

Using Comedy to Shape Tragedy in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*"

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Abstract

This paper looks at Christopher Marlowe's play, *The Jew of Malta*. More importantly, it examines how Marlowe uses genre to strengthen genre; how comedy strengthens tragedy. There is heavy focus on the character of Barabus and Act 4, Scene 4, the latter of which unfolds as a fully comedic scene in an otherwise serious play. Barabus is a complex character throughout the play, showing both his flaws and strengths. In the final scene of Act 4, however, Marlowe treats Barabus as the comedic relief and utilizes the character to suddenly flip the play's genre and ultimately allow for a more impactful final act.

Introduction

Authorial intention is always something to consider when analyzing various characteristics of literature. Aside from New Criticism, which looks at literature as a purely self-contained object and does not consider anything outside of the text itself, the intentions of the author have been considered by readers for a long time. And although this may not have been the case when Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* was written, looking at the play through a more modern lens and considering the author's intentions can prove quite beneficial. Even if one cannot be completely sure of *why* Marlowe made certain decisions, the simple consideration of his intentions is worthwhile because it can give the reader a deeper understanding of the text. In *The Jew of Malta*, comedic moments and the genre of comedy are used to strengthen the tragedy of the overall story. The play's genre in and of itself has been debated since as early as its first publication in 1633--or even as early as 1594 when it was first performed. Even famous scholars and people well-established in the literary field have disagreed on its overall genre, as noted by editor Roma Gill in the introduction to *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*. Gill claims that the play "defeated twentieth-century attempts to classify it: T. S. Eliot, noting the 'terribly serious, even savage comic humour', pronounced it a 'farce'. Clifford Leech asked whether it should be called 'Black Comedy or Comic Tragedy'" (ix). The play is most commonly considered to be a revenge tragedy but a unanimous consensus has not been settled on, unlike many other plays of the period. In a delicate balancing act, *The Jew of Malta* seamlessly juggles

comedy and tragedy: through the character of Barabus, Marlowe utilizes whimsical comedy to develop and further the prominent tragic focus of the play. Barabus is quite complex with many faults and shortcomings; in short, he is a deeply flawed, even villainous, character, but the way Marlowe writes him is extremely deliberate and purposeful.

First, before looking at one of the most fascinating scenes in *The Jew of Malta*, it is important to examine the character that is at the center of it all: Barabus. Barabus begins the play as a quite selfish and greedy man, his focus on little else besides his own fortune and wealth. By the end, however, he has degraded further and further into vengeance and revenge. He kills countless people, including his own daughter, which contrasts his statement in Act 1, Scene 1: “(Aside) Nay, let ‘em combat, conquer, and kill all/ So they spare me, my daughter, and my wealth” (Lines 151-152). Barabus’ words here convey his selfish nature at the beginning of the play, but they become more untrue as the story unfolds when he is responsible for the death of his beloved daughter, Abigail. Barabus becomes so consumed by vengeance that he kills not of need but of desire. He no longer cares nearly as much about his daughter or his wealth when compared to the revenge he seeks. His actions become purely villainous as the play goes along, and he descends into madness. B. R. Menpes agrees with this sentiment when he states that the play “appears to present a main character who is, to all intents and purposes, not only devoid of ‘morality’, but the complete antithesis of the ‘moral’” (66).

That being said, I do push against this statement because although Barabus’ morality is arguable, Marlowe’s character is not without depth and complication. Marlowe strains the reader’s view by creating some sympathy for the protagonist. In Act 1, Scene 2, due to his Jewish status, Barabus is treated harshly by Ferenze, who states that Jews “stand accursèd in the sight of heaven” (Line 64). This slanderous comment encapsulates Ferenze’s whole attitude towards Barabus and the other Jewish people in Malta. In this scene, Ferenze’s anti-Semitism paints him as a villain while painting Barabus as sympathetic. This brief scene is meant to display the harsh prejudice that Barabus faces due to his Judaism, as well as convey a different side of the character. Even though Barabus has been shown to be a deeply flawed character--and, to a certain extent, unlikeable--this moment challenges the audience’s feelings because it conjures sympathy for a villainous character.

Barabus has been the protagonist since the beginning of Act 1 and he, though morally ambiguous at times, has remained the center focus of the story. Additionally, early on in the play, it is clear that Barabus loves his daughter, even considering the events that eventually transpire when he poisons a whole nunnery in addition to her. Despite Barabus’ selfishness and greed, Marlowe creates an interesting situation that challenges the audience’s (and the reader’s) feelings towards the protagonist. Marlowe treats the controversial character of Barabus as a real person with depth and detail for almost the entire play. Marlowe has played with the audience’s feelings towards Barabus by showing the bad sides of him as well as the potentially good sides. He shows the protagonist’s selfish nature that demonstrates his care for little else aside from himself, his wealth, and his daughter. He also shows Ferenze’s harsh treatment towards Barabus, which is intended to make the audience question their feelings toward the main character, if not stir up some sympathy for him.

