

## ABSTRACT

Sivefors, Per. *The Delegitimised Vernacular: Language Politics, Poetics and the Plays of Christopher Marlowe*. Göteborg University, Department of English/Blekinge Institute of Technology, School of Technocultural Studies, Humanities and Spatial Planning. March 2004.

The present study of Marlowe's plays has as its point of departure the sixteenth-century uncertainty as to what constituted the category of literature. Particularly in England, so acutely aware of this problem were writers and educators that they sought to define and legitimise vernacular literature by integrating it within a rhetoric of language politics, according to which literature in English should serve and promote the English nation.

I argue that instead of participating in the movement towards legitimisation of English as a literary language, Marlowe's plays are involved in a process of *delegitimation* that emphasises the specificity and autonomy of the aesthetic. Submitting the seven plays in the Marlowe canon to close readings, I develop a perspective on how rising ideas of literary English are articulated and challenged. My discussions of individual plays are structured around concepts centrally related to this perspective: in *Dido Queen of Carthage*, the idea of literary imitation; in the two parts of *Tamburlaine*, the Renaissance idea of 'wit'; in *Doctor Faustus* and *The Jew of Malta*, Protestant and humanist conceptions of the individual's relationship to the world through language; in *Edward the Second* and *The Massacre at Paris*, the idea of literary language as a politically expedient mediator in the public sphere.

For my discussion of how English was becoming legitimised as a literary language in the sixteenth century, I draw on an eclectic framework of theoretical positions, including those of M. M. Bakhtin and Pierre Bourdieu. However, my main concept of delegitimation is adapted from Jean-François Lyotard's discussion in *The Postmodern Condition*, according to which specific discourses such as science or literature are characterised by a dissolution of legitimising and universalising metanarratives. Yet, far from claiming any transhistorically 'postmodern' qualities for Marlowe's plays, this study insists on the historicity of the period and the texts under examination. While Lyotard thus sees postmodern society as 'after' legitimisation, I see the sixteenth century as largely 'before' legitimisation with respect to literary discourse. Although I interpret the works of Tudor writers and educators in terms of striving for legitimising metadiscourse, I contend that there is a critique voiced in especially Marlowe's plays against the construction of a metadiscourse that legitimises vernacular literature. This critique, I suggest, insists on the separateness of the literary language game.

### Keywords:

English-sixteenth-century-literature, Elizabethan-drama, aesthetics, poetics, English-language, language-politics, nationalism, nationhood, legitimisation, delegitimation, Marlowe-Christopher.