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## **CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE'S CONTRIBUTION TO TRAGEDY AS REVEALED IN HIS DRAMATIC WORKS**

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### **Abstract**

Christopher 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 was undoubtedly the greatest dramatist of the pre-Shakespearean era who forever changed the fate of English drama. Marlowe's heroes were bold, and his rhetorical language and themes were radical at that time. Marlowe popularised the use of blank verse in drama which many famous dramatists, including Shakespeare, later used. Exaggerated thoughts and artificial diction mark his verse so much that later dramatists like Ben Jonson called his dramatic lines "Marlowe's mighty line." The fact is that Marlowe was a genuine scholar who excelled not only in classical learning but also in geography, astronomy, and philosophy; all this knowledge was combined in his plays to make them superior to his contemporary dramatists. 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 tragedy on humanism, was derived from a popular pamphlet and a ballad on the same subject. It goes without saying that dramaturgy and dramatic art are both concerned with being—the inner basis of existence. Experiences in both the fields reveal inner drama which shows Christopher Marlowe as a dramatist. This paper will explore how Marlowe's dramas depict dramatic art. Herein lies the uniqueness of Marlowe as a dramatist.

### **Keywords**

Renaissance, Futurism, Reformation, Medieval, Dramaturgy, Conflicts, Catholicism.

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Elizabethan dramaturgy and medieval antecedents are taken into account in Marlowe's dramatic art. What is prominent in Marlowe's dramas is glorification of man who regards strength as life and fearlessness as virtue. Everywhere the love for life and the world is dramatized with no concern for futurism. The dissertation is to present Marlowe as a link between medieval theatre and the Shakespearean stage and as a pre-Shakespearean poet and dramatist. As an heir to the Renaissance, Marlowe was skeptical of God-talk. In the Renaissance period the scholars in general evaluated the extent religious tendencies, not God per se. Here we shall attempt to show how Marlowe turns out to be one of the greatest protagonists of Elizabethan drama, and a prime creative force, exemplifying the Zeitgeist of the particular period of history called the Renaissance. Again, we shall analyze Elizabethan dramaturgy and its medieval antecedents and show how this native tradition contributed to the Marlovian art by making it a greater force of vitality and animation. It is well known that the native tradition of theatre was very vigorous during Marlowe's literary career. Like many of his contemporary dramatists, Marlowe fell back upon this tradition and borrowed some stage conventions there from. At the same time Marlowe took account of the set of tastes, values and expectations of the Elizabethan audience. Naturally he tried to cater to the demands of the popular taste in his dramas.

Since theatre is a composite form made up of song, dance, mime, poetry and narrative—all constituting what life is, Marlowe employed his staging methods to build up a bond between the actor and the audiences. Thus the theatre linked up with society, this is Marlowe's great contribution to the principles of Elizabethan dramatic art or dramaturgy. By studying it we get an insight into society and understand the community as a social, economic and religious unit. So Marlowe's main theme is life whose vital constituent elements are poetry, religion and drama.

Then we shall present how the dramatic art is enriched by folk rituals, the Bible plays and the Saint plays and the Morality. The last genre was disconnected from the Bible stories

and the lives of saints. Actually, the allegorical elements in religion and literature produced what the Morality was. Now imagining that we are members of the audience when reading the plays of Marlowe, we shall try to interpret the meaning of the plays because the drama is a genre or a special kind of writing which requires to be performed in the theatre. Again, in our interpretation the conflicts in each of his plays will be identified in order to get close to the large ideas binding the parts of the text together.

Marlowe's first play, *Tamburlaine*, produced in 1587, had great impact on the public mind in virtue of its impetuous force, its splendid use of blank verse and its sensitiveness to beauty. *Tamburlaine*, the hero is a Scythian shepherd whose ambition is to be "the scourge of God" (*Tamburlaine the Great* 248.) and to strike terror into the minds of man till "Immortal Jove say "Cease, my Tamburlaine!" (*Tamburlaine the Great* 200) he chases, vanquishes, maims and murders the strongest emperors of the East in the blood-thirsty manner as a brute does. He luxuriates in the ecstasies of earthly glory and of love and power, and keeps himself ever ready to challenge God and Death, the Persian warrior remarks about *Tamburlaine's* magnetism and attractions:

