Thunder at a Playhouse

Essaying Shakespeare
and the Early Modern Stage

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Watching Shakespeare Learn from Marlowe

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This essay traces the influence of a particular moment in Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* on Shakespeare. It suggests that Shakespeare learned something from Marlowe about the dramatization of inwardness, and it suggests also that the particular Marlovian scene it describes stuck with Shakespeare even after, as James Shapiro puts it in *Rival Playwrights*, “Shakespeare’s engagement with Marlowe appears to come to an end, around the turn of the century.”¹

One does not usually associate Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* with inwardness, and even Robert Logan, a critic committed to establishing Marlowe as a model for a variety of forms of Shakespearean excellence, sees Barabas as a relatively one-dimensional figure, especially in comparison with Shakespearean emotional complexities: “Barabas,” Logan comments, “does not prize that which is non-material, human, and emotional.”² So one swims against something of a critical current in discussing Barabas the character and *The Jew of Malta* the play as exemplars of inwardness.

Let me plunge in by commenting that inwardness comes in harder and softer varieties, and that Marlowe’s is hard. *The Jew of Malta* begins with a prologue by “Machiavel” followed by a soliloquy by Barabas. One of the aspects of Machiavelli’s 1513 *The Prince* that made it notorious in sixteenth-century Europe was its recommendation that leaders be able to dissimulate their intentions, to lie, when it is expedient to do so. This is one of several of Machiavelli’s views of leadership that divorce desirable effectiveness from indispensable moral exemplarity. Marlowe finds this divorce in general provocative and appealing, and he is particularly drawn to Machiavelli’s admiration for strategic rationing of the exposure of one’s inward thought for purposes of control and safety. As Katharine Eisaman Maus remarks, “Marlowe . . . keeps returning to the implications of a personal inwardness withheld or withholdable from others.”³ The Machiavel of Marlowe’s prologue expects those
who read him to dissimulate their indebtedness to his advice: “such as love me guard me from their tongues, / . . . / Admired I am of those that hate me most.”4 Machiavel’s comments prepare audiences for two important aspects of The Jew of Malta: deceptive self-presentation (set off by private self-revelation), and their own ambivalence toward a figure who presents a strong but amoral version of the reality of human economic and political life. The first is established early on by soliloquy and aside, and both center on Barabas.

Barabas’s first soliloquy, “in his countinghouse, with heaps of gold before him,” as the stage direction has it, seems at the outset impersonal, the talking to himself of a merchant reckoning his accounts: “So that of thus much that return was made; / And of the third part of the Persian ships, / There was the venture summed and satisfied” (1.1.1–3). But the soliloquy soon becomes more expressive, though it remains focused on the wealth in front of Barabas. He reveals impatience at having to account for small sums: “Fie, what a trouble ’tis to count this trash!”, contrasting himself with “The needy groom that never fingered groat” who would wonder at “thus much coin” (1.1.7–14). As he proceeds to an approving account of the hoards of “the wealthy Moor” (1.1.21), he seems enthralled by the way objects of enormous economic value concentrate beauty and power in tangible form:

Bags of fiery opals, sapphires, amethysts,
Jacinths, hard topaz, grass-green emeralds,
Beauteous rubies, sparkling diamonds,
And seld-seen costly stones of so great price
As one of them, indifferently rated
And of a caret of this quantity,
May serve, in peril of calamity,
To ransom great kings from captivity.

(1.1.25–32)

As an exposure of inwardness, this does not seem very inward. It represents Barabas’s participation in the thrill of possessing what others desire, and an awareness that such objects also represent the resources others may desperately need. The neediness of those who do not have his resources—the groatless groom, the captive king—is a major component of the resources themselves. Though Barabas is talking in part about others, he is also placing himself among them, though at the same time registering his own difference as a disenfranchised Jew who has no home ground from
which wealth can be directly extracted. The “wealthy Moor” can, in Barabas’s fantasy at least, simply “pick his riches up” from the “Eastern rocks” where precious stones abound, but Barabas’s own more laborious and intellectual work as a merchant achieves the same kind of concentrated potential by separation of wealth from the ordinary people who are enmeshed in a market-world they cannot control:

This is the ware wherein consists my wealth:
And thus, methinks, should men of judgment frame
Their means of traffic from the vulgar trade,
And, as their wealth increaseth, so enclose
Infinite riches in a little room.

