

# George Lillo's *The London Merchant*: Public Fame versus Literary Setbacks

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**Abstract**— *The London Merchant* is always considered the first Bourgeois Drama, written by George Lillo, a tradesman in England. It first performed at the Drury Lane Theatre on June 21, 1731; soon after, it became one of the most popular plays of the century. After the failure of his two earlier plays, Lillo industriously studied the theatric market and strove to include in his new play all the factors that ensure success, such as catering to the expectations and trends of middle class particularly the tradesmen and apprentices, breeding an innovative and appealing dramatic theory, making use of the popularity of criminal literature, and holding in high esteem the fundamentals of Puritanical faith. In doing so, he attained tremendous success and public fame. However, its public success does not square with the literary merit and specifications of a domestic tragedy. This study is meant to mark a number of setbacks the play endures. Among the major setbacks are first, a hazy plot and characterization; second, shaky claim of naturalness and abundant debt, third, over-abundance moralizing that often suspends and rather breaks down the dramatic build up.

**Keywords**— George Lillo, Bourgeois Drama, Middle Class, Moralizing, and Jeremy Collier.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The 18<sup>th</sup> Century European society was predominantly aristocratic. Yet in many European countries, the aristocratic ruling class was being progressively undermined by the challenges of a newly rising class, the merchant class. This class enriched by trade and money lending, began to claim social privileges by the purchase of offices or by inter-marriage with the nobility. In no country could this be so clearly seen as it was in England. While there were some restrictions on the aristocracy of other countries about engaging in trade, this was not so in England where landowners could sometimes save their dwindling estate by tying it up in commerce. Further, the merchants who had become prosperous and had married their daughters off into the nobility began to deal and have a share in political power and social status. The rising respectability of the merchant, however, was not only felt by the impact their prosperity had on society, but also by the impact of their values and morals, which were basically the values and morals of middle class. Daniel Defoe in his article, *The Complete English Tradesman* (1726) shows the growing influence and acceptability of this class:

*As for the wealth of the nation, that undoubtedly lies chiefly among the trading part of the people... How are the ancient families worn out by time and family misfortunes, and the estates possessed by a new race of tradesmen, grown into families of gentry, and established by the immense of wealth, gained, as I say, behind the counter; that is in the shop, the warehouse and the competing-house? How are the sons of tradesmen ranked among the prime of gentry? How are the daughters of tradesmen at this time adorned with the ducal coronets, and seen riding the coaches of the best of our nobility? ... in short, trade in England makes gentleman, and has peopled our nation with gentlemen; for after a generation or two the tradesmen's children, or at least their grandchildren, come to be good gentlemen, Statesmen, Parliament-Men, Privy-Counselors, Judges, Bishops, and Noblemen, as those of the highest birth and most ancient families; and nothing too high for them. (cited in George Rude pp. 75-78)*

Defoe's essays seem to show the acceptability of the merchants' upward social status, yet with some noticeable

discomfort, and occasional reservations, on the part of nobility, aristocrats and landowners who felt dragged by distressing circumstances to accept grudgingly bitter realities, i.e. to see themselves equals to what used to be inferior to them. As commonly agreed upon, the rise of middle class was both useful and distasteful to the wealthy and old aristocratic families. On one hand, it was useful for those who were forced to shore up their heavily indebted lands through marriages with daughters of wealthy merchants and tradesmen; at the same time those marriages were also advantageous to middle class members as they acquired through prestigious surnames of nobility and aristocrats. On the other hand, it was distasteful to aristocratic families who saw their alliance and blood ties with middle class as discarding both to their heritage and genealogy. Such social changes are often reflected in the plays of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. For example, in Sir Richard Steele's play, *The Conscious Lovers*, the upper-class could accept a large dowry of Sealand, a wealthy merchant, but were clearly snobbish about the merchants' lack of lineage. The exchange between Mr. Sealand, a tradesman, and Sir Old Bevil, a landowner, exemplifies the undesired mingling of classes. It was very real to his class the fact that the merchant class worked hard for the money, opposed to the landed class for being *bred up to be lazy; therefore, I warrant you, industry is dishonorable* (*The Conscious Lovers*, IV.ii.65-67). It can be seen also in Myrtle's words, *We never had one of our family before who descended from persons that did anything* (*The Conscious Lovers* V.i.16-17). Obviously, the deliberation often works in support of middle class characters who seem morally better off even in the question of marriage. A merchant might set the happiness of his daughter above any other consideration. By contrast, the landed families are interested in the money that a marriage match would bring to their lot. They may endure the little peevishness of the merchant class for the sake of gaining a great wealth of a merchant's daughter. What matters most to the nobility is the doubling of their estate, not the conduct or origin of a wealthy merchant (See Cole 1995, Freeman 2001, Hynes 2003, O'Brian 2004).