"And sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere

Than *Tamburlaine* be slain or overcome." (*Tamburlaine the Great* 175-176)

The play suggestively treats of the Renaissance glorification of man as abstracted from the national enthusiasm for real-life heroes like Sir Francis Drake. Marlowe's unique contribution in the English theatre lies in producing a kind of drama in which popular tastes and traditions and those of the Renaissance are found identical. Like the epicureans, the Elizabethan public enjoyed life immensely. This is the picture of life which surfaces in this play. The impact of classical Epicurean philosophy of virtue lying in power and enjoyment is perceived throughout *Tamburlaine*. The tragedy emerges out of such life. Our conclusion about the dramatist is that till Marlowe's time no one had made credible the demonic figure like *Tamburlaine* whose tragic doom is compelled by the inner forces and ill luck from without. In this area of treatment, Marlowe is uniquely different from the writers of Morality. This meeting-point of poetry, religion and drama is to be considered carefully to perceive Marlowe's unique dramatic genius.

Again, almost the same uniqueness will be found in *The Tragical History of Dr Faustus*. Here we find the elements of humanism as well as those of traditional Miracle and Morality plays. In fact *Dr Faustus* is the first great tragedy of humanism. The farcical elements in this play are reminiscent in those of some of the Miracle plays and in the most popular Interludes and of horse-play in the popular jigs. The play's similarity to the Morality plays will be found in the struggle between Good and Evil in the protagonist. But this play's distinction lies in Marlowe's delineation of the central character as a real man- not an abstract quality as found in Morality. *Dr Faustus* dares, sins and suffers like a real man. In his splendid defiance, responsible for the tragedy, *Faustus* is similar to *Tamburlaine*. Furthermore, we mark the Renaissance glowingly visible in the mediaeval setting of the legend of *Faustus*. The prevailing beliefs are called into question. Thus herein dawns freedom which makes man less prone to assenting to the medieval view that this life should be sacrificed to the future. The present world and its problems fascinated *Dr Faustus* more and so he explored the world and made experiments as to how to enjoy life and the world to the maximum extent and to possess worldly self and power.

Marlowe's third tragedy *The Jew of Malta* has dramatized the Jew *Barabas's* craze for wealth. The Jew devised his scheme to hold the entire city to ransom. In the process of his



evil work he was overtaken by the evil and victimized by his own sinister machinations. He fell into a boiling cauldron which was prepared for another. Thus the evil recoiled in him. The Jew's only regret at the moment of his death was that he could not commit all the crimes preserved in his memory. He had no compunctions, no qualms of conscience. His dying farewell to people in the prologue was: "Let me be envied but not pitied!" (*The Jew of Malta* 27). As in his other plays, the concluding part of the *Jew of Malta* shows an accumulation of horrors, resembling a melodrama.

In *Edward II* Marlowe expresses his love for the world differently. Here his writing has the form of sensuous pleasures. Let us see how it is expressed by Piers Gaveston:

"I must have wanton poets, pleasant wits,  
Musicians, that with touching of a string  
May draw the pliant king which way I please." (*Edward II* 51-53)

We also get the tone of the Renaissance adventurer in the speeches of Young Mortimer:

There is a point, to which when man aspires,  
They tumble headlong down: that point I touch'd,  
And, seeing there was no place to mount up higher,  
Why should I grieve at my declining fall?—  
Farewell, fair queen; weep not for Mortimer,  
That scorns the world, and, as a traveler,  
Goes to discover countries yet unknown." (*Edward II* 59-66)

In *Edward II* Marlowe behaves in a way that is the opposite of what someone expects of him. He believes that he is doing the right thing by just doing the reverse of what is usually done. Here the action is in clear revolt against the common morality. He shows the image of Edward II's unnatural love for Piers Gaveston, at which the king Edward II is lyrically exultant. Such treatment of the theme makes it possible for Marlowe to set the stage on fire. The flame of passion is Marlowe's contribution to the development of the Elizabethan romantic drama. Very rightly Cazamian remarks about the great poet who "lifted drama into the sphere of high literature" (Legouis & Cazamian 79). Here we find the link between poetry, drama and religion as forged in Marlowe's mind.

