In this lecture I aim to do two things; first to put the play into a religious and theological context, and second, to look at how it may be responding to that context. I am not offering an overarching reading of the play, but I hope to give you a couple of ways in, that might help you in exploring the play for yourself. I will focus mainly on the first scene of the play, with references to elsewhere.

I want first to look at a painting, which you may have seen before – it is on the cover of The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1500-1600, edited by Arthur F. Kinney. This is The Ambassadors by Hans Holbein the Younger. It was painted in 1533. This picture, in many ways, sums up many of the themes I will be talking about today. On the left is Jean de Dinteville, the French ambassador to England and on the right is Bishop Georges de Selve. Critics have argued both that the painting shows the good relationship between church and state and that the broken string on the lute is actually evidence of disharmony between the two. So the tension between the secular and religious worlds is one thing to be aware of when looking at literature from this period. An Ambassador’s job involves of course travel. If we think of the Renaissance itself, this was a time when people were exploring new lands and coming back with stories, and new trade routes were opening. People’s horizons were literally widening.

I also want you to take a look at the objects placed around them.
We have two globes, one terrestrial (this world) and one celestial (detailing the heavens), a quadrant (used to measure angles by astronomers), a sundial, and various other astrological and mathematical gadgets. The painting is clothed with fine textiles and carpets from all over the world; we have open books, a lute, a Lutheran Psalmbook and more. Think about all of the different objects and the different disciplines they reflect, and then let us think about Faustus and his own experience of being “Yet level at the end of every art.” These are the type of objects that Faustus could have had in his study, which is of course where the play begins.

Faustus is versed in theology, mathematics, classics, astrology, medicine, law, languages and philosophy. He has come from ‘base stock’ and gained the highest renown. He is to all intents and purposes exactly what the Renaissance was about. But with the discoveries of the Renaissance came the challenge of interpreting all of this new information. The cultivation of all knowledge still requires the element of individual interpretation. The issues that arise when we combine masses of contradicting information with the human condition and all of its virtues and faults, are, I believe what drives this play, and I want to look at the prologue and opening scene to explore this further.

Reading the first scene of Dr. Faustus, it becomes clear why a number of critics have argued that the play doesn’t seem to choose one overarching system of theological belief. Rather, it seems to juxtapose competing traditions of thought and belief systems in order to question them. The opening scene seems to play with the contradictions and differences between the three main Christian systems of belief in the air at the time that Dr Faustus was written. These are Calvinism, moderate Anglicanism and Catholicism. Atheism was also in the air and I am sure you have read about the various charges of atheism and blasphemy levelled at
Marlowe. The introduction to *Dr Faustus* in the Renaissance Drama Anthology edited by Arthur F. Kinney provides more detail on the theological climate at the time the play was written.

England’s official religion had changed four times between 1547 and 1558, and we had Elizabeth’s Middle Way in 1559. So Catholicism, and the trappings of it, were in the public consciousness. Faustus makes fun of a ‘bell, book and candle’ used by the Catholic Church to excommunicate and of course we have the scene with the Pope. The play also borrows elements of the essentially Catholic morality plays, though I would contend that Marlowe takes this framework somewhere else completely. Morality plays, a tradition which began in the fifteenth century, feature an everyman figure on his journey through life, good and bad angels, and the seven deadly sins and virtues who fight for mankind’s soul. One of the most popular readings of Faustus (and I think this overlaps with what I am saying in some ways) is of Faustus as a Renaissance Everyman (although it is a bit more complex than that). Morality plays were banned quite late in England, in the 1580s.

