

Marlowe's Theatre of Cruelty: Threat, Caution and Reaction in Five Plays

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Violence is a very common theme in the plays of Christopher Marlowe. The violent scenes in the plays of Marlowe always include knife or stabbing instruments to create a tremendous fear among the audience. Unlike providential history plays and homiletic moralities, Marlowe's plays enact violence through especially visual and kinetic means, resulting in moments of audience distress that precedes moral judgment and form powerful meaning in themselves. Cutting or stabbing instruments assert meaning beyond mere stage property to bring forth strong reactions among the audience on a Marlovian theatre. His plays can be justifiably compared with the "Theatre of Cruelty" theorized by Antonin Artaud. This article is a study of Marlowe's relentless and literal use of knife or sword as special prop agent which become the symbol for the emergence of terror as a new and devastating instrument of culture in theatre.

The Theatre of Cruelty is a surrealist form of theatre as theorized by Antonin Artaud in his book "The Theatre and its Double". According to Artaud, the Theatre is not possible without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle. In our present state of degeneration it is through the skin that metaphysics must re-enter our minds. He has also explained that cruelty is not sadism or causing pain, but rather a violent austere physical determination to shatter the false reality that lies like a shroud over our perceptions. There are three features of the Theatre of Cruelty as Artaud projects it in theory. First, it does not involve physical or spiritual maltreatment as the words suggest, but rather, it artistically expresses what he calls in different places the "rigor," "necessity" or "implacability" of theatre and life. Second, this theatre draws on the individual dreams and the collective dreams, or the myths, of all men. It will furnish each

spectator with the truth of the subconscious, in which a taste for crime, erotic obsessions, savagery, fear, utopian sense of life and matter, and even his cannibalism, pour out as honest feelings. Third, because it works viscerally, on the nerves and senses, rather than on the intellect, and because it impinges on anxieties common to all men, the Theatre of Cruelty is aimed at a general public. Whether realized or not, the poetic state of feeling such a theatre arouses is a transcendent experience of life for everybody. Moreover, Artaud believed that words themselves were an ineffective means of direct communication; therefore, he preferred to use gestures, cries, and ritual to reach a defenseless area of communication. Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty is completely evident in the plays of Marlowe. In order to shock the audience, and thus win the necessary response, the extremes of human nature (often madness or perversion) are graphically depicted on the stage. As Artaud explains:

The Theatre of Cruelty has been created in order to restore to the theatre a passionate and convulsive conception of life, and it is in this sense of violent rigor and extreme condensation of scenic elements that the cruelty on which it is based must be understood. This cruelty, which will be bloody when necessary but not systematically so, can thus be identified with a kind of severe moral purity which is not afraid to pay life the price it must be paid. (66)

In Marlovian drama, the actors through their cruelty and barbarity show a truth that the audiences do not wish to see. The word "cruelty" in a Marlovian drama is like a sense of an appetite for life, a cosmic rigor, an implacable necessity, that devours the darkness; it is the consequence of an act. Everything that is enacted is a cruelty in Marlowe's tragedies. In his theatre, actions of fear and distress that occur prior to intellectual perception always produce complex reactive effects beyond moral pedagogy and can be justifiably compared with Artaud or Seneca, or even post-reformation humanist debate. Matthew Greenfield in an article titled "Christopher Marlowe's Wound Knowledge" asserts, "Few writers have tried harder than Christopher Marlowe to find language for the

representation of physical pain. Wounded characters in Marlovian drama often speak about what they feel . . . they develop an uncanny knowledge of what is happening inside their bodies, including the precise anatomy of their injuries and the physiology of the onset of death." (233). Arthur Wise, in his book titled "Weapons in the Theatre", counsels, "the purpose of an authentic weapon is to kill; the purpose of a theatrical weapon is to appear to do so" (12). More recently, Eli Rozik describes the semiotics of objects onstage—for our purposes especially a knife—dropping their practical function and assuming a communicative function. Thus, a knife plays a knife onstage. It becomes a knife "in quotation marks" for other purposes. Or rather it becomes a knife in italics—for emphasis. These comments are fully justified if we consider the major plays of Marlowe like *Edward the Second*, *The Massacre at Paris*, *Tamburlaine the Great Part I, II*, *Doctor Faustus*, and *The Jew of Malta*.

