

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *THE JEW OF MALTA* AND OTHER ELIZABETHAN PLAYS

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When Shakespeare left Stratford-upon-Avon for London, and began his career as actor and arranger of old plays for the Lord Chamberlaine's Servants, a group of scholar-poets held possession of the stage. The date of this cannot be fixed with certainty. But "We may refer it with probability to the year 1585."¹ Before 1600 Shakespeare had already become the greatest dramatist of the Elizabethan period, not only by the production but also by the publication of his earlier comedies and tragedies. In that period of fifteen years, between 1585 and 1600, the scholar-poets, so-called University Wits, died or left off writing for the theater. They were Robert Greene, George Peele, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Lodge, Thomas Nash, and Thomas Kyd. Greene died in 1592, Marlowe in 1593, Peele in 1597, Kyd not later than 1594, Lyly died soon after 1600, Nash in 1625. These are the dramatists with whom Ben Johnson thought fit to compare Shakespeare. Among them Marlowe stands apart, as a superior genius, the true founder of blank verse, a pioneer and creator in the highest sense. A. C. Swinburne speaks highly of Marlowe: "Of English blank-verse, one of the few highest forms of verbal harmony or poetic expression, Marlowe was the absolute and divine creator... he left the marvellous instrument of his invention so nearly perfect that Shakespeare first and afterwards Milton came to learn of him."² J. A. Symons, referring to the influence of Marlowe upon English stage, says, "Marlowe revolutionized the English stage during Greene's ascendancy, and forced his predecessors to adapt their style to his inventions."³ and gives a full account of Marlowe's originality. "In the first place, he saw that the romantic drama, the drama of the public theatres, had a great future before it. In the second place, he saw that the playwrights of the classic school had discovered the right dramatic metre. In the third place, he raised both matter and metre, the subjects of the romantic and the verse of the classic school, to heights as yet unapprehended in his days."⁴ In other words, Marlowe was more or less influenced by classics, the morality play, the plays of his contemporaries, and also he influenced his successors including Shakespeare. In fact mutual influences are found here and there throughout *The Jew of Malta*. Therefore in the following chapters, we will investigate Machiavellism of his age and the morality play, and at the same time will consider these influences through Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and Shakespeare's plays, chiefly through *The Merchant of Venice*.

I

In *The Jew of Malta*, written about 1590 but published until 1633, forty years after his death, Marlowe once again offers a dynamic, wilful character as the center of dramatic interest. His first play, *Tamburlaine the Great* is the drama of "proud audacious deeds," in which Tamburlaine crosses swords with his enemies, and his second play, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* is the drama of consciousness, in which Faustus revels in necromancy for the mystery of the universe, while *The Jew of Malta* is the drama of worldly desires, in which Barabas tries to enclose "infinite riches in a little roome."⁵ In other words, ambition, the desire of empire, the control of power by means of super-human

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knowledge, yield place to avarice. In this work, however, the protagonist does not triumph over his enemies. The Jew, who takes pleasure equally in adding to his great fortune and in tormenting Christians, ironically comes to grief at the hands of his Christian antagonist, Ferneze. He is a more artful manipulator than Barabas and hence he can survive in the corrupt society of Malta. Thus Machiavellism is discernible.

The Jew of Malta begins with the Prologue. This prologue is put into the mouth of Machiavelli himself brought on to the stage. Machiavelli on the stage asserts that men who follow his methods of guile and trickery (which are soon identified as "policie" and the word "policie" is mentioned thirteen times, and serves to associate Barabas with Machiavelli.) succeed in becoming rulers or popes and that those who ignore his teachings suffer defeat and are removed from power. He boasts that he does not respect other men and, therefore, places no value on what they say. Those who claim to hate him most actually admire him, and those who preach against his book nevertheless read them and profit from their lesson. Thus we are informed that the successful politician does not trust other men, believe what they say, or divulge the fact that he accepts and employs unscrupulous political tactics. Machiavelli blasphemously declares, "Religion but a childish Toy"⁶ and his imitators on stage—Barabas and the Christians—all use religion as a justification for their inhumanities. In fact, the majority of characters in the play ignore the ethical doctorines of their religion and live by the dictates of either avarice or revenge, and often both. Finally, Machiavelli states his business to the audience. He has come to Britain "to present the Tragedy of a Jew, / Who smiles to see how full his bags are cramb'd, / Which mony was not got without my meanes."⁷ Thus our hatred and fear are excited against Barabas before he is ever seen by the audience. Yet when Machiavelli utters the last three lines of his Prologue, we are alerted to Marlowe's ironic intention with regard to his protagonist:

