

## WAS MARLOWE'S "MALTA" MALTA?

By D.L. FARLEY-HILLS

IF FEW modern scholars would go so far as to support Leon Kellner's assertion that 'Der "Jew of Malta" ist fast ein historisches drama'<sup>1</sup> probably fewer still would go to the other extreme and agree with Dr. Roth's opinion that 'the play has not the slightest historical foundation or verisimilitude'.<sup>2</sup> But how much history is there in the play and how much sheer invention? The most fruitful suggestions in connecting Marlowe's play with actual history to date have centred largely on connecting the central character, Barabas, with two historical Jews, Juan Miques and David Passi;<sup>3</sup> yet while the connections are quite striking the strange thing is that neither have any close connection with Malta. If Malta were used simply as Shakespeare uses his Sicilies and Bohemias in *The Winter's Tale* this would not perhaps seem a matter of great importance. But one of the features of the *Jew of Malta* is not only the constant and particular references to Malta throughout the play (it is referred to by name over 50 times) but also the central importance given to the whole Society in which the action is supposed to take place. It is a mistake to regard the play as primarily about a rich Jew who happens to live in Malta, one of the most characteristic qualities of the play is the way in which the central character seems to epitomize a whole society that ostensibly rejects him. Had Marlowe only been interested in Barabas much of the cynical picture of Maltese society that we are given throughout the play would be completely gratuitous. The play, indeed, is as much about a society as a single man.

So the question: Why did Marlowe choose Malta? is an important one. Did he find something in contemporary Malta that led him to the choice or was it merely a convenient and well known place (since the Great Siege of 1565) in which to stage a meeting of Christian, Turk and Jew? That Marlowe was not interested merely in recording history is obvious

<sup>1</sup> Leon Kellner: *Die Quelle von Marlowe's Jew of Malta*, English Studies 10, 85 (1886).

<sup>2</sup> C. Roth: *The Jews of Malta*, transactions of the Jewish Historical Society XIII (1931) p. 245.

<sup>3</sup> For a useful account of the conjectured sources for the *Jew of Malta* see J. Bakeless: *The Tragical History of Christopher Marlowe* (Harvard 1942) Vol. I pp. 334-360.

from his cavalier treatment of some of the facts. The play as is well known abounds in historical inaccuracies. To start with, if the action of the play is intended to take place during the Great Siege of 1565 as is possible but by no means certain,<sup>4</sup> then the presence of a Merchant Jew operating in Malta at this time is an impossibility. The Jews had been expelled from Malta when it was still part of the Aragonese dominions in 1492, and although some Jews are found in Malta during the sixteenth century (mainly as slaves) a regular trading community was not again established until the 18th century.<sup>5</sup> Barabbas' assertion therefore that he gained his wealth in Malta<sup>6</sup> is unhistorical. Apart from this, Marlowe departs from history at many points: after the arrival on the island of the Knights of St. John (who of course appear in the play) there was no Governor as there had been under the Aragonese regime. The island was ruled over by the head of the Order, the Grand Master, and as a member of a religious order and a sworn celibate he could not have had an acknowledged son as Marlowe's governor does. Then at no time did the Turks ever take either of the 'towns' of Malta (Mdina, the capital or Birgu the port) and therefore there was never any question of setting up a puppet government like the one Barabbas heads. At no time did the Order of St. John pay tribute to the Turks as Marlowe has them do.<sup>7</sup> There are other inaccuracies especially in the nomenclature of the characters, but enough have probably been mentioned to make the point.

