

Chapter 1

Life and historical contexts

Canterbury: birth and early education

The first recorded event of Christopher Marlowe's life is his christening at St George's church, Canterbury, on Saturday 26 February 1564. According to the usual practice of his time, this would have taken place a few days after his birth, the exact date of which is unknown. His parents were both migrants to Canterbury from other parts of Kent: his father John from Ospringe, some ten miles distant, in about 1556, and his mother Katherine from the coastal town of Dover. Christopher was their first son; his older sister Mary, born two years previously, would die in 1568.

The family into which Christopher was born might be described as that of a struggling tradesman. John Marlowe was a shoemaker, and gained his freedom – the right to open a shop, take on apprentices, sue for debt, and so on – in the year of Christopher's birth. His career seems to have been marked neither by outstanding success nor by dismal failure. In 1569 or 1570 he was lent £2 by a local charitable institution, and had yet to pay it back by 1573. He was sued several times for debt and, in the mid 1580s and 1590s, for non-payment of rent; when his term as warden and treasurer of the Shoemakers' Company ended in 1590 he was unable to provide satisfactory accounts, and was successfully taken to court. At the same time he appears to have been quite an aspiring and energetic man, as his company wardenship might suggest: he took on his first minor official role in his guild in 1570, served as a sideman (assistant churchwarden) and later as a churchwarden, and was in a company of volunteer soldiers at the time of the Spanish Armada in 1588. He was also part of a minority within his trade in being able to read and write.

Women were substantially excluded from public office in Elizabethan England, and the rights of married women to own and dispose of property were severely restricted, so it is not surprising that there are fewer records of Katherine Marlowe than of her husband. However, as Constance Kuriyama (2002) points out, this does indicate that Katherine lived a life free from public scandal; furthermore, the request in her will that she be buried near John

2 *The Cambridge Introduction to Christopher Marlowe*

suggests that they had an affectionate marriage, while the fact that six of her nine children survived to maturity in an age of high infant mortality may be a sign of her conscientiousness as a mother.

Marlowe's plays repeatedly depict individuals who, by dint of extraordinary talent and extraordinary ambition, transcend the circumstances of their birth: Tamburlaine the shepherd turned conqueror of nations, Faustus born to 'parents base of stock' but going on to achieve pre-eminence as a scholar before succumbing to the lure of forbidden knowledge. Tempting though it may be to compare these characters to the shoemaker's son who became a gentleman through his Cambridge education and achieved fame through his writings, it should be emphasised that Marlowe was not alone among writers of his time in coming from a tradesman's family. His exact contemporary William Shakespeare was the son of a glover (albeit of more substantial means than John Marlowe), Robert Greene the son of a saddler and Ben Jonson the stepson of a bricklayer (although he believed he had a claim to gentility through his father). None of these writers gives the theme of heroic (or demonic) ambition the degree of prominence that Marlowe does, so it is hazardous to explain his interest in it simply as a symptom of his own upward mobility, or to identify the playwright too closely with his protagonists.

It was, above all, education that gave Marlowe the opportunity to move out of the social position he was born into, and to develop and to realise his poetic gifts. It isn't known when or where Marlowe went to 'petty school', where he would have learned to read, write and do basic arithmetic; the earliest record relating to his education is that of the scholarship he won to attend the King's School, Canterbury (or the Queen's School as it was called during Elizabeth's reign) in December 1578, at the relatively late age of fourteen. While his family would have found it difficult to pay for Christopher to study there prior to the award of his scholarship, it is conceivable that he did so, since John Marlowe provided two boys with board and footwear which the school may have accepted in lieu of fees.

It hardly needs to be said that the education Marlowe received had a profound impact on his writing, but it may be as well to identify what were perhaps the two most important features of that education: its stress on the Latin language, and its goal of indoctrinating students with the teachings of the Church of England. The 'grammar' in 'grammar school' refers to *Latin* grammar, so by definition the aim of such a school is to produce students who are proficient in that language. In 1578, Latin was still the international language of learning, providing access to the canonical literary, philosophical and scientific texts of the ancient world as well as to some extent being the language in which such texts continued to be written: it was the language in which Sir Thomas More

wrote his *Utopia* (1516), in which John Calvin set out his Protestant theology (*Institutio Christianae religionis*, 1536), and in which Copernicus asserted that the earth went round the sun (*De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, 1543).

