

The Influences of Elizabethan Society on the Writings of Christopher Marlowe

Christopher Marlowe's plays were the product of the time in which he lived, of this there can be no question. Marlowe lived and worked in England under the rule of Elizabeth I. It was a time of progress, when England developed into one of the most powerful nations in Europe. In order to better understand Elizabethan society, and how the society affected Marlowe's writing, it is important to note the historical events that led to the Elizabethan age.

The reign of Henry VIII is an important precursor to the Elizabethan age. Several important events occurred during Henry's time as king, events which directly affected the society of England under Elizabeth. When Henry VIII first took the throne, England was a Catholic nation, and Henry himself was a devout believer. So strong was his faith that he published a book, *In Defence of the Seven Sacraments*, which exposed the work of the German Protestant, Martin Luther, as heresy¹.

Henry had married Catherine of Aragon, the widow of his deceased brother. She gave birth to a son in 1511, but the child died after six weeks. Catherine later gave birth to a daughter, Mary, in 1516. Further attempts to produce a male heir only resulted in miscarriages and stillbirths. Henry became convinced that he was being punished by God for the sin of marrying his brother's widow, and he sought a papal annulment of the marriage so that he could instead marry Anne Boleyn².

Pope Clement VII refused to grant Henry an annulment. For five years Henry's desire for divorce and remarriage consumed English politics. The people of England tended to favour Henry's side of the argument as there was already a growing anti-papal sentiment for the heavy taxes imposed by the Church³. The matter culminated in an act of Parliament in 1533 which denied the authority of the pope and established Henry as the head of the Church of England. Subsequently following the break from the papacy, Henry's divorce from Catherine and marriage to Anne Boleyn were finalized. In 1533 Anne gave birth to a daughter, Elizabeth. Still seeking a male heir, Henry accused Anne of infidelity and had her executed. He then married Jane Seymour who died giving birth to a son, Edward. Henry married three more times, but his only heirs would be the Princesses Mary and Elizabeth and the sickly Prince Edward⁴.

¹ Palmer, Alan. *Kings and Queens of England* (London: Octopus, 1976), p75.

² Ibid, p75.

³ Ibid, p77.

⁴ Cannon, John, ed. *The Kings and Queens of Britain* (Oxford UP, 2001) p258, p260.

Henry was succeeded by Edward VI, who was an enthusiastic Protestant, but died in 1553, three months short of his sixteenth birthday⁵. His half-sister Mary took the throne following his death. Mary was a Catholic, and sought to heal the breach with Rome. Her staunch devotion to the Catholic faith resulted in the persecution of Protestants who refused to return to the Roman church, earning her the epithet "Bloody Mary". She married Philip of Spain, a union which unsettled the English people as they feared England would become a puppet of the Spanish empire. Indeed the connection to Spain drew England into a war with France, resulting in the loss of the wealthy port city of Calais, which England had held for more than two hundred years⁶.

When Mary died without having produced an heir, Elizabeth took the crown in 1558. She did so under grave circumstances. The war with France continued, the country was essentially bankrupt and in a state of economic depression, and the people were deeply divided by religion⁷.

Elizabeth held fast to the Anglican faith created by her father Henry. Parliament renewed the crown's supremacy of the church, which was rejected by the Catholic bishops who had served under the reign of Mary, and set England on course for a second breach from the papacy. Elizabeth's refusal to maintain England as a Catholic nation resulted in her excommunication by Pope Pius V in 1570⁸.

Parliament established adherence to the Catholic faith as a crime against the state, and in 1585 a law was passed making it treason for a Catholic priest to be in England. Some 250 Catholics died during Elizabeth's reign. In turn, the Protestants held the universities, and began to produce clergy which spread the Protestant faith throughout the nation⁹.

