

The Great Reckoning

Who Killed Christopher Marlowe and Why?

by Stephanie Hopkins Hughes

“His life he contemned in comparison of the liberty of speech.”

Thomas Nashe, *Jack Wilton The Unfortunate Traveller*

The Oxfordian thesis has forced us into areas of psychology, biography and history – English, continental, and literary – that we would not have had to deal with if it were not that the issue of Shakespeare’s identity has forced us to. Seeking the truth about the author of the western world’s most important and influential literary canon has required that we examine the facts surrounding the production of other literary works at the time, facts that demonstrate that the Stratford biography is not the only one rife with anomalies. Although Christopher Marlowe’s biography holds together far better than most, his death remains as much a mystery as Shakespeare’s identity. Could these two mysteries be related?

Birth of the Media, the Fourth Estate

It was during the period when Marlowe was writing, in the decade from 1583 to 1593, that the first modern commercial theater was built in England. By this we mean a permanent structure meant solely for theatrical performance, one that opened its doors to the public on an almost daily basis, and that did not rely (solely) on aristocratic patrons or the Crown for financing, one that paid its taxes and supported its owners, managers and the companies that performed in it on the proceeds of ticket sales to the public.

For centuries, theater had been produced either at court or in noble households for the entertainment of courtiers and nobles, enacted by choirboys, musicians or other members of the household, many of whom had other duties the rest of the year. At the other end of the social scale, rural and small town communities were entertained in churches, the courtyards of inns, on village commons or in the halls of trade guilds, by actors who were often little better than beggars in costume. Burbage’s Theatre, built in 1576, was a start, but it wasn’t until Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* exploded on the London scene in 1587 that actors, playwrights and theatre owners could see the public stage as having the potential to provide them with a dependable living.

This same period also saw the first glimmers in publishing of what would eventually

evolve into modern journalism. Penny ballads – single sheets that put topical lyrics to well-known tunes – had been in production for years, but these functioned intellectually at the level of comic strips and commercially at the level of peanut vending. True journalism, or one form of it – an inexpensive format produced at regular intervals consisting of entertaining or informative material that generated enough sales that printers found them profitable to publish – did not take off until the uproar created by Martin Mar-prelate in the late 1580s created a reading audience that, having found itself, was eager to support storytellers and satirists like Robert Greene and Thomas Nashe. Greene and Nashe can be seen as the first modern English journalists and their pamphlets as the first magazines. Thus were the commercial stage and the commercial press born at roughly the same time, the final quarter of the 16th century.

The people of London, starved for entertainment by the grim strictures of the Swiss Reformation thrust upon them earlier in the century,¹ were the ground out of which the commercial stage and press first thrust forth tender and uncertain shoots. This burst of popular enthusiasm for the stage, and to a lesser extent, for the press,² created a situation whereby their producers could live, or at least could hope to live, on the proceeds of a large number of small transactions, a significant first in English history. For the first time, writing for the public would be driven more by popular demand than by wealthy patrons, religious polemics, or court propaganda.

The importance of this new development, the tremendous power that it represented (the *vox populi*, the voice of the people, the Fourth Estate of government), may have taken awhile to sink in, but soon enough both court and city officials realized the threat it posed to their hegemony. Their concern is evidenced by the Crown's efforts to control the press through censorship and licensing, and the city's many efforts to "pluck down" the theaters (Chambers 2.236 et seq.).

Scanning history for clues to the human forces behind these developments, the decade when they began, roughly the 1580s, presents a smooth facade, lacking in specifics. Despite a scattering of facts, names, and dates, nothing provides the kind

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of connections necessary to get a reliable picture of who or what was propelling events. Not until March of 1595 comes the first occurrence in a theatrical record of the name Shakespeare,³ the name that, in time, will come to represent the peak of this new force. Strangely it will not appear again in any similar connection until 1598 when it's published on the title pages of two popular plays, *Richard II* and *Richard III*. Its appearance in these two places, so widely separated in time, so late in the development of the stage, is puzzling.

As for the Earl of Oxford, so difficult to locate later, he does appear during this early period, obviously and publicly in connection with the stage, less obviously in the press. In 1580 his name surfaces as patron of at least two companies that perform at court and in the provinces throughout the decade, one of boy actors and another of adults (Chambers 2.100-01). If, as we believe, he was also doing most of the writing for the Queen's Men,⁴ then he and his plays dominate the revels at court throughout the 1580s. We see him stepping in to lease the first Blackfriars Theater in 1583 when it was in danger of being shut down (Smith 151). In the early 1590s his persona (if not his name) is dragged by Thomas Nashe into his pamphlet duel with Gabriel Harvey.⁵

The University Wits

Nashe, along with Robert Greene, George Peele, Thomas Watson, Thomas Lodge, and Thomas Kyd is included as a member of the mysterious coterie of early writers termed by 19th-century scholars the University Wits. Marlowe and Lyly are often included though, unlike the others, their connections with other members of the group are less significant than their individual biographies. Having surfaced in London in the early 1580s with the advent of the amorphous Robert Greene, all but Nashe had disappeared from "the paper stage" by the middle of the 1590s and he appears only once after 1596. That within such a narrow time-frame this group should appear and then vanish like a batch of out-of-season mushrooms has not only not been explained by orthodox scholars – not one so far as I know has even noticed that it needs explaining.

Investigations into their individual biographies reveal an assortment of anomalies much like those that bedevil the Stratford biography. The one thing that most have that William of Stratford does not is time spent at a university; for the rest their histories are equally problematic. Since there also exists at that time a group of erudite courtiers, who, like Oxford, were known for their writing skills, but who left little or nothing signed with their names (Puttenham's *Arte of English Poetry* (1589) as quoted by Ogburn 687), today's authorship scholars must consider the possibility that William of Stratford was not the only proxy for courtiers who wished to see their works in print. That being the case, where does Marlowe fit in this early modern publishing scenario?

Of one thing we can be sure, at least where his plays are concerned, Marlowe was nobody's proxy. His passion, his point of view, are all his own.

Marlowe's Success

It may be that Marlowe had more to do with the commercial success of the London stage than any other single individual (apart from Oxford). Of course without the acting talent of Edward Alleyn his scripts would not have been brought to exciting life, and without the entrepreneurial skills of Alleyn's father-in-law and partner, Philip Henslowe, owner and manager of Southwark's public stage, the Rose, their combined talents might have blazed and died away like so many holiday fireworks.

But strong acting and the entrepreneurial instinct were probably present all along. It took someone of Marlowe's genius to create the vehicles for Alleyn to bring in the crowds night after night, crowds who would be willing to pay once more to see Tamburlaine thunder down his adversaries, and in the process, show potential investors that, given the right elements, theater had the potential to become a profitable venture.

Nor could he have done it without Oxford, who created the first public stage in 1576,⁶ provided the most popular plays, as revealed by Henslowe's Diary,⁷ and showed him the way. But it may be that Oxford hadn't yet acquired the common touch that gave the shoemaker's son the edge with the 16th-century public. It may be that, although Oxford (as we believe) taught him the craft of writing plays, it was Marlowe who showed Oxford how to reach, if not his most important audience, certainly his largest.

Was Marlowe Shakespeare?

Because the name Shakespeare begins to appear so late in the record, Marlowe is often given credit for shared tropes, scene construction, even particular phrases. According to the poet Swinburne, "He and he alone guided Shakespeare in the right way of work." Malone, the first real Shakespeare scholar, attributed *Titus Andronicus* to Marlowe, while dozens of others have claimed for him Shakespeare's early quartos and particular scenes from his earlier plays. Others have gone so far as to claim that Marlowe continued to write behind the name Shakespeare, that he survived his assassination and, protected by patrons, went on to write *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, etc.

While the reason for these mis-attributions lies with the out-of-sync dating scheme bequeathed us by the Stratford biography, the best argument comes from Caroline Spurgeon's close examination of their differences in her great book, *Shakespeare's Imagery* (1935). Having sifted their works for their favorite comparisons, metaphors and similes, in classifying and comparing them she finds too great a difference for them to have come from the same mind.⁸ Oxfordians might ask, could Oxford have

used Marlowe as a proxy before he began using Shakespeare? No, and for the same reason. And there are other differences.