The point to make is that *Edward II* is an unconventional tragedy in which Marlowe explores the problem of moral conflict implicit in the established society. Unlike the megalomaniac seekers of power, Edward II was born into the inheritance of kingships, but he proudly spurns in favor of mastery, which is of homosexual love—totally unacceptable to the world where he is obliged to move and live. We see Edward II as king without command; lover denied fulfillment, a lion changed into a lamb encompassed by wolves and a man hurled by his antagonists to the depth of human misery and humiliation.

In *Hero and Leander* we also find the English Renaissance at work on a legend of antiquity which Marlowe changed to suit his purpose. The tragic end of the lovers did not make him decide not to make merry. Here we are forbidden to see sin though there is no marriage. An atheist and libertine, Marlowe does not derive his concept of sin from society. The poem runs counter to the extant conventions society in the age of Marlowe, who takes pleasure to transgress the moral sense of people. What he is mainly concerned with is to unmask the latent behavior of people which is shockingly unreasonable and outrageous and also to unmask the unconscious hypocrisy. Most of Marlowe's writings contain atheistical speculations stemming from a private fascination with abandoned knowledge, ambition and disruptive work of imagination which the Elizabethan political and religious establishments

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deemed seditious.

The aforesaid analysis of Marlowe has now brought us to the position where from we shall try to find out if Marlowe wrote anything in the form of a Renaissance manifesto. We shall also try to understand Marlowe's Renaissance vision of life as expressed in "Beauty not as luxury but as power" (Waddle 24) through the medium of his tragedy and great verse. The true tragedy and its true vehicles—great verse, superb lyric—are his contribution to the Elizabethan drama and poetry.

We find conflicts between society and individual – forming the major portion of action in Marlowe's each drama. Tamburlaine or Faustus is unwilling to submit to the earthly conditions of life, as he is bent on wielding infinite power. The heroes are the prototype of Marlowe. So the negative capacity as found in Shakespeare in a great degree is conspicuously absent. For right interpretation and appreciation of Marlowe's modernity in the field of drama we shall have to identify the conflicts in the play that will ultimately lead to our identification of the large ideas that integrate the play by binding all parts together. Marlowe's contribution mainly lies in the conflict between dramatic and empirical reality, and between content and form of the work of art. Imagining that we are members of the audience when reading Marlowe's play, we can perceive that the aesthetic effect of a work of art does not reside in its content. The point to make here is that the form of the work of art is aesthetically different. Here by content we mean that the thoughts and feelings of the work and by form we mean all the linguistic elements involved to express contents. But this conventional distinction will be untenable as we find on close scrutiny that content has some elements of form. So we can say that if events are taken as parts of the content, the way they are arranged into a "plot" is part of the form. No artistic effect is achieved if this kind of arrangement is ignored. Thus words are also aesthetically indifferent like the crude content. So all crude contents and words used to express them are materials. But the manner in which the materials take on aesthetic efficiency is the structure. The old pair, content and form is not given a new nomenclature. Both content and formal parts are all materials, and structure conceptually includes content and form so far as they combine to secure aesthetic purpose. This structure is a system of signs used in a work of art to secure aesthetic delight. Now we shall turn to Marlowe and examine a bit more closely how Marlowe has used the system of signs in his plays to offer dramatic pleasure to his members of audience, here the readers of his plays. The heroes of Marlowe's plays are often found to act as "slaves of passion" (Levin 66) to quote Harry Levin. This is a kind of study of conventional people, but on perpetuating the social slavery and conditioned existence in society. The Marlovian protagonists who show their proneness to do precisely the reverse of what is usually done in society. They are all marginalized people, disconnected from the mainstream. Marlowe has taken two things- the heroes and the social conventions- apart and presented them dramatically. Here we notice the conflict between two sets of people – social slaves and social misfits. The battle is endless, and it lasts for life.

