

Christopher Marlowe's Modernity in His Poetry, Religion and Drama

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Abstract — This paper will treat of Marlowe's dramatic principles based on religion and poetry. The protagonists of Marlowe's plays will appear to be slaves of their respective passion. In pursuing their objects of passion all of them have used pompous language, highly decorative and ornamental. It signals complete emptiness of life and language. Then it seems that such heroes are social misfits.

Keywords — *Dramaturgy; Conflicts; Renaissance Ideal of Humanism; Native British Tradition of Drama.*

1. Introduction

The point to make here is about Marlowe's high poetry or the expression of his passions and emotions. As a dramatist of the age of Elizabeth he imbibed three trends, viz. native dramatic tradition, Liturgical plays of England and Renaissance spirit [1]. Last but not the least Marlowe successfully blended content and form of each of these dramas through appropriate structures. All of his dramas reflect some conflicts of the society as well as conflicts in the mind of the heroes. We shall show how such conflicts are dealt with in the dramatic manner.

The paper is to present Christopher Marlowe as a link between medieval theatre and the Shakespearean stage and to show his modernity as a dominant Renaissance figure in the age of Elizabeth and as a pre-Shakespearean poet and dramatist [2]. As an heir to the Renaissance, Marlowe was sceptical of God-talk. In the Renaissance period, the scholars in general evaluated the extant 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 [2][3].

Again, we shall analyse Elizabethan dramaturgy and its medieval antecedents, and show how this native tradition contributed to the Marlovian [4] 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 therefrom [1][4]. 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 Biblical plays and the Saint plays and the Morality plays [1]. The last genre was disconnected from the Bible stories and the lives of Saints [1][5]. 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 meanings of the plays because the drama is a genre or a special kind of writing which requires to be performed in the theatre.

2. Objectives

This paper actually talks about several aspects but not limited to following aims and objectives :-

- To know a brief about the dramatic art of Christopher Marlowe with the help of religion, poetry and drama as found in his dramas.
- To know basic about thoughts and ideas, content and form correlated to the main themes of Christopher Marlowe's dramas.
- To know about the need and potentiality of the proposed paper as the part of society.

The study will centre around the work of Christopher Marlowe :- To study the history and conditions of religion, poetry and drama in particular

3. Methodology

The present study is an academic paper based on the uniqueness of the dramatic art of Christopher Marlowe. It will be an attempt to look into the life force of Christopher Marlowe in the light of social, cultural and historical issues [6]. Library work and perusal of all literature related to dramatic art have constituted the main tool. The major dramas of Christopher Marlowe will be referred to closely to bring out our central point of discussion.

4. Discussion

Again, in 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", [7] 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" and to strike terror into the minds of man till "Immortal Jove says, Cease. Tamburlaine!" [8][9]. 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:

*"Sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere
Than Tamburlaine be slain or overcome."
(Act I Scene II, Tamburlaine)*

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 to 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 engaged 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 daemonic 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"[7]. Here we find

the elements of humanism as well as these of traditional Miracle and Morality plays. In fact, "The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus" is the first great tragedy of humanism. The farcical elements in this play are reminiscent of those in some of the Miracle plays and in the most popular Interludes, and of horse-play in the popular gigs. The play's similarity to the Morality plays will be found in the struggle between Good and Evil [8] in the protagonist's character. 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 medieval setting of the legend of Faustus. The prevailing beliefs are called into question. Thus dawns freedom which makes man less prone to assenting to the medieval view that this life should be sacrificed to the future [6]. 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 power and pelf.

Marlowe's third tragedy "The Jew of Malta" [7] has dramatised 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 on him. The Jew's only regret at the moment of death was that he could not commit all the crimes as preserved in his memory. He had no compunctions, no qualms of conscience. His dying farewell to people was: "Let me be envied and not pitied" [7]. 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 [7]. Here his writing has the form of sensuous pleasures. Let us see how it is expressed by Gaveston:

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

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

*"What Mortimer, can ragged stony walls,
Immure thy virtue that aspires to heaven!
No, Edward, England's courage it may not be,
Mortimer's hope surmounts his fortune far."
(Act III Scene IV, Edward II)*

Lightborn's pride in his art of murdering people is typically of the Renaissance:

*"I learn'd in Naples how to poison flowers ;
To strangle with a lawn thrust through the throat ;"*
(Act V Scene IV, *Edward II*)

Mortimer's contempt for worldly limitations can also be treated as one of the marked features of the Renaissance : About Mortimer's revolt against all earthly limitations is delineated in the following lines of "*Edward II*" :

*"Base fortune, Now I see, that in thy wheel
There is a point, to which men aspire
Thy tumble headlong down : that point I touch,
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 us a traveller
Goes to discover countries, yet unknown."*
(Act V Scene VI, *Edward II*)

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 [6]. 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 Elizabethan romantic drama. Very rightly Cazamian remarks about the great poet who "lifted drama into the sphere of high literature" [5]. Here we find the link between poetry and 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 kingship, but he proudly spurns in favour of another mastery, which is of homosexual love – totally unacceptable to the world where he is obliged to live and move. We see Edward II as king without command, lover denied fulfilment, a lion changed into a lamb encompassed by wolves and a man ultimately 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 changes 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 drive his concept of sin from piety. The poem runs counter to the extant conventions of 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 behaviour of people, which is shockingly unreasonable, outrageous and preposterous, and also to unmask hypocrisies of the unconscious. Most of Marlowe's writings contain hypocrisies of his main characters : atheistical speculations stemming from a private fascination with "forbidden" knowledge with ambition and with the disruptive work of imagination, which the Elizabethan political and religious establishments deemed seditious [8][9].

The aforesaid analysis of Marlowe has now brought us to the position wherefrom 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" through the medium of his tragedy and great verse [10][11]. The true tragedy and its true vehicle – great verse, superbly lyrical – are his contribution to the Elizabethan drama and poetry.

5. Significance and Relevance of the Paper

The present paper will be beneficial in many ways. It will look into the main stream of drama neglected so far. It will help to understand the needs and requirements for the researchers. It will create awareness.

6. Conclusion

The above points of reference will clearly show that Marlowe was a master dramatist among the pre-Shakespeareans. Really, he is the central sun around which other fellow dramatists revolve.

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