Calvinism, based on the ideas of John Calvin, is a form of Anglican belief that says you are predestined as one of God’s elect or as one of the damned, and that no matter what you do, you are destined to fulfill that fate. In carrying out your fate, you are first damned by God, then by the Church and then by yourself and you have no control over this. While Marlowe himself was at Cambridge, this was being debated fiercely and promoted by William Perkins. As a Parker scholar (a scholarship given to those expected to go on to Holy Orders – although he didn’t) it seems pretty unlikely that Marlowe wouldn’t have debated this himself. The main issue with Calvinism is, ‘how do you know if you are one of the elect?’ ‘How do you know if you are damned?’ The answer given by this system was that you are
not one of the elect if you have a tendency or a predilection to sin. But, the result of this is that if one believes that they are damned already, what have they to lose? They might as well have fun because they are going to hell anyway. (If anyone has read the nineteenth century *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* by James Hogg they will also see this ideology tested to its limits). A Calvinist reading of the play, suggesting that Faustus is damned from the outset, could help make sense of questions that have previously been asked of the play, such as why does Lucifer appear when Faustus calls to Christ’s blood to save him? When the Old Man seems to convert Faustus, why does he still accept a dagger from Mephistopheles? When the good angel suggests Faustus *can* attain Mercy, why is the evil angel allowed to interrupt and then have the last word? Faustus’s reference to having a hard heart can also be compared to Perkins’ *A Golden Chain or The Description of Theology*, (written in 1590) where he specifically identifies this as one of the symptoms of the un-elect. I would however advise caution in reading the play as purely Calvinist; it is the interplay between opposing ideologies that I suggest plays a key role in this play.

In contrast, moderate Anglicanism, whilst acknowledging the Calvinist belief, still taught that good works and obedience were vital, and preachers used the maxim of ‘reaping what you sew’ to counter the issues that came with Calvinism. Catholicism too was counter to Calvinism, with its focus on free will. The emphasis on free will, though combined with the grace of God when needed, is key to the action of the morality plays just mentioned. Atheism and lack of religion is also in the air, with a number of trials for blasphemy taking place, and Archdeacons expressing concern that even their own clergy do not know the correct prayers or articles of faith.
It is through a discussion about logic, that Faustus discusses the logic of living with all of these different systems of theological belief. After summarizing his achievements in various arts, and their limits, Faustus declares that, “When all is done, divinity is best” (37). He says, “Jerome’s Bible, Faustus, view it well;/Stippendium peccati mors est: ha! Stipendium etc./The reward of sin is death? That’s hard.” Yet Faustus has not read the rest of that line, and one would expect he knows that it goes on to say, “but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Faustus continues, “Si peccasse regamus, fallimur, et nulla est in nobis veritas./if we say that we have no sin,/we deceive ourselves, and there’s no truth in us./why then belike we must sin,/and so consequently die/ay we must die an everlasting death./what doctrine call you this? Che sara, sara/What will be, shall be! Divinity adieu!” Again, he fails to read the rest of the line which finishes, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our own sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Look at those lines again, which seem to be heavily influenced by the idea of Calvinism – if we say that we have no sin,/we deceive ourselves, and there’s no truth in us./why then belike we must sin,/and so consequently die/ay we must die an everlasting death./what doctrine call you this? Che sara, sara/What will be, shall be!’

This seems to be exactly the response to Calvinist thinking that the moderate Anglicans were trying to balance out with their emphasis on good deeds. Faustus uses logic to take Calvinist thinking to test it to its extreme, concluding that, as humans are all naturally drawn to sin, no-one can be elect, and to lie about that is an even worse sin. Hence, all are damned.
Yet Faustus chooses to accept this reading of the lines. He appears to use his own free will (and I do believe it is his free will) in choosing to believe that he has no choice. The prologue itself also seems to suggest a complex system of free will, held within a cause and effect system ruled by God (or the Gods), “Till, swollen with cunning, of a self conceit,/His waxen wings did mount above his reach,/And melting heavens conspired his overthrow,” the words ‘and’ and ‘conspiring’ suggesting causation rather than solely predestination.

