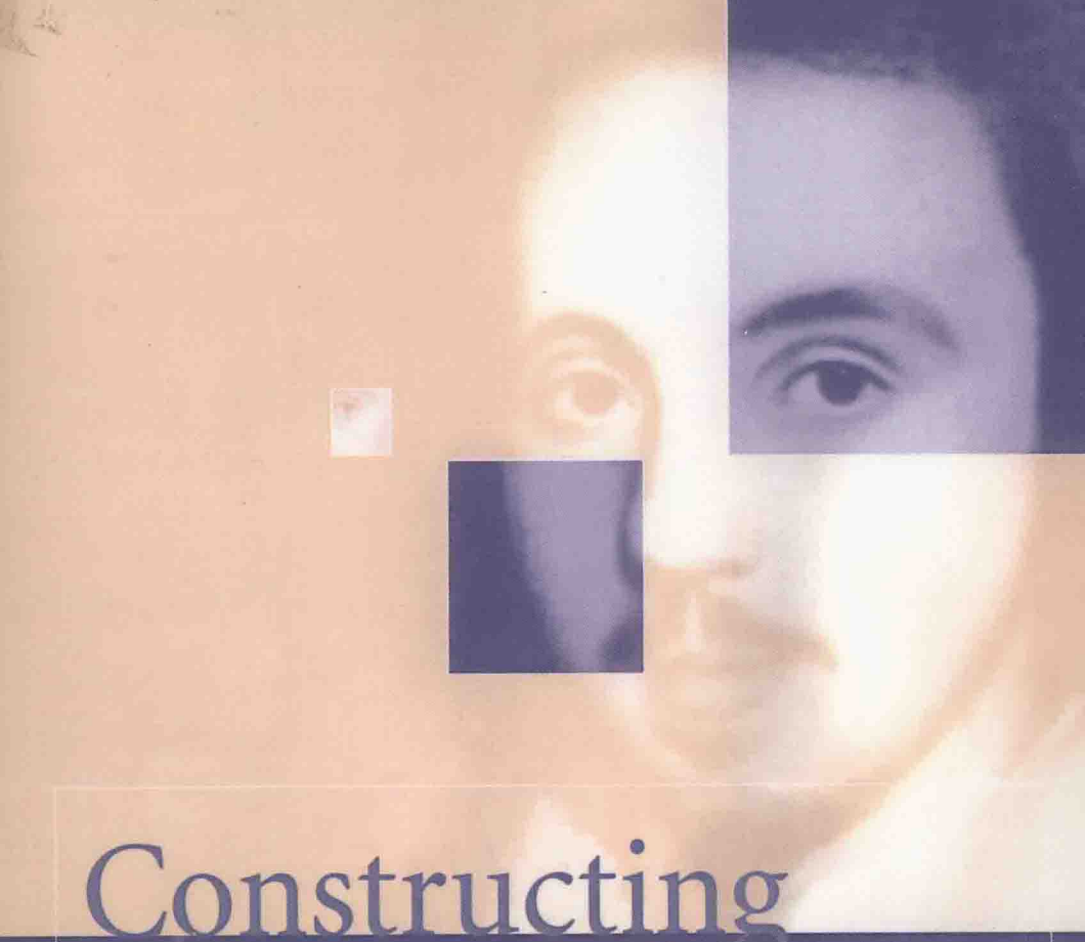

Constructing Christopher Marlowe

Edited by J.A. Downie and J.T. Parnell

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Contributors

JULIAN M. C. BOWSHER, Museum of London

GEORGIA E. BROWN, Queens' College, Cambridge

JANET CLARE, University College, Dublin

J. A. DOWNIE, Goldsmiths College, University of London

JOANNA GIBBS, Goldsmiths College, University of London

LAWRENCE NORMAND, Middlesex University

J. T. PARNELL, Goldsmiths College, University of London

LOIS POTTER, University of Delaware

RICHARD PROUDFOOT, King's College, University of London

GARETH ROBERTS, formerly University of Exeter

SIMON SHEPHERD, Goldsmiths College, University of London

CLAUDE J. SUMMERS, University of Michigan-Dearborn

RICHARD WILSON, University of Lancaster

Editors' note

Although there are many editions of Marlowe's plays, there is no standard edition. Unless indicated otherwise, quotations are from Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Plays*, J. B. Steane (ed.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), and references to act, scene, and line are given in the body of the essay within parentheses (e.g. *Tamburlaine Part II*: 1.6.80–4).

