

## The Possible Midpoint of Western Intellectual History or Being Romantic Doesn't Involve Candlelight and Seductive Music?

Goethe's *Faust* (1801-1832)

Faust is bored and disappointed. He decides to call on the Devil for further knowledge and magic powers with which to indulge all the pleasure and knowledge of the world. In response, the Devil's representative, Mephistopheles, appears. He makes a bargain with Faust: Mephistopheles will serve Faust with his magic powers for a set number of years, but at the end of the term, the Devil will claim Faust's soul and Faust will be eternally damned. The term usually stipulated in the early tales is 24 years—one year for each of the hours in a day.

During the term of the bargain, Faust makes use of Mephistopheles in various ways. In many versions of the story, particularly Goethe's drama, Mephistopheles helps him to seduce a beautiful and innocent girl, usually named Gretchen, whose life is ultimately destroyed. However, Gretchen's innocence saves her in the end, and she enters Heaven. In Goethe's rendition, Faust is saved by God's grace via his constant striving—in combination with Gretchen's pleadings with God in the form of the Eternal Feminine. However, in the early tales, Faust is irrevocably corrupted and believes his sins cannot be forgiven; when the term ends, the Devil carries him off to Hell.

***Faust* and the adjective *Faustian* imply a situation in which an ambitious person surrenders moral integrity in order to achieve power and success for a delimited term.**

**FAUST:** Ah! Now I've *done* Philosophy,  
I've finished Law and Medicine,  
And sadly even Theology:  
Taken fierce pains, from end to end.  
Now here I am, a fool for sure!  
No wiser than I was before:  
Master, Doctor's what they call me,  
And I've been ten years, already,  
Crosswise, arcing, to and fro,  
Leading my students by the nose,  
And see that we can know - nothing!  
It almost sets my heart burning.  
I'm cleverer than all these teachers,  
Doctors, Masters, scribes, preachers:  
I'm not plagued by doubt or scruple,  
Scared by neither Hell nor Devil –  
Instead all Joy is snatched away,  
What's worth knowing, I can't say,  
I can't say what I should teach  
To make men better or convert each.  
And then I've neither goods nor gold,  
No worldly honour, or splendour hold:  
Not even a dog would play this part!

Discussion questions: How does the term Faustian apply to other literary works and humanities ideas that we have explored this semester?

How does Goethe's *Faust* question the Renaissance and Enlightenment ideals and values?

## **TRAGEDY** (notes)

- *What's so tragic about tragedy?*
- week of 5 August

## **GREAT CHAIN OF BEING** (notes)

- *What is man's place on the Great Chain of Being?*
- week of 12 August

## **MACHIAVELLI & HOBBS** (notes, *Leviathan* cover image)

- *If I call you a Hobbesian Machiavel, is that a compliment?*
- week of 19 August

## **DUTCH MASTERS: VANITAS & STILL LIFE** (PPT presentation, notes)

- *Why are you staring at the clock?*
- week of 26 August

## **DEMONS, DEVILS, & WITCHES IN RENAISSANCE CULTURE** (PPT presentation, notes, Dante's *Divine Comedy* online text and layers of Hell)

- *Demons and devils and witches, oh my!*
- week of 9 September

## **MONTAIGNE** (notes, Montaigne's tower)

- *Would most of your problems be solved if you could sit quietly pondering death?*
- week of 30 September

## **CERVANTES** (*Don Quixote* cartoon video)

- *Is chivalry dead?*
- week of 14 October

## **EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY POMP IN FASHION, ARCHITECTURE, & ART** (PPT presentation)

- *Can one ever be too rich or too thin?*
- week of 21 October

## **HOGARTH** (BBC video about *The Rake's Progress*, *Beer Street and Gin Lane*, *Four Stages of Cruelty*)

- *Just how base and absurd are human beings?*
- week of 28 October

## **THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT** (PPT presentation, passage)

- *Was it the "best of times" or the "worst of times"?*
- week of 11 November

## **MOZART** (*Amadeus* film clip: Mozart's genius, Symphony 41: *Jupiter*)

- *Is balance the key to beauty?*
- week of 18 November

## **GOETHE**

- *Being Romantic doesn't involve candlelight and seductive music?*
- week of 9 December