A Fascinating but Frustrating Study of Marlowe's Drama and its Historical Context

Jefferey H. Taylor

Metropolitan State University of Denver

Clayton MacKenzie's *Deathly Experiments; A Study of Icons and Emblems of Mortality in Christopher Marlowe's Plays*[1] is a fascinating, but equally frustrating, study of Marlowe's drama and its historical context. The basic premise, to enrich our reading of Marlowe's plays through resonance with widely available printed emblems and similar iconic art, is a worthy endeavor, one that follows the impulse to illuminate drama by examining contemporary visual art, and foregrounding the presence of theater as visual communications and enriching sensitivity to the communicative power of image and icon.

This certainly also resonates with the basic New Historicist desire to reach beyond texts to a more comprehensive cultural hermeneutics. In this respect, the aligning of popularly available emblem books with the popular theater is a significant service to the student and scholar alike. Moreover, MacKenzie's attempts to place the plays into possible socio-political contexts, with an eye to the popular reception of Marlowe's drama for contemporary audiences, goes far in enriching the understanding of Marlowe's more critically acclaimed plays, such as the *Tamburlaine* plays and *Dr. Faustus*, and, more importantly, works toward a rehabilitated view of some of his less regarded works, especially *Dido, Queen of Carthage* and *The Massacre at Paris*.

However, this monograph contains enough misreadings, uncritical assumptions, historical-cultural mistakes, and hyperbolic declamations to somewhat tarnish an otherwise worthy endeavor.

1 Clayton G. MacKenzie, *Deathly Experiments; A Study of Icons and Emblems of Mortality in Christopher Marlowe's Plays* (New York: AMS, 2010).

Gleaning material for lectures from this book might well serve the teaching of Renaissance drama, and Marlowe in particular, especially with the goal to help students understand the theatricality of tableau, central to Early British drama, but assigning it as a course-text would undoubtedly require much critical correction.

It is fitting that this study found publication through AMS Press, a publisher that has contributed much to the study of visual communication through its monograph series, *Studies in Emblemism*, and also through publishing significant works by scholars such as Clifford Davidson, a pioneer in the use of the visual arts in the critical understanding of Early British drama.[2] Though the movement to incorporate the visual artifacts of culture into the study of texts has made great gains in recent decades, this necessary part of the study of literature, especially as concerns early drama, still represents a significant gap in the scholarly reception and teaching of Early Modern literature. Indeed, a truly rigorous understanding of the noetic function of representation in the consciousness of earlier times is still in its infancy, and to the extent that theatricality maps figurational performativity, any scholarship that turns our attention to the visual rhetoric of the 16th century cannot help but contribute to a significant refashioning of the inheritance of meaning.

Any scholar at all sensitive to these issues will be instantly struck by the value of this program upon turning to the first of the fourteen figures published in this monograph, "Figure 1. 'The Dangers of love.' Guillaume de la Perrière's *Le Theatre des bon engins* (Paris: Denis Janot, 1544), fol L4" (6). From the provocative subject matter, "[t]he alembic distillation of human love" (6) to the ornate multiple framing, this reproduction is in itself a day's lesson in the essentiality of icon and image for a period for which, in Owen

2 Davidson's seminal work in this area, *Drama and Art; An Introduction to the Use of Evidence from the Visual Arts for the Study of Early Drama* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1977), was not published by AMS, but much of his work has been brought forth by AMS, such as *From Creation to Doom; The York Cycle of Mystery Plays* (New York: AMS, 1984) and *Selected Studies in Drama and Renaissance Literature* (New York: AMS, 2006). Davidson has also reviewed MacKenzie's book; see *Comparative Drama* 45.3 (2011), 289-91.

Barfield's terminology, a remnant of participation is still present in the common figurations of consciousness.[3] MacKenzie's use of this figure, and others described but not reproduced, to explicate two lines of *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (3.4.22-3) as key to the characterizations of Aeneas and Dido, is brilliant and does much to illuminate Marlowe's artistry and give insight into the contexts of meaning through which an Elizabethan audience would receive this play (3-7). Similarly, Figure 8, a woodcut from "Henry Peacham's *Minerva Britanna: Or A Garden of Heroycal Devices* (London: William Dight, 1612)" enriches the reading of *Edward II* in ways that offer fine insight into the play and allow significant teaching moments about the socio-political contexts of Renaissance history plays (59). Indeed, MacKenzie's reading of the political context of Marlowe's play might even serve to introduce a course or unit on Shakespeare's tetralogies.

Similar examples of the use of emblemism and other contemporary visual representations, some given as figures, others described and carefully referenced, occur throughout the monograph and represent the greatest strength of this scholarly offering. Yet, at times MacKenzie seems to misunderstand the long-standing theatricality of tableau in which Marlowe worked and to misconstrue the rich visual rhetoric of the age. MacKenzie presents Marlowe as uniquely perceptive to the visual nature of his society and attributes his popularity to his ability to create "visual tableuax on stage" and a perceptive reliance on the "rich array of visual knowledge" available to his audience (xiv-xvii).