However, Act 4, Scene 4 comes with a significant change in genre, or—at least—a change in the *prominent* genre. The play’s comedy undermines the seriousness that has been present in the rest of the play, as this scene shifts the play’s focus from tragic elements to comedic elements. This scene is particularly striking for several reasons, the first being that it is the only real comedic scene in the entire play. Barabus disguises himself as a French lute player in order to hear Ithamore’s confession. This change in costume, and in genre, is by design. But just writing the scene as comedic is not enough for Marlowe—instead, he writes it in such a way that makes the comedy feel over-the-top which, in turn, punctuates how out-of-place it feels.

When Barabus first enters, he says that he must “tuna my lute for sound—twang, twang!—first” (Line 33). Then, after Ithamore instructs him to play, he responds by saying: “*Pardonnez-moi*, be no in tunne yet. [*He tunes.*] So, now, now all be in” (Lines 49-50). The way Barabus speaks in this scene is meant to reflect a Frenchman whose first language is clearly not English. Additionally, the back-and-forth between Barabus playing the lute for Ithamore, Bellamira, and Pilia-Borza and his asides is something straight out of a modern-day comedy. Even when reading, one can imagine the comical timing of Barabus stopping his playing to speak to the audience and then resume playing, and repeating that several times. This along with the comments from Ithamore, Bellamira, and Pilia-Borza add to the hilarity of the scene. Additionally, the comments from the other three characters act as setups for jokes and Barabus’ asides serve as the punchlines. On line 55, when Pilia-Borza compliments Barabus by saying, “Methinks he fingers very well”, Barabus responds in an aside by saying, “So did you when you stole my gold” (Line 56). The wittiness comes way out of left field as it has not been much of a presence in the play up to this point. This is especially true for Barabus, whose character has been shown to have no, or very little, comedic elements about him. Marlowe treats his protagonist quite seriously and up until Act 4, Scene 4 writes him in a deliberately serious light. This scene carries a tone that is the complete opposite of the darker, more serious one that permeates through the rest of the play. When Barabus walks in on Ithamore, Bellamira, and Pila-Borza’s conversation, he is disguised as a musician, speaks with a comical French accent, and plays the lute. This is likely much less distracting when one is solely reading the play but it is certainly spotlighted when seeing it acted out on stage. And although this scene feels out of place in a lot of ways, it is not by accident.

Furthermore, L.C. Knight states that Marlowe writes Barabus as a “great merchant, comic monster, master of policy, whining victim—these transformations we could perhaps assimilate if we felt that Marlowe, as a deliberate artist, were sure of his tone—of his attitude towards his audience, and towards his subject” (371). While I agree that Barabus as a character (and the entire play to a certain extent) touches a lot of different corners in terms of genres, themes, and tones, I disagree with the notion that Marlowe is not sure of the decisions he makes in *The Jew of Malta*. It appears Marlowe’s decisions are entirely deliberate even if they may seem all over the place. He wants to challenge the audience and their feelings towards Barabus. And the seemingly strange comedic scene with Barabus in disguise is no different. Marlowe uses this scene to emphasize the more serious characteristics of both the story and Barabus’ character. On the surface, it seems like this out-of-place comedy scene undercuts his character by treating him as nothing more than comedic relief. However, this scene is not meant to

undercut Barabus as a character--in fact, it is meant to stir some empathy in the audience and provide a moment of levity before the climax. The scene comes directly before Act 5, which is incredibly fast-paced and intense. It is a moment that acts as the calm before the storm--it is meant to give the audience the chance to take a breath before plunging into the finale. It is arguable if Marlowe uses the appropriate amount of comedy to provide levity but that is certainly what his intentions are in this scene. The comedy strengthens the tragedy because the deliberateness in which it is used highlights the darker, more tragic happenings in the play--especially those that occur in the final act.

All in all, *The Jew of Malta* is a play that balances several different themes and tones. It is a play that deals with both comedy and tragedy in terms of genre. Although both of these genres on their own utilize different tones, Marlowe uses the comedic elements to compliment the tragic focus of the entire play. He aims an extremely sharp lens on Barabus both as a character and as the story's main protagonist. He successfully challenges how the audience feels about Barabus, providing many moments of selfishness and greed while also conjuring moments of sympathy that push against the negative side that is shown more frequently. As a character, Barabus is given lots of depth that makes him complex and, by Marlowe's intention, difficult to fully understand. He is written seriously and the situations he gets into are presented in the same light. Because of this, Act 4, Scene 4 sticks out a lot more than it might have in a different play. The scene is a moment of light-heartedness that allows the incoming tragic elements in Act 5 to hit a lot harder. It allows the audience to get their bearings before Marlowe plunges them into the climax of the play. This lighter scene is necessary so the play's final act can stick its landing and resonate better with the audience. Without the comedy, the tragic elements from throughout the play all fall on the same level. *With* the comedy, however, Marlowe is able to craft an ending that holds a greater impact and distinguishes itself from the rest of the play. The tedious balancing of genre is not clumsy or awkward, but graceful and severely intentional. It is a deliberate choice that is used to powerfully mold the story as Marlowe sees fit. It is the eye of the storm that unsettles the reader but also comforts them; it is a brief reprieve from the harsh, biting tragedy at the center of the play. Marlowe is quite conscious of comedy in *The Jew of Malta* and his use of it, particularly in the character of Barabus, is deliberate and done in a way that strengthens the overall genre of tragedy in the play.

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