**A synopsis of *Dr. Faustus* with critical comments**

**The Speech of the Chorus (Prologue)**

The Chorus introduces the theme of the play. We are informed that the dramatist will not in this play deal with the subject of war, or depict scenes of love in royal courts, or present "proud audacious deeds". This play will deal with "Faustus's fortunes, good or bad". Faustus, we are told, was Germany. He belonged to a low family. He was chiefly brought up by his relatives in the city of Wittenberg. He grew up to be a great scholar, acquiring extensive knowledge the fields of divinity and theology. But, becoming too proud of his knowledge and learning, he tried to over-reach himself and thus met his downfall. He took to the study of necromancy, and launched upon his career as a magician. Magic became dearer to him even than the salvation of his soul.

**Critical Comments**

The speech of the Chorus acquaints us with the intellectual achievements of Faustus and his fatal choice. The reference to Icarus\* and his flight into the sky with waxen wings (Lines 20-22) is significant: it represents self-destructive aspiration and is symbolic of Faustus's career. Faustus's choice of "cursed necromancy" in preference to his soul's salvation is clearly deliberate. There is no outside force compelling him to take to magic (line 26-27)

Nothing so sweet as magic is to him,

Which he prefers before his chiefest bliss.

As the Prologue to Tamburlaine offered to lead the audience to the "stately tent of war", so the Chorus here leads the audience away from that sphere ("not marching now in fields of Thrasymene"). The Chorus mentions the "pomp of proud audacious deeds" only to dismiss them, and we hear a cooler and more moderate tone when the Chorus promises to perform "the form of Faustus's fortunes good or bad." Marlowe strikes a new note in the gracious appeal that is made to the "patient judgments" of the audience for applause. As the Chorus tells of new subject matter, so the rhetoric of the opening lines disappears from his speech. The narrative of Faustus's life begins in a quiet tone, and a rare serenity is attained in the line: "the fruitful plot of scholarism graced." The repetition of the word "graced" in the line that follows is not just a play on words: it expresses the mutual blessing between the scholar and the study. The measured quietness is violated by the swelling movement of the lines about Icarus, as the natural order is upset by Faustus's unlawful aspirations.

**Scene I (Faustus in his Study)**

Faustus is shown in his study, examining various fields of learning in order to decide upon his choice of the particular field in which to specialise. He is attracted by Analytics or Logic but finds that he has already attained great proficiency in it. He next thinks of medicine but finds that his skill as a physician is already widely recognised. He also deplores the fact that the study of medicine has not enabled him to make human beings immortal or to bring dead men back to life. Legal studies, he goes on to say, are suited to a man who is merely money-minded. Divinity would perhaps be the best choice, but even divinity teaches a doctrine, the doctrine of fatalism, which is totally unsatisfactory. The study of magic makes a great appeal to him. Magic will bring him not only wealth, but power and glory. Magic will enable him to extend his authority as far as the mind of man can go.

Faustus's servant, Wagner, enters and Faustus asks him to go and request his friends, Valdes and Cornelius, to visit him. Wagner goes to bring the two men. The Good Angel and the Evil Angel appear. The former asks Faustus not to read the book of magic but to study the scriptures. The Evil Angel encourages Faustus to study magic and to become as powerful on the earth as God is in the sky.

The two Angels then make their exit, and Faustus is again left alone. In a soliloquy, Faustus dwells upon the power and the pleasures that he will be able to enjoy by means of magic. He will make spirits bring him gold from India, pearls from the ocean, and delicious fruits from all corners of the New World. He will make spirits read to him "strange philosophy" and tell him the secrets of foreign kings. Through the agency of spirits, he will wall all Germany with brass, make the river Rhine circle the city of Wittenberg, clothe university students with silk, raise an army to chase the Prince of Parma from his land, and have at his disposal marvellous weapons of war.

Valdes and Cornelius now appear on the scene. Faustus tells them that their advice to him to practise magic has proved effective. But he makes it clear that it is not only because of their advice, but because of his own free choice, that he has decided to study and practise magic. Magic, he says, has "ravished" him. He recalls his victories in the discussions he has had with the priests of the German church and says that he has resolved to become as great à magician as Agrippa used to be. Valdes encourages Faustus in his resolve and says that spirits of every element will be at the service of Faustus. Spirits will attend on him, guard him. and bring great treasures to him from

America. Sometimes these spirits will appear before him as lovely women, or unmarried maidens. Faustus assures Valdes of his firm resolution. Cornelius says that, as Faustus is fully qualified and equipped for the study of magic, he will in course of time be held in greater reverence than the Delphian oracle. Valdes then gives Faustus the necessary guidance and asks him to go to some solitary grove in order to conjure. Faustus decides to conjure this same night, no matter what happens.

**Critical Comments**

The first scene deals with Faustus's decision to take up magic. One by one, he examines the branches of higher learning as they were organised in the universities of his day: philosophy, medicine, law, and theology. One by one the feats of secular learning are rejected because their ends do not satisfy his demand has clearly to be understood. But,his demand has clearly to be understood. He does not pursue knowledge for the sake of truth, but for the sake of power, super-human power over life and death. His fundamental grievance is: "Yet an thou still but Faustus, and a man". Dissatisfied with his human status, he rebels against human limitations. He would like to have the power to make men live eternally, and the power to bring the dead back to life. He rejects divine learning (or theology) also, because it is based on a recognition of man's mortality and fallibility. Leaving divinity to God, Faustus dedicates himself to the devil. Rejecting the fatalism of the doctrine "Che sera, sera (what will be, shall be), he performs an act of his own will, and it is one of the developing ironies of the play that what he wills to be shall be (that is, he chooses the devil and damnation, and he goes, in the end, to the devil and damnation).

The superficial logic by which Faustus rejects the scriptures and divinity is in itself a deeply ironic comment on his character and career. This logic is also misleading, and only an excuse for Faustus to try to gain "a world of profit and delight, of power, of honour, and omnipotence". This logic betrays not only a willingness to discard the scriptures but also an attitude of mind that will gradually lead him to the sin of despair. In aspiring to be more than man, Faustus repudiates his humanity, and rebels against the ultimate reality. In his aspiration to be as God, he chooses the not-God. This is the essential irony of sin, and the central irony of the play. According to the Christian view of the world, it is inevitable that the choice of the not-God will lead not only to disappointment but also to the deepest suffering.