

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* (1594)

The Oxfordian thesis has forced us into areas of psychology, biography and history—English, Continental and literary history—that we would not have had to deal with if it were not that Shakespeare’s identity has proven so mystifying. Seeking the truth about the author of the world’s most important and influential literary canon has forced us to examine the facts surrounding the production of other literary works at the time, facts that demonstrate that Shakespeare’s biography is not the only one rife with anomalies. A good two dozen of these exhibit the same sort of problems we find with the Stratford biography. Although the biography of the greatest of Shakespeare’s predecessors, Christopher Marlowe, holds together far better than most of these, his death remains as much a mystery as Shakespeare’s identity. Could these two great literary mysteries be related?

Birth of the Media, the Fourth Estate

It was during the period when Marlowe was writing, the decade from 1583 to 1593, that the modern commercial theater was born in England. By “modern commercial theater” we mean the kind of theater that takes place in a permanent structure meant solely for theatrical performance, that opens its doors to the public on an almost daily basis, and that does not rely on aristocratic patrons or government officials for financing, but can pay its taxes and support its owners, managers and the companies that act in it entirely on the proceeds of ticket sales to members of the public at large.

For centuries theater had been produced either at Court and in noble households by courtiers and nobles for their own holiday entertainment, enacted by choirboys, musicians or other members of the household who had other duties the rest of the time. At the other end of the social scale, rural and small town communities were entertained by travelling companies in churches, the courtyards of inns, village commons or the halls of trade guilds, by actors who were often little better than beggars in costume.

Burbage’s Theatre, built in 1576, was a beginning, but it wasn’t until Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine*, with Edward Alleyn in the lead role, exploded on the London scene in 1587 that theater could be seen by actors, playwrights and theatre owners as having real potential for a dependable yearround living.

This same period also saw the first glimmers in the publishing business of what would eventually evolve into modern journalism. Penny ballads—single sheets that put current news items and scandals to the words of well-known tunes—had been in production for many years, but these functioned intellectually at the level of comic strips and,

commercially, at the level of peanut vending. What we would regard as true journalism, or one form of it—an inexpensive format consisting of commentary and exchanges between writers, exchanges that generated enough interest among readers that publishers found it profitable—did not take place until the pamphlet war launched by Martin Marprelate in the late 1580s created an audience that, once it found itself, was eager to support storytellers and satirists like Robert Greene and Thomas Nashe. Their pamphlets can be seen as the first magazines and they as the first modern English journalists.

This burst of popular enthusiasm for the stage, and to a lesser extent, for the booksellers stalls¹ created a situation whereby their producers could live, or at least could hope to live, exclusively on the proceeds of a very large number of very small transactions, a significant first in history. From now on, writing for the public would be driven more and more by popular demand than by the propagandistic or didactic concerns of wealthy patrons or official producers of Court, Church, school or civic entertainment. Thus the people's hunger for entertainment and their enthusiasm when they found it gave birth to the popular media, the commercial stage and press, that would play such important roles in time to come in creating a home environment where democratic forms of government could gradually grow and be accepted (Hughes, *Hide Fox*).

The importance of this new development, the tremendous power that it represented, may have taken awhile to sink in; but officials of Court and City realized soon enough these new forms threatened a substantial loss of control. That this frightened them is evidenced by their efforts to control the press through licensing and censorship, and their many efforts to close down, or at least control, the theaters (Chambers 2.236 et seq.).

Oxford's name pops up in the theater and publishing records during this period with a greater frequency than before or later. We see him stepping in to lease the first Blackfriar's Theater in 1583 when it was in danger of being lost as a performance venue. He surfaces as patron of at least three companies that perform at Court and in the provinces during the '80s, one of boy actors, one of adult actors, and one of musicians. His companies dominate the revels at Court for the 1583/84 and 1584/85 seasons (Chambers 2.99-102). In the early '90s his name is dragged into the Nashe-Harvey pamphlet duel at least twice for reasons that are far from obvious.

At the end of the 1580s comes the first occurrence in the public record of the name Shakespeare in a theatrical connection, a name that will appear a year later in a list of shareholders of the Lord Chamberlain's men.² Scanning the big picture for signs of long

¹ Lesser because everyone can understand a play, but few could read well enough to enjoy a pamphlet. This meant that the pamphlet audience consisted for the most part of those at the upper level of the socio-economic ladder.

² The name *William Shakespeare* appears for the first time under the dedication to Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton of *Venus and Adonis*, published in April, 1593, a little over a month before Marlowe's disappearance. It appears for the first time in a theatrical connection as one of the payees for the Lord Chamberlain's men in their first season at Court, 1594/95.

term change, the appearance of this name in these two places, a name that would come to dominate all of English literature in later centuries, could be said to mark the end of this gestation period of obvious upheaval, and the beginning of a decade of apparent stability in both the theater and publishing that would continue until the end of Elizabeth's reign.

Unfortunately the decade from 1583 to 1593 is also one of the most difficult to see clearly. There are some facts, names, and dates, but not enough to get a reliable picture of the forces that propelled events. There are obvious signs of controversies and rivalries, but the essentials (like people's names!) remain out of reach. Oxford loses his financial clout and disappears from literary view. The identity of Martin Mar-prelate, the point of the Nashe-Harvey pamphlet duel, any explanation at all for the abrupt disappearance of the University Wits, remain hidden under clouds of conjecture. That these mysteries are due purely to the ravages of time or the loss of original documents seems unlikely.

The University Wits

The most intriguing of these mysteries may be the fate of the writers dubbed by later scholars the *University Wits*. These include Robert Greene, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe, George Peele, Thomas Watson, Thomas Lodge, Thomas Kyd, plus several lesser lights—all (relatively) young and all with connections to one of the universities. All surfaced in London at some point during the '80s and all had all disappeared from the writing scene by the middle of the '90s. That the entire group had appeared and then vanished within the same time-frame like a crop 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 the same kinds of anomalies that weaken the Stratford biography. Although most of them came from backgrounds similar to the Stratford Shakespeare, most of their works show the same familiarity with aristocratic themes, games, Court protocols, etc., that cause us to question the Stratford biography. Contemporary references to most of them are ambiguous at best—at worst impossible to reconcile with sober reality. The one thing that most have that Shakespeare doesn't is a provable connection to a university. For the rest of it their biographies are just as problematic as his.³

Since there also exists at the same 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 as qtd. by Ogburn 401), authorship scholars must consider the possibility that William of Stratford was not the only standin, but was perhaps one of a number of individuals with similar backgrounds who functioned as standins for those members of the

³ Writers normally included among the University Wits and the periods when they were writing are: John Lyly: 1578–1592, George Peele: 1581–95, Thomas Watson: 1582–1592, Robert Greene: 1583–1592, Thomas Lodge: 1589–96, Thomas Kyd: 1586–1594, Christopher Marlowe: 1587–1593, and Thomas Nashe: 1589–1596.

Court who wished to see their works in print, but who didn't wish (or dare) to reveal their identities. Was Marlowe one such?

Marlowe's importance

It may be that Christopher Marlowe had more to do with the breakthrough of theater into true commercial success than any other single individual. Of course without the talent of the popular actor Edward Alleyn his scripts would not have been nearly so popular and without the entrepreneurial skills of Alleyn's father-in-law and partner, Philip Henslowe, owner and manager of The Rose theater, 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 vehicle for Alleyn to bring in the crowds night after night, willing to pay again and again to see Tamburlaine thunder down his adversaries, and in the process, show all concerned that, given the right elements, theater could be a very profitable industry.

