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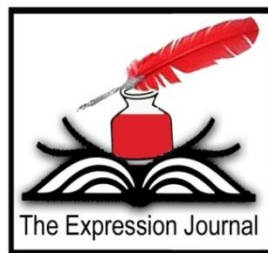
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Christopher Marlowe's Major Dramas: A Scrutiny

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Abstract

Marlowe is to be understood in the wider perspective of the individual and freedom in Renaissance philosophy, not in relation to Calvinism. The religious thought of the Renaissance puts emphasis on man's freedom. At the same time the growth of naturalistic thought which emphasizes the role of necessity in the determination of human life. A Renaissance man, Marlowe feels attracted by both freedom and necessity. Life is caught in a crisis in which freedom passes into deterministic forces such as different kinds of magic, deities and naturalism. There is also a protest that the aim of a man is self-liberation. This paradox is exemplified in Doctor Faustus. All of Marlowe's heroes are sinners in that they have turned away from the unchangeable good to their private good that existed externally. For their self-indulgent and proud life they are living death; their life is death. The higher life is denied to them forever. They will always fail to express divinity. Tamburlaine plays the role as the scourge of God. His last line in the play is the self-regarding utterance: "For Tamburlaine, the scourge of God must die". The idea of the scourge originated in a passage from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Significantly Calvin seems preoccupied with the idea when he makes his comment on the passage where we find that God is using a heathen Assyrian to punish the disobedient children of Israel. When the Assyrian triumphantly revels, he is struck down by God. In Elizabethan times, war was often understood as God's scourge. The scourge is understood as one that inflicts suffering on God's people and so naturally brings about God's will.

Keywords

Authority, Reminiscent, Conglomeration, Terrible money-lender,
Compunction, Conscience, Renaissance.

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Tamburlaine has the outward form of a morality play, but actually it is an immoral play. Here Marlowe sets out to prove that there is no God and that man aspires to turn out a Hitler or a Tamburlaine. In this play Marlowe's message is that there is no such thing as the divine scheme. The universe is full of lawless elements which are to be controlled by human wisdom and power. Here the point to make is that *Tamburlaine* is anti-Christian in that he defies the canons of Christianity. Christopher Marlowe was the most important dramatist before Shakespeare among the University Wits. He left behind powerful tragedies– (a) *Tamburlaine*, (b) *Doctor Faustus*, (c) *The Jew of Malta*, (d) *Edward II*. Each one of these tragedies manifests the Renaissance spirit and moves around the central personality consumed with lust for power. It is one man type of tragedy in which there is one dominating character, drafting the other characters by his outstanding personality. The hero of his *Tamburlaine the Great*, with his faith in the ecstasies of earthly glory, including those of love and power, and his readiness to challenge God and Death in their accomplishment marks the zenith in the Renaissance glorification of man and coincided with a peak of national enthusiasm for real-life heroes like Sir Francis Drake. In *Tamburlaine the Great*, the dramatist focuses his attention on the meteoric career of Timur, the Tarter, who began his life as a shepherd, swept over Persia and ran the whole East with the tremendous passion of establishing his authority all over the East. Sitting on his chariot drawn by captive Kings, with a caged emperor, he is boastful of his overriding power. Then afflicted with disease, he talks wildly and angrily against the gods and would overthrow them as he has done earthly rulers. *Tamburlaine* reads like an epic, but anybody can understand its instant success with a people only half-civilized, fond of military glory and the instant adoption of its 'mighty line' as the vehicle of his drama.

One of Marlowe's greatest services to the English Theatre was to produce a type of drama in which popular tastes and traditions finally joined forces with those of the Renaissance. Thus *The Life and Death of Dr. Faustus* (1588), the first great tragedy on humanism, was derived from a popular pamphlet and a ballad on the same subject. The farcical elements are reminiscent of those in some of the Miracle Plays and in the most popular of the Interludes as well as of the horse-play in the contemporary jigs. The play

is also a Morality play in that it is a struggle between Good and Evil. But simultaneously the central character is no abstract quality but a real man who dares and sins and suffers– as grand in tragic defiance as Tamburlaine. Like *Tamburlaine* this tragedy also lacks in dramatic construction. The whole play is a conglomeration of fourteen scenes spread around the personality of Faustus. The play contains passages of rare poetic beauty, particularly the Helen passages where Dr. Faustus invokes the spirit of the dead queen of beauty.

