

## I

## The Strange Case of Christopher Marlowe

MARLOWE'S life and works together present one of the strangest puzzles in our literary history. Of his life we know enough to make the blanks and uncertainties tantalizing. We cannot even trace with certainty the development of his thought and art; for although it is probable that *Tamburlaine* was Marlowe's first work for the London stage the chronological order of the other plays is still open to dispute. *Dr Faustus*, which some regard as the culmination of his short career, is placed by others near its beginning. The text of that play, as is well known, exists in two versions, and although it seems likely that the later of the two is nearer to the original, we do not know how much of the original was Marlowe's, or who—if anyone—collaborated with him. Even more important, critical opinion concerning the nature and the value of the plays is sharply divided.

Sunrise and thunder fired and shook the skies  
That saw the sun-god Marlowe's opening eyes.

If there are none today to share Swinburne's raptures about Marlowe as the herald of a new humanism, it is still possible to present him, in a sober study, as a serious and impassioned proponent of free thought and rational disbelief—'an heir of all the ages of protest against Christianity and a voice for the inarticulate and nameless of his own day'. On the other hand there are equally sober, equally well documented studies that tell us the precise opposite: however much Marlowe may have sympathized with the arrogant individualism of his heroes, the sequence of plays traces, with increasing objectivity, 'the inevitable impoverishment of Renaissance humanism'. Such differences of opinion do more than reflect conflicting attitudes towards

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the Renaissance; they spring from radically opposed critical judgments concerning the nature of Marlowe's achievement. And when we put the critics on one side and try once more to make a personal estimate of the plays—asking ourselves what kind of thing they are and how they demand to be taken, how they stand in relation to other works of literature and what nourishment for the imagination they contain—then, unless we have a very strong *parti pris*, we are likely to find ourselves veering with each fresh reconsideration of the major plays. That at all events has been my fate in preparing this lecture, and I am able to bring nothing to this quatercentenary celebration but an attempt to account for perplexity; an attempt which may perhaps, however, help to promote understanding of the nature and the limitations of Marlowe's genius.

## i

The main facts of Marlowe's life can be briefly told. He was born at Canterbury in 1564, the first son and second child of John Marlowe of the Shoemakers' Guild. Shortly before his fifteenth birthday he was admitted as a scholar to the King's School. Early in 1580 he was admitted to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, as the holder of one of the scholarships founded by Matthew Parker, Master of the College from 1544 to 1553 and later Archbishop of Canterbury. He retained the scholarship for six years, which means both that his behaviour was satisfactory—he took the B.A. degree in 1584—and that he was regarded as a candidate for holy orders. In June 1587, when Marlowe had supplicated for, but had not yet received, his M.A. degree, the Privy Council addressed to the University the following letter:

Whereas it was reported that Christopher Morley was determined to have gone beyond the sea to Rheims and there to remain, their

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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 this next commencement; because it was not her Majesty's pleasure that any one employed as he had been in matters touching the benefit of his country should be defamed by those that are ignorant in th'ffairs he went about.

Dr Leslie Hotson, who established that the letter refers to Marlowe, envisages the poet, 'supported by his former employers, the Privy Council, wresting his master's degree from the cold and hostile Cambridge authorities'. The grounds of that hostility we do not know, though the mention of Rheims suggests a suspicion of Roman Catholic leanings. We do not know the nature of the 'matters touching the benefit of his country' in which Marlowe had been employed. Nor do we know whether he continued his discreet services to the government. It may be noted however that it is probable that he spent the last months of his life at the country home of Thomas Walsingham, uncle of Sir Francis Walsingham, and that Robert Poley, who was with Marlowe at the time of his death, had been employed by Sir Francis Walsingham as a spy at the time of the Babington conspiracy. After the award of the M.A. degree in July 1587, Marlowe was soon well known in London literary circles, with a reputation for reckless talk about religion, and it seems that he knew Sir Walter Raleigh and the members of Raleigh's circle. But there are few hard facts until the last month of his life. In May 1593 he was summoned to appear before the Privy Council, presumably as a witness. On May 30 he was stabbed to death by Ingram Frizer in an eating-house at Deptford. The coroner's jury found that the quarrel had arisen about the reckoning, and that Frizer had acted in self-defence. Meanwhile Thomas Kyd, whose rooms