As we find in Marlowe's *Edward II*, a red-hot poker emphatically plays the role of a murder weapon, a horrific stabbing instrument of torture, and an unusual, but historically reported means of assassinating a king. The full title of the first publication is *The Troublesome Reign and Lamentable Death of Edward the Second, King of England, with the Tragical Fall of Proud Mortimer*. It was the final torture that made Edward II's death arguably the most famous in English royal history: a group of men pinned the deposed king beneath a mattress or table, and then inserted a red-hot poker inside his body that burned out his internal organs. This grisly execution was supposedly devised to leave no visible mark on the body. Even though Marlowe omitted the final dreadful scene of the king's death, the tension and fear it creates during the final scene, is truly cruel and violent. Its language is generally bare and tense. Big speeches are frequently punctured by colloquially plain counterstatements. Single lines are heavy with hidden meanings. Here we observe a great king's decline from kingship to abjection. Structural and verbal patterns converge in the closing scenes, where Edward's laments are juxtaposed with the callous double-talk of Mortimer and Isabella. The torments of the king have been emphasized by shaving of the King's beard and washing with sewer-water which shows

cruelty towards a great king. Moreover, in the murder scene, we observe a ghastly fusion of cruelty and sexuality. Such use onstage does not produce an alienation effect but an intensification effect that is especially Marlovian in its moment of performance. Ruth Lunney specifically observes in her survey titled *Marlowe and the Popular Tradition*, *Edward II* presents “a radical change in the way that audiences are enabled to respond to a cautionary tale” (73), a new kind of experience in theatre that exceeds the blunt morality of cautionary moral tradition just as it does the cutting edginess of *Tamburlaine* or *Doctor Faustus*. Onstage, that scream should certainly raise the collective blood pressure of the audience. Dramaturgically, the scream itself in pitch and volume effectively performs the horror of the mimed action. Its performance is at once unrestrainedly vocal, horribly novel, and yet a matter of historical reporting that registers itself as information but exceeds such inscribed boundary through the violent theatricality of performance. That final fatal attack on the king must be theatrically obvious and sensational. Crushing to death under a table, would be a bit awkward to stage effectively as well as rather diffuse in its signals. But a brandished instrument like a red hot spit is unmistakable. The violence described by Holinshed, mentioned and implied in Marlowe's play, and usually performed onstage, requires the dramatic force of that terrible stabbing instrument. Such performance stimulates a profoundly unsettling, extroverted and kinetic sensibility that both threatens and elicits an adrenaline response. In reality, we might fight back, flee, or freeze and thereby become a victim. As audience, we go beyond the smug comfort of moral sensibility to experience a detachment enabling us “to gaze into the horror of individual existence, yet without being turned to stone by the vision” (Rozik 128). Instead, we are enabled through kinesthetic experience safely to extend our bodies into the violence, dwell in our reactions, and achieve a complicated empathy. Herein, the brandished blade or stabbing instrument emphasizes the truth of male-on-male (and female) violence as horrible shaping of circumstances and unsettling threat to polite best wishes. In the theatre we co-create a moment of horrid

historical truth, a truth momentarily reinforced by Lightborne's proud rhetorical question: "Tell me, sirs, was it not bravely done?" (116) before Gurney draws a knife and "stabs Lightborne" (117). Here we observe an amazingly original stage direction. It is as if Marlowe insists on it. He explains the true story and assists it with more violent scenes and dialogues which make the audience shiver with horror.

