

# MARLOWE: ECONOMIST

By James Branch Cabell

MARLOWE was an artist who labored, with sincere and appreciative reverence for his labor's worthiness, in the very highest fields of creative writing. It is really an inconsiderable matter that his dramas are failures in that they patently do not attain to the ideal conception. The shortcoming is bred not by inferior workmanship, for in technique Marlowe excelled, but by the reach of his conception, which in cold earnestness was superhuman. And, finally, Marlowe himself has answered this criticism, once for all, in Tamburlaine's superb prologue beginning: "If all the pens that ever poets held"—which I forbear to quote, because for your esthetic enrichment it is preferable that you search out and read these thirteen lines with painstaking consideration. For when you will come by sure knowledge of what "poetry" actually is and must remain always. . . .

Indeed, as you may with profit remember, the conclusive verdict as to this tirade has been rendered by an adequately competent judge: "In the most glorious verses now fashioned by a poet to express with subtle and final touch the supreme limit of his art, Marlowe has summed up all that can be said or thought on the office and the subject, the means and the end, of this highest form of spiritual ambition." And Swinburne, for once, really appears to speak with moderation.

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BUT I intend both here and hereafter to avoid that dreary thing called literary criticism and make no effort to define the faults and merits of the various writers to whom I may allude. I shall not analyze, compare, or appraise any of them. Instead, I shall but educe them as illustrations of my theory as to the working code of romance, and shall consider them from that sole viewpoint. So, in deliberating the economy of Marlowe, it is eminently necessary here to emphasize the fact that his true genius was exercised worthily. It is not unreasonable, indeed, to assert that he has had no equal anywhere. To consider—as after any such statement seems unavoidable—the possibility that, had Marlowe lived to attain maturity, he might today have been as tritely gabbled about as Shakespeare, is rather on a plane with debating "what song the Sirens sang" or the kindred mystery of what becomes of political issues after election.

Marlowe, precisely by virtue of his sensitive genius, was predestinate to an early death. In so far as any comparison can be carried, the advantage is, of course, with Marlowe. He was a scant two months older than Shakespeare; and all his wizardry was ended before the young fellow from Stratford had achieved anything notable. The highest aim of Shakespeare during Marlowe's lifetime was to poetize, as exactly as was humanly possible, in Marlowe's manner. It was by observing Marlowe that Shakespeare finally learned how to write; and Milton "formed himself" on the same model. Marlowe himself had no instruction and no need of any.

To the other side he displayed little of that gift for voicing platitudes in unforgettable terms by virtue of which Shakespeare "comes home" to most of us, and still remains so universally quoted. Marlowe's utterance is lacking in that element of triteness without which no work of art can ever be of general appeal in a world of mostly mediocre people. Then, too, one shudders to consider what Marlowe would have made of Mercutio or Falstaff, in the piece Swinburne, Marlowe was really not the foremost of English humorists. To the contrary, his plays are riddled with quite dreadful scenes in prose, of which the only humorous feature nowadays seems to lurk in the fact that they were intended to be amusing. In the acting there is no doubt that such rough and tumble fun had appreciative audience, just as it does today in the athletic comedy of our Sunday newspaper cartoons, and in the screened endeavors of our most popular moving picture actors, who to the delight of crowded auditoriums throw custard pies and fall down several flights of stairs. . . . Nor may one fairly raise any question of art, this way or the other: Elizabethan dramatists labored under the necessity of making the audience laugh at certain intervals, and, being unable to write comedy, Marlowe fulfilled a business obligation by concocting knockabout farce.

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CHIEFLY, the fame of Marlowe has been preserved by "The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus." And this is actually "poetic justice," for Marlowe is at his unrivaled best in rehandling the legend of the sorcerer who, in exchange for his soul, leased of the devil Mephistopheles a quarter century tenure of superhuman powers, and at the running out of his bond was carried off alive to hell. Now, it must be noted that Marlowe thought this story as to what had happened in Württemberg, not quite a hundred years before the time at which he wrote, narrated

plausible and established facts. The story told of a bargain which Marlowe believed was capable of consummation, by such "forward wits," at the very moment Marlowe wrote: and he no more questioned that as a result of this bargain Johan Faustus, after doing certain unusual things, was carried off alive to hell than you and I would think of denying that Napoleon, after doing certain unusual things, was carried off alive to St. Helena.

