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# Reading Marlowe Again

*The Collected Poems of Christopher Marlowe.* Patrick Cheney and Brian J. Striar, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 302 pp. \$39.95, paperback.

The shepherd's still waiting for an answer, if you're curious. If you haven't checked in a while, Christopher Marlowe's exquisite little Elizabethan poem, "The Passionate Shepherd to his Love," continues to occupy its tiny pasture of white paper, although for many poetry readers it may stand mainly as a dusty memory from an English lit survey long ago. He's still repeating his appeal—"Come live with me and be my love"—awaiting his answer, or a poem in return. Marlowe's Renaissance contemporaries, Walter Raleigh and John Donne, both wrote saucy verse replies, but their answers were not exactly the desired ones, at least from the shepherd's perspective, expressed so urgently and with such longing. Better to settle for a simple note, perhaps with boxes to be checked "yes" or "no"—even that much attention might be enough for someone enduring this love plight. The earliest readers would have more easily heard darker connotations of trial and suffering in Marlowe's title word "Passionate"; think of Christ's passion. However plaintive his song, Marlowe's shepherd still stands there patiently and no less canonically on page 767 of volume one of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, in its accustomed place near the bottom of a bookcase.

Now that *The Collected Poems of Christopher Marlowe* is available, students of Renaissance literature and poetry lovers generally can read afresh the entirety of Marlowe's poetic output, as well as the

responses and continuations it invited. This edition is portable, though at \$39.95 it's hardly affordable compared with most poetry paperbacks. That said, it remains less pricey than the doorstep/bookshelf ballast that is *The Norton Anthology*, and far more of Marlowe's lyric poetry (namely all of it) can be found herein. The additional inclusion of others' poetic reactions suggests the commitment of Marlowe's present editors to contextualizing his poetry for a modern audience, which may have encountered this great innovator of early English verse only in passing, or under classroom duress, and in any case in the shadow (or glare?) of reading Shakespeare. In Marlowe's own time, his poems were not just texts; they were *events*. "The Passionate Shepherd" frequently appeared in anthologies, some of the earliest in English, and the poem was parodied almost as frequently. And who wasn't talking about *Ovid's Elegies*, those jubilant, Cambridge-undergrad versions of Ovid's randy Latin *Amores*? Marlowe's English translations, memorable for pointing out the energetic possibilities of heroic couplets, were publicly burned in 1599 by orders of the bishop of London and archbishop of Canterbury. "Poetry makes nothing happen," says Auden. Someone try telling that to Christopher Marlowe, or to that bishop.

Patrick Cheney's excellent introduction, which is thorough yet readable, makes clear the huge influence Marlowe had in various poetic realms—lyric, erotic, epic, you name it. In fact, Cheney's reference to Marlowe as "Renaissance England's first great poet-playwright" is a not-so-subtle allusion to Shakespeare, the most famous of Marlowe's poet-playwright protégés. It is hard to imagine what sort of author Shakespeare would have been if, at the beginning of his long career, he were not "writing up" to Marlowe's already considerable poetic and dramatic achievements. Recall Ben Affleck in the Oscar-winning film *Shakespeare in Love*: playing the famous actor Edward Alleyn, Affleck insolently boasts to a theater producer that he has played Faustus, Tamburlaine, the Jew of Malta—all heroes from Marlowe's popular plays. Then Affleck's booming voice narrows to an afterthought, for the sake of politeness, as he turns to the young Shakespeare, played by Joseph Fiennes: "And oh yes, Will, Henry the Sixth, too." In the early 1590s, this "upstart crow" Shakespeare had little more than the very Marlovian *Henry the Sixth* plays to show for himself.

Shakespeare later acknowledged Marlowe's influence, and his friendship, in his pastoral comedy *As You Like It*, where he apostrophizes a "Dead shepherd," and alludes to that shepherd-friend's most famous couplets: "Where both deliberate, the love is slight: / Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?" These lines describe the doomed lovers in Marlowe's longer, unfinished poem, *Hero and Leander*, which remains one of the greatest poems of lust, if not love, in the English language. This poem is the central pleasure of the present volume. Consider the lyrical buildup to *Hero*, paradoxically called "Venus' nun," when the city of Sestos celebrates the feast of Adonis. Even dowdy nobodies return from this festival as lovers, the narrator says with a wink:

For every street like to a firmament  
Glistered with breathing stars, who where they went  
Frighted the melancholy earth, which deemed  
Eternal heaven to burn, for so it seemed,  
As if another Phaeton had got  
The guidance of the sun's rich chariot.  
But far above the loveliest *Hero* shined,  
And stole away th' enchanted gazer's mind;  
For like sea-nymphs' inveigling harmony,  
So was her beauty to the standers by. (198)

