
Being a Human in Society: Golden Age of English Drama

The period referred to as the Golden Age of English Drama was a revolutionary period when it came to the portrayal of human thought and behavior in society. Some would even argue that this period in Renaissance England was a major influence in the development of English identity. At the time, Europe was experiencing many changes in all social spheres and those changes were strongly reflected in English drama. Amongst the many great playwrights of the time the present essay will focus on was Christopher Marlowe, specifically two of his works: *Tamburlaine the Great* and *Doctor Faustus*. It was the thinking of Marlowe and his contemporaries that probably had the biggest influence in the shaping of English identity and the society of Early Modern England. The notions of the Marlowe and his colleagues, especially those belonging to the titular 'School of Night', were seen as outlandish and atheist by many critics and as a result the group was highly persecuted. However, as I will attempt to argue, the ideas of the group and especially Marlowe, were more for the benefit of the people rather than for the detriment of the government. To this endeavor I will make two claims. The first is that Christopher Marlowe represented the notions of politics and religion in the use of theatrics (a blanket term which I will use to refer to all physical manifestations of a play such as props, scenery, etc.). The second being that Marlowe embodied his ideas about humanism in his two eponymous heroes to illustrate that one can decide his own fate and live on his own terms without the intrusion of politics and religion.

In order to begin I would like to discuss some terminology that I believe is crucial to the foundation of my arguments. The first thing I would like to discuss is the title itself. The 'Knight' specifically refers to Christopher Marlowe. The 'Night' as discussed in the introduction refers to the enigmatic 'School of Night', a group consisting of many artists and scholars such as Marlowe, Sir Walter Raleigh, and to some extent even William Shakespeare. Because the group was so secretive it is really difficult to pin down their exact motives and some even argue their existence outright. However, the interpretation that I would like to examine is their critique of the government, and in Marlowe's case, the interplay of politics and religion. Many of his critics accused him of some version of the following quote, "...affirming our [Savior] to be but a [deceiver], and Moses to be but a [conjurer] and seducer of the people, and the holy Bible to be but [vain] and idle stories, and all religion but a [device] of [policy]" (Hunter, 149). This quote is allegedly attributed to Marlowe, although quotes such as these have dangerously lackluster evidence to support them, and it clearly depicts his feelings towards government and politics and it is this interpretation of his notions that I wish to use in the present essay. As I mentioned the particular quote has some questionable validity but many claim that Marlowe was responsible for some version of the above quote and many believed him to express similar notions occasionally. From this I can conclude that Marlowe was fairly aware that politics were

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fairly influenced by religion and in retrospect it is easy to support this as many English monarchs generally held on to the 'divine right to power'.

Another thing I would like to discuss is the notion of atheism. Marlowe is often alleged as an atheist and as it turns out, this connotation places on him an unwarranted stigma. The present definition of atheism differs greatly from the one used centuries ago. Today we define an atheist as someone who denounces the notion of a deity as well as the conventions of religion for a more humanistic approach to life. In Renaissance England the term was used as a throw-away word for immoral behavior. Nicholas Davidson claim "...in the sixteenth century, words such as 'atheist' and 'atheism' had no precise intellectual connotation, and were used mainly as terms of abuse or as a literary device on which to hang more orthodox arguments" (Davidson, 132). Davidson argues that the term was so loosely used that its potency in Early Modern England is questionable at best. Furthermore, some scholars agree that the term 'atheist' was synonymous with what we would call an anarchist. That is, not someone who is in open rebellion against the government per se but merely someone who strongly questions policy. And, if the above representation of Marlowe is to be believed then the suit of 'atheist' becomes a better fit for him. Certainly Marlowe was not a stranger to questioning the powers and policy of government. Michael Kelly claims that many writers before and after Marlowe used the written word to safely criticize the government through satire (Kelly, 3). This quote, coupled with everything we have been looking at creates the sense that Marlowe did indeed believe in the presence and power of religion, however as I claim, he believed the power it had over people was inferior to the innate human power, the idea of humanism. From this I can conclude that Marlowe held the belief that religion was responsible for the background workings of society and that he held strong disagreements of its efficacy.

