

From “Villain” to “Heretic”: Identity Politics and the Roots of Tragedy in **The Jew of Malta**

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Abstract

Christopher Marlowe’s **The Jew of Malta** profoundly reflects the value reconstruction and social upheaval of the Renaissance through its unique “villain-hero” narrative. Grounded in the social context of the Elizabethan era, a deconstruction of the characters of the Jew Barabbas and the Governor Funnes reveals that, compared to Barabbas’s explicit quest for vengeance, Funnes’s use of religious rhetoric to mask political plunder constitutes a more covert and profound form of Machiavellianism. This exposes the hypocritical nature of the Christian world, which commits injustice in the name of the sacred. Building on this, by introducing the theory of binary oppositions, the analysis delves from the superficial identity conflict between “Jews and Christians” to the deeper struggle between “humanist desires and religious authoritarian order”—Barabbas’s tragedy is not merely the moral ruin of an individual, but an epochal metaphor for the sharp conflict between the awakening of human nature and the traditional theocratic order during the era of primitive accumulation of capital.

Keywords

The Jew of Malta; Machiavellianism; religious hypocrisy; binary opposition; Renaissance.

1. Introduction

Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593) was one of the pioneers of English Renaissance drama; his play **The Jew of Malta** (1590) was one of the three most popular works in London theaters during the 1590s¹. In this play, Marlowe introduced comic elements into tragedy for the first time² and broke away from the protagonist-driven, monologue-style narrative of his earlier works, **Tamerlane** and **The Tragedy of Doctor Faustus**, shifting toward more complex plot structures and character development; this can be considered a turning point in his dramatic career³. The play primarily tells the story of Barabbas, a wealthy yet greedy and cruel Jew who, seeking revenge for the loss of his fortune, conspires with his servant Ismael to cause the untimely deaths of his daughter and her two suitors. Through treacherous means, he first sells the island of Malta to the Turks, and then, in collusion with the Governor of Malta, plots to have the Turkish conquerors boiled alive in a cauldron, only to ultimately perish in a fire himself. Here, the play’s protagonist, Barabbas, is not a traditional hero in the conventional sense of the time, but rather embodies the traits of a villain—“a thoroughly Machiavellian figure” (428.7)⁴. In doing so, Marlowe established the precedent of the “villain-hero” in the history of

¹ Lukas Erne: *Beyond The Spanish Tragedy: A Study of the Works of Thomas Kyd* (Manchester University Press, England and United States 2001), p.44.

² T. S. Eliot: *Essays on Elizabethan Drama* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, United States 1956), p.62.

³ Wang Zuoliang, He Qixin: *A History of English Renaissance Literature* (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, China 2018), p.169.

⁴ Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, Thomas Middleton: *Selected Plays of the English Renaissance* (Vol. 2) (Writers Publishing House, China 2018), p.428. All quotations from plays in the following text are taken from this edition; they will not be cited individually, but the page and line numbers will be indicated directly in the text.

English drama⁵. It is worth noting that scholars of Marlowe have long debated who is the true conspirator or Machiavellian in **The Jew of Malta**⁶. The play actually portrays two “Machiavellian” figures: the Jew Barabbas and the Christian Governor of Malta, Funnes. Throughout the play, although both are labeled as followers of Machiavelli by the playwright and critics, their cultural connotations differ significantly. Based on this, this paper combines the social and historical context of the time with a deconstruction of the characters to examine Barabbas’s Machiavellian resistance and the religious hypocrisy within the play, and attempts to analyze the deeper implications behind Barabbas’s tragedy from a binary oppositional perspective.

