

The Babylonian Woman As Heroine In Dekker's Drama

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Abstract

The present research paper provides an analysis of Thomas Dekker's exaltation of the figure of the Babylonian woman as a tragic heroine in his dramatic art. The paper falls into two sections. The first section outlines the deliberate misrepresentation of the figure of the Babylonian woman in the Bible and the misreading of that figure. The second section reveals Dekker's rectification of the distorted image of the Babylonian woman, whom he defends and glorifies as a heroine and a victim of misinterpretation and conspiracy.

1 Background

1.1 The Whore of Babylon as a Biblical Icon

1.1.1 The Scriptural Whore of Babylon

In the Book of Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse, St. John the Divine gives the following description of a Babylonian female figure that has ever since been identified as the "Whore of Babylon":

And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, Come hither; I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters ... With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication ... And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration.¹

1.1.2 Babylon as a Cryptogram

Commenting on these apocalyptic verses, John Riches states,

In the Book of Revelation Rome is portrayed as the whore of Babylon and the seer [John] looks to its destruction and the time when God's rule will extend over the whole world.²

Similarly, Reginald H. Fuller states that in Jewish writings at the time the Apocalypse was composed, "Babylon was frequently used as a cryptogram for Rome."³ In this sense, Babylon serves as a veiled reference to, or a Biblical metaphor for, Rome. In his exhaustive study of the Book of Revelation, M. Eugene Boring observes that there

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“can be no doubt that the harlot city of John's vision is Rome.”⁴ Biblical scholars have unanimously agreed that John used Babylon as a cryptogram for another city.⁵ Reasons for this analogy between Rome and Babylon include the similar destiny which the speaker sees fit as the ultimate and inevitable end for the two cities. Both ancient Babylon and pre-Christian Rome were pagan superpowers that held sway over considerable parts of the globe. Moreover, the choice might have been an expression of Jewish hostility towards the two anti-Semitic cities:

In the Bible, Babylon and Imperial Rome are demonized because of the Babylonian Captivity and Rome's occupation of the Hebrew kingdoms of Judah and Israel. In this mindset both Babylon and Rome were equal in their sins against the Jewish people.⁶

Considered from an Orientalist perspective, on the other hand, the choice of Babylon was perhaps the outcome of a deep-rooted Greco-Roman prejudice against the East:

Prior to the conquests of Alexander the Great, the West had been more or less insulated from the cultures of the East – Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India – by a sort of arrogance which is apparent in Herodotus, who wrote of these regions somewhat as though they contained Hottentots. To the Greeks, all foreigners were “barbarians,” a prejudice fully shared by the conquering Alexander. Although a Macedonian himself, he had been tutored by Aristotle and was a passionate devotee of Hellenism.⁷

In the light of this analogy, the defeat of the Whore of Babylon represented the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.⁸

1.1.3 Cities as Whores

The portrayal of cities as whores is not alien to Judaism. M. Eugene Boring states that “Picturing a city as a woman was common in prophetic Jewish thought.”⁹ Hence, God-fearing cities were metaphorically depicted as brides and wives, whereas pagan cities were portrayed as harlots. The Bible clearly associates the then pagan cities of Rome, Babylon, Judah, Nineveh, Tyre and first-century Jerusalem with harlotry.¹⁰ This was particularly true of Rome, where there was idolatrous and blasphemous worship offered and encouraged by Rome, especially the emperor cult. This has headed John's list of charges ... and is what he means by describing Babylon as a “harlot” and charging her with “fornication,” that is, idolatry, a breach of the first commandment.¹¹

William Graham Cole in his book *Sex and Love in the Bible* (1959) argues that there were many cases of marital infidelity, whoredom and debauchery in pagan Rome. As a reaction against this deterioration in Roman society, “the Christians were shocked No wonder they regarded Rome as ‘the whore of Babylon.’”¹²

From a feminist point of view, the metaphoric description of a pagan city as a whore was engendered by the masculine and patriarchic perspective within which the Bible was composed. The invention of this Biblical figure of speech, which Avaren

Ipsen in his essay “Prostitution in the Bible” terms “the whore metaphor,” is attributed to the eighth-century prophet Hosea.¹³ In *Helpmates, Harlots and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (1994), Alice Ogden explains,

If patriarchy sees women as occupying a marginal position within the symbolic order, then it can construe them as the limit or borderline of that order. From a phallogocentric point of view, women will then come to represent the necessary frontier between man and chaos; but because of their very marginality they will also always seem to recede into and merge with the chaos of the outside. Women seen as the limit of the symbolic order will in other words share in the disconcerting properties of all frontiers: they will be neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown. It is this position that has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, to view them as Lilith or the Whore of Babylon.¹⁴

1.1.4 Paganism as a Form of Prostitution

The association of paganism with whoredom, it derives from the notion that the inhabitants of such pagan cities as Rome and Babylon “served false gods or did not obey the laws of God.”¹⁵ The close analogy between prostitution and idolatry is, moreover, part of the general Biblical concept of whoredom, which is presented as a spiritual as well as a physical experience:

Fornication and adultery are used in the Bible in both the physical and the spiritual sense. Of Jerusalem God said, “How is the faithful city become a harlot!” (Isaiah 1:21). Israel ... had entered into unholy, adulterous alliances with the idol-worshiping nations about her. She had “committed adultery with stones and with stocks [idols]” (Jeremiah 3:9) The entire chapter of Ezekiel 16 explains Israel's spiritual adultery in detail, both with heathen nations and with their false gods, as do many other passages.¹⁶

The Jews’ alliance with foreign nations is disparaged in the Bible as a form of fornication and harlotry.¹⁷ As Avaren Ipsen explains,

