



## Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*

Christopher Marlowe was the first modern English playwright. Son of a shoemaker, he was born in 1564 and attended Cambridge University thanks to a scholarship from the Archbishop of Canterbury. Marlowe, however, left Cambridge to write plays for the flourishing theatres of London. While in London he wrote *Tamburlaine the Great* (1587), and *The Jew of Malta* (1589). In around 1591, Marlowe wrote *Edward II*, and presumably the play *Doctor Faustus*, which was first published in 1604, eleven years after Christopher Marlowe's death. The play is a study in ambition. The main character is an 'overreacher', a man who strives against human limitations. He aims to know, possess and experience everything he can.

The play is based on a medieval legend centred on the character of Doctor Faustus, a disreputable scholar and astrologer who wanted to extend his limited knowledge and pleasures by striking a deal with the devil at a very high price: his eternal soul.

The play both borrows traditional forms – it is in some ways a medieval morality play, with its good and bad angels – and breaks with them. Faustus, for example, is the hero of this tragedy, but unlike the classic tragic character he belongs to a low social class.

Faustus had already mastered the works of Aristotle, Galen, Justinian, and finally, Jerome's Bible. At this point of his life, however, he wishes to have magic books, books that seem to contain forbidden knowledge. For this reason, Faustus sells his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge and power, but gets very little of either. He considers repenting but he is too proud to ask God for forgiveness. His pride ultimately seals his fate.

Apparently *Doctor Faustus* is based on a Christian moral: because of his mortal sin, Faustus is condemned to live in hell. He denies God and is therefore denied God's mercy. The play is also a symbolical analysis of the shift from the late medieval world to early modern society.

### ACTIVITIES

- 1 Discuss the main topics in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*.