

Ideological Containment and Subversive Resistance in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*: A New Historicist and Cultural Materialist Reading

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Abstract

Literary texts can serve as vehicles through which ideology is disseminated, negotiated, and sometimes challenged. In this framework, Christopher Marlowe's popular play *The Jew of Malta*, published in 1588, offers fertile ground for critical analysis because it is deeply embedded in the religious, political, and economic tensions of early modern England. The play draws upon contemporary representations of Jews, Christians, Muslims, Machiavellianism, religious conflict, commerce, and political authority, while simultaneously exposing contradictions within the ideological structures that it appears to sustain. The present article applies New Historicist and Cultural Materialist approaches to *The Jew of Malta* by situating the play within its historical context and examining how ideology circulates through its representations of religion, power, economic interests, and Otherness. Although previous scholarship has variously interpreted Barabas as an embodiment of antisemitic stereotypes, a satirical exposure of Christian hypocrisy, and a figure destabilizing dominant cultural assumptions, this article argues that the play is most productively understood through the tension between ideological containment and subversive resistance. Barabas is simultaneously constructed by the dominant Christian imagination and made to expose its contradictions. Similarly, the Christian characters who claim religious and political superiority repeatedly reproduce the Machiavellian practices and material interests that they condemn in the Jew. The juxtaposition of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism therefore permits us to perceive the play as inherently dialogic in relation to its historical context. It participates in the ideological structures of its culture while also producing moments in which those structures become visible, ambivalent, and potentially unstable.

Keywords: *The Jew of Malta*, New Historicism, Cultural Materialism, History, Ideology, Marlow

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1. Introduction

New Historicism and Cultural Materialism have markedly influenced literary theory and revolutionized how we think about literature in its 'dialogic' relationship with history, ideology and politics. Notwithstanding their slight nuances, both critical approaches are profoundly concerned with the historical configurations and ideological dimensions of literary and non-literary texts. As Louis Montrose formulates it, the concern is with both "the textuality of history and the historicity of texts" (Montrose, 1989). Correspondingly, for New Historicists and Cultural Materialists, literary texts are decidedly "products of a historical period" (Spiegel 1997, 191), and cannot be completely dissociated from the political, religious, and socio-economic conditions in which they are produced. The literary text does not simply reflect historical reality; rather, it participates in the production, circulation, negotiation, and contestation of cultural meanings.

Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* or *The Famous Tragedy of the Rich Jew of Malta* (1558) is a particularly productive text for such an investigation. The play is preoccupied with religion, wealth, political authority, violence, foreignness, and the unstable relationship between moral discourse and material interest. Barabas, the Jewish merchant at the center of the play, is introduced through a highly charged cultural vocabulary in which Jewishness, wealth, usury, cunning, and otherness are brought together. At the same time, however, the Christian characters who appear to represent the moral and political center of the play repeatedly behave according to the very principles that they condemn in Barabas. Ferneze confiscates Jewish property in the name of the state; the friars are deeply implicated in material and sexual interests; and political authority repeatedly proves to be governed by expediency rather than by the religious morality it publicly professes.

Existing scholarship on the play has explored this contradiction. Preedy (2012) for example, has argued that the

play represents religious rhetoric as something appropriated by characters pursuing self-interested and antisocial agendas. More recently, Lavezzo (2016) draws attention to the relationship between Jewish wealth, Barabas's counting house, and the spatial organization of Malta. More recently, Xing (2025) explores how Marlowe constructs Barabas as a fiscally targeted, wealthy stranger, in a narrative that foregrounds the acute confrontation between the stranger and the local authorities. These interpretations demonstrate that the play cannot be reduced to a straightforward expression of Christian antisemitism. The present article broadens these insights and reads the play through the combined perspectives of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. Rather than asking whether *The Jew of Malta* is simply antisemitic or anti-Christian, I argue that the play operates through a more complicated ideological contradiction. It reproduces dominant representations of the Jewish Other while simultaneously exposing the contradictions of the Christian political and religious order that produces those representations. In other words, the play is both ideological and potentially subversive. Its subversive elements, however, do not exist outside ideology; they emerge from within the ideological structure itself. And here comes a critical difference between New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, in the sense that while the former's primary aim is to unmask and dismantle buried ideologies and structures of power within the text, the latter transcends this by looking into ways wherein the text, while conveying the dominant ideology, holds the potential of subverting the hegemonic power and prevailing ideology. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to trace signs of history, ideology, and hegemony in the play, and how the play *per se*, despite its seemingly ideological affiliation and evident endorsement of the social matrix, subtly incorporates seeds of potential destabilization and subversive resistance.

