Marlowe's Close, Not-So-Close, Rendition
to the *FaustBook*

A Comparative Literature Study of the Early Modern
English Period

Aitana Peña Olivas
Antonio López Santos

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RESUMEN: En el Trabajo de Fin de Grado (TFG) expuesto se ha realizado un estudio de literatura comparada con el fin de investigar acerca de la figura y mito del Doctor Fausto y su papel en la literatura medieval y renacentista inglesa. Para ello, el presente estudio pretende analizar la relación entre la traducción al inglés del Faustbuch alemán realizada por P.F., The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus, y la posterior versión en forma de obra de teatro de Christopher Marlowe, The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus. Con dicho propósito, se comienza tratando la posible existencia del Doctor Fausto, así como el contexto religioso que rodea ambas versiones del mito. Tras ello, se comparan sus estructuras y el tema principal de ambas obras ahondando en la ambigüedad de la escritura de Marlowe en contraste con el didactismo directo del Fausto alemán e inglés. Las palabras y acciones de Fausto y Mephistopheles a lo largo de las dos obras, así como sus divergentes finales, son también analizadas con el fin de reafirmar, tanto la relación entre los dos textos, como la evolución que el mito alemán presenta en Doctor Faustus.

Palabras clave: Literatura comparada, literatura inglesa, FaustBook, Faustbuch, Christopher Marlowe, Doctor Faustus, Fausto, Mephistopheles, ambigüedad, didactismo.

ABSTRACT: In the present “Trabajo de Fin de Grado” (TFG) a comparative literature study has been carried out aiming to further investigate the figure and myth of Doctor Faustus and his role in English Medieval and Renaissance literature. With this aim, this work expects to analyze the relationship between P.F.’s translation of the German Faustbuch, The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus, and the later theatre play written by Christopher Marlowe, The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus. This paper begins by dealing with the possible existence of Doctor Faustus as well as with the religious setting surrounding both versions of the myth. After that, both works’ structures and main themes are compared, examining Marlowe’s ambiguity in contrast with
the English and German *FaustBook's* straightforward didacticism. Faustus and Mephistopheles' actions and words in both works, as well as their divergent endings, are also considered in this study with the purpose of reaffirming, not only the relationship between both texts, but also the evolution that the German myth has suffered in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*.

Keywords: Comparative literature, English literature, *FaustBook, Faustbuch*, Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, Faustus, Mephistopheles, ambiguity, didacticism.
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2. Introduction

Translated anonymously from the German original *Historia von D. Johann Fausten* by P.F.¹ in 1592, the complex, well-known and oft performed *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus* or the English *FaustBook* (in German, *Faustbuch*), as it is referred to by the critics, has been interpreted and adapted by writers and intellectuals throughout time² such as Marlowe, Goethe, Coleridge, Mann, and painters, composers and filmmakers such as Schubert, Schumann, Murnau or Sokurov, to name just a few of the many examples available (Rutter 41; Smeed 2). The complex and open-to-interpretation adventures and misadventures of Doctor John Faustus were adapted for the first time just a few years after the publication of the first version of the novel by Johann Spies³ in Frankfurt am Main, and its translation to English, by the hand of Christopher Marlowe. However, Marlowe has pictured Faustus and his companions in a play that, although close to its source, its final significance is not as straightforward as the Lutheran didacticism found on the *FaustBook* (Riggs 232; Rutter 41; Smeed 3). Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the relationship between P.F.’s *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus* and Christopher Marlowe’s interpretation, *Doctor Faustus*⁴, analysing not only the existing proximity between both texts but also the evolution that the myth experienced through Marlowe and the understanding the English author gave it.

2.1 Justification

The subject matter chosen for this TFG answers to personal motivations in connection with

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¹ The identity of P.F. is unsolved yet, only this acronym is known. The identity of the author of the German *Historia von D. Johann Fausten* (*Faustbuch*) is also unknown. See Figure 1 and 2 in the appendix to contemplate the cover of both *Faustbuch* and *FaustBook*.