2. Deconstruction of Characters

Barabbas has traditionally been viewed as a “Machiavellian” figure, largely due to the series of vengeful acts he committed to seize and preserve his wealth. He successively caused the deaths of the governor’s son Roderick and his romantic rival Matthias, and poisoned many nuns and monks, including his own daughter Abigail; after helping the Turks capture the city, he betrayed them, attempting to ally with the governor to eliminate the Turks. On this level, Barabbas is a typical schemer who will stop at nothing to exact revenge; he is not only ruthless toward his enemies but also shows no mercy toward the innocent, sparing not even his own daughter⁷. Consequently, he is often viewed as a Machiavellian figure devoid of moral conscience, driven solely by cold calculation and strategic planning.

However, we can see that Barabbas’s character in the play is far more complex than this. In the prologue, Machiavelli enters and declares, “I have come to Britain not to lecture, but to present a tragedy about a Jew who could not help but gaze at the sack full of money—money earned according to my principles.” (431.13-17) In fact, before the Governor demands that Barabbas surrender his property, the play’s depiction of Barabbas’s business dealings shows no trace of so-called Machiavellianism. On the contrary, the first act immediately portrays an exceptionally confident and brilliant merchant who knows every shipping route by heart and commands his captains with ease; his merchant ships sail across the globe, forming a commercial empire he has built through wisdom and passion⁸. From a historical perspective, Barabbas represents the advanced economic force of Elizabethan capitalism, which propelled the development of post-Renaissance British society⁹. In fact, it was only after the Governor forcibly seized his property to pay tribute to the Turks that Barabbas launched a series of Machiavellian retaliations to reclaim his assets.

On the other hand, Barabbas showed absolutely no interest in the political power or communal politics emphasized by Machiavelli from the very beginning¹⁰. He directly states, “I must admit that we cannot become kings through inheritance” (437.13–14), and upon learning that Jews must attend the Senate’s assembly, he bluntly declares, “Give us peace and prosperity; crown a Christian as king—they are ravenous for the lands of the fiefdom” (437.19–20). His primary concern seems to be solely his wealth: “If anything were to affect our well-being, I would

⁵ Wang Zuoliang, He Qixin: *A History of English Renaissance Literature* (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, China 2018), p.169.

⁶ Feng Wei: *The Two Faces of Machiavellianism: A Critique of the Absence of “Morality” in *The Jew of Malta**, *Journal of British and American Literature Studies*, 2022, No.2, p.56-66.

⁷ Hua Ming: *The Passion of Evil: A Study of Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta**, *Drama (Journal of the Central Academy of Drama)*, 2017, No.3, p.139–144.

⁸ Cui Chenyue: *The Depiction of Violence in Marlowe’s Plays* (Ph.D., Henan University, China 2024).

⁹ Chang Yuanjia, Zhao Yanqiu: *The Dual Paradox of Good and Evil: On the “Villain-Hero” in Marlowe’s Tragedies*, *Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 50 (2021) No.4, p.107–114.

¹⁰ Feng Wei: *The Two Faces of Machiavellianism: A Critique of the Absence of “Morality” in *The Jew of Malta**, *Journal of British and American Literature Studies*, 2022, No.2, p.56-66.

certainly take notice—(aside) especially regarding my own well-being” (439.5-6). Even near the end of the play, when Barabbas is appointed governor of Malta by the Turks, he has absolutely no intention of ruling the island¹¹.

Thus, we cannot equate Barabbas—who covets wealth but not power—with a Machiavellian in the strict sense, but can only liken him to a Machiavellian figure based on the nature of his actions.

Let us now turn to the role of the governor, who, compared to the former, clearly comes closer to the image of the ideal prince as depicted by Machiavelli. In Machiavelli’s description, language that contradicts one’s true intentions is like lines in a play, and disguises that differ vastly from one’s actual image are like role-playing on stage. These are common disguises used by rulers when employing violent means; they are necessary tools for establishing a new political image and a necessary model for “building a state”¹². This aligns perfectly with the character of Fortunato. He shifts the blame for the atrocities of seizing Jewish property onto the impending Turkish invasion, thereby exploiting Barabbas; and the brutal acts of eliminating the foreign invaders at the end of the play are conveniently portrayed as retaliation for Barabbas’s own actions¹³.

