

The God-Haunted Atheist and the Posh Boy: Christopher Marlowe in *Will and Upstart Crow*

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All discussions of Marlowe's writings, at one point or another, lead back to the author himself. No poet-playwright of the Elizabethan age is more deeply implicated in his work than Marlowe; this is a historical constant of Marlovian scholarship despite theoretical assaults on the notion of autonomous authorship and the questions of collaboration surrounding the plays.¹

As Paul Whitfield White discerns, perhaps because we know so little about Christopher Marlowe's life, scholars have been tempted to view his dramatic protagonists—Tamburlaine, Barabas, Edward II, and especially Doctor Faustus—as if they were quasi-autobiographical depictions of the author himself. A. L. Rowse, for example, makes the bald assertion that, “in a very real sense, Faustus *is* Marlowe.”² This identification of the playwright with his most celebrated tragic hero is troubled, however, by the common observation that the Faustus of the middle of the play bears little resemblance to the character we see in the opening and closing sections. As Lukas Erne puts it, “The Faustus of the comic scenes is not easily accommodated to the view of Faustus as a tragic and ultimately noble and heroic overreacher—a view, that is, that reads Faustus in the light of the mythographic image of his creator.”³ Moreover, Erne contends that scholars have a crucial stake in promoting the particular image of Marlowe that coincides only with the tragic Faustus of the beginning and ending of the play:

The commodity called “Marlowe,” which we try to sell at academic conferences, in university seminars, and to academic publishers, has been selling well in recent times. I believe that Marlowe's cultural and, in particular, academic capital results to no slight degree from a mythographic creation with which it is in our best interest to be complicit. Marlowe was an atheist, and people who think differently and subversively matter. Marlowe was a homosexual, and sexual difference matters. So Marlowe matters.⁴

¹ Paul Whitfield White, “Marlowe and the Politics of Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Patrick Cheney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 85.

² A. L. Rowse, *Christopher Marlowe: A Biography*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1981), 150.

³ Lukas Erne, “Biography, Mythography, and Criticism: The Life and Works of Christopher Marlowe,” *Modern Philology* 103, no. 1 (2005): 41.

⁴ Erne, 30.

This “tragic” version of Christopher Marlowe, which emphasizes his transgression of the orthodox boundaries of religion and sexuality in his own ill-fated life, is a cultural commodity with a proven track record. Yet the “comic” version of Marlowe, the man who squanders his gifts on vain pursuits, and thereby aligns with the Faustus of the middle of the play, has not, until recently, made a significant appearance in cultural or academic circles.

However, during the mid-2010s, there appeared a pair of television shows featuring William Shakespeare in the title role, with Christopher Marlowe as a central supporting figure: Craig Pearce’s TNT drama *Will* (Season 1, 2017) and Ben Elton’s BBC comedy *Upstart Crow* (Seasons 1–3, 2016–2018).⁵ Pearce’s depiction of Marlowe as a brilliant but tortured, blaspheming homosexual corresponds very closely with what Erne calls the “mythographic image” of the playwright cultivated by Marlowe scholars and biographers. Throughout the only year of the series, Pearce’s Marlowe struggles with the composition of *Doctor Faustus*, a play whose tragic hero re-enacts the spiritual journey of his own creator. By contrast, Elton’s comic portrayal of Marlowe as a charming but unambitious “posh boy” who did not even write the plays attributed to him turns the stereotypical image of the playwright upside down. Elton’s Marlowe is no atheist, but a conventional Protestant who serves as a spy for the English crown, not out of religious commitment, but for the chance to secure money and meet girls. In fact, although *Upstart Crow* flirts with the notion that Marlowe was bisexual, we frequently observe him attempting to seduce women, never men. The plays that bear his name have no connection at all to his real life because they were actually penned by Shakespeare before he became famous. Both Pearce and Elton rely upon the same documentary evidence upon which scholars and biographers have built the myth of the tragic Christopher Marlowe, but while Pearce portrays Marlowe according to this legendary image, Elton assumes his audience’s knowledge of the myth, which he then overturns for comic effect. Neither Pearce nor Elton attempts to depict Marlowe as a playwright who could have written *Doctor Faustus* alone in its entirety, but they also decline to challenge the notion of single authorship by introducing a comic collaborator.

Pearce’s representation of authorship in *Will* follows the general conventions of the literary biopic, in which there is a mutually constitutive relationship between the author’s life and works. As Paul J. C. M. Franssen observes, “When little is known about an author’s life,

⁵ TNT cancelled *Will* after only one season. As of this writing, the BBC has not yet announced whether there will be a Season 4 of *Upstart Crow*.

the gaps tend to be filled in by projecting elements from the plots of his or her own works back onto his or her life, pretending that the author's experience was the origin of that literary work to begin with." For instance, Franssen notes that the film *Shakespeare in Love* "is built on an intertextual relationship with *Romeo and Juliet*, which here is supposedly inspired by Shakespeare's private life rather than by his reading of Bandello's story."⁶ Similarly, Pearce's television series takes *Doctor Faustus* as its source for many of the unknown details of Marlowe's life and then supposes that Marlowe fashioned the play entirely out of his own experience, with no reference at all to his demonstrable consultation of *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus*. Such a characterization of the process of authorship disregards the use of literary sources in favour of "the Romantic notion of writing straight from the heart."⁷ Marlowe personally suffered despair and damnation, Pearce tells us, and that is how he could write the tragedy of a man condemned to everlasting perdition, but such an assumption cannot account for the comic sections of the play, so Pearce proceeds as if they do not exist.

