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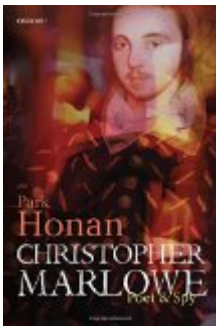
Park Honan. *Christopher Marlowe: Poet and Spy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. xv + 421 pp. $32.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-818695-3.



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Marlowe ... Kit Marlowe

Each term when I teach early modern non-Shakespearean drama and we get to the unit on Christopher Marlowe, I suggest Charles Nicholl's riveting book *The Reckoning* (1992). Bleary-eyed students curse me for it the next week, having found themselves unable to sleep or do any other homework until they have read it breathlessly through. Park Honan's *Christopher Marlowe: Poet and Spy* will not have readers paging through it in a similar fever. Rather Honan's is a book to be pored over, as he attempts to paint, in words, a portrait of the fleering--perhaps atheistic, perhaps homosexual--poet-spy to complement the mysterious painted one that constitutes the frontispiece to his book. That portrait of a gentleman in fashionable dress, with a shock of unkempt hair and an arrogant demeanor (found in 1952 at Marlowe's alma mater, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge University), occasions one of Honan's many digressive attempts to ferret out any aspect of the young man's brief but violent life that may reveal something about his origins as poet and/or spy. In the introduction to the chapter devoted to Marlowe's entry into espionage, under Elizabeth's I's spymaster, Sir Thomas Walsingham, Honan abruptly shifts into an eight-page discussion of the history of the painting and the case both for and against it as a representation of Marlowe. Honan cryptically tells us that the painting hung in Corpus Hall until 1995 "when it went to a safer locale" (p. 116). While this is representative of a number of similarly enigmatic statements in the book, Honan concludes his defense of the portrait as one of Marlowe with an equally characteristic gem of arresting prose: "In dress, we make of ourselves what we intend to be" (p. 117).

Honan has some clear ideas about what Marlowe intended to be in a life that followed the course of a shooting star. He traces Marlowe's early years as the son of shoemaker John Marlowe in Canterbury; his early academic successes that sent him to both the Queen's School and Cambridge University on scholarship; his meteoric rise in both the public theaters (with the wild popularity of *Tamburlaine*, parts 1 and 2) and among the nobility (particularly the Walsinghams and the "wizard earl" Henry Percy) with his poetry

and his knack for spying; and his tragic, violent death in the company of three other government operatives at Deptford at the age of twenty-nine. Marlowe was stabbed just above his right eye with the twelve-penny dagger of Ingram Friser. According to the coroner's inquest, Friser was flanked, at the time of the murder, by Nicholas Skeres and Richard Poley. All three men had ties to the government, ranging from the seedy and somewhat questionable (Skeres) to the highly confidential and professional (Poley).

Honan concludes that Marlowe was something of a momma's boy who developed a profound sympathy for women in both his attachment to Katherine Marlowe and the adulation likely heaped upon him by his younger sisters. He also sees in Marlowe a social aspirant who resented the difference in his class position as the son of a Canterbury cobbler sharing library privileges at Cambridge with the children of London's power elite. Marlowe's work for the spymaster Walsingham and his friendly relationship with the latter's son (also named Thomas Walsingham) seem to have been efforts to shake free of financial exigency. Finally, Honan exerts considerable pressure on the limited evidence regarding Marlowe's sexuality that emerges from careful scrutiny of his own writing, from the subjects that he was drawn to, and on the basis of the way that he treats sexual matters within his handful of brilliant literary works.

One of the main virtues of this work is also one that necessitates close, careful reading: Honan's detailed biographies of the many people linked to Marlow. We come to know the members of the Marlowe family; Marlowe's classmates at the Queen's School and at Cambridge; other poets whom he would have been likely to know (such as the poets John Lyly and Stephen Gosson, who turned vehement antitheatricalist after beginning his career as a playwright, and William Shakespeare); the men who arrested him; and the men who were present at his murder.[1] Indeed, the paucity of factual detail about Marlowe's own life is, at times, compensated for by a superfluity of information about those around him. Along the way, we also receive richly detailed verbal tours of Canterbury, Corpus Christi College, the theater district in London, and even the estate at Scadbury belonging to Thomas Walsingham the younger. Honan's recreations of Marlowe's social, cultural, and even physical milieus provide a wonderful context for the poet and his works. However, they ultimately tempt Honan to trace autobiographical eruptions into Marlowe's plays, such as the claim that concludes his sumptuous recreation of the sights, sounds and smells of the culmination of the Canterbury pilgrimage: "Becket, or St. Thomas, was venerated in a Trinity Chapel shrine which filled up with trinkets such as a bright ruby given by Louis XII, silver-gilt candlesticks, and costly plate--all approached through a glazed ambulatory of inlaid stone roundels. Such wealth left a good precedent for Marlowe's ironic interest in rich jewels and 'paltry silverlings'" (p. 11), the quoted phrase taken from Marlowe's 1590-91 play *The Jew of Malta*.

