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Othering Women and Femininity in *The Jew of Malta* and *Edward II* by Christopher Marlowe

Abstract
The main objective of this paper is to examine the philosophical concept of the Other in relation to some of Christopher Marlowe's female characters. A primary issue of the article is the violation of the socio-normative order and the consequences for those who dare to challenge the status quo. The paper, which draws on the work of prominent feminist theorists, explores how female characters are portrayed and what key features they possess, as well as the extent to which women are allowed to act independently.

Keywords: Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*, *Edward II*, women, identity, feminist theory, the Other.

Numerous theorists have extensively discussed the concept of the Other, as well as the related concepts of otherness and othering. My aim in this article is to produce a critical analysis of two plays by Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta* and *Edward II*, which provide ample scope for the study of otherness. I will focus on Marlowe's female characters in the plays and, especially, follow how they are portrayed as *others* and how femininity is seen through the eyes of the playwright's male characters.

Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) is among the most influential thinkers who have defined "the Other" in relation to women and femininity. According to her, "the concept of the Other describes women in patriarchal, androcentric cultures" (Pilcher and Whelan 2017: 96). In such societies, "whilst men are 'the One' (in other words, beings in and of themselves), women are 'the Other', beings defined only in relation to men" (Pilcher and Whelan 2017: 96). In her most famous book, significantly entitled *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir also stresses women's complicity in their subordination. They fail in defining themselves as "the One" because they accept the current situation of male domination (see Pilcher and Whelan 2017: 96). She further maintains that "woman may fail to claim the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity and because *she is often very well pleased with her role as the Other* [my emphasis]" (qtd. in Pilcher and Whelan 2017: 96). According to Judith Okely, women have "chosen to remain beings in themselves rather than become beings for themselves" (Okely 1986: 59), thus evading adult autonomy and responsibility.

While some authors have been critical of Beauvoir's view of women, Carrie Paechter have found the concept of the Other useful and productive, arguing that it reminds us that "power relations are central to the construction of gendered identities" (Pilcher and Whelan 2017: 97). While Paechter's argument is valid, it cannot be denied that Beauvoir's views are universalist, implying that "the Other is the experience of all women, at all times" (Pilcher and Whelan 2017: 97). Later authors have rejected the binarism in Beauvoir's thought, which manifests itself in her distinction between "the One" and "the Other" or between "Subject" and "Object" (see Pilcher and Whelan 2017: 97). In what follows I will use Beauvoir's idea of otherness as a foundation while referencing work by other theorists.

To understand the world of Marlowe's heroines better, we must examine gender relations in the historical and social contexts of his plays. Despite having a female monarch, the society in which Marlowe lived and worked was shaped by a distinct division of the sexes. Patriarchal standards were never questioned and both men and women had clear roles in the community and occupied clearly defined positions in it. Men were the heads of families, and their women and children were subject to their whims, just as servants were to their masters. Although wives were comparably better positioned than servants, patriarchal authority strengthened the inequality in the family system. Women were also associated with the private and domestic realm and were expected to take care of the household and the children, while men were the ones who had access to the public sphere, literacy, politics, trade, and other occupations. In Marlowe's time, men functioned within a heterosexual culture dominated by the belief that the universe is centred on homosocial and heterosexual interactions.

The term "homosocial" has been lucidly defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. According to her,

> "[h]omosocial" is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with "homosexual," and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from "homosexual." In fact, it is applied to such activities as "male bonding," which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality. (Sedgwick 1985: 11)

Homosocial relations could show as mutually advantageous relationships among men solidified by the exchange of women in marriage. Women were present in that system solely as objects, devoid of agency about their own aspirations and ambitions (Chedgzoy 2004: 247). Reviewing the Elizabethan patriarchal system, Frances Dolan argues, however, that while it is undeniably true that women suffered from various disadvantages and constraints particular to their gender, it is also important to stress that women found many ways to exercise authority, enact resistance, express themselves and pursue their desires, control money and property,

exploit or defend the status quo, or effect change (Dolan 2003: 8). They were ladies in waiting at the royal court, daughters and sisters of rich merchants or noblemen, who had the network and connections to influence decisions, they were midwives and nurses, they were left in charge of their estates, lands, families and servants while their husbands were away at war or in exile (see Dolan 2003: 15).