### **The London Merchant**

After the failure of his first plays *Silvia*, and *The Country Burial*, Lillo closely studied the trends and interest of audience, and then abided by. *The London Merchant* is designed to meet the expectations of middle class, and to present on stage what that audience crave to see. Lillo was sure that *The London Merchant* would be a success. He had

known it would be so because he knew what the theatre-goers had wanted. Surely, he did everything he could to ensure its being a hit. To further promote his play, he had the ballad of George Barnwell, the old ballad, circulated all day before the play opened, selling off his product. Further, he requested to have his play open in the summer in order to avoid the harsh *winter critics* who might negatively affect the salability of his new product. Nobility, the snobbish critics, often leave town for the summer. The play harvested a notable public success as Lillo expected (McNally 1968, McBurney 1965 & Morley-Priestman 2010). However, the literary merit of the play does not square with its remarkable publicity. The following sections attempt on one hand to highlight the factors behind its public success, and on the other hand, to show the notable setbacks the play endures.

### **Investment of Middle Class Values**

Like a tailor-made sweater, *The London Merchant* was designed to be the finest illustration of trends and expectations of middle class audience. Evidently Lillo, the playwright, is as desirable of impressing the importance of the tradesmen and their values as was Defoe (See Cole 1995 & Faller 2004). In the very first encounter between Thorowgood and his apprentice Trueman, Lillo shows the merchant to be loyal, honest, and powerful. In their second encounter, in Act III, Scene I, the two provide a paean to trade. First, it is claimed that merchandizing (trade) promotes *humanity, arts, industry, peace, and plenty*. Trueman elaborates,

*I have observed those courtiers whose trade is promoted and encouraged do not make discoveries, to destroy, but to improve, mankind; by love and friendship to tame the fierce and polish the most savage; to teach them the advantages of honest traffic.* (III. i. 14-19).

In additions, the idea of industriousness of merchants, as opposed to the sluggishness of high class, is worked in with the belief that trade is done with the country's good heart. In the paean of trade and tradesmen, one can see that the values, ideals, beliefs of middle class are being commended, and rather idealized. The play, as an epitome of the rising Bourgeois, suggests that wholeheartedness application to honest business brings happiness and riches, whereas dishonesty and idleness bring financial disaster and social failings (Gainor 2004). Stone notes that *The London Merchant* was often scheduled for December 26, the Apprentices' Holiday, since the merchants felt it had good

advice, especially for the apprentices and assistants of merchants (Cole 1995). The class' dictum could not be more didactically stated than when Trueman tells Barnwell, *But business requires our attendance, the youth's best preservative from ill, as idleness his worst of snares* (II. i. 127-129). That this middle-class formula for good and evil was highly influential can be seen throughout *The London Merchant* (see Hynes 2003).

The wooing of the merchant class by the nobility is also invested for the purpose of tackling the interest of middle class and secure their approval of Lillo's play. This can be seen in Maria's many noble suitors, who are interested not in Maria as a person but in the money of her wealthy father. There is the same touchiness in the comments of both Thorowgood, the chief merchant in the play, and his daughter Maria in relation to her gentry suitors and courtiers:

Thorowgood: *Let there be plenty, and of the best, that the courtiers may at least commend our hospitality.* (I. i. 72-73)

Maria's reply gives air to the discomfort of suitors as the noble lords will *repent their condescension, and think their labor lost*, in coming to his home for supper;

*The man of quality who chooses to converse with a gentleman and merchant of your worth and character may confer honor by so doing, but he loses none.* (I. i. 95-97).

Thorowgood, a rather pragmatic tradesman, sees a match with a nobleman a great advantage. The prospective match is advantageous to Maria and her Father, as they would acquire through, respectability and prestigious surnames of nobility and aristocrats:

*A noble birth and fortune, though they make not a bad man good, yet they are a real advantage to a worthy one, and place virtues in the fairest light.* (I. i. 142-145).

