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An Underdog Dramatist: Christopher Marlowe

ANTONIO G. MANUUD

IF England has her "slighted poets" (see James Donelan on John Skelton¹ and William Langland²), she also has her "underdog dramatists". For example, none but the most devoted enthusiasts seem publicly bothered about the fourth centenary of a man who, had he not lived, might have denied us reason for celebrating the 400th birthday of one who knew "small Latin, and less Greek". Christopher Marlowe, old boy of King's School in Canterbury, member of Benet College (now Corpus Christi), and an M.A. Cantab., was born on an indeterminate date some two months before William Shakespeare. This kind of seniority, to be sure, counts for very little in the world of literature, but Marlowe also wrote some of the very best plays of his time, though he died when only 29—when, there is every reason to suppose, his writing career had not as yet reached its zenith. The best of his plays, as a result, have since stood in the shadow of Shakespeare's best, for the latter's durability in the physical world provided the temporal amplitude (denied Marlowe) which enabled him to exercise his talents, to develop them, and thereby to ensure his immortality in the world both of the theatre and of literature.

By dying, therefore, at an inopportune juncture in his literary career (he had other callings, not all savory), Mar-

¹ *Philippine Studies*, VIII/2 (April 1960), 237-58.

² *Ibid.*, IX/3 (July 1961), 423-59.

lowe started to become an 'underdog' at an unhappily tender age. This unflattering qualification he has never since been able to shake off. Today's undergraduates, saving the English majors, cannot always be expected to know that the intriguing epigraph to one of T. S. Eliot's *Prufrock* poems is from a Marlovian play and not from an anti-Semitic tract. Nor can the schoolboy declaimers, at least in this country, be easily persuaded that the famous death speech of Faustus, far from being an inspired translation of Goethe, is in truth the powerful close of a perfectly respectable Elizabethan play.

Marlowe nevertheless is not without admirers even in this country. An unkind few, disturbed perchance at sight of a less than pleasant face, have been known to parody the well-known query that begins his invocation of Helen. Many more, looking with piratical eyes through anthologies for quotations to include in their love-letters, have allowed themselves momentarily to become passionate shepherds who would all the pleasures prove. In the face of all this admittedly adolescent adulation, it would probably be a trifle egregious to expect a full-scale Marlowe celebration in the Philippines, particularly when the British themselves are being more than usually imperturbable about his 400th anniversary. It is true that this summer, the Royal Shakespeare Company is reviving *The Jew of Malta* on its "other" stage at the Aldwych theatre in London. But this is the gesture magnanimous: a splendid acknowledgment, by a rich relation, of one's embarrassing existence. For one thing, many a student of English literature will protest that *The Jew of Malta* is Marlowe's clumsiest play, and even though it may have inspired Shakespeare to work on the same theme years later, it will always remain a sorry prototype of *The Merchant of Venice*. If a tie-in with Shakespeare was necessary, the Company might instead have elected to stage *Edward II* (is it not today almost a critical convention to compare this play with *Richard II*?); but then, of course, the Bard—who yet had a long way to go when he wrote about a weeping king who looked for deeper wrinkles in a glass—would have to risk coming out second-best.

In the context of this and all the slights against which Marlovian societies have had to protest (e.g. the pointed omis-

sion of Marlowe in the National Theatre's 1964 repertoire, though it made room for Farquhar and even Chekhov), the thesis that Marlowe is an 'underdog dramatist' is pretty well supportable.

It may then be asked why I should bother to bring Marlowe's ghost up at all, especially in a journal devoted to Philippine studies. The reasons are several, and they range from the capricious to the Olympian. From among the capricious, I offer my American experience. It has conditioned me to show immediate sympathy for, or at least solicitous interest in, the 'underdog': anyone who for two years running has had to cheer in vain for the Milwaukee Braves will readily recognize the validity of this posture. As to the Olympian, might one not take a cue from Marlowe and in true Renaissance spirit cite a dictum of Seneca's? Without granting the immediate supposition, might one not assent to the view from the *Epistulae morales* that "it is better to have useless knowledge than to know nothing?"

