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978-0-521-09087-2 - Christopher Marlowe: Merlin's Prophet

Judith Weil

Excerpt

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## I

## Introduction

The descriptive phrase in the title of this study, 'Merlin's prophet', refers primarily to a style, rather than to a man. It derives from the passage with which Rabelais concludes his *Gargantua*. There, Gargantua and Friar John both comment on the meaning of a 'prophetic riddle' engraved on a plate and discovered in digging the foundations of the abbey of Thélème. Gargantua interprets the riddle – a muddled account of an Antichrist, an apocalypse, and a triumphant elect – to mean 'the Continuance and Upholding of Divine Truth'. Friar John, however, disagrees:

That is not my Explanation; The Style is that of Merlin the Prophet. Put upon it all the Allegories and Grave Expositions that you will, and dote about it, you and the Rest of the World, as much as you like.

For my Part, I believe there is no other Meaning enveloped in it than a Description of a Game at Tennis hidden under obscure Words.<sup>1</sup>

Friar John's brief argument with Gargantua can serve to introduce two basic sources of disagreement among the spectators and readers of Marlowe's work. First, Marlowe seems to have been a rhetorical provocateur, as well as, quite possibly, a political one. He could tantalize and manipulate the imaginations of an audience in a masterful fashion. Rarely does he disappoint our expectations without first over-inflating them. He thereby encourages us to 'dote' about his heroes and his ideas. Second, his plays mingle sense with nonsense, allegory with the violent energies of farce and tragedy. In language so 'obscure' that it may have baffled even his contemporaries, Marlowe 'enveloped' plots disturbingly similar to games, wagers, and jokes.

Marlowe's style has inevitably drawn attention to his personal character and beliefs. Most students of the plays soon become familiar

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with those speculations about the writer which began during his own life-time and survive into ours.<sup>2</sup> The few facts which remain suggest that Marlowe may have attempted to act conflicting roles. Although he had studied theology in Reformation Cambridge and had worked briefly for the Privy Council (perhaps actually spying upon the Jesuit community at Rheims), he later baited his peers with scurrilous, anti-Christian harangues. These peers seem to have included great and gifted gentlemen as well as underworld rogues. Simultaneously, he wrote plays which mask their strong dependence upon the Bible and the commonplaces of Christian thought. Such a man might have courted misunderstanding and aggression. Provoked by his dramatic history, we may neglect J. B. Steane's cautious warning: 'The impression is so very vivid that we tend to forget that what we have is only a small part of the truth.'<sup>3</sup>

If this impression of a personality owes much of its sharpness to the playwright's skill, we may need to revise some of the questions we have posed about him. Instead, for example, of asking why he was a rebellious free-thinker, we might ask why he wanted some of his contemporaries to *believe* he was a rebellious free-thinker. My study does not entirely beg these biographical questions, for all that it concentrates on Marlowe's ironic style. The essential argument in the following chapters is that Marlowe mocks his heroes in a remarkably subtle fashion. Their knavish speeches sleep so well in our ears because he has carefully obscured the folly of the speakers. Nevertheless, these speakers, with their mighty lines, are often the objects as well as the agents of his irony. Like Erasmus, another independent and subtle ironist, he exposes disorders of the spirit – self-love, literalism, and violence. My first concerns are to analyse the verbal and visual deceptions which have encouraged us to believe that Marlowe shares the attitudes of his heroes, and to show how these deceptions function within entertaining, popular plays. Should my argument about the style seem convincing, it may bring some common assumptions about Marlowe's personal knavery into doubt.

Whether or how well other writers of Marlowe's age actually understood his stylistic obscurity are problems we may best approach by studying their own plays and poems.<sup>4</sup> Pertinent comments are few. When read in light of the awareness that Marlowe alludes frequently to Biblical and classical literature, and that his style is some-

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times proverbial, Drayton's nostalgic praise (1621) acquires more substance:

Neat Marlow bathed in the Thespian springs  
 Had in him those brave translunary things,  
 That the first Poets had, his raptures were,  
 All ayre, and fire, which made his verses cleere,  
 For that fine madnes still he did retaine,  
 Which rightly should possesse a Poets braine.<sup>5</sup>

Because simple proverbs were believed to conceal ancient insights, their roughness might have augmented the oracular quality produced by more 'cleere' and rapturous verses.

