

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

Formatted: Font: Italic

Formatted: Font: Italic

Formatted: Centred, Line spacing: Double

### A Comparative Study of Marlowe and Jonson: *The Jew of Malta* and *Volpone*

Formatted: Line spacing: Double

Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1590) and Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1606) offer a striking contrast in the dramatic temperaments of two of the most influential playwrights of the English Renaissance.

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

play they also reveal the differences in character development, presentation of morality and their stylistic technique, and a comparative study who manipulate those around them,

### Character Development

Formatted: Font: Bold

It is the lust and greed of ~~and~~ a comparative study reveals fundamental differences in character conception, moral vision, dramatic method, and overall artistic temperament.

### Character Conception: The Overreacher vs. The Comic Type

Marlowe's protagonist Barabas, and his embodiment of both desire and cruelty, that is the focus at the centre of the *The Jew of Malta*. For example, ~~play~~ hethis is evident in his

~~is a figure of extraordinary ambition and audacity, whose greed and lust for revenge propel the narrative. He is conceived on a grand, almost mythic scale, embodying the extremes of human desire and cruelty. As Barabas declarations, '[a]And, if you like them, drink your fill and die; / For, so I live, perish may all the world!' (Marlowe 5:2), which he directed at the carpenters who are celebrate ing 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.

~~"I count religion but a childish toy, / And hold there is no sin but ignorance" (Marlowe 1.1).~~

Barabas dominates the stage, his energy and audacity creating a sense of awe and terror. In contrast, Jonson's protagonist Volpone is ~~is, though~~ equally clever and deceitful, although also comic, and his scheming operates within the play's moral framework. In this attempt to explore

Formatted: Font: Bold

Formatted: Line spacing: Double

Formatted: Font: Italic

human folly and vice, particularly through his protagonist, Jonson makes use of stereotypical character types, albeit to comic effect. For example, characters, such as the legacy-hunters, function as social mirrors, exaggerate aspects of human vices for didactic and 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 through vice. A significant connection exists between the two plays;

rather than presenting complex psychological portraits;

is a comic figure whose scheming is bound by the social and moral framework of the play. Whereas Marlowe revels in the dramatic energy of an individual will, Jonson's focus is on exposing human folly and vice through carefully constructed types. Volpone exclaims observes, "'What a rare punishment is avarice to itself!'" (Jonson 1.4). Jonson's characters, such as the legacy hunters, function as social mirrors, exaggerating human vices for didactic and comic purposes, rather than presenting complex psychological portraits. As Tulip (1992) recognises notes, "'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'" (Tulip 231). This highlights both Jonson's debt to Marlowe and his distinctive approach to social satire.

## **Morality**

Formatted: Font: Bold

Formatted: Tab stops: 13 cm, Left

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,

**Barabas** ‘I count religion but a childish toy, / And hold there is no sin but ignorance’ (Marlowe 1.1), emphasising his own moral code. -

Formatted: Line spacing: Double

### **Moral Vision: Amoral Spectacle vs. Moral Satire**

The moral vision of each playwright further underscores their differences. *The Jew of Malta* presents an amoral universe where: Barabas’s villainy captivates and the, and the supposedly virtuous characters — the Christian characters s — are hypocritical and flawed. Marlowe appears less interested in presenting a universal moral code and more interested in exploring aspects of power, deception and revenge. the’s

When

interest lies in the spectacle of power, deception, and revenge rather than in moral instruction.

Barabas cynically declares, ‘“Thus every villain ambles after wealth, / Although he ne’er be

richer than in hope' e" (Marlowe 3.4), ~~he shows a view of avarice evident across social groups.~~  
The play has ~~no moral centre and no position of virtue from which it judges, which creates an~~  
~~unsettling theatrical experience for its audience.~~

~~However,~~ Jonson, ~~however,~~ 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 to using of using comedy to reinforce an ideal ethical framework,~~  
Marlowe makes use of dramatic excess. This is illustrated by ~~and~~

~~vice is ridiculed, corruption is unmasked, and poetic justice is ultimately served. Where~~  
~~Marlowe excites awe through dramatic excess, Jonson seeks corrective laughter, using comedy~~  
~~as a means to reinforce societal norms and ethical boundaries. As Mosca's declaration states,~~  
~~"[y]Your 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 pretwhat he sees~~  
~~as negativepretentiousense behaviours. rejects.~~ As

~~).~~ Modern scholarship emphasizes this distinction: Donaldson (1997) argues, ~~notes that~~ observes,  
~~"[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 t-portrayal of morality.~~

<sup>22</sup>  
23

## Religion

Formatted: Font: Bold

The two playwrights differ in their treatment of religion. ~~within each play,~~

contrasting with Marlowe's more individualistic portrayal of immorality. (Donaldson 15).