What is actually being punished with violence is not prostitution *per se*, but a kind of metaphorical adultery Many subsequent prophets reuse the popular metaphor (Isa 1:21, 23:15-18, Mic 1:7, Am 7:17, Jer 3:1-10, Nah 3:4-7, Ezek 16 and 23, Rev 17-19). It is generally a city or territory labeled “whore” that is punished for its infidelity to God.¹⁸

1.1.5 Biblical Toleration with Prostitution

Prostitution as described in the Bible is not always described as a condemned act. Ipsen explains that

The Hebrew and Christian scriptures evidence widely conflicting depictions of prostitution. In some texts prostitutes appear as heroines, as in the story of Rahab. Other texts depict prostitutes as normalized members of society. Still other texts depict acts of violence and wrath against those who “play the whore,” that is, women who are not necessarily prostitutes Biblical prostitution can be examined in three ways as “real” prostitution, metaphorical prostitution and sacred prostitution.¹⁹

Ipsen goes on to illustrate this ambivalent attitude towards prostitution:

Biblical prostitution could be either a licit or an illegal act. The vacillating portrayal of the heroine Tamar shows this status ambivalence in the same

story where having sex with her as a prostitute is at first morally neutral, but in her identity as a daughter-in-law of Judah the penalty is death.²⁰

Tamar's fault was practicing prostitution without being a member of "the category of unattached women able to engage in prostitution without criminal penalty."²¹

Furthermore, the notion of a harlot as a heroine is not unfamiliar in Biblical accounts:

Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho, is a heroine and incorporated into the people of Israel (Jos 2,6:17-25). Her memory continues to the time of the Christian scriptures where her faith is extolled as comparable to Abraham's (Heb 11:31) and her hospitality is a model for others to follow (Jas 2:25). She is also listed with other sexually suspect women, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba, as an ancestress of Jesus (Mt 1:4).²²

In *God, Gender and the Bible* (2002), Deborah F. Sawyer shows how the Bible presents prostitution as both a profession and a transgression. She refers to the story of Judah as an illustration of this point:

In his sexual encounter with the prostitute on his route to Timnah to meet the sheepshearers, Judah was committing no crime, and the text attaches no value-laden language to this encounter. Although dangerous, prostitution was a recognised, and not necessarily illicit, occupation ... and the prostitute was a 'liminal' character outside the social order rather than a criminal The activity of prostitution was forbidden, however, to women who were not prostitutes by occupation. Hence there is no problem with the activity Judah and the prostitute engage in on the road to Timnah. It is only when it transpires that Tamar had been illicitly engaging in prostitution that a vital boundary is transgressed.²³

In line with such notions is the idea that prostitutes would be admitted into heaven.²⁴

These beliefs reflected the social conduct of the Jewish community. Letty M. Russell explains that "prostitutes in the structure of Israelite society ... constituted an established urban group outside of the unity of family and household and, by implication, the system of marriage and female control."²⁵ One of the unquestionable verdicts in legal cases of seduction, for instance, demanded that the "seducer must deliver his wife to the seduced girl's father for prostitution."²⁶

1.1.6 The Biblical Debt to Babylon

Cult prostitution, also known as temple or sacred prostitution, was a familiar practice in ancient Babylon, and it was part of the fertility rites related to "the cult of Ishtar."²⁷ Morris Jastrow observes that in ancient Babylon the word *Ishtaritum* (meaning "devoted to Ishtar") was the name given collectively to the harlots who practiced sacred prostitution at the temple of Ishtar.²⁸ They were not looked down upon; rather, they were held with high esteem and were thought to play a significant role in education. It was such a temple harlot, for example, who educated and civilized Enkido in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.²⁹ The fifth-century Greek historian Herodotus referred to this Babylonian custom "which required as a religious duty that

every Babylonian woman, rich or poor, highborn or humble, should once in her life prostitute herself in the temple.”³⁰ These sacred rituals were transferred via several channels of transmission to the rest of the Middle East and were adopted by the Jews:

The name given to the harlot among Babylonians and Hebrews, *Kadishtu* or *K'deshâ*, that is, 'the sacred one,' is sufficient evidence that, at its origin, the rite was not the product of obscene tendencies, but due to naïve conceptions connected with the worship of Ishtar as the goddess of fertility.³¹

The Bible similarly makes a firm association “between human harlotry and the land.”³² Tamar’s decision to become a temple prostitute after her husband’s death reflects this ancient Babylonian fertility ritual. Onomastic support of this association can be discerned in her name, which means “date palm,” a symbol of fertility.³³ Deborah F. Sawyer argues that the concept of temple prostitution as presented in the Bible goes back to the ancient Mesopotamian fertility cult of Ishtar.³⁴

However, the reason for the Scriptural condemnation of whoredom is a scenario aimed at distinguishing the Jews from other neighboring peoples. Sawyer elaborates:

The picture of the lascivious world of cultic prostitution, painted with particular confidence by Biblical scholars, is heavily underpinned by one source, Herodotus' *Historiae*, to form a stark contrast between God's holy nation and its pagan neighbours. This use of the evidence has been viewed with increasing suspicion by contemporary classical scholars The backcloth of rampant, universally practised, cultic prostitution, against which Biblical moral imperatives were set, is a decreasingly credible scenario.³⁵

1.2 The Renaissance and Jacobean Concept of the Whore of Babylon

During the Renaissance tensions were tight between The Church of England and the Church of Rome as each attempted to achieve dominance over England. The Anglican Church sought, displayed and encouraged anti-Catholicism in order to establish its supremacy and independence from papacy. Countless accusations on its part were therefore directed against its Roman rival. These accusations involved cases of assassination, conspiracy and plots:

From John Foxe had come the Anglican image of Catholic cruelty; from the statutes and official tracts of Elizabethan and Jacobean England, the obsessive fears of Catholic treason. John Foxe taught his generation that persecution and treason had been practiced by the papal antichrist since the fourteenth century. The apparent timelessness of Roman evil was given new support by the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 and the Irish Massacres of 1641. Moreover, by culling quotations from church councils, papal decrees, and Catholic divines, seventeenth-century Anglican writers alleged that treason and cruelty flowed from the very principles of the Roman church.³⁶