(1.1.33–37)

“Judgment,” for Barabas, consists of concentrating the world-spanning reach of human transactions in a private space: the “little room” of his countinghouse, or the privacy of his intentions, unavailable to the “vulgar.” The idea that this is, potentially, a king’s ransom suggests that it represents security and even political power as well as accomplishment. Machiavel promises us “the tragedy of a Jew / Who smiles to see how full his bags are crammed” (Prologue 30–31), and Barabas’s soliloquy demonstrates how much more interesting and complex the situation of such a Jew seems from inside his own consciousness than when looked on unsympathetically from the outside. At the same time Machiavel’s comment warns us that Barabas will not smile for long.

What, then, does this soliloquy accomplish in terms of the representation or evocation of inwardness? It establishes a kind of baseline for Barabas’s later frenzy, in that his complacent account of his own success is shot through with expressions of impatience at the life he has led to achieve “thus much coin,” “wearying his fingers ends with telling it” (1.1.16). He clearly prefers to think of his achievement in terms of the solidity and brilliance of hidden gems, “seld-seen costly stones” (1.1.28), rather than as a pile of coins that have passed through many hands and may at any time return to promiscuous negotiation. Moreover, when the soliloquy resumes after an interruption in 1.1 it also sets the terms on which he finds his adversarial relation to the dominant Christians of Malta tolerable:

Who hateth me but for my happiness?
Or who is honored now but for his wealth?
Rather had, I, a Jew, be hated thus
Than pitied in a Christian poverty;
For I can see no fruits in all their faith
But malice, falsehood, and excessive pride,
Which methinks fits not their profession.

(1.1.111–18)

Barabas sees his relation to the Christians as a struggle lightly
masked by hypocritical professions of charity on the Christian side
and the systematic foregoing of political authority on the side of the
Jews:

They say we are a scattered nation;
I cannot tell, but we have scrambled up
More wealth by far than those that brag of faith.

I must confess we come not to be kings.
That’s not our fault. Alas, our number’s few,
And crowns come either by succession
Or urged by force; and nothing violent,
Oft have I heard tell, can be permanent.

(1.1.120–32)

We moderns think of the inner self as prone to ambivalence and
contradiction. So far—and in this Marlowe typifies Renaissance
norms—Barabas’s soliloquy has been marked by a high level of rhetorica
consistency and formality: except in its frankness, his
speech to himself does not seem that different from a speech he
might deliver to an assembly. Nonetheless, as suggested already by
my account of Barabas’s impatience above, the “alas” and the “not
our fault” register Barabas’s distress at the denial of political power
to match the economic accumulation the greatest Jews have
achieved. It appears to be faute de mieux, suppressing his own
distress, that Barabas concludes “Give us a peaceful rule; make Chris
tians kings, / That thirst so much for principality” (1.1.133–34).
The punctuated soliloquy of 1.1, then, establishes both Barabas’s
precarious complacency and his awareness that it is endangered by
the collective vulnerability of the Jews. Indeed, the soliloquy locates
in Barabas’s psyche the social thought-experiment that is at the
center of the play: what are the consequences of concentrated eco
nomic power in the hands of the politically powerless?

The first consequence is that when they really need it the politi
cally powerful will grab the money of the powerless rich. In 1.2 Bar
abas has, in rapid, plausible succession, been summoned to the
senate house, told by the Christian governor, Ferneze, that the
Turks have demanded payment of ten years’ neglected Maltese tribute, and asked to contribute half his wealth on penalty of forced conversion to Christianity and total dispossession if he refuses. When Barabas declines to be christened and says (in an echo of his opening soliloquy) “Half of my substance is a city’s wealth. / Governor, it was not got so easily; / Nor will I part so slightly therewith!” (1.2.86–88), he is held to have “denied the articles” and thus to forfeit all possessions to the state. When his fellow-Jews (who have quickly submitted to the expropriation of half their goods, and have so escaped Barabas’s total loss) attempt to console him, Barabas rejects their consolations in terms that remind us of the foregone aspirations to power in his first soliloquy. Here his lost money becomes a general’s defeated army and reminds us of the way he likened himself earlier to Agamemnon:

You that
Were ne’er possessed of wealth are pleased with want.
But give him liberty at least to mourn
That in a field amidst his enemies
Doth see his soldiers slain, himself disarmed,
And knows no means of his recovery.

