Chapter: V

RELIGION AND POETRY

Marlowe’s Attitude to Religion

Marlowe’s Poetic Achievement

Marlowe’s attitude to religion has been a controversial subject. From the now famous sentences, it is generally concluded that he was an atheist. The words of his friend Robert Green, "Daring God out of heaven" have become a substitute for Marlowe’s attitude to religion". The words of the ghost of Machiavelli in the Jew of Malta deify Marlowe as an atheist.

Marlowe’s religious stance has been discussed by too many and their finding vary from castigating him as an atheist to deifying him as an objective artist. The following words of Machiavelli’s ghost have become famous and are inseparably associate with Marlowe’s religious stand:

“I count Religion but a Childish Toy,
And hold there is no sinne but Ignorance.
Birds of the Aire will tell of murders past;
I am asham’d to heare such fooleries”.

Marlowe’s views on religion and god may have to be examined in relation to the under currents of the religious thoughts during the Tudors. Despite the fact that the Anglican Church was established, the people’s attitude to religion was open, liberal during the Tudors. “The Tudors inhabited from the medieval world view a coherent system of beliefs bearing on social order”. In the world of scholasticism the old ideas of
Aristotle and Medieval Christianity was fast crumbling. The new conditions favoured a pragmatic outlook and the ideal of self-development through action. The humanist looked to classical antiquity for a moral and intellectual revival while the Protestant Reformers tried to find salvation in the Scriptures. This is well-illustrated and substantiated by St. Thomas Aquinas and Hooker.

In the first phase of the Queen Elizabeth’s reign, there was an intellectual synthesis between a faith in the vital processes of the soul and the practical aspects of an expanding society. The synthesis resultanty provided a robust gusto to the writers in the earlier period. There was a rosy and sanguine idealism of the spirit, added to the newly inspired Patriotism, Nationalism and even material prosperity.

Marlowe was a full-fledged participant in this wave of the synthesis between the spiritual idealism and the joy and profit of materialism. But the genius of Marlowe made him to see through this synthesis more clearly than others. He recognised the absurdity in this temporary synthesis, and as Dr. Fermor pointed out, “Marlowe’s keen spiritual sense sees through the delusion of prosperity that intoxicates his contemporaries as a whole and anticipates that mood of spiritual despair, which is its necessary result and becomes the centre of the later tragic mood. And this position is reached by Marlowe through once section his experience, which is, in its turn, an epitome the experience that touched a large number of the Jacobean dramatists after him, his exploration of the system of Machiavelli.
During the 80's 90's of the Sixteenth century, the world of epistemology, was full of intellectual analysis and discussions regarding the basic structures of the Church and the state. Hooker attempted to accept nature and its workings to be of primary importance. Law for Hooker is an all embracing concept. Divine and natural and man-made laws are put on the same base. It is clear that this new emphasis on nature was slowly displacing the strong structures of the medieval institutions like the church and the state. The very effort of the Tudors to reshape the medieval order on a national footing placed it under increasing strain. Actually, 'Protestantism' outran the wishes of Henry VIII and Elizabeth. The new monarchy itself stimulated unruly ambition. And the desire was gradually forming to master nature and not to obey her.

In the field of religion, the established church of England could not command the expected respect from the Englishmen. The Puritans refused to recognise any authority in religion outside the Bible. Similarly the Catholics attacked the church from the other side. There was an unending discussion on the religious issues and many of them were carried on openly and publicly. This trend seemed to endanger the authority of the state, there was an order issued: "Such subjects as are disobedient or rebellious against their princess, disobey god and procured their own damnation. The attempt to revive the classical conception of nature was the outcome of the doubtful and sceptical discussions on the basics of religion. All the intellectuals, and sensible readers of the Bible participated in the controversies and desired to record their voice. Under such conditions of religion, fogged with distrust and instability, most of the intellectuals resorted to Machiavelli. Because his theory seemed to cut away the ground from religious theories
altogether. For most Elizabethans Machiavelli was simply a monster, an advocate of murder and treachery. But some sincere students, who read and understood Machiavelli, enthroned him as an alternative to the religious and political nihilism. "When Machiavelli was abused in public, therefore he was studied in private for his effectual truth."

