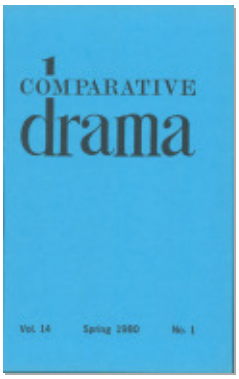
The Jew of Malta by Christopher Marlowe (review)

Mark Rose



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White's volume should be a must for all libraries because it is an extraordinary compendium of information. In addition, it reads with ease and interest.

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Christopher Marlowe. *The Jew of Malta.* Edited by N. W. Bawcutt. The Revels Plays. Manchester: Manchester University Press; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978. Pp. xvi + 207. $15.00.

Do we need another edition of *The Jew of Malta?* Since 1962 there have been at least five new editions of Marlowe's collected plays, including the old-spelling text edited by Fredson Bowers in 1973. There is also an excellent Regents Renaissance Drama edition of *The Jew of Malta,* edited by R. W. Van Fossen (1964), and a New Mermaid, edited by T. W. Craik (1966). None of these, however, can be regarded as a full-scale scholarly edition comparable to, say, the New Arden Shakespeares. The collected editions by Leo Kirschbaum (1962), Irving Ribner (1963), J. B. Steane (1969), and Roma Gill (1971) are all teaching or reading texts of various kinds. The Van Fossen and Craik texts are more fully annotated than these, but most of the notes are merely glosses on difficult words and phrases. Bowers' text, on the other hand, provides only sparse textual notes and nothing at all in the way of glosses or historical information. For a full-scale edition of *The Jew of Malta* scholars have still had to rely on H. S. Bennett's volume in the standard *The Works and Life of Christopher Marlowe,* produced nearly half a century ago under the general editorship of R. H. Case. Published in 1931, Bennett's edition is usable but dated. N. W. Bawcutt's new Revels Plays text replaces it and should now become the standard scholarly reference edition of the play.

All texts of *The Jew of Malta* are based on the 1633 quarto printed under Thomas Heywood's sponsorship some forty years after the play was written in the late 1580's or early 90's. The orthodox attitude toward the quarto is that it presents a text badly corrupted as a result of periodic overhaulings of the play after Marlowe's death. Thus, although the first two acts appear to be substantially Marlovian, it is hard to say how much of Marlowe's hand is present in the latter part of the play. Bawcutt examines the arguments for revision after Marlowe's death and finds them unconvincing. Indeed, from the quarto's formal characteristics—variations in speech-prefixes, omissions of entries and exits, inconsistent marking of asides, and such matters—Bawcutt concludes that what lies behind the early printed text are Marlowe's own foul papers. Thus, in his view, the play that we have is substantially the play that Marlowe wrote. Since the quarto itself, despite its careless printing, is a fairly good one with a number of manifest errors but relatively few serious cruces, the question of what underlies the printed text does not greatly

affect individual readings. Nevertheless, the question does greatly affect our whole approach to the text that we have. Bawcutt's conclusions are not wholly novel—Kirschbaum also suggests an author's draft as the basis of the quarto and other scholars as well have argued for the relative integrity of the text—but they are welcome and they suggest the distance that scholarship has come since Bennett's text.

By and large the glosses and historical notes in Bennett's edition were well done—the curious reader might, however, wish to look up the embarrassing note on Jewish and Italian women on p. 69—and they have formed a basis for subsequent editors' work. Besides incorporating nearly all the still useful information that can be found in Bennett, Bawcutt's edition is able to draw upon recent studies by, among others, G. K. Hunter, P. H. Kocher, and Wilbur Sanders. In particular, Bawcutt provides many new and valuable notes on Marlowe's literary, biblical, and proverbial allusions. Bawcutt also incorporates his own important study of the Elizabethan reception of Machiavelli, material that was published separately in 1970 in *Renaissance Drama,* into both the notes and the introduction. The cumulative effect of the annotations is to locate the play in a fuller and more complexly conceived historical and literary context than has been previously available.

Bawcutt's introduction is also fuller than Bennett's or than those of the Regents and New Mermaid editions. Several aspects of the introduction, in addition to the textual arguments, are worth noting. Most scholars understand the early theatrical records as implying periodic revivals of *The Jew of Malta* and this interpretation has confirmed their sense of the text having been repeatedly overhauled and consequently corrupted. Bawcutt, however, suggests that the play may have been more or less continuously popular from its first appearance to the closing of the theaters. The section on sources is also valuable. Here, in addition to a summary of his work on the reception of Machiavelli, Bawcutt provides a good discussion of the case for regarding Joseph Nasi, the sixteenth-century Jew who was made Duke of Naxos by the Turks, as the prototype of Barabas.

The longest section of the introduction is the critical discussion. Here Bawcutt makes a number of excellent observations about Marlowe's technique in *The Jew of Malta,* dealing in a particularly interesting fashion with the frequent asides—Marlowe, he says, "seems to have been the first English dramatist to explore at length the possibilities of the aside"—and with wordplay and allusion. In this section he also addresses the critical question raised by the textual argument: if this is the play that Marlowe wrote, how is the disappointing second half to be explained? Bawcutt's answer is sound although somewhat predictable. The play is not "broken-backed," half high tragedy and half melodrama or farce. Understood properly, the second half can be seen to develop directly from the first with Barabas consistently conceived as a role player and a villain, an early figure in the theatrical line that leads to Richard III and Volpone. The play as a whole, according to Bawcutt, is a deeply cynical and pessimistic work, and its general vision is implicit in the skeptical message that may be drawn from Machiavelli's

prologue: "The lesson of history is consistent: in practice men scorn idealism and morality, and rely on force, or come to grief if they do not do so."

Bawcutt treats the play's staging in an appendix in which he suggests that a special booth containing a trap door was constructed onstage for the spectacular finale in which Barabas falls into the cauldron. He also departs from the usual editorial practice and relegates Heywood's dedication of the 1633 quarto and his two sets of prologues and epilogues to an appendix. This departure is appropriate. If *The Jew of Malta* that we have is indeed Marlowe's play—and Bawcutt's entire edition may be seen as an extended and persuasive argument to this effect—then why should Thomas Heywood stand between the modern reader and the play?

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Katharine Worth. *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett.* Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, Inc., 1978. Pp. 276. $20.00.

With this series of earnest discussions of selected anti-Naturalist dramatists, we see how a British university teacher whose speciality is student theater productions takes her cast of intense young amateurs into a text. Her thesis, that Yeats's style, originating in the rather isolated Irish theater, now appears a part of a widespread theatrical tradition, is unexceptionable. She supplies her students historical background and continuity for both dramatic literature and stage history and helps them read the plays to work out characterizations. She does not hide her positive bias. She only puts on the plays she loves! Her selection of dramatists, while not incongruous, finds its prevailing unity in her own enthusiastic response. So whether or not we find the book a convincing whole depends upon our response to the modesty, warmth, and charm of the writer. Obviously we shall be more enthusiastic if we share her enthusiasms. These are Yeats above all and all in all (the better part of six of the 10 chapters); some Maeterlinck, one play by Wilde *(Salomé),* Synge, O'Casey, and Beckett.

Furthermore, we shall find her discussions more satisfying if we bring our expectations in line with her purpose. She is not trying to provide any new insights; she is trying to provide consensus and information. She is not trying to be exhaustive in her research; it would overburden her amateur actors. She does not check original texts; her students will use the authorized stage versions. She certainly does not go to original texts when they are not in English, for her students will perform in English translation. It is, in short, a source book for undergraduates

But it is also a book which other teachers can study for its pedagogical