

Allegorical Implications of 'Barabas' in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*

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Abstract

The allegorical significance of the play, especially the allegorical implications of the main character 'Barabas' is somehow downgraded or has not received enough critical considerations by literary critics. Notably, few research have been conducted on the allegorical implications of the main character in Christopher Marlowe's drama within the Renaissance context. So, this research attempts to shed light on the allegorical implications of the play, mainly the main protagonist, by investigating different related aspects, which the play alludes within the religious and socio-political context of the Elizabethan era.

Key Words : (Allegory, Stigmatized, Minority Groups, Symbolic Representation, Machiavelli, Religious Prejudices, Victimized Alien, Religious Conversion , Humanistic, Implicit Satire).

INTRODUCTION

Any reading of the play as anti-Semitic is reductive in its approach, and it does not take into account the comprehensiveness of its thematic significance. Beyond race issue, which the play satirizes by mixing different labels upon which the Elizabethan society categorized different minority groups, controversial religious issues were also ridiculed. "Not only does it reveal the condemned character traits of the Jews, but it also ridicules the Christians"¹. The play mainly exhibits the misfortune of the main character 'Barabas'. This character's misfortune can be taken as allegorical representation of the misfortunes of other religious minorities who faced forced conversion or their properties were confiscated during the Elizabethan era. Interestingly, Elizabethan society, unlike modern societies, had not developed many complex concepts about race and identity. People were labeled and even stigmatized not based upon their races but upon their religious beliefs. Faith or religious belief was a crucial issue by which a person's social status or moral values were evaluated:

Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that the racial stereotypes which arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth century to justify the economic and social manipulation of native populations both inside and outside Europe were predicted on religious rather than genetic differences:"The stereotypes were based on an essentially theological conception of the status both Moors and Jews as non-Christians; the former distinguished by their black skin, whose color was associated in Christian iconography with sin and the devil, the latter by their being, as Mathew's account of the crucifixion suggests, 'Christ-killers.'²

Elizabethan audience had viewed the character of Barabas like any other villainous figure commonly seen on Elizabethan stage. However, the play brings many controversial religious issues on stage allegorically, whether the mistreated 'Jew' or the deceptive and falsely acclaimed Christian 'Ferneze'. The main conflict between these two central, opposite characters brings into surface many false assumptions and prejudices by Elizabethan society against small religious minorities. Implicit satire targets Ferneze's false religious pretence and his rigid prejudices against the unjustly victimized Barabas ."Barabas, as satirist, may assault Christian hypocrisy directly, its 'malice' falsehood, and excessive pride' which pride especially presses itself in the

¹ Bubenechik , Milena (2010), Religion and the Formation of Early Modern Identities in The Island Princess and The Jew of Malta: The Significance of Christianity in the Early Modern Period, Hamburg: Druck Diplomica Verlag GmbH. .8.

² Qouted At : Kolin, Philip, ed. (2002) Othello: New Critical Essays. London and New York: Routledge. 169-170.

libido dominandi of the Christian prince.”³ Barabas’s numerous evil deeds in the play come as a result of Ferneze’s self-righteous hypocrisy. In other words, Barabas’s villainy only becomes evident after he had been victimized by Ferneze. Barabas’s ruthless murders of the nuns, (-an ironic act resembles the killing of the Virgins by *Tamburlaine-*), comes into effect after his property was confiscated, and his house was turned into nunnery. Again, the killing of the Christian Friars by Barabas, assisted by Ithamore, comes as further reaction to the way Barabas was mistreated at the early beginning of the drama . Ironically, Barabas ‘s dark sense of humour ; his numerous funny asides and playful cunningness, may draw more sympathy or admiration by the spectators than Fernez’s hypocrite, Machiavellian rhetoric. Denying Ferneze a heroic role and making Barabas more like a lovable villain would further complicate audiences’ responses. Barabas’s ‘theatrical’ cunningness and his playful rhetoric may draw audiences fascination, even sympathy, than Fernez’s rigid and aggressive manners.

