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Works Cited

Robinson, Claire. "Christopher Marlowe." *Magill'S Survey Of World Literature, Revised Edition* (2009): 1-7. *Literary Reference Center*. Web. 16 July 2012.

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Christopher Marlowe

Christopher Marlowe

Born: February 6, 1564; Canterbury, England
Died: May 30, 1593; Deptford, England

Principal Works - Christopher Marlowe

drama

Dido, Queen of Carthage, pr. c. 1586-1587, pb. 1594 (with Thomas Nashe)
Tamburlaine the Great, Part I, pr. c. 1587, pb. 1590 (commonly known as Tamburlaine)
Tamburlaine the Great, Part II, pr. 1587, pb. 1590
Doctor Faustus, pr. c. 1588, pb. 1604
The Jew of Malta, pr. c. 1589, pb. 1633
The Troublesome Reign and Lamentable Death of Edward the Second, King of England, with the Tragical Fall of Proud Mortimer, pr. c. 1592, pb. 1594 (commonly known as Edward II)
The Massacre at Paris, 1593, pb. 1594(?)
Complete Plays, pb. 1963

miscellaneous

The Works of Christopher Marlowe, 1910, 1962 (C. F. Tucker Brooke, editor)
The Works and Life of Christopher Marlowe, 1930-1933, 1966 (R. H. Case, editor)
The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe, 1973 (Fredson Bowers, editor)

poetry

Hero and Leander, 1598 (completed by George Chapman)
"The Passionate Shepherd to His Love", 1599 (in The Passionate Pilgrim)

translation(s)

Elegies, 1595-1600 (of Ovid's Amores)
Pharsalia, 1600 (of Lucan's Bellum civile)

Biography

Christopher Marlowe was born in Canterbury, England, on February 6, 1564, the eldest son of a shoemaker. He was baptized exactly two months before William Shakespeare was baptized at Stratford — a significant detail, as Marlowe exercised an enormous influence on Shakespeare and is generally believed to be the rival poet of Shakespeare's sonnets.

As a pupil at the King's School, Canterbury, Marlowe was elected a "Queen's scholar." He entered Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, in 1580 and was again awarded a scholarship. In 1584, he earned his B.A. degree and entered into graduate study of divinity in preparation for taking holy orders. Just before Marlowe was to receive his M.A., the university proposed to withhold the degree. The decision was based on rumors that, after spending time at the seminary for exiled English Catholics in Reims, France, Marlowe meant to take Catholic holy orders. The seminary was a hotbed of Catholic insurrection against Elizabeth I's Protestant rule. Marlowe was awarded his M.A. only after the exceptional intervention of the Privy Council, which dealt with matters of national security. Records imply that Marlowe may have gone to Reims as an intelligence agent in the employ of Elizabeth's secretary of state, Sir Francis Walsingham.

Marlowe left Cambridge for London in 1587 without taking holy orders. Literature, not divinity, preoccupied him. Among works believed to date from his Cambridge years are Elegies (1595-1600), a translation of Ovid's Amores (c. 20 b.c.e.); Pharsalia (1600), a translation of Lucan's Bellum civile (first century c.e.); a play, Dido, Queen of Carthage (pr. c. 1586-1587, pb. 1594); and Tamburlaine the Great, Part I (pr. c. 1587, pb. 1590). Some scholars add to this list his epic poem Hero and Leander, though it was not published until after his death, in 1598.

Marlowe's rise to fame as a playwright was rapid. The opening performance of Tamburlaine the Great, Part I was enthusiastically received. With its ruthless conquering hero and vivid pageantry, the play tapped the popular mood of feverish excitement at the prospect of war with Spain, and Marlowe quickly followed up with Tamburlaine the Great, Part II (pr.1587, pb. 1590). Few plays were more imitated, satirized, and joked about in print than the Tamburlaine plays.

