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Biography, Mythography, and Criticism: The Life and Works of Christopher Marlowe

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The reception of Marlowe has often been marred by a vicious hermeneutic circle within which the play's protagonists are read into Marlowe's biography and the mythographic creature thus constructed informs the criticism of his plays. The documents about Marlowe's life and death that have come down to us are generally read as suggesting an unorthodox personality, allegedly atheistic, allegedly homosexual. These documents, in turn, are often thought to be reflected in the unorthodox protagonists of Marlowe's plays, in Tamburlaine's and Faustus's defiant challenges to God and in King Edward's love for his minions. It is my contention that these biographical and critical fallacies hide a more complex truth.

* * *

Sometime in the year 1953, construction in the Master's lodge of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, led to the discovery of a portrait, oil on canvas painted in 1585, of a young man who is identified as being aged twenty-one. As it happens, Christopher Marlowe was twenty-one years old in 1585 and a student at Corpus Christi College. Yet even apart from the fact that a portrait dated 1585 found at Corpus Christi College is not necessarily a representation of a former student of that same college, the fact that a number of young men aged twenty-one were studying at Corpus Christi College in 1585 would seem to make an attempted identification of the sitter extremely difficult. Moreover, considerable evidence appears to militate against identifying the young man as Marlowe. The lavish costume bespeaks considerable wealth, whereas Marlowe was the son of a cobbler who got into King's School on a scholarship for "poor boys" who were "destitute of the help of friends."[1] The Statute of Apparel in force at the time forbade anyone under the rank of knight to wear velvet, yet the anonymous man's doublet, as has been pointed out, is clearly velvet.[2] To argue that, as a secret agent in the Queen's service, Marlowe would have been a servant of the Queen, and therefore excluded from this rule, does not really solve the problem, since it would hardly have been in the interest of secret agents to draw attention to their status.[3] These minor inconveniences have not prevented identification of the unknown sitter as Marlowe. Like Shakespeare's birthday, which has long been held, in the absence of any firm evidence whatsoever, to have occurred on April 23, Feast of the English patron Saint George, the identification of the figure in the portrait with Marlowe was simply too tempting to resist. By means of the ingenious device of ruling out all the other contenders with the same or even better credentials, not only Marlowe but, arguably, Marlowe scholarship was given a face. It should not surprise us that it was the then Master of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, who, in 1953, cleverly identified "the face that launched the Marlowe industry."[4]

Many have gratefully embraced the proposition of the Master of Corpus Christi. The portrait of the anonymous young man appears on the cover of J. B. Steane's Penguin edition of Marlowe's plays, of A. D. Wraight and Virginia F. Stern's biography, of Lisa Hopkins's recent biography, as well as on the cover of and as illustrations in many other Marlowe studies and editions.[5] Most scholars who take the trouble to investigate the history of the Corpus Christi portrait agree with J. A. Downie that "there is *not one iota of evidence* that Marlowe is the subject of the portrait found in builders' rubble at Corpus Christi

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1. See A. D. Wraight and Virginia F. Stern, *In Search of Christopher Marlowe: A Pictorial Biography*, 2nd ed. (Chichester: Adam Hart, 1993), 38; a footnote refers rather imprecisely to "Chap. XXVII of the 1541 Statutes" (358).
2. Ibid., 68.
3. Ibid., 69.
4. Richard Proudfoot, "Marlowe and the Editors," in *Constructing Christopher Marlowe*, ed. J. A. Downie and J. T. Parnell (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 41, 41–54. See Wraight and Stern, *Marlowe*, 63–71, for the fullest discussion of the portrait. Their conclusion that Marlowe is the likely sitter does not seem borne out by the extant evidence.
5. J. B. Steane, ed., *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969); Wraight and Stern, *Marlowe*; and Lisa Hopkins, *Christopher Marlowe: A Literary Life* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2000).

in 1953."[6] But the portrait is too important to the Marlowe industry for this industry to be discouraged from using it by anything as mundane as lack of evidence.

I have dwelt on this little incident of half a century ago because it illustrates a mechanism at work in Marlowe scholarship more generally: the pretense that we know Marlowe, not only what he looked like but also what he believed, who he was. A possibility, however small, solidifies into an assertion whose veracity is no longer questioned. The assertion is no longer questioned because not only the Master of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, but all of us with an interest in Marlowe have something to sell. The commodity called "Marlowe," which we try to sell at academic conferences, in university seminars, and to academic publishers, has been selling well in recent times. I believe that Marlowe's cultural and, in particular, academic capital results to no slight degree from a mythographic creation with which it is in our best interest to be complicit. Marlowe was an atheist, and people who think differently and subversively matter. Marlowe was a homosexual, and sexual difference matters. So Marlowe matters. Which academic would like to start a seminar or a lecture on Marlowe by candidly admitting that we know next to nothing about the playwright? Who was Marlowe? We don't know. Was he an atheist? We don't know—but probably not, if by "atheist" we mean the modern sense of the word. Was he homosexual? We don't know and, by the way, the concept didn't exist. What is the relationship between the outrageous heroes of Marlowe's plays and their creator? We don't know. Clearly, this Marlowe does not sell, neither in theaters, nor in bookshops, nor in seminars.

* * *

So what do we know about Marlowe? We know that he was baptized in Canterbury on February 26, 1564, that he obtained a scholarship at the King's School, Canterbury, on January 14, 1579, and that on March 17, 1581, he matriculated at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, where he was to be for much of the next six years. But he was not there all the time, as the Corpus Christi buttery books and college accounts recording Marlowe's expenditures make clear. His periods of absence

6. J. A. Downie, "Marlowe: Facts and Fictions," in Downie and Parnell, *Constructing Christopher Marlowe*, 16, 13–29. See also Stephen Orgel's similar conclusion: "The only reason to identify this as a portrait of Marlowe, rather than one of his classmates, is that it's Marlowe we want a portrait of" (Stephen Orgel, "Tobacco and Boys," in *The Authentic Shakespeare and Other Problems of the Early Modern Stage* [New York: Routledge, 2002], 211–29, 216).

resulted in the well-known letter from the Privy Council to the authorities of Cambridge University of June 29, 1587:

> Whereas it was reported that Christopher Morley [Marlowe] 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 rumor 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 anyone employed as he had been in matters touching the benefit of his country should be defamed by those that are ignorant in the affairs he went about.[7]

A skeptical scholar has recently questioned whether this refers indeed to the dramatist, but since Marlowe was the only student with a similar name to take a degree in 1587 (one "Christopher Morley" of Trinity College had taken his MA in 1586), the identification can be made with some confidence.[8] The fact that rumor had it that Marlowe had defected to Rheims, where an English Catholic seminary was located, does not in itself prove that Marlowe had been there as a spy. The language of the Privy Council is suggestive, however, and betrays a definite urgency: "the rumor thereof should be allayed by all possible means." The refusal to specify the nature of the "matters touching the benefit of his country" and the indication that even those who have normally the right to know are "ignorant in the affaires he went about" also seems significant. It is not in the nature of such documents to allow, centuries later, for an unambiguous interpretation, but the biographical supposition that Marlowe was involved in some form of intelligence service on behalf of the government rests on fairly solid ground.