Oxford, if he was who we think he was, was equally important, having set things up by creating the first public stage in 1576, and providing most of the best plays until then.⁴ Oxford's plays were popular, but he hadn't yet acquired the common touch that gave the shoemaker's son the edge with the public audience. It may be that, although Oxford (we believe) taught Marlowe the craft of writing plays, it may have been Marlowe who taught Oxford how to reach, if not the most important audience of his day, certainly the largest.

Was Marlowe a standin for a Court writer?

The fact that Marlowe and Shakespeare, the Shakespeare of this period at any rate, frequently sound so much alike forces us to consider the possibility that what has been divided by publishers is, in fact, a single voice; in other words that Oxford may have used Marlowe as a standin before he began using Shakespeare. Yet even with the many similarities, sometimes so far as identical phrasing, so many important and fundamental differences can be found between them that even on the basis purely of style and content it seems unlikely.

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

⁴ That is, if, as we believe, he was the true author of plays later attributed to Robert Greene: *Friar Bacon, James IV, Edmund Ironside, Thomas of Woodstock*; Thomas Kyd: *The Spanish Tragedy*; and Shakespeare: *Famous Victories, Titus Andronicus, The True Tragedy, The True Contention*, etc..

clown that Shakespeare delighted in might go against the grain. Had Shakespeare written the clown parts in *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 rapidfire dialogue; Marlowe's a rhythmic and hypnotic rising, rising, rising, like an operatic aria, to a climax. Clearly these are two separate voices. If there are crossovers of style and content, of phrases shared in common, the explanation must be found in some period when they worked together.

Seemingly fairly equal in skill at the time that we first catch glimpse of them, they were different in just about every other way.⁵ Unlike Shakespeare, there is ample evidence that Marlowe had the necessary education to write the works attributed to him. Unlike Shakespeare, Marlowe's works reflect his nature as portrayed by his origins and the incidents of his life. Unlike Shakespeare, his most popular heroes 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. Tamberlaine, who wants to conquer everything, and Faustus, who wants to know everything, were heroes for that intensely ambitious new middle class into which Marlowe was thrusting himself through his writing—while Barrabas, the money-lender who wants to own everything, was its villain.

Marlowe's audience

This burgeoning class, surging into prominence with the sudden growth of the modern market economy, needed role models. Neither the timeless folk myths that sustained the yeomanry—such as Robin Hood or George á Greene—nor the pastoral myths of chivalry that fueled the psyches of the ruling class could have much meaning for the new middle class. The author himself, as a writer forced to live by his wits and the son of a man who lived by the work of his hands, was clearly a member of this class.

It was Marlowe who had the kind of Horatio Alger genius that the orthodox scholars claim for Shakespeare, 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 themes call on classic ideals of chivalry far more frequently and intensely than they do on Christian mores, there is no trace of chivalric ideals, either pro

⁵ Caroline Spurgeon lists a number of differences between their separate voices in Chapters II and III of her book, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What it Tells Us*.

(thematic) or con (satiric), in any of Marlowe's works. What they do exhibit, over and over, are ironic references to such ideals.

In fact, Marlowe's world-view is in almost all points the diametric opposite to 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 slanders of atheism directed at Marlowe shortly after his death were exaggerations made to order by those who needed to portray his death as a boon to society—but taken for what they're worth, they strengthen our impression of this writer as a man not contented with the narrowly 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.

With the little we know for sure at this time, we can only guess at the kind of relationship that might have existed between the two playwrights, but one thing we can be sure of, there was—there had to have been!—some sort of relationship. Their world was simply too small for these two powerful voices not to be keenly aware of each other. That being the case, their influence on each other must have been at least as vital as the rest of the elements that stimulated their individual achievements. 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 in which they vied for the public's favor on the stage of the Rose Theater—the period when they sound so much alike, and when, together, they helped give birth to the English commercial stage, a brief period of some five or six years—each measured himself against the other.

Like knives, Marlowe and Shakespeare sharpened their skills on each other, if not directly, one-on-one, over a bowl of sack at the Steelyard, surrounded by a group of admirers, or in some even more direct relationship, then 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.⁶ 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 didn't get the chance.⁷

⁶ If nowhere else, their paths must have crossed on—or near—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 VI plays and *Titus Andronicus*, and Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* and *Massacre at Paris*.

⁷ Marlovians, those who believe Marlowe wrote Shakespeare, wish to see him as escaping from his captors and returning to write the Shakespeare canon, but the evidence for this is virtually nonexistent.

So, although there remain many unanswered questions, in comparison with the kinds and amounts of questions and anomalies that swarm around Shakespeare and the University Wits we feel secure in accepting Marlowe as what he appears to be, a poet of stunning talent who ascended on a rapidly rising tide of external circumstance in a few short years to a height of popularity and influence a quantum leap from his origins; a shoemaker's son who, when he got into hot water, could casually use the names of the cream of the peerage as character references⁸ and who, at the height of his success—much like one of his own heroes—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, and Calvin Hoffman have left no doubt (in my mind) 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, there are very few in agreement on why he was killed or who was behind it. Even Charles Nicholl, who delves most deeply into the records surrounding Marlowe's death in his 1992 book *The Reckoning*, cannot, or will not, accept the simple truth as it appears so clearly from his collected data.

Marlowe's biography

A shoemaker's son from the cathedral town of Canterbury, educated at first by means of a scholarship intended to provide the Canterbury Cathedral choir with boy singers,⁹ and then at Cambridge by means of a scholarship for poor but promising students from Canterbury,¹⁰ orthodox opinion holds that Marlowe arrived in London shortly after receiving

More important, this scenario simply does not fit on all but one or two of the many levels of the multidimensional puzzle that is the Shakespeare authorship question.

⁸ When questioned by Sir Robert Sidney in Flushing on charges of counterfeiting, Marlowe felt secure in using the names of the Earl of Northumberland and Lord Strange as character references.

⁹ Marlowe was the recipient of the recently-endowed Matthew Parker scholarship to Cambridge, which required that he be able to sight-read music and sing solfeggio, and that he study to be a clergyman. Marlowe enrolled at Corpus Christi in 1580, three weeks before Christmas, at age seventeen, three years older than the average freshman. On Palm Sunday, 1584, Marlowe got his B.A., 199th out of 231; in July, 1587 he received his M.A.

¹⁰ It's thought that Marlowe's benefactor was Sir Roger Manwood, who may have suggested him for a scholarship to the King's School two weeks short of the upper age limit, fifteen. Known to history as a corrupt justice of the Queen's Bench, though a philanthropist in his home town, Manwood had connections with the Walsingham family, who feature in Marlowe's story, and who were also from Kent. Long after our story ends, Thomas Walsingham's son married Manwood's granddaughter (Wright 35).

his Masters degree at the age of twenty-three, sometime after July of 1587; that he began writing for the theater right away, perhaps even with a play or two ready for production on his arrival; and that his first play in London was the super-hit, *Tamburlaine*, performed later that year.¹¹ In the five years following *Tamburlaine*, Marlowe produced one hit after another; roughly one a year from 1587 to 1592.

When the Cambridge dons balked at giving Christopher his Masters degree in '87, presumably because they suspected that his prolonged absences from Cambridge were due to his having journeyed to Rheims, a stronghold of Catholic dissent on the Continent, the Privy Council overrode their decision with a letter stating that Marlowe was engaged in important service for her Majesty.¹² This interference in affairs related to a poor scholarship student, together with his frequent absences during the last three years of his studies, has led scholars to conclude that Marlowe was spying for Principal Secretary Walsingham (Breight 111).

