CONTENTS

LANGUAGE

Dramatists through the sixteenth century had used a wide variety of **prose** and poetic patterns to structure their language: **rhyming couplets**, fourteen-syllabled lines ('fourteeners'), short lines such as those used by the poet John Skelton ('Skeltonics') and many more had been tried in the increasingly successful innyard theatres (see also **Literary background** on **Poetic styles**). Christopher Marlowe adapted the **iambic pentameter** line, already familiar from poets such as Chaucer, and combined it with **blank verse** to create a strikingly effective new way of writing. This line, with its driving five-beat rhythm, has dynamic pace, but also the capacity to sound easy and colloquial when necessary, since spoken English, broadly speaking, tends to fall into iambic patterns. The grandeur of Marlowe's line is supplied by his use of **polysyllables** within it, and by its strongly **end-stopped** character. As with any poetic structure, variations on the basic line can be made once the **form** is established, and this process of varying the original structure displays the writer's skill. Marlowe's blank verse iambic pentameter is the verse form that Shakespeare later took up, rendering it more fluid and flexible by reducing the end-stopping in favour of **enjambment** (the run-on line), and increasing the number of lines shared between different characters.

Christopher Marlowe also uses a rich vocabulary, characterised by extreme or **hyperbolic** language, which carries the reader or audience into an imaginary world filled out with references to myth and to the limits of geographical knowledge. He thus generates a sense both of excitement, and of the importance and dignity of his subject matter. His use of proper names – in particular elaborate and polysyllabic ones such as 'Mephastophilis' – sustains that sense of dignity, as does his highly controlled habit of repetition. It is the combination of passion and control that marks out Marlowe's poetic achievement from those of his predecessors, an achievement which critics have described as a 'poetry of excess'.

THEMES

ATHEISM

Like Marlowe himself, Faustus has been described as an atheist, and the conflict between belief and unbelief is a dominant **theme** in the play, permeating plot, **dialogue** and **imagery**. In discussing belief and its absence, atheism, a distinction needs to be made between the beliefs held by Faustus himself and those represented by the effects of the play overall.

The concept of atheism in the sixteenth century was not clear-cut, but it can be broken down into two categories: one, denying the existence of God; and the other, denying the goodness of God. At various points Faustus asserts or implies that there is no such thing as either God or heaven, for example: 'There is no chief but only Belzebub, / To whom Faustus doth dedicate himself' (Scene 3, lines 57–8). He uses the concept 'a mighty god' (Scene 1, line 62) apparently as an alternative to the Christian God. This does not make Faustus an atheist according to modern definitions, but it does in the period of the play. Faustus's ambition to become a god ('try thy brains to gain a deity', Scene 1, line 63) marks him with the deadly sin of pride, or **hubris**. In spite of his scepticism about God, he appears to believe that he possesses a soul, thus subscribing – in a contradictory manner – to some aspects of conventional theology but not others. Faustus's beliefs are generally unstable and shifting; this is the essence of the doubt he feels when he uses one belief and then the other, for example in Scene 5, lines 1–10:

> Now Faustus, must thou needs be damned,
> And canst thou not be saved.
> What boots it then to think of God or heaven?
> Away with such vain fancies and despair,
> Despair in God, and trust in Belzebub.
> Now go not backward: no, Faustus, be resolute;
> Why waverest thou? O, something soundeth in mine ears:
> 'Abjure this magic, turn to God again'.
> Ay, and Faustus will turn to God again.
> To God? He loves thee not

World events	Marlowe's life	Literature/drama
c1448 Birth of Johann Faust or Faustus, the man on whom Marlowe's protagonist was based		
1519 Charles V becomes Holy Roman Emperor		**1516** Thomas More writes Latin work *Utopia*
1527 Birth of future King Philip II of Spain, son of Charles V		**1527** John Colet's *Aeditio* is published posthumously
1530 Martin Luther and others compose the Augsburg Confession, marking the culmination of the German Reformation		
1533 Birth of future Queen Elizabeth I of England		
		1534 Publication of Martin Luther's German translation of the Bible
1535 Execution of Sir Thomas More		**1535** First complete English translation of the Bible (by Miles Coverdale) is published
1536 Death of Desiderius Erasmus, Dutch priest and humanist thinker		
c1540 Death of Johann Faust or Faustus		
1546 Death of Martin Luther		
		1551 Ralph Robynson translates More's *Utopia* into English
1553 Mary I becomes Queen of England		

World events	Marlowe's life	Literature/drama
1554 Mary I of England marries Philip II of Spain		
1556 Charles V abdicates, dividing his empire between Philip II of Spain and brother Ferdinand I of Austria		
1558 Elizabeth I accedes to the English throne following death of Mary I; death of former Charles V; birth of Thomas Kyd		
1564 Birth of William Shakespeare	**1564** Birth of Christopher Marlowe at Canterbury	
1566 Birth of Edward Alleyn		
1568 Mary Queen of Scots imprisoned by Elizabeth I		**1568** Richard Grafton, *A Chronicle at Large of the Affairs of England from the Creation of the World unto the First Year of Queen Elizabeth*
		1569 Edmund Spenser, *The Visions of Bellay* and *The Visions of Petrarch*
1573 Sir Francis Walsingham appointed Secretary of State		
1576 James Burbage erects the first permanent theatre in England since Roman times		
	1579 Obtains scholarship to study at the King's School, Canterbury	