Marlowe’s Staging of Meaning

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In his preface to the collection “A Poet and a filthy Play-maker” Kenneth Friedenreich remarks that for a long time criticism of Marlowe’s plays focused on his abilities as a poet rather than as a playwright, and that not until the late twentieth century had “the community of Marlowe’s interpreters accepted the truth that all his plays possess—albeit in varying degrees—a theatrical dimension possessed of its own powerful structure and logic.” Particularly effective in illustrating how Marlowe combines the visual and verbal to create meaning onstage are studies calling attention to the influence of emblem books and of pageants and morality plays on his work. One of the first critics to take this approach was Jocelyn Powell, developing the premise that,

In constructing his plays, [Marlowe] pays very careful attention to the visual effect made by each scene in action, and contrives that the movements of the actors, their properties, their costumes, and the background against which they appear, should combine to form a picture, as representative as the words, of the psychological and moral tensions about which he is writing. Powell adds that “on the whole Marlowe’s most powerful effects do not rely on tradition; he creates his own images, giving them significance through context and language, underlining the action with significant visual detail, or extending the verbal action into the stage-picture” (199). Picking up on Powell’s use of “spectacle,” J. W. Harper notes that “the word preferred by Marlowe and his contemporaries was ‘show’, and this word in the Renaissance carried a connotation which it has since lost: a show was a visible means of communicating an intellectual concept.” Harper adds that Marlowe’s “basic dramatic method is the presentation of a series of emblematic images which, in their suggestion of formal arrangement, communicate their meaning as forcefully to the eye as to the ear” (xv). In this study I want to demonstrate that only when we perceive this aspect of Marlowe’s plays and its thematic purposes is it possible to achieve an accurate appreciation of his theatrical craftsmanship.

Indeed, the “play-maker” epithet should be a reminder that Christopher
Marlowe was a playwright, a craftsman who constructed plays by using the tools of his craft. He spoke the language of the early modern stage—what Alan Dessen has described as the “theatre vocabulary” shared by those responsible for putting plays onstage: playwrights, players, and bookkeepers. Essential to that language are the stage directions and dialogue signals that determine what the characters do and where onstage they do it. Because a playgoer’s experience of drama is linear, these visual elements are necessarily fundamental to a play’s structure and meaning. Marlowe seems to have understood not only that actions and their stage location are important but that they can be a means of both highlighting and linking key events in the plot. This device of visual emphasis is evident in all Marlowe’s plays, from, at one extreme, Edward II and 1 Tamburlaine, which have the most minimal stage directions and staging requirements, to The Jew of Malta, which makes the most extensive use of the performance space. In each play a direct relationship between the staging and a governing idea is apparent. In using this method, Marlowe is no different from his contemporaries, all of whom to some degree employed a nonrealistic “theatrical logic—call it symbolic or imagistic or presentational.” But Marlowe was especially adept at creating and deploying successive stage images to chart a sequential process.

In early modern plays the stage directions indicate a playwright’s familiarity with the language of the theater; in addition, they can provide evidence of his approach to playmaking. Marlowe’s directions demonstrate his strong interest in the visual and the importance of that dimension to the structure of his plays. His directions are for the most part conventional, demonstrating his familiarity with, in particular, the world of the Rose playhouse inhabited by the Admiral’s Men. Not surprisingly, the confused and confusing extant text of The Massacre at Paris is something of an exception, although it too includes staging practices similar in important ways to those of Marlowe’s other plays. In general, then, his stage directions are minimal, but sufficient to produce the required action when combined with dialogue cues. This is typical of playtexts through the period: even in the extant manuscripts and quartos annotated for performance, the bookkeepers rarely supplement dialogue signals with additional stage directions. Although probably no early modern playtext by any author has a signal for every character entrance, in Marlowe’s most of these directions are present. He seldom specified exactly how many “others” or “attendants” should appear, but he frequently called for such figures to swell an entrance. While exit or exeunt is always less common than enter in playtexts of the period, Marlowe’s are notably unusual in that he seldom marked character exits or scene endings with couplets; even his dialogue signals for departure are often extremely subtle—not the typical “go,” “come with me,” or “follow.” Almost always, however, he included dialogue to effect the removal of a body. Also atypical, but characteristic of Marlowe, are abrupt mid-scene changes in location. His plays make consider-
able use of properties and costumes, and feature distinctive items or memor-
able business at thematically central moments—a chafer of coals, cage, chariot; banquets, hangings, bed scenes. Like his fellow playwrights, Mar-
lowe included many more small, hand-held props than large items that had
to be carried on; probably the most common property is a simple letter or
other piece of paper. Interestingly for a playwright whose plays rely so heav-
ily on emblematic moments, he never used the term “dumb show.” And
while none of the stage directions we can safely attribute to Marlowe requires
the stage trap, he often made repeated use of the tiring-house wall and its
openings. Indeed, Marlowe seems to have been well aware of the power of
repetition (that essential playwright’s tool), something nowhere more appar-
tent than in his play with the fewest and most minimal stage directions.

