
MARLOVIAN THEORY, VENUS AND ADONIS, AND THE SHAKESPEARE AUTHORSHIP QUESTION

ENGLISH 317:

INTRODUCTION TO BRITISH LITERATURE WITH MICHAEL MCCLLOUD

ABSTRACT:

This project takes a critical look at the existing research for and against the concept of Marlovian Theory and argues for Marlowe's guise as William Shakespeare in later life. This argument is drawn from not only expert, outside scholarship, but also involves a close examination of Marlovian and Shakespearian texts, specifically Venus and Adonis, and strives to prove that it was, in fact, Marlowe who composed this epic poem. This project also acknowledges the fact that despite what some might consider definitive proof in favor of Marlovian Theory, the Shakespearian authorship question will always remain.

The same name appears on some of the greatest plays and poems written in the entirety of English history: William Shakespeare. However, was this poor, uneducated man from Stratford-upon-Avon truly the author of these works? Many believe otherwise. Popular Shakespeare-authorship theories state that other men, better educated and well-respected writers, may have produced these works. Names of possible authors include Sir Francis Bacon, Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, William Stanley, the sixth Earl of Derby, and Christopher Marlowe. Perhaps the most interesting of these candidates is Christopher Marlowe. Marlowe's secret lives (espionage, alleged homosexuality, and atheism), his untimely death, and his similarities to Shakespeare in writing styles all point to the fact that Marlovian theory may be correct; this young man may have written the plays and poems that today carry the name William Shakespeare. By exploring Marlowe's past one can conclude that Shakespeare's famous poem, *Venus and Adonis*, was actually written by Marlowe, due to the themes, literary devices, style, and symbolism common between Shakespearian and Marlovian works.

To better understand why Christopher Marlowe could be the author of Shakespeare's works, one must examine his childhood and upbringing. He was born in Canterbury, "in the same artisan class and in the same year (1564) as William Shakespeare." His intelligence won him a scholarship where he attended the King's School. From there Marlowe went on to attend the University of Cambridge. His education took a secretive route at this point. Many believe Sir Francis Walsingham recruited Marlowe to serve the Crown as a secret agent.¹ The article, "The Government Agent," states this "was vitally important in this age of Catholic versus Protestant political intrigue, an age of political assassinations, directed against the Heads of States" (para. 1). Because of this, Walsingham was charged with creating an unparalleled espionage network, which probably included young Christopher Marlowe.²

Marlowe's secret lives did not stop with his spy work for the Crown. Perhaps his upbringing, his intelligence, or his secretive nature explained his involvement in another covert organization. Marlowe was a part of a group called the Free-Thinkers. Though this group and its School of Night may not sound too terribly dangerous, the information and ideas exchanged at this time were highly controversial. The Free-Thinkers were labeled as atheistic, though whether or not all the members actually denied a belief in a higher power is unknown.³ Rather, the Free-Thinkers "... discussed a wide range of subjects and were avid in their pursuit of all knowledge," which centered around scientific discovery.⁴ These men and their pursuit of knowledge were seen as dangerous, revolutionary, and vile. One of the theories concerning Marlowe's untimely death is based upon his involvement with this group and the Church's discontentment with that fact.

The Church chose to target Christopher Marlowe as an enemy against its teachings not only because of his rumored atheism but also because of a report by Richard Baines on Marlowe's homosexuality, in which he quotes the playwright as saying, "All they that love not Tobacco and Boys are fools."⁵ Aside from this testimony, Marlowe's own works included many blatant, homosexual themes and characters. In *Edward II*, Marlowe paints the king as having a relationship with a man named Piers Gaveston. The article, "Marlowe and Homosexuality" states, "This was very new for the time" and recognizes that Marlowe's characterizations and explorations paved the way for other playwrights, including William Shakespeare, to experiment with homosexual innuendo.⁶ Many of the young playwright's other works also demonstrate homosexual undercurrents, including *The Passion-*

ate Shepherd to His Love and Hero and Leander. Aside from just writing about homosexuality, Marlowe also had a close relationship with a gentleman named Thomas Watson with whom he later lived. Watson introduced Marlowe to Sir Francis Walsingham and was the reason Marlowe became a spy for the Crown.⁷ This close relationship between the two males fed Baines' attempt at incriminating, and eventually killing, Marlowe—an attempt that many believe worked.