Abbreviations

Bartels	Emily Bartels, *Spectacles of Strangeness, Imperialism, Alienation and Marlowe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993)
Bredbeck	Gregory W. Bredbeck, *Sodomy and Interpretation: Marlowe to Milton* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991)
Cartelli	Thomas Cartelli, *Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the Economy of Theatrical Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991)
Dabbs	Thomas Dabbs, *Reforming Marlowe: The Nineteenth-Century Canonization of a Renaissance Dramatist* (Lewisburg, London and Toronto: Bucknell University Press and Associated University Presses, 1991)
Dollimore	Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984)
Greenblatt	Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980)
Kastan and Stallybrass	David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass (eds.), *Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991)
Keach	William Keach, *Elizabethan Erotic Narratives: Irony and Pathos in the Ovidian Poetry of Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Their Contemporaries* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1977)
Shepherd	Simon Shepherd, *Marlowe and the Politics of Elizabethan Theatre* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986)

Smith	Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991)
Steane	J. B. Steane, *Marlowe: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965)

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Introduction

J. T. Parnell

The title of this book can be understood in at least a double sense. To a greater or lesser extent, all the contributors engage with the ways in which Marlowe has been constructed by the critical discourse that has developed around his works. At one extreme, this process of construction has given us a 'Marlowe' who sometimes appears to be little more than the product or projection of the preconceptions and preoccupations of his commentators. Yet it would be a bold or foolish critic who claimed objective access to the 'real' Marlowe and the definitive meanings of his plays and poems. The essays gathered here aim, therefore, to contribute in a positive sense to the critical effort to construct a fuller understanding of the poet and playwright, but with a keen awareness that such a project is necessarily ongoing and incomplete.

While the modern formal academic essay bears little resemblance to Montaigne's sceptical and digressive discourses, his conception of the form as a provisional means of 'trying out' ideas and arguments nevertheless sheds light on the aims of the essays in this volume. By their very nature, single-authored monographs tend to be driven by one informing thesis. A collection of essays, on the other hand, not only eschews final and potentially reductive closure, but is able to offer a productive dialogue between positions. Accordingly, while the contributors to *Constructing Christopher Marlowe* are united in their rejection of biographical approaches and their attention to more nuanced and flexible readings of the complexities of Marlowe's texts and culture, one of the strengths of the book is that it does not impose methodological or interpretative homogeneity across the essays. As well as presenting the reader with essays on key areas of contemporary debate in Marlowe studies, the collection highlights both the range of Marlowe's concerns and the variety of perspectives from which they can be illuminated.

Superficially, at least, Marlowe seems to invert Michel Foucault's dictum that 'the author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning'.[1] From Robert Greene's 'mad and scoffing poet'[2] to Stephen Greenblatt's flaunter of his 'society's cherished orthodoxies' (Greenblatt, p. 220), Marlowe's putative personality has licensed and informed disparate and often conflicting readings of his writings. And yet, of course, the return to 'Marlowe' betrays the desire for a centre around which the ambiguities and complexities of his plays and poems can be resolved. If such an interpretative strategy is now less likely to be damned, in Roland Barthes' terms, as the dogmatist's search for 'a final signified',[3] it remains peculiarly suspect in Marlowe's case. As J. A. Downie reminds us in the first chapter in this collection: 'We know next to nothing about Christopher Marlowe. When we speak or write about him, we are really referring to a construct called "Marlowe".'