Edward II is often discussed in terms of the language of Fortune’s wheel—of high and low, rising and falling—but what a playgoer actually
sees is horizontal movement, namely entrances and exits. And since Marlowe
typically signals virtually every action with a dialogue cue, what the playgoer
hears are repetitions and variations of leave, depart, part, away, exile, banish,
gone, farewell, come, stay, arrive, and return. It might be objected that any
play consists of a series of entrances and exits, but Edward II consists of
very little else—or at least no other actions are given nearly the same almost
continuous verbal and visual emphasis. On its own, this repetition is not sig-
nificant, but when it is considered in relation to King Edward’s love for Piers
Gaveston, the coming and going can be seen as integral to the staging of this
story. That relationship and its consequences are manifested from start to
finish in the play’s basic structure of arrival and departure, union and separa-
tion. This is interspersed with moments of pause or stasis that not only high-
light the arrivals and departures but are emphasized by contrast with the
dominant mode of movement on and off stage. To show how this works, it is
necessary to describe in some detail how Marlowe uses dialogue and action
to create the process; doing so, however, will establish a technique funda-
mental to Marlowe’s playmaking.

Edward II begins with Gaveston reading a letter from Edward, an action
that effectively joins the two characters into one as Edward “speaks” first,
but in Gaveston’s voice. In addition, the issue is their current separation: the
letter commands Gaveston to “come” to Edward. When the king enters,
Gaveston cavedrops on the argument between Edward and Mortimer about
his “return” to England (83, 95, 105). This matter is therefore central from
the start. Once they are alone, Gaveston signals his movement towards Ed-
ward: “I can no longer keep me from my lord” (138) and they embrace, cre-
ating the first of a series of similar images of union. Almost immediately,
however, they begin to discuss Gaveston’s possible “exile” to France. In the
second scene Mortimer and the other nobles plot to separate the two—
“We’d hale him from the bosom of the king” (1.2.29)—and the queen enters
only to be asked “whither walks your majesty so fast?” (46). Isabel replies that Edward has told her “Go whither thou wilt, seeing I have Gaveston” (54). Mortimer tells her to “return unto the court again” because they are going to “exile” the king’s favorite (55–56).

The long fourth scene provides considerable evidence of how Marlowe combined the visual and verbal to create dramatic meaning. The motif of high and low is present at the start of this scene, when Edward and Gaveston sit together, probably on a raised “state” or dais, as Warwick speaks of “Phaethon” and Mortimer says, “Their downfall is at hand” (4.1.16, 18). But Gaveston is captured and taken “Away” at Lancaster’s command (33; exit cues are neither incidental nor accidental in this play). Next, Edward is forced to agree to Gaveston’s “exile” (53) and the nobles hurry to “see him presently dispatched away” (90). But Gaveston reenters for an exchange with Edward during which they refer repeatedly to their forthcoming separation, using the established language of the play—for example: “I am banished and must fly the land” (107), “thou must hence” (110, 124), “Therefore, with dumb embracement, let us part” (134). When finally the king says “I’ll bear thee on thy way” (140) and they are about to leave, the queen enters and asks where he is going. He responds “get thee gone” and “Away then; touch me not. Come, Gaveston” (145, 159). After they have left, Isabella decides she must “be a means to call home Gaveston” (184) to regain her husband, and persuades the nobles to “call him home again” (246). Still in scene 4, Edward reenters, mourning Gaveston’s “absence” (304). When he is told that Isabella has engineered his return, Edward embraces her and they join hands (329–35)—possibly for the only time in the play.

In the first scene of act two, there is an echo of the play’s beginning when Lady Margaret reads aloud a letter from Gaveston announcing his “returning home” (2.1.58). The next scene begins with everyone waiting for Gaveston’s return, until Lancaster signals his entrance: “look where his lordship comes” (2.2.49). Edward’s happy embrace of his favorite is interrupted by an attack from Lancaster and Mortimer, who wounds Gaveston. The king responds, “Out of my presence! Come not near the court,” to which Mortimer replies “I’ll not be barred the court for Gaveston” (89–90). The disruptive effect of Gaveston’s presence is apparent through this scene, particularly when Kent advises Edward to “banish him for ever” (210), but the king responds by exiling Kent: “Out of my sight and trouble me no more” (215). Act 2, scene 3 begins with the entrance of Kent, who meets Lancaster and the other nobles saying, “I come to join with you and leave the king” (2). Lancaster tells the others “That Gaveston is secretly arrived” (16). The stage directions that begin 2.4—“Enter the King and Spencer,” then, “to them Gaveston” (0.1, 3.1)—describe a visual event that the dialogue elaborates. Edward asks Spencer, “where is Gaveston?” then sees him—“here he comes!” (1, 3)—at which point they probably embrace once more. But the moment is brief be-
cause they are about to flee the nobles, who have taken control. The dialogue emphasizes not only the action of departure, but that the king and Gaveston go in separate directions: “Fly, fly, my lords,” “O stay, my lord,” “Gaveston. Away!” “Farewell, my lord” (4, 7, 8, 9). When Edward says “Farewell, sweet Gaveston, and farewell, niece” (to Margaret), Isabella asks, “No farewell to poor Isabel, thy queen?” (12–13). Isabella is then once again left alone on-stage to lament, “From my embraces thus he breaks away” and to wish “That I might pull him to me where I would, / . . . That, when I had him, we might never part” (16, 18, 21). By the end of this scene, Isabella has decided “My son and I will over into France” (65). Her exit is juxtaposed with “Enter Gaveston, pursued” (2.5.0). He is immediately taken prisoner for the second and final time. Noteworthy, however, is how Marlowe uses the basic business of exit cues to highlight the nobles’ difficulty in getting rid of Gaveston. Warwick says “Go, soldiers, take him hence” (20); when Gaveston tries to speak, Warwick cuts him off: “Soldiers, have him away” (25); but then Edward’s emissary, Arundel, arrives with the request that the king might see Gaveston one last time: Warwick refuses and repeats “Soldiers, away with him” (48). When Gaveston echoes the request, Mortimer again says “Soldiers, away with him!” (49). Arundel reassures them that Edward “will but talk with him and send him back” (57). Then Pembroke says he will “undertake / To carry him and bring him back again” (77–78) and Gaveston says “Sweet sovereign, yet I come / To see thee ere I die” (92–93). Marlowe’s desire to call attention to Gaveston’s final exit is indicated not only by the failed attempts of Warwick and Mortimer to send him “away” but by the last moments of the scene when Pembroke says, “be gone,” and Gaveston, musing more profoundly than he knows, signals his own exit: “Unhappy Gaveston, whither goest thou now?” (107–8). The sequence is not over, however, because Gaveston immediately reenters, followed by Warwick and his men. Again Warwick commands “Go, take the villain; soldiers, come away” (2.6.11) and, after a final exchange with Gaveston, repeats “Away” (17).