In the opening scene of Doctor Faustus, reviewing the mastery he acquired over the subjects under the sun, he reflects on Divinity and says,

``
divinity is best,
Jerome's Bible, Faustus view it well.
Stipendium peccati mors est: ha, Stipendium, & c.
The reward of sinne is death: thats hard.
Si peccasse negamus, fallimur, & nulla est in nobis veritas.
If we say that we haue no sinne,
We deceiue our selves, and there is no truth in vs.
Why then belike
We must sinne, and so consequently die.
I, we must die an everlasting death:
What doctrine call you this, Che sera, sera,
What will be, shall be? Divinitie, adieu."
``

The implication of these sentences is in a way illogical, and yet the Christian doctrine stresses that death is the result of sin. Death is as natural as birth. It can be defended only when birth is conceived as the result of sin. The absolute contradiction of the sentence is too hard to bear. He adds that to say that one has no sin is to deceive one's own self. He concludes that the sin also is inevitable, as the death is inevitable. It still may be assumed that Marlowe gave only a cryptic comment only due to the fear of heresy. In this expression there is a glimpse of the separation between the two worlds, the spiritual and the material. Faced with an inevitable choice, he naturally prefers the material and the immediate. This choice of the worldly and the material at the cost of the
spiritual is very common in the contemporary society. In such a dilemma it is interesting to see the choice made by Shakespeare:

"who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country, from whose born
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have,
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all."

(Hamlet Act III, Scene I)

The seen and the known are definitely preferred to the unseen and unknown. As many others of his generation, like Sir Walter Raleigh, Marlowe had opted for the material the immediate.

The preceding arguments are presented only to show that Marlowe’s attitude towards religion are in no way different from those held and cherished by some of the intellectuals of his times. It appears that this spirit is not a negation of God. In the midst of confusing concepts, provided by the contemporary political and religious conditions, one is tired and ultimately opts for a particular path — “Of this am I assured, that death ends all”.

The establishment of the Church of England and the Reformation left good many sincere and intellectual Christians into a moral crisis. It is now a common knowledge that Henry VIII on his deathbed repented and craved for forgiveness from the real God. Though the country as a whole and the Puritans in particular were jubilant at the
reformation, in the age of Queen Elizabeth. These Puritans were disillusioned by the way in which the Church of England was run. It also may be mentioned that Sir Thomas More who was sent to scaffold refused to take his oath in the name of the King. In the last decades of the 16th century the religious scepticism and the truth about the religion and god were the most discussed and debated points. John Donne in one of his most powerful sonnets expressed his divided soul between the English god and the Roman god:

"Batter my heart, three person'd God:- - -
I, like an usurp towne, to'another due,
Labour to'admit you, but Oh, to no end,
Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved alone,
But am betroth'd unto your enemie:
Divorce mee, 'untie, or break that knot again;
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free,
Nor ever chest, except you ravish mee,

(Page no. 88 Metaphysical Lyics and Poems Ed. By H. J. C. Grierson, Oxford )

Even Sir Thomas Browne said, "I could never hear the Ave Maria bell without an elevation or thinking a sufficient warrant, because they erred in one circumstance, for me to err in all, that is, in silence and dumb contempt; whilst therefore they direct their devotion to her, I offer mine to God, and rectify the errors of their prayers by rightly ordering mine own." (Religio Medici section 3) All these things show that this split soul and divided faiths were a common phenomena specially in the educated and the intellectuals. Marlowe hailed from a family sincere and devotional to God and religion. He was courageous and dynamic young man. He was not only a University student but also very close to the royal court due to his presumed employment as a spy. Because of all these things he courageously expressed his sceptical and rational ideas in his friends'
circle. But some of the close friends thought of gaining an advantage over him by reporting them to the queen.