Since there is no indication of any such activity on his part until January of 1592 at the earliest, it seems far more likely that his absences from college during those years were periods when this gifted young scholar and playwright was testing his writer's wings in London.¹³ The Privy Council would have been just as concerned over the need for artful propaganda as they were for ordinary spies.¹⁴ When examined closely, it becomes apparent that the periods of Marlowe's absences from Cambridge correspond exactly to the times when plays were being prepared, rehearsed, and produced for the Court. In any case, it seems unlikely on the face of it that the government would train someone as

¹¹ According to E.K. Chambers, a production of Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage* was produced in Ipswich and Norwich in August.

¹² Among the members of the Privy Council present when the letter on Marlowe's behalf was sent to Cambridge University in 1587, were Lord Burghley, who had passed along his control of the spy network to Sir Francis Walsingham, Henry Hunsdon, Lord Chamberlain of the Household, responsible for providing entertainment at Court, and John Whitgift, Archbishop of Canterbury, soon to be needing the help of writers for the pamphlet war with Martin Mar-prelate.

¹³ In March of 1583 it was Sir Francis Walsingham who was given the authority to form the Queen's Men from the best of the current playing companies. Chambers attributes this to the fact that Lord Chamberlain Sussex, whose task it would normally have been, was too ill at that time (he died a few months later). Nevertheless it puts the spymaster at the center of the formation of the Queen's official company of actors, the one that would rule the boards in both the Court and the City for the rest of the decade.

¹⁴ The Lord Chamberlain of the Household was the Court officer in charge of entertaining the Queen and the Court. In 1583, the Earl of Sussex, who had been Lord Chamberlain since 1578, became ill. At his death in 1583, his office passed to Lord Howard of Effingham, soon after to be patron of the Lord Admiral's men, the company that put *Tamburlaine* and Edward Alleyn in the history books. (*Tamburlaine*, published in 1590, claimed on its title page that it was "showed upon Stages in the City" by the Admiral's men.) In 1585, Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, was appointed Lord Chamberlain to take Sussex's place. Ten years later he would be patron of The Lord Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare's company.

gifted as Marlowe to spy when his native talents could be put to much better use doing the kind of thing no ordinary agent could do.

In the Spring of 1583, Oxford acquired the lease of Blackfriars which he then passed along to his secretary John Lyly. Officially Blackfriars was used to rehearse plays for production at Court. After two years of banishment for impregnating a Maid of Honor, Oxford was officially reinstated at Court on June 1, 1583. That same year he combined the Children of Her Majesty's Chapel with the Children of Paul's, known variously in the records as Oxford's Boys, Paul's Boys, or the Earl of Oxford's Company (Chambers 101). The holiday seasons of 83/84 and 84/85 at Court consisted solely of plays by the Queen's Men and Oxford's boys. If, as we think obvious, Oxford was also writing for the Queen's Men at that time, then it should also be clear that he was in total charge of entertainment at Court for those two years.¹⁵

Fears of Spain and Jesuit infiltrators drove the Crown to fund Walsingham's growing intelligence operation to the tune of £2000 per annum the summer of 1585, at which time, not surprisingly, a number of sleazy characters began to appear in the records in connection with undercover work for the government. Oxford was busy with military matters that summer; first in petitioning the Queen and Burghley to send him to the low countries; then in going; and then almost immediately returning—his promised post transferred to his ancient rivals, Leicester and Sidney.

The following summer of 1586, Oxford himself is allotted a grant of £1000 per annum in the Privy Seal Warrant, the next item after Walsingham's grant. Although the purpose of the annuity as stated in the warrant was to finance an appropriate lifestyle for one of England's premiere earls, it could easily have been intended as well to assist him with his efforts to propagandize against the Spanish in the theaters and the printshops.¹⁶

It is also at this time that the names of the University Wits begin to appear in the records in much the same way that the names of undercover agents began to appear with the funding of Walsingham's Secret Service. Similarly, Marlowe's absences from school began in late 1584 and cover eight to nine week intervals throughout 1585 until he

¹⁵ It was not the habit of Court scribes during this period to note the names of the plays presented, but the single notation that does give the name of a production performed by one of Oxford's troupes, that of 1584/85, as "The History of Agamemnon and Ulysses by the Earl of Oxenford his boys on St. John's day." This is the play that E.T. Clark thinks was an early version of *Troilus and Cressida*. (Robert Greene's *Euphues, His Censure to Philautus; A Philosophical Combat between Hector and Achilles on the Virtues necessary to gentlemen*, was entered in the Stationer's Register on Sept. 18, 1587. Dedicated to Walsingham's daughter Frances, it contains many similarities to *Troilus and Cressida*.)

¹⁶ Ogburn notes a comment made by the Venetian ambassador in Spain at this time describing the anger of Philip II on hearing accounts of the "masquerades and comedies which the Queen of England has ordered to be acted at his expense" (692-4).

finished school in March of '87,¹⁷ with *Tamburlaine* beginning its ground-breaking run at The Rose four months later.

Since *Tamburlaine* is too innovative and too polished not to have been preceded by immature efforts, it's fair to suggest that Marlowe's rapid grasp of the techniques of successful playwriting was fostered by someone who knew considerably more about playwriting than he did. With Oxford in control of the theater scene at that time, receiving funding from the same royal warrant that funded Walsingham's new spy service, he would seem the most likely candidate for this role, assisted by the experienced actors of the Queen's Men.

There are several anonymous plays that have Marlowe's style that could as easily be his own early work as the later imitations by others of his work that they're now thought to be.¹⁸ Throughout the '80s Oxford was living in his renovated mansion, Fisher's Folly, on Bishopsgate Street just outside the London wall, a short walk from Norton Folgate, where Marlowe was living in 1589 (Nicholl 178).

Although there is no hard evidence that Marlowe lived with or near Oxford and studied with him,¹⁹ this scenario connects a number of previously isolated points. It also accounts for the stylistic crossovers between "Shakespeare" and Marlowe, and the unusually rapid attainment of excellence by a novice. If, at the time that Oxford ran into financial difficulties in the mid-to-late '80s, Marlowe left Oxford's group for greater artistic freedom and better money with Alleyn and Henslowe, this scenario also provides a location for the University Wits²⁰ and a background against which to place several heretofore ambiguous references to Marlowe by Greene, Nashe, and Shakespeare.

¹⁷ Marlowe was absent from Cambridge for eight weeks from the middle of April until the middle of June, 1585, and again for nine weeks from July to September. He was missing for nine weeks between April and June of '86, and then again for seven or eight weeks early in '87. In fact, there is no proof that he was at Cambridge at all after March 1587 (Nicholl, *Reckoning* 99).

¹⁸ *Alphonsus, King of Aragon, The Tragical Reign of Selimus, Orlando Furioso, David and Bathsheba, and A Looking Glass for London*; all Marlovian in style, have all been attributed to either George Peele or Robert Greene. The Shakespearean overtones of *Alphonsus* in particular have caused scholars to label this play Greene's failed attempt to beat Marlowe at his own game. Greene's many similarities to Shakespeare, and vice versa, they explain as Shakespeare's effort to get started by imitating Greene.

¹⁹ Both Ogburn and Clark think it likely that Oxford discovered Marlowe. Given the Kentish connections of Marlowe's patron Sir Roger Manwood and the Walsinghams, however, Marlowe's path to Oxford may run from Sir Roger to Thomas Walsingham to Sir Francis. Or it could have happened a dozen other ways. Marlowe was brilliant and the literary/theatrical community was very small.

