

## Psychologizing the Anti-Semitism in *The Jew of Malta*

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...the figure of the Jew as an allegory of Evil conceals the fact that it represents within the space of ideological narration the pure immanence of the textual operation that “quilts” it...The psychoanalytical answer is, of course, enjoyment --- the only substance acknowledged by psychoanalysis, according to Lacan. The “Jew” cannot be reduced to a purely formal organizational device: the efficacy of this figure cannot be explained by reference to the textual mechanisms of “quilting”; the surplus on which this mechanism relies is the fact that we impute to the Jew” an impossible, unfathomable enjoyment, allegedly stolen from us.

---Zizek 2002:19

*The Jew of Malta* is Christopher Marlowe’s fourth play, probably written in 1592 and posthumously published in 1633. It describes the tragic fall of the Jewish protagonist Barabas, whose revenge upon the Christian governor for depriving him of his wealth, and subsequent crimes he commits while carrying out the revengeful acts, including the murder of his own beloved daughter, which elicit the audience’s fear, resentment and excitement with blood and violence. Intertwined with the themes of the dangers of Catholicism, anti-Semitism, Jewish greed, Machiavellism, and treacherous international politics, the play offers a satiric revenge comedy under a tapestry of exoticness.

The paper aims to explore the theme of anti-Semitism in the play, which is quite obvious in the stereotypic characterization of Barabas, from the perspective of Lacanian and Zizekian psychoanalysis. I would like to bring out what state of mind lurks behind the visible anti-Semitism and for what purpose the playwright made such a composition, considering his depictions of Barabas’s brutal murders of so many innocent victims unrelated to his being dispossessed of wealth.

In “Marlowe, Marx, and Anti-Semitism,” by engaging with an intertextual juxtaposition between Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* and Karl Marx’s “On the Jewish Question,” Stephen J. Greenblatt argues that both the authors share identical dependence upon an ideological vein by using “the figure of the perfidious Jew...[as] a powerful interpretive link between Renaissance and modern thought,” and in both the works, the Jew’s real relationships to the historical situation becomes “incidental;” that is to say, both the playwright’s and the polemicist’s representations of the Jew are based more on fantasy than on reality. Greenblatt even maintains:

We are obliged to acknowledge that there is something unsavory, inexcusable, about both works. Their nature is subdued to what it works in, like the dyer’s hand; they are, I would insist, defiled by the dark forces they are trying to exploit, used by what they are trying to use.

And the “something unsavory, inexcusable” is the vein of anti-Semitism that has been incessantly exploited all the way down from the Middle Ages in Europe.

Peter Berek, in “The Jew as Renaissance Man,” argues that Marlowe uses Barabas’ Jewishness to manifest the covert social “anxieties about self-fashioning” (138) and about free choice of identity in the English society in Renaissance and also to serve as an “antithesis of Englishness” (129), but the playwright’s “representation of Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* is not just an act of mimesis but itself the ground for mimesis” (130). Reserved about “what Marlowe made Barabas out of”, Berek puts more stress upon “what Marlowe made of Barabas” (130). To the critic, Barabas’s monstrous Jewishness lays the ground for subsequent Jewish characters in English Renaissance literature, and has a lingering influence on the worldly stereotypic image of the Jew in the future ages. In the paper, Marlowe’s indebtedness to his contemporary stereotypes about the Jew will be analyzed to reveal the author’s characterization of Barabas is far from realistic.