Christopher Marlowe was only twenty-nine when he was murdered. In the year 1595, Marlowe and others rented rooms from a woman named Dame Eleanor Bull. The irony here is that her house in Deptford was supposedly a safe place for government agents to meet, and it was in this house that the murder of Marlowe allegedly occurred. The three men involved in the murder were also, strangely enough, all men who knew or worked for Walsingham, the same man who hired Marlowe to work as a spy for the Crown. These men were Ingram Frizer, Robert Poley, and Nicholas Skeres. Marlowe was said to have spent the day with the men. An inquisition into Marlowe's death, written by William Danby, states that the jury acquitted Frizer because he killed Marlowe in self-defense. However, the inquisition seems rushed and incomplete. According to the article, "Death in Deptford," "The report leaves many questions unasked and there are many hypotheses as to what really happened that day in Deptford, producing theories that range from a Government-backed assassination to a faked murder".⁸ This and the fact that Marlowe's body was strung up and burned directly after the coroner confirmed it was, indeed, the young spy, and that Frizer was released by Queen Elizabeth only fourteen days after the murder, have given fuel to the theory that Marlowe did not die that day. Scholars theorize that perhaps Queen Elizabeth was part of the conspiracy. But was this conspiracy against Marlowe or in his favor? Some believe he lived on in secret and continued to write works now credited to William Shakespeare.⁹

The idea of a faked murder whereby Marlowe was simply exiled by the Crown to save him from the Church has grown in popularity. Scholars have analyzed Marlowe's complete works and compared them to those supposedly written by William Shakespeare. Marlovian theory, still alive and active today in organizations such as the Marlowe Society, states that, based on content and stylistic similarities, Marlowe is the author of Shakespeare's works, which he completed while in exile.¹⁰

Marlowe's works, which include *Tamburlaine*, *The Tragicall*

History of Doctor Faustus, and *Edward II*, arrived on the London stage when "the public theater [was] still in its infancy, several years before Shakespeare [made] his debut".¹¹ The fact that Marlowe's plays came to the stage before Shakespeare's is key. Shakespeare has always been the imitator, not the other way around because Shakespeare would have had to study and watch Marlowe's productions. His writing style would have mirrored Marlowe's, and his themes and characterizations would have been closely related to his contemporaries, which included none other than Marlowe. The argument that Shakespeare did not imitate but that Marlowe simply continued writing after exile under a different name makes sense. Likewise, Marlowe's prophetic genius, which seemed to allow him to sense the direction the theatre would take, comes out in his prologue to *Tamburlaine*. This famous play, one of many, captured the attention of the English populace like none had before, just as Shakespeare's plays would later do. Indeed, Marlowe's style is similar to that of William Shakespeare, a fact explored by Calvin Hoffman in his book, *The Murder of the Man Who Was "Shakespeare."*

Hoffman spent nineteen years researching the Shakespearian authorship question. He argues that the larger-than-life exploration of humanity that peppers the pages of Shakespeare's texts mirrors the exciting and tragic life of the young spy and playwright. Due to the themes of Marlowe's travels throughout the Western world and the similarities in writing styles, Shakespeare's works should be given to their rightful owner: Christopher Marlowe.¹²

Hoffman compiled many examples of Shakespearian and Marlovian similarities within their respective works. Some include:

Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*:

Holla, ye pampered Jades of Asia.

What, can ye draw but twenty miles a day...

Shakespeare's *Henry IV* (Part II):

And hollow pampered jades of Asia,

Which cannot go but thirty miles a day.

Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* (conjuring Helen of Troy):

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?

Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (referring to Helen of Troy):

...She is a pearl,

Whose price hath launched above a thousand ships.¹⁵

Hoffman lists many other similarities and parallelisms between

both the plays and poetry of Shakespeare and Marlowe. He states that after nineteen years of research, he "was ready to prove, beyond any reasonable doubt, that every single play and poem we have been led to believe was written by William Shakespeare had been written by Christopher Marlowe."¹⁴

Other researchers also agree with the theory that Marlowe was Shakespeare. In a video produced by the Kennedy Center, the narrator explores the possibility that Marlowe "faked his death and continued to write extensively under the name William Shakespeare" (*The Christopher Marlowe Theory*). The video explains how Marlowe feigned his death in order to escape persecution by the Church and was forced to live in other parts of Europe. There he, no doubt, became familiar with other cultures and people and lived in a state of constant inspiration, which led to the production of some of the greatest literary works of all time: those credited to Shakespeare.

The video states that Marlowe supposedly died on May 30th, 1593. Perhaps this death, if it were faked, saved him from the wrath of the Church. It could have allowed him to retire in peace and continue doing what he loved: writing. Indeed, simulating his death would have benefitted several parties including the whole of play-going England and Queen Elizabeth. The queen owed Marlowe money for his service as a spy, but by allowing him to fake his death, she gave him a gift greater than money, his life. Although William Shakespeare is reported to have sought Queen Elizabeth's favor as a patron, perhaps the name William Shakespeare was a simple front. Shakespeare's money could have conceivably gone to Marlowe, who simply used Shakespeare as a cover-up, or even a *nom de plume*. One argument, as explored by The Kennedy Center, states that Marlowe and Shakespeare were the same man and compares a picture of the young Marlowe with a picture of Shakespeare. Minus some hair, the paintings are almost identical.¹⁵

On June 12th, less than a month after Marlowe's supposed death, the narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* was published in the Stationer's Register.¹⁶ Marlovian theorists believe Marlowe asked his London publishers to release the work under the name William Shakespeare. The video produced by The Kennedy Center states that even if Marlowe was not the author of the plays and poems credited to Shakespeare, the real author would owe a huge debt to Marlowe, as Marlowe's own works heavily influenced the Shakespearian author.¹⁷

But Marlowe is, in fact, the author of the narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*. The themes found in the play, the style of writing, the coincidence in dates, and analyses by Renaissance scholars leave no room for question. *Venus and Adonis* is a poem about the Greco-Roman goddess Venus who falls in love with a mortal man named Adonis. Adonis is a mortal like no other. He has no equal in looks or in skill. Thus, the goddess is determined to have him. However, Adonis resists her advances. By the end of the narrative poem he has resisted her but at the expense of death. These themes are not new to Marlovian works, nor is the style or word use. The symbolism seen in this work is also highly important to arguing that Marlowe is the true author.

The themes in *Venus and Adonis* and works credited to Marlowe are similar. The theme of passionate love appears in other Marlovian works, including in the poem *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love*. Also, the rural, springtime setting is similar between *Venus and Adonis* and *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love*. The exploration of a world of magic (such as in *The Tragicall History of Dr. Faustus*) where mythical creatures (Mephostophilis as compared with Venus) interact with mortals is commonly seen in Marlovian works. Of course, readers see how the mortals are negatively affected by the immortals. The mortals are manipulated, abused, and damned by the immortals. Often, the mortals even end up dead at the end of the works. In *The Tragicall History of Dr. Faustus*, Faustus' death scene goes on for pages. In *Venus and Adonis*, Adonis is gored to death by a boar, and the author does not spare the reader when he graphically draws out the scene.

The comparisons in subject matter between the poem by Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*, and Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* add another clue to the authorship mystery. Both works explore an ancient world, the same ancient world. Both look to the same author of ancient source material: Ovid. The characters and their interactions are similar, as seen in the line from *Hero and Leander*, "For [Adonis'] sake whom their goddess (Venus) held so dear, / Rose-cheeked Adonis" (ln. 92-93). And in the end, the poems conclude tragically for the mortals, which is perhaps reflective of Marlowe's own untimely, faked death.