Now that the groundwork has been covered I believe I can argue for my first claim: that Christopher Marlowe stages his plays in such a way as to represent the presence of religion and politics as theatrical elements. I will use theatrical element to refer to every part of the play-making process that includes things like scenery, costumes, props, and so on. I believe this connection between theatrics and religion is reasonable due to Marlowe's feelings about religion as a whole. In his paper, Davidson mentions that certain intellectuals ('atheists') were described my writer Thomas Nashe as those who "whose position and opinion it is that there is no Hel or misery but opinion"; they deny the accuracy of the scriptures and call Moses a magician" (Davidson, 135). This quote is not specifically attributed to Marlowe but it is a fairly common viewpoint held by critics of religion and government. Following from that, this next quote is more specifically connected to Marlowe, "I count Religion but a childish toy, /And hold there is no sin but ignorance" (Jew of Malta, Prologue 14-15). This quote is from the prologues to *The Jew of Malta* another one of Marlowe's works. It is spoken by Machiavelli who was known to have his gripes with religion long before Marlowe. The mention of things like 'toys' and 'magicians' with reference to religion is what first allowed me to make the connection

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between theatrics and religion and although I do believe that the connection is not absolutely concrete I don't believe that it is such a far leap to take. Furthermore, I believe that religion and plays share the quality of being greatly reliant on trust, that is, the notion of the suspension of disbelief. In a play the audience member has to believe that what he is seeing is the truth in order to fully immerse himself in the action, even though even the most common audience members in Marlowe's time would know that everything is fabricated for their entertainment. Religion is itself based on the idea of conviction and undisputed faith in god. Even though many believers cannot specifically explain the things that religious texts propose they still have faith in things like miracles and the omnipotence of god. In the following sections the specific examination of *Tamburlaine* and *Doctor Faustus* will, in my opinion, make this connection more apparent. With that taken into consideration let us now look at the aforementioned plays more closely to see how this claim helps argue my second claim: that Marlowe portrays his characters in such a way to propagate the notion that human power stands above the power of things like politics and religion.

The first play I will look at is *Tamburlaine* mainly because it's first in terms of chronology. The connection between theatrics and politics is clearly evident here as politics and war is what fuels the plot and determines the actions of *most* characters. *Tamburlaine* seems to stand apart from all the other characters in terms of actions, behavior, and morality and I believe that is by design. Not only because he is the main character but because he is meant to embody the notion of humanism. The first thing I want to look at is *Tamburlaine's* obsession with crowns. In 1.II.vi. *Tamburlaine* gives his famous soliloquy about the aspiring towards greater things and "the ripest fruit of all, /That perfect bliss and sole felicity, /The sweet fruition of an earthly crown". This quote highlights two very important things: the first being aspiration which I will come back to later and the second is the idea of the crown. And that is what I want to put under the microscope. It is the feeling of an earthly crown that *Tamburlaine* is after rather than the physical object. I think it is too drastic to say that *Tamburlaine* does not outright care about the physical crown but it seems reasonable to me to say that he is more interested in the power it provides. To him, it is just a prop and I believe that is what separates him from the rest of the characters, like *Mycetes* for example who goes far enough to hide it in a hole in the ground. Furthermore, regardless of how many crowns he wins it is never enough for him. He always seems to want more which is what ultimately kills him. That is what Marlowe was trying to accomplish with *Tamburlaine*: to show what aspiration can lead to. And it is fair to interpret *Tamburlaine's* conquest in a negative light and likening him to *Icarus* or other tragic heroes who fell due to ambition, but one thing that cannot be undermined is what he was ultimately able to accomplish.

Another thing to look at is specifically what he was able to accomplish and the position he came from. From the outset *Tamburlaine* is an outsider to the political sphere "Oft have I heard your majesty complain /Of *Tamburlaine*, that sturdy Scythian thief,.... /Hoping (misled by dreaming