Marlowe's initial acquisition of Latin would have been through the tedious process of rote memorisation; he would then have learned to translate passages from Latin and to write Latin sentences. These skills were put into practice over his final three years at grammar school, when Marlowe would have been made to translate the prose of Latin authors such as Cicero and the verse of poets such as Virgil and Ovid, and then to write Latin prose and verse modelled on theirs. He would also have learned the so-called 'figures of oratory' – the rhetorical techniques that were meant to enable him to construct a persuasive speech on any given topic.

Some of the effects of Marlowe's grammar school education are immediately obvious. His play *Dido, Queen of Carthage* is based on Virgil's *Aeneid*, and includes passages from it translated into English as well as short sections of it in Latin. Marlowe also produced two verse translations from Latin, namely his versions of Ovid's *Amores* (which he certainly would not have studied at school, for reasons that will become obvious) and of the first book of Lucan's *Pharsalia*. He wrote poetry in Latin: one of his last works is his Latin elegy on the judge Sir Roger Manwood, who died on 14 December 1592. His education gave Marlowe more than just proficiency in Latin, however. In learning to compose Latin verses, Marlowe had to master that language's complex rules of versification. Classical Latin poetry is metrical, not rhymed: the lines of Virgil's *Aeneid* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are structured not by a rhyme-scheme, but by the need to conform to set patterns of long and short vowel sounds. The Elizabethan schoolboy had to learn how to choose Latin words, and to arrange them, in a way that produced a metrically satisfactory line. This skill was a virtual prerequisite for the scholarship Marlowe subsequently won to Cambridge, which demanded 'the best and aptest scholars well instructed in their grammar and if it may be such as can make a verse'. One of Marlowe's most important innovations as a dramatist writing in English would be in the power and melody he gave to blank verse – in 1623 Ben Jonson would refer to 'Marlowe's mighty line' – and it is partly Marlowe's classical education that we have to thank for the form, as well as the mythological content, of lines like

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships
 And burnt the topless towers of Ilium? (*Doctor Faustus*, 14.90–1)

A third effect of Marlowe's education, of equally fundamental importance, is that it gave him access to ways of thinking and of experiencing the world that were at odds with those encouraged by the Church and other institutions

4 *The Cambridge Introduction to Christopher Marlowe*

of the Elizabethan era. The writers of the ancient world, by definition, had not been Christian: they did not automatically assume the inherent depravity of humans through original sin, or fear an eternal damnation that could be avoided only through divine grace. Furthermore, the fact that for much of its history Rome had been a republic meant that educated Elizabethans knew of a successful form of non-monarchical government – a problematic notion in a hereditary monarchy like England.

It would be wrong to magnify the potentially subversive effects of the Elizabethan education system, however. At the same time as Marlowe and his fellows learned to read, write and speak Latin, they were indoctrinated with the strongly conformist and monarchist tenets of the Church of England (whose head, of course, was the Queen herself). A set text at grammar schools was Alexander Nowell's *A Catechism or First Instruction of Christian Religion*, which establishes those tenets by means of answers provided by a scholar to questions posed by his schoolmaster. John Gresshop, who was headmaster of the King's School for part of Marlowe's time there, had numerous copies, some in the original Latin and some in Thomas Norton's English translation, so we can be certain that Marlowe would have known it. One example of the way it extrapolates Elizabethan orthodoxy out of biblical texts is its argument that the commandment 'Honour thy father and thy mother' refers not just to natural parents but to 'all those, to whom any authority is given, as magistrates, ministers of the church, schoolmasters', such that it is 'much more heinous for a man to offend or kill the parent of his country' – that is, the Queen – 'than his own parent'. The *Catechism* also sets out a doctrine of crucial importance to *Doctor Faustus*, namely that not only are all humans inherently sinful and in need of God's mercy, but that mercy cannot be earned by the good deeds or 'works' we may do in this life:

MASTER Can we not therefore prevent God with any works or deservings, whereby we may first provoke him to love us and be good unto us?

SCHOLAR Surely with none. For God loved and chose us in Christ, not only when we were his enemies, that is, sinners, but also before the foundations of the world were laid.

Marlowe and his contemporaries were thus told from an early age that the question of whether they would go to heaven was one that had been decided before their birth, and over which they had no control.

