



Scene 12 :The Tragedy of Ambition

An analysis of Scene 12 from Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*

Scene 12: The Court of Vanholt

Scene 12 presents Faustus at the court of the Duke of Vanholt, performing for the nobility:

- Faustus offers to fulfil any desire of the pregnant Duchess
- Despite it being January, she requests ripe grapes
- Mephistophilis is dispatched to India to retrieve them
- The Duchess declares them the finest she has tasted
- The Duke promises substantial rewards for this "miracle"

This interaction exemplifies the **degradation of Faustus's supernatural powers** into mere parlour tricks for aristocratic entertainment.



The Diminishment of Power



Scholar's Ambition

Faustus begins as a brilliant scholar who seeks knowledge beyond human limitations, rejecting theology, medicine, and law as insufficient.



Diabolic Bargain

He trades his eternal soul for 24 years of unlimited power through black magic, expecting to become "great emperor of the world."



Trivial Results

By Scene 12, his supernatural abilities are reduced to procuring out-of-season fruit for aristocratic amusement—a profoundly trivial use of his damned powers.

"The learned doctor spends some of his last fleeting moments providing 'merriment' and 'delight' for the duke and duchess."

Critical Perspectives on Scene 12

Theological Critique

Marlowe shows how Faustus's spiritual corruption manifests as intellectual diminishment. A man who could have glorified God through his intellect now wastes his gifts on frivolous magic tricks.

The grapes—symbolic of abundance and pleasure—represent the temporary and ultimately unsatisfying nature of worldly delights compared to eternal salvation.

Class Commentary

Scene 12 offers pointed criticism of aristocratic frivolity. The pregnant Duchess's desire for unseasonable luxury rather than spiritual nourishment mirrors Faustus's own misplaced priorities.

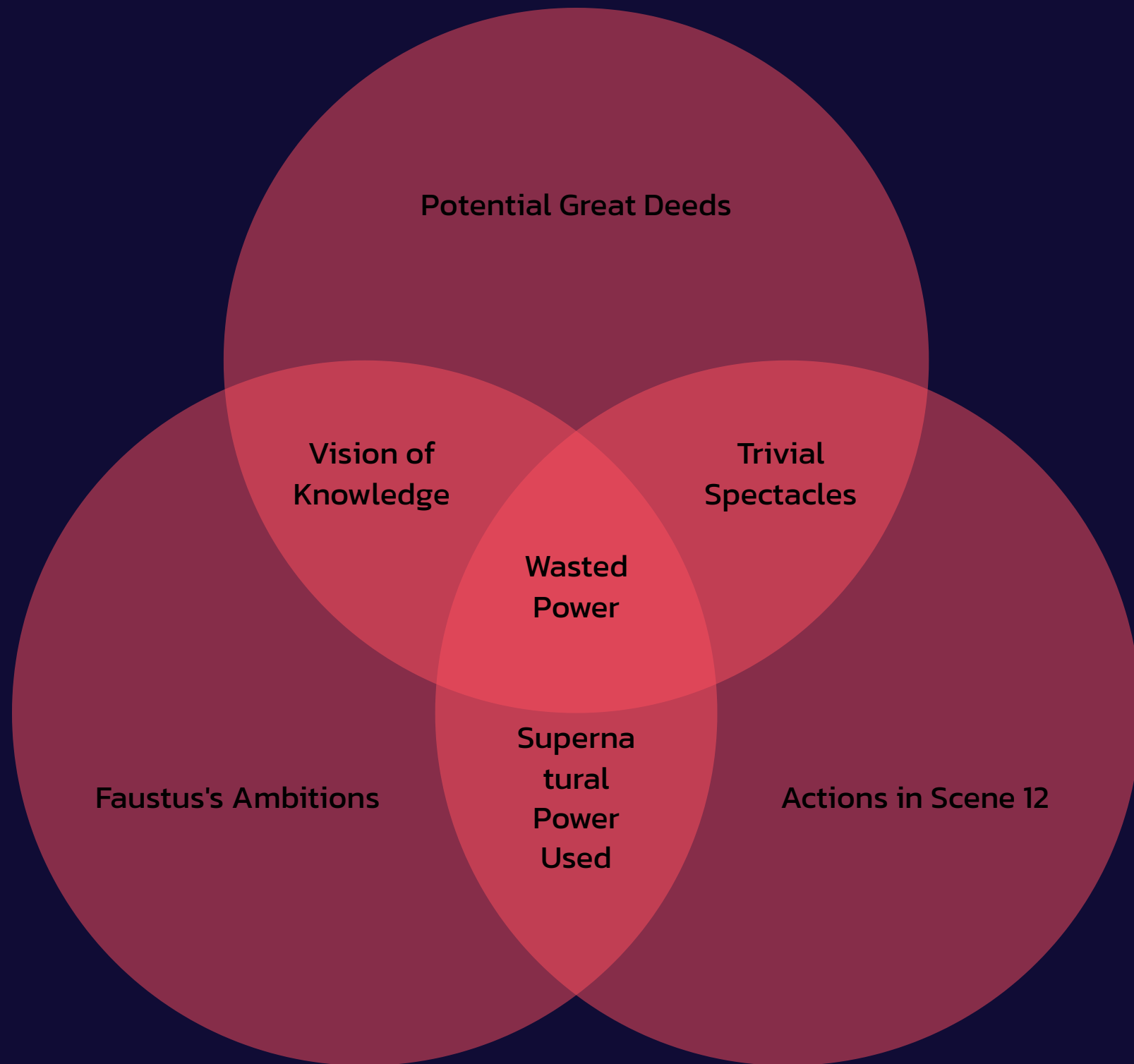
Marlowe subtly critiques a nobility that values spectacle over substance—a potentially dangerous position for a playwright dependent on aristocratic patronage.

Psychological Reading

The scene reveals Faustus's desperate need for validation and recognition, even as his time grows short. His eagerness to please the Duke suggests a man seeking to justify his damnable choices through worldly acclaim.

The winter setting contrasts with the summer grapes, emphasizing how Faustus disrupts natural order yet achieves nothing of lasting significance.

The Tragic Irony of Faustus's Powers



Scene 12 represents Marlowe's masterful portrayal of Faustus's tragic decline. A man who sold his soul for godlike powers now performs tricks that any court jester might envy but no serious scholar would value.

- ⊗ For your essays: Consider how this scene relates to Renaissance anxieties about ambition, knowledge, and the proper limits of human achievement. How might Marlowe's contemporary audience have interpreted Faustus's diminishment differently than we do today?

The procurement of grapes in January serves as a powerful **memento mori**—a reminder that Faustus's time is running out, even as he distracts himself with increasingly inconsequential demonstrations of his fading power.