With the expected separation of Gaveston from Edward nearly complete, the ironies are apparent when in 3.1 the king anxiously awaits his favorite’s return but the queen and prince enter instead. Edward sends his wife and son to France and she signals her exit (“My lord, I take my leave,” 87) then Arundel immediately enters with the news of Gaveston’s death. By the end of the next scene, Edward has defeated the nobles in battle and is exacting revenge. He first dismisses Kent (“Away, avoid our presence,” 3.2.48), then sends Warwick and Lancaster to execution (“Away with them,” 61) and Mortimer to the Tower (“Be gone,” 71). By having Edward manage all these exits, Marlowe subtly but effectively conveys that the king is still in control at the midpoint of the action.

But as the fourth act begins, Kent and Mortimer are preparing to leave for France. Then with one of the abrupt shifts Marlowe liked to use, the location
is France and Prince Edward is urging his mother to “return to England” (4.2.3). Indeed, it is worth noting that for most of the play, location is important only insofar as it is either the place departed from (England) or exiled to (France). Here, Isabella greets the entering Kent and Mortimer: “Welcome to France” (37), but they talk only about England. And in the next scene, located back in England, Edward receives a letter with the news that Mortimer is returning from France to “give King Edward battle in England” (4.3.57–58). This is followed by the arrival of the prince, Kent, Mortimer, and the queen, who upon entering says “Welcome to England all” (4.4.2). Although these expressions might be thought simply a formulaic means of establishing place, in the latter part of this play they also emphasize the repeated shifting of location as the action moves inexorably towards Killingworth and Edward’s death.

The beginning of that process is signaled by “Enter the King, Baldock, and Spencer the son, flying about the stage” (4.5.0) and by Spencer’s “Fly, fly, my lord; . . . / . . . Shape we our course to Ireland” (1, 3). Although the king resists (“was I born to fly and run away,” 4), Baldock hurries him off (“Away! We are pursued,” 9). When next Edward appears he is in an Irish monastery and disguised. For the second time in the play, the dialogue indicates that he is sitting, and the echo is significant. Whereas earlier the defiant king challenged his nobles, “What, are you mov’d that Gaveston sits here?” and Lancaster responded, “Your grace doth well to place him by your side, / For nowhere else the new earl is so safe” (1.4.8, 10–11), now the “miserable” Edward says to Spencer and Baldock, “come sit down by me” (4.7.15–16) and to a monk, “Good father, on thy lap / Lay I this head, laden with mickle care” (39–40). At this moment of stasis, Edward’s opponents enter to capture him and the prolonged buildup to another separation and departure ensues. Spencer asks that he and Baldock can “take our farewell of his grace”; Baldock says to Edward “we take our leaves” (69, 77); then Leicester announces, “Your majesty must go to Killingworth” (69, 77, 82). Although Edward responds “Must! ’Tis somewhat hard when kings must go,” he is placed on a “litter” and as he is taken away says to his followers, “part we must. . . . And go I must” (82, 87, 95, 96, 99). When he has been carried off, Spencer cries, “O is he gone? Is noble Edward gone? / Parted from hence, never to see us more?” and “Gone, gone, alas, never to make return” (100–101, 103).

Act 5 begins with the entrance of Edward with his captors, now at Killingworth. The removal or departure at the heart of this scene is not of a character but of King Edward’s crown, which Winchester and Leicester want for the coronation of Prince Edward. Again Marlowe uses repetition with variation, here to associate this action with the difficulty Warwick and Lancaster had in taking Gaveston prisoner (2.5). Leicester asks “Will you yield your crown?” and in his long response Edward shifts from “Here, take my crown” to “But

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stay awhile; let me be king till night, / That I may gaze upon this glittering crown” and “See, monsters, see, I’ll wear my crown again” (5.1.50, 57, 59–60, 74). He tells them “Traitors, be gone” but when they start to leave, Leicester tells Edward to “Call them again.” When they return, Edward says “Here, receive my crown” but then shifts to “Take it” and finally, “Bear this to the queen” (87, 91, 97, 102, 117). As the dialogue clearly prescribes, the king repeatedly takes off and puts on the crown, an action recalling how he had been twice united with and then separated from Gaveston. When Edward next appears he is “Within a dungeon,” forced to “Sit down” while Matrevis and Gurney wash and shave him (5.3.19, 28, 36.1).