By comparison, the so-called “Machiavellian” Barabbas appears more like a “Machiavellian villain” accepted and endorsed by the audience on stage, and his acts of retaliation are, to some extent, motivated by the defense of his own property—his resistance against the governor and against the Turks. Machiavelli once noted that Cesare Borgia was regarded as cruel; nevertheless, his cruelty brought order to the Roman provinces, unified them, and restored peace and loyalty. Here, the reason Cesare’s brutality gained public acceptance lay in his use of appropriate disguises in the performance of violence¹⁴. And how can the governor’s actions not be described as employing a masterful strategy of disguise?

3. A Religious Perspective

Throughout the play, it is evident that aside from the protagonist’s unique identity as a Jew, all definitions of justice and injustice seem to be tied to religion—specifically, the conflict between Christianity and Judaism, the “other faith.” Consequently, many scholars have labeled this play as exhibiting “anti-Semitic” tendencies¹⁵. Whether it be “poisoning the well” or usury, these are common depictions of the evil image of Jews in modern European history, and Marlowe also depicts a scene in the play where Barabbas poisons food. At the same time, the name “Barabbas” itself echoes the background of the biblical story. According to the Bible, the day Jesus was arrested coincided with a Jewish festival. In accordance with Jerusalem custom, the people demanded that the Roman governor release a prisoner. At that time, besides Jesus, there was another prisoner named Barabbas—a robber imprisoned for murder. In the end, the Jewish people chose to release Barabbas and execute Jesus. It is clear, then, that the figure of Barabbas itself conveys the antagonistic attitude between Judaism and Christianity.

In fact, with the socio-economic development of Europe and the rapid spread of the Renaissance, the theocratic order centered on the Christian Church in medieval Europe began to disintegrate¹⁶. Marlowe, who lived during the transitional period from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, presented a somewhat obscure and ambiguous approach to religious issues in

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Zeng Zaolei: *Violence in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (Ph.D., Southwest University, China 2014).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Yuan Yingying: *Binary Oppositions in Christopher Marlowe’s Tragedies* (Ph.D., Shanghai International Studies University, China 2009).

¹⁶ Cui Chenyue: *The Depiction of Violence in Marlowe’s Plays* (Ph.D., Henan University, China 2024).

his plays. The play **The Jew of Malta** effectively exploits anti-Semitic clichés, portraying Barabbas as a cunning, morally corrupt villain; yet, in reality, he is more compelling than the devout Christians, who unscrupulously invoke religion to justify their plundering of Jewish wealth¹⁷. Let us proceed with a further analysis based on the text.

The Christian world's definition of "justice" has always revolved around its own interests, and religious doctrine has been reduced to a tool for justifying oppression. Under pressure from Turkish tribute demands, Governor Fonz forcibly confiscated Jewish property. Citing the justification that "these taxes and levies fall upon you, those condemned by God" (442.27–28), he issued a decree compelling wealthy Jewish merchants to surrender half their assets; those who refused were forced to convert to Christianity or face the confiscation of all their property; He justified this with the moralistic argument that "it is better for one person to suffer for the welfare of the many than for the many to suffer for the welfare of one" (444.6–7), packaging this blatant plunder as a sacred act of justice¹⁸. They listed "envy" as one of the seven deadly sins, yet when Barabbas countered Fonz's baseless accusation that his "excessive wealth was the result of envy" (445.5) by arguing that "theft is a worse sin" (445.7), Fonz's silence served to confirm the hypocrisy of committing injustice in the name of religion.