On the other hand, men could also be in dependent positions. For instance, they could be servants or be reduced to vagrancy and forced to beg in the streets. It would be incorrect to speak about the Elizabethan period in absolutes and go from one extreme to the other; women were not slaves with no opinion or say in their own lives, but they were also not considered equal to their male counterparts legally or socially. This ambiguity makes it all the more intriguing to look into how women navigated and coped in the very limited society they lived in.

When examining Marlowe's depictions of women, it is essential to note that they have not escaped critical censure. Some commentators assert that his diction may be perceived as sexist or misogynistic. In his plays, he does not often give his female characters active agency within the plot and while some of them display power and resistance, they are still subject to the patriarchal system and its cultural expectations. Most of Marlowe's heroines are characterized by passiveness, which only intensifies the toxic masculinity of his male characters. Marlowe's dramatic works depict women as objects and conduits of power rather than as its agents; his plays both reveal and contribute to the oppression and objectification of women by males (see Bartels, qtd. in Chedgzoy 2004: 249).

Marlowe's plays do not represent domestic or traditionally feminine atmosphere. In their rare presence, women in *Tamburlaine the Great*, for instance, are linked to "sin, death, fall, and trouble-making" and limited to "the domestic sphere" under the light of a constant male gaze (Liao, qtd. in Takapoui 2018: 71). Even the major female character, Zenocrate, embodies the concept of a powerlessness. She lacks control in her life and conforms to her husband's desires and expectations. Zenocrate elects to submit entirely; however, as long as she lives, she operates as a revered symbol rather than a genuine human being, representing a shadowy area on Tamburlaine's map to be subdued, while for others, she remains an unattainable, pristine domain, eternally isolated and fetishized as an imperial territory, "a silent corpse" (Liao, qtd. in Takapoui 2018: 73).

It should be noted, however, that there are scholars who argue that Marlowe's women are more complex and nuanced. They can be said to challenge the normative gender roles, stereotypes and societal expectations. If we once again take *Tamburlaine the Great* as an example, we can suggest that Zenocrate's role is a multifaceted one, as she gains some power throughout the play. While the majority of scholars depict her as a submissive and voiceless figure, initially merely a war captive compelled to marry Tamburlaine, Corinne Abate offers a contrasting perspective: she posits that, despite women being regarded as spoils of war during that era, the primary motive for Tamburlaine's capture of Zenocrate lies in his desire to legitimise

his military endeavours and transcend his ignoble origins by uniting with a woman of superior socio-economic status (Abate 2003: 19). This proves that she has a much more significant role for the plot than most choose to acknowledge. I would like to next focus on two other female characters that play equally pivotal parts in the plots of their respective plays: Queen Isabella from *Edward II* and Abigail from *The Jew of Malta*.

Queen Isabella is a character who defies the established order in multiple ways, and I assert that she might be perceived as a disobedient Other from at least three distinct perspectives. One of the main ways in which traditional gender roles are challenged is when Queen Isabella disregards her husband by going against him and conspiring behind his back, in addition to having an adulterous relationship with Mortimer Junior. These are all critical transgressions of the socio-normative perceptions of the role of a woman. Adultery constituted both a sin and a crime, particularly condemned when committed by a woman; historical records indicate that numerous women lost their lives as a result. But forsaking the role of a humble and loving wife for the role of an adversary and a leader of an army against King Edward, an act traditionally expected of men, was something that must have caused unease to the audience in the theatre. That would have signalled to both men and women in the audience that any woman could oppose the social order and turn against her husband if she wished so. We must recognise that Queen Isabella's initial endeavours aim to address the instability of her marriage, even as she grapples with emotional and sexual rejection by Edward. Although Isabella laments her mistreatment at her husband's hands, she reluctantly accepts her wifely duty of obedience in the hope that it will lead to reconciliation, accepting Edward's injunction to work for the recall of his beloved Gaveston.