³ Johann Spies is only the publisher of the German *Faustbuch*. See note 2 for further information.

⁴ The original name of Marlowe's play is The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus but since the edited compilation of his plays consulted for this work has shortened it to Doctor Faustus, this will be the form used throughout it. See Figure 3 in the appendix to contemplate Christopher Marlowe's play cover and see how the necromancy and devilish motifs are already shown in its first page's engraving.
my academic studies. During the course of my university years I have developed a particular interest in English literature rather than in linguistics. Also, my Erasmus experience as a Comparative Literature student for one course made me, not only learn about this discipline, but also enjoy literature even more so. Besides, Marlowe's work, the legend of Faust and the Early Modern English period seemed very appealing to me as most of the research work I have done over the course of this degree has been mostly focused on Romanticism and Victorianism. For these reasons, and in order to widen my expertise on these matters before finishing my English Studies Degree, I have chosen a comparative study on Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and the English *FaustBook*.

2.2 Methodology

With the purpose of achieving the most thorough understanding possible of the two mentioned works, this study first focuses on a brief but necessary overview of the background behind Faustus as a living person and how it evolved into a myth. A look into the Early Modern English and German period religious setting is also taken, as well as its influence on the English *FaustBook* and on Marlowe's play. Then, the overall structure of both works will be examined while addressing the main theme of the story and placing particular emphasis on Marlowe's characteristic ambiguity. After that, the main characters' words and behaviour as well as its symbolism will be analysed throughout various scenes of the story, to finish with a comparison of both final acts and the intentions that the authors had with them. Finally, a conclusion reaffirming the aim of this work and summarising the areas and aspects observed throughout will close it.

3. Framing Faustus' myth: Historical Setting and Marlowe's Circumstances

Although from our twenty-first century perspective *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus* may seem an imaginative tale of witchcraft, where the all-time theme good vs bad, God vs Devil is presented; it is necessary to consider
the circumstances surrounding Faust's figure in order to understand that it is not solely a fictional character. A view shared by all the critics studied for this work who deal with Doctor Faustus' origins (Empson 5; Jones 3; Rutter 42; Smeed 1, 90), claims Faustus legend is based on a real German scholar who lived during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries called Georgious Faustus or Georg Helmstetter. Although his birth and death dates are not clear, it is known that he was a scholar who wandered throughout Germany, interested in occult practices such as alchemy and magic, and practicing medicine and astrology. Being acquainted with such knowledge, Georg embodied a humanist man and, therefore, could have been called Doctor (Empson 6). However, the environment around him was not very conducive to such practices due to the atmosphere of conservatism held by the Protestants and Lutheran principles. Faustus was considered a Devil's sorcerer and his practices were condemned since the seeking of knowledge was not considered acceptable (Bevington and Rasmussen xii-xvi; Empson 6; Jones 3-4; Smeed 2-3). With all these ingredients, and the addition that Faust sold his soul to the Devil, a legend was created when the Lutheran Jonathan Spies published the German Faustbuch in 1587 claiming it as truth, though the intention “was clearly both to entertain and to construct the 'improving' biography of a presumptuous man whose dissatisfaction with the God-given limits to human knowledge led to his downfall” (Smeed 2).

The Historia was a best seller not only because of the popularity of the magic, cosmology and concerns about afterlife at that time, but also due to the Renaissance aspiration of knowledge and the Protestantism issue of God limits on wisdom (Empson 14; Jones 9; Smeed 90): “Ah grosse vnderstanding and wilfull will, what seazeth on my limmes other than a robbing of my life … The punishment that I see prepared for me of my selfe now

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5 The name of the actual historical person varies from one study to another.
6 It is believed that the real Faustus' neck was twisted when he died. This mark is characteristic of those who have sold their souls to the Devil. See Empson 8.
must I suffer.”