As Peter Berek observes that until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Jews “were more available as concepts than as persons,” more as “figures from narratives rather than experience,” because during the Renaissance, there were few Jews residing in England and people

derived their impressions about Jews from “the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, or medieval legends of Jewish villainy” (128). As far as England is concerned, the Jews were forced to leave the country in 1289 by Edward I under the Edict of Expulsion. The following excerpt shows that the Jews’ economic activity obviously caused some chaos and corruption among the English people:

Although we enjoy much temporal profit from the aforesaid Jews, we prefer to provide for the peace of our subjects rather than to fill our coffers with the mammon of iniquity, especially since by the loss of temporal goods spiritual gains are achieved. (qtd in Mundill 300)

The expulsion of the Jews from England initiated a series of responses in the European continent. In 1394, France decided to remove Jews from the country; in 1492, Spain followed suit. Portugal ordered the Jews to leave the country in 1497, and Provence gave the same order in 1502. The next follower was southern Italy in 1541 and then came many other European cities in the next century (qtd in DiCosmo). After the Expulsion, the only Jews remaining in England were the Marranos, who chose to convert to Christianity in order to stay in England, but they still underwent processes of suspicion, interrogation and persecution. It was not until 1656 that the Jews were readmitted into England as converts to Christianity, so “the Renaissance was a period of constant upheaval and instability for the Jewish people” (DiCosmo). However, the Jewish victimization rarely sees realistic reflections in the Renaissance literature.

With the ambivalence between criminality and Jewishness, Christopher Marlowe’s construction of the protagonist Barabas is unlikely to be exempt from anti-Semitism and stereotypes. In the first place, the playwright’s naming policy betrays his true intention in the characterization of the protagonist. Barabas was originally the name of a Jewish serial killer, for whose escape from crucifixion Jesus Christ was used as a substitute by the former’s fellow Jews. Therefore, for Christian audience in the Renaissance, the name’s allusion can’t be clearer: the character carrying that name is a wicked murderer, and the ethnic group that he belongs to has committed the unforgivable crime of sacrificing Jesus Christ. The villainy, moreover, is easily imputed to the inner nature of

the character and the people, instead of being seen as the consequence of contingent happenings. As a result, “criminality is indistinguishable from his [Barabas’s] Jewishness” (Yaffe 24).

Barabas’s criminality in the play is well constructed to correspond to the allusion of his name. When Ferneze demands Barabas’s property, one of the Knights justifies the confiscation by referring to the Jew’s biblical sinfulness: “If your first curse fall heavy on thy head, / And make thee poor and scorned of all the world, / ‘This not our fault, but thy inherent sin” (1.2.108-10). So Barabas as well as the Jews is depicted to bear a vicious nature. Starting from Act 2, after his property is confiscated and he teams up with Ithamore, Barabas begins to show his “inventive viciousness” (Engle 290). By giving an exceptionally long monologue of 28 lines (the longest in the play), the angry Jewish merchant boasts of his “villainous achievements” to his slave and assistant just to reveal how wicked he was and can be:

As for myself, I walk abroad a-nights  
And kill *sick people* groaning under walls.  
Sometimes I go about and *poison wells*;  
And now and then, to cherish *Christian thieves*,  
I am content to lose some of my crowns,  
That I may, walking I my gallery,  
See ’em go pinioned along by my door.  
Being young, I studied physic, and began  
To practice first upon the Italians;  
There I enriched the priests with burials,  
And always kept the sexton’s arms in ure  
With digging graves and ringing dead men’s knells.  
And after that was I an engineer,  
And in the wars ‘twixt France and Germany,  
Under pretense of helping Charles the Fifth,  
Slew friend and enemy with my stratagems.

And after that was I an *usurer*,  
And with extorting, cozening, forfeiting,  
And tricks belonging unto *brokery*,  
I filled the jails with bankrupts in a year,  
And with *young orphans* planted hospitals,  
And every moon made some or other mad,  
And now and then one hang himself for grief,  
Pinning upon his breast a long great scroll  
How I with interest tormented him.  
But mark how I am blest for plaguing them:  
I have as much coin as will *buy the town!*  
But tell me how, how hast thou spent they time? (The italics  
mine) (2.3.178-205)