The Jew of Malta is a study of the lust for wealth and centres round the figure of the Jew Barabas– a terrible money-lender. In his lust for wealth he strongly suggests Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* of Shakespeare. The Jew devised plans to hold the city to ransom, but the evil recoiled upon him and he fell a victim to his evil machinations. He fell into a boiling cauldron prepared for another. He died speaking in an irreverent way about God and sacred things. The Jew had no compunctions and no qualms of conscience. In his dying farewell to people, he says that he should be envied, not pitied. The last part is full of melodramatic horrors.

It may also be that scourge identifies God's enemies and punishes them on behalf of God. When Babylon falls, he calls himself "the wrathful messenger of mighty Jove". Tamburlaine acts more directly against the heathens, when he orders his soldiers to burn down all the holy books of the Moslems. Here the role of Tamburlaine is that he is the scourge of God and that he always acts in obedience of God.

Edward II of Marlowe is a tragic study of a King's weakness and wretchedness and it brings out the irony of kingship. Edward II is murdered in cold blood. His tragic end arouses sympathy in the readers' heart. The royal utterances in prison move all readers to tears. In style and construction this is the best attempt of Marlowe in tragedy. The dramatist has been found showing his grasp in handling his subject matter. There is no looseness in plot-construction. Here is a regular five Act tragedy like tragedies of Shakespeare. The character portrayals of Edward II, Mortimer, Isabella and Gaveston have been done admirably. In this last tragedy Marlowe has reached the climactic point of his dramatic art and acted as a real forerunner of Shakespeare, preparing ground for him.

Marlowe's life and writings manifestly show that he was of independent and rebellious attitude to the life in the world. In the sixteenth century the popularity and notoriety of Machiavellian doctrine spread through the continent. Marlowe was among the first in England to accept and use the Machiavellian doctrines. He made a god of 'virtu'. In his time the Italians were full of desires and ambitions, and their selfish and cynical activities were obvious. Machiavelli refused to accept any morality with no bearing on the welfare of the individual. According to him no action was deemed ignoble so long as it makes the position of the Prince in the state safer and more secure. Marlowe has used this idea in his first three tragedies because of his dominating egoistic power. To Barabas there is no sin but ignorance, and he wishes to be envied, not pitied. This is clearly Machiavellianism.

In Marlowe 'virtu', derived from Sanskrit 'viratva', meaning 'will', 'ambition', constitutes his religion and poetry. Italy was not then class-ridden. The Italian dukes and princes during Renaissance were low-born men who had got their ranks and positions by dint of personal merit, confidence or tricks. Likewise, in Marlowe's dramas, the heroes are all base-born men, not found in the former tragedies. Tamburlaine has

been raised to empire from sheer peasanthood. Barabas is a mere money-lender and Faustus an ordinary German doctor. In these dramas Marlowe has strictly followed the Renaissance ideal of individual worth; ignoring completely the medieval conception of tragedy as descent from greatness to misery. Shakespeare gradually changed the ancient tradition in favour of the Marlovian ideal. There is a marked change in the tragic aim of Marlowe's tragedies. The main point is not in the falling of a great man from happiness; it is in the struggle of a brave and ambitious soul against forces too strong for it. The spectators and readers are all attracted to the personality, greatness and nobility of the hero. Tamburlaine was great master of those kings around him; Faustus possessed infinite knowledge; Barabas was a supermind among the puppets affected greatly by him. The marked feature of all these heroes are intellectual majesty as found later in Shakespeare's Hamlet.

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 stews 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. His desire to be loved is a secret shame. Nobody loves him; he is an alienated man. His revenge is seen as compensatory, providing people with reason for bearing hatred to him. Abigail discovers that there is no love on earth. Shorn of love, Barabas is all alone though he likes to have friends, and gets Ithamore as his second self. Being an egoist, Barabas cannot live with others nor can he do without others. As Barabas plots against other people, they rightly combine against him. But these combinations do not last as all of them are selfish. People live in a vicious circle of mutual distrust. It is an acquisitive society when men are wolves to each other; there is more knave than fool. In this play one encounters the beasts of prey. Only Abigail is dove like and she also feels that every experience of life and world is purchased with sorrow. We see the visions of evil in this world. In religious terms one sees Machiavelli as the devil's disciple and Barabas as Machiavelli's disciple. In this world ignorance is the only sin. The room is very small, but the riches are infinite. Barabas is monstrous and he lives in a narrow and static world. All attempt to sell themselves at a high price and to buy others at a cheap rate. The moral issue that may be considered under religion is between folly and knavery.