But the supposition that Marlowe can be of no use to Filipinos cannot of course be granted; and I think that implicit in its denial are the more compelling arguments for an article on Marlowe in a Philippine journal. There is an aspect of art, after all, which may not be confined by national boundaries; moreover, one of the more convincing explanations for the present adolescent status of Philippine literature in English is that our writers (and *a fortiori* our reading public) have yet to understand fully the implications of our "cultural unity with Shakespeare and his cultural heritage."³ Once it is perceived that Shakespeare owes certain debts to Marlowe, then there is reason to suppose that Marlowe himself will not be unappealing to Filipino students of comparative literature and indeed to Filipino writers, the most vigorous among whom are today schooled in English. The problem, were we to shut our eyes to the Filipino's English heritage, is not so much the danger of being "culturally islanded,"⁴ as it is, to use another

³ See M. A. Bernad, S.J. *Bamboo and the Greenwood Tree* (Manila: Bookmark, 1961). p. 108.

⁴ See the chapter entitled "Literature" in *Higher Education and Philippine Culture* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila, 1960), pp. 12-31.

image, the certainty of becoming 'culturally orchidaceous': always at a remove from cultural roots.

One could very easily go on multiplying reasons for some more pages until this apologia balloons into a full-sized article and until the very modest observations I propose to make on Marlowe's contribution to literature dwindle into an absurd appendix, but this is no way to celebrate the quatercentenary of a dramatist, even if he is an underdog.

1

Many browsers through Elizabethan literature will concede that a relationship exists between *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice* on the one hand, and between *Edward II* and *Richard II* on the other. However, those who have a keener interest than others will go on to add that the relationship between Shakespeare and Marlowe is not simply one that can be expressed by a play-to-play ratio. Barabas may precede Shylock in the blood-sucking business of storing "infinite riches in a little room". But in addition, *The Jew of Malta* anticipates *Othello* by its use of history as a background for fiction: in both cases, the forays of the Turk up and down the Mediterranean. The theme of the deposed monarch is of course common to *Edward II* and *Richard II*, but it also is to *Henry VI* (the same Harry who is for ever trisected in the minds of undergraduates). One may not always find some other who will agree that there is a certain similarity between Edward's musings on a missed vocation in the abbey of Neath, and Henry's pathetic meditation in mid-battle outside Towton:⁵

Father, this life contemplative is heaven:

O, that I might this life in quiet lead,...

(*Edward II*, 1887-8.)

O God! methinks it were a happy life,

To be no better than a homely swain...

(*Henry VI*, Part 3, II.v. 21-2).

⁵ All quotations from Marlowe's plays follow the modern spelling of the Everyman edition (M.R. Ridley, ed.) but the line numbering of the Oxford University press edition (C.F. Tucker Brooke, ed.). All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from the one-volume Oxford University press edition of 1938.

But it will be difficult to find a dissenter when one advances the opinion that there is more than a coincidental ring to the words Doctor Faustus addresses to Helen and the question Richard II addresses to himself just before he dashes, emblematically it seems, the mirror of his magistracy:

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?—

(*Doctor Faustus*, 1328-9).

Was this Face, the Face,
That every day, under his Household Roof,
Did keep ten thousand men?

(*Richard II*, IV.i.281-3).

These correspondences, it may be argued, prove little more than that Elizabethan playwrights took a more cavalier-like attitude toward copyright than we would now expect our writers to take: thunder, in those days, was undoubtedly a favorite and uninsurable object of theft. But if one is to aver that Shakespeare is especially indebted to Marlowe, I think a better case might be built on the score that it was Marlowe who first emancipated the medium we know as Shakespeare's, i.e. English blank verse, from the straight-jacket of the regular, end-stopped, iambic pentameter line. Consider the following lines from *Gorboduc*,⁶ written some twenty-five years before *Tamburlaine*. Marcella, a lady of the Queen's privy-chamber, has just brought in the news that the Queen had killed Porrex, her own son. Marcella continues with her report to Arostus, a counsellor to the king:

Marc. Alas, he liueth not! It is to true
That, with these eyes, of him, a peerlesse prince,
Sonne to a king, and in the flower of youth,
Euen with a twinke a senselesse stocke I saw.