I crave but this, Grace him as he deserves,
And let him not be entertain'd the worse
Because he favours me. (Prologue, 33—35)

Although Machiavelli claims a spiritual kinship with Barabas, the action of the play dispels the idea that the Jew alone employs unsanctioned methods of attaining wealth and power, though Barabas is well qualified to speak for himself, speaking more lines than any of Marlowe's other characters, indeed, about half of the play. In fact, the influence of Machiavelli is felt on every level of Maltese society. In trying to approach Marlowe's Machiavellism, we must consider Douglas Cole's advice as well as Machiavelli's assertion on the stage. "The popular image of Machiavelli in England, formed by the central influence of Gentillet's *Contre-Machiavel* (1576) rather than by the works of Machiavelli himself, involved a host of evil characteristics beginning with the most loathsome practices of statecraft and expending to what was most vile in human nature generally. Rapacity, avarice, atheism, ruthlessness, craft and deceit, treachery, diabolism—all these were summed up in the name of Machiavelli and in the "policy" that became his notorious trademark."⁸ It seems that *The Jew of Malta* meets the qualifications of Cole's advice.

II

Marlowe was the first dramatist to introduce the character Machiavelli upon the stage, and to give a Machiavellian the central and dominant role in a play. It seems, however, that the principles and dicta of Machiavellism had been employed in drama before *The Jew of Malta*. The most notable example

on the stage is Lorenzo in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, who emerges as the villain of the play, murdering Horatio, and disposing of his accomplices Serberine and Pedringano by treacherous stratagems. Like the Vice of the morality play, Lorenzo reveals himself as villain to the audience, but his principles and slogans are not so much inversions of Christian doctrine as they are examples of Machiavellian "policie".

Why so! *Tam armis quam ingenio*:
Where words prevail not, violence prevails;
But gold doth more than either of them both.
How likes Prince Balthazar this stratagem?⁹

And better it's that base companions die
Than by their life to hazard our good haps.
Nor shall they live, for me to fear their faith.
I'll trust myself, myself shall be my friend;¹⁰

This last line reminds us of Barabas. As soon as Barabas is left to "sinke or swim,"¹¹ he defies his "lucklesse Sterres."¹² Like Tamburlaine and the rest, he considers himself to be "fram'd of finer mold then common men."¹³ His attitude toward others is exactly that of Lorenzo. This egoism is stated even more insicively by Richard III;

Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I.¹⁴

Barabas makes the same affirmation in Latin more euphemistically.

Ego mihi met sum semper proximus. (I. i. 189)

As Douglas Cole suggests, the dramaturgical quality and expression of the villainy of Lorenzo, and more particularly of Barabas, is drawn from the tradition of the morality play and the moralistic, self-destructive nature of the morality Vice.¹⁵ This influence of the morality play will be considered later. There is another line which seems to have been copied by Marlowe. When Abigall introduced herself to the Abbess as

The hopelesse daughter of a haplesse Jew, (I. ii. 317)

Marlowe, it seems, was shaping his play by the sterner conventions of *The Spanish Tragedy* and Kyd's Hieronimo,

The hopeles father of a hapless Son. (I. iv. 84)

So far we have seen some examples copied from *The Spanish Tragedy*. It may be that Marlowe was thinking of outdoing Kyd's theatricalism and sharpening the formula for the tragedy of revenge. But in the process he seems to have learned a good deal from *The Spanish Tragedy*: from its complicated plotting, its interplay of motive, and its characters. As F. S. Boas says, *The Spanish Tragedy* holds a unique place in Elizabethan drama, reaching back forward to *Gorboduc*, and forward to Shakespeare's early plays, probably even to *Hamlet* and *King Lear*.¹⁶ Indeed it may safely be said that Kyd is "the

pioneer of introspective tragedy in England."¹⁷

As above-mentioned, the dramaturgical quality and expression of the villainy of Lorenzo, and more particularly of Barabas, is drawn from the tradition of the morality play. Robert Potter says, "Shakespearean character, and dozens of other Elizabethan stage figures, inherit the functions of conventional morality characters. . . . it can be said that the morality play furnishes a kind of stage mythology upon which much of Elizabethan drama is based. It would be a mistake wilfully to ignore these medieval implications in English dramatic performance."¹⁸ What is the morality play, then? According to *The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama*, it is as follows; "A medieval religious play in the vernacular in which the forces of good and evil act upon protagonist who represents mankind. In the morality play, the forces of good and evil are personified in the figures of allegorical characters who are named for the moral quality they represent, such as Mercy, Shame, Beauty, and so on. The central conflict, the salvation or damnation of man's soul, was, before the advent of Calvinism usually resolved in favor of salvation. The most famous example of a morality play is *Everyman*."¹⁹ From now on we will consider the influence of the morality play.²⁰