> ISABELLA
> Then let him stay; for rather than my lord
> Shall be oppressed by civil mutinies,
> I will endure a melancholy life,
> And let him frolic with his minion. (scene 2: 64–67)

Up to a certain juncture in the play, she preserves the social order at the expense of her personal tranquilly and contentment. However, the persistent maltreatment and humiliation she endures incite her desire for vengeance. Thus, her earlier commitment to marriage mutates into more disorderly desires, including the adulterous and politically ambitious passion for Mortimer. Isabella's interactions with Mortimer indicate that her sorrow over the dissolution of her marriage propels her to engage in actions that contest the gender stereotypes prevalent in the play's context (Chedgzoy 2004: 250–251). Marlowe presents Isabella as willing to disobey the social order in exchange for power and retaliation. This may also be seen as a way for her to take revenge for her wounded pride as the King's legitimate spouse who

has been forsaken by him because of his obsession with a homoerotic relationship. Alternatively, we may perceive her as a highly ambitious individual who regards a man unfit to govern, a monarch more inclined to indulge in his erotic fantasies than to engage in state matters, and consequently concludes that she is the superior candidate for rulership; she must first ensure the King's abdication. In this sense, she metamorphoses into the quintessential disobedient Other: a woman who rejects her husband's diversions and instead confronts them. By conspiring against him she becomes an active agent in the dethronement of the King and aims at assuming his place. She also demonstrates her own power and free will by having a lover of her own choice.

She is also othered on account of her foreign origin: she is a French woman at the English court. However, later in the play, when she attempts to find solace in her homeland, she is regarded as a foreigner there as well. Undoubtedly, that is due to Edward's involvement, but it does not diminish the sense of lost belonging, especially when she is marginalized somewhere, where she was once fully accepted and placed high in the social hierarchy. In her book *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva describes foreigners as not belonging to "any place, any time, any love" (Kristeva 1994: 7). Queen Isabella perceives herself as estranged from both France and England, as well as from the affection of her French relatives and that of her English husband. Isabella, in addition to her role as an outsider in love, may be regarded as an Other by both Edward and Gaveston, as she is neither included nor capable of inclusion, but rather serves as an annoyance and discomfort to their homosexual partnership. Although tied to the King by their marriage vows and the normative heterosexual world of the play, she is an Other in her marriage as she is viewed as the outsider in this love triangle. Hated by both men, she is a constant reminder that their love is viewed by society as unacceptable, immoral, and sodomite.

I must, nonetheless, further comment on one particular part of the play, where even as an active agent and transgressor, Isabella is still repressed by male authority. In scene 17, while she is making a speech before the soldiers, Mortimer is quick to interrupt her emotionally charged attempt to validate her position of power in front of a male audience.

> MORTIMER JUNIOR
> Nay madam, if you be a warrior,
> Ye must not grow so passionate in speeches. (scene 17: 14–15)

Apparently, as a woman, Isabella is unfit to be a leader and a warrior because she is guided by emotions and passions rather than solid reasoning and logic. Despite her efforts to assume an equal role in their resistance against the King, she is muted and consigned to a state of neglect, serving merely as a tool for Mortimer's aspirations for power. Kristeva argues that rather than try to do away with the Symbolic order, women should place themselves within it as they are speaking beings

above all (Kristeva, qtd. in Oliver 9). But how can women defy this barrier if it is so fervently defended by the members of the patriarchy? How could they place herself in the Symbolic order if they are immediately silenced? Perhaps, Mortimer is aware that if Isabella dared rebel once, she would not hesitate to do it again in order to keep her power. His interruption could be seen as fear that the order had already been corrupted once and if he did not intervene, it would eventually be destroyed. Obstructing her speech is a desperate attempt on his part to keep her in a position of semi-activeness. Mortimer imposes this transitional role on Isabella and designates her as an emblem of royal authority, thereby solidifying his own status as a genuine contender for the throne, while also guaranteeing that she would not obstruct his ambitions and he would avoid Edward's fate.

