

51. The Tragedy of Humanity: Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* Revisited¹

Ali Özkan ÇAKIRLAR²

APA: Çakırlar, A. Ö. (2024). The Tragedy of Humanity: Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* Revisited. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Arařtırmaları Dergisi*, (40), 841-853. <https://doi.org/10.29000/rumelide.1502244>.

Abstract

Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* is a significant example of the transition from Morality Plays to a period of more developed and mature drama in the Elizabethan period. The themes that Marlowe handles and the protagonist he presents in the play emerge as aspects of a distinctive approach to dramatic representation and the concept of drama of that time. The play is set against the background of the struggle for economic, political, and military dominance between the Catholic Spain and Moslem Ottoman Empires and the Catholic administration and Jewish mercantile class in Malta. Religious conflicts and bigotry, intrigues, betrayals, and revenge plans committed by almost all characters representing different religious communities, ethnic prejudices that affect not only individuals but also the whole society, greed, and moral corruption emerge as the basic themes. Although the full title of the play was *Famous Tragedy of the Rich Jew of Malta*, the play could not gain the status of a tragedy in the Aristotelian or Elizabethan sense of the word for many critics due to its dominant farcical characteristics. For a modern reader, however, *The Jew of Malta* can be considered as a satirical tragedy, the tragedy not of the protagonist Barabas, but of humanity that craves material benefits and political power, and for the sake of achieving these, commits all kinds of villainies including exploitation, theft, and murder, and as a result, socially experiences the fall of the tragic hero.

Keywords: Christopher Marlowe, The Jew of Malta, satire, religious prejudices, economic interests

¹ **Statement (Thesis / Paper):** This article is adapted from the master's thesis entitled "Religious Prejudices and Economic Interests in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*" written and approved by Ali Özkan Çakırlar at Bilkent University. It is declared that scientific and ethical principles were followed during the preparation process of this study and all the studies utilised are indicated in the bibliography.

Conflict of Interest: No conflict of interest is declared.

Funding: No external funding was used to support this research.

Copyright & Licence: The authors own the copyright of their work published in the journal and their work is published under the CC BY-NC 4.0 licence.

Source: It is declared that scientific and ethical principles were followed during the preparation of this study and all the studies used are stated in the bibliography.

Similarity Report: Received - Turnitin, Rate: 4

Ethics Complaint: editor@rumelide.com

Article Type: Research article, **Article Registration Date:** 03.04.2024-**Acceptance Date:** 20.06.2024-

Publication Date: 21.06.2024; DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1502244

Peer Review: Two External Referees / Double Blind

² Dr., Çankaya Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü / Dr., Çankaya University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature (Ankara, Türkiye), aozkanc@ankaya.edu.tr, **ORCID ID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3049-4772> **ROR ID:** <https://ror.org/056wqre19>, **ISNI:** 0000 0004 0595 5447, **Crossref Funder ID:** 100010731

İnsanlığın Trajedisi: Christopher Marlow'un *Malta Yahudisi* Oyununa Yeniden Bakış³

Öz

Christopher Marlowe'un *Malta Yahudisi* adlı oyunu, Elizabeth döneminde, ortaçağın ahlaki oyunlarından daha gelişmiş ve olgun bir tiyatroya geçişin önemli örneklerinden birisidir. Marlowe'un oyunda yarattığı başkahraman ve ele alıp işlediği temalar, o dönemin tiyatro anlayışına katkıda bulunan farklı bir yaklaşımın etmenleri olarak ortaya çıkarlar. Oyun, Katolik İspanya ve Müslüman Osmanlı İmparatorlukları ile Malta'daki iç dinamikleri oluşturan Katolik yönetim ve Yahudi tüccar sınıfı arasındaki ekonomik, siyasi ve askeri egemenlik mücadelesinin arka planında geçer. Dini çatışmalar ve bağnazlık, farklı dini toplulukları temsil eden hemen hemen tüm karakterler tarafından işlenen entrikalar, ihanetler ve intikam planları, sadece bireyleri değil, tüm toplumu etkileyen etnik önyargılar, açgözlülük ve ahlaki yozlaşma gibi temalar oyunun ana fikrini oluşturan temel etmenler olarak ortaya çıkar. Her ne kadar oyunun tam adı *Maltalı Zengin Yahudinin Trajedisi* olsa da oyun, bir çok eleştirmene göre içindeki baskın fars özelliklerinden dolayı Antik Yunan ya da Elizabeth dönemi trajedileriyle aynı konumda değerlendirilemez. Ancak günümüzün modern okuru için *Malta Yahudisi*, başkahraman Barabas'ın değilse de, maddi çıkar ve siyasi güç peşinde koşan ve bunları elde etmek uğruna sömürü, hırsızlık ve cinayeti de içeren her türlü alçaklığı yapan ve bu bağlamda trajik kahramanın düşüşü ve yok oluşunu toplumsal olarak deneyimleyen insanlığın hicivsel trajedisi olarak yorumlanabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Christopher Marlowe, *Malta Yahudisi*, hiciv, dini önyargılar, ekonomik çıkarlar