It appears that the intervention of the Privy Council on behalf of Marlowe was successful; he was awarded his MA in 1587. We know little about Marlowe's activities in the following years. He must have left Cambridge for London, where he wrote plays for a variety of dramatic companies, including the Lord Strange's, the Lord Sussex's, and the Lord Pembroke's Men. In 1589, he spent some two weeks in prison

7. The letter itself is no longer extant, but the Council minutes contain what seems to be a full summary. See PRO Privy Council Register (Eliz) 6, fol. 381b (I have modernized the spelling).

8. For the skeptical scholar, see Downie, "Marlowe: Facts and Fictions," 15–16.

following a London street fight that ended with one man dead. Sometime in 1591, Marlowe was sharing a writing room with the playwright Thomas Kyd. The following year, he was at Flushing in the Low Countries, this time sharing a room with Richard Baines (of whom more below), who, like Marlowe, was arrested for counterfeiting coins. Marlowe and Baines, who may both have been active as English agents or double agents, accused each other "of intent to goe to the Ennemy or Rome."[9] Despite his arrest in the Low Countries in January 1592, Marlowe was free four months later when he was involved in a scuffle with two London constables. Later in September, he was back in his native Canterbury attacking a tailor.[10]

The following year, 1593, is the year of Marlowe's death, and it is only here that the documentary record gets fuller, owing to the circumstances surrounding his death. The scene of the tragedy was the house of Eleanor Bull (which may have been a licensed tavern); the dramatis personae consisted of Marlowe, Ingram Frizer, Robert Poley, and Nicholas Skeres.[11] According to the Coroner's Inquisition, Marlowe lost his temper over the issue of the payment of some bill and attacked Frizer, who, in self-defense, stabbed Marlowe with a dagger, inflicting on him "a mortal wound over his right eye of the depth of two inches & of the width of one inch."[12] The biographers have been quick to doubt the veracity of this report and have substituted their own theories. The configuration of events and personalities that ingenious biographers have managed to relate in one way or another to Marlowe's end have produced rather too many conspiracy theories. As early as 1928, S. A. Tannenbaum developed the theory that the killing of Marlowe was a political murder.[13] Furthermore, Marlowe came to be connected with the so-called School of Night, around which more than one Marlowe biography has been constructed. The fact that the School of

9. R. B. Wernham, "Christopher Marlowe at Flushing in 1592," *English Historical Review* 91 (1976): 344–45. The document is: PRO, State Papers 84/44, fol. 60. The letter from Sir Robert Sidney (the younger brother of the late Sir Philip) to Lord Burghley is fully quoted in Charles Nicholl, *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 235–36.

10. Surveys of the extant evidence are provided by Frederick Samuel Boas, *Marlowe and His Circle: A Biographical Survey* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), and *Christopher Marlowe: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940); and, more recently, by Wraight and Stern, *Marlowe.*

11. On the scene of the death, see William Urry, *Christopher Marlowe and Canterbury* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), 83–84.

12. The original document is in Latin (PRO, C260/174, no. 27). An English translation, from which I quote, is in Wraight and Stern, *Marlowe*, 293.

13. See S. A. Tannenbaum, *The Assassination of Christopher Marlowe* (New York: Tenny Press, 1928).

Night "may never have existed," as Lois Potter has recently pointed out, did not prove an impediment to the writing of these biographies.[14]

Charles Nicholl's *The Reckoning* of 1992 provides the most detailed story that alleges to explain Marlowe's death. Nicholl establishes, or pretends to establish, various connections between what he considers to be the key players in "a classic piece of Elizabethan secret theatre," a piece in which "Marlowe is being given a role to play" and dies as a consequence.[15] Marlowe's murder needs to be seen, Nicholl argues, in the context of the deadly rivalry between Sir Walter Raleigh and the Earl of Essex, in particular of the campaign by Essex's followers to smear Marlowe as an atheist. According to Nicholl's scenario, Marlowe is thus the victim of court intrigues and is assassinated by political agents.

In a carefully researched article, Paul Hammer has shown that many of Nicholl's "claims and assumptions are simply wrong," that "Nicholl's endeavor to explain Marlowe's death through the world of spies proves a bootless quest," and that Marlowe's death is far more likely to have been "a momentary blunder" than a planned killing.[16] On inspection, the elaborate construction that sets Marlowe's death in the context of court intrigue and intelligence service collapses like a house of cards. It may not reflect well on the state of Marlowe biography that Nicholl's *The Reckoning* was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for biography, though we may get some comfort from the fact that it also received the Crime Writers' Golden Dagger Award.[17]

Unsurprisingly, with regard to Marlowe's death, pseudobiographical investigations in which historical evidence happily mixes with fanciful invention have been supplemented by explicitly fictional treatments. These include Peter Whelan's play *The School of Night* (produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1992), and several

14. Lois Potter, "Marlowe Onstage," in Downie and Parnell, *Constructing Christopher Marlowe*, 100, 88–101.

15. Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, 290.

16. Paul E. J. Hammer, "A Reckoning Reframed: The 'Murder' of Christopher Marlowe Revisited," *English Literary Renaissance* 26 (1996): 226, 239, 240, 225–42. Nicholl's revised edition of *The Reckoning* (London: Vintage, 2002) cites Hammer's article and retracts his theory about Essex. Nevertheless, *The Reckoning* remains influential. While mentioning C. B. Kuriyama's incisive biography (*Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002]) as "a wholesome caution against leaping to unwarranted conclusions," David Riggs, in his 2004 biography, goes on in the next sentence to declare that "my own view is closer to that of Charles Nicholl" (*The World of Christopher Marlowe* [London: Faber & Faber, 2004], 352). Note that the biography by Park Honan, *Christopher Marlowe: Poet and Spy*, forthcoming from Oxford University Press, will be published too late to be taken into account in this essay.