Ultimately, Isabella cannot evade the repercussions of her transgressions, despite the parental connection she has with the newly ascended King Edward III. To him, she represents a transgressive Other because of the wrongs she perpetrated against his father and, especially, her breach of the socio-normative order. Consequently, the freshly ascended king delivers the stern judgement:

KING EDWARD III
Mother, you are suspected for his death,
And therefore we commit you to the Tower
Till further trial may be made thereof;
If you be guilty, though I be your son,
Think not to find me slack or pitiful. (scene 25: 78–82)

To her own son, Queen Isabella is a woman who defied the social order and, hence, must be removed from it. Even though his father likewise violated the social norm through his homosexuality, it is his mother who must bear the negative repercussions of her decisions. The rejection of his mother is closely connected to her role as a transgressive Other. As the disturber of the normative order, Isabella must be sent to the Tower, otherwise, even with the deposition of the previous unfit king and the ascension of the new King Edward III, the order would not be restored. She must be removed from court physically. If someone breaks a prohibition or takes on a role unsuited for them, society works to correct the transgressor: "there are punishments for not doing gender right" (Butler 1993: 55). The more dangerous aspect and the more problematic one is that Isabella *chose* not to do gender "right." Stigma and expulsion are used to correct subjects who are not appropriately enacting their roles. These roles are by no means necessary nor unchangeable, but function to reinforce the current structure of society and are thereby protected through marginalization and punishment (Carson 2020: 52).

Moving on to the second drama under consideration, *The Jew of Malta*, we meet Abigail, a different heroine, who experiences a similar destiny. She is a com-

plex character who is subjected to othering in more than one respect. Abigail embodies three identities categorized as Other or stranger: woman Jew, and Catholic. The combined identities seem symbiotically connected in their marginalization and yet fundamentally opposed to each other (see Rapatz 2016: 257). Let us examine the first category of othering based on her gender. As a woman, Abigail's agency is severely limited compared to that of her male counterparts (excluding her father) in the play. When her father's estate is confiscated by the government, she finds no other option but to offer to go before the Senate and plead for mercy.

> ABIGAIL. Nor for myself, but aged Barabas:
> Father, for thee lamenteth Abigail:
> But I will learn to leave these fruitless tears;
> And, urg'd thereto with my afflictions,
> With fierce exclaims run to the senate-house,
> And in the senate reprehend them all,
> And rent their hearts with tearing of my hair,
> Till they reduce the wrongs done to my father. (Act 1, scene 2: 236–237)

The speech demonstrates Abigail's love of her father. As she is unmarried, her father is her sole protector. As a daughter and a woman, her primary vocation is domestic, yet she considers going to the Senate to plead her father's cause. Abigail feels an obligation to serve her father and comply with his commands, as is expected of her, even when his commands contradict her own desires or when she recognises the immorality of his actions. When her father demands that she show affection for both Don Mathias and Don Lodowick in order to fulfil his plan to kill them, despite her initial lamentation, she complies and acts according to his commands. She sustains her dedication to her father until her death. Even when she divulges everything to Friar Barnardine, she does so with the expectation that her father will attain salvation via Christianity and be able to redeem his soul. Unfortunately, her father reciprocates her love and devotion only partially. He cherishes her yet perceives her as a commodity, a commercial object to be used for the sake of enacting his vengeance. After her first conversion, Abigail can enter the nunnery that her home has been turned into and retrieve Barabas's jewels and money. After she passes them on to Barabas, we find it difficult to decipher whether he is grateful for the jewels or for his daughter:

> BARABAS. O my girl,
> My gold, my fortune, my felicity,
> Strength to my soul, death to mine enemy;
> Welcome the first beginner of my bliss!
> O Abigail, Abigail, that I had thee here too!

