

Critical appreciation of the poem Was this the face that launched a thousand ships by Christopher Marlowe.

The poem 'Was this the face that launched a thousand ships' is from the great tragic drama 'Doctor Faustus' by Christopher Marlowe, the great playwrights of his time. Dr. Faustus is a typical renaissance figure who craves for Helen, a paragon of classical beauty and bursts into lyrical expression after seeing Helena. He is utterly amazed by her beauty that he thinks it justified that Greeks launched thousands of ship to recover their peerless beauty against Trojans whose prince has abducted Helen. He thinks it was not wrong to burn tall towers of Ilium for the sake of Helena. He has strong desire to achieve nearness of Helen. He needs sweet Helen and no lesser beauty to make him immortal with a kiss.

Faustus' desire for beauty beyond human reach is a form of the soul's desire for power- no trivial thirst for pleasure, but a longing to achieve the unattainable, and hold in human grasp the bliss reserved for a god. But when Helena kisses him, she asks forth his soul that was pledged to the Devil. It is implied that Helen and Devil are no different beings. Both stoke passions, sway reason and destroy the soul's innocence. Dr. Faustus asks Helen to kiss him once more and return back his Soul as he feels that heaven lies in her lips and anything except her is waste and rubbish.

Faustus considers himself to be in love with Helena like Paris, the Prince of Troy and wants to destroy Wittenberg in place of Troy. He is too desirous to combat with weak Menelaus and Achilles and be again kissed by Helena.

He compares her fairness to the evening air and considers her more beautiful and brighter than Jupiter when he appeared before Semele and lovelier than Sun god Apollo in stretched blue arms of Arethusa. He wants Helena to be her secret love.

This 20 line poem is written in perfect blank verse. Its might has obscured its technical precision, admirable lucidity and finish. Marlowe's blank verse is unequalled by any of his contemporaries except Shakespeare. The lines are filled with breath of passion and wooden blank verse has become a trumpet, blazing out poetry and eloquence in high astounding terms.

Special Features

Alliteration– “make me immortal”

“give me my soul”

“Brighter art thou than”

“Arethusa's azure arms”

Simile- “fairer than evening's air”

“Brighter are thou than”

“More lovely than the monarch of the sky”

Metaphor- “for heaven is in these lips”

“I will be Paris”

“Clad in the beauty of thousand stars”

Imagery- “Brighter art thou than the flaming Jupiter

When he appeared to hapless Semele

More lovely than the monarch of the sky

In wanton Arethusa's azured arms"

Hyperbole– "I will combat weak Menelaus"

The use of myth and legend is integral to his thought and contribute to the music and melody of the verse. It reveals Marlowe's fondness for the music that can be wrung from proper names and his skill in this respect is seen abundantly throughout.

The diction of the poem is simple and noteworthy. The poet is neither rhetorical nor obscure, but speaks with a bright and lucid simplicity. Many of his happiest lines are woven from the words of everyday speech, often a sequence of monosyllables as in

"Her lips suck forth my soul, see where it flies"

This poem specially discusses a renaissance figure whose soul is hungry for ultimate beauty ie Helen who is considered to be th most beautiful lady in the world. In order to attain nearness of Helen, Faustus sells his soul to the devil Mephistopilles. At the same time he he is ready to ruin his life and sack wittenberg too. At last he compares the beauty of Helen is far fairer than evening's air. The message of the poem human being must control his passion if he/she wants to survive in the world otherwisehe will have to pay cost of it like Fustus.