For modern readers of Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*, the anti-Semitic stereotypes surrounding the play’s central character Barabas may powerfully shape initial responses to the text. From Ithamore’s reference to Barabas’ big nose to Barabas’ own ceaseless preoccupation with accumulating wealth, this theatrical portrait of the Jew seemingly taps into every deplorable pigeonhole. When Barabas brags his way through a litany of the heinous crimes that he claims he has perpetrated, Marlowe is accessing a long tradition of defamatory blood libel stories that Christendom had laid upon the Jews, stories guaranteed to incite anti-Semitic sentiment. Interlaced with these sensational and prejudicial elements, however, is also Marlowe’s exploration of Anglo-European Machiavellianism. While many Marlovian plays feature characters with Machiavellian qualities, in *The Jew of Malta* scarcely a single character is free from the tendency to manipulate people and intrigue situations—often cruelly—for personal or political ends. While this calculating model for human behavior provides dramatic and engrossing theatrical plot lines, the social commentary of the events in *The Jew of Malta* goes far beyond mere entertainment value. Bound up in the play’s interactions are analogs and parallels of a variety of the current events of the latter decades of the sixteenth century—events of both English and Continental origin that many might categorize as Machiavellian. In these, Marlowe openly offers his audience a version of Machiavellianism as it had come to be perceived by the general public, i.e., as the realm of the “politic villain” (Raab 57), but he complicates that image in *The Jew of Malta* by juxtaposing two versions of the Machiavel: one a thoroughly
recognizable depiction of the way power-wielders can be seen to behave in the real world, the other a satirical exaggeration that plays upon the public misconceptions of Machiaveli’s writings. In the process, Marlowe subtly interrogates the political practices of Elizabethan England for their contact with the spirit of the Machiavel.

The term Machiavelian refers, of course, to the theories of Italian civil servant and political analyst Niccolo Machiaveli. His works, The Prince and the Discourses, pragmatically describe the intrigues and realpolitik landscape of Florentine politics during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. These revelations express not an amoral new theory of statecraft, but an “ethical consciousness” grounded in a period of economic growth, trade expansion, and political restructuring that heralded the advent of the modern nation-state. For those who held the reins of government, Machiaveli’s writings provided a “grammar of power”—how to obtain it, maintain it, and maximize it (Lerner xxxiii-iv). Though controversial and often proscribed—the Roman Catholic Church put The Prince on its index of prohibited books in 1557—Machiaveli’s insistently secular precepts on statecraft became widely known. In England, where the works were refused printing license until the mid-sixteen hundreds, many who wanted to read Machiaveli did so in the Italian or through unlicensed translations; historian Felix Raab argues that evidence supports the conclusion that “from the middle ‘eighties onwards, Machiaveli was being quite widely read in England” (53). Besides those who read the actual writings of Machiaveli, other Elizabethans may have formed their impressions of Machiaveli upon the basis of a French attack piece, Gentillet’s 1557 Anti-Machiavel (Contre-Machiavel), which gave “just enough Machiaveli to distort him, and not enough to make him either comprehensible or human” (Lerner xl). Whether they read the primary source or the slanted secondary one, the Tudor English consumed Machiaveli. The events Marlowe depicts in The Jew
of Malta seem divided between these two alternate assimilations of Machiaveli, one grounded in sometimes ugly reality, the other a caricature that edges into horrific satire.

Marlowe opens *The Jew of Malta* with a direct correlation to a particularly notorious strain of Machiavelianism. A character forthrightly named Machiavel delivers a solitary prologue wherein he claims to represent the spirit of Machiavelian practice, most recently at work through the actions of the Duke of Guise in France, now “come to read a lecture here in Britany” (Prologue 29). The Duke of Guise and his connections to the events in France that precipitated the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in 1572 had become infamous examples of the worst sort of Machiavelian scheming and of “count[ing] religion as but a childish toy” (Prologue 14). Notably, Gentillet’s book blames Machiavelian doctrine as the “inspiration of the detestable policies adopted by the French court” and for what Gentillet saw as advocating the exploitation of “religion as a political tool, the impoverishment and oppression of subjects,” and the sowing of “discord among [a ruler’s] subjects in order to keep them firmly under his rule” (D’Andrea 400). In addition to Marlowe’s linking of the Machiavel character with the French atrocity of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, the playwright also draws upon the older theatrical conventions of the morality play in which personified Vice would “become not only a driving force in the plot, but also a satirical master of ceremonies” who would paradoxically engage the audience to be wary of his wiles, while simultaneously “invit[ing] their complicity as spectators” (Cole 89-90). The dramatic nexus of the morality tradition, the French massacre of thousands of Huguenots, and Machiavelian power plays set the geopolitical scene in Malta through which Marlowe works out a faceted portrait of the Machiavel.

