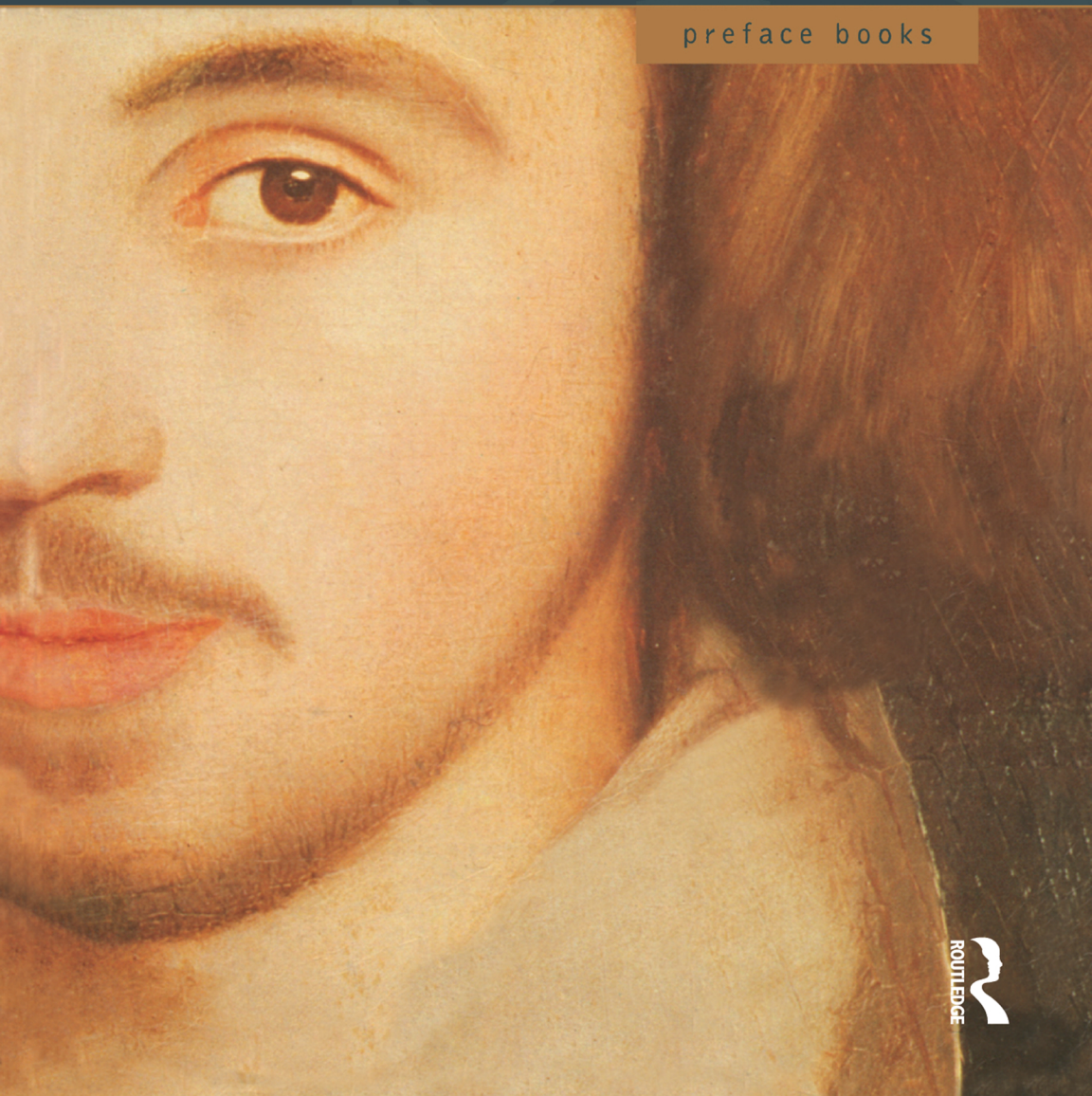
STEVIE SIMKIN

MARLOWE

preface books



ROUTLEDGE

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'A description of what the *Preface Books* were intended to be was included in the first volume and has appeared unchanged at the front of every succeeding title: "A series of scholarly and critical studies of major writers intended for those needing modern and authoritative guidance through the characteristic difficulties of their work to reach an intelligent understanding and enjoyment of it." This may seem modest enough but a moment's reflection will reveal what a considerable claim it actually is. It is much to the credit of Longman and to their [founding] editor Maurice Hussey and his authors that these words have come to seem no more than a plain statement of fact.'

