

Marlowe as a Metrical Artist

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ABSTRACT: The use of blank verse on the part of Marlowe's predecessors was dull and monotonous. It was mechanical. The accented and unaccented syllables alternated with regularity. The pause was always placed at the same spot. The sense ended with each line — each line was a period in itself. At the end of each line there was a strong monosyllable. They failed to realize that blank verse could be written with far greater effect of melody and force of rhetoric by varying the unit of the rhythm, or the foot. They failed to realize that emphasis but "enforced accent." They tried to imitate classical models and did not realize (1) that in the absence of rhyme on line can be linked to another without injury, periods like those of prose can be formed, in which phrase balances phrase, and the music of language is drawn through sequences of mutually helpful verse, (2) that the *pause* or stop can add another element of variety, by allowing each line to be broken in more than one place, and enabling a skilful craftsman to open and close periods of rhythmic melody at several points in the structure, (3) that Blank Verse in an eminently dramatic metre. Its facility and rapid movement bring it into close relation with the speech of common life, and impose no shackling limitations upon dialogue. But at the same time, the fixed element of rhythm raises it above spoken language and renders even abrupt transitions from the pedestrian to the impassioned style of poetry both natural and easy, (4) that the emphasis on which it mainly relies for variety of music, gives scope to rhetoric, (5) that by shifting the accent, not only can a play-wright animate his verse and produce agreeable changes in the rhythm, but he can also emphasise the meaning of his words and yield opportunities of subtly modulated declamations of the actor, and (6) that the same end is also achieved by altering the *pauses*, and a very wide scale of oratorical effect is thus attained. "Blank verse is, in fact, the nearest of all poetic measures to prose, yet it does not sacrifice the specific note of verse, which is the maintenance of one selected rhythm, satisfying the ear by repetition and charming it by variety within the compass of its formal limitations".

Keywords: Marlowe, Blank verse, emphasise

Marlowe's Handling of it : His Innovations

It was Marlowe, who by his genius realised all this and made blank verse the supreme instrument of dramatic poetry. Instead of the improver he may almost be called the

creator of blank verse : for the mere omission of rhyme in the metre of his predecessors did not suffice to contribute what we now understand by blank verse." He made numerous and significant innovations in the handling of this metre.

(1) He found the heroic line monotonous and monosyllabic, divide into five feet of tolerably regular, alternate short and long syllables. He left it various in form and structure, sometime redundant by a syllable, sometimes deficient, and at other times animated by unexpected emphases and changed in the pause.

(2) He found it a clumsy and mistaken imitation of the Classic Iambic; he made it a native English rhythm.

(3) He found nosequence of concatenated lines, attempts at periods— one verse followed another in isolation, and all were made after the same insipid model. He grouped his lines according to the sense, allowing thought contained in the words to dominate their form. The melody was and carried through several line linked together by rhetorical modulations.

(4) The cadence was skilfully varied according to thought and emotion.

(5) He thus produced the double effect of unity and contrast: maintained the fixed march of his chosen rhythm, and yet by alterations in the pause speed, and grouping of syllables, changes in emphasis and accent, he made one measure represent a thousand, and,

(6) His predecessors sacrificed the poetry of expression, the force of rhetoric, to the mechanism of their art. Marlowe achieved melodious effect by elasticity and pliability of cadence, and saved it from insipidity by licenses which emphasized the poet's sense and which were demanded by his rhetoric.