The Jew Barabas presents the play’s most obvious manifestation of the villainous Machiavel, one with a penchant to ‘make evil’ for its own reward as the play progresses.
Initially, Barabas is introduced not as an especially dangerous schemer, but as a very successful international businessman, albeit one who sensuously revels in his “infinite riches in a little room” (1.1.37). As a Jew living on the margins of a Christian community, Barabas describes his aloof position toward the political scene: “nothing violent, / Oft I have heard tell, can be permanent, / Give us a peaceful rule; make Christians kings, / That thirst so much for principality” (1.1.131-33). Barabas wants peace and stability because these conditions favor business. His character veers radically, however, after he becomes the victim of the local officials’ tax-funding plot—Barabas’ assets forfeit and his home turned into a nunnery by the governor’s order. The first sign of this shift in personality occurs with Barabas’ counsel to his sympathetic daughter that “in extremity / [They] ought to make no bar of policy” (1.2.274). He is now at war with the state and its agents who have injured him, and he will use every cunning craft he knows. Barabas’ subsequent purchase of the slave Ithamore marks the Jew’s point of no return and his descent into calculatingly unmitigated mayhem. At their first acquaintance, Barabas and Ithamore conduct a quasi-flyting match striving to outdo each other in recounting the depravity of their deeds, many of which feed upon religious hatred, that favored toy of the Machiavel who speaks in the spirit of the Duke of Guise. Barabas brags that he will “go about and poison wells” and for entertainment slyly tempts Christians into petty thievery and arrest; Ithamore gloats that he has set “Christian villages on fire” and crippled religious pilgrims (2.3.180-4, 207-16). Together they perpetrate one of the play’s most shocking acts of violence.

By the time this most lethal event occurs, Barabas has reached a level of premeditated perversity which allows no concern for any level of human cost, even for the life of his only daughter. Barabas will poison the entire house full of nuns with tainted rice porridge, including Abigail his daughter who has joined with them. Marlowe through Barabas connects the Jew’s
deed to historical deaths of great men: “As fatal be it to her as the draft / Of which Alexander drunk and died! / And with her let it work like Borgia’s wine, / Whereof his sire, the Pope, was poisoned!” (3.4.97-100). David Bevington observes that the scene also evokes recent English history as it alludes to “Henry VIII’s dissolution, confiscation, and sale of English monasteries earlier in Marlowe’s century” (291). Additionally, this horrific mise en abyme of mass murder retells in small the wholesale butchery of Protestant Huguenots by French Catholics during the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre.

The nuns’ mass poisoning also has a more intimate connection to Marlowe personally through his espionage associations with Richard Baines, who Marlowe scholar Charles Nicholl reports once contemplated a similar plot to be carried out against the president of the seminary college Baines attended at Reims: Baines mused “how the president might be made away, and if that missed, how the whole company might be easily poisoned,” through the introduction of poison “into the college well or communal bath, and so take off the whole seminary in one fell swoop” (124). Whether reflecting the deeds of state actors or individual plotters, this distorted Machiavel, spirit of the Guise, hereafter operates unfettered in the Jew. Eventually, Barabas betrays the Maltese Christian community into the hands of the Turks—ranting as he does that he aims “to slay their children and their wives, / To fire their churches, pull their houses down,” even at the cost of everything he himself owns (5.1.64-6)—and afterward offers turnabout betrayal of the Turks to the Christians. Nothing is left of the businessman Barabas, only the vicious, naked ‘policy’ which he constantly invokes as the coin of kings “to purchase towns / By treachery, and sell ‘em by deceit” (5.5.48-9). His actions are outrageous and exaggerated, a virtual parody of the Machiavel. Barabas’ actions do not, however, accurately reflect the writings of Niccolo Machiavelli on the uses of power, in much the same way that Gentillet’s
writings do not. Barabas’ intentions are magnified beyond all limits when seen in the person of a single angry Jew, yet if extrapolated to a larger geopolitical setting, they contain quite enough resemblance to human behavior to horrify realistically.