Shakespeare was a deeply humorous person. We sometimes get the feeling that it was his sense of humor that saved him from madness. Marlowe on the other hand is always in earnest and what humor he shows rarely reaches beyond a sort of savage irony. His wit is meant to wound, not amuse. If the clown roles in *Dr. Faustus* are his, then he wasn't half trying when he wrote them; many scholars can't hear his voice in them at all, believing that they were added after his death by a second writer (Ribner xxiv). Himself a product of the working class, it's understandable that creating the kind of working-class clown that Shakespeare's audience delighted in might go against the grain.⁹ Had Shakespeare written the clown parts in *Dr. Faustus* they would probably have been funny.

Marlowe has a different rhythm than Shakespeare: heavier, more insistent, less flexible. Shakespeare moves us in many ways, but frequently by stinging us into awareness. Marlowe moves us in an almost opposite way, by hypnotizing us into a state of excitement. Shakespeare can sound like Marlowe, but he will shift away from it. Marlowe can sound like Shakespeare in the quality and timing of his one-liners, but he hasn't the Bard's flexibility. Shakespeare's genius shifts with ease from one mode of expression to another, from singsong to imperative, poetry to rapid-fire dialogue; Marlowe's is a rhythmic and hypnotic rising, rising, rising, like an opera chorus, to a climax. Clearly these are two separate voices. If there are crossovers of style and construction, of phrasing and tempo, the explanation must lie elsewhere.

Seemingly fairly equal in skill at the time that we first catch sight of them, they were different in just about every other way. Unlike the Stratford Shakespeare, there is ample evidence that Marlowe had the necessary education to write the works attributed to him. Unlike the Stratford Shakespeare, Marlowe's works reflect his nature as portrayed by his origins and the incidents of his life. His protagonists were not noblemen, but were, like himself, men of obscure background who raised themselves to positions of power through their talent, charisma, and strength of will. Tamburlaine, who wants to conquer everything, and Faustus, who wants to know everything, spoke for that ambitious new middle class into which Marlowe was thrusting himself through his writing – while Barabas, the money-lender who wants to own everything, was its villain.

This burgeoning class, surging into prominence with the development of the modern market economy, needed role models. Neither the timeless folk myths that sustained the yeomanry – like Robin Hood or *George á Greene* – nor the chivalric romances like Arthur and Lancelot or *Orlando Furioso* that fueled the psyches of aristocrats, could have much meaning for this new entrepreneurial class. The author himself, as a writer forced to live by his wits, the son of a man who lived by his hands, was clearly one of these.

It was Marlowe who had the kind of reckless Icarian genius that the orthodox are forced by their short timetable to claim for William of Stratford, and it shows in the style and themes of his most popular works and the kinds of heroes he created, as it most manifestly does not in Shakespeare. Unlike Shakespeare, whose early themes tend to call on classic ideals of chivalric loyalty, there is no trace of these, either pro (thematic) or con (satiric), in any of Marlowe's works – though he may cast an ironic eye their way in passing. Marlowe's world-view is, in almost all points, the diametric opposite of Shakespeare's.

Shakespeare's ideology harkens back to a feudal world where peace and harmony depend on the hero keeping – or, returning, after a pleasant sojourn in a sylvan fantasy – to his proper place in the scheme of things – or, as in the tragedies, going mad or dying because for some reason he can't return. In contrast, there is no possibility of peace or harmony in Marlowe's world. His heroes are admired for their very refusal to remain at their predestined level, and for the passion and perseverance with which they create a new world, however cruel and unstable, with themselves at the center.

The accusations of atheism directed at Marlowe shortly after his death were written to order for those who wished to portray his killing as a boon to society – but taken for what they're worth, they too strengthen our impression of this writer as a man not contented with the orthodox explanations of things, one hungry for the kinds of truths that the Church regarded as off-limits, one in fact much like his own Dr. Faustus.

Marlowe vs. Shakespeare

With the little we know for certain at this time, we can only guess at the kind of relationship that might have existed between these two brilliant artists whose works place them together in time. While history strangely ignores it, one thing we can be sure of, there was – there had to have been – some sort of relationship. The world of the London stage was simply too small then for these two powerful voices to be unaware of each other. That being the case, their influence on each other must have been at least as vital as any of the other factors in their individual developments. At their best they were in close competition with each other, and although others occasionally approached them in their lesser moments, no one else ever came close to approaching either of them at their lyrical best. It simply has to be that, during the brief period when they vied for the public's favor on the stage of The Rose theater – when they brought a new and more polished speech to the stage, and when, together, they helped give birth to a commercially successful theater industry, a brief period of some five or six years – each measured himself against the other.

Like knives, did Marlowe and Shakespeare sharpen their skills on each other? If not

directly, one-on-one, over a bowl of sack at the Steelyard or the Mermaid Tavern, surrounded by a group of fellow wits, or in some even more direct relationship, but at the very least in the constant awareness that the other was watching and listening, perhaps slipping into the theater unseen to measure the intensity of the crowd's response to the other's latest play.¹⁰ It simply must be that it was in large part competition with Marlowe that gave Shakespeare the thrust to become the greatest writer of his time – if not of all time. We'll never know, of course, what Marlowe might have become, since he never got the chance.

So, although there remain many unanswered questions, in comparison with the kinds and numbers of questions that swarm around Shakespeare and the University Wits, we feel secure in accepting Christopher Marlowe as what he appears to be: a young poet of stunning ability who rose in a few short years on a tide of circumstance to a height of popularity and influence. Marlowe's success was a quantum leap from his origins: a shoemaker's son who, when he got into hot water with authority, could use the cream of the peerage as character references.¹¹ Unfortunately, at the height of that success – much like one of his own heroes – he was dashed to destruction in a sudden turn of Fortune's wheel.

Did that wheel turn purely through the immutable workings of Fate, or was there a hidden hand at work in Marlowe's sudden fall? And if so, whose and why? Researchers Charles Nicholl, Leslie Hotson, A.D. Wright, Calvin Hoffman, and Curtis Bright have left no doubt in many minds that the scenario of Marlowe's death was not at all the unfortunate result of accidental violence that it was made out to be in the coroner's report. Yet of all the scholars who have dealt with Marlowe, few agree on why he was killed or who was responsible.

Marlowe's Background

A shoemaker's son from the cathedral town of Canterbury, educated first through a scholarship meant to provide the Canterbury Cathedral choir with young singers, and then at Cambridge University through a scholarship for poor but promising students from Canterbury, orthodox opinion holds that Marlowe arrived in London shortly after receiving his Masters degree at the age of twenty-three, sometime after March of 1587, and that he began writing for the theater right away, perhaps even with a play or two ready for production on his arrival. One of these was the super-hit *Tamburlaine*, performed for the first time in the summer of 1587. In the five years after *Tamburlaine* he and Alleyn produced one hit after another; roughly one a year from 1587 to 1592.

When the Cambridge dons, nervous over religious dissension on campus, were set to deny him his Masters degree in 1587 because they saw his extended absences from Cambridge as trips to Rheims, a Catholic stronghold on the continent, the

Privy Council overrode their decision with a letter stating that Marlowe deserved his degree because he had been engaged in important service for her Majesty. This interference by the Crown in the affairs of a poor scholarship student, together with Marlowe's absences during the final three years of his studies, has led scholars to the conclusion that the only possible explanation is that he was spying on Catholics for Francis Walsingham.

Since nothing remotely connected with spying can be found in his record until the year before his assassination, it seems far more likely that these absences were periods during which the gifted young playwright was testing his wings on the London stage. Facing the gathering storm that would result in the attack by the Spanish Armada in 1588, by 1584, when his absences began, Walsingham and the Privy Council would have been just as concerned with the need for artful propaganda as they were for spies.¹² When examined closely, it becomes apparent that the periods of Marlowe's absences from Cambridge correspond to periods when plays would be prepared for rehearsal for court performance, which means they would also have been performed at the public theaters for the groundlings. In any case, it should seem unlikely that the government would set someone as gifted as Marlowe to spy on his fellows when his native talents could be put to so much better use doing what nobody else could, and where but with the playwright whose theaters and plays had created the London Stage.¹³

What, Where, and When?

A close look at events, locations and dates puts Marlowe and Oxford physically close in the mid-to-late 1580s. From 1580 to late 1588, Oxford was living in Shoreditch, just outside the London Wall, at the manor known as Fisher's Folly, a fifteen-minute walk north to the Theatre built by James Burbage in the Liberty of Norton Folgate, where Burbage's family and a number of other actors and musicians were living by then. Next door but one to Fisher's Folly and Bishopsgate was the inn known as the Pye, the home of young Edward Alleyn (*ODNB*), with whom Marlowe would form the partnership that brought them both such success.