In Faustus’s favouring of the Calvinist reading of the Bible over the idea of free will, it does perhaps go some way to explaining the play’s descent into farce and Faustus’s increased love of pleasure. If you believe that you have nothing to look forward to, no heaven to work for, and you are just waiting for death, what do you do to fill in the time? Such questions perhaps put a modern reader in mind of Larkin’s Toads and Toads Revisited poems or even the theatre of the absurd. Faustus responds by having fun. He becomes invisible in order to frighten the Pope, has dalliances with beautiful women (or rather spirits), exercises his wrath, travels the world, and performs for royalty. His invisibility in the Pope scene also perhaps suggests his own withdrawal from the real world, as his role as performer is accentuated. He is now a novelty, a spectacle. In performing he remains active and doesn’t have to examine his choice. It perhaps makes us think of the idea of the clown who is happy on stage, but behind the mask there is anguish. As long as he is performing, he is ok. The so-called farce scenes, in comparison with the scenes where Faustus is boasting of his achievements (even before he has made his deal with Lucifer) do however, perhaps also raise the question, was he not always a performer, even as an academic? Think about when he cured a whole village of the plague and was held in great renown.
A purely Calvinist reading of this play would argue that the fact that Faustus does not read the rest of these lines is because he is hardened to sin already. Yet the chance of salvation is offered immediately, as the good angel appears (again a borrowing from the morality play tradition) and says, “O Faustus, lay that damned book aside,/And gaze not on it, lest it tempt thy soul,/And heap God’s heavy wrath upon thy head; Read, read the Scriptures; that is blasphemy.” The good angel’s use of ‘lest’ suggests Faustus can still easily be accepted into heaven; yet in telling him to ‘read,’ one wonders if Marlowe is here also acknowledging that all belief is down the fact of human interpretation, and Faustus’s eternal damnation or salvation is reduced to simply choosing one interpretation, or reading, over another.

The play seems to raise questions over whether a simple matter of interpretation should carry with it such eternal repercussions, and whether one should be damned for that, when the acquiring of new knowledge and the interpretation of it was of key importance in this period. I think that this scene juxtaposes the differing logics of religious beliefs precisely to puzzle us and alert us to their contradictions despite the fact that they all (obviously except atheism) offer the same thing as a result – salvation of the soul.

This same first scene, in which Faustus boasts of his capabilities, does, I think, expose the fact that the foundations of that same society, which produced him, are shaky – all systems of belief are absolutely dependent on and shaped by the human condition itself.

I just want to return to the Holbein painting and one thing that I didn’t mention, the skull at the bottom, which seems to transcend the perspective of the rest of the picture. It is painted in an anamorphic style, and plays with new developments in optics and painting. It is one of those pictures where it comes into view as you physically move around it, (it becomes clear when you look at it from the side of the bishop.) Is the skull there to
undercut the rest of the painting, and say that wherever we go in our ambition and skill, we are all destined for the same thing – death? Does it also raise the question of interpretation, by making us physically look at the skull differently to the rest of the painting?

Or, is it simply that Holbein’s own self importance has come into play and he saw it as a chance to show off his skills and power in painting? Has he ruined a perfectly good portrait with his own ego?

At the height of man’s achievements his weaknesses and limits also become clear. The prologue to the play seems to suggest this, stating that despite Faustus’s achievements, the play is not an epic, but “Only this (Gentleman) we must perform,/The form of Faustus’ fortunes good and bad.” Faustus admits it himself, (though in frustration), that “Yet art thou still but Faustus and a man,” yet in making his deal with the devil he still cannot escape this.

