

Analysis of “Desire” and “Humanism” in Christopher Marlowe’s Tragedies

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Abstract: Christopher Marlowe was the most significant playwright in Great Britain before Shakespeare and he has been titled as “the Farther of English Tragedy”. His special achievements lies in his contributions to advocate humanism in his plays which makes him become the forerunner of Shakespeare and other playwrights in Renaissance period. This paper explores how he shows his “humanism” by describing the hero’s “desire” in his three most important tragedies *Tamburlaine the Great*, *The Tragic History of Doctor Faustus* and *The Jew of Malta*.

Keywords: Desire, Humanism, Christopher Marlowe’s Tragedies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Christopher – Marlowe, the playwright and poet of British Renaissance in the 16th century, after waiting for up to four hundred years, obtained courtesy to be buried in Westminster Abbey “poet’s Corner” in 2002, slept with the most influential art elites in British history such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens, Browning, Tennyson, Byron, and Milton and accepted people’s memorial and respect because of his extraordinary literary achievement and contribution to English literature, in 2002. In fact, early in 1993, two international conferences were held in memory of his death for 400 years in the UK and USA. Up to now, there are two Marlowe Associations active in the study of Marlowe’s activities. According to statistics of annual meeting of America’s Modern Language Association, the number of submitted research papers about Marlowe, is more than any early modern British dramatist except Shakespeare. The reason why Marlow has become more and more frequently in the research field of scholars since his death of hundreds of years lie in that his achievements and especially the importance of his works has been recognized by people. He was not only the creator of blank verse, but also regarded as the pioneer of English Renaissance drama literature, Shakespeare’s most important predecessors who influenced him greatly. His greatest contribution to the Renaissance of the British literature was to shape out a series of characters with strong desire for knowledge, power and money in his plays, for example, “*Tamburlaine the Great*”, “*The Tragic of Doctor Faustus*” and “*The Jew of Malta*”, and highlighted the “humanism” essence of the spirits of the renaissance by revealing their nature fully.

2. DESIRE FOR INFINITE POWER IN *TAMBURLAINE THE GREAT* AND ITS “HUMANISM”

“*Tamburlaine the Great*”, known as Marlowe’s masterpiece, which blew “the first sound horn of the English Renaissance drama the revolution”⁽¹⁾, is made up of the upper and lower sets. When the play was put on in 1587 release, it produced a sensation very quickly at that time. The reasons of its success lie in that: on the one hand, Marlowe succeeded in using English iambic pentameter of blank verse in the play which laid the foundation for British drama of the Renaissance period; on the other hand, the more important, is that Marlowe has created a vivid image of the heroine *Tamburlaine*. In F.P. Wilson’s words, Marlowe is “describing a character of flesh and blood and rich the in feelings by using languages full of enthusiasm, and passion language”⁽²⁾.

2.1. Desire for Infinite Power in *Tamburlaine the Great*

Tamburlaine the Great is a play about an ambitious conqueror in the 14th century who rose from a shepherd to an overpowering king and then began to decline and die after reaching the summit of power. In Marlowe's description, the character, subjected to the strong desire of conquering everything, was cold, brutal and ambitious. He was dissatisfied with the status quo and always wanted to subvert the existing order. His overweening, imperious and despotic words and actions were very shocking. He believed he could be masters of their own destiny, conquered the world and ruled the land where the sun shines from east to West. He said:

I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chain
And with my hand turn Fortune's wheel about,
And sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere
Than Tamburlaine be slain or overcome.

----I, ii, 174-176

In fact, in the play, the great hero with high ambition and sheer brutal force conquered one enemy after another. In order to seize the throne, he lured the Persian king's brother to usurp the throne, and then killed the conspiracy of usurping kingship. His superb schemes and intrigues always helped him to get success one by one which made him arrogant. His high-aspiring mind caused him to flout the given order, despise everything and trampling on despairing princes. However, his ambition and his unlimited dissatisfaction went beyond the limits of moral existence. When he plans to attack the Ming Emperor in China, he is afflicted with disease and finally, he was defeated and died alone while he was arrogant to challenge the authority of God raving against the gods and would overcome them as he has overthrown earthly rulers.