An examination of *Will*'s tragic depiction of Marlowe demonstrates that Pearce must have researched his subject thoroughly, but my concern is not with the historical accuracy of the portrayal per se; rather, I am interested in the ways in which Pearce shapes the documentary material to establish the two primary traits of Marlowe's mythographic image: his atheism and his homosexuality. Near the middle of Episode 2, Shakespeare seeks Marlowe in a tavern and finds him regaling a group of young men with blasphemous comments: "Jesus Christ was a bastard, Saint Mary a whore, and the Angel Gabriel a bawd to the Holy Ghost."⁸ This sentence derives directly from the first official charge of atheism brought against Marlowe: the Baines Note, a report submitted to the Queen's Privy Council on May 27, 1593, only three days before Marlowe's death, by Richard Baines, "with whom Marlowe shared rooms in Flushing and with whom he had previously lodged in the late 1580s."⁹ This paper bears the heading, "A note containing the opinion of on[e] Christopher

⁶ Paul J. C. M. Franssen, "Shakespeare's life on Film and Television: *Shakespeare in Love* and *A Waste of Shame*," in *Adaptation, Intermediality and the British Celebrity Biopic*, ed. Márta Minier and Maddalena Pennacchia (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 102.

⁷ Franssen, 108.

⁸ Quotations from *Will* are my own transcriptions of the dialogue based on the episodes posted online at the TNT site. No DVD or Blu-ray version of the series has yet been released.

⁹ Thomas Healy, "Marlowe's Biography," in *Christopher Marlowe in Context*, ed. Emily C. Bartels and Emma Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 341.

Marly concerning his damnable judgment of religion and scorne of gods word” (131).¹⁰ The body of the note incorporates a list of sacrilegious statements about biblical figures purportedly made by Marlowe, including the assertions that “Christ was a bastard and his mother dishonest” and “the Angell Gabriell was baud to the holy ghost, because he brought the salutation to Mary” (221–22). The document closes with a promise that more information and corroboration by reliable witnesses will be forthcoming:

These thinges with many other shall by good & honest witnes be aproved to be his opinions and comen speeches and that this Marlow doth not only hould them himself but almost into every company he cometh he perswades men to Atheism willing them not to be afeard of bugbears and hobgoblins and utterly scorning both god and his ministers (222)

The fact that Pearce’s Marlowe offers his blasphemous sentiments to a group of young men who laugh along with him coincides with Baines’s charge that Marlowe would often express such views in company and thereby convert other men to atheism.

The Baines Note also alleges that Marlowe had expressed the view that “the first beginning of Religioun was only to keep men in awe” (221). According to Michael Hunter, this claim was a commonplace of sceptical writers, who were supposed, during the Renaissance, “to hold a cynical view of religion itself as ‘nothing else but a certaine humane inuention and politike rule of mans wit,’ intended ‘to keepe men within the compasse of humane lawes,’ a view that was frequently associated with Machiavelli, of whose ideas ‘atheists’ were habitually seen as devotees.”¹¹ Indeed, Marlowe introduces the character Machiavel in *The Jew of Malta* as a Prologue who confesses, “I count Religion but a childish Toy, / And hold there is no sinne but Ignorance” (lines 14–15).¹² Pearce’s Marlowe anticipates this claim in Episode 6, when he declares, “Hell is a children’s story to frighten us into being ashamed of who we are.” Here, the playwright, like his character Machiavel, decries religion as a means of social control employed by the powerful to scare immature people away from unsanctioned behaviour. Four years after Marlowe’s death, Puritan clergyman Thomas Beard held the playwright up as an example of a wicked man punished by

¹⁰ All quotations from the Baines Note, the Kyd letters, the anonymous agent’s report, and the Coroner’s Inquest refer to the transcripts published in Constance Brown Kuriyama, *Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002) and will be noted parenthetically by page number in the text.

¹¹ Michael Hunter, “The Problem of ‘Atheism’ in Early Modern England,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 35 (1985): 141. Hunter quotes from John Carpenter, *A Preparatiue to Contentation* (1597), 233 and Jeremy Corderoy, *A Warning for Worldlings* (1608), 12.

¹² Quotations from Marlowe’s plays refer to Roma Gill, ed., *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*, vol. 4, *The Jew of Malta* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Anthony B. Dawson, ed., *Tamburlaine: Parts One and Two* (London: A & C Black, 1997); and David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen, eds., *Doctor Faustus A- and B-texts (1604, 1616)* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

providence for such atheistic views: “he denied God and his Sonne Christ, and not onely in word blasphemed the Trinity, but also (as it is credibly reported) wrote bookes against it, affirming our Saviour to be but a deceiver, and *Moses* to be but a coniuurer and seducer of the people, and the holy Bible to be but vaine and idle stories, and all Religion but a device of pollicy.”¹³ Beard’s account demonstrates an awareness of the accusations of blasphemy and atheism made by Baines, as well as a familiarity with Marlowe’s reputation, derived from his plays, as a follower of the “politician” Machiavelli.

This image of Marlowe the Machiavellian “atheist” is complicated by the fact that the word itself has undergone changes in meaning since the Elizabethan era. While the term is usually employed today in the narrow sense of a disbelief in the existence of God, it once served, as Chloe Kathleen Preedy reminds us, to denote a wide range of spiritually unacceptable beliefs and behaviors: “When Marlowe’s contemporaries termed him an atheist, they might have meant that he denied God’s power to intervene on earth or the immortality of the soul; they might also have been using the term in a more generalised sense to denounce a blasphemer, suggest a lack of commitment to the English Protestant Church, or even vilify a professional rival.”¹⁴ Thus, the “mythographic image” of Christopher Marlowe that fascinates us today does not represent him as spiritually apathetic; rather, as Erne phrases it, “Marlowe’s religious opinions, though they may well have departed from generally accepted beliefs, were the result of intense engagement with, rather than indifference toward, religion.”¹⁵ Marlowe’s dramatic works display a mind struggling not solely with secular issues, but also with theological questions about the nature of existence, the efficacy of prayer, and the existence of the afterlife. As G. K. Hunter writes,

Marlowe was called an atheist in his own day; the word served then to describe any unorthodoxy. But the combined evidence of the plays and the Baines note suggest that if he was an atheist in the modern sense at all, he was a God-haunted atheist, involved simultaneously in revolt and the sense of the necessity for punishment against such a revolt, simultaneously fascinated and horrified by the apparent self-sufficiency of the fallen world.¹⁶

In the tragic Faustus, who dismisses talk of the afterlife as “trifles and mere old wives’ tales” (2.1.138), yet is ultimately dragged screaming to eternal damnation, we imagine we perceive

¹³ Thomas Beard, *The Theatre of Gods Judgments* (London, 1597), STC (2nd ed.) 1659, 92. *Early English Books Online*.

