



“Our quarrel is no more / But to defend their strange inventions” (IV.ii.7-8): The Art of Religious Dispute in Christopher Marlowe’s *The Massacre at Paris*

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“Language is an institution with a vengeance. It suffers the fate of all institutions: it is a locus for the exercise of power [...]”.¹ This sentence taken from *The Violence of Language* by Jean-Jacques Lecercle perfectly illustrates Christopher Marlowe’s use of language in *The Massacre at Paris* (c. 1592). The play was written around 1592 and performed by professional players in 1593. When Marlowe wrote his play, the anti-Spanish and anti-Catholic feeling was at its height in England, following the defeat of the Spanish Armada. In 1588, only a few years before the play was written, the Spanish fleet had launched an attack against England in order to invade the country. France was in the midst of yet another war of religion between Catholics and Protestants, which had started in 1585 and would last until 1598 when the Edict of Nantes was signed. Christopher Marlowe wanted to describe and denounce the 1572 St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, during which the Duke of Guise ordered his Catholic followers to kill thousands of Protestants. Thus, the play takes place almost 20 years before it was written. *The Massacre at Paris* is one of Christopher Marlowe’s most neglected plays. It has long been disregarded by scholars due to the poor quality of the text that survived.² Nevertheless, what we have is enough to catch a glimpse of what the play might have contained. Among the parts of the play that we now possess are the events leading up to the St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre. The play opens on the preparations for the massacre. The starting point of this event was the marriage of the Protestant Henry of Navarre to the Catholic Margaret of Valois. Many Protestants were in Paris to attend the wedding festivities. The Duke of Guise, who founded the Catholic League, and Catherine of Medici, the Queen Mother, seized this opportunity to convince Charles IX to launch an attack on the Protestant leaders gathered in Paris. In Marlowe’s play, the first murder we are made to witness is that of the old Queen of Navarre, the Protestant Jeanne d’Albret, who is poisoned by Guise and the

¹ Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*, London, Routledge, 1990, p. 47-48.

² There is still an ongoing debate among scholars as to whether the text that we have is Marlowe’s actual play or merely a text that was constructed from memory by an actor.

Queen Mother. This murder puts an end to the attempt to fashion a harmonious coexistence between Catholics and Protestants, which was symbolised by the wedding. The two sides are henceforth at war and the massacre, during which the religious feuds are best exemplified, begins. The end of the play is devoted to the fall of the Catholic party in France and the accession to the throne of the "Protestant" Henri of Navarre, Jeanne's son, who will be crowned as Henri IV. The massacre remains the most important event in the play and is described at length. It spreads out over three scenes, which I shall study in detail.

A scene of religious dispute can be defined as a scene that foregrounds a difference of opinion between two or more characters concerning doctrinal issues. This opposition can be rendered through agonistic dialogue or physical violence, through verbal or visual means. In its first meaning, a dispute is an active verbal contention. This definition stresses the importance of speech and words. Verbal violence was the main feature of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century religious disputes organised by the authorities. In England, Protestant preachers and Catholic missionaries exchanged arguments about their doctrinal tenets in the course of debates. Verbal jousting was the key word describing these exercises. These disputes or disputations can be traced back to the Middle Ages, when the act of arguing about a given topic was part of the syllabus for every student. Nevertheless, the word "dispute" is not restricted to verbal arguments. It can also be defined as a fight or struggle, thus putting the emphasis on physical violence.³ In the same way, the word "quarrel" has two meanings: it can be an argument as well as an arrow used in a crossbow. In the years following the Reformation in Europe, the contention between Catholics and Protestants became increasingly violent. A prime example of this shift is the French Wars of Religion that lasted from 1562 to 1598. A trend steering away from the conventional medieval disputations and towards a more chaotic way of arguing emerged during the Renaissance. Playwrights appear to have echoed this shift in their texts. Marlowe is no exception and his description of the French Wars of Religion bears testimony to this fact. This is the reason why I will focus on the extent to which Marlowe manages to steer his scenes of religious confrontations away from a "traditional" scholastic dispute and towards a modernised version of the art of dispute corresponding to the period of religious turmoil which followed the rise of Protestantism. I will first analyse the numerous elements of violence present in the text, then focus on the treatment of language in the three scenes. To conclude, I will explore how the staging of the art of dispute can lead to a vindication of the art of theatre.