The long quotation is meant to show what deliberate care Marlowe takes to fabricate Barabas's inherent vicious nature by describing him firstly always killing or trapping the weak and the marginal, instead of the powerful and dominant, and secondly practicing brokery and usury, the stereotypic occupations that the Jews were traditionally said to take up, and thirdly being greedy enough to "buy the town," thus threatening the Christendom. Rather than being an embroidery of his past "to seduce Ithamore into being his accomplice" (Engle 291) as Lars Engle suggests (given his confident and manipulating character, I don't think it justifying that Barabas has to fabricate such a story in order to persuade a slave into committing murderous crimes with him), this depiction of Barabas's wicked crimes of killing and injuring the weak helps reinforce the audiences' anti-Semitism and immunize them from sympathizing with the villain's upcoming revenges upon the ruling and greedy Christians as a result of the seizure of his property.

In addition to straight biblical allusions to the inherent criminality of Barabas and the Jews, Marlowe also uses another stereotype to villainize the protagonist. In Act 1, scene 1, when he is glad to see riches coming in from around the world, Barabas says to a

merchant:

Thus trolls our fortune in by land and sea,  
And thus are we on every side enriched.  
These are the blessings promised to the Jews,  
And herein was old Abrams happiness.  
What more may heaven do for earthly man  
Than this to pour out plenty in their laps,  
Rippling the bowels of the earth for them,  
Making the sea their servant, and the winds  
To drive their substance with successful blasts? (1.1.102-10)

When it comes to “blessing promised to the Jews” (1.1.104), Martin. D. Yaffe argues that this is another example of Marlowe’s inaccurate representation of the Jewish people. What God promises Abram is a home or a promised land, which is the Jews’ collective desire, not accumulation of wealth, as Marlowe depicts. The playwright’s use of wealth-devouring Barabas reveals both the former’s ignorance of Jewish beliefs and his ideological propensity. Marlowe makes ready use of the stereotypes of the Jews in the Renaissance England in the characterization of his protagonist, just as Charles B. Mahon argues in “The Jew in English Poetry and Drama”:

...the Jews were only too likely, under such conditions, to become the objects of dark and fanciful suspicions. And in the domain of imaginative literature, especially, was it likely that these ideas should find concrete expression, and the figure of the Jew assume those grotesque and distorted forms with which the superstitions of the age invested him. With few exceptions, it must be admitted, however, that the majority of these allusions, more particularly in early English literature, are of a casual and incidental character, and void of any set purpose of intention to present Jewish life and character with any pretence to verisimilitude.

Moreover, as far as land is concerned, the Jewish obsession with monetary asset is

also a consequence of marginalization. Since feudalism was a land-based mode of production, land signified not only wealth but also social prestige, recognition and stability. As Jacob Katz observes, viewed as aliens, the Jews were not permitted to acquire land by the law:

Landed property attracted the ordinary burgher who attained wealth because of the feeling of stability and economic security it gave him and the social prestige involved. But in his peculiar situation, the Jews would set no great store by either. He could not hope to perpetuate his wealth in that locality, nor did he seek a niche in the dominant social and economic hierarchy. The economic nexus linking the Jew with his environment was purely instrumental. (qtd in Greenblatt)

As a result, the Jew had to accumulate his wealth in movable property so as to facilitate movement, which in turn weakened his link with the society and consolidated his status as an alien. In the play, Barabas, though rejoicing in his riches and condemning the Christians' hypocrisy, has to concede that they cannot be kings due to the small number of Jewish population and they can only depend on a peaceful Christian rule: "I must confess we come not to be kings. / That's not our fault. Alas, our number's few, / And crowns come either by success / Or urged by forces; and nothing violent, / Oft have I heard tell, can be permanent. / Give us a peaceful rule; make Christians kings, / That thirst so much for principality" (1.1.128-34). Therefore, the Jew's interest in movable wealth and alienation in local society and politics are in fact effects of social and political marginalization, not their inherent greed and sin.

