



THE LEGACY OF CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE AND HIS LITERARY IMPACT ON THE ELIZABETHAN ERA WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON MARLOVIAN STYLE OF DRAMA

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Article information

Received:10/10/2021
Accepted: 14/11/2021
Published online:20/11/2021
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.8.4.78](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.8.4.78)

ABSTRACT

Every child or in fact every middle-educated student in the world knows the name of the greatest dramatist of all time who was none other than William Shakespeare. It is indeed true that the legacy and greatness of this magnificent dramatist has been a point to talk every day and night since many centuries. But there lies the hidden fact that many of us, in fact most of us have been forgetting that “who paved the way for Shakespeare to become such an astonishing dramatist of all time in the entire world?” If we dig deeper into the history of literature, then the answer would be one of the major University Wits namely Christopher Marlowe.

Introduction

This research article evidently proves that Marlowe was the one who greatly influenced Shakespeare to write dramas. Though the Globe theatre has been associated with Shakespeare, it was indeed Marlowe who literally helped him in gaining the knowledge of how to design dramas during the loss of years of William Shakespeare i.e., from 1585 to 1592 (the period of 1585-1592 was called Lost Years in Shakespeare’s life). Between these years, Shakespeare was in exile and was in the process of gaining knowledge of dramas.

This paper aims at discovering how Christopher Marlowe was completely different from the other dramatists of the Elizabethan era. He was the one whose thoughts were completely different from the others. He chose his heroes from the so called low class families something that we didn’t see in any of the other writers of that time. In addition to the above statement, Marlowe was also famous for using different themes in his works like Necromancy and brutality.

This paper focuses on his tragedies and how they influenced the Elizabethan British society. He created a beautiful way to write drama especially tragedies. Marlowe, more than Shakespeare was the representative dramatist of the Renaissance period. In his four tragedies we have a full blooded expression of the entire age with all its new aspiration, hopes and dashing adventure. Marlowe was the dramatist of the Renaissance period par excellence and his tragedies are an epitome of what the Renaissance people have felt and lived.

Marlowe as literary leader of 16th century

Marlowe touched almost all aspects of the Renaissance in his tragedies. Each one of his tragedies reflected the Renaissance spirit and revolved around the central personality who was consumed by lust for power. His tragedies are one man type of tragedies in which the hero dominates over the rest of the characters and drafted them by his towering personality. He was the first English playwright to reveal the full potential of dramatic blank verse and the first to exploit the tragic implications of Renaissance humanism.

Many of the English dramatists before Marlowe have achieved remarkable success in the field of comedy but most of them failed to produce tragedy. It was Marlowe who first made the remarkable advancement in tragedy. Interestingly, in each of his major plays Marlowe focused on a particular character who dominates the action of the play by virtue of his extraordinary strength of will. Marlowe might be under the shadow of Shakespeare but the fact is that if Marlowe had lived ten or fifteen years more, then he would have been more popular than Shakespeare. Although for the most part lacking the subtlety of Shakespeare's mature poetry proved a remarkably effective medium for this kind of drama. Christopher Marlowe, commonly as one of the University Wits, flourished during the reign of Elizabeth I, noted in history for glorious all-round achievements.

Little wonder then that he should become an object of contempt for Robert Greene and Thomas Kyd, whose profession received tremendous, set back in consequence of Marlowe's appearance on stage, as playwright. His second play, 'the tragical history of doctor Faustus' was played for the first time towards the beginning of 1589, by which time he must have been living in London for about two years his popularity began to grow very rapidly, so much so that the public began to greet him as the '*Morning Star of Song*' and '*The young Apollo of the Elizabethan age*'.

The Elizabethan age in which Marlowe lived was influenced by the Renaissance. By 1579 many of the great classics, both ancient and modern had been translated into English. England's guiding force from 1578 to 1625 was not religion but patriotism. To this patriotism all else even religion was subservient. To the majority, the Protestantism which was soon to triumph, was no more than freedom from foreign influence, and might be summed up as the rejection of papal supremacy. They desired a Christianity which was insular, and sought to monopolize God. Except for a small group of Puritans, majority of the people thrust aside care and austerity and gave themselves up to the joy of living.