From the various accounts provided to us the personality of Marlowe appears more dignified than what we think of him as an author of plays. Marlowe appears before us as a hefty man with big strides walking the streets of London during the nights with a missionary zeal to propagate atheism and to convert Christians to atheists. A visitor of taverns and houses of men like Sir Walter Raleigh finding an opportunity to question and to disprove the authenticity and the sacredness of the Scriptures. Such a picture arises after reading the accounts received from Richard Baines, as quoted by Paul H. Kocher, reveals the opinions held by Marlowe. Kocher analyses the various charges laid against Marlowe by Baines. They fall under four main topics: 1. Attacks on the theological version of the early history with respect to the Old Testament figuring Adam and Moses; 2 disrespect to Christ about his divinity and sexual looseness; 3. Criticism of the ‘method’ of the Christian religion; 4. Marlowe’s efforts to secure converts to atheism. Baines files these charges and states that he actually heard them from Marlowe himself. Paul Kocher comments, “To the objection that the Baines’ document represents no more than the rolling snowball of malicious rumour against Marlowe. The present theory can give no conclusive answer.”6 (‘Marlowe’s Atheist Lecture’ by Paul H. Kocher.) From the Journal of English and German Philology, XXXIX 1940 p. 98-106) It is surprising that Kocher concludes though he anticipates the conception which has no answer.
The young American J. Leslie Hotson, made 'a series of remarkable discoveries in London' that completely changed the tradition picture of how Marlowe has met his death. Hotson has been puzzling over the name of Marlowe's killer. After a strenuous search, "As I turned over the Leaves of the Calendar of close role, my eye fell upon the name of Imgram Frizer. I felt at once that I had come upon the man who killed Christopher Marlowe." (Introduction of Judith O'Neill 'Critics on Marlowe') Hotson's brilliant piece of detection established the true fact of Marlowe's death. This evidence of Marlowe's death was responded by some of his puritans contemporaries with religious undertone. For example, Thomas Beard (Ibid.) commented, "The manner of his death being so terrible (he even curse and blasphemed to his last gasp, and together with his breathe and oath flew out of his mouth) that it was not only a manifest sign of God's judgement but also an horrible and fearful terror to all that beheld him." Similarly William Vaughan commented on Marlowe's death, "Thus did God, the true executioner of divine justice worked the end of impious atheism" (Ibid.) Another contemporary Edmund Rudferde stated, "Mark this ye players that leave by making fools, laugh at sins and wickedness." All these instances show that at least in his days, there was a Puritan conspiracy to dub him as an atheist.

While disagreeing with Mr. Kocher, William Empson stated, "If Marlowe had not been murdered so soon he would very probably burned alive. It was not hard for him to imagine hellfire." (Judith O'Neill, page no. 118) There would be no reason for surprise if he were burned alive. Because the readers know what happened to Sir Thomas More
and Sir Walter Raleigh. To be burnt alive during the Tudor reign, one need not be an atheist only. This argument does not give any relief for our literary problem. In the same review William Empson correctly points out, "The peculiarity of the mind of Marlowe is not that it is 'aspiring' or 'subjective' are considered 'will invisible' but that it erected opposed ideals. The unmentionable sin for which the punishment was death was the proper thing to do. (His)"¹² (Ibid.) But the question is what the actual connotation of the word 'proper'. If it is not exaggerated, the theme of Marlowe's plays and the effort of Marlowe is to secure the actual meaning of the word proper 'by initiating an impartial public debate.

However, by all these incidents, anecdotes and accounts, it is established that Marlowe was an atheist. Atheism is simply the disbelief in God. Again it can be questioned disbelief in the Christian in the God or disbelief in one Universal God irrespective of religion. In the given context of Marlowe's time, rational questioning of religious issue was both a common and uncommon matter. But one thing is certain, that is punishment of death can not be, or need not be a criterion for blasphemy or atheism during the Tudor reign.

Secondly, it must be considered whether Marlowe's personal views is specially a revolutionary questioning about the place of religion, is visible in his dramas or not. A survey of his dramas and detailed study of his characters do not substantiate such a view. On the other hand his plays attempt to open up and opened debate on the concept of God.
and belief. There may not be any assertion of any particular religious God, but in each of
his plays the problem of morality and belief is ever present.

The above discussion may be concluded by stating that Marlowe’s dramas may be
admired and evaluated without any reference to atheism. We can quote William Hazlitt
in this connection. “I cannot find, in Marlowe’s play, any proofs of atheism or impiety
attributed to him, unless the belief in witchcraft and the Devil can be regarded as such;
and at the time he wrote, not to have believed in both, would have been construed into the
rankest atheism and irreligion. There is a delight, as Mr. Lamb says, in dallying with
interdicted subjects; but that does not, by any means, imply either a practical or
speculative disbelief of them........"13 (Critics on Marlowe Ed. by Judith O'Neill pg.
no. 17) If Marlowe’s creative world is removed from the stain of atheism and accept it as
an independent world by itself then, question would arise if his heroes are mouthpieces of
their creator or not. The traditional criticism always forwarded the view that Marlowe’s
heroes are his own personal projections. It also included the heroes, religious
convictions, their sincerity of belief, and the conception of God and religion. But it is
difficult to summarily accept it. Marlowe’s heroes are the creations of his own
projections only to a limited extent. They are loaded with superhuman ambition and
aspiration. They are also what Marlowe wished the Renaissance’s man to be but they
also are the victims of Marlowe’s shattered dream of idealism. However, they must be
studied from their religious attitudes and their conceptions of words. It cannot be denied
that Marlowe’s concern for the spiritual problems is predominant in his creative
imagination. The stories availed from religion and popular students are incubated in his
romantic imagination, mixing them with his own intellectual colours. Each of these themes is spiritually elevated.