The above view of conflicts between society and individuals appears to be right when it is reviewed from Marlowe's point of view, as written in the Prologue to *Tamburlaine the Great*:

"From jiggling veins of rhyming mother wits,  
And such conceits as clownage keep in pay,  
We'll lad you to the stately tent of war,  
Where you shall hear the Scythian Tamburlaine

Threatening the world with high astounding terms,

And scourging kingdoms with his conquering sword." (*Tamburlaine the Great* 1-8)

Here Marlowe wants his audience to mark the difference of his play from the conventional drama in language and in theme. F. S. Boas observes "with the jiggling veins" of rhymesters are contrasted the Scythians "high sounding" terms, while his heroic exploits are similarly set off against the mere conceits of "clownage" (Boas 85). Thus the author of *Tamburlaine* aimed at a double reform in the dramatic art, and seldom has a literary revolutionist achieved so swift and enduring a triumph. His innovation in style was extremely bold, and yet in a sense, like other intuitions of genius extremely simple. It consisted in the adoption of blank verse, the accredited meter of the classical school, for the purpose of the popular drama, which has hitherto found its instrument in the rhyming couplet. Such a change is absolutely essential if Romantic art was to attain to a rich and untrammelled development. In Marlowe's hands we find the evolution of the linguistic medium capable of expressing the passionate cry of the human heart.

The mighty Titanic figure of Tamburlaine is not only an embodiment of Marlowe but also the supremely representative figure of the Renaissance age. A great aspirant, Tamburlaine shows his dislike of earthly conditions, and his soaring passion is to reach the high altitudes of infinite power, beauty, thought and love. This spirit is conceivable only in a perfect society as envisaged by Thomas More, or visible in the pattern of the highest, holiest manhood or in Bacon's clarion-call to adventurers to conquer all knowledge. The heroic deeds and speeches of Sidney, Gilbert and Grenville also express such heroic spirit as in Tamburlaine. But the thirst for limitless power degrades and compels a man. This is psychological slavery that Harry Levin detected in the characters of the protagonist of Marlowe's plays. The close study of Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* reveals him a personification of Avarice. In the beginning stage Barabas gloats over "infinite riches in a little room" (*The Jew of Malta* 37). It is wealth that takes up all the time of Barabas. Really he is engrossed in it. As a Jew, Barabas perceives the power of wealth:

"And a carrot of this quantity,  
May serve in peril of calamity

To ransom great kings from captivity." (*The Jew of Malta* 30- 32)

Like Tamburlaine who rises from shepherd's weeds to a crown, Barabas rises from the humble status of an alien in Malta to the high gubernatorial rank. Initially he does not crave for power as he says:

"I must confess we come not to be kings  
That's not our fault: alas, our number's few,  
And crowns come either by succession,  
Or urg'd by force; and nothing violent,  
Oft have I heard tell, can be permanent.  
Give us a peaceful rule; make Christians kings,

That thirst so much for principality." (*The Jew of Malta* 128-134)

Soon often people get crazy about wealth. Selim Calymath asks for ten year's tribute. Then Ferneze decries in his capacity of governor of Malta that the tribute money "shall all be levied among the Jews" (*The Jew of Malta* 69). This policy is based on injustice and so it gave rise to vigorous protests from Barabas. Eventually, Ferneze takes possession of all his wealth and property without compensation. Barabas is now compelled to plan Malta's destruction:

“For by my means Calymath shall enter in,  
I’ll help to slay their children and their wives,  
To fire the churches, pull their houses down.” (*The Jew of Malta* 63-65)

After overthrowing Ferneze, the Turk makes Barabas the new gubernator of Malta. But Barabas pursues his policy of profit and takes no interest in power:

“And since by wrong thou got`st authority,  
Maintain it bravely by firm policy,  
At least unprofitably lose it not:” (*The Jew of Malta* 35-37)

Barabas betrays the Turk to Ferneze and grants:

“Why, is not this  
A kingly kind of trade to purchase towns  
By treachery and sell `em by deceit?” (*The Jew of Malta* 46-48)

