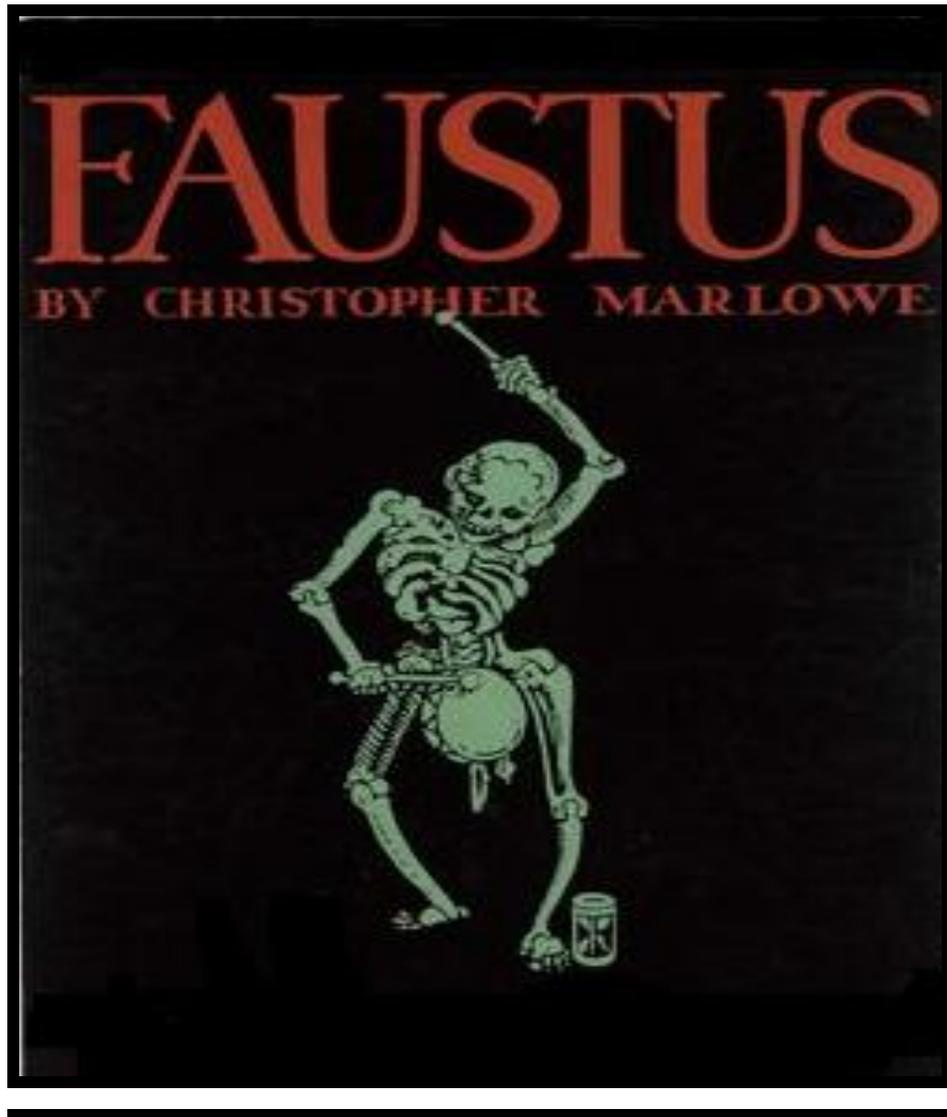
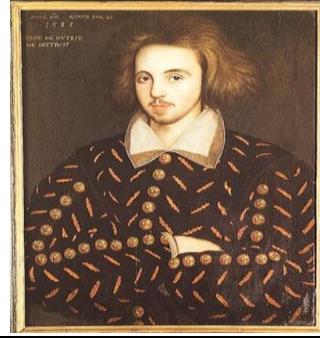


# GableStage

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## Christopher Marlowe Biography

Christopher Marlowe, an English dramatist, poet, and translator of the Elizabethan era, was the foremost Elizabethan tragedian before William Shakespeare.

Born in 1564, (the same year as Shakespeare) Marlowe was the son of a well-to-do shoemaker and a clergyman's daughter. He was educated at King's School in his native Canterbury and at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, where he achieved a Bachelor degree in the Arts in 1584 and then his Masters of Arts in 1587. He served as a confidential agent for the government; engaged in philosophical or theological speculation within the circle Sir Walter Raleigh's *Free Thinkers*; he became the outstanding dramatist of London, in association chiefly with the Admiral's Company of players. At the age of 29, Marlowe was stabbed and killed in a tavern in Deptford by a companion who also had been in the service of the government. Marlowe was buried on June 1, 1593.