The final three scenes are very busy, with frequent entrances and exits that help to convey the transfer of power from Edward II to Edward III. First Mortimer sends Lightborn to murder the deposed king. Then the newly crowned Edward III enters for a brief moment of celebration before the captured Kent is brought on, which initiates an emblematic tussle between Mortimer and the new king over whether or not Kent will be executed. Mortimer impatiently says to the soldiers “How often shall I bid you bear him hence?” and “Once more, away with him” (5.4.99, 101). This is juxtaposed with the reappearance of Matrevis and Gurney discussing the imprisoned Edward’s condition, “in a vault up to the knees in water” (5.5.2). When Lightborn enters they give him “keys” and “a light to go into the dungeon” (25, 37), then Edward asks, “Who’s there? What light is that? Wherefore comes thou?” (41). Here, for the first time in the play, Marlowe seems to have used an opening in the tiring-house wall for more than a basic entrance or exit. Certainly the process from King Edward’s initial freedom to his complete containment would have been symbolized by his brief appearance in this recessed area, although it is most unlikely that the murder was enacted in that space. More probably, early in his lengthy exchange with Lightborn, Edward would move forward so that when Lightborn says “Lie on this bed and rest yourself awhile” (5.5.71) Edward would be out on the stage. Given the play’s repeated emphasis on going and staying on the one hand, and moments of stasis on the other, it is significant that in response to Edward’s “O wherefore sits thou here” (perhaps on the bed where Edward is lying), Lightborn says, “If you mistrust me I’ll be gone, my lord” and Edward replies: “No, no; for if thou mean’st to murder me / Thou wilt return again; and therefore stay” (95–98). Furthermore, the gruesome business with mattress, table, and poker, while historical, also vividly both emblematizes and enforces Edward’s ultimate immobility. The scene ends with Matrevis and Gurney carrying Edward’s body off to “Mortimer our lord” (5.5.118).

In the final scene the movement on and off the stage continues. The new king enters and confronts Mortimer then sentences him to beheading, setting up another sequence of repeated commands for departure, this time from Edward III: “Why stays he here?” “Hang him, I say, and set his quarters up! /
But bring his head back presently to me," then "Hence with the traitor, with the murderer!" and finally "What! Suffer you the traitor to delay?" (5.6.50, 52–53, 57, 66). This not only verbally reinforces Edward's determination but calls visual attention to the exit of the character who has engineered the removal and death of many who have departed before him. Edward's control is further emphasized when he sends his mother off to the Tower ("Away with her," 84); but her exit is also delayed when, in an echo of earlier requests, she asks if she can "accompany [her lord] to his grave" but is told "'tis the king's will you shall hence" and "gentle madam, go" (87, 88, 90). The new king's resolve is also expressed visually in the play's final moments. A Lord enters with Mortimer's head, which he gives to Edward, who sends him off again to get the hearse and his funeral robes. Here the young king is briefly alone with the head, an emblematic moment that would have conveyed much about life, death, and power to the playgoers for whom it was written. Then the hearse is brought on—a final ironic entrance for Edward II, who also, interestingly, began the play as an invisible presence in the form of the letter read by Gaveston. The play's conclusion is the last in the series of emblematic moments that Marlowe created to emphasize thematic links. Edward "offer[s] up" (99) Mortimer's head to his father, probably placing it on the hearse for a last coming together of the contending forces that have governed the play but are now replaced by the single figure who controls the final movement off the stage.

The venue where Edward II was first performed is unknown, so it is impossible to say whether or not Marlowe might have constructed the play to accommodate certain physical conditions. At the same time, however, the play's minimal staging requirements mean that it could have been successfully performed virtually anywhere that had a rear wall with at least two doors. Furthermore, the relationship between the plot and the action I have been describing suggests to me that the staging was determined by the story Marlowe wanted to tell. The dominant action of movement on and off the stage serves to highlight the recurring moments of stasis, prompting playgoers to become aware of how and why the play ends as it does. And although one might assume that Marlowe's reliance on the repeated use of a few properties—chairs, crown, letters, bed—was also determined by the exigencies of performance, arguably he included those few specific props so as to emblematize the tragic sequence of events. In such a case, the minimalist use of the stage becomes an important means of reinforcing the ironic repetition with variation that charts King Edward's journey from his court, to a monastery, to Killingworth castle. If, for example, the chairs on which Edward first sits with Gaveston (1.4) are located in the same area of the stage as the seats where the disguised and fleeing Edward sits with Spencer and Baldock then lays his head on a monk's lap (4.6), and those seats are where the deposed Edward later sits to be shaved (5.3) and where Lightborn invites Edward to
“lie down and rest” (5.5.91) and, finally, the hearse bearing Edward’s body is brought to the same place, thematic connections would be made with great theatrical economy.

That Marlowe used the visual—properties, costumes, and stage space—to help convey ideas particular to each play is also made evident by comparing the two very different parts of Tamburlaine. Part 1 is not unlike Edward II in being dominated by movement, in this case conveying Tamburlaine’s acquisition of power. Until Damascus there is little sense of place, which helps to convey the constant progress from one conquest to the next. Tamburlaine takes his “show” with him: the stage directions call for a number of properties—treasure, crowns, dagger, swords, cage, chair of state, banquet, laurel branches—and specific costumes for Tamburlaine. But a performance requires no more than a bare platform: even at the play’s end, the tiring-house wall is not required for the defeat of Damascus.