Elizabethan literature was also influenced by the spirit of conquest and self-praise. The English writers tried to surpass the literatures of France and Italy. In fact, the starting point of live for literature and the popularity of drama was the same patriotism which drove England forward to claim the first place in every field of action and it was Christopher Marlowe who dedicated and devoted his life for the enhancement of drama especially tragedy with his out of box themes like necromancy and brutality.

Marlowe as the hero of tragical writing:

Undoubtedly Marlowe contributed a lot to the Elizabethan drama. John Charles Swinburne says that "*the father of the English tragedy and the creator of the English blank verse was therefore, also the teacher and the guide of William Shakespeare*". When Marlowe started writing his plays, the Elizabethan drama was in deplorable condition. Before Marlowe there was neither genuine blank verse nor a genuine tragedy in our language. After the arrival of Marlowe the way was prepared, the paths were made straight without any hurdles for Shakespeare. After the reformation, the mystery plays and morality plays have lost their influence on the audience: things become bad to worse as the people did not even like those plays. This is because these plays have the connection and association with the old church.

So, in response to the demand of the public, interludes came into existence with its fun and frolics and the masques and pageants with their costume displays gorgeous colors. Therefore, comedy has captured the mind of the English people. But each and everything was in a chaotic and formless state before the advent of the University Wits and the greatest among them was none other than Christopher Marlowe.

The first great thing done by Marlowe was to break away from the medieval conception of tragedy, as in medieval drama, tragedy was a thing of the princes only. It dealt with the rise and fall of the kings and princes. But it is left to Marlowe to create the tragic hero. Marlowe used some of the characteristics in drama which are famously known as the Marlovian tragical elements. These are the elements which he used to formulate the English drama. Specially tragedy was improved upon and perfected by a genius known as William Shakespeare.

Marlowe's heroes are men and men only. These men are fired with indomitable passion and inordinate ambition. For example, his Tamburlaine is in full-flooded pursuit of military and political power, his doctor Faustus has sold his soul to the devil to attain some of the ultimate powers through knowledge and his Jew of Malta was absolutely discards all sense of human values with his blind and inordinate aspiration towards wealth as an ultimate end. But what Christopher Marlowe really depicted and dramatized with thoroughness was that all his mighty heroes with all their sky-kicking aspirations find that the flush of their temporary success leads to ultimate failure bringing about their tragic and terrible end. Here lies the greatness of Marlowe.

In fact a great tragedy reveals the emotional conflict or moral agony of the mighty hero. In this respect and in the realm of England's dramatic literature the Tragedy of Doctor Faustus can be considered as the first ever great spiritual tragedy of the soul. In this very drama the deep moral agony and the painful spiritual conflict has been excellently laid bare before us by Christopher Marlowe. This inner conflict reveals the true significance of character as the main-stay of a great tragedy.

Like the ancient tragedy heroes, Christopher Marlowe's heroes are not helpless puppets in the hands of blind fate. The tragic flaw was in their character and the tragic action also issued out of their characters. This was really Marlowe's greatest contribution to the English tragedy during the Elizabethan era.

SHAKESPEARE is the best...MARLOWE is better than HIM:

It was still a question whether any man would arise of sufficient genius to successfully combat these sinister influences, and become the dramatic interpreter of the Elizabethan grand age. The only dramatist who was seriously working out the new type of drama which suited to the Elizabethan times was George Peele. But the major drawback was, his gifts lay in the quieter graces of poetry and comedy only. But Christopher Marlowe was not that kind of robust genius which could fill the public theatre with poetry and passion. More often than not Marlowe was aimed at the plays and he had given more importance to plays and dramas with serious themes than poetry. As Wilson correctly pointed out that "what the stage still need was, the dramatist who can write a play on a serious theme in verses that combined sweetness. Exactly that kind of typical dramatist appeared in the face of Marlowe in the year of 1587".

Another notable characteristic of the tragedies of Marlowe was its high seriousness. Therefore, there is complete lack of comedy or humor. The scenes of clownishness in drama, doctor Faustus were nothing but later interpolations. Even the women characters are also conspicuous by their absence. The Zenocrate in Tamburlaine and Duchess and Helen in doctor Faustus and Abigail in Jew of Malta were either figureheads or spirits or shadows.