Another comment which may imply recognition of Marlowe's deceptive style is Robert Greene's contemporary attack on the language of Tamburlaine in *Perimedes the Blackesmith* (1588). Greene is settling a score with 'two Gentlemen Poets' who '...had it in derision, for that I could not make my verses iet upon the stage in tragicall buskins, euerie worde filling the mouth like the faburden of Bo-Bell, daring God out of heauen with that Atheist *Tamburlan*, or blaspheming with the mad preest of the sonne'. Justifying himself, Greene continues, 'but let me rather openly pocket vp the Asse at *Diogenes* hand: then wantonlye set out such impious instances of intollerable poetrie, such mad and scoffing poets, that haue propheti-call spirits, as bred of *Merlins* race'.<sup>6</sup>

After this cryptic outburst, Greene apologizes to the Gentlemen Readers of his prefatory epistle for speaking 'darkeley' – for engaging, that is, in the Rabelaisian sport of enigmatically describing enigmatic obscurity. Like the popular prophecies of Merlin to which he refers, his own comment is partly open to subjective interpretation. Does Greene's defensiveness hint that Marlowe's jetting verses may have been an advertisement – or a defence – for Marlowe? The cynic Diogenes, according to Diogenes Laertius, called himself a 'Socrates gone mad' and dismissed *his* critics as follows: 'When some one said, "Most people laugh at you", his reply was, "And so very likely do the asses at them; but as they don't care for the asses, so neither do I care for them."' It is surely a moot point whether the brunt of Greene's attack falls upon Marlowe or upon the poet-hero Tamburlaine as created by and distinct from Marlowe. We cannot be certain whether he is a Gargantua accusing Tamburlaine of religious impiety, or a Friar John accusing him of nonsense. In either case,

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Greene's dark irony seems to pattern itself on Marlowe's, as if he had known that too direct an assault would be less effective. When we seek out the impious man behind the 'intollerable poetry', we are apt to discover an accomplished literary trickster.

By linking Marlowe's style with that disreputable genre, the prophecy, I may have implied that his relationship with his audience is an opportunistic and one-sided affair, that the dramatist manipulates naive readers and spectators according to rules which he can slyly break at will. Such an extreme view resembles its opposite, the view that because Marlowe speaks through his characters, the irony of his plays must be incidental – a privy scoff here, a fleeing frump there. It would be impractical to discard all sense of these extremes when encountering so fiery an ironist as Marlowe. Although this book will emphasize mutually constructive relationships between playwright and audience, it will not pretend that these relationships should always please and reassure us. Every reader and spectator of Marlowe's plays can expect to find passages where artistic control threatens to shatter and communication to fail.

In speaking of Marlowe's beliefs or concerns, I mean by 'Marlowe' a set of intentions derived from study of his plays. All criticism which relies heavily on the concepts of intention and reaction runs three risks: 1) of creating an apology for the writer, making up for his real deficiencies with an integrating response, 2) of treating the writer as a moralizing pedagogue and the audience as a group of docile pupils, and 3) of using the term 'audience' as a means of giving one's personal responses more authority.<sup>8</sup> Even if it were desirable completely to skirt these risks, it might not prove possible. To turn a critical procedure into a myth: The most rewarding route toward discovery of integrating elements *within* Marlowe's plays may lie through their ironic traps. If my approach is considered too apologetic, moral, and personal, I hope it will at least deserve this excuse – that it adds to our understanding of Marlowe's ironic art, and of the range of responses his art produces.

Surprisingly, Marlowe's relationship to his audience may seem more one-sided and manipulative when his attitude is militantly serious. His plays sometimes presuppose a relationship between playwright and audience similar to that suggested between the prophet and his congregation in Second Corinthians 11:17–19.<sup>9</sup>

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That I speak, I speak it not after the Lord: but as it *were* foolishly, in this *my* great boasting.