THE PLAY’S ALLEGORICAL HINTS AND SATIRICAL REFERENCES

The play allegorically brings on stage real historical events occurred during the early modern period or even earlier. The first encounter between Ferneze and Barabas not only shows religious rift between two different religions, but it also sheds light on power struggle between these two groups as well. Ferneze uses his authority to submit Barabas to his will, mainly by confiscating his wealth. Here Ferneze , being the true Machiavelian figure in the drama, uses his Christian faith as a pretext to exert power over the weaker Barabas. Ferneze’s justification to strip barabas from his wealth by using religiously loaded rhetoric ‘*To save the ruin of a multitude*’ may allude to many real historical incidents in which Christian ruling figures used for political reasons. Historically, Jews were subject to multiple kinds of injustice ; their property and wealth were confiscated , faced forced conversion , or even forced to flee into exile. In France, for instance, “ the rule of Philip 11, “ Augustus” (1180-1223), saw increasing demands on Jews for money, including a raid on the synagogues in 1180 when the Jews were held until paid the exorbitant amount of 15,000 marks.”⁴ Beyond confiscating property , forced conversion was another method practiced against Jews during different historical periods. Beside demanding Barabbas’s house turned into nunnery, Ferenzze also in numerous occasions hints at forcing Barabas converting to Christianity. Implicitly, the play allegorically alludes to “ numerous historical accounts of the forced conversion of Jews in the high Middle ages”⁵. In Europe the process of forced conversion of Jews take a systematic pattern, though varied considerably from one state into another :

While officially opposed to forced conversion, the papacy was powerless to stop the forced conversions of Jews in Castile and Aragon after 1391; it did not criticize the waves of expulsion of Jews from German cities throughout the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, nor did it condemn the ritual murder and host desecration accusations against the Jewish communities of central Europe and northern Italy.⁶

Religious Conversion as subject of Irony

Ironically, religious conversion in the play is used for pragmatic purposes or serving personal interests, mainly Maltese governor, than changing character’s faith. Barabas himself “ may emulate the use of the conversion as an escape from just legal consequences, “⁷ or simply to regain what had been taken from him by Ferneze, who masterfully uses religion for his own benefit. In *The Jew of Malta*, attempts of religious conversion are becoming a subject of satire in different instances, like the dramatic situation in which Barabas deceptively asks Bernard and Jocomo to convert him to Christianity:

³ Malcolm.Miles. Kelsall (1981). Christopher Marlowe. Leiden, Netherlands : E. J. Brill. 137.

⁴ Norman. Roth (2005) . Daily Life of the Jews in the Middle Ages. Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc. 182.

⁵ Kristine T. Utterback, Merrill L. Price. (edit). (2013). Jews in Medieval Christendom: Slay Them Not. The Netherlands : Brill NV, Leiden.129.

⁶ Guido. Ruggiero. (edit).(2007). A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance. Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 341.

⁷John W. Mahon, W. John . And Ellen Macleod Mahon. (2002) *The Merchant of Venice: Critical Essays*. , NY : Routledge. 108.

BAR. O holy friars, the burthen of my sins

BAR. Lie heavy on my soul; then pray you tell me,

BAR. Is't not too late now to turn Christian? (Ac. IV, Sc.1, 45.)

Barabas, in that dramatic scene, could easily achieve his objective in deceiving, and latter on, murdering both friars. They blindly follow the trap Barabas cunningly set for them. Due to their lusting after Barabas's wealth, both Friars fight among themselves in order to win Barabas's wealth :

F.JAC. O good Barabbas, come to our house,

F.BARN. O no, good Barabas, come to our house.

And, Barabas, you know----

BAR. I know that I have highly sinned.

You shall convert me, you shall have all my wealth.

F.JAC. O Barabas, thier laws are strict.

BAR. I know they are and I will be with you.

F.BARN. They were no shirts, and they go barefoot too.

BAR. Then 'tis not for me; and I am resolved

You shall confess me, and have all my goods. (Ac. IV, Sc.1, 46.)

Most of the irony in this play lies in the way religion is used by different characters. Barabas and his daughter are feigning conversion for their own benefits, similar to Ferneze and two Christian Friars. Abigail uses religious conversion for the sake of restoring her father's stolen wealth. "From her father, Abigail learns how to master language that throws the Christians into confusion: she also provides the prototype for Barabas's own course of action in the play."⁸ Ironically, Abigail's last sincere attempt to convert by turning into a nun receives not so much spiritual comfort from the Christian Friars. "In fact, Marlowe highlights the contradictions of Abigail's conversion: he depicts her displays of religious devotion while refusing to recognize her as a figure of Christian conversion."⁹ Barabas expresses his utmost agony about his looted wealth more than the loss of the Jewish Faith by his daughter, affirming the secondary role, or even none, of religion in changing character's moral attitudes in the play. Barabas's exclaim is totally ironic when he learns about Abigail's conversion:

O my girl,

My gold, my fortune, my felicity!