Marlowe's independence and initiative are shown in his choice of subjects also. Though in Edward the second Marlowe followed the prevailing taste for English history, yet in Tamburlaine he has chosen the story of a world conqueror, from nowhere Tamburlaine has become the Great with courage and brutality in the battlefield.

In Doctor Faustus, Marlowe introduced the story of a legendary doctor called Faustus who intended to have supernatural powers by crossing the limits of the human life. And in the Jew of Malta, Marlowe worked over unknown sources into a tragedy of revenge with great freedom of invention. All these stories present notable contribution to the serious tragic themes. Marlowe's choice and treatment of plots also seem to be dictated by a new conception of tragedy as dealing not merely with a life and death or a bloody crime or a reversal of fortune but with the heroic struggle of great personality, doomed to inevitable defeat.

There were some drawbacks in his tragedies as he was followed the old chronicle style of plots. But still we should remember that he was the pioneer and a path-finder to many. What he has done was really magnificent and he was truly regarded as the father of English tragedy as the “morning star of Elizabethan drama”. Marlowe was really the Columbus of the new literary world. It is very clear that, George Peele is one of the greatest writers ever produced during the Elizabethan age. But he was famous for poetry and comedy but not tragedy. Though he was a great writer and a poet, he was not known for tragedy.

Marlowe also had broken away from the medieval concept of tragedy. Instead he forged a new way for writing drama. When we look at the middle ages tragedy deeply and intensely, it was all about kings and princes only. But Marlowe has changed it completely. For Marlowe it was a thing of individual heroes.

All the above mentioned themes/stories presented the notable contribution to the tragic themes. His choice and treatment of the plots also seem to be dictated by a new conception of tragedy as they were not dealing with a life and death or just a bloody crime, or a reversal of fortune but they deal with the heroic struggle of a great personality doomed to inevitable defeat.

Marlowe changed the art of writing drama by inculcating blank verse, which was still unformed and most of the writers did not know how to use that in a proper way Marlowe wrote his plays in blank verse. All his heroes are essentially the poets in their nature. They are all reflections of Marlowe’s personality.

Out of his four great tragedies, Tamburlaine the Great, Doctor Faustus, The Jew of Malta and Edward the second, the first three stand together displaying certain common characteristics. These common characters give us an idea about Marlowe’s new conception of tragedy. Marlowe’s tragedies are completely different from the ordinary tragic emotions of that time.

When we look at these three plays of Marlowe, there are some common characters that we can notice by reading them. If we have a look at Tamburlaine the Great, we witness a common man who became a great conqueror with some great courage and bravery. We notice that Tamburlaine was a king at the back end of the drama. But he initially came from a common family background. Similarly, when we look at Doctor Faustus, we can find a fact that, even Dr. Faustus also came from a middle class family background and became the best ever doctor in the country of Germany.

But, on the other side of the coin, there is one more similarity between these two tragedies. Tamburlaine had some cruelty in him and eventually doomed to his inevitable defeat. Whereas, in the case of Doctor Faustus, Faustus himself offers his soul to the Satan in return for 24 years of power and pleasure. In all these plays of Marlowe, we find the influence of Machiavelli who was more and more impressing upon the English people.

Conclusion

The plays of Christopher Marlowe are very much the product of Elizabethan England. Social mobility and anti-Catholic sentiment were two of the most prevalent themes of the time in which he lived. There were issues that affected politics, religion, economics and society. Marlowe himself was very closely involved with anti-Catholic activities.

Thus, Christopher Marlowe gave to the Elizabethan drama three things. The first is his rich and sonorous Blank Verse, the second is the intensity of Tragic Passion and the third is the presentation of Historical Drama. Historical plays were written even before Marlowe, but they were far different from his plays.

Marlowe’s great contribution to the conception of tragedy, prevailing those days, was to replace the Senecan model with the Romantic. The form of tragedy, then prevalent was essentially medieval in conception and moralistic in spirit, which Marlowe changed with his selection and exclusion eventually transformed into a new and better form which in the opinion of Marlowe, was conducive to the popular taste.

“A great man had become the greatest dramatist”

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