

CONSTRUCTING CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

EDITED BY

J. A. DOWNIE and J. T. PARNELL



PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK
<http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>

40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
<http://www.cup.org>

10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Baskerville 11/12.5pt [CE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Constructing Christopher Marlowe / edited by J. A. Downie and
J. T. Parnell.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 57255 x (hardback)

1. Marlowe, Christopher, 1564-1593 - Criticism and interpretation.

I. Downie, J. A. (James Alan), 1951- . II. Parnell, J. T.

PR2674.C65 2000

822'.3-dc21 99-16604 CIP

ISBN 0 521 57255 x hardback

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CHAPTER I

Marlowe: facts and fictions

J. A. Downie

You must and will suppose (fair or foul reader, but where's the difference) that I suppose a heap of happenings that I had no eye to eye knowledge of or concerning.

Anthony Burgess, *A Dead Man in Deptford* (1993), p. 3

Is this a true story?

Yes, in the sense that it is fact rather than fiction. The people in it are real people, the events I describe really happened, the quotations are taken verbatim from documents or books of the period. Where there is a dialogue I have reconstructed it from reported speech. I have not invented anything.

Charles Nicholl, *The Reckoning* (1992), p. 3

We know next to nothing about Christopher Marlowe. When we speak or write about him, we are really referring to a construct called 'Marlowe'. The same might of course be said about all writers. Truly 'modern' critics are only too well aware of 'the historicity of texts and the textuality of history'. But Marlowe/'Marlowe' poses the problem in a peculiarly acute form. The recent spate of fictions published about Marlowe, in which category one is forced to include Charles Nicholl's book about Marlowe's murder, are merely the latest manifestation of a (dis)honourable tradition.¹ For whatever reason, writers and critics seem particularly predisposed to pontificate about Marlowe's life, his character, and his artistic intentions, regardless of the exiguity of the documentary evidence on which they base their accounts. Given these circumstances, it is scarcely surprising that researchers' hunches quickly become transmogrified, as a consequence, into hard 'facts'.²

Nicholl, for instance, claims at the outset of his narrative that his is 'a true story . . . in the sense that it is fact rather than fiction' (Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, p. 3). It is nothing of the kind. For all his digging in the official records of Elizabethan England, what we are

offered by Nicholl is an account of *what might have been* the 'facts' of Marlowe's life – but what, equally clearly, might be nothing more than a fiction of his own constructing. Nicholl writes a lot about the importance of 'evidence', but he doesn't actually provide any for his tendentious suggestion that Marlowe was murdered on the orders of the Earl of Essex as part of the wider power struggle in which Essex was engaged with Sir Walter Raleigh, and the increasing resort to *credo* is a giveaway. So many sentences and phrases begin with the words, 'I believe', particularly towards the end of Nicholl's book, that it assumes the character of a nervous tic.

Given this tendency to embellish the 'facts' of Marlowe's life, it might be salutary to remind ourselves just how little we know for certain. Born in Canterbury, 'Christofer the sonne of John Marlow' was christened on 26 February 1564.³ Subsequently, on 14 January 1579, 'Chr[ist]ofer Marley' was admitted to one of the scholarships provided for 'poor boys, both destitute of the help of friends, and endowed with minds apt for learning'⁴ at the King's School, Canterbury. Then, on 17 March 1581, 'Chrof. Marlen' matriculated at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.⁵ As Frederick S. Boas remarks: 'of Christopher's home life not the faintest echo remains either in tradition or in his writings'.⁶

Already, however, we have several of the variants on Marlowe's surname in the scanty documentary evidence which have caused problems for biographers. There were soon to be others. The name of 'Christof. Marlyn' appears in a list of Corpus Christi undergraduates admitted to the degree of BA in 1584, while 'Marley' is listed 199th out of 231 graduates on the 'Ordo Senioritatis' in the Grace Book of the University of Cambridge for 1583–4.⁷ That was not the end of Marlowe's university career, however. His Parker scholarship, restricted to a native of Canterbury who had attended the school there, was for a period of six years, and Marlowe carried on studying for his MA. By 1587 he had held it for virtually the maximum permitted duration, which implies, as Boas points out, 'that he intended to take holy orders' (Boas, *Christopher Marlowe*, p. 15).