O girl! O gold! O beauty! O my bliss! (Ac. II, Sc.1, 20.)

Barabas's numerous twisting rhetoric in order to save himself and his wealth again affirms the secondary role of religion in the play. Satirically, shifting religion in the play as easy as changing identities by Barabas:

Religious conversion, he makes clear, is merely a guise for mercenary exchanges of resources, Barabas hints at his true meaning of "conversion" as he boasts of his assets and offers them as a bribe for his freedom: " All this I'll give to some religious house, / So I may be baptized and live therein."¹⁰

⁸ Michelle. Ephraim (2008). *the Jewish Woman on the Elizabethan Stage* : Ashgate Publishing Limited.Reading.(P.126).

⁹ Ibid . (P.128).

¹⁰ Ibid. 126.

Barabas' situation as a 'victimized alien'

The play mostly reflects on showing the 'undefined', somehow bizarre, legal status of Barabas in multi-ethnic and multi-religious society of Malta. Beside trying desperately to preserve his wealth from being taken by the Maltese governor, Barabas also struggles to preserve his disputable status in a hostile community which is far from being friendly towards certain religious groups like Jews. Barabas' situation as a 'victimized alien' allegorically may allude to similar situation other religious minorities faced within the realm of Christian authority, whether forced conversion or even expulsion, due to their religious background. We may include Jews, muslims¹¹, moors and other small religious groups who faced either forced conversion or expulsion or both in the early modern period or even before that era." As religious minorities, Jews and Muslims shared similar experiences of oppression and resistance in this period, but they differed as well."¹² Insignificant his role may appear, Ithamore plague is no less grave than Barabas. Both represents two different religious backgrounds, but at the same time having a common cause, manifested in fighting Christian foes at any cause. It is significant that Marlowe set one of the dramatic scene in Valletta which is used to be a very strategically important site of cross-cultural trade in the early modern world , especially slave marking:

Baced on some historical records, " There were around 3,000 muslim slaves on the island [Malta] at the end of the sixteenth century, due largely to the crusading activities of the Knights of the Order of St John. The Italian-run Maltese Inquisition kept a close eye on their contact with islanders. Muslim slaves were in particular demand by the island's treasure seekers."¹³

The close relationship that establishes between two victimized individuals, Barabas and Ithamore, comes as a result of having a common cause or because they find themselves have been stigmatized as alien to Maltese society. Here, Marlowe again touches upon the role of religion in Maltese society in stigmatizing smaller religious minorities. Ironically, that policy of stigmatization and alienation brings old foes together, similar to the situation of Baranas and Ithamore ;" As the plot unfolds, Ithamore becomes his partner in crime, his putative heir, and finally his poisoned victim."¹⁴ Again, Marlowe had complicated the common boundary that distinct between the villain character from noble one. Put it into the larger historical context, Ithamore is a religious victim like anyone else in Maltese society which discriminates people upon their religious beliefs :

In *The Jew of Malta*, Marlowe "was dramatizing a situation which disrupted all the traditional polarities between friend and foe, or the Crescent and the Cross, in a place where, as English witnesses reported, ' the victims are persons of any race, age or sex, who happen to be sailing in captured ships' and ' Jews, Moors, Turks and Christians are enslaved and sold together."¹⁵

Malta as allegorical setting

Marlowe demonstrates the role of religion in changing the fortune of small religious minorities caught between stronger powers. Clearly, Jews were caught between Christian and Muslim

¹¹ SEE Mary Elizabeth Perry's book *The Handless Maiden: Moriscos and the Politics of Religion in Early Modern Spain.* (in which he describes the situation of Jews and Muslims in early modern Spain : " Both groups had faced expulsion from the Spanish kingdoms unless they converted to Christianity, and both Judeo-conversos and Moriscos lived in early modern Spain as minorities suspected of false converts. Yet Judeo-conversos often enjoyed a higher socioeconomic status than Moriscos" 4.

¹² Qouted at : Perry, Mary.Elizabeth.(2005). *The Handless Maiden: Moriscos and the Politics of Religion in Early Modern Spain.*: Princeton University Press. 4.

¹³ Owen . Davies.,(2009). *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books*: Oxford University Press Inc. (P.76).

