

Prometheus or Not?

# The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus

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## Background: EM Theatre

- PPT: "Shakespeare's Theatre";
- Tipsheet: "Questions to Ask of the Recalcitrant Scene";
- Read the headnote on the play, and the Appendices, "A Text" and "B Text" at the end of the play.

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## SCENES we will be LOOKING AT IN DETAIL

- **SCENE 1:** Chorus and Faustus's opening speech;
- **SCENE 3:** esp. 3.35-100;
- **COMIC COUNTERPOINTS:**
  - Scene 4: Wagner and the Clown
  - Scene 10: The Horse-Courser;
- **PSYCHOMACHIA:** Good and Evil Angels, esp. 1.70-76; 5.1-21;
- **SCENE 13:** HELLMOUTH

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**GENERAL QUESTIONS we will consider**

- Does *Faustus* challenge or reinforce religious systems?
- Does the play advance a clear-cut moral premise?
- How does the play engage with humanist ideas/values?
- How do the play's STRUCTURE and DRAMATIC elements communicate its ideas?
- DOES FAUSTUS JUMP OR IS HE PUSHED?

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**SCENE 1: OVER-REACHING**

Chorus and Faustus's opening speech:  
The CHORUS compares Faustus to Icarus (1.21-22).

**WHAT:** With reference to Faustus's opening speech, discuss the idea of the OVER-REACHER. Consider:

- What limits Faustus may be over-reaching;
- the other mythical over-reacher, PROMETHEUS, who was punished for stealing fire from the gods.

**SO WHAT:** What is the relationship between the concept of the over-reacher and the values associated with HUMANISM?

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**SCENE 1: STAGING TEMPTATION**

The scene opens with Faustus at his desk reading and discarding books.

- How would you stage this scene? Consider
  - ll. 38-46: He reads HALF of the Biblical passage, "The reward of sin is death," but neglects to read the other half: "But the gift of God is eternal life (Rom. 6.23).
- IS FAUSTUS ALONE ON STAGE? If not, who might be with him? What difference would it make?

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## SCENE 3: PICTURING EVIL

- How would you play Mephistophilis? What would he look like?
- Would he be
  - Hideous?
  - Beautiful?
  - Old, young?
  - Like Faustus himself?
  - VISIBLE or INVISIBLE?
- What would be the effect of these various options on our understanding of Faustus's bargain?
- Why does Faustus get to SEE Mephistophilis, and even Lucifer (5.258 passim), but never sees the angels or God?

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## SCENE 3: Power and Servitude

**WHAT:** How is hell defined in this scene?

What is the relationship between Mephistophilis's description of hell and Faustus's assertion of his power over Mephistophilis?

Who has the power in this scene?

**SO WHAT:** How does the operation of power in the scene relate to the kind of power Faustus is able to exert in later scenes? Consider:

- The use of "like" and "as" in Vales' description of their fame (1.121-29); Mephistophilis's refusal to make Faustus a wife (5.137-145 + s.d.) or to answer his questions (5.251).

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## SCENES 4, 10: Comic Counterpoints

**WHAT:** What is the function of **COMIC COUNTERPOINTS**, Scene 4 (Wagner and the Clown) and Scene 10 (The Horse-Courser)?

(Hint: If you say "comic relief," may devils arise like fleas and pinch you for eternity).

Consider:

- The scenes' **reflection** of and **commentary** on the main plot;
- The language of animality and disintegration.

**SO WHAT:** What is the significance of the rehearsing of Faustus's experience at the level of clowns and servants?

What do these scenes tell us about the nature of Faustus's "tragedy" from a humanist and from a theological point of view?

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# PSYCHOMACHIA



- The "battle for the soul"




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## The Soul: HOCKEY PUCK in a COSMIC GAME

The human soul as basically a "prize" in a battle between EXTERNAL, cosmic, metaphysical forces

EG. *The Castel of Perseverence*;  
Various productions of *Faustus* which cast him as a puppet




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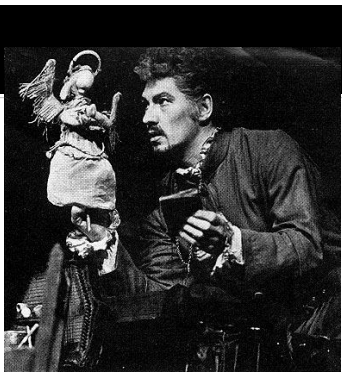
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## The Soul: PSYCHOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE

The human soul as a self-determining AGENT responsible for its CHOICES;

PSYCHOLOGIZED model, in which the battle is INTERNALIZED as part of the individual's psychic make-up.

EG. Ian McKellan 1974 RSC




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## PSYCHOMACHIA: Good and Evil Angels

**WHAT:** What is the function of the two types of psychomachia, the angelic and the earthly (the two scholars, Valdes and Cornelius)? Consider:

- **When** they appear: Angels (1.70-76; 5.1-21); Earthly (1.100 passim; 13.1 passim);
- Faustus's response to them.

**SO WHAT:** How does the presentation of the PSYCHOMACHIA influence our understanding of Faustus's "tragedy" and the nature of his damnation? Is he an AGENT or a HOCKEY-PUCK?

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## SCENE 13: VISIBLE or INVISIBLE?

As Faustus approaches zero hour, he cries: "I would weep, but the devil draws in my tears! ... O, he stays my tongue! I would lift up my hands, but see, they hold them, they hold them!" (13.28-31). Trying to "leap up" to meet God, he fails, wailing: "Who pulls me down?" (13.69).

Do we SEE the devils?

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

Consider the bargains he tries to strike and the escape routes he attempts to find in his closing speech.

In other words: **Who pulls Faustus down?**

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