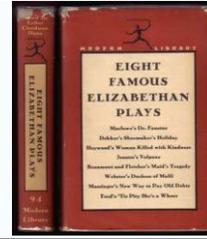
Given the murky inconsistencies concerning the account of Marlowe's death, an ongoing conspiracy theory has arisen centered on the notion that Marlowe may have faked his death and then continued to write under the assumed name of William Shakespeare. Authors who have propounded this theory include:

- Wilbur Gleason Zeigler *It Was Marlowe* (1895)
- Calvin Hoffman, *The Murder of the Man Who Was Shakespeare* (1955)
- Louis Ule, *Christopher Marlowe (1564-1607): A Biography*
- AD Wraight, *The Story that the Sonnets Tell* (1994)
- Roderick L Eagle, *The Mystery of Marlowe's Death*, N&Q (1952)

Marlowe's first known play to be performed on the London stage was *Tamburlaine* (1587), a story of the conqueror Timur, who rises from a lowly shepherd to wage war on the kings of the world. It was one of the first popular English plays to use blank verse, and it is generally considered the beginning of the mature phase of the Elizabethan theatre. *Tamburlaine* was a success, and *Tamburlaine Part II* soon followed.

*The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (written 1589 or 1593) was based on the recently published German *Faustbuch*, was the first dramatic version of the Faust legend of a scholar's dealing with the devil. While versions of "The Devil's Pact" can be traced back to the 4th century, Marlowe deviates significantly by having his hero unable to "burn his books" or have his contract repudiated by a merciful god at the end of the play. Marlowe's protagonist is instead torn apart by demons and dragged off screaming to hell.

## Plays by Marlowe



(The dates of composition are approximate.)

*Dido, Queen of Carthage* (c.1586) (possibly co-written with Thomas Nashe)

*Tamburlaine, part 1* (c.1587)

*Tamburlaine, part 2* (c.1587-1588)

*The Jew of Malta* (c.1589)

*Doctor Faustus* (c.1589, or, c.1593)

*Edward II* (c.1592)

*The Massacre at Paris* (c.1593)



## DOCTOR FAUSTUS Synopsis

DOCTOR FAUSTUS, A WELL-RESPECTED GERMAN scholar, grows dissatisfied with the limits of traditional forms of knowledge—logic, medicine, law, and religion—and decides that he wants to learn to practice magic. His friends Valdes and Cornelius instruct him in the black arts, and he begins his new career as a magician by summoning up Mephistophilis, a devil. Despite Mephistophilis’s warnings about the horrors of hell, Faustus tells the devil to return to his master, Lucifer, with an offer of Faustus’s soul in exchange for twenty-four years of service from Mephistophilis. Meanwhile, Wagner, Faustus’s servant, has picked up some magical ability and uses it to press a clown named Robin into his service.

Mephistophilis returns to Faustus with word that Lucifer has accepted Faustus’s offer. Faustus experiences some misgivings and wonders if he should repent and save his soul; in the end, though, he agrees to the deal, signing it with his blood. As soon as he does so, the words “Homo fuge,” Latin for “O man, fly,” appear branded on his arm. Faustus again has second thoughts, but Mephistophilis bestows rich gifts on him and gives him a book of spells to learn. Later, Mephistophilis answers all of his questions about the nature of the world, refusing to answer only when Faustus asks him who made the universe. This refusal prompts yet another bout of misgivings in Faustus, but Mephistophilis and Lucifer bring in personifications of the Seven Deadly Sins to prance about in front of Faustus, and he is impressed enough to quiet his doubts.

Armed with his new powers and attended by Mephistophilis, Faustus begins to travel. He goes to the pope's court in Rome, makes himself invisible, and plays a series of tricks. He disrupts the pope's banquet by stealing food and boxing the pope's ears. Following this incident, he travels through the courts of Europe, with his fame spreading as he goes. Eventually, he is invited to the court of the German emperor, Charles V (the enemy of the pope), who asks Faustus to allow him to see Alexander the Great, the famed fourth-century B.C. Macedonian king and conqueror. Faustus conjures up an image of Alexander, and Charles is suitably impressed. A knight scoffs at Faustus's powers, and Faustus chastises him by making antlers sprout from his head. Furious, the knight vows revenge.

Meanwhile, Robin, Wagner's clown, has picked up some magic on his own, and with his fellow stablehand, Rafe, he undergoes a number of comic misadventures. At one point, he manages to summon Mephistophilis, who threatens to turn Robin and Rafe into animals (or perhaps even does transform them; the text isn't clear) to punish them for their foolishness.