¹⁴ Chloe Kathleen Preedy, *Marlowe’s Literary Scepticism: Politic Religion and Post-Reformation Polemic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), xvii.

¹⁵ Erne, “Biography, Mythography, and Criticism,” 36.

¹⁶ G. K. Hunter, “The Theology of Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 27 (1964): 240.

the self-castigation of the “atheist” playwright, who can neither believe in divine judgment nor escape his desperate fear of it. It is this “God-haunted atheist” that Pearce presents to us in *Will*.

Pearce’s portrayal of Marlowe’s sexuality, like his depiction of Marlowe’s unorthodox religious views, draws upon a similar combination of contemporary reports and evidence from the plays. Indeed, as Tiffany Jo Werth reminds us, during the Early Modern period, “charges of social deviancy frequently included atheism alongside sexual deviancy, especially sodomy.”¹⁷ The Baines Note demonstrates this confluence in its allegation that Marlowe had claimed that “St John the Evangelist was bedfellow to Christ and leaned alwaies in his bosom, th[at] he used him as the sinners of Sodoma” (221). This unusual accusation receives corroboration from two letters written by the playwright Thomas Kyd to Sir John Puckering, a member of the Queen’s Privy Council, a short time after Marlowe’s death. In the first of these letters, Kyd, who had been arrested on suspicion of being involved in the Dutch Church libel, claimed that a certain “atheistical” text found among his papers actually belonged to Marlowe, with whom he had been sharing a lodging.¹⁸ The second letter includes the contention that Marlowe “wold report St John to be our Savior Christes *Alexis* I cover it with reverence and trembling that is that Christ did love him with an extraordinary love” (231). As Nicholas Davidson explains,

The nature of the relationship between Christ and “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” traditionally identified as John the son of Zebedee and the author of the Fourth Gospel, had long been a matter for speculation The suggestion that Christ and St John were sodomites, and the likening of their relationship to that of Alexis and Corydon, which is depicted in Virgil’s *Eclogues* as explicitly homosexual, is remarkably daring.¹⁹

Marlowe’s reputed audacity to depict Christ as a homosexual coincides with his similarly bold portrayal of the King in *Edward II*, which has led some scholars to equate the playwright’s own sexual orientation with that of his creation. Lisa Hopkins, for example,

¹⁷ Tiffany Jo Werth, “Atheist, Adulterer, Sodomite, Thief, Murderer, Lye, Perjurer, Witch, Conjuror or Brute Beast? Discovering the Ungodly in Shakespeare’s England,” *Literature Compass* 10, no. 2 (2013): 180.

¹⁸ J. A. Downie, “Reviewing What We Think We Know about Christopher Marlowe, Again,” in *Christopher Marlowe: The Craftsman: Lives, Stage, and Page*, ed. Sarah K. Scott and M. L. Stapleton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), 46; Erne, “Biography, Mythography, and Criticism,” 36.

¹⁹ Nicholas Davidson, “Christopher Marlowe and Atheism,” in *Christopher Marlowe and English Renaissance Culture*, ed. Darryll Grantley and Peter Roberts (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), 141. Davidson cites from John 13.23; 19.26; 20.2; 21.7, 20, and 24.

writes of Marlowe that “*Edward II* may well appear to be openly based on his own sexual preferences.”²⁰

Pearce implies this preference during the scene of Marlowe’s very first appearance in the series when James Burbage, the builder of the Theatre, insists that Marlowe owes his dramatic career to Burbage: “Without me, there would be no theatre in England, and Christopher Marlowe would be just another arse-swiving nobody.” In Episode 2, Marlowe makes a sexual advance on Shakespeare by kissing him, but Will responds by breaking away from the embrace (Pearce opts not to emphasize the homoeroticism of the Sonnets and makes Shakespeare, in contrast to Marlowe, resolutely heterosexual). The show’s next episode contains a scene in which Marlowe awakens, naked, in a house full of similarly unclothed and sleeping men in what appears to be the aftermath of a drunken homosexual orgy. He rudely kicks his guests out of his home so that he may work on his latest piece, the “greatest play to have ever been scribed by hand mortal or divine” (Episode 2), but he suffers from acute writer’s block. Later in the same episode, Pearce includes another orgiastic scene, filmed primarily from a bird’s-eye view of Marlowe as he lies on his back on a table, nude, surrounded by a dozen or more naked men circling him, pleasuring him with their hands. He shouts, “the only place for me is the very slicing edge of life. Oh, come on. Come on, boys! Inspire me!” (see Figure 1). This moment encapsulates the image of Marlowe as a man who lives his own life on the “slicing edge” of spiritual and sexual transgression, which he attempts to use as inspiration for his dramatic works.



Figure 1: Marlowe seeks inspiration through transgressive sexual behavior

²⁰ Lisa Hopkins, *Christopher Marlowe: A Literary Life* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 104.

However, at the beginning of the season, Marlowe struggles to obtain such motivation, so he seeks additional help from the cabal associated with Sir Walter Raleigh. The Baines Note and other historical documents connect Marlowe to Raleigh as follows: to exemplify Marlowe's nefarious influence in company, Baines contends that one "Ric Cholmley . . . hath confesst that he was perswaded by Marloes reasons to become an Atheist" (222). This charge is supported by a separate anonymous agent's report (c. March 1593) that alleges, among other things, that Richard Cholmeley "saieth and verely beleveth that one Marlowe is able to shewe more sounde reasons for Atheisme then any devine in Englandee is able to geve to prove devinitie & that Marloe tolde him that hee hath read the Atheist lecture to Sir Walter Raliegh & others (215). Thomas Healy insists that such accusations were part of a trumped-up case against Marlowe that "had been developing for some time, with the authorities seeking to denounce Marlowe as a dangerous atheist as part of a wider plan to discredit Sir Walter Raleigh through similar accusations."²¹ Raleigh and his circle, which included the astronomer and mathematician Thomas Harriot and the occult philosopher John Dee,²² were branded the "school of atheism" by Jesuit priest Robert Parsons in 1592,²³ but as Healy points out, "There is no evidence that these figures formed a distinct grouping, let alone a . . . 'School of Atheism' as some of their detractors proposed."²⁴