### Investment of the Puritanical attitude of Jeremy Collier

The reverend ideas of Jeremy Collier, among the middle class, are overtly invested by Lillo for the same purpose, the marketing of *The London Merchant*. This class formed a large portion of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century audience, unlike the Restoration theatre-goers which was largely- coterie made up of court lords, ladies, and servants. The hard working sober middle class had avoided the theatre of Restoration, because they thought theatres were dens of vices, corruption, immorality, and

profaneness. By time, things had changed. When the merchants became wealthy, they began attending theatric performances, aping the manners and lifestyle of fashionable people. The major difference, however, is that they came to theatre with the Puritanical attitude of Jeremy Collier's; and undoubtedly, any playwright must observe Collier's specification for the purpose of winning the approval of the Collier-advocate audience. To Collier, the main function of drama is *to recommend virtue*, and the idea of making only delight the main business of drama is a dangerous principle. Delight, Collier believes, opens the way to all licentiousness, and it blurs the distinction between mirth and naïveté. On stage there must be no place for coarse characters, debauched imagery, libertine description and allusion, licentious discourse, and risqué language; Puritan moralizing must be the magic word for playwrights to win the approval of audience and moralists. (see *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, in Kaneko, Ed.1998 & Corder, 2000).

Jeremy Collier had a tremendous effect on the 18<sup>th</sup> Century plays. His name is most often associated with the final downswing of Restoration comedy (Ellis 1991). Going by the light of Collier, the language of *The London Merchant* is less risqué and more modest and refined. There is no debauched imagery, libertine description or allusion, nor licentious discourse. The rake or the ruffian, the ideal character in Restoration plays is replaced by a benevolent role-model person. The punishment of vice became axiomatic for 18<sup>th</sup> Century playwrights. In the Dedication, Lillo, going by Collier's recommendation, states that the chief purpose of drama is to instruct and inspire rather than only to delight. Theater, therefore, must be a haven for good education rather than being a den of corruption. The main mission of the playwright is to show the audience the innate goodness of people; and that through moral instruction, people can find the path of righteousness (Brockett 2007). Most of Collier's ideas were upheld by Lillo, for no reason but for his audience preference. Herbert Carson in his article, *The Play That Would Not Die: George Lillo's The London Merchant*, notes

*Another influence upon drama was the entrance into theatre audiences of people who were inclined toward the same view as Collier, the English Middle class with its semi-Puritan morality and its less than refined taste. This group of people showed little interest in the amorous exploits of young lords and other semi-nobles... the merchants of London saw*

*no humor in the careless dissipation of money. An older outlook made them frown on the excesses of youth whose spirits they saw as an element to be curbed by the wisdom of age.* (Carson, P. 233).

Crucially important, the rise of middle class and their fast growing fortune alone might not have affected the drama. What affected English drama was the idea that this class now formed a large portion of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century audience, and Lillo was fully aware that the tradesmen audience did not confine themselves to being spectators only. Like the courtiers at the Restoration theatre, tradesmen now pass judgment on plays and could decide the direction that plays would take. Nicoll highlights the fondness of tradesmen in drama and their effect on the 18<sup>th</sup> Century plays as follows,

*Coming to the theatre, they, like the courtiers of a former reign, started to write plays. These efforts of theirs, naturally, were both for the bad and for the good..., and all had the talents of Lillo. In the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century, we are startled at the number of one-play writers* (Nicoll, P.7-8).

As aforementioned, George Lillo himself was a London tradesman, a jeweler who found in theatre a medium to commercialize the values of his fellow tradesmen, as well a place for selling his theatric merchandise

### **Popularity of Criminal Literature**

Lillo, as a brilliant salesman, took advantage of the popularity of and interest in Criminal Literature among the multitudes. In this period the interest in criminals' lives and deaths was intensified, as illustrated in many literary works, not only in Lillo's. It can be seen in Gay's *The Beggars' Opera* which takes the audience into the criminal world. As well, Defoe's *Moll Flanders* deals with the life of a repentant criminal. Fielding's *Jonathan Wild*, the unscrupulous impeacher thief, was hanged in 1728 with the blood of a hundred betrayed accomplices on his hand.

