

PROPOSAL

Title: Characterization and Spiritual Individuality in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*

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Abstract

This paper explores the place of Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* in the history of religious dramatic literature, particularly his contribution to literature's focus on individual character. It attempts to show how the cultural shift from the dominance of the medieval Church in England to the rise of Protestantism is reflected in the 1604 play. In *Dr. Faustus*, Marlowe moves away from the universality of the morality plays of the medieval era and introduces both concepts from contemporary Protestant dramas in addition to his own emphasis on individual characterization. The paper uses experts' definitions of morality plays and Protestant dramas as well as direct commentary on *Dr. Faustus* to draw these conclusions. It also uses the quintessential morality play *Everyman* with which to compare and contrast Marlowe's play.

To provide an effective update on morality plays, Marlowe uses many established elements of the genre, including the title character's allegorical nature, the story's overall "moral," the use of a temptation plot, and more. From this base, he moves on to reflect the Protestant's ridicule of the medieval Church hierarchy, aligning himself with the Reformation's emphasis on the individual over the corporate. He paints God as a very distant, wrathful being which allows his study of Faustus to be more spiritually complicated and personal. He also shows God's servants to be ineffective, through which Faustus is not merely a pawn but a being

who must struggle and who makes his own choices. The way that Marlowe characterizes the devil, Mephistophilis, further emphasizes characterization: devils were a broad stereotype in morality plays, and Marlowe's personalized take was unprecedented in drama. Finally, the paper focuses on the character of Faustus himself, Marlowe's clearest update on morality plays. Faustus's background, complexity, and spiritual turmoil set him apart from the Everyman of morality plays. The content of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* along with the research on morality plays make a compelling argument for its reflection of the historical context in which the play was written, as well as its contribution to literary characterization.