One more feature about Marlowe's construction of Barabas has to be mentioned: the character's Renaissance and Christian ideologies. Stephen J. Greenblatt argues that, considering the protagonist's frequent use of proverbs, Barabas is a construct of the Christian world. The critic maintains, "Proverbs in *The Jew of Malta* are a kind of currency, the compressed ideological wealth of the society," so Barabas' recurrent use of the aphorisms reveals not his alienation from the society but instead the social inscription

in him. For example:

Or who is honored now but for his wealth? (1.1.112)

...You that

Were ne'er possessed o' wealth are pleased with want. (1.2.201-2)

A reaching thought will search his deepest wits,

And cast with cunning for the time to come;

For evils are apt to happen every day. (1.2.223-25)

...for religion

Hides many mischiefs from suspicion. (1.2.282-83)

Aphorisms like these abound in the play, and therefore, if proverbs are the ideological wisdom of the society as Greenblatt observes, Barabas does not stand aside from the society he curses but in fact is caught inside the ideological containment of the social space.

The most conspicuous trait of Barabas's character which compels him to the merciless vengeful acts and thus to audiences' condemnation is his desire for gold. When Abigail secretly brings his father his gold from the nunnery, Barabas' exclamation is straightforward but unfatherly: "My gold, my fortune, my felicity,"/ Strength to my soul, death to mine enemy! /...Then my desires were fully satisfied" (2.2.47-51). The unrestrained and manifest greed for gold appears abominable to the reader and audience, especially considering the violence and deaths it engenders. Nevertheless, as Stephen Greenblatt observes, "Barabas's own desire of gold...is the glowing core of that passion which fires all characters," the protagonist's desire is shared by all the characters in the play with the distinction that the latter's is constrained by and disguised under such screens as love, religion and morality. The core emblem of this shared desire in the play is the slave market, run by Christians who preach morality and civility but turn infidels into commodities, each carrying a price on his back. Compared with the slave-selling Christians, Barabas, who trades goods for gold, is actually not more wicked and greedy.

Therefore, Greenblatt argues, "Barabas' avarice, egotism, duplicity and murderous cunning do not signal his exclusion from the world of Malta but rather his central place

within it.” That is to say, Barabas is a vivid and extravagant representation of the Christian world which despises him and which he despises. Namely, he is not an alien practicing heterodoxical beliefs and deeds but a social subject constructed by and caught inside the ideological containment of the social space. Nevertheless, for what purpose did Marlowe or the society construct Barabas and the Jew in the way of “differentiating homogeneity?” What is the mentality involved?

I would argue that Marlowe’s construction of Barabas serves as the Zizekian obscene superego or the underbelly side of the European subject. With the absence of genuine and constant contact with the Jews, Marlowe’s Jewish character is mostly a fictional representation, on which I have gone all the lengths to make textual analyses. The fictionalization corresponds to Slavoj Zizek’s argument that on account of the ignorance of what the Jews want or what their desires are, the Europeans invent their version or fantasy of what the former want, just as Christopher Marlowe did. The fantasy created offers an imprecise but tangible answer to the perplexing question of “*Che vuoi*”: What do you want from me?, which Zizek considers as the origin of racism. And the fantasy is the source of all the stereotypes. The source of all the perplexity with the Jews, according to Zizek, is the character of the Jewish God. The Jewish God is unknown. With the prohibition on making His images, the Jewish God remains mysterious even to the Jews. People have no clear idea about His *Che vuoi*, about what He wants from them. Also the Jews are mysterious because they were picked by God as the “chosen people” for no particular reason. Additionally, the biblical record about Christ’s crucifixion also likens the Jews to villains, which fuels the Christians aversion toward the Jewish people. As a result, the Jews are villainized by Christians as a fantasmatic answer to the known desire of the other, just as Barabas is.

