

Jacob A. Cedillo Tootalian  
University of Wisconsin – Madison

### Stage Ventures: Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the Plotting of Chance

Performances of The Jew of Malta stage a verbal confrontation between the Maltese governor and the Turkish bashaws in the penultimate scene of the third act. The sudden return of the Ottoman fleet prompts the governor to demand the reason for their entrance:

Ferneze:       What wind drives you thus into Malta road?

Callapine:     The wind that bloweth the world besides:

Desire of gold. (3.5.2-4)

Ferneze's question uses the language of meteorological determinism to assume an explanation for the fleet's arrival that occludes human agency. Callapine's retort, however, turns that logic by identifying the elemental force of the wind with a distinctly human motivation. The Turks have come to demand tribute of Malta and Callapine conspicuously veils the drive to accumulate wealth in the metaphorical vestments of a physical cause. This conflation obscures the distinction between events that occur through human action and events that occur through forces beyond human control. Though these causal explanations confront difficult epistemological questions, distinguishing between them is narratologically vital. The status of plotted occurrences determines the narrative logic of a play, affecting the way that meaning is constructed through theatrical performance. Works like Marlowe's The Jew of Malta and Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice engage the challenge of understanding chance—the manifestation of factors that appear random from a limited perspective—in their depiction of early modern mercantile trade. Yet, chance is an inexorable component of the commercial theater. For both playgoers and playing companies, drama constitutes a venture that aspires for theatrical success in an environment in which many of the variables remain unknowable. This pragmatic concern is

difficult to articulate when the critical emphasis is fixed on either aesthetics or ideology. In an effort to hone in on the practical function of theatrical works, I will focus the comparative inquiry into The Merchant of Venice and The Jew of Malta on the plotting of chance events in these plays. The contingencies enacted through the plot of these narratives treat playgoers to the experience of chance as a mediator of human actions. Whereas Marlowe presents characters that seek to manage the notion of fortune, Shakespeare uses chance events to facilitate the actions of characters. I argue that their distinct portrayals of chance dynamics have implications for their respective theories of theatrical engagement. By staging the uncertainty of commercial ventures, Marlowe and Shakespeare afford us the opportunity to understand their impressions of human action and contingency as they operate within the enterprises of trade and theater alike.

The general similarities between The Merchant of Venice and The Jew of Malta—the depiction of commercial trade, Jewish characters, Mediterranean locales, etc.—have drawn significant critical attention to the relationship between the plays. Rosalyn Knutson speculates that Shakespeare produced his comedy in response to the enduring stage success of Marlowe's tragedy (53-4). The scholarly convention of Marlowe and Shakespeare's antagonistic rivalry casts a shadow across efforts to understand the relationship of influence between The Merchant of Venice and The Jew of Malta. James Shapiro conceives of the connection between the plays using the new historicist "containment" model, which relies on a principle of hostile emulation "fueled by and mirrored in the nascent capitalism upon which the commercial theater was founded" (275). His insistence on these economic implications does not lead to further study of the operations that underlie the market dynamics of the theater, nor does it frame the perceived conflict between the playwrights in a manner that accounts for their calculated engagements with playgoers. Rather, Shapiro's consideration of the ideological valences of the plays obscures the

exploration of drama as a practical endeavor reliant on the commercial support of active audiences. Robert Logan more productively considers the pragmatic function of the public stage, setting aside the theory of an antagonistic professional rivalry between Marlowe and Shakespeare, of which he sees no evidence. Instead of an ideological framework, Logan develops the inquiry into literary influence, concentrating analysis on “the use(s)” to which inspirations or borrowings are put (9). Logan determines that Shakespeare was not necessarily invested in Marlovian ideas or lines of exploration *as such*. He seems to have been “primarily interested in the theatrical and literary techniques of Marlowe that made him a successful commercial playwright” (120). While this insight attends to some of the underlying calculations that drive dramatic composition, Logan does not pursue in any sustained way the nature of audience engagement required for the commercial success of a play.