On June 1, 1583, Oxford was officially reinstated at court after his two-year banishment for impregnating a Queen's "maid of honor." Immediately upon his return he combined the Children of Her Majesty's Chapel with the Children of Paul's into a single company known variously in the records as Oxford's Boys, Paul's Boys, or the Earl of Oxford's Company (Chambers 4.101), rehearsing them at the little school in Blackfriars where evidence shows him holding the lease in 1583 (Smith 151).

The Revels account for that winter shows three plays by the Queen's Men, their first at court. For two of them, the payee is Oxford's man John Dutton.¹⁴ Two of the plays were performed by the Children of the Chapel (recorded as "Oxford's boys")

and one was performed by the Earl of Oxford's "servants" (where the payee was John Lyly). The following winter, 1584-5, there were four plays by the Queen's Men, one by "the children of the Earl of Oxford," one by "servants to the Earl of Oxford for feats of activity and vaulting," and one by "the Earl of Oxenford his boys" (Chambers 4.160-61). Doubtless Oxford was overwhelmed.¹⁵ That he, Hunsdon and Walsingham would have been on the lookout for someone who could assist with providing these companies with new plays makes sense, and in fact it was in the fall of 1584 that Marlowe's first long absence from Cambridge occurs.

By the summer of 1585, fears of Spain and Jesuit infiltrators had driven the Crown to fund Walsingham's growing intelligence operation to the tune of £2000 per annum (Read 2.370-1). While Oxford was dealing with military matters that summer – first in petitioning the Queen and Burghley to give him a command in the Netherlands – then in going, and then almost immediately returning (his promised cavalry post transferred to the 19-year-old Earl of Essex), Walsingham and Hunsdon must have felt pressured to find someone who could replace him for the coming winter holiday at court. This was not necessary as it turned out, since Oxford was back in England by late October.

The following summer Oxford was allotted a grant of £1000 per annum in the Privy Seal Warrant, the Queen's personal funding source, the source also of Walsingham's secret service grants. It's been assumed that this was to finance an appropriate lifestyle for one of England's premiere earls, but since no purpose was stated, it could just as easily have been meant to fund a behind-the-scenes operation to provide anti-Spanish propaganda in the theaters and bookstalls.¹⁶ Just as the unsavory agents who were being gathered by Walsingham began to appear with his increased funding, so did the University Wits begin to appear with Oxford's annuity.

In his detailed account of the circumstances surrounding Marlowe's assassination, Charles Nicholl provides data that supports our assumption. Drawn from two sources, the Cambridge buttery books record what the students spent on food and drink, and Marlowe's scholarship account; it records the shilling per week he collected as a scholarship student, but only when he was present. When both of these disappear during a particular time period, it is evidence he was away from campus (98).

According to Nicholl, during the four years Marlowe was studying for his BA, he rarely left the campus, even during the summers (99). The absences that so concerned the Cambridge dons began with the first year of his Master's program. For eight weeks from the middle of April until mid-June 1585, then another nine weeks from July through September, Marlowe was missing from Cambridge. Are there hints in the Revels record for the following winter holiday at court that this was the true reason for his absence?

That winter there were plays by "the Queens Men, Howard's [the Lord Admiral's]

Men, Hunsdon's [the Lord Chamberlain's] Men, John Simon's, and Mr. Stanley's [Lord Strange's] boys" (Chambers 4.101-02). Since this is the first mention in the Revels record of the Lord Admiral as a patron, this may be the hint we're looking for, because Lord Admiral Charles Howard was the patron at the Rose during most of the time that Marlowe dominated its stage. This is also the year that Marlowe's "actual spending at the buttery leapt from a customary few pennies to lavish weekly sums of 18 shillings and 21 shillings" (Nicholl 100). 1585 is also the year inscribed on the portrait found at Marlowe's college,¹⁷ in which he's dressed like a young lord with 30 gold buttons prominently displayed on his over-sized jacket.¹⁸

Marlowe's final absence of seven or eight weeks out of the normal twelve (99) occurred the following spring. There is nothing to show that he was in Cambridge after March 1587. *Tamburlaine* was first produced at the Rose early that summer. Since *Tamburlaine* is both too innovative and too polished not to have been preceded by juvenilia, it's fair to suggest that Marlowe's rapid grasp of the techniques of successful playwriting was fostered by someone more experienced than himself. With his future partner Edward Alleyn located next door to Fisher's Folly and Alleyn's brother John working for James Burbage just up the road at Norton Folgate (Edward Alleyn ODNB) – with records that by 1589 place Marlowe with fellow poet Thomas Watson, recorded as living in or near Fisher's Folly during or shortly after Oxford's time as owner (Anderson 232) – there's more than enough evidence to place Marlowe with or near Oxford in the mid-to-late 1580s.¹⁹ Certain plays produced for the Queen's Men at that time suggest Marlowe's developing style.²⁰ While there's no hard evidence, locating Marlowe so close to Fisher's Folly at this time helps to account for the links of style and construction that connect him to Shakespeare (i.e., Oxford), and for his unusually rapid leap to glory.

Was Marlowe Ever a Spy?

What then of Marlowe's purported involvement in government spy operations? Despite an exhaustive 400-year exploration of the records, there is still no solid evidence that Marlowe ever acted for the Crown in that capacity.²¹ The entire structure that condemns him as a spy rests on the later conjecture by academics that the Privy Council's claim in 1587 that he was acting in the Queen's interest could only mean one thing: that he was spying for Walsingham.

Apart from the event that resulted in his elimination from the London stage, the only other incident in which Marlowe appears to have been involved with members of the Elizabethan spying community took place in January 1592 in the Netherlands, where it seems he was sharing a room in Flushing with two known government operatives, one Richard Baines and a "Gifford Gilbert." We know this because Baines denounced him to Sir Robert Sidney, then governor of Flushing, as having urged "Gilbert" to counterfeit a Dutch shilling and to have declared that he was about to

“go over” to the enemy, i.e. the expatriate English Catholics in Brussels (Nicholl 234-249).²² When interviewed by Sidney, Marlowe claimed that it was Baines who set up the coining episode while Baines claimed that Marlowe was intending to defect. The last we hear of the matter, Marlowe and the purported coiner²³ were on their way back to England under guard, for questioning by Burghley (Nicholl 238).

With Marlowe’s emphatic denials of any involvement in the supposed counterfeiting scheme and no other evidence of any connection with the spy community, the idea that this identifies him as a double agent, either a counterfeiter working for the Jesuits or posing as one to attract catholic dissidents into the spymaster’s web, is patently absurd.²⁴ Motivations may be difficult to parse from our place in time, but the maybe-this-maybe-that motivations attributed to Marlowe by Nicholl and others make no sense. Why they would choose to give credence to anything said by men like Baines and Gifford, why supposedly intelligent researchers would continue to lump Marlowe, “the muses darling,” in with these blackguards, is an even greater mystery. With the end of the story in mind, it should be obvious that this coining adventure was a trap set by the government that Marlowe managed to escape. Next year he would not be so lucky.

“The Reckoning”

On May 12, 1593, in a sweep ostensibly to discover the author of a political libel pasted on the wall of the Dutch Church the day before, government agents found what they claimed was an atheist tract in the rooms of an impoverished scrivener named Thomas Kyd, a paper Kyd said must be Marlowe’s because it wasn’t his.²⁵ While Kyd languished in prison, Marlowe was brought before the Star Chamber for questioning about his “blasphemy,” then released with orders to remain available for further questioning. Ten days later, supposedly having been invited to a feast in Deptford, a port town on the Thames a few miles from Greenwich Palace, he spent from ten in the morning until sometime after supper with three men, two government agents and a confidence racketeer, in a room and garden of the home of one Eleanor Bull, a widow who let rooms and provided meals to travelers.

At some point during this prolonged get-together, Marlowe was stabbed to death just above the right eye. A coroner’s jury was hastily assembled; a plea of self-defense was offered by one of those present at the killing, attested to by the other two, and accepted by the coroner’s jury; the body was buried immediately somewhere nearby and the killer freed on a verdict of self-defense.

These three angels of doom cooperated with the authorities like true professionals. Ingram Frizer, the self-confessed killer, “neither fled nor withdrew himself.” All agreed that Marlowe, angered over “the reckoning” – the bill for the day’s expenses – had grabbed Frizer’s knife from him and was trying to stab him when Frizer acciden-

tally stabbed Marlowe in the eye. Frizer was officially pardoned exactly a month later, apparently spending no time at all behind bars. This is the official story. It's a story that begs a number of questions. Without pretending to know all the answers, we'll consider some of them.

