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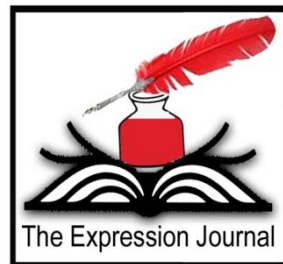
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## ***THE JEW OF MALTA: A UNIQUE DRAMA OF THE RENAISSANCE PERIOD***

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### **Abstract**

The conception of Renaissance “virtu” constitutes the general spirit of Marlowe’s dramas. “Virtu” is struggling forward and when it falls, it falls unconquered by fate. This theme is of greatness; not found in English drama before. Marlowe dramatizes the Renaissance belief that men are not weak and that they are fearless. Then life will not be strenuous; power will come; glory will come; greatness will come; everything that is excellent will come. Never will he be nobody; he will be a hero. This “virtu” combines religion with poetry in the dramatic way. In fact, Marlowe’s dramas are all experimental and so they cannot be truly great. But they serve as the pointers to the greatness of the future dramas. His limitations are the lack of structural power and subtle characterization. In *The Jew of Malta*, Barabas stew in the juice of his pride. He is dramatically presented as a melodramatic villain. Malta is traversed, murder is out; crime is not paying and the reward of sin is death. Only the Lord takes revenge. At the zenith of his career Barabas is shown as a Machiavellian, and referring to the Turks and Christians, Barabas is bent on making a profit of his policy, though he does not love them. According to Machiavelli, cruelty and pity are necessary and when one is feared and then loved, one will have more safety. He also says that every man is ungrateful, inconstant, dissembler, fearful of dangers and covetous. Barabas possesses all these qualities, making him conscious of being hated. In religious terms one sees Machiavelli as the devil’s disciple and Barabas as Machiavelli’s disciple.

### **Keywords**

Rehabilitate, Christians, Church, Ecclesiastical Polity, Power-hungry, Catholicism, Renaissance.

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*The Jew of Malta* is the play Christopher Marlowe writes next to his *Doctor Faustus*. In this play also as in *Doctor Faustus* a great design is incompletely executed. Marlowe is ever found showy and presents his main character flamboyantly. In the first scene of *The Jew of Malta* the Jew surveys heaps of gold in his counting-house. Everything is flamboyant here, but effective. Barabas displays his extreme joyfulness and rapture as he fingers his sparkling coins. He is fanciful over the track of his ships with valuable cargo. One marks a change in his shape and appearance, which shows avarice under transfiguration at the grass level unlike that of Jesus Christ. Once the religion approximates to poetry, avarice is presented not as something contemptible; rather it looks a marvelous swell, which really portrays Barabas' passion for the infinite. Infinite riches in a little room show the ideal expanding from economics to aesthetics and thus getting sublimated. Here Marlowe's creative spirit of poesy is at work as if all were conceived in the sphere of "Infinite I am" (Coleridge 135), to borrow the Coleridgean phrase. Marlowe presents Barabas proceeding to infinitude from little room full of infinite riches. Compared with Barabas, Shakespeare's Shylock is more miserly sans the vein of idealism which characterizes Barabas, and so the latter detects a link of his passion for wealth with the blessing pronounced by God.

At the time of the confiscation of wealth by the governor of Malta to pay his tribute to the Turks, Barabas philosophizes that theft is a more sordid vice than his passion for wealth. Here his wealth evokes the audience's compassion. Finding it hard to bear sorrows, Barabas inquires of his persecutors whether they are satisfied. After taking all wealth of Barabas, his persecutors have now nothing left except bereaving Barabas' life. The readers show tendencies to forgive Barabas for the device he employs to recover some part of his treasure. When everything has been confiscated including his house that has now become a convent, Barabas urges his daughter Abigail to become a nun and send down the jewels to him at night. As he tumbles to his money-bags thrown out, he cries out ecstatically:

"O my girl,

My gold, my fortune, my felicity." (Marlowe 46-47)

Here Abigail is found superior to Shakespeare's Jessica in that the former's filial tenderness

is conspicuously absent in Shakespeare's Jewess. Contrasted with Shylock also elevates revenge to a height, Barabas degenerates into a monster in the expression of his malignant revenge. Avarice is not eclipsed in his character as in Shylock.

