

# Introductory Words on Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*

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Marlowe may not quite be the inventor of blank verse (Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey gets the credit there), but he was certainly the first to give it stirring, dramatic force. His out-of-this-world main characters reflect the zeitgeist of Elizabethan London: curious, acquisitive, cosmopolitan. His three main plays: *Tamburlaine*, *Dr. Faustus* and *The Jew of Malta* center on isolated, self-made, driven, lead characters. Each crave status in a different way: *Tamburlaine* with brutal political power; *Dr. Faustus* with knowledge; *Barabas* with wealth. The age of individualism bursts into view in these plays. Marlowe also played to his audience's fascination with an exotic East, birthing the outlook Edward Said later described as Orientalism.

A major stumbling block for modern audiences is the play's crude stereotypes, particularly its anti-Semitism. It probably explains why the play has hardly been produced in America and why Marlowe's text is confined to small or pulp presses. In the near-absence of actual Jews in 16<sup>th</sup> century London, Marlowe "educated" his play-goers with the crudest caricature of the money-grabbing Jew. The play opens with *Barabas* in his counting house, fondling gold and jewels. The merchant is named after the New Testament thief freed by the mob in return for Jesus' life. *Barabas* brags of poisoning wells and killing the indigent. His daughter, *Abigail*, escapes from her father's evil to become a Christian. The play also has anti-Catholic themes (think of the randy, bequest-hunting monks), but these pale in comparison to the unrelentingly negative portrayal of Jews throughout the play.

Given that, why is Marlowe's play still read and enjoyed? Well, *Barabas* is evil, but he *becomes* evil only after great injustice is done to him: the summary confiscation of his entire wealth. Even his house is immediately appropriated by nuns. If he is obnoxious, he has good company at all levels of Maltese society: a tyrannical governor; lecherous and credulous noblemen; lecherous and rapacious monks; a blackmailing whore and her thieving pimp.

Marlowe entitled his play a tragedy. If we take Aristotle's definition of that genre as being a *great* person undergoing reversal of fortune, we must ask: is *Barabas* great? One hunts in vain for noble qualities in the protagonist, but he has certain admirable traits: resourcefulness, quick-thinking, even wiliness that is clearly necessary given his precarious social position. He is honest in his lust for wealth and has the courage to defend himself in front of his legal robbers while his co-religionists cower.

Perhaps we should, like T.S. Eliot, consider the play not a tragedy, but a (dark) farce. That can explain away the crude stereotypes, the galloping, implausible plot line, the wild swings in fate. Absent physical humour – *Barabas* is never slapped with a pig's bladder – Eliot may have hit on the right interpretation of this play. It also has consistency with our limited knowledge of Marlowe himself as being rebellious, cynical, atheistic. We can picture *Barabas*' dying "damn you all" curses as being the author's own.

Let's discuss!