(“Faust Book” ch. 59). As can be seen in this fragment, Faust laments his hunger for sensual pleasures and knowledge, reckoning that damnation is now close and showing the clear didactic and moralistic purpose of the FaustBook as well as the multiple interpretations of his words, helping the legend to survive through the centuries. Although, the German Faustbuch was translated in 1592, critics consider that perhaps Marlowe had access to the text before it was published since the play's publication date swings between 1588 and 1592-3 (Riggs 181; Rutter 41). Therefore, the English FaustBook would be Marlowe's Doctor Faustus's principal source (Empson 36, 42; Levin 136; Riggs 181; Rutter 41) but considering also that a certain quantity of Marlowe's personal life is reflected therein.

Riggs, who discusses these biographical overtones more broadly, argues that Marlowe identified himself with Faustus: Marlowe spent six years as a scholar in Cambridge studying astronomy, mythology and astrology and, as Riggs continues, “conjuring was not a freak division at Oxford and Cambridge … English scholars learned how to operate demons from Continental books on magic” (176-177), supplying the play's plot with further sorcery elements. Thus, the popular “scholar-magician who strikes a bargain with the Devil” (181) could have been appealing for Marlowe, acquainted with similar circumstances. However, there is a clash between the critics concerning Marlowe's religious ideals: did he repudiate Faust's peculiar morality or did he support it? While Kirschbaum (80) and Riggs (3), despite the support of the latter on Faustus and Marlowe's similarities, maintain that Marlowe, as a Christian, rejected Faustus' ways; Levin argues that the English author was an “impertinent and wilful miscreant whom Elizabethan preachers termed a scounrer” (161). Nonetheless, generally Marlowe's works are open to interpretation and so is Doctor Faustus, an ambivalent

7 Though a digitalized version of P.F.'s 1592 manuscript has been consulted when conducting this study (See P.F.), for the sake of clarity and convenience, a hyperlinked and typewritten version of the English FaustBook is used for quotations. See “Faust Book”.

8 Riggs perspective is supported in some brief notes by Bevington and Rasmussen xvii, Levin 136 and Rutter 41.
play that could be defined with the very own Faustus words: “Che serà, serà/What will be, shall be” (Marlowe 141)

4. Confronting P.F.’s *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus* and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*

4.1 The book vs. the Play: Structure and Narrator

Though the overall theme of the Faustus legend and his “Damnable life” is, in both texts, the defiance of God's intervention in human affairs, the longing for free will and supreme knowledge and its consequences, taking into account the possibility of redemption; Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is not a purely staged reproduction of the myth as Brooke argues: “The play is the thing, but ... [it] is not just ... exploiting a popular interest in devils and witchcraft ... . There is a principle of selection in his treatment of the *FaustBook*” (93). As was pointed out before, *Doctor Faustus* 'history . . . , his coniuration, and other actes that he did in his life; out of the which example euery Christian may learne” (“Faust Book” ch. 63) come from P.F.’s *History* making both works' overall structure similar: Faustus' beginnings and desires are presented, Mephistopheles is summoned and the pact is made, Faustus asks the pertinent questions, his adventures, travels, jokes and horseplays are described\(^9\), Helen of Troy appears living Faustus' final years with him and the redeemless death happens. Even the narrator's voice of the *FaustBook* is reinterpreted as the Chorus in the play, framing the incidents and opening an invitation to acknowledge “the theme of wickedness” (Smeed 15). Nevertheless, while in the *FaustBook* the narrator is an outsider, an observer who moralizes and teaches didactic in a straightforward way; Marlowe presents Faustus' tragedy from the inside, giving him life and passion; turning him into a “hero ... a living man thirsting the

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\(^9\) Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* exists in two versions; the A-text and the B-text. There is a consensus among the critics that a wider version of the comic scenes is played in the B-Text with the purpose of further entertaining the play's audience. See Bevington and Rasmussen xvi-xvii; Empson 152,168; Levin 151; Rutter 54-60.
infinite” and no judgment is made but the limitless knowledge available is exalted (Brooke 96; Ellis 37; Smeed 16):

These metaphysics of magicians,

And necromantic books are heavenly,

…

Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires.