(1.2.201–6)

When they leave him alone, he springs up and in a wonderful brief soliloquy reveals his sense that he is harder and more resistant to dissolution than ordinary men:

See the simplicity of these base slaves,
Who, for the villains have no wit themselves,
Think me to be a senseless lump of clay
That will with every water wash to dirt!

(1.2.216–19)

This resistance to the suddenly fluid nature of his experience carries on even after Barabas’s daughter Abigail brings the distressing news that their house, where he has hidden a reserve of gold and jewels (“stones infinite” [1.2.247]) for just such an emergency, is turned into a convent, and Barabas as a male Jew is of course forbidden to enter it. Barabas briefly considers despair and suicide, representing them as an even more radical form of dissolution:

What, will you thus oppose me, luckless stars,
To make me desperate in my poverty,
And, knowing me impatient in distress,
Think me so mad as I will hang myself,
That I may vanish o'er the earth in air
And leave no memory that e'er I was?

(1.2.260–65)

Rather than thus allow himself to dissipate, Barabas embraces uncertainty:

No! I will live, nor loathe I this my life.
And since you leave me in the ocean thus
To sink or swim, and put me to my shifts,
I'll rouse my senses and awake myself.

(1.2.266–69)

Neither a stone to sink nor a clod to wash to dirt, Barabas will be a swimmer and a shape-shifter. Much of the inconsistency and manic variety of the rest of the play derive from this resolution, since once Barabas leaves the precarious truce with Christian power that he articulated in his opening soliloquy he never achieves a position of stability, and indeed he dies at the end of the play trying to reestablish something approximating the accommodation he started with.

In his first “shift,” he responds to his exile from his own house by asking his daughter Abigail to pretend conversion to Christianity so that she can enter the nunnery and recover Barabas’s rainy-day fund. After some natural hesitation Abigail, persuaded, turns to the Abbess who is processing conveniently across the stage to take up her new residence and begs admission as a novice. While apparently cursing Abigail for her faithlessness, Barabas arranges, in a series of hilarious asides, to come early in the morning to the new convent to receive the re-stolen goods. But when he arrives “with a light” before his house, his confidence in the arrangement appears to have given way to vengeful self-pity. The soliloquy with which Barabas opens the second act differs markedly in tone from his first. And it is this soliloquy, followed by a complex cross-soliloquizing conversation with Abigail, that I will argue stuck in Shakespeare’s mind.

Thus, like the sad presaging raven that tolls
The sick man’s passport in her hollow beak,
And in the shadow of the silent night
Doth shake contagion from her sable wings,
Vexed and tormented runs poor Barabas
With fatal curses towards these Christians.

(2.1.1–6)
As in his earlier soliloquy, this one at first seems to show Barabas’s mental life as quite instrumental, focusing on powerful rhetorical presentation of his activities and intentions. At the same time it mixes a myth of doom for his enemies with a somewhat comic sense of his own movements: no fatal bird of the air but instead a distracted earthbound creature trying with difficulty to hurry in the dark. Night has brought torment and self-doubt, as is seen in the way the raven’s flight immediately becomes the flight away from him of everything he has counted and counted on:

The uncertain pleasures of swift-footed time
Have ta’en their flight and left me in despair;
And of my former riches rests no more
But bare remembrance, like a soldier’s scar,
That has no further comfort for his maim.

(2.1.7–11)

No longer an angry general on the field of his defeat, Barabas is now a poor soldier with only his scars to show for his losses. Lines 9–11 are, even for Marlowe, of exceptional poetic power. Their power derives partly from sonic richness: the sequential off-rhymes beginning with “despair” at the end of line 8: “air” “or” “er” “ore” “are” “ar” “ur” and “er,” abetted by the intense alliteration of initial m, b, and r consonants. The power is partly rhythmic: the way the pause after “remembrance” breaks the iambic pattern so dominant in Marlowe’s pentameter line. And it is partly semantic, from a subdued pun on “member” in “remembrance”: the mutilated soldier can “remember” what he had, but he cannot regain the member he has lost. We tend to think of this kind of intensity as Shakespearean.