This hypocrisy is even more vividly displayed among the clergy. Friars Giacomo and Bernardine, who should have been paragons of Christian holiness, instantly abandoned their condemnation of Barabbas's crimes upon learning of his intention to donate his property. Instead, they turned to mutual flattery and fierce rivalry, exposing their greedy nature toward wealth, and ultimately turned against each other, killing one another. Moreover, when Barabbas's daughter Abigail lay dying, Brother Bernardine not only failed to fulfill a clergyman's duty of salvation but instead lamented, "She is a Christian, and a virgin at that; this causes me great anguish" (492.7). His base desires stood in sharp contrast to his identity as a man of the cloth. As Isamol said, "My lord, when holy monks turn into devils and slaughter one another, do you still wish to be a Christian?" (500.21–23). This contrast and this challenge are thought-provoking; perhaps, to some extent, they prompt the audience to reflect on the true nature of political stability in Maltese society, which lies hidden beneath the guise of religion¹⁹.

Let us return to the earlier discussion of Fonz's "Machiavellian" persona. From this perspective, Fonz's series of actions fully align with Machiavelli's principle of "the ends justify the means"—religion serves merely as the perfect cover for his various acts aimed at achieving political gain, that is, a strategy of disguise. He was well aware of the sacred authority of religion in the society of his time, so he never directly exposed his scheming and calculations. Instead, he consistently used religious doctrine as his justification, perfectly concealing his Machiavellian political calculations and ambitions for power beneath the façade of a devout Christian.

Ironically, under Fonz's logic of banditry, Barabbas actually became a Christ-like figure of suffering. Barabbas's extreme actions were indeed immoral, but his resistance stemmed from the injustice and oppression of the Christian world. While his Jewish compatriots were compromising and enduring in silence, he chose to confront oppression with violence; his actions possessed a certain justice, and his transformation from victim to perpetrator was understandable²⁰. To a certain extent, his unvarnished evil was actually more authentic than the disguised goodness of Christians. Here, the figure of Barabbas embodies the dual paradox of "moral evil and historical good." His resistance to Christian oppression may well represent the

¹⁷ Helen Hector: *A Brief History of the English Renaissance* (Chemical Industry Press, China 2018).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Zeng Zaolei: *Violence in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (Ph.D., Southwest University, China 2014).

²⁰ Cui Nan: *The Dramatic Characteristics of Christopher Marlowe as Seen in Four Plays*, *Appreciation of Masterpieces*, 2016, No.6, p.106-107.

Renaissance humanists' rebellion against medieval religious despotism and traditional Christian values²¹. To a certain extent, the hypocrisy of Christianity not only undermined the moral authority of religion itself but also gave rise to extreme resistance that sought to combat falsehood with violence.

4. The Origins of Tragedy

Drawing a connection to Marlowe's other play, *Doctor Faustus*, we can observe that both works share the common trait of tragedy arising from boundless desire. This desire-driven narrative of tragedy resonates deeply with the defining characteristics of the Renaissance era—the awakening of self-awareness, the pursuit of personal value, and opposition to Christian asceticism. Within this historical context, Marlowe's work is naturally regarded as possessing “distinctively twentieth-century characteristics,” as he was “intoxicated by power” and witnessed the “collapse of the old moral and religious systems”²². Consequently, scholarly interpretations of these two tragedies have largely focused on religious or moral dimensions, positing that Faust's tragedy stems from his rebellion against God, while Barabbas's downfall is attributed to divine condemnation brought about by his Jewish identity. In *New Wine and Old Bottles: Doctor Faustus* (1968), Wilbur Sanders proposed an analysis of the play's binary oppositions²³. This paper attempts to analyze the conflicts in *The Jew of Malta* and Barabbas's tragic fate from the perspective of binary oppositions.

Binary opposition is a key concept in structuralist theory, originating from the work of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure argued that meaning in language is not determined by the actual connotations of words, but is established through binary oppositions between them. Greimas inherited and developed this theoretical framework, arguing that since meaning originates from binary oppositions, a narrative that begins with semantic oppositions will ultimately lead to situations and actions shaped by these same oppositions²⁴. Furthermore, he expanded upon the theoretical perspectives of structuralist narratologists such as Lévi-Strauss and Brémond, forming a theoretical system that integrates both the narrative logic and the value-based meanings present at the surface and deep levels of the narrative²⁵.