²⁰ Other probable members of the team of apprentices assembled by Oxford would be Thomas Kyd, a "scrivener" used for copying, George Peele, put to work for the most part on things like holiday processions and entertaining visiting dignitaries, Thomas Watson, his Latin secretary, and Thomas Lodge. We may see a reflection of this group in Prince Hal's cohorts in *Henry IV*, with Bardolph, Nym and Pistol

Was Marlowe 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 good evidence of any sort that Marlowe ever acted in any way as an undercover agent for the government.²¹ Apart from the one that killed him, the one and only incident unearthed to date took place in January 1592 in the Netherlands, when it seems he was sharing a room in Flushing with two known government operatives, Richard Baines and Gilbert Gifford, for what purpose remains unclear. We know this because Baines denounced him to Sir Robert Sidney, then governor of Flushing, as having urged Gifford to counterfeit a Dutch shilling and to have declared that he was about to "go over" to the enemy, i.e. the Catholics (Nicholl, *Reckoning* 234-249). Coining and defecting were often linked because the Catholic cause was desperate for money.

When interviewed by Sidney, Marlowe swore that it was Baines who set up the coining episode while Baines claimed that Marlowe was intending to defect.²² The purported coiner called himself "Gifford Gilbert," but he was, without a doubt, the same Gilbert Gifford who had provided Burghley and Walsingham in 1584 with the plan for the sting operation that succeeded in bringing Mary Queen of Scots to the block.²³ The last we hear of the matter, Marlowe and Gifford were on their way back to England, under guard, for questioning by Burghley.

With so little proof of any other connection with the spy community, and in view of the outcome, the idea of most scholars that this somehow proves that Marlowe was a double agent, either a counterfeiter working for the Jesuits or posing as one to attract Catholic dissidents into the spymaster's web, makes no sense at all.

comic versions of Marlowe, Kyd and Peele. That Bardolph's utterances are satires of Marlowe's style suggests that these scenes were written before Marlowe's death, for if written afterwards they would have been an insult to the memory of one who loved his liberty not wisely, but too well.

²¹ "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" (Nicholl, *Reckoning* 110).

²² According to Nicholl, Baines was a peculiar individual, half writer, half covert operative, with a slightly hysterical streak, strangely eager to betray Catholics though born a Catholic himself.

²³ Gilbert Gifford was one of the most important of the governments agents during this period, with the agency's success in the Babington plot and the entrapment of Mary Queen of Scots due in large part to his cleverness. Despite his overdrawn and annoyingly repetitive descriptions of undercover chicanery, Nicholl is willing for some reason to accept this name inversion as a coincidence. So far no one who's written on the subject has come up with a biography for "Gifford Gilbert."

One's view of the matter depends on whether one chooses to believe Marlowe or Baines. Why Nicholl and any others who have written on the subject would choose to put their faith in Baines and Gifford, both known informers, undercover agents, and manufacturers of disinformation while disbelieving Marlowe, who all the world knows was a brilliant poet, passes all understanding. That this coining adventure was a trap for Marlowe set by the government, one that he managed to escape, should be obvious. The following year he would not be so lucky.

Whatever the full truth behind the Flushing sting, 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, 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.

“The reckoning”

May 12, 1593: in a sweep ostensibly aimed at discovering the author of political libels 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 Thomas Kyd,²⁴ an impoverished scrivener, a paper which Kyd claimed belonged to Marlowe. While Kyd languished in prison, Marlowe was brought before the Star Chamber for questioning about his “blasphemy,” then released with orders to remain available should he be required for further questioning.

Ten days later, supposedly having been invited to a feast in Deptford, a port town on the Thames midway between London and the English Channel, Marlowe spent from ten in the morning until sometime after supper with three men, two of them government agents, in a room and garden of the home of one Eleanor Bull, a widow who let rooms and provided meals to travellers. At some point during this eight to ten-hour get-together, Marlowe was stabbed to death, probably in the 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 and the killer was soon freed on a verdict of self-defense.

The three 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 accidentally stabbed Marlowe “in the

²⁴ Nicholl makes it clear that this so-called atheistic tract 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. But it contained nothing of the nature of the charges later laid to Marlowe's account, adding another stroke to the picture of Marlowe's entrapment.

forehead.” 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 boat to sail, for a message to arrive, for it to turn dark, for the time to be ripe to make some sort of move. If they had been ordered to convince Marlowe that he must do—or not do—something or take the consequences, ten hours without some sort of resolution seems unlikely. Of course at this distance there is no way of knowing at what point during those ten hours he was actually killed. In fact, we can’t be absolutely sure that he *was* killed, that (per Hoffman) he wasn’t smuggled aboard a ship leaving for the Continent, or Scotland, and that it was a different corpse that was exhibited at the inquest.

Why was he stabbed in the eye? The inquest says he was stabbed in the forehead, but that’s absurd. The forehead is solid bone. It would take immense strength to drive a knife through it. However, a stab just under the forehead and above the eye would find no resistance at all. 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, and would probably not bleed a great deal, either, since there isn’t much blood in the brain, which would explain the lack of blood if the body was already dead when it was stabbed.

Why were there three of them? Marlowe was young and strong, and the records show that he was involved in at least two street fights, so there probably had to be enough men present to assure success, two to hold him and one to do the deed. If Hoffman is right, and he was transported, then there had to be at least two to make sure he didn’t just take off. Since the last man to arrive was Robert Poley, whose reputation as a spy and government agent suggests that he was the one the other two relied on to do whatever it was that the official orders required, the two others may have been necessary to make sure that Marlowe couldn’t make a break for freedom until Poley arrived.

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 with Walsingham’s “man,” Ingram Frizer)? Or was it because Deptford was near the ocean, with Mrs. Bull’s house right on the Strand, close to ships, and a quick and secret passage out of the country? 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?

Was it also because the Queen was then in residence at Greenwich just across the river, which put Deptford within the ten mile limit 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, one whose standing with high level Court officials meant more to him than the truth about the death of some athiestic brawler? Although Marlowe's *works* were well known, it's unlikely that many outside the theater community knew his name or what he looked like.

Why did they meet at Eleanor Bull's? Mrs. Bull, in whose house the killing occurred, was related to Blanche Parry, long time chief gentlewoman of the Privy Chamber, the Queen's closest personal confidante since childhood, who, when she died some time previously, had left her cousin Eleanor Bull a sizable bequest. And so, far from an ordinary innkeeper, as portrayed in some versions of the killing, Mrs. Bull was a person with Court connections, one who belonged to a prestigious network of important individuals with the right to ask for—and duty to grant—special favors if asked.

And finally, did the fact that this was the worst year for the plague in many years, and that the theaters were all closed, the players were all on the road, and that powerful patrons of the theater that might have interfered were at their country estates, as far as they could get from the zone of contagion, contribute to the timing of the murder?

During the period from a few days before the killing to several weeks afterwards, Marlowe was portrayed as a scurrilous atheist and brawler in three documents which have lasted until this day. As Nicholl clearly shows, all three of these are what we would now regard as “disinformation,” meaning they originated from the same spy community to which two of the three parties to the execution belonged. These libels befouled Marlowe's reputation so successfully that to this very day they have obscured his importance to English literature.

Ingram Frizer and the Walsinghams

The man who actually confessed to the killing, Ingram Frizer, was a servant of young Thomas Walsingham. Thomas was a second cousin of Sir Francis Walsingham, Queen Elizabeth's Principal Secretary and spymaster who died three years earlier, in 1590. It was with Thomas Walsingham that Marlowe was staying when he was taken, probably by Frizer, to the “feast” that ended his life (or at least, his life as a playwright).

Thomas Walsingham's role is usually described as that of Marlowe's homosexual lover. Less often is it noted that he was a member of the same undercover community to which at least two of the three men present at Marlowe's undoing belonged. Thanks to Nicholl we have evidence that both Thomas and his older brother had, as young men, followed their Uncle Francis into “the Service.” Thomas worked for him overseas from 1580-1584, then later as his secretary in London.