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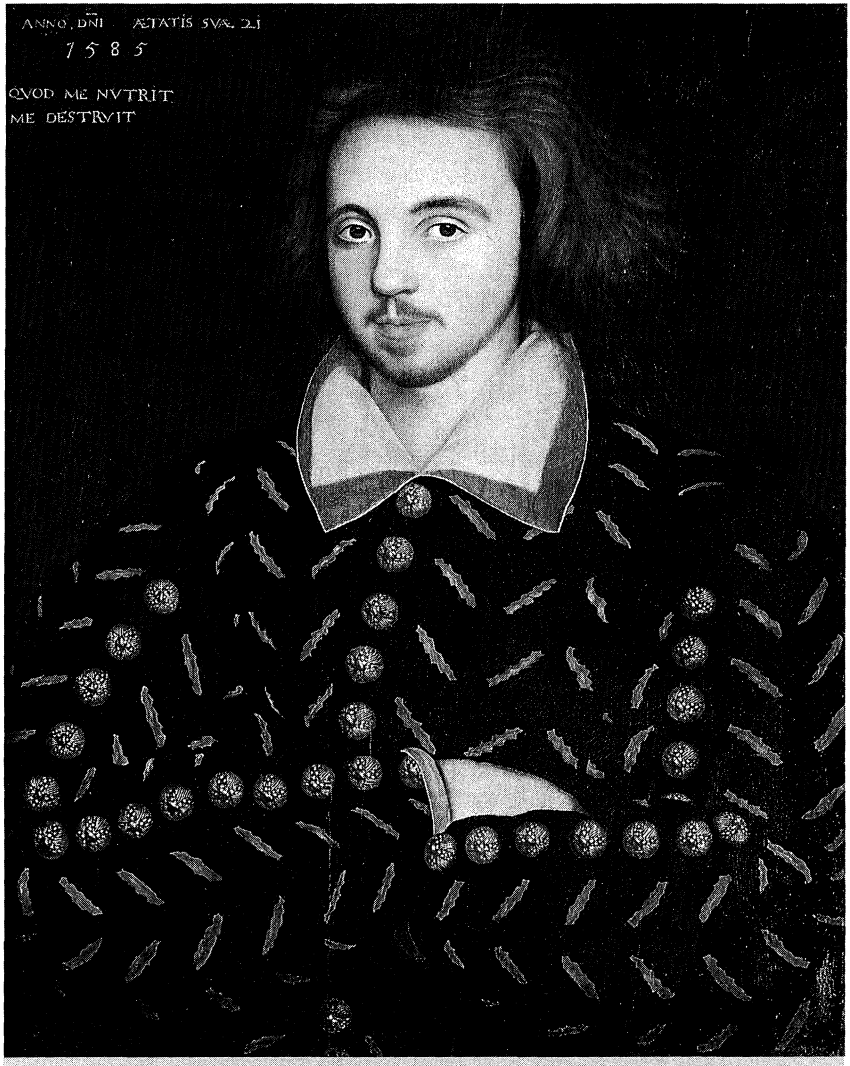

Portrait of a young man, believed to be Christopher Marlowe, from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. (By courtesy of the Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. The College cannot vouch for the identity of the portrait.)

A PREFACE TO

MARLOWE

STEVIE SIMKIN

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Finally, I owe the greatest debt of gratitude to my wife, Aileen, and our children, Jamie and Matthew, for love, support and just putting up with it all.

Stevie Simkin, Winchester, 29 April 1999

A NOTE ON TEXTUAL REFERENCES

For discussion of Marlowe's poetry, I have used Stephen Orgel's 1971 edition of *The Complete Poems and Translations* (Penguin). All references to Marlowe's plays are based on the Revels Plays editions, as follows:

Bawcutt, N.W. (ed.) 1997. Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*. Revels Plays edition. First published 1978. Manchester University Press

Bevington, David & Rasmussen, Eric (eds) 1993. *Doctor Faustus*. Revels Plays edition, Manchester University Press

Cunningham, J.E. (ed.) 1999. *Tamburlaine the Great*. Revels Plays edition. First published 1981. Manchester University Press

Forker, Charles R. (ed.) 1994. Christopher Marlowe, *Edward II*. Revels Plays edition, Manchester University Press

Oliver, H.J. (ed.) 1968. *Dido Queen of Carthage* and *The Massacre at Paris*. Revels Plays edition, Methuen.

References to Shakespeare's works are to the one-volume *Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jena E. Howard and Katharine Eisaman Maus (W.W. Norton & Company, 1997).

Note that spelling has been modernized in almost all quotations. Original spellings remain where such details are relevant to the discussion.