The purported link between Marlowe and Raleigh gains further validation from the Baines Note, where the charge concerning Christ and St. John is immediately followed by the declaration that Marlowe had professed that "all they that love not Tobacco & Boies were fooles" (221). Although, as Erne notes, "these words seem to advocate pederasty rather than homosexuality,"²⁵ they have formed the primary basis for viewing Marlowe as "a pioneer of gay liberation."²⁶ Moreover, this link between sodomy and tobacco adds further weight to the implication that the Baines Note constitutes an indirect attack upon Raleigh, whom Orgel calls "the major advocate of tobacco in Elizabethan England."²⁷ Later in the note, Baines attempts

²¹ Healy, "Marlowe's Biography," 342.

²² Stephen Orgel, *The Authentic Shakespeare and Other Problems of the Early Modern Stage* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 222.

²³ Charles Nicholl, "'By my onely meanes sett downe': The Texts of Marlowe's Atheism," in *Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson: New Directions in Biography*, ed. Takashi Kozuka and J. R. Mulryne (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 155.

²⁴ Healy, "Marlowe's Biography," 345n14.

²⁵ Erne, "Biography, Mythography, and Criticism," 43.

²⁶ Richard Wilson, "'Writ in Blood': Marlowe and the New Historicists," in *Constructing Christopher Marlowe*, ed. J. A. Downie and J. T. Parnell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 132.

²⁷ Orgel, *Authentic Shakespeare*, 222.

to associate Raleigh's favorite import from the Americas with sacrilege when he incorporates, among his charges against Marlowe, the contention that "the sacrament . . . would have bin much better being administred in a Tobacco pipe" (221). Pipe smoking, blasphemy, and sodomy, strikingly juxtaposed in the Baines note, also occur together in Pearce's representation of Marlowe's involvement with the Raleigh circle in Episode 4 of *Will*.

In search of inspiration, Pearce's Marlowe takes Shakespeare with him to an extravagant party, and after they retire to a private room, Marlowe introduces his guest to an older gentleman with a young man draped on each shoulder: "Sir Francis Bacon, our host. A notorious sodomite" (Episode 4). Bacon then acquaints Will with Sir Walter Raleigh, but the member of the Raleigh circle that Marlowe has come to consult is actually John Dee, "the Queen's chief astrologer and mathematician." Dee, dressed in the garb of a wizard, hurls powder into a cauldron spouting blue flames and announces, "Our purpose here tonight is to access the divine." Marlowe and the rest of these men, like Doctor Faustus, seek to learn the secrets of the unseen, divine world, not through prayer, but through occult practices. Marlowe's attempts to perceive this hidden world have thus far been unsuccessful, so he brings along his Catholic friend Shakespeare, as he tells him, "to see what a believer like yourself made of Dee's angels and demons." Dee's associate Edward Kelley offers Shakespeare a large ornate pipe in order to smoke an undisclosed substance that will "help immerse [him] in the ceremony." After both Marlowe and Shakespeare take a long drag on the pipe (see Figure 2), Shakespeare looks into Dee's flame and experiences a guilt-ridden hallucination involving the ghosts of two dead men. Marlowe, who sees nothing unusual, implores Shakespeare to describe his apparition: "For Christ's sake, tell me what you saw. Heaven, Hell, God, the Devil? Are they real? . . . I cannot write unless I conquer them all." Pearce suffuses this entire sequence with elements derived from the Baines Note: homosexuality, tobacco smoking, and occult beliefs and practices that run counter to orthodox Christianity. Marlowe, in accordance with the mythographic image of the god-haunted atheist, longs to compose his *magnum opus* about "Heaven, Hell, God, [and] the Devil," but at this point, he believes he cannot write it until he conquers his doubt that these supernatural locations and beings actually exist.



Figure 2: Marlowe smokes from a pipe while Shakespeare and Raleigh look on

In the second half of the season, we witness Marlowe assembling the material for *Doctor Faustus* from the defining moments of his own life. At the very end of Episode 5, he enters the bedchamber of a fine house and lies down alongside an older man who is dying of a consumptive disease. This figure, we find out at the end of the season, is an invented character named Barrett Emerson, who was once Marlowe's lover. The two men share a deep devotion, yet they cannot escape from the misgiving that their forbidden coupling has doomed them both to hell:

EMERSON. Go to and examine your life, Wasp. It's too late for me. Repent yet, and God may pity thee.

MARLOWE. I have nothing to repent, and neither do you.

EMERSON. We are both of us damned.

MARLOWE. Peace, my King. If there is a God, he is just. And if there is a heaven, you will go there.

EMERSON. The only heaven I will know is the time I've spent on Earth with you. I sold my soul for your love, and I would not change it for an eternity of redemption.

(Episode 6)

Emerson believes that, like Faustus, he has sold his soul, but instead of 24 years of perfect knowledge, he receives in exchange Marlowe's love. After Emerson dies in the next episode, Marlowe toasts his corpse with an admission that he has made a similar trade: "If your love cost me my soul, then here's to damnation, darling. I shall see thee in hell." Emerson's warning, "Repent yet, and God may pity thee," anticipates an admonition that Faustus will

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receive from the Good Angel—“Faustus, repent yet, God will pity thee” (2.3.12)—but Marlowe, like Faustus, refuses to repent and beg God’s forgiveness.

Marlowe does not regret his “immoral” relationship with Emerson because it allowed him to achieve his identity as a man who lives on the slicing edge of life. Before Emerson dies in Episode 6, Marlowe tends to his bedridden lover:

MARLOWE. How can I help you?

EMERSON. [*Points off screen*] Let me see it. [*Marlowe pulls a cloth away from a painting on an easel to reveal a portrait of a young man*]

EMERSON. You were an impossible model but an exquisite youth.

