

The British College of Nurses, Ltd.

The British College of Nurses, Ltd.—together with the Infectious Hospitals Matron's Association—are holding an At Home, at 19, Queen's Gate, to entertain International Students, on Friday, September 7th, at 3 p.m.

Records of historical interest on Nursing History and Miss Florence Nightingale will be on view, and members of both associations are cordially invited to meet these guests.

Tea will be served at 4 p.m.

Lecture delivered by Mr. Francis Edwards.

DURING THIS COURSE OF LECTURES you have probably heard me say of some play or another that it is "universal" in its appeal. And since such praise is the greatest that can be given to any play I propose to make universality the subject of my lecture this afternoon.

The play I have chosen as an example upon which to work is Christopher Marlowe's "Dr. Faustus," a very rarely acted but, among students, at least, a very well-known Elizabethan tragedy. I have chosen it because I believe it to have some special significance for us in the light of present-day problems.

Christopher Marlowe was born in the same year as Shakespeare. He knew Shakespeare and worked with him, though little if anything is known of the relationship between the two men. Marlowe was a very great dramatist and although he lacked the wonderful restraint of Shakespeare it is probably fair to say that he was ahead of him in the development of tragedy when he met his death at the age of twenty-nine.

"Dr. Faustus" was the second play to be written by Marlowe. It was based upon the story of a German chemist who lived during the fifteenth century and whose name became legendary because of the fantastic experiments which he carried out. In Marlowe's play Faustus is a scholar who has mastered the whole field of human knowledge and who seeks to extend his power through the study of magic. He manages to conjure up the spirit of Mephistophilis to whom he promises to sell his soul in return for twenty-four years of life with absolute power over all the elements. The main source of dramatic power in the tragedy comes from the frequent struggles between Faustus and his conscience. Right up to the end the power to repent seems to lie in the man though in an ever dwindling degree, until at the hour of his death, which is certainly one of the most dramatic things in English Literature, the full horror of his deed comes upon him and he realises the awfulness of damnation.

From this story steeped in the superstition of the Middle Ages, Marlowe extracts matter of such wide significance that the impact of the play does not diminish in the least through the years, and I want you to focus your attention this afternoon on those parts of the play which give to the whole this universal quality.

Let us turn to the first part of the play in which Faustus is discovered in his study turning over the works of the great authors he has mastered. He turns to philosophy and finds that it can no longer teach him anything new and therefore has no attraction for him. He turns to physics with the same result; then to law, and finally to divinity. He knows them all and is content with none. At this point we get the following speech:—

"Divinity, adieu !

These metaphysics of magicians,
And necromantic books are heavenly ;
Lines, circles, scenes, letters, and characters ;
Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires.
Oh what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence
Is promised to the studious artisan !
All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command : emperors and kings

Are but obeyed in their several provinces,
Nor can they raise the wind, or rend the clouds ;
But his dominion that exceeds in this,
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man ;
A sound magician is a mighty god :"

Now it is quite possible to regard all this as the mere rant of a man seeking to dabble in a magic in which we no longer believe. But behind the reference to magic there lies something of great significance. One notes that the real point of the speech is the power that goes with knowledge. Once that point is grasped the subject of magic becomes irrelevant and our minds become focussed upon something far more important.

Marlowe was a man of the Renaissance, which meant that he was caught up in the exciting adventure of discovery that marked the whole period. Man was beginning to feel the potentialities, not merely of the new world he was discovering, but also of his own mind. This was the age of Francis Bacon whose belief that man could direct his destiny by mastering the secrets of natural science was to change the whole course of scientific research. All this spirit of adventure is reflected in the speech of Faustus together with the pride and lust for power which also were salient characteristics of the age. Thus Faustus becomes more than a character in a play; he represents Man at the turning point of his destiny.

Let us turn now to the passage in which Faustus succeeds in conjuring up Mephistophilis. Faustus questions Mephistophilis about Hell and those who live there :

Faustus : Tell me, what is Lucifer thy lord ?
Mephistophilis : Arch-regent and commander of all spirits.
Faustus : Was not that Lucifer an angel once ?
Mephistophilis : Yes, Faustus, and most dearly loved of God.
Faustus : How comes it, then, that he is prince of devils ?
Mephistophilis : Oh, by aspiring pride and insolence ;
For which God threw him from the face of heaven.

Note the emphasis that Marlowe places here upon the sin of pride and insolence, and how he suggests to the audience the enormity of the sin Faustus is himself committing. He is preparing the way for a passage of great significance and dramatic power :

Faustus : And what are you that live with Lucifer ?
Mephistophilis : Unhappy spirits that fell with Lucifer,
Conspir'd against our God with Lucifer,
And are for ever damn'd with Lucifer.
Faustus : Where are you damn'd ?
Mephistophilis : In hell.
Faustus : How comes it, then, that thou art out of hell ?
Mephistophilis : Why this is hell, nor am I out of it.
Think'st thou that I, who saw the face of God,
And tasted the eternal joys of heaven,
Am not tormented with ten thousand hells
In being deprived of everlasting bliss ?
Oh, Faustus, leave these frivolous demands,
Which strike a terror to my fainting soul.

You will observe that Marlowe has discarded the Medieval idea of hell as a fire situated in some special region and has described it as a condition of misery from which there is no escape. Hell is where evil is, and evil is pride and insolent lust for power. One therefore draws the inference that Faustus is in danger of creating his own hell through his aspiration to power, and if we identify Faustus with mankind in general we shall see how universally significant the tragedy is.

Milton, who was greatly influenced by Marlowe, draws the moral of "Dr. Faustus" to its natural conclusion in the eighth book of "Paradise Lost" when Raphael answers

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)