Holbein’s painting was produced in 1533, and Dr. Faustus was performed around 1594. I want to ask, is Marlowe’s play a portrait of the Renaissance man at crisis point? Marlowe seems to be raising the question, how far can man really go when he is bound to the same instincts of pride, jealousy and aspiration that he has had since the start of time? Where does one go next? Perhaps the only place he can go is back to the beginning. In scene 5, Faustus himself tells Lucifer that the sight of the seven deadly sins, “will be as pleasing unto me, as Paradise was to Adam, the first day of his creation,” (277-8) aligning his own faults with the first fault of Adam and Eve in Eden and coming full circle. Faustus responds positively to the temptation to “Be thou on earth as Jove is in the sky,” words which sound strikingly like those of the serpent to Adam and Eve in the medieval mystery plays, or Lucifer himself.
When we look deeper into the content and narrative of the play, we find that it is full of circles and repetitive movements, which seem to undercut everything Faustus does (this is something which I think warrants further investigation and which I am hoping to explore myself in more detail at some point). Faustus seems destined to repeat rather than to move vertically. He begins his whole endeavor by drawing a circle on the ground, in which to practice his black arts, but which seems to signal the start of this circular motion of the action, and his imprisonment within it.

We know that he is not even the first person to draw this circle and dabble in the black arts, as he has already taken instruction from Valdes and Cornelius. The play begins and ends in his study – for all of his jaunts around the world he has come back to where he started. In the middle of the play we have the scene of Robin, Rafe and the Vintner, yet Faustus too seems to repeat a similar kind of action immediately after with the Knight and then the Horse-courser. Faustus appears to be constantly weighed down physically and narratively by the fact that he is simply repeating the acts of others; repetition of others’ work being the worst crime an academic can commit.

Before his death, he commands that the “ever-moving spheres of heaven stop,/That time may cease and midnight never come!” the spheres and the clock both making circular movements which he cannot control. Faustus himself seems to betray the truth that he can only go so far before having to go back to the start when, in scene one, whilst boasting about the kingdoms and the elements that he claims he will control, he says, “his dominion that exceeds in this/stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man:” again leading to a comparison with Adam and the fact that man’s own instincts and humanity decide his limits.
Faustus does not seem to realize that this line is evidence of man’s limits rather than his endless possibilities.

But is this the play suggesting acceptance of this, as man at the hands of another circular motion, the wheel of fortune, (fortune being mentioned both in the prologue and the epilogue) or does it rather betray frustration and indignation at this fact?

I think another piece of evidence of the play’s questioning of boundaries, comes when we look at the play as a tragedy, and how Marlowe deals with the tragic form. How the play relates to tragedy is something that you may wish to explore in your own work and I am just touching on this briefly, but I do think it is connected to what I have been talking about. Faustus says he is, “Yet level at the end of every art,/And live and die in Aristotle’s works.” – is this also the play’s nod to the confines and limits of the form of tragedy itself?

Aristotle’s rules of tragedy say that the protagonist should be renowned and prosperous, so his change of fortune can be from good to bad – we can tick the box on that. He also declares that there should be unity of place, time and action. Dr Faustus spans 24 years (not 24 hours as declared by Aristotle) and Faustus travels all over the world – not sticking to the rules there then. Aristotle also argues that the change in the fortune of the lead character should come about as the result, not of vice, but of some great error or frailty in their character – but where exactly, having considered the different theologies that the play seems to acknowledge, do we place Faustus in that? What exactly is his error or flaw? As we have seen, the play is full of competing systems of belief - Calvinism, Moderate Anglicanism, Catholicism and Atheism, each of which would suggest a different position or interpretation of Faustus’s vice within or outside that Aristotelian framework.
One wonders if this line also seems to make the point that adhering to the tragic form as set by Aristotle is in itself a form of predestination, like Calvinism itself. Did Marlowe want to save his hero but in so doing would obliterate the tragic form, a risk he didn’t want to take? Does he want to leave the bounds of tragic drama as he has left the bounds of the morality play, but grudgingly acknowledges that in order to make it dramatically effective he has had to bow down, in the most part, to Aristotle’s rules and predestine Faustus fate in this way? Do the circular motions of the play actually create an overarching and claustrophobic sense of unity of place, time and action, that ultimately expose the restrictions on Faustus, on humankind, and on the form of the play itself? I don’t have the answer to this, but I do think that there is certainly a tension between the content of the play, the theologies it examines, and the tragic form that it appears, in most parts, to adhere to. But then, that is a matter of interpretation.

ENDS