Aros. O damned deede!

Marc. But heare hys ruthefull end!

⁶ The fragment from *Gorboduc* is from Joseph Quincey Adams's edition of the play in the collection entitled *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas* (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), pp. 503-35.

The noble prince, pearst with the sodeine wound,
 Out of his wretched slumber hastely start,
 Whose strength now fayling, straight he ouerthrew,—
 When in the fall his eyes, euen now vnclosed,
 Behelde the queene, and cryed to her for helpe.

(*Gorboduc*, IV.ii.198-208).

The passage is typical. There is an occasional inversion (e.g. the trochee for the iamb in "Sonnet to a king, etc."); there is even a spondee (two consecutive stresses) in the juxtaposition of "prince, pearst..."; but these devices are exceptional, for through large chunks of the play, the stresses which generally alternate with the unstressed syllables invariably command uniform weights. The general result, as far as the listener is concerned, is about as effective as a soporific barcarolle.⁷ No wonder there was a great deal of raging on the pre-Shakespearean stage, of Herods out-Heroding Herod: why not?—after five or nine steady minutes of rock-a-bye line after rock-a-bye line, there *would* be need to redeem any audience from the arms of Morpheus. Blood-and-thunder rhetoric, in fact, became such a convention that Marlowe himself had to unlearn the technique slowly. The hero of his first play, *Tamburlaine*, is certainly not noted for gentle speeches, and not until *Edward II* was Marlowe to make an outraged king far more eloquent with understatement than with bluster:

Tell Isabel the queen, I look'd not thus
 When for her sake I ran at tilt in France,
 And there unhors'd the Duke of Cleremont.

(*Edward II*, 2516-8).

One will note that the above quotation, though no longer than three lines, serves as an example of what Marlowe has done to the same basically decasyllabic line used in *Gorboduc*: Marlowe has made it licit to experiment with the internal structure of each line. In the first, though he has five stresses,

⁷ M.R. Ridley, in his introduction to the Everyman edition of *Marlowe's Plays and Poems*, traces the beginnings of the problem to the not very discriminating adoption, by English Renaissance poets, of the Greek iambic trimeter minus two syllables. Cf. *op. cit.*, introduction, xii ff.

there are only three groups of sound. There are again three groups of sound in the second line, but the effective stresses have been reduced to four (the speech would be most unnatural indeed were any stress given the first word in the line). Any temptation to read this line in sway-back hobby-horse rhythm is frustrated by the pairing of the final "t" in "at" with the initial "t" in "tilt", thus causing a very slight but genuine pause which effectively breaks the run-away beat. The third line is a regular iambic pentameter, but it allows an actor some variety in the placing of the secondary stress in "Cleremont"—after all, it is a French place-name. This flexibility with which Marlowe endowed the decasyllables of poetic drama was, as we all know, to achieve full glory in the sustained output of Shakespeare's imagination, but even in Marlowe's own plays, it had already become a mature instrument, as witness this fragment from *Dido*:

Dido. Æneas!

Æn. Dido!

Dido. Tell me, dear love, how found you out this cave?

Æn. By chance, sweet queen, as Mars and Venus met.

Dido. Why, that was in a net, where we are loose; And yet I am not free,—O, would I were!

Æn. Why, what is it that Dido may desire And not obtain, be it in human power?

Dido. The thing that I will die before I ask, And yet desire to have before I die.

Æn. It is not aught Æneas may achieve?

Dido. Æneas! no; although his eyes do pierce.

Æn. What, hath Iarbas anger'd her in aught? And will she be avenged on his life?

Dido. Not anger'd me, except in angering thee.