To understand the artistry of drama designed within the economic reality of the public stage, literary scholars must take into account the agency of playgoers. Thomas Cartelli examines the appeal of commercial theater, using the metaphor of economy to conceptualize the active and complex engagement of audiences. His study considers the playtext as a supplemental record of performance that “asks us to reconstruct the dynamics of audience engagement from the point of view of the audience itself,” an audience perhaps “more restive and contentious” than modern critics might expect (11). The playtexts of The Jew of Malta and The Merchant of Venice, then, afford us the opportunity to examine the theatrical strategies mapped on the page and to extrapolate the range of engagements they might facilitate in the experience of performance. This perspective underscores the inability of a playing company to wield absolute control over the impact of their performances. We can only understand Marlowe and Shakespeare as agents in a process that eventually becomes “a matter of resonances and

suggestions that continue to ramify in a playgoer's mind long after play's end" (Cartelli 28). Thus, drama operates through a medium of contingencies that permits theatrical experience, a manner of engagement that occurs on the level of what Cartelli calls "incidental effects" (28). Just as a merchant's commercial fortunes are subject to the whims of chance, a playwright hazards forth on dramatic ventures that can only aspire toward the engaged responses of playgoers.

Despite the potential for disjunction between playwrights, players, and playgoers, the conventions of plot cohere theatrical experience through the chain of events acted on the stage. An essential feature of theater is its sequential mode of presentation, which motivates a diachronic style of engagement. Whereas readers of a text can pause, turn back, or look forward, theater audiences are afforded continuously progressing access, an experience that emphasizes the function of plot as the engine of narrative. The exploration of contingency in The Jew of Malta and The Merchant of Venice operates at this narratological level, portraying chance events—namely, the fortunes of mercantile sea ventures—that wield significant influences on the actions of characters within the play. Michael Nerlich attributes this style of plotting to a shift in the conception of adventure toward the incipient capitalism of the early modern moment. The result is a chance-oriented epistemology, whereby, in the terms of scholastic philosophy, "*accidens* becomes *essentia*" (Nerlich xxi). That is, the incidental features of a phenomenon come to define its essence. The causes of fortune or misfortune for off-stage commercial ventures in the plays remain beyond the apprehension of characters and playgoers alike. Whether effected by the unknowable *telos* of divine providence or the immeasurable collusion of physical forces, events that may be completely determined nonetheless manifest as chance, due to the necessary limitations of human perspective. Those limitations enable theater to operate on the

level of incidental effects, facilitating contingent thinking that allows playgoers to explore narrative possibilities and to consider the apprehensible elements of on-stage human actions. The logic entailed in the dialectic between plotted variables and the exploits of characters has consequences for our understanding of theater. We cannot with critical precision understand the intent of Marlowe and his playing company's dramatic enterprise, but, by reading the incidental effects that might be elicited in performance, we can construct a theatrical experience of The Jew of Malta.

Much of the engagement with Marlowe's tragedy derives from its protagonist. Barabas betrays an implicit awareness of the dangers of chance from the outset of the play. David Thurn asserts that he is an occult usurer, who insulates his endeavors into commerce with a usurious accumulation of riches. Certainly, the "enclosure of extravagant wealth frees the merchant from the liabilities and sordid demands of commercial traffic" (Thurn 162). Barabas declares it a prudent practice that

. . . should men of judgment frame  
 Their means of traffic from the vulgar trade,  
 And as their wealth increaseth, so enclose  
 Infinite riches in a little room. (1.1.34-7)

To counteract the potential for misfortune for the wealth he does hazard, Barabas tracks fastidiously the trajectories of the wind to mind his two ventures still at sea: a convoy of ships arriving from the banks of the Nile and an argosy returning from Alexandria. He expresses his hope for the secure recovery of the former and anticipates the safe return of the latter with declarative certainty. Yet, his confidence is disrupted momentarily when one of his merchants enters and informs him that the ships from the Nile are safe but that the argosy from Alexandria

has yet to arrive. Alone, Barabas utters, “And yet I wonder at this argosy” (1.1.83). The prospect of misfortune enters the narrative. When a second merchant enters with the news of the argosy’s arrival, that possibility is dispelled, but the contingent thinking that it inspires persists. For all his certainty, his ability to read the winds, Barabas briefly faces the chance of material loss.