In spite of this disregard of strict historical truth the play is set in the context of Mediterranean history and geography with a fair amount of general accuracy. Marlowe knows of the presence of the Knights on the island, he knows of the conflict between the Order and the Turks, he knows something of the history of the Order's flight from Rhodes (ll. 231f) and of their subsequent wanderings (not entirely accurate) after their heroic fight there (1753f.) he knows that the Spanish King still has a 'title to this isle' (1742), for Charles V granted the Island in fief to the Order in 1530; he knows that a Spanish relief squadron was sent over from Sicily to help the order against the Turks (though Marlowe distorts the chronology and characteristically gives the Spaniards the purely cynical motive of coming to sell their slaves 706f.). Marlowe also seems to have a more than hazy notion of geographical matters: Malta's position in the Mediterranean is understood in some detail (1435, 2230-2236) and

<sup>4</sup> The Courtesan refers to her loss of trade during the 'Siege' 1150f. However there was at least one other major Turkish raid on Malta (1551) between the arrival of the Knights of St. John in 1530 and the date when the play was written c. 1590.

<sup>5</sup> Roth: op. cit. p. 243.

<sup>6</sup> 2168-9. All line references throughout are to the edition of C.F. Tucker Brooke: *The Works of Christopher Marlowe*, Oxford, 1910.

even its lack of natural wealth is recorded in the Governor's reply to the Turks' demand for money: 'In Malta are no golden minerals'. Several times the 'City of Malta's' walls are mentioned and this might well reflect Marlowe's knowledge of the spectacular fortifications built after the Great Siege. Marlowe's use of the term 'City of Malta' is incidentally paralleled in contemporary Jewish references.<sup>7</sup> But the most striking points of similarity between Marlowe's Malta and the real Malta are just at the point in which the setting is of most importance for Marlowe's purpose: in the social conditions prevailing in the Malta of this time.

It has already been noticed elsewhere<sup>8</sup> that one of Marlowe's possible sources, the *Navigations* of Nicolas de Nicolay, refers in its chapter on Malta to the large number of prostitutes to be found in the port of Birgu (where the Knights had their residences until Valletta was built in the 1570's and 1580's) and that this may account for the presence of the Courtesan and her associates in the play. But of course Marlowe's picture of sexual depravity is by no means confined to one scene and one character. One important minor theme of the play (an unusual one for Marlowe) is the sexual immorality that is part of the general cynicism pervading the whole society. This is something that exists almost apart from the character of Barabas, though it is Barabas who sums up the prevailing mood in his famous lines to the Friars:

Friar: Thou has committed —

Barabas: Fornication? but that was in another country: And beside, the Wench is dead. (1549-51)

It is of course the Friars themselves who exhibit the most startlingly cynical attitudes in these matters. Now it has probably not been generally realised that Nicolay's observation on the large number of prostitutes in Malta reflects a situation that became increasingly scandalous until it sparked off an incident that in the early 1580's was a subject of international notoriety. Nicolay was in Malta, as he says, in 1551. In 1565 however, in the year of the Great Siege that is, we read confirmation of Nicolay's observation in the Order's own archives, for we find the Order hastily preparing to evacuate the 'inutili' from the dangers threatened by the Turkish invasion. Special provision we find is to be made to evacuate the prostitutes: 'donne publique cortegiane tante forestieri come Maltesi e native di questa isola'<sup>9</sup> . . . That the Order was not slow in bringing these ladies back after the danger was over is clear from the number of attempts

<sup>7</sup> See Roth, *op. cit.* p. 343

<sup>8</sup> By Bakeless *op. cit.* p. 232.

<sup>9</sup> Archives of the Order in Malta 91 (A.O.M., Malta Public Library) 10th April 1565.

to discourage their activities made by La Cassière who became Grand Master in 1572. It was one of La Cassière's attempts to restrict the prostitutes to outside the new city of Valletta that, according to the Order's own historian Dal Pozzo, caused the international incident I referred to earlier. It is true that Dal Pozzo seems to gloss over a good deal of the other matters that caused la Cassière to be overthrown and incarcerated in his own castle of San Angelo, but I don't think there is any reason to doubt the accuracy of what he says: it may be only part of the story but it is the part that is relevant to this article. At any rate, according to Dal Pozzo, the Head of the Order of St. John was deposed partly at least because he was trying to tighten up on the Order's morals. This is Dal Pozzo's own account:

Ma quello che diede l'ultima spinta alla rivolta fu ch'abominando egli i pubblici scandali, ne sapendo trovar altro rimedio alle dissolutezze della Gioventù, publicò un editto contro le Meretrici di dover sfrattare nel termine d'un mese dalla Valletta, ritirandosi al Borgo o altrove.<sup>10</sup>

That the state of public morals implied here is not exaggerated can be seen from further independent testimony: some of it from the Order's own documents. We can read for instance in the records of the Council for April 1574 that a commission was set up after public accusations have been made by a member of the Order of the degenerate conduct of other members, these include accusations of rape, fornication with Jewish women:

'ac ... alia maiora peccata atque crimina quae propter Religionis decus ac honestatem tacere ...<sup>11</sup>

A most interesting and ironic commentary on this lurid picture is provided when the Sicilian government decide to send a commission in 1581 to enquire into the dispute in the Order. The commission is headed by Pompeo Colonna, brother of the Sicilian Viceroy and includes a young nobleman Galceran Corbera. On 18th of August 1581 Pompeo writes urgently to his brother that Corbera has been stabbed to death in Valletta after having it seems been involved in a dispute over a prostitute, the mistress of a number of French Knights. The murderers were never discovered.<sup>12</sup>

This kind of immorality even among a community sworn to the Christian life like the Order of St. John is not sufficiently abnormal for the times to

<sup>10</sup> Dal Pozzo: *Historia della Sacra Religione* (Verona 1703-1715) v. 1, p. 180.

<sup>11</sup> A.O.M. 94 p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> H. Koenigsberger: *The Government of Sicily under Philip II of Spain*, (London, 1951) p. 189.

be specially remarkable in itself. One has only to think of Marlowe's own associates in London to see that his view of these events would not be ours. But there are two factors in the situation which might make this society in Malta attractive to Marlowe as a basis for a play about a community dominated by 'Machiavellian' concepts. Firstly as a society ostensibly sworn to upholding Christian values it was an ideal place to choose in exposing discrepancies between Christian (or Catholic) Theory and Christian fact. Secondly the La Cassière scandal of 1581 gave international publicity to this state of affairs. La Cassière, having with the aid of his supporters freed himself from arrest, took the dispute to Rome where we are told fighting broke out between the parties.<sup>13</sup> News of the dispute we find being given in a letter from Cardinal de Foix to Henri III in Paris<sup>14</sup> and from Paris we find Henry Cobham reporting about the affair to the government in London in November 1581.<sup>15</sup>

An even more interesting connection between Marlowe's Malta and the real Malta is the position of the Jews in both the fictitious and the actual society. Once again here Marlowe has flouted actual fact in that Barabas' career would not have been possible in 16th century Malta, but he builds his fiction (whether he knew it or not) against a background of Maltese-Jewish hostility which would fully justify the choice of Malta as an ideal scene for the clash of Jew with Christian. The Jews evidently regarded the Knights of St. John with peculiar abhorrence throughout the sixteenth century, using the special maledictory formula 'May its name be wiped out' when speaking of it.<sup>16</sup> A 16th century Jewish chronicler Joseph haCohen sums up the Jewish feeling at the end of his account of the Great Siege: 'The monks of Malta are still today a snare and trap for the Jews'.<sup>17</sup> The main reason for this special hostility seems to have been Malta's central position in the European slave market. The Order's galleys with their constant raids on Jewish and Moslem shipping and seaports brought numerous Jewish and Moslem slaves into Malta and the Jews were especially prized as being better able to fetch higher ransom prices than other slaves, those who could not afford a ransom were either 'exported' as slaves or were made to work as galley slaves in the Order's ships.<sup>18</sup> It is not surprising then that, as Dr. Roth says, Malta became 'a symbol for all that was cruel and hateful in the Christian world.'<sup>19</sup> This feeling seems

<sup>13</sup> E. Schermerhorn: *Malta of the Knights* p. 119.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p. 114

<sup>15</sup> Public Records Office, London, S.P. 78/6.