Questioning the Official Story

What kept these four men together for ten hours? Ten hours is a long time to spend at anything. People spend time like that when they're waiting for something; waiting for someone to show up, for a ship to sail, for a message to arrive, for it to turn dark. If the three government operatives had been ordered to convince Marlowe that he must do – or not do – something or take the consequences, ten hours without a resolution seems unlikely. Of course there is no way of knowing at what point during those ten hours he was actually killed.

Why was he stabbed in the eye? A stab in the eye is one of the few knife blows that can be certain to kill instantly since it cannot miss the brain.

Why were there three of them? Marlowe was young and strong, and knowing that he had acquitted himself in at least two street fights, there probably had to be enough men present to insure the success of their mission, two to hold him and one to do the deed. Since the last man to arrive was Robert Poley, whose reputation as a government agent suggests that he was the leader, the other two required to make sure that he stayed put until Poley arrived. Altogether they provided the requisite two witnesses to justify the killer's plea of self defense.

Why did they meet in Deptford? Was it because Deptford was in Kent, not far from Scadbury, where Marlowe was staying with Thomas Walsingham and his servant Frizer? Was it because Deptford was a port town filled with sailors and strangers, a rough town, used to having to deal with violent death, and thus not inclined to linger over details? Was it because it was a town where Marlowe would be unknown to any that might be on the jury, and where the body of someone other than Marlowe could be identified as his without anyone knowing the difference? Although Marlowe's *works* were well known, it's unlikely that many beyond the theater community or his audience knew his name or could recognize his face.

Or was it perhaps because the Queen was then in residence at Greenwich which put Deptford within the twelve mile verge of the court, so that it would not be the local coroner in charge of the inquest but William Danby, Coroner to the Royal Household, whose standing with high level Court officials would have meant a good deal more to him than the death of some atheistic playwright.

Why did they meet at Eleanor Bull's? Mrs. Bull, in whose house the killing occurred, was not just any old innkeeper. She was closely related to Blanche Parry, a long-time

headmistress of the Queen's Privy Chamber and Elizabeth's personal confidante since childhood, who, when she died some time before, had left her cousin Eleanor Bull a sizable bequest (Nicholl 36-7). She was a person with Court connections and one who belonged to a prestigious network of individuals with the right to ask for – and the duty to grant – special favors to those in power.

Finally, did the fact that this was the worst year for the plague in many years contribute to the timing of the murder? Certainly the fact that the theaters were all closed, the players were on the road, and the powerful patrons of the theater who might have interfered, had all relocated themselves as far as they could get from the zone of contagion, make what appears to have been a government sting operation much more easily accomplished than if the plague not cleared the City.

During the period from a few days before the killing to several weeks afterwards, three notices were created that portray Marlowe as a scurrilous atheist and brawler. As Nicholl clearly shows, all three of these were written by what we would now regard as “disinformation” experts, meaning they originated from the same community of undercover agents to which, as Nicholl so clearly proves, two of the three parties to the execution belonged. One was written by the same Richard Baines who had attempted to get Marlowe arrested in Flushing the year before. These libels have so befouled Marlowe's posthumous reputation that for centuries he's been denied his place in literature.

Ingram Frizer and the Walsinghams

The man who confessed to the killing, Ingram Frizer, was a servant of Thomas Walsingham, who was second cousin to the Queen's former Secretary of State, Sir Francis Walsingham. Marlowe was staying with Thomas Walsingham when he was taken by Walsingham's servant Ingram Frizer to the “feast” that ended his life. Walsingham's role is sometimes described by the pundits who wrote about the assassination as that of Marlowe's homosexual lover. Less often is it noted that he was a member of the same undercover community to which all three of the men present at Marlowe's undoing belonged.

Thanks to Nicholl we have evidence that, as young men, both Thomas and his older brother had followed their father's first cousin Francis Walsingham into “the service,” Thomas having worked for Sir Francis in Paris, then later as his secretary in London. Ingram Frizer began as a servant of their father, but when he died, rather than stay with the heir, Thomas's older brother Edmund, Frizer chose to stay with Thomas. Four years before Marlowe's visit, Edmund's death left Scadbury, the family estate, in the possession of the 26-year-old Thomas. Thus it was to Scadbury that the messenger was sent to fetch Marlowe to his Star Chamber hearing on the 10th of May and so it was also from Scadbury that Marlowe rode with Frizer to Deptford on

the morning of May 30th.

Skeres and Poley

Nicholas Skeres, the servant of Thomas Walsingham who escorted Marlowe to his final feast, was, as records dug up by Nicholl reveal, a tout for the kind of London moneylender who paid scurvy types like Skeres to ensnare unwary young heirs, desperate for cash, into signing away their estates (Nicholl 25-31). During the Babington sting in 1586, Skeres functioned as a government provocateur, helping to steer the poor fool and his friends towards prison and the scaffold.

The third man, Robert Poley, was a government agent of long standing. Having orchestrated the Babington Plot that “beguiled” Anthony Babington into committing himself to treason and the gallows, the following year he was instrumental in getting the Queen of Scots to incriminate herself, thus enabling Burghley and Walsingham to put an end once and for all to the plots focused on getting her crowned Queen of England.

On May 30, 1593, the day Marlowe was led to the slaughter, Poley had just returned from passing important communiques between the English government and the Hague. Nicholl shows that payments later disbursed to Poley include the period from his arrival back from the Continent to several days after the inquest, proving that he was on the government payroll at the time of Marlowe’s death. That he was involved in Marlowe’s “reckoning” suggests that his government employers saw the popular playwright’s elimination as something that required his particular experience as a seasoned professional.²⁶

Which brings us to the question of *why* Marlowe was killed. Disinformation created by government agents after his death suggest a number of reasons, but these can be eliminated since they have served only to distract his audience, and generations of scholars, from the truth.

Was it Spying that Caused his Death?

Obviously Marlowe was silenced by members of the government spy community, but so far there isn’t a shred of solid evidence that spying activities of his own had anything to do with his killing, either directly or by implication.²⁷ Suggestions by Kyd and Baines that Marlowe was on the verge of defecting to Scotland or to the Catholics overseas, ring hollow. Why should a brilliant young poet at the peak of an exciting career in the brave new world of commercial theater wish to leave the arena of his success – that is, unless he was forced to for some reason? Nothing in anything he wrote suggests an adherence to Catholicism, or any religion – quite the opposite.

Was Sex Involved?

Among the various reasons put forth to explain the murder, one of the more enduring held that he died in a brawl caused by jealousy over his love affair with Thomas Walsingham. In this, Walsingham is seen as Marlowe's beloved with Walsingham's servant Ingram Frizer as his violently jealous lover. In this scenario Marlowe is pictured in the midst of penning *Hero and Leander* as a gift for Walsingham when he's interrupted for the fatal jaunt to Deptford – total fiction, though there may be some truth to the relationship. That Marlowe was more attracted to men than women seems likely from his writing; in the three plays that we can be certain are his own, the female characters are little more than cardboard stereotypes; what's meant to be romantic dialogue comes off as little more than stilted rhetoric.

Records at Corpus Christi show that Marlowe had a lot more money to spend at school by 1585 than he had ever spent before. Writing for the theater didn't pay much (nor, presumably, would working for Oxford, whose £1000 would have had to cover a stable of writers and secretaries, some in need of bed and board, in addition to printers, theaters and acting troupes, and their costumes and props). Gifts from a gentleman lover would have put the kind of spending money in Marlowe's purse that enabled him to splurge at the buttery at school, as he evidently did, and to dress like a gentleman, as revealed in his portrait.

As for Thomas Walsingham, based on the little we know, it's impossible to conjecture with any assurance about his sexual bias. His youth, his rank, his time spent in Paris, would easily make him a likely member of one of the circles of young men-about-town who frequented the theater and patronized artists, one who could have been particularly interested in the author of the most popular plays in London. Thomas had returned to London at about the time Sir Francis organized the Queen's Men and that Marlowe's long absences from Cambridge began to occur.

It's difficult to look at the scenario as we now have it (thanks to Charles Nicholl and Leslie Hotson) and not see Marlowe as having been set up by Thomas Walsingham as a favor to someone in power.²⁸ In what would be the least malignant version, Walsingham may have had no choice.

Was it Because of his Atheistic Beliefs?

In the years immediately following his death, the claim that Marlowe was an atheist, though not portrayed as a direct cause, was certainly played up as a factor. The three documents that most immediately accused him of atheism originated either from members of the government disinformation crew (an especially impressive bit of delving by Nicholl), or from Thomas Kyd, whose condemnations of Marlowe's atheism can be discounted as a desperate attempt to end his own sessions on the rack. Thus all contemporary references to Marlowe's atheism can be seen as “written

to order.” That is, all but one.