Tamburlaine does not possess any respect for any religion or God. He says,

"I hold the fate bound fast in iron chains,  
With my hands turn fortune's wheel above;"

(Act I, scene ii, lines 74-75)

His looks do menace heaven and dares the God. It was correctly pointed out that Marlowe’s Tamburlaine is shaped after Hercules, who set out to vanquish gods. According to Theridamas, “God is not so glorious as a King”. This spirit of drama ignored the concept of God but at the same time some force is stated as a substitute, sometimes it is Fate and sometimes it is Nature. Tamburlaine asserts:

“Nature that fram’d us of four elements,  
That teaches us to have aspiring mind.”

Marlowe’s heroes seem to be not so much against God or some invisible power, but all of them deride and dislike Christianity as a religion. The peace pact between Sigismond and Orcanes brings out the inherent hatred for the Christian behaviour but organically Orcanes provides an illustration where Christ comes upright by punishing Sigismond and his army. Orcanes’s are really exemplary because being a Turk asks Christ to prove his esteemed omnipotence:

“Thou, Christ, that art esteem’d omnipotence  
If thou wilt prove thyself a perfect God,  
Worthy the worship of all faithful hearts”.  

(Tamburlaine Part II, Act II, scene ii, lines 54-57)
In part Tamburlaine maintains the same attitude. Before his death he conceits that there is fate but no God. In The Jew of Malta, Barabas also is completely devoid of any sense of God. He also yields to Fate in the end.

In the play the Christians are very mercilessly abused for their nature and qualities. Barabas vehemently incarcerate them for their idleness and selfishness. Barabas questions them

"Will you then steal my goods,  
Is theft the ground of your religion?"
(The Jew of Malta, Act i, scene ii, lines 95-96)

He exhorts, "It is no sin to deceive a Christian." Inspite of Barabas’s hatred and tirade against Christianity, his daughter Abigail dies with the words:

"Convert my father that he may be saved  
And witness that I die a Christian".

Barabas also dies uttering these words:

"Die, life! Fly, soul! Tongue, curse thy fill and die!"

Of all the dramas of Marlowe, Doctor Faustus is the most popular and the most discussed play during his days. Inspite of its maimed nature it becomes castigate not only for Marlowe’s religious dilemma. Here Marlowe’s religious attitude is described severally, as ‘Subjective’, inverse morality, Satanic creed etc. Actually, this drama is very simple, and it dramatised a story of a German magician of the Middle Ages. It has a moral purpose because Marlowe himself asserts in the first and the last prologue. It is described as Faustus’s ‘Hellish fall’, as a warning to others of the dangers of exceeding the heavenly ordained limits of knowledge. As a morality plays does, Doctor Faustus ends with the lines,
"Whose deepness doth entice such forwards wits
To practice more than heavenly power permits"

In the first part of the play, then, Faustus's mind reaches out eagerly to the new worlds before him, in spite of an occasional check from the suggestion of the good angel. In the second part his tendency is to react from this and to repent but he is checked and dragged back unwillingly to ruinous courses by the same spirit that had urged him on in the first part.

In the first, Faustus is brought at length to throw in his lot with the evil forces and loosen his hold on the good; in the second, he is brought to despair of the good and so give himself over wholly to the evil. When the first has been accomplished the downward action sets in the catastrophe follows immediately upon the second. Faustus is a typical Marlowian hero. Just as Tamburlaine represents Conquering Power, and Barabas the Power of Wealth, Faustus typifies the Power of Boundless Knowledge, which was the ideal of the medieval scholar. He has the genuine Renaissance passion for the 'knowledge infinite'. His ambition is even greater than Tamburlaine's; he soars beyond the petty possibilities of humanity, leagues himself with superhuman powers, and rides through space in a fiery chariot exploring the secrets of the universe. Faustus is the most learned scholar of the day; he has learnt all that the university can teach him—logic, physic, law, divinity, and still he is unsatisfied. He will pluck the forbidden fruit-magic.