By contrast, 2 Tamburlaine places considerable demands on the tiring-house wall and opening. Possibly Marlowe wrote the second part with a different or specific venue in mind, which might explain the staging requirements; but given how the stage is used, a more satisfying and probable primary reason for the differences is that he was again employing the means at his disposal to create visual manifestations of his play’s concerns. A general effect of using the rear wall is that there is less sense of continuous and powerful movement in part 2. The playgoer is prompted to be more conscious of each stopping place, and each stop is longer than in part one, with more location-specific action. In particular, the several uses of the opening in the tiring-house wall mark the dominant events of the play. An important sequence begins when “The arras is drawn, and Zenocrate lies in her bed of state, Tamburlaine sitting by her; three Physicians about her bed, tempering potions; Theridimas, Techelles, Usumcasane, and the three sons” (2.4.0).12 If Marlowe had a particular stage space in mind for this discovery, it was not merely a doorway—there are eleven characters and a bed here, strong evidence for a larger central opening. The progressive change and decline that his wife’s death initiates in Tamburlaine would have been emphasized when the same opening was used in the next scene but one for the entrance of Tamburlaine and his sons with Zenocrate’s hearse (3.2.0). That same space is also probably where “Amyras and Celebinus issue from the tent where Calyphas sits asleep” (4.1.0), and then where Tamburlaine “goes in and brings [Calyphas] out” before killing him in a rage (90). The idea that Tamburlaine’s destructive passions gain complete control of him after Zenocrate’s death would have been further emblematized if it were from the same opening that playgoers saw “Tamburlaine drawn in his chariot by Trebizon and Soria with bits in their mouths, reins in his left hand, in his right hand a whip, with which he scourgeth them. Techelles, Theridamas, Usumcasane, Amyras, Celebinus, Natolia and Jerusalem led by five or six common soldiers” (4.3.0;
a total of at least fifteen or sixteen characters, plus the chariot). The use of the tiring-house wall as a focal point for the enactment of Tamburlaine’s wrath is also evident when the Governor of Babylon enters “upon the walls with others” (5.1.0) and Tamburlaine’s forces “scale the walls” (64.1). Then Tamburlaine reenters in his chariot pulled by the conquered kings and commands that the defeated governor of Babylon be hung “in chains upon the city walls” (108). Later dialogue makes it clear that not only does the governor hang from the wall, but that as he hangs there Theridamas and others shoot him at Tamburlaine’s command.

Each of the two majestic entrances of Tamburlaine in his chariot would have been instantly recognizable as an emblematic “triumph” of conquest, an image explicitly and ironically changed to a triumph of death in the final scene when Tamburlaine is unable to stand and the chariot becomes a necessity. This fact is emphasized when he is brought onstage in it, taken off, and brought on again—a cumbersome business even with a large opening through which to exit and reenter. Near his own and the play’s end, after he has moved from the chariot to his throne, Tamburlaine says “Now fetch the hearse of fair Zenocrate; / Let it be placed by this my fatal chair” (5.3.210–11), which suggests that Marlowe wanted to create a visual echo of Tamburlaine “sitting by” (2.4.0) his wife as she died—the central event from which he never recovered.

The differences between the staging requirements of the two parts of Tamburlaine are especially significant when one considers that they were probably written for the same theater—the Rose—and were both certainly performed there. Thanks to the archeological discoveries of 1989, we now actually know something about the dimensions of the Rose stage (or stages). In particular, the new evidence shows that the stage was roughly thirty-six feet wide at the tiring-house wall, about twenty-six feet at the front, and approximately sixteen (later eighteen) feet from front to back. This is significant because it means that most of Marlowe’s plays were performed on a relatively small and shallow stage, on average about twice as wide as it was deep. Equally interesting is the possibility that the tiring-house wall followed the concave shape of the theater wall rather than being flat as in the Swan drawing. Sadly, however, the archeologists discovered nothing new about the openings in that wall, neither how many there were nor their dimensions. So there is still no contemporary evidence of what has come to be called the “discovery space” (although the term was never used in the period). Nevertheless, stage directions in Marlowe’s (and other) plays provide considerable support for the belief that the tiring-house wall did have an opening that permitted the effective staging of important action both in and from it. That there were only sixteen to eighteen feet of stage in front of that wall at the Rose would seem to increase the likelihood that some sort of discovery space was available and regularly used. Certainly Marlowe’s staging, which repeat-
edly includes actions from, in, before, or upon the tiring-house wall, would have been particularly suited to such a stage configuration: the advantages of using the wall for spectacular events or the opening to suggest secrecy or containment, for example, would not have been undermined by the playgoers’ inability to see the action.

Indeed, *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, probably Marlowe’s first play (written with Thomas Nashe),\(^{17}\) begins with an emblematic revelation almost certainly in such an opening: “*Here the curtains draw; there is discovered Jupiter dandling Ganymede upon his knee, and Mercury lying asleep*” (1.1.01).\(^{18}\) Combined with Jupiter’s first words—“Come, gentle Ganymede, and play with me” (1.1.1)—this tableau vividly introduces the play’s central motif of obsessive, misdirected love and consequent neglect of responsibility. As scene 1 continues, Jupiter puts jewels around Ganymede’s neck and promises more gifts, “if thou wilt be my love” (1.1.49). Then in act 2, after Aeneas’s long speech summarizing the Trojan War, he and Dido exit; but his son, Ascanius, remains onstage to be joined by Venus and Cupid. The goddess of love describes action that echoes the play’s beginning: “*For Dido’s sake I take thee in my arms / And stick these spangled feathers in thy hat*” (2.1.313–14). When Ascanius falls asleep Venus lays him in “this grove” (315; very possibly an opening in the tiring-house wall, behind a curtain),\(^{19}\) then sends Cupid “*in Ascanius’s shape*” to Dido “*who, instead of him, will set thee on her lap and play with thee*” (323, 324–25). Sure enough, in the next scene Dido says to the boy she thinks is Aeneas’s son, “*Sit in my lap*” (3.1.25), giving Cupid the opportunity to wound her with his arrow. Because the audience knows what he is doing, the idea of love as dotage is emphasized. The most important scene that uses an opening in the tiring-house wall is also at the play’s structural center: “*The storm. Enter Aeneas and Dido in the cave at several times*” (3.4.0). All previous action prepares for this scene and all subsequent action follows from it. Probably the two figures came out of the opening for their love scene, during which Dido says to Aeneas “*Stout love, in mine arms make thy Italy*” and “*Hold, take these jewels at thy lover’s hand*” (3.4.56, 60). Act 3 ends with their exit “*to the cave*” (63). There can be little doubt that the repetition of action and language is intended to emphasize thematic links—from Jupiter and Ganymede to Venus and Ascanius, to Dido and Cupid, to Dido and Aeneas.\(^{20}\) As a consequence of the events this sequence encapsulates, the focus of the final two acts shifts to Aeneas’s choice between love and duty, Rome and Carthage. This opposition is given two locations in the play: “*sea*” and “*shore*”; but although playgoers hear these two words repeatedly, they see only Dido’s world of Carthage and shore where she remains, imagining how “*I’ll frame me wings of wax like Icarus, / And o’er his ships will soar unto the sun / That they may melt and I fall in his arms*” (5.1.243–45).\(^{21}\)