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The sense of physical violence is overwhelming in the three scenes. The audience witnesses a series of murders. In less than two hundred lines, the murder of thousands of people is suggested and that of six well-known Huguenots is directly performed on stage. Furthermore, the religious quarrel triggers many instances of violence directed against dead bodies. One of the most striking examples may be that of Coligny. Gaspard de

³ The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word "dispute" as follows: "To contend with opposing arguments or assertions; to debate or discourse argumentatively; to discuss, argue, hold disputation; often, to debate in a vehement manner or with altercation about something" and "To contend otherwise than with arguments (e.g. with arms); to strive, struggle." "Dispute, v.", *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, 2014. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/55214?rskey=INHzwR&result=60951&isAdvanced=true> [accessed 27 August 2014].

Coligny was the leader of the Huguenot army during the French Wars of Religion. His body is first thrown down and then cut into several pieces. Guise orders: "Cut off his head and hands".⁴ As the Duke of Anjou, one of his murderers, suggests, his body stands for the whole Protestant community: "Now, Guise, shall Catholics flourish once again; / The head being off, the members cannot stand" (I.v.22-23). The connection between microcosm and macrocosm shows that the main goal driving the dispute is not to exchange arguments *pro* and *contra* but to dissect and destroy the religious Other and his entire community.

Moreover, this violence is materialised by the sense of verticality that emerges from the scenes. Most of the characters undergo a movement suggesting a downward trajectory. The Admiral's body is "thrown down" (I.v.33) and another Protestant character, Loreine, is killed during the massacre and thrown into a ditch (I.vi.10). Seroune, still another victim, is asked to "come down" (I.vi.13) before his murder and the bodies of the Protestants killed in the Seine will "sink" (I.vii.63). Since the space under the stage, to which we may assume the bodies were "thrown down", was often associated with the Inferno, the movement at work here may suggest that the Catholics hope to send their religious enemies to hell, visually creating separate *loci* for the two religions.

It is precisely the presence of the two religions on stage which triggers this violence. In *The Massacre at Paris*, the massacre scenes are structured as the succession of very short vignettes and close-ups on symbolic murders. A character enters on stage and is killed only a few lines later. This pattern is repeated, with only slight changes, several times in a row. For instance, Loreine enters the stage and is murdered seven lines later. The stage direction informs us that his body is dragged offstage. Seroune enters almost immediately after Loreine's exit and is killed, in turn, eleven lines later. The dispute seems to turn into a dance of life and death paced by the entrance and exit of each character. Interestingly, in Guillaume Delaveau's 2007 production of the play performed at the *Théâtre National de Toulouse* and at the *Théâtre National de Strasbourg*, a piano was placed on stage, underlining the rhythm of the massacre scenes. In the text, since each murder is associated with one particular doctrinal issue that was at the heart of post-Reformation debates, this rapid pace conveys the feeling that a list of theological issues is foregrounded as the scenes unfold. For instance, the Admiral's murder is linked to the Marian cult (his murderer asks him to "pray unto our Lady", I.v.29) and to the use of relics, with an allusion to the cross. Seroune's murder is associated with the reliance on the intercession of the saints. These issues enable the playwright to link theology and quarrel. Guillaume Delaveau also chose to foreground one particular doctrinal issue with each murder. In her review of the production, Nathalie Rivère de Carles remarks that, after the Admiral's murder, the director added "a group of Catholic priests in ceremonial garb who began celebrating the Eucharist in Latin. [...] The screen replayed a close-up of the holy mass enacted on stage".⁵ Therefore, the theological aspect was emphasised through the staging. In the text, the religious aspect of the dispute is also reinforced by the well established *topoi* associated with the idea of a heretic enemy. The scenes are repeatedly described as a hunt, with the Protestants playing the part of the prey. The metaphor was used in many other plays and pamphlets written after the break with Rome to describe

⁴ Christopher Marlowe, "The Massacre at Paris", *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays*, ed. J. B. Steane, London, Penguin Books, 1969, I. v.43. All further references to this text are from this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

⁵ Nathalie Rivère de Carles, "Le Massacre à Paris (The Massacre at Paris)", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 25, 2007, p.143-145, 146.

the encounter between Catholics and Protestants. In *The Massacre at Paris*, it helps define the dispute as a religious one.

