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# Tragedy and Trauma in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe / Matthew R. Martin

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**Matthew R. Martin. *Tragedy and Trauma in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe*. New York: Ashgate, 2015; Routledge, 2016. 202 pp.**

Reviewed by DANIEL G. LAUBY

When Oxford University Press publicized that it would credit Christopher Marlowe as the co-author of Shakespeare's *Henry VI* plays in October, 2016, interest in Marlowe's legacy and influence spiked as evidenced in a proliferation of newspaper articles, Facebook shares, and podcasts. This possible collaboration between Marlowe and Shakespeare prompts important questions concerning Marlowe's relationship not only to Shakespearean tragedy but also to established epic, *de casibus*, and morality play traditions that shape tragic histories and offer opportunities for identification, catharsis, and erasure.

Matthew R. Martin deftly investigates how Marlowe subverted conventional theatrical aesthetics in *Tragedy and Trauma in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe*. Throughout the book, Martin takes a psychoanalytical approach, particularly drawing from Lacanian theory as he explores how Marlowe disrupted tragic mimesis, most notably through the disavowal of trauma and the tragic response to the Other. Martin carefully traces Marlowe's precedents and demonstrates how he innovated by demanding new kinds of spectatorship and identification that exposed social anxieties by undermining the very sources he appropriated. Through these negotiations of trauma, Marlowe redefined tragic history and the spectator's relation to it.

Martin begins by arguing that Marlowe disrupted tragic aesthetics in *Dido, Queen of Carthage* by fashioning Aeneas into a Derridean "faith hero." Marlowe appropriated both the Virgilian and false Aeneas traditions, and the precedents clearly mingle in the embedded narrative of Troy's destruction adapted from the *Aeneid*. Virgil's and Marlowe's protagonists each answer a divine call for nation-building, but Marlowe's Aeneas is traumatized by geographical, cultural, and moral dislocations that result from an unreliable destiny foretold by negligent deities who Martin notes are "demanding, insisting, unforgiving, and always on the verge of vanishing" (32).

In either case, the Marlovian and Virgilian gods require a sacrifice for the sake of Rome, but the epic Aeneas suffers no uncertainty, and his flight from Troy reinforces his heroic persona. The faith hero, on the other hand, must fracture a universal ethical framework through the violation of values associated with the epic tradition. Whereas the Virgilian Aeneas embodies cultural ideals associated with masculinity and heroism, the Marlovian Aeneas's flight "concludes with his own castration: his manhood did not serve" (36). To answer the transcendent Other's call, Marlowe's Aeneas becomes a faith hero through the violation of Augustinian *virtus*, or soldierly masculinity, and he later forsakes Dido's love—that which he most treasures. Martin investigates Aeneas as the faith hero in the contexts of Jacques Derrida's *Gift of Death*, comparing Aeneas's uncertain leap of

## Reviews

faith in response to an unreliable, transcendent Other to Abrahamic sacrifice and legacy. By examining the sacrifice that upends heroic virtue and consequentially necessitates Dido's curse, Martin asserts that Marlowe unsettled "not only Virgilian but also Elizabethan triumphalist narratives of the origins and development of empire" (42).

Conversely, triumph entirely defines the hero featured in *Tamburlaine the Great*. Rather than responding to the Other as Marlowe's Aeneas does, Tamburlaine is in a constant state of "becoming" through the usurpation of the transcendent Other, an aim that disrupts tragic theater by relegating trauma to the conquered. In *Tamburlaine the Great*, trauma is what the hero inflicts, not what is inflicted upon the hero. Martin argues that rather than erasing or redeeming tragedy, Tamburlaine "escapes the cancelling out of trauma" as the god-like Other (46). Noting that modern criticism does not describe this play as a tragedy, Martin suggests that it is a "trauma narrative that refuses tragic mimesis and the catharsis such mimesis purportedly provides, dispersing tragedy within its own traumatic mimesis" (44).

However, the rejection of trauma is only an illusion, for Martin also suggests that *Part I* is ultimately a Freudian fort/da game in which Tamburlaine engages in repetition and mastery, a fantasy rooted in trauma. Although he seems to minimize Tamburlaine's Freudian castration anxiety, or "lack," Martin does argue that Tamburlaine attempts to disavow the "socio-economically vulnerable position of his childhood" by exhibiting mastery through "crowns and corpses" (47). Unfortunately, Martin does not directly address the sadomasochistic contradiction that arises out of Tamburlaine's desire to possess the deified Zenocrate, an overvalued love object who is a Žižekian "embodiment of the impossible Thing" rather than a "mere signifier like a crown" (51). In his pursuit of Zenocrate, Tamburlaine temporarily indulges in the poetic discourse of love poetry, and Tamburlaine reacts to the feminizing threat of a masochistic situation through a corresponding sadism as he attempts to disavow his "castration."