All scholars are agreed that it was Marlowe that Robert Greene harangued in *Greene’s Groatsworth of Witte*, as “thou famous gracer of tragedians” in an effort to stop him and two other playwrights – probably Nashe and Peele – from continuing to write for certain ungrateful actors. If it weren’t for *Greene’s Groatsworth* we might be satisfied with the conclusion that Marlowe’s reputed atheism was no more than a slander created by his murderers to justify his brutal death. But Greene’s warning has a genuine ring to it and since *Groatsworth* was published nine months before Marlowe’s death, it seems unlikely that it was connected with the later official campaign to tarnish his memory. Did Greene actually know something nine months before Marlowe’s arrest, or was his warning just a lucky shot?

The term *atheism* and what it meant in Marlowe’s day can be defined perhaps as any belief system or philosophy that wasn’t Christian – meaning Catholic, Anglican, evangelical or dissident – and since Catholics were condemned as pagan idolaters and dissidents as heretics, there was little room for an independent thinker. More to the point perhaps, charges of atheism were to the 16th-century English what charges of communism were to 20th-century Americans, a hot button used by politicians to rid themselves of rivals and enemies.

Marlowe’s atheism, if we must call it that, was certainly publicized by his killers to excuse his killing, but it could not have been the reason *why* he was killed. Had it been, his story would have ended with an execution similar to that of the Catholic activist Edmund Campion and other enemies of the State, bloody dramas performed to as large a public audience as possible as a warning. Had religion been the real issue there would have been no gathering of government agents, no faked argument over the bill, no need to drag him all the way to Deptford so that it would be the royal coroner who led the inquest. We can probably state with a fair amount of assurance that although Marlowe’s sexual bias and indifference to religion gave his killers sticks with which to beat his corpse, neither was the *reason* for his death.

Did His Killing Have Something to Do with Martin Mar-prelate?

Martin Mar-prelate was the pen name of a wickedly gifted satirist who began publishing anti-Church pamphlets in 1588. The authorities did what they could to stop him, not only because his calls to revolution threatened to reach all the way to the top levels of government, but also because he revealed embarrassing things about the Anglican bishops and seemed ready to publish more.

The hunt for Martin began right away, but it wasn’t until 1593 that a suspect, John Penry, was run to ground. Penry was known to be the chief printer of the Marprelate tracts, but most doubt that he had either the wit or the inside information to write the pamphlets himself – something he continued to deny to the end, claiming

that he never knew who actually wrote them. Returning secretly from Scotland the previous autumn in an effort to rejoin his religious community, Penry had managed to elude discovery until March 22nd of 1593, when he was finally nabbed by the authorities shortly before the anti-Marlowe libels were pasted on the wall of the Dutch Church. The rapidly-evolving chain of events that followed are of interest to anyone studying Marlowe.

Chronology of Penry/Marlowe events

- **April 10:** Penry is questioned by Richard Young and the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Whitgift, at Newgate Prison. The following day . . .
- **April 11:** Libelous tracts appear on the wall of the Dutch Church, so rousing that they push the Privy Council into taking action to discover the author or authors. These imitate Marlowe's style and refer to Tamburlaine. The following day . . .
- **April 12:** A paper is "discovered" during a supposedly random search of Thomas Kyd's lodgings. The authorities label it atheistical. Kyd, now in prison, identifies it as Marlowe's.
- **May 20:** Marlowe is brought before the Star Chamber for questioning by Burghley and Archbishop Whitgift, Penry's prosecutor. The following day . . .
- **May 21:** During his trial before the King's Bench, Penry continues to deny his authorship of the Martin tracts and begs Burghley for clemency, but (so we are told) Whitgift is set on vengeance. A week later . . .
- **May 29:** Penry is hurried to a remote location, and hanged in the courtyard of an inn on the Canterbury Road halfway to Deptford. The following day . . .
- **May 30:** Marlowe is "feasted" in Deptford, a feast – to take a phrase from his great contemporary – "not where he eats, but where he is eaten."

Was Marlowe the Author of the Mar-prelate Tracts?

How many writers could there have been in London capable of writing these brilliant and angry satires, that henceforth would set a standard for satirical writing? This was a question that the authorities must have asked themselves frequently over the four-year period while Martin had them under his ink-stained thumb. But Marlowe's style was nothing like Mar-prelate's, nor was he privy to Mar-prelate's inside information.

Was Marlowe Really Murdered?

It's also possible that Marlowe wasn't actually killed that day in Deptford, that his

death was a covert action designed to put a stop to his writing and explain his disappearance without resorting to murder. This is the opinion of Calvin Hoffman, whose thesis, published in 1955, offers an answer to certain otherwise difficult questions.

One of the oddities of the Marlowe story is the long wait – some ten hours – that the men spent in each other’s company before the killing took place. No scenario, whether of random violence or government sting can account satisfactorily for this ten hour wait before an action that could have been over in an hour. The only explanation is that they were waiting for something, a ship perhaps? Deptford was a port town that offered an easy passage out of the country. The arrival of a corpse to represent Marlowe? Penry’s perhaps? Both ship and corpse?

In any case, whether dead or transported, Marlowe’s voice, his sensibility, his rousing style, his almost operatic verse, were heard no more. Several works were published later under his name, but differences in style suggest that these may have not have been his.²⁹ Whatever the true scenario, one thing is certain, after May 30, 1593, there would be no new Tamburlaines to feed the public appetite for underclass heroes. Whether murdered or transported, Christopher Marlowe was silenced.

But why? And by whose orders?

Was It Raleigh?

It has been suggested by Dr. Samuel Tannenbaum (1926) and others that it was Sir Walter Raleigh who had Marlowe killed to prevent him from having to testify in Star Chamber regarding the “School of Night” that supposedly met at Durham House to discuss forbidden matters. Since Raleigh had no known connection with any of the killers, and since he was just as open about his occult studies as he was about most of what he did and never seemed to be paying much attention to possible repercussions, this seems unlikely. Raleigh was no Mr. Milquetoast, but murder was not his style.

In addition, all the documents of disinformation created to cast Marlowe’s removal in the light of national security, starting from the beginning with the Dutch Church libel, mentioned Raleigh and his circle in their implications of the dangerous spread of atheism, something that the intelligent Raleigh would certainly not have done to himself. Now that we have clear evidence that the Dutch Church libel was part of a covert government operation, we can guess that the finger of blame that points to Raleigh does so because it was fixed in his direction from the start.³⁰

Was It The Earl of Essex?

Based on a guess that Marlowe was questioned about Raleigh’s atheism in his Star Chamber hearing and had refused to testify against him, Nicholl goes to some length

to accuse Essex, chiefly because it was known that he detested Raleigh and so was seeking his destruction, a theory based, as Breight puts it, on “extremely thin evidence” (129). Not only has Nicholl no evidence that Raleigh’s name was brought up at Marlowe’s hearing, his thesis paints Essex as conspiring to destroy one of the Court’s leading lights purely out of spite. What Nicholl does show is that Marlowe’s murder was the work of professionals, which to my mind eliminates Essex. His one proven sting, the destruction of the Portuguese Jew, Dr. Lopez, was clumsy in the extreme. Had Essex been good at this sort of thing he would never have fallen into one trap after another himself as he would later.

Scholar Hugh Ross Williamson thinks Marlowe was killed because he refused to continue working for Poley, but it is simply not feasible that Poley would have dared to assassinate a government agent unless he had orders to do so. To assassinate someone who was undergoing investigation by the Star Chamber would certainly require orders from the highest level, and again, while Nicholl shows that all three of Marlowe’s assassins had previous connections with each other, there’s never been anything to show that Marlowe was one of them.

Whatever the full truth behind the Flushing sting and the Deptford “feast,” one thing can be stated with assurance: it would be very hard to finish Charles Nicholl’s book without becoming convinced that Marlowe was eliminated on someone’s orders; someone who was central to government intelligence networks, someone with enough authority to order it done, someone with the skill to manage it, and with the kind of influence to control the outcome so that no embarrassing questions ever surfaced, either at the time or for centuries afterwards.

Was It Robert Cecil?

