

## THE FAUSTIAN BARGAIN

*Be careful what you wish for.*

The legend of Doctor Faustus, the man who sells his soul to the demon Mephistopheles in return for worldly knowledge and pleasure, is loosely based on the life of Johann Georg Faust (1480-1540). Intended to be a representation of “every man,” Faust was reportedly a real alchemist, a practitioner of black magic who attempted to change ordinary metals into gold. The heart of the legend lies in a person’s promising their soul for something longed for -- wealth, fame, power, or some other desire worth giving up their most precious possession for.

Christopher Marlowe’s play, *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Dr. Faustus*, was the first published version of the legendary story. Written in 1588, Faustus is frustrated by his ordinary life, so he signs a pact with the devil and trades his soul for 24 years of unlimited knowledge, power, and pleasure. But when he reaches the end of his life, he wishes to take back his promise. But it’s too late. He is carried away by demons and doomed to spend eternity in hell.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust*, Germany’s most famous play was written in 1808. Goethe spent his life writing the long dramatic poem that explores what happens to a man who makes a bargain with the devil. In the poem, Mephistopheles makes a bet with God that he can corrupt the loyal Faust. By promising Faust everything he has ever wanted, Mephistopheles persuades him to sign the pact with his own blood. The poem ends badly, but Faust goes to heaven because he eventually redeems himself through good works at the end of his life.

This theme has lasted centuries and appears in music, art, literature, film, fairy tales, video games, and graphic novels. It is a theme that has been used in every culture to explore the consequences of making a deal with the devil. Writers and artists who are frustrated by the limits that are placed on humans re-create this infamous tale. The motive for the pact is almost always personal gain. And the hero almost always tries to take back their promise at the end.

The bargain, which seems to flourish during times of moral crisis and instant gratification, allegedly must be written and signed in blood signifying the permanence of the act. Mephistopheles is the quintessential manipulator: self-confident, tempting, deceiving, and evil. He promises whatever appeals to the Faustian character and suggests that they say anything and do anything to get what they want. Mephistopheles in a [BBC](#) video says “You don’t have to mean it. You don’t have to do it. You just have to say it.”

As humans, we are all subject to the Faustian bargain. We want what we want when we want it, and if we don't have money, we purchase it on credit. We want beautifully written papers, so we go to the internet. We want to be popular, so we join the "in-crowd." The story warns us to beware of quick and easy answers and empty promises. We must be "wary of the cult of the ego, the seductions of fame and celebration of power. These are hollow triumphs, and short-lived; indeed, 'what good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?'"

*Ramm, Benjamin. (26 September 2017). What the myth of Faust can teach us. BBC Popular Culture. [What the myth of Faust can teach us - BBC Culture](#)*