

**What does a comparative study of *The Jew of Malta* and *Volpone* suggest about the contrasted characteristics of Marlowe and Jonson as dramatists?**

While both Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1590) and Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1606) centre on morally ambiguous and manipulative protagonists, a comparative analysis reveals significant differences in the dramatic approaches of these two Renaissance playwrights. These differences are particularly evident in each playwright's character development, presentation of morality and their stylistic technique.

### **Character Development**

It is the lust and greed of Marlowe's protagonist Barabas, and his embodiment of both desire and cruelty, that is the focus of *The Jew of Malta*. For example, this is evident in his declaration, '[a]nd, if you like them, drink your fill and die; / For, so I live, perish may all the world!' (Marlowe 5:2), which he directs at the carpenters who are celebrating his wealth, revealing that he is willing to sacrifice anyone for his own success. Through his character, and, especially through his flaws, Marlowe explores the nature of an individual's free will.

In contrast, Jonson's protagonist *Volpone* is equally clever and deceitful, although also comic, and his scheming operates within the play's moral framework. In this attempt to explore human folly and vice, particularly through his protagonist, Jonson makes use of stereotypes to comic effect. For example, characters, such as the legacy-hunters, exaggerate aspects of human vice for

comic purposes rather than present accurate character portraits. As Volpone observes, '[w]hat a rare punishment is avarice to itself!' (Jonson 1.4), which encapsulates Jonson's concern with the self-inflicted moral consequences of a character's actions.

## **Morality**

A significant connection exists between the two plays, as Tulip (1992) recognises, '*Volpone* owes its origin and deep structure to Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, and its more complex social satire reflects Jonson's engagement with contemporary Venetian society' (231). The moral framework of each play reveals this key contrast between the two playwrights. *The Jew of Malta* presents a vision of an amoral world where its protagonist, Barabas, captivates the supposedly virtuous Christian characters in the play, illustrating that they, too, are flawed. He claims, 'I count religion but a childish toy, / And hold there is no sin but ignorance' (Marlowe 1.1), emphasising his own moral code. Marlowe appears less interested in presenting a universal moral code and more interested in exploring aspects of power, deception and revenge. When Barabas declares, 'Thus every villain ambles after wealth, / Although he ne'er be richer than in hope' (Marlowe 3.4), he shows a view of avarice evident across social groups. The play has no position of virtue from which it judges, which creates an unsettling theatrical experience for its audience.

However, Jonson, constructs *Volpone* as a deliberate satire with a clear set of moral boundaries. For example, power is systematically ridiculed and corruption is exposed. In contrast to Jonson's approach of using comedy to reinforce an ideal ethical framework, Marlowe makes use of

dramatic excess. This is illustrated by Mosca's declaration, '[y]our parasite / Is a most precious thing, dropped from above, / Not bred 'mongst clods and clot-poles, here on earth' (Jonson 3.1), which reveals how Marlowe condemns what he sees as negative behaviour. As Donaldson (1997) argues, '[i]n Jonson's universe, civic misconduct is the ultimate offence, a form of 'blasphemy' against the polis' (15); a viewpoint that contrasts Marlowe's more individualistic portrayal of morality.

## Religion

The two playwrights differ in their treatment of religion. In *The Jew of Malta* religion operates as a tool of manipulation, and Marlowe presents a world where both Christians and Turks exploit their faith for personal benefit (Bevington, 2022: 212), which appears to reflect his scepticism towards social hierarchies. Jonson's approach differs significantly, as while *Volpone* does not centre on critiquing religion, it addresses issues of morality and ethics. The schemes of *Volpone* are condemned for ethical reasons rather than for religious ones, which reflects Jonson's wider preoccupation with social order and virtue (Orgel, 1996). This distinction suggests that while Marlowe raises questions about moral authority, Jonson accepts it as a foundation of society but critiques those who go against it.

## Style

The formal characteristics of each play reflect key differences in stylistic approach. For example, Marlowe's use of blank verse, episodic plotting and theatricality illustrate his character's ambitions. Barabas's claim that, '[a]s for myself, I walk abroad a-nights, / And kill sick people groaning under walls' (Marlowe 1.1) illustrates Marlowe's stylistic technique of combining a negative image with poetic rhythm.

In contrast, Jonson's approach involves tight plotting, precise language and aspects of social realism. Volpone begins with the invocation, '[h]ail to the world's soul, and mine. / More glad than is / The teeming earth to see the longed-for sun / Peep through the horns of the celestial ram' (Jonson 1.1). This ornate rhetoric has a satirical function, which reveals both Volpone's self-delusion and grandiosity. His structured dialogue also reflects his approach to order in the theatre, which contrasts with Marlowe's experimental approach.

## Conclusion

This comparative study of *The Jew of Malta* and *Volpone* reveals Marlowe and Jonson's contrasting approaches and their distinct contributions to Renaissance theatre. Marlow presents his fascination with the extremes of individual will and his scepticism of social hierarchies, and Jonson shares his commitment to social critique and moral instruction, but through comedy. As Kermode (2000) notes, 'Marlowe enthralls through character as a force of nature; Jonson instructs through comedy as a reflection of society' (88).

These differences represent two different approaches to the function of drama. For example, Marlowe's audience is drawn into the spectacle of Barabas's intellect, while Jonson's is guided to laugh at recognisable folly and reflect on their ethical choices with the promise that such reflection can lead to improvements in society. In their distinct approaches, both plays contribute to the evolution of character representation and satire on stage.

## References

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