MARLOWE. Before you, no one ever encouraged me to be Marlowe. You liberated me from a colorless life. If it weren’t for you, I would not be who I am.

EMERSON. And that is why I fear for you. I addicted you to Marlowe.



Figure 3: Emerson’s portrait of Marlowe

The painting in Emerson’s room is recognizable as a representation of the portrait found in 1953 during construction on the Master’s lodge at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, where Marlowe was once a student (see Figure 3). Dated 1585, the portrait identifies its subject as being twenty-one years old, and Marlowe was that age in that year. Of course, there would have been many twenty-one-year-olds at Corpus Christi at that time, and nothing in the portrait indicates that the young man was a student in the college. Moreover, J. A. Downie points out that the appearance of the sitter does not match the known facts of Marlowe’s circumstances in 1585: “As the lavishness of the costume attests, the portrait is evidently of a wealthy young man. Marlowe was a cobbler’s son, at Corpus Christi as a Parker scholar; he

is therefore highly unlikely to be the subject of the controversial portrait.”²⁸ Despite this contrary evidence and the lack of any positive support, “the identification of the figure in the portrait with Marlowe was simply too tempting to resist,”²⁹ and this likeness has entered the public consciousness as a representation of the playwright’s dashing countenance.

In the context of *Will*, this portrait serves as an icon for “Marlowe,” the persona into which Barrett Emerson encouraged young Christopher to grow, which is the show’s equivalent for the mythographic image of Marlowe revered by modern scholars. In the final episode of the series, Marlowe reveals the history of his transformative relationship with Emerson:

He was an artist, the first true artist I’d ever met. He made me believe I could be me. The thrill, the liberation of being truly seen for the first time is intoxicating. I was like a great, stupid child armed with a broadsword, slicing and swiping at everything and everyone. Drunk on the power of being “Christ”-opher bloody Marlowe.

Emerson, as a true artist, saw and painted not only his subject’s exterior beauty, but also his essence, which allowed the young man to believe that he could assume the image represented in the portrait, which he calls “‘Christ’-opher bloody Marlowe.” This version of the playwright’s name captures the intoxicating, god-like power that Marlowe felt when he originally adopted the persona that Emerson granted him years ago, but the thrill eventually wears off. In Episode 8, Marlowe confesses to Shakespeare, “I am in hell! The void within me is bottomless, and it is black and it is eternal. I need to believe that there is more to this existence than this table, than this chair, more than vain, cruel, lying, cheating, ‘Christ’-opher cocksucking Marlowe!”

In search of a faith in the afterlife that would allow him to complete *Doctor Faustus*, Marlowe, in Episode 9, seeks spiritual advice from Robert Southwell, a fugitive Jesuit priest, whom Marlowe has been seeking in his role as a spy for the English government. Their conversation reveals that Marlowe’s progress is blocked because he cannot conceive how his unrepentant main character could ever be saved:

MARLOWE. I can write Faustus’s desires, his bargaining, his damnation because all that is real to me. But I cannot write his salvation.

SOUTHWELL. Because he is you. Have you made a bargain with the devil?

MARLOWE. With every glorious abomination of my life. I had found salvation in the unselfish love of someone I loved in return, but that was also both our damnations.

²⁸ J. A. Downie, “Marlowe: Facts and Fictions,” in Downie and Parnell, *Constructing Christopher Marlowe*, 16.

²⁹ Erne, “Biography,” 29.

Southwell, like Rowse, concludes that “Faustus *is* Marlowe,” a man who has sold his soul to the devil, and that Marlowe cannot imagine Faustus’s salvation because he declines to seek his own. Marlowe, in response, acknowledges that he has committed a “glorious abomination,” the oxymoron capturing in one phrase the magnificence of his mutual love with Barrett Emerson, which Marlowe cannot repent, and the “sinfulness” of their relationship, which he fears has consigned them to hell for all eternity.

Near the end of Episode 7, Marlowe pitches the concept for his greatest tragedy, based solely on his own life experience, to Philip Henslowe, the owner of The Rose Theatre, and Edward Alleyn, the lead actor of the Admiral’s Men: “An intellectual sells his soul to the Devil so he may learn all the secrets of this world, and is dragged to hell ... [to Alleyn] ’Tis the greatest part thou will ever play: Doctor Faustus.” Without any explanation of the source of this name, Marlowe offers the part of Faustus to Alleyn, but in the next episode, when we observe Marlowe finally writing the play, scenes of composition are cross-cut with segments from the drama taking place in Marlowe’s imagination. There, Alleyn plays the part of Mephistopheles while Faustus is performed by Marlowe himself. At the conclusion of this sequence, the ghost of Barrett Emerson appears to the playwright in the real world and speaks lines that Marlowe will incorporate into the role of Mephistopheles (2.1.124–26):

EMERSON. Hell hath no limits, Kit, nor is it circumscribed in one self place. Where we are is hell, and where hell is, then we must ever be.

MARLOWE. Then I am damned.

This surreal segment not only shows us Marlowe in the costume and persona of Faustus; it also dramatizes the playwright’s acceptance of his own fate, which will determine the outcome for his tragic hero. To finish the play, Marlowe must eventually accept that his main character does not achieve salvation; like himself, Faustus is damned.

Pearce dramatizes Marlowe’s completion of his tragedy in Episode 10. The scene begins with Marlowe asleep, seated with his head down on a long table littered with bottles and paper, a quill hanging loosely from his fingers. He jolts awake, leaps to his feet, and cries, “Aah! M-my King!” Realizing that he is alone, he remarks, “Not even a poxy ghost to keep me company.” Marlowe has apparently been dreaming of Barrett Emerson, whom he called by the pet name, “My King,” but he recognizes that Emerson’s ghost is no longer present. Emerson has served Marlowe as a type of muse, collaborating with him on the composition of his most recent play. Modern scholars generally accept that Marlowe worked with some other playwright on *Doctor Faustus*, but according to editors David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen, “Marlowe wrote the serious and tragic portions” of the drama while “a

collaborator took responsibility for the comic horseplay.”³⁰ Consistent with Pearce’s conception of authorship as a reflection of biography, the play produced by his fictional Marlowe concerns only the “serious and tragic” story of a man who sells his soul to the devil and is damned for it, not the “comic horseplay” of the promising scholar who wastes his considerable abilities. Pearce endeavours to align his portrayal of Marlowe with the mythographic image of the tragic playwright, which requires him to ignore the play’s middle scenes and replace the anonymous comic collaborator with a purely fictional muse, Barrett Emerson, who provides Marlowe with material only for the tragic sections of the play.

