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**"If Words Might Serve": The Tension Between Hyperbole and
Limitation in Christopher Marlowe's Plays**

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**"If Words Might Serve": The Tension Between Hyperbole and
Limitation in Christopher Marlowe's Plays**

Abstract

This study investigates the changing function of language in Christopher Marlowe's plays I Tamburlaine, II Tamburlaine, The Jew of Malta, and Doctor Faustus. Like other Tudor dramatists, Marlowe used rhetorical devices enjoyed by contemporary audiences. While incorporating these devices he also departs from them, and his concern with language and the power of the spoken word becomes primary. This study analyzes the growing split between reality and the language Marlowe's characters use to interpret and to discuss that reality. This split widens as Marlowe's characters discover that language's power--to convince, to shape personal image, and to stand for actions--is accompanied by its ability to deceive, to carry double meanings, and its inability to effect magical changes in their lives. Finally, this study demonstrates that as language fails Marlowe's characters, it also fails Marlowe. Yet he remains the final controller of the word because, unlike his characters, he understands language's shortcomings. His attempts nevertheless to transcend these limitations is examined, and the study concludes that Marlowe's final triumph is his control over his characters' use of language and his ability to bend their words to his will.