Geography and identity in Marlowe

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Abstract

Foreign settings in early modern English drama are often assumed to be as vague and imprecise as Shakespeare's famously non-existent Bohemian shore in The Winter's Tale. Designed to generate a nebulous sense of Otherness, foreign landscapes are sometimes little more than evocatively alien. Standing as an obvious exception to this view are the plays of Christopher Marlowe, in which dramatic location is carefully chosen: Tamburlaine's imperial conquests carry him from East to West, ever closer to an English audience both fascinated and terrified by his legacy; Barabas lives at the centre of Mediterranean trade and a flashpoint of Euro-Ottoman relations; and Faustus exists on the fault line of Protestant and Catholic conflict. The care with which Marlowe chooses his settings speaks to his sustained interest in the profound cartographic and geographic innovations of the late sixteenth century. This interest has intrigued critics since at least the 1920s, when Ethel Seaton first pointed out that the itineraries of Tamburlaine's many (achieved and projected) conquests are based upon Abraham Ortelius's influential atlas, Teatrum Orbis Terrarum (1570). Relatedly, it is a commonplace of Marlovian criticism to read his protagonists in geographic terms, as transgressors of both moral and physical boundaries. And yet, what scholars have not attended to is the extent to which the precise relationship between geography and identity differs across Marlowe's plays. To see this, we must first take up what are commonly termed the 'new' and 'old' geographies, then consider their importance for three of Marlowe's works, Tamburlaine the Great, The Jew of Malta, and Doctor Faustus. Along the way, we will focus not only on world geographies but also on local, affective ones, as represented by Faustus's household or Barabas's counting house. By considering geographies both old and new, and both global and affective, we will isolate the importance of the relationship between geography and identity to the representation of Marlowe's central characters.

Fingerprint

- Geography
- Conquest
- Affective
- Jews
- Early Modern English
- Innovation
- Criticism
- Physical
- Malta
The relationships between space, power and identity are necessarily mediated by symbols. A symbol is a concrete reality (a building, a statue, a coin, etc.) that communicates something intangible (an idea, a value, a feeling): consequently, a place of power is by definition a symbolic place, which is a vehicle for power in the spatial order and for space in the order of power. A place can be considered as “symbolic” whenever it means something to a group of individuals, in such a way that it contributes to giving an identity to the group. With examples taken across the Americas, this paper investigates how symbolic places are produced and controlled by public authorities, civil societies and economic actors.