Faustus then goes on with his travels, playing a trick on a horse-courser along the way. Faustus sells him a horse that turns into a heap of straw when ridden into a river. Eventually, Faustus is invited to the court of the Duke of Vanholt, where he performs various feats. The horse-courser shows up there, along with Robin, a man named Dick (Rafe in the A text), and various others who have fallen victim to Faustus's trickery. But Faustus casts spells on them and sends them on their way, to the amusement of the duke and duchess.

As the twenty-four years of his deal with Lucifer come to a close, Faustus begins to dread his impending death. He has Mephistophilis call up Helen of Troy, the famous beauty from the ancient world, and uses her presence to impress a group of scholars. An old man urges Faustus to repent, but Faustus drives him away. Faustus summons Helen again and exclaims rapturously about her beauty. But time is growing short. Faustus tells the scholars about his pact, and they are horror-stricken and resolve to pray for him. On the final night before the expiration of the twenty-four years, Faustus is overcome by fear and remorse. He begs for mercy, but it is too late. At midnight, a host of devils appears and carries his soul off to hell. In the morning, the scholars find Faustus's limbs and decide to hold a funeral for him.



## Elizabethan Drama

English Renaissance theatre is sometimes called "Elizabethan Theatre." The term "Elizabethan Theatre", however, covers only the plays written and performed publicly in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603). As such, "Elizabethan Theatre" is distinguished from Jacobean theatre (associated with the reign of King James I, 1603–1625), and Caroline theatre (associated with King Charles I, 1625 until the closure of the theatres in 1642).

Before the reign of Elizabeth I, companies of players were attached to the households of leading noblemen and performed seasonally in various locations. These companies became the foundation for the professional players that performed on the Elizabethan stage.

English Renaissance theatre derived from several medieval theatre traditions, such as the mystery plays that formed a part of religious festivals in England and other parts of Europe during the Middle Ages. The mystery plays were complex retellings of legends based on biblical themes, originally performed in churches but later becoming more common around religious festivals. Other sources include the morality plays that evolved out of the mysteries, and the "University Drama" that attempted to recreate Greek tragedy. The Italian tradition of Commedia dell'arte frequently presented at court came to play roles in the shaping of public theatre.

The men who wrote these plays were primarily self-made men from modest backgrounds. Some of them were educated at either Oxford or Cambridge, but many were not. Although William Shakespeare was an actor, the majority do not seem to have been performers. There were no major playwrights who came on the scene after 1600. No women were professional dramatists in this era. Prior to 1660, men and boys played women onstage.



## Popular Genres

Popular genres of the Elizabethan period included the history play, which depicted English or European history. Well-known playwrights, William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe, belong to this category. Shakespeare's plays about the lives of kings, such as *Richard III* (1591) and *Henry V* (1599), and Marlowe's *Edward II* (1594) and George Peele's *Famous Chronicle of King Edward the First* (1593) dramatized preceding events of the era.

Tragedy was a common genre. Marlowe's tragedies were exceptionally popular, such as *Tamburlaine the Great* (1590) and *The Jew of Malta* (1598). The audiences particularly liked revenge dramas, such as Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1582). John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614) offers a parade of bloody cruelties, as did Shakespeare's *MacBeth* (1603).

Comedies were common as well. A sub-genre developed in this period was the city comedy, which deals satirically with life in London after the fashion of Roman New Comedy. Examples are Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* and Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*.



## The End of an Era

The rising Puritan movement was hostile to the theatres, which the Puritans considered to be sinful for several reasons. The most commonly cited reason was that young men dressed up in female costume to play female roles. Theatres were located in the same parts of the city in which brothels and other forms of vice proliferated. When the Puritan faction of Parliament gained control over the city of London at the beginning of the English Civil War, it ordered the closing of all theatres on Sept. 2, 1642—though this was largely because the stage was being used to promote opposing political views. After the monarchy was restored in 1660 the theatres re-opened.



## Study Guide Questions

- 1) What similarities exist between Marlowe's and Shakespeare's blank verse?
- 2) Do you think it's possible that Marlowe was the real author of Shakespeare's plays?
- 3) Are there parallels between Dr. Faustus and Lucifer?
- 4) Discuss the character of Mephistophilis. How much of a role does he play in Faustus's damnation?
- 5) How does Marlowe complicate Faustus' character and inspire our sympathy?
- 6) What is the attitude toward learning in this play?
- 7) Comment on the theme of pride, which leads Faustus to his tragic damnation