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## THE STRANGE CASE OF CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

had been searched in connexion with some recent disturbances, had protested that papers containing dangerous opinions found with his own were not his but Marlowe's. He later elaborated on this, saying that he went in some fear of Marlowe 'in regard of his rashness in attempting soden pryvie iniuries to men'. At about the same time an informer, Richard Baines, sent to the Privy Council 'A note containing the opinion of one Christopher Marly concerning his damnable judgment of religion and scorn of God's word'. It is not known now much of what Kyd reported in a panic, or of what Baines reported for some motive of his own, corresponded to Marlowe's actual opinions, though it seems likely that he was accustomed to make provocative and 'atheist' remarks in all companies. Marlowe was buried at Deptford on June 1, 1593, and four years later Thomas Beard, in *The Theatre of God's Judgements*, adduced, with some inaccuracy, the manner of his death as a warning to atheists and epicures.<sup>1</sup>

Facts of this kind however tell us little more than that Marlowe was in some ways an outsider, one who did not easily find a place in the established society of his day. But how did that society appear to the man who experienced it in his living consciousness? There is evidence enough that he regarded much of what he saw with exasperation and contempt; and before we turn to the plays we may dwell for a moment on some features of that complex and remote Elizabethan world. It is doubtful whether Cambridge did much for Marlowe beyond giving him access to a good library. Ruled by an oligarchy, divided into factions, remote from the world of action yet offering a foothold for worldly corruption, it was not a great home of learning, nor a place where exceptional talent could be sure of reward. Scholarship had suffered from the religious strife of the mid-

<sup>1</sup> For the information in this paragraph I have drawn on Leslie Hotson's *The Death of Christopher Marlowe* and the *Life* by C. F. Tucker Brooke in the Methuen edition of Marlowe's Works (ed. R. H. Case).

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Excerpt

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THE STRANGE CASE OF CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE century; Roman Catholic and Protestant scholars alike had been compelled to go abroad, and much energy was expended in petty controversy. What a contemporary referred to as 'these fanatical contests about the surplice and the cap' (amid which 'the time once bestowed upon the arts and sciences' was 'frittered away in frivolous disputes') had died down by 1580. But theology, narrow and intolerant, remained the dominant study; and although rhetoric and logic retained their medieval pre-eminence, the mathematical sciences had no place in the formal curriculum, such knowledge as there was of cosmography and astronomy had no relation to contemporary discovery, history and linguistic studies were at a low ebb. By the end of the century, according to Bass Mullinger, 'the enquiring spirit of the Renaissance had again given place to something like medieval credulity'. It is hard to resist the conclusion that Arnold's 'national glow of life and thought'—which, he said, made possible the literary achievement of the Elizabethan age—was somewhat dimly reflected in Marlowe's Cambridge, where, it must be remembered, he spent rather more than half his adult life.<sup>1</sup>

As for the greater world that Marlowe saw when he 'cast the scholar off' and rejected a clerical career, there is only one aspect of it that can be touched on here. In *Edward II*, Spencer Junior advises the ambitious ex-scholar Baldock:

'Tis not a black coat and a little band,  
A velvet-cap'd cloak, faced before with serge,  
And smelling to a nosegay all the day . . .  
Or looking downward with your eyelids close,  
And saying, 'Truly, an't may please your honour',

<sup>1</sup> I have drawn on the standard history of the University by James Bass Mullinger, *The University of Cambridge*, Vol. II, *From the Royal Injunctions of 1535 to the Accession of Charles I*. H. C. Porter's *Reformation and Reaction in Tudor Cambridge* gives a far more lively and intimate picture of the University, but it does not seem to me to demand any substantial revision of the general impression of the University c. 1580 obtained from the older work.

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Can get you any favour with great men;  
 You must be proud, bold, pleasant, resolute,  
 And now and then stab, as occasion serves.