Ironically, public hanging was still a favorite pastime for the crowds in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Mrs. Proctor Pews, as they were called, near Tyburn Tree were seldom not completely filled (Burke 1994). In *The London Merchant*, Barnwell refers to the scene of public hanging. He will, after being hanged, *be suspended between heaven and earth, a dreadful spectacle, the warning and horror of a gaping crowd* (IV. Ii. 92-93). Half-penny ballads or repentance sheets were frequently sold on the day of hanging. Further the crowds, while always pleased to hear of a criminal's repentance, sometimes cheered criminals on, appalled yet secretly pleased with the

bravado with which some criminals died. The Newgate Calendar supplies information of scenes of bravado to some convicted criminals at the time of execution. It was discovered that as one of the last acts Wild had picked a bottle screw from an official's pocket while on the scaffold. Dick Trupin, who failed to repent but purchased fustian frock and a pair of pumps, in order to wear them at the time of his death. (Newgate Calendar, p.173). The Ordinary writes, *It is difficult to conceive the reason of all this concern and sympathy, for surely a more heartless and depraved villain than Trupin never existed* (Newgate Calendar, p. 174). To promote his play, Lillo actually used the old ballad about the real George Barnwell as an advertisement for the play; it was sold a day before its first performance, but beyond that he presents two methods of leaving this world. First, the repentant Barnwell, who like so many young criminals, repents before death. The second can be seen in Millwood who moves forward unrepentant, defiant, then horrified at the session. As a receptive playwright, Lillo in sending both to the gallows gives his audience the two most popular stories for a criminal's dying. All in all, one can clearly see that Lillo made use of what the audience wanted to see.

### **Lillo's Innovative Critical Theory of Drama**

Lillo's theory of tragedy is not of his own invention, but it leans heavily upon other theories, from Aristotle to Sentimental or New-Classical ones, with some slight innovation however. Lillo is led by the idea that *the more useful the moral of tragedy, the more excellent the piece* is, as illustrated in the Dedication adjoined the text of play. (see Stone 597). By that standard, his play should be one of the peculiar examples of its kind. The Aristotelian theory of Catharsis is assumingly observed. In his Dedication. Lillo claims that "the end of tragedy[is] the exciting of the passions in order to the correcting such of them as are criminal, either in their nature, or through their excess" (Stone 597). His play at least on one occasion fulfills this idea of tragedy as Carson notes,

*The moral lesson was effective, according to David Ross, who played the part of Barnwell during the Christmas holiday of 1752. Over thirty years after the first production, Ross tells about a young man who had made the 'improper acquaintance' of an evil woman and had given her money entrusted to him by his father. This young man was contemplating how to get more money, when he chanced to see Mr. Ross's Barnwell. Struck with contrition, the youth felt into a swoon and recovered*

*only when his father forgave him. Years later at Mr. Ross's benefit, a note with money attached came to the actor. The note expressed a tribute of gratitude from one who was highly obliged and saved from ruin, by seeing Mr. Ross's performance of Barnwell (Carson 240).*

As Lillo earnestly conforms to the dictates of Catharsis, he is at a notable remove from the Aristotelian concept of tragic hero. According to Aristotle, a tragic hero must be a man of high rank and heroic reputation, yet he is brought down to grief, from a high state to a lower one, by ill-fortune, or a flaw in his personality, hence that flaw inevitably leads to misjudgment and stands behind the downfall of the hero. In contrast, the Aristotelian concept of the tragic hero cannot in any measure apply to either Barnwell or Millwood, the leading characters. Barnwell is a poor young apprentice misled by a low origin lady. Millwood, a slut, engages in unlawful and socially unexpected sexual intercourse often for material gain. At the end, they fall down for the crimes they deliberately commit. Neither one has any Aristotelian attributes customarily attached to a classical tragic hero. Lillo picks a mere tradesman apprentice to fulfill the main role, and in so doing he overtly splits with the classical definition of a tragic hero. In defense of his inclinations, Lillo rationalizes,

*Tragedy is so far from losing its dignity by being accumulated to the circumstances of the generality of mankind that it is more truly august in proportion to the extent of its influence and the numbers that are properly affected by it, as it is more truly great to be the instrument of good to many who stand in need of our assistance, than to a very small part of the numbers. ...If princes, etc. were alone liable to misfortunes arising from vice or weakness in themselves or others, there would be a good reason for confining the characters in tragedy to those of superior rank; but, since the contrary is evident, nothing can be more reasonable than to proportion the remedy to the disease. (Dedication)*

