Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* is an unorthodox piece of stagecraft by most any standards, and the received critical assessment of the play reveals a predictable discontinuity of opinion. The older view of the play is typically unkind. Hazlitt remarked that it is "a tissue of unprovoked and incredible atrocities," anticipating a critical scorn for Marlowe's hyperbolism that generally held, in our own day, until the 1950's. In spite of T. S. Eliot's kindly comment that *The Jew* may be called a "farce of the Old English humor, the terribly serious, even savage, comic humor," the earlier moderns were rarely moved to praise. Bakeless' stern evaluation is representative: "*The Jew of Malta* is not a great play; . . . It is not even a good play; . . . It is, indeed, not so much a play at all as the great beginning of a play." Kocher complained that *The Jew* "bulges grotesquely under the pressure of Marlowe's satirical impulses, which dart in at every opportunity or no opportunity," and declared the plot an "unreasoned mass of melodramatic incident." The appearance in 1952 of Harry Levin's *The Overreacher*, however, signaled a shift in critical sensibilities. Following Levin's lead, more recent commentators have focused less on the notorious weaknesses—melodramatic implausibility, lack of unity and generic integrity—and have attended more to the subtle strengths and newly discovered wholeness of the play. Levin had called attention to the complex irony and dexterous stagecraft that culminate in the "irony of ironies," Barabas' death by "coup de theatre, a machine which is worthy of all the machination that has gone before." New, more appreciative readings of *The Jew* then began to follow apace. Babb viewed Barabas' "policy" as a credibly portrayed response to a Christian society essentially evil, and
Kirschbaum praised Marlowe’s craftsmanship and his “mastery of stage speech. . . [that] continues to astonish by its ease and maturity.”6 More recently, Sanders has admired Marlowe’s bold satire in the play as a courageous attack on “vicious social prejudice” and anti-semitism.7 Although my essay shares with these new approaches a basic sympathy for a much-maligned play and a general appreciation for Marlowe’s theatrical achievement, it differs in its close investigation of a neglected but important feature of The Jew of Malta: the dramaturgical function of Barabas’ Thracian slave, Ithamore.

In its preoccupation with the pyrotechnics of Barabas, received opinion on The Jew has largely overlooked Ithamore and his role, or purpose, in the play. Even Constance Kuriyama, whose recent work traces psychological patterns in Marlowe’s drama, suggests only that Ithamore is an object or possession which the egotistical Jew can employ, control, and ultimately discard in a delayed manifestation of his ethnocentric hatred for Turks.8 More typically, Ithamore is perceived as little more than the villain’s “roguish accomplice,” a kind of dramatic equivalent to the conventional “sidekick” for the rascal-hero of a picaresque novel.9 It is true that when Ithamore first enters the dramatic world of The Jew of Malta in Act II, he appears as a rather stereotyped agent of evil and catalyst in conspiracy. His projected role in Barabas’ diabolical plans actually defines the Jew’s need for a slave. Seeing Ithamore for the first time, Barabas announces this need in one of his numerous asides:

Ay, mark him, you were best; for this is he that by my help shall do much villany.

(II.iii.134-35)10

Yet Ithamore’s character seems rather ambivalent in the play, as he variously wears the hats of villain and clown and oscillates between the poles of Barabas’ own dichotomy of “knave and fool,” “the serpent and the dove.” Indeed, Ithamore’s three-act space in the play finally provides sufficient evidence to render him clearly less villain than fool. In this essay I will document that observation and suggest that Ithamore’s role may serve as a dramatic paradigm for what happens to the Jew and ultimately to the reductive world of the play itself, as it drifts from apparent sophistication to near-