In another legendary Play *The Massacre at Paris* Marlowe effectively combines theatre and religion within the Duke of Guise who, as a pan-European terrorist and bloodthirsty fanatic, cannot do anything without physically drawing a knife or sword or imagining himself or someone else as doing so. This sort of effect is created by Guise in *The Massacre at Paris* when he stabs to death a pair of unarmed academics, guilty only of being Protestants, with the chilling line "I'll whip you to death with my poniard's point" (29). Onstage, it is true but it is not real. Such horror produces radical tensions among the audiences. Among other twisted fantasies of destruction, Guise threatens that, "the catholic Philip, King of Spain, Ere I shall want, will cause his Indians To rip the golden bowels of America" (19). Then Guise plays with our fearful imaginations too as he ponders his political rival and wearily concedes, "Ay, but Navarre, Navarre, 'tis but a nook of France, Sufficient yet for such a petty king. . . . Him will we -" . . . followed by the stage direction of the original octavo: "Pointing to his sword" (2). It's a guaranteed laugh line, but a nervous laugh line, that radicalizes the whole experience of performance through forced irony as well as through the eliciting of fear. The language seldom rises above mediocrity, the characters are drawn with the indistinct faintness of shadows, and the plot is contemptible: events in themselves full of horror and such as should strike the soul with awe, become ludicrous in the extreme by injudicious management. Thus *The Massacre at Paris* is considered as the most dangerous play of Christopher Marlowe.

Marlowe is capable of making us feel fear with a transformative immediacy felt similarly by the blubbering Virgins of Damascus in his another outstanding play *Tamburlaine the Great*. Interpreters stressing the

ironic undercutting of Tamburlaine further insist that a moral uncertainty blurs the victorious resolution of *Tamburlaine, Part I*. The events of the drama appear to uphold Tamburlaine's imperialistic ambitions. Here the audience regards the truce, marriage, and coronation against the backdrop of Zenocrate's still reverberating lamentations for the impaled virgins, the Turkish suicides, and her slain betrothed. Moreover, Tamburlaine delivers his exultant victory speech on a stage strewn with human corpses, the tableau stressing the tension between "the visual image of man's descent into brutality and the auditory image of man's quest for divinity" (Leggatt 28). "Costume further underscores visual irony; at the end of the play when Tamburlaine and his retainers remove their armor and don scarlet robes, their red garments blend with the bleeding corpses on the stage; thus, Tamburlaine's pledge of truce with all the world is made against a blood red stage, the image saying what the words repress" (Shepherd 24). According to this ironic interpretation, therefore, although his final triumph seems to vindicate Tamburlaine and the ethos he represents, Zenocrate's choice of love and mercy over honor and violence complements the pervasive disparity between glorious words and barbarous deeds to render the play's ethical system highly problematic. In the play we find that Tamburlaine is constantly breaking the rules, defying conventions, yet he turns his defiance into ceremonies, rituals, of conflict. Here the emblem of ambition is staged in all its grim cruelty. The effect is to render the audiences' reaction excitedly uncertain. In a suggestive observation, Clare notes that Artaud recognized Renaissance theatre as "a theatre that excluded placid emotional and moral responses and exteriorized depths of latent cruelty and perverse sensibilities of the mind" (82). But she then relies on a rhetoric of placid responses when she observes that "Marlowe's 'mighty line,' in particular the rhetoric of *Tamburlaine*, corresponds to Artaud's notion of a poetry of the senses" (82-83), further observing that Tamburlaine's exchange with the virgins "effectively depersonalizes the killing" (83). However, for Tamburlaine, killing is always personal, as in his sadistic interaction, center stage, with the virgins. He brandishes a weapon and demands: "Behold my sword—what see you at the point?" (108).