Consequently, the association of Babylon with Rome in the Book of Revelation was seized upon and emphasized in contemporary Protestant writings. In *Whores of*

Babylon: Catholicism, Gender and Seventeenth-Century Print Culture (1999),

Frances E. Dolan states that the

Reformers' attacks on the Roman Catholic church also associated it with the Whore of Babylon, borrowing imagery from the Book of Revelation to vivify intensely corporeal denunciations of the church's corrupt and feminized body.³⁷

Alison Shell likewise argues that

It is a commonplace that certain features of the Book of Revelation lent themselves to anti-popery. The Pope was identified with Antichrist, since his kingdom of Rome was on seven hills and his doctrines and hierarchies perverted true religion while maximising worldly power. Numerological exegeses also identified various popes with the Beast, whose number was 666. From after England's break with Rome to well into the nineteenth century, it was commonplace for the orthodox English Protestant to identify the Pope as the Whore of Babylon.³⁸

The epithet "Whore of Babylon" was widely used during the Jacobean period to denounce the Roman Catholic Church.³⁹ It was considered "the most powerful anti-Catholic icon of all."⁴⁰ In Dekker's England, Rome was equally regarded as "the corrupt popish Babylon of Foxe's martyrology."⁴¹

On the other hand, the figure of the whore was not as black as it might be thought. In medieval England, for example, the whore, or the "common woman," was popular in contemporary writings, in which she was at times delineated as a victim of circumstances.⁴² Furthermore, a number of converted prostitutes were believed to have achieved sainthood. As Ruth Mazo Karras observes in her book *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (1998),

the whore who became a saint held a fascination for medieval Christians. Christianity was a religion of repentance and forgiveness. Saints who had been sinners embodied the message that confession, contrition, and penance could wipe away the worst of sins, and saints who had been whores embodied it most dramatically.⁴³

Hagiographers have recorded the stories of at least "four prostitute saints whose legends were widely known in England: Mary Magdalen, Mary of Egypt, Thais, and Pelagia."⁴⁴ Besides, the good-hearted prostitute features as a heroine and a motif in English literature, particularly during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁴⁵

Renaissance playwrights in general developed a hostile attitude towards contemporary Rome as a result of several instances of "secular interference" on the part of the Catholic Church.⁴⁶ This led to their adoption of the Biblical icon of the Whore of Babylon in their works as a symbol of the Roman Church. Alison Shell sums up this attitude:

Within drama, her [the Whore of Babylon's] presence is ubiquitous. She appeared on stage in many Tudor anti-Catholic interludes ... but she is also invoked by much of the language of decadence and feminine depravity

typical of Italianate tragedy, and that invocation, sometimes only an innuendo, is enough to spark off a gunpowder-train of pre-existing association.⁴⁷

Among such playwrights who touched upon her before Thomas Dekker (1572-1632) was William Shakespeare (1564-1616), as Barbara L. Parker has shown in her study “The Whore of Babylon and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*” (1995).⁴⁸

The figure of the whore in general attracted several Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights. In her book *Prostitution in Elizabethan and Jacobean Comedy* (1983), Anne M. Haselkorn examines the figure in a number of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. She finds that the word “whore” in these plays is used interchangeably and synonymously with other names such as

harlot, strumpet, punk (or pung), trull, wench, mutton, bona roba, quean, doxy, aunt, cockatrice, tweak, trug, mermaid, road, polecat, waistcoater, frump, stall, Dutch widow, Welsh virgin, etc. – but “whore” is the one most commonly used.⁴⁹

Haselkorn defines the word “whore” as it occurs in Elizabethan and Jacobean texts as “the commercial practitioner who has sexual intercourse with a man who is not her husband, primarily for payment in money, land, clothes or jewels.”⁵⁰ She concludes that

Elizabethan and Jacobean drama explored the position of women, and a group of comic playwrights – Shakespeare, Jonson, Marston, Middleton, and Dekker among them – found the position of the whore sufficiently compelling to invest her with a dramatic life.⁵¹

Haselkorn classifies the dramatists’ attitudes to whores into two types. She calls the first a Puritan attitude and the second a liberal one. While the former presents the whore as an object of ridicule and derision with severe retribution as the only just end for such a character, the latter attitude accepts the possibility of a whore’s reformation and of her reestablishment of respectability through penitence and matrimony.⁵²

2 Thomas Dekker’s *The Whore of Babylon*

2.1 The Dekkerian Concept of Whoredom

In his essay “The Social and Moral Philosophy of Thomas Dekker,” George E. Thornton defines Dekker’s attitude towards prostitutes as follows:

To Dekker, the prostitute is a product of the social contradictions of her society. Her establishment is a haven wherein gallants repair to drink, smoke, and swagger to their heart's content. It is an establishment with an atmosphere which the gallant's more conventional realm does not provide, in return for which, however, the woman is rewarded with the contempt of her society and with a gallant's renunciation when brought to justice.⁵³

Thornton further states that Dekker dramatically presents prostitutes in his works “as highly respected members of their own chosen profession; i.e., he permits them loyally to support professional standards of their own.”⁵⁴

This view of the whore as a victim of social and economic forces turns her into a tragic heroine and renders Dekker's portrayal of the reformed harlot in his dramatic works more acceptable and worthy of social acclaim. This outlook is manifested in the first part of the play *The Honest Whore* (1604), composed by Dekker in collaboration with Thomas Middleton (1580-1627), in which a courtesan named Bellafront examines her life and her sin and finally repents and leads a life of virtue. In the second part of the play, which was penned in 1605 or 1606 by Dekker alone, Bellafront's virtue is tested and proven adamant against the advances of Hippolito, a dashing young son of a wealthy man of Milan. At the end of the play, she becomes "the paradigm of Puritan values."⁵⁵