To be sure, as Downie acknowledges, all authors are inevitably partially constructed by their commentators, but myths of Marlowe the man, regardless of their provenance, have had a special force in Marlowe studies from their beginnings in the nineteenth century to the present day. The continuing potency of the biographical approach can be gauged from the opening paragraph of David Bevington's and Eric Rasmussen's World's Classics edition of *Doctor Faustus and Other Plays* (1995):[4]

> From first to last in his brief and meteoric career, Marlowe appears to have been fascinated by challenge of the established order in its cosmic and human dimensions. We sense in this, as we read or experience his plays in the theatre, the projection of a self that was no less daring, yet at the same time caught up in guilt and remorse. Even though we cannot interpret the plays as straightforward autobiography, no body of dramatic literature in the Renaissance makes us more curious to know the dramatist himself, for the plays seem to us intensely personal.

While it is difficult to gainsay this reading on the level of reader or audience response, it is just as difficult to believe that such conclusions could be derived from the plays alone. Behind the 'meteoric career' lingers the myth of Marlowe the Romantic artist, who lived as he wrote in one gloriously short and inspired burst. So the biographical 'facts' of rumoured transgressions neatly fall into place in the image of Marlowe as a guilt-ridden aesthete for whom it is entirely appropriate to elide life and works. Circular reasoning thus

reduces textual complexities and questionings to the personality traits of a hypothetical 'Marlowe'.

Given the traditional nature of such reasoning in Marlowe criticism, and the undiminished appetite for biographical conjecture evident in the recent work of Charles Nicholl and others, Downie's account of the few verifiable biographical facts is salutary. Teasingly elliptical and suggestive as it may be, the documentary evidence neither supports the commonplaces about Marlowe's involvement in espionage, his alleged atheism and homosexuality, nor adds up to anything like a meaningful biography. If free-wheeling critical speculation is required to flesh out a 'life' that will make sense of the plays, Downie's scepticism takes us in a different direction by reminding us of the disturbing fact that not even the plays were 'unambiguously attributed to [Marlowe] prior to his death'.

Turning to a similarly shadowy area of our knowledge of the historical Marlowe, Julian M. C. Bowsher offers an archaeologist's perspective on the playhouse most clearly associated with early performances of the two parts of *Tamburlaine*, *Doctor Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta* and *The Massacre at Paris*. Although, significantly, 'there remains no documentary evidence' of Marlowe's personal association 'with the London playhouses', the regular performances of the plays at the Rose attest to their popularity, if not to the playwright's fame. Indeed, that the papers of the Rose's owner and manager, Philip Henslowe, name the plays but make no mention of Marlowe himself alerts us to important differences between our own assumptions about authorship and the priorities of Elizabethan acting companies and audiences.

The survival of Henslowe's papers has, as Bowsher notes, long given the Rose 'a unique documentary status amongst its contemporaries', but the Museum of London's excavation of the playhouse in 1989 adds a new dimension to the picture by revealing 'for the first time the physical context in which the plays of Marlowe, and his contemporaries, were performed'. Two distinct stages of the theatre's physical development were uncovered by the excavations. The redevelopment of the Rose (probably in 1592) to improve staging conditions and increase audience capacity parallels similar developments at the Theater, and suggests, according to Bowsher, keen competition among the London playhouses, 'all of which were striving to attract audiences, acting companies, and playwrights'. Interestingly, the second phase of development did little to enlarge a

stage space that was 'small even by contemporary standards'. The extension of the yard, however, 'produced a greater "thrust" and thus greater contact with the groundlings'. It is in this intimate arena that Edward Alleyn famously 'stalked and roared' as Tamburlaine and made the roles of Barabas and Faustus his own.