Utterly terrified, they stammer variously, “Nothing . . . fear . . . fatal steel” (109), and he relishes in the horrifying reach of his contemptuous reply “Your fearful minds are thick and misty, then, For there sits Death, there sits imperious Death, Keeping his circuit by the slicing edge” (110). He then offers a momentary glimpse of reprieve – “But I am pleased you shall not see him there” (113) – before demeaning his victims completely with a swift alteration of mood that points the way to their certain and terrible death: “He is now seated on my horsemen’s spears.” (114). Finally, Tamburlaine issues a direct order that is hair-raising in its image of bloody mass-impalement “Techelles, straight go charge a few of them. To charge these dames, and show my servant Death, sitting in scarlet on their armed spears.” (116) Death rides on knife blades and spear points, and moves onstage at the whim of Tamburlaine. Clare (2000) finds all this to be of counter value with regard to standard Elizabethan literary humanism: “Whereas Tamburlaine is made to use rhetoric persuasively, its purpose is also undermined in that persuasion is used not to reveal ‘the high mysteries of the gods’, but to convince an audience of his own omnipotence” (81-83). No undermining here; nor omnipotence, rather, like a connoisseur Tamburlaine convinces an audience of terror by his words and weapons working kinetically and horribly within their very moments of performance onstage. Contradict him if you dare. Or go one better: learn from his constant reference to the classics, feel it within the poetry, experience it in Marlowe’s theatre of action, reaction, and threatening physicality.

Simon Shepherd appreciates a sense of bristling kinesthetic energy on Marlowe’s stage. And he exercises it in a curious critical fantasy titled “A Bit of Ruff,” the ostensible thesis of which states that “while Shakespeare has to be treated primarily as a consummate artist, Marlowe’s work can’t keep out the signs of an illicit sexuality and a violence that is about to happen, really” (109-10). But, Shepherd further inquires, what precisely is real. Is it Transgressive pleasure or Audience complicity? Or is it more like the combination of outrage and impotence elicited by a sharp weapon smuggled into the ring by a present-day professional wrestler—a despicable villain with a stage history of remorseless violence and brutality

ever ready to exceed his previous record of crime? Marlowe's dramaturgy has to be excessively, terribly, delectably dangerous. Marlowe's threatening dramaturgy is more convincing and more variable. If a mirror were suddenly held in front of our faces as we watched Marlowe's plays, perhaps we would be horrified by the sight of our own engrossment in cruelty, torture and murder represented before us. We would thus have a sudden and painful insight into ourselves. In the theatre of Cruelty the stage becomes that mirror; a reflection of our latent and suppressed proclivities. This I believe Marlowe was trying to do in most of his Tragedies, trying to reach a deeper level of awareness than one of superficial interest in plot and character.

In *Tamburlaine part II*, the title character reaffirms the loyalty of his sons through a similar self-mutilation. This self-lacerating moment suggests immediate instinctive representation beyond the generalities of Tudor political hypocrisy. It is as if Tamburlaine inoculates his sons with a booster of anarchic violence. Having sliced his arm open, he urges, "Come, boys, and with your fingers search my wound and in my blood wash all your hands at once" (126). Two of his three sons demand wounds of their own, and Tamburlaine even offers to scar them appropriately, before accepting their willingness as self-mutilation enough. Of the scene, Matthew Greenfield, in a recent article titled "Christopher Marlowe's Wound Knowledge," observes that Tamburlaine "recognizes an opportunity for a new glory and a new species of compelling theater" (246). This brings us to the compelling theatrical realizations of *Edward II* and specifically to the scene of the king's murder, which was like a ghastly fusion of cruelty and sexuality long latent in the play. Like justice itself, stage violence must be seen to be done and done with effective theatricality. But Marlowe goes a step further in the theatre to produce what Clare appreciates as a "sensory assault on the spectator and the violation of any predictable moral or emotional response" (82).