The similarities between these poems go even deeper. *Venus and Adonis* is actually a portion of *Hero and Leander* that Marlowe decided to flesh out more fully. At the start of *Hero and Leander*, Marlowe writes, "Where Venus in her naked glory strove, / To please the careless and disdainful eyes, / Of proud Adonis that before her lies" (lns. 12-14). This short sequence alludes to the entire story that unfolds within *Venus and*

Adonis. The character interactions follow the same path in *Venus and Adonis* as they do in *Hero and Leander*. In both poems, the beautiful, talented, but foolish mortal, Adonis, resists the great goddess, up to the point of his death. Marlovian scholar, Daryl Pinksen, supports this analysis in his article “Who Wrote Venus and Adonis? And Why?” In this article, he writes, “*Hero and Leander*; [is] assumed to have been written before *Venus and Adonis*, but not published until four years later.”¹⁸ He goes on to say:

Hero and Leander influenced Shakespeare directly and powerfully when he was writing *Venus and Adonis*...Shakespeare had read *Hero and Leander* since he quotes from it, since his scheme and treatment are essentially similar in *Venus and Adonis*.¹⁹

From this analysis, it is not a leap but a small step to assume that Marlowe actually wrote *Venus and Adonis* and simply published the work under William Shakespeare’s name.

Just as the themes between *Venus and Adonis* coincide with those in Marlowe’s works, the style of writing and the usage of language are also similar. Both Shakespeare and Marlowe were praised for their writing talents because they used rhyme schemes within their works. They were also praised for their ability to massage and manipulate language. As Pinksen reminds readers, the “scheme and treatment” between Shakespeare’s works and Marlowe’s works are quite similar around the time of Marlowe’s death and Shakespeare’s early publication.²⁰ The argument against this case states that Shakespeare’s mature writing style differs greatly from Marlowe’s, but nothing less should be expected from a great writer. Of course the writer’s, whether Marlowe in disguise or Shakespeare, style and language usage improved over time; he tackled greater and more complex projects. This is to be expected because historians have seen this pattern of maturation in other great writers, such as Chaucer, Plutarch, and others.

As for language usage, *Venus and Adonis*, *Hero and Leander*, and *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love* all follow an iambic rhyme scheme, though the meters differ. The maturation from a form like iambic tetrameter to iambic pentameter seems a natural progression for one writer to make. Writing consecutive verses in rhyme is a one-of-a-kind talent; for two men born around the same time period to both have such a talent was as unlikely then as it is today (After all, in all of human history, there has been but one Shakespeare).

Like the maturation in iambic meter, readers can see maturation in

the employment of literary devices. In *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love*, the reader can find alliteration in phrases such as “feed their flocks” and “Melodious birds sing madrigals.” Marlowe also employs metaphor and hyperbole, such as in lines nine and ten when he writes, “There will I make... / a thousand fragrant posies.”

In *Venus and Adonis*, which was written four years after *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love*, the reader experiences the author employing techniques like alliteration and metaphor (clearly, the author shows a penchant for these devices, despite a four-year gap between the creation of the two pieces); he also branches out to use anaphora “Still he entreats / Still is he sullen / still he lours and frets” (lms. 73 and 75). The author uses simile on top of metaphor and even uses some ironic phrases when he states lines, such as, “Poor queen of love... / To love a cheek that smiles at thee in scorn” (lms. 251-252). The reader watches the very goddess in charge of love fail at love itself. This use of irony could reflect either Marlowe’s own trials with love, like the backwards courtship where ladies of court fawned over and pursued the young playwright, while he preferred the company of men, or his alleged homosexuality. Even if both of these conclusions are incorrect, the consistencies within the employment of literary devices and the beautiful use of language that develops from them supports the argument that Marlowe wrote the love poem *Venus and Adonis*.

Finally, the symbolism seen in *Venus and Adonis* and its relation to Marlowe’s life alludes that he is the true author of the poem. Adonis is a mortal man of great beauty and skill, much like Marlowe, who excelled at all his endeavors (within writing and his spy work). He, like Adonis, could have married and settled down, perhaps with one of the ladies of court. However, his pursuit of other interests consumed his life; in fact, they led to his death, or the illusion of his death, much like Adonis’ resistance led to his death. Furthermore, resisting a goddess, beautiful beyond compare, and preferring the company of men, echoes the homosexual themes found in other pieces of Marlowe’s writing, such as in *Hero and Leander* when he writes of the god Neptune desiring a young boy.