Even in the Prologue, Lillo resents the demands that Neo-Classicism lays on the shoulder of playwrights in tailoring for them the garb and attributes of a tragic hero. He claims,

*The Tragic Muse, sublime, delights to show  
Princes distressed, and scenes of royal woe  
In lawful pomp, majestic, to relate  
The fall of nations or some hero's fate*

*That sceptered chiefs may by example know*

*The strange vicissitude of things below:*

*What dangers on security attend;*

*The pride and cruelty in ruin end;*

*Hence providence supreme to know and own,*

*Humanity adds glory to a throne. (Prologue, 1-10)*

The concept of poetic justice is partly violated too. Crime is punished, yet virtue remains unrewarded. Actually the criminals, Barnwell and Millwood, are punished, yet no virtuous character is rewarded, though the play is overly didactic. Maria, the relatively virtuous character, puts into question the whole concept. In Act IV, Scene I, after she sees her only love Barnwell driven to the scaffolds, she laments

*How falsely do they judge who censor or applaud,  
as we are afflicted or rewarded here! I know I am  
unhappy, yet cannot change myself with any crime  
more than the frailties of our kind, that provoke just  
Heaven to mark me out for sufferings so uncommon  
and severe. Falsely to accuse ourselves, Heaven  
must abhor; then is it just and right that innocence  
should suffer, for Heaven must be just in all its  
ways? (IV. i. 1-9).*

Instead of being rewarded, Maria is left confounded, offended, and rather tormented. Moreover, one may notice that Lillo, like the Elizabethan playwrights, shows stage violence. Death and blood are enacted, not reported by others, for instance the killing of the Uncle and the blood on Barnwell's hands. As a tradition, blood and death were uncivil to show on stage especially in Greek tragedies. A notable example is Oedipus' plucking of his eyes and the suicide and death of Jocasta. Such events, and the like, are reported by Messenger. However, Lillo takes on the Elizabethan not the Aristotelian specification. Further break can be noticed in the type of medium used by Lillo. Except for some relapses, he not only moves from poetic rhymed verse, to blank verse; but also he uses instead prose, a tendency foreign to both Greek and Elizabethan tragedies. Earnest Birnbaum comments,

*A more important contribution of Lillo's to domestic tragedy was his use of prose instead of verse... In emotional passages, Lillo often reverted probably unintentionally into a rhymed not unlike regular blank verse... cultivating an unusually natural diction. It was far grandiloquent than that of classical tragedy. (Birnbaum, 1958, pp. 156-157).*

Upon the above, one feels inclined to make out that all Lillo's modifications were made for no other purpose but chiefly for winning the audience applause and marketing his play.

## II. LITERARY SETBACKS

### a. Characterization

Despite the public fame of the play, one may cite a number of setbacks related first to the portrayal of main characters. The characters are mostly middle class, portrayed as allegorical figures than actual people, like the characters customarily encountered in Morality Plays. Again one may assume that Collier's specifications and the values of middle class have the upper hand in shaping the conduct and words of each character. The most interesting person in the story is certainly Millwood, a middle class slut. She, like Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, resembles an unrepentant and defiant sinner, who adamantly denies not only the authority of God, but also the authority of masculine society. She is a misanthropic who abhors men, woman, and everything moving on earth even herself, and ironically she strives to itch justification for her amoral faults. Cunning, mischievousness, wickedness, and cruelty are attributes conferred on Millwood, yet she is in comparison the most animated character among the rest. Her vividness pans out in her well-fabricated defense of her action, her condemnation of masculine society, and her attack on the double standard and hypocrisy of mankind in general:

*...well may I curse your barbarous sex, who robbed me of them ere I know their worth, then left me, too late, to count their values by the loss. ... and all my gain was poverty and reproach... Riches, no matters by what means obtained, I saw, secured, the worst of men from both. I found it therefore necessary to be rich, and to that end I summoned all my acts. You call them wicked, be it so! (IV. ii. 260-267)*

Furthermore, her animation comes off in her ardent testimony before Thorowgood after she is exposed as being accomplice in the crimes of Barnwell, killing his uncle and stealing Thorowgood's treasure:

*I know you, and I hate you all. I expect no mercy and ask for none; I follow my inclinations and that the best of you do every day. All actions seem alike natural and indifferent to man and beast, who devour, or are devoured, as they meet with others*