The play is different with his other plays who are similar in spirits but it has occupied the centre stage of criticism, because Doctor Faustus views and actions directly injured the Christian spirit. But it is also a fact that 'there is nothing in it, which could
not have been written by a convinced Christian. He does not twist the traditional story for anti-traditional end. Marlowe does not attempt to elicit excess of sympathy for the unorthodox aspirations of Faustus. The drama deals with the traditional concept of sin, the puzzle between material pleasure and salvation of soul. If Marlowe handled this theme in Doctor Faustus as he handled in other plays like Tamburlaine and the Jew of Malta, there would not have been any speciality. Faustus is an ambitious man as his desire is not merely infinite knowledge. He mastered many subjects, and he also enjoyed the resultant profit, but he is not satisfied. He desires something, which a man can never do and that only god can do. He is dissatisfied because he could not bring a dead man to life, nor to make man immortal. It means that his ambition and aspiration is a spiritual challenge to god. Tamburlaine and Barabas aspired only for material victories within the reach of man. But Faustus demands for what belongs to God. This is the scene according to Christianity. To fulfil his sinful desires he sells his soul to Lucifer, so that he would enjoy everything for twenty-four years. The pity is that Faustus knows what is good and what is evil. He also knows the pleasures of heaven and the pangs of hell. This knowledge of Faustus makes him frightened even in the midst of his hellish pleasures.

At the beginning of the drama his desire for the ultimate is very strong and his fear of God is very insignificant. As the play develops, the growth of these two becomes inversely proportional. His fear of hell makes him shiver and he is convinced that god would spurn him. This particular aspect of the anguish of a surrendered soul, craving to go back to his divine Father. The theme is the essence of Christianity. The drama's
popularity is because its crisis is the concern of every Christian. The crisis is moral in Doctor Faustus, as it is emotional in Hamlet.

As it is, the drama does not have any need to reflect upon the Christian doctrine of sin, for its study and appreciation. It is the universal drama of every human being who is invariably caught between good and evil and between worldly pleasure and salvation of soul. There are some critics who upheld the aesthetic value of drama without paying much attention to its moral and religious dimension.

The Massacre at Paris must act like a foil for Doctor Faustus. Those who were hurt by Doctor Faustus, must be happy because Marlowe paid great sympathy for the massacre of the Protestants. The murder of the Protestants is not only punished but Navarre as a supporter of Protestant is also rewarded. During the Tudor days Pope was equated with Devil by the Protestants. There was a great hatred for everything related to Roman Catholicism. On such a background Marlowe might have selected this topic intentionally. Right from the beginning of the play the Guise is associated with Pope and Roman Catholic Church all the while. He has Machiavellian cunning and cruelty in him. Behind the massacre Guise has played a villainous role with the co-operation of the King, King’s mother Catharine and his brothers. Catharine is a staunch Catholic and the aspiring Guise a favourite of Pope. On the other side there is the King of Navarre, who married Margaret the sister of the French King. Even before the marriage Catharine is very unhappy because King of Navarre is at Protestant. Ultimately Navarre is successful in eliminating Guise and Protestant King is enthroned in France. Marlowe has selected
this theme timely. The horror of 1572 massacre was still fresh in the English mind. Besides Prince Phillip of Spain planned to defeat England and marry Elizabeth but this plan failed. Catholic in England, with foreign help plotted against the Queen of England. Under such conditions Marlowe wrote this play. In this drama the character of Navarre is a kind of deification a Protestantism. His faith in God is very strong. He says:

"But he that sits and rules above the clouds
Doth fear and see the prayers of the just,
And will revenge the blood of innocence."

While considering Marlowe’s attitude the religion, Navarre becomes the mouthpiece of the glories of the Protestant God.

Marlowe has presented Dido a widowed Queen of Carthage who should lead a pious life and devote her time for the welfare of the state. But she is ready to risk her crown for Aeneas’s love.