Barabas intrigues against Christian and Turk both. In *The Prince* Machiavelli warns the Prince to be a lion to terrify the wolves and a fox in order to know his enemies. He makes his secret plan to ruin Selim Calymath, the Turk but as ill luck would have it, Ferneze betrays Barabas and prefers to hold Calymath as hostage till he gives the compensation money to refurbish Malta and restore its refulgence. Ferneze is more Machiavellian than Barabas and so he easily overcomes Barabas with his guide. The most unfortunate part of the issue is that Barabas himself falls into the trap he prepared for Selim Calymeth. The heroes of Marlowe meet with tragedy like Barabas. They become victimized by their own action. Dr Faustus also prefers profit to delight like Barabas:

“O, what a world of profit and delight,  
Of power, of honor, of omnipotence,  
Is promised to the studious artisan!  
All things that move between quite poles  
Shall be at my command....” (*Doctor Faustus* 52-56)

Is Dr Faustus the prototype of Marlowe who had classical learning from the University of Cambridge? Both of them are far away from the domain of wisdom and so all their learning has been lost.

Faustus makes a bargain with the informal agents to gratify his lower desires and eventually communicates to Lucifer through Mephistopheles. Faustus disregards spiritual values and he is more interested in material benefits. If we look at the issue from the point of view of St. Augustine, we are bound to say that Faustus’s will has sinned as it has turned away from the eternal good to the private good. Faustus’s self-indulgent life as compared with the higher spiritual life is the name of death. Faustus’s pursuit of pleasure, profit and immorality unleash all evils which are found impossible for him to restrain. The picture of Faustus is presented as terrifying similar to a modern scientist in the current century.

Faustus’s main study is the passage of time. The clock making sounds in the external world signals that time is beyond the control of Faustus. Probably the clock under reference is the church clock. He reflects on time for a moment and is convinced that time is created by the movement of stars, so he argues that he can make time stop if he makes the stars stand still or make the sun rise. Since the sun and the stars exist in the haven, they are beyond the reach of Dr Faustus. Besides, his power is limited to the action of the earth-bound Mephistopheles. Here time is Faustus’s enemy. It moves forward under God’s directive. God determines the length of human time so he chooses the Day of Judgment. God also presides



over the concept of eternity. Faustus's last thought is about eternity which he will have to spend in hell. He tries to understand eternity by counting out speeches of time – ("a thousand years/ a hundred thousand and..." *Doctor Faustus* 99-100) which are not equal to eternity, and then midnight strikes and the devils remove him. Then we are given relief as we do not want to share Faustus's tortured condition of mind.

In *Dr Faustus* Marlowe has analyzed an "I" that tries to hide from God. Faustus perceives that his soul suffers, not the body. His soul must suffer to pay for the pleasures of his body. So *Dr Faustus* has many things in common with the Morality plays, still it has departed from the morality tradition strikingly when we find that Faustus is not saved ultimately. Faustus should be seen as a mankind figure and it is also true that he is an individual whose tragic situation is unique. That is why we do not regard Faustus as the representative of ordinary humanity. In *Dr Faustus*, religion, poetry and drama are put together. Faustus is placed in Martin Luther's home university of Wittenberg. All these suggest a Protestant connection. Faustus chooses Pope as the butt of satire. It is to be seen as an attack on Catholicism. Again, when Faustus conjures, he uses Latin phrases. The audience associates these with Latin of the Catholic Mass. At this time to the orthodox Elizabethans, Catholicism was a devilish trick. The book is an Anglican attack on Roman Catholicism. Here poetry lies in the carnivalesque behavior of Dr Faustus. He is as restless as Barabas is turbulent. In a sense these protagonists are living embodiments of restless and tortured souls in despair. *Dr Faustus* has dramatized unresolved conflicts in society between a medieval theology in which external factors work upon a passive human subject, and a Renaissance humanism which makes individual responsible for their choices in order to make them free. In this life of freedom, Faustus feels condemned as the fake apparitions and the pompous language are seen as empty objects used by Faustus as substitutes for a reality which is missing.

Poetry of passion is found in *Edward II*. In this book Mortimer Junior has a similarity with Tamburlaine. He speaks like an officer in public service. Then he intrigues with Queen Isabella and grows into a wicked tyrant guilty of regicide. We find a natural leader turned into a tyrant in Mortimer Junior. He illustrates the adage: "power corrupts." The irony of the king's defeat is that no one controls fortune permanently.

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