2. The Historicity of the Play: Machiavellianism, Religion, and Ideology

To begin with, Jonathan Culler maintains that "History manifests itself in narrative constructs, stories designed to yield meaning through narrative ordering"(1989:129). Implicit in Culler's statement is that historical events become meaningful through narratives, cultural institutions, and ideological constructions. In this framework, texts are historicized, and history is textualized, entailing that historical events, "facts", and ideologies are reflected, transformed, and sometimes contested in literary representation. To better comprehend literary texts, one has to reposition the text in its broader context. Such contextualization permits the critic and the reader not only to understand the ideological assumptions informing the text but also to recover the tensions and contradictions that those assumptions attempt to conceal. (Lai, 2006).

In *The Jew of Malta*, the historicity of the text is quite obvious. The play is deeply embedded in the religious, economic, and political tensions of the late sixteenth century. At that time, what marked England was mainly its anti-Machiavellian *zeitgeist*, anti-Semitic sentiments, the great religious tension and the inauguration of the schism between Catholicism and Protestantism, religious hypocrisy, the Turkish invasion of Malta in 1565, and the war of the Armada in 1588, which typifies the historical antagonism between Spain and England; all of which are mirrored in the play. Malta itself provides a particularly productive dramatic location because it is represented as a Mediterranean space in which different religions, cultures, political powers, and commercial interests come into contact. Earlier scholarship has already warned against assuming that Marlowe's Malta is simply the real historical Malta. Farley-Hills (1965), for example, questions the extent to which the play corresponds to actual Maltese history. More recent scholarship has instead examined the dramatic and ideological functions of Malta as a Mediterranean space. Publicover (2017), for instance, situates the play within the wider cultural imagination of the Mediterranean and argues that Marlowe uses this geography to reflect upon English cultural and political assumptions. Thus, Malta should be understood not simply as a geographical setting but as a cultural and ideological space. It is a liminal location between East and West, Christianity and Islam, Europe and the Mediterranean, and the local and the foreign. Such liminality creates a dramatic environment in which questions of identity and power become particularly visible. The conflict among Christians, Jews, and Muslims is consequently not merely religious. It is also a conflict concerning political sovereignty, economic interest, and the right to belong. The opening of the play, in the prologue, immediately establishes this relationship between wealth, Jewishness, and political power. Barabas is introduced through his wealth.

But to present the tragedy of a Jew,
 Who smiles to see how full his bags are cramm'd;
 Which money was not got without my means.
 I crave but this, --grace him as he deserves,

And let him not be entertain'd the worse
 Because he favours me. (Prologue 30,35)

The association between Jewishness and wealth is not an innocent one. It draws upon a long tradition of Christian representations that associated Jews with money, usury, and material greed. Yet the play does something more complicated with this stereotype because economic interest is not confined to Barabas. Almost immediately, the political authorities themselves reveal their dependence upon material wealth. Barabas is represented as Machiavellian and morally corrupt, but the Christian political authorities themselves act according to expediency and are repeatedly implicated in corruption. The ideological opposition between Jew and Christian is therefore established by the play only to be repeatedly complicated by the actions of the characters.

In the Prologue, there is also an oblique reference to Machiavellianism. The speaker introduces himself as “Machiavel” and declares:

And let them know that I am Machiavel,
 And weigh not men, and therefore not men's words.
 Admir'd I am of those that hate me most:
 Though some speak openly against my books,
 Yet will they read me, and thereby attain
 To Peter's chair; and, when they cast me off.
 (Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*, Prologue)

Machiavelli had become an important figure in the English cultural imagination of the period, frequently associated with political manipulation, atheism, deception, and the pursuit of power. Stevie Simkin states in his interesting book *Analyzing Texts: Christopher Marlowe*, “Machiavelli and his writings had been demonized by Elizabethan culture” (2001, 23). The significance of the Prologue, therefore, is not merely that it introduces Barabas as a Machiavellian character. Rather, it establishes Machiavellianism as an ideological context within which the entire play should be understood. Ironically, Marlowe unearths the hypocrisy of British culture in that those who abhor Machiavelli and his philosophy deploy and follow his teachings to attain their interests. Barabas certainly embraces deception, manipulation, and violence, but so do the Christian authorities and other supposedly respectable characters. In fact, this allusion to the Italian political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli functions as a kind of moral context within which the play and British society in general are inscribed. Practically, all characters in the play, including Barabas, Ferneze, Bellamira Ithamore, Pilia Borsa who will resort to the Machiavellian principle “the end justifies the means” to serve their interests.