17. This is pointed out on the back of the paperback edition of *The Reckoning.*

novels: George Garrett's *Entered from the Sun*; Robin Chapman's *Christoferus or Tom Kyd's Revenge*; Anthony Burgess's *Dead Man in Deptford*; Judith Cook's *The Slicing Edge of Death*; and Stephanie Cowell's *Nicholas Cooke: Actor, Soldier, Physician, Priest*, to give only a few examples, all published in the 1990s.[18] In one sense, these fictional treatments constitute the logical continuation of a biographical, or mythographical, tradition that has worried preciously little about which parts of the story seem historically warranted. As Downie has commented, "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. 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."[19]

More than any other document, the so-called Baines note, written shortly before Marlowe's death, has been thought to provide privileged access to Marlowe's personality. In it, Richard Baines, whom we already met in Marlowe's company in Flushing, purports to provide evidence of Marlowe's atheism and unorthodoxy by providing a list of opinions Marlowe is said to have entertained. These include "that the first beginning of Religioun was only to keep men in awe" and "that all they that loue not Tobacco & Boies were fooles."[20] Paul Kocher saw the Baines note as the "master key to the mind of Marlowe."[21] Roy Kendall, in an article published in 1994, has shown how problematic this supposition is.[22] Kendall's research on Baines draws on several

18. George Garrett, *Entered from the Sun* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991); Robin Chapman, *Christoferus or Tom Kyd's Revenge* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993); Anthony Burgess, *Dead Man in Deptford* (London: Hutchinson, 1993); Judith Cook, *The Slicing Edge of Death* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1993); and Stephanie Cowell, *Nicholas Cooke: Actor, Soldier, Physician, Priest* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993). See also Kenneth Friedenreich, "Marlowe's Endings," in *"A Poet and a filthy Play-maker": New Essays on Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Kenneth Friedenreich, Roma Gill, and Constance Brown Kuriyama (New York: AMS Press, 1986), 361–68, about "the endings imagined for Marlowe the man by biographers and would-be hagiographers" (361); and Hopkins, *Marlowe*, 142–45, for other recent fictional treatments of Marlowe's life and death.

19. Downie, "Marlowe: Facts and Fictions," 13.

20. I quote from Wraight and Stern, *Marlowe*, 308–9.

21. Paul Kocher, *Christopher Marlowe: A Study of His Thought, Learning, and Character* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1946), 33.

22. Roy Kendall, "Richard Baines and Christopher Marlowe's Milieu," *English Literary Renaissance* 24 (1994): 507–52. See also Kendall's more recent book-length exploration of Marlowe and Baines, *Christopher Marlowe and Richard Baines: Journeys through the Elizabethan Underground* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004).

documents that Marlovians had not previously considered and reveals that "there is an uncanny resemblance between Christopher Marlowe as described by Baines in the early 1590s and Richard Baines as described by himself in the early 1580s."[23] In a written recantation of 1583, Baines accuses himself of "blasphemous remarks," of joking about the divine offices, of heretical opinions, and of persuading other men to atheism, much the same as what he accuses Marlowe of ten years later.[24] Importantly, Kendall also shows that Baines's deposition concerning Marlowe appears to have been ordered by a government agent called Thomas Drury, who was under considerable pressure to be able to produce accusations of atheism.[25] Once we become aware of what appears to have gone into the making of the Baines note, it becomes difficult to estimate just how much the document tells us about Marlowe.

Similar uncertainties cling to the accusations against Marlowe in two letters written by Thomas Kyd, accusations that considerably overlap with those made in the Baines note.[26] Just how Kyd came to make his accusations is of importance. Following the appearance of a number of inflammatory pamphlets against foreigners throughout London, the Privy Council had Kyd's rooms searched.[27] Instead of finding what they were looking for, the Privy Council's officers found parts of an atheistical tract, which Kyd claimed he had from Marlowe. What is important to know is that, at the moment the two accusatory letters were written, Kyd had been imprisoned and tortured, and Marlowe was already dead. Kyd had, to say the least, a great interest in clearing himself by passing on the blame to someone else, and Marlowe was conveniently dead. To what extent Kyd was telling the truth, or whether, alternatively, he was drawing on rumors and gossip about Marlowe in order to save himself from further imprisonment and torture is impossible for us to know.[28]

A further problem encountered by Marlowe's biographers is that the few scraps of evidence we have are interconnected in ways that

23. Ibid., 515.

24. Ibid., 544; see 543–46 for a translation of Baines's written recantation.

25. Ibid., 536–41.

26. For the two letters, see British Library MS, *Harl.* 6849, fols. 218–19. and MS *Harl.* 6848, fol. 154; and, for a faithful transcription, Arthur Freeman, *Thomas Kyd: Facts and Problems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 181–83.

27. See Arthur Freeman, "Marlowe, Kyd, and the Dutch Church Libel," *English Literary Renaissance* 3 (1973): 44–52.

28. For a provocative reading of Kyd's letters, see Jeffrey Masten, "Playwrighting: Authorship and Collaboration," in *A New History of Early English Drama*, ed. John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 357–82.

are far from transparent. For instance, Sir Robert Sidney's letter from Flushing accuses Marlowe of coining, and the Baines note states Marlowe's alleged opinion that "he had as good Right to Coine as the Queene of England." So, do the two shreds of evidence reinforce each other? Or does the fact that Marlowe, far from suffering the death penalty (the standard punishment for coining), was a free man only months later suggest that he was not guilty of the crime? Could the coincidence of the two allegations even suggest that "Marlowe, the coiner" (and, by extension, "Marlowe, the transgressor") is more a product of his outrageous talk, of theatrical self-fashioning, than of similarly outrageous deeds?

This is not to deny that Marlowe seems to have entertained beliefs that were unorthodox. Yet to sum them up by calling him an atheist is to use the term of Marlowe's opponents rather than a term that he himself would have been likely to embrace. Of course, accusing someone of "atheism" was a common device with which to tarnish a person's reputation, a device that remained in use for centuries. Far from denoting a disbelief in the existence of God, the term "atheist," in the sixteenth century, was applied rather loosely to anyone who disagreed with accepted religious beliefs.[29] The text that was found among the papers of Thomas Kyd, which he claimed to have from Marlowe, was characterized by the authorities as "atheistical." Yet its actual theology corresponds (more or less) to what we would now call Unitarianism.[30] Cambridge in the 1580s was a hotbed of innovative theological thought, a hotbed in which a brilliant young man like Marlowe could not fail to find stimulation. T. S. Eliot called Marlowe "the most thoughtful, the most blasphemous (and therefore, probably, the most Christian)" of Elizabethan dramatists.[31] It may be useful to recall with Eliot that Marlowe's religious opinions, though they may well have departed from generally accepted beliefs, were the result of intense engagement with, rather than indifference toward, religion.

29. See Lucien Febvre's classic study, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, trans. Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), for the argument that what we now call atheism was virtually unthinkable in the sixteenth century. Febvre's study was originally published in 1942 as *Le Problème de l'incroyance au XVIe siècle: La religion de Rabelais* (Paris: A. Michel). For more recent work that updates and revises Febvre's argument, see Michael Hunter and David Wootton, ed., *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford University Press, 1992).