Having begun by establishing both certainties and uncertainties in our efforts to reconstruct a historical Marlowe, the collection moves on, with the chapters of Richard Proudfoot and Gareth Roberts, to consider some of the interpretative ramifications of the no less vexed area of Marlovian bibliography. In a chapter which offers an overview of the fortunes of the plays in the hands of editors and publishers, Proudfoot begins with a consideration of William Mountfort's rendering of *Doctor Faustus* as farce. A high point in what Robert D. Hume calls the 'farce boom' of the Restoration, Marlowe scholars, nevertheless, have often viewed Mountfort's *Faustus* as 'a dreadful object lesson in textual instability and the corrosive effect of the players on the play'. Yet, Proudfoot argues, the late and posthumous *publication* of *Doctor Faustus* 'and the clear indications that neither A- nor B-text is unadulterated "Marlowe" should allow theatrical history a greater importance than is usually accorded to it in editions of the play'. Although it is not a matter of a simple choice between the comic emphasis of seventeenth-century traditions and a twentieth-century tendency to downplay or simply drop the scenes of 'low' comedy, the tonal alternations on which the play depends were better understood, suggests Proudfoot, when *Faustus* 'remained . . . a play for acting, not a text for academic study'.

Accepting the unresolvable nature of certain textual questions, our ignorance about the dating of Marlowe's plays, and the sequence in which they were written, Proudfoot draws attention to the comparable cases of contemporary playwrights such as Robert Greene and George Peele. Necessarily fragmentary though it is, the 'theatrical history of [Marlowe's] time' offers as 'rich a context' as any for the plays. Thus the essay concludes with a call for a more daring approach to the editing and performance of plays, for 'anthologies that juxtapose Marlowe with other plays from the repertoires of the Admiral's and Pembroke's Men . . . and a Marlowe theatre festival at which his repertoire might be extended to take in *Dido* and *The Massacre*, and even . . . to juxtapose . . . seventeenth-century versions of *Doctor Faustus*'.

Focusing too on *Doctor Faustus*, Roberts finds significant parallels

between critical attempts to comprehend the meaning of 'magic' in the play and those of editors to reconstruct Marlowe's 'original' text: 'The hope of recovering an "authentic" text might be as fallacious as recovering "magic" in the play . . . As there are variant readings in scenes of magic in *Doctor Faustus* and . . . two distinct plays, so it might turn out that we have to acknowledge different discourses of magic in the Renaissance.' Beyond these crucial editorial problems, Roberts' discussion of how, for example, we might best read Faustus' claim that 'These metaphysics of magicians/ And necromantic books are heavenly' opens up broader questions about the play's much debated orthodoxy or subversiveness. While it is possible to discover authorial irony behind the epithet 'heavenly', which might then guide a reading of the play's essential orthodoxy, Roberts points out that 'juxtapositions of magic and religious thought' are not necessarily 'uneasy and ironic' in the early modern period.

Indeed, Roberts argues, the issue is made problematic by the typical discursive entanglements of religion and magic in the Renaissance, and further complicated by the differing inflections of three distinct discourses about magic: 'orthodox demonology, high magic, and popular belief'. We might look to demonologies to bolster an orthodox reading of *Doctor Faustus*, but while the conservative position is evident in, for example, 'the voices of the Prologue and the Good Angel', it is 'not the only or dominant viewpoint in the play'. What the play does, according to Roberts, is to mobilise 'different discourses about magic and [set] them at odds'. This characteristic Marlovian strategy denies the reader or viewer the security of either a straightforwardly orthodox or a straightforwardly subversive interpretation of the play.

While a number of important studies of Marlowe from David Bevington's *From Mankind to Marlowe* (1962) to Clifford Leech's *Christopher Marlowe, Poet for the Stage* (1986) have argued that the plays are best understood as theatre, there are also strong traditions in Marlowe scholarship in which primarily textual analysis implies the secondary and almost incidental nature of performance. Moreover, for all the popularity of the plays in performance in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Marlowe's plays have only been selectively and occasionally revived in the twentieth century. There are a number of possible reasons for this relative neglect, but among them the perceived unfamiliarity of the plays' dramatic idioms and Marlowe's continuing ability to disturb rank high. The chapters of

Janet Clare and Lois Potter thus join important debates about Marlowe as dramatist. Like several of the other contributors to this volume, Clare points to the value of attending to Marlowe's dramaturgy on its own terms, while Potter demonstrates the relationship between stage history and broader issues of interpretation.