O, what a world of profit and delight,

…

Is promis'd to the studious artizan! (Marlowe 141)

4.2 Marlowe's Ambiguity: To Repent or not to Repent

At this point of the paper Marlowe's characteristic ambivalence needs to be thoroughly analysed: Marlowe indeed recognizes the Renaissance man's picture in Faustus but, simultaneously, his arrogance, vanity and vainglory and his basic hedonistic desires are presented in the play10 (Brooke 96-97; Jones 882-83; Smeed 3):

How pliant is this Mephistophilis,

Full of obedience and humility!

Such is the force of magic and my spells. (Marlowe 146)

Marlowe's dualism goes on in many other topics such as the Christian view of God's limits upon humanity and man's “voluntary subjection … to an accepted order” (Brooke 93). Whereas in the FaustBook morality lessons are linked to Christianity and Faustus' sins are condemned openly, numerous studies support the ambiguous character of Marlowe's play. Research by Brooke, Empson and Rutter (103-105; 125; 44-49) highlights the fact that a play

10 These specific characteristics also are featured in the FaustBook but keeping a rejecting attitude.
satirizing religious ideals and exalting sorcery at that time suggests a certain atheism:\textsuperscript{11}:

Tis magic, magic that hath ravished me.

\ldots

And I, that have with concise syllogisms
Gravelled the pastors of the German church
\ldots

Will be as cunning as Agrippa was, (Marlowe 141)

And yet, morality is acknowledged along the verses and divinity studies exalted:

So soon he profits in divinity,
\ldots

That shortly he was graced with doctor's name,

Excelling all whose sweet delight disputes

In heavenly matters of theology; (Marlowe 139)

Finally, the biggest ambiguity on Marlowe's play is asked by the very same Faustus:

"Che sarà, sarà" (Marlowe 141); "am I, or am I not, one of the saved?" (Rutter 49). That is to say, is Faustus' damnation assured? If it is, why the continuous conflict between repentance and non-repentance?

FAUSTUS When I behold the heavens, then I repent
\ldots

MEPHISTOPHELES Why Faustus,

Thinkest thou heaven is such a glorious thing?

I tell thee, 'tis not half so fair as thou

Or any man that breathes on earth.

FAUSTUS How provest thou that?

\textsuperscript{11} Brooke strongly claims that Marlowe's ideas were actually blasphemous which was a serious offence at his time. See Brooke 105 for further information.
MEPHISTOPHELES It was made for man; therefore is man more excellent.

FAUSTUS If it were made for man, ’twas made for me:

I will renounce this magic and repent (Marlowe 157)

Although the changing, unsteady mind of Faustus is also characteristic of the *FaustBook*, depriving “him of any constant purpose” (Jones 17), his laments always end with his own thoughts of final unrepentance such as “Too late”, beside Mephistopheles’s constant threats of torture:

I durst neuer doo it, although I often minded, to settle my selfe vnto godly people, . . . then came the Diuell and would haue had me away, . . . and sayd so soone as I turned againe to God, hee would dispatch mee altogether.

(“Faust Book” ch. 63)

In Marlowe, Faustus’ struggle between good and evil is portrayed by the Good and the Evil Angel, two “powerful reinforcements of [the] metaphor … of the vacillating mind of Faustus” (Jones 17):

GOOD ANGEL Faustus, repent yet, God will pity thee.

EVIL ANGEL Thou art a spirit. God cannot pity thee.

FAUSTUS Who buzzeth in mine ears I am a spirit?

Be I a devil, yet God may pity me;

Ay, God will pity me if I repent.

