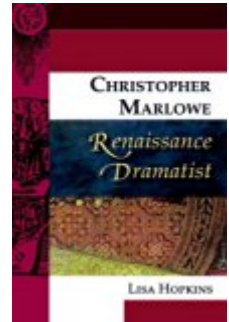


Lisa Hopkins. *Christopher Marlowe, Renaissance Dramatist*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008. x + 179 pp \$29.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-7486-2473-7.



Reviewed by Musa Gurnis

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Commissioned by Brian S. Weiser (Metropolitan State College of Denver)

Lisa Hopkins's book is a new addition to the Renaissance Dramatists series published by Edinburgh University Press. These are introductory texts geared toward undergraduate and secondary school students that seek to provide relevant cultural contexts, performance histories, surveys of important scholarship, and readings of the plays of major early modern playwrights. Hopkins's book offers readers new to Christopher Marlowe a great deal of rich, useful material. She reproduces, for example, the whole of Richard Baines's note and much of the "Dutch Church Libel," documents that seem likely to appeal to twenty year olds encountering Marlowe for the first time. Hopkins organizes her book thematically, with subsections within each chapter dealing with individual plays. This format, unfortunately, may be unwieldy for students who are looking for insight into one or two plays in particular. Sean McEvoy's book on Ben Jonson (*Ben Jonson: Renaissance Dramatist* [2008]) in the same series follows an introductory overview with chapters on individual plays, which is a more manageable

format for readers likely unfamiliar with a playwright's entire oeuvre.

Chapter 1, "Marlowe's Life and Death," is a lively opener. Hopkins delivers a strong sense of Marlowe, "the Atheist Spy," who "liked to shock," while at the same time neatly exposing the dangers of biographical criticism (p. 22). In response to the question "was Marlowe homosexual?" Hopkins writes, "in a technical sense, no: the word 'homosexual' did not exist until the 1890s, and a number of pieces of evidence suggest that people in the sixteenth century did not think of a preference solely for men as a possible sexual identity. From a more practical, 'commonsense' position, though, the answer to the question 'Was Marlowe homosexual?' is almost certainly yes" (p. 21). Hopkins then goes on to refer to Marlowe as homosexual in a fairly uncomplicated way for the rest of the book. This one-sentence treatment of the "acts versus identities" paradigm of early modern same-sex eroticism seems too short. There is an opportunity missed here to more fully historicize

early modern sexual paradigms. The realization that sexuality, which seems so innate or natural, is historically contingent is often a powerful intellectual experience for undergraduates. It is particularly unfortunate that Hopkins leaves this subject relatively undeveloped, since, in later chapters, she gives a number of very engaging readings of same-sex interactions in Marlowe's work.

Chapter 2, "The Marlowe Canon," gives brief textual histories of the plays, their source materials, and contemporary cultural or political events that the plays particularly reference. Hopkins offers an extremely lucid and useful explanation of *Doctor Faustus's* (1588) engagement with the tension between Lutheran and Calvinist models of salvation. There are, however, a few infelicitous moments. After Hopkins quotes Barabas's "well-poisoning" speech in her segment on *The Jew Of Malta* (1589), she writes, "moreover, though Barabas offers this account as his own personal history, it is equally possible to read it as a kind of composite or representative overview of recent history and the ways Jews might have become involved in it, and indeed Barabas has been compared to a number of historical Jews including David Passi and Joao Micques" (p. 33). Hopkins here is not sufficiently attentive to the kinds of misreadings to which undergraduates are susceptible. A college freshman could easily read this passage and think that Barabas's account of poisoning wells and murdering and bankrupting Christians was actually a reflection of the actions of historical Jews, rather than a collection of popular sixteenth-century anti-Semitic old wives tales. There are a number of passages throughout the book that, by leaving out some detail or failing to make a distinction, might be misleading for readers unfamiliar with the field. But Hopkins is tasked with presenting a huge body of material in a very condensed form and these kinds of omissions are perhaps inevitable.

The latter half of the book contains a number of strong readings and some very engaging con-

textual material. Chapter 3 gives performance histories, both modern and early modern of Marlowe's plays. Hopkins presents neat summaries of the *de casibus* tradition and David Bevington's argument about Marlowe's debt to medieval morality plays. If her treatments of the stage histories of some plays seem a bit short, Hopkins makes up for it in her wonderful, extended treatment of Derek Jarman's film adaptation of *Edward II* (1991). Chapter 4, "Marlowe as Scholar," shows Hopkins at her best. She begins by looking at some of the ironic deployments of classical knowledge in Marlowe's plays. Then, she follows with a strong section on the relationship between new geographical knowledge and religious skepticism in Marlowe's work, and moves to an intriguing segment on Marlowe's precise representations of physical pain and bodily wounds. The chapter closes with a solid piece on Marlowe's treatment of cosmology. Chapter 5, "Marlowe the Horizon Stretcher," opens with a number of perceptive comments on Marlowe's tendency to push the limits of theatrical representation by writing scenes that seem impossible to stage—such as burning a body and a woman stabbing herself in the throat. The chapter then moves to a discussion of Marlowe's reputation as an atheist and the transgressive challenges posed by his heroes. Hopkins closes with a chapter summarizing criticism of Marlowe from Jonson to the present, with particular attention to the limitations of studies that read Marlowe primarily in terms of his relationship to William Shakespeare (i.e., as "inferior to Shakespeare"). She also proposes some intriguing exceptions to the critical commonplace that Marlowe's plays marginalize women.

As a teaching aide, Hopkins's book is a mixed performance. The structure of the book makes for a somewhat jumpy read, and Hopkins sometimes fails to anticipate the needs, or at least the common misperceptions, of high school and college students. However, there is much useful material

here for readers new to Marlowe, and Hopkins offers some inspired readings of the plays.

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