The anti-Semitic sentiment, which was intensely anchored in the British psyche, is similarly articulated in the prologue. Historically, the hostility of the British towards the Jews was due to several reasons. The Jews, argues Stevie Simkin, “were blamed by Christian doctrine for the death of Christ, associated with the devil, feared and hated” (2001, 25). Subsequently, the Jews were scattered in Europe, including the liminal space of Malta, and suffered from unsympathetic oppression and discrimination. Interestingly enough, Stevie goes on to assert that “When Marlowe wrote *The Jew of Malta*, Jews had been officially banned from England for over 300 years, expelled by Edward I in 1290” (2001, 26). This clarifies to a great extent the particular status Barabas, the Jewish merchant, has in Malta. He is not a full citizen; moreover, he is constantly regarded as an outsider and alien. The six final verses in the prologue are reasonably significant as far as anti-Semitic prejudice is concerned. Barabas is introduced promptly as a person who has an extreme greed for material wealth. Secondly, Barabas is presented as a Machiavellian persona, one that is likely to adopt Machiavelli's principles in the play.

Clearly then, in *The Jew of Malta*, history is “textualized” through the incorporation of both the anti-Semitism and anti-Machiavellian sentiments in the very beginning of the play. Still, there are other historical dimensions upon which the play feeds. The most prominent of which is the Armada war of 1588. Although the war is not revealed explicitly, Marlowe seems aware of the hostility between Spain and England, and this explains his obliquely negative representation of Spanish as being unreliable mainly when they promised to help Malta, “I will write into his majesty for aid” says the Spanish Admiral Del Bosco”(Act2,scene2) yet towards the end of the play, we come to realize that the Spanish broke their promise, “Now, where is the hope you had of haughty Spain”(Act5,scene2) says the Turkish governor Calymath after conquering Malta.

3. The Intersection of Religion, Ideology and Power in the Play

The interplay of ideology, religion, and politics, along with the circulation of power, is quite obvious in *The Jew of Malta*. In this framework, the issue of representation from a New Historicist and Cultural Materialist perspective is of paramount importance. In fact, according to the French philosopher Louis Althusser, From an Althusserian perspective, ideological representations participate in the reproduction of social relations (1971). In the same vein, Abrams, M.H maintained that, for many historicists, “These cultural and ideological representations in texts serve mainly to reproduce, confirm, and propagate the complex power structures of domination and subordination which characterize a given society” (1999, 120).

Malta is a multicultural in-between space or a liminal space between East and West, and this offers greater possibility for transcultural encounter/conflict between divergent religions, namely Islam, Christianity and Judaism, and different social classes, particularly between upper and lower classes and different racial groups as well. Correspondingly, any human interaction or encounter does inexorably involve the question of power relations. Marlowe, in this respect, represents the Self/Center, although in a problematic way insofar as his representation of characters is not clear-cut Manichean. To put it succinctly, his criticism embraces not only the ‘peripheral’ Other but also his ‘Central’ fellow Christians. Marlowe employs satirical and critical representation of the Friars, Giacomo and Bernardine, and Maltese governor Ferneze who, despite their claim of morality and religious piousness, fall ultimately in the trap of material greed and follow the Machiavellian principle. Put differently, the play does not simply establish a Manichean distinction between good Christians and evil Jews or Muslims, but rather it repeatedly fractures this distinction wherein the Christian Self ironically embodies the characteristics attributed to the Other.

Nonetheless, the play, despite its questioning and superficial problematizing of religious hypocrisy, merely maintains the social and political order and thus serves the dominant ideology. Ferneze, who had been victimized by the Turks, equally victimizes Barabas and seizes his property, which is an act of hegemony and injustice warranted and grounded on a religious basis; as if the Jew has to pay for his religious difference. The ending of the play is staggeringly indicative in this respect. It is neither the Jew nor the Muslims who triumph but the Christians. Marlowe, by this ending, contributes to maintaining the political status quo and prevailing social order.