But Marlowe was not in attendance at Corpus Christi for the whole of this time. His scholarship carried with it an allowance of twelve pence a week, and there are numerous entries in the buttery books and college accounts relating to his expenditure. These suggest that he was absent for several weeks during the academic

years 1581–2 and 1582–3, and again in 1584–5 and 1585–6.⁸ Marlowe's absences assume significance in the light of the famous entry in the Privy Council Register dated 29 June 1587:⁹

Whereas it was reported that Christopher Morley was determined to haue gone beyond the seas to Reames and there to remaine, Their Lordships thought good to certefie that he had no such intent, but that in all his accions he had behaued him selfe orderlie and discreetlie wherebie he had done her Majestie good service, & deserued to be rewarded for his faithfull dealinge: Their Lordships request was that the rumor thereof should be allaied by all possible meanes, and that he should be furthered in the degree he was to take this next Commencement: Because it was not her Majesties pleasure that anie one employed as he had been in matters touching the benefitt of his Countrie should be defamed by those that are ignorant in th' affaires he went about.

Does this refer to the Christopher Marlowe known to posterity? After all, a Christopher Morley of Trinity was a contemporary of Marlowe's at Cambridge, although he took his MA in 1586. While some scholars have been cautious about the identification of Marlowe as 'Morley', others have been less circumspect. 'This is definitely Marlowe', insists Nicholl, 'and this certificate of good behaviour drawn up on a summer morning in 1587 is the earliest record of his involvement in confidential government work' (Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, p. 92). What sort of work? Here Nicholl is equally confident. At Rheims was the English College, a Catholic seminary at which young Catholics were trained in order that they might return to England and work for the restoration of Catholicism as the national faith. 'On the surface Marlowe appears to be a Catholic sympathiser, but this is only a pose', Nicholl explains. 'In reality he is the government's man, working in some way against the Catholics. This is the only possible interpretation of the Council's wording' (Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, p. 93).

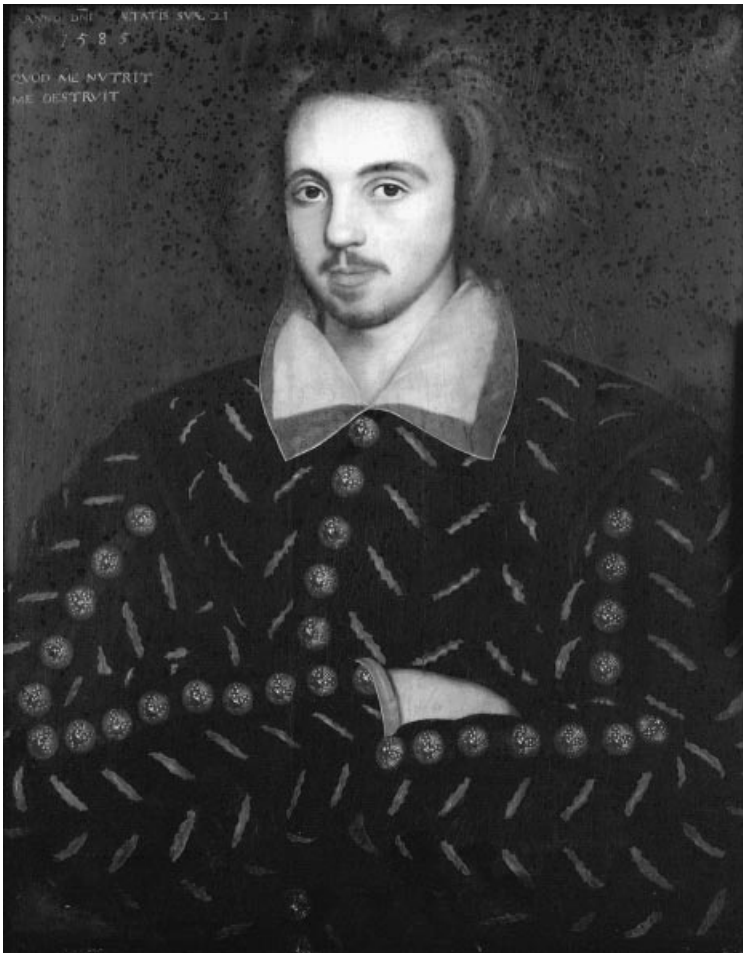
The *only* possible interpretation? Scarcely. However, assuming that the Privy Council's letter does refer to Marlowe, who took his MA degree in July 1587, it seems that rumours had evidently been circulating that he had converted to Catholicism, and had 'gone . . . to Reames . . . there to remaine'. New light on the significance of these rumours has recently been supplied by Peter Roberts, who draws attention to 'the residential requirements for students and fellows' at Cambridge in the 1580s, which allowed for 'discontinuance' between the BA and the MA provided that the Vice-

Chancellor received confirmation that they had 'lived soberly and studiously the course of a scholar's life' during their absence from College. 'The Privy Council testimonial', Roberts concludes, 'was presumably a substitute for the landlord/parson certificate'.¹⁰ Apparently Marlowe had been absent from Cambridge for some weeks early in 1587, as only 5s 6d was paid from his Parker scholarship during the Lent term. Perhaps this was the source of College gossip. To set the record straight, the Privy Council insisted this was not the case. Marlowe had been employed in unspecified 'matters touching the benefitt of his Countrie'.