Honan is on firmer ground in the connections that he draws between Marlowe's educational career and the stunning poetry that he would ultimately write, shaking a powerful blank verse line for stage dialogue free from his predecessors' heavier and more artificial rhymes. Luckily, John Gresshop, headmaster during Marlowe's time at the Queen's School in Canterbury, left an inventory of his books, which Honan mines for suggestion as to the literary works on which Marlowe may have cut his teeth. As Honan nicely puts it, Marlowe "collected verbal bullets, and learned to shoot" (p. 55). Much evidence survives of daily life at Cambridge, including scholarship records, the records of Marlowe's matriculation to the B.A. and M.A. degrees, and the Buttery Books' accounts of his presence in the dining hall. The latter two pieces of evidence reveal Marlowe's entry into espionage and foreign spy work, since his increasing absences from school are made apparent in

his absence from the dining hall. The Privy Council was famously forced to intervene on Marlowe's behalf to see that he received his degree in spite of his poor record of attendance. The surviving letter to the Cambridge authorities announces: "it was not her majestie's pleasure that anie one emploied as he had been ... should be defamed by those that are ignorant in th'affaires he went about" (p. 154).

The chapters or sections of chapters Honan devotes to each of Marlowe's plays and his major poems assume virtually no knowledge of Marlowe's work and therefore slow down readers who have intimate familiarity with it. Honan's analyses, however, compile a wide range of critical responses to Marlowe's corpus in one convenient package, offering excellent overviews of critical assessments of the plays and poems from his own day to the present one. Within the context of these discussions of Marlowe's writing, Honan works hard to "prove" that Marlowe wrote from a "homosexual perspective" (p. 213), even as he acknowledges the anachronism of this perspective in a culture that did not perceive sexuality so rigidly. Much of the burden of this argument is placed on the contempt for the penis and bemused view of sex that emerges in one of Marlowe's first poetic endeavors, his translation of Ovid's *Amores*. Additional weight is placed on the infamous note from Richard Baines, who arrested Marlowe in Flushing under suspicion that he might have been involved in the Dutch Church Libel (May 1593), to Sir John Puckering ticking off Marlowe's alleged heresies, blasphemies, and atheistic rants, including the now legendary line "all they that love not Tobacco & Boies were fooles" (p. 374). If Marlowe said this at all--and that is a big "if," considering the source--it does not necessarily mark him out as a homosexual per se, since, as Honan himself points out, Marlowe lived in "a strongly male, homosocial culture" (p. 296).

Honan also emphasizes Marlowe's consistent attraction in his limited corpus to narratives of same-sex love, as in *Edward II* (1592-93) and his incomplete long poem, *Hero and Leander*. However, Marlowe is at least as eloquent in *Edward II*, in articulating Queen Isabella's anguish over her husband's neglect of her in favor of Gaveson, as he is in the speeches of longing that he writes for Edward, pining for Gaveston. Moreover, Marlowe's Leander tries hard to rebuff Neptune's advances with a reminder of normative heterosexuality--"I am no woman, I" (p. 315)--and he is, after all, swimming the Hellespont to get to a romantic rendezvous with Hero. Finally, arguably Marlowe's most famous poem in his own day was his posthumously published love lyric "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," which is specifically addressed to a woman, a fact underscored by the many poetic replies penned to it, including Sir Walter Ralegh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd."

In the end, Marlowe remains as shadowy a figure as that in his reputed portrait in the dirty and damaged state in which it was found in 1952. The portrait was cracked almost straight down the middle when it was found, a beautiful visual metaphor for the man it might depict. Born into the working class, Marlowe earned degrees that authorized him to style himself a gentleman. A student of theology, Marlowe's career ended with posthumous charges of atheism. Reputedly a favorer of tobacco and boys, Marlowe wrote equally poignant love verses about same-sex and opposite-sex attractions. Studied now as a poet, he lost his life (in 1593), it seems, as a result of his work as a spy. Honan gathers all that is currently known about the mysterious Christopher Marlowe and explains the conclusions that he has drawn based on that evidence with meticulous care. However, the final virtue of this book is that Honan by no means expects you to take his word for it. He provides extensive documentary evidence, including five appendices--two genealogical tables; Richard Baines's note; the two letters

that Thomas Kyd, playwright and former roommate of Marlowe, wrote about incriminating papers found in his room that he claimed to be Marlowe's; and the coroner's report following the inquest into Marlowe's murder--that enable readers to assess the evidence for themselves. The jury may still be out on many aspects of Marlowe himself, but thanks to Honan's book, the flat background of his alleged portrait has been colorfully filled in, and the world in which he lived and wrote brought vividly to life.

Note

[1]. See Park Honan's earlier biography on William Shakespeare, ***Shakespeare: A Life*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Honan is also the author of the literary biographies ***Matthew Arnold: A Life*** (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981); and ***Jane Austen: Her Life*** (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).