30. Freeman, *Thomas Kyd*, 27.

31. T. S. Eliot, "The Stoicism of Seneca," in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1932), 133.

Discussing Marlowe's "career as an intelligencer," Lisa Hopkins has argued:

> In order to play any such role at all, he would almost certainly have had to be able to pass as either Catholic or Protestant. Perhaps both poses were equally false, or perhaps, as Richard Baines . . . reported, Marlowe preferred Catholicism to Protestantism on the grounds that at least it had music and ritual, whereas, Baines alleged, he dismissed all Protestants as "hypocritical asses." Perhaps, indeed, he had been pretending from the beginning, claiming to intend to take holy orders to be able to benefit from a Parker scholarship, but never feeling a genuine commitment to the idea.[32]

Perhaps. Hopkins's willingness to accept the narrow limits of our knowledge is refreshing. What emerges clearly from this biographical agnosticism, dictated by the sheer lack of evidence, is that to pretend to be able to separate the poses from the man is a desperate undertaking more than four centuries after the dramatist's death. What we can be confident about is that, as an agent or double agent, the ability to adopt and maintain poses, to forge identities without revealing the true one, was of vital importance for Marlowe. The control necessary to do so would seem singularly deficient in a man who went around scoffing at authorities and advertising his unorthodox beliefs. So did this, too, constitute a pose? Scholars who claim to know the "real" Marlowe—Marlowe the atheist and homosexual, informing and reflected by his overreaching dramatic protagonists—claim to have access to the personality that it would have been Marlowe's regular business to hide from his contemporaries. I need hardly belabor the epistemological dubiety of such an undertaking. It does not seem impossible to read the biographical evidence as showing a man in control of his outrageously self-fashioned self just as the plays betray an artist in control of his outrageous protagonists.[33] Rather than believing that Marlowe's "second career" as an intelligencer neatly conforms to his supposedly unorthodox personality, scholars may need to be willing to admit that Marlowe's likely activities as a spy considerably complicate the rest of the biographical picture they draw.[34]

32. Hopkins, *Marlowe*, 67.

33. This thesis is developed in Judith Weil, *Christopher Marlowe: Merlin's Prophet* (Cambridge University Press, 1977).

34. See Riggs's apt comment: "Was Marlowe a bona fide atheist? Or was he a government spy attempting to entrap men suspected of that crime . . . ? Within the fluid, opportunistic world of the double agent, it is hard to imagine what sort of evidence could categorically exclude either alternative" (Riggs, *The World of Christopher Marlowe*, 328).

* * *

Our tendency to pretend that we know Marlowe's beliefs and intentions affects and disturbs not only our reception of the playwright's biographical persona but, I would like to argue, also that of his plays. In what remains of this essay, I propose to illustrate this by reference to three of Marlowe's plays, *Tamburlaine*, *Doctor Faustus*, and *Edward II*. Let me begin with *Tamburlaine*, perhaps Marlowe's earliest play, written around 1586–87 and first published in 1590. One of the most famous passages, perhaps the most famous passage, of the play occurs in the prologue:

> From jigging veins of rhyming mother-wits,
> And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay
> We'll lead you to the stately tent of War,
> Where you shall hear the Scythian Tamburlaine
> Threat'ning the world with high astounding terms
> And scourging kingdoms with his conquering sword.[35]

Marlowe scholarship has been strangely unanimous in its interpretation of these lines. Arriving in London when the public theater is still in its infancy, several years before Shakespeare makes his debut, the stage being still dominated by lesser dramatists ("rhyming mother-wits") who write lesser plays in what the prologue refers to as "jigging veins," Marlowe, prophetically aware of the turn English drama was to take, sweeps away his dramatic predecessors in the prologue to his very first play. As the play's editor in the New Mermaids series puts it, the prologue constitutes "Marlowe's expression of his contempt for the popular theatre of the day, with its low comedy, rough metre and rhyme."[36] David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen, in their fine edition of Marlowe's plays for the World's Classics series, similarly comment that "Marlowe contrasts the high seriousness of his mirror for princes with the doggerel style and 'clownage' of much popular theatre of his day."[37] Editors and critics seem to agree that the prologue's subject is Marlowe's break with theatrical fashion.

35. Prologue to *Tamburlaine*, lines 1–6, quoted from Christopher Marlowe, *"Doctor Faustus" and Other Plays*, ed. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford University Press, 1995). Unless otherwise stated, I refer to and quote from this edition.

36. Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine*, ed. J. W. Harper, New Mermaids (London: Ernest Benn, 1971), 7.

37. Bevington and Rasmussen, *"Doctor Faustus" and Other Plays*, 403. For similar views on Marlowe's prologue to *Tamburlaine*, see *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. R. B. McKerrow, 5 vols. (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1904–10), 4:446; and F. P. Wilson, *The English Drama, 1485–1585* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 148. Most recently, Riggs has written that "the evolutionary leap from 'rhyming mother wits' to 'Marlowe's mighty line' measures the poet's contribution to English prosody" (Riggs, *The World of Christopher Marlowe*, 206).

Yet in fact, to suggest that Marlowe's prologue is reacting to "the popular theatre of the day, with its low comedy, rough metre and rhyme" is not unproblematic. From the vantage point of literary history, this is what it may look like, but did it look the same in Marlowe's own time? What "the popular theatre of the day" was like when Marlowe arrived in London is something we know next to nothing about. Only two plays written for the commercial stage and performed by adult companies had been published before *Tamburlaine* appeared in 1590.[38] In fact, we know very little about pre-Marlovian commercial drama. To build our interpretation of the prologue to *Tamburlaine* around it therefore does not seem entirely safe.

It is then at least surprising that no one appears to have advanced another reading that seems no less straightforward:[39] the prologue to *Tamburlaine*, like other prologues in roughly contemporary plays, including that of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, announces the play to come in which we will be led from "jigging veins of rhyming mother-wits" to the impressive blank verse of "the Scythian Tamburlaine / Threatening the world with high astounding terms." This description seems to correspond rather well to the play itself. Here is Mycetes, the play's rhyming mother wit, in the opening scene:

> Thou shalt be leader of this thousand horse,
> Whose foaming gall with rage and high disdain
> Have sworn the death of wicked Tamburlaine.
> Go frowning forth, but come thou smiling home,
> As did Sir Paris with the Grecian dame.
> Return with speed, time passeth swift away.
> Our life is frail and we may die today.
>
> (1.1.62–68)

In a later soliloquy beginning "Accursed be he that first invented war," the same character, ignominiously hiding his crown, says: "So shall not I be known, or if I be, / They cannot take away my crown from me" (2.4.13–14). Here, surely, we have a rhyming *mother wit* par excellence. Tamburlaine's later "high astounding terms," in blank verse, hardly require illustration. But what of the prologue's second line, "And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay"? Little in the extant

38. These are Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London* (1584) and the anonymous *Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune* (1589).