FERNEZE. Content thee, Calymath, here thou must stay,
And live in Malta prisoner; for come all the world (Act1, scene5)

In this quote, the Christian Maltese governor is staged in a position of power. After he had cunningly undermined Barabas’ plot to murder the Turkish governor Calymath, and after he was a helpless governor and Barabas’ prisoner, the unexpected climactic events have rendered him powerful and superior to the extent that even the supposedly powerful Turkish governor Calymath is under the mercy of Christians.

Otherness in *The Jew of Malta* is not confined to religious identity. The play also creates a space for examining gender, class, sexuality, and social marginality. Bellamira, Abigail, and other female figures occupy structurally subordinate positions within the patriarchal world of the play. The play, to put it differently, is an interstice for marginalized people, like the Jews, Bellamira the courtesan, Bilia Borsa the thief, and women. The three female characters, Abigail, Bellamira, and Catharine, are represented as either subjugated by the patriarch epitomized by Barabas or devil-like Bellamira. As a courtesan, Bellamira occupies a socially marginal position. When she attempts to speak to Ferneze, he dismisses her:

“Ferneze: away with her; she is a courtesan
Bellamira: whatever I am, yet, Governor, hear me speak (Act4, Scene 1)

Abigail is also used by her father for his benefit, and Catherine represents the figure of the submissive mother, and this is typical of the status of women in the Elizabethan period wherein patriarchy, which relegated women and subjugated them to a lower status, had been perceived as somewhat unquestionable. Hence, even if Marlowe gives voice to marginalized characters like the Jews and women, their voice is controlled and contained within the dominant structure of power. Remarkably enough, Abigail, Barabas’s daughter, is considered ‘good’ and no longer evil only when she converts to Christianity, implying thus the only “good” and essential religion is Christianity. Hence, Abigail complicates the stereotype of Jewish evil. She is compassionate, loyal, and capable of moral action in ways that undermine the assumption that Jewish identity necessarily entails wickedness. Her

goodness therefore becomes another site of contradiction. In this framework, it seems that, as Greenblatt argues, the subversive perceptions do not disappear, but are “contained and indeed serve to heighten a power they would appear to question” (165, 1990). Another instance of Marlow’s ideological affiliation might be traceable in the scene wherein Barabas and Ithamore were competing in the art of devilry. In this scene, the Christians are startlingly shown to be innocent, victimized, and attacked to the extent that even thieves are rendered innocent and victims of the Jews and Muslims.

4. Signs of Subversion, Resistance, and Destabilization

Michel Foucault, who is said to be a progenitor of New Historicism, fascinatingly upholds that “Where there is power, there is resistance” (1979). Since New Historicism is commonly criticized for its downplaying of resistance by maintaining that most forms of resistance are already contained within the already established contour of power (185), Cultural Materialism, conversely, seems to acknowledge the possibility of resistance.

In *The Jew of Malta*, besides unmasking power and ideology, the play can be said to open up a space for potential subversion and dismantling of the hegemonic ideology of that time, particularly Catholicism, anti-Machiavellianism, and anti-Semitism. Surprisingly, it is Barabas, the ‘villain’ Jew, and sometimes Abigail and Ithamore, the Turkish slave, who are endowed by Marlow with the power of subverting the established Christian beliefs and values through their ironic, critical, derogatory comments whenever they encounter Christians. Barabas is the most obvious example. Although he is constructed as the villain of the play, he is also one of its most articulate critics of Christian ideology. His questions concerning theft, religion, and hypocrisy expose the contradictions of the dominant order. Ithamore similarly participates in the play’s irreverent treatment of Christian morality. In the scene involving the friars, for instance, religious authority is subjected to comic and sexual ridicule. In this sense, the play does not simply replace Christian ideology with Jewish ideology. Rather, it destabilizes the binary itself. To be Christian does not necessarily entail being good, just as to be Jewish does not necessarily entail being evil. The ideological categories remain present, but their coherence is undermined. The same applies to Machiavellianism. Barabas’s behavior appears to embody Machiavellian principles, but Ferneze and other Christian characters repeatedly employ similar strategies. Machiavellianism therefore ceases to be an exclusively Jewish or anti-Christian category. It becomes a general political logic that circulates throughout the society represented by the play.