As well as being shaped by texts like Nowell's, however, the religious views of the young Marlowe must have been influenced by the simple fact of growing up in Canterbury. After Saint Augustine established a monastery there at the end of the sixth century, shortly followed by a cathedral, Canterbury became the

administrative centre of the Church in England. The cathedral became a site of pilgrimage (as in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*) following Archbishop Thomas Becket's murder there in 1170, and even after the Reformation of the 1530s (which rejected the Pope's authority over the English Church) the Archbishop of Canterbury continued to be the nation's principal prelate, second only to the monarch. While its archbishop and its cathedral were tangible reminders of the authority of the Church, however, some details of the city's sixteenth-century history demonstrated the pre-eminence of the monarch and the state. The shrine of Thomas Becket was desecrated and his bones burnt under Henry VIII; Augustine's abbey was also partially destroyed. The human cost of the century's religious turmoils was also profoundly felt in Canterbury. Catholics from the city who died for resisting the Reformation included the nun Elizabeth Barton and the friar John Stone, while over forty Protestants were burnt at the stake on a single day in 1556, during Mary's reign. Many of these were immigrants who had fled religious persecution in continental Europe, and sixteen years later more refugees would bring to this culturally diverse city news of the massacre of Protestants that began in Paris on the eve of St Bartholomew's Day, 1572.

Cambridge and the translations of Ovid

Marlowe went up to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, in December 1580; college accounts from the first week of that month record Christopher 'Marlen' (one of several variant spellings of his name) as having spent one penny on food and drink. He was the recipient of a scholarship endowed by the former Archbishop of Canterbury Matthew Parker which enabled a student from the King's School, Canterbury to study at Corpus, the assumption being that the student would become a priest if he proved suitable. The context for such scholarships was a Church of England many of whose clergy were perceived as educationally inadequate: William Sweeting, who married Marlowe's parents, seems to have been barely literate. The need for an educated priesthood, as well as for civil servants to staff the expanding Tudor bureaucracy, was one reason why increasing (though as a proportion of the population, minuscule) numbers of young men like Marlowe from less prosperous backgrounds were able to attend university. A degree brought with it a measure of social mobility, in that university graduates were able to describe themselves as gentlemen rather than commoners, although this did not necessarily bring with it wealth and privilege: the annual stipend of many Elizabethan clergymen, for instance, remained relatively meagre.

6 *The Cambridge Introduction to Christopher Marlowe*

As with grammar school, one of the intended outcomes of a Cambridge education was the ability to argue convincingly. Students studied rhetoric, or the techniques for using language artfully and persuasively, as derived from classical writers such as Cicero. They studied dialectic, the art of logical reasoning. In their final year, they studied philosophy. An increasingly prominent feature of Marlowe's studies over the course of his degree would have been disputation, the debating – publicly, orally and in Latin – of set topics with his fellow students. This discipline tested scholars in several aspects of their studies: their logical reasoning, their fluency in Latin and their rhetorical skill. Disputation fostered abilities that would have been invaluable to the future dramatist, such as the artful use of language and the production of a coherent, well-turned speech. More generally, Marlowe's Cambridge education continued the immersion in classical literature that had begun at the King's School, introducing him to ancient Greek as well as to Latin logicians and philosophers. At the same time, Marlowe continued to have the doctrines of the Church of England drummed into him. Each day began with an hour's prayer in chapel, and much of Sunday was taken up with listening to sermons.

Cambridge also introduced Marlowe to some of the most gifted aspiring poets of the time. It was here that he met Thomas Nashe, who matriculated at St John's College in 1582 and with whom he would collaborate on *Dido, Queen of Carthage*. His relationship with Robert Greene, who would later criticise his atheism in print, may also have begun at Cambridge, where Greene was studying for his MA between 1580 and 1583.

In 1584 Marlowe himself completed his BA and remained in Cambridge to study for his MA, as his Parker scholarship allowed him to do. His translations of Ovid's *Amores*, first published in England (in Latin) in 1583, are usually assumed to have been made during this period, although there is no definite external evidence for this. The *Amores* are often called the *Elegies*, since Ovid wrote them in the elegiac metre where a hexameter (a line consisting of six metrical feet) is followed by a pentameter (a line consisting of five). While other works by Ovid, such as his epic compendium of mythology the *Metamorphoses*, were widely known and studied, the *Amores* were much less accessible, primarily because of the frankly sexual nature of their subject matter. In the fifth poem of book one the speaker describes an afternoon's love-making with his mistress; in 2.10 he boasts of being able to satisfy two girlfriends, and expresses his wish that he might die of sexual exhaustion ('droop with doing,' in Marlowe's translation); in 2.15 he imagines being the ring he has given his lover as a gift, thereby gaining intimate access to her body; 3.6 is a famous and graphic description of impotence. All this in itself may have made the poems appealing to an iconoclastic young man such as Marlowe, but as Patrick Cheney (1997) has argued, there is another aspect of the *Amores*

that may have attracted him, namely the way they seem to lay out a blueprint for a poetic career. The speaker of the poems frequently presents them as early works by a writer who means to work in the more prestigious genres of tragedy and epic, but is being compelled to write erotic poetry instead:

I durst the great celestial battles tell,
 Hundred-hand Gyges, and had done it well,
 With Earth's revenge, and how Olympus' top
 High Ossa bore, Mount Pelion up to prop ...
 My wench her door shut, Jove's affairs I left ...
 Toys and light elegies, my darts, I took,
 Quickly soft words hard doors wide open strook. (2.1.11–14, 17, 21–2)

The speaker had been prepared to write of the battles between the heavenly gods and the earth-bound giants (such as Gyges), who piled up mountains in an attempt to reach their adversaries; but his mistress shutting her door on him, he puts the gods to one side, and uses love-poetry ('Toys and light elegies') to charm her into opening it again. On the one hand, the speaker's personal life and the erotic poetry that is a part of it are being presented as things that distract him from higher matters; on the other, love-poetry obtains for the poet a more material reward than the immortal fame that epic might promise, namely sexual favours. This ambivalence towards the genre he is writing in is a recurrent feature of the *Amores*. In the final poem, for example, he addresses the love-deities Venus and Cupid,

Both loves to whom my heart long time did yield,
 Your golden ensigns pluck out of my field.
 Horned Bacchus greater fury doth distil,
 A greater ground with great horse is to till.
 Weak elegies, delightful Muse, farewell;
 A work that after my death here shall dwell. (3.14.15–20)

The two gods are asked to take back the standards they have planted in his ground, as he has in mind a greater project – presumably a tragedy or an epic poem of the kind he had earlier complained love was preventing him from writing. Yet even as he bids farewell to the elegies and the Muse (goddess of creativity) that inspired them, he seems to indicate that through them he shall achieve lasting fame after his death.

'Good service' and 'faithful dealing'

Marlowe's manner of living appears to have undergone some interesting developments during the period of his MA. Firstly, he appears to have begun to

8 *The Cambridge Introduction to Christopher Marlowe*

absent himself from the university for substantial periods of time, including the period from July to December 1584 and from July to September 1585. His expenditure in college increased, with his buttery (food and drink) bills averaging nineteen pence a week (while his scholarship awarded him only twelve pence a week). The portrait in Corpus Christi College that is often identified, on no strong evidence, as being of Marlowe is dated 1585, and this in itself would have been expensive to commission. Even if only for food and drink, the money must have come from somewhere, and it is tempting to make some sort of connection between Marlowe's spending, his absences from college, and one of the key biographical documents in Marlowe studies, a record from a meeting of the Privy Council (made up of the Queen's most senior advisors) on 29 June 1587. The Council minutes seem to indicate that Marlowe's right to graduate as Master of Arts from Cambridge was being called into question:

Whereas it was reported that Christopher Morley was determined to have gone beyond the seas to Rheims and there to remain, their Lordships thought good to certify that he had no such intent, but that in all his actions he had behaved himself orderly and discreetly, whereby he had done her Majesty good service, and deserved to be rewarded for his faithful dealing. Their Lordships' request was that the rumour thereof should be allayed by all possible means, and that he should be furthered in the degree he was to take at this next Commencement, because it was not Her Majesty's pleasure that any employed as he had been in matters touching the benefit of his country should be defamed by those who are ignorant in the affairs he went about.

Marlowe, or 'Morley' as his name is spelled here, has apparently been doing more than merely studying in the period leading up to 1587, which would explain the absences, and his 'good service' deserves reward, which would explain the expenditure.

Marlowe's absences from Cambridge may have had a perfectly innocent explanation. In her biography of Marlowe, Kuriyama (2002) emphasises that students often were away from college for long periods; that for some of the periods Marlowe was away other students were too, implying that some external cause such as an epidemic may have been responsible; and that for one of his periods of absence, during summer 1585, we know that he was in Canterbury because he signed the will of a fellow student's mother there. However, the fact remains that there were rumours that Marlowe was intending to go to Rheims in northern France, and that the Privy Council felt the need to quash these rumours. At this point, some further explanation may be necessary.

