

THE (INTER-)THEATRICALITY OF MARLOVIAN PROLOGUES

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When discussing the idea and function of a prologue/epilogue in drama, Manfred Pfister (1991: 74-90) points to several features that are part and parcel of this dramatic and theatrical phenomenon. First of all, he states (1991: 74) that prologues/epilogues are "presented by a figure outside the internal dramatic action, either an anonymous speaker [in Elizabethan drama often referred to as Prologue/Epilogue], an allegorical personification or god figure, or a stylised personification of the author himself." Then, he proceeds (1991: 74) to list the most important functions of the prologue/epilogue such as apologies for a poetological programme, résumés of events leading up to the play and comments on the ensuing action. In other words, the prologue serves to define a drama or performance as suggested by Keir Elam (1984: 34). It is a means to signal the dramatic framework or mark the fictitious convention thus breaking the mimetic illusion (Elam 1980: 59).

Such a notion of the prologue was implemented as early as in the ancient Greek and Roman drama. European theatre of modern times, including Elizabethan drama, added new functions while retaining the traditional ones. The figure speaking the prologue (e.g., a Chorus) was endowed with the ability to distance itself from the dramatic action, thus acquiring a new dimension of epic quality (Pfister 1991: 82), which allows us to treat both the figure and its utterance [=prologue/epilogue] as parts of a narrative text contributing to the panoramic *testo spettacolare* (Sinko 1988: 8). These parts are complex systems of signs operating on, *inter alia*, the theatrical level (i.e., pertaining to the performance, stage production, actors, etc.).

Another important trait of Elizabethan prologues is the so-called 'exordial function' which consists in "welcoming the audience and getting it into an appropriate mood" (Pfister 1991: 90) as well as "presenting a poetological programme" (Pfister 1991: 90). This is certainly a characteristic theatrical device as it is intended to make sure that the audience enjoy the *staging* of a drama. It is often implemented

in the way outlined in the famous prologues in Shakespeare's *Henry V* where "the effect of denigrating the powers of the presenters while inflating the contribution of the audience ... is to hand all the praise for the *success* (emphasis mine) of the performance to the audience, all the blame for its shortcomings to the presenters. The audience is thus complimented as the *perfecters of the performance* (emphasis mine) ... [which emphasizes] the primacy of the contribution made by the audience." (Jones 1978: 93) This result cannot be achieved if we consider the dramatic or literary dimension only.

The literary level is primarily stressed when Keir Elam (1984: 89) focuses on dramatic beginnings in Elizabethan comedies. He argues that "many of the comedies trace ... an anterior co-text and its corollary, a pre-existing universe of discourse. They begin, that is to say, not only *in medias res* but, more strikingly, in *media verba*." Be that as it may, my claim is that it is not only the literary aspect but also the physical reality of a performance that such a beginning (including a prologue) presents. Consequently, we can say that a play commences in the centre of theatrical signs, too.

To finish this introductory part sketching the theatrical potential of a drama in Marlowe's times, it seems worthwhile pointing to yet another role attributed to Elizabethan drama in general, and to prologues in particular. The prologue reflects a peculiar feature of drama in the Elizabethan era: it presents and reveals the most important ideas pertaining to the contents of a play, which enables the recipient to concentrate on the way these ideas are handled on stage. The Elizabethans were usually well familiar with the general outline of the subject matter of the plays they were to see. In this respect, they resemble modern theatre-goers who usually know the text of the drama before they enjoy the performance.¹ Drawing parallels with modern theatre is not out of place here as it will help us focus on the theatrical nature of the prologues in Marlowe's plays.

The choice of this particular period and playwright for an analysis of a structural unit in a drama has been determined by two factors. Firstly, Elizabethan theatre is an exceptional phenomenon, both artistic and commercial, which, in a way, culminates and complements traditional, ancient Greek drama and opens up new vistas of drama's development, which are to be found in modern theatre.² Secondly, much attention has so far been paid to Shakespearean prologues, especially those prefacing the five acts of *Henry V* while prologues penned by Marlowe, to the best of my knowledge, have not been discussed as a separate issue. Furthermore, they represent the mixture of tradition and novelty so typical of the Elizabethan period. Therefore they seem to lend themselves to an investigation into their theatrical potential.