Marlow himself is recorded to be an atheist and homosexual, two things which were quite unacceptable in the Elizabethan period. So, despite Marlow’s apparent anti-Semitic touch in the play, it was a mere stratagem to criticize the corrupt Christian society through Barabas. Marlow himself is deploying Machiavelli’s prominent principle “The end justifies the means” in the sense that it was intimidating for him to denounce Christianity directly in his play. The tactic, then, was to use a Jewish character that the Christians hate and whose sarcastic and undermining comments on Christianity won’t be taken into consideration. Barabas’s subversive remarks against Christians, who represent the dominant ideology, can be traced in some extracts. The following are but a few,

Barabas: Will you then steal my goods?

Is theft the ground of your religion? (Act1, scene1)

And,

Barabas: for religion hides many mischiefs from suspicion” (Act2, Scene 1)

And,

Ithamore: A very feeling one: have not the nuns fine sport with the friars of Saint Jacques”
 (Act3, Scene 3)

Barabas turns the language of Christian morality against the Christians themselves. If Christianity is linked with justice, charity, and morality, how can Christians justify the theft of Jewish property? The rhetorical question renders the Christian ideological system internally contradictory. This subversive questioning of Christianity has the potential to awaken Christian’s readers and audiences by pushing them to rethink and reconsider their religion. Barabas’s critique of Christianity therefore does not establish him as morally superior. Instead, it reveals that the moral distinction between Barabas and his Christian opponents is much less stable than the ideological structure initially suggests.

Furthermore, the element of subversion is sketched out in another instance. The fact that Governor Ferneze, the friars, and Bellamira, who are Christians, do resort to the Machiavellian principle for personal purposes makes

them no different from or superior to Barabas; hence the oppositional dichotomy between the good (the Self) and the bad (the Other) is fractured and destabilized by Marlowe. In other words, to be Christian does not necessarily entail being good, and to be a Jew does not mean to be evil. Similarly, Abigail can also serve as a subversive element insofar as, despite her Jewishness, her compassion, humanity, and goodness serve to undermine the essentialist anti-Semitism sentiment that conceives all Jews to be wicked.

Despite the superficial destabilizing of religious hypocrisy, the play does not finally overthrow the social and political order. This is particularly evident in its ending. After the complex series of betrayals, murders, and political reversals, Ferneze ultimately reasserts Christian political authority. From a New Historicist perspective, this can be interpreted as an embodiment of containment. The play allows the dominant order to be challenged, but ultimately restores the hierarchy that has been challenged and questioned. Yet, from a cultural materialist approach, the restoration of order does not necessarily erase the paradox exposed in the play, namely corruption, hypocrisy, and material interests through which Christian authority operates.

5. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it seems thus that Marlow's *The Jew of Malta* is a fertile ground for deploying New Historicist and Cultural Materialist approaches. The juxtaposition of the two critical trends permits us to perceive the text in relation to its historical context and trace the interplay of ideology in the text while not overlooking the potential for resistance and subversion. On the one hand, the play is deeply embedded in the historical, religious, political, and economic tensions of the early modern period. Its representations of Jewishness, Christianity, Islam, political authority, commerce, and Otherness cannot be separated from the ideological structures of the society in which it was produced. On the other hand, the play cannot be reduced to a simple reproduction of those structures. Its most significant feature is its ideological tension. Barabas is constructed through antisemitic stereotypes, yet he is also the character who ironically exposes Christian hypocrisy. Christian characters claim moral superiority, yet they repeatedly reproduce the Machiavellian practices they condemn. Religion is presented as a source of moral authority, yet it is repeatedly appropriated to justify material and political interests. Women and other marginalized characters are given voices, yet those voices remain constrained by the dominant structure.

Ultimately, *The Jew of Malta* unearths how literary texts can reproduce dominant ideologies while simultaneously revealing their inherent contradictions. The plurality of voices within the play does not guarantee liberation, but it prevents ideology from becoming completely coherent. Barabas may be contained, but the questions he raises cannot be entirely contained with him. It is particularly this tension between ideological reproduction and potential seeds of subversion that makes Marlowe's play an especially productive site for New Historicist and Cultural Materialist analysis.

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