Æn. Who, then, of all so cruel may he be That should detain thy eye in his defects?

Dido. The man that I do eye where'er I am; Whose amorous face, like Pæan, sparkles fire, Whenas he butts his dreams on Flora's bed.

Prometheus hath put on Cupid's shape,
 And I must perish in his burning arms:
 Æneas, O Æneas, quench these flames!

Æn. What ails my queen? is she faln sick of late?

Dido. Not sick, my love; but sick I must conceal
 The torment that it boots me not reveal:
 And yet I'll speak,—and yet I'll hold my peace.
 Do shame her worst, I will disclose my grief:
 Æneas, thou art he—what did I say?
 Something it was that now I have forgot.

(*Dido*, III. iv, 996-1025),

I recently read this fragment to a student, and I asked him what impressed him most about it. I had thought that he would say something about Dido's playing the eternal woman—going in a way directly to the point by indirections; or perhaps something about the eternally unperceiving (or merely cautious) male. But no, what impressed him most was the natural swing of the lines. "It's genuine conversation," he said with some surprise, "and it's poetry!" Marlowe had made good his boast that he would lead us from "jigging veins of rhyming mother-wits" and with his fine Cantabrigian ear conniving with his native talent, fashioned unforgettably for the English theatre language of "high astounding terms".

2

The ability to write a heroic line, however, does not by that token alone make a dramatist of a man. A poet, yes; but a dramatist must first of all write successful plays. He may sing the most mellifluous phrases, trumpet the bravest verses in the language, but if his plots, his whole sense of theatre, do not hold an audience, then he is no dramatist.

Let me fall into cliché and say that the proof of the pudding is in the eating. We know, historically, how well received Marlowe's plays have been both in his own time and after—when they were produced at all. We may never know how great a playwright Marlowe could have become had he been able to write more than the handful that today com-

prise the Marlowe canon. But even with what is on hand, it would probably be foolhardy to do within the limits of an article the kind of study that could do justice to Marlowe's technique.⁸ In a paper designed merely to draw attention to a deserving underdog, I do not for instance feel called upon to enter into debate, say, regarding the chronology of the plays. This is not to say, however, that I shall not advert to the state of the question, albeit sketchily.

The problem of dating *Doctor Faustus* correctly has continued to intrigue scholars even in our own day. M. R. Ridley⁹ presents persuasive reasons for considering the play as Marlowe's last; Havelock Ellis¹⁰ on the other hand (ignoring the earlier opinion of F. S. Boas) favors an earlier *Doctor Faustus*. Both construct a theory of the development of Marlovian style according to their different chronologies, and neither one seems to me implausible. I shall leave the critics to their primary sources on such questions, but since one may not know Marlowe unless one considers at a close enough range what subjects, what themes, what preoccupations are discernible from at least his principal plays, it may be helpful to mention a few things about them.

There is nothing recondite about Marlowe's subjects. *Tamburlaine* is an elaboration of Pedro Mexía's life of *Timur*, a sixteenth century account in Spanish of Tamerlane's conquests. *The Jew of Malta* is the familiar tale of the acquisitive Jew who, seeking to enrich himself, eventually loses all instead. *Edward II* is the story of the deposed monarch; *The Massacre at Paris*, allegedly rushed because *Edward II* had been an instant hit, recounts the happenings of St. Bartholomew's Day. And *Doctor Faustus*, in Marlowe as in the *Faustbücher* before his day or in Goethe afterwards, is the

⁸ Possibly the best among the recent books about the dramatist and his technique are Michel Poirier's *Christopher Marlowe* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1951), and Harry Levin's *The Overreacher* (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1952).

⁹ *Op. cit.*, introduction, xi.

¹⁰ In his introduction to the Mermaid edition of *Christopher Marlowe: Five Plays* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1956). See esp. xxiii ff.

well-known legend of the man who sells his soul to the devil and is made to pay up.

Marlowe's themes are no less familiar: ambition, the overweening passion for power, Man on the Wheel of Fortune—speeding to his apogee in the belief that he controls Fate, and soon discovering that he is not capable of retarding the Wheel's inexorable roll.