Marlowe inserted prologues into four plays: the two parts of *Tamburlaine* (here regarded as two independent dramas), *Doctor Faustus* and *The Jew of Malta*. The order suggested here by no means points to the chronology of composing these

¹ This characteristic was also noticed by Brennan (1979: 44).

² See also Brennan (1979: 44) who compares the Prologue to Act II of *Henry V* with some elements of Brechtian drama.

plays. While it is certain that *Tamburlaine* was the first drama written by Marlowe, it is difficult to establish the date of *Doctor Faustus* and definitely place it either before or after the composition of *The Jew of Malta*.³ I set *The Jew of Malta* aside as it contains a prologue (or, to be more exact, prologues) that significantly differs from those of the other plays and calls for a separate scrutiny.

Gary Taylor in his "Introduction" to the Oxford Shakespeare edition of *Henry V* says that "Choruses are untheatrical" (Taylor 1984: 57). I will attempt to challenge this statement and prove the opposite. I shall view the functions of the prologue as theatrical signs and attributes of the theatre familiar to a modern theatre-goer. Thus, I suggest that the prologue fulfils the roles of a curtain and footlights as well as playbills and programme notes⁴, which belong to the setting that is indispensable in the theatrical ritual.

In Marlowe's drama, like in other Elizabethan plays, the prologue is delivered by a special character before the actual dramatic events are displayed. Naturally, following what has been said earlier, this character forms a bridge between the dramatic world and its theatrical framework: he is a creation that certainly stands apart from the audience and its critical judgement (which he intends to mould or influence), and yet is part of the most intimate and direct communication that is effected between stage and audience. What is more, the prologue-character appears to form another intermediate construct: he is placed halfway between the animate world of actors enacting the *dramatis personae* and the inanimate set of properties and scenery. On the one hand, the character's position is rather fixed; physically, he is usually imagined as approaching the edge of the stage and delivering his address from that spot⁵. On the other hand, his ability to move and transcend the simple semiotic function already ascribed to him puts him in the dramatic world (he is often grouped in the list of characters alongside other personages, as in *The Jew of Malta*).

The prologue is also a useful instrument of the critical assessment of other theatre productions; here, these stagings will be either those of Marlowe's plays or his predecessors' or contemporaries'. This is what I call the intertheatricality of the prologue drawing on the notion of intertextuality (if we assumed that a performance is a text, as suggested by Sinko (1988: 6), then we might as well use the term 'intertextuality').

A clear reference to the theatrical tradition is found as early as in the first two lines of the Prologue to *Tamburlaine Part One*:

³ For a discussion of the sequence of Marlowe's plays see Gill (1965: xi-xii).

⁴ In his analysis of the character of Time in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, Pafford suggested that "Time's speech acts valuably as a programme explanation, and like a programme it is read, so to speak, in an interval." (Pafford ed. 1963 [1991]: ix) Although inserted in the middle of the play, this part functions very much like a typical prologue (as *The Winter's Tale* is a play divided by a distinct temporal gap into two segments, Time's monologue can be safely viewed as a prologue to the latter part). In this paper, the word "programme" refers exclusively (unless indicated otherwise) to the printed leaflet available before a performance in the foyer. This specification is necessary because the term is also understood in the sense of an artistic programme (as suggested by Zbierski 1991: 498).

⁵ As depicted in Walter Hodges's drawing reprinted in Gurr 1992: 8.