Doctor Faustus was produced around 1588, and the first quarto edition appeared in 1604. This play gripped the imagination of the public and was frequently performed into the Jacobean Age. The Jew of Malta (pr c. 1589; pb. 1633) was also a theatrical success. Around 1592, Marlowe offered a new play, Edward II (pr. c. 1592, pb. 1594), to the Earl of Pembroke's players. All of his other plays were performed by the Lord Admiral's men. A minor play, The Massacre at Paris (pb. 1594?), was produced in 1593.

Marlowe's personal life did not run as smoothly as his career. His impetuous and rebellious character frequently led him into trouble. In 1589, he was arrested and briefly imprisoned, then pardoned, as a result of his involvement in a fight in which a man died. Less than three years later, a constable sought the protection of the law against Marlowe.

In 1593, his heterodox opinions brought him into serious danger with the authorities. He was sharing living quarters with dramatist Thomas Kyd when Privy Council agents searched Kyd's papers and discovered a treatise containing "vile heretical conceits denying the deity of Jesus Christ our Saviour." Under torture, Kyd disclaimed the paper, saying it was Marlowe's. Kyd

was not alone in charging Marlowe with free thinking. More evidence came from Richard Baines, one of Walsingham's former intelligence agents. Baines testified to Marlowe's "damnable Judgment of Religion, and scorn of God's word." According to Baines, Marlowe doubted the historical truth of the Bible and held that "the first beginning of Religioun was only to keep men in awe." Baines added that "almost into every company he cometh he persuades men to atheism, willing them not to be afraid of bugbears and hobgoblins."

Marlowe's works reinforced charges of religious skepticism, containing as they did attacks on all major religions. In 1588, the year after the first performances of the Tamburlaine plays, Marlowe's Cambridge senior, Robert Greene, accused the playwright of "daring God out of heaven with that atheist Tamburlaine." To complicate the issue, on the evidence of Doctor Faustus, Marlowe was well versed in the lore of witchcraft; Shakespeare suggests in Sonnet 86 that he dabbled in it.

Privy Council suspicions against Marlowe were fueled by the company that he kept. Among his friends were Sir Walter Ralegh, famous for his so-called School of Atheism, and astronomer Thomas Harriot, labeled an atheist. (Both might more accurately be described as deists.) Marlowe was arrested on May 20, 1593. He was instructed to report daily to the Privy Council while they deliberated, yet he was never to face the consequences of his nonconformism. On May 30, Marlowe spent the day at an inn in Deptford, England, with companions of his friend Sir Thomas Walsingham. At the end of the day, a dispute about the bill arose between Marlowe and Ingram Frizer, Walsingham's business agent, who had, it seemed, invited him. Marlowe, in a fit of anger, drew Frizer's dagger and cut him over the head. Frizer retrieved his dagger and stabbed Marlowe above his right eye. Marlowe died instantly. Frizer was later pardoned as having acted in self-defense.

Analysis

Marlowe is often called the father of English tragedy because Tamburlaine the Great was the first tragedy to combine a grand concept, a strong central character capable of carrying the action of the play, and suitably heightened verse style. The extent of the revolution in drama that Marlowe initiated cannot be understood without considering his contribution to English verse. The poetry of Tamburlaine the Great was a kind never before heard on the English stage, with passages of exultant magnificence and lyrical sweetness. Its power was attributable largely to Marlowe's discovery of true blank verse style. Previous dramatists had experimented with an unrhymed decasyllabic line with five iambic feet (each foot having a weak stress followed by a strong one). Consider as an example these lines from an earlier play, Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville's Gorbuduc (pr. 1561, pb. 1565; also published as The Tragedy of Ferrex and Porrex): "Your lasting age shall be their longer stay,/ For cares of kings, that rule as you have ruled." Each line has five pairs of two syllables, each pair consisting of a weak stress followed by a strong one (the iambic foot); the strong stresses are uniform in weight; and this iambic rhythm is never varied. The result is tiresomely repetitive.