And that is all we *know* about Marlowe's activities prior to the middle of 1587, although it has not prevented speculation about what he *might* have been doing. Attention has been drawn to the sharp increase in the scale of his spending in 1585, as recorded in the buttery books. Where did he get the money, not only to spend eighteen or twenty-one pence a week in the college buttery, but to kit himself out in such lavish style for his celebrated portrait? I do not pretend to know the answer to the first question, although it should be pointed out that there are clear discrepancies in both the college accounts and the buttery books.¹¹ As for the second, it must be stated, quite categorically, that there is *not one iota of evidence* that Marlowe is the subject of the portrait found in builders' rubble at Corpus Christi in 1953. Similarly, it is simply not safe to assume that Marlowe was a twenty- or twenty-one-year-old spy in the middle of the 1580s, and that that is the burden of the entry in the Privy Council Register.

Circular arguments of considerable ingenuity have been constructed not merely to 'prove' that the portrait is of Marlowe, but that it offers evidence to indicate that, by 1585, he was already a 'spy'. How else is one to account for the sitter's costly apparel? Rash reasoning of this sort is rife in Elizabethan scholarship in general, and Marlovian scholarship in particular. As the lavishness of the costume attests, the portrait is evidently of a wealthy young man. Marlowe was a cobbler's son, at Corpus Christi as a Parker scholar: he is therefore highly unlikely to be the subject of the controversial portrait, which must fairly be described as a portrait of an unknown young man.

During the late 1580s Marlowe is also confidently believed to have had another occupation ostensibly remote from the world of espionage. 'By the summer [of 1587] *Tamburlaine* was on-stage in



¹ Christopher Marlowe: a putative portrait, from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. The College cannot vouch for the identity of this portrait and 'it must be stated, quite categorically, that there is *not one iota of evidence* that Marlowe is the subject'.



2 Christopher Marlowe: the 'Grafton' portrait, from the John Rylands University Library of Manchester

London', writes Nicholl with his customary lack of scholarly caution, 'and Marlowe was launched on his career as a "play-maker"' (Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, p. 100). On the basis of the evidence of Greene's *Perimedes The Blacke-Smith*, published in 1588, scholars assume that *Tamburlaine* was staged in 1587, although the extant printed text, which states that the two parts of the play 'were

sundrie times most stately shewed upon Stages in the Citie of London. By the right honorable the Lord Admirall his seruantes’ was ‘newly published’ in 1590.

Tamburlaine is the only play now attributed to Marlowe that was published during his lifetime. Unfortunately, it is also the only play now attributed to Marlowe that is not attributed to him on the title-page, either by his full name, or by the abbreviation ‘*Ch. Mar.*’. But Greene, alluding to ‘two Gentlemen Poets’ whose verses have ‘latelye’ appeared ‘vpon the stage in tragicall buskins’, not only refers to them as ‘daring God out of heauen with that Atheist *Tamburlan*’, but as ‘such mad and scoffing poets, that haue prophetically spirits as bred of *Merlins* race’.¹² Critics assume that this refers to Marlowe, the man with many names. ‘Merlin’ would have been pronounced ‘Marlin’ in Elizabethan England and, after ‘Morley’, ‘Marlin’ was perhaps the commonest corruption of Marlowe’s surname. Thus the fact that ‘the dramatist’s name was often known as Marlin’ is sufficient for Boas to insist that it ‘can leave no reasonable doubt that Marlowe is here attacked as the writer of *Tamburlaine*’. Well, it’s possible. And, with Boas,¹³ we can always choose to ignore the fact that, apart from the passage I have just quoted, there is no external evidence that Christopher Marlowe wrote *Tamburlaine* dating from before his death.

