

T.S. Eliot (1888–1965). *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. 1922.



Notes on the Blank Verse of Christopher Marlowe

"Marlowe was stabb'd with a dagger, and dyed swearing"

1

A MORE friendly critic, Mr. A. C. Swinburne, observes of this poet that "the father of English tragedy and the creator of English blank verse was therefore also the teacher and the guide of Shakespeare." In this sentence there are two misleading assumptions and two misleading conclusions. Kyd has as good a title to the first honour as Marlowe; Surrey has a better title to the second; and Shakespeare was not taught or guided by one of his predecessors or contemporaries alone. The less questionable judgment is, that Marlowe exercised a strong influence over later drama, though not himself as great a dramatist as Kyd; that he introduced several new tones into blank verse, and commenced the dissociative process which drew it farther and farther away from the rhythms of rhymed verse; and that when Shakespeare borrowed from him, which was pretty often at the beginning, Shakespeare either made something inferior or something different.

The comparative study of English versification at various periods is a large tract of unwritten history. To make a study of blank verse alone, would be to elicit some curious conclusions. It would show, I believe, that blank verse within Shakespeare's lifetime was more highly developed, that it became the vehicle of more varied and more intense art-emotions than it has ever conveyed since; and that after the erection of the Chinese Wall of Milton, blank verse has suffered not only arrest but retrogression. That the blank verse of Tennyson, for example, a consummate master of this form in certain applications, is cruder (*not* "rougher" or less perfect in technique) than that of half a dozen contemporaries of Shakespeare; cruder, because less capable of expressing complicated, subtle, and surprising emotions.

2

Every writer who has written any blank verse worth saving has produced particular tones which his verse and no other's is capable of rendering; and we should keep this in mind when we talk about "influences" and "indebtedness." Shakespeare is "universal" (if you like) because he has more of these tones than anyone else; but they are all out of the one man; one man cannot be more than one

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man; there might have been six Shakespeares at once without conflicting frontiers; and to say that Shakespeare expressed nearly all human emotions, implying that he left very little for anyone else, is a radical misunderstanding of art and the artist—a misunderstanding which, even when explicitly rejected, may lead to our neglecting the effort of attention necessary to discover the specific properties of the verse of Shakespeare's contemporaries. The development of blank verse may be likened to the analysis of that astonishing industrial product coal-tar. Marlowe's verse is one of the earlier derivatives, but it possesses properties which are not repeated in any of the analytic or synthetic blank verses discovered somewhat later.

The "vices of style" of Marlowe's and Shakespeare's age is a convenient name for a number of vices, no one of which, perhaps, was shared by all of the writers. It is pertinent, at least, to remark that Marlowe's "rhetoric" is not, or not characteristically, Shakespeare's rhetoric; that Marlowe's rhetoric consists in a pretty simple huffe-snuffe bombast, while Shakespeare's is more exactly a vice of style, a tortured perverse ingenuity of images which dissipates instead of concentrating the imagination, and which may be due in part to influences by which Marlowe was untouched. Next, we find that Marlowe's vice is one which he was gradually attenuating, and even, what is more miraculous, turning into a virtue. And we find that this bard of torrential imagination recognized many of his best bits (and those of one or two others), saved them, and reproduced them more than once, almost invariably improving them in the process.

It is worth while noticing a few of these versions, because they indicate, somewhat contrary to usual opinion, that Marlowe was a deliberate and conscious workman. Mr. J. M. Robertson has spotted an interesting theft of Marlowe's from Spenser. Here is Spenser (*Faery Queen*, I. vii. 32):

Like to an almond tree y-mounted high
 On top of green Selinis all alone,
 With blossoms brave bedeckèd daintily;
 Whose tender locks do tremble every one
 At every little breath that under heaven is blown.

And here Marlowe (*Tamburlaine*, Part II. Act iv. sc. iii.):

Like to an almond tree y-mounted high
 Upon the lofty and celestial mount
 Of evergreen Selinus, quaintly deck'd
 With blooms more white than Erycina's brows,
 Whose tender blossoms tremble every one
 At every little breath that thorough heaven is blown.

This is interesting, not only as showing that Marlowe's talent, like that of most poets, was partly synthetic, but also because it seems to give a clue to some particularly "lyric" effects found in *Tamburlaine*, not in Marlowe's other plays, and not, I believe, anywhere else. For example, the praise of Zenocrate in Part II. Act II. sc. iv.:

Now walk the angels on the walls of heaven,
 As sentinels to warn th' immortal souls
 To entertain divine Zenocrate: etc.

This is not Spenser's movement, but the influence of Spenser must be present. There had been no great blank verse before Marlowe; but there was the powerful presence of this great master of melody immediately precedent; and the

combination produced results which could not be repeated. I do not think that it can be claimed that Peele had any influence here.

The passage quoted from Spenser has a further interest. It will be noted that the fourth line: 8

With blooms more white than Erycina's brows

is Marlowe's contribution. Compare this with these other lines of Marlowe:
So looks my love, shadowing in her brows

(*Tamburlaine*)

Like to the shadows of Pyramides

(*Tamburlaine*)

and the final and best version:

Shadowing more beauty in their airy brows
Then have the white breasts of the queen of love

(*Doctor Faustus*)

and compare the whole set with Spenser again (*F. Q.*):

Upon her eyelids many graces sate
Under the shadow of her even brows,

a passage which Mr. Robertson says Spenser himself used in three other places.