Barabas’ transformation starting from Act 2 is so drastic that some critics are suspicious of its authenticity as Marlowe’s composition. With the exception of the shared desire for gold, Barabas is depicted as the direct opposites of the Christians characters. Such is his cruelty that he sacrifices his beloved daughter Abigail without hesitation, but Ferneze and Katharine show great sorrow for Lodowick’s and Mathias’

death. His selfishness blinds him from the common good by refusing to donate half of his wealth to help pay the Turks tribute to prevent Malta from the Turkish invasion, but Ferneze sounds so rational and responsible a governor when he says, “And better one want for a common good / Than many perish for a private man” (1.2.99-100). Barabas’ Machiavellism and cunningness cause so many deaths, the Turkish invasion and almost the loss of Malta to the infidels. In particular, his contempt for religion and morality contradicts the prevalent ideologies in Renaissance Europe. What’s more, Barabas is described as a failed subject when he takes over the responsibility of rule and has the chance to become the subject of power. But he forms alliance with the disempowered Ferneze, which finally leads to his downfall. Ian McAdam observes, “He cannot face the truth that power is acquired and maintained only by assuming great responsibility and by taking great risks” (70). In other words, he is accustomed to taking the position of the other, the object or the ruled. Barabas is indeed the alien other of the European/English subject.

Confronting such an extremely vicious and cunning other, who obtains so much enjoyment from transgressing upon the symbolic social law, the subject has also to be powerful enough to maintain his subjectivity and identity so as to ensure his acquisition of enjoyment. Sean Homer argues:

...A dual process is taking place whereby the dehumanizing of the other is accompanied by an inflation of the other’s power and strength...What we find in anti-Semitism is that vicious cycle articulated through the superego, whereby the law --- the prohibition that maintains and regulates the social order --- draws its strength from that which it excludes. (61)

That is to say, for the symbolic law to function effectively and the symbolic subject to come into existence, there must be an underbelly side of the superego to serve as the foundation of the superstructure and the other of the subject. Therefore, Barabas’ monstrosity is fabricated for the purpose of consolidating the Christian or English subject, just as his cruelty is in direct contrast to Ferneze’s mercifulness. In a period when

self-fashioning and social mobility was getting more and more intense, the other like Barabas helps attain its symbolic function of constructing what the subject is by fabricating what the other is first. Therefore, James Shapiro insightfully points out in *Shakespeare and the Jews* that discussion of Jews in Medieval and early modern England was less about Jewishness than about what it meant to be English.

It proved much easier to identify those who are English by pointing to those who were assuredly not --- e.g., the Irish and the Jews. Invariably, however, this required a tacit agreement that these others epitomized the very antithesis of Englishness. (102)

So the biological, social and religious other in the villainous Barabas helps construct English national identity in the coming centuries.

When it comes to the shared desire for gold among the characters, which can be seen as a symbol for the desire for Lacanian *jouissance* or enjoyment, the Jews are attributed to the status of the obstacle to the cruel and licentious father of the primal horde, who has the access to all the enjoyment and who people identify with because of their nostalgic yearning for the lost *jouissance*. Everyone aspires for enjoyment, but it is impossible for everyone to have as much as his or her heart desires, and it is necessary for the society to regulate the individual desire for excessive enjoyment so as to ensure the perpetuation of the society. Therefore, there must be some scapegoat or the other to blame for the deficiency and restriction of individual enjoyment so as to hold a community or society together. So Zizek argues that paradoxically what holds together a given community is:

...not so much identification with the public or symbolic law that regulates the community's "normal" everyday life, but rather *identification with a specific form of transgression of the Law's suspension* (in psychoanalytic terms, with a specific form of *enjoyment*). (55)

To be more specific, what holds a community together is not the symbolic law that imposes superegoic prohibition on people's enjoyment but rather the imputation of

excessive enjoyment to the other or alien and “This attribution of excessive enjoyment to the other comes to operate as a form of theft for the subject --- the theft of one’s own enjoyment” (Homer 63). So the dissatisfaction of the subject can be ascribed to the other’s excessive enjoyment; the latter has taken too much enjoyment so that the former has to suffer its loss.