INTRODUCTION

The Preface Books series approaches the work of the author from a particular perspective: by introducing the writer via a biographical sketch and a survey of his or her cultural and social context, it encourages readers to root their understanding of the texts in the period in which they were produced. The titles given to the two opening chapters – 'Marlowe in his time' and 'The time of Marlowe' – aim to reflect the commitment to a contextual approach. At the same time, both chapters urge a degree of caution, warning against the impulse to draw straightforward conclusions about Marlowe's work from a knowledge of his life and times. In Elizabethan London his plays attracted large audiences, provoked respect, parody and vituperative jealousy among rival playwrights, and drew the sharp eye of the state censor. Marlowe himself was a remarkable and provocative figure, and it is tempting to correlate the controversial issues that the plays address with what we know (or think we know) about him, his personality and his beliefs.

Marlowe remains, for many critics, intricately bound up with his subject matter: if we choose to read *Edward II* as the story of a king brought down by his all-consuming love for another man, it is difficult not to make a connection with Marlowe's reported declaration 'That all they that love not tobacco and boys were fools'. *Doctor Faustus* and *The Jew of Malta*, in their different ways, can be seen to cast a sceptical eye on religion, and we learn that Marlowe was arrested on account of supposed heretical and atheistic beliefs – 'monstrous opinions', as his one-time friend and fellow playwright Thomas Kyd referred to them. Even Marlowe's poetry caused controversy: an edition of his translations of Ovid was one of a number of books that the Archbishop of Canterbury ordered to be burned six years after his death. *Tamburlaine the Great* and *The Massacre at Paris* revel in their garish violence and *Edward II* includes one of the most shocking executions in stage history. But Marlowe himself remains perhaps more famous than his plays: his violent death at the age of 29, stabbed through the eye in a fight (we are told) over a

bill for food and drink, intrigues us. For many, Marlowe is the Icarus of his age, soaring beyond acceptable boundaries and paying the price. However, as we shall see, the multiple stories that we can gather of Marlowe's life and, in particular, of his death are like pieces from different jigsaw puzzles, each one startling and intriguing in its own right, but stubbornly refusing to fit with any of the other pieces. Any attempt to squeeze specific interpretations of his work into the same jumble of 'evidence' needs to be treated with a degree of circumspection.

There is a familiar image that adorns the cover of a number of works by and about Marlowe – a striking portrait of a handsome Elizabethan man that has been used so often that we tend to forget that there is no direct evidence at all to prove that it is actually Marlowe's likeness. At the fringes of Marlovian studies lurk the scholars who would hitch his wagon to a bigger star. Members of the Marlowe Society have launched a hopeful vessel into the troubled waters of the Shakespeare authorship controversies. An annual competition, the Calvin and Rose G. Hoffman prize, was established to encourage scholarship in the field with the ultimate aim of finding someone who will furnish 'irrefutable and incontrovertible proof and evidence . . . that all the plays and poems now commonly attributed to William Shakespeare were in fact written by Christopher Marlowe'. In his own time, Marlowe eclipsed Shakespeare; today, he is compared (almost invariably unfavourably) with him, except by those who wish to prove the two writers were one and the same person. Once again, Marlowe's identity shifts in and out of focus. On the south side of the River Thames, a painstakingly researched replica of the Globe theatre, first built in 1599, has been erected, providing a site for the revival of Shakespeare's plays in 'Shakespeare's theatre'. Not far away, in the basement of an office block, the foundations of the Rose ('Marlowe's theatre') lie in a foot of soil and water. Since April 1999, a sound and light show designed to give visitors some idea of the original construction and history of the theatre has been on offer.

Although a degree of awareness of the context in which Marlowe lived and wrote is crucial to an understanding of his work, dramatic texts matter because they persist, they have an after-life, and they will mean something different in each new context in which they are revived. This book places a particular emphasis on the plays in performance, devoting attention both to what we can determine about their production and consumption in Elizabethan times, and examining how modern interpreters have approached them. Marlowe's plays have sharp edges: they are disconcerting texts in many varied ways, and 400 years have, in most instances, failed to wear those awkward edges down. Marlowe's *Jew of*

Malta deploys anti-Semitic stereotypes in the cause of a brutal black comedy, and his *Tamburlaine* depicts, with a degree of irony that is hard to determine, the mighty acts of a fourteenth-century tyrant who slashes and burns his way through central Asia. Tamburlaine has the virgins of Damascus impaled on spears by his cavalry and casually hands over the women of another conquered city to be raped by his soldiers. At the time of writing this introduction to complete the book, rereading those passages cannot help but bring to mind the savage ethnic conflict in the Balkans, and the horrifying stories that are emerging from a shattered Kosovo.