The outdoor public Renaissance theaters—*The Jew of Malta* played mainly at the Rose, Philip Henslowe’s venue, in the 1590s (see Gurr, 69–77)—all featured a curtained recess at back center stage that probably was the site of Barabas’s countinghouse in 1.1, and also had an upper playing space above that recess with a window-like opening. In this upper stage, while Barabas paces back and forth on the bare main stage carrying his lantern, Abigail appears, unheard by her father and searching for his treasure. Their soliloquies cross each other in one of the more brilliant Marlovian scenes, and one that, as I suggested above, Shakespeare took note of. Square brackets around stage directions (which are always in italics) indicate that the directions are supplied by a modern editor for the reader’s convenience rather than appearing in the early printed text or texts on which the modern edition is based.
Abigail. [to herself] Now have I happily espied a time
To search the plank my father did appoint.
[Finding riches] And here, behold, unseen, where I have found
The gold, the pearls, and jewels which he hid!
Barabas. [to himself] Now I remember those old women’s words,
Who in my wealth would tell me winter’s tales
And speak of spirits and ghosts that glide by night
About the place where treasure hath been hid;
And now methinks that I am one of those.
For, whilst I live, here lives my soul’s sole hope,
And when I die, here shall my spirit walk.

(2.1.20–30)

Barabas’s words are, as we say, overdetermined: they have more than one appropriate and indeed necessary meaning. His “soul’s sole hope” is his treasure, and the lost house in which he originally amassed it, and the daughter who might be expected to carry his inheritance into the future. Barabas’s memory now associates his treasure with the spiritual traces of others who lost it before he gained it (or hid it before he found it). In his extremity, he also begins populating his inner self with voices from the past, old women who told him stories that undermine the confident account of the meaning and origins of wealth he gave in his first soliloquy. After all, the “spirits and ghosts” haunting hoarded treasure stand for the restless need for vengeance of those from whom it has been taken, and more generally touch on the social resentment that poor Christians feel toward rich Jews, which has turned on and victimized Barabas, as well as on Barabas’s own anger. And as Barabas thus voices this line of inner thought, he is unheard by one of the objects of that thought, who is herself recovering another object of it: the double soliloquy thus has an uncanny connection to the winter’s tale of disembodied connection to lost possessions that Barabas remembers. Abigail too feels a mixed sense of elation and loss:

Now that my father’s fortune were so good
As but to be about this happy place!
’Tis not so happy; yet when we parted last,
He said he would attend me in the morn.
Then, gentle sleep, where’er his body rests,
Give charge to Morpheus that he may dream
A golden dream, and of the sudden wake,
Come, and receive the treasure I have found.

(2.1.31–38)

Barabas, the unhearing object of Abigail’s spoken thought, has meanwhile given up: “As good go on as sit so sadly thus” (2.1.41).
Then he suddenly spies his daughter above him: "But stay! What star shines yonder in the east? / The lodestar of my life, if Abigail!" (2.1.42–43). If the title of The Winter's Tale is not a sufficient indication that this scene stuck in Shakespeare's memory—The Jew of Malta was first performed in 1589 or 1590, just before or simultaneously with Shakespeare's first plays, and Marlowe was the dominant dramatist in London from Tamburlaine in 1587 until his death by stabbing in 1593, so his then-less-prominent contemporary Shakespeare surely saw and perhaps read or even acted in his work—the way this moment of recognition of Abigail on the upper stage is recast at a key moment in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet four to six years later surely clinches it.7 Romeo dismisses Benvolio with a line that reworks Barabas’s comments on scars and maims and then follows with a direct paraphrase of Barabas's line as he looks up and sees a candle in the upper playing space: "He jests at scars, that never felt a wound. / [A light appears above, as at Juliet’s window.] But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? / It is the east, and Juliet is the sun" (2.2.1–3). I will return to the way the rest of this scene affected Shakespeare below. What follows, though no longer in the mode of simultaneous soliloquy, remains remarkable for intensity:

Barabas. [He calls] Who's there?
Abigail. Who's that?
Barabas. Peace, Abigail. 'Tis I.
Abigail. Then, father, here receive thy happiness.
Barabas. Hast thou 't?
Abigail. Here. (Threws down bags.) Hast thou 't?
Barabas. There's more, and more, and more.
O my girl,
My gold, my fortune, my felicity,
Strength to my soul, death to mine enemy!
Welcome, the first beginner of my bliss!
Oh, Abigail, Abigail, that I had thee here too!
Then my desires were fully satisfied.
But I will practice thy enlargement thence.
Oh, girl, oh, gold, oh, beauty, oh, my bliss!

(Hugs his bags)
(2.1.44–53)

Again, readers of Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare's play about Jews and Christians from around 1596, will notice (and many critics have remarked) how closely several key moments in that play are modeled on this scene from Marlowe: Jes-
sica throwing her father Shylock’s bags of ducats out of his window to her lover Lorenzo in 2.6, and, more importantly, Solanio’s description of Shylock’s confused grief and rage after Jessica and Lorenzo have eloped: “My daughter! O, my ducats! O, my daughter! / Fled with a Christian! O, my Christian ducats! / Justice! The law! My ducats, and my daughter!” (2.8.15–18).

The influence of Marlowe on Shakespeare, despite the connection between Barabas’s memory and the title of The Winter’s Tale (1610–11), one of Shakespeare’s last plays, is usually held to extend up to midcareer, to Hamlet (1600–1601) and basically no further. The elegiac remarks in As You Like It about the “dead shepherd” and the nostalgic paraphrase of Dido, Queen of Carthage in the play within the play in Hamlet seem like a kind of farewell. And (despite Robert Logan’s counterarguments) there are good reasons for this; blustering martial characters whose verse reminds us of Marlowe’s heroes, especially of Tamburlaine, basically disappear from Shakespeare at the end of the 1590s, and the seventeenth-century Shakespeare seems to have moved beyond imitating Marlowe’s style. Nonetheless, I think the combination of brilliant stage and psychological effects in this scene—most notably the two family members hearing things in the dark, operating on different stage levels as they try to reach each other, the way their interaction, here so collaborative, will shortly after be broken so that they will be mutually destructive, and the way the dark itself is rendered emblematic of oncoming death and destruction by Barabas’s initial speech—serves as a model for one of Shakespeare’s more remarkable scenes in Macbeth (1606). In act 2 scene 2, Lady Macbeth is waiting by torchlight for Macbeth to return from the upstairs chamber where he has gone to murder Duncan.

_Lady Macbeth._

Hark! Peace!
It was the owl that shrieked, the fatal bellman,
Which gives the stern’st good-night. He is about it.

_Macbeth._ [within] Who’s there? What, ho!
_Lady Macbeth._ Alack, I am afraid they have awaked,
And ’tis not done, Th’ attempt and not the deed
Confounds us. Hark! I laid their daggers ready;
He could not miss ’em. Had he not resembled
My father as he slept, I had done’t.

_Enter Macbeth, [bearing bloody daggers]_

My husband!
_Macbeth._ I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?
Lady Macbeth. I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry.
    Did not you speak?

Macbeth. When?

Lady Macbeth. Now.

Macbeth. As I descended?

Lady Macbeth. Ay.

Macbeth. Hark! Who lies i' the second chamber?

Lady Macbeth. Donalbain.

(2.2.2–20)

There is a further development of the uncanny in the scene from Macbeth, but it reworks elements of this scene in The Jew of Malta that we know from three other Shakespearean plays imprinted itself on Shakespeare's mind. The Marlovian scene also forecasts the family feeling struggling with violence, the characteristically Shakespearean interaction of unfolding ambivalent intentions, in Lady Macbeth's comment about Duncan and her father: "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done 't" (2.2.12–13). And Shakespeare may also have learned something mysterious about timing in this scene as well: using the divisions in modern editions, The Jew of Malta 2.1 is reprised in Romeo 2.1 or 2, Merchant 2.6 and 2.8, and Macbeth 2.2.