Regaining his bearings, Marlowe’s eyes drop to the table, where he spies a stack of manuscript pages. The top sheet is the opening page of *Tamburlaine*, but the second sheet, whose top section is visible above the first, reads, “Doctor Faustus / C Marlowe” (see Figure 4). The playwright grasps the manuscript, and before hugging the pages to his chest, he recalls, “That’s right. That’s right. It’s done. I have been to hell and back for you.” Figuratively, Marlowe has endured a great deal of suffering to produce his play, but he has also gone “to hell and back” in a more literal sense. In Episode 5, as part of his efforts to confirm or deny the existence of the afterlife, he convinces Edward Kelley to bury him to the neck in a freshly-dug grave in a cemetery. Overnight, he encounters a dead spirit in the form of a blank-eyed boy and Satan himself in the shape of a wolf.³¹ In the morning, when Kelley’s men return with shovels to dig him out, Marlowe greets them with a one-word question: “Resurrected?” In light of these events, the alternative name “Christ”-opher Marlowe suggests that our god-haunted atheist playwright has been fashioned in the image of the Antichrist. This element is the only facet of Pearce’s portrayal of Marlowe that vaguely recalls the “scenes of comic degeneracy in mid play,” which “depict the kinds of bogus miracles traditionally associated with Antichrist.”³² However, Pearce does not endow Marlowe with any occult powers that allow him to perform trivial wonders, and the extent of his inverse relationship to Christ extends to his journey “to hell and back” and nothing more.

³⁰ Bevington and Rasmussen, *Doctor Faustus*, 70.

³¹ The symbolic function of the wolf is ambiguous in Episode 5, but at the end of Episode 6, the animal appears again on Emerson’s bed, growling at the dying man. Marlowe screams at the wolf, “Spare him, Satan!”

³² Bevington and Rasmussen, *Doctor Faustus*, 10.

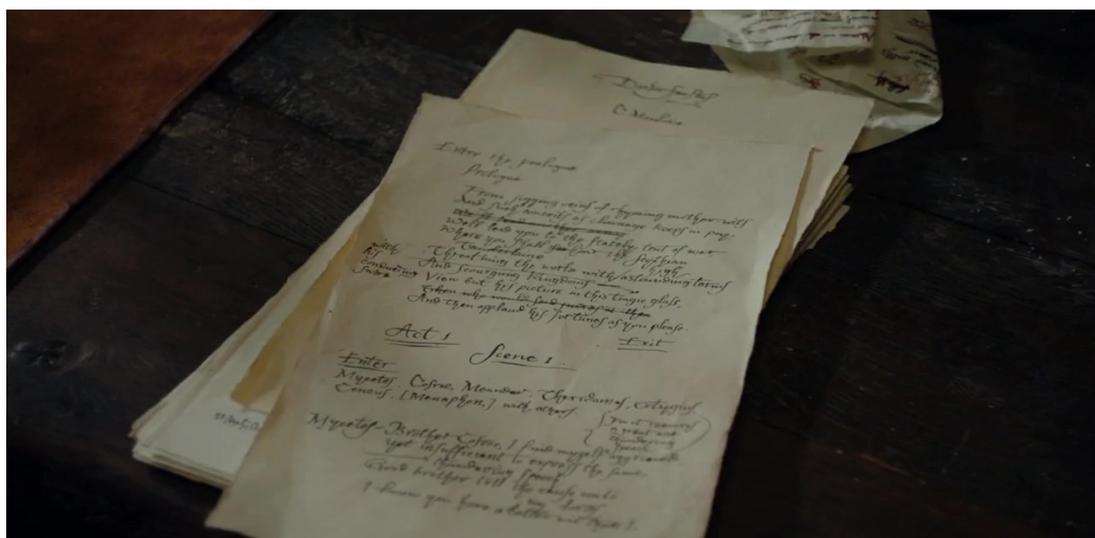


Figure 4: The manuscript of Doctor Faustus, with the first page of Tamburlaine on top

Although *Will* does put Marlowe through a type of death and unholy resurrection, the cancellation of Pearce's series after only one season prevented him from dramatizing Marlowe's actual tragic demise. Given the extent of Pearce's familiarity with the historical sources for Marlowe's biography, it seems likely that, had the series continued, the show eventually would have borrowed details from documents like the Coroner's Inquest to stage the scene of the playwright's death. Ben Elton's BBC comedy *Upstart Crow*, however, has run for three seasons, long enough for the show's creator to kill off Kit Marlowe and bring him back to life as his own blonde-haired brother Kurt. Elton's humorous version of Marlowe bears no more resemblance to the Marlowe of Pearce's *Will* than the frivolous magician of the middle of *Doctor Faustus* bears to the protagonist of the early and concluding scenes of the play. Whereas Pearce's Marlowe bases *Doctor Faustus* on the tragic circumstances of his own life, Elton's Marlowe simply takes credit for dramas written by his companion William Shakespeare:

SHAKESPEARE. Marlowe, I've told you, I'm not writing you any more plays.
MARLOWE. Come on, Will. You owe me. It's me that got your work before the public in the first place.
SHAKESPEARE. By sticking your name on it.
MARLOWE. It was the only way. What were you? A country bum-snot fresh off the coach. Nobody took you seriously.
SHAKESPEARE. Exactly. I was but a jobbing actor when I gave you *Tamburlaine* and *Doctor Faustus*, but now I want credit for my own work. (Season 1, Episode 2)³³

³³ Quotations from *Upstart Crow* are my own transcriptions of the dialogue based on the DVD versions of Seasons 1–3.

