

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE (1564-1593)

Born in Canterbury, Shakespeare's contemporary and would-be rival Marlowe was the son of a shoemaker. He received his B.A. from Cambridge in 1584 and an M.A. in 1587. By the latter year it seems he was attached to the Lord Admiral's men as a dramatist. Sir Walter Raleigh and other dashing men-about-town were his roistering companions. He was accused of heretical, even atheistic, views, but before the authorities could question him, he was rather mysteriously killed by his companion, Ingram Frizer, a gentleman, in a tavern brawl at Deptford. Marlowe may have been the victim of conspiracy, possibly because of his alleged political activities as an agent of France.

Marlowe's reputation slumbered through the 17th and 18th centuries, but rose to great heights with the Romantics of the 19th century. Twentieth-century fantasizing about him, such as claiming him to be author of Shakespeare's plays, is unnecessary. The ascertainable facts about Marlowe assure him major stature in English letters.

Marlowe's major works include:

Tamburlaine The Great (Part 1, c. 1587; Part 11, c. 1588)--"Fall of Princes" tragedy. This is apparently Marlowe's first work for the stage and it may well be the most remarkable initial effort of any of the world's great authors.)

The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus (c. 1589)--"Fall of Princes" tragedy.

The Jew of Malta (c. 1591)--"Fall of Princes" tragedy.

The Troublesome Raign & Lamentable Death of Edward the Second (c. 1592) Chronicle play.

"The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" (c. 1588) appeared in The Passionate Pilgrim & England's Helicon. It is one of the best known of the great Elizabethan lyrics. It called forth the answer "The Nymph's Reply," by Raleigh.

Hero & Leander (1598) is the undisputed masterpiece of Marlowe's Lyric genius. It is a reworking of the famous story by the Greek poet, Musaeus. Written in heroic couplets, it is particularly noted for its lush sensuality and ringing memorable lines. Many consider it to be the finest example of erotic epyllion in the English language. However, Marlowe completed only two setiads (about eight hundred lines) of the work. The rest was completed by George Chapman.

Ovid's Elegies (pub. 1569), a translation of Ovid's Amores. Probably done when Marlowe was a freshman at Cambridge.

SOME OF MARLOWE'S GREATEST ACHIEVEMENTS ARE:

1. "Marlowe's mighty line," as Ben Jonson aptly termed Marlowe's use of blank verse. Although Surrey introduced it into English and Goboduc employed it in drama, blank verse was a pale and

chambered thing until Marlowe made it resound with eloquence and grandeur. Shakespeare and the multitudes of English poets who have since employed the form ultimately derive blank verse's expressive force from Marlowe.

2. "The Muses' darling," as Peele termed him, first trumpeted from the stage the Renaissance lust for life. Not since Chaucer had an English voice so sounded the robustness of living, its challenges and its glories. But Marlowe senses the tragic grandeur of life quite differently from Chaucer. The central character in each of his dramas is a towering figure, insatiably desiring to wrestle with every experience. Not even Shakespeare painted such supermen, driven by such consuming desire.
3. No previous English dramatist had such a sense of theatre. Kyd may have known more about dramatic construction, but Marlowe knew the brilliant stage maneuver that would stir the audience by its sheer theatricality.