The paradoxical idea of the honest whore springs from Dekker's distinction between two types of virtue. The first type is untried virtue, "a virtue which Milton would call blank," while the second is tested virtue, which is deemed higher and nobler than the first.⁵⁶ Another reason for Dekker's presentation of "such a unique, indepth portrait of a whore" is his "philosophy [which] is one that includes an acceptance of a firm morality tempered with the Christian spirit of compassion and mercy."⁵⁷

Dekker's awareness that the audience's response would not favor such sympathetic and feminist treatment of a traditionally despised figure could be seen in the first part of *The Honest Whore*, where Matheo, commenting on Bellafront's disavowal of prostitution, tells her,

Is't possible to be impossible, an honest whore! I have heard many honest wenches turn strumpets with a wet finger, but for a harlot to turn honest is one of Hercules' labours. It was more easy for him in one night to make fifty queans than to make one of them honest again in fifty years. Come, I hope thou dost but jest.⁵⁸

However, the impossible does take place as the plot unfolds. Bellafront's self-redemption, moreover, does not only bear individual significance. It is made to affect her community as a whole. The play, Jean E. Howard maintains, is "a morality tale about a woman who, through an individual act of repentance, reforms, thereby cleansing the civic body and providing a model for self-disciplined urban dwellers."⁵⁹ The fact that her reformation is self-motivated and unaided deserves public praise, since she "achieves her triumph single-handedly through much suffering, so that she is recognized as a truly moral person."⁶⁰ It is on account of this unconventional view of harlotry that writers like Charles Swinburne (1837-1909) spotted what they considered "many traces of moral or spiritual weakness and infirmity in the writings of Dekker."⁶¹

2.2 An Analysis of Dekker's *The Whore of Babylon*

Dekker's play *The Whore of Babylon* was printed in 1607.⁶² It has generally been regarded as a "controversial political allegory."⁶³ As such, it outlines the failure of the several Catholic plots conspired against Elizabeth I (1533–1603), particularly the failure of the Gunpowder Plot which was discovered on November 5, 1605.⁶⁴ Susan E. Krantz notes that the play has already been acknowledged as "a long allegorical account of the various assassination attempts on Queen Elizabeth (Titania) by representatives of Roman Catholicism (the Whore of Babylon)."⁶⁵ The play thus reflects "the religiopolitical mood in London at the time" and expresses "anti-Papist, anti-clerical, and national feelings."⁶⁶

This interpretation accounts for Dekker's choice of subject matter. The Biblical story of the Whore of Babylon discussed above was so akin to the religious and political scene in Elizabethan England that its presentation would very likely produce a successful allegory. In the "Lectori," the preface Dekker wrote for the printed version of the play, this allegorical purpose is clearly outlined for the reader:

The Generall Scope of this Drammaticall Poem, is to set forth (in Tropicall and Shadowed collours) the Greatness, Magnanimity, Constancy, Clemency, and other the ncomparable Heroical vertues of our Late Queene And (on the contrary part) the inveterate malice, Treasons, Machinations, Underminings, and continual bloody Stratagems, of that Purple Whore of Rome, to the taking away of our Princes lives, and utter extirpation of their Kingdomes.⁶⁷

The "Lectori," however, does more than just provide the right perspective from which the reader can view the play. More importantly, it reveals the author's intention to depart from the convention of the chronicle play. Dekker confirms his awareness of the possibility of being "Critically taxed" (1) for his unconventional work, since he had "falsifie[d] the account of time, and set not down Occurrents, according to their true succession" (1). This deviation from historical accuracy is meant to make the play more palatable as a work of art. Dekker thus sacrifices historical verity for literary merit. He reminds his readers, "I write as a Poet, not as an Historian, and that these two doe not live under one law" (1-2). He justifies his departure from history by drawing an analogy between literature and music: "Let the Poet set the note of his Numbers, even to Apolloes owne Lyre, the Player will have his owne Crochets, and sing false notes, in dispite of all the rules of Musick" (2). He concludes by asking his readers to patiently endure this deviation and informs them, "you shall (if your Patience can suffer so long) heare now how himselfe [the poet] can speake" (2-3). Such remarks set a non-allegorical perspective at the disposal of readers who wish to

enjoy the play outside its allegorical framework. Dekker, in other words, hopes that his contemporary readers, unlike his contemporary audience perhaps, would appreciate the allegorical as well as the esthetic value of the work. An interpretation of the Gunpowder Plot as the mere incident that conceived the play would strip the work of its artistic merit. Susan E. Krantz contends,

Surviving records and modern scholarship on the Gunpowder Plot testify that Dekker's simplistic and singular identification of Roman Catholicism with every assassination attempt in England since the Reformation and his conflation of Roman Catholicism with Spain contradict both court policy and the evidence amassed on the conspiracy.⁶⁸

Dekker's presentation of the Babylonian Empress in the play is clearly characterized by a tone of dignity, pomp and nobility. Both the title of the play and the opening speech are reserved for her:

That we, in pompe, in peace, in god-like splendor,
With adoration of all dazeled eies,
Should breath thus long, and grow so full of daies,
Be fruitfull as the Vine, in sonnes and daughters,
(All Emperors, Kings, and Queenes) that (like to Cedars
Vprising from the breast of Lybanus,
Or Oliues nurst vp by Ierusalem)
Heightened our glories, whilst we held vp them:
That this vast Globe Terrestriall should be cantled,
And almost three parts ours, and that the nations,
Who suspiration draw out of this aire,
With vniuersall Aues, showtes, and cries,
Should vs acknowledge to be head supream
To this great body (for a world of yeares:)
Yet now, when we had made our Crowne compleat,
And clos'd it strongly with a triple arch,
And had inrich'd it with those pretious jewels
Few Princes euer see (white haire) euen now
Our greatnesse hangs in ballance, and the stampe
Of our true Soueraignty, clipt, and abas'd.⁶⁹