The reason why any young man in the 1580s would want to go to Rheims would be to attend the English Catholic seminary there which trained up

young men for the priesthood, preparing them to return to England in secret with the ultimate aim of converting the country back to Catholicism. This was horribly dangerous work, carried out through religious conviction and in the belief that the torture and death with which the Elizabethan authorities punished Catholic priests amounted to a glorious martyrdom. To understand why the Elizabethan state was so ferocious in its persecution of such priests, one needs some awareness of the broader religious context, and the inextricable linkage of religion and politics during the period. The great cultural trauma of sixteenth-century Europe was the Protestant Reformation, whereby many European Christians rejected the religious authority of the Pope. Most famously, Martin Luther's protests against the Church's sale of indulgences (alleviations of the soul's punishment after death) grew into a wider denial of Papal rule in which Luther was supported by several German princes. Luther's supporters disagreed with Catholic teachings in several key respects: for example, they believed that salvation could only be through faith, not action ('works'), and they held the Bible, not the Pope or the priesthood, to be the ultimate source of religious truth. While Henry VIII, as King of England between 1509 and 1547, was initially an opponent of Luther's ideas, his dispute with the Pope over whether his marriage to Katherine of Aragon could be annulled (enabling him to marry Anne Boleyn) led to him appointing himself supreme head of the Church in England in 1534, and two years later he began the dissolution of the monasteries, by which lands and wealth belonging to the Church were confiscated by the state. The establishment of a Church of England brought with it considerable bloodshed, including that of hundreds of armed protesters from the North of England who took part in the 30,000-strong 'Pilgrimage of Grace' against Henry's religious policies as well as that of more famous individuals such as Sir Thomas More.

Henry's death did not conclude England's religious turmoils. Under his successor, Edward VI (born 1537, reigned 1547–53), many died in the widespread rebellions that greeted the imposition of a single template for religious services, the Book of Common Prayer. The return of the country to Catholicism under Mary Tudor (born 1516, reigned 1553–8) entailed the death by burning of high-profile Protestants such as Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley and Thomas Cranmer as well as the execution of about a further 300 (including, as we have seen, several dozen in Canterbury in 1556). The accession of Elizabeth (1533–1603) to the throne in 1558 brought with it a further change of religion, back to the Church of England instituted by her father.

The reign of Elizabeth, in the course of which Marlowe was born and died, thus followed on from over two decades of sectarian strife; it did not, however, put an end to that strife. Many people continued to practise Catholic

10 *The Cambridge Introduction to Christopher Marlowe*

forms of worship in secret; others felt that the Reformation had not gone far enough, and that the whole system of Church government by bishops needed to be radically overhauled. Though these differences of opinion might seem like private matters, in fact they were potentially of considerable political importance. The annulment of Henry's marriage to Katherine of Aragon was not recognised by the Pope, which made his marriage to Anne Boleyn (and the birth of their daughter Elizabeth) illegitimate according to the Church of Rome. Accordingly, Elizabeth's own right to inherit the crown could be called into doubt; and indeed it was called into doubt by a bull (Papal proclamation) issued by Pope Pius V in 1570 that described her as 'the servant of crime, and pretended Queen of England'. After going on to enumerate Elizabeth's crimes against the Catholic religion in making herself head of the Church, abolishing Catholic forms of worship, and imposing the doctrines of the Protestant theologian John Calvin, Pius excommunicates her and her followers, says that the English people are no longer obliged to obey her, and deprives 'the said Elizabeth of the right to her pretended kingdom'. He forbids 'all nobles, people, subjects, and others, to venture to obey the orders, advice, or laws of the said Elizabeth'. Those who act otherwise are in effect excommunicated along with Elizabeth.

While in the early years of Elizabeth's reign the state was relatively tolerant of Catholicism when practised covertly, Pius's bull made private devotion a public issue by making it a sin for English Catholics to obey the monarch, effectively calling on them to depose her. The fact that there was a substantial body of English prepared to take up arms against the authority of the state had been made clear by the Northern Rising of 1569, which culminated in the hanging of hundreds of rebels, while Mary Queen of Scots (a captive in England from 1568 until her execution in 1587) was becoming the focal point of Catholic plots to depose Elizabeth and put Mary on the throne in her place.

It was in this climate that the Rheims seminary was operating. To those who ran it, the young men who studied there were working to restore England to the true faith; to the Elizabethan authorities, they were traitors who wanted to bring about the death of the Queen and an invasion by foreign forces (primarily Spain, with whom England was effectively at war from the late 1570s). The universities at Oxford and Cambridge were evidently seen as places full of talented young men willing to explore subversive religious and political ideas: David Riggs (2004) notes that Robert Parsons, a priest who led the Catholic mission to England, wrote to his associate Claudio Acquaviva in 1581 that at Cambridge he had 'insinuated a certain priest into the very university, under the guise of a scholar ... Within a few months he has sent over to Rheims seven very fit [i.e. appropriate] youths'. For its part, the Elizabethan state – in