In the first act Marlowe tries to rehabilitate the Jew and in it Barabas is shown as a superb figure in his encounter with the hypocritical governor. In this aspect lies the source of poetry, religion and drama in all integrity, and so Marlowe as poetic dramatist identifies himself with the Jew. It is also revealed after an intensive study that Marlowe makes use of his audience's revulsion against the Catholic defenders and Turkish attackers. The overreacher falls into hell yet it will be found that *The Jew of Malta* is more comic, though blackly, than tragic in that the drama serves as an expose of hypocrisy. Marlowe is Machiavellian, and admired in this account. He has dramatically shown ignorance as a sin. The screams of Barabas at the last stage clearly indicate that the sin of ignorance is universally present in the human character. So in this twirl we mark religion, poetry and drama jostling together. In *The Jew of Malta* the Jew's lust of money has something sublime in it; here his desire is of huge proportion. He is no miser busy treasuring coins in the contemptible manner. On close study Barabas reflects his real nature by considering commonpeople's opulence unworthy of respect.

The critical commonplace is that religion was inseparably connected with politics during Queen Elizabeth's reign. Queen Elizabeth was powerful governess of the Church of England. John Whitgift was then the Archbishop of the Church of England, had authority as a Privy Councilor. In the divinely sanctioned rule of the Queen as God's vice-regent, any transgression of her laws was not just a crime, but a sin against God; contrariwise a deliberate dissent from the Church's official prescriptions of order and worship was not just a sin, but a crime against the State. These ideas, of course, form the part of the official ideology of the Elizabethan government. When the Roman Catholics advocated the Queen's overthrow after a Papal Bull had excluded the Queen as a punishment from the privileges of a member of the Christian Church, such as marriage or burial in Church, Holy Communion in 1570 or when the Puritan radicals demanded the routing of bishops and their hierarchical mode of ecclesiastical polity from the national church, the English subjects knew that the Church and state are intimately linked. It is no surprise that Marlowe expresses and explains the complex intersections of religion and politics in his different works.

This political religion is easily understood when Tamburlaine, God's scourge is dissected. The rulers- Cosroe, Bajazeth, Orcanes, Callapine, and their allies are all vanquished by Tamburlaine as they are shown to be power-hungry unbelievers desecrating the holy places. Bajazeth, the Turkish emperor, boastfully says that the Christian apostates have reinforced his army. Thus he poses Christendom and besieges Constantinople. Europeans feared him as an agent of divine vengeance against divided Christendom. At that instant he vanquishes Bajazeth and raises the siege of Constantinople, which releases the Christian captives. For this act, the historical Tamburlaine is honoured all over Europe.

The name Barabas means Biblical thief. The Jews asked Pilate to set Barabas free to replace Christ prior to his Crucifixion. He values wealth more than anything else; so he never chases political power. He believes that the accumulation of wealth has its own kind of authority and influence. He has the Jewish identity. Marlowe represents Judaism as booby religion, in which the blessings promised to Abraham are worldly prosperity and economic superiority of God's chosen people. In Jewish religion one finds the justification of the acquisitive drive, restless pursuit of riches and usurious money practices of Jewish

merchants like Barabas. This Jew has religious hypocrisy and has no hesitation to pose himself as a Christian convert to play tricks on the Friars.

In *The Jew of Malta*, Catholicism is a false religion like Judaism. In the days of Marlowe England waged war with Catholic nations abroad— particularly Spain and the Catholic provinces of France. Barabas' daughter, Abigail, is opposed to her villainous anti-Christian father, and to the repulsive Catholic people. Her honesty and inward-centred faith is contrary to her father's hypocrisy-based atheism and the Friars' lechery and avarice, seen as a travesty of the Catholic formulae for spiritual reform— poverty, purity and obedience. Abigail dies a Christian death and he is the representative figure of true faith which is averse to avarice, lechery, dishonesty and hypocrisy, and she abides by the Cardinal principles of Christianity. These virtues of the inner world of Abigail form the core of true religion dramatized in *The Jew of Malta*. These virtues are juxtaposed by the ardour of Machiavellianism as expressed in the ironical remark of Ferneze at the conclusion of the play— "Let due praise be given/ Neither to fate nor fortune, but to heaven." (Marlowe 122-123). This is all about Marlowe's concept of religious politics— distinctive feature of Machiavellianism, expressing itself in Marlowe as a form of materialism tinged with Satanism. Tension created by religious politics is the seedbed of drama.