Seing that manie reioyce after the flesh, I will reioyce also.

For ye suffer fooles gladly, because that ye are wise.<sup>10</sup>

Particularly in those plays whose irony is more satiric – *The Jew of Malta*, *Doctor Faustus*, and *The Massacre at Paris* – Marlowe may seem to scorn the worldliness of his audience. Although he compels us to suffer the boasting of his heroes gladly, he ultimately exposes both their folly and ours.

Marlowe is a writer who continually invites us to compare the distinct and distinguish the comparable. He rarely lends himself to static formulations. Having suggested that his relationship to his audience sometimes resembles St Paul's, I must quickly add that the true prophet speaks to the few, the playwright to the many.<sup>11</sup> He cannot persist in the linguistic inversions of paradox if he wishes to represent mutability. His characters who rejoice after the flesh are not altogether foolish. Those who end their careers as allegorical abstractions begin them as realistic human beings. Moreover, had Marlowe consistently taken the Pauline view of his art and his audience, he could not have written those plays whose irony has a more tragic quality. *Dido Queen of Carthage*, the two *Tamburlaine* plays, and *Edward II* all invite a more independent and imaginative response by the audience. They encourage diversity in interpretation because they relate personal transformations to general historical ones.

By emphasizing two tendencies in Marlowe's ironic relationship with his audience, one satiric and the other tragic, I have tried to avoid the misleading rigidity of another distinction – that which has often been drawn between Marlowe the man and Marlowe the artist.<sup>12</sup> Marlowe's style will always confuse both biographical and formal critics, unless they are willing to exchange insights. We are not merely indulging a Romantic penchant for biography when we regard Marlowe's plays as unstable compounds of air and fire, ready to dissolve with each new translunary rapture. They *are* unstable, full of rapture. On the other hand, those who have discovered and analysed new evidence for Marlowe's intellectual control of his art sometimes seem to have neglected his air and fire.<sup>13</sup> We cannot isolate our reactions to the discipline of art from our reactions to the power of character and the energy of verse.

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To surmise that Marlowe's 'prophetic spirit' accommodates all these reactions may be to risk comparison with Faustus and his desire for heady, magical solutions. The non-chronological approach to Marlowe's plays in the following chapters has the design of concentrating on actual changes in the relationship between ironist and audience. Chapter 2 describes essential features of Marlowe's boisterous style and suggests well-known Renaissance analogues for his ironic methods. Detailed analysis of his work begins in chapter 3 with *The Jew of Malta*, a play which inhibits our impulse to 'dote about it', as Friar John says. Because of its negative temper and constricted form, one can put a few 'Allegories and Grave Expositions' upon the play with greater likelihood that they are meanings Marlowe intended. Analysis ends with the tragedy of *Edward II*. For all its resemblance to *The Jew of Malta* in rapid pace and tight construction, *Edward II* is more humane in temper, more expansive and dynamic in form.

One benefit of studying relationships between style and audience has been the way in which this moving focus can clarify the anomalous nature of *Doctor Faustus*. No simple generic label seems to describe this particularly unstable compound of air and fire or to explain why it frustrates expectations based on familiarity with other dramatic forms. Central to the following interpretation is the argument that *Doctor Faustus* begins as a dark satire and ends as a satiric tragedy of knowledge, which only a knowing audience can fully experience. The superior insight acquired by the audience enables it to measure the hero's progress from foolishly clever impiety towards a desperate recognition of God. Even the painful terror of this recognition is not enough to dispel the detachment which Marlowe's firm satiric purpose generates. Faustus owes his seemingly tragic stature to an elaborate series of rhetorical deceptions. Unless we grant that he is a *potentially* tragic hero, he will always disappoint us. It may be that only two of Marlowe's characters acquire the large dimensions of tragic heroism, Tamburlaine and Edward II. And even so their gains are tenuous, depending less upon the power or awareness of the dramatic character than upon the reactions of the audience. Finally Marlowe's prophetic spirit moves out of his plays into the consciousness of those who read or watch.