39. I am here indebted to a conversation with Kirk Melnikoff.

printed text of the two parts of *Tamburlaine* qualifies as "clownage," but we know that the same did not apply to Marlowe's original play as it was performed in the theater. In an address to the reader, the play's editor, Richard Jones, writes that "I haue (purposely) omitted and left out some fond and frivolous Iestures, digressing (and in my poore opinion) far vnmeet for the matter, which I thought, might seeme more tedious vnto the wise, than any way els to be regarded, though (happly) they haue bene of some vaine cõceited fondlings greatly gaped at, what times they were shewed vpon the stage in their graced deformities."[40] What Jones says was greatly gaped at by conceited fondlings may well be the very conceits that clownage keeps in pay, according to Marlowe's prologue. In other words, we have reason to believe that the prologue describes and announces what Marlowe's play enacted. The facts that no one appears to have come up with what I think is not an overly fanciful interpretation and that Marlowe scholarship has repeated time and again that the prologue constitutes a grand Marlovian gesture, self-advertising, defiant, and provocative, have much to do, I think, with our mythographic conception of the playwright himself. Marlowe was outrageous and defiant and so, consequently, are his plays, starting with the prologue to what may have been his first play. If the same prologue had been written by someone else, the alternative I have suggested would quite possibly long have been in circulation. Marlowe mythography and the reception of *Tamburlaine* have shaped and reinforced each other, resulting in readings in which a heterodox "Marlowe" inhabits his texts, texts that, in turn, come to corroborate our image of their creator.

* * *

The traditional reading of the prologue to *Tamburlaine* depends upon the belief that comic conceits and clown scenes were appreciated and used by Marlowe's predecessors and contemporaries but not by Marlowe himself. Just how strong this prejudice has been among some Marlowe critics is best exemplified by A. H. Bullen, a one-time editor of Marlowe, who categorically stated that "Marlowe never attempted to write a comic scene."[41] I have argued that the address to the reader prefacing the first edition suggests otherwise. So do other Marlowe plays. *The Jew of Malta* constantly borders on farce, from the lecherous

40. I quote from W. W. Greg, *A Bibliography of the English Printed Drama to the Restoration*, 4 vols. (London: Bibliographical Society, 1939–59), 3:1196.

41. A. H. Bullen, introduction to *The Works of Christopher Marlowe* (London: J. C. Nimmo, 1885), 1:xxviii–xxix.

friars to Barabas disguising himself as a French lute player, to Ithamore's pathetic love for Bellamira, the Courtesan. More importantly, *Doctor Faustus*, between its opening and its final sequences, chiefly consists of a series of comic scenes tracing the twenty-four years of infinite power and voluptuousness that Faustus receives in exchange for the ultimate surrender of his soul to the devil. Robin, the clown, and Rafe, another comic character, appear several times in these farcical scenes. Faustus's jokes, dramatized in the play, show him make a fool of the pope and repeatedly slap him in the face as well as, in another scene, literally pull off someone's leg. Here, surely, there are "such conceits as clownage keeps in pay."

The Faustus of the comic scenes is not easily accommodated to the view of Faustus as a tragic and ultimately noble and heroic overreacher—a view, that is, that reads Faustus in the light of the mythographic image of his creator. It has become increasingly difficult to resist such a view. A. L. Rowse's sweeping claim that "Faustus *is* Marlowe" is only the most straightforward expression of an attitude that continues to bedevil, as it were, the play's reception.[42] Lisa Hopkins has similarly collapsed creator and creation, arguing that "*Doctor Faustus* appears to offer us a glimpse of Marlowe's religious beliefs."[43]

One consequence of this scholarly tendency is that *Doctor Faustus* has increasingly come to be regarded as a play whose shape resembles that of a James Bond movie: a strong beginning, a strong ending, but a weak, muddled, and ultimately meaningless part in between. An all-too-easy way of dealing with this problem is simply to deny Marlowe's responsibility for the comic scenes. The late Roma Gill, for instance, who edited the play for Oxford University Press in 1990, attributed the comic scenes to Thomas Nashe and the actor John Adams on the slightest of grounds.[44] Her hypothesis that Marlowe left the play unfinished is implausible, all the more so as Henslowe, at the first recorded performance on September 30, 1594, does not mark the play as new.[45] I am not arguing that the entirety of the earliest version of *Doctor Faustus*, published in 1604 and usually referred to as the A-text, is necessarily by Marlowe.[46] What does need to be countered, however,

42. A. L. Rowse, *Christopher Marlowe: A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1964), 150.

43. Hopkins, *Marlowe*, 104.

44. *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*, vol. 2, *Dr. Faustus*, ed. Roma Gill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), xviii.

45. See R. A. Foakes and R. T. Rickert, eds., *Henslowe's Diary* (Cambridge University Press, 1961), 24.

46. For the most careful examination of the question of the A-text's authorship, see Eric Rasmussen, *A Textual Companion to "Doctor Faustus,"* The Revels Plays Companion Library (Manchester University Press, 1993), 62–75.

is the tendency to dissociate Marlowe from the play's total shape, reading him into the tragic and heroic figure at the text's extremities but absolving him from the distinctly less than heroic figure in between. Richard Proudfoot has incisively diagnosed "a late twentieth-century solemnity which is so afraid of the play's fragility that its high seriousness has to be shored up and sandbagged against comic scepticism."[47] As a result, there is little sense of the fact that the comic material has its cogency and constitutes an integral part of the play's design. As Richard Waswo, commenting on the comic scenes, has put it, "Granting that some of it may be tedious or poorly written, the comic conception which underlies it was not only . . . a part of the medieval dramatic tradition but is also . . . implied in the very nature and expression of Faustus' aims. If we fail to acknowledge the design of the comedy, we shall probably fail to understand the outcome of the tragedy."[48] Like the progress of Milton's Satan from seemingly heroic fighter for freedom to cowardly seducer of two innocent beings, to peeping Tom, to toad, to snake—a sequence that, as C. S. Lewis pointed out, has its theological stringency[49]—Faustus's progress is in no way accidental to the work's overall design. Tragedy and comedy, the text's extremities and the text's middle, are intimately related and can be understood only with reference to each other.