The Renaissance heralded a new age in Europe and ushered forth a new era of bright hopes and aspirations. It sent forth flickering rays in the continent early in the fourteenth century. This Renaissance spirit reached England later. In this period the new spirit awakened men by degrees until there was an upsurge in their hearts. The literary figures expressed their love for life and its varied beauties. This age was also the age of adventure and material wealth. The visions of distant lands rich in gold and jewels allured men to make adventures. Various art forms such as music, dance and so on played significant roles in the general life of the time. This life of mirth and joy was eventually followed by people's love for luxury and wealth. Deep learning of the classical writers of Greece and Rome found favour with the literary artists of this age. A marked feature of the age was the scorn of earthly conditions. The ambitious men sought to scale the heights of power, beauty, and love. Marlowe's four plays – *Tamburlaine*, *Doctor Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta* and *Edward II* are full-blooded expression of the zeitgeist of the age – new aspirations, hopes and enterprises. Marlowe's plays serve as an epitome of the lives and feelings of the people of the Renaissance.

In *The Jew of Malta* what fired the imagination of people at that time was the love of wealth and precious stones. Barabas is the representative figure of the Renaissance. He uses all his energy for the accumulation of wealth. He has got "infinite riches in a little room" (Marlowe 37). Here the excess of wealth has generated his covetousness – the monstrous sin. He is a lover of wealth, having the vision of precious stones such as fiery opals, sapphires, amethysts, topaz, and emeralds and so on. His mind always strives after wealth. Here he is akin to Marlowe – the mouthpiece of the new age of Renaissance – exulting. As an incarnation of devil, Barabas committed many sinful acts and showed no scruple in poisoning his daughter to death. He is Machiavellian in that he denied all morality except the morality which functioned for the welfare of the individual man. The power he wields is egoistic. The following lines as found in the Prologue to the *Jew of Malta* are reminiscent of *The Prince* of Machiavelli:

"And let them know that I am Machevil,  
And weigh not men, and therefore not men's words,

Admired I am of those that hate me most.

.....

I count religion but a childish toy  
And hold there is no sin but ignorance.

.....

....O' th' poor petty weights,  
Let me be envied but not pitied!" (Marlowe 7-27)

This doctrine of Machiavelli has boldness and strength introduced into the Elizabethan stage through *Barabas* by Marlowe.

In those days, most of the Italian dukes and princess were base-born, men who came to occupy their high positions by virtue of their sheer merit, confidence or feeling. In the dramas of Marlowe the heroes are different from what we meet in the heroes belonging to the different class altogether. Marlowe recognizes individual worth as the criterion of a man's rise to the eminent position. Suddenly a king on the stage, Tamburlaine has been raised to that position from the rank of a shepherd by his parentage. *Barabas* is a money-lender. *Faustus* is an ordinary German doctor. Here we identify the Renaissance ideal of individual worth distinguished from the medieval idea of tragedy as turning from greatness to misery. This individual worth is 'virtu' understood as will or ambition. The hero is shown rising by dint of his own worth, not by his membership in a class. Thus the old tradition gradually gets modified by the Marlovian ideal, also recognized by Shakespeare.

In Marlowe's tragedies we mark a change. The central part of his dramas lies in the struggle of some brave and ambitious persons against too strong forces. There is the marked absence of moral ideas. Here all attention of readers focused on the personality of the hero. To illustrate the point, we here mentioned Tamburlaine who has become the master of those staging about him. *Faustus* is another hero possessing infinite power of knowledge. Last but not the least; it is the Jew *Barabas* who is sort of super mind among the puppets whom he moves continually. Unlike the other plays of Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta* has no transcendental quality. It is full of intrigues. The play is governed by Machiavellianism. It is a farce full of rollicking laughter.

The forgoing discussion leads to the core of the matter, as formed by religion and poetry. *Barabas*' diabolical pleasure in acquiring fabulous wealth brings him into the sphere of poetry and religion, though not in the conventional sense. It is to be noted that it is *Barabas*' monstrosity and his felony. This is his religion over which he expresses his ecstatic joy and mirth. Since this impulse is true and sincere, it reads like a poem. But this is all the negative wave of poetry and religion.

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