The book ends with a concluding chapter entitled 'Marlowe in our time', which provides an assessment of some of the ways in which Marlowe's work has penetrated our contemporary culture, and investigates how theatre practitioners and other artists, working in various media, have explored his plays or else appropriated them for specific agendas. In the critical survey section, studies of individual plays consider recent productions; the discussion of *The Jew of Malta* explores, in a postscript, a particular attempt to read the play systematically 'against the grain' in order to make it speak *about* (rather than simply speak out) ethnic oppression.

Marlowe's brief life and slim volume of work retain their fascination because of the position they occupy at the intersection of a number of different discourses: religious, political and cultural. But any answers to the puzzles of his plays lie not in what we know (or what various dubious acquaintances of Marlowe's would have us know) about their author's life. Instead, the interplay of past and present constantly generates new meanings for these texts. It is the aim of this book to enable the reader to approach Marlowe's work on those terms, recognizing the texts as documents determined by their original contexts, while being open to the new ways in which they may continue to resonate, 400 years later.

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PART ONE

THE WRITER AND HIS SETTING

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Chronological table

Year	Marlowe's Life	Literary/Theatrical Events	Historical Events
1558			Death of Mary I and accession of Elizabeth I
1559			Act of Supremacy and Allegiance: restoration of Protestant church in England
1560		Geneva translation of the Bible	
1562		Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc*	
1563		John Foxe's *Acts & Monuments*, first edition	
1564	6 Feb?: born at Canterbury	23 April?: William Shakespeare born at Stratford	
1565–7		Golding's version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* published	
1565			Great Siege of Malta
1566		Edward Alleyn born	
1568			Mary Queen of Scots imprisoned
1570			Elizabeth I excommunicated
1571			Battle of Lepanto: Turks defeated by Christian forces
1572			Aug: St Bartholomew's Day Massacre
1576		The Theatre opens; first Blackfriars opens (mostly used by boy companies)	
1577		The Curtain theatre opens; Holinshed's *Chronicles* published	
1578–9	Educated at King's School, Canterbury, on a scholarship		

Year	Marlowe's Life	Literary/Theatrical Events	Historical Events
1580	Dec: at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, as a Parker scholar		
1581	17 Mar: matriculates		
1581–6?	Long periods of absence from Cambridge, apparently working for the Government's secret service		
1582		Sidney writes *Astrophil and Stella* (not published until 1591)	
1584	Receives his BA degree		
1585–9			Civil wars in France
1586	Writes *Dido Queen of Carthage*, possibly in collaboration with Thomas Nashe	Death of Sidney	Babington Plot uncovered
1587	Receives his MA degree; probably writes *Tamburlaine* in this year; it is staged in 1587 or 1588	Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* Rose theatre built	Mary Queen of Scots executed
1588	May have written *Doctor Faustus* about this time		Defeat of Spanish Armada
1589	18 Sept: Marlowe and Thomas Watson imprisoned over death of William Bradley in street brawl; Marlowe on bail in Oct, discharged Dec		Henri III of France assassinated; succeeded by Henri of Navarre (Henri IV)
1590	*Tamburlaine* first published	Early parts of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* published	
1590/1	Writes and sees *The Jew of Malta* performed about this time		
1591	Sharing work room with Thomas Kyd	Shakespeare's *Henry VI* parts 1–3 first performed Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* published	
1591/2		Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew, Comedy of Errors, Richard III*	
1592	In the Netherlands, counterfeiting money		Plague; theatres closed for long periods

Year	Marlowe's Life	Literary/Theatrical Events	Historical Events
1592	*Edward II* probably written and staged in this year, possibly also *The Massacre at Paris*		
1593	Writes *Hero and Leander* 12 May: Kyd arrested, and heretical papers discovered in the rooms he shares with Marlowe 18 May: warrant issued for Marlowe's arrest 30 May: killed by Ingram Frizer in Deptford 1 June: buried 2 June: Baines accuses Marlowe of heresy 28 June: Frizer pardoned 29 June: Richard Cholmeley accuses Marlowe of atheism		Plague; theatres closed for much of the year July: Henri IV of France converts to Catholicism
1594	*Dido* and *Edward II*, and possibly *Massacre*, published	Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*	7 June: Roderigo Lopez executed
1595		Death of Kyd The Swan theatre opens	
1596		Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*	
1597–1600		Edward Alleyn retires from the stage	
1598	*Hero and Leander* published		
1599	Marlowe's translation of Ovid's *Amores* banned and burned	Globe theatre opens	
1600–5		Alleyn returns to the stage, then retires to theatre management; dies 1626	
1603			Death of Elizabeth I; accession of James I
1604	*Doctor Faustus* 'A-text' published		
1616	*Doctor Faustus* 'B-text' published		
1633	*The Jew of Malta* published		