However, Barabas does not learn an enduring lesson about the reality of contingency. With both of his ventures successfully returned and out of risk, he declares himself providentially chosen. Relying on the Abrahamic covenant between God and the Jews, he asks, with righteous assurance,

What more may heaven do for earthly man  
Than thus to pour out plenty in their laps,  
Ripping the bowels of the earth for them,  
Making the seas their servant, and the winds

To drive their substance with successful blasts? (1.1.105-9)

Barabas declares himself the beneficiary of the material prosperity granted to him and others of the Jewish nation and he proclaims them endowed with the power to control the elements, rendering him immune from the spurn of ill luck. Upon the coming of the Turkish fleet, his soaring hyperbole is severely undercut. Barabas asks the other Jewish denizens of Malta, “What accidents betided to the Jews? (1.1.143). The “accident” is the Turkish demand of ten-years’ tribute, which the Maltese government decrees will be levied by seizure of half the estate of each Jew. Of course, this apparent ill fortune is the result of a deliberate and forcible action pronounced by Ferenze. As with Callapine’s later reply to the governor, these characters cloak explicitly willed actions in the language of fortune. The rest of the play is driven largely by Barbaras’ vengeful stratagems. In the final lines of the play, Ferenze returns to the idea of chance

in order to draw a distinction between it and providence, attributing the felicity of Malta's defeat of the Turks and Barabas' death to divine will: "let due praise be given / Neither to Fate nor Fortune, but to Heaven" (5.5.122-3). This conclusion affirms the tension, as Shapiro asserts, "between the imposition of providential closure . . . and the uneasy sense that such an ending is arbitrary in the face of the often random nature of historical and political processes" (272). Thus, the play presents events in which Marlovian characters seek to manage the idea of contingency, whether through Barabas' effort to marginalize its negative impact, Callapine's usurpation of its function, or Ferenze's reassignment of its effects to a higher purpose.

Contingency operates more productively in The Merchant of Venice, driving the central thread of the plot. Nerlich reads the comedy as an economic *pièce à clef* that affirms the incipient capitalist concept of adventure. Though his argument is overstated, Nerlich insightfully associates Antonio's relatively sparse presence in the play with his function as a merchant of capital, which "sets the whole play in motion and holds it together" (143). He personifies capital by allowing his resources to shift to other characters. Salerio and Solanio, though, misread Antonio's melancholy as financial angst, with Salerio asserting that his "mind is tossing on the ocean" with his commercial ventures. Solanio expresses the sympathetic anxiety he would experience had he all of his fortunes out to sea. In a meek parody of the triumphant command of the elements that Barabas declares, Solanio claims he "should be still / Plucking the grass, to know where sits the wind" (1.1.8, 17-18). Antonio, however, is not worried about his mercantile enterprises. In fact, he is in the full embrace of a cultural development that Ian MacInnes calls the "elevation of risk" (40). Grateful for the opportunity to put all of his wealth to chance, Antonio states,

I thank my fortune for it,  
 My ventures are not in one bottom trusted,  
 Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate  
 Upon the fortune of this present year. (1.1.41-4)

MacInnes identifies this financial predicament as one that we would now call “diversified” (48). By this rubric, risk becomes a virtue. The contingencies that Antonio subjects his wealth to are, in his words, “swayed and fashioned by the hand of heaven” (1.3.89), a justification he uses to differentiate his ventures from Shylock’s usury. Though he invokes providence, it is not qualified as distinct from chance. Antonio does not pretend to know the greater purpose that the whims of fortune serve. He asserts only that complete surrender to the forces of contingency constitutes an act of piety and he seems to have maintained a financial yield that he keeps continually reinvested.