*weaker or stronger than themselves. (IV. ii. 296-301)*

And as the teaching of Christian orthodoxy decrees, at end of the play, she is doomed to degenerate like the end of Milton's epic. A sinner, as she is, must suffer the ordeal of her unforgivable sins, fornication, theft, and crime. Her degeneration is made plausible as she walks to the gallows, defiant, unrepentant, and despair in the mercy of God. At the scaffold, Millwood *looks wild, ruffled with passion, confounded and amazed* (The Last Scene, 6-8). As Lucy comments, *She goes to death encompassed with horror loathing life yet afraid to die; no longer can tell her anguish and despair* (The Last Scene. 70-72). Her final words indicate a sense of loss and assumingly degeneration of her type: *Encompassed with horror, whither must I go? I would not live – nor die. That I could cease to be! – or ne'er had been!* (The Last Scene, 57-58). Her motivation is well-established, a mixture of revenge and greed, and then made plausible through her vivid defense and animated personality. The whole story of Millwood is hatched, on one hand, to emphasize the common idea embraced by middle class, crime must be punished no matter the motivation. On the other hand, Millwood can be taken as a Hobbesian woman who recognized the animalism and devilish side of men, and her misleading of Barnwell might be taken as a form of revenge against all society, including Barnwell, the most docile character, whose only fault is love enflamed by lust of a young inexperienced man.

Except for the vivid personality of Millwood, the rest of characters seem to move within the confines of their assigned roles, yet with no distinction. Barnwell, Millwood's prey, can be taken as a foil to her, especially in repentance and the type of death he chooses, for he goes to death *humble and composed*. Even though, he is an underdeveloped character whom Millwood uses to fulfill her revenge against society and thus leads him by the collar to the gallows. Maria talks about his goodness, yet nothing he really does to show this. Several critics look down to the portrayal of Barnwell. Howe (1945) describes Barnwell, *a spineless youth*: Carson describes him as a *dupe... a weak-willed, 'nincompoop,'* the most naïve young man in tragic drama (Carson, p.291). The main defect in the portrayal of Barnwell is a lack of motivation for the crimes he commits. His motivation is difficult to accept, and the rapid change he undergoes cannot be plausible whatever. After spending one night with Millwood, Barnwell changes from being a docile and receptive apprentice to a real criminal stealing money from

his good master Thorowgood, and then killing his uncle. The spell of Millwood on him is too rapid to be true. In contrast, in heroic drama one is at least prepared for action through the long speeches of characters and some laps of reasonable time. His only motivation, as Lillo wants his audience to believe, is a lecherous desire of a young man who blindly submits to the snares of an experienced slut. His motivation for murdering his uncle is incredibly bare in the first place, to the point that Charles Lamb mockingly says it made the murder of uncles *trivial* (cited in Stone 596). Only after shocks, he transforms into an obedient lamb in the hands of Thorowgood, realizing his failings and accepting his misfortune. Under the horror of death, Barnwell expresses remorse and regret and thus willingly repents his crime before execution. Furthermore, on their way to the gallows, he appeals emotionally and earnestly to help Millwood regret her sins and ask for God's mercy. Nevertheless, one must examine his personality within the confines of his dramatic function. Had Millwood a real rebel against the exploitation of women, Barnwell is, thus, only a vehicle used by her to revenge the indignation of women in a most hypocrite masculine society.

The other characters, Thorowgood, Trueman, and Maria are difficult to distinguish. They would be all costumed in white with gold halos on their heads. Like good Morality characters, they function as machines to spout out morality and good business sense. Blunt and Lucy are almost ordinary people employed to fulfill one function: it is to show that one can turn from wicked ways, repent, be saved, and even rewarded as evident in the following exchange:

Thorowgood: *Happy for you it ended where it did! What you have done against Millwood, I know, proceed from a just abhorrence of her crimes, free from interest, malice or revenge. Proselytes to virtue should be encouraged. Pursue your purpose reformation, and know me hereafter for your friend.*

Lucy: *This is the blessing as unhopd for as unmerited, but Heaven, that snatched from impending ruin, sure intends upon you as its instrument to secure us from apostasy.* (V. i. 40-50).