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prophecies) /To reign in Asia, and with barbarous arms /To make himself the monarch of the East (1.I.i 35-6 & 41-3). Additionally he refers to his shepherd parentage as an example of how far he rose. Yet even so he is able to greatly physically impact the world around him as he claims, "Here at Damascus will I make the point /That shall begin the perpendicular (1.IV.iv 84-5). This quote refers to him 'redrawing' the map to put his kingdom in the center of the world, exemplifying his power. What all these quotes illustrate is yet another quality of humanism that heavily contrasts the powers of politics and religion: the ability of one to live and die on his own terms. Everything that Tamburlaine does is on his own terms. For example, the whole exercise of using different color tents to reflect his mood and actions just seems very alien in the scope of the play. The colors reflect his actions and in whatever endeavor he strives towards he cannot be dissuaded or stopped: he not only massacres to virgins of Babylon despite their pleas, he kills his own son to the chagrin of everyone around him. But perhaps the greatest example of him taking his own life into his own hands is ironically his death. Throughout the course of the play Tamburlaine makes numerous challenges towards the gods (this is less an example of modern day atheism and more of the Marlovian interpretation of it of critiquing the powers that be), starting with Jove and then moving on to Mahomet, with either 'responding' to his challenges. That is, there are no repercussions for his actions and he takes it mean that he is unopposed. As a matter of fact, he imagines himself even doing god's work, "I that am term'd the scourge and wrath of God" (1.III.iii 44). He adopts the title of the 'scourge of god' because he does what god cannot. One can even argue that this is another way of Marlowe showing the possible futility of religion. Regardless, what is to be taken from his constant badgering of the gods is that ultimately he dies. In class we discussed in part the two major interpretations of this. The first being that his 'warrior spirit' was too much for his body to handle and as a result he dies. The other is that the gods finally had enough and decided to punish him. The actual choice, in my opinion, is irrelevant. Whether or not the gods kill him he still dies on his terms. While dying he still calls the shots and determines what is to be done after he passes but what is more important is what he doesn't do. That is, not once does he plead for his life or repent for what he has done. He doesn't acknowledge that he was bested. As a matter of fact, he sees this as a step up, as an evolution for him because he finally gets to go and conquer heaven (as idealistic as that sounds) and he is reunited—hopefully—with Zenocrate. Taking one's life into his or her own hands is a crucial tenet of humanism and it is a direct counter to the fate-based prospects or religion and the puppet-like control that monarchies held over their subjects. These beliefs were very idiosyncratic of Tamburlaine at they were one of the many reasons why he stood out.

However, what I feel is the most apparent example of Tamburlaine exemplifying the humanist characteristics is the following speech he gives in part two of the play. While chastising his eldest son for being a pacifist rather than a warmonger he exclaims:

View me, thy father, that hath conquer'd kings, And, with his host, march'd round about the

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earth, Quite void of scars and clear from any wound, That by the wars lost not a drop of blood, And see him lance his flesh to teach you all (2.III.ii. 110-4).

The first time I was made aware of it was in the theater and it just struck me as unbelievable: Tamburlaine at this instance is almost superhuman. Marlowe explicitly states that after decades of conquering a majority of the known world, Tamburlaine is left somehow unscratched. No weapon, no soldier, nothing can touch him other than himself and to me this shows just how much he stands apart from the play. It is almost as if he is some omnipotent observer or better yet some puppeteer who firmly controls the tide of the story. And by making Tamburlaine superior to the pomp and circumstance of the play, Marlowe shows that one can similarly take power into his own hands and somewhat ignore the pressures and influences of the world around him at least as far politics and religion are concerned. If anything *Tamburlaine* explores the intrinsic power held by human beings and how they can fight for their own identity by individualizing themselves. However, certain scholars like William Stull, who examines the plays in terms of psychology claims that Marlowe fails in his mission when it comes to *Tamburlaine* saying “[but] social interest plays no role in either part of *Tamburlaine*” (Stull, 449). To respond, I feel that in order to develop a more hive-mind identity it is more important to start at the individual level and in a sense that is what Marlowe was trying to show as well. Because Tamburlaine was such a charismatic person he managed to attract many followers who eventually shared his vision to great effects.

Now I would like to look at *Doctor Faustus* and how the eponymous hero embodies similar qualities to Tamburlaine, much to the same end. As *Tamburlaine* did with politics, *Doctor Faustus* has a very strong connection between theatrics and religion. The plot is about a struggle for the soul of the titular character and all the props and characters involved are religious in nature. To begin, I would like to examine an interpretation of the play which I find somewhat obscure yet not any less potent. Throughout the course of the play Faustus poses many questions about the world, physical and metaphysical, to Mephistopheles. The latter answers, as many scholars argue, sarcastically or in a patronizing tone. Stull notes, “In answer to even the most “slender questions” of cosmology, [Mephistopheles] replies with truisms worthy of a schoolboy” (Stull, 457). An example of one of these would be when Faustus asks Mephistopheles what hell is and the latter answers that “all places shall be hell that is not heaven” (v. 128). To me it is clear that Mephistopheles could be perceived as treating Faustus as a child. However, more to the idea of the present essay I would like to take yet another interpretation. To put it plainly: what if Mephistopheles does not really know the answers? There seems to be no proof that he actually does and is therefore offering Faustus common low-born answers or answers that are provided by religious canon, “Equally central, it was believed, was a preference for natural as against supernatural explanations, the view that ‘all things come to [pass] by nature, or fortune’. Hence God’s active supervision of the world came under challenge” (Hunter, 141). Granted, it does seem like a weaker interpretation but it is at least one