Nonetheless, physical violence can be concomitant with, or even replaced by, verbal violence. Again, two separate spheres are created. The use of Latin has an important role to play in this verbal violence since the use of the vernacular became a much-debated issue after the Reformation. In the text, the reference to Saint Jacob in Latin ("Sanctus Jacobus, he's my saint; pray to him." I.vi.2) can be considered a form of aural violence through which the Catholics assert their superiority. In Guillaume Delaveau's stage production, a prayer in Latin was recited on stage. The audience was thus able to experience the verbal violence directed against the Protestants. Another instance of verbal violence is to be found in the Duke of Guise's corrupted use of the Scriptures. Indeed, he refers to the Bible when he says, just before Loreine's murder: "'Dearly beloved brother', – thus 'tis written" (I.vi.8). According to the stage direction, he then stabs Loreine, who dies. The Duke of Guise first displays his violence through words but also on the words themselves. Indeed, he makes a slight change when uttering these words. The 1560 Geneva Bible reads "Therefore, my brethren, beloved and longed for",⁶ yet Guise uses "brother" and inverts the order of the words. He thus alters the Scriptures, which is a form of violence. Loreine becomes the martyr who acts not only as the victim of the violence directed against him but eventually against God himself. Nevertheless, this sense of violence is mainly conveyed through invectives and insults. Naming the religious opponent is a very important aspect of these scenes of disputes. The Catholics tend to highlight the differences with their religious enemies in terms of identity. Three main insults are to be found during the murders. One of the murderers calls Seroune a "villain" (I.v.20), Guise refers to Ramus as a "peasant" (I.vii.54) and, a few lines later, he describes two Protestant schoolmasters as "those pedants" (I.vii.66 and 78). All these invectives enable the Catholics to relegate the Protestant characters to a lower moral, social or psychological level. A villain is inferior to an ordinary man as far as morals are concerned, a peasant does not possess any land and the pedants, or schoolmasters, are thrown back into the sphere of childhood.

Verbal violence also enables Marlowe to introduce another dimension to his quarrel scenes. Indeed, the disputes are political as much as they are religious. Words referring to theological issues are interspersed with words, or rather insults, alluding to a reprehensible political stand. Most tellingly, the last insult uttered by Navarre to the Duke of Guise is "thou traitor" (I.vii.79). It shows that religion and politics are strongly intertwined but it also hints at a shift from religious to political disputes, which is reflected in the quarrel scenes. This idea would be fully exploited a few years later.

While violence permeates inter-confessional disputes in the play, the exercise was generally acknowledged as a way to exchange arguments and reach the truth. In *The Massacre at Paris*, Marlowe makes a very special use of speech and rhetoric.

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First, the unreliability of speech is underlined several times in the scene preceding the massacre. This scene seems to act as a warning not to trust words to solve problems. The theme of oath breaking can be found in the words of the French King, Charles IX, who notices:

⁶ *The Geneva Bible: A facsimile of the 1560 edition*, ed. Lloyd Berry, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969, Philippians 4:1.

Madam, it will be noted through the world
An action bloody and tyrannical;
Chiefly, since under safety of our word
They justly challenge their protection. (i.iv.5-8).

This theme is taken up a few lines later when Charles IX knowingly lies about the culprit of the Admiral's attempted murder: "I vow and swear, as I am King of France, / To find and to repay the man with death," (i.iv.54-55). Since he is the one who has just ordered the Admiral's murder, these words seem void of meaning. It thus comes as no surprise that during the massacre the Catholics are depicted as the enemies of the art of dispute as it was practiced during the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, that is, as a highly codified verbal contention designed to reveal the truth about a given topic.

In *The Massacre at Paris*, physical violence leaves but little space for verbal arguments. In these scenes, the importance of speech is constantly devalued and downplayed. During the massacre, the Catholics are the reverse image of what a true participant in a medieval *disputatio* should be, as they disregard every rule set for the exercise. This is mainly exemplified in three ways. First, every opportunity to speak or argue is denied by the violence of the Catholics. No proper extended speech is to be found during the massacre scenes. For instance, the dialogue between the Admiral and Gonzago, his murderer, is reduced to three lines:

GONZAGO.
Where is the Admiral?
ADMIRAL.
O, let me pray before I die!
GONZAGO.
Then pray onto our Lady; kiss this cross. (i.v.12-14)

Immediately after this exchange, the stage direction indicates that Gonzago stabs the Admiral. This act comes as an untimely event following the reference to a doctrinal controversy that could have started a verbal argument between the two characters.