The way in which *Tamburlaine* was first attributed to Marlowe by literary scholars is illuminating. It was neither the result of the references in *Perimedes The Blacke-Smith* nor Gabriel Harvey’s similarly ambiguous allusion to ‘*Tamberlaine*’ in ‘Gorgon, Or the Wonderfull Yeare’ (1593).¹⁴ As Thomas Dabbs notes, ‘[i]n the eighteenth century, Malone had assigned the authorship of *Tamburlaine* to Nashe’ (Dabbs, p. 61). It was John Payne Collier who first insisted not only that Marlowe was its author, but that he was an actor, too – just like his famous contemporary, Shakespeare. And Collier went to extraordinary lengths to ‘prove’ that Marlowe wrote the play, down to forging an entry in Philip Henslowe’s diary that had ‘escaped the eye of Malone’.¹⁵

Collier was reacting to the comments of the editor of the 1826 Pickering edition of Marlowe’s works, who ‘concluded that *Tamburlaine* “cannot be laid to Marlowe’s charge”’ on the basis of Thomas Heywood’s prologue to *The Jew of Malta* (1633) (quoted in Dabbs, pp. 61–2):

We know not how our play may pass this stage,
 But by the best of poets in that age,
 The Malta Jew had being and was made;
 And he then by the best of actors play'd:
 In Hero and Leander, one did gain
 A lasting memory: in Tamburlaine,
 This Jew, with others: th' other wan
 The attribute of peerless, being a man
 Whom we may rank with (doing no one wrong)
 Proteus for shapes and Roscius for a tongue.

Heywood's verses are every bit as obscure as Greene's and Harvey's references to '*Tamburlaine*', and therefore no more conclusive on the question of authorship. Clearly it is Marlowe who has gained a 'lasting memory' on account of *Hero and Leander*. But it is far from clear whether the allusion to Tamburlaine refers to the play or to the character, to the playwright or to the actor – whether, in short, it refers to Marlowe or to Edward Alleyn.

However, although we have no information whatsoever on his actual movements between leaving Cambridge¹⁶ and the fracas in which he was involved in the autumn of 1589, we know for certain from a very different kind of source that Marlowe *was* moving in theatrical circles in London in the late 1580s. By this time, Marlowe was evidently a neighbour of the poet and playwright Thomas Watson, in the district of Norton Folgate, near Shoreditch, close to the Theater and the Curtain. We know this because Watson and 'Christoferus Marlowe nuper de [Norton Fowlgate] yoman' were arrested and committed to Newgate prison on 18 September 1589¹⁷ on suspicion of the murder of William Bradley in Hog Lane in the parish of St Giles without Cripplegate. The inquest on Bradley's death was held the following day, but it was only on 1 October that 'Christopher Marley of London, gentleman' was bailed. His sureties for the sum of £40 were 'Richard Kytchine of Clifford's Inne, gentleman, & Humfrey Rowland of East Smithfeilde in the county aforesaid, horner'. Watson was subsequently found to have killed Bradley in self-defence, and Marlowe was duly discharged on 3 December 1589 at the Old Bailey where, presumably, he appeared in person to save his bond.

Like all other documentary references to Marlowe, the Hog Lane incident prompts a number of questions, but offers few answers.

How did the fight between Marlowe and William Bradley begin? Why did Marlowe take no further part in it once Watson intervened? Why was Marlowe, a graduate of Cambridge, described as 'yoman' in the Middlesex Sessions Roll, but as 'generosus' when admitted to bail? Why was bail set at such a high sum? What was the nature of the relationship between Marlowe and Watson? After all, the dedication to the Countess of Pembroke of the posthumous edition of Thomas Watson's *Amintæ Gaudia*, entered in the Stationers' Register on 10 November 1592, is signed 'C. M.', and *Edward II* was acted by the Earl of Pembroke's servants.

If the connection between Marlowe and the Pembroke circle is worth pursuing, so are Watson's connections with others who have their place in Marlowe's story. Watson was, for instance, a friend of Thomas Walsingham, dedicating *Meliboeus* to him in 1590. *Meliboeus* was an elegy on Walsingham's cousin, Sir Francis Walsingham, who, until his death in that year, had been Elizabeth I's Secretary of State and spymaster-in-chief. Sir Francis would therefore have been in a position to know the circumstances behind the famous entry in the Privy Council Register concerning Christopher Morley, although he was not present at the meeting held on 29 June 1587. And when 'E. B.' – presumably Edward Blount – dedicated *Hero and Leander* to Sir Thomas Walsingham in 1598, he reminded him of his interest in the poet:

I suppose my selfe executor to the unhappily deceased author of this Poem, upon whom knowing that in his life time you bestowd many kinde favours entertaining the parts of reckoning¹⁸ and worth which you found in him, with good countenance and liberall affection.

It was from Thomas Walsingham's house at Scadbury in Kent that Marlowe would ride to Deptford on 30 May 1593 to a meeting with Ingram Frizer, Robert Poley, and Nicholas Skeres.