In *Upstart Crow*, Marlowe neither lives out the tortured spiritual journey of Doctor Faustus nor writes the tragedy that bears his name; in fact, Elton's Marlowe is not even a writer at all. Whereas Pearce's version of the character earns the persona of "Marlowe" through his own transgressive literary efforts, Elton's version simply co-opts the public image of a playwright from his gifted colleague. When Shakespeare coins the phrase "fair play," Kit marvels at his friend's eloquence:

MARLOWE. "Fair play." That is pretty good. That's just the sort of line I should have written.

SHAKESPEARE. Hmm. But you didn't.

MARLOWE. Oh, don't quibble, Will. It makes you look small. Come on. Give us a play. Because of you, everyone thinks I'm this brilliant poet guy when, actually, I couldn't be bothered to rhyme "dove" with . . . See? Lost interest already. Verse is just not my gig. (S1, E2)

Instead of a "brilliant poet guy," Elton's Marlowe is often described as a "posh boy" because he attended Cambridge and behaves with the good-humoured but entitled pretentiousness of the upper classes. He relishes his fame as a talented author, but despite his education, he cannot be bothered to compose actual verse, so he simply expects Shakespeare to supply him with plays to publish under his own name. Like the Faustus of the middle scenes of the play, this Marlowe has talents, but he does not put them to productive use. According to romantic notions of authorship, such a Marlowe should have been able to base the comic sections *Doctor Faustus* on his own experiences, but the assumption of single authorship prevails. In Elton's world, the only playwright who could have written both the comic and tragic sections of the play by himself is Shakespeare.

For Elton's version of Kit Marlowe, playwriting is merely camouflage for his primary employment as a spy for the English crown:

MARLOWE. Come on, Will. You totally know why I need this poet thing. It's my cover.

SHAKESPEARE. Oh, yes, of course. I was forgetting. You're a secret agent.

MARLOWE. I'm one of Walsingham's men. Sworn to defend the realm, yet forever in the shadows, and so I play the gadsome poet whilst on my secret work of vital national importance.

SHAKESPEARE. Hmm. This work being the entrapping and burning of Catholics?

MARLOWE. Absolutely.

SHAKESPEARE. And that's vitally important, is it?

MARLOWE. Well, it seems to be. Walsingham never shuts up about it. (S1, E2)

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Like his counterpart in *Will, Upstart Crow*'s Marlowe spies upon Catholics for Sir Francis Walsingham, but his activities as a secret agent have nothing to do with his own search for spiritual enlightenment. He does not appear confident in the vital importance of apprehending Catholic heretics; he merely follows the orders of his superior, who is obsessed with the Catholic menace. In fact, Marlowe does not appear to think deeply about religious matters at all:

MARLOWE. But burning Catholics, that's definitely the big thing.

SHAKESPEARE. Just as burning Protestants was the big thing of the last insane bint in a crown who passed England's way.

MARLOWE. Yes, weird, isn't it? But I don't make the rules. I'm just in it for the expense account and the chance to chase foreign girls. (S1, E2)

Confronted with the ironic contradictions stemming from Renaissance England's vacillation in state religion, Marlowe can only remark that the situation is "weird" and then absolve himself of responsibility by claiming that he is not in charge of determining religious policy. Far from agonizing over the question of whether "Heaven, Hell, God, [and] the Devil" really exist, this comic version of Kit Marlowe the secret agent simply toes the Protestant line in order to get what he really wants, "an expense account and the chance to chase foreign girls."

Nevertheless, Marlowe's activities as a spy ultimately draw him into danger, partially because he does not care enough about the religious distinctions that drive the conflict between the Protestant government and the Catholic resistance:

MARLOWE. The Crown suspects me of being a double agent. My own fault. I keep getting pisslingtoned and forgetting which near-identical branch of the same religion we're supposed to hunt down and kill.

SHAKESPEARE. Well, yes, it is confusing.

MARLOWE. Which has not gone down well with the God-prodding Pure-titties, who also accuse me of being an atheist. (S3, E2)

For Elton's Marlowe, Protestantism and Catholicism are nearly identical branches of Christianity, and when he is drunk, he cannot tell the difference between them. This lack of engagement with the finer points of religious doctrine reveals Marlowe to be a conventional, unthinking member of the established church, not the atheist that the "God-prodding Pure-titties" [Puritans], like the real-life clergyman Thomas Beard, accused him of being. In *Upstart Crow*, Marlowe never makes a single blasphemous remark or expresses the slightest doubt in the existence of God or the afterlife, so the Puritans' charge appears to be a baseless rumor.

Similarly, Marlowe's reputed homosexuality, which is demonstrated graphically on several occasions in *Will*, is presented as mere gossip in *Upstart Crow*. At the end of every episode, Shakespeare and his wife Anne sit before the fire in their Stratford home, smoking pipes and reviewing the events that have led to the composition of Shakespeare's latest play. The following exchange occurs during their conversation at the close of Episode 4 in Season 3:

ANNE. And Marlowe's a shagsome, bonking rodent, who, rumour has it, prefers his maids with cod-dangles, if you know what I mean.

SHAKESPEARE. 'Tis true that, like the restless pendulum that marks the steps of Father Time, Kit swingeth both ways.