³ **Beyan (Tez/ Bildiri):** Bu makale, Ali Özkan Çakırlar tarafından, Bilkent Üniversitesinde yazılıp onaylanan "Religious Prejudices and Economic Interests in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*" başlıklı yüksekisans tezi çalışmasından uyarlanmıştır. Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.

Çıkar Çatışması: Çıkar çatışması beyan edilmemiştir.

Finansman: Bu çalışmayı desteklemek için dış fon kullanılmamıştır.

Telif Hakkı & Lisans: Yazarlar dergide yayınlanan çalışmalarının telif hakkına sahiptirler ve çalışmalarını CC BY-NC 4.0 lisansı altında yayımlanmaktadır.

Kaynak: Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.

Benzerlik Raporu: Alındı – Turnitin, Oran: %4

Etik Şikayeti: editor@rumelide.com

Makale Türü: Araştırma makalesi, **Makale Kayıt Tarihi:** 03.04.2024-**Kabul Tarihi:** 20.06.2024-**Yayın Tarihi:** 21.06.2024; **DOI:** 10.29000/rumelide.1502244

Hakem Değerlendirmesi: İki Dış Hakem / Çift Taraflı Körleme

Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* has a distinctive place in the 16th-century English drama concerning its themes and characters. Along with Marlowe's other plays, it marks a turning point in the transition from the morality plays to a period of more developed and mature drama. In the play, Marlowe emphasizes the conflicts about the pseudo-moralistic challenges of the three monotheistic religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, and the dark realities of the struggles for economic and political domination of colonial powers. While doing this, Marlowe introduces 'Machevill' as he calls him, as a 'myth' that impacted English thinking during the Elizabethan era. The Machiavellian idea not only determines the framework of the play, but also controls the themes, and hints at the horrifying actions and ending of it. Catholic Christianity is the dominant religion and controls the majority of the population in Malta while Judaism constitutes a small but financially powerful community of merchants. Islam is represented by the Turks and although there is not an Islamic community in Malta, it affects both Christians and Jews through the Ottoman siege of the island.

The Jew of Malta was written in 1589 or 1590, after *Tamburlaine* and before *Edward II* and *Dr. Faustus*, and successfully staged and performed several times in London and gained great popularity even before it was published in 1633. Numerous historical events such as the 1565 Turkish siege of Tripoli and some famous Jewish characters of the time may have inspired Marlowe for the subject matter and characters. But as T. W. Craik indicates, these constitute only details and the political framework of the story, not the substance (x). The Elizabethan audience was fond of bloody revenge plays and together with Marlowe's notorious reputation and the execution of the queen's Jewish physician due to the false accusation of his attempt to poison her increased the public interest in the play. The full title of the play was "Famous Tragedy of the Rich Jew of Malta", so Marlowe might have intended to compose the play as a tragedy and to present the main character as a tragic hero or he used the word 'tragedy' to attract the attention of the audience through the popularity of the genre in that period. However, Barabas could not gain the status of a tragic hero and the play could not achieve the status of a tragedy because it fails to create, in the Aristotelian or Elizabethan sense, feelings of terror and pity as well as understanding and relief. Many critics have evaluated the play as a black or satiric comedy rather than a tragedy. T.S. Eliot, for instance, sees the play "not as a tragedy... but as a farce", employing a tone of "serious, even savage comic humour" (123). Marlowe's desire to compress the larger-than-world issues such as political and religious hypocrisy and colonial ambitions of dominant imperialistic powers into a single text may have prevented the play from being considered as a tragedy. Another argument is whether the play employs and provokes the anti-semitic sentiment, particularly through the characterization of its protagonist. Historically speaking, this was not a problem in the Elizabethan time and until the 20th Century because of the widespread anti-semitic bias that was already dominant in the Christian territories. However, in the 20th Century and particularly after the Holocaust, texts and plays like *The Jew of Malta* have almost become taboo to be read or staged due to their so-called anti-semitic themes or characters.

