

**OLD ENGLISH PLAYS NO.
I; MARLOWE'S
THE TRAGICAL HISTORY
OF DOCTOR FAUSTUS**

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CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

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OLD ENGLISH PLAYS No. 1

Marlowe's
The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus

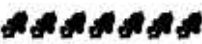

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The Tragical History of
Doctor Faustus 
by Christopher Marlowe 
Edited, with Introduction and Notes, by
F. J. Cox



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THE PLAY
AND
ITS AUTHOR.

THE place of Christopher Marlowe in the hierarchy of the English dramatists is so well defined that it offers no scope whatsoever to the pertinacious critic who, at irregular intervals, vainly seeks to establish for himself a reputation for originality by challenging the world's verdicts and breaking the world's idols. Around Marlowe's shrine no divergent schools contend. The nature of the work which he wrought in his brief lifetime is as clear as its effect upon the development of the English play is obvious and palpable.

In order to apprehend precisely where his place lies, it is essential for us to take a brief survey of the stages which, at Marlowe's advent upon the scene, had already been travelled. During the unfruitful Middle Ages the only dramatic fare available was the Miracle Play, which was a pageant grounded on some episode in the Divine narrative, baldly written and rudely presented, sometimes in churches, sometimes in the open street. Its object was unequivocally religious, and the priest found in it a powerful

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auxiliary. By means of its vernacular rhymes and spectacular glamour it familiarised the people with the Scriptural incidents it portrayed. It threw into strong contrast the beatitude of the saints and the tortures of the damned. The gilded courts of Heaven, the gaping jaws of Hell: such were among its indispensable "properties." The Miracle Play was part and parcel of the mediæval Catholic régime; so close, indeed, was the bond between them, that it rapidly dwindled and died when the Church which had originated and encouraged its performances was deposed from its places of power in this realm.

After the Miracle Play came the "Morality," in which the characters were no longer drawn from the Bible, but were invariably abstractions, each representative of some vice or virtue. Puppets typifying Innocence, Sensualism, Ignorance, Wit, Science, Folly, Conscience, Shame, and the like, now held the traffic of the stage. Of these "Moralities" the piece entitled "Everyman" is generally conceded to be the best surviving example, and it still holds, as we have recently seen, sufficient human interest to attract a London audience in the twentieth century. The aim of the Moral Play being ethical rather than religious, it stands as an important landmark on the long journey which led towards the complete secularisation of the drama.

This secularising process had already proceeded some lengths when "Kit" Marlowe, with a poet's dreams and ambitions stirring within him, came up to London to write for the stage. The

necessity of making "the booth of boards" an adjunct to the pulpit, of being didactic, of writing plays "with a purpose," had disappeared; stimulated by the invigorating atmosphere of the Renaissance, the emancipated playwrights had disdainfully rejected all such curbs and fetters upon their art. They had ceased to draw material from the overworked mines of sacred story and allegorical catalogue, and were boldly ransacking legend and history for themes and characters. So far as choice of subject went, Marlowe was not a pioneer. The tragedies of "Gorboduc" and "The Misfortunes of Arthur"—each founded on an old British legend—are both anterior to Marlowe's *début*. Greene, Nash, and Peele had also been tillers of the same fruitful soil; while Lyly, the author of "Euphues," had made no inconsiderable discoveries with regard to the dramatic treatment of classic story.

Marlowe's triumph, then, lay not in the discovery of such dramatic material, but rather in the process to which he subjected it after it had been discovered. His triumph was that he transmuted it in the alembic of his imagination—an imagination far more powerful than any that had yet been applied to the service of the English stage. Everything he touched became fired by the ardour of his passionate soul. With his raptures he vitalised the dry bones of story and fable. And above all these things, he gave the poetic drama a permanent, inevitable form which Shakespeare borrowed and made perfect. He invented his "mighty line!"

The form which Marlowe superseded and reformed altogether may be described as flamboyant, unrestrained, bombastic. Full of sound and fury, it revelled in the employment of full-blown epithet, inflated imagery, pompous diction, and hyperbolic statement. Largely meretricious, it sought to hide under a gaudy exterior the poverty of ideas within. Shakespeare, with wonderful mimetic skill, parodies the style of his own and Marlowe's predecessors in the speeches of the Player King and the Player Queen in "Hamlet," and none will be surprised at Queen Gertrude's criticism that the latter protested too much. Over-protestation was indeed, the keynote of the style, just as the occasional rhymed couplet was its outward sign and symbol.

A strong example of this flamboyant utterance may be quoted from Greene's "Orlando Furioso." The theme is the infinite vileness of women, and it is safe to say that nowhere else in our literature has the utter worthlessness of the sex been so violently exposed! Thus:

Discourteous women, Nature's fairest ill,
The woe of man, that first-created curse,
Base female sex, sprung from black Ate's
loins,
Proud, disdainful, cruel, and unjust,
Whose words are shaded with enchanting
wiles,
Worse than Medusa mateth* all our minds;
And in their hearts sits shameless treachery,
Turning a truthless vile circumference.

*See Note 1, *post*.