England began to embark on voyages of discovery around the globe, which resulted in the creation of English colonies in the Americas. The economy stabilized, and the coinage regained the value it had lost near the end of the reign of Henry VIII¹⁰. The strengthening economy gave way to the rise of the gentry. These were wealthy families who were not of noble birth, but because of the economic conditions of the time, were able to build their own fortunes. While Elizabethan society was hierarchical, it was possible for the individual to have a freedom of social mobility¹¹.

Christopher Marlowe was born in 1564, during Elizabeth's reign. The son of a shoemaker, Marlowe enjoyed a relatively comfortable upbringing, though his family was not prosperous enough to enjoy any real affluence. Marlowe

⁵ Palmer, p78.

⁶ Cannon, p268-9.

⁷ Roberts, Clayton, et al. *A History of England - Vol.1* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002) p287.

⁸ Cannon, p271.

⁹ Roberts, p294.

¹⁰ Ibid, p287.

¹¹ Ibid, p307.

attended Cambridge University on scholarship, earning his BA in 1584 and his MA in 1587. During his time at Cambridge, Marlowe began working as an agent in Elizabeth's secret service. His duties as an agent would have been most likely to uncover Catholic resistance to the crown¹².

After completing his MA, Marlowe lived mainly in and around London working as a dramatist. He continued his work for the secret service during this time. On 12 May 1593, the dramatist Thomas Kyd, whom Marlowe had shared rooms with, was arrested. The rooms were searched, and authorities found "vile and heretical" papers, which Kyd claimed belonged to Marlowe. On 20 May Marlowe was ordered to report daily to the Privy Council to give an account of his activities. On 30 May he spent the day in a house at Deptford with three others who had connections to the secret service. The official story is that an argument broke out over the bill for the day. Marlowe attacked one of the men, who killed him in self-defence¹³.

In looking at three of Marlowe's plays, *Doctor Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta*, and *The Massacre at Paris*, some common themes can be found which correlate to the time in which they were written. Perhaps one of the most prevalent elements in all three works is a running anti-Catholic sentiment. In Act 3, Scene 3 of *Doctor Faustus* a scenario is set with Faustus, in an invisible form, attending a banquet for the Pope. Throughout the course of the scene, the invisible Faustus steals the meat and wine from the table, and finally punches the Pope on the ear, when he and his friars run off.

In Act 3, Scene 6 of *The Jew of Malta*, Barabas sends a pot of poisoned rice porridge to the local convent. All the nuns, including Barabas' own daughter, who had recently converted to the Catholic faith, are poisoned and die. There is another anti-Catholic sentiment expressed in Act 3, Scene 3 when the slave Ithamore asks the question, *Have not the nuns fine sport with the friars now and then?* This is an expression of the belief that many Protestants held concerning the Catholic holy orders, being that the clergy were corrupt, and the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience were only for outward show¹⁴.

The entire work of *The Massacre at Paris* is concerned with a group of French Catholics murdering their Protestant countrymen. At the play's end the Catholic French king, Henry, lies dying after having been stabbed by a Catholic friar. The basic message is that the Catholics are murderous beasts who would turn on their own kind if it suited them. Henry denounces the papacy and proclaims his friendship to the Queen of England. After Henry dies, Navarre announces that he will have vengeance and put the Catholics to death.

In looking at English history, the battle between Catholics and Protestants was not simply a religious one. In many ways, it was also a political struggle.

¹² Healy, Thomas. *Christopher Marlowe* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), pp12-15.

¹³ Ibid, p13.

¹⁴ Cannon, pp248-250.

For England to be Catholic meant that the authority of the crown was superseded by the authority of the papacy. The political issue spilled over into a social question as well, because the English people in a Catholic society would be forced not only to pay the country's taxes, but also the taxes passed by the local cardinals, resulting in economic hardships and a decline in the productivity of the society.

There are two significant reasons why Marlowe would have chosen to express anti-Catholic sentiments in his writing. The most obvious being the fact that at the time of his work, Elizabeth was restoring the country to the Protestant ways that her father, Henry VIII had established. As seen earlier, to be a Catholic in Elizabethan England could carry a heavy price, possibly even death.