The technique of opening a play with a striking moment that initiates a
visual and verbal pattern of thematic significance is a hallmark of Marlowe’s stagecraft. In addition to his use of this strategy in Edward II and Dido there is the well-known start of Doctor Faustus with a stage direction that signals the appearance (probably a discovery) of the protagonist in a place that defines him: “Faustus in his study” (1.1.0, the location created by the books from which he will soon be quoting). Subsequent directions call for Faustus to enter “in his study” again at the beginning of 2.1 and 2.3, making it reasonable to speculate that the same prop-defined space is where he appears before he comes forward into his magic circle “to conjure” at the beginning of 1.3. There are no stage directions describing how the A-text version of the final scene was staged, but Faustus cries, “Ugly hell gape not, come not Lucifer, / I’ll burn my books, ah Mephostophilis!” (5.2.114–15) before he exits with the devils. In the B-text the Good Angel tells Faustus “The jaws of hell are open to receive thee,” after which comes “Hell is discovered,” implying the use of an opening in the tiring-house wall. If Faustus were taken off through the same space from which he had originally and then repeatedly entered, this would conflate his study with hell and act as a reminder of why he has been “in hell” spiritually from the start. In this overtly emblematic play, indeed, which has already included good and bad angels and a parade of the Seven Deadly Sins, it would be surprising if the links between events leading to Faustus’s fall had not been made explicit by his exit into the property “Hell mought” owned by the Admiral’s Men.

In The Jew of Malta the action likewise begins with a scene that conveys the essence of the protagonist: “Barabas in his counting house with heaps of gold before him” (1.1.0.1). As with the beginning of Dido and Faustus, this is almost certainly a discovery that has the effect of immediately encapsulating the dominant idea of the play. And as in all Marlowe’s plays, place is not simply a location but central to the meaning of the action. The Jew of Malta’s staging is even more complex, however, because both the opening in the tiring-house wall and the gallery in the upper level are used repeatedly to create significant dramatic ironies. Furthermore, in this play the particular locations are always related to the broader one—Malta. Beginning at Barabas’s house, the rapid progression of specific places is clearly established for the playgoer by repeated verbal signals. No sooner is the stage space defined as Barabas’s house, where he keeps his daughter and hides his treasure, than Malta is occupied by the Turks and Barabas evicted: “Convert his mansion to a nunnery; / His house will harbour many holy nuns” (1.2.130–31). Next Barabas enlists Abigail to retrieve his gold from what was his house but is now the nunnery. The shift from one place to the other is effected when the tiring-house is referred to as “the new made nunnery,” and the ironic conflation is emphasized when Abigail asks the Abbess if she can “lodge where I was wont to lie” (1.2.305, 332). Abigail is the first to appear on the upper level when she throws the bags of gold down to Barabas, making it possible
for him to acquire a new house, to which he is next heard inviting Lodovick and Mathias (2.3.139, 151). The location change is signaled when Barabas calls to his daughter, “open the door” (223). In his own space again, Barabas plots the subsequent deaths there of Mathias and Lodowick.

With the beginning of act 3, however, the location shifts abruptly to the house of Bellamira the courtesan, putting this place at the center of the play structurally and, by implication, morally. Significantly, Pilia-Borza enters with a bag of gold that he says he has stolen from “the Jew’s counting-house” (3.1.18), which helps to keep the play’s first scene (and location) firmly in the playgoer’s mind. Another of the quick shifts typical of Marlowe’s play construction then occurs and Barabas is “above” (3.2.4.1), presumably at his house, watching as his plot to kill Abigail’s suitors unfolds. His emblematic placement in a position of power here is heavy with proleptic irony, since it is this event that begins the progression towards the play’s spectacular conclusion. When next the tiring-house is a focal point it is once more the nunnery, and Abigail is confessing to Bernardine how her two suitors were murdered (3.6). Then it is again Barabas’s house, to which he has invited Bernardine in order to murder him because he knows the truth (4.1). Although there are no stage directions, probably Barabas draws curtains to reveal Bernardine, who is strangled in or before the opening in the tiring-house wall.28 In the next scene the location shifts once more when Ithamore enters with a letter for Bellamira, saying “Here’s her house” (4.2.39); again the implicit conflation of the prostitute’s house with the nunnery and Barabas’s house creates ironies available for exploitation.