<sup>16</sup> C. Roth: *op. cit.* p. 216.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> C. Roth: *The Slave Community of Malta*, *The Menorah Journal* 1928 p. 220.

<sup>19</sup> Roth: *Jews of Malta* p. 216.

to have been reciprocated, because we find La Cassière writing to the Pope in 1578 justifying this hostility.<sup>20</sup> Dr. Roth comments: 'the Knights on their side professed to regard the Jews as more dangerous enemies even than the Turks'.<sup>21</sup> Jewish hatred of the Order was so well known that it occasioned a rumour that the Jews had financed the Turkish expedition against Malta in 1565.<sup>22</sup>

The suitability of choosing contemporary Malta as the setting for a play about the clash between Jew and Christian is now quite clear. But a third connection has still to be made between fact and fiction. Marlowe's play, as the Prologue makes clear, is about Machiavellian 'policy', it is a picture of a society dominated by self-seeking and an unscrupulous exercise of power and wealth. As such it is, from the Christian point of view, a picture of an anti-society. Barabas, as the central exponent of his society's viewpoint, suitably enough is represented on a man obsessed with a desire for wealth, because it is traditionally in the substitution of the money transaction for the true Christian relationships of charity that the Christian writer portrays his vision of the anti-society. Now here again contemporary Malta proves to be an ideal place to represent as a community where *cupiditas* has taken the place of *caritas*. A good part of the Order's wealth at this time came from the loot obtained in acts of piracy against non-Christian and sometimes even Christian shipping<sup>23</sup> and one of the most valuable items of this loot were the slaves taken from captured vessels. Marlowe again, in building up his theme of cupidity, violates fact in representing the Knights as paying the Turks tribute money. But although this is not historically accurate it serves to emphasise his main theme: the dependence of the community's very existence on dubious financial transactions. Once again the actual fact is not strictly accurate but the spirit of both real and fictitious Maltas are remarkably close. Marlowe does of course make considerable play with Malta's connections with the slave trade both in making it the reason for the appearance of del Bosco's fleet (a nice sardonic touch) and in emphasising it again in the scene in which Barabas buys Ithimore. Piracy and especially slaves remained a chief source of income from the Order well into the 18th century. As Dr. Roth tells us 'throughout the Rule of the Knights ... the island was a last European refuge of slave traffic and labour'<sup>24</sup> Grand Master La Cassière's chief opponent in the troubles that led to his over-

<sup>20</sup> *ibid* p. 216 n. 1.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* p. 216.

<sup>22</sup> Roth *Slave Community* p. 220.

<sup>23</sup> Schermerhorn *op. cit.* p. 117.

<sup>24</sup> Roth: *Slave Community* p. 219.

throw for instance was a highly successful buccaneer, a former Master of the Order's galleys, Romegas, while the Grand Master who succeeded La Cassière in 1581, Verdalle, had his own private corsairing fleet, his 'supposed fortune had acquired international notoreity'.<sup>25</sup>

There are many features of Marlowe's Malta that are not historically accurate, but one cannot help thinking that for a Protestant (or simply anti-Catholic) playwright out to create a vision of the anti-Christian 'Machiavellian' society, as Marlowe clearly was in this play, the Malta of the day made an ideal starting point. Not only was it a place ostensibly dedicated to the Christian life, but in fact of notorious immorality, whose economy partly depended on plunder and the buying and selling of slaves, but also, as a place particularly notorious to the Jews, it provided a setting for a plot in which a standard of comparison could be made without violating the completeness of the vision of depravity. If Marlowe did not know of the condition of Malta at the time when he was writing his play then the spiritual likeness of the two communities is a most remarkable coincidence.

<sup>25</sup> Schermerhorn p. 145.