From jiggling veins of rhyming mother-wits,
And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay
(Marlowe 1986: 105, ll. 1-2)

Here, “the arrogant young scholar-poet, with all the disdain of a University Wit ... sweeps aside the doggerel rhymes and clownish jigs of his predecessors” (Levin 1965: 47). Harry Levin rightly points to Marlowe’s declaration of a new poetic programme as well as new way of staging (the traditional theatrical effects are contemptuously called ‘clownage’). This would imply a new quality of stage business and property that would match Marlovian ‘mighty line’. Actually, the exuberance and splendour of the production was echoed in the inventory of the stage properties owned by Lord Admiral’s Men, which included a cage for Bajazeth, Tamburlaine’s coat trimmed with copper lace and breeches made of crimson velvet (Bakeless 1942, 1: 201-202). This sumptuous feast of entertainment is emphasized by the image of “the stately tent of war” (Marlowe 1986: 105, l. 3). It points to the Prologue’s function as a curtain (as a matter of fact, when the curtain was introduced in the 17th century, it was used only after the prologue, Taylor J.R. 1983: 81): it suggests that the audience will find the stage a place of war, battles, etc. In other words, it stirs the recipient’s “theatrical imagination”, as H. Levin (1965: 48) put it, which is efficiently supported by elaborate properties.

This role is also assigned to the Prologue opening *Tamburlaine Part Two*. The last line clearly indicates the idea of revealing or disclosure that is physically embodied by the curtain: “Himself [= ?author/Prologue-character/actor] in presence shall unfold at large” (Marlowe 1986: 183, l. 9). Furthermore, the Prologue receives yet another semiotic characteristic: it works as a spotlight highlighting an important scene in the play (as it does, in fact, in the case of *Tamburlaine Part One*, attracting the reader’s attention to the character of Tamburlaine and the actor impersonating it):

And with how many cities’ sacrifice
He celebrated her sad funeral.
(Marlowe 1986: 183, ll. 7-8)

It is worthwhile remembering that in Marlowe’s times there was no artificial lighting and no spotlight could be used. The performances were usually shown in broad daylight beginning at 2.00 p.m. That is why this particular feature of the prologue seems crucial here.

To some extent, the Prologue is also intended as a kind of a programme note: it presents and praises the author’s previous work – *Tamburlaine Part One*. Characteristically, it speaks about the success of the performance. Moreover, it combines the role of a play programme with that of a theatrical allusion (to Marlowe’s own drama):

The general welcomes Tamburlaine receiv’d,
When he arrived last upon our stage,
Have made our poet pen his Second Part,
Where death cuts off the progress of his pomp.
(Marlowe 1986: 183, ll. 1-4)

This quotation makes it clear that the success (both artistic and commercial) which *Part One* enjoyed leaves no room for poetological or theatrological declarations. Like a modern film director or producer, Marlowe produces a sequel for more or less similar reasons as his twentieth-century counterparts. And the popularity the play won, which the dramatist was well aware of, also resembles that of some modern film or theatre hits: the response of the audience must have been extraordinary indeed if in a sermon preached by Stephen Gosson at Paul’s Cross on 7 May 1598, the minister, referring to theatre-going in general, points out that “in publike Theaters, when any notable shew passeth over the stage, the people arise in their seats, & stand upright with delight and eagernesse to view it well” (after Gurr 1992: 10).

The prologue’s function as a play programme is to be noticed in the presentation of the highlights which reveal the contents of the play. I have already pointed to this trait as a typically Elizabethan device allowing the audience to concentrate on how the drama was performed. It reminds one of the programme used at the opera which always contains a synopsis of the libretto so that the audience can admire the music and singing.

The highlights of significant scenes perform still another role. They inform the recipient of the structure of the drama and performance. The expression “progress of his pomp” (Marlowe 1986: 183, l. 4) is a key phrase here: *Oxford English Dictionary* explains the word ‘pomp’ as 1. splendid display or celebration, magnificent show (which could be used to describe a staging); and as 2. a triumphal or ceremonial procession or train; a pageant: a splendid show or display along the line of march [emphasis mine]. In view of this definition, the line “progress of his pomp” (Marlowe 1986: 183, l. 4) seems somewhat tautological. However, it is a very apt portrayal of the structure and subject matter: a series of scenes showing royal personages (the use of the word ‘pageant’ in *OED* must be stressed in this context). This quality of *Tamburlaine* has been noticed by many critics who complain about the loose structure. Harper (1971: xvi) does not treat it as a defect; on the contrary, he claims that

The passages in *Tamburlaine* which make little sense as narrative sequence exist to make their points as dramatic emblems, each one capable of communicating its intellectual content through appeal to the eye and of occupying its own pageant waggon. *Tamburlaine* is not merely an indulgence in spectacle but a whole series of “goodly shows”.