CHAPTER 1

MARLOWE IN HIS TIME

'A dead man in Deptford': the Marlowe myth

On Wednesday 30 May 1593, four men spent the day together in a house owned by a woman called Eleanor Bull in Deptford, a town set on the Thames, south-east of London. Ingram Frizer was an up and coming businessman beginning to make his fortune via financial investments in property and commodities. Robert Poley was an agent in Queen Elizabeth's secret service who had worked in various shady capacities across the European continent. Nicholas Skeres was another dubious character who had connections with various moneylenders in London, as well as associates in the Elizabethan criminal network. The fourth man in the group was Christopher Marlowe, a young, successful, university-educated writer who had scored a number of notable successes with plays performed at the Theatre and the Rose, two of the early purpose-built playhouses in London. Having spent the day in each other's company at Widow Bull's, they took supper together and Frizer, Skeres and Poley settled down to a game of backgammon. Marlowe lay down on the bed in the sparsely furnished backroom. Suddenly, a violent dispute erupted between Frizer and Marlowe, possibly provoked by a disagreement over the bill for the day's food and drink. A fight broke out in which Marlowe beat Frizer around the head with Frizer's dagger, and in the struggle Frizer regained control of his weapon and stabbed Marlowe in the face, the point of the dagger probably entering the top of his eye socket. Death was instantaneous.

It may seem odd to begin an account of Marlowe's life at the point of his death. But one of the reasons why Marlowe continues to fascinate, 400 years or more after he died, is because it seems that we know more about his death than we do about his life: the coroner's report on his death, meticulously detailed, is at the head of a family tree of documentation about the incident. Stories about his death quickly

proliferated in a process akin to Chinese whispers: the narrative is embellished with increasingly gruesome detail, becoming more and more outlandish as it is handed from one teller to the next. The coroner's report clearly identifies Marlowe as the aggressor: 'it so befell that the said Christopher Morley, on a sudden & of his malice towards the said Ingram aforethought, then and there maliciously drew the dagger of the said Ingram' and 'gave the aforesaid Ingram two wounds on his head of the length of two inches & of the depth of a quarter of an inch' (cited in Wraight & Stern, 1993, p. 293). The report continues:

> and so it befell in that affray that the said Ingram, in defence of his life, with the dagger . . . gave the said Christopher then & there a mortal wound over his right eye of the depth of two inches and of the width of one inch; of which mortal wound the aforesaid Christopher Morley then & there instantly died . . .

The report makes it very clear how it perceives the killing – that Frizer acted 'in the defence and saving of his own life'. We will return to this shortly, but it is worth tracing first some of the transformations this story underwent in the years following Marlowe's death.

Thomas Beard was a Puritan who had been at Cambridge with Marlowe and would later be Oliver Cromwell's schoolmaster. According to Beard, writing in his book *Theatre of God's Judgements* (1597), Marlowe was 'by practice a playmaker, and a poet of scurrility' and a blasphemer who had 'denied God and his son Christ . . . affirming our Saviour to be but a deceiver . . . and the holy Bible but vain and idle stories, and all religion but a device of policy' (cited in MacLure, 1995, pp. 41–2). Incidentally, Beard actually uses the name 'Marlin' for Marlowe – as we shall see, Marlowe's name is as slippery as the stories of his life and death. Beard, rabid in his condemnation of theatre and fanatical in his religious beliefs, must have been overjoyed to find a man justly punished by God who was not only a playwright but someone rumoured to have been an atheist. Though it is impossible in medical terms, in the light of the report of Marlowe's wound, Beard maintains that Marlowe 'even cursed and blasphemed to his last gasp'. So terrible was the manner of Marlowe's death, according to Beard, that it was 'not only a manifest sign of God's judgment, but also an horrible and fearful terror to all that beheld him' (cited in ibid., pp. 41–2). Pressing the point home, as it were, with all the grim satisfaction of the zealot, Beard concludes:

> But herein did the justice of God most notably appear, in that he compelled his own hand which had written those blasphemies to be the instrument to punish him, and that in his brain, which had devised the same.
>
> [cited in ibid., p. 42]