From this perspective, the binary oppositions in *The Jew of Malta* can be divided into two levels: the superficial opposition of religious identity and the deeper opposition of “man versus God”—that is, the conflict between man's infinite desires and the inviolable sovereignty of an omnipotent God²⁶.

4.1. Superficial Binary Opposition

The superficial binary opposition focuses on the visually apparent contrasts in scenes and symbols within the play, forming multidimensional, explicit conflicts through scene transitions and character actions. First, the Christians in the play regard themselves as God's chosen people, positioning themselves as the moral and power center, while the Jews are seen as those abandoned by God, relegated to the margins of society. When Barabbas refuses to pay tribute to the governor, he is instantly stripped of his wealth and mansion; ironically, this very mansion is immediately converted into a monastery. The transformation from the “lowly” dwelling of the

²¹ Chang Yuanjia, Zhao Yanqiu: The Dual Paradox of Good and Evil: On the “Villain-Hero” in Marlowe's Tragedies, *Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 50 (2021) No.4, p.107 - 114.

²² R.E. Knoll in 1969, quoted in MacLure, *Marlowe: Critical Heritage*, p. 23.

²³ Yuan Yingying: Binary Oppositions in Christopher Marlowe's Tragedies (Ph.D., Shanghai International Studies University, China 2009).

²⁴ Scholes, Robert: *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* (Yale University Press, England 1974), p.102-103.

²⁵ Feng Jiqing: Binary Opposition and Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, *Foreign Literature Review*, 2002, No.3, p.59-67.

²⁶ Yuan Yingying: Binary Oppositions in Christopher Marlowe's Tragedies (Ph.D., Shanghai International Studies University, China 2009).

Jewish Barabbas to the “sacred” monastery of the Christian governor creates a stark dichotomy that serves not only as an absurd satire of Barabbas but also as a mockery of the Christian governor himself. As the plot unfolds, the monastery becomes the site of the massacre of the army of the Turkish emperor Kalimas; that such a bloody and cruel conspiracy should take place within a religious sanctuary further heightens the irony of this dichotomy.

Looking at specific characters, whether they exist as independent individuals or as groups formed through interaction with others, they all exhibit characteristics of duality. As a Jewish merchant, Barabbas spent his life worshipping gold yet was stripped of his wealth; he scorned royal authority yet was unexpectedly appointed Governor of Malta; he sought revenge through cruel means yet remained frank and unpretentious. These traits intertwine to create an absurdly tragic atmosphere, forming the character’s own internal duality. His conflict with the Christian governor, Funanz, has already been extensively discussed above and will not be repeated here. As Barabbas’s antithesis, Funanz ostensibly adheres to the law and champions a sacred Christian stance, yet in reality, he is a hypocritical thief who plunders property under the guise of religion. His accusations of Barabbas’s greed only serve to expose his own predatory nature. Fathers Giacomo and Bernardino similarly deviated from Christian doctrine; they were greedy for money and engaged in illicit affairs with nuns. Lured by Barabbas’s wealth, they shed their masks of hypocrisy, and the rapid exposure of their true nature intensified the dramatic irony arising from this dichotomy. Thus, the conflict over superficial religious identities is not merely a clash between Jews and Christians, but also a conflict between the Christians’ own behavior and their so-called religious doctrines, thereby deepening the implications of religious hypocrisy.

4.2. The Deep-Seated Binary Opposition

The deep-seated dichotomy transcends superficial symbols to point directly at the core contradiction of the play. Levine has argued that the protagonists in Marlowe’s plays are all “usurpers”²⁷. These characters are energetic and insatiable, always pursuing unattainable goals; just as Barabbas, with his cunning schemes, pursued endless wealth, ultimately bringing about his own downfall.