Marlowe had a sufficiently sensitive ear to perceive that though the norm of blank verse should be this regular iambic rhythm, and though the audience's awareness of that norm should not be lost, few lines should conform to that pattern. The strong stresses per line should be fewer than five; the line should be broken into four, three, even two groups of sounds, separated by a minuscule pause; moreover, different kinds of feet other than the iamb should be introduced. In applying these discoveries, Marlowe exploited the flexibility and expressiveness of blank verse and cleared the way for other poets such as Shakespeare, John Milton, and William Wordsworth. Compare the Gorbuduc lines with the following passage from Doctor Faustus: "Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships?/ And burnt

the topless towers of Ilium?/ Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss." The first line is regular, with five iambic feet and five stresses. The second is regular in rhythm but has only four strong stresses, and the line falls into three sound groups. The third, however, diverges completely from the regular meter, beginning with a foot of two strong stresses and having a foot of two weak and one strong stresses ("me immor-") in the middle. Such changes in the basic rhythm emphasize emotionally charged words and phrases, increasing the expressive power and enlivening the listener's attention.

Marlowe was an innovator also in his choice of themes. Religious skepticism recurs throughout the plays. Tamburlaine the Great challenged both Christian and Moslem faiths; The Jew of Malta confounded Christianity and Judaism alike. Marlowe's questioning of humanity's place in the universe reached its height in Doctor Faustus, an agonized cry of defiance against an orthodoxy represented as chaining humankind's unquenchable thirst for knowledge. One cannot, however, assume that Marlowe was atheistical in the modern sense of materialistic. If there is anything of Marlowe in the solemn speech given to Orcanes in Part II, act 2 of Tamburlaine the Great, one may infer that the dramatist accepted the existence of a nondenominational supreme intelligence.

At the core of Marlowe's heterodoxy was his fascination with humanity's aspirant spirit and illimitable mind — a theme that did not fit easily into contemporary Christian thought. Marlowe's heroes are self-made, fired by a sense of their own power and greatness, in strong contrast to Shakespeare's, with their orthodox assumption of the privileges and honor due to noble birth.

Marlowe's treatment of this theme became more complex over the years. Faustus shares with the earlier hero Tamburlaine aspirations for worldly power at any cost. Both plays display the immense power of the individual to unleash massive forces for good or ill. Yet Faustus's odyssey, unlike Tamburlaine's, is intellectual rather than physical, internal rather than external. Whereas Tamburlaine the Great was a play of action and show, Doctor Faustus is a play of ideas — hence, perhaps, its more enduring fascination. Tamburlaine's approach to life is never seriously challenged, whereas the obstacles placed in Faustus's path form the premise of the play.

Marlowe's other major plays contain views as controversial as those in Doctor Faustus, for different reasons. The action of Edward II, remarkable for the time, revolves around a homosexual relationship between Edward II and his favorite minion, Gaveston. Marlowe, who according to Baines said that "all they that loue not Tobacco & Boies were fooles," often treated the subject of homosexuality sympathetically. The Jew of Malta also adopts an unorthodox standpoint, this time in public matters: The play is a cynical commentary on the corruption and greed of social and political life, after the theories of Italian political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli.

Tamburlaine the Great **First produced:**Part I, c. 1587 (first published, 1590); Part II, 1587 (first published, 1590)

Type of work: Plays

In Part 1, the Scythian shepherd Tamburlaine conquers many Eastern countries, becomes king of Persia, and marries the soldan of Egypt's daughter Zenocrate; in Part II, Tamburlaine continues his conquests, Zenocrate dies, and Tamburlaine slays his cowardly son and finally dies.

When Tamburlaine the Great burst upon the Elizabethan stage in 1587, it took audiences by storm. The most popular tragedy of the time had been Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy (pr. c. 1585-1589, pb. 1594?), which featured a strong dramatic sense but unmemorable verse. Tamburlaine the Great, in contrast, was written in poetry of the scope and magnificence that moved Shakespeare to write of "the proud full sail of [Marlowe's] great verse" (Sonnet 86).