Francis Meres, writing in 1598, refers to Beard's account in his collection of jottings, quotations and literary gossip *Palladis Tamia*. Here, we learn that Marlowe was, apparently, 'stabbed to death by a bawdy serving man, a rival of his in his lewd love' (cited in ibid., p. 46). The nature of this 'lewd love' is left unspecified, but one possible interpretation is that it is hinting at Marlowe's reputed homosexuality (Nicholl, 1992, p. 68). Certainly the familiar glib phrase, 'all they who love not tobacco and boys are fools', had already passed into the folklore gathering around his posthumous reputation, along with his supposed opinion that Christ and St John were lovers. It would be ill-advised to use these scraps of 'evidence' to draw a straightforward conclusion that Marlowe himself was a homosexual, however: to impose modern understandings of sexual orientation onto the early modern period ignores the immense cultural shift that separates us from the Elizabethans. As we shall see when we come to study Marlowe's historical tragedy *Edward II*, there were significant differences in attitudes to and conceptions of sexual relationships 400 years ago.

We now have Marlowe cast as both lewd and heretical. William Vaughan, writing some years later (*The Golden Grove*, 1600), adds some gruesome detail: 'he stabbed this Marlow into the eye, in such sort, that his brains coming out at the dagger's point, he shortly after died'. He also reinforces the idea that Marlowe's death was an act of God: 'Thus did God, the true executioner of divine justice, work the end of impious Atheists' (cited in Wraight & Stern, 1993, p. 307). Another furious religious tirade, blessed with the catchy title *The Thunderbolt of God's Wrath against Hard-Hearted and Stiff-Necked Sinners* (1618), the work of one Edmund Rudierd, also drew on Beard, but managed to turn the story into a warning against playwrights and actors in general:

> But hearken ye brain-sick and profane poets, and players, that bewitch idle ears with foolish vanities: what fell upon this profane wretch, having a quarrel against one whom he met in a street in London, and would have stabbed him: But the party perceiving his villainy prevented him

> with catching his hand, and turning his own dagger into his brains, and so blaspheming and cursing, he yielded up his stinking breath: mark this ye players, that live by making fools laugh at sin and wickedness.
>
> [cited in Wraight & Stern, 1993, p. 307]

Marlowe's death, then, is interpreted in a number of different ways: first as a warning against atheism; then, connected with some kind of immoral sexual practice; and now taken as proof of God's disapproval of the theatre. When we begin to look in more detail at Elizabethan society, we will explore further the opposition to the theatre that existed among certain influential sectors of the population. What is important to notice at this point is the fact that Marlowe's unusual and untimely end is appropriated for different purposes by different writers. The 'facts' of the case mutate as they filter through different accounts. This gives us some kind of insight into how history works – less a collation of facts than a process of telling stories about the past. It is a notion we shall return to when we come to look at the story Marlowe told about the reign of Edward II. But to return to Vaughan's account: for the Puritans, it seems, the story of Marlowe's death is underpinned by a notion of God's hand in human affairs, meting out suitable punishment for the heinous sins of blasphemy and atheism. How Marlowe acquired this reputation is another thread that we will trace shortly. But there is another tale to be told about Marlowe, and in order to unravel it, we need to return to his origins and trace his life from its humble beginnings in Canterbury in 1564.

Early years

Some rudimentary details of Marlowe's early years can be traced. He was born the son of John Marlowe, a shoemaker in the ancient city of Canterbury, and Katherine, formerly Katherine Arthur. Of their nine children, Marlowe was the second, and the oldest that survived. He was also the only one of the boys to live beyond infancy; four of his sisters also lived to adulthood. We know that Christopher was born in February 1564, but it is after this bare fact that we stumble over the first gap in his biography, and we pick up the story again when Marlowe acquires a scholarship to attend the King's School, Canterbury, at the

age of fifteen (although it may be that he started at King's before this date). Here Christopher would have received a thorough grounding in Latin and Greek grammar, and some ancient literature. He would have learnt about Roman history, as well as the familiar Greek and Roman legends. Canterbury, situated along the route from Dover to London, was a busy city, and Marlowe would have grown up in a lively atmosphere that was lent by virtue of its position something of a cosmopolitan air. One event it is safe to assume Marlowe witnessed, as a child of nine, was the procession that moved down the High Street in September 1573, as Elizabeth I made her royal visit to Canterbury Cathedral; it is likely that the spectacular pageantry would have made a strong impression upon him (Wraight & Stern, 1993, p. 23). Spectacles of another kind were provided by travelling bands of players – records survive of visits by a number of companies during Marlowe's time in Canterbury, among them Lord Strange's Men, a group that would become closely associated with Marlowe's own work. We know, too, that plays were regularly staged at the King's School, and although there is no direct proof that Marlowe himself performed, it seems fairly likely that he did. He may well have taken part in performances by students at Cambridge, too: records survive of performances at Corpus Christi College during Marlowe's time there.

