

Death Put Off By Cunning and Forc'd Cause

David Chandler

It seems predictable that 1993, the 400th anniversary of Christopher Marlowe's death, should have inspired little new Marlowe scholarship but several more fictions, among them Anthony Burgess's *A Dead Man in Deptford*; Robin Chapman's *Christoferus or Tom Kyd's Revenge*; Judith Cook's *The Slicing Edge of Death*; and Liam Maguire's *Icarus Flying*. Even in the first decade after he died, interest in Marlowe's violent death threatened to outweigh interest in his work. But paucity of facts bred speculation, and speculation fiction. A trend was established that is clearly still alive after four hundred years.

While death has always provoked fiction, Marlowe's death in 1593 has itself been called a fiction. As early as the 17th Century there were suggestions that Marlowe had survived 1593. John Aubrey reported a tradition that it was Marlowe who was killed by Ben Jonson in 1598. But if Marlowe did survive 1593, what did he do? What did he write? The only answer that has ever been proposed was that he wrote "Shakespeare."

The idea began in inverted form with William Taylor of Norwich (1765-1836), in his youth a brilliant German specialist. In the 19th Century, new interest was taken in Marlowe's work (see Thomas Dabbs' excellent 1991 study, *Reforming Marlowe*). New interest in the work meant new interest in Marlowe's life, more speculation, and more fiction. In two articles that appeared in the *Monthly Review* in 1819 and 1821 Taylor suggested that "Marlowe" was "but a borrowed designation of the great Shakespeare, who disappears from all biographical research just at the moment when Marlowe first came on the stage; and who re-appears in his proper name in 1592, when a strange story was put in circulation that Marlowe had been recently assassinated with his own sword, which may be allegorically true."

Taylor provoked a great sensation, though found no critical support. But so shadowy a figure had Marlowe become that it was initially difficult to refute

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him. The three parts of *Henry VI* and *Titus Andronicus* were already being attributed to Marlowe by respected critics, so single authorship of both the Marlowe and Shakespeare canons was not too far-fetched an idea. Taylor prepared the way for later Marlowe-wrote-Shakespeare theories by showing that the canons fitted neatly together: Marlowe's "allegorical" death preceded publication of *Venus and Adonis*, the "first heir" of William Shakespeare's "invention," by a few months.

Taylor's paradox¹ brought the long era of Marlowe's obscurity to an end. Within a few months James Broughton, a literary antiquary, had been inspired to check the Deptford parish register for "some record of Marlowe's burial." He was successful. Modern Marlowe scholarship was born.

Over the next three decades Broughton, John Payne Collier and Alexander Dyce assembled a reasonably complete and accurate biography of Marlowe that was not substantially modified until Leslie Hotson published his seminal *Death of Christopher Marlowe* in 1925. The new biography was still undecided about Marlowe's death, but 19th Century commentators tended to favor Francis Meres's 1598 account. Meres had fictionalized with cool deliberateness to create a parallel: "as the poet Lycophron was shot to death by a certain rival of his; so Christopher Marlowe was stabbed to death by a bawdy serving man, a rivall of his in his lewde love." Victorian dramatists who treated Marlowe's death—R.H. Horne, W.L. Courtney, J.D. Hosken—followed this critical preference but cleaned the story up. The "lewde love" became a chaste, ideal lover, union with whom is prevented by cruel Fate.

William Gleason Zeigler, a San Francisco attorney, accepted this idealized version for his 1895 novel: *It Was Marlowe*. But Zeigler added a new twist, quite appropriate to the 1890s. For, since 1856, a loud minority had proclaimed Francis Bacon's authorship of the Shakespeare canon. As with most such theories, the negative side of the "Baconian" case was more convincing than the positive. By 1890, the pretensions of Shakespeare of Stratford to authorship of the works published under his name were widely mocked, and a host of other "authorship" candidates began to be posited. *It Was Marlowe* was historically the first to make a case for Marlowe, thus reversing Taylor's suggestion of 1819.

Somewhat ironically, because of his unashamedly fictional presentation, Zeigler has since gained the vituperation even of those who have adopted his theory. But he initially considered the "authorship question" from a critical point of view, favoring Marlowe on grounds of proven dramatic genius, stylistic parallels, and a "like spirit." Examining the "contradictory" early reports of Marlowe's death, Zeigler felt they hid a greater mystery. He naturally paid most attention to Aubrey's tantalizing suggestion that Marlowe was still alive in 1598. Unfortunately, he found not a shred of evidence that pointed to

Marlowe's living beyond 1593. So after carefully studying the Elizabethan period, he set about a fictional reconstruction of what *might* have happened.

