

# Doctor Faustus: An Extension Pack (DL626)

Jam-packed with complex theories, original performance ideas and critical analysis which will help extend any students' views of this play.

ENG LM

1.

## Staging the Religious Aspects of the Play

What should a director, designer or actor be aware of when considering how to stage the religious aspects of this play, for a modern audience?

It is never fully clear what messages Marlowe intended to convey about religion. Do you think that Marlowe wanted to use this play to criticise religion? To confirm religion? Or even to show conflict between science and religion?

As a director, actor or designer you will need to consider what your intentions are for this very important theme. Read the following essay which will hopefully help you to clarify your own performance intentions for this theme...

### LOOK AT THE PLAY'S RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

Firstly, to help you consider your own intentions for the theme of religion you should have a basic understanding of the play's religious context. This will help you to develop your own interpretations.

Religion in sixteenth century England was extremely important and it was in a constant state of flux. The sixteenth century began with England being staunchly Roman Catholic, but the reign of Henry VIII and the problems that he had with his divorce changed the religious landscape completely. The New Religion or Established Church (not yet the Church of England) was established and it was decreed that all churches would adhere to Protestant doctrines. Henry was succeeded by Edward VI, who continued in the Protestant faith but the succession of Queen Mary in 1553 changed everything back to Catholicism. Protestants were ruthlessly persecuted and the Queen was given the nickname of 'Bloody Mary'.

In 1558 (thirty years before this play was written) Elizabeth I came to the throne, she was a Protestant and was initially tolerant of Catholics, however, her attitudes changed as her forty five year reign progressed. There were many Catholic plots against her, the most famous of which was from Mary Queen of Scots who was eventually executed. In 1570 Pope Pius V excommunicated Elizabeth and in 1580 Pope Gregory III conspired to assassinate her. From 1585 to 1603 Protestant England was at war with Catholic Spain and in 1588 the Spanish attempted to invade with their armadas and were beaten back in the Channel.

At the time this play was written, it had become increasingly difficult to practice Catholicism. Being a Catholic was not a crime but a person would be fined for not conforming to the established religion. Every church was a Protestant church; it was illegal to be a Catholic priest and it was impossible for Catholics to legally practice their faith. A person born during the reign of Elizabeth would be required to practice the Protestant religion whilst their grandparents would almost certainly have been brought up as Catholics.

With the country being declared Protestant, despite the fact that many people were still Catholic, it is easy to understand

why people felt confused over religion. Perhaps Marlowe was using this play to portray people's confusions and doubts about religion. You, as a director, designer or actor will need to consider whether you have such an intention, especially so because it could be argued that a modern day audience are perhaps not as confused as an Elizabethan audience would have been over religion.

### LOOK AT THE PLAY'S LITERARY CONTEXT

It is also important to look at the literary context this play fits in to, when questioning Marlowe's messages about religion. We can then ascertain whether his views and ideas concurred or contrasted with literature of the time and whether an audience would be shocked or accepting of his religious messages.

Marlowe wrote *Dr. Faustus* between 1588 and 1592. The play is thought to be based upon *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Dr. John Faustus*; an English translation of a German book about an actual person who dabbled in the occult. The play was first published in 1604, eleven years after Marlowe's death, although this was not unusual as authors tended to leave the publishing of their work to others. It is the story of a man who sells his soul to the devil in return for twenty four years of liberty, knowledge, pleasure and magic power.

Prior to the Elizabethan era, plays had been primarily mystery or morality plays. Marlowe drew on the themes of the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century morality plays, redemption and damnation.

ENG LM

2.

## Staging the Religious Aspects of the Play

### WHAT IS MARLOWE SAYING ABOUT RELIGION?

Some critics argue that Marlowe, like the writers of morality plays, used this work to warn audiences about the dangers of rejecting religion. Marlowe spells out the consequences of rejecting religion in the prologue when, towards the end of it, we are told that Faustus has become full of pride and arrogance: "swell'n with cunning, of a self-conceit", and that like Icarus in the Greek myth, Faustus has overreached himself and flown too near to the sun, although in this case it is God who has been the instrument of his downfall and not the sun. From the start of the play we know that Faustus' future is doomed and that we should disapprove of his study of magic "cursed necromancy". It seems therefore, at the start of the play the audience are being warned of the dangers of rejecting religion.