#### **b. Plot**

The plot was taken from the hundred-year-old ballad about George Barnwell, but Lillo made some modification which might not be for the best. In the original ballad, Barnwell, after his first fall, voluntarily, out of no sense of guilt or compassion, continues his relationship with Millwood. He

himself thinks of murdering his uncle. He goes to his uncle's house, enjoys his hospitality, deliberately commits his misdeed, and then relishes the fruits of his murder without remorse. He afterwards brings about the capture of Millwood by testifying against her; subsequently he perpetuates another murder. In addition, neither Trueman nor Maria are mentioned in the original ballad, and Thorowgood is a nameless master for whom Barnwell has no affection. In developing the plot of *The London Merchant*, Lillo allows the action to move too rapidly, especially the murdering of the uncle, something neither plausible nor well connected. This is quite evident in Barnwell's repentance. When Barnwell is ready to repent and gives up Millwood, she comes and gives the story of the guardian, so it is out of compassion for her that he steals the money. The killing of the uncle which is protested by critics as making it too trivial to exhibit, as done upon slight motives, is orchestrated in an attempt by Lillo to make it plausible, which is not in all measures. Lillo makes his audience believe it credible (or he tries to), in that Barnwell has a second thought, and it is only because of possible discovery and drawing sword, he suddenly knives his uncle. In truth, Barnwell visits his uncle, masked, for one purpose, i.e. to kill and rob his treasure.

#### **c. Moralizing**

The major setback in *The London Merchant* is undoubtedly overuse of moralizing. It is often hampering rather than improving the build-up of dramatic mood and suspense. Moralizing begins in the *Dedication* where he declares his stand over the question of hardworking and good faith of middle class, and ideas related to punishment and reward, sin, regret and repentance. In the play, one may effortlessly detect the exemplary method dissolving into moralizing cold words. Ironically, the repetition of the same ideas over and over makes his discourse dull and tedious, and more likely fail to achieve its desired effect. It turns the play into a *nauseous sermon*, as Lamb describes (See Stone, 597). Moralizing is actually overdone though. From the beginning to the end, the play is filled, with exemplary speeches and mini-maxims, etc. The abundance of didacticism breaks what at some places would have been perhaps a stirring dramatic mood. For instance, the dramatic mood being set by the uncle becomes almost comically moralistic

Uncle: *If I were superstitious, I should fear some danger larked unseen, or death were nigh. A heavy melancholy clouds my spirit; my imagination is filled with ghastly forms of dreary graves and bodies changed by death, when the pale, lengthened visage*

*attracts each weeping eye, the musing soul, at once  
with grief and horror, pity and aversion* (III. iv. 1-8).

This is an effective building of dramatic suspense, but with the abrupt thrusting of the following reflection, the rising drama is battered into ground with the heavy hammer of didacticism:

*I will indulge the thought. The wise man prepares  
himself for death by making it familiar to his mind.  
When strong reflections hold the mirror near, and  
the living in the dead behold their future selves, how  
does each inordinate passion and desire cease, or  
sicken at the view!* (III. iv. 8-13).

On another occasion, Barnwell's tragic-heroic speech is again broken down by the moralistic hammer. When he is surrendered by Millwood and seized by Blunt and attendants, Barnwell exclaims,

*To whom, of what or how shall I complain? I will  
not accuse her: the hand of heaven is in it, and this  
the punishment of lust and parricide. Yet heaven,  
that justly cuts me off, still suffers her to live,  
perhaps to punish others. Tremendous mercy! So  
fiends are cursed with immortality, to be the  
executioners of heaven.* (IV. ii. ii. 99-104)

The heroic-tragic speech of Barnwell is soon geared into moralistic meditation, and thus the rising tragic tone is again broken and lost:

*Be warned, ye youths, who see my sad despair,  
Avoid lewd women, false as they are fair;  
By reason guided, honest joys pursue;  
The fair, to honor and to virtue true,  
Just to herself, will never be false to you.  
By my example learn to shun my fate;  
(How wretched is the man who's wise too late!)  
Ere innocence, and fame, and life, be last,  
Here, purchase wisdom, cheaply, at my cast!* (IV. ii.  
105-115)

Other themes are pounded home by exemplary speeches and mini-maxims such as *youth is a dangerous period, idleness ensnares whereas industry preserves*, as is evident in Thorowgood's advisement to Barnwell:

*Yet be upon your guard in this gay, thoughtless  
season of your life; when the sense of pleasure's  
quick and passion high, the voluptuous appetites*

*raging and fierce demand the strongest curb, take  
head of relapse: when vice becomes habitual, the  
very power of leaving it is lost.* (II. i. 183-188).