A second example depicting the Catholics as the enemies of the conventional scene of religious disputation is the Duke of Guise's use of the traditional vocabulary linked to rhetoric and dispute. Before Ramus's murder, Guise tellingly organises his speech as a scholastic dispute:

And *ipse dixi* with this quiddity,
Argumentum testimonii est inartificiale.
To contradict which, I say, Ramus shall die:
How answer you that? Your *nego argumentum*
Cannot serve, sirrah. – kill him. (i.vii.34-38)

Ramus was a French humanist who firmly believed that the use of reason and rhetoric could lead to truth. The play offers not a proper disputation but only the parody of a dispute, as the corrupted use of "*ipse dixi*", where it should have been *ipse dixit*, indicates. Moreover, the words and phrases "*ipse dixi*", "contradict", "say", "answer" and "*nego*" are all, as the linguist J. L. Austin puts it, expositive words, that is words which "make plain how our utterances fit into the course of an argument".⁷ Nevertheless, they are here deprived of their meaning since Guise does not allow Ramus to take part in the debate. The outcome of this parody of a disputation has already been decided, as the two words

⁷ J. L. Austin, *How to do things with words*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1962, p.151.

"shall die" suggest. As Richard Serjeantson concludes when analysing this speech: "It is also, in the end, a piece of dark wit about the inefficacy of verbal argument in the face of physical violence".⁸

Finally, the Catholics' attempt to control every minute detail of the scenes puts the stress on the unorthodox nature of their behaviour. It is completely at odds with the expected behaviour of someone taking part in a dispute. Catholics are in control and, as a result, devote no time to verbal contention. This leads to a biased version of a quarrel scene. This is exemplified through the repeated use of the modal "shall" associated with verbs conveying the idea of death, with "shall die" (I.iv.34 and I.vii.36), which is repeated twice, "shall be murder'd" (I.v.13-14) or "shal't have the stab" (I.vii.16). Everything must go according to a plan that allows no room for counter argument. The absence of retort during the murders may be symbolised by the elisions in the last two quotations. In Marlowe's play, religious disputes are not fruitful and their failure to reveal the truth is constantly stressed. It stands in stark contrast to the attitude of the Protestants who seem to value speech very much, as this dialogue between two Protestant characters and Mountsorrell, their Catholic murderer, illustrates:

SEROUNE'S WIFE (*within*).
Husband, come down; here's one would speak with you.
From the Duke of Guise
Enter SEROUNE from the house.
SEROUNE.
To speak with me, from such a man as he?
MOUNTSORRELL.
Ay, ay, for this, Seroune; and thou shalt ha't.
Showing his dagger. (I.vi.13-16)

The repetition of the verb "speak" uttered by the two Protestant characters suggests that the spoken word is of prime importance to them. The Catholic character only answers with his dagger. Once again, the opportunity to speak and to debate is put to an abrupt end and is replaced by violence on the Catholic side.

In these scenes, Marlowe stresses visual elements as the dispute is displaced onto symbolic objects. Each theological issue mentioned in the text is linked to the use or absence of certain objects to perform religious rites. The word "cross" is used several times, including as a pun. When Gonzago kills Coligny in his bed, he asks the Admiral to kiss the cross. This can be viewed as a metaphor, the cross would symbolise the dagger he is about to get stabbed with, but it can also indicate that Coligny's refusal to perform the act of kissing the cross eventually leads to his death. On stage, there may be a real cross engraved on the dagger in order to emphasise the visual effect of this cue. The word "Cross" with a capital letter is repeated only a few lines later. We are told that the Admiral was killed, in part, because he "hated so the Cross" (I.v.32). This motif is thus recurrent in the Admiral's murder. The scene steers away from a rational dispute to rely on visual effects. This seems to have been taken into account in Guillaume Delaveau's production of the play. Nathalie Rivère de Carles describes the staging of the Admiral's murder, "During a dumb show to the sound of the Angelus, the murderers first profaned Coligny's surrogate body with a crucifix before throwing the dummy off the gallery".⁹ Therefore,

⁸ Richard W. Serjeantson, "Testimony", *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, ed. Sylvia Adamson, Gavin Alexander and Katrin Ettenhuber, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.185.

⁹ Nathalie Rivère de Carles, "Le Massacre à Paris (The Massacre at Paris)", p. 45.

Guillaume Delaveau chose to retain and emphasise the visual aspect of the dispute, symbolised by the crucifix, and he downplayed the verbal aspect by replacing words with the sound of the bells. This is furthered by the director's choice to enact the murder during a dumb show. The only sound was that of the bells. This may symbolise the failure of words in the face of religious dissension. Speech is no longer an adequate tool to express religious controversies.

The emphasis on the visual aspects of the dispute calls attention to the art of drama itself. In these scenes, Marlowe manages to vindicate the powers of the art of drama in many ways.

