the mouthpiece of their oracle. Of course he fails and is severely punished.

So by the end of the Chorus's speech, we are being shown a man who is doomed, who may or may not be a tragic hero, though the ingredients are there. And though he is in love with magic, we should still hold in our minds that this is not a bad man as such, but an ordinary man, both 'good and bad.'

What note would you want to strike with this opening? A modern audience is not anything like that of Elizabethan times. Then the reality of God and Heaven and the

opposite faction of the Devil and Hell was much closer. The vast majority of the audience in Marlowe's day would believe in these things absolutely. Yet there was also a spirit abroad of questioning and doubt - a forbidden spirit, since the power of the church was still enormous - but questioning was there nonetheless. Marlowe himself, as you will have read, was widely believed to be a doubter, and if this is so the play takes on a greater significance: that of a personal exploration of the doubt in his own soul.

Are modern audiences so different? They may not be church goers, but there is still a very active fascination with the Devil and his demons, if not with a physical hell where lost souls burn for eternity. There is still a questing spirit too, for something beyond. Hence the present fascination with the occult, the emergence of strange sects, the adoption of other religions than the one people are born into, the quest for inner peace and bodily health through yoga or meditation. Modern man is more confused by the enormous array of foods for the soul on offer than Elizabethan man but mostly he still reaches a point where he looks for something that satisfies some inner craving. It may not happen soon; it may not happen until faced with one's own mortality and fear of death; but for most of us it will happen.

So this play could offer something to that inner self, even for a modern audience and, though some of the ambitions that Faustus has will strike us as naive, even silly, the final battle for a man's soul still strikes home. We are still capable of fear. Faced with the great unknown of death, many of us will still hedge our bets.

The Chorus strikes the first note and sets the scene. What is that scene? In a play which would originally have been set on the Elizabethan open thrust stage, where no scenery except props and essential furniture would have been used, it is perhaps too early to make absolute decisions about setting. The play covers many places, even countries - but it also roots itself in the main setting: that of Faustus's study. It is possible therefore to make something of this place - even suggest, in a play which deals with so much illusion, that nothing but that little world bounded by his own learning exists. An academic's study is not neat and tidy. He would be surrounded by books, old parchments of maps, perhaps a model of the world as understood at that time in a period where most people still believed in the Ptolemaic view of the universe: that Earth was the centre of that universe and that all the planets and stars revolved around it. If you look at a picture of this system, [in the introduction] it resembles a cage. All the planets and stars are fixed to wires, lest they fall to the Earth. In the model at the Science Museum, the wires are metal, but in reality they were believed to be made of crystal which would be invisible to the naked eye and explain why early telescopes did not see them! There was no understanding of gravity yet.

I don't propose to go too far along the history of early astronomy, but in the fifteenth century, well before this play was written, an astronomer called Copernicus had argued that the planets and Earth revolved around the sun. Of course, we know now he was right, but the powerful Church suppressed the Copernican belief as it spread, going so far as to torture Galileo to recant when, with his more powerful telescope, he came to the same conclusions as Copernicus - and more. If there are no crystal wires holding the planets up, no comfortable cage at the centre of which lies Earth, then where is Heaven? Galileo had not seen it. Instead he had seen the infinite spread of space, and dared to say so.

The belief in Heaven and Hell as physical places was important to the medieval mind. Perhaps as much so was the belief that Earth is central to this system and that God had nothing better to do than gaze with his angels down on the world and on mankind and look after them. It must have been a very cosy feeling. Life was short and hard but there was better to come. God and his heaven sat above the ninth sphere of the planets. So taught the Church. Heaven as a spiritual place, invisible, was not something that the minds of the ordinary people were yet ready for.

The Elizabethans were still steeped in that tradition. Those who studied and read widely, like Marlowe, would have been aware of the rumours of other ideas. It was all part of the mix that brought a spirit of unrest across the intelligentsia of the whole Elizabethan age. Boundaries were falling down, not just of astronomy, but of geography

too. The world was expanding and with it the minds of the men who inhabited it.