Antonio’s embrace of chance is the narrative fulcrum upon which The Merchant of Venice turns. When he borrows money from Shylock in order to grant Bassanio the resources to court Portia, Antonio assures his friend that he does “expect return / Of thrice three times the value of this bond” (1.3.152-5). He reaffirms this note of certainty at the scene’s conclusion, striking the knell of the first act with the rhymed couplet: “Come on: in this there can be no dismay; / My ships come home a month before the day” (1.3.176-7). But, in a contingency that he is unprepared for, Antonio’s ships do not return. Salerio recounts to Solanio the word he received from a Frenchman who reported that “in the narrow seas that part / The French and English, there miscarrièd / A vessel of our country richly fraught” (2.8.28-30). Salerio expresses his hope that the misfortune is not Antonio’s. Yet, the news persists on the Rialto, though still “unchecked,” that “Antonio hath a ship of rich lading wrecked on the narrow seas—the

Goodwins I think they call the place—a very dangerous flat and fatal, where the carcasses of many a tall ship lie buried” (3.1.2-6). The ill fortune of Antonio’s ventures leads to his forfeit of the bond. Though heretofore he had thrived on capital risk, his sudden change of fortune does not alter his regard for the dynamics of chance. Even as Shylock—who according to Jessica “would rather have Antonio’s flesh / Than twenty times the value of the sum / That he did owe him” (3.2.286-8)—demands the pound of flesh, Antonio rationalizes against any interventions into the commercial contract:

For the commodity that strangers have  
 With us in Venice, if it be denied,  
 Will much impeach the justice of the state,  
 Since that the trade and profit of the city  
 Consisteth of all nations. (3.3.27-31)

The bond, after all, functions as a venture of its own. For Antonio, the contingency lay in the fate of his mercantile expeditions. For Shylock, the prospect of vengeance against Antonio is worth a monetarily valueless forfeiture that would nonetheless mean his death. Though the device of the caskets delves into the issues of contingency as well, Antonio’s ventures and the interconnected bond with Shylock drive the action of the play from the outset, facilitating the agency of Shakespeare’s characters.

By plotting contingency in their plays, Shakespeare and Marlowe explore dynamics as relevant to mercantile trade as they are to commercial theater. Their deployment of chance events within The Jew of Malta and The Merchant of Venice allows insight into the pragmatics of the stage. To engage with active playgoers, playwrights and their companies would have to recognize the medium of possibilities that allows for successful theatrical experiences. There

emerges, then, two distinct models for conceptualizing the agency of audiences in the contingent process of theatrical production: a Marlovian mitigation and management of chance and the Shakespearean embrace of its enabling power. The incidental effects through which we experience these dramas constitute the critical epistemological link that allows a play to happen. Taking seriously the narratological calculations that contribute to the effectiveness of works like The Jew of Malta and The Merchant of Venice, we can begin to understand the power of contingency in the work of theater.

## Works Cited

- Cartelli, Thomas. Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the Economy of Theatrical Experience. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991. Print.
- Knutson, Rosalyn. Playing Companies and Commerce in Shakespeare's Time. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.
- Logan, Robert A. Shakespeare's Marlowe: The Influence of Christopher Marlowe on Shakespeare's Artistry. Aldershot, Eng. and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006. Print.
- MacInnes, Ian. "Ill luck, Ill luck?": Risk and Hazard in The Merchant of Venice." Global Traffic: Discourses and Practices of Trade in English Literature and Culture from 1550 to 1700. Eds. Barbara Sebek and Stephen Deng. Basingstoke, Eng.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 39-55. Early Modern Cultural Studies, 1500-1700. Print.
- Marlowe, Christopher. The Jew of Malta. Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays. Eds. Frank Romany and Robert Lindsey. London: Penguin, 2003. 241-340. Print.
- Nerlich, Michael. Ideology of Adventure: Studies in Modern Consciousness, 1100-1750. Trans. Ruth Crowley. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987. 2 vols. Theory and History of Literature 42-43. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. The Merchant of Venice. The Norton Shakespeare. Eds. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus. Vol. 1. 1111-75. Print.
- Shapiro, James. "Which is The Merchant here, and which The Jew?": Shakespeare and the Economics of Influence." Shakespeare Studies 20 (1988): 269-79. Academic Search Premier. 1 Feb. 2010. Web.

Thurn, David H. "Economic and Ideological Exchange in Marlowe's Jew of Malta." Theatre Journal 46.2 (1994): 157-70. JSTOR. 1 Feb. 2010. Web.