In *Venus and Adonis*, both Adonis and Venus are symbolic. Perhaps Marlowe used the goddess of love as a representation of the Church. Venus is a goddess (a blatant representation of religion), wields great power (representing the structural confines of religion, as well as the power struggle between common men, Church, and State), and she uses her outward beauty to seduce men into worshiping her. The golden crosses, ruby-

and emerald-studded communion cups, and the stained glass windows adorning churches in the Elizabethan Era were also outwardly beautiful. The fact that Adonis runs from the goddess could be symbolic of Marlowe running from the Church, both figuratively during his days of involvement with the Free-Thinkers and literally during the days surrounding his death. Venus only ceases pursuing Adonis when he is gored to death by a boar. If Venus is the Church, then readers can experience Adonis' death (where he goes to spend fall and winter with Persephone in Hades, according to Greek lore) as not a tragedy but as a release, much like a faked death would have released Marlowe from the threats of the Church. Perhaps Marlowe chose to characterize himself as Adonis because the peerless mortal of mythology lives on in the underworld and in the works that literature students and scholars still study today. Both Adonis and Marlowe continue to outlive their respective time periods, one because of the impact of the stories he was in and the other because of the impact of the stories he wrote.

Due to the life Christopher Marlowe lived—one fraught with peril, adventure, and intrigue—and due to the parallels between Marlowe's writing and the writing of William Shakespeare, scholars have made convincing arguments for Marlovian Theory. Will future generations read *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe* instead of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*? Such an extreme notion is doubtful, for now, but the Shakespearian authorship question remains. And we will continue to search for its answer.

ENDNOTES

¹Erne, Lukas. "Biography, Mythography, and Criticism: The Life and Works of Christopher Marlowe." *Modern Philosophy* Vol. 103. Issue 1 (2005): 28-50. Print.

²"The Government Agent." Marlowe Society. The Marlowe Society. 2002-2011. Web. 23 September 2011.

³It is this author's opinion that Marlowe must have, indeed, questioned the idea of a singular higher power. I came to this conclusion because of the groundbreaking and revolutionary themes he explores in the play, *The Tragicall History of Dr. Faustus*, and because of Marlowe's intelligence, which was coupled with worldly travel. This travel, no doubt, exposed him to other belief systems and other "Free-Thinkers."

⁴"The Free Thinkers." Marlowe Society. The Marlowe Society. 2002-2011. Web. 23 Sept. 2011.

⁵“Marlowe and Homosexuality.” Academic Encyclopedia. Academic Kids. Web. 29 Oct. 2011.

⁶“Marlowe and Homosexuality.”

⁷“Marlowe and Homosexuality.”

⁸“Death in Deptford.” Marlowe Society. The Marlowe Society. 2002-2011. Web. 23 Sept. 2011.

⁹“Death in Deptford.”

¹⁰“Marlowe in Exile?” Marlowe Society. The Marlowe Society. 2002-2011. Web. 23 Sept. 2011.

¹¹Erne, Lukas. Pg 38.

¹²Hoffman, Calvin. *The Murder of the Man Who Was "Shakespeare."* New York: Julian Messner, 1955. Print.

¹³Hoffman, Calvin. Pg 54.

¹⁴Hoffman, Calvin. Pg 51.

¹⁵“The Christopher Marlowe Theory”. John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, 2007. Web. Video. 24 Sept. 2011.

¹⁶Pinksen, Daryl. “Who Wrote *Venus and Adonis*? And Why?” The Marlowe-Shakespeare Connection. 17 Aug. 2009. Web. 22 Oct. 2011.

¹⁷“The Christopher Marlowe Theory”.

¹⁸Pinksen, Daryl.

¹⁹Pinksen, Daryl.

²⁰Pinksen, Daryl.