All of Nicholl’s evidence points directly to Robert Cecil. Only he was in a position to bring it off and only he had the motivation for such an elaborate operation. Curtis Breight, in his *Surveillance, Militarism and Drama in the Elizabethan Era* (1996), provides voluminous citations proving that all of those involved in the assassination, killers and demonizers, were in the employ of either Lord Burghley or his son Robert Cecil, both before and after Marlowe’s death (127-171). Although Breight accepts the Marlowe as spy thesis, he’s one of the few who grasps that the reasons for the assassination were entirely political (134).

With Secretary Walsingham’s death in April of 1590, his network of undercover operatives and spies was left without a director. Burghley, who had created the office of Elizabethan Secretary of State, spies and all, and who had seen to it that Walsingham got the job in 1573 when he himself moved over to the Treasury, urged that the office be given to his son Robert, then in his thirties. But so great was the weight of dissent from leading officials and courtiers, Essex in particular – so nervous were

they about what a power bloc led by Robert Cecil could mean to themselves and England's future once the aging Queen was gone – that Elizabeth, at a loss, simply stalled.³¹ While the office of Secretary continued to remain vacant, Burghley simply added the paperwork to his workload as Lord Treasurer and other offices, passing the legwork on to his son. For this reason, by July 1596, when he was finally officially appointed, Robert Cecil had been Principal Secretary in everything but name for six years.

Following Walsingham's death, we're told that his spy network was dispersed, Poley remaining with Cecil, while his other top agent, Thomas Phelippes, transferred to Essex. Nicholl, and those whose research could not be done without access to the archives at Hatfield House, would like to make much of this, but common sense would urge that in fact Phelippes never left the team, pretending to work for Essex while reporting what he could about Essex back to Cecil. Bright cites evidence that Burghley employed Phelippes to do some deciphering work long after Phelippes had supposedly joined Essex's intelligence team. Indeed, Burghley asked Phelippes to do some intelligence work for him . . . within days of Marlowe's death (281 n1).

Why Was He Murdered?

Since it's Marlowe's writing, or its popularity, that is the single most important thing we know about him, one would think that his plays would be front and center in any effort to answer questions about his life. Sidetracked and befuddled by the spy allegation, hardly anyone has considered it, even in passing. Anyone but Curtis Bright that is, who sees Marlowe's *Edward II* as the obvious and immediate cause of the Cecils' wrath. Bright guesses that one of the two unnamed plays performed at Court by Pembroke's Men in the winter of 1592-93 was *Edward II*, but had that been the case it would have said so in 1594 on the play's title page, rather than just that it was "acted by Pembroke's Men in the Honorable City of London."

It's even more likely because the onstage torture of the King in Act 5, Scene 2 and his grisly murder in Scene 5 so grossly violates the unwritten rule against portraying the deposition or assassination of an anointed king.³² This was not the sort of thing that the Queen would ever have found entertaining; the Lord Admiral's Men may have been reckless, but they were not insane. The Queen would not have seen it, but the Cecils would certainly have known of it and would have been aware that anyone who could afford a penny in the "Honorable City of London" could have seen it. But Marlowe was either unaware of this rule, or more likely purposely ignored it.

As Bright quotes from another scholar, "Tamburlaine's assertion that, 'Nature . . . doth teach us all to have aspiring minds' "(150), might well be taken as encouraging the poor workers in his audience to rebel against their masters, a dangerous suggestion at a time when riots were breaking out all over London over high prices and

the bullying of citizens by government officials.³³ Tamburlaine was a godless infidel, but that does not alter the effect on his audience when he drives a cart across the stage pulled by two kings on their knees, as he shouts, “Holla, ye pampered jades of Asia! What? Can ye draw but twenty miles a day?” And although it’s supposed to be the Quran that he burns in Part II, that Marlowe’s usurper and murderer of kings ultimately dies peacefully of old age would suggest to his audience, who paid little attention to details like differences in Time and Place, that when it came to Tamburlaine’s sins, the Lord must have been looking the other way.

While the record has apparently been cleansed of anything that might lead future historians to this conclusion, common sense alone should suggest how the Cecils would have seen these plays.³⁴ Marlowe may have been warned by Robert Greene and others, but if so, it’s clear he paid no attention, for his final play, *The Massacre at Paris*, portrays the brutal onstage stabbing of the French Duc de Guise just five years earlier, and ends with the murder of Henri III.

When the Cecils and the more conservative members of the Privy Council saw how *Edward II* and *The Massacre at Paris* were pulling audiences off the streets day after day at the Rose they could hardly have been ignorant of the message he was sending to that dangerous social animal, the apprentices of London, nor to the power he was beginning to acquire, not only with the public, but also with certain members of the ancient nobility, who saw reflected in his plots their outrage against the cruelties perpetrated by the Crown against their fellow catholics.

If Marlowe wasn’t stopped now, later might be too late.

Did His Fellow Writers Leave Any Clues?

Unlike Shakespeare who appears to have said nothing at the time, three of the University Wits were quick to mention Marlowe’s passing. In a poem dedicated to his patron, Henry Percy, 9th Earl of Northumberland, apparently for the Garter Ceremony of June 26, 1593, George Peele speaks of the “unhappy end” of “Marley, the Muses darling.” In his book *Jack Wilton, the Unfortunate Traveller*, finished on June 27, 1593, a month after the assassination, it’s assumed by those accustomed to Nashe’s style, that when Nashe praises Pietro Aretino as “one of the wittiest knaves that ever God made,” and adds “his life he contemned in comparison of the liberty of free speech,” he was referring to the recently assassinated Marlowe.

While *Jack Wilton* wasn’t published until the spring of 1594, it seems that immediately following Marlowe’s murder, Nashe published instead the morose pseudo-religious *Christ’s Teares Over Jerusalem*, in which he refers to Marlowe as an atheist whose death was simply good riddance to bad rubbish. *Christ’s Teares* has caused some head-scratching by Nashe scholars, chiefly because it differs so markedly from anything else he ever wrote. Drenched in Calvinistic gloom and doom and with none of

the nonchalance of his other works, what caused Nashe to rush this miserable book into print ahead of the far more entertaining and better written *Unfortunate Traveler*? What caused him to so abruptly change his attitude, his public attitude at least, towards Marlowe in the weeks immediately following his murder?

Marlowe's Variable Reputation

For a good four years after the publication of *Jack Wilton* there is nothing (extant) in print about Marlowe. Then, in 1597 comes the first of what would be many references to him and to his death in works by puritans using what Nicholl calls “demeaning and dismissive” terms. These have set the tone for most of the printed references to Marlowe from then until the late 20th century. In 1598, the author of *Wits Treasury* (aka *Paladis Tamia*) – famous as the first mention of Shakespeare as the author of ten currently popular plays – repeats the official view of Marlowe while performing the same disservice for the recently deceased George Peele, claiming he died of the pox, a total fabrication according to Peele’s biographer David Horne. The usual imitators, repeating like parrots the official view of Marlowe’s character and his death, caused his reputation to sink ever lower as the years went by.

In 1598 however, perhaps as a reaction, a very different picture of Marlowe begins to appear: Marlowe the literary genius. That year, Blount’s publication of *Hero and Leander* refers to him in idealistic terms, while in *Lenten Stuff* Nashe returns to praising him. Two years later, Blount attributes Thomas Thorpe’s dedication of the translation of *Lucan* to Marlowe, and he also praises him, despite its oddly jesting tone. Over the years, these perceptions have continued to survive alongside each other until the present: Marlowe the celestial poet, Marlowe the atheistic sexual deviate, Marlowe the double-agent and spy. Modern biographers have been hard-put to weave these into a believable whole.

Shakespeare's Comment

Shakespeare’s references to contemporary personalities are generally so diffuse as to be hopeless of absolute identification, but he’s more obvious than usual in *As You Like It* when the shepherdess Phoebe declares her feelings for Ganymede by quoting Marlowe: “Dead shepherd, now I find thy saw of might; whoever loved that loved not at first sight?” Few dispute that this refers to a line from *Hero and Leander*, though consensus is lacking, as usual, on his reasons for the quote. It seems likely that it was one of a number of additions Shakespeare made to this play during his final years – additions that contribute nothing to the story but appear to be messages of a personal nature embedded in the text, intended for a coterie of insiders, even, perhaps, for future readers.

In another late addition to *As You Like It*, again as an aside that has nothing to do

with the plot, the banished Court jester Touchstone says: “When a man’s verses cannot be understood, nor a man’s good wit seconded by the forward child understanding, it strikes a man more dead than *a great reckoning in a little room*” (3.3.9-12, italics added). This comment has been chewed over by scholars for many years, again with no consensus. The fact that it is followed soon after by Touchstone’s comparison of himself to the Roman poet Ovid, exiled to the land of the barbaric Goths by the Emperor Augustus, suggests that Touchstone (*aka Shakespeare aka Oxford*) is drawing parallels between his own fate and that of Marlowe and Ovid, both “tongue-tied by authority” (Sonnet 66).