In the winter of 1580, Marlowe arrived in Cambridge as the Archbishop Parker scholar at Corpus Christi College, one of the oldest colleges in the university which itself dates back to the twelfth century. Matthew Parker had been Archbishop of Canterbury from 1558 until his death in 1575. The Cambridge connection came via Parker's period as Master of Corpus Christi College from 1544 to 1553. Three scholarships were established by the terms of his will (Parker had already set up a number of others), and Marlowe qualified for the first of these, which was set aside for a native of Canterbury educated at the King's School. University life then was a very different experience from what it is now, as we might expect, but the immensity of that difference may still astound us: the student's regime actually sounds more like a monastic lifestyle than anything else. Rising at four for prayers at five and breakfast at six, the students would attend a morning of classes lasting until dinner at noon: the first half of the afternoon would be taken up by more classes, leaving the rest of the day for private study. The afternoon classes might often involve attendance at debates: university examinations were conducted orally at this time, with a student required either to attack or defend a particular proposition in a kind of verbal combat with his peers. To receive his BA, the student would have

been required to offer four such demonstrations of his skill in debate, two offensive and two defensive. The curriculum was again classically based, with a thorough programme of classical philosophy at its centre. Generally, students resided in college for eleven months of the year, although there were many instances of this rule being broken. Indeed, it appears that some questions were raised over Marlowe's progress from the BA to the MA element of this degree because of his erratic attendance record. Marlowe lodged in a converted storehouse with three other scholars. Many of the students at Corpus Christi would have been younger than Marlowe, since the usual age for entry was fourteen. Although he arrived at Cambridge in December 1580, Marlowe was seventeen when he formally matriculated in March 1581. A total of six years' study led to an MA, which Marlowe achieved in 1587. As a Parker scholar, he would have been expected to embark on a career in the church. However, it seems clear that Marlowe had very different ideas about where his future lay. He wrote *Dido Queen of Carthage* while at Cambridge, as well as some poetry (including translations of the erotic poetry of the Latin writer Ovid) and very probably most of the first part of *Tamburlaine the Great.*

At Cambridge we can locate a number of these fragments of biographical data that make the puzzle of Marlowe's life so alluring. In 1953, a portrait was discovered amidst a pile of rubble left by builders repairing the Master's Lodge at Corpus Christi (see the Frontispiece). Charles Nicholl provides some fascinating speculative background to the portrait in his investigation of Marlowe's death, *The Reckoning* (1992), and the discussion here of the mystery surrounding it is indebted to that book. Although badly damaged, the painting was sent to the National Portrait Gallery, where it was authenticated as Elizabethan – an inscription bears the date 1585 – and, after restoration, it was hung in the dining hall of the college. Although the painting gives no clue as to who the sitter for the portrait was, it does tell us that the subject was 21 years of age at the time: Marlowe's age in 1585. As we have already noted, Marlowe entered university unusually late, and it is unlikely that there were many – if any – other students of this age at that time. In 1585, he had received his BA and was embarking on his MA. This makes it more likely that the portrait is indeed of Marlowe. One of the mysteries surrounding the painting is its own history: it does not appear in a list of paintings belonging to the college compiled in 1884. The implication is that it was at some stage taken down and stored away, and then forgotten. Some scholars, assuming it *is* a portrait of Marlowe, have speculated that it might have been removed in the aftermath of Marlowe's

death and the scandal surrounding the event. Again, speculation piles upon speculation, but there are undoubtedly some good reasons for believing that it might be his portrait. Some of the reasons are soundly and logically based, whilst others are founded on a degree of romanticism that can be hard to resist, particularly when we read the Latin inscription beneath: '*Quod me nutrit me destruit*': 'that which nourishes me destroys me'. It is, as we shall see, a haunting and a provocative line, and one that fits conveniently into the Marlowe myth that we are now beginning to piece together; this has made it all the more tempting to assume that it is his portrait.