At the start of the final act, the location broadens to Malta—first inside then outside, then inside the “walls,” which Barabas helps the Turks to enter (93).29 He says he will open “the gates” to let them in (5.1.17), and if he actually does so (there is no stage direction), the playgoer would again see him in the opening of the tiring-house wall. The use of this stage space for much of Barabas’s Machiavellian plotting and actions culminates, of course, in the final scene, located back at Barabas’s house, where he appears “above” (5.5.0) for the second time—but now he has lost control of events and the playgoer knows it. In addition, the stage direction “A cauldron discovered” (62.1) indicates that the property was almost certainly located in the same defining space where Barabas had first appeared, sitting in his counting house with his bags of gold, and where he subsequently murdered Bernardine.30 As at the end of Doctor Faustus, here the visual and verbal combine to call to mind a hell-mouth: from the cauldron Barabas cries, “But now begins the extremity of heat / To pinch me with intolerable pangs” (5.5.86–87).31

As noted earlier, despite its problematic provenance even The Massacre at Paris contains clear evidence of Marlowe’s playmaking presence, especially in staging that uses the tiring-house wall opening—in this case to emphasize
the wholesale murder signaled in the title. Indeed, the use of the wall to designate places of residence and of the opening to stage the murder of the occupants are good examples Marlowe’s essentially theatrical approach to playmaking for the shallow Rose stage. Furthermore, despite the sometimes cryptic stage directions, it is possible to see how Marlowe’s practice of using the same stage space for analogous events is a central element of this play’s structure and meaning.

At the heart of this technique in Massacre at Paris is the repeated action of invading private space to kill the occupants. This sequence begins with the king’s “I will go visit the Admiral” followed by “Enter the Admiral in his bed” (4.48, 49.1). In one of the instant shifts common in this play (and typical of Marlowe’s stagecraft), the location becomes the Admiral’s house and bedchamber. The wording of the direction does not indicate if this was to be done by thrusting the bed forward through an opening in the tiring-house wall or by drawing curtains to reveal it in the opening; but in either event the playgoer—who has just learned of the plan to kill the Admiral—would see an image of one man’s vulnerability in his own house. This idea is even more apparent in the next scene when his murderers, who have been told by the Guise to “break into the Admiral’s house,” then “Enter into the Admiral’s house, and he in his bed” where they “Stab him” (5.8, 23.1, 28). On being told that the Admiral is dead, the Guise says “Then throw him down” (32), which has led editors to suppose that in this scene the bed was on the upper level and the body was thrown to the main stage. But the evidence provided by stage directions in other plays of the period indicates that (not surprisingly) beds were never located above; furthermore, the phrasing of the first direction puts the bed in or before the discovery space, and it is virtually impossible to imagine that it could have been moved to the upper level in the few minutes it took to perform the first twenty-three lines of the next scene before the bed reappears. At the same time, it is entirely possible to interpret “throw him down” to mean simply that Gonzago throws the body from the bed to the stage in a final act of disrespect, which is emphasized when the Guise “stamps on [the Admiral’s] lifeless bulk” (41).

The next action in the sequence is the murder of Seroune in scene 8, which begins “Enter Mountsorrell and knocks at Seroune’s door.” The voice of his wife, calling from within, establishes the location as Seroune’s house. He enters, realizes why Mountsorrell has come, and the brief scene ends with the direction “Stab him” (14). Interestingly, there is no indication that the body was removed—something Marlowe usually signals. Perhaps this omission is explained by the state of the extant text, but it is equally possible that removal of the body was not necessary because Seroune fell back into the tiring-house opening: into the private space where he has practiced the religion for which he has been murdered. Immediately after this scene the action shifts with “Enter Ramus in his study” (9.0.1), which was almost certainly in the same
tiring-house wall opening, where he too will be murdered at the Guise’s command (9.54). The state of the text makes it difficult to be sure what Marlowe intended in some of the later scenes, but given the information we have it is quite possible that when the Guise is himself finally murdered, it is also in this same space. If so, the technique of bringing things full circle visually that characterizes Marlowe’s plays is apparent again here.\footnote{7}

These examples illustrate not simply how Marlowe exploited one physical aspect of the stage for which he wrote, but also his broader approach to writing plays. They demonstrate that his plays should be studied not as literary creations by a poet who happened to be writing for the stage, but as theatrical scripts by a playwright who capitalized on the possibilities of a medium that was and is certainly verbal but especially visual. So while it is no longer possible to reproduce the physical conditions of their original performance, the most complete appreciation of the plays requires an awareness that they were written with a particular kind of stage structure and shared staging conventions in mind. Indeed, the consequence of Marlowe’s reliance on repeated emblematic stage images to construct the thematic frameworks of his plays is that only in performance can their meanings be fully apparent and complete.

Notes


2. Jocelyn Powell, “Marlowe’s Spectacle,” Tulane Drama Review 8 (Summer 1964): 197. See also Nicholas Brooke on Marlowe as “a dramatist who had the resources of a great poet at his command” (“Marlowe the Dramatist,” Elizabethan Theatre [London: Edward Arnold, 1966], 87–105), 91.


4. The phrase is Alan Dessen’s (Recovering Shakespeare’s Theatrical Vocabulary [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 5) and the general idea is most clearly articulated and demonstrated in his work.

5. This phrase too is Alan Dessen’s, in Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 2.

6. William B. Long has argued effectively that stage directions in extant playtexts generally reflect what the playwright wrote. See, for example, “‘A bed / for woodstock’: A Warning for the Un wary,” Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England 2 (1985): 94.

7. This play is one of only four about which Laurie Maguire says “a strong case can be made for memorial reconstruction” (Shakespeare’s Suspect Texts [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996]), 324.