Following this opening chorus, Faustus is alone on stage in his study surrounded by his books of learning and he starts talking to himself, addressing himself in the third person. This soliloquy shows us the depth of his learning and is a device to build a relationship between Faustus and the audience. It is also an interesting point to look at in terms of Marlowe's intentions for the theme of religion.

Faustus' opening soliloquy concludes with the idea that he needs to go beyond the human condition and become "a deity." He thinks that only magic will enable this to happen. Therefore, right at the start of the play an audience has to ask the following question: is Faustus supposed to be the incarnation of the secular learnings of the Renaissance and is this play a challenge to Christianity? Should a director want to show Faustus, from his opening soliloquy, as a character who rejects religion and favours the temporal? Such intentions and messages about religion would have been unusual and controversial at the time this play was written.

Yet, this opening soliloquy also causes confusion when trying to analyse it in terms of the religious messages. If this play is to be read as an attack or criticism of religion, why in this opening soliloquy does Faustus still recognise heaven and hell? Despite his secular leanings, he still clings to some elements from the spiritual.

It is at this point that a director, actor or designer must realise the main theme in this play, the theme that is bigger than religion: conflict. From the opening soliloquy alone we see the conflict between the confident and over-reaching Christian Faustus and the conflict between his ambition and boundaries. The prologue asks the audience to denigrate his ambitions but the first speech indicates that religion may put limiting boundaries on human potential. Are we the audience being asked to take sides? Are these questions reflecting the personal beliefs of the author? Was Marlowe in conflict over his own religious beliefs? With the country being declared Protestant, despite the fact that many people were still Catholic, it is easy to understand why people felt confused over religion.

The confusion over this theme further develops as we can never really decide whether Marlowe intended for the play to be a serious tragedy or whether he wanted to inject a little light relief into his messages. Faustus sells his soul to the devil and the play develops mainly into a series of magic shows and tricks put on by the devil for the benefit of Faustus. The play alternates between progressively darker, serious scenes and some lighter comic relief. It is therefore difficult to decide whether Marlowe wanted us to take his messages about religion seriously, or merely be entertained by them.

Unfortunately for an audience, Marlowe never resolves these conflicts and ambiguities over his religious messages. The closing soliloquy of the play seems to indicate that Faustus would like to repent his sins and recant his pact with the devil, but knows that he cannot. Has Faustus realised that he no longer has secular leanings, yet is there no hope for his Christianity? The concluding speech reverses his opening speech, in that he wanted to be a 'mighty god' but would now settle for being less than human. He no longer wishes eternal life but would settle for extinction.

Faustus eventually exits with the devils and we are left to imagine his fate. Are we as an audience supposed to believe that he paid the ultimate price, because he rejected religion? As actor, director or designer you need to decide upon your exact intentions for this very complex theme.

SECTION A

Doctor Faustus

### Glossary

**Secular:** doctrine that rejects religion. It could be argued that Faustus has secular beliefs when he turns his back on religion.

**Temporal:** something that is worldly. It is not concerned or connected with religion.

**Necromancy:** sorcery, the belief in magical spells that conjure evil spirits.



## the Religious Aspects of the Play

Faustus' gradual descent into the dark arts? Would you gradually remove books from the stage with magic props and symbols? Would you reduce the lighting levels?

What effects for the appearance of devils, angels, etc? Would you use music to convey the

Geared specifically at the more able student, it is written to a high level and will help extend students' interpretations of the play whether from a directorial, acting or design viewpoint.

How would the comic scenes be presented in contrast to the serious messages about religion? Should they be slapstick or more subtle? Should the lighting change to signify a lighter moment? Actors and directors would need to switch between making an audience laugh and making them think. There are many different acting styles required for this play.

Doctor Faustus