The speech is also significant on account of its abundant arboreal imagery which associates the Empress with fertility, for she is as "fruitfull as the Vine." It is also obvious that she is not depicted as a cruel and sinful woman at all, but as a benign ruler who has "sign'd so many pardons" (33). The appellation "whore" as used in the play falls within the category of invectives uttered to express hostility. The Empress herself pronounces such terms as "strumpet" (64) and "Curtizan" (71) to vent her anger at Truth. It is worth mentioning at this point that the Empress is not called "whore" except by her rivals. In both the list of the dramatis personae and the text she is described as "Empress of Babylon."⁷⁰ She tells the three kings standing before her, "Shee [Truth], they, Titania, and her Fairie Lords, / Yea euen her vassaile elues, in publike scorne / Defame me, call me Whore of Babylon" (91-93). Although Truth exonerates herself from profanities, she uses in the same breath abusive language to

describe the Babylonian Empress as a “harlot” (1652). One of her attendants is surprised at this accusation and asks, “Why? is shee [The Empress of Babylon] spotted?” (1654). It is Truth, not Titania, whom the Empress loathes and blames for all the trouble and tensions that have risen in the two kingdoms. She believes that Truth resembles “a cunning Spider, / And in her nets so wraps the Fairie Queene [Titania]” (65-66).

Obviously, the Empress’s knowledge is not firsthand. When asked how she came to know about the conspiracy against her, she replies, “Aske these holy Fathers” (22). This indicates that her accusation is based on hearsay. It is her vulnerability to rumors that will ultimately prove to be the tragic flaw that drives her, at the instigation of these fathers, to commit the tragic error of seeking revenge.

Dekker’s portrayal of her character does not match the picture of the voluptuous schemer that Truth and her accomplices try to propagate. Her enemies claim that she is a “common” woman (95), who prostitutes her body, entices and intoxicates kings to achieve material and personal gains (95-102). Dekker, however, presents her as a wise and peaceful leader. When the three kings suggest that they send their army to set fire, plunder and wreak havoc at Fairy Land in revenge, all the attendants unanimously shout “Let’s to armes” (110). However, the Empress immediately denounces this retaliatory act and dissuades them against such a course of action.

After she departs, two Cardinals complain that the medicine they are taking to cure their illness does not prove effective, since they are not showing any signs of recovery. This need for remedy and the failure to recover is symbolic of the mental disease they are infected with – namely their desire for revenge. One of the two conversing Cardinals says, “Revenge were milke to us” (153), and the other affirmatively replies that revenge is to him as delicious as “Manna” (145). Left alone on the stage, these two Cardinals, representing the Catholic clergy, express their desire to disobey their sovereign and use all means, including “Poyson” (167) and “Treason” (169), to obliterate Fairy Land. Later in the play, they accuse her of being too permissive and too peace-loving. They urge her to wage war against Titania:

Then be your selfe, (a woman) change those ouertures:
 You made so herof an vnusuall peace,
 To an vnusde defiance: giue your reuenge,
 A full and swelling saile, as from your greatnes
 You tooke, in veyling to her: you haue beene
 Too cold in punishment, too soft in chiding. (1165-1170)

They ask her to “signe no more pardons / To her [Titania’s] Off-fallings and her flyings out” (1178-1179), a clear indication of the Babylonian Empress’s good heart and her intention to promote peace. When the first Cardinal announces to her that he has at his command a large network of spies and conspirators who can play an active role in the downfall of Fairy Land, she objects, stating that she does not intend to “use” them (1222). He immediately euphemizes the verb and says, “Only to imploy them” (1223). When she sends the three kings to Fairy Land to confirm the rumors she has heard about Titania’s ill intentions towards her, the First King complains:

But is this all? shall we thus bend our sinews
Onely to emptie quiuers, and to shoot
Whole sheafes of forked arrowes at the Sunne,
Yet neuer hit him? (1341-1344)

Similarly, when her assistant Campeggio assures her that he will “cleaue the kingdome” (1405), she immediately asks him about the “manner” (1406) in which this can be achieved. He assures her that the manner is “Easie” (1407) but does not elaborate. This reveals her anti-Machiavellian attitude, for she does not approve of an end which justifies such a vicious means.

In contrast to the speech of the Empress of Babylon is Titania’s speech which reveals a concern with personal rather than national safety:

Wee thought the fates would haue closde vp our eyes,
That wee should nere haue seene this day-starre rise:
How many plots were laid to barre vs hence,
(Euen from our Cradle?) but our Innocence
Your wisdom (fairy Peeres) and aboue all,
That Arme) that cannot let a white soule fall,
Hath held vs vp, and lifted vs thus hie,
Euen when the Arrowes did most thickly flie:
Of that bad woman, (Babilons proud Queene,
Who yet (we heare) swels with Inuenomed Spleene. (291-300)

The parenthetical remark “we heare” in the last line quoted above also indicates her secondhand knowledge of the Babylonian Empress, a fact that rules out the possibility of having an accurate description and implies the active presence of conspiracy. Owing to these hasty judgments, the two women cannot be said to stand at the two poles of good and evil, since each does not have true knowledge of the other’s character. In this sense, Dekker’s play becomes a drama of conspiracy in which his political message is that rulers should know one another deeply and directly, since lack of such knowledge might have grave political consequences. Jean E. Howard states,

Throughout the text each side clings tenaciously to its reading of the other as false counterfeiters. The effect is to call attention to the political motivations underlying such readings, to the malleability of signifiers to the interpretive determinations of various readers.⁷¹

The Empress of Babylon became ultimately the victim of such misjudgment on the part of both herself and Titania's.