Lucy in her aside, produces another mini-maxim *for one vice as naturally begets another, as a father a son* (II. ii. 202-203). And upon the dreadful career of Millwood and what it leads to, Barnwell, the subject of her snares, strikes another moral unfortunately out of place for the rising tension is eventually dissolving into moralizing cold words:

*From our example may all be taught to fly*

*The first approach of vice; but, if overtaken.*

*By strong temptation, weakness, or surprise,*

*Lament their guilt, and by repentance rise;*

*The impenitent alone die unforgiven;*

*To sin's like man, and to forgive like heaven.* (V. the  
last. 83-89)

#### **d. Claim of Natural Speech and Lillo's Debts**

Lillo's claim of natural speech might not square with his direct debt to other playwrights, especially the Elizabethans. Lillo wrote his play in prose except a few speeches and rants, bearing in mind the audience's positive reaction to natural speech. Textual evidence, however, found in his play might deflate the claim of naturalness. He draws more from Shakespeare's diction and scenes than naturalness of speech requires. In several places, one might detect Lillo's reliance on Shakespeare's stock expressions. For instance, the scene of Barnwell coming to Millwood (IV. ii.), trembling with bloody hands closely resembles the scene of Macbeth coming shaking to his Lady after murdering King Duncan, and her fear of his inability to conceal his crime:

Macbeth: *(Looking at his hands) This is a sorry sight.*  
Lady Macbeth: *A foolish thought, to say a sorry sight*  
(Macbeth II, ii, 19-20).

The close counterpart of Shakespeare's scene and diction can be effortlessly seen in the scene of Barnwell and Millwood, and the closeness may deflate Lillo's claim of naturalness:

Millwood: *... his bloody hands show he has done the deed,  
but show he wants prudence to conceal it.*

BARN. *Where shall I hide me? Whether shall I fly to avoid  
the swift, unerring hand of Justice?*



MILL. *Dismiss your fears. Though thousands had pursued you to the door, yet being entered here, you are safe as innocence.* (IV. ii. 10-15)

The allusion to Macbeth's bloody hands brings up to mind the whole conception of Macbeth. The expressions Barnwell uses while pondering: *our journey's at an end. Life, like a tale that's told, is past away; that short, but dark and unknown passage, death, is all the space 'tween us and endless joys, or woes eternal,* recall Macbeth's well-known soliloquy Tomorrow and Tomorrow: *It[life] is a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.* (Macbeth. V. v. 26-28)

Other terms seem to be taken verbatim from Shakespeare's plays. For instance, the expressions used by Claudius' in his well-known soliloquy have their close counterparts in Barnwell's address to Millwood at the scaffolds:

*Oh wretched state! Oh bosom black as death!  
Oh limed soul that struggling to be free...  
Bow Stubborn knees, and heart with strings of steel  
Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe  
May all be well* (Hamlet, III, iii. 70-72).

Barnwell seems to use almost the same words as he entices Millwood for confession and repentance, in the last scene of Act V:

BARN. *Yet, ere we pass the dreadful gulf of death yet, ere you're plunged in everlasting woe. O, bend your stubborn knees and harder heart, to deprecate the wrath divine! Who knows but Heaven, in your dying moments, may bestow that grace and mercy which your life despised?* (V. Last Scene, 341-39).

The image of *Bow Stubborn knees*, is slightly altered to *O, bend your stubborn knees*; and the image of *heart with strings of steel* is replaced by *harder heart humbly to deprecate the wrath divine*. As Claudius urging himself for repentance, Barnwell urges Millwood for repentance. And the resemblance is too obvious to overlook.

### III. CONCLUSION

*The London Merchant* is a full-fledged bourgeois play introducing on stage middle class personalities to lead the action, something which many regard as innovative and contributory to the development of English drama. Lillo's play has left a notable stamp on the English drama (Ronald 1978, & O'Brian 2004), and it became highly influential in the continent. It is true that the play had a few imitators in

England, yet it had a tremendous impact on the playwrights in the continent. In Europe it became the inspiration of Bourgeois tragic domestic drama (Dobree, 255). Despite the public success it achieved taking advantage of the trends and expectations of its audience, the play suffers a number of literary drawbacks in relation to its mushy characterization, implausibility of plot, heavy debts to other playwright, and above all overabundance use of cold didacticism that often breaks down the rising tragic tone.

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