Vital to the play's success was the figure of Tamburlaine. The prologue introduces him in lines that were to become famous: "Threatening the world with high astounding terms,/ And scourging kingdoms with his conquering sword." Tamburlaine's power comes from his limitless self-concept, not from his birth, which was that of a humble shepherd. In Marlowe's world, a person's worth is measured by his or her actions. Thus Tamburlaine declares, "I am a lord, for so my deeds shall prove — / And yet a shepherd by my parentage." His thoughts, he says, are coequal with the clouds, and his aspiration is immortality such as the gods enjoy. Indeed, he claims to gain his authority to terrorize the world from Jove himself, whose scourge he is.

As for the traditional enemies of the aspirant — Death and Fortune — the plays contain frequent references to Tamburlaine's mastery over them, as in the passage in Part I, act 1, where he claims that he has bound the Fates in iron chains and turns Fortune's wheel with his own hand. He appears to have assumed the role of Fate in condemning the virgins of Damascus to death for their failure to surrender before he symbolically decked his tents in black: His Customs, he says, are "as peremptory/ As wrathful planets, death, or destiny."

Such assertions are hubristic in the extreme and, in a Christian context, would merit a downfall such as Faustus's. Tamburlaine, however, moves freely in a non-Christian setting. His death, when it comes, occurs through illness. He is never punished for his past exploits; rather, he is lionized by all save his enemies. "Nature," he says, " . . . doth teach us all to have aspiring minds"; our souls are ever "climbing after knowledge infinite." Compare this blithe celebration of the illimitable mind with the Chorus's fearful and bitter epilogue to Doctor Faustus lamenting the tragic fate of inquiring minds who are tempted to explore forbidden knowledge.

Christianity makes a brief appearance in Part II in the unsympathetic character of Sigismund, a Christian king. Sigismund makes a treaty with the Muslim king Orcanes only to be persuaded to break it on the grounds that oaths made with heathens are not binding. When Orcanes defeats the treacherous force of Sigismund, he wonders whether his victory was attributable to his invocation of Christ's wrath on the enemy or to Mahomet's favor. The skeptical Gazellus pointedly suggests that the cause lies in neither prophet, but in the fortunes of war. Marlowe's casual dismissal of Christ and Mahomet as a couple of rival prophets is indicative of his skeptical attitude toward all religions and their claims to a monopoly on truth.

The taste of the theatergoing public has changed since the Elizabethan Age, and modern audiences may view the bloody acts of ruthless tyrants with less enthusiasm. The negative sides of Tamburlaine's character — his cruelty, vengefulness, and extraordinary amount of machismo — may put him in danger of losing the audience's sympathy altogether. Scenes that spring to mind are, in part 1, his slaughter of the virgins of Damascus after the town's surrender and his inhuman treatment of Bajazeth. Part II depicts his self-indulgent act of burning the town where Zenocrate dies; his deliberately cutting his arm to show his sons that a wound is nothing, and his insistence that they wash their hands in the blood; his slaying of his son for cowardice; and his harnessing of the captured kings in his chariot.

Yet evidence exists that the Elizabethan response to Tamburlaine's overweening arrogance was not without a certain tongue-in-cheek humor. Tamburlaine's words to the harnessed kings as they draw his chariot onstage — "Holla, ye pamper'd jades of Asia!" — apparently brought the Elizabethan house down, since the line was the subject of jokes and was imitated and satirized in the works of different authors for years to come.

Tamburlaine the Great's appeal has diminished also because of its lack of inner dramatic conflict. Even its external conflicts — the battles — lack any threat to Tamburlaine's invincible status. The play's appeal to the modern mind more often lies in its grand images and breathtaking poetry. Take, as an example, Tamburlaine's glorious hymn to his own boundless spirit in act 4 of Part II. Delivered just before he stabs his son, it exemplifies the vast cosmic images that sustain the heightened effect of the plays. Lines memorable for their loveliness abound. Some examples are Callapine's description of the Grecian virgins, "As fair as was Pygmalion's ivory girl,/ Or lovely Io metamorphosed," and Tamburlaine's speech to the dying Zenocrate punctuated by its lyrical refrain. The part of Tamburlaine's soliloquy in act 5 of Part I dealing with poetry's attempts to capture the essence of beauty has attained the status of a set piece.