After 3 December 1589, however, Marlowe's name once again disappears from view in the official records until Sir Robert Sidney, Sir Philip Sidney's younger brother, writes to Lord Burghley, the Lord Treasurer, on 26 January 1592 from Flushing, about a 'scholer' called 'Christofer Marly' who had been taken up for coining in Flushing along with one Gifford Gilbert.¹⁹ They had been shopped by their 'chamber fellow' Richard Baines – a name otherwise familiar to Marlowe scholars on account of his 'note Containing the opinion of on[e] Christopher Marly Concerning his Damnable

Judgment of Religion, and scorn of Gods word'. In this document, Baines also alleged that Marlowe had affirmed that 'he had as good Right to Coine as the Queene of England, and that he was acquainted wth one poole a prisoner in newgate who hath greate Skill in mixture of mettals'.²⁰ 'The men being examined apart never denied anything', Sidney assured Burghley, 'onely protesting that what was done was onely to see the Goldsmiths conning.'

This sounds like our man. The most interesting piece of information to arise from Sidney's letter, however, concerns Marlowe's alleged connections with much bigger fish than Richard Baines and John Poole. According to Sidney:

The scholer sais himself to be very wel known both to the Earle of Northumberland and my Lord Strang. Baines and he do also accuse one another of intent to goe to the Ennemy or to Rome, both as they say of malice one to another. Hereof I thougth fitt to advertis yowr Lo: leaving the rest to their own confession and my Anciants report.

For the second time, then, documentary evidence exists of Marlowe's intention either to defect to the enemies of Elizabeth I's England or to convert to Roman Catholicism or both. In order to get out of trouble this time, however, Marlowe insinuated that he was connected in high places. For Nicholl, this scrap of second-hand evidence becomes the clinching argument for Marlowe's membership of Raleigh's 'School of Night', to whom, according to Richard Cholmeley, he read his 'atheist lecture'. Nicholl puts it thus: 'Marlowe himself said, in early 1592, that he was "very well known" to Northumberland' (Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, p. 52). Once again, then, circular reasoning allows us to postulate hard 'facts' about Marlowe. Cholmeley claims that Marlowe was an atheist associated with the so-called 'School of Night'. 'Fortunately', writes Nicholl, 'we do not have to rely on Cholmeley's word alone' (Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, p. 52). Marlowe evidently told Sidney that he was 'very wel known both to the Earle of Northumberland and my Lord Strang'. Northumberland, in turn, 'was a close associate of Sir Walter Raleigh' (Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, p. 52). *Ipsa facto*, Marlowe was part of the 'School of Night'.

Alas, it is not that simple. Arrested for coining – a crime which carried the death penalty – 'Christofer Marly' told his interrogator that he knew powerful men like Northumberland and Strange. Why should he do this if, as Nicholl and others contend, he was a government agent? What are we to conclude from Sidney's letter to

Burghley? That Marlowe was well in with Northumberland and Strange, and ‘part of that free-thinking, philosophical clique, centred on Raleigh, called the “School of Night”’ (Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, p. 52)? Or that ‘Christofer Marly’ was trying to impress Sidney with his connections and escape the consequences of being caught in the act of ‘uttering’ a counterfeit Dutch shilling?

What, then, is the evidence for Marlowe’s association with Northumberland and Strange?

Anxious to establish an ‘early connection between Marlowe and Northumberland’ which would reveal the former at work as a ‘poet-spy’ in the latter’s household (Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, p. 201), Nicholl makes much of the fact that Thomas Watson dedicated two pieces of work (one unpublished) to Northumberland. And of course Marlowe knew Watson. Further, there was an eighteenth-century tradition known to Thomas Warton and Edmond Malone that Marlowe translated one of these, *Helenaë Raptæ*, ‘into English rhyme’ in 1587 (Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, pp. 192–3). (What this proves I am not quite sure, and of course Malone thought *Tamburlaine* was the work of Thomas Nashe.) Thwarted but apparently undismayed by the lack of evidence, Nicholl then simply assumes that Marlowe ‘had perhaps served as a government listener in the Northumberland circle’ (Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, p. 232). Why? Because he believes Marlowe’s murder was a political job, engineered by the Earl of Essex.

While other evidence of Marlowe’s association with Northumberland is simply lacking, Henslowe’s diary, as Julian Bowsher notes, records performances of both *The Jew of Malta* and *The Massacre at Paris* by Lord Strange’s Men at the Rose theatre in 1592 and 1593. ‘In May 1593, Kyd recorded that he and Marlowe had been “wrytinge in one chamber twoe years synce”’, Bowsher continues. ‘Marlowe was working (or rather, writing) for the “plaiers” of a certain Lord, unidentified, but thought to be Lord Strange’ (see below, p. 33). If the Lord to whom Kyd refers is indeed Strange, then once again we encounter evidence which is difficult to interpret. Kyd’s description of Marlowe’s relationship with ‘his Lordship’ is hardly that of a favourite, much less a friend:²¹

My first acquaintance wth this Marlowe, rose vpon his bearing name to serve my Lo: [Lord] although his Lp never knew his service but in writing for his plaiers, ffor never cold my L. endure his name, or sight, when he had heard of his conditions, nor wold in deed the forme of devyne praiers used duellie in his Lp’ house haue quadred wth such reprobates.