¹⁴ Jyotsna G. Singh , (2009). *A Companion to the Global Renaissance: English Literature and Culture in the Era of Expansion* : Blackwell Publishing Ltd.345.

¹⁵ Andreas. Höfele , Werner von Koppenfels. (2005). *Renaissance Go-betweens: Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe.*: Berlin ; Die Deutsch Bibliothek.190.

conquerors alike. By implication, the Jew of Malta in Marlowe's play, " may serve as a sidelong attack on"¹⁶ Catholics, especially English Catholics. " We need to remember that both Ferneze and his Knights, and the Spanish admiral Del Bosco, are not just Christians but *Catholic Christians*"¹⁷. We also need to remember " that England under Elizabeth was a Protestant nation forced to meet on a number fronts, both international and internal."¹⁸ The element of satire or dark humour by the protagonist serves arousing laughter among the English spectators who certainly enjoyed seeing Catholic friars being humiliated or even murdered in cold blood by Barabas and Ithamore. Thus, the role of Barabas is mainly allegorical one, aimed at falsifying masked hypocrisy and false pretence of different religious groups in the play. We may include English Protestants among those religious groups that Barabas, by allegorical implication, satirically criticizing. " [Maltese] governor places the Jews in situation similar to Elizabethan Catholics, who, after 1587, could have up to two thirds of their lands seized for refusing to pay fines for attending Mass or refusing to attend Protestant services."¹⁹ Like most of Elizabethan plays, Marlowe's play may shroud its subversive elements by presenting a culturally stigmatized comic figure, commonly seen on stages during Elizabethan era:

Like all Elizabethan playwrights, Marlowe wrote under conditions of censorship. All stage plays required approval from the Master of Revels Office Elizabethan censorship, however, was often a loose and inept affair, and could inspire remarkable resourcefulness on the part of the playwrights, who, with a bit of ingenuity, could manage to have it both ways: producing stage plays that were both compliant and subversive.²⁰

Moreover, choosing Malta as the setting of *the Jew of Malta* is significant for its historical connection with the development of Jews as " trading nation". Barabas, as free tradesman, could be taken as symbolic representation of the Jewish citizens who achieved material prosperity at certain period of time in Malta. But the fortune of Jews dramatically changed when the island came under Spanish rule in 1479. Remarkably, the fate of Jewish citizens in Malta changed when " Charles V gave the island to the Order of the Knights Hospitaller of St John in 1530, following their expulsion (Jews) from Rhodes by the Turks eight years earlier. It was only after the arrival of the Knight that Maltese Jews lost their status as citizens, becoming slave-like captives to the newly governing Christians."²¹ Barabas's misfortune with Maltese governor *Ferenze* may represent similar a situations Jews faced with different ruling powers in Malta during certain historical periods. By alluding to Malta, thus, Marlowe was able to implicitly deliver a critical message regarding the situation of Jews minorities lived across European continents. Not only that, by mixing controversial religious issues with political ones, especially those controversial issues in Europe's early modern period, Marlowe reflected satirically on both the religious and political conflicts which troubled the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

CONCLUSION

By choosing a distant and foreign setting, and by presenting an 'alien' character ,(-since Barabas is viewed by different religious groups as 'alien figure'-), Marlowe had not only been able to deliver an implicit allegorical satire on various religious and social issues during the Renaissance period, but also satirically reflected on the religious situation in Elizabethan England. As the play exhibits the misfortune of Barabas character, it does also allegorically sheds light on the misfortunes of other religious minorities, among others; Jews, Muslims, Moors, or even English

¹⁶ Sara.Munson.Deats, And Ogan, Robert A. (2015) Christopher Marlowe at 450. Ashgate Publishing Company; New edition edition.119.

¹⁷ Stevie. Simkin (2000). A Preface to Marlowe. New York, Pearson Education Limited(P.156).

¹⁸ Ibid, 156.

¹⁹ Quoted At : Hammill. Graham (2012). The Mosaic Constitution: Political Theology and Imagination from Machiavelli to Milton. : University Of Chicago Press.119.

²⁰ Deats, Christopher Marlowe at 450, 119

²¹ Quoted at : Aaron. Kitch, (2009).Political Economy and the States of Literature in Early Modern England . Farham ; Ashgate Publishing Limited. 117

Catholics , who faced either forced conversion or their properties confiscated by various ruling figures during that era. This certainly reaffirms Marlowe's humanistic approach in reflecting on the issue of social and religious stigmatization of different religious minorities occurred during different historical phases.

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