Whatever the purpose of such asides, and whoever the individual or group to whom they were addressed, there seems no doubt that Shakespeare is using *As You Like It* to make a point of some kind about Marlowe. The phrase “great reckoning” is a direct reference to “the reckoning,” the bill for the day’s refreshments, named in the coroner’s report as the cause of the quarrel that led to his death. The phrase “a little room” conflates the room in which Marlowe died with another famous Marlovian phrase, “infinite riches in a little room,” (from *The Jew of Malta*). Shakespeare appears to be saying that for a poet to be misunderstood – by his audience? by the authorities? – is another kind of death. It is the death of his work, the death of its value.

But why does he amplify “the reckoning” into a “*great* reckoning?” Is the reckoning *great* – in the sense of mighty or powerful rather than good – because of its deadly nature, because it was the *final* reckoning for a great poet? Or was the reckoning *great*, not because it was with a great poet, but in the sense that it was payback directed at an entire community of writers, the community to which Marlowe belonged? Was this perhaps why Nashe withdrew his ebullient *Jack Wilton* shortly after Marlowe’s death, rushing into print instead the morbid *Christ’s Teares*, with its effulgent condemnation of almost everything, including himself and the poet he couldn’t praise highly enough in just about every other reference he made to him? Was Shakespeare saying that “the reckoning” was meant to silence, not Marlowe alone, but the entire writing community? Was this why the University Wits began disappearing so soon after Marlowe’s death?

Hardly a commentator on Marlowe fails to note the strangely prophetic tone of the final sentence in Robert Greene’s *Groatsworth*, his warning to Marlowe to give up his atheistic ways, “for little knowest thou how in the end thou shalt be visited.” Was this no more than an oddly coincidental prophesy? Or did Greene have some special insight into the forces that were gathering against them all? Did he write as he did in a genuine effort to get the message through to his hard-headed protégé, perhaps in the only way he could?

“His life he contemned in comparison of the liberty of free speech,” wrote Nashe shortly after his demise. Of the circle of writers who knew Marlowe, and as one who more often than any other dared to speak the truth as he saw it, this forthright pro-

nouncement by Nashe should be taken at face value, no less because of his strange about-face in *Christ's Teares*, but perhaps even more because of it, if it reveals his fear that by skirting so near the surface of truth in his pamphlets he had, like Marlowe, been taking a deadly risk.

Greene may be telling us that Marlowe was silenced because of his free-thinking. Shakespeare (in *As You Like It*) may be telling us that he was silenced as a warning to other writers. Nashe may be telling us that he was silenced because he couldn't be controlled any other way. In any case, it achieved one result that most certainly has had a lasting effect on the development of English literature – to the eternal confusion of its critics and historians – which is that certain 16th-century playwrights and poets, unable to resist the compulsion to tell the truth about life as they saw it, were driven ever deeper into strategies for hiding their real identities. Marlowe's mistake, or perhaps simply his fate, was that unlike Shakespeare, he had no place to hide.

Conclusion

I would venture that the Dutch Church libel, which Nicholl asserts “can be seen as the opening move in the smear campaign against Marlowe,” was also the opening move in Robert Cecil's first big operation as the head of domestic intelligence. With the plague making an early and fierce appearance, the theaters were closed in February and everyone who could afford to leave town did so. With the nobility away in the country, the actors on the road, and the Court holed up at Greenwich, he could count on having a relatively free hand with a maneuver that at another time would have run into resistance from more liberal Court members (like Essex and Raleigh). The slanders were created by the crew he inherited. Robert Cecil's sting was calculated to demonstrate his muscle to those who were not ready to take him seriously. It was time to show the anti-establishment satirists and playwrights, and their noble patrons, who was now in charge.

As Nicholl shows, all three of Marlowe's killers, Frizer, Skeres, and Poley, had ties to either Burghley or his son Robert Cecil during this period. Once Walsingham was gone, Burghley could step back into the role of Court policeman, perhaps taking care of some matters that, in his view, Walsingham had let slide, perhaps even made possible, and he would train his son in the harsh realities of maintaining order at a Renaissance court, perhaps in a hands-on exercise of this sort. This seems not only possible, but it is the only possible explanation for Marlowe's murder and also that of his patron, Lord Strange, a year later (Wilson 172). England may have Burghley to thank in large part for her rise to power among the nations of the world, though it is unfortunate that among his many gifts was not included a greater appreciation of literature. As Hamlet said of Polonius, “He's for a jig or a tale of bawdry, or he sleeps” (*Hamlet*, 2.2.496).

Despite Nicholl's incessant flummery regarding how poets are inclined by nature to become spies he also wrote:

Amid all these ructions that attended the last years of Elizabeth and the first years of James, there is one figure who continued to rise, and to ride the troubled waters of his succession, who was indeed the principal prosecutor of Essex, Raleigh, and Northumberland in his role as Mr. Secretary. That is, of course, Sir Robert Cecil . . . he is the one that emerges from these years as the chief manipulator and broker of political power. . . . Also beneficiaries of James' favors were the Walsinghams, Sir Thomas and Lady Audrey

(333-34)

Perhaps faced with what he regards as a conclusion he dares not publish in England, Nicholl simply leaves it to the reader to arrive at the inescapable conclusion that it was Robert Cecil who was responsible for the violent end to the literary phenomenon that was Christopher Marlowe.

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Notes

- 1 The English Reformation that transformed the nation from Catholic to Protestant halfway through the 16th century, was a grim version of the Swiss or Calvinist form of Protestantism that eliminated all but a handful of the traditional holidays from the Church calendar leaving the public without the pleasures of their regular Saints Day feasts.
- 2 In the 1580s, the audience for plays was far greater than that for pamphlets since at that time it is estimated that only two to three percent of the population were literate.
- 3 The name William Shakespeare appears for the first time in a theatrical connection as one of the payees for the Lord Chamberlain's Men following their first season at Court, 1594-95. It had appeared in public for the first time two years earlier, in 1593, as a dedication on an inside page of *Venus and Adonis*, but only the tiny percentage of people who could read would have taken any notice.
- 4 The Dutton brothers who appear in leading positions in the developing theater scene of the early 1580s show connections to Oxford that are traceable at various points in the record. Lawrence Dutton was a payee for Oxford's company in 1580 (Chambers 2.100), John was a payee for the Queen's Men at their inception in 1583 (2.101), Lawrence joining later (2.107). Early versions of four of Shakespeare's early plays were produced by the Queen's Men plus a number of other early plays that would immediately be accepted as early Shakespeare were it not for the limitations imposed by Stratford-based dates.
- 5 In *Strange News of the Intercepting of Certain Letters* (1593) Nashe attempts to shame Harvey for his treatment of Robert Greene with the statement that Greene "would have drunk with thee for more angels than *the Lord thou libelst on gave thee in Christ's College*." This seeming non-sequitur was in response to Harvey's caricature of Oxford in his poem "Speculum Tuscanismo," published in 1580 in *Three Proper and witty . . . letters*. Harvey would defend himself later, claiming in *Four Letters and Certain Sonnets* (1593) that Oxford had taken the ribbing with Jovian aplomb, and that he had the right to address him since they'd been introduced by the son of Sir Thomas Smith, Harvey's patron and Oxford's old tutor (17). There are at least two similarly oblique references to Oxford in other Nashe pamphlets.
- 6 Oxford was clearly involved in the creation of the first two commercially successful public theaters in London, both having appeared shortly after his return from Italy in 1576: Burbage's big public stage in Shoreditch survived for 20 years, and the little rehearsal stage in the school for the Queen's Children of the Chapel known as the First Blackfriars Theater survived for 14 (Gurr Company 4).