No wonder then that there were doubters. There must have been many. This play is an expression of doubt, though it is couched in the beliefs of the time.

You can toss around some of these concepts now, as a precursor to decisions about how you will set the play ultimately. How about enclosing the playing space with a suggestion of the Ptolemaic system, planets and stars attached to fine wires? These wires as they descend towards the stage floor could thicken into metal [still curved as if going on down under the stage floor], which can suggest openings and entrances and exits, and even be used as platforms, trapezes, slides and so on.

Or you can build a stage of books - as they did in a fairly recent production of *A Winter's Tale*, which I saw at the Round House, nicely used to suggest catastrophe, when the shelves of books tumbled over - something that could work for the ending of this play too, and with more reason: I never quite understood why books were chosen as a feature of *A Winter's Tale*, but no matter. It's a better idea for *Dr Faustus*. If used here, you can define either just the space of Faustus's study, or use them to define the whole playing area - with gaps amongst the shelves, cunningly placed to overlap and give us surprise entrances. Again, this idea suggests that the whole world of ideas is contained in Faustus's study and that he never actually emerges from it. Anything other is an illusion.

When I directed the play - so lost in the mists of time that I blush to remember the clumsiness of much of my approach [it was the second play I'd ever done, as a school production] - I used a black stage with screens painted red on the outer frames, but with black material stretched between the frames. Some of this material was loose, to allow for surprise entrances. The black screen curtains against the black curtains surrounding the whole stage blended together, giving the illusion that the screens were open, merely frames. This helped with surprises, illusions and entrances in general. With a raised level as a permanent setting for Faustus' study, strewn with leather-bound books, the set worked well.

Use the above ideas to start off discussion about setting, bearing in mind that final solutions will probably emerge at a later date.

Look at the first speech now. Divide it up into three parts. The first goes up to '... Faustus' fortunes, good or bad.' The second to '... heavens conspired his overthrow.', and the third to the end of the speech. **Dividing the class into three groups, allot one of these sections to each and ask them first of all to come up with a version in their own words. This will miss out all the poetic allusions and so on and come up with just the bare bones of the facts. They won't be wordy!**

Once they have the bare bones, which will have meant they understand exactly what they're saying, then have them pick out the phrases in their speech which convey those important facts. These are the parts that must communicate to an audience, if they are to understand.

Third and last, the task is to get to grips with the whole section. Look particularly for how the rhythm is conveyed. For instance, in the first section, the rhythm relies on the 'not's and 'nor's, ending with that telling 'only'. **Try what happens when those are the words that are given the greatest emphasis, slowing down on them and leaving a tiny beat after each one. Notice the alliteration and how that helps the rhythm: 'marching ... Mars ... mate'; 'court ... kings'; 'pomp ... proud'; 'form of Faustus' fortunes.'** Pick out any words that draw your eye [or ear]. For me, that is 'only' and 'must'. 'Only' slows the beginning of the line down, gives it an added weight and prepares the ear for something important. Then, why 'must', which implies compulsion? Discuss this and come up with a conclusion of your own which will dictate how you say that word. It could be that it 'must' be performed, despite a feeling of horror and reluctance in the speaker. Or there might be a sense of urgency: 'you need to know this, members of the audience, for your own good.' **Decide for yourself.**

The second section is more straightforward up to the last half of it. Notice how the writing for the first half gives you the rhythm of natural, even chatty, speech, the stress on

'Excelling all' helps this naturalness. Then you get the alliteration: 'swoll'n... self-conceit'; 'waxen wings'; 'mount ... melting.' These help the rhythm of the important second half. Especially if you stress 'mount' and 'melting', the rest of those lines fall into place. 'Melting' needs a slight hiatus after it. It is not the heavens that are melting but the wings. Finally, which words stand out here and why? For me it is the word 'cunning', which in those days had more the meaning of learning - but also the implication of williness. Here we have the suggestion that Faustus thinks his learning makes him better than God; this is his *hubris* and for it he must be punished. So heaven 'conspired his overthrow.' Conspiracy infers more than one person. Does this mean, the whole of the heavens - god and his angels - are in collusion? What do you think? What is backed up by the play? 'Overthrow' is a strong word. What kind of God 'overthrows' a sinner? What form might that 'overthrow' make? Is this the God of the Old Testament - a jealous God, who demands enormous tests of His followers? Or the God of the New Testament, as reinterpreted through Christ? Why do you think that the Devil in this play works so hard for Faustus's soul, through Mephistopheles and others, whilst God does nothing except send perhaps the Good Angel to talk to Faustus? Or is all of this play an interior battle only and both demons and angels simply figments of Faustus's own imagination? Lots of questions to think about and discuss, but they are important ones, central to your own interpretations of the play.