While no-one familiar with Marlowe's work would doubt the genius of his handling of dramatic tableaux, to imply that this theatricality was either revolutionary or unique to Marlowe ignores the fact that Renaissance playwrights inherited dramatic forms

3 For Barfield's theories, see especially: Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances; A Study in Idolatry*, 2nd ed. (Middletown CT: Wesleyan UP, 1988) and *History, Guilt and Habit* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan UP, 1981). New editions of *Saving the Appearances* and much of the Barfield catalog are now available through the Barfield Literary Estate at http://www.owenbarfield.org/.

from the preceding centuries that were in their most essential characteristics a theatricality of dramatized tableaux. Similarly, the implication that popular emblem books created the visual communications which Marlowe then made use of in his plays would seem to ignore the ubiquitous visual communications of the day to which MacKenzie himself often refers. The cultural knowledge communicated by the emblem books did not originate with them; rather, they are a manifestation and reinforcement of long-standing iconic communications. However, the existence of emblem books as marketable products drawing on centuries of visual communication is extremely significant, and it is interesting to suggest that Marlowe's theatricality might have purposely sought resonance with particular widely published emblems. Even more interesting is the suggestion that Marlowe's theatricality of tableau may have been significantly impacted by the nuances of visual rhetoric arising from the emergence of emblem books, though it would seem that MacKenzie's analysis does not adequately address that possibility.

More specifically there are readings in this monograph that misconstrue foundational iconography or ascribe differences between British and Continental culture that would seem to miss the essentials of a cultural superdialect of symbols that span much time and space in Western Europe. Much of the analysis of death symbolism in the chapters on the *Tamburlaine* plays, *Edward II* and *The Massacre at Paris*, inadequately considers the ubiquity of these symbols across several centuries and much territory. To ascribe "an explosion of artistic interest in the iconic image of cadaverous death" (74) to the legacy of the *danse macabre* plays of late medieval France, ignores the great ubiquity of skeletal and transi motifs. The *danse macabre* plays are a striking example of the motif of figurated death, and the resonance with *The Massacre at Paris* that MacKenzie notes is apt, but the source of these motifs is much deeper and interpenetrated in Western culture that this ascription would suggest. Similarly, to contextualize these motifs by describing "Medieval Catholic

Europe" as "riddled with crime and war, and stalked by the specter of the Black Death" (74), smacks of historical and cultural stereotypes that have long been laid aside by serious scholars of the period. The implied juxtaposition between medieval Catholics for whom "death was unknown, its territory incomprehensible, its advent a clarion call of terror" (75) and the enlightened English playwright betrays a tenor that seems more ideological than scholarly. A much deeper understanding of medieval culture and its figurational meanings would serve this analysis much better.

Similarly, MacKenzie's analysis of *Fortuna* in *The Jew of Malta* emphasizes resonance with several interesting visual artifacts but ignores completely the Boethian foundation of the Fortuna motif. This is perhaps unsurprising when one considers that in his article "Fortuna in Shakespeare's Plays" published in 2001, MacKenzie reductively misreads Boethius in order to dismiss Boethian influence on Shakespeare.[4] The presentation in Chapter 3 of Jan Van der Noot's excellent "Fortuna" woodcut in which "one ship fares well while a second sinks," (Figure 7) and drawing attention to its resonance with "Barabas's argosies, lost and saved at sea" (40), is another example of the striking power of MacKenzie's program. Yet, the claim that this icon of flourishing and foundering ships is "the late sixteenth century's most common representation of Fortuna's fickle powers" (40) is presented without adequate evidence and ignores the ubiquitous Boethian representations of Fortuna that flourished as much if not more in the 16th century as they had in the preceding medieval centuries. Indeed, MacKenzie does a few pages later reference the more common Wheel of Fortune as a widespread motif (44), but instead of referencing a relatively obscure cathedral painting and tarot cards, one could more easily reference the ubiquitous influence of Boethian imagery.

Indeed, there is much contextualization in this study that will undoubtedly prove problematic for scholars with good grounding

4 Clayton G. MacKenzie, "Fortuna in Shakespeare's Plays," *Orbis Litterarum* 56.6 (2001), 355-66.

in the milieu of late medieval culture. Renaissance scholars, too, might object to some of the characterizations of the Elizabethan age, and, indeed, to Elizabeth herself. Though it is perhaps intriguing to suggest that *Dido, Queen of Carthage* serves as a warning to Elizabeth not to entangle herself with a foreign prince (7-8), namely the Duke of Anjou, and MacKenzie is not the only critic to suggest this, we should perhaps give Marlowe—and Elizabeth—more creditable political acumen than this argument implies. Despite Elizabeth's lyrical lament, "On Monsieur's Departure," on the exit of her last legitimate suitor in 1581, it is likely that her dalliance with the young Duke had more to do with European power politics and religious alliances than a serious consideration of marriage in her late forties.