Frizer was originally a servant of their father, but when “the old Knight” died, Frizer went with Thomas rather than with his older brother, the heir, whose death at age thirty-two followed closely (and we must add, suspiciously) on the heels of their father's death. By this means the family estate, Scadbury, had come into the possession of twenty-six-

year-old Thomas by the time of Marlowe's visit. It was to Scadbury that the messenger was sent to fetch Marlowe to his Star Chamber hearing on the tenth of May and it is believed that it was from Scadbury that Marlowe rode with Ingram Frizer to Deptford the morning of May 30th.

Thomas Walsingham has a resumé no more savory than that of his man Frizer or the others present at Marlowe's death. Four years later, Thomas and Frizer were charged with having attempted, shortly after Marlowe's elimination, to conning a youthful heir out of a large sum of money (Nicholl 22-3). Walsingham was knighted by Elizabeth in 1597, and after marrying in 1598-'99, rose to considerable influence during the reign of James I. After Thomas Walsingham's death, Frizer remained in service to his wife, Lady Audrey Walsingham, whose intimate relationship with Robert Cecil brought her considerable notoriety as did her later friendship with the scandal-ridden Earl and Lady Suffolk. A Court record states that when she died she left the world "only her ill name" (Wraight 261).

In those days men were inclined to follow in their forbears' footsteps, so it's interesting that it was as royal policeman that the Walsingham family first got its start at Court. Sir Edmund Walsingham, grandfather of Sir Francis, was Lieutenant of The Tower under Henry VIII. The King's voracious paranoia caused one aristocrat after another to pass through his hands on their way to the block. His grandson Francis came to Elizabeth's Court in 1578 to assist Burghley with uncovering the plot that brought down the Duke of Norfolk. For this Sir Francis was rewarded with Burghley's own office of Principal Secretary, including the responsibility for organizing and maintaining a spy agency whose chief object at the beginning was tracking down and destroying Catholic dissenters. According to Nicholl, the Ridolfi plot provided the formula by means of which Walsingham would conduct all subsequent government sting operations against the ancient Catholic nobility.²⁵

Nicholas Skeres

The second of the three men present at Marlowe's death was, as records dug up by Charles Nicholl reveal, a real Dickensian lowlife, a tout for the kind of London money-lender that paid other scurvy types like Skeres to ensnare unwary young heirs, desperate for cash, into signing away their estates (Nicholl 25-31). Skeres also appears on a government list of thieves and fences operating at that time in London. Although his name is found on a list of the members of the group that hung around Anthony Babington, the supposed Catholic plotter, it's not on the list of those who were rounded up for execution, suggesting that Skeres was a government provocateur whose job was to help steer the poor fool and his friends towards the hangman's noose. From about 1589 until

²⁵ This is not to infer that Walsingham was responsible in any way for the kind of foul play that these agents engaged in. Although born a Walsingham, his father's death left him an orphan who was raised by his mother's relatives. The attacks on Marlowe and the other members of the literary community didn't begin until after his death. It's also likely that he was the one who brought Marlowe into the London writing community in the first place.

1595, when Skeres drops from sight, any record of his activities notes that he is a servant of Essex; though his continued association with money-lenders would seem to indicate that whatever it was that he was supposed to be doing for Essex, it wasn't paying him enough to live on.²⁶

Robert Poley

The third man was a government agent of long standing, described by one commentator as “the very genius of the Elizabethan underworld” (31). It was Robert Poley who, in 1585, orchestrated the Babington Plot that “beguiled” Anthony Babington into committing himself to treason and the gallows. A year later Poley was a major player in the complex and successful ruse to entrap Mary Queen of Scots into incriminating herself in treasonable communications (Bowen 394), thus enabling her enemies on the Privy Council, Burghley and Walsingham, to get rid of her once and for all.

On May 30, 1593, the day Marlowe was led to the slaughter, Poley had just returned from transmitting 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 demanded Poley's experience.

Which brings us finally to the question of why Marlowe was killed. Disinformation created by government agents after his death suggest a number of reasons, but, in our opinion, these, as intended, have served only to distract generations of scholars from the truth, and most can be eliminated. With Nicholl's evidence before us, that Marlowe's elimination was a government sting operation similar to others performed by these same agents both before and after Marlowe's, seems hard to deny. The big question, of course, is why was the government out to get him?

Was sex involved?

In examining the various reasons put forth in the years following his death there may be elements of interest. One of the earliest versions that has remained active ever since held that he died in a brawl caused by jealousy over his homosexual love relationship with Thomas Walsingham. In this, Walsingham is seen as his Beloved with Ingram Frizer as his violently jealous Pagliacci. In this scenario Marlowe is frequently pictured in the midst of penning *Hero and Leander*, as a gift for Walsingham when he's interrupted for the fatal jaunt to Deptford—purest fiction, though there may be some truth to the homosexual relationship.

²⁶ Whether or not Essex had a genuine use for Skeres, men in Essex's position may have felt it necessary to hire such men to protect themselves and their supporters.

Records at Corpus Christi show that Marlowe had a lot more money to spend at school for the last two years before he graduated than he had had previously. Writing for the theater didn't pay much (nor, presumably, would working for Oxford either, whose £1000 would have had to cover a stable of writers, most probably in need of bed and board, in addition to printers, theaters and acting troupes, and their costumes and props).

Gifts from an aristocratic lover would have put the kind of spending money in Marlowe's purse that would enable him to splurge at the Buttery at school, as he evidently did, and to dress like a gentleman, as in the portrait found at the lodge at his school at Cambridge in 1953.²⁷ That Marlowe was more attracted to men than women seems likely from his writing. In the three plays that we can be certain are all his own work, the female characters are little more than cardboard stereotypes who play no real part in the unfolding of the drama.

As for Thomas Walsingham, based on the little we know it's impossible to conjecture with any assurance regarding 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, men who would have been particularly interested in the author of the most popular plays in London. Apart from this, as has already been pointed out, Thomas Walsingham has a Kentish link to Marlowe via Marlowe's patron from his Canterbury School days, Sir Roger Manwood. Young Walsingham had returned to London from Paris by the Spring of 1584 at just the time that Marlowe's long absences from school 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 Thomas Walsingham as somehow involved in Marlowe's demise. In what would be the least malignant version, perhaps he was given no choice.

Was it because of his atheistic beliefs?

In the years immediately following his death, Marlowe's "atheism," 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 dirty tricks community (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 with the rackmaster. 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 harranged at length in an effort to stop him and two other playwrights—probably Nashe and Peele—from

²⁷ 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. Wraight's book.

continuing to write for certain ungrateful actors in his supposed deathbed pamphlet, *Greene's Groatsworth of Witte*, published months before Marlowe's death. If it weren't for Greene 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 could be connected with the later government disinformation campaign to tarnish his memory. Greene's reference to Marlowe's atheism came in the form of a warning that if he didn't change his tune he was headed for serious trouble. Did Greene actually know something nine months before the government struck, or was his wording just a lucky shot?²⁸

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—that is, Anglican, Catholic or Puritan—and since Catholics were condemned as pagan idolaters and Puritans as heretics, little room remained for independent thinkers. More to the point perhaps, charges of atheism were to the sixteenth-century English what charges of Communism were to twentieth-century Americans, a hot button used by unscrupulous politicians to those they wanted out of the way.

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, or the spectacular executions of witches, dramas performed to as large a public audience as possible as a warning to potential miscreants. Had his atheism 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 the royal coroner would be in charge of the inquest.

We can probably state with a fair amount of assurance that although Marlowe's sexual bias and irreligion gave his killers sticks with which to beat his corpse, neither holds up as the reason for his death.