Having dissected and understood the speech, there are decisions to make as to how to present it. The Chorus is traditionally a man, standing in for the writer himself. By Marlowe's time, the word no longer has the meaning of a number of people, as in Greek times, though it still fills some of the functions of the ancient Greek Chorus: that is, it stands apart from the action commenting on it [more apart than in Greek times, where the Chorus is usually caught up in, or affected by, the action]; it points the way for the audience to think; it fills in such details as we need to know that are not being covered by the play to follow. Really in this particular case [as in Shakespeare's *Henry V*] this Chorus is just a Prologue to the action, whereas ancient Choruses commented and participated throughout the play.

You are the boss, however, and can present this first speech in any way you like. You could divide it up amongst a number of people or give it to a character in the play. It could be the Good Angel who speaks the lines, with pity and regret. Or it could be the Bad Angel, with irony and sly delight. It could be a detached and quietly gloating Mephistopheles. Or it could be a number of demons, or even the disembodied voice of God. Or perhaps you think, like Marlowe, the Prologue to the play should be spoken by someone completely outside of the action. Discuss the merits of both this and a partisan approach. **Try some of them out as well as the following:**

**divide the speech up into a number of voices who
regret Faustus' fall
delight in it
are divided between those who regret and those who delight**
Could it be the whole cast who assemble and divide the speech amongst them?

We have spent a long time on this opening speech because it stirs to the surface many of the issues you need to decide upon. Though you do not need to finalise your ideas at such an early stage, you do need to be aware of the different approaches you could make to the play and its meaning.

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

Faustus declares himself fed up with the limitations of all he has learned from all his books except for a forbidden volume of magic. Two Angels, representing the two sides of his conscience, argue for and against his decision to learn the art of magic. Faustus ignores his Good Angel and calls in two men who are adept in magic, who vow to teach him all he needs to know to 'conjure' for himself.

Our first sight of Faustus is through this long opening speech, which must be made clear and interesting to a modern audience. Faustus dismisses philosophy, medicine, law and divinity, the four great disciplines of the age, because of their limitations. The first thing to notice, however, is his own limited understanding of each discipline, or perhaps deliberate avoidance of the more far-reaching aspects of them all. Thus he dismisses the whole field of philosophy with reference only to Aristotle's books on logic, ignoring such as the spiritual discussions of Plato and others. Medicine is dismissed because it can not confer eternal life; he ignores all the benefits to mankind of health. From his law books he picks out only the pettiest of examples. The Bible offers him only the idea that 'the wages of sin are death,' wilfully ignoring the invitation offered by Christ of salvation and eternal life through repentance. This he dismisses by stating baldly that it is impossible to be without sin, therefore all will die, and that death will be everlasting. This dismissal of Christ's promise is absolutely central to an understanding of the whole play.

It is clear from the whole speech that Faustus is adept at all four of these disciplines. He has mastered logic; he has found cures for many desperate illnesses, even the plague; he knows the law but it is too trivial; divinity offers no hope of escaping mortality.

Clues to his character are scattered throughout. It is not enough to serve others, as through law or medicine. In fact, it is this service that he finds exasperating. No, he is obsessed with one selfish thing only: the continuation of his own life: 'Yet art thou still but Faustus and a man.... Ay, we must die an everlasting death.'