Indeed, to match Elizabeth with Dido is potentially problematic when one considers that the Tudor mythos invested much in the claim that as descendants of Welsh nobility, the Tudor monarchs were the true inheritors of Felix Brutus and therefore natural descendants of Aeneas. We might well read Elizabeth as Aeneas, the agent of destiny toying with a foreign youth for fleeting pleasure and shrewd politics, and surely the gender-switch necessary for such a reading would not be uncharacteristic of Marlowe, Elizabeth or the age in general. To even make the argument of the play as a warning to Elizabeth, rather than a subtle flattering of her political acumen, one must push speculation on the dating of the composition to the early extreme.

Even harder to accept is the hint in Chapter 5 that *The Massacre at Paris* might resonate with the fear of Elizabeth marrying a Catholic Frenchman (86). A 1593 date for this play is fairly certain. Elizabeth was by then 60, and it had been 12 years since she had dismissed Anjou (who, after all, was himself involved in Protestant rebellions in France). A more obvious context for this 1593 play is Elizabeth's extreme reaction to Henry of Navarre's renunciation of Huguenot Protestantism in that very year in order to secure the throne of France. From that perspective, there might well be a note of political intrigue in this macabre but popular production—an attack

on Henry, who had so disappointed his friend Elizabeth. Indeed, the index to this monograph seems to confuse Henry III of Navarre, who later became Henry IV of France, with Henry III of France (146), who was briefly considered as a husband for Elizabeth (in 1570), had some involvement in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, and was himself notoriously murdered in 1589 by a fanatical Dominican friar, as is depicted, somewhat unhistorically, in this very play.

Nonetheless, the rehabilitation of *The Massacre of Paris* through reading it as a reflex of the medieval *danse macabre* genre is worth the effort, and the fear of religious violence inherent in the play is inescapable. The St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572 was certainly in the living memory of many, and the great agitation of the Armada in 1588 was only five years before the play. Inevitably we must grant that the fear of Catholic violence was certainly more than a theatrical motif. Still, when MacKenzie argues that "none among an Elizabethan audience would have been unduly surprised by the Catholic propensity for extermination" (85), we must pause and consider a rhetorical frame that is at best uncritical and at worst seems to label Catholicism as inherently vicious. Whether or not this is an overt intention, the presence of such statements in this volume is uncomfortably problematic and certainly a simplistic view of 16th century religious conflict.

Other examples include the afore mentioned "Medieval Catholic Europe, riddled with crime and war, and stalked by the specter of the Black Death . . . " (75) and "a salutary reminder of genocidal antipathies of Continental Catholics" (86). Whatever the intentions, such overblown statements, at the very least, assume a strictly religious motivation for the political violence of the day and mistakenly assume that Marlowe's audience would have been firmly, even zealously, Protestant. When MacKenzie suggests that "no Elizabethan audience would have accepted for a moment the thesis that a murderous Catholic cabal could be acting at the behest of God" (87), he is characterizing *The Massacre of Paris* in strict religious terms that even his own analysis at times subverts;

moreover, this assumes a thoroughly Protestantized England in 1593, which is certainly a false assumption. Religious politics in this era were much more complicated than this text at times over-zealously assumes.

The best strength of this study lies in its program to use emblems and icons to enrich our understanding of Marlowe's theatricality of tableau, and though the connections made are sometimes tenuous, even sometimes mistaken, there are enough legitimate resonances drawn to make the monograph a worthwhile contribution to Marlowe scholarship, and, indeed, part of the movement to awaken our understanding of the essentiality of visual representation in the period. In addition, the text could well help stimulate greater interest in Marlowe's plays, both those more well known, such as the *Tamburlaine* plays, *Edward II* and *Dr. Faustus*, and those most ignored, such as *Dido, Queen of Carthage* and *The Massacre at Paris*. The weaknesses perhaps arise from argument overextensions that either fail to adequately contextualize the inheritance of meaning or make uncritical assumptions about the social and political complexities of the period. As such, the scholar and instructor might well make good use of both the strengths and weaknesses of MacKenzie's study to stimulate a richer and more complex exploration of Marlowe's dramatic corpus and the period in which it was produced.

Jefferey H. Taylor (PhD, Southern Illinois 1994) is Professor of English at Metropolitan State University of Denver. He is the author of Four Levels of Meaning in the York Cycle of Mystery Plays (Lewiston: Mellen, 2006). Much of his research interests lie in redefining cultural performance in terms of Owen Barfield's theories on the evolution of consciousness and Mary Douglas's Grid/Group theories of social cosmology with the goal of using changes in theatricality to map significant transformations of consciousness in the Medieval and Early Modern periods. A long-time member of the International Boethius Society, he has published articles in Carmina Philosophiae *on Boethius translation traditions, and is co-author with Dr. Leslie Taylor of a forthcoming book on the influence of Boethius on Renaissance English literature.*