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that can be considered. On a metaphysical level I can argue that this was simply Marlowe trying to enforce the notion that religion cannot provide the answers to these questions because of a, somewhat common, thought amongst Marlowe's contemporaries, "... Christianity, Judaism, and Islam – had, it was occasionally suggested, all been invented for political purposes only, to aggrandize their founders and to secure the power of the secular rulers" (Davidson, 137). Even though it is not the strongest point to make it does at least show that there is something to question when it comes to *Doctor Faustus*.

The next thing I wish to look at is a classical interpretation of the play as an allegory of sorts for the Calvinist notion of predestination. The idea claims that a human soul is destined to either go to heaven and hell before birth and that no action on earth can influence the decision in any way. This seems very problematic for me because if that is the case than the play only highlights the inefficacy of religion. What I want to pick on is the presence of the good and bad spirits. As we mentioned in class, those two characters represent the dichotomy of Faustus' soul as it debates between repenting and sinning, respectively. Now, if we were to consider that the idea of predestination was actual doctrine then we would have to conclude that the presence of the angels is rendered useless. The play ends with Faustus dying and his soul being sent to hell so if predestination is correct then it would follow that this was going to happen regardless of what occurred during the play: it was determined before his birth and therefore long before the play begins. If that is the case then the good spirit cannot possibly persuade Faustus to meaningfully repent. Additionally, because Faustus is already doomed the bad spirit cannot further persuade him to sin and to further doom himself. Taking this into consideration the only conclusions I can draw from this is that either the Calvinist notion of predestination is wrong or that it is in fact right and that all the 'earthly' religious conventions are futile. This is just the tip of the iceberg and the spirits represent a much bigger pattern of inadequacy which religion provides. A majority of the tricks and charades that result from invoking the dark magic throughout the story either backfire or fall flat in terms of grandeur, for example the comic relief sections with Robin and Rafe. However, as has been the case throughout this essay is that all of the plot points, the magic tricks, and the like are mostly just 'sound and fury'. The real meat of the play is of course what happens to the title character and that is what I will now focus on.

Just like *Tamburlaine*, *Doctor Faustus* is a play in which the main emphasis is on the eponymous hero and, for the benefit of the present paper, how this hero take power into his own hands and takes control of his life in order to exemplify the notions of humanism. From the beginning we are introduced to a man who, like Tamburlaine, stands apart from his society by denouncing things like medicine, religion, and the law because he feels incomplete, and so he turns to the dark arts. Throughout the play Faustus' descent into darkness consistently escalates all the way until his death. But he most important details to take out these events is that ultimately Doctor Faustus is the one truly responsible for what happens to him. As Stull

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notes, "For in true Adlerian fashion, it is not God or Lucifer who damns Faustus to a living hell. It is Faustus himself" (Stull, 458). He is the one who makes the conscious decision to delve into the dark arts. He is the one who chooses to summon a demon to do his bidding. And most importantly, he is the one who initiates himself into hell by offering to sell his soul to the devil. These actions, and their subsequent resolution are reminiscent of Tamburlaine. Both men share this almost unquenchable ambition for bigger and better things and eventually it is this ambition that overwhelms them but it is also this ambition that in turn allows them to transcend their realms. And in my opinion that is what is important here: the mere possibility of this sort of evolution is enough to inspire the audiences to pursue their own natural power and it is this sort of aspiration that could be seen as problematic for the power that be. What is problematic is the way in which this is portrayed in the plays by this sort of rebellion against politics and religion.

In his plays, Christopher Marlowe portrays the presence of religion and politics of everyday life as theatrical elements that the man characters strive to escape or stand apart from in order to highlight their true potential. Although his beliefs were good in spirit they were still seen as problematic, which is a notion that extended to many of his contemporaries as well. The Golden Age of English Drama saw the rise of the English identity and its subsequent snuffing out by the same government that the playwrights sought to humanize. Regardless of what the opinions about them were, the members of the 'School of Night' are remembered as being greatly influential in the creation of English Renaissance drama and some, like Marlowe, have even influenced philosophers and scholars like Nietzsche and Freud to pursue their own studies into the human psyche and humanism as an alternative to the spectacle of religion.

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