The play begins with Machevill's prologue, in which he declares that his ideas should be followed to gain economic and political power. Then Machevill introduces Barabas, a rich Jewish merchant, and informs the reader that Barabas resembles him and deserves just treatment. In the first act, the conflict between Barabas and Ferneze, the Governor of the island, over the tribute money to be paid to the Turks to protect the island from invasion is revealed. While the majority of the Jews surrender the administration's enforcement that only the Jews are subjected to pay the money, Barabas resists this and challenges the authority of the Governor, which causes him to lose his wealth and house. The second act displays how Barabas reclaims some of his wealth with the help of his daughter Abigail, who is forced by his father to a fake conversion to Christianity to secure her father's status. Meanwhile, Barabas

provokes two youngsters, Abigail's potential suitors, Lodowick who is Ferneze's son, and Mathias for a duel for her. In the third act, Mathias and Lodowick kill each other and when Abigail learns that her father is responsible for their deaths, she takes refuge in a convent for a real conversion to Christianity this time. Ithamore, Barabas's moslem slave whom he bought from the Spanish Admiral Del Bosco, and whom he sees as his true heir after his daughter, betrays him by revealing his secrets to a prostitute Bellamira and her pimp Pilia-Borza. Together with Ithamore, they start blackmailing him for money. After guaranteeing the tribute money from the Jews and protection from the Spaniards, Ferneze decides not to give money to the Turks and prepares for war against them. In the fourth act, Barabas goes mad because of Abigail's conversion and poisons the nuns in the convent, including his daughter. As she dies, Abigail confesses her father's crimes to friar Jacomo who, together with a rival friar Barnardine, accuses Barabas of murder. Each one of the friars invites Barabas to their churches, which compete, and wants to benefit from his wealth. After killing both friars, Barabas breaks his alliance with Ferneze and joins the Turks who, with his help, invade Malta and capture the Governor. Barabas is appointed the governor of Malta by Calymath, the Turkish leader of the siege and son of the emperor. Since he does not feel safe and secure under Turkish rule, Barabas secretly plans to betray Calymath and reestablish an alliance with the Christians. He kills Ithamore, Bellamira, and Pilia-Borza to take revenge for their betrayal. Then he sets a trap for Calymath but is betrayed by Ferneze who learns of his treachery. In the end, Barabas dies by falling into his own trap, Ferneze captures Calymath and sets up again his rule on Malta.

The Elizabethan audience would not have much sympathy for the Catholic version of Christianity since Protestant England was in conflict with the Catholic Kingdom of Spain at the time. In such an atmosphere, although Marlowe does not refer to the Protestants, he somehow adopts an unbiased approach concerning the conflicts among the Catholics, Jews, and Moslems and attacks the religious prejudices used to conceal economic interests. Moreover, he is not only aware of the effects of the changes in his era but also can recognize the relationship between economic and political powers. He shows how the former is a prerequisite for the latter, and underlines that the essential conflict lying behind all the religious enmities is the consequence of the struggles for economic interests: "the wind that bloweth all the world besides, / Desire of gold" (Marlowe 3.5.3-4). These words, together with the context they appear in, underline the essence of the play and reveal, perhaps indirectly, that the desire for gold captures all the world including Protestant England. In fact, Malta represents the microcosm that reflects the economic transformation Europe has been undergoing. Therefore, Marlowe dwelt upon both the phenomenon of imperialism and the religious oppression related to economic exploitation effectively.

Another important point in *The Jew of Malta* is the characterization of the protagonist, Barabas. Although he carries some attributes of the stereotyped figures of medieval drama, the characteristics that render him a flesh-and-blood individual are dominant. He asks questions about the world and the society he lives in as well as about his place and identity in such a society, provides answers for these questions, and makes clever comments. He is portrayed as a self-confident, effective, obstinate, and powerful character, but sometimes he is also confused, undetermined, and weak. It is misleading to take him as a symbol of pure and aimless malevolence. He carries the seeds of evil, and, to that extent, is all too human. But he is, at the same time, the product of the social, political, and economic conditions depicted in the play. Most of his actions are, in fact, certain reactions against others' behaviour and prejudices. Doubtless to say, these evil deeds are, in many instances, irrationally exaggerated reactions, but Marlowe conspicuously denotes, perhaps through a series of overstatements, the reasons that cause Barabas's actions.

