

## MARLOWE'S PLACE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Christopher Marlowe was born in Canterbury in 1564, a few months before Shakespeare. His father, who was a poor shoemaker, could not afford to send him to school, but through the kindness of a Patron the boy received an education at Cambridge. When about twenty years of age he came to London, became a dramatic writer, and contributed to the stage. He led a very extravagant life, the unbridled passion and violence of which are reflected in his dramas. He was not given time, however, to find himself, for he died at the early age of twenty-nine by the hand of a murderer in a tavern brawl.

He was still full of the conceit of a young man just entering the realms of knowledge, who had but newly begun to realize his capabilities in the field of drama. Throughout his unlicensed career, although it was rudely and prematurely shattered, he held to a high literary purpose that attained its end. He was influenced by what Taine calls the Pagan Renaissance movement, whose creative spirit found its fruition in Shakespeare, Jonson, and their contemporaries. Youth though Marlowe was, and consequently somewhat lacking in due sense of proportion, admiration for his genius completely offsets censure for the dissipations of his short lifetime.

If one study the lives of famous English writers, one will find that, with few exceptions, they were all more or less Bohemian; and upon closer study it will be found that their lives were in harmony with their works. They lived as they could, got into debt, wrote for their bread, and went on the stage. So it was with Marlowe, and his life is reflected in his works. Taine says: "He was an ill-regulated, dissolute, outrageously vehement and audacious spirit, but grand and sombre, with the genuine poetic frenzy; pagan, moreover, and rebellious in manners and creed. He

is a sceptic, denies God and Christ, blasphemes the Trinity, declares Moses 'a juggler', Christ more worthy of death than Barabbas, says that, 'yf he wer to write a new religion, he wolde undertake both a more excellent and more admirable methode', and 'almost in every company he cometh, perswadeth men to Atheisme' ". Imagine what poetry could emanate from such a character! Imagine—nay, do not tax the imagination—one glance is sufficient to perceive the product of the harmony between Marlowe's life and his works.

His play *Tamburlaine* first brought Marlowe before the public. This is a story of Timur the Tartar, who, from the lowly condition of shepherd chief, has risen to the dignity of the most powerful ruler in the East. He is, however, soon afterwards afflicted with a disease, and in his senseless fury rails at the gods who have stricken him, and prays for their overthrow. It is a play in which blind rage, murderous violence, senseless pride, demoniacal passions, and prodigality of carnage combine with a display of glittering splendors and exaggerated colors, to make one of the most bizzarre and one of the most famous epics in English literature.

This was followed by the wonderful drama upon which Marlowe's fame chiefly rests—*Faustus*. The master-thought of the principal character of the play, Dr. Faustus, is his craving to satisfy his soul, no matter at what price or with what results. The drama contains an unusual number of passages of rare poetic beauty.

In his next two plays, *The Massacre of Paris*, and *The Jew of Malta*, his bombast decreases but his violence remains. His *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, is but servile fidelity to Vergil. Of his last play, *Edward the Second*, Long says: "It is a tragic study of a king's weakness and misery. In point of style and dramatic construction, it is



by far the best of Marlowe's plays, and is a worthy predecessor of Shakespeare's Historical Drama."

Marlowe's writings are the first outbreak of conceited youth. His bombast, violence and "mighty line" are but the expression of what he felt, and are sometimes used to veil an understratum of sentimental fatalism. The words of Mortimer in *Edward the Second*:

"Base Fortune, now I see, that in thy wheel  
There is a point, to which, when men aspire,  
They tumble headlong down: that point I touch'd,  
And, seeing there was no place to mount up higher,  
Why should I grieve at my declining fall?—  
Farewell, fair queen; weep not for Mortimer,  
That scorns the world, and, as a traveller,  
Goes to discover countries yet unknown. . . . ."

are a cry from the heart, the profound confession, of Marlowe. He, too, saw the futility of courting Fortune, and aspired to a higher ambition. In vain? That is not for us to judge.

Marlowe's characters would, at a cursory glance, seem impossible. They act upon pure impulse, with no thought of what they do, or of the consequences of their having acted. The specialty of his characters is their abrupt commission of the deed, and therein is where they are true to life. They are children,—robust children. Take for instance his *Edward the Second*. The characters of this play are men of the Middle Ages. They have the fierceness, tenacity, and pride of big, well-fed, thoroughbred bulldogs; and they act accordingly. In *Tamburlaine*, Timur is the lifelike type of a once lowly shepherd, intoxicated with success and consumed with the lust of power. Dr. Faustus is another type, that of a scholar with an insatiable thirst for knowledge, who sells himself to the devil

for twenty-four years of absolute power and knowledge; he is filled with remorse, shudders and shrinks with fear when the time for the forfeit draws near. In his lyric, *The Passionate Shepherd to his Love*, we see again how truly he depicts his characters. He portrays the shepherd as a primitive man wooing his mate with promises of sensual comforts and delights; lesser poets dwell in their pastorals on the aesthetic phases of love, but what is the average shepherd expected to know, or sing, of love except as a natural, sensuous impulse and a physical, sexual attraction? Despite their extravagance and violence, Marlowe's characters are true to life.

Algernon C. Swinburne says that "Marlowe is the greatest discoverer, the most daring and inspired pioneer in all our poetic literature. Before him there was neither genuine blank verse nor genuine tragedy." Without a doubt, Marlowe, followed by Kyd, Nash, Lyly, Peele, and Green, brought the English drama to the point where Shakespeare began to experiment upon it.

"When Shakespeare began to write tragedy," says Professor Dowden, "the department of tragedy was dominated by a writer of superb genius, Christopher Marlowe, and Shakespeare might well have hesitated to dispute with him in this special province. But Shakespeare could not imitate the vices of Marlowe's style—he saw them too clearly. He saw that he must write tragedy of a kind altogether different from that created by Marlowe's method—the method of idealizing passion on a gigantic scale. He must eliminate the bombast and rhapsody of blood."

From this it may be seen that Christopher Marlowe was to Shakespeare in the school of literature what P. Vanucci Perugini was to Raphael in the school of painting. In both instances the pupil eclipsed the master, but in both cases the master was responsible for the development of

the pupil's capabilities, and to the master was due the pupil's successful elimination of the bad, and concentration of the good qualities that characterized two of the greatest artists that ever lived.

Marlowe enjoys a place in the literature of England as the father of English tragedy, the originator of genuine blank verse, the poet of unbridled passion and despair, one of the most suggestive figures of the English Renaissance, and as the only dramatist who can be compared with Shakespeare, whose greatest predecessor he was. Here and there his work has a stateliness of verse and a poetic beauty equal to Shakespeare's. What Marlowe might have been will ever be the subject of much speculation; and the Epilogue of *Faustus* might appropriately be written on his tomb:

"Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight,  
And burned is Apollo's laurel bough  
That sometime grew within this learned man."

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