Trying to reconstruct Marlowe's time at Cambridge is another game of deduction and speculation, but the most mundane of sources have the potential to offer up rich, intriguing clues, solutions and possibilities. These sources include the college accounts (complete apart from the 1585–6 academic year records, which are missing), which show the payments he received as a Parker scholar, and the Buttery book, which details expenses on food and drink for individual students. Scholars such as Frederick Boas (1940), Wraight & Stern (1993, first published 1965) and Charles Nicholl (1992) have studied the patterns of these records (there are photographs of some of the relevant pages in Wraight & Stern's appendices), and made some fairly safe deductions from them. Their conclusions lead us back into the shadows that enveloped Marlowe at Eleanor Bull's house in Deptford in May 1593. The records of attendance are not extraordinary for the first three years of his university career: a couple of periods of absence lasting six weeks each technically exceeded the college regulations, but were not unheard of. However, the 1584–5 session sees a sudden drop in Marlowe's total scholarship payments: with the scholarship working on the basis of a shilling a week for every week the student was in attendance, the amounts paid to Marlowe during this academic year total only 19*s.* 6*d.* The Buttery book fills in some of the detail for us, suggesting that Marlowe was absent for eight weeks between April and June and nine weeks between July and September, returning for the end of the Trinity term. For the next year, the Buttery book is all we have to go on, and it indicates another April–June truancy; and in 1587, college accounts show a further absence of a couple of months by the time the Lent term wound up on 25 March.

Marlowe's absences had, of course, not gone unnoticed, and he was initially refused permission to proceed from his BA to his MA degree. The decision was overturned by a letter sent to the Cambridge authorities from Elizabeth's Privy Council:

> Whereas it was reported that Christopher Morley was determined to have gone beyond the seas to Reames [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 discretely 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' affairs he went about.
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> [cited in Nicholl, 1992, p. 92]

Scholars have proved fairly conclusively that this Christopher Morley was our Marlowe; I have already noted in the discussion of Thomas Beard's account that Marlin was one alternative form for Marlowe's name, particularly in his days at Cambridge; Morley was another. 'Reames' is the French city of Rheims where the English College had been established, one of only a handful of Catholic seminaries established in Europe for Englishmen. The rumour that Marlowe had visited Rheims would have implied that he had defected not only in religious terms, from England's Protestantism to France's Catholicism, but in political terms too. What the Privy Council's letter implies is that Marlowe, far from being a political and religious traitor, was in fact a loyal patriot. What we seem to have is a classic example of the undercover agent, working behind enemy lines.

Marlowe and Sir Francis Walsingham

The mystery of Marlowe's life and death deepens, and we must pause as we take what may seem a fairly modern concept – the secret agent – and locate it in its Elizabethan context. A fuller account of the politics of Elizabethan England can be found in chapter 2, which also discusses the ways in which politics and religion were profoundly intertwined. For now, it is enough to bear in mind that England under Elizabeth

was a Protestant nation, but one that was forced to meet the Catholic challenge on a number of fronts, both internationally (particularly in relation to the imposing empires of France and Spain) and internally. The Protestant Elizabeth had been preceded by her Catholic sister Mary Tudor, who had reigned from 1553 to 1558; Mary Queen of Scots (also Catholic) laid claim to the English throne (she was technically speaking Elizabeth's heir) and consequently remained a thorn in Elizabeth's side until her execution in 1587. One of the chief weapons in Elizabeth's struggle against the Catholic threat was her secret service, and the key player in that organization was Sir Francis Walsingham. Walsingham, who was the father-in-law of the poet Philip Sidney, had spent a good deal of the 1550s abroad, becoming fluent in French and Italian and establishing contacts in those countries that would prove invaluable in the future. In 1568 and 1569, he was able via his Italian contacts to feed information to Sir William Cecil, Elizabeth's right-hand man for most of her reign, about potential threats to the English queen, and between 1570 and 1573 he served mostly in France, working to establish some kind of settlement between France and England. But the so-called St Bartholomew's Day Massacre on 24 August 1572, when thousands of Huguenots – French Protestants – were massacred at the instigation of Charles IX and his mother Catherine de Medici, brought these efforts to an end. (Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris* is a dramatization of that slaughter and its aftermath.) Walsingham left Paris soon after, returning to take up the post of Secretary of State, which he retained until his death in 1590. Walsingham was a Puritan and, particularly in the wake of the Huguenot massacre, obsessively devoted to the cause of stamping out the Catholic threat. He poured considerable amounts of his own wealth into financing the secret service, and his spies were everywhere. Although some government funds were at Walsingham's disposal, the Elizabethan secret service remained outside the formal organization of the government. It is worth bearing in mind that there were no standing armed forces at this time either, armies being raised as and when necessary. With the secret service more akin to a network of paid spies and informers than to a formal and hierarchical marshalling of agents, loyalties were notoriously fickle and the accuracy of information, gained by word of mouth and by intercepting correspondence, was wildly unpredictable.

Although we cannot know for sure that Marlowe travelled to Rheims – it may only be part of the kind of malicious gossip that dogged him for much of his short life – it is quite possible that he did. This was a particularly volatile time: the Spanish Armada would sail against