After the three kings complete their mission in Fairy Land, two of them depart while the third remains behind to plot against Titania. In the ensuing conversation between the Third King and Campeius –one of the native scholars in Fairy Land – the reader can discern the high reputation that the empire of Babylon had enjoyed at the time. In this conversation Dekker presents an alternative interpretation of the Biblical icon of the Whore of Babylon:

3. King.

Know you the Court of Babylon?

Camp.

I haue read,

How great it is, how glorious, and would venter

A soule to get but thither.

3. King.

Get then thither; you venture none, but saue a soule going thither:

The Queene of Babylon rides on a beast,

That carries vp seauen heads.

Camp.

Rare.

3. King.

Each head crow'nd. Enter his man like a sayler with rich attires vnder

his arme.

Camp.

O admirable!

3. King.

Shee with her owne hand

Will fil thee wine out of a golden bowle.

There's Angels to conduct thee. Get to sea,

Steale o're, behold, here's one to waft thee hence,

Take leaue of none, tell none, th'art made, farewell. (1083-1098)

For Campeius, Babylon is a utopia, a dreamland which he wishes to travel to. The seven-headed beast that the Babylonian Empress rides – traditionally associated with lust or the seven hills of Rome – is revered as a “Rare” and “admirable” phenomenon. It is important to remember that this judgment is neither made by a layman nor biased, for it is expressed by a scholar who is acknowledged in the play as “Deeply learnd” (807).

These actions, motives and speeches in the play reveal that the Empress of Babylon is more likely to be manipulated than manipulating. Of the three kings she trusts blindly, it is the third who urges her to seek vengeance. He is the prime mover of the action and the true villain of the piece. The Babylonian Empress is but his victim. For this reason, he is given a more significant role than the other two kings and the four Cardinals at the Babylonian court:

Dekker exhibits more poetic license in his account of the Third King (Spain) sent by the Whore than he does for any other character or incident

in the play. Spain is the only king who is given a name, Satyrane, ... and he speaks more lines than either France or the Roman Empire, Titania's other two suitors. Because he is more individualized than any other representative of Catholicism, he is more threatening.⁷²

Susan Krantz identifies the Third King with Philip II (1527–1598) of Spain, “the monarch responsible for launching the Armada against England.”⁷³ The name Dekker selects for him, Satyrane, is reminiscent of Satan. This onomastic affinity between him and the devil introduces him as a rhetorical and persuasive schemer who eventually leads the Eve-like Babylonian Empress and the city of Babylon itself to their tragic fall. Krantz regards him as “a political Machiavel who comes to Fairy Land complete with innumerable disguises to stir up treason amongst courtiers, soldiers, scholars, and country clods.”⁷⁴ Similarly, Cyrus Hoy describes him as “a dramatized force of evil – an active power of temptation.”⁷⁵ Even when seen as a pure political allegory, the play does not fail “to concentrate so much evil in a single character.”⁷⁶

Despite the Empress’s desire for order and peace, Satyrane warns her, “there's a hell on earth or if not hell, / Devils there are or worse then Devils, that roare onely at you” (2050-2051). She is astonished at this statement and ejaculates, “At us?” (2052). He continues his instigation by repeatedly harping on whoredom as her alleged profession:

Thus then: the Faiery Adders hisse: they call you
The superstitious Harlot: purple where:
The whore that rides on the rose-coloured beast:
The great whore, that on many waters fitteth,
Which they call many Nations: whilst their Kings,
Are slaues to sate your lust, and that their blood,
(When with them you haue done) serues as a floud,
For you to drinke or swimme in. (2055 -2062)

His persistence breaks her will and she eventually yields, consenting to sound the battle drums and march to war.

As the Empress and her attendants depart to prepare for war, Paridell and his kinsman enter to discuss the grudge they bear against each other. The dialogue is significant because it examines two opposing views of revenge. Paridell’s kinsman believes that vengeance consumes and ruins the avenger. The consequences of revenge are dire and the best alternative would be to bury the hatchet:

Say you should wound me; should I (in reuenge)
Murder my selfe? for what can be the close
But death, dishonour; yea, damnation
To an act so base, nay so impossible. (2206-2209)

The dialogue is intended to show how Titania and the Empress of Babylon alike are misguided and misadvised by their conspiring and bloodthirsty counselors. The view

expressed by Paridell's kinsman is therefore an impartial comment on the main action of the play and represents the playwright's recommendation of patience and diplomacy in dealing with this tension.

When word reaches Titania that her land is under attack, she commands her army to defend the country. Time's avowal of revenge is typical of her other speeches in the play:

Ile flie hence to the fleete of Babylon ,
 And from their tacklings and their maine-mast tops.
 Time shal shoote vengeance through his bow of steele,
 Wedge like to split their Nauie to the keele.
 Ile cut their Princes downe as blades of grasse,
 As this glasse, so the Babilonian power,
 The higher shall runne out to fill the lower. Exit. The Seafight,

(2587-2593)

The Babylonian fleet sustains such heavy casualties that it "more shall Sextons neede than Surgeons" (2614-2615). At this loss, Satyrane sounds a retreat. This destruction of the Babylonian fleet allegorizes the defeat of the supposedly invincible Spanish Armada that sailed against England in 1588 during Queen Elizabeth's reign.⁷⁷ The allegorical nature of the work accounts for the emergence of Titania as the victor at the end. Moreover, Dekker's desire for royal approval is another reason for handing the victory to Fairy Land. Krantz observes,

Dekker's spectacular re-creation of the English defeat of the Spanish Armada is obviously meant to glorify the English people and their former queen, and in this sense Dekker merits the approval of court and citizen.⁷⁸

Meanwhile, Titania congratulates herself on attaining a position of authority and power:

We neuer held a royal Court till now:
 (Warriours) would it not seeme most glorious,
 To haue Embassadors to greete vs thus?
 Our chaire of state, a drum: for sumptuous robes
 Ruffling about vs, heads cas'd vp in globes. (2624-2628)

Her ecstasy at being the head of state, seated on a throne and surrounded by ambassadors, as well as her pleasure at sartorial luxury, are in sharp contrast to the tragic plight of the Empress of Babylon and to the overall situation at hand. While Fairy Land is confronting its foes and facing death, Titania indulges in showy and superficial matters.