For Clare, the 'combination of Renaissance eloquence and extreme acts of aggression' found in the plays makes it both necessary and difficult to 'find an appropriate vocabulary for Marlowe's dramaturgy'. Since 'character' in the plays seems to have little to do with 'either humanist or determinist notions of psychology and agency', Clare suggests that biographical readings of the plays are necessarily 'unreliably premised'. In addition, Clare argues, attempts to understand the violence of the plays in terms of its ideological and social implications ignore the 'limitations in Marlowe's representations of power, shorn in its reduction to violence of its other attributes'. Writing within the relatively new context of purpose-built theatres, which made increasing 'claims to be recognised as [places] of dangerous effects and emotions,' Marlowe extended traditional stage violence to a level of 'on-stage, amoral intensity'.

Because the aesthetics of Elizabethan critics like Sidney, Puttenham, and Lodge are 'grounded in didacticism', they have 'little to say about the effects and implications' of the plays' 'violent enactments'. Sensitive to the historical milieu of Marlowe's plays, Clare, nevertheless, finds a more appropriate model for his dramaturgy in Antonin Artaud's conception of the theatre of cruelty. In particular, Artaud's call for a theatre built on 'extreme action pushed beyond all limits', which might serve 'as a liberating vent to extreme passions and cultural nightmares' finds an analogue in Marlowe's 'excesses of . . . spectacle', his 'sensory assault on the spectator and the violation of any predictable moral or emotional responses'. In his sensual use of word and image and his eschewal of psychologically complex character construction, Marlowe solicits a 'radical audience response'. Such a response has little to do with moral exempla or empathy with his protagonists. By 'surrendering the ethical to the aesthetic', Marlowe, Clare argues, invites his audience to complete his texts, 'to formulate their own responses'.

Potter's account of key moments in the history of the revival of Marlowe's plays reveals a number of trends that often parallel the preoccupations of academic commentary. The tendency, before the

opening of the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1986, to justify 'many Marlowe revivals' on the grounds of 'comparison with Shakespeare' has its counterpart in literary criticism and suggests, perhaps, the limitations of selective literary history as much as the cultural value of the bard. The critical fascination with Marlowe's brief life and especially his violent death is echoed in the theatre in such plays as R. H. Horne's *The Death of Marlowe* (1837) and Peter Whelan's *The School of Night*, which opened in Stratford in 1993. A more welcome, but, perhaps, no less double-edged, manifestation of the relationship between professional criticism and performance is the fact 'that most Marlowe revivals (those of *Tamburlaine* and *Dido* in particular) have happened in academic or experimental contexts'.

Of Marlowe's 'four major plays', *Faustus* has been the most frequently produced, perhaps because of a perception of the 'timeless' nature of the Faust myth. The other plays have been more obviously interpreted in the light of urgent contemporary concerns. Thus, for example, post World War II productions of *Tamburlaine* have sometimes identified the hero 'with the military leaders whose ambition kills civilians and soldiers alike'. Similarly, Barry Kyle's 1988 *Jew of Malta* alluded to the Holocaust, and by suggesting parallels with 'religious conflict, in Ireland [and] the Middle East, gave Marlowe's fantastic plot a new relation to real life'. Of all the plays, *Edward II* has been the most 'affected by outside events, particularly the disappearance of pre-performance censorship in 1968'. Since the late 1960s, Potter notes, 'productions have become so explicit about both the hero's homosexuality and the nature of his death that it is hard to believe that the play was once able to make its effect in any other way'.

Clearly, productions of the plays on the twentieth-century stage raise inevitable questions about the relationship between contemporary appropriation and the historical integrity of Marlowe's texts. Yet, as much as it might like to rise above such questions, the critical discourse of twentieth-century Marlowe scholarship is fully implicated in them. The critical revolution which followed from the importation of the *nouvelle critique* in the late 1970s and 1980s brought about a much-needed re-thinking of traditional assumptions about English literature in general. Because the study of the Renaissance was seen to be especially burdened with ideological baggage, its literature became and remains a subject of lively contestation. The sense that all critical positions are interested ones and that the