

Writing Marlowe As Writing Shakespeare:
Exploring Biographical Fictions

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UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEXROSALIND BARBER
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH LITERATUREWRITING MARLOWE AS WRITING SHAKESPEARESUMMARY

This thesis consists of two components: a 70,000-word verse novel and a 50,000-word critical component that has arisen out of the research process for that novel.

Creative Component: The Marlowe Papers

The Marlowe Papers is a full-length verse novel written entirely in iambic pentameter. As with verse novels such as *The Golden Gate* by Vikram Seth, or *The Emperor's Babe* by Bernadine Evaristo, its inspiration, derivation, conventions and scope owe more to the prose novel than to the epic poem. Though there is as yet no widely-accepted definition, a verse novel may be distinguished from an epic poem where it consists, as in this case, of numerous discrete poems, each constituting a 'chapter' of the novel. This conception allows for considerable variations in form and tone that would not be possible in the more cohesive tradition of the epic poem. *The Marlowe Papers* is a fictional autobiography of Christopher Marlowe based on the idea that he used the pseudonym 'William Shakespeare' (employing the Stratford merchant as a 'front'), having faked his own death and fled abroad to escape capital charges for atheism and heresy. The verse novel, written in dramatic scenes, traces his life from his flight on 30 May 1593, through the back-story (starting in 1586) that led to his prosecution, as we similarly track his progress on the Continent and in England until just after James I

accedes to the English throne. The poems are a mixture of longer blank verse narratives and smaller, more lyrical poems (including sonnets). Explanatory notes to the poems, and a *Dramatis Personae*, are included on the advice of my creative supervisor.

Critical Component: Writing Marlowe As Writing Shakespeare

This part of the thesis explores the relationship between early modern biographies and fiction, questioning certain ‘facts’ of Marlovian and Shakespearean biography in the light of the ‘thought experiment’ of the verse novel. Marlowe’s reputation for violence is reassessed in the light of scholarly doubt about the veracity of the inquest document, and Shakespeare’s sonnets are reinterpreted through the lens of the Marlovian theory of Shakespeare authorship. The argument is that orthodox and non-Stratfordian theories might be considered competing paradigms; simply different frameworks through which interpretation of the same data leads to different conclusions. Interdisciplinary influences include Kuhn’s philosophy of scientific discovery, post-modern narrativist history, neuroscience, psychology, and quantum physics (in the form of the ‘observer effect’). Data that is either anomalous or inexplicable under the orthodox paradigm is demonstrated to support a Marlovian reading, and the current state of the Shakespeare authorship question is assessed. Certain primary source documents were examined at the Bodleian Library, at the British Library, and at Lambeth Palace Library. Versions of Chapters 2, 3 and 4, written under supervision during this doctorate, have all been published, either as a book chapter or as a journal article, within the last year (Barber, 2009, 2010a, b).

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A note on spellings

Many rebuttals to non-Stratfordian arguments are advanced along the lines that, with regards to the man usually attributed as the author, ‘his name is on the plays’. This is *argumentum in circulo*, starting as it does with the assumption that the Stratford-born man is the author, and demonstrates that to consider the Shakespeare authorship question at all requires that we distinguish the author of the plays and poems from the Stratford-born man to whom they are usually attributed. In order to avoid wordiness or repetitive qualifiers, where a distinction is necessary I have used the convention adopted by Diana Price and others, using the spelling Shakespeare when the reference is to the author and Shakspere when the information pertains to the man born in Stratford-on-Avon. They may be one and the same man, but in order to explore the theory at all, confusion must be avoided. The vagaries of Elizabethan spelling are acknowledged and do not constitute any significant part of my argument.

Shakespeare's Contemporaries. Shakespearean England was a treasure-trove of historical giants – Elizabeth I, Ben Jonson, the Earl of Essex, Edward Alleyn, John Lyly, William Kempe – all fascinating to be sure. It was hard to choose, but here is a list of those five contemporaries of the Bard whose lives I find most intriguing.

1. Christopher Marlowe The brilliant young playwright Christopher Marlowe was killed in a tavern brawl on May 30, 1593, and the events surrounding his suspicious death have chilled and captivated all those interested in Renaissance England. Allusions to Marlowe's work are prevalent in Shakespeare's plays. Here Shakespeare quotes directly a line from Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* (176): "Whoever lov'd that lov'd not at first sight?" (*As You Like It*, 3.5.81). Christopher Marlowe, Elizabethan poet and Shakespeare's most important predecessor in English drama, who is noted especially for his establishment of dramatic blank verse. Marlowe was the second child and eldest son of John Marlowe, a Canterbury shoemaker. Nothing is known of his first schooling. What did Christopher Marlowe write?