This economy is frequent in Marlowe. Within *Tamburlaine* it occurs in the form 9
of monotony, especially in the facile use of resonant names (*e.g.* the recurrence of "Caspi" or "Caspian" with the same tone effect), a practice in which Marlowe was followed by Milton, but which Marlowe himself outgrew. Again,
Zenocrate, lovlier than the love of Jove,
Brighter than is the silver Rhodope,

is paralleled later by
Zenocrate, the lovliest maid alive,
Fairier than rocks of pearl and precious stone.

One line Marlowe remodels with triumphant success:
And set black streamers in the firmament

(*Tamburlaine*)

becomes

See, see, where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!

(*Doctor Faustus*)

The verse accomplishments of *Tamburlaine* are notably two: Marlowe gets into 10
blank verse the melody of Spenser, and he gets a new driving power by reinforcing the sentence period against the line period. The rapid long sentence, running line into line, as in the famous soliloquies "Nature compounded of four elements" and "What is beauty, saith my sufferings, then?" marks the certain escape of blank verse from the rhymed couplet, and from the elegiac or rather pastoral note of Surrey, to which Tennyson returned. If you contrast these two soliloquies with the verse of Marlowe's greatest contemporary, Kyd—by no means a despicable versifier—you see the importance of the innovation:

The one took sanctuary, and, being sent for out,
 Was murdered in Southwark as he passed
 To Greenwich, where the Lord Protector lay.
 Black Will was burned in Flushing on a stage:
 Green was hanged at Osbridge in Kent...

which is not really inferior to:

So these four abode
 Within one house together; and as years
 Went forward, Mary took another mate;
 But Dora lived unmarried till her death.

(Tennyson, *Dora*)

In *Faustus* Marlowe went farther: he broke up the line, to a gain in intensity, in the last soliloquy; and he developed a new and important conversational tone in the dialogues of *Faustus* with the devil. *Edward II.* has never lacked consideration: it is more desirable, in brief space, to remark upon two plays, one of which has been misunderstood and the other underrated. These are the *Jew of Malta* and *Dido Queen of Carthage*. Of the first of these, it has always been said that the end, even the last two acts, are unworthy of the first three. If one takes the *Jew of Malta* not as a tragedy, or as a "tragedy of blood," but as a farce, the concluding act becomes intelligible; and if we attend with a careful ear to the versification, we find that Marlowe develops a tone to suit this farce, and even perhaps that this tone is his most powerful and mature tone. I say farce, but with the enfeebled humour of our times the word is a misnomer; it is the farce of the old English humour, the terribly serious, even savage comic humour, the humour which spent its last breath on the decadent genius of Dickens. It has nothing in common with J. M. Barrie, Captain Bairnsfather or *Punch*. It is the humour of that very serious (but very different) play, *Volpone*.

First, be thou void of these affections,
 Compassion, love, vain hope, and heartless fear;
 Be moved at nothing, see thou pity none...
 As for myself, I walk abroad o' nights,
 And kill sick people groaning under walls:
 Sometimes I go about and poison wells...

and the last words of Barabas complete this prodigious caricature:

But now begins th' extremity of heat
 To pinch me with intolerable pangs:
 Die, life! fly, soul! tongue, curse thy fill, and die!

It is something which Shakespeare could not do, and which he could not have understood.

Dido appears to be a hurried play, perhaps done to order with the *Aeneid* in front of him. But even here there is progress. The account of the sack of Troy is in this newer style of Marlowe's, this style which secures its emphasis by always hesitating on the edge of caricature at the right moment:

The Grecian soldiers, tir'd with ten years war,
 Began to cry, "Let us unto our ships,
 Troy is invincible, why stay we here?" ...

By this, the camp was come unto the walls,
And through the breach did march into the streets,
Where, meeting with the rest, "Kill, kill!" they cried....

And after him, his band of Myrmidons,
With balls of wild-fire in their murdering paws...

At last, the soldiers pull'd her by the heels,
And swung her howling in the empty air....

We saw Cassandra sprawling in the streets...

This is not Vergil, or Shakespeare; it is pure Marlowe. By comparing the whole ¹³
speech with Clarence's dream, in *Richard III.*, one acquires a little insight into the
difference between Marlowe and Shakespeare:

What scourge for perjury
Can this dark monarchy afford false Clarence?

There, on the other hand, is what Marlowe's style could not do; the phrase has a ¹⁴
concision which is almost classical, certainly Dantesque. Again, as often with the
Elizabethan dramatists, there are lines in Marlowe, besides the many lines that
Shakespeare adapted, that might have been written by either:

If thou wilt stay,
Leap in mine arms; mine arms are open wide;
If not, turn from me, and I'll turn from thee;
For though thou hast the heart to say farewell,
I have not power to stay thee.

But the direction in which Marlowe's verse might have moved, had he not "dyed ¹⁵
swearing," is quite un-Shakespearean, is toward this intense and serious and
indubitably great poetry, which, like some great painting and sculpture, attains its
effects by something not unlike caricature.