In this context, Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* is a tragedy, the tragedy not of the protagonist Barabas, but of humanity that craves material benefits and political power, and for the sake of achieving these, commits all kinds of villainies including exploitation, theft, and murder. The play is set against the background of the struggle for economic, political, and military dominance between the Catholic Spain and Islamic Ottoman Empires and again the Catholic administration and Jewish mercantile class in Malta. It deals with the themes of religious conflicts and dogmatism, with intrigue, betrayal, and revenge schemes committed by almost all the characters representing different religious communities, with ethnic prejudices, greed, and moral corruption, infecting not only the individuals but also the whole society. In this sense, "... Marlowe's play goes beyond revenge, satirising religious hypocrisy, statesmanship and the human condition" (Herman). Marlowe employs the famous Renaissance political figure Niccolo Machiavelli and his teaching to establish the play's framework within which human brutality and hypocrisy can automatically be transformed into 'smart', 'cunning', but 'necessary' actions for the sake of economic and political power. Therefore, Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* functions as a bitter and dark reminder, for the modern reader, of how eternally tragic the human condition is.

There is not much information about whether Marlowe read Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* or other related manuscripts or books. For this reason, it can be assumed that while introducing Machiavelli to the Elizabethan stage, Marlowe was rather influenced by the 'Machiavell-myth' which was widespread in Europe during his time. As Wilbur Sanders asserts:

... Machiavelli, whether read or not, whether distorted by popular fancy or judiciously pondered by the wise, represents one of the central facts of Elizabethan culture. Even if Marlowe had not read him, he (and any other intelligent Elizabethan) was certainly aware of the movement in European thought which made Machiavelli appear important to later historians. Machiavelli, and the kind of mind he represented, was the radical yeast in the traditional loaf. (62)

In the prologue of the play, Machevill declares "the radical yeast" to set the scene and the framework to develop the plot and prepare the minds of the audience. Marlowe makes Machevill remark that there is no place for the established order of values anymore since a new value system has started to replace the traditional ones all over Europe:

Albeit the world think that Machevill is dead,
Yet was his soul but flown beyond the Alps,
And now the Guise is dead, is come from France
To view this land, and frolic with his friends. (Prologue 1-4)

While Machevill underlines the universality of his ideas, he also declares his confidence in finding a serious number of admirers in England. Machiavellism, back then, was widespread although some people pretended to condemn it:

Admired I am of those that hate me most.
Though some speak openly against my books,
Yet will they read me, and thereby attain
To Peter's chair: and when they cast me off.
Are poisoned by my climbing followers. (Prologue 9-13)

Machevill puts forward the principles of a hierarchical system that rewards the ones who employ all the political tricks disregarding moral concepts and punishes the ones who refuse to resort to such ways and

forms of political struggle. Politics for Machevill is a playground where the ideas and the values of mankind are only details, but not dominant and determining factors: “And weigh not men, and therefore not men’s words” (Prologue 8). Machevill has both a critical and pragmatic approach when he says “I count religion but a childish toy” (Prologue 14) because for him religious principles are considered to be obstacles to one’s desires. Hence, evil actions that were committed in the past should not be questioned: “Birds of the air will tell of murders past? / I am ashamed to hear such fooleries” (Prologue 16-17). Past deeds are unquestionable and subject to oblivion. According to Machevill, to have power is much more important than to have moral values, which leads to the idea that it is preferable to be envied rather than to be pitied. (Prologue 27)

When Machevill introduces Barabas, he wants the audience to “grace him as he deserves” (Prologue 33) since Barabas will function as his spokesman throughout the play. Marlowe, in this way, determines the ideological foundations of the play which favours the pragmatic benefits of individuals and groups, for the sake of power, instead of the established ethical or moral norms. In other words, Machevill’s prologue functions like an anti-chorus introducing the main themes and characters of the play, and declaring the principles of the whole pragmatic system. In line with the Machiavellian ideology, hence, Marlowe does not preach or teach morality in *The Jew of Malta*. His attitude towards the dominant themes and characters is rather descriptive. As T. W. Craik indicates: “The play is essentially neither propagandist nor moralistic (in either an orthodox or an unorthodox spirit), but dramatic. Moral questions are not seriously discussed: they are ironically touched upon and left” (xiv). The exploration of religious prejudices and dogmatism in the service of economic benefits, imperialistic ambitions, and political power under the strong influence of the Machiavellian ideological climate within the microcosmic setting of Malta builds up the framework of the play, which sheds light on the tragic human condition.