Marlowe has contributed many things to English drama in general and the Elizabethan drama in particular. But the greatest of them is Blank Verse. Before him also poets and dramatists used Blank Verse. It was just like a verse form like any other. But Marlowe transformed this verse-form as the most proper means to communicate the ethos of the Elizabethan dramatic spirit. The Elizabethan mind was eager, demanding, ambitious and passionate. The Renaissance spirit at first found its musical utterance in poetry of Sidney, Spenser and the Elizabethan sonneteers. The Elizabethan Age has aptly been described by Legouis as ‘a nest of singing birds’. But very soon the Renaissance spirit shifted from the court to the theatre. The common man, a labourer or a
gravedigger drunk deep with the new spirit. Poetry gave way to drama. The public demand of drama was completely different from the courtly demand of poetry. A new drama was the need of the day and that too with a medium of popular taste and popular idiom. This demand of the public was fulfilled by Marlowe by wielding Blank Verse for the dramatic use. Saintsbury opined that before Marlowe, blank verse lines were either stiff or nerveless. He compared the previous attempt “like a dried preparation, like something waiting for infusion of blood, for the inflation of living breath”.

Primarily, the Elizabethan Age was stirred by unbridled imagination resulting in passion. Blank Verse was employed by Marlowe to give vent to high passion. His first play ‘Tamburlaine’, Marlowe ironically describes the existing fashion as ‘jigging veins of rhyming mother-wits’ from which he promises to lead into the tents of war, with high astounding terms. The passionate expression is freely adjusted in the free verse of iambic pentameter lines without the burden of rhyme. High passion and high imagination found its free flow in Marlowe’s Blank Verse. The first speech of Tamburlaine:

“I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains,  
And with my hand turn Fortune’s wheel about;  
And sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere  
Than Tamburlaine be slain or overcome.”  
(Tamburlaine Part I, Act I, scene ii, lines 174-177)

The majesty and dignity of those lines provides a sober shade of the passion. A more emphatic example is,

“For fates and oracles the heaven have sworn  
To royalise the deeds of Tamburlaine,  
And make them blest that share in his attempts.”  
(Tamburlaine Part I, Act II, scene iii, lines 7-9)

The passion of rage is physically conveyed in these lines.
"Brawl not, I warn you for your treachery;
For every man that so offend shall die."

Or the famous passage is a mixture of pride, ease and mockery,

"Holla, you pampered Jades of Asia
What, can ye draw but twenty miles a day,
And have so proud a chariot at your heels
And such a coachman as great Tamburlaine,
But from asphalise, where I conquered you
To Byron hear, where thus I honour you?"

(Act IV, scene iii, lines 1-6)

When it is passion of beauty, his blank verse becomes lyrical,

"Was this the face that launch’d the thousand ships
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium
O Helen make me immortal with a kiss"

Or

Fair is too foul an epithet for thee

or

If all the poets that held the pens.

Even the weak King Edward II is electrified in anger. He rages,

"But when the imperial lions flesh is gourd
He rants and tears with his wrathful path,
And highly scouring that the lovely earth
Should drink his blood, mounts up into the air"

Marlowe has made blank verse an appropriate medium not for expressing passion only. He also adopted it for conversational tone. Normally, it is thought Marlowe’s drama have lesser conversation. For example, the opening of Tamburlaine uttered by Mycetes is a weak man’s speech with a heavy and semi-ironical mode,
"Brother Cosroe I find myself a griev’d;
Yet insufficient to express the same,
For it requires a great and thundering speech;
Good brother, tell the cause unto my lord;
I know you have a better wit than I."

Sometimes conversation among many is conducted, by preserving the individual traits. In Act I scene ii of Tamburlaine Part I, a soldier brings news –

Soldier: - news, news, news.
Tamburlaine: - How now what’s the matter?
Soldier: - A thousand Persian Horsemen are at hand,
   Sent from the king to over come us all - "

The blank verse was employed by the Senecan School of dramatist. In their hands each line ended with a strongly accented syllable, as a result each line stood by itself. It also is separated by a pause from the preceding and the following verses. But Marlowe made the line end with an unaccented syllable, which gained a swing or a momentum. This made the line a part of a passage, connecting it with the previous and the following lines.