2.2. Humanism in *Tamburlaine the Great*

Although Tamburlaine's ambition, cruelty and violence brought him into a tragedy end, Marlowe's intention was not to focus on the theme of "Personal ambition leading to God's punishment". On the contrary, he showed his appreciation for the hero's extraordinary courage, amazing potential and shocking bravery instead of making a general moral judgment about the character. Tamburlaine advocated martial arts, relying on their own courage to refuse to be cowed or submit and at last boarded the pinnacle of power. He was a shepherd, he became the king of kings, and the conqueror in western world not by noble birth, the loyalty of the soldiers, and the resourceful strategists, but his supercilious power and the ambition and determination of stepping on the whole world at his feet.

By depicting Tamburlaine, Marlowe voiced the supreme desire of the man of the Renaissance for infinite power and authority. In Marlowe's times, the humanism thought which is the essence of renaissance, has been popular in England. Humanism voiced that the world human being inhabited was theirs not to despise but to question, explore, and enjoy, and man did not only have the right to enjoy the present life, but had the ability to perfect himself and perform wonders. Thus, influenced by humanism, human values are greatly emphasized in this period which aroused the British people's dignity and their attentions on the human's personality. Moreover, in 1580s, there was a confrontation between England and Spain navy which stimulated the national pride sense of the British people. As a result, Tamburlaine's heroic utterance and ambitious actions is very easy to cause the people's sympathy and resonate in minds. Based in this, Tamburlaine can be seen a product of Marlowe's characteristically Renaissance imagination, fascinated by the earthly magnificence available to men of imaginative power who have the energy of their convictions. In other word, In other words, by shaping the image of Tamerlane the, Marlowe displayed the Renaissance spirit incisively and vividly and by his magic imagination, the humanity has gotten the largest bloom.

3. DESIRE FOR INFINITE KNOWLEDGE IN *THE TRAGIC OF DOCTOR FAUSTUS* AND ITS "HUMANISM"

The Tragic of Doctor Faustus was Marlow's second tragedy which was staged in 1588. The leading role in the play, Dr. Faust sells his soul to the devil for power and knowledge and the play ends with Faustus' forced surrender of his soul to the devil after a lapse of 24 years.

3.1. Desire for Infinite Knowledge in *the Tragic of Doctor Faustus*

If we say that the unlimited desire for power is presented in *Tamburlaine the Great, the tragedy of Doctor Faustus* is the performance of never-ending pursuit of knowledge. As a knowledgeable doctor, Faustus does not satisfy the four subjects of the world such as philosophy, medicine, law and theology because,

For philosophy, he thinks that it has once brought happiness, yet

Is to dispute well logic’s chiefest end?

Afford this art no greater miracle?

Then read no more, though hast attained the end.

A greater subject fitteth Faustus’ wit.

Bid Oncaymaeon farewell. Galen, come! (38-42)

For medicine, he knows he has been regarded an respected expert, yet

Wouldst thou make men to live eternally?

Or, being dead, raise them to life again?

Then this profession were to be esteemed.

Physic farewell! Where is Justinian? (54-57)

For law, he despises it:

This study fits a mercenary drudge,

Who aims at nothing but external trash----

Too servile and illiberal for me. (64-66)

For theology, although he thinks “divinity is the best”, he thinks it is unreasonable in some points:

Ay, we must die an everlasting death.

What doctrine call you this----Che sera, sera?

What will be, shall be? Divinity, adieu! (76—78)

It is shown from the selected part, Faustus was very knowledgeable and longs for all kinds of knowledge. Yet he can always find out the shortcomings of a certain subject and after grasping one knowledge, his desire will always force him to grasp another. At last, his infinite desire for knowledge makes him turn to a book of magic:

These metaphysics of magicians

And necromantic books are heavenly.