In the second act of the play Barabas reveals the central feature of the Vice's dramatic conduct by exhibiting himself and his villainy. Even earlier, he had betrayed the favorite trick of the Vice—in scenes with fellow Jews, with Abigall, and with Lodowick. But his meeting with Ithimore (III. iii. 168—198) brings out the demonstrative manner of the Vice in full force. Barabas makes a point of hating Christians and plotting their destruction, but the course of the play shows that he is malevolent and treacherous with everyone, Christian, Turk, or Jew, including villainous Ithimore and Abigall. This is the Vice's characteristic of aggression against everyone. Like the Vice, the Jew's career is essentially an exhibition of his villainies, most of which are brought about by artful deception. Barabas uses the Vice's trick of weeping in order to persuade Mathias that the match of Abigall and Lodowick is an unhappy one. From all these elements of evil is *The Jew of Malta* made. After all what Marlowe has done is to cast in the form of the Vice's conventional exposition of his activities the characteristic evils ascribed to the Jews: poisoning, avarice, and usury. Barabas embodies them all. He shares with the Vice the temptation of his victims to despair and suicide, though his interest is not in spiritual damnation, but merely in the joy of destruction. It may be said that this is the crucial difference in Barabas' career from that of the Vice: Barabas' goal is the material destruction of his enemies, not their spiritual ruin.

III

In his very interesting book, H. Amphlett tells us the hypothesis that Shakespeare was Marlowe. "Christopher Marlowe's claim seems to have originated in his having 'shuffled off this mortal coil' at the precise date that the 'Shakespeare' poems began to appear—1593. He was, by the testimony of a jury of sixteen men, declared to have met his death at the hands of one Abraham Frizer, who stabbed him in self-defence. This fray occurred in an inn at Deptford. The suggestion is that in fact he fled to France, leaving his companions to foist the corpse of an unknown man upon the jury for examination. While in France he wrote the Shakespeare plays."²¹ Of course Amphlett rejects the idea, saying that this is the stuff for a 'thriller'. But to those who see strains of Marlowe in Shakespeare, this hypothesis is very attractive. "The influence of Marlowe's originality genius," A.L. Rowse says, "as with almost everything he wrote, was immense. It was greatest with Shakespeare, in both big and little. . . . the resemblances are closest between *The Jew* and *The Merchant*."²² Therefore we will show

“the resemblance between *The Jew* and *The Merchant*,” and at the same time will consider both the difference between the two plays and the influence of *The Jew of Malta* on some of Shakespeare’s plays including *The Merchant of Venice*.

In the opening scene Barabas is found in his counting-house. Barabas in his counting-house with heaps of gold before him, tells over his wealth and the exotic places it came from. He concludes with a line, “Infinite riches in a little roome,” which reminds us of Marlowe’s fate in the quarrel over a great reckoning in a little room. And his mind goes off to his argosy:

See how stand the Vanes?
East and by-South: why then I hope my ships
I sent for *Egypt* and the bordering Iles
Are gotten up by *Nilus* winding bankes:
Mine Argosie from *Alexandria*,
Loaden with Spice and Silkes, now under saile,
Are smoothly gliding downe by *Candie* shoare
To *Malta*, through our Mediterranean sea. (I. i. 40—47)

Argosy, with the suggestion of riches in the world, is a favourite one with Marlowe and is often repeated in the play (no less than five times). It seems that “argosy” has appealed to his ambitious, restless mind. The word is taken up in *The Merchant of Venice*, which seems to have been so much indebted to this scene.

he has an argosy bound to Tripolis,
another to the Indies; I understand, moreover,
upon the Rialto, he hath a third at Mexico,
a fourth for England, and other ventures he hath,
squandered abroad.²³

Shakespeare’s mind, it seems, was infinitely suggestible, and Marlowe’s was suggestive.