Formatted: Line spacing: Double

### Themes and Treatment of Religion

Another key difference lies in the playwrights' treatment of religion. In *The Jew of Malta*, religion ~~operates functions~~ as a tool of ~~hypocrisy and~~ manipulation, ~~and~~ Marlowe presents a world where ~~both~~ Christians and Turks ~~alike~~ exploit ~~their~~ faith for personal ~~benefit~~ gain, suggesting that moral corruption is universal (Bevington, 2022: 212), ~~which appears to~~. ~~This treatment of religion reflects his skepticism~~ ~~skepticism~~ towards social hierarchies. ~~u~~

~~In~~ By contrast, Jonson's approach differs ~~significantly~~ significantly as while *Volpone* ~~play~~ does not ~~center~~ 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~~ preoccupation with social order and virtue

Formatted: Font: Italic

religious critique; the focus is on social morality and ethical conduct. Volpone's schemes are not condemned on religious grounds but on ethical ones, reflecting Jonson's concern with civic virtue and societal order (Orgel, 1996: 47). This distinction suggests that while Marlowe raises

questions about moral authority, Jonson accepts it as a foundation of society but ~~eritques~~critiques those who go against it~~them~~.

Formatted: Line spacing: Double

### ~~Dramatic Method and Style: Rhetorical Flourish vs. Structured Satire~~

#### Style

Formatted: Font: Bold

The formal characteristics of each play reflect key differences in stylistic approach. For example, ~~Marlowe's use of verse demonstrates~~blank verse, favours the dramatic spectacle and how episodic plotting and ~~theatrically~~theatricality illustrate his character's ambitions. Barabas's claim that, '

Formatted: Font: Not Bold

Formatted: Font: Not Bold

~~Dramatic technique and style further distinguish the two authors. Marlowe's verse is characterized by soaring blank verse and rhetorical brilliance, often favoring dramatic spectacle over structural cohesion. His episodic plot and heightened theatricality amplify the grandeur of his characters' ambitions. For instance, Barabas declares, "[a]s for myself, I walk abroad at nights, / And kill sick people groaning under walls" (Marlowe 1.1).~~illustrates~~illustrates~~ Marlowe's stylistic technique of combining a negative~~horrible~~ image with poetic rhythm.

In contrast,

Jonson's ~~craftsmanship, by contrast, approaching~~ involves tight ~~emphasizes meticulous~~ plotting, precise language, ~~and~~ aspects of social realism. Volpone begins with the invocation ~~opens with a declaration of self-importance and wit:~~ "[h] Hail 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. 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 theatre, which contrasts Marlowe's experimental approach.

## Conclusion

Formatted: Font: Bold

~~Jonson's use of classical unities and structured dialogue reflects his commitment to order and decorum in drama.~~

This comparative study of Artistic Temperament and Audience Reception

Formatted: Line spacing: Double

~~Ultimate~~ In conclusion, a comparative reading comparison of *The Jew of Malta* and *Volpone* reveals ~~illuminates the contrasting artistic temperaments of Marlowe and Jonson's contrasting approaches and their distinct~~ distinct contributions to Renaissance theatre. Marlow presents his fascination with the extremes of individual will and his skepticism 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 extend beyond individual approach to represent two different approaches to the function of drama. For example, *satire*.~~

~~Marlowe emerges as the dramatist of romantic excess, fascinated by the extremes of individual will and ambition. Jonson exemplifies the classical satirist, committed to social critique, moral instruction, and orderly comedy. Marlowe's audience is drawn into the thrilling spectacle of Barabas's intellect and audacity, while Jonson's spectators ~~is~~are 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. Both plays. As Kermode (2000) notes, "Marlowe enthralls through character as a force of nature; Jonson instructs through comedy as a reflection of society" (Kermode 88).~~

~~While In essence, Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* theatre exhilarates through the force of examines the complexities of human nature, Jonson's *Volpone* focuses on vice and folly.~~

~~human desire and audacity, whereas Jonson's theatre instructs through measured exposure of folly and vice. The addition of modern critical perspectives underscores how both dramatists, while differing in style and moral vision, contributed fundamentally to Renaissance drama and the evolution of character and satire on the English stage.~~

Formatted: Line spacing: Double

Formatted: Line spacing: Double

## Works Cited/References

Formatted: Font: 12 pt

Formatted: Font: 12 pt

Bevington, David. ~~-(2002)-~~ *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*. 2nd ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2002.

Donaldson, Ian. "Marlowe, Jonson, and the Origins of Evil." *Shakespeare Studies*, ~~vol.~~ 25, 1997, pp. 13–24.

Jonson, Ben. *Volpone, or The Fox*. 1606. Edited by G.A. Wilkes, Methuen, 1913.

Kermode, Frank. *Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson: The Poems and Plays of the Elizabethan Stage*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Marlowe, Christopher. *The Jew of Malta*. c.1590. Edited by Frank W. Chandler, Houghton Mifflin, 1900.

Orgel, Stephen. *Ben Jonson: The Critical Heritage*. Routledge, 1996.

Tulip, J. "The Intertextualities of Ben Jonson's Volpone." *Journal of Renaissance Studies*, ~~vol.~~ 12(2), ~~no. 2~~, 1992, pp. 229–245.

SparkNotes Editors. "The Jew of Malta Quotes." *SparkNotes*, <https://www.sparknotes.com/drama/jewofmalta/quotes/>

SparkNotes Editors. "Volpone Quotes." *SparkNotes*, <https://www.sparknotes.com/drama/volpone/quotes/>

GradeSaver Editors. "The Jew of Malta Study Guide." GradeSaver,  
<https://www.gradesaver.com/the-jew-of-malta/study-guide/quotes>

Field Code Changed



Oxford Essays