In *It Was Marlowe*, the dramatist, fresh from the success of *Edward II* but in trouble because of charges of blasphemy being brought against him, meets his former lover Anne, now the much suffering wife of "Francis Frazer." Anne is still in love with Marlowe but too virtuous to leave Frazer. Frazer discovers them together and with drawn sword instantly attacks Marlowe (who he assumes is planning an elopement with Anne). Marlowe draws his own sword to defend himself and succeeds in stabbing Frazer through the eye.

For a moment, the horrified lovers believe all is lost, but Anne suggests an audacious plan that is quickly developed by Marlowe. Both Frazer and Marlowe are strangers in Deptford and of similar appearance and build. Moreover, Frazer's face is now bloodied and distorted. So Marlowe swaps clothes with the corpse and goes into hiding. At the inquest the following day, Anne identifies the dead man as Christopher Marlowe. Marlowe has a legal friend who ensures the proceedings are rapidly brought to a close and the corpse buried locally.

Deliberately leaving *Hero and Leander* unfinished, Marlowe devotes himself to writing in his hidden chamber in London. He has a few theatrical friends, including the actor Will Shakespeare. These are in on the secret, and arrange for Marlowe's work to be passed on to theatrical managers by Shakespeare, who will silently accept credit for the work. Marlowe tries desperately to change his style but the early "Shakespeare" plays are so Marlovian as to cause suspicion in some quarters that he is still alive. His continued existence in London eventually becomes too dangerous and he leaves for the continent. Despite the advice of friends he returns in 1598 to witness the success of *Hamlet*, in which Shakespeare is playing the Ghost. He is recognized by jealous Ben Jonson. With abrupt effectiveness, Zeigler concluded his novel here, leaving the final denouement to the readers's imagination and avoiding the awkward question of whether it was possible for Marlowe to have written the entire Shakespeare canon by 1598. The fairest thing to say about *It Was Marlowe* is that though its "rivals in love" plot was Victorian fabrication, the argument as a whole is as convincing and certainly more entertaining than that of other books of the period purporting to "identify" Shakespeare.

"Did Marlowe Write Shakespeare?" was the provocative title of an article in *Current Literature* for February 1902. It was written by the widely respected Thomas Corwin Mendenhall. Professor of Physics at Ohio State University, Mendenhall had developed an early method of authorial "fingerprinting," based on word length. Having read *It Was Marlowe*, he applied his tests to check Zeigler's theory. The apparent correlation between Shakespeare's style and Marlowe's that was revealed, "produced something akin to a sensation

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among those actually engaged in the work.” Zeigler’s intuition now seemed supported by hard scientific fact, even though Mendenhall judiciously abstained from any conclusive statement respecting Marlowe’s authorship and consequent need to survive 1593.

Strangely enough, given the number of books appearing on the “authorship question,” further support for Marlowe was a long time coming. In 1923 an attempt was made to attribute Shakespeare’s sonnets to Marlowe, but this could be done without needing to fictionalize further the circumstances of Marlowe’s death. Meanwhile, in the world of orthodox scholarship, Leslie Hotson’s 1925 *Death of Christopher Marlowe* opened a new era in biographical studies of Marlowe. But publication of the official documents respecting Marlowe’s death still left so much room for speculation that in closing one era of fictional reconstructions, Hotson unwittingly opened another.

The first to deny that Hotson’s discoveries proved Marlowe to have died in 1593 was Gilbert Slater. Looking at the new evidence presented by Hotson and almost simultaneously by Eugenie De Kalb, Slater was incredulous that Thomas Walsingham, given his closeness to Marlowe (Walsingham was the eventual dedicatee of *Hero and Leander*, the dedication to which referred to the “many kind favours” he had shown Marlowe), should have continued to employ Marlowe’s murderer, Francis Frizer. Slater’s own suggestion was that Frizer and Marlowe were both part of a scheme of Walsingham’s to fake Marlowe’s death so that Marlowe could assume a new identity for top secret espionage missions abroad. It was also a friendly gesture to protect Marlowe from the charges of blasphemy and treason brewing against him at home. Walsingham was, in Slater’s view, sufficiently influential to ensure that the coroner and carefully selected jury identified another corpse as Marlowe’s and have it promptly buried. Zeigler’s idea of a wrongly identified corpse was to prove his most enduring legacy.

Slater did not claim Marlowe as sole author of the Shakespeare canon. His own theory—advanced in *Seven Shakespeares* of 1931—was that they were the work of a group of writers: Francis Bacon, Marlowe, William Stanley, Roger Manners, Edward de Vere, Walter Raleigh, and the Countess of Pembroke. It was an ambitious attempt to reconcile the warring factions of “anti-Stratfordians.” Marlowe was needed by the group, Slater suggested, because none of the others had practical experience of writing for the theater.

It was in the 1930s that Calvin Hoffman, a Canadian theater critic, arrived independently at the conclusion that Marlowe must have written the Shakespeare canon. He was then in his late 20s and from that moment dedicated his life to establishing proof. It is probably fair to say that if anyone today has a vague idea that Shakespeare’s plays have been attributed to Marlowe, it is due to the

indefatigable labors of Hoffman.