The amplified parodic atrocities of the Jew Barabas stand in larger-than-life contrast to the play’s lesser Machiavels: Calymath, the tribute-demanding Turkish prince; Ferneze, the Governor of Malta; and Bosco, the Vice Admiral of Spain. Each of these men perpetrates cruel acts against others that are calculated for maximum political dividends. Calymath demands for the Turks ten years’ worth of Maltese tribute, a levy slightly civilized by the grant of a thirty-day stay of collection because “‘tis more kingly to obtain by peace / Than to enforce conditions by constraint” (1.2.25-6), yet backed up by an armed warship and the eventual threat to “turn proud Malta to a wilderness” in the case of default (3.5.25). Ferneze passes along the strong-armed confiscation of another’s property through his official tax decree that nearly strips the local Jews (and does Barabas) so that the Christians of Malta may retain their own goods and property. The Spaniard Bosco takes advantage of the unstable political situation to reassert his country’s claim to Malta and find a marketplace for his cargo-hold full of slaves. Tribute, taxes, and trade—all state-sanctioned—may sound more like business as usual than Machiavelian scheming, yet these men’s actions, like those of Barabas, evoke parallels in contemporary geopolitics, and more sensitively, in the policies of Elizabeth I herself. The text obliquely asks its audience to consider the possibility that England was already infected with the dreadful spirit of the portentous Machiavel who opened The Jew of Malta with warnings of the spirit of the Guise and those who would “speak openly against my books / Yet will they read me” to obtain money and power (Prologue 10-11).
As a female ruler in a man’s world, Elizabeth I cultivated royal ritual and spectacle centered on herself and designed to align with the sixteenth century model for rulers—that the “image of the monarch, idealized as God’s representative on earth, was a means to the people’s allegiance” (Levin 24). But the Virgin Queen, Gloriana, the idealized Elizabeth, was also at the head of a state which needed her to possess “the heart and stomach of a king.” In a dangerous world of European powers contending for influence and the wealth of the New World, her official policies pragmatically included the sponsorship both of piracy and of the slave trade. Elizabeth granted official backing to Sir Francis Drake and others in a community of adventurers on the high seas that allowed them to attack vessels and seize “cargoes belonging to Spanish merchants or other traders from hostile countries.” The catch for these privateers was submission of their booty for royal inventory, for this “piracy was not only an instrument of war, but a mean of taxation as well” (Kelsey 372). Other Drake missions involved maintaining plausible deniability for the English monarchy. A planned 1578 voyage to the Spanish Indies prompted a visit to Drake from the queen’s intelligence man Sir Francis Walsingham (also a Marlowe connection) to deliver Elizabeth’s admonition that Drake “make quiet arrangements for a raid on the possessions of the king of Spain who had caused her ‘divers injuries’” and that anyone “who let the king of Spain hear about the plan would lose his head” (76). Subterfuge, global gamesmanship, and barely legalized piracy were all part of Elizabeth’s arsenal of political strategies and dirty tricks.

If Drake was the queen’s pirate, John Hawkins was her slave trader. As the first Englishman to take up the slave trade in the New World, Hawkins seduced investors who might have been squeamish about human trafficking with a balance sheet weighted generously on the side of profit (Hazelwood 312). His slaving voyages were financed by an English syndicate.
whose shareholders included “London merchants; courtiers; members of the Navy Board and the Privy Council; and the Queen’s Majesty herself” (Hampden 28). Trawling the Western coast of Africa, Hawkins writes that “a king oppressed by other kings his neighbors” appealed to the slavers for aid, whereupon, Hawkins’ men attacked a “town of the negroes of our ally’s adversaries, which had in it 8,000 inhabitants.” That raid netted some “250 persons, men, women, and children” bound for the slave block (Hawkins 32). For the queen’s involvement in this venture, she allotted navy ships, “had private audience with John Hawkins, gave him orders on the way he should exercise his duties, shielded him against the tirades and demands of Spanish and Portuguese ambassadors, [and] covered for him while he carried on his business,” all the while accruing healthy dividends as one of the syndicate’s investors (Hazelwood 312). While Elizabeth’s sanctioning of Drake’s piracy might conceivably be justified as a tactic of war, the profit motive drove England’s involvement in the slave trade.

Marlowe’s connection to and knowledge of these secrets of state and other ignoble pursuits of revenue by the crown could have come through his involvement with covert services under the queen’s Secretary of State, Sir Francis Walsingham, whom Nicholl describes as a “spymaster par excellence” and “an archetype of Machiavelian political cunning,” skilled in foreign languages and the overseer of a network of intelligence contacts (102-3). Marlowe’s own participation in international intrigues ultimately made him a “source in his own right” who had insider knowledge of pivotal high-level events such as those surrounding the French Duke of Guise and the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre (material also for Marlowe’s play The Massacre at Paris) (Riggs 313). Through the many scenes of intrigue, political maneuvering, and personal revenge in The Jew of Malta, Marlowe holds a set of mirrored windows up to the ethics of his country and his time. Like the Turks’ piratical predation upon the island ‘ship’ of Malta,
England sent out its virtual pirates to prey on merchants and traders as they could. Like the Spanish Vice Admiral Bosco who sold slaves as a sideline to conquest, the English nobility and even the queen had enriched their coffers through human trafficking. At the same time, *The Jew of Malta*’s Governor Freneze who mercilessly appropriates the property of Barabas does so “To save the ruin of a multitude / And better one want for a common good / Than many perish for a private man” (1.2.98-100). The moral ambiguity, even ostensible altruism, of the actions that set many horrors in motion demands perpetual vigilance. These calculated pursuits called to account England’s own participation in the Machiavel’s spirit, yet all the more insidious for their resemblance to business as usual. On the other hand, Marlowe’s exaggerated “politic villain,” Barabas, offered up a boogyman whom one should not mistake for the real danger in the world. Perhaps neither of these models of the Machiavel would fit the original Machiaveli’s mold, but Marlowe’s play continues to challenge the ethics of the state as they play out through the individual actor.
Works Cited