Fear deflects itself through witty criminal riposte in the plays of Christopher Marlowe. In his most remarkable play *The Tragical History of*

the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus, Faustus attempts to overcome a state of fear as he seals his bond of association with great Lucifer. He decides to make the bargain, and he stabs his arm in order to write the deed in blood. However, when he tries to write the deed, his blood congeals, making writing impossible. Mephistophilis goes to fetch fire in order to loosen the blood and finally Faustus writes the deed. He hands over the deed, which promises his body and soul to Lucifer in exchange for twenty-four years of constant service from Mephistophilis. As Faustus tells Mephistophilis [Stabbing his arm]: "Lo, Mephistophilis, for love of thee, I cut mine arm, and with my proper blood. Assure my soul to be great Lucifer's, Chief Lord and regent of perpetual night! View here the blood that trickles from mine arm, and let it be propitious for my wish" (60). This dramatic effect of knife evokes horror and fear among the audience and startles them with suspense and impending doom. Bernard Beckerman in his book "Dynamics of Drama", put it clearly, stating that in the theatre, "our bodies are already reacting to the texture and structure of action before we recognize that they are doing so" (151). When Faustus signs the deal with the Devil, the audiences wait zealously to see the final damnation of the most learned man; the unpardonable crime he commits by writing the deed with the devil. Yet the humanistic Renaissance characteristic of Faustus explains that the crime he is doing is fully justified.

The Jew of Malta is another remarkable play of Marlowe, in which we find the Jew Barabas as a monster and observe his horrific acts. Having just poisoned a whole nunnery in *The Jew of Malta*, Ithamore thinks about keeping the killing a secret, assuring his master, "For my part fear you not." And Barabas replies simply "I'd cut thy throat if I did" (11) Violence is also evident in the death scene of Barabas where we find some medieval staging practices. Medieval mansion and plateau staging often involved the use of a Hellmouth where evil was eventually sent. At the end of the play Barabas is thrown into a hot boiling cauldron by Ferneze. Marlowe had Ferneze call the cauldron a "rack" which "was another stage or scaffold on which the theatre of hell was played out" (Sales120). The Theatre of hell most likely refers to the Hellmouth mansion used in Medieval staging practices. More

recently, Janet Clare in an article titled "Marlowe's Theatre of Cruelty" explained, "It is a commonplace of our understanding of Marlowe that he produced a theatre of violent techniques and effects. Confronted with a combination of Renaissance eloquence and extreme acts of aggression, it can be difficult . . . to find an appropriate critical vocabulary for Marlowe's dramaturgy" (74). Therefore *The Jew of Malta* is closely tied to medieval theatrical movements.

The analysis of the cited plays attest to the fact that the radical actions within Marlowe's dramaturgy enact a new theatre of experience and action beyond the usual retrospective limits of moral consolation, critical response, and even legal explanation. The themes, forms, visual and verbal imageries of Marlovian Tragedies can be justifiably related to The Theatre of Cruelty. Even when Marlowe's characters die by more conventional means, they do so in ways that challenge the limits of illusionism. It is easy enough to stab oneself in the armpit and pretend it is the chest, but it is difficult to imagine, how Olympia could convincingly stab herself in the throat, or set fire to corpses of her husband and sons, or how Zabina and Bajazeth could appear to have their brains dashed out in *Tamburlaine*. His numerous references to official methods of persecution- from boiling to pressing, from cutting to beheading - clearly project the violence and horror in his theatre, which make the audience shiver with horror. In most of the plays of Marlowe the display of torture is evident and his amazing dramatic vocabularies express his characters' tragic end. Frightening and cruel as the scenes are, in terms of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, they are ultimately beneficial. The cruelty is seen to some extent as viciousness among human beings. But such scenes must be presented in a manner calculated to rid the spectator of the corresponding emotions in him rather than to arouse in him the desire to imitate. Thus the Theatre of Cruelty can be seen as using violent methods to achieve beneficial effects. It can also be suggested that although Artaud was the formulator of the concept of Theatre of Cruelty, in actual practice such a theatre existed long before he wrote *The Theatre and Its Double*. Finally it can be mentioned that there are noticeable relationships between Marlovian tragedies and a twentieth

century theory of drama. The dramatic theories of Artaud are just like a reappearance of Marlowe's grotesque theatrical ideas.

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