This essay has investigated a somewhat unrepresentative instance of a general relation between Marlowe and Shakespeare: a case where Shakespeare's reaction to Marlowe's poetry and dramatic form appears to be both appreciative and appropriative, and in no obvious way parodic or rivalrous. It is also a case, as I implied when I remarked that we might call "Shakespearean" the poetic effects of Marlowe's lines "But bare remembrance, like a soldier's scar / That has no further comfort for his maim," of a mode of writing in Marlowe that has been so taken over and made his own by Shakespeare that (as Eliot puts it in "Tradition and the Individual Talent") "something . . . happens to all the works of art which preceded it." This is not the Marlowe we recognize as Marlovian. It is not, in fact, the Marlowe who writes the last three acts of The Jew of Malta, as Harry Levin noted long ago.

I began this essay by citing James Shapiro and Robert Logan as two critics who offer opposed views of the duration of Marlowe's relation to Shakespeare. What is more central, though, is Logan's attempt to refute Shapiro's view—a view shared, I would think, by most critics, only partly because of the excellence of Shapiro's work—that the relation needs to be thought of in terms of a competition for supremacy as a dramatist or poet. Logan believes that we
should think of the Marlowe-Shakespeare relation as essentially collaborative, like the writing of a great many of the plays in the Elizabethan and Jacobean publics. For Logan, inter-company and interpersonal competition as innovators need not have amounted to a modern rivalry, in which one rival seeks unequivocally to defeat another:

While Marlowe lived, the awareness the two dramatists had of each other’s work probably had the beneficial effect of heightening the desire of each to promote his creative individuality. At the same time, their mutual interest in playwriting and production undoubtedly included an increased consciousness of ways of meeting the practical challenges of becoming a commercial success.13

And Logan points, as I have done in discussing a specific concatenation of stage effects, poetic effects, and representations of interior mental life, to the way dramaturgy allows playwrights and companies collaborative opportunities to rework one another without undoing one another. While in general I would side with Shapiro, whose readings I find more compelling than I find Logan’s, the particular case I have examined here (a case not thoroughly examined by either of them), supports Logan’s arguments.

Collaboration does not preclude rivalry, of course: Ben Jonson, a temperamentally rivalrous person (and like Marlowe one prone to personal violence), collaborated often on both plays and masques, and clearly felt rivalry with some of those he collaborated with. But in Shakespeare the signs of rivalrous feeling are far less clear: there is evidence in the sonnets for a tendency on Shakespeare’s part toward envy and self-doubt with respect to the art and scope of others and (in 78–86) to the art of another poet, but this is in the context of a specific erotic relation that generates massive recurrent cycles of self-doubt and self-reassurance that probably do not reflect professional feeling as a playwright. While Shakespeare expertly dramatizes rivalrous behavior, he also of course dramatizes strong countertendencies: gentleness, generosity, weariness with conflict, and so on, in ways that mark a difference from Marlowe or Jonson. This essay, then, may trace Shakespeare’s self-aware registration of a moment in which another poet-craftsman showed how to do something new. Shakespeare did that new something again and again, arguably did it better, but also does not seem to have forgotten how and from whom he learned how to do it.
NOTES


2. Robert Logan, Shakespeare’s Marlowe (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 119. Logan cites Lawrence Danson and A. L. Braunmuller offering similar judgments of the specific relation between Barabas on his gold and his daughter and Shylock on his ducats and his daughter on pp. 118–19.


7. For chronology, see G. K. Hunter, English Drama 1586–1642: The Age of Shakespeare (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 554. For discussion of how the history of drama in the very late 1580s and early 1590s makes it likely that Marlowe and Shakespeare knew each other, see Shapiro, Rival Playwrights, 77, and Logan, Shakespeare’s Marlowe, 3–5.

8. Logan, surprisingly, does not cite The Winter’s Tale among the later Shakespeare plays influenced by Marlowe, but he stresses the influence of Doctor Faustus on Macbeth and on The Tempest.


12. Logan, Shakespeare’s Marlowe, 7.