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 real evidence that spying activities of his own had anything to do with his killing, either directly or by implication. Suggestions by Kyd and Baines that Marlowe was on the verge of defecting to the Catholics overseas or to Scotland, 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 great and continuing success—that is, unless he was forced to for some reason? Nothing in anything he wrote suggests any sympathy for Catholicism, quite the opposite. Bright finds evidence of sympathy for recusant Catholics in his last play, *The Massacre at Paris* (performed by

²⁸ Actually, Greene had already taken Marlowe to task about his atheism three years earlier, in *Menaphon*, published in 1589.

Lord Strange's Men throughout the winter season at the Rose until it and all the other theaters were closed due to plague in February '93 (134), but that's about cruelty to human beings and has nothing to do with dogma.

Did his death have anything to do with Martin Mar-prelate?

Martin Mar-prelate was the pen name of a wickedly talented 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 some nasty personal things about the bishops and seemed ready to publish more. The hunt for Martin began right away, but it wasn't until 1593 that the main suspect, John Penry, was finally run to ground.

Penry was known to be the chief printer of the Marprelate tracts, but doubts have lingered ever since that he had either the wit or the inside information to write the pamphlets himself—something that 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 managed to elude discovery until March 22 of '93, when he was finally nabbed by the authorities. The pattern of events from that point on 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:** libellous tracts appear on the wall of the Dutch Church, so libelous that they arouse the Privy Council into taking action to discover the author or authors. These imitate Marlowe's style and refer to *Tamburlaine*. Then—with surprising luck—the day after the libels appear:
- **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. A week later:
- **May 20:** ten days after Penry's questioning at Newgate and the day before his trial, Marlowe is brought before the Star Chamber for questioning by Burghley and Archbishop Whitgift, Penry's prosecutor;
- **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 (we are told) Whitgift is set on vengeance;
- **May 29:** Penry is hurried to a remote location, and hanged near an inn on the Canterbury Road.²⁹ 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.”

²⁹ For those who find the names involved in this story of more than coincidental significance, the name of the inn was *The Greene Man*.

Was Mar-lowe 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. If so, he would have had to develop a style he never used in any of his plays.

Nevertheless, did Penry, while “questioned” at Newgate the day before the Dutch Church libels were posted, incriminate Marlowe in the writing of the Marprelate tracts? Was he, perhaps, forced under torture in Newgate’s well-equipped confession chamber, to “confess,” whether rightly or wrongly, that Martin was Marlowe? If so, that would have given the government all they needed to convince the Queen and those members of the Privy Council who may have appreciated Marlowe’s talent and saw no harm in it that he had to be eliminated.

In any case, the fact that the careers of both these dynamic and popular anti-establishment writers came to their bloody ends at almost exactly the same moment in time, and possibly as part of a single government campaign, would seem to require some consideration.

Was Marlowe really murdered?

There is another possibility that must be considered, which is 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 solves certain otherwise difficult problems.³⁰

One of the oddities of the Marlowe story is the long wait—eight to ten hours—that the four 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 with in fifteen minutes. The only explanation is that they were waiting for something, a ship?—Deptford was a port town that offered an easy passage out of the country; the arrival of a corpse to represent Marlowe?—Penry’s? Both? There is the fact that the three writers who mourn his passing in print soon after his death do so in ambiguous terms, two of them linking it with the death of another University Wit, poet and Latinist Thomas Watson, who vanished from the scene nine months earlier.

³⁰ Calvin Hoffman, A.D. Wraight, and a number of others believe that, after being forced to leave the country, Marlowe continued to write under the name *Shakespeare*. Though this is unlikely, it does not affect the possibility that those who wanted Marlowe silenced would have been willing to see him transported rather than killed. The motive wasn’t revenge, it was prevention.

And then there's the ironic comment by Pseudo-Harvey in his *Supererogation*: "Weep Paul's, thy Tamburlaine vouchsafes to die." To *vouchsafe* means to allow or to agree. What did he mean when he said that Marlowe agreed to die? Why would Marlowe "agree" to die, or agree to a faked death? The most obvious answer is that he was given the choice that was given convicted felons during colonial times, namely death or transportation.

In any case, whether dead or transported, Marlowe's voice, his style, his sensibility, his almost operatic verse, were heard no more. Several poems and translations were published later under his name, but differences in style suggest that these may have not have been his work. Whatever the true scenario, one thing is certain, after May 30, 1593, there would be no new *Tamburlaine* to feed the public appetite for working class heroes. Whether transported or dead, Christopher Marlowe was silenced for good. 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 his home 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.

Further, Nicholl shows how 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, were crafted to include Raleigh and his circle in their implications of the dangerous spread of atheism, something that Raleigh, a most intelligent man, would certainly not have been likely to do 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 purposely fixed in his direction from the beginning.

Was it the Earl of Essex?

Based on his guess that Marlowe was questioned about Raleigh's atheism in his Star Chamber hearing and had refused to testify against him, Nicholl accuses Essex, who detested Raleigh and was therefore seeking his downfall. Nicholl, so diligent in uncovering evidence, reveals a sorry weakness when it comes to interpreting it. Not only has he no evidence that Raleigh was brought up at Marlowe's hearing, his thesis paints Essex as conspiring to destroy one of London's leading literary lights purely out of spite for not assisting in the destruction of another great writer.

Marlowe's murder was the work of professionals, which as far as I am concerned eliminates Essex. His one proven sting, the destruction of the Portuguese Jew, Dr.

Lopez, was clumsy in the extreme. Had Essex had been good at this sort of thing he would never have fallen into one government trap after another himself as he did a few years 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 had orders to do so. To assassinate someone who was undergoing investigation by the mighty Star Chamber at the time would certainly require orders from the highest level.

Was it Robert Cecil?

Of course. All Nicholl's evidence points directly to Cecil. The only question here is why does Nicholl refuse to see the picture he himself has so clearly revealed? Can it be because he's English and the Cecils are still one of the most powerful families in English politics and society? If so, then when will it ever end?

An important factor to consider is the death of Sir Francis Walsingham in the spring of 1590, exactly three years earlier, a death that created a vacuum at the center of his spy network, a center which had to be filled. Burghley, who created Walsingham's job in the first place, spy network and all, and who had seen to it that Walsingham got the job when he himself moved over to Lord Treasurer, urged, now that Walsingham was gone, that the office be given to his son Robert, then in his thirties.

Burghley was forced into a showdown with Essex, who wanted the office for his own candidate, William Davidson, though his motives may have been less because he wanted Davidson than because he was afraid of Cecil getting too much power. While the Queen continued to stall, Burghley simply took on the job himself, passing much of the actual work to his son. For this reason, by July 1596, when he was finally appointed, Cecil had been Principal Secretary in everything but name for six years.

Shortly after Walsingham's death, all his files "disappeared." The records also indicate that his spy network split up then, with Poley reporting to Robert Cecil via Sir Thomas Heneage and with Walsingham's other top agent, Thomas Phelippes, moving over to Essex. Although Essex may have been the likely heir to his father-in-law's spy network, my guess is that Phelippes, good amoral little soldier that he was, would be more loyal to his old colleagues than to his new master; and that along with the other members of the original team he simply continued to report to Robert Cecil from within the Essex entourage.³¹ To be told that Essex created his own spymaster in the person of Anthony Bacon, as claimed by Nicholl and many others, is to laugh. Anthony Bacon, the neurasthenic poet, a match for Robert Cecil? I don't think so.

³¹ Nicholl has found that there is at least one recorded instance of Phelippes reporting to Burghley, in June 1593, shortly after Marlowe's removal. When it comes to undercover operations, a single instance is a fair indication that there may be more.