Lines, circles, signs, letters, and characters---

Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires. (79—82)

Just the same as *Tamburlaine*, Faustus turns to magic in order that he can get infinite power to control the word. Thus, he signs a contract with the devil Mephistopheles and sells his soul to him on the condition that he latter sill satisfy every demand of his for a period of 24 years. Unfortunately, also just as *Tamburlaine*, his fate ends with a tragedy after his series of adventures and romances following the contents of the contract. During the 24 years, ignorant of God's suggestions and others’ advice, he always refuses to realize his error and create many absurd deeds such as amusing the German Emperor and making fun of the pope. However, his free ride in the realm of thought only expands his horizons, and doesn’t make him explore into the mystery of life. After the expiration of the contract, at the time of being brought to hell by the devil, he is suddenly awakened, but it is too late.

3.2. “Humanism” in *The Tragic of Doctor Faustus*

Although Dr. Faust's end is a tragedy, but his image of never-ending pursuit of knowledge leave a deep impression to the readers. If compared with the figures of the characters in the morals of Middle

Ages, a wealth of humanistic spirit is presented from Faust. A medieval morality play mostly advocated religious or secular morality through the allegorical method and its purpose lies in advocating secular vanity and happiness in other world; Yet Faust is a hero revolting against God's authority and seeking for earthly life. He rebukes the theology "disgusting, despicable and contemptible person", and denies the other world and hell. Even more, in spite of God warning, he goes its own way, "I am determined to have, and will not repent, " if my souls are multiple as the stars, I will sell them to the devil".

Although filled with contradictions, and influenced by theological shackles, he always chooses earthly happiness on behalf of the "evil" earthly happiness in the end and gives up the happiness of the other world on behalf of the "good". In the play, the inner struggle between good and evil in Faust's soul is internalized the struggle between good and evil angels. "Good angel" represents "good virtue" of Christianity leading people to believe in God and give up worldly enjoyment. "Evil angel" induces people to enjoy the earthly joy, pursuit "power and glory" and give up the belief in God to obey the devil command. The struggle between "the good angel" and "evil angel" is actually a struggle between two kinds of ethics. One is the Christian faith of regarding God as the religious ethics, and the other is the ancient Greek secular ethics belief of people-oriented. Faust's pursuit of knowledge and beauty is the same as that of Greece. He was not the humble soul controlled by the concept of original sin and salvation in morality play but a traditional moral and religious rebel and a humanism thinker of exploring the mysteries of life. His position of knowledgeable learner, the poet's noble temperament and ambitious goals and magnificent spirit makes him more own rich flavor of the times and the bourgeoisie new characteristics. Of course, Faust in action also showed hesitation and shaking. But this is mainly due to the weakness of his own, reflecting the inherent weakness of bourgeoisie with new ideas yet not completely free from the old theological ideas. The significance of his tragedy lies in the fact that the weight of the feudal church's power and his self contradiction make "a noble heart broken up".

Faust's courage and boldness that gives up opportunities for the salvation of souls to deal with the devil for the pursuit of knowledge and beauty just reflect the people's state of mind in Renaissance period: they are eager to get rid of thought imprisonment from medieval theology, fighting for the liberation of personality and giving full play to the unlimited potential. Because religious and feudal ideas are still very strong in that era, Faust image described by Marlowe eventually became a tragic figure; however, this figure reflects the spirit of the pursuit of happiness which made the people excited in Marlowe era. Based on this, Doctor Faustus is a real description of that era. As what Mr. Yang Zhouhan said, Marlowe's Faust reflected, "to obtain scientific knowledge in medieval ignorance is processes of painful struggle just like baby dystopia. Faust dissatisfies all the 'knowledge' of the middle ages and pursues new knowledge because a new knowledge is power which can achieve their political aspirations, but he was deeply suffered the bondage of medieval theology and can't get rid of the heavy shackles which is his inner shield, pain and Tragedy⁽³⁾.