In what sense, then, was Marlowe claiming to be 'very wel known' to Strange?

In either case, Marlowe's claim to be connected with Northumberland and Strange apparently cut no ice with Sidney, who sent Marlowe and Gilbert (but *not* Baines) 'over unto [Burghley], to take their trial as you shall think best'. What Burghley thought best we do not know, although Sidney's letter was endorsed: 'Sir Robert Sidney to my L. He sendes over by this bearer his Auntient one Evan Lloyd, and 2 others Christopher Marley and Gifford Gilbert a goldsmith taken for coynage, to be tryed here for that fact. There hath bene only one dutch shilling uttered, the metall playne peuter.'²²

Whether Marlowe was tried, whether he was punished, or whether he was shielded by Burghley because he was a government agent,²³ he was at liberty in May 1592 when he was arrested for making threats against the constables of Holywell Street in Shoreditch. According to the record, Christopher Marlowe of London, gentleman, was put upon his recognisance on 9 May 1592 to appear at the Michaelmas Middlesex Quarter Sessions of October 1592.

Revealingly, Mark Eccles called this 'the second definite record of Marlowe's life as a playwright in London' (Eccles, *Christopher Marlowe in London*, p. 114), with the affray in Hog Lane the first. It is an interesting point. Marlowe may well have been the author of *Tamburlaine* and other plays, but there are no documentary records of his authorship dating from his lifetime. In addition, Thomas Kyd, under interrogation in May 1593, referred to the time when he and Marlowe were 'wrytinge in one chamber twee yeares synce', but Kyd was in fear of his life, and trying to explain how certain 'waste and idle papers . . . fragmentes of a disputation toching that opinion affirmed by Marlowe to be his' were found in his, Kyd's, possession. These dangerous papers, which we now know not to have been written by Marlowe at all, but to have been part of a treatise by John Proctor published in 1549 called *The Fal of the Late Arrian*, supposedly got 'shuffled wth some of [Kyd's]', without Kyd's knowledge.²⁴

'When we next hear of Marlowe after the seizure of Kyd's papers in May a year later', Eccles pointed out, 'the Council is ordering him arrested at the house of Mr Thomas Walsingham in Kent' (Eccles, *Christopher Marlowe in London*, p. 106). However, one of the very few new pieces of information about Marlowe to have come to light since the publication of *Christopher Marlowe in London* in 1934 reveals that he was involved in a third violent *contretemps* prior to his

encounter with Ingram Frizer, Robert Poley, and Nicholas Skeres on 30 May 1593 in Deptford. According to the Plea Roll of Canterbury Civil Court, on 15 September 1592 Marlowe 'did by force of arms [*vi et armis*], viz., with staff and dagger, make an assault upon the aforesaid plaintiff [William Corkyn], and against the Peace of the said Lady the Queen' near the 'central crossroads of Canterbury' (Urry, *Christopher Marlowe*, pp. 65, 66).

Marlowe's father stood bail for his son for the princely sum of 12*d*. (Why did Marlowe, the successful playwright, government agent, and friend of Northumberland and Strange, not have such a sum at his disposal?) In the meantime, his attorney, John Smith, prepared an indictment against William Corkyn for the quarter sessions which began at Canterbury on 26 September, in which Marlowe, in turn, unsuccessfully accused Corkyn of an assault on his person. Marlowe's civil case duly came up on 2 October, was first adjourned, and then dismissed a week later on the 9th. As William Urry notes: 'Christopher Marlowe's dismissal from court on 9 October 1592 marks his last recorded appearance at Canterbury and indeed is the last precisely dated evidence for his whereabouts until his arrest and death the following May' (Urry, *Christopher Marlowe*, p. 67).²⁵

Marlowe was arrested in May 1593 as a direct result, it appears, of the apprehension (on or before the 12th) and subsequent interrogation of Thomas Kyd. We do not know what Kyd was taken up for, although papers found in his chamber led to the suspicion that he was an atheist. Kyd fingered Marlowe. On 18 May 1593 the Privy Council issued a warrant to a messenger 'to repair to the house of Mr. T. Walsingham in Kent, or to anie other place where he shall vnderstand Christopher Marlowe to be remayning, and by virtue hereof to bring him to Court in his companie, and in case of need to require ayd'.²⁶ The Privy Council, then, knew that Marlowe was likely to be staying at Thomas Walsingham's house at Scadbury. But Marlowe was not arrested and kept in confinement. Instead, after appearing before the Council on 20 May, he was released on bail, and ordered to report daily.