9. A “letter” is called for in over four hundred stage directions of the period; see Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson, A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580–1642 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 131–32; see also “paper,” 156–57.

10. The quarto has no act or scene divisions. Quotations are from Edward the Second, ed. Charles R. Forker (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994).

11. In his edition, Forker suggests the possibility that Edward “comes up from below”; but his note surveys other opinions and provides good reasons why a discovery is the more likely staging (5.5.40.1 note).

12. Quotations are from the New Mermaids edition, cited in note 2; here and elsewhere I have quoted stage directions without including the editor’s square-bracketed additions. In fact the sequence begins with the appearance of Zenocrate on the throne in 1.4 (see Zuker’s analysis, 64–67.). In discussing the “stage-spectacle” here, Zuker cites Wolfgang Clemen, who observed that “in Tamburlaine Marlowe created a highly individual dramatic style in which stage-tableau and stage-business combined with the long speeches to produce a new kind of unity” (English Tragedy Before Shakespeare, trans. T. S. Dorsch [New York: Barnes and Noble, 1955], 125.). Clemen is correct, and although my focus in this study is Marlowe’s use of a sequence of stage images to emphasize themes, for a full appreciation of how such moments work it is important to note that his characters’ speeches explicate the symbolism of what they and the playgoer see.


16. See Richard Hosley, “The Discovery-Space in Shakespeare’s Globe,” Shakespeare Survey 12 (1959): 35–55, for a discussion that applies to discoveries generally, especially 45. See also Hosley’s “Shakespearean Stage Curtains: Then and Now,” College English 25 (1964): 488–92, in which he makes the same points and stresses that “those of Shakespeare’s plays which require discoveries do so very rarely” (489). This is an important difference between Shakespeare’s and Marlowe’s uses of the stage.


18. Quotations are from Oliver’s Revels edition, cited in note 17.

19. Venus’s speech that concludes the scene and act could signal her closing of a curtain over a tiring-house opening where Ascanius sleeps. In his edition H. J. Oliver
says the play “would presumably have been written especially for performance at a ‘private’ indoor theatre, such as the first Blackfriars, or at Court, and it seems to have been intended for the stage with fixed multiple set as distinct from the probably bare stage of public theatres.” This supposition leads him to produce an elaborate theory about the staging: “there were three ‘mansions’. One on, say, the left of the stage and perhaps set at an angle, would represent the cave, and the area in front of that would then naturally enough represent the shore and the wood. One in the centre, set well back (perhaps in a ‘discovery’ space) and perhaps raised, would represent Olympus. . . . The third ‘mansion’, on the other side of the stage, would represent the gates, or more probably, the walls of the city of Carthage. There could still be an area down-stage, centre, which was unlocalized . . .; here, for example, Iarbas could offer his sacrifice” (xxx–xxxiii). Oliver believes that such a staging would eliminate the abrupt changes of location, but as I have noted these are characteristic of all Marlowe’s plays, regardless of what theater he might have had in mind when writing. The more important reason to disagree with Oliver’s theory, however, is that separating the locations and action as he suggests would eliminate the kind of thematic overlapping made possible when different fictional locations are represented by the same stage space. Certainly this more fluid staging would eliminate the need for “mansions” (for which there is little evidence) and would make Marlowe’s abrupt shifts of place a part of the whole effect rather than a problem.


21. Given the repeated visual emphasis on embraces, it is worth noting that verbal images of being in someone’s arms echo through the play, especially the last two acts (see 1.1.22, 2.1.266, 313, 315, 3.1.22, 3.2.99, 3.3.48, 3.4.21, 56, 4.1.42, 4.4.61, 101, 135, 5.1.45, 48, 130, 180).

22. Quotations are from *Doctor Faustus*, ed. Michael Keefer (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1991); this is an edition of the 1604 A-text.

23. Appendix 1, 5.2.87, 87.2. To my knowledge, *discover* is never used in relation to the opening of a trap door in the stage.


26. Bawcutt discusses the first scene as a discovery (199).

27. See the repetitions of “my house” and “nunnery” (1.2.249–78).

28. See Bawcutt, 199.

29. Here between 5.1.58 and 61 there is an abrupt shift of location that has caused one critic to suggest that to effect the move from inside to outside the walls Barabas’s body was thrown from the stage to the yard (J. L. Simmons, “Elizabethan Stage Practice and The Jew of Malta,” *Renaissance Drama*, n.s. 4 [1971]: 93–104). In fact, however, this kind of location change is typical of Marlowe; here the dialogue and the exit of all but Barabas (60.1) do the job.

30. Zuker also notes the symmetry of the play’s initial and final discoveries (83).

31. *Henslowe’s Diary* lists a “cauderum for the Jewe” (321, line 93). See Zuker’s discussion of the emblem-book images of Hell-as-cauldron alluded to in this scene (pp. 96–97). Note that this is the third use of fire at the end of a Marlowe play.
32. Quotations are from *Dido Queen of Carthage and Massacre at Paris*, ed. H. J. Oliver (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968). This edition is divided into scenes only.

33. Bed scenes of both kinds are about equally common in plays of the period.

34. See Oliver's note, for example.

35. See the entries for *above* and *bed* in *A Dictionary of Stage Directions*, 1, 24–25.

36. For other examples of bodies being similarly "thrown down" see the entry for *throw* in *A Dictionary of Stage Directions*, 229.

37. Edward Esche, the most recent editor of *Massacre at Paris*, makes similar observations and suggestions about the ironies that its staging can create (*The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*, vol. 5 [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998]), 312–15.
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