There is nothing inevitable about our modern predilection for the serious or tragic scenes at the beginning and at the end of Marlowe's play. In the seventeenth century, for instance, Marlowe's play remained immensely popular and was paid the tribute of revisions and adaptations. But it was the comic rather than the tragic parts that received most attention.[50] By the end of the century, *Faustus* was still performed, not in Marlowe's original version but in an adaptation by William Mountfort that the 1697 title page accurately describes as "*Faustus*, Made into a FARCE."[51] I do not believe that Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is a farce, but our modern tendency to focus too exclusively on Faustus the tragic overreacher and to read him in the light of the

47. Proudfoot, "Marlowe and the Editors," 41–54, 47.

48. Richard Waswo, "Damnation, Protestant Style: Macbeth, Faustus, and Christian Tragedy," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1974): 86, 63–100. Waswo's article, which Rasmussen rightly calls "masterful" (*Textual Companion to "Doctor Faustus,"* 95), cuts through so much that is wrongheaded in criticism of *Doctor Faustus* that it should be compulsory reading for any serious student of the play.

49. See C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to "Paradise Lost"* (Oxford University Press, 1942), 97.

50. This is evidenced as early as 1616, year of the publication of the so-called B-text with additions and revisions to the comic scenes in what clearly seems to be a different hand.

51. See Proudfoot, "Marlowe and the Editors," 43–47.

mythographic persona of his creator arguably does the play no more justice than the seventeenth century's stress on the play as a farce.

* * *

Before concluding, I shall touch upon a third and final play, *Edward II*. The play about the weak English king, his love for his minions, and his deposition and murder has attracted considerable recent attention, partly no doubt because it is a fine play, but partly also because there seems to be a general impression that the play, as Lisa Hopkins puts it, appears to be "openly based on [Marlowe's] own sexual preferences."[52] The only evidence the biographical record contains to support such a view is Marlowe's flippant statement, according to the Baines note, "that all they that loue not Tobacco & Boies were fooles." On the face of it, these words seem to advocate pederasty rather than homosexuality or, to use the early modern word, sodomy. In spite of this, the reception of *Edward II* has become the key locus for what Richard Wilson has called the "construction of Marlowe as a pioneer of gay liberation."[53] As we would expect, how Marlowe's play engages with Edward's love for his minions is an issue that has received intense scrutiny. Able work has been done by Alan Bray and others to show that the dramatization of the Edward-Gaveston relationship skillfully fluctuates between a variety of early modern discourses, that of friendship, that of patronage, as well as that of sodomy, without an easy resolution. As Bray puts it, "Marlowe describes in this play what could be a sodomitical relationship, but he places it wholly within the incompatible conventions of Elizabethan friendship, in a tension which he never allows to be resolved."[54]

A focal point of much discussion has been the dramatization of Edward's murder as what Richard Rowland calls a "gruesome parody of the sodomitical act."[55] First forced to resign the crown and then imprisoned in what is in effect the bottom of the castle's privy, Edward is murdered in the penultimate scene by Lightborn, who is aided by Matrevis and Gurney. Here is the passage as it appears in Bevington and Rasmussen's World's Classics edition:

> EDWARD . . . tell me: wherefore are thou come?
> LIGHTBORN To rid thee of thy life.—Matrevis, come!

52. Hopkins, *Marlowe*, 104.

53. Richard Wilson, "'Writ in Blood': Marlowe and the New Historicists," in Downie and Parnell, *Constructing Christopher Marlowe*, 132.

54. Alan Bray, "Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England," *History Workshop Journal* 29 (1990): 10, 1–19.

55. *Edward II*, ed. Richard Rowland (Oxford University Press, 1994), xxxii.

[*Enter Matrevis and Gurney*]
EDWARD I am too weak and feeble to resist.
Assist me, sweet God, and receive my soul!
LIGHTBORN Run for the table.
EDWARD O, spare me, or dispatch me in a trice!
[*Matrevis and Gurney bring in a table and a red-hot spit*]
LIGHTBORN So, lay the table down, and stamp on it,
But not too hard, lest that you bruise his body.
[*The King is murdered*]
MATREVIS I fear me that this cry will raise the town,
And therefore let us take horse and away.
LIGHTBORN Tell me, sirs, was it not bravely done?

(5.5.107–16)

The added stage direction, "*The King is murdered*," is not very explicit. Neither are other modern editions. Richard Rowland's laconically reads "King dies" (22.112.1), as does Frank Romany and Robert Lindsey's new Penguin edition of Marlowe's *Complete Plays* (25.113.1).[56] Although Martin Wiggins and Robert Lindsey in their introduction mock the "genteel obscurantism in editions of the play" and complain about the "opacity" of the stage direction "King Edward is murdered," the stage direction in their edition, "LIGHTBORNE murders him with the spit" (24.112.2), is hardly less opaque.[57] Arguably, even Charles Forker's more detailed stage direction, "Using the table and featherbed to hold him down, they murder EDWARD, who screams as the spit penetrates him," does not really spell out how Edward is killed.[58] Nevertheless, as footnotes and introductions to these editions explain, Edward is killed through anal penetration by the red-hot spit. Several editors refer to and quote from the 1587 edition of the *Chronicles*, where Holinshed seems to have had less inhibition than Marlowe's editors to spell out exactly how Edward died:

> [Maltravers and Gourney] came suddenly one night into the chamber where he lay in bed fast asleep, and with heavy featherbeds or a table (as some write) being cast upon him, they kept him down and withal put into his fundament an horn, and through the same they thrust up into his body an hot spit, or (as others have) through the pipe of a trumpet a plumber's instrument of iron made very hot, the which passing up into his entrails, and being rolled to and fro, burnt the same, but so as no appearance of any wound or hurt outwardly might be once perceived.[59]

56. Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Plays*, ed. Frank Romany and Robert Lindsey, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2003).

57. Christopher Marlowe, *Edward the Second*, ed. Martin Wiggins and Robert Lindsey, 2nd ed., New Mermaids (London: A & C Black, 1997), xxxii.

58. Christopher Marlowe, *Edward the Second*, ed. Charles R. Forker, The Revels Plays (Manchester University Press, 1994), 312.

If Marlowe consciously draws on Holinshed to turn Edward's murder into a "gruesome parody of the sodomitical act," then it becomes possible to argue, as critics have not failed to do, that the dramatization of Edward's death is also a parody of poetic justice: the punishment is related to the alleged crime, but the disproportion between punishment and crime is such that it draws attention to the injustice and cruelty of the punishment. In ahistorical readings that conflate a mythographic understanding of Marlowe the homosexual and Edward, who dies through anal penetration, Edward's murder becomes Marlowe's way of advocating the cause of his own sexual orientation.