Ten days later, as everybody knows, Christopher Marlowe was 'in the house of a certain Eleanor Bull, widow', in Deptford Strand, from 'about the tenth hour before noon . . . until the sixth hour after noon' on 30 May 1593, in the company of Ingram Frizer, Robert Poley, and Nicholas Skeres. In the early evening they came in from the garden and had supper. Then they argued over '*le recknynge*'.

According to the affidavits, Marlowe attacked Frizer with his own dagger. Frizer fought back, 'and so it befell in that affray that the said Ingram, in defence of his life, with the dagger aforesaid to the value of 12*d.* gave the said Christopher then & there a mortal wound over his right eye of the depth of two inches & of the width of one inch'.²⁷ Marlowe's death was evidently instantaneous.

The inquest on Marlowe's death opened on 1 June, with William Danby, Coroner to the Royal Household, presiding. (Marlowe had been killed 'within the verge', in close proximity to Greenwich Palace and the body of the Queen.) Sixteen jurors found that Frizer had killed Marlowe in self-defence. Marlowe was buried in an unmarked grave in St Nicholas' churchyard the same day. For some reason, as if determined that the ambiguity over documentary evidence relating to Marlowe should dog him to his death and beyond, the parish register reads: 'Christopher Marlow slaine by Francis Frezer'.²⁸ A writ of *certiorari* was issued on 15 June to summon the case into Chancery, and on 28 June a pardon was issued to Frizer as he had acted 'in defensione ac saluacione vite sue'.

And so the 'historical' Marlowe disappears from view, unless one is prepared to entertain the preposterous theory that he was not killed at all, that the 'recknyng' was a clever way of 'disappearing' Marlowe for some reason that is not immediately apparent, but that was not unconnected with espionage. That the unusual circumstances of Marlowe's death should tease the scholar into thought is understandable. As soon as the affidavits were discovered in the 1920s, speculation began as to whether the 'affray' could have happened as alleged, and whether Marlowe's wounds were consistent with the events described by Frizer, Poley, and Skeres. Conspiracy theories have been woven around the connections of Marlowe's companions, and the suspicious ease with which Frizer was pardoned. Is this not indicative that he had friends in high places? But so far all that these theories amount to is mere speculation. Announcing the discovery that Frizer had indeed 'one more [friend] than has been suspected', not Walsingham or Burghley or Essex, but Paul Banning, sometime elected Sheriff of London, Arthur Freeman puts it thus: 'the "conspiracy theory" . . . seem[s] less necessary than before. Marlowe may even have been murdered, as his earliest biographers believed, in a brawl' over the reckoning.²⁹

After duly weighing all the documentary evidence for the historical Marlowe which has been presented over the years, I see no

reason to contradict Frederick S. Boas's admirably balanced judgement on the death of Marlowe: 'Is it legitimate, from the natural desire to shield the name of a great poetic playwright, and to redress the balance of contemporary prejudice against a revolutionary thinker, on account of some difficulties in the case, to reverse the verdict in posterity's court of appeal?'³⁰ I think not.

What, then, are we left with? Marlowe was born in Canterbury, educated at the King's School, Canterbury, and Corpus Christi, Cambridge, where he took BA and MA degrees. He was absent from his college from time to time prior to 29 June 1587, when he took his MA, apparently on account of nameless 'matters touching the benefitt of his Countrie'. He was arrested and imprisoned on suspicion of murder in September 1589, but subsequently released. He was arrested on a charge of coining in the Low Countries in January 1592, and deported to England. He was arrested in May 1592 for threatening behaviour in Shoreditch. He was arrested once more in Canterbury on 15 September 1592 for an assault on William Corkyn. Such conduct, taken in conjunction with the account of his alleged attack on Ingram Frizer on 30 May 1593, might be taken to corroborate Kyd's account of Marlowe's 'other rashnes in attempting soden pryvie iniuries to men'.