Whether *The Jew of Malta* is essentially based on an anti-semitic demeanor is an important discussion to determine the ways through which the play is read. As regards the Jew image in the Elizabethan period, there was no first-hand information because the Jews had been exiled from England in 1290 and resettled as late as 1656. The number of Jewish groups was rather small and there was virtually no social contact between the Christians and the Jews. Therefore, a Jew myth was wandering around without any valid and reliable support. It seems that the “Elizabethan anti-semitic frenzy,” (343) as Sanders calls it, was caused mainly by the speculations coming from outside of England, particularly from the Continent. Hence, Marlowe’s treatment of Jewish stereotypes in the context of Christian dogmatism is worth considering. Marlowe gives, in a sense, a list of derogatory words or phrases referring to historical antipathy about the Jews such as “No, Jew, like infidels.” (1.2.65), “He never put on clean shirt since he was circumcised.” (4.4.61), “The hat he wears, Judas left under the elder when he hanged himself.” (4.4.63-64), “What, has he crucified a child?” (3.4.49). Rather than inflaming the anti-semitic air, these sayings make, particularly the modern reader, feel the absurdity of the prejudice because they generally reflect “the ignorant hostility of the speaker better than they give the tone of the play” (Sanders 41). Moreover, they “are a reductio ad absurdum of antisemitic attitudes. It must be remembered that Jews were comparatively rare in Elizabethan England... so the populist fear of them that the play taps into was essentially folkloric” (Nicholl). In other words, the characterisation of the protagonist Barabas is used emblematically to reflect the essence of deliberate religious dogmatism and distortions: “... the strongest tendency in the play is to assail the facile and hearty complacency of Christian anti-semitism with persistent inversions and permutations of the Jew-Christian antithesis” (Sanders 341). Rather than evoking Jewish villainy, these clichés function, particularly for the modern reader, as instruments for demolishing Christian or all sorts of religious hypocrisy. In addition, at the beginning of the play,

Barabas is portrayed as a cartoon figure, in a sense, surrounded by heaps of gold. In his opening monologue, while boasting over his wealth, he asserts his opinions on the Christian faith:

Rather had I a Jew be hated thus.
Than pitied in a Christian poverty:
For I can see no fruits in all their faith.
But malice, falsehood, and excessive pride.
Which methinks fits not their profession. (1.1.116-120)

Underlining the discrepancy between Christian theory, which preaches humanity to be ethical and just, and practice, in which human malice and pride overweigh, Marlowe makes Barabas speak as a discerning satirist: "... Marlowe's purpose in presenting us with this pantomime Jew is surely to satirise the crudity of the stereotype. It is a provocative or Hebdoesque piece of religious cartooning that challenges the complacencies and credulities of his audience" (Nicholl). The Christian administration's opportunism in confiscating only Jewish merchants' money to pay the tribute is shown through the alterations of the tone of the Governor's voice, and in this way, the function of stereotypical remarks against the Jews becomes clearer. The gentle tone "Soft Barabas, there's more 'longs to't than so" (1.2.46) immediately changes into a commanding one when he realizes the resistance of Barabas: "For to be short, amongst you't must be had" (1.2.58). As an answer to the Governor, Barabas calls the Jews 'strangers' as a sign of their othering on a religious basis from the rest of the community: "Are strangers with your tribute to be taxed?" (1.2.61). Of course, Barabas does not react only for the sake of his religious/cultural identity. He, too, uses this identity as a protective shelter to veil his selfish monetary interests. The Governor's answer, not surprisingly, reveals the precedence of economic interests, this time of the Catholic administration, disguised as religious conflicts:

No, Jew, like infidels.
For through our sufferance of your hateful lives,
Who stand accursed in the sight of heaven.
These taxes and afflictions are befallen, (1.2.65-68)

Like his predecessors, the Governor takes advantage of the so-called religious conflicts between Christianity and Judaism to extort money from the Jews. Barabas, however, is not a member of the herd-like Jewish merchants who are ready to surrender without any resistance. Unlike them, he shows the characteristics of a strong-willed individual who can think, ask questions, and challenge the enforcements of opportunistic authorities: "Will you then steal my goods? / Is theft the ground of your religion?" (1.2.97-98). When Barabas rejects paying half of his wealth, the Governor's decree takes effect and Barabas is forced to yield completely. Leading administrators and knights, too, rely on the same demagoguery as the Governor who furthers the rhetoric by claiming that Barabas should give up all his wealth for the sake of the well-being of the whole community:

No, Jew, we take particularly thine
To save the ruin of a multitude:
And better one want for a common good.
Than many perish for a private man: (1.2.99-102)

Barabas, however, is not stupid and wonderfully turns the argument on its head showing the Christian hypocrisy in all its clarity:

What? Bring you scripture to confirm your wrongs?
 Preach me not out of my possessions.
 Some Jews are wicked, as all Christians are:
 But say the tribe that I descended of
 Were all in general cast away for sin.
 Shall I be tried by their transgression?
 The man that dealeth righteously shall live:
 And which of you can charge me otherwise? (1.2.113-120)

Through Barabas's mouth, Marlowe challenges religious oppression inflicted upon the Jews under Christian rule. Although Barabas makes exaggeration by saying all Christians are wicked, he does not discriminate between the two religions, which enables him to stress more powerfully the second point in the speech: individuals cannot be accused because of the evil deeds, if any, of their ancestors. When similar disputes among nations, religions, and communities in the modern era are taken into consideration, the significance of the point Barabas makes becomes more meaningful. During the quarrels, fights, and wars concerning the ethnic, religious, and cultural conflicts in today's world, almost identical claims and accusations are exercised and similar strategies of defense are put into effect to gain advantage against the rivals. Hence, what Marlowe manages to show, almost 450 years ago, through the lines of *The Jew of Malta* is, in fact, the unchanging hypocrisy of humanity.

Barabas is not the only instrument Marlowe employs to expose the absurdity of the claims of religious superiority and the reality lying behind it. He makes use of every character and incident for his purpose. His daughter, Abigail for instance, tries to persuade the friars to convert her father to Christianity to save him from the atrocities of Christian administration. The rivalry between the two friars, belonging to different churches, to influence Barabas to donate his money to their church delineates a tragicomic scene. Friars' accusations of each other concerning the absurdity of the ritualistic rules show how religious clichés are used for the sake of material benefits:

1FRIAR
 Oh good Barabas come to our house.
 2FRIAR
 Oh no, good Barabas come to our house.
 And Barabas you know-
 1FRIAR
 Oh Barabas, their laws are strict.
 2FRIAR
 They wear no shirts, and they go barefoot too. (4.1.77-79, 82-84)

The way Marlowe exposes the origins and policies of anti-semitism concerning the socio-cultural structure of Malta is quite clever. By showing the shallowness of the claims of religious superiority, he reveals the absurdity of the claims and accusations leading to religious dogmatism.

It is a matter of long-standing dispute among scholars whether Barabas is a stereotyped figure to mirror the speculations about Jewish villainy, or a flesh-and-blood character representing the rise of the Renaissance individual. Although Marlowe in *The Jew of Malta* does not present a detailed portrayal of

his characters including his hero, the personality of Barabas is one of the most complex problems in the play. As Emily C. Bartels says: "What is – perhaps most problematic about *The Jew of Malta* – and what therefore receives prominent critical attention – is its seemingly anti-Semitic stereotype of the Jew" (4). Referring to the title of the play Bartels remarks:

Its title – in contrast to all of [Marlowe's] others (Dido, Tamburlaine, Doctor Faustus, and Edward II) which name the main character – privileges type, as it presents "the Jew" rather than Barabas. Machevill seconds this emphasis in his prologue by announcing the play as "the tragedy of a Jew," and further abnegates the title character's individuality by using "a" rather than "the" here. (4)

According to Allan C. Dessen, Barabas is presented as a stage Jew and, in this sense, is a follower of Wilson's Gerontus and a predecessor of Shakespeare's Shylock (235). Similarly, the change of tone between the first two and the last three acts may lead to conflicting interpretations of Barabas's characterization. "The aspiring superman of the play's beginning has been converted by its end into the caricature of a villain upon whom retribution is visited in conventional terms of poetic justice" (Ribner xxxi). When, however, the other characters in the play are considered, Barabas appears to be the only one who is capable of seeing the big picture and understanding the interconnections among economic, social, and cultural phenomena and state of affairs through his thinking and questioning skills:

See the simplicity of these base slaves,
Who for the villains have no wit themselves,
Think me to be a senseless lump of clay
That will with every water wash to dirt:
No, Barabas is born to better chance.
And framed of finer mould than common men,
That measure nought but by the present time.
A reaching thought will search his deepest wits.
And cast with cunning for the time to come:
For evils are apt to happen every day. (1.2.218-227)