Doctor Faustus **First produced:** c. 1588 (first published, 1604)

Type of work: Play

A brilliant scholar sells his soul to the Devil in return for forbidden knowledge and worldly power.

Marlowe's play Doctor Faustus is generally considered his greatest. The play shares certain elements with its ancestor, the medieval morality play: the opposing admonishments of good and bad angels; the characters of Lucifer and Mephostophilis; and the appearance of the Seven Deadly Sins. Yet it breaks with tradition in two important respects: in the sympathy evoked for the straying hero, and in the questions raised against the cosmic order of conventional Christian doctrine.

Faustus pursues his grand aspirations in what Marlowe portrays as a repressive climate of Christian orthodoxy, which, in designating certain knowledge as forbidden, blocks fulfillment of his desires and effectively becomes his antagonist. The play opens with Faustus in his study. He has plumbed the depths of all disciplines and found them unfulfilling. He will settle for no less than a dominion that "Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man" — a world of physical beauty, sensual delight, and power over life and objects. He decides his best hope is necromancy, an art forbidden by Christian doctrine.

Thus, the scene is set for Faustus's tragic decline. Planted in the text, even from the beginning, are warnings of the terrible fate awaiting Faustus. A master of dramatic irony, Marlowe has these warnings go unheeded by his hero while they build an uneasy tension in the audience's awareness. An example is Faustus's remark on his own great powers in conjuring up Mephostophilis. Only a few lines later, it is revealed that Mephostophilis has come more out of his own and Lucifer's self-interest than in deference to Faustus's wishes. Similarly, when Mephostophilis tells Faustus that Lucifer was thrown from Heaven for aspiring pride and insolence, the audience recognizes that Faustus exhibits the same faults and may meet the same fate. There is ambivalence, too, in Faustus's repeated exhortation to himself to be resolute in his damnable course of action. The word, used more often in connection with Christian virtue, gains an ironic weight, rendering Doctor Faustus a negative version of John

Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress (1678, 1684).

Counterbalanced against this carefully crafted tragic inevitability is the hope that Faustus will repent and save himself. Marlowe keeps the conflict in Faustus's soul active until the end. In the moving soliloquies, Faustus's initial confidence in his pact with Lucifer alternates with regret and determination to turn back to God. Despair however, prevails. In his second soliloquy, Faustus is turned back from repentance by his sense of God's indifference to him and his own indifference to God: Faustus serves only his own appetite. In one profoundly moving scene, Faustus announces, "I do repent" only to have Mephostophilis threaten him with having his flesh torn into pieces for disobedience to Lucifer. Faustus effects a hasty turnabout of meaning in an ironic echo of his previous phrase: "I do repent I e'er offended him."

Yet just as God failed Faustus in his aspirations, so does Lucifer. Disillusionment follows rapidly on his pact. Faustus asks for a wife; but marriage is a sacrament, so Mephostophilis cannot provide one. When Faustus questions him about astronomy, Mephostophilis tells him nothing the scholar Wagner could not have told him. Although the Chorus reveals that Faustus attains fame for his learning, his achievements are superficial and empty in comparison with his grandiose intentions at the outset. He humiliates the pope (a typically Marlovian scenario), avenges some petty wrongs done to him by Benvolio by attaching antlers to his head, and entertains the duke and duchess of Vanholt with insubstantial illusions. At the play's start, no area of knowledge is large enough for Faustus's overweening sense of self; toward the end, fear and despair have so diminished him that he wants only dissolution and oblivion: "O soul, be chang'd into little water drops,/ And fall into the ocean, ne'er be found."