Yet Hoffman's main work on the subject, *The Man Who Was Shakespeare*, published in 1955 after 19 years of research, offered little that was new. Hoffman claimed that it was only after 12 years that he came across Zeigler's book (an astonishing confession given that Hotson had referred to it), dismissed it as a "cinematic thriller," and then unscrupulously claimed to be the first to propose Marlowe as the sole author of the Shakespeare canon. But he repeated arguments already put by Taylor, Zeigler, and Slater, though owning only Mendenhall (whom Hoffman rebuked for not having the courage of his convictions) as a predecessor.

Despite sneering at Zeigler's "cinematic thriller," the heart of Hoffman's own book falls back on what he admitted was a "fictional reconstruction." Like Slater, Hoffman put the greatest emphasis on Thomas Walsingham who, he argued at length, was Marlowe's lover and the recipient of the sonnets ("Mr. W.H." = Walsingham). He assumed Frizer was more likely to have been involved in his employer Walsingham's plot to save Marlowe from a likely death penalty for treason and blasphemy, than to kill him. Frizer and friends Skeres and Poley thus killed an innocent who could be identified as Marlowe. But Hoffman played down the espionage angle as much as he played up the homosexual one. In Hoffman's "fictional reconstruction," Marlowe goes into Italian exile, from where he sends his plays to Walsingham. Walsingham has them copied and passed on to the theater through William Shakespeare, who is paid to cooperate.

Hoffman's book was dismissed in the Times Literary Supplement as "a tissue of twaddle," but the very existence of such reviews indicates the stir he had created. It seems to have been felt on all sides that *The Man Who Was Shakespeare* would be decisive one way or the other. Would it win a large cult following such as the "Baconians" had enjoyed in the Nineteenth Century? Or sink into oblivion as the last ineffective championship of a lost cause? In fact, neither happened; Hoffman won a small following, dedicated in the way small anti-establishment groups are. There was some published support and some proposed modifications of Hoffman's "fictional reconstruction." One of these was so outlandish as to deserve separate treatment.

William Honey was convinced by the main premise of Hoffman's book, but not its detail. His own research began with an examination of Shakespeare's epitaph: Good friend for Jesus sake forbear, / to digg the dust enclosed here: / bleste be the man that spares thes stones, / and curst be he that moves my bones. Honey found that this was a regular anagram that, interpreted with a few licences permitted by William Camden in his 1605 remarks on anagrams, actually read:

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Good friend who wishes for Shakespeare
to digge the dust: entombed heae:
playes by the man, verses hys sonnets
and Chrystopher Marlowe's bones.

"The solution was so easy that I was amazed no one had arrived at it before me," Honey added. "In order to account for the presence of Marlowe's body in Stratford-upon-Avon, it now becomes necessary to hypothesize one extraordinary characteristic about the actor Shakespeare. He was remarkably like Marlowe to look at: so like him, indeed, that he might have been taken for his twin."

Accept that and the rest follows. It was not just any corpse that was identified as Marlowe's in 1593: it was the corpse of William Shakespeare, the "upstart crow" who had angered the professional playwrights with his plagiarisms and bombast. He was lured to his death in Deptford by Walsingham's men. Marlowe "would then furtively, possibly at dead of night, have made his way to Shakespeare's lodgings and installed himself." After a few weeks of feigned illness he appeared to the world as Shakespeare. Theatrical friends not easily gulled countenanced the deception because of the likely commercial success of Marlowe's work, and when he eventually visited Stratford, old John Shakespeare was bribed into silence with money and a coat of arms.

Honey's *The Shakespeare Epitaph Deciphered*, from which the above is quoted, was written in 1964 and published in 1969. Honey's 1,400-page sequel, *The Life, Loves, and Achievements of Christopher Marlowe Alias Shakespeare*, vastly expanding the conclusions of the earlier book, was privately published in 1982. 1993 would have been as good a year as any to produce a "fictional reconstruction" that allowed Marlowe to walk away from Deptford. Yet so far none has appeared.

In his brilliant study of Marlowe's death, *The Reckoning*, Charles Nicholl dismissed the idea that Marlowe survived the Deptford incident to write Shakespeare as a "false trail" that "is no kind of trail at all." Perhaps not, but the assumption that if Marlowe lived beyond 1593 he wrote Shakespeare, and if he didn't write Shakespeare then he must have died in 1593, suggests the extent to which the tradition recorded here has entered popular belief. If the "fictional reconstructions" of how Marlowe survived 1593 are to be dismissed on these grounds, then they have truly been hoist with their own petard.

Notes

1. For a more detailed examination of William Taylor's 1819 paradox and its context, see my article: "Marlowe: A Hoax by William Taylor," in *Notes and Queries* 41 (June 1994 New Series): 2.