Furthermore, Cecil, or I should say, the Cecils, had a far more potent reason for wanting Marlowe eliminated than spite (Essex), fear (Raleigh) or revenge (Poley). As Principal Secretary, the nation's protector, its number one keeper of law and order, it's hard to think that Robert Cecil would not have seen Marlowe's rising popularity as a danger to the state.

Was it his writing that led to his murder?

Of course. Unfortunately for Marlowe, it seems that most of the scholars who have interested themselves in his biography over the years have been more excited by the romantic fantasy of "Marlowe the Spy" than any close look at his writing. Contrary to Nicholl's bizarre theorizing, poets of Marlowe's stripe are among the least likely of all human creatures to allow themselves to be used, as Nicholl claims, to spy on and entice their fellows to destruction.

Prof. Curtis Bright makes the case, based on the work of a number of other scholars, that Marlowe's later work reflects, not the religious, but the political viewpoint of the Catholic recusants of the period. He claims that their bitterness against Elizabeth and her anti-Catholic policies is revealed in the torture and gross assassination of the monarch in *Edward II* and that while Marlowe portrays the Catholic Duc de Guise in *Massacre at Paris* sympathetically, the Protestant Henry IV is portrayed satirically. If scholars today can see these things, what did the audiences of the sixteenth century see, or perhaps more to the point, what did Burghley and Cecil see? Surely an attack on their policies.

In all the commentaries I have read on Marlowe's death including Nicholl's, it seems odd that not one has examined his writing as a possible cause. Since it's Marlowe's writing, or— what's perhaps more important from an historical perspective—its popularity, that is clearly the single most important thing we know about the man, one would think that his plays should be front and center in any effort to answer questions about his life, among them the reasons for his absence from Cambridge in the mid-80s and his ultimate quietus a decade later. But as so often happens, we see, once again, the historians ignoring literature and the literatti ignoring history.

Eva Turner Clark's opinion that there may have been a connection in the minds of the groundlings between the greedy Tamburlaine and Philip of Spain (Ogburn 693) seems unlikely, since the King of Spain was anything but a humble goatherd nor would a patriotic Englishman wish to see England's worst enemy succeed the way Tamburlaine did. Surely what brought the apprentices and journeymen of London into the Rose Theater time and again to hear Alleyn spout Marlowe's "mighty line," had nothing to do with international politics and everything to do with Tamburlaine's not-so-subtle message that a man born into lowly circumstances could cast off his cultural chains and fight his way to the throne.

The Queen and the Court may have enjoyed *Tamburlaine* if it was performed by Lord Strange's men at Court, but when the Cecils and the more conservative members of the Privy Council realized that it was pulling audiences in off the streets day after day at

The Rose they could hardly have been ignorant of the message this play was sending to that dangerous social animal, the apprentices of London, nor the power that its author was beginning to acquire, not only with the public, but also with certain members of the ancient nobility. The Cecils may have felt that if Marlowe wasn't stopped now, later might be too late.

It's clear from Nicholl's delving in the record mines that the Dutch Church libels were not a genuine act of popular revolt, but disinformation created by skillful government agents. That they were crafted to connect the subject of Marlowe's most recent and very popular play *The Massacre at Paris* with threats of bloody riots by English artisans and merchants should the government continue to license the refugee Dutch craftsmen, has got to point towards those Court officials who were most concerned about this issue. Those officials were Lord Burghley and Robert Cecil.³²

Do his fellow writers leave any clues?

Unlike Shakespeare, three of the University Wits were quick to mention Marlowe's passing in print. In a poem dedicated to Henry Percy, ninth Earl of Northumberland, apparently written for the Garter Ceremony of June 26, 1593, George Peele speaks of the "unhappy end" of "Marley, the Muses darling;" connecting him in the same breath with the shadowy poet and Latinist, Thomas Watson; also recently deceased.

The poem *Narcissus*, by one Thomas Edwards, also connects Marlowe's lamented passing with that of Watson. This, though not published until '95, was entered with the Stationers in October '93 by the printer John Wolfe, who had entered Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* a few weeks earlier.

In his book *Jack Wilton, the Unfortunate Traveller*, finished on June 27, 1593, a month after the assassination, Thomas Nashe calls Marlowe "one of the wittiest knaves that ever God made," adding "His life he contemned in comparison of the liberty of free speech." This book was supposedly in the printer's hands in September of 1593, but was not actually published until the spring of '94. Astonishingly, in *Christ's Teares Over Jerusalem*, written *after* Jack Wilton but published almost immediately in September of '93, Nashe does a 180-degree about-face, falling right in with the official view of Marlowe as a foul atheist whose death was simply good riddance to bad rubbish.

³² Nicholl: "The context of the Dutch Church libel was the resentment of London traders and artificers against immigrant merchants, particularly the Dutch." English tradesmen and artisans felt, doubtless with reason, that the more sophisticated Dutch were taking their business from them, and had threatened reprisals. A crisis threatened due to the current debate of the issue in Parliament. "On 21 March a bill [drawn up by Burghley] was presented to the House, proposing the extension of various privileges to the immigrant traders. One of the few who opposed it was Raleigh. In the debates that followed . . . he spoke vehemently against the Dutch merchants and their strangle-hold on the economy" and suggested that rather than supported they be expelled. Robert Cecil voted for the bill, which passed (*Reckoning* 290-291).

Christ's Teares has caused some head-scratching by Nashe scholars, chiefly because its tone differs so from anything he had done before, fairly dripping with Biblical gloom and doom and with almost none of the satirical verve of the rest of his work. What caused Nashe to rush this miserable book into print ahead of the far more entertaining and better written *Jack Wilton*? What caused him to so abruptly change his attitude, his public attitude at least, towards Marlowe in the weeks succeeding his death?

Marlowe as sexual deviate/atheist vs. Marlowe as literary genius

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; terms that set the tone of most references to Marlowe to appear in print thenceforth from that day to this. In 1598, Francis Meres added his tuppence to the Marlovian disinformation in his *Wits Treasury* where he performs the same disservice for George Peele by claiming he died of the pox, a complete fabrication according to Peele’s most recent and thorough biographer (Horne). Others added to the store of disinformation about Marlowe and the cause of his death, so the perception of his character continued 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 *Leander* refers to him in ideal terms while in *Lenten Stuff* Nashe returns to praising him. Two years later, Thomas Thorpe’s dedication of his translation of *Lucan* also praises him, despite its oddly jesting tone. Over the years, these two quite separate perceptions have continued to survive alongside each other until the present: Marlowe the genius vs. Marlowe the atheistic, rabble-rousing, sexual deviate. Modern biographers have been hard-put to weave them into a believable whole.

Shakespeare’s asides in *As You Like It*

Shakespeare’s references to contemporary personalities are generally so oblique as to be hopeless of absolute identification. But he came out much further into the light 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, as usual, is lacking on the Bard’s reasons for the quote. It seems likely that it was one of a number of additions Shakespeare made to the play in the late ’90s—additions that contribute nothing to the story, but appear to be messages of a personal nature embedded in the text, perhaps as a means of preserving them.

Another late addition to *As You Like It* in another scene that has little 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 froward child Understanding, it strikes a man more dead than a great reckoning in a little room.” This comment has been chewed over by commentators over the 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) is drawing parallels between his own fate and that of two writers who were silenced by authority: Marlowe, who was murdered (or possibly banished), and Ovid, who was certainly banished.

Whatever the purpose of such asides, and whoever the individual or group to whom they were directed, there seems no argument about the fact that Shakespeare is using *As You Like It* to make a point of some kind about Marlowe. The "great reckoning" is a direct reference to "the reckoning," named in the coroner's report as the cause of the quarrel that led to his murder—while the "little room" conflates the little room in which Marlowe died with one of his most famous phrases: "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 a death worse than murder—it is the death of his work, the death of its value, its importance.