In spite of the intellectual nature of the play's premise, it contains scenes of a striking visual immediacy. The first entrance of Mephostophilis, too ugly for Faustus's taste, and the appearance of Helen of Troy are examples. Often, scenes of horror are not directly represented on stage but chillingly evoked in words. Faustus's blood congeals as he attempts to sign his soul away to the Devil; a Latin inscription meaning "Fly, O man!" appears on his arm. That the audience is told this by Faustus rather than seeing it for itself lets it experience the terror through his awareness. Similarly, a chill of fear is produced by Faustus's words to the Scholars: "Ay, pray for me, pray for me; and, what noise soever ye hear, come not unto me, for nothing can rescue me." The image is as powerful in its understatement as the explicit horror of the final scene, where devils drag Faustus off to Hell.

Marlowe's verse reached its full emotional power in Doctor Faustus. Faustus's soliloquy beginning "Ah, Faustus,/ Now hast thou but one bare hour to live" is an example of the emotional intensity of which Marlowe was capable. Faustus's request that the spheres of Heaven cease their motion to give him time to repent is heartrending because of its very impossibility. Desperation is conveyed in the rapid and diminishing series of time extensions that he demands. His violent reversals of mood — from calling on God to anguish at being dragged downward by devils, from the vision of Christ's blood streaming in the firmament to the pain of Lucifer's tortures — move the audience with him from despair to hope. His spiritual agony is summarized in the evocative and poignant line, "O lente lente currite noctis equi" ("Slowly run, O horses of night").

The traditional morality play affirmed Christian virtue and faith and condemned the vices of those who strayed from the path. Doctor Faustus offers no such comfortable framework. It does not offer a reassuring affirmation of Christian faith or a straightforward condemnation of

Faustus. Instead, it presents a disturbing challenge to the cosmic order as defined by Christian orthodoxy. Listeners are invited “Only to wonder at unlawful things,/ whose deepness doth entice such forward wits/ To practise more than heavenly power permits.”

The question with which the play ends is whether the tragedy of Faustus is individual, the tragedy of one man’s fall from grace, or universal, the tragedy of Everyman in a system of belief that offers no place or path for the growth of the illimitable human spirit.

Hero and Leander **First published:** 1598

Type of work: Poem

Leander falls in love with Hero, who lives on the opposite side of the Hellespont, and tries to seduce her.

Marlowe left Hero and Leander unfinished at his death. It was completed by dramatist George Chapman in very different style and published by him the following year. (This analysis deals only with the part of the poem that Marlowe wrote, the first two sestiads.)

Hero and Leander is the most famous example of a favorite Elizabethan genre, the brief epic. It circulated in manuscript for some years before publication. During this time, it was certainly read by William Shakespeare, whose poem of the same genre Venus and Adonis (1593) was influenced by it, and whose plays contain strong echoes of its lines. The brief epic was a poem on an erotic and mythological subject, often drawn from Ovid’s Metamorphoses (c. 8 c.e.). Hero and Leander is Ovidian in character, though the story actually comes from a later version of the myth by Musaeus. Most adaptors of Ovidian subjects indulged in a high degree of moralizing, a factor dispensed with by Marlowe.

Hero and Leander is an exuberantly sensuous poem enlivened by an irrepressible comic spirit. Having fallen in love with the beautiful Hero, Leander wastes no time in attempting to bed her. He uses the commonplace arguments of Renaissance naturalism: Since virginity has no material reality and is imperceptible to the senses, it is no thing — and therefore nothing to preserve or anything of which to be proud. Such specious logic is meant to be enjoyed as flights of wit and audacity, and would only be taken at face value by someone of Hero’s naïveté. Leander’s devious sophistry is pointed out in lines whose rhymes anticipate Lord Byron’s Don Juan (1819-1824, 1826): “At last, like to a bold sharp sophister,/ With cheerful hope he thus accosted her.” Also enlisted into the argument is a theme shared by Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis and his sonnets, the sterility and waste of youth and beauty’s keeping its gifts to itself in the virginal state.