EVIL ANGEL Ay, but Faustus never shall repent. (Marlowe 157)

Critics (Brooke 107; Empson 171; Greg 82; Jones 17; Kirschbaum 88; Rutter 51) agree that these voices give Faustus moments of brief clarity where repentance is possible. Nevertheless, as he himself reaffirms a moment later: “My heart's so hardened I cannot repent.” (157). Besides going forward and backward during the whole play, Faustus is always, as occurs in the *FaustBook*, convinced that he cannot repent despite the opportunities
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the Angels might see. In both works, Faustus puts himself in a place where God cannot forgive him, denying any opportunity presented and defying God's will:

   Further, I covenant and grant . . . that at the end of 24. yeares next ensuing the date of this present Letter, . . . be serued of them at my wil, . . . And to the more strengthening of this writing, I haue written it with mine owne hand and blood, (“Faust Book” ch. 6)

   But tell me, Faustus, shall I have thy soul?
   And I will be thy slave, and wait on thee,
   . . .

   FAUSTUS Ay, Mephistotheles, I give it thee.
   . . .

   Lo, Mephistotheles, for love of thee
   I cut mine arm, and with my proper blood
   Assure my soul to be great Lucifer's,
   . . .

   FAUSTUS Consummatum est; this bill is ended, (Marlowe 152)

In this way, both Faustus sign their covenants with Mephistopheles, the spirit who may serve him, satisfy every desire and answer every question. In these extracts, works are quite similar: the covenant’s significance and the pact with blood that reaffirms that, after twenty-four years, Faustus will belong to the Devil, are alike: “a little blood … in earnest of real death in the end” (Empson 129). With this conjuration begins Faustus' years of senses pleased and knowledge acquired:

   FAUSTUS Speak, Mephistopheles, what means this show?

   MEPHISTOPHELES Nothing, Faustus, but to delight thy mind withal
   And to shew thee what magic can perform.
FAUSTUS But may I raise up spirits when I please?

MEPHISTOPHELES Ay, Faustus, and do greater things than these. (Marlowe 153)

4. 3 Helen of Troy and the Old Man: Marlowe's Final Approach

Despite the joy of being able to perform magic and obtain what he desires, Faustus' inner struggle will begin over time, but the longing is futile for Faustus as he will not repent. The years go by and with them his adventures and his jokes but with this ambivalence always present. At this point, and as the studies presented highlight, two encounters in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* cannot be missed: Helen of Troy and the Old Man; the last stops in Faustus' path. Helen appears in both texts and represents Faustus' last desire and his last act as an “incorrigible hedonist” (Kirschbaum 89): “FAUSTUS Was this the face that launched a thousand ships/ And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?/ Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.” (Marlowe 178). Helen of Troy appears in both versions and, since she disappears a few moments before the ending, critics argue that she must be a succubus, a spirit or a demon (Levin 155; Rutter 56, Smeed 189).

It is from her vanishing where the two stories split apart from each other. The pitiful and fateful grand finale of the play and the *History* shows, as could not be otherwise, Faustus' death by failing to have repented and by maintaining that he can control his own soul as opposed to God's will over it. Since the myth, as said before, has its roots in Lutheranism, Faustus' “believes] that he has put himself beyond God's ability to forgive him” (Rutter 50) but this fact “is untenable as it places a limit on divine power” (50). His soul does not belong to him so he must repent or die at the hands of the Devil so that the story can have a further message. In the last chapters, Faustus offers various soliloquies as well as a speech to his

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12 In Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* Helen disappears in act 5.1, just before the Old Man enters the scene. See Marlowe 176. In the *FaustBook* the narrator tell the readers in chapter 55 that she disappears with their child when Faustus dies. See “Faust Book” ch. 55.
students where he denounces knowledge: “Knowledge dare I not trust” (“Faust Book” ch. 61) and keeps his belief of not possible repentance: “I know no hope resteth in my gronings. I haue desired that it should bee so, and God hath sayd Amen to my misdoings: for now I must haue shame to comfort me in my calamities.” (“Faust Book” ch. 61). With a grotesque ending, Faust is dismembered and with an epigraph, the author points out that it may serve as an example every Christian may learne, . . . to be at defiance with all diuelian workes, as God hath most precisely forbidden, to the end we should not inuite the diuell as a guest, nor giue him place as that wicked Faustus hath done (“Faust Book” ch. 63).