His preoccupations encompass a number of what in his own day were ideas suspiciously dangerous and *avant garde*: Machiavellian politics, for one. A humanism divorced from religion, for another. But we are not sure how deeply committed he was to any of these "passions" (the background of his involvement in espionage and counter-espionage does not help to make evaluation any less difficult) and the critic J. C. Maxwell has himself preferred to reject in principle "anything that does not directly emerge from the plays" because "the mostly hostile gossip of the day" cannot be a reliable source of information.¹¹ The point is well taken, and as I have always been a firm believer in following the examples set by one's betters, I shall confine the rest of this essay to an exploration of the limits of ambition in Marlowe's plays.

Weakness, it would seem to me, is through the plays a special target of Marlowe's contempt. He does not always despise the weak with the same intensity, however. Sometimes, he holds them up for ridicule (e.g. Mycetes); sometimes, for pity (e.g. Edward II). Furthermore, the quality of this weakness needs definition. On the surface, it looks like the weakness born of ill-preparedness, a type of improvidence, a failure of "policy". Thus, for lack of clarity as regards objective, or for the absence of thoroughness in the pursuit of a goal, the "lost causes" of many men in Marlowe's plays seem to me part of the pre-conditioning that later on make the lost heads and the rest of the ghastly litter on the Jacobean stage not unpalatable to English audiences. Apart from the unhappy bunglers like Friar Jacomo, and the clowns Ralph and Robin who are "mercifully" transformed into an

¹¹ See "The Plays of Christopher Marlowe" in the Pelican *The Age of Shakespeare* (Boris Ford, ed.), pp. 162-78.

ape and dog respectively, there is Sigismund who commits an error as grave at least as his perfidy. There, too, is Cosroe, victim of a mislaid trust. And Calymath whose fortunes are quickly reversed by a lack, it seems, of Machiavellian perspicacity.

But Marlowe does not really bother too much about the preposterous ambitions and the petty failures of such men. His central characters are men who loom large with ambition. At least one of them is immediately recognizable as a Titan, and all have one thing in common: a drive for power which provides them with an undeniable impulse to master Fortune, to grab Fate by the throat, and—in one case at least—to win thereby “the sweet fruition of an earthly crown.”

Tamburlaine's boast rings loud and clear:

I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains,
And with my hand turn Fortune's wheel about;
(*Tamburlaine, Part 1, I.ii.369-70*).

Barabas may say,

make Christians kings,
That thirst so much for principality...
(*The Jew of Malta, I.172-3*),

and yet we presently see him plotting to wrest absolute rule for himself towards the end of the play.

Faustus's own ambitions do not pale beside Tamburlaine's:

Emperors and Kings
Are but obey'd in their several provinces
Nor can they raise the wind, or rend the clouds;
But his domination that exceeds in this,
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man:
A sound magician is a demi-god,
(*Doctor Faustus, 85-90*).

Both Guise and Mortimer, finally, are involved in such scrambles for power which, on achievement, merely seems to tantalize both into hotter and more reckless pursuit of more power.

These are the men about whom Marlowe has chosen to wrap his plots and counter-plots, and I submit that just as they share an insatiable thirst for power (the postulate being that each of Marlowe's protagonists views himself as sole controller of his fortune, although he may not at first—or indeed ever—say so), so do they share in the validly tragic weakness of not being able to recognize the proper ambit of their own drives until they are forced to a position where they must submit, at last, to the very Fate which they thought to master.

Because the limits are unrecognized, at least initially, the story of each hero becomes the tragedy of the overreacher. The hero transgresses by over-valuing his position, and the result of this *hubris* is, as in the plays of classical antiquity, *nemesis*—in varying degrees.