- 7 That is, if, as we believe, he was the true author of plays like *Thomas of Woodstock*, *Edmund Ironside*, *King Leir and his Daughters*, or plays later attributed to Robert Greene such as *Friar Bacon*, *James IV*, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, or of *The Spanish Tragedy*, attributed to Kyd; or of the early quartos of Shakespeare's plays like *The Famous Victories*, the *True Tragedies*, the *True Contentions*, and many others.
- 8 As Spurgeon claims in her introduction, she embarked upon this painstaking and encyclopedic study on purpose to prove that neither of the claimants challenging William of Stratford at that time, Marlowe or Francis Bacon, could have been Shakespeare.
- 9 In his first words to the audience in *Tamburlaine*, Marlowe shows his disdain for the Queen's Men and the kind of humor that they were known for: "From jigg- ing veins of rhyming mother-wits and such conceits as clownage keeps in pay, we'll lead you to the stately tent of war . . ."
- 10 Their paths must have crossed on the stage of the Rose Theater in 1590-92, since plays by both writers were produced there within the same time period: Shakespeare's *Henry the Sixth* and *Titus Andronicus*, Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* and *Massacre at Paris*.
- 11 Lord Strange, heir to the Derby earldom, and Henry Percy, 9th Earl of Northumberland.
- 12 Largely due to the loss of his private papers, the orthodox view of Walsingham still sees him as little more than Elizabeth's "tough-fisted" spymaster, when in fact it was he who almost singly-handedly prepared England to defeat the Armada (Conyers Read). Walsingham was considered by the younger writers of the time as their Maecenas, their great patron, a facet of his biography almost totally ignored by historians.
- 13 One of our problems in connecting the plays in question with corresponding events is that the Academy treats history and literature as separate studies to the extent that almost no correspondence is ever drawn between the two, leaving history as little more than a dull recounting of dates, and literature as little more than myths and fables whose only external interest lies in which came first. This is unfortunate since literature could bring history to life and history could reveal the important role literature plays in human events.
- 14 The Dutton brothers, John and Lawrence, appear throughout this period in the role of payee and lead actor for companies either known to be Oxford's or as suggested by the available facts. Court scribes during this period rarely recorded the titles of plays, however there is one from the entry for that winter that records a play performed "by the Earl of Oxenford his boys on St. John's day" (Chambers 4.160. F 365) titled *The History of Agamemnon and Ulysses*, which sug-

gests an early version of *Troilus and Cressida*.

- 15 That Oxford was writing for the Queen's Men at this time I believe will be borne out when the Stratford biography no longer blocks a clear view. Evidence that points in that direction include the fact that titles performed by the Queen's Men in the 1580s include several early versions of Shakespeare plays, among them: *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, *The True Tragedy of Richard III*, and *King Leir* (McMillin 88-89).
- 16 Early versions of Shakespeare's history plays performed by the Queen's Men, created by Walsingham on purpose to tour the provinces, plays such as *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* and *The Troublesome Raigne of King John* suggest propaganda meant to arouse patriotism in audiences along the southern coast where the Spanish would be most likely to land.
- 17 We cannot be certain that it's Marlowe, but the circumstantial evidence is impressive. It was discovered in a pile of rubble outside the Master's Lodge at Corpus Christi, Marlowe's college, in 1952. Now hanging in the Master's Lodge, it does provide a date: 1585, and the age of the sitter: twenty-one – Marlowe's age in 1585. More information on the portrait can be found in Nicholl's book and also in A.D. Wright.
- 18 Gold buttons were a means of displaying the wealth of a gentleman. They were usually made with a metal loop on the back so a set like Marlowe's could be moved from little round button holes on one garment to those on another. Nicholl draws conclusions about Marlowe's personality from his pose and the size of his jacket, but this must be discounted since standard studio practice was to have the clothing painted by an apprentice. Marlowe having left the jacket with the artist, it would have been modelled by a clerk or another apprentice (the need to fill the space left on the canvas with just the arms and jacket would explain their out of scale size). That his hands are hidden has nothing to do with some aspect of his personality as Nicholl wants to believe; hands, being difficult to paint, would have added to the cost of the portrait. For the studio's leading artist to paint the entire portrait would have been very expensive.
- 19 In September 1589 records show that Marlowe was briefly jailed for having gotten into a sword fight in which another resident of Fisher's Folly, the poet Thomas Watson, also got involved (Watson *ODNB*). The fight occurred on Hog Lane, a long winding road that ran past both the Curtain Theater and the rear entrance to Fisher's Folly.
- 20 *Alphonsus*, *King of Aragon*, *Selimus*, *Orlando Furioso*, and *A Looking Glass for London*, all somewhat Marlovian in style, were all produced by the Queen's Men sometime in the '80s (McMillin 91). Generally attributed either to George Peele or

Robert Greene, *Alphonsus* in particular has been labelled an attempt by Greene to beat Marlowe at his own game (Ribner).

- 21 Even Charles Nicholl, who so enthusiastically subscribes to the Marlowe-as-spy theory, admits: “The only record of [Marlowe’s] early activities as an intelligencer is the certificate supplied by the Privy Council . . . in response to the particular problem of his MA” (110). But this says nothing about spying.
- 22 Coining and defecting were often linked because the catholics were supposedly desperate for money.
- 23 Since no one so far has ever come up with a background for “Gifford Gilbert,” the purported coiner, the strong likelihood is that this was the same Gilbert Gifford who in the mid-’80s was central to the entrapment of Mary Queen of Scots and Anthony Babington. While evidence is cited for Gifford’s death in a French prison in 1590, the name is simply too suggestive. If not Gifford himself, then it was someone who, for whatever reason, found it useful to call himself by this inversion of Gifford’s name.
- 24 Bright agrees: “It makes little sense that Baines would inform on Marlowe if they were working together on some government operation” (152).
- 25 Nicholl makes it clear that the atheistic tract found (or planted) in Kyd’s lodging was nothing more than a digest of Unitarian tenets copied from a book published many years earlier, and that the most inflammatory item in it was perhaps the notion that Jesus was a man of flesh and blood and not a supernatural being.
- 26 Having been incarcerated in 1597 for his involvement in *The Isle of Dogs*, Jonson mentions Poley later, as biographer Riggs suggests, as one of the “two damn’d villains” who entrapped him. Says Riggs, “the very mention of their names [by Jonson] reminds the reader that Jonson’s liberty is imperilled by state-supported surveillance and repression” (Riggs, *Jonson: A Life*, 231).
- 27 Nicholl’s persistent sleuthing reveals how all three men involved in Marlowe’s death were connected with each other through previous government stings and confidence rackets. Missing is any evidence for a previous connection with Marlowe.
- 28 With the death of Secretary of State Walsingham, Robert Cecil inherits Thomas Walsingham along with the rest of his agents. As soon as Cecil receives his appointment, Thomas turns up at Court, is appointed Justice of the Peace, is knighted, is granted a visit by the Queen, and is made Member of Parliament for Rochester and granted the reversion of the keepership of the Great Park at Eltham. With the accession of James and the rise of Cecil to total power, further perks come Walsingham’s way, largely it would seem through Cecil’s relationship

with his wife (*ODNB*). A court record states that when she died she left the world “only her ill name” (Wraight 261).

- 29 Following Marlowe’s death, various individuals saw to the publication under his name of translations of Ovid’s *Amores*, of Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, and the narrative poem *Hero and Leander*. The questionable histories of these works, the fact that none conform to the nature and style of Marlowe’s plays, and that all are flagrantly in violation of either the sexual or political mores of the period, suggest that somebody simply made use of his name and his posthumous reputation to get them published. It would be immensely helpful to have this issue properly examined, as these attributions may well have distorted our perception of who Marlowe was.
- 30 Nicholl traces this animus against Raleigh and Northumberland through the various documents created to blacken Marlowe’s reputation (291-93).
- 31 The Queen had run out of options; Sir Ralph Sadler had died in 1587, Leicester in ’88, Walsingham in 1590, and Hatton in 1591. In her aging eyes, none of the younger men, none but Cecil that is, had the necessary experience.
- 32 As Alfred Hart shows in his *Shakespeare and the Homilies* (1934), there was an unwritten but nevertheless potent prohibition against portraying the downfall of an anointed monarch on the stage, evidence of which can be seen by the fact that during Elizabeth’s reign *Richard II* was published in quarto three times without the deposition scene (Bullough 3.353); this because according to the Homily in question, required by law to be read aloud to the captive audience at Church once a year, to depose or kill an anointed monarch was a mortal sin that would inevitably bring down the wrath of God on the sinner and his entire community. Hart shows how faithfully Shakespeare conformed to this requirement throughout his career.
- 33 As reported by English Professor Chris Fitter and historians Barbara Freedman and Roger B. Manning, the 1590s were a violent period of political unrest.
- 34 Among the interesting gaps in the minutes of the Privy Council as noted by E.K. Chambers in *The Elizabethan Stage* (4.259), the period from August 1593 through October 1595, if intact, might have revealed something about Marlowe’s assassination and certainly would have had something to say about what it was that caused two members of the Council to create the Lord Chamberlain’s Men and the Lord Admiral’s Men.