

Contextual analysis of act 1, scene 1 of dr faustus



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In Act 1 Scene 1, Marlowe continues to subtly parody the structure of a typical Aristotelian tragedy, following the Chorus' unusual introduction with a seemingly orthodox dialogue from the protagonist, Dr Faustus. However, he does not interact with the Chorus as would be expected, and his soliloquy openly dismisses Aristotle, further revealing Marlowe's intent to subvert the traditional model. Faustus uses his opening speech to systematically reject the four main areas of academia at the time of the play's writing: philosophy, medicine, law and divinity. His dismissal of each area in turn reveals his undisputed achievements- having apparently reached the limit of human knowledge he is unsatisfied and hungry for more. Faustus strongly resembles the protagonist of Lyly's *Euphues* in this speech, even referencing the same names in Aristotle, Justinian and Galen. Conversely, while that character seems "onely to desire them" and says they have "made such a breache into my minde", Faustus is finished with the known world of human knowledge and proclaims that "a greater subject fitteth Faustus' wit." In his evaluation of philosophy, Faustus discusses Aristotle and his *Analytics*, which had been at the heart of the university curriculum in Western Europe since the 13th century but was beginning to be challenged as Marlowe graduated. This reference not only shows how the established order of knowledge was beginning to change, but alludes to Marlowe's own questioning of the Aristotelian model of Tragedy. However, the Latin quote in line 7 is in fact written by Petrus Ramus, one of the intellectual reformers who was at the front line of the attacks on Aristotle and his works. This quote has a distinct flavour of Sophistry about it, and as such would have rankled against everything that Aristotle argued. Faustus supports his dismissal of Aristotle and philosophy with an entirely contradictory quote, undermining his

declaration that he “ hast attained the end” of the discipline. Interestingly, his final farewell to philosophy quotes “ on kai me on”, an aphorism of Gorgias of Leonti, known as the father of Sophistry and the object of one of Aristotle’s most personal attacks. Faustus is in fact truly confused and not the master of the subject that he believes. This is the first of a series of mistaken claims and ignorant statements that he makes in his assertion to have reached the limit of conventional learning. By invoking the name of Galen, a 2nd century Greek physician who was considered a medical authority well into the Middle Ages, Faustus now moves his attention to the art of medicine. He sees medicine as a means to earn money, and looks down upon it as merely a way to “ heap up gold”. The link between gold and medicine is a long established one, and the concept of potable gold (aurum potabile), a gold-based potion that was said to cure all illness, had been discussed in Classical times and had even been claimed to have been invented by the alchemist Paracelsus, who also lived in the 16th century. This is referenced by Shakespeare, Marlowe’s great contemporary, in Henry IV. However, it seems that Faustus views the connection between gold and medicine to concern profit rather than cure, a view similar to that expressed by Chaucer’s Physician in The Canterbury Tales, and this connection taints Faustus with some of the Physician’s less than admirable qualities. Faustus’ dismissal of medicine for this reason is ironic, considering his later discussion of magic and the way he would use it for material gain. Furthermore, Faustus laments medicine’s inability to conquer man’s mortality, and talks of raising the dead “ to life again”. This would have had a strong impact upon a contemporary audience, with links made to biblical stories such as the Resurrection and that of Lazarus. To bring someone back from the dead was

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a power exclusively linked to God, and to wish for such things was blasphemous and hubristic, a clear example of Faustus as an over-reacher. Marlowe's reference to Hippocrates through the word "aphorisms" (Hippocrates' Aphorismes) could be another example of Faustus' arrogance: to compare himself to such a renowned thinker. It could however also be read as a fair comparison and sign of his incredible intellect. Justinian was a Roman Emperor during the 6th century AD, famous for his reformation of Roman law. His work formed the basis of Christian canon law, and this is alluded to in the phrase "universal body of the Church", a pun on Justinian's Corpus Juris (Body of the Law). While Faustus sneers that Justinian only concerned himself with "paltry legacies", once again the quotes he uses reveal far more than he realises. The translation of the first quote (If one and the same thing is promised to two people, one should have the thing itself, the other the value of the thing) could be read to relate to Faustus' later dealings with Lucifer. Perhaps the misery and disaster that befalls Faustus is of equal value to the very soul he gives away. This reading gains credibility when read from a Calvinist viewpoint: if the soul was damned from its inception, it has no worth at all to a Christian. The second quote translates as "A father cannot disinherit his son unless..." The ellipsis here may again signify the actions about to unfold, the father may refer to God: is Marlowe suggesting that Christianity's God would never forsake a soul, unless it sunk to such levels as Faustus' will? Once again, with the phrase "mercenary drudge" Marlowe creates the perception that Faustus is deriding the Law as being underneath his own abilities and good only for making a living, a purpose far below his lofty goals. The irony of this becomes apparent quickly, as Faustus immediately talks of a "world of profit" as soon as he outlines his

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plans for his magical knowledge. It is when Faustus discusses divinity that he is at his most illogical; the irony is that he is meant to be a great scholar on the subject. Firstly, he talks of Jerome's Bible before proceeding to quote in Latin that did not appear in this edition. More obviously, Faustus fails twice to fully quote a biblical passage: subsequently he entirely misses their messages. The omitted passages are incredibly apt to the play, both offering the comfort of eternal life if one comes "through Jesus Christ" (Romans vi, 23) and that God is "faithful and just" and "will cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (John 1, 8) if sins are confessed. It is the fact that Faustus ignores these aspects of Christian doctrine that condemns his soul for eternity. The fact that seems to upset Faustus most is the truth that man has to die, the same realisation that troubled him when dismissing medicine as impotent. Faustus refusal to consider an afterlife in heaven, and his obsession with worldly sensation and materialism, is at the heart of his tragic demise. He sees an "everlasting death" rather than the possibility of the Christian afterlife, an outlook that drives the bargaining of his own immortal soul for a lifetime of hedonistic pleasure. Despite the highlighted inconsistencies in his argument and Faustus' clear displays of hubris, Marlowe does not intend for the audience to condemn him, nor to fall entirely in line with the teachings of the Church. Faustus is such an interesting figure because he is meant to excite the drive within each one of us to fulfill human potential and to break free of limiting factors, such as those placed on society by religion at that time. In the new atmosphere of anthropocentrism that had begun to envelope Renaissance Europe, a character with such far reaching ambition to further human knowledge was meant to be revered. However, when Marlowe's own radicalism and

subversive nature is taken into account, many read Dr. Faustus as a rallying call for such individual liberation and an attack against the stifling influence of the Church, only pandering to Christian sensibilities to pass through the necessary censorship. Yet as is made evident by the numerous and frequent references to Faustus own failings, Marlowe is not an unequivocal advocate of such a philosophy. Even the most intelligent among us, he says, do not know all that we can know. There will always be certain inexplicable aspects of our universe, and it is dangerous for us to reach too deeply into these abysses. To borrow a metaphor from the Icarus story that Marlowe references, mankind should rise above the cloying sea-mists of self-limitation and not drown in ignorance, but should soar into the free airs of unknown knowledge, breaking boundaries and advancing as far as we can. However, there is always the danger of flying too high, and of scorching ourselves with the inexplicable, unreachable power of certain unknowable truths. It is this same idea that makes Faustus such a powerful dramatic figure: he is a hero in the original sense, someone who transcends humanity, but ultimately transgresses and is necessarily punished. He is someone who pushes, but pushes too far. For that he should not be universally condemned, but his mistakes must be seen as a warning.