Interpretations that argue for the importance of Lightborn's red-hot spit for Marlowe's negotiation of sexuality and violence have been central to the reception of *Edward II*. Or perhaps they were central until a few years ago when Stephen Orgel reread the original text of Marlowe's play and concluded that the "red-hot spit" is a critical fantasy.[60] It may be useful to do what Orgel did, and to reread the passage in the original, without any of the stage directions that editors customarily add:

Edw. [. . .] therefore tell me, wherefore art thou come?
Light. To rid thee of thy life, *Matreuis* come,
Edw. I am too weake and feeble to resist,
Assist me sweete God, and receiue my soule.
Light. Runne for the table.
Edw. O spare me, or dispatche me in a trice.
Light. So, lay the table down, and stampe on it,
But not too hard, least that you bruse his body.
Matreuis. I feare mee that this crie will raise the towne,
And therefore let us take horse and away.
Light. Tell me sirs, was it not brauelie done?
Gurn. Excellent well, take this for thy rewarde,
Then Gurney stabs Lightborne.
Come let vs cast the body in the mote,
And beare the kings to Mortimer our lord, away.

Exeunt omnes.

I have purposely quoted a slightly longer passage to make clear the difference between the actions at the very end of the scene—Gurney

59. Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (London, 1587), 3:341.

60. Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 46–49.

stabbing Lightborn, and the characters leaving, which are marked by stage directions—and the supposed action of Lightborn's murder, which no stage direction, nor anything in the dialogue, spells out. Orgel's argument, which follows from his rereading of the original text, deserves to be quoted at some length:

> Modern performances always, and critics nearly always, construe the murder scene as an anal rape with a hot spit or poker. But this is "correcting" Marlowe by reference to Holinshed: at the beginning of the murder scene, Lightborne directs that a red-hot spit be prepared, and asks also for a table and a feather bed; these are the murder weapons authorized by history, though Holinshed makes the table and the feather bed alternatives, observing that some of his sources mention one, some the other. In the event, however, Lightborne ignores Holinshed and sends his accomplice Matrevis only for the table.

Having quoted the relevant passage from the first edition of 1594, Orgel continues:

> Edward is pressed to death; directors who want the spit to be used have to send Lightborne off stage to fetch it himself—tables are two-handed engines. It might be worth considering why, for modern commentators, that unused spit is so irresistible—Bruce Smith, for example, insists that "though the speeches and stage directions mention nothing about this spit while Edward is being crushed . . . the cry he lets out leaves little doubt that Lightborne puts the spit to just the use specified in Holinshed's *Chronicles*," as if being crushed to death were not sufficient motivation for crying out. David H. Turn, in an otherwise exceedingly perceptive reading, does not even notice the table, but kills the king "with the brutal thrust of a 'red-hot' poker," and Gregory Bredbeck's excellent chapter on the play unintentionally provides an epitome of modern revisionism: "The murder of Edward by raping him with a red-hot poker—quite literally branding him with sodomy—can be seen as an attempt to 'write' onto him the homoeroticism constantly ascribed to him." It can indeed: we want the murder to be precisely what Marlowe refuses to make it, a condign punishment, the mirror of Edward's unspeakable vice.[61]

As Orgel shows, the ending editors and directors have imagined for the English king is not warranted by a straightforward reading of the original text. The mythographic homosexuality of the play's creator, along with the words in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, seem to have proved too suggestive to allow for more careful attention to the words on the page. Agreeing with Orgel's reading, a recent critic has commented

61. Orgel, *Impersonation*, 47–48.

that "a criticism that confines this scene to being a gesture of homosexual inscription is one preoccupied with Marlowe as sex."[62] Arguably, the received reading, or misreading, of this passage has simultaneously fed into the construction of Marlowe as a homosexual. Mythographical and critical readings, both similarly speculative, may well have come to reinforce each other through a vicious hermeneutic circle whose mechanism I have described earlier on in this essay.

Orgel's rereading of Edward's killing is well on the way to becoming the new orthodoxy and has already found several followers who endorse or even build upon it.[63] The moment may then be opportune to subject Orgel's argument to criticism. For one, it is hardly true that "directors who want the spit to be used have to send Lightborne off stage to fetch it himself." Most tables, it is true, need to be carried by two people, but it would hardly be impossible for Gourney and Maltravers to bring in the spit, too, with one character using one hand to carry the table and the other to carry the spit. Also, Orgel's objections to Bruce Smith's argument that Edward's cry suggests that a spit is used seems less than fully convincing. It is true that being crushed to death would provide sufficient motivation for a cry that "will raise the towne," but it seems unlikely to leave Edward the physical ability for it. It is possible to raise a further objection: just how is Edward supposed to be "crushed to death" by a table, as Orgel puts it, if his body, at the same time, is not to be bruised? This may be asking for greater realism than Elizabethan actors and spectators cared about, but since Lightborn repeatedly draws attention to the subtlety of the killing, the question may not be far-fetched.

A more serious reservation about Orgel's revisionary reading is that like critics, editors, and directors before him, Orgel pretends to know "precisely what Marlowe," to use Orgel's own words, did when dramatizing Edward's murder. Orgel's new orthodoxy, like the orthodoxy he attempts to supersede, argues by way of Marlowe and his intentions: according to the earlier interpretation, Orgel suggests, Marlowe intended the murder to be "the mirror of Edward's unspeakable vice," whereas in Orgel's rereading, Marlowe "precisely" refuses to provide such a mirror. Arguably, the difference between Orgel's and the

62. Simon Shephard, "A Bit of Ruff: Criticism, Fantasy, Marlowe," in Downie and Parnell, *Constructing Christopher Marlowe*, 115, 102–15.

63. See Lawrence Normand, "*Edward II*, Derek Jarman, and the State of England," in Downie and Parnell, *Constructing Christopher Marlowe*, 190–91, 177–93; Shephard, "A Bit of Ruff," 114–15, 102–15; and Riggs, *The World of Christopher Marlowe*, 290–91. Note, though, that Romany and Lindsey's 2003 edition inserts a stage direction between square brackets that reads "Matrevis and Gurney bring in a table and a red-hot spit" (25.111.1).

traditional interpretative procedure is more apparent than real in that each examination is informed by a very similar mythographic understanding of Marlowe, by an understanding, or a pretended understanding, of what "precisely" Marlowe intended.