Quite on the contrary, Marlowe's ambivalence remains until the end, moving away from the straightforward message of the FaustBook. Along with Helen's figure, who does not stay next to Faustus as in P. F’s translation but is summoned discontinuously in the last scenes, enters in the fifth scene\textsuperscript{13}, an Old Man, a character created by Marlowe. His entrance in the scene acts as a Christian counterweight to Faustus and Helen's paganism and penetrates into the consciousness of the necromancer (Levin 155):

OLD MAN Ah, Doctor Faustus, that I might prevail
To guide thy steps unto the way of life,

. . .

That shall conduct thee to celestial rest!
Break heart, drop blood, and mingle it with tears-
Tears falling from repentant heaviness
Of thy most vile and loathsome filthiness, (Marlowe 177)

The Old Man's speech offers ultimately one last chance of redemption (Brooke 108;

\textsuperscript{13} Of the A-text of the play.
Kirschbaum 88; Levin 156), one last chance to accept his beliefs and the existence of a forgiving God; the struggle, again, between repentance and non-repentance (88): “Where art thou, Faustus? Wretch, what hast thou done?/ Damned art thou, Faustus, damned! Despair and die!” (Marlowe 177). The Old Man implies that hope is still available despite the presence of Helena, who is claimed by Brooke to be the ultimate damnation (108). However, Faustus chooses Helena, chooses his appetites and his most primitive will, opposing God, embracing Hell and sending the Old Man to torture: “But Faustus' offence can ne'er be pardoned … and must remain in hell for ever. Hell, ah, hell, forever!” (Marlowe 179-180). In this manner, Faustus reaches the end of his covenant and the end of his days. Unlike the FaustBook, this end is not as dramatic and bloody, but thus leaves Marlowe its open ending: Faustus is, once again, aware of his sins but doubtful and willing to purge “the pride of knowledge” (Brockbank 175): “I'll burn my books!” (Marlowe 182). The open ending and the last sentences of Faustus offers a balance between the dramatic and reverential finale of the FaustBook, and yet leaves it open to interpretation.

5. Conclusion

Having reached this point, it is necessary to take a look at all the evidence collected and to ponder whether the purpose of this work has been achieved. Although it would be difficult to deny the close relationship between Marlowe's Doctor Faustus and the The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus translated by P.F, it is not risky to raise one's voice and defend Marlowe's own characteristics as a writer implied on the play. Both texts have deep undertones in Christianity and Lutheran Protestantism since they were written not far from each other, in an Early Modern setting. The purpose of the History, as it has been analyzed, is straightforward didacticism, a cautionary tale with a moral message, as his narrator exemplifies along the story. However, Marlowe's Doctor Faustus not only has this religious background implicit in the play, the
characters, the sorcery, the seeking of knowledge and the question of the possible final redemption, the same terrific images of Hell, and spirits and demons mixed with even comic scenes, but also presents a complex ambiguity and dualism that allows the myth to evolve and grow, as well as to be widely open to interpretation. Faustus is one of those all-time characters that we never tire of, so eclectic and debatable that the number of authors that have written about it, as well as the number of critics that will analyze his world, will continue to grow as time goes by.
6. Works Cited


Figure 1: Cover image of the *Historia von D. Johann Fausten* published by Johann Spies.
Figure 2: Cover image of the *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus* translated by P.F.
Figure 3. Cover image of *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* written by Christopher Marlowe.