In spite of Leander’s sophistication in the art of persuasion, in the art of love he is an innocent. In a passage of comic understatement, he toys with Hero “as a brother with his sister,” “Supposing nothing else was to be done” — “yet he suspected/ Some amorous rites or other were neglected.” Hero is able to deflect Leander’s inept advances and greets the morning still intact. Leander returns home, and the narrator’s ironic comment on his encounter with his father sustains the comic detachment: “His secret flame apparently was seen,/ Leander’s father knew where he had been.” Mock-heroic images also contribute to the poem’s comic tone, as in the passage in sestiad 2 likening Leander’s attempt to touch the reluctant Hero’s breast — exaggeratedly described as a globe “By which love sails to regions full of bliss” — to a siege. She “did as a soldier stout/ Defend the fort, and keep the foeman out.”

Another comic episode shows Leander, determined to see his love, swimming the Hellespont

to reach her home. He is nearly frustrated in his aim by the sea god Neptune's taking a fancy to him. Neptune mistakes Leander for Jove's page Ganymede and, in a scene of intense homoeroticism as funny as it is sensuous, tries to seduce the unwitting young man. Leander, at cross-purposes with Neptune, protests that he is no woman. The worldly-wise Neptune smiles at his innocence. It is not the first homoerotic element in the poem: Leander's feminine beauty is described in unusually intimate detail, from the point of view of the male narrator and of other male admirers.

The imagery of the poem creates a world of intoxicating sensuality. Leander's beauty exceeds that of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool. Hero worships Venus at a temple sumptuously described; about her neck, she wears chains of pebble-stones that shine like diamonds.

"The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" **First published:** 1599 (collected in The Passionate Pilgrim, 1599)

Type of work: Poem

This work is one of the best-known Elizabethan lyrics and was endlessly imitated, parodied, and answered well into the seventeenth century.

"The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," comprising six stanzas of four lines each, is an intellectual's vision of pastoral life, in a tradition going back to the Roman poets Theocritus and Vergil. Its undoubted emotional power hinges on its yearning evocation of an idyll that never was and can never be. The wistful invitation of the poet to his love to live with him in this impossibly perfect place evokes the pathos of unfulfilled desire and longing.

The work is rich with images chosen to delight the senses. There is the visual feast of the pastoral landscape and of the belt with coral clasps and amber studs, the soft touch of the gown made from wool pulled from lambs, the sounds of the birds singing melodious madrigals and of the shepherds' songs, the smell of the beds of roses and of the thousand fragrant posies.

The regular rhyme scheme, of two pairs of rhyming couplets per stanza, the smooth iambic rhythm, and the use of alliteration add to the songlike quality of the poem, and indeed, an adapted version of one of its stanzas appears as a song in Shakespeare's The Merry Wives of Windsor (pr. 1597, revised, c. 1600-1601, pb. 1602).

Summary

Christopher Marlowe was a brilliant innovator and an intellectual nonconformist, with much to tell and much to question about power, desire, sensuality, greed, and suffering. His poetic images, vast in scale and cosmic in conception, as well as his larger-than-life characters of grand aspirations and prodigious sensual appetites, inspired critic Harry Levin to dub Marlowe "the overreacher." No better word could be chosen to characterize the magnificence, the vehemence, and the violent egotism that give his genius such an intensely personal stamp.

Discussion Topics

•Identify the characters in Christopher Marlowe's plays who might be called "overreachers."

•Analyze metrically a group of Marlowe's lines that you find effective and determine the nature of the variations.

•How might Marlowe's subject in his early play Dido, Queen of Carthage have influenced William Shakespeare's choice of dramatic subjects?

•To what extent was Doctor Faustus a rejection of "the cosmic order of conventional Christian doctrine"?

•What makes Dr. Faustus's goal more shocking than those of Tamburlaine and the Jew of Malta?

•What qualities in "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" made it irresistible to the other poets who composed "replies" to it?

Essay by: Claire Robinson