It faintly echoes Mr. Lewis Perry’s assessment of the theatrical or staging qu-

alities of *The Jew of Malta*, also criticized for the apparent lack of a coherent structure:

Critics of this particular play have united in saying that the interest falls off after the second act and that the play deteriorates into such a succession of horrors that all dramatic interest is lost. We did not find this to be the case when the play was acted. There was, on the other hand, a steadily rising interest from first to last (Lewis Perry after Bakeless 1942, 1: 361).

John Bakeless (1942, 1: 360-361) also voices a similar opinion: "the purely literary faults of *The Jew of Malta*, which are clear enough in the study, disappear in the theatre, for the mutilations were originally made for the sake of a *theatrical effect* (emphasis mine), which they still produce."

Unlike *Tamburlaine* or *The Jew of Malta*, *Doctor Faustus* is generally thought to be a well-constructed play. Despite continuing arguments as to which of the two versions of the play that have survived to our times was truly Marlovian, it is quite safe to analyse the Prologue as it seems that the controversy does not centre on this section. Since *Doctor Faustus* was certainly composed and produced after the success of *Tamburlaine*, its prologue does share common features with those prefacing the two parts of the earlier play. Firstly, it begins with references to plays already performed by Lord Admiral's Men. Roma Gill (1965: 4) contends that the lines: "In courts of kings, where state is overturned,/ Nor in the pomp of proud audacious deeds" (Marlowe 1986: 265, ll. 4-5) speak about *Edward II* and *Tamburlaine* respectively. An interesting aspect of the Prologue is a clear indication that it is spoken on behalf of the actors: "the Muse" of line 6 is masculine, which may point to the position of the Poet/Playwright – "Intends our Muse to vaunt his heavenly verse" (Marlowe 1986: 265, l. 6). Such a treatment of the word 'Muse' is found in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. According to Gill (1965: 4), "Shakespeare, comparing himself with 'that Muse Stirred by a painted beauty to his verse' [Sonnet XXI], clearly alludes to a rival poet". Thus, the theatricality of the event receives a double emphasis: the actors break the illusion by reminding the audience of the fact that they are actors, professionals who have already been applauded by the viewers who, in turn, are about to *see* and *hear* a show specially prepared for them by, *inter alia*, the playwright.

Secondly, the same passage is a good illustration of the prologue functioning in the role of a programme: references to previous plays, the quality of performances staged so far and the allusion to Marlowe himself (here treated like a best-seller writer) are meant to encourage the audience to watch the play and to convince them that they have not come to the theatre in vain.

Thirdly, the initial apology for flouting the audience's expectations serves to introduce the change in the rhetoric and, implicitly, a different way of staging a performance. The lines:

Only this, gentles: we must now perform

The form of Faustus' fortunes, good or bad.
And now to patient judgements we appeal.
(Marlowe 1986: 265, ll. 7-9)

first flatter the recipients, as 'gentles', according to G.P. Jones (1978: 98), "could be used by polite metaphorical extension to refer to virtually any collection of listeners" and then ask them for a critical evaluation of the actor's skills. The Prologue makes it clear that the subject matter of the play will be grave and require the audience's close attention; and yet, nowhere is the drama referred to as a tragedy (unlike *Tamburlaine Part One*). This assumption remains tacit: the actors are supposed to enact the tragedy and, being professionals conscious of their artistic worth, they seem to believe that the real measure of their success will be the audience's realization of the extent of Faustus's loss and the moral lesson that the play teaches.