Anne has observed first hand that Marlowe is sexually promiscuous, and she also mentions the "rumour" that Kit prefers partners with male sexual organs. Shakespeare concurs that Marlowe is known to be bisexual, but the narrative action of the series does not support this ascription. We never observe Marlowe make any sort of advance toward a man, but at several points, he woos female characters, including one "foreign girl." For instance, in Season 2, he sleeps with a woman named Gertrude, whom he thinks is a prostitute (Episode 2), and in Episode 3, which puts him in the position of Proteus from Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, he wavers back and forth in his attraction to Kate (the daughter of Shakespeare's landlady) and an Italian contessa named Silvia. In the same way that *Upstart Crow* portrays Marlowe's atheism as idle speculation, it raises the possibility of Marlowe's sexual transgressiveness only to deny it by depicting his actions as conventionally heterosexual. This emphasis on the unreliability of rumour constitutes a critique of the mythographic image of Marlowe, which is based on a series of slurs and accusations made by men whose testimony has been called into question.³⁴

Elton's series also challenges the predominant image of Marlowe, based on contemporary documents, as a man who died violently under mysterious circumstances. The Coroner's Inquest, dated June 1, 1593, concludes that Ingram Frizer killed Marlowe "in defense and for the salvation of his life" (225), but many have long suspected that the playwright was murdered as a result of his sacrilegious beliefs, his political associations,

³⁴ Erne, among others, doubts the veracity of Kyd's allegations because, at the time they were lodged, Kyd had already been imprisoned and tortured for his supposed role in the Dutch Church libel. Marlowe was already dead, and Kyd may simply have been drawing upon rumours about Marlowe in order to exculpate himself. See Erne, "Biography," 35. The Baines Note has likewise come under suspicion, due in large measure to the work of Roy Kendall, who offers evidence that the note may have been "occasioned by threats of an immediate reprisal" by government agent Thomas Drury. See Kendall, "Richard Baines and Christopher Marlowe's Milieu," *English Literary Renaissance* 24, no. 3 (1994): 538.

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and/or his activities as a spy. Elton contradicts this image by suggesting that Marlowe was not killed by Frizer, in self-defence or otherwise, because his death was faked. In Season 3, Episode 2, Shakespeare receives word from his servant Bottom that Marlowe is dead, and the two of them visit his burial site with Kate and Lucy, a local tavern keeper:

SHAKESPEARE. An unmarked grave. An unmarked grave in Deptford is all they give him. Such a paltry memorial. And such a paltry end ... [H]e is stabbed in the eye in a brawl in a small room over the reckoning of a bill. And such were the number and variety of his enemies at his end that we four are all that come to mourn him.

MARLOWE. Yes. A bit disappointing, can't deny. I was kind of hoping for a state funeral.

SHAKESPEARE. Kit!

MARLOWE. Shh-shh. Keep it down, mate. I'm supposed to be dead.

SHAKESPEARE. But aren't you dead?

MARLOWE. No! I got three old mates from the service to rig a fight using a stage dagger. It's a plague corpse in the coffin.

As in *Will*, Elton's Marlowe experiences a type of resurrection (see Figure 5); but the explanation for his return from the afterworld in *Upstart Crow* is theatrical rather than supernatural. Pearce's Marlowe goes to hell and comes back, while Elton's Marlowe fakes his own death with a "stage dagger" and then, like Tom Sawyer, makes a show-stopping appearance at his own funeral. The comic effect of this sequence depends upon our anticipation that Elton's Marlowe might conform to the figure of the playwright tragically murdered as a result of his dangerous behaviour, but Elton humorously overthrows this expectation, as he has done with every other aspect of Marlowe's characterization, to create a comic version of Christopher Marlowe that explodes the tragic mythographic image proffered by Marlovian scholarship.



Figure 5: Marlowe resurrected (far left) appears at his own funeral

Although Craig Pearce and Ben Elton operate here in a medium (television) often taken lightly by literary critics, a close examination of their work demonstrates that both creators manifest in their portrayals of Christopher Marlowe a detailed familiarity with the known facts of the playwright's life, along with the particulars of the various historical documents that shape our impression of his personality, his religious beliefs, and his sexuality. Pearce, writing a dramatic television series, takes his subject matter quite seriously and chooses to embody the thrill-seeking, blasphemous, homosexual image preferred by modern scholars, which corresponds to the tragic Doctor Faustus who sells his soul to the Devil and thereby suffers eternal damnation. Elton, however, writing a situation comedy, more playfully imagines a world in which the rumours concerning Marlowe's atheism and sodomy are untrue, as is his reputation as a brilliant poet, for he wastes his Cambridge degree in the same way that the comic Doctor Faustus misapplies his supernatural talents in the performance of silly parlour tricks for heads of state. And yet, Elton's depiction of Marlowe as an artistically lazy, heterosexually philandering, conventional Church-of-England man relies for its humour, at least in part, upon its distance from the dominant image of Marlowe with which the type of viewers who would watch a series about Shakespeare might be expected to be familiar. In a similar fashion, the central comic scenes of *Doctor Faustus*, in which the hero squanders his mystical powers, establish the play's sense of tragic waste by illustrating the vast disparity between the immortal scholar that Faustus might have become—"the branch that might have grown full straight" (Epilogue, 1)—and the shallow conjuror into which he does degenerate.

What neither show gives us, however, is a plausible account of the composition of *Doctor Faustus*. In line with romantic notions of authorship, both series assume that only one man wrote the entire play, and Pearce, who supposes that this playwright must have drawn the subject matter of the tragedy from his own life, must consequently ignore the frivolous middle section of the play. Neither show considers that Marlowe clearly consulted a literary source, the *Damnable Life*, for many of the details of his protagonist's experiences, nor do they account for the stylistic evidence which suggests that, while Marlowe may have planned the outline of the whole play, he "then farmed out certain [comic] scenes to another dramatist who worked with only an imprecise knowledge of what Marlowe was up to."³⁵ Elton jokingly suggests that Shakespeare penned *Doctor Faustus* in its entirety, but this claim functions merely as an ironic jab at those who believe that Marlowe wrote Shakespeare's plays. It is apparently impossible to reconcile the romantic theory of single authorship drawn from biography with the fact that the character Faustus appears to be two different people at different points in the play. What one might hope to see, at some time in the future, is a televisual version of the life of Christopher Marlowe that presents a more comprehensive picture of the process of authorship; one that takes into account the consultation of literary sources and collaboration with other playwrights that most likely occurred in the Elizabethan theatre world. Elements of the mythographic image of Marlowe the God-haunted atheist and sexual transgressive may well have contributed to the subject matter of his plays, but this persona does not tell the full story of the composition of *Doctor Faustus*.

³⁵ Bevington and Rasmussen, *Doctor Faustus*, 71.

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