The Jew is not the only villain in the play. No character is basically better than the frankly opportunist Barabas in a world where love, justice, integrity have lost their value. The Christians among whom Barabas lives have long since turned away from their worship of God to the worship of Mammon. The only standards of society Marlowe has thought are commercial values. Ferneze asks Bashaw:

“What wind drives you thus into Malta road?”

The following answer of the Turk sets the road for the play:

“The wind that bloweth all the world besides,
Desire of gold.

Time and again Barabas can excuse his actions on the grounds that the Christians, with all their pretended horror of usury, are just as greedy for money as he.

When Barabas says: “Now will I show myself to have more of the serpent than dove/ that is, more knave than fool” no ethics-religious considerations enter into this world, only intelligence counts. The rogue who cheats everybody is more acceptable than the hypocrite who cheats himself. This opposition of self-confessed opportunism against self-concealed greed is portentously dramatised in the scene between Ferneze and Barabas, in which the Governor deprives the Jew of all his possessions in order to obtain tribute money for the Turks. When the Jew asks if he and his fellow-Jews will contribute equally with the Maltese, Ferneze uses words- unctuous with hypocrisy and ferocious with superstitious hatred. What is visible is that the Puritan’s wrong action is always right. In the entire play treachery is justified on religious grounds. The Christians cheat those not belonging to their own faith and a Jew has also a good pretext for deceiving a Gentile. So all heretics are not Jews. The sham values of the Mammon-worshipping world are exposed. They foreshadow the mercantile society of later times. The Jew has no tragic dignity; he is a monster.

Edward II is a study of moral conflict within an established society. Here Edward II is born into inheritance of royal government but effectively throws it away for the sake of his homosexual love which cannot be accepted in the historical world where he lives and moves. Many aspects of the king are understood when he is seen as a king without command, as a lover with no fulfilment of love, as a lion transformed into a lamb surrounded by wolves, and finally as one reduced to the depth of wretchedness. Edward II is a conventional tragic character in Marlowe’s unconventional tragedy. When Edward II lost crown, his life has become valueless-he cries for his crown. Here Marlowe has shown the self-destruction of a false humanism. His pride in life ultimately yields to the rejection of life. The king welcomes death as his friend- not an unconquerable enemy. In Marlowe’s days when the humanistic ideals fell down, men turned to the religious poets when the new century started.

Marlowe’s plays are all tragedies. They had been written from 1587 to 1592. The comic parts of his drama are mostly interpolations. Marlowe had no natural liking for comedy. His poetry is excellent in that his verse is characterised by its burning energy, splendid diction and its responsiveness to the demands of different emotions as well as imagery from different such as geography, astronomy and so on. He used his poetry to create his great characters and to raise them to the level of limitless aspiration. Poetry helps Marlowe a lot when he depicts anxiety and despair that victimise his heroes. Marlowe has analysed such expressions poetically through drama. He has shown that when a man is anxious he fears everything which is nothing. Ultimately he passes into

despair. Such a situation as one meets with in the plays of Marlowe has been structured by the hero from the point of view of the free Renaissance figure. Is there any freedom in the deterministic arrangement of the factual world? The answer is No.

It is observed that the Marlovian heroes live for pleasure. Such people can never have any social status in the community. Their tragedy lies in their attempt to overcome despair and depression and in doing so they have chosen despair and sank deep into despair. In despair they try to leap to god, but they fail for their long, atheistic life. They are like solitary individuals of the modern world. In the last phase of life Faustus perceives that the being of for itself is nothing but being what it is not. But being is what it is, and it is being-in-itself.

This stage is far off and unreachable. The consciousness of lacks and expectations of the future drive the heroes of Marlowe to become conscious of what is not. Thus enters nothingness (what is not). They feel the presence of men-being in themselves. Nothingness haunts their being. This nothingness is the gap between consciousness and the domain of things. This gap is of poetic and religious significance, and has been shown responsible for the tragedy; it is the gap between expectations and the fulfillments. This is echoed in a beautiful expression of Shakespeare in Macbeth: "And nothing is but what is not" (1.3.145). So the fundamental concept of Marlowe's religion is man's nothingness. By nihilating being, Marlowe's heroes make themselves the tragic heroes.

The fundamental religious idea as expressed poetically in Marlowe's dramas is that man has lost his belief in God and thus lost the foundation of his truth and morality-all life-affirming, not life – denying. Marlowe was greatly influenced by these concepts of Modernity and it is needless to say that we hear these modern voices in all his plays.

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