Fourthly, like in *Tamburlaine*, the Prologue to *Doctor Faustus* alludes to some aspects of stage business and properties. It may appear that the latter will be much poorer than the ones used for *Tamburlaine*. However, *Henslowe Papers* (Greg 1906: 118, l. 84) mentions a "j dragon in fostes" together with unusually large takings which, as suggested by John Bakeless (1942, 1: 297), "may have been due to special scenic effects". These, in turn, are hinted at, I would argue, in the image of Icarus; as we know, the dragon was used in Faustus's travels and aborted search for divine knowledge and thus embodies the central idea of rise and fall so perfectly mirrored in the concept of Icarus's attempt at flying.

The last parallel with the structure of the *Tamburlaine* Prologues is found in the curtain-like quality signalled by the last line: "And this the man that in his study sits." (Marlowe 1986: 265, l. 28). Here, the discovery space is revealed showing Faustus – in modern theatre, the curtain would be raised and the spotlight would be focused on the protagonist. In a way, such a device is also a bridge that joins all the plays discussed in this paper. As Harry Levin (1965: 134) put it, "as with *The Jew of Malta*, this introduction is completed by drawing aside the curtain to the inner stage – which in Elizabethan theatrical usage, was appropriately called 'the study'. The protagonist is then discovered in his literal study, the little room, the monkish cell that comprises his library and laboratory".

This solution seems to be almost the only similarity of the Prologue spoken by Machiavelli (or Machevill as Marlowe had it) with the prologues uttered by other Marlovian characters (called 'Prologue' and 'Chorus'). Although there are some faint echoes of the productions of Marlowe's plays: the name of the Guise refers the recipient to *Massacre at Paris* and the mention of Peter's chair in line 12 (Marlowe 1986: 347) may evoke a scene from *Doctor Faustus*, they can hardly be treated as properly functioning intertextual references. Instead, the audience faces a character that acts as an embodiment of a stereotype of political thought; one who is integrated with the dramatic world and yet never appears on stage to partake of Barabas's plotting. In this light, he can be interpreted as resembling theatre's footlights demarcating the dividing line between the stage and the audience. Furthermore, Machevill performs another theatrical function which has

not been touched upon so far. He seems to orchestrate the play's atmosphere and the audience's response in the way a priest organizes and leads a ritual. A theatrical performance is certainly such ritual: its ancient and Medieval origins leave no doubt about it. Thus, roles are assigned: the viewers are eager to see a play full of vice and malice presented, judging by the references to exceptional cruelties (e.g., the brazen bull) with the help of theatrical tricks (such as the use of the trapdoor and the cauldron in the final scene), and the actors are supposed to follow their minister and become fellow-priests controlling and conducting the ritual.

To end this brief survey of Marlowe's prologues, it appears worthwhile devoting some space to one more prologue to *The Jew of Malta* written most probably by Thomas Heywood and referred to as "The Prologue to the Stage, at the Cock-Pit". It functions like a good playbill or programme as it places emphasis on the excellent acting that the audience enjoyed while watching the performances of Marlowe's dramas. The allusions to the legendary Edward Alleyn or less eminent Richard Perkins were a guarantee of the commercial and artistic success. Marlowe himself also used this technique to lure the audience; he was more subtle, though. When the Prologue of *Tamburlaine Part Two* mentions the success of *Part One*, the viewers are aware that it was achieved owing to the first-class performance by Alleyn cast as the Scythian conqueror.

The Elizabethan audience loved theatre; characteristically, it was the staging of the play that Marlowe's contemporaries enjoyed rather than dramatic texts. When a play was published, the main reason behind this step was to protect it from pirate, illegal editions that could be used by a rival theatre company. The status of the Elizabethan theatre can be compared to that held by the cinema only some decades ago, before television became so powerful. It was a prosperous business and an event that people willingly took part in. It was a ritual which consisted of the text, properties, actors, audience, etc. And the prologue was a crucial element of this ritual. It attracted the potential viewer with the promise of a magnificent show enacted by famous actors, and flattered them. It expounded the form of the production spotlighting the main character(s) and highlighting scenes which required rare skills or extraordinary theatrical tricks. It raised and levelled the wall between the stage and the audience building up suspense and whetting the audience's appetite. The prologue was a handy tool to promote the profitable business of Elizabethan drama and as such was primarily concerned with the reality of a stage production.

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