This is one of the most significant speeches Barabas makes in the play. These lines reflect the essence of Barabas's individuality. He is not a lump of clay to be shaped by others easily. He rejects bending with the wind to get a superficial salvation. There is a similarity between Barabas's "lump of clay" speech and Hamlet's "playing the pipe" speech. Both assert that man is not something to be shaped or played by others against his will, which signifies the declaration of individuality in a new era. Although his main motivation is to protect his wealth and, in this way, perhaps, his survival, his remarkable resilience, his aptitude for adjustment and change, his stubborn resistance to oppression, his capacity for cunning machinations, the strength of his will-power, and his ambition for life indicate that he is one of the characters Marlowe created to remark the rise of the individual. At the end of the play, Barabas betrays the Turks and is betrayed by the Christians. His defeat is not the result of the Machiavellian policy he follows but of the Machiavellian policy he fails to follow until the end. He dies by falling into his trap and his death is the ironic victory of Machiavellism over the value systems created by societies to provide human existence with order and stability.

For the spectator who has responded to the play's laughter by distancing himself from the action, Barabas's death – the play's epiphany – becomes an icon not of hell-fire, but of the hell that we humans create for one another on earth. After all, with the protagonist suffering hell in plain view, eternal damnation becomes a little superfluous. (Goldberg 244).

Barabas is both a victimized villain and an outrageous anti-hero. He is victimized because of the oppressive politics based on religious prejudices for the sake of the economic interests of the Christian administration. Consequently, he turns into a villain to take his revenge on the implementers of this policy, but at the same time, he gains the status of an outrageous anti-hero through the brave challenges against the dominant powers.

Marlow utilizes the Machiavellian climate and anti-semitic sentiments to focus on the main theme in *The Jew of Malta*: economic interests and ambitions of colonial powers, religious groups, social classes, and individuals, which determine the essence of social relations. As Bartels says:

The Jew of Malta particularly, centers on and subverts colonialist constructs. By offering Barabas "the Jew" as its main character, the play provokes readings which center on the Semitism or anti-Semitism of his characterization, of the text, and of the playwright; yet significantly, it contextualizes its representation of the Jew amid imperialist conflicts and reveals the stereotype as a product not of religious but of colonialist competitions. (4)

Marlowe's choice of Malta as the setting of the play was a bright idea in terms of creating excitement and attention. Besides, as Murray Boston contends, the socio-economic emphasis was closely related to the political climate in England:

There was also a contemporary motivation behind Marlowe's selection of this theme. As he was writing this play, England was experiencing a late awakening to the challenges of exploitation and the search for new sources of wealth. Vasco da Gama, opening up the Cape route, had won for Portugal the fabulously rich spice trade of the East Indies. Spanish galleons were plying the seas laden with spoil from Cortez's conquest of the Aztec empire, and Marlowe's friend Raleigh was now urging Elizabeth to empower him to achieve similar wonders for England. ... If *Tamburlaine* had made the English stage aware of the new spaciousness of empires, *The Jew of Malta* was responding to the infinite riches such expansion could pour into the coffers to the adventurer and the merchant. (166)

In this context, the introduction of the Turkish threat at the beginning of the play sets the background for the main theme. The Spanish intentions, on the other hand, on Malta are introduced in Act 2 Scene 2. The dialogue of a Maltese knight and the Spanish Vice Admiral Martin Del Bosco reveals the economic and political ambitions of Spain hidden behind religious solidarity:

KNIGHT

Del Bosco, as thou lov'st and honour'st us,
Persuade our Governor against the Turk;
This truce we have is but in hope of gold,
And with that sum he craves might we wage war.

BOSCO

Will Knights of Malta be in league with Turks,
And buy it basely too for sums of gold?
My lord, remember that to Europe's shame.
The Christian isle of Rhodes, from whence you came.
Was lately lost and you were stated here
To be at deadly enmity with Turks. (2.2.24-33)

BOSCO

My lord and king hath title to this isle.
And he means quickly to expel them hence;

Therefore be ruled by me, and keep the gold:

I'll write unto his Majesty for aid.

And not depart until I see you free. (2.2.37-41)

The Governor, as another Machiavellian, takes this chance immediately and begins to challenge the Ottomans after guaranteeing the support of the Spanish army:

On this condition shall thy Turks be sold.

Go officers and set them straight in show.

Bosco, thou shalt be Malta's general;

We and our warlike knights will follow thee

Against these barbarous misbelieving Turks. (2.2.42-46)

And again:

So will we fight it out; come, let's away:

Proud-daring Calymath, instead of gold.