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* because it was a reckoning, not with Marlowe alone, but with an entire community of writers? 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 in print?³³ Was Shakespeare saying that the reckoning was meant to silence, not Marlowe alone, but the entire writing community? Was it a warning to the increasingly upstreporous University Wits and their patrons, to shut up or else? Surely Nashe's attack of nerves suggests as much.

The death of Marlowe's patron

In November of the year that Marlowe died (1593), Ferdinando Lord Strange succeeded his father to the Earldom of Derby, a position he enjoyed for less than five months, dying the following April at the age of thirty-six, one month short of a year after the death of his acting company's most popular playwright. Lord Strange's death occurred under even more suspicious circumstances than Marlowe's. Charles Nicholl touches briefly on it in *The Reckoning*, but goes into it in much greater depth in his biography of Nashe, *A Cup of News*, where he gives sufficient details to suggest that government agents were engaged in their standard entrapment procedures against Strange at the time of his death.

Though raised as a Protestant, Stanley came from the kind of powerful northern aristocracy that the Cecils found so threatening. He had enduring ties to wealthy and politi-

³³ Nashe did enjoy himself at Marlowe's expense several times before his death, one being the "scurrilous" *Cobbler of Canterbury*, but this may have been in the nature of a roast, meant to tickle, not to wound. It's always hard to tell with Nashe.

cally powerful recusant families including his own brother's. He was wealthy in land and very influential in his own territories. And what was perhaps most dangerous (to himself, certainly), he was in the line of succession to the throne, which to his enemies meant that he had a great deal of political clout, should he ever choose to use it.

Although Nicholl emphasizes the strong probability that Lord Strange's death was linked to political issues, much like his blindness regarding Marlowe's writing as a cause of his silencing, he never approaches the possibility that it was Strange's theatrical enterprise that led to his murder. Lord Strange's men were the most popular acting company at Court during 1591-'93, the period when Christopher Marlowe was writing for them, years that saw a full-time commercial theater succeed for the first time, with all the power that that implies, and with his company one of the main factors in its success.

Strange's company performed six plays for Her Majesty during the holiday season of 1591-'92, a record for plays performed by a single company during a holiday season at Elizabeth's Court. A year later his foremost playwright was murdered and the following year he himself was murdered, yet history treats them as separate incidents that had nothing to do with each other. Was the murder of Marlowe's patron the final chapter in "the great reckoning?"³⁴

So, who killed Marlowe and why?

I would venture to guess 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 sting operation as the new head of domestic intelligence, replacing Walsingham and removing some of the agents of change that Walsingham had brought to the forefront, and that this included Oxford's propaganda wing that, in Cecil's estimation, and probably his father's also, had simply gotten so out of control that not Oxford, not anyone, could stop it. In so doing he took advantage of the fact that 1593 was a plague year.³⁵

³⁴ In June of 1594, shortly after Lord Strange's death, Lord Hunsdon, now Lord Chamberlain of the Royal Household, took the strongest players from his acting company to create the newly formed Lord Chamberlain's Men, the company that from then on would be, officially at least, Shakespeare's company.

³⁵ In examining the life and works of William Cecil, Lord Burghley, it must be understood that part of his role in stabilizing English politics, and in establishing order where, in his own youth, and that of his father, and his Queen, there had been deadly chaos, was the gradual but steady bringing under control, (and where control appeared to be impossible, elimination), of the ancient nobility. In some cases this was done by sending them far from their native centers of power on long (and expensive to them) diplomatic missions, but in others more stringent methods were required.

Unexplained deaths at an early age haunted the top ranks of the English aristocracy throughout Elizabeth's reign, deaths that often resulted in an easier life for William Cecil. Though the English have no problem seeing the truth of the Court politics of the French in the tactics of such as Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin, or of the Machiavellian politics of the great Italian renaissance princes, they have a hard time

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 theaters closed, the nobility away in the country, the actors on the road and the Court holed up as far as possible from the City, Cecil could count on having a relatively free hand with a maneuver that might have run into resistance from the liberal community in ordinary times. Cecil's sting operation was calculated, at least in part, to demonstrate his muscle to those who were not ready to take him as seriously as he would wish. It was time to show the antiestablishment satirists and playwrights and their noble patrons who was now in charge, something it's likely he accomplished.

As Nicholl shows, both Skeres and Poley had secret service ties to Robert Cecil during this period, while Baines, author of "the Note" that painted so foul a portrait of Marlowe days before his death, had been an agent of Walsingham's since the early '80s. Nicholl also shows evidence of Cecil's subsequent efforts to distance himself from the Richard Cholmeley who Nicholl believes was the author of the Dutch Church libels.³⁶

In the impressive quantity of new evidence that Nicholl brings to his book there is not one single fact that does not point directly or indirectly to Robert Cecil as the source of the covert operation that took down Marlowe, yet Nicholl will not draw the obvious conclusion. And although there is not a single fact that points to either Essex or Raleigh, for reasons which should be obvious to anyone who knows anything about the history of the period, it is Essex that he chooses to blame for Marlowe's death, with Raleigh as a secondary cause.

perceiving the beam in their own eye. Burghley, schooled in the cruel realities of the time during the turbulent period of his youth at the Courts of Henry, Mary, and Edward, was determined to keep things on an even keel, and willing to do what had to be done to that end. That it put a severe strain on his nerves can perhaps be seen in the sick spells that seemed to fell him whenever one of these executive actions was in the offing. In his *An Elizabethan Diary* G.B. Harrison wrote on March 14, 1593: "Lord Burghley said to be ill, with no hope of saving him." This would have been the period, shortly after the theaters were closed in February due to the plague, that the Dutch Church libels and all that was to follow would have been in the planning stage.

That once Walsingham was gone, Burghley would 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 that he would train his son in the harsh realities of maintaining order at a Renaissance Court, perhaps in a hands-on exercise of some sort, seems quite possible. 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 tale of bawdry or he sleeps."

³⁶ Cholmeley is quoted by Nicholl as claiming that he was asked by Robert Cecil at one point to write libellous pro-Catholic verses; an odd request for a prosecutor of Catholics; that is, unless they were to be used for purposes of disinformation or entrapment.

Nicholl's excessive flummery regarding the propensity of poets to become spies suggests that he suffers from a sort of schizophrenia. Of the sorry fates awaiting both Essex and Raleigh at Cecil's hands further down the road he states: "thus fell the two sides of the Court war which I believe led to the killing of Marlowe," while later in the same paragraph he writes:

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

Perhaps Nicholl, faced with what he regards as a conclusion he dared not publish, left it to the reader to make the final connection.

Christopher Marlowe, Lord Strange, Sir Walter Raleigh, and the Earl of Northumberland, were all targeted by the Dutch Church libel in one way or another. Within a year the first two were done for, while Raleigh and Northumberland, too powerful to hurt at the time, were finally brought down as soon as Cecil achieved enough power under King James to do so via the Main and Bye plots. One can't help but wonder just how early in his career it was that he set his sights on their destruction, or what it was about them that made him hate them so.

So why was Marlowe killed?

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 the author perhaps have some special insight into the forces that were gathering against him, and write as he did in a genuine effort to get the message through to his hard-headed former protégé, perhaps in the only way he could?

"His life he contemned in comparison of the liberty of free speech," wrote Nashe of Marlowe 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 pronouncement 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 dicing with death.

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, whoever it was that ordered the silencing of Christopher Marlowe, and whatever their reason, or reasons, for doing so, they may have 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 sixteenth-century playwrights and poets, unable to resist their compulsion to reveal in their writings the truth about life as they saw it, were driven ever deeper into strategies for hiding their real identities.

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