This, besides providing an example of the dramatist's best laconic manner, opens a window on Marlowe's world. To trace the ramifications of Sir Francis Walsingham's activities as head of the secret service (with which Marlowe was perhaps connected) is to learn something of the devious violence with which Elizabethan state power was underpinned.<sup>1</sup> Violence less devious was enacted at the Tower and Tyburn and elsewhere; and although much of this could be defended on grounds of national security, a similar ruthlessness inspired both the struggle for wealth and power of Elizabeth's courtiers at home and the mercantile struggle to exploit the new sources of wealth abroad. It was with some restraint that Marx described the methods of that phase of capitalist activity as 'anything but idyllic'.<sup>2</sup> It was Shakespeare's Faulconbridge who jauntily supplied a motto for the age:

Since kings break faith upon commodity,  
 Gain be my lord, for I will worship thee.

This thumb-nail sketch is of course grossly over-simplified; and rapacity is not peculiar to any age. My point however is not only that these were in fact obtrusive features of the world that Marlowe knew, but that a ruthless self-seeking was linked by

<sup>1</sup> See Conyers Read, *Mr Secretary Walsingham and the Policy of Queen Elizabeth*, Chapters XI and XII.

<sup>2</sup> See *Capital*, translated by Eden and Cedar Paul (Everyman edition), Vol. II, Part VII, Chapter 24, 'Primary Accumulation'. I do not know that any of Marx's instances of rapacity have ever been contradicted. When, on pp. 833-4, one reads the following, one begins to suspect the existence of a Dutch translation of *The Jew of Malta*!—'Wishing to get possession of Malacca, the Dutch bribed the Portuguese governor of the town, promising to pay him the sum of £21,875 as the price of his treason. When he admitted them within the walls, in the year 1641, as per bargain, they hastened to his house and assassinated him, wishing to "abstain" from payment.'

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[More information](#)

THE STRANGE CASE OF CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE  
 complex gradations to an official piety altogether too deficient in self-questioning. It was not Marx but an unusually well-qualified literary scholar who said, 'Religion is soon shaped to fit the peculiar wishes of a rising capitalist nation. Protestantism, particularly in its Calvinist branches, develops into a faith supporting property and the prudential virtues. Christ and the New Testament become the bulwarks of trade and commerce.'<sup>1</sup> If I may put it so, there was a large element of the Victorian in the Elizabethan mind. The self-righteous self-assurance of a world that offered small resistance to drives for power and riches might well provoke exasperation in a mind that was not afraid of asking radical questions:—'What right had Caesar to the empery?' In these circumstances the intelligent outsider who was also a born writer might do one of two things. He might identify himself with the expansive drives of his contemporaries, magnifying them and stripping them of any conventional protective justifications. Or he might—and by the same process of stripping—expose them for what they were.

Now tell me, worldlings, underneath the sun  
 If greater falsehood ever has bin done?

My reading of the plays is that Marlowe attempted to do both, and that for the most part he was never quite clear about his own purposes.

ii

Marlowe's plays deal with power and pride and individual self-assertion. What, as an artist, has he to say of these matters? Does he simply endorse, or does he probe and clarify, that 'unrestrained individualism' which is rightly regarded as his main,

<sup>1</sup> Louis B. Wright, *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England*, p. 268.

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[More information](#)

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his obsessive, theme? I have already indicated my own opinion; but the question is too complicated to admit an easy answer, and I propose to approach it indirectly. Since in art 'substance' only exists in and through 'form', we may obtain some illumination by considering a particular feature of Marlowe's blank verse. In *The Massacre at Paris* the Guise reveals his ambitions:

Now Guise begins those deep-engender'd thoughts  
 To burst abroad those never-dying flames  
 Which cannot be extinguished but by blood.  
 Oft have I levell'd, and at last have learn'd  
 That peril is the chiefest way to happiness,  
 And resolution honour's fairest aim.  
 What glory is there in a common good,  
 That hangs for every peasant to achieve?  
 That like I best, that flies beyond my reach.  
 Set me to scale the high Pyramides,  
 And thereon set the diadem of France;  
 I'll either rend it with my nails to naught,  
 Or mount the top with my aspiring wings,  
 Although my downfall be the deepest hell.  
 For this I wake, when others think I sleep,  
 For this I wait, that scorns attendance else;  
 For this, my quenchless thirst, whereon I build,  
 Hath often pleaded kindred to the King;  
 For this, this head, this heart, this hand, and sword,  
 Contrives, imagines, and fully executes,  
 Matters of import aimed at by many,  
 Yet understood by none;  
 For this, hath heaven engender'd me of earth;  
 For this, this earth sustains my body's weight,  
 And with this weight I'll counterpoise a crown,  
 Or with seditions weary all the world. . . .

