

## **The Character of Mephistophilis**

**Or**

### **The Concept of Hell in *Doctor Faustus***

Christopher Marlowe was the foremost Elizabethan tragedian of his day who belonged to the group of university-educated practitioners of literature known collectively as the 'University Wits'. In Marlowe's play, Mephistophilis has layers to his personality. He admits that separation from God is anguish, and is capable of fear and pain. But he is gleefully evil, participating at every level in Faustus' destruction. Not only does Mephistophilis get Faustus to sell his soul; he also encourages Faustus to waste his twenty-four years of power.

Mephistophilis is the second most important dramatic personage in the drama. He appears in most of the scenes with Faustus. When he is first seen by Faustus, he is horrendously ugly. Faustus immediately sends him away and has him reappear in the form of a Franciscan friar. The mere physical appearance of Mephistophilis suggests the ugliness of hell itself. In his first appearance, we discover that Mephistophilis is bound to Lucifer in a manner similar to Faustus' later servitude. Mephistophilis is not free to serve Faustus unless he has Lucifer's permission. Then after the pact, he will be Faustus' servant for twenty-four years. Consequently, the concepts of freedom and bondage are important ideas connected with Mephistophilis and Faustus. In other words, no person in the entire order of the universe is entirely free, and what Faustus is hoping for in his contract is a complete and total physical, not moral, freedom. It is paradoxical that the brilliant Dr. Faustus does not see this contradiction in his views about freedom and bondage.

In most of the scenes, Mephistophilis functions as the representative of hell and Lucifer. Only in a few fleeting moments do we see that Mephistophilis is also experiencing both suffering and damnation because of his status as a fallen angel. In the third scene, he admits that he is also tormented by ten thousand hells because he had once tasted the bliss of heaven and now is in hell with Lucifer and the other fallen angels.

Upon Faustus' insistence to know about the nature of hell, Mephistophilis reveals that it is not a place, but a condition or state of being. Any place where God is not, is hell. Being deprived of everlasting bliss is also hell. In other words, heaven is being admitted into the presence of God, and hell, therefore, is deprivation of the presence of God. This definition of hell corresponded to the newly founded doctrine of the Anglican church, which had just recently broken with the Roman Catholic church. But Marlowe also uses a medieval concept of hell for dramatic purposes. As the devils appear in the final scene and as Faustus contemplates his eternal damnation, there are strong suggestions and images of a hell consisting of severe punishment and torment, where ugly devils swarm about and punish the unrepentant sinner.

Marlowe's characters are significant due to its newness, renaissance influence, Machiavellian morality, powerful and passionate expressions, element of tragic inner conflict and the character of Mephistophilis speaks volumes about it.