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## Marlowe's prophetic style

Marlowe designed his plays as striking reversals which heap disaster upon the protagonists they have seemed to celebrate. His heroes endure exacting retributions which are carefully matched with their particular failings. The catastrophes adjust plot to character, trapping protagonists within a rigorously moral form. Their appropriateness may invite critics to read the plays backwards, discovering anticipations of these last judgments. John Russell Brown, for example, has argued that a play by Marlowe 'is always more significant than any of its characters can realize: the hero is viewed ironically or relatively'.<sup>1</sup> This argument depends, I think, on the privilege of hindsight. It fails to explain why an audience might experience a final disaster with great surprise and shock.

Guided by the morality of Marlowe's catastrophes, the audience does ultimately discover that a protagonist's fate has always been implicit in the strong desires which move him. Douglas Cole has shown that Marlowe's plots seem to provide rationalizations of an Augustinian moral psychology: 'The soul is weighed in the balance by what delights her, as St Augustine put it, which is another way of saying that what a man loves tells most about what that man *is*.'<sup>2</sup> By creating disasters which fulfil mistaken desires and identify the characters with their loves, Marlowe casts brilliant light on basic spiritual perversions. Surely a process so intelligible in retrospect cannot be all that puzzling when experienced scene by scene. But, in fact, it can be very puzzling indeed. Few playwrights have been as willing as Marlowe was to obscure disaster in the offing, to postpone the resolution of ambiguities. Few have disguised self-deception so well or exposed it so belatedly. We might expect that Marlowe would have been anxious to guide the judgment of the audience. We

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probably do *not* expect that he would have sought to suspend our judgments and to let them go straying through the dark.

Even when Marlowe's irony brightens in a more satiric play like *The Jew of Malta*, it is subdued to the power of a protagonist who is a plausible spokesman for his own position. Marlowe's protagonists move energetically through contexts and relationships which reinforce their vigour and potency. This potency may prevent the audience from seeing the protagonists 'ironically or relatively' until the end of the play approaches. It is doubtful that 'Marlowe's staged suffering clearly underlines the irony of the kind of human "fulfillment" to which his major characters aspire', or that 'the dream of the poetic word is consistently confronted with the reality of the dramatic action'.<sup>3</sup> Marlowe encourages his audience to dream with his characters. While he intimates the 'reality' held in reserve, he also tempts the audience to ignore it. Marlowe's dramatic strategy inhibits detachment. In its overall function and effect upon an audience it bears a strong resemblance to the rhetorical questions asked so frequently by his characters. Repeatedly they adopt this method of affirming their values:

Who hateth me but for my happiness?  
Or who is honored now but for his wealth?  
Barabas, I.i.110-11

Is to dispute well logic's chiefest end?  
Affords this art no greater miracle?  
Faustus, I.i.8-9

What greater bliss can hap to Gaveston  
Than live and be the favorite of a king?<sup>4</sup>  
I.i.4-5

We might pause to answer such questions, were the questioners themselves less persuasive or the pace of the action less swift. Our attention moves onward, and we are disturbed, if at all, only by a suspicion that Marlowe's questioners cannot really be answered in the terms they employ.

The dramatic conventions which Marlowe adapts to his obliquely ironic purposes are traditional ones which he shares with other playwrights of his time.<sup>5</sup> As they work together, these conventional methods reveal Marlowe's preoccupation with particular types of character and theme. Risking repetition and a logical circle, I will



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consider these preoccupations before the ironic use of conventions. Both have been widely misunderstood. A brief discussion of his basic concerns may help to make the subsequent survey of Marlowe's methods more pertinent.