We'll send thee bullets wrapt in smoke and fire:

Claim tribute where thou wilt, we are resolved,

Honour is bought with blood and not with gold. (2.2.52-56)

The external struggle for the domination of the island by imperialist powers is juxtaposed with the internal efforts for the domination of the Jews as the source of finance by Christian authorities. It appears that Malta is the last strategic island in the Mediterranean to be defended by the Christians against the Turks, and the Spanish army supports the Maltese government for so-called religious and cultural solidarity. However, the alliance established between Spain and Malta by the impositions of Del Bosco serves the prospective interests of Spain. Marlowe's play manages to portray the significance of material interests as the essential motive around which all other themes revolve. Even though Barabas appears to be the main performer of such a policy, almost all the characters are included in the same circle. Thus, by pointing out the double meaning of the word 'policy', Howard S. Babb asserts that "... however the qualities of its action may vary, *The Jew of Malta* explores a single set of issues: religious hypocrisy and governmental expedience as they are informed by a pervasive lust for wealth" (86).

Marlowe wrote *The Jew of Malta* in a period when there were great changes in the social, cultural, and political climate in Europe. He was undoubtedly influenced by his time; but in turn, he also influenced it. Religious dogmatism, which seems to be impenetrable because of its holy attributes, social problems created by the chaotic turbulence of the economic structure, and the rise of the individual are among the themes of *The Jew of Malta*. He presents how personal interests play a crucial role in man's actions, often concealing themselves behind religious dogmatism and ethnic prejudices. By employing a satirical tone, he attacks the Machiavellian policies and anti-semitic approaches in the microcosm of Malta.

It is hard to classify *The Jew of Malta* within a single dramatic genre. The themes it dwells on, the comic but touching fall of its protagonist along with its stock characters, its attack on religious dogmatism, its recognition and representation of the new world order based on the economic, political, and military domination of the colonial powers enable it to be a realistic representation of the period rather than to be a text of moral teaching. Some critics contend that, in the transition period from Medieval to Renaissance drama, the play shows the characteristics of farce or black comedies in terms of the development of its plot throughout the acts and scenes and concerning the shallow representation of its characters who seem to be types rather than flesh and blood human beings. A modern reader of the text,

however, can feel, perhaps not the tragedy of the protagonist, but the tragedy of humanity suffering from the religious dogmatism and hypocrisy infecting all the established beliefs for the sake of material benefits. The moral corruption poisoning almost all the characters and the touching awareness that nothing has changed much for centuries about the pitiable state of human civilization which, on the one hand, has established cultural and moral values to bring meaning and order to its existence, on the other hand, has been destroying all these values for selfish individual and social interests, are effective aspects making *The Jew of Malta* a unique play.

References

- Babb, Howard S. (1957). "Policy in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*". *ELH*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 85-94. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2871823>
- Bartels, Emily C. (1990). "Malta, the Jew, and the Fictions of Difference: Colonialist Discourse in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*". *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 20, no.1, pp. 1-16.
- Boston, Murray. (1988). *Macmillan History of Literature: Sixteenth-Century English Literature*. gen.ed. A. Norman Jeffares, London: Macmillan.
- Craik, T.W. (1989). Introduction. *The Jew of Malta*. by Christopher Marlowe New York: W WNorton, pp. vii-xviii.
- Dessen, Allan C. (1974). "The Elizabethan Stage Jew and Christian Example: Gerontus, Barabas, and Shylock." *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 231-245.
- Eliot, T. S. (1932). *Selected Essays*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Goldberg, Dena. (1992). "Sacrifice in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 233-245.
- Herman, Judi. (2015). Review: *The Jew of Malta* – Bracingly amoral violence on the island of Malta, Retrieved from <https://www.jewishrenaissance.org.uk/blog/review-the-jew-of-malta>
- Machiavelli, Niccolo. (1987). *The Prince*. Trans. George Bull, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Marlowe, Christopher. (1989). *The Jew of Malta*, edited by T.W. Craik, New York: W W Norton.
- Nicholl, Charles. (2015). Review: "The Jew of Malta – antisemitic or a satire on antisemitism?" *The Guardian* 27 March. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/mar/27/the-jew-of-malta-christopher-marlowe-stage-rsc-swan-theatre>
- Ribner, Irving. (1963). ed., *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*. New York: The Odysseys Press.
- Sanders, Wilbur. (1968). *The Dramatist and the Received Idea: Studies in the Plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare*. Cambridge: The University Press.