Once we stop concentrating on Marlowe and his intentions and focus instead on the nature of early modern printed playbooks, we realize that the lines as printed in the quarto of 1594 are less transparent than either Orgel or his predecessors seem to assume. It is true that the text provides no stage direction spelling out that the spit is brought onstage. This, however, as an experienced editor of Shakespearean drama must surely be aware, does not prove that the action was not performed onstage.[64] Contrary to many of their modern equivalents, Shakespearean and Marlovian play texts contained few and often imprecise stage directions. As Antony Hammond has pointed out, "While better than ninety percent of the dialogue text can be recovered, with a good degree of accuracy, for most surviving plays of the Elizabethan period, ninety percent of what actually happened on stage in their performance is not to be found in the stage-directions of any manuscript or printed text."[65] Alan Dessen, the most thorough student of the theatrical vocabulary of early modern play texts, agrees with Hammond, adding that "most of the relevant evidence, including many things so obvious to players and playgoers in the 1590s and 1600s as to be taken for granted, has been lost."[66]

A recovery of stage action in early modern plays must therefore proceed by indirection and, even so, is often bound to fail. Is a spit brought onstage before Edward is murdered? Perhaps not, considering that no stage direction says so and considering that Lightborn, immediately before Edward is killed, asks Maltravers and Gourney to "Run for the table" without mentioning the spit. Yet quite possibly, a spit was used considering that Lightborn, early in the scene, asks Maltravers to get it ready and considering that the absence of stage directions is not evidence for absence of stage action. Despite Orgel's argument, the latter possibility seems more likely, though the evidence does not allow for ultimate certainty. When *Edward II* was first performed, some form of oral communication among the actors would have made it clear to everyone involved how Edward's murder was to

64. Orgel has edited *The Tempest* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) and *The Winter's Tale* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) for the Oxford Shakespeare series.

65. Antony Hammond, "Encounters of the Third Kind in Stage-Directions in Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama," *Studies in Philology* 89 (1992): 81, 71–99.

66. Alan Dessen, *Recovering Shakespeare's Theatrical Vocabulary* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 6.

be staged, a decision that did not need to be recorded in writing. Obvious though it was to anyone involved in the late sixteenth century, it is impossible for us to know today. A third possibility may even be added. Lightborn's "Run for the table" is a conspicuously short line, preceded and followed by regular iambic pentameters. It does not seem impossible that the line had originally read "Run for the table and the red-hot spit" but was subsequently curtailed, perhaps censored, before the play was prepared for the stage, or for the page.

Before Edward's murder, Lightborn ominously predicts that "none shall know which way he died" (5.4.25). Owing to the nature of early modern printed playbooks, which translate very imperfectly the stage action that took place in the theaters, Lightborn's line has now taken on an additional, ironic dimension. Once we stop focusing on Marlowe and the mythographic image biographers have created of him and concentrate instead on the material conditions in which plays and playbooks were produced, we become aware that it is precisely impossible to know what Marlowe's intentions were when dramatizing Edward's death. Orgel and the earlier scholars he is trying to supersede all fail to conceive of the original material witness of *Edward II* as a complex and ultimately opaque dramatic document rather than as a transparent window that gives access to Marlowe and his intentions.

* * *

Emily Bartels has written that "perhaps more than any other Renaissance drama, Marlovian drama, in its remarkable uniformity, its singularity of vision and voice, and its unprecedented radicality, creates a sense of a single author, well in control of his texts."[67] I have argued in this essay that this "sense of a single author" is, to no mean extent, the product of a mythography that insidiously affects, and infects, our understanding of both Marlowe the man and the plays we believe to be by Marlowe. It may well be that it is this mythographic creation of a clear sense of the author that has led some to exaggerate the "uniformity" and "singularity of vision and voice" in what we take to be Marlowe's plays. If we thought of Marlowe, as many do of Shakespeare, as being "within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails,"[68]

67. Emily C. Bartels, *Spectacles of Strangeness: Imperialism, Alienation, and Marlowe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), xvi.

68. I am quoting Stephen Dedalus's famous ideal of the impassive artist in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916; London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), 219.

then this sense of uniformity described by Bartels might well be considerably weaker. Marlovians who approach the evidence with scholarly skepticism rather than with the usual stereotypes are starting to shake our certitudes concerning not only the plays but also the playwright. In a recent collection of essays on Marlowe, two scholars have lucidly resisted the dominant mythographic construction of the dramatist's persona: "Teasingly elliptical and suggestive as it may be," J. T. Parnell writes, "the documentary evidence neither supports the commonplaces about Marlowe's involvement in espionage, his alleged atheism and homosexuality, nor adds up to anything like a meaningful biography."[69] Similarly, Downie points out that "we know next to nothing about Christopher Marlowe. When we speak or write about him, we are really referring to a construct called 'Marlowe.'"[70] Such resistance to biographical stereotypes may well lead to fruitful reexaminations of Marlowe's plays.[71] Once we stop pretending we know Marlowe once and for all, Marlowe studies may well have exciting times ahead.

69. J. T. Parnell, introduction to Downie and Parnell, *Constructing Christopher Marlowe*, 3.

70. Downie, "Marlowe: Facts and Fictions," 13.

71. This is evidenced by Ruth Lunney's recent *Marlowe and the Popular Tradition: Innovation in the English Drama before 1595*, Revels Plays Companion Library (Manchester University Press, 2002). Placing Marlowe's plays squarely among the other plays of their time, Lunney's study is one from which Marlowe, the mythographic persona, is conspicuously absent.

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

New Light on Henry Fielding from the Malmesbury Papers

FREDERICK G. RIBBLE

Throughout his adult life, Henry Fielding was very much in the public eye, first as a playwright and later as a political journalist, novelist, and magistrate. He lived boisterously and extravagantly, had a wide circle of friends, and enjoyed a reputation as a brilliant conversationalist. His biographers, however, have been disheartened by the surprising paucity of significant contemporary references to him, by the meagerness of the documentary record. Working in this stubborn soil, Martin and Ruthe Battestin have produced a superb biography that greatly enhances our understanding of Fielding's life and personality.[1] It remains true, though, as Martin Battestin has written more recently, that "we know less about Fielding's private character and circumstances than we know about the life of any figure of comparable importance of the age."[2]

Within the last few years, however, an extraordinarily rich archive, the Malmesbury Papers, containing (among much else) the correspondence of Fielding's best friend James Harris and his extensive circle, has been made fully available to the public. Some of these documents, notably almost all of Harris's correspondence with Henry and with his sister Sarah Fielding, have already been published. But this archive

I would like to express my appreciation to Martin Battestin and to my wife Anne for their help on this article. I have also benefited greatly from the knowledgeable and courteous assistance of the staff at the Hampshire Record Office and from the professional services of Colin Metcalfe.

1. Martin C. Battestin with Ruthe R. Battestin, *Henry Fielding: A Life* (London: Routledge, 1989).

2. *The Correspondence of Henry and Sarah Fielding*, ed. Martin C. Battestin and Clive T. Probyn (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), vi. Further references to this work are given parenthetically in the text.