Tamburlaine's rejection of Freudian lack, particularly in reaction to Zenocrate's death, becomes central to Martin's discussion of *Part II* because he claims that this denial places Tamburlaine outside of tragedy. Throughout the argument, Martin cites Freud's *Totem and Taboo* to characterize Tamburlaine as the primal Father. By disavowing castration within a cosmological and mythological discourse, Tamburlaine characterizes himself as the supreme Other who ultimately is rivalled by and reflected in only Death himself.

Resistance to castration continues in *The Jew of Malta* when Martin argues that Barabas is a protagonist who refuses sacrifice. Once more, the question of abjection is central to the identity of a protagonist as Barabas refuses to act as scapegoat or surrender his daughter for the sake of the universal order. As a method of disavowing his lack, Barabas then becomes the "castrating agent" in a repeating cycle, much like Tamburlaine (97). In this way, the play does not work through trauma but "acts out and perpetuates the psychopathology it dramatizes" (86), and Martin claims the effect is that Barabas represents everything society does not want to know about itself since "Barabas is taking responsibility for a wide range of the deadly consequences of the large and seemingly agentless

## Reviews

economic and technological transformations reshaping early modern Europe” (101).

The rejection of what hurts in *Edward II* and *A Massacre at Paris* seems to echo Martin’s previous assertions about the erasure of trauma in tragic history. Martin claims that *Edward II* is metatheatrical in that Edward’s pain is a Christ-like spectacle for voyeurs. As he does in earlier analyses, Martin frequently cites Slavoj Žižek and refers to the “Žižekian subject” who utters, “I suffer, therefore, I am, I exist, I participate in the positive order of being” (104). Yet Edward’s murder reinforces the uncertainty of tragic history since Mortimer’s conspiracy to conceal Edward’s assassination resists elevating Edward’s suffering to a symbol of martyrdom by allowing its erasure from history. That action and dialogue often occur offstage or out of the range of spectators’ hearing reminds them of “history’s private parts” (117). Edward’s death, then, juxtaposes what is known and unknown as his screams escape symbolic expression. Martin explains, “Edward’s screams forcefully declare the inadequacy of the rhetoric of violence, or any rhetoric, to make sense of or justify the infliction of such excruciating pain” (123). However, Mortimer’s beheading and the restoration of Edward to traumatic history denies Edward’s torture. The restoration of “community and history” occurs only at the cost of erasing Edward’s pain (124). Thus, history is at the mercy of realpolitik.

In many ways, Martin points to similarities between *Edward II* and *Massacre at Paris* since Marlowe disrupts traumatic realism through selective remembering. Martin excuses many of the shortcomings often associated with this play as a purposeful disruption of unities in order to question the political motives behind the assembly of history. Martin notes that “tragic frames are silently not chosen or, to put it more strongly, actively forgotten in order to privilege an incoherence that refuses to bring trauma into narrative order,” and by shifting from location to location along with the tolling of the bells, Marlowe created a “whirlwind of action” (132) that assaults “the audience’s senses visually and aurally” (134). The dramatic shift away from the massacre, an event that is never directly mentioned again in the play, suggests that reality is under cover. Once again, tragic history is most noted for its gaps, and Martin claims, “It is precisely the amnesia of realpolitik that the play has invited its audience to interrogate” (143).

Finally, Martin confronts the fundamental traumatic question of the primal scene in *Doctor Faustus*—What does the Other want from me? The trauma results from God’s absence or in the response of “nothing.” Martin argues that “Faustus desires to be desired by the Other,” but there is never any indication that the Other cares at all for Faustus. Contracts, angels, and repentance are all illusions that attempt to appease Faustus’s desperation to be desired by the Other, so Martin argues that “Faustus’s contract, then, provides a specific answer to the traumatizing question of the Other’s demand. He is the phantasmagoric Helen, the *agalma* that is desired by an Other, but like Helen, it is an illusion” (154). Like Edward II, the invisible and the silent involves spectators in the action since, according to Martin, “Faustus’s imperative, ‘see,’ allows the audience to fill the theater’s heavens with their own theological fiction; it equally permits them to see nothing at all, to let the play’s fictional reality collapse back into a heterogeneity of

## Reviews

theatrical devices” (162). The consequence is that Faustus’s own traumatic insecurity reflects that of the audience.

Throughout his investigation, Martin’s psychoanalytical approach provides useful insight as to how Marlowe’s plays disrupt aesthetic conventions. Martin creates an invaluable text that positions Marlowe’s plays within the framework of tragedy and pulls from a wide range of sources, presenting sometimes provocative and rich assertions regarding Marlowe’s subversive approach. Martin’s *Tragedy and Trauma in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* is a text I am glad to have in my library.

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