But, above all, it must be noted that the exploit which, as attributed to Faustus, most deeply impressed Marlowe was the evocation of Helen of Troy, in defiance of time and death, and any process of human reason, to be the wizard's mistress. For Marlowe believed in this feat also: and he found the man who had performed it enviable. To Marlowe—need I say?—Queen Helen, that lost proud darling of old nations whereamong she moved as a ruinous flame, prefigured the witch woman. The apostrophe of Faustus to Queen Helen, apart from the mere loveliness of words, thus pulsates with an emotion for which there is really no expression in human speech. In imagination the poet, for one breathless moment, stands—as he perfectly believed, you must remember, that Johan Faustus had stood—face to face with that flawless beauty of which all poets have perturbedly divined the existence somewhere, and which life as men know it does not afford, nor anywhere foresees.

To Marlowe's mind, it was for this that Faustus pawned his soul and drove no intolerable bargain: and the moral which Marlowe educes, wistfully, when all is over, is that a man must pay dearly for doing—not what heaven disapproves of, as would speed the orthodox tag—but that which heaven nowadays does not permit. . . . Of course his hero technically "repents," with a considerable display of rhetoric; but not until his lease of enjoyment is quite run out and hell is pyrotechnically agape: by the prosaic the ethical value of "repentance" for the necessity of discharging an ardently unpleasant debt may be questioned. There is really no trace of regret for the hellish compact until punishment therefor impends: and then, by a stupendous touch of irony, Faustus is dragged to torment just as his parched lips pervert, to shriek his need, in terror-stricken babblement, that sugared and languorous verse which Ovid whispered in Corinna's arms at the summit of life's felicity.

In short, this Christopher Marlowe was one of the supreme artists of literature. . . .

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WE may lay finger upon this much, then, as increment, toward justifying Marlowe's economy. This much we have to set against its purchase price, which at crude utmost was the flungaway life of a shoemaker's oldest son, very discreditably murdered at 29. All this, it must be remembered, was created—tangibly to exist where before existed nothing—by a young fellow who, as went material things, was wasting his prospects in pothouse dissipation. At the birth of much of it not all this loveliness alcohol played the midwife. And really to make this admission need not trouble us, even nowadays when, at the moment I speak, we have so far advanced toward barbarism as to have revived the tribal taboo in the form of prohibition; and are resolute to let art take its chances, with the other amenities of life, under that new régime, which so alluringly promises alike to outlaw the views of Christ concerning alcoholic beverages, and to enable zealous Christians to turn an honest penny by spy work.

For, faithful in this as in all else to his abstention from logic, man has never believed his moral standards to be retroactive. We are so constituted that we can wholeheartedly detest from afar whatever our neighbors consider undesirable, when it is a measure of miles which removes the object of disapproval, but not when the thing is remote by a span of years. Of course in this there is no more display of reason than we evince, say, in the selection of our wives. In abstract theory people ought today to view the infamy of Heliogabalus with at least the indignation they reserve, at the moment I speak, for the policy of the kaiser; in practice a knave's wickedness becomes with time an element of romance, and large iniquities serve as colorful relief to the tedium of history. And it seems banal to point out that it no longer matters ethically to any one breathing that a shoemaker's son, rather more than three centuries ago, made a ruin of his body through intemperance, for the case is no longer within the jurisdiction of morals. Our sole concern with Marlowe nowadays is esthetic: and the most straitlaced may permissibly commend the "Faustus" with much of that indifference to the author's personal "morality" which renders their enjoyment of the "Book of Psalms" immune to memories of the deplorable affair with Uriah's wife.