Interestingly, having dismissed the riches he attained from his miracle cures and dismissed law as being just a means of earning money as 'a mercenary drudge', it is the thought of worldly riches and power that charms him into magic. Is this because he has accepted death as an inevitable, so he might as well attain all that the world can offer through magic? Or are these worldly ideas the first sign that Faustus is 'but a man' and has limitations which he cannot even recognise: the limitations of greed, and an attraction to worldly things and possessions?

I think this discussion is an important one to have. It is embedded in the ideas already discussed. Does Faustus deliberately avoid the wider scopes of the four disciplines he brings out and dismisses? Or are his own limitations at fault? If the former, is his avoidance merely out of boredom - his mind has encompassed all that his learning has to offer? Or is he, even at this early stage, being led astray by the devil? Why do the books open at the very pages from which he quotes? Could the devil have already scented the possibility of Faustus's soul and be leading his eye at just those things that will either convince him of their limitations or drive him into despair?

Discuss all this fully, and then test the possibility of the devil leading Faustus's eye. **Try:**

**little demons [invisible to Faustus] turning the pages, or indicating a passage with a pointing finger
an eerie noise [which can be made by a chorus of demons] to accompany the magical riffling of pages [worked by threads] as Faustus opens each book**

Contrast this with Faustus simply opening each book at random, moving his finger around in the air, then jabbing the page with the tip. This also gives the effect of chance taking a hand - and the possibility of things being weighted towards the

devils' side, but more subtly.

The pattern of the speech is to take each of the four books, one by one, opening each at first with enthusiasm, selecting a page at random [or how it falls open - seemingly at random], reading a line or two with increasing disappointment, finishing with dismissal of all that book [and therefore that discipline too] has to offer.

So the lines on which he selects each new book are, in order:

'Sweet analytics, 'tis thou hast ravished me!'

'Be a physician, Faustus.'

'Where is Justinian?'

'When all is done, divinity is best... Jerome's Bible...'

Taking these four lines on their own, it is clear to see a progression of mood. **Try experimenting with these lines [and as many after in each case as you wish to add] in the following ways:**

starting with genuine enthusiasm and moving through boredom - a kind of attempt at whipping up enthusiasm in himself, which is clearly failing - then approaching the Bible with a kind of dread.

doubt throughout, the bored scholar, allowing a kind of anger to surface which arises from a feeling of being betrayed by all in which he has hitherto put his trust.

either of the above, but a superstitious awe, even fear, in his handling of the Bible.

The progression on which you decide will dictate the way you act out this first speech. There needs to be contrast and the building up to a series of little climaxes as he dismisses each discipline. Look, in consequence, at the lines in which he dismisses the four, again in order:

'Bid Oeconomy farewell.'

'Physic, farewell!'

'This study fits a mercenary drudge,/ Who aims at nothing but external trash;/ Too servile and illiberal for me.'

'Divinity, adieu!'

In each case examine the preceding line or two which sets the mood for the dismissal.

He enjoyed debate, so there is perhaps a reluctance in his farewell to analytics. The limitations of medicine annoy him? Disappoint him? Law appears to make him the most scornful; it is this discipline which he feels most trivial.

Then what about divinity? He begins cautiously, aware of the potential danger of going away from the Bible's teachings. **Try this part of the speech:**

slowly, puzzling through the argument which leads to his conclusion that death is inevitable - then with a kind of wonder as he reaches his own conclusion

with an increasing sense of betrayal and therefore anger - a deep anger with a tragic sorrow, so that it is clear when he puts down the book that it is as if he is ripping out his own heart

Each of these approaches will dictate a different way to say 'Divinity, adieu!' It will also dictate a different way with which to pick up the book of magic.

Try picking it up with:

caution, with a proper sense of fear, which may look like religious awe

a dart, a lunge for it, fuelled by anger with divinity then, at the last moment - a hesitation, his hand hovers over the book before we see a decision made and he grasps it firmly, with conviction

reluctantly, as if driven to it for there is nowhere else to go touching the book with questing fingers, with curiosity which grows into a kind of greed.

Put this together with the putting aside of the Bible beforehand. No words - put everything that the words are hinting at, in your opinion, into your actions