As a typical tragic figure, the Empress of Babylon finally comes to a moment of recognition when she discovers that she has been led into a miscalculated and unjust war against Titania by her false allies, whose wiles now incur her wrath:

... y'are Scorpions to my brest,
 Diseases to my bloud: he dies that speakes.

 Be damned for your speech: as y'are for Act,

You are all blacke and close conspirators
In our disgrace. (2716-2724)

In her closing lines, she acknowledges this moment in history as the first in which she experiences tragedy and Babylon experiences a downfall: “Neuer was day to me thus Trogical, / Great Babylon thus lowe did neuer fall” (2778-9). Unlike Titania, who remains a static figure, the Babylonian Empress has developed and arrived at a moment of self-realization which elevates her to a better and nobler state than her rival.

The foregoing interpretation of the Babylonian Empress as the tragic heroine and of the play as a tragedy does not overrule the conventional interpretation of the work as a political allegory or a “city comedy.”⁷⁹ It provides an alternative approach to the play and is therefore intended to add to the work’s richness and literary merit. It accounts for Dekker’s decision to depart from the traditional and ecclesiastical approach to a Biblical icon. It also places this play appropriately within his concept of the whore expressed elsewhere in his works. By adopting this approach, Dekker composed a work that is simultaneously true to the ancient Babylonian culture and close to the benevolent spirit of Christianity.

NOTES

¹ The Holy Bible. King James’ Version (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1914), chapter 17, verses 1-6. All subsequent references to the Bible in this paper are made to this edition and will be cited parenthetically within the text by chapter and verse numbers.

² John Riches, *The Bible: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.117.

³ Reginald H. Fuller, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1971), p.156. See also Willoughby G. Allen, and L. W. Grensted, *Introduction to the Books of the New Testament* (London: T. and T. Clark, 1913), pp.280-281.

⁴ M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1989), p.179.

⁵ See G. Biguzzi, “Is the Babylon of Revelation Rome or Jerusalem?” (URL:<http://209.85.129.104/search?q=cache:NL13Am7YrlkJ:www.bsw.org/project/biblica/bib187/Bib87Comm11.pdf+%22Is+the+Babylon+of+Revelation+Rome+or+Jerusalem%22&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1>), retrieved February 6, 2006. In his study “The Whore of Babylon” (URL:<http://ecclesia.org/truth/whore.html>), retrieved April 19, 2006, Richard Anthony concludes that “throughout Scripture, Jerusalem is said to be the whore.”

⁶ “Whore of Babylon,” *Wikipedia* (URL:http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whore_of_babylon), retrieved March 3, 2006.

⁷ William Graham Cole, *Sex and Love in the Bible* (New York: Association Press, 1959), p.215.

⁸ “Whore of Babylon,” *Wikipedia*.

⁹ Boring, p.179.

¹⁰ For Judah as a harlot, see Isaiah (1: 21) and Jeremiah (2: 20 and 3: 1-3). For pre-Christian Jerusalem as a harlot, see Ezekiel (16: 15-18). For Nineveh as a harlot, see Nahum (3: 1-7). For Tyre as a harlot, see Isaiah (23: 15). For a city as a bride, see David M. Carr, *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality and the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.166-168. Jerusalem is depicted as Jesus' bride in Revelation (19: 7).

¹¹ Boring, p.187.

¹² Cole, pp.214-215.

¹³ Avaren Ipsen, "Prostitution in the Bible" (URL:http://swop-usa.org/Prostitution_in_the_Bible.php), retrieved May 7, 2006.

¹⁴ Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1994), p.196.

¹⁵ "Whore of Babylon," *Wikipedia*.

¹⁶ Dave Hunt, "A City on Seven Hills" (URL:<http://www.wayoflife.org/otimothy/tl030003.htm>), retrieved April 3, 2006.

¹⁷ Christine E. Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.66.

¹⁸ Ipsen.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.* Ipsen is referring to Genesis (38: 24)

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Deborah F. Sawyer, *God, Gender and the Bible* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.60.

²⁴ See Matthew (21:31): "tax collectors and prostitutes shall enter the kingdom of god before you."

²⁵ Letty M. Russell, *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1985), p.89.

²⁶ Moshe Greenberg, *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), p.34.

²⁷ Georges Contenau, *Everyday Life in Babylon and Assyria* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1954), p.265.

²⁸ Morris Jastrow, *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria* (URL:<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20758/20758-h/20758-h.htm>), retrieved March 8, 2006.

²⁹ Jean-Charles Seigneuret, ed. *Dictionary of Literary Themes and Motifs*, vol.1 (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1988), p.998.

³⁰ George Rawlinson, *The Seven Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World*, vol.4 (URL:<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16164/16164-h/16164-h.htm>), retrieved October 6, 2006. Georges Contenau states that "ritual prostitution was still being practised in Mesopotamia when Herodotus was travelling there," p.265. For a detailed account of sacred prostitution in ancient Babylon, see Zainab Bahrani, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp.51-55.

³¹ Jastrow.

³² Russell, p.93.