Thus, Tamburlaine is unconquered and unconquerable within his own *métier*, but when he orders his generals to wage war against the Fates and to bring Zenocrate back from death, Theridamas for the first time finds the courage to contradict him, and is not for this rash act censured with the terrible wrath of a man whose word, in *Part 1*, would brook no contradiction. Indeed, so splendid is the gigantic fury of Tamburlaine in *Part 1* that though the limits to early ambition are clearly set even in that play, the pronouncement has the force merely of an aside. From Zenocrate come the words:

Those that are proud of fickle empery,
And place their chiefest good in earthly pomp,
Behold the Turk and his great emperess!

(*Tamburlaine, Part 1, V.i.2134-6*).

One might reasonably argue that there is no *nemesis* in *Part 1*, after J. C. Maxwell¹²—this is of course true, but it should also be fairly obvious (inferring again from Maxwell) that *Part 1*, taken as it was originally written, is not by any means intended as a tragedy. Still, in the lines quoted above,

¹² "...what Marlowe wrote in the first instance was a play of conquest, not a play of conquest followed by death." *Op. cit.*, p. 163.

it is seen to set limits to earthly pomp, and by deduction, to the earthly pomp that Tamburlaine is bound to lose in *Part 2*, though he never quite loses it in the same inglorious way that the Turk and his great empress do.

Tamburlaine's ambitions, indeed, are beset by more than one limit in *Part 2*. The Scythian discovers he cannot bend the will of his son to his own way of life, and so ends the boy's life. In a way, this is the first defeat of the Unconquered: this is the first time force or magnetism are unable to yield him his desire, for (he does not realize this yet) the ordaining of another man's fate is outside his province and no longer his *métier*. Eventually, he does come to realize that, even in regard to his own self, the control of Fate can go only so far: he cannot wage war on death and still come out the victor—and with recognition comes resignation:

Farewell, my boys! my dearest friends, farewell!
My body feels, my soul doth weep to see
Your sweet desires depriv'd my company,
For Tamburlaine, the scourge of God, must die!

(*Tamburlaine, Part 2, V.iii.4638-41*).

He has reached his end—and this happens, within the structure of the play, after he had overreached himself. This may appear like *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* argumentation, but not really. There is no intention here to force the play into a morality pattern. For his death is not the first of Tamburlaine's reverses; these began from the death of Zenocrate, when he sought to wage war on Fate, and continued with the killing of his son. To kill in battle is one thing; to kill a son who will not do battle, another—even in the curious ethos of Tamburlaine's world. And so, in a very special sense, Tamburlaine does not merely die. He falls. This is more than just irony; this is tragedy.

I have already suggested that while at first the Jew of Malta seems to set for himself his own limits, he allows the run of events to throw him out of what is essentially his world: his "infinite riches in a little room." As long as he confines himself to piling up wealth, he is eminently success-

ful. But when he attempts to expand the boundaries of his counting-house to include the whole island of Malta, when he tries his hand at that very same business of government which he has ironically assigned earlier to Christians, he is at once betrayed—and he plummets from his perch at the governmental pinnacle. He has stepped beyond his bounds. The Jew, after all, is the personification of cunning, and the ultimate weakness of cunning is a form of overreaching: being caught in nets of one's own weaving.

The ambition of Doctor Faustus is not in power through military indomitability, nor is it in power through wealth, but in power through the supremacy of his intellect. With this power, he envisions to encompass beauty besides and to drink life to the lees. This is the expression of the Renaissance's *libido dominandi, sciendi, and sentiendi*.¹³ But here again, as long as the hero seeks what is within the spirit of man to accomplish, he is a "doctor" respected by colleagues and scholars who seek him out for the advice that he can give them. Having committed himself to the pursuit of preternatural knowledge, however, he traffics illicitly with the devil, overreaches his limits, and loses his soul.

To many a Catholic reader, the magnificent despair of Faustus could have an unconvincing ring: the argument would be that if Faustus were as learned as he is pictured to be, one might reasonably expect him to be well-schooled in at least elementary theology, whether traditional or of the Reformation. He could not have been other than Christian, else there is no point to the play. If a Catholic, surely he would have known of the limitless mercy of God; if a Protestant of the type that in Marlowe's time lived in Germany and England, he surely would have had recourse to an affirmation of his Faith, since "Faith alone can save." Therefore (the conclusion might be expressed this strongly) Faustus's despair is unconvincing.