In *An Apology for Poetry*, Sir Philip Sidney states a distinction which can be brought to bear on Marlowe's kind of irony. When he turns to those objections to poetry which might be put in a 'counter-balance' against his own defence, Sidney mentions first a group of 'Poet-haters' and anti-poets. He describes them as:

All that kinde of people who seek a prayse by dispraying others, that they doe prodigally spend a great many wandering wordes in quips and scoffes, carping and taunting at each thing, which, by styrring the Spleene, may stay the braine from a through [sic] beholding the worthines of the subiect.<sup>6</sup>

Many of Marlowe's characters belong to this group. The cowards in both *Tamburlaine* plays, the scheming Machiavels in *The Jew of Malta*, *The Massacre at Paris*, and *Edward II*, and the Bad Angel and Mephistophilis in *Doctor Faustus* all know how to 'seek a prayse'.

Sidney then distinguishes these jesters, who deserve only our ridicule, from a second, more serious group:

So of the contrary side, if we will turne *Ouid's* verse, *Ut lateat virtus proximitate mali*, that good lye hid in the neerenesse of the euill, *Agrippa* will be as merry in shewing the vanitie of Science as *Erasmus* was in commending of follie. Neyther shall any man or matter escape some touch of these smyling raylers. But for *Erasmus* and *Agrippa*, they had another foundation then the superficial part would promise.<sup>7</sup>

Marlowe's raillery seems to have been more sardonic than the 'smyling' version which Sidney commended in *Agrippa* and *Erasmus*. But like their raillery, Marlowe's does seem to have had 'another foundation then the superficial part would promise'. We need not identify him with the clever scoffers in his plays. Sidney went on to observe that 'scoffing commeth not of wisdome'.<sup>8</sup> When scoffers like *Barabas* and *Faustus* celebrate their wisdom they are actually praising their folly. Such paradoxical encomia may be highly persuasive, for, like *Erasmus* himself, Marlowe knew well how to 'stay the braine from a through beholding the worthines of the subiect'. His glorious fools are especially plausible when their exciting ideas and activities coincide with the ways of their worlds. That the pleasing spokeswoman of *The Praise of Folly* often has enough sense to understand

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such ways hardly recommends their value. Erasmus permits her to identify and satirize other fools, but he reminds us of her folly by suggesting now and again that her use of authorities and her reasoning are dubious. We will see that Marlowe uses a similar procedure in presenting his characters.<sup>9</sup>

Through the allusions which occur in all of his plays, Marlowe reveals an abiding preoccupation with wisdom. We can discern, behind his mistaken praisers of wisdom, the shadow of that lady who praised herself in the books of Proverbs and Wisdom as the bride of God and mother of all creation. The Church Fathers chose to replace this mediating Wisdom figure with the second person of the Trinity, Christ. Nevertheless, she preserved a feminine identity congenial to Erasmus and to such Christian poets as Dante, Spenser, and Donne.<sup>10</sup>

There appears to be a natural congruity between the darkness of Marlowe's ironic style and 'Wisdom's' shadowy life in literary convention. As a symbol for mediation and intuition, it is simply not in her character to support any literary 'foundation' too obviously. We will see that only Faustus and Tamburlaine, the boldest of over-reachers, insist on giving wisdom a literal human shape. Many of Marlowe's allusions to wisdom appear to derive from the Hebraic sources of the wisdom tradition – the books of Job and Proverbs, and the 'ecclesiastical' books of Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus.<sup>11</sup> In *The Jew of Malta* and *Doctor Faustus* he suggests a foolish distortion of wisdom through allusions to Christ – in St Paul's words, 'the power of God, and the wisdom of God' (First Corinthians 1:24). Perhaps these plays also make some reference to the distinction stated in the Epistle of St James between genuine and devilish wisdom (3:13–18). Other allusions to wisdom ultimately derive from classical sources but seem to have taken on a proverbial, topical character in the Renaissance. Marlowe could easily hint at the folly of a character by comparing him with Actaeon or Icarus.

Within their dramatic contexts, these allusions imply that Marlowe's characters pervert 'sapientia' – a knowledge of things human as well as things divine.<sup>12</sup> Until more definitive studies of Marlowe's own Biblical learning have been made, it might be best to regard the wisdom which his characters abuse as eclectic and traditional in nature. Renaissance thinkers adapted the ancient wisdom tradition to their own attitudes and purposes. These ranged from the mysti-