However, this scapegoat for excessive enjoyment is usually “retroactively” created. It is good to have one to serve the purpose, but if there is none, the community has to invent one to make sure its operation. The greedy Jewish image is thus invented to justify the social repressive prohibition on individual desire, just like the Nazis had to construct the vicious “conceptual Jew” so as to facilitate the operation of the totalitarian regime. “The point is that the Jew is not the cause of that ideology, but rather something that is constituted in its effects, that is to say, the Jew is posited retroactively as the condition of possibility for the fascist regime” (63).

In *The Jew of Malta*, the protagonist Barabas is constructed as a scapegoat who has excessive enjoyment by accumulating too much gold, which is the object of everyone’s desire, including the Christian friars and nuns, and as a villain who has usurped enjoyment from the other characters. As David H. Thurn observes, “Marlowe presents in Barabas a figure who submits with ludic abandon to the imperative of profit and acquisition, to a policy which demands that nothing to be lost, that even the sheer accidents of plot be appropriated, enclosed, and put into an investment” (167). The protagonist’s demand for complete enjoyment is presented as his inherent sin and the cause of his merciless revengeful acts when he is deprived of enjoyment. However, as his vengeful schemes proceeds, his enjoyment diminishes because his enjoyment lies not in politics but in wealth; as a result, when he finally defeats Ferneze and gains the control of Malta, Barabas does not enjoy ruling the island. His satisfaction is derived from counting his money in his counting house, and to get the enjoyment back, he runs the risk of cooperating with Ferneze and finally suffers the wrong decision. Therefore, Marlowe, to show the absurdity of the demand for complete enjoyment, diminishes the Jew’s enjoyment gradually by de-individualizing him with stereotypes and ideologies as the

plot progresses; that is, the play “works increasingly to convert the Jew’s ‘surplus use-value’ into the visible currency of popular tradition, his complexity into a caricature of the Jew as a usurious and scheming figure, given to ruthless cunning and murderous pranks” (164).

In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt puts forth the notions of “absolute play” and a “will to play,” claiming that Marlovian heroes

take courage from the absurdity of their enterprise, a murderous, self-destructive, supremely eloquent, playful courage. This playfulness in Marlowe’s works manifests itself as cruel, murderous practical jokes, a penchant for the outlandish and absurd, delight in role-playing, entire absorption in the game at hand and consequent indifference to what lies outside the boundaries of the game, radical insensitivity to human complexity and suffering, extreme but disciplined aggression hostility to transcendence. (220)

To translate Greenblatt’s concepts in a psychoanalytical term, it is the Lacanian death drive to go beyond the pleasure principle for excess *jouissance*, for perfect enjoyment that is working under the self-destructive, resistant and playful acts. It is Barabas’ inherent demand for *jouissance* that drives him toward the resistance against authority and transgression upon boundaries, for he obtains enjoyment through plotting his schemes and manipulating the other characters that he deems as objects. However, his acts get more violent and aggressive when he finds his enjoyment receding, because the object of his desire is gold or wealth, not political power. Therefore, by giving a psychoanalytic interpretation on Barabas’s acts, I consider Barabas’ revenge not driven by an independent will to absolute play but by unconscious wishful thinking for satisfaction of desire.

Consequently, I agree to one of David H. Thurn’s arguments:

...the concept of an *absolute play* risks eliding the historical restrictions implied both by a containment model deployed in a

taxonomy of sovereign power and by an exchange model serving a dynamic economy of culture. History recedes before the figure of Barabas conceived as a triumph of the will to absolute play (161).

Barabas' desire for gold is not socially exceptional and individualistic; it is a desire inscribed in the protagonist by the symbolic Other. Barabas, in consequence, is an object of the Other's desire, which consists of ethnic, economic, religious, and national primacy, for whose materialization the Jewish merchant is constructed.

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