In the intervals between his court appearances, Marlowe apparently wrote some plays, although none of them was unambiguously attributed to him prior to his death. He also wrote some poems. 'Marlowe's poems and translations are traditionally assigned to his Cambridge years', writes Stephen Orgel, 'though there is in fact no evidence to support this view'.³¹ Once again, none of the poems appears to have been published prior to his death. Greene's *Menaphon* (1589) paraphrases *The Passionate Shepherd*, although the earliest extant printed version is from 1599 when it appeared in *The Passionate Pilgrim. Hero and Leander: Begun by Christopher Marloe; and finished by George Chapman*, with a dedication to Sir Thomas Walsingham signed 'E. B.', was published in 1598. None of the surviving clandestine editions of Marlowe's translations of Ovid's *Amores* is dated, although the book was banned by Archbishop Whitgift and burned in the yard of the Stationers' Hall on 4 June 1599. The Huntington Library copy is entitled *All Ovids Elegies: 3. Bookes*, by 'C. M.', and was supposedly published 'At Middlebrough'.³² Finally, *Lucans First Booke Translated Line for Line, by Chr. Marlowe*, appeared in

1600, with a dedication by Thom. Thorpe to Edward Blount, 'his kind, and true friend', '*in the memory of that pure Elementall wit Chr. Marlow; whose ghoast or Genius is to be seen to walke the Churchyard in (at the least) three or foure sheets*'.

It is difficult to judge how seriously to take Thorpe's pun. Clearly it is suggesting that Marlowe was a published author '*whose ghoast or Genius*' could still be found if one were to take the trouble of visiting the booksellers at St Paul's Churchyard. Assuming that Thorpe's purpose was not to insinuate that he knew or suspected that some of the works attributed to Marlowe between 1593 and 1600 by his initials or by the abbreviation '*Ch. Mar.*' were not actually written by Marlowe at all, but were 'ghosts' – booksellers' ploys to cash in on the sensational manner of his death, Thorpe nevertheless implies that Marlowe was known as the author not of a large body of plays, but of '*(at the least) three or foure sheets*'. This might mean as little as three or four broadsheets or at least 96 pages, assuming the format was duodecimo – about the length of *Hero and Leander*, for instance.

We can name certain of Marlowe's associates, some with more confidence than others. Clearly, in addition to Walsingham and Blount, he knew the poets and playwrights Thomas Watson and Thomas Kyd, as well as Thomas Nashe and Robert Greene. He may also have been connected with the Earl of Pembroke. Although both Kyd and Richard Baines associate Marlowe's name with that of Thomas Harriot, 'S^r W[alter] Raleighs man', Kyd's apparently second-hand account is the only source for Marlowe's conversations 'wth . . . Warner, Royden, and some stationers in Paules churchyard'. Similarly, although it seems to be the basis of Nicholl's conspiracy thesis, Sir Robert Sidney's letter to Burghley is the only source connecting Marlowe with the Earl of Northumberland and Lord Strange, as well as being the only suggestion that Marlowe was personally known to Burghley. (True, *The Jew of Malta* and *The Massacre at Paris* were acted by Lord Strange's men, but that is no proof that Marlowe and Strange were personally acquainted – indeed Kyd's testimony would rather suggest the reverse.)

Finally, there are of course the strong traditions concerning Marlowe's atheism. Kyd's references to 'marlowes monstrous opinions' – 'to iest at the devine scriptures[,] gybe at praiers, & stryve in argum^t to frustrate & confute what hath byn spoke or wrytt by prophets & such holie men' – correspond closely to those of Richard Baines, Marlowe's 'chamber-fellow' in Flushing when he

was arrested for coining. Baines claimed that Richard Cholmeley ‘Confessed that he was perswaded by Marloe’s Reasons to become an Atheist’. Cholmeley was alleged to have said ‘that one Marlowe is able to show more sound reasons for atheism than any divine in England is able to give to prove divinity, & that Marlowe told him he hath read the atheist lecture to Sr Walter Raleigh & others’. Several other traditions deriving from a single source suggest that Cholmeley was not the only one to be persuaded to atheism by Marlowe. According to Eccles, they ‘go back to Simon Aldrich, whose home was in Canterbury and who was for many years a scholar and fellow at Cambridge, so that he heard what was said about Marlowe both by his fellow-townsmen and by the gownsmen of the university’ (Eccles, *Christopher Marlowe in London*, p. 61). But, on their own, do these accounts – second-hand at best – make Marlowe an ‘atheist’? On the contrary, accusations of atheism and sodomy were common contemporary methods of blackening a man’s character – as they were until at least the later twentieth century.³³

Of more significance, does any of this help us to interpret Marlowe’s plays? They, too, are massively ambiguous documents. Although it is highly unfashionable to write of an author’s intentions, I suspect that they were *intended* to be ambiguous:

View but his picture in this tragic glass,
And then applaud his fortunes as you please.

In this context, the words of the Prologue to *Tamburlaine* seem to have been chosen with particular care.