The reason for his downfall is precisely the inevitable outcome of this binary opposition: on one side stands liberated human nature and the thirst for infinite knowledge, wealth, and power; on the other, long-standing restrictive notions of human nature and the religious social order²⁸. Specifically, traditional Christian beliefs of the time did not advocate the pursuit of wealth, let alone Barabbas’s excessive and even extreme pursuit of it. The biblical admonitions that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” and that “you cannot serve both God and Mammon” explicitly set the worship of money in opposition to religious devotion; moreover, as one of the seven deadly sins, greed labels the pursuit of wealth as an absolute evil²⁹. Barabbas, however, not only regarded wealth as his sole faith but also accumulated it through extreme means such as plunder and revenge, completely deviating from Christian moral norms. This blatant transgression against the religious order made him a heretic within the traditional system, and he ultimately could not escape the fate of being purged by the sacred religious order.

On the other hand, with the emergence of the nascent capitalist system, the existing religious and moral framework of society gradually collapsed, and the pursuit of individual value and self-interest advocated by the humanist movement became the new voice of the

²⁷ Levin, Harry: *The Overreacher: A Study of Christopher Marlowe* (Farber & Farber, England 1967).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Chang Yuanjia, Zhao Yanqiu: *The Dual Paradox of Good and Evil: On the “Villain-Hero” in Marlowe’s Tragedies*, *Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 50 (2021) No.4, p.107–114.

era³⁰. Barabbas's actions were an extreme manifestation of this trend; he broke free from the shackles of religious asceticism and sought wealth through personal wisdom and will, representing the progressive economic forces of the era of primitive capital accumulation³¹. This behavior, driven by human desire, undoubtedly constituted an open challenge to Christian doctrine and the so-called God-for God not only establishes moral laws but also constrains humanity—as creatures, humans ought to revere divine authority and abide by the boundaries of their existence, while the expansion of boundless desire is, in essence, an usurpation of this sacred order; it is the limited will of humanity opposing God's infinite sovereignty, presuming to rewrite the predetermined fate of creatures through one's own wisdom and means. To a certain extent, it was the humanist currents of the time that gave Barabbas the courage to break free from his shackles, and the nascent capitalism provided the fertile ground for his pursuit of desire. Yet his ultimately tragic fate also reflects the sharp contradiction of the Renaissance era—the rise of capital, the awakening of human nature, and the constraints of religion. Compared to Tamerlane and Faust, Barabbas's quest is closer to social reality and perhaps carries a stronger sense of critical reflection.

5. Conclusion

Set against the backdrop of the social transformation of the Renaissance, *The Jew of Malta* employs the contrasting portrayals of Barabbas and Fountez—two “Machiavellian figures”—and the concrete depiction of the hypocrisy of the Christian world to deliver a sharp critique of religious hypocrisy. It also reveals the era's conflict between the rise of capitalism, the awakening of human nature, and religious constraints, which lies behind the dual paradox of “moral evil and historical good” embodied by the protagonist Barabbas. The era's conflicts surrounding the rise of capitalism, the awakening of human nature, and the constraints of religion. Through innovative dramatic narrative techniques, Marlowe intertwines individual fate with the contradictions of the age, elevating the work beyond mere anti-Semitic narratives and moral judgments to become a classic text reflecting the spiritual fragmentation and value reconstruction of Renaissance society. Its inquiries into the complexity of human nature, the authenticity of faith, and the boundaries of order continue to hold significant real-world implications to this day.

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³⁰ Yuan Yingying: Binary Oppositions in Christopher Marlowe's Tragedies (Ph.D., Shanghai International Studies University, China 2009).

³¹ Chang Yuanjia, Zhao Yanqiu: The Dual Paradox of Good and Evil: On the “Villain-Hero” in Marlowe's Tragedies, *Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 50 (2021) No.4, p.107–114.

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