Marlowe frames his heroine gorgeously, but throughout his poem love is never a platonic, disembodied, or ultimately safe power. The above passage, as a matter of fact, has its insinuations of ravishment and, less exaltedly, of the peep show too. Considering how Marlowe looks as unflinchingly at the dark appetites of Eros as at Aphrodite's lovely visions, perhaps we should be less shocked by the images on the pavement of the Temple of Venus: "There might you see the gods in sundry shapes, / Committing heady riots, incests, rapes" (200)—a clear sign that Marlowe, like any good Tudor schoolboy, knew Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and other Roman poems well, and maybe all too well, as far as nervous Christian schoolmasters were concerned.

A different kind of literary pleasure awaits readers in Marlowe's versions of Ovid's *Amores*. Here we see a young poet learning his craft, and what he lacks in verbal economy and metrical skill, he usually makes up for in his sly narrations and vigorous English phrasing. The

speaker in elegy 1.4 coaches his mistress on the secret signs they will share at dinner, when accompanied by her husband:

View me, my becks and speaking countenance;  
Take and receive each secret amorous glance.  
Words without voice shall on my eyebrows sit,  
Lines thou shalt read in wine by my hand writ.  
When our lascivious toys come in thy mind,  
Thy rosy cheeks be to thy thumb inclined.  
If aught of me thou speak'st in inward thought,  
Let thy soft finger to thy ear be brought.  
When I (my light) do or say aught that please thee,  
Turn round thy gold ring, as it were to ease thee.

...

What wine he fills thee, wisely will him drink;

...

When thou hast tasted, I will take the cup,  
And where thou drink'st, on that part I will sup. (38-39)

Erotic grandstanding has hardly sounded better, as Marlowe expresses with his own youthful panache the brazen, playful, and deceitful world of Ovid's lovers.

The final poem not to be missed here is Marlowe's translation of the first book of the *Civil War, or Pharsalia*, an epic poem by the Silver Age Roman poet Lucan. In this higher, epic register, Marlowe's verse more resembles the speeches in his plays, and specifically the "mighty line" that made him and his stage heroes so famous. In the following passage, he describes the panic overtaking Rome once Julius Caesar crosses the Rubicon:

You would have thought their houses had been fired,  
Or, dropping-ripe, ready to fall with ruin;  
So rushed the inconsiderate multitude  
Thorough [sic] the city, hurried headlong on,  
As if the only hope that did remain  
To their afflictions were t' abandon Rome. (490)

While his blank verse lacks the overall flexibility and range of effect found in later, more famous practitioners such as Milton, Wordsworth, or Stevens, some of the rhythms above are quite accomplished. The

grammatical structure makes it clear that those Roman houses are neither on fire nor collapsing (the panicked multitude just react as if they were), but this imagined urban violence nevertheless seems crystallized in the second line, thanks to the consonance of “dropping-ripe” and the repeated *r*'s across the short phrases, which “dig in” to accentuate the staccato syntax. And furthermore, how smart he was to follow the third line’s “So rushed” with that Latinate object phrase, the “inconsiderate multitude,” whose syllables seem to scurry around the mouth’s precincts. Marlowe deserves more credit than he usually receives as a poet writing in blank verse, especially when doing so was still a bit of a classicizing novelty. He helped to make blank verse not only viable, but also the representative meter in the English tradition.

Marlowe died in a mysterious scuffle in 1593. He was staying with three friends (or at least associates) down the River Thames from London, in a Deptford home that provided room and board to lodgers. All four men were involved diversely in the Elizabethan underworld and intelligence networks. In truth, these nebulous worlds overlapped to a troubling degree. The coroner’s report speaks of Marlowe attacking one of these men in a rage, in disagreement about the “reckoning” or tab. Scholars have for a long time suspected otherwise, and Marlowe’s two latest biographers, Park Honan and David Riggs, both believe his death was premeditated. They disagree as to who initiated it, though Riggs feels the order may have come from Queen Elizabeth herself. Marlowe was a controversial figure—reputed an atheist, known for writing provocative plays, and previously arrested for brawling and counterfeiting. He may have become a liability.

He also had a reputation as a fiery, sublime, and “elemental” poet. One of Marlowe’s first printers wrote that despite his death, “yet the impression of the man, that hath been dear unto us, living an after life in our memory, there putteth us in mind of farther obsequies due unto the deceased.” The printer speaks punningly here: the “impression” refers to Marlowe’s verses, now pressed onto paper. His poetry was indeed that part of him that survived him most, and the editors of this new Oxford edition perform their own noble obsequy by making Marlowe’s mighty lines available again.

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