¹³ For a discussion of the three-pronged libido as it finds expression in Marlowe's plays, see chapter 2, "The Progress of Pomp," in Harry Levin's *The Overreacher*, pp. 30-54.

Such an objection can only be raised by one who has but a partial view of the Renaissance—or, for that matter, by one who has missed the import of Faustus's mutterings to himself at the opening of the play. His syllogisms in that first soliloquy clearly seduce him to a more quiet version of the same despair that rings down the final curtain with anguished cries. There is no resolution—*che sera, sera*—and so he bids Divinity adieu and turns to magic. The despair moreover must have struck terror in the hearts of Marlowe's audience: to them, perhaps more than to us, it is horribly plausible because there is no escaping the devil's fee for the sexual liaison Faustus enjoyed with him in the form of Helen of Troy. But all this is straying from the basic argument which is simply this: that Faustus went out of his *métier* and thus magnificently fell to hell.

The characters I have thus far discussed all ended their lives in tragedy because, at a point in their lives, they became fish out of water. In *The Massacre at Paris* and in *Edward II* one discovers three characters who, to use another metaphor, swim beyond their own depths and thus drown in eventual defeat. They keep to their own *métiers* ostensibly, i.e. politics, but we know from the dialogues of one and the other play that, as resolutely as Tamburlaine or Barabas or Faustus and yet in a different manner, all three exceeded their bounds. In *The Massacre at Paris*, Henry III addresses the Guise quite explicitly:

Come, Guise, and see thy traitorous guile outreach'd,
And perish in the pit thou mad'st for me.

(*Massacre at Paris*, 969-70).

But in *Edward II*, one begins to wonder who the overreacher is, since the king and Mortimer are foils to each other. What the King lacks, Mortimer seems to possess, and yet the King is indubitably a tragic character in that he is a victim of his own excesses. Is Mortimer then a victim of his own virtues? The question is of course absurd: at this point in his career, Marlowe has gone so far along the road to perfecting his plots and his characters that he could not allow so simple an equivalence between the fates of his foils. Both

plotting and character motivation have now become more intricate. For while the King transfers his ambitions to indulging his unnatural love for Gaveston, he allows the ambitions of Mortimer the latitude and the conditions in which they might prosper (whether in politics or in illicit love with the Queen) to an extent that makes it possible, at length, for Mortimer to give us Marlowe's mind on the limits of ambition:

Base Fortune, now I see, that in thy wheel
 There is a point to which, when men aspire,
 They tumble headlong down: that point I touch'd,
 And seeing there was no place to mount up higher,
 Why should I grieve at my declining fall?—

(*Edward II*, 2627-31).

Thus Mortimer himself admits his helplessness against the relentless turning of Fortune's wheel. Again, he appears as one more overreacher who, while in the ascendant, failed to recognize his limitations. Call this what one will—recklessness or an excess of confidence in one's power, in human power—it is still, even if in Renaissance garb, the Greek *hubris*.

This *hubris*, this unknowing disregard for the limits of man's capabilities or ambitions, is to my mind what Marlowe sees as the weakness of his great men. I submit he writes about it without necessarily intending to moralize: he may merely see that there are limits, and that such limits are to be accepted. Now, it may here be objected that this runs counter to the ebullient spirit of adventure, of derring-do in whatever field, that man bravely entered into during the so-called Renaissance, but I cannot believe that the period can be described with such naiveté, for the more thoughtful among Elizabethans, or at least the literary among them, would have had some acquaintance with the classics. There, to be sure, Fortune is conceived as something man can master (do not mere mortals hold Zeus to his promises?), but the same classic authors who wrote heroically about men daring gods also set sagely down the doctrine of the Golden Mean: *ne quid nimis*, a mnemonic for overreachers.