Opinion of Critics

One eminent critic after another has highly praised Marlowe's handling of blank verse, and the ways in which he adapted it for use on the stage. For example, referring to Marlowe's innovations with regard to the use of blank verse for the stage, Boas remarks in his book, *Shakespeare and His Predecessors*: "His innovation in style was extremely bold, and yet, in a sense, like other intuitions of genius, extremely simple, it consisted in the adoption of blank verse, for the purpose of the popular drama, which had hitherto found its instrument in the rhyming couplet. Such a change was absolutely essential, if Romantic Art was so attain a rich and untrammelled development. Of all forms of literature, the drama which calls its creations into independent life, and bids them be their own interpreters, naturally craves the largest and freest utterance. It organ of

expression must be stately enough for the highest uses and yet sufficiently simple and nervous to render articulate the cry of human heart in passionate extremes. Rhyming metres with their necessary element of antithesis and artificiality are unequal to the service; they throw emotion into leading strings, they distort its lineaments, dwarf its stature, emasculate its virility. Thus the genius of Marlowe seeking a fit channel of utterance, turned instinctively to blank verse. This metre had become the instrument of the Senecan school of dramatists. But as yet, it had only been declaimed to select gathering of scholars and courtiers within academical or legal precincts. To dissever it from these associations, and submit it on the boards of the public theatres to the rough-and-ready verdict of the groundlings, might well have seemed a hazardous experiment. Yet it achieved an instant success which completely disconcerted contemporary playwrights".

T. S. Eliot referring to the contribution of **Marlowe** to blank verse has remarked in his book, *Elizabethan Essays* : "The verse accomplishment of Tamburlaine are notably two Marlowe gets into blank verse the melody of Spenser, and he gets a new driving power by enforcing the sentence period against the line into line, as in the famous soliloquies. 'Nature, compounded the of four elements,' and, 'What is beauty, saith my suffering, then ?,' marks the certain escape of blank verse from the rhymed couplet, and from the elegiac and pastoral note of Surrey, to which Tennyson returned In *Dr. Faustus* Marlowe went further; he broke up the line, to gain in intensity, in the soliloquy; and he developed a new and important conversational tone in the dialogues of *Faustus* with the devil."

Some Defects

Marlowe, having discarded the rhyme, captured the attention of his hearers by strange, swelling phrases, and his great and thundering speech is frequently exaggerated into bombast and rant. There are numerous contemporary reference to the impression made by Tamburlaine's "high astounding terms." Ben Jonson, even more severe in his criticism, writes that the language of the "true artificer, though it differs from the vulgar, somewhat, will not fly from humanity with the Tamburlaines and Tamer Chans of the late age, which had nothing in them but Senecan strutting and furious vociferation to warrant to the ignorant gapers." This tendency to bombast and rant is the greatest weakness of Marlowe's handling of his medium.

His Real Greatness

But in spite of these obvious defects one can deny that Marlowe rendered a great service to the Elizabethan drama by the adoption of blank verse as a fit medium for the stage. The following passage from **Thorndike's** Tragedy brings out clearly Marlowe's greatness in the use of blank verse: "Genuine human passion and a vital conception of life's tragedy found expression in verse, sometimes inspired, sometimes absurd, but always spontaneous and unflinching. Blank verse, borrowed from 'tally and adapted in English Senecan plays, now became a new instrument, and its pre-eminent adaptability for tragic poetry henceforth long remained unquestioned.. If it has had many greater master since, it had none comparable before, and in spite of stiffness, monotony, and great unevenness, it rises now and again to remarkable technical excellence. It has plenty of Senecan hyperbole, but curiously little of Senecan antithesis or aphorism; it abounds in rant and bonabast; it is over-adorned with classical allusions; it delights in ornament and sonority; and in the main it is declamatory and lyrical rather than dramatically suited to character and situation."

Yet the lover of romantic poetry will find delight in the very impetuosity of descriptions, the of the rant, the thunder of the declamation, the roll of proper names, the colour and pageantry of descriptions, the occasional loveliness of the luxurious classicism, and yet more in the splendid surges of the verse to reveal the turmoil and anguish of passionate death. From the first moment **Marlowe** was an undoubted poet : and to his tremendous facility of words and rhythm he was adding, as Edward II reveals, a moderation of ornament, an evenness of power, and a dramatic consistency, while still retaining the potentiality of dazzling dramatic flash. "He brought not only blank verse, but poetry to the English drama, and the greatness of its style dates from his achievement."

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