T. S. Elliot says, “Marlowe gets into blank verse the melody of Spenser”14. Marlowe handling of blank verse, was received with mixed response from his contemporaries. Ben Jonson complained that “It had nothing in them but cynical strutting and furious vociferation to warrant them to the ignorant gapers”. Marlowe’s contribution to the blank verse is summarised by Thorndike in the following words:
“If it has had many greater masters since, it had none comparable before, and inspite of stiffness, monotony and great unevenness it rises now and again to remarkable technical excellence. --- yet the lover of romantic poetry will find delight in the very impetuosity of the rant, the thunder of the declamation, the role of proper names, the colour and peasantry of description, the occasional loveliness of the luxurious classicism, and yet more in the splendid surges of the verse to reveal the turmoil and anguish of passionate death.--- he brought not only blank verse but poetry to the English drama and the greatness of his style dates from his achievement.”¹⁵

The survival and success of any drama depends on the idiom. The familiar, popular idiom brings the drama and the audience to a level of mental understanding and admiration. A great dramatist is one who presents it through his dramas. Marlowe moulded blank verse to daily speech rhythm. This has become ultimately the popular idiom. The dialogues of his dramas were written for the groundlings and the common men. This can be seen from the speeches that depend on loud voice and lengthy passages. Actually, Marlowe made blank verse supple, to be twisted to his needs. It is worth mentioning that in his limited number of plays, the number of apt quoted passages are too many.

To consider the contribution of blank verse to drama is also to consider his contribution to poetic drama. The subtle difference between the worse drama and poetic drama emerges in the plays of Marlowe. It may not be summarily stated that other Elizabethan dramatist did not exhibit this quality. The plays dealing with Greek and

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Roman mythology or the Senecan tragedies like the ‘Spanish Tragedy’ could not be a proper contest to reveal this subtle difference. But when the themes related to the Scythian shepherd, the German doctor or Barabas, this difference arises glaringly. Poetic drama is not a drama garbed in verse. It is a view of life, conceived in poetic imagination and executed. An ordinary thing is condition in a poet’s imagination, which is resultanty, acquires an elevation, a lofty stage. It can be communicated in spontaneous poetry, with appropriate imagery and symbolism. The life of Scythian shepherd is transformed into an epic of human endeavour. He is presented as a symbol of stately tent of war threatening the kingdoms. The conception of the theme is completely transformed in Marlowe’s poetic vision. The personality of Tamburlaine grows to an Herculean size and his wavering swords becomes the scourge the God. The ‘Persian shepherdess’ becomes a model of beauty of Renaissance’s imagination. So a poetic drama is conceived and it materialisation cannot be done without poetry.

Marlowe was a born poet and there were many during Elizabethan Age. But a poetic drama emerges out of his pen. Every poetic drama may not be a popular success because of the vast gap between poet’s conception and audience’s comprehension. This is bridge only when the dramatist moulds his poetic imagination into the popular idiom. This was achieved by Marlowe when he grasped the pulse of exalted imagination of the Elizabethan audience. In his first three dramas there are either a prologue or an introduction. He explains his intention of presenting a poetised situation of life. Marlowe was aware of the Elizabethan stage and its limitations very well. It was a bare stage, and the audience was not cultured and educated courtiers. He will have to reach them only
with the spoken word charged with emotion and imagination. So he used his poetic abilities, to achieve this effect.

In the opening scene of The Jew of Malta, the Jew’s love for money is presented in a startling fashion, where the idea of money is changed into an image of universal wealth. Barabas wished to revenge on the Christians is equalled with a catastrophic hit back of a superman. But in Doctor Faustus the theme itself was of a sublime level. The poet only added the glittering edge of Faustus’s fear and his anguish for the choice. Even in the massacre of Paris Marlowe raises the King of Navarre to be the champion of Protestants. These transformations by poetic imaginations are the essential ingredients for a poetic drama. Reality becomes poetic by emotion and imagination and that too when reality undergoes a sea change to identify with them. That is what Marlowe has done. He made blank verse supple and flexible, as he was a born poet. When he successfully transformed base reality into emotional and imaginative substance, genuine poetic drama came into existence. Hence Marlowe may be termed as ‘The Father of English Poetic Drama’.
Reference Chapter V

1. The Jew of Malta (Prologue lines 14-17)
2. Doctor Faustus (Act I, scene I, lines 38-49)
3. Hamlet (Act III, scene I)
5. Religio Medici sec III
6. Marlowe’s Atheist Lecture by Paul H. Cocher from the Journal of English and German Philology XXXIX 1940 pg. No. 98-106
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
15. ‘Tragedy’ by Thorndike.