There is another resemblance in the following scene. Barabas induces his daughter Abigail to enter the sisterhood, and throw out the jewels to him by night. As the money bag came tumbling into his arms, he cries out in confused ecstasy:

Oh my girle,
My gold, my fortune, my felicity;
· · · · ·
Oh girle, Oh gold, oh beauty, oh my blisse! (II. i. 47—55)

In his delight he hardly knows what gratifies him most. Shakespeare directly copies this scene, improving on it as usual, making it more amusing:

My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats! (II. viii. 15—16)

Shakespeare, mitigating the harshness of Marlowe’s Jew, seems to lose something of its intensity. The

relation of Abigall to her father precludes those of Shylock and Jessica, but Marlowe's Jewess certainly has the advantage over Shakespeare's in filial tenderness: we can recall Shylock's anger to Jessica; "My own flesh and blood to rebel!"²⁴

Along with the villainies and the sensationalism, we find snatches of true Marlovian poetry. Here is a very lovely passage:

Content, but we will leave this paltry land,
 And saile from hence to *Greece*, to lovely *Greece*,
 I'll be thy *Jason*, thou my golden Fleece;
 Where painted Carpets o're the meads are hurl'd,
 And *Bacchus* vineyards over-spread the world:
 Where Woods and Forrests goe in goodly greene,
 I'll be *Adonis*, thou shalt be Loves Queene.
 The Meads, the Orchards, and the Primrose lanes,
 Instead of Sedge and Reed, beare Sugar Canes:
 Thou in those Groves, by *Dis* above,
 Shalt live with me and be my love. (IV. ii. 88—98)

The last line reminds us of a first formulation of his famous lyric, *The Passionate Shepherd to his Love*, "Come, live with me and be my love!" And at the same time we recall an atmosphere of peace and music in that moonlight act (Act V) in *The Merchant of Venice*, the loveliest Shakespeare ever wrote. We find another example of Marlovian touches of poetry:

A faire young maid scarce fourteene yeares of age,
 The sweetest flower in *Citheres's* field,
 Cropt from the pleasures of the fruitful earth,
 And strangely metamorphis'd Nun. (I. ii. 378—381)

"fourteene yeares of age" brings up the image of Juliet. Barabas' daughter, Abigall, is just Juliet's age. In *Romeo and Juliet* her father pronounces upon her parting words which, it seems, was inspired from Marlowe's words:

Her blood is settled, and her joints are stiff;
 Life and these lips have long been seperated:
 Death lies on her like an untimely frost
 Upon the sweetest flower of all the field.²⁵

Even in this resemblance we notice the difference between the two plays; Marlowe's classic beauty, Shakespeare's country image of the "untimely frost", which is more touching.

There is another example of Marlowe's echo in *Romeo and Juliet*. Sleepless with excitement, Barabas arrives with a light before midnight when Abigall has risen to search for, and find, the hidden treasure. This night scene, in its imagery and staging, curiously coincides the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. When Abigall appears on the upper stage, Barabas exclaims:

But stay, what starre shines yonder in the *East*?

The Loadstarre of my life, *if Abigall*. (II. i. 41—42)

On the other hand, Romeo, burning with passion for Juliet, enters Capulet's orchard and says:

He jests at scars that never felt a wound.
 [Juliet appears above at a window.
 But, soft! What light throw yonder window breaks?
 It is the East, and Juliet is the Sun. (II. ii. 1—3)

It is true Shakespeare copies the night scene, but he brightens it in accordance with the more youthful and burning mood of Romeo.

Now returning to the comparison between *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*, we find the lines which seem to have suggested Shylock's famous outburst. The following lines represent the fundamental attitude of Barabas:

We Jewes can fawne like Spaniels when we please;
 And when we grin we bite, yet are our lookes
 As innocent and harmelesse as a Lambes.
 I learn'd in *Florence* how to kisse my hand.
 Heave up my shoulders when they call me dogge,
 And ducke as low as any bare-foot Fryar,
 Hoping to see them starve upon a stall, (II. iii. 20—26)

Shylock betrays his greatest anger to Salarino, a friend to Antonio and Bassanio:

Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands,
 organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?

 If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you
 tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we
 not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? (III. i. 61—69)

When we read these two passages, what will we feel? We will feel more sympathy for Shylock than for Barabas. Why? It is because Barabas in the malignity of revenge turns to Vice or a villain after Act II, but with Shylock, revenge itself is dignified by its purity over the baser sin of avarice, and for all his cunning ferocity, he remains human to the last.

So far we have seen the influence of *The Jew of Malta* on Shakespeare's plays, chiefly *The Merchant of Venice*. But there are considerable differences between *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*. One is the difference between Barabas' character and Shylock's. Another is the difference of the impression left by the two plays. We have already discussed the former. So we will pursue the latter.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock disappears together with the storm and passion he has stirred. And around him Shakespeare grouped noble Bassanio, devoted Antonio, witty Gratiano, the dignity of Portia, the tenderness of Jessica, the merriment of Nerissa. These remain, and over them, is shed an atmosphere of peace and music in that moonlight act (Act V). On the other hand, the impression left by *The Jew of Malta* is very different. Round Barabas gather grasping tyrants, hypocritical friars,

the rapacious Bellamira, the hideous Ithimore, the ruffian Pillia Borza. It is as if Marlowe had planned the vilest scheme of villainy, greed, treason, murder, lust and infernal cruelty in order to justify the melodrama of the cursing end of the protagonist.

