1564–1593

Though not the first English poet to write in blank verse (unrhymed, iambic pentameter), Christopher Marlowe's brilliant use of it in his plays established it as the preeminent meter for verse drama and ultimately for epic poetry in English. Marlowe wrote one of the world's immortal tragedies, Dr. Faustus, as well as several other notable plays and poems.

Born in Canterbury, Marlowe was the son of a shoemaker. He went to Cambridge University on a scholarship usually awarded to students studying for the ministry. However, he spent much of his time writing plays and serving as a government agent. He never took holy orders. He is, indeed, reputed to have been an atheist, or at least to have held highly unorthodox religious views.

While at Cambridge, Marlowe wrote Tamburlaine, the play that made the public aware of his dazzling abilities. It dramatizes the exploits of a fourteenth-century Scythian shepherd who conquers much of the known world. As Marlowe portrays him, Tamburlaine personifies energy and ambition. He is a dynamic character well served by the dramatist's powerful blank verse. In the remaining six years of his life, Marlowe wrote five more plays, including Dr. Faustus and a sequel to Tamburlaine. On May 30, 1593, he was stabbed to death in a tavern. His murder may have been the result of a fight over the bill, or it may have been a political assassination.

Was Marlowe a spy? Hints that he may have been for a time, a spy for Queen Elizabeth's secret service rest on an astonishing letter the Queen's Privy council wrote to the authorities at Cambridge in June of 1587. The letter seeks to suppress rumors that Marlowe planned to go to Rheims. "It was not in her Majesty's pleasure that anyone employed as he had been in matters touching the benefit of her country should be defamed by those who are ignorant in the affairs he went about," they wrote. Such official concern for a young divinity student suggests that Marlowe had performed an unusual service for the government.

Marlowe's fame rests primarily on his plays, especially on his "mighty line," as Ben Jonson described his dramatic blank verse. Dr. Faustus has been a classic of dramatic literature for four hundred years. However, Marlowe's nondramatic poetry alone would be enough to secure him a permanent place in English literature. Hero and Leander is one of the finest narrative poems ever written in English, and "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" is one of the best known and most popular lyrics of the English Renaissance.
from The Tragical History of the Life, and Death of Doctor Faustus

The Faust Legend. The Faust legend is one of the most important of western civilization. Numerous writers have seen it as a profound revelation of the consequences of aspiring to rise above the human condition.

The legend derives from the life and activities of an actual German scholar and magician, Johann Faust (or Faustus), who lived from about 1480 to 1540. He traveled widely, performed magic, and died under mysterious circumstances. Many Germans of the time considered him a fraud, but Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, believed that he had satanic powers. Even during Faust's life he was the subject of legends. According to many of them, he had sold his soul to the devil for youth, knowledge, and magical powers.

In 1587 a crude, unreliable biography of Faust appeared. The unknown author had incorporated into it many legends of other magicians. The biography concludes with Faust going to hell at the end of his life. This volume appeared in an English translation titled The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus. It is the immediate source of Marlowe's play, which was probably written in 1588.

What effect did The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus have on Elizabethan audiences? Witches and devils were very real to Elizabethans, and when Faustus signed his soul away, their blood froze. Indeed, Elizabethans often attributed any unexplained occurrence. Many legends sprang up about performances of Doctor Faustus. One story concerns a performance of the play in Exeter. As Faustus summoned the devils, the actors counted one more devil than the scene called for and feared that Satan himself was in their midst. Terrified, they stopped the play, the audience ran from their seats, and the actors bolted from town early the next morning.

Think of an experience you would anticipate with dread—for example, a test of some kind, a visit to a doctor or dentist, or a confrontation. What would be your thoughts and feelings beforehand? Write a monologue that presents the thoughts that pass through your mind. Try to write the monologue in a way that expresses your feelings without actually naming them.
FAUSTUS: Ah, Faustus.
Now hast thou but one bare hour to live,
And then thou must be damn'd perpetually!
Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven,
That time may cease, and midnight never come;
Fair Nature's eye, rise, rise again, and make
Perpetual day; or let this hour be but
A year, a month, a week, a natural day,
That Faustus may repent and save his soul!
O lente, lente currite, noctis equi!
The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike,
The devil will come, and Faustus must be damn'd.
O, I'll leap up to my God!--Who pulls me down?--
See, see, where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!
One drop would save my soul, half a drop: ah, my Christ!--
Ah, rend not my heart for naming of my Christ!
Yet will I call on him: O, spare me, Lucifer!--
Where is it now? tis gone: and see, where God
Stretcheth out his arm, and bends his ireful brows!
Mountains and hills, come, come, and fall on me,
And hide me from the heavy wrath of God!
No, no!
Then will I headlong run into the earth:
Earth, gape! O, no, it will not harbour me!
You stars that reign'd at my nativity,
Whose influence hath allotted death and hell,
Now draw up Faustus, like a foggy mist,
Into the entrails of yon labouring clouds,
That, when you vomit forth into the air,
My limbs may issue from your smoky mouths,
So that my soul may but ascend to heaven!

The clock strikes the half-hour.
Ah, half the hour is past! 'twill all be past anon.
O God,
If thou wilt not have mercy on my soul,
Yet for Christ's sake, whose blood hath ransom'd me,
Impose some end to my incessant pain;
Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years,
A hundred thousand, and at last be sav'd!
O, no end is limited to damned souls!
Why wert thou not a creature wanting soul?
Or why is this immortal that thou hast?
Ah, Pythagoras' metempsychosis, were that true,
This soul should fly from me, and I be chang'd
Unto some brutish beast! all beasts are happy,
For, when they die,
Their souls are soon dissolv'd in elements;
But mine must live still to be plagu'd in hell.
Curs'd be the parents that engender'd me!
No, Faustus, curse thyself, curse Lucifer
That hath depriv'd thee of the joys of heaven.
[The clock strikes twelve.]
O, it strikes, it strikes! Now, body, turn to air,
Or Lucifer will bear thee quick to hell!
[Thunder and lightning.]
O soul, be chang'd into little water-drops,
And fall into the ocean, ne'er be found!
[Enter Devils.]
My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!
Adders and serpents, let me breathe a while!
Ugly hell, gape not! come not, Lucifer!
I'll burn my books!