Then my desires were fully satisfied:
But I will practice thy enlargement thence:
O girl! O gold! O beauty! O my bliss!
[Hugs the bags.] (act I2, scene 1: 49–56)

What is more, the confiscation of Barabas's estate is a direct act of oppression against him and his daughter on the basis of their religion. It is clear throughout the whole play that they suffer social ostracism. In sixteenth-century England, Jews were marginalized and persecuted. They were considered "the accursed descendants of those who had killed Christ and who continued in their devilish ways" (Shapiro 2016: 37). Among the numerous transgressions attributed to the Jews was their prevalent role as usurers, a profession profoundly scorned by English society, which perceived the Jews engaged in this practice as exploiting and punishing the unsuspecting Christians with exorbitant interest rates. Another even more disturbing accusation was the so-called *ritual murder*: a belief that Jews killed Christians in special rituals in order to collect their blood and use it to anoint their deceased (Shapiro 2016:19). Additional alleged offences comprised the ritualistic slaughter of children and forced circumcision (Shapiro 2016: 89). In addition to those, there were certain physical traits that were considered Jewish, such as circumcision or an abnormally prominent nose, by which a Christian could recognise someone who was of Jewish heritage.

As a woman, Abigail is not physically marked by circumcision. This enables her to escape the stigma against Jews by means of conversion and marriage. Her ability to convert and become a Christian wife might have helped her find a new sense of belonging and adopt the role of an acknowledged member of Maltese Christian society. Abigail converts to Christianity twice. The *turn* and *re-turn* pose the question of how genuine and sincere her conversions are. There were stories about many Jews in England, who were outwardly Christians, but still maintained and practised their Jewish beliefs in private. This fluidity and ambiguity "provoked fears ... of a hidden interiority" underneath an apparently conforming Christian façade (Bovilsky, qtd. in Rapatz 2016: 258). Abigail's first conversion was clearly a deception orchestrated by her father. Her second conversion appears genuine but was it perceived as such by the prejudiced Elizabethan audience, who harboured deep hostility against Jews?

In Elizabethan England, both Jews and Catholics were subjected to hate and discrimination from theatrical audiences. Catholics were readily linked to Jews on account of the significant public animosity towards Spain and Roman Catholicism. Researchers of early modern England have highlighted the association between Catholics and Jews as demonized Others (see Rapatz 2016: 257). Abigail participates in this demonization by converting to Catholicism and ultimately dying as a nun in a Roman Catholic monastery.

Finally, I must state that the topic under consideration in this essay requires extensive research. What I have presented is merely the tip of the iceberg. Identity, both masculine and feminine, in Marlowe's plays poses many questions whose answers are not as obvious as one may expect. Given that the majority of his characters are male and his plays emphasise men's accomplishments, one can perceive his heroines as docile and unremarkable. However, it is beneficial to transcend conventional limits in order to scrutinise the fluidity of Marlowe's characters and the concepts presented in his works regarding the heterosexual patriarchal society, the roles of men and women, gender and sexuality, the autonomy of human will, and individual aspirations. His heroines, despite being severely constrained in self-expression and autonomy over their acts and life-altering decisions, exhibit a measure of resolve and drive that is evident in the actions they undertake independently. Contemporary feminist theories could serve as a point of reference when studying these women even if they did not inhabit a strictly feminist world. What is more, I believe that Marlowe's plays do not limit the characters solely based on their gender – the way I see it, he masterfully created humans who were limited because of the numerous social and racial prejudices, extreme perceptions of nationality, religion, sin, sex, and love. Considering his purported homosexuality, I am compelled to believe that in crafting some characters, he deliberately interwove his own contradictory views of existence and the culture surrounding him with his storylines. Even without indulging in affection for the individual behind the author, I perceive his characters as more intricate and ideologically significant than literary criticism typically suggests.

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