4. DESIRE FOR INFINITE MONEY IN *THE JEW OF MALTA* AND ITS "HUMANISM"

The Jew of Malta which is considered to have been a major influence on William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* was probably written in 1589 or 1590.

The title character, Barabas, the Jewish merchant, dominates the play's action. In this play, exploration of human desire was also very full. But this desire is no longer the pursuit of power and the pursuit of knowledge, but the pursuit of money and wealth. By shaping the artistic image Barabas, the play shows corrosion and destruction of money on people.

4.1. Desire for Money in *The Jew of Malta*

Barabas is a man owning more wealth than all of Malta. In the play, Barabas takes the pursuit of money as his only interest in life. At the beginning of the play, we see that Ba La Paz sitting in their accountant, with a pile of gold in front of him, he was immersed in the reverie of unlimited wealth and power.

However, Barabas's wealth is seized and he is left penniless when Turkish ships arrive to demand tribute. In order to revenge for his wealth loss, Barabas carries a series of actions: for money, he lets his daughter lie that she is converted to Christianity, so as to make himself to his original housing which has been confiscated and changed to abbey and transfers his treasures of gold and silver in it; for money, he makes use of his daughter's beauty to embitter the governor's son and his friend against

each other, leading to a duel in which they both die. Moreover, he brutally kills his own daughter; for money, He is capricious and does a variety of harmful activities to circle round with Christians of Malta; and at last, for money he plots rebellion, firstly selling island of Malta to the Turks, and then planning to put Turkish conquerors into the boiling pot, the result is to make his own into the fire.

4.2. “Humanism” in *The Jew of Malta*

At the beginning, the same as Tamberlain and Faust, Barabbas with imaginative mind is not a devil, but his goal is not territory expanse of the Empire and knowledge of understanding the life, but to meet individual desire for wealth. His mind is filled with merchant ships traveling in the ocean and his eyes are filled with sapphire, amethyst, topaz and purse which present an image of a bourgeois businessman to a great extent. But his dream of a free development is soon destroyed and a series of social injustice hits him: The governor who believes in Christian passes on the tax to him, and then forcibly confiscated his property. It is this kind of religious oppression which led to his emergent transformation. Therefore, he decides to maintain his rights and wealth which also shows humanity spirits similar to that advocating in the period of Renaissance, particularly when he protests against the blatant unfairness of the governor's edict that the Turkish tribute will be paid entirely by Malta's Jewish population. It is because of Barabbas's protests that he is stripped of all he has and consequently becomes a sort of monster.

Although the Jew of Malta can be regarded as a morality play taking money as the theme in a certain extent, Marlowe and the audience his era also responds with derision and scorn to Barabbas and Marlowe perhaps wants to give a criticism to the trend of money worship created with the humanism by describing the character Barabbas, but just like Tamburlaine and Faustus, the character's image also reflects an endless pursuit of the spirit, only because of beyond human tolerance limits which eventually led to the failure.

5. CONCLUSION

Marlowe's works filled with rich imagination and not rigidly bind by the traditional, keen to tap the human potential and with a strong romantic color; hence he is called “Keats of Renaissance”. His works also disclose spirit and value of his era; hence, he gets worshiped from realism. Through his rich romantic imagination, he creates a series of images such as Tamburlaine and Faustus and Barabbas, who have strong desire for power, knowledge and money to the pursuit of unlimited desire, whose spirits of exploration also indirectly, show people's mental state of renaissance in England.

Notes:

- [1] Wang Zuoliang, & He QiXin (2006). *English Renaissance literature*. foreign language teaching and Research Press. p116.
- [2] E.P. Wilson (1953). *Marlow and early Shakespeare*. University of Oxford press. p30.
- [3] Wang Zuoliang, et al, eds (1983). *An Annotated Anthology of English Literature*. Beijing: The Commercial Press. P60.

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