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First of all, the massacre is constantly referred to as a play within the play. The murderers are repeatedly described as actors. By comparing his own play to the violent dispute the play stages, Marlowe seems to suggest that the art of theatre is the most relevant medium to represent accurately the inter-confessional quarrel. Metatheatrical references abound and this is made clear from the very beginning of the massacre scenes when Catherine of Medicis remarks, "And, as we late decreed, we may perform" (i.iv.4). The idea is reinforced only a few lines later when Guise orders: "They / That shall be actors in this massacre / Shall wear white crosses on their burgonets" (i.v.29-30). This *mise en abyme* enables the playwright to assert the relevance of drama to comment on the religious quarrels of his time and also to establish historical tragedies as holding a mirror to current and future times.

The vindication of the art of theatre is also asserted thanks to a very significant episode. The murder of Pierre de la Ramée, also known as Ramus, is the only one to be described at length and he is the only character to be given the right to speak and argue before his murder. The controversy alluded to in the play is pregnant with meaning since it mainly deals with Ramus's view on logic and poetry. Contrary to Aristotle, Ramus believed that philosophy and poetry should be reunited. Tamara Goeglein summarises the theory expounded by Ramus, "One of the most controversial aspects of Ramism is that it incorporated poetic examples within its logical discourse: the poesy was a successful pedagogical technique, but its presence in Ramist treatises transgressed the time-honoured semantics of scholastic dialectic".¹⁰ Going into the details of this particular murder enables Marlowe to show his agreement with Ramus's theory. Ramus sought to use poetry as a tool of edification, and so did Marlowe.

And indeed, one final aspect of Marlowe's scene of dispute in *The Massacre at Paris* is the paradoxical victory of the Protestant side. As Marie-Céline Isaïa puts it when analysing the figure of the Christian martyr in Roman Antiquity:

In an obvious manner, justice has been served, since the scheduled defeat of the Christian has been publicly confirmed inasmuch as the pagan imperial order is victorious. But in the narratives of his fight, the Christian martyr, although he lies dead, is victorious and the one who is truly defeated is the tyrant who had him executed.¹¹

¹⁰ Tamara A. Goeglein, "'Wherein hath Ramus been so offensive?': Poetic examples in the English Ramist Logic Manuals (1574-1672)", *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, 14, 1996, p.73-101, p. 74.

¹¹ "D'une façon manifeste, justice est rendue puisque la défaite du chrétien, planifiée, est vérifiée publiquement tandis que l'ordre païen impérial est vainqueur. Mais dans les récits de son combat, le chrétien martyr, bien que mort, est vainqueur et le vrai perdant est le tyran qui l'a fait exécuter". Marie-Céline Isaïa, "Le martyre, de la performance sportive à la mort sublimée. Disparition d'un modèle de compétition dans le haut Moyen Âge", *Agôn. La compétition, v^e-xii^e siècles*, ed. F. Bougard, R. Le Jan, Th. Lienhard, Turnhout, Brepols, 2012, p.281.

By bringing the atrocities committed by the Catholics to the fore, Marlowe turns a massacre into a victory for the Protestants.

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Christopher Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris* participates in the refashioning of the art of religious dispute in sixteenth-century theatre. In the play, the quarrel scenes are filled with violence, so that the inter-confessional meeting is not fruitful and does not lead to truth. Speech is no longer considered an adequate tool to allude to doctrinal issues. Words are gradually replaced by symbolic acts. Such are the tools that are used to express one's opposition to the religious enemy. Gestures such as kissing a cross or refusing to do so become as powerful as a fully-fledged disputation using the Scriptures and rational arguments. This led to the idea that theatre could take part in the dispute. Marlowe even asserts its superiority through metatheatrical language. In *The Massacre at Paris* as in all his other plays, Marlowe reaffirms the powers of theatre. Here, he uses this genre to renew an old medieval exercise: the art of religious dispute. As Chloe Preedy argues, "the convergence of words and spectacle aptly mirrors their creator's [Marlowe] fascination with the power of theatrical display".¹² More than four hundred years later, Guillaume Delaveau echoed this fascination with the art of drama. He chose to add one character to his adaptation of *The Massacre at Paris*, Christopher Marlowe, who appeared on stage and addressed the audience throughout the play, as if to show not only the power of the art of drama but also that of the playwright in creating a "fascinating dance of death for all times".¹³

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¹² Chloe Kathleen Preedy, *Marlowe's Literary Scepticism: politic religion and post-Reformation polemic*, London, Arden Shakespeare, 2012, p.54.

¹³ Nathalie Rivère de Carles, "Le Massacre à Paris (The Massacre at Paris)", p. 144.

The Geneva Bible: A facsimile of the 1560 edition, ed. Lloyd Berry, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969.