A second, more personal reason behind Marlowe's anti-Catholic writing was his work as an agent for the secret service. In at least one instance Marlowe went to Rheims, where there was a college to train Englishmen as Catholic missionaries. He presented himself at Rheims as a Catholic, so as to gain the confidences of those studying to become missionaries, and so entrap them¹⁵. It is very clear that Marlowe was a believer in the anti-Catholic sentiments his works expressed.

Another theme found in two of Marlowe's plays is the idea of social mobility: that one could transcend the class into which one was born. *Doctor Faustus* is a prime example of this social mobility. The opening chorus describes Faustus as a man who came from *parents base of stock*. He studied at Wittenberg and became a doctor, which by Elizabethan standards would give him the social rank of a gentleman¹⁶.

Faustus' lust for knowledge compels him to trade his soul to Lucifer in the hopes of gaining even more power, knowledge, and wealth. Throughout the play, Faustus never seems satisfied with the bargain. His powers are often used as tricks to conjure the great poets of the past, and his astrological discourse with Mephistopheles in Act 2, Scene 1 does not give him the ultimate answer he seeks, that is, who made the world?

The Jew of Malta portrays another instance of social mobility. In Act 1, Scene 2, Barabas, the wealthy Jew is brought to the court of Malta to assist in paying off the large debt Malta owes to the Turks. Barabas does not comply, and his fortune is forcibly taken from him. Through his cunning and deceitfulness, Barabas manages to recover his lost wealth, and sets about exacting his revenge on those who would have had a part in his downfall. As the play progresses, Barabas becomes a greedy murderer, and changes his loyalty between Malta and the Turks, depending on which side he believes will favour him the best.

¹⁵ Healy, p15.

¹⁶ Ibid, p15.

The social mobility of Barabas is seen in the ability of an outsider and lower class person such as a Jew, to amass a fortune by fitting out trading ships. The fact that he is called to court demonstrates that because of his wealth, Barabas was seen on a somewhat equal level with the nobility, though an anti-Jewish sentiment is still seen. Nevertheless, the message is that it is possible for virtually anyone to improve his social rank.

In both plays, the characters who seek to improve their social rank come to bad ends. *Doctor Faustus* ends with Faustus refusing to repent his sins and being taken to Hell. *The Jew of Malta* ends with the nobility of Malta betraying Barabas to his own scheming devices, resulting in his death.

It is possible that with both of these plays Marlowe was making a comment on the economic and social traps that the gentry could find themselves in during Elizabethan times. As the gentry increased their social rank, certain expectations emerged. The gentry were expected to offer hospitality, and to entertain the royal family when the Queen made a progress through the country. These entertainments proved costly, even to the extent of nearly bankrupting some gentlemen. The gentry also were extravagant in their manner of dress and use of expensive household furnishings¹⁷. It was through hard work that a person achieved a higher social rank, but maintaining that rank proved an even greater challenge for many. There was the social pressure to behave in the manner of gentility, the economic pressure to carry on a lavish lifestyle, and in some ways there was a political pressure to be in the Queen's favour. The political aspect carried further with the fact that many of the gentry were gaining seats in the House of Commons¹⁸.

Social mobility was possible in Elizabethan times; however it could carry a price. To become one of the gentry meant that an individual had to walk a fine line to fit in with the rest of the social class. If elected to the House of Commons, the individual had to deal with even more pressures. The drive of the Elizabethan gentry to gain power and wealth is commented on by Marlowe's writing. Through the plays Marlowe shows that such ambition could ultimately be self-defeating.

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. They were issues that affected politics, religion, economics, and society. Marlowe himself was very closely involved with these issues. As an agent for the Queen he was directly involved with anti-Catholic activities. As the son of a shoemaker who earned his MA, Marlowe was an example of social mobility. These plays could not have been written in any other time period. The plays are comments on the nature of the society in which Marlowe lived.

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¹⁷ Roberts, p310.

¹⁸ Ibid, p307.