- ³³ "Tamar," *Wikipedia* (URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tamar_%28Bible%29), retrieved October 6, 2006.
- ³⁴ Sawyer, p.32. It is worth mentioning at this point that the word *qedeshah*, which means "sacred prostitute," occurs in the Bible. See Deuteronomy (23: 17-18), 1 Kings (14: 24, 15: 12, 22: 46), 2 Kings (23: 7).
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ John E. Drabble, "Mary's Protestant Martyrs and Elizabeth's Catholic Traitors in the Age of Catholic Emancipation," *Church History*, vol. 51, issue 2 (1982), p.172.
- ³⁷ Frances E. Dolan, *Whores of Babylon: Catholicism, Gender and Seventeenth-Century Print Culture* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), p.52.
- ³⁸ Alison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination 1558-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.25.
- ³⁹ Dolan, p.43.
- ⁴⁰ Shell, p.31
- ⁴¹ Daniel Woolf, *The Idea of History in Early Stuart England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p.171.
- ⁴² Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.118.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.120.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ For the good-hearted prostitute as a motif in literature, see Seigneuret, pp.998-1004.
- ⁴⁶ Richard Vliet Lindabury, *A Study of Patriotism in the Elizabethan Drama* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1931), p.127.
- ⁴⁷ Shell, p.31. See particularly pages 31-48 for the various allusions to the Whore of Babylon in Elizabethan, Tudor and Jacobean texts.
- ⁴⁸ Barbara L. Parker, "The Whore of Babylon and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, vol. 35, issue 2 (1995), p.251.
- ⁴⁹ Anne M. Haselkorn, *Prostitution in Elizabethan and Jacobean Comedy* (New York: Whitston, 1983), p.1.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.141.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, p.143.
- ⁵³ George E. Thornton, "The Social and Moral Philosophy of Thomas Dekker" (URL:<http://www.geocities.com/magdamun/dekkerthornton.html>), retrieved September 24, 2006.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ Haselkorn, p.125.
- ⁵⁶ Thornton.
- ⁵⁷ Haselkorn, p.116.
- ⁵⁸ Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, *The Honest Whore Part One* (URL:<http://www.tech.org/~cleary/1hw.html>), retrieved May 13, 2006.
- ⁵⁹ Jean E. Howard, "Civic Institutions and Precarious Masculinity in Dekker's *The Honest Whore*" (URL:<http://emc.eserver.org/1-1/howard.html>), retrieved October 18, 2005.
- ⁶⁰ Thornton.

⁶¹ Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Thomas Dekker" (URL:<http://www.geocities.com/magdamun/dekkerswinburne.html>), retrieved January 5, 2007.

⁶² The play's title was recorded in the Stationers' Register on April 20, 1607. The play was published in the same year and was staged by Prince Henry's servants. See Frederick S. Boas, *An Introduction to Stuart Drama* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), p.157.

⁶³ Felix E. Schelling, *Elizabethan Playwrights: A Short History of the English Drama from Medieval Times to the Closing of the Theatres in 1642* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1925), p.94. G. K. Hunter classifies the work as a "history play." See G. K. Hunter, *English Drama 1586-1642* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p.262.

⁶⁴ Mary Leland Hunt, *Thomas Dekker: A Study* (New York: The Columbia University Press, 1911), p.36. The Gunpowder Plot of 1605 was an abortive attempt made by a number of English Catholics to kill King James I (1566–1625) and key members of the Protestant aristocracy by blowing up the Houses of Parliament. For further historical details on the Gunpowder Plot, see Conrad Russell, *The Crisis of Parliaments: English History 1509-1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp.264-266. See also Derek Hirst, *England in Conflict 1603-1660: Kingdom, Community, Commonwealth* (London: Arnold, 1999), pp.85-86, and John A. Wagner, *Historical Dictionary of the Elizabethan World: Britain, Ireland, Europe, and America* (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1999), p.120.

⁶⁵ Susan E. Krantz, "Thomas Dekker's Political Commentary in *The Whore of Babylon*," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, vol. 35, no. 2 (Spring, 1995), p.271.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Thomas Dekker, *The Whore of Babylon* (London: Eliot's Court Press, 1607), p.1. All other quotations from Dekker's "Lectori" are taken from this edition and are cited parenthetically within the text by page number.

⁶⁸ Krantz, p.273.

⁶⁹ Thomas Dekker, *The Whore of Babylon* (London: Nathaniel Butter, 1607), lines 1-20. The electronic version of the play cited here is taken from *English Verse Drama*, published by Chadwyck-Healey, Inc. The version was accessed at Northwestern University Library, April 9, 2007. All subsequent references to the play are taken from this electronic version and are cited parenthetically within the text by line number. No act divisions are marked in the original printed text of the play. See Wilfred T. Jewkes, *Act Division in Elizabethan and Jacobean Plays 1583-1616* (Connecticut: Shoe String Press, 1958), p.141.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁷¹ Jean E. Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.54.

⁷² Krantz, "Thomas Dekker's Political Commentary in *The Whore of Babylon*," p.277.

⁷³ Susan E. Krantz, "Identifying Dekker's Third King in *The Whore of Babylon*" (URL:<http://www.geocities.com/katacheson/dekkrantz.html>), retrieved August 17, 2006.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Cited in *ibid.*

⁷⁶ Krantz, "Thomas Dekker's Political Commentary in *The Whore of Babylon*," p.278.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* For a detailed account of the Spanish Armada, see Frank W. Thackeray, and John E. Findling, eds., *Events That Changed the World through the Sixteenth Century* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), pp.183-199.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.279.

⁷⁹ Howard, "Civic Institutions and Precarious Masculinity in Dekker's *The Honest Whore*."

الخلاصة:

يتم في هذا البحث تحليل شخصية المرأة البابلية كبطلة تراجيدية مميزة كما صورها توماس ديكر في فنه المسرحي. يظم هذا البحث جزئين. يعرض الجزء الاول التفسير الخاطئ لشخصية المرأة البابلية وتشويه صورتها في كتاب التوراة والانجيل. اما الجزء الثاني من البحث فيوضح محاولة توماس ديكر لتصحيح هذه الصورة المشوهة للمرأة البابلية وذلك من خلال تقديمها كبطلة تقع ضحية المؤامرة وسوء الفهم.