*The Massacre* is, admittedly, a very bad play; but—to mis-quote Coleridge—if you met these lines running wild in the deserts of Arabia, you would instantly exclaim 'Marlowe'. It is not only



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that the Guise provides a motto for so many of Marlowe's heroes ('That like I best that flies beyond my reach'), the verse itself—with its constant superlatives, over-emphasis, and hyperbole—is characteristically Marlovian. The exaggeration and expansiveness are not in the least critical—as you can see by putting the passage beside comparable speeches of Ben Jonson's *Sejanus*: it simply flows with the minimum of control. Marlowe, as we shall see, had other ways of writing, and what he achieved in blank verse, at his best, has been rightly praised; but the passage quoted does fairly represent a quality found in almost all his plays—a free-flowing impetuosity that somehow fails to be transformed into the energies of art.<sup>1</sup>

It was a valuable remark of T. S. Eliot's that 'no artist produces great art by a deliberate attempt to express his personality. He expresses his personality indirectly through concentrating upon a task . . .'. What I have called the energies of art spring from a disciplined concentration: they do their work most effectively when the artist's primary impulses are subject to a certain resistance—a resistance that may indeed be assimilated and overcome, but that is in some ways similar to the resistance offered to the sculptor by the intrinsic nature of wood and stone. The analogy is suggestive rather than exact, and different poets find different formal disciplines. They may practise their art by imitating chosen masters. Dante and Shakespeare were skilled in the rhetorical arts of language of their times. (The figure of Beatrice begins her ever-growing symbolic life in the *Vita*

<sup>1</sup> J. A. Symonds, who writes well of Marlowe's achievement in blank verse, has some interesting comments on the poet's handling of Virgil's text in *Dido*, II, 1 ('the exaggerated, almost spasmodic attempt made to heighten the tragic tension of each situation').—*Shakespeare's Predecessors*, Chapter XV. Tucker Brooke's notes to the same scene in his edition of *Dido* provide some further examples. In the well-known simile borrowed by Marlowe from Spenser—'Like to an almond tree ymounted high . . .' (2 *Tamburlaine*, IV, iii, 119)—the lines added to the original make the comparison even more diffuse and inappropriate than it is in *The Faerie Queene* (I, vii, 32).

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[More information](#)

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*Nuova*, which to modern eyes can seem, at times, an almost pedantic exercise; and of Shakespeare's Sonnets Keats said, 'They seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally—in the intensity of working out conceits'.) The Metaphysical poets carried into poetry some of the sternly patterned techniques of religious meditation. Emily Dickinson hammered out her concentrated expressive forms with the help of a manual of hymn-book metrics.<sup>1</sup> In great works of art, therefore, there is a certain doubleness. They extend the area of consciousness, but in such a way that their symbolic forms activate a wider area of experience than their authors, or anyone else, could express in conceptual, non-symbolic language. But it is by the way of artifice that they enlist what is pre-conscious and inarticulate, drawing—as Dryden has it—'the sleeping images of things *towards the light*' (my italics). In Marlowe this subtle balance between 'reason', deliberate craftsmanship or formal artifice and the unconscious or partly conscious affective life from which reason springs, is upset. His work does not only enlist, it is partly at the mercy of, unconscious drives. That is why Symonds could say of Marlowe's 'colossal personifications' that 'we feel them to be day-dreams of their maker's deep desires'.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to be clear on this point, for the issues are sometimes clouded by the assumption that these 'embodiments of a craving for illimitable power', whether or not they are meant to be admired, are in fact heroic. It is a questionable assumption; how questionable we are unlikely to know so long as we continue to see these figures exclusively in relation to some Herculean prototype or to the Renaissance quest for power and knowledge in the real world of thought and action. In the curious prologue to the action in *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, Marlowe embroiders

<sup>1</sup> See Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation*; T. H. Johnson, *Emily Dickinson: a Critical Biography*.

<sup>2</sup> *Shakespeare's Predecessors*, Chapter XV; quoted by Raymond Mortimer in an article in the *Sunday Times*, February 2, 1964.