As we have seen, Shakespeare got the dramatic suggestion of Shylock from Barabas. When Shylock says, "Would any of the stock of Barrabas/ Had been her husband rather than a Christian!"²⁶ we believe firmly that Marlowe sketched the prototype of Shylock.

IV

In the preceding chapters, we have found the prototype of Marlowe's Barabas in the Vice of the morality play and in Machiavellian Lorenzo of *The Spanish Tragedy*. In his turn Shakespeare got the dramatic suggestion of Shylock from Barabas and refined it. Moreover, at the height of his powers, Shakespeare created the type of dissembling villainy in Iago. It may be that we will find Barabas' words transformed in the play. Thus it may be concluded that Lorenzo, Barabas, Shylock and Iago can claim descent from the Vice in the morality play.

In dealing with Marlowe, it is impossible to separate the man from his creations. His personality does not retire, like Shakespeare's, behind the work into obscure mystery. Rather he inspires the principal characters of his tragedies with the ardour, the ambition, the audacity of his own restless mind; where Shakespeare was discreet, tactful, prudent, Marlowe was arrogant and contemptuous, daring and challenging, unable to contain his scorn for ordinary people and their conventional fooleries. But with it, Marlowe seems to have a great deal of charm. Now we will finish our discussion by supporting Swinburne's opinions. "Nor was ever any great writer's influence upon his fellows more utterly and unmixedly an influence for good. He first, and he alone, guided Shakespeare into the right way of work; ... Before him there was neither genuine blank verse nor genuine tragedy in our language. After his arrival the way was prepared, the path were made straight, for Shakespeare."²⁷

NOTES

¹J. A. Symonds, *Shakespeare's Predecessors in the English Drama* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1967), p.427.

²Hugh Ross Williamson, *Kind Kit; An Informal Biography of Christopher Marlowe* (London, Michael Joseph, 1972), p. 9.

³J. A. Symonds, *op. cit.*, p.429

⁴*ibid.*, p.471.

⁵*The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe (Vol. I): The Jew of Malta*, ed. by Fredson Bowers (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), Prologue, 11. 29—30. Subsequent quotations from *The Jew of Malta* will refer to this edition.

⁶*ibid.*, 14.

⁷*ibid.*, 30.

⁸Douglas Cole, *Suffering and Evil in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p.137.

⁹Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, ed. by Toshikazu Oyama and Toshiko Oyama (Tokyo: Shinozaki-Shorin, 1972), II. i. 107—110. Subsequent quotations from *The Spanish Tragedy* will refer to this edition.

¹⁰*ibid.*, III. ii. 115—119.

¹¹I. ii. 268.

¹²*ibid.*, 260.

¹³*ibid.*, 219.

¹⁴*The Annotated Shakespeare (Vol. II): King Richard III*, ed. by A. L. Rowse (New York: Charles N. Potter, 1978), V. iii. 184.

¹⁵Douglas Cole, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

¹⁶Frederick S. Boas, *Shakespeare and his Predecessors* (New York: Gordian Press, 1968), p.66.

¹⁷*ibid.*

¹⁸Robert Potter, *The English Morality Play; Origins, History and Influence of a Dramatic Tradition* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p.124.

¹⁹*The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama*, ed. by John Gassner & Edmund Quinn (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969), p.586.

²⁰The following section of our discussion is heavily indebted to Cole's remarks. See Cole, *op. cit.*, pp.139—142.

²¹H. Amphlett, *Who Was Shakespeare?; A New Enquiry* (New York: Ams Press, 1955), pp.198—199.

²²A. L. Rowse, *Christopher Marlowe; His Life and Work* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p.98.

²³*The Annotated Shakespeare (Vol. I): The Merchant of Venice*, ed. by A. L. Rowse (New York: Charles N. Potter, 1978), I. iii. 18—22. Subsequent quotations from *The Merchant of Venice* will refer to this edition.

²⁴*ibid.*, III. i. 37—39.

²⁵*The Annotated Shakespeare (Vol III): Romeo and Juliet*, ed. by A. L. Rowse (New York: Charles N. Potter, 1978), IV. v. 25—28. Subsequent quotations from *Romeo and Juliet* will refer to this edition.

²⁶IV. i. 295—296.

²⁷*Marlowe: The Critical Heritage (1588—1896)*, ed. by Millar Maclure (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p.184.

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