

Christopher Marlowe: Life and work

Christopher Marlowe was the son of a wealthy Canterbury shoemaker who was an influential citizen in his community. Marlowe was born on February 6, 1564, and was baptized at Saint George's church in Canterbury on February 26. After attending King's School in Canterbury, Marlowe went to Corpus Christi College in Cambridge in December 1580. He attended on a scholarship founded by Archbishop Parker which was granted for six years to those who were studying for a career in the church. From this fact, it appears that it was Marlowe's intention to go into the church, even though in the college records he first appears as a student of dialectics.

Marlowe received his B.A. in 1584, and three years later he received his M.A. degree. His academic career was fairly conventional except for some long periods of absences during his second year. The only trouble which Marlowe had was just before he was granted his M.A. degree. Because of the prevalence of certain rumors, the college was going to hold up his degree. The Privy Council of the queen wrote a letter to the university assuring the college about Marlowe's character and asserting that he had been of service to her majesty. The purpose of this letter was to allay rumors that Marlowe planned to join the English Catholics at Reims in France.

Marlowe appears to have performed services for the government during these years, such as carrying dispatches overseas or else acting as a spy in the service of Sir Francis Walsingham, who was the head of Queen Elizabeth's secret service. No direct evidence, however, remains as to what his specific tasks or assignments were in the service of the queen.

After receiving his M.A. from the university, he moved to London, where he was a part of a brilliant circle of young men which included Rawley, Nashe, and Kyd. Before the end of the year 1587, both parts of his first play, *Tamburlaine the Great*, had been performed on the stage. At this time, Marlowe was a young man of only twenty-three and

already established as a known dramatist as a result of the success of this first play.

In the remaining six years of his life after he had left the university, he lived chiefly in the theatrical district of Shoreditch in London. Although he traveled a great deal for the government during this time, he always retained this London address. For a time, he had as his roommate Thomas Kyd, who is also the author of a very popular Elizabethan play, *The Spanish Tragedy*. Kyd later made the statement that Marlowe had a violent temper and a cruel heart.

In September of 1589, Marlowe was imprisoned in Newgate for his part in a street fight in which William Bradley, the son of a Holborn innkeeper, was killed. One of Marlowe's friends named Watson had actually killed the man with his sword, so Marlowe was not charged with murder himself. He was released on October 1, on a bail of forty pounds, and was discharged with a warning to keep the peace.

Three years later, in 1592, Marlowe became involved in a court action as he was summoned to court for assaulting two constables in the Shoreditch district. The officers said that they had been in fear of their lives because of Marlowe's threats. He was fined and released.

In the spring of 1593, Marlowe again found himself in difficulty with the Privy Council on the charge of atheism and blasphemy. Thomas Kyd had been arrested for having in his possession certain heretical papers denying the deity of Christ. Kyd denied that they belonged to him and maintained that they were Marlowe's. Marlowe was then summoned to the Privy Council, which decreed that he must appear daily before them until he was licensed to the contrary.

Then, twelve days later, Marlowe was killed in a tavern in Deptford, a dockyard adjacent to Greenwich. On that day, Marlowe had accepted an invitation from Ingram Frizer to feast at the tavern with several other young men of dubious reputation who had been mixed up in confidence games, swindles, and spy work. After supper, Marlowe got into an

argument with Frizer over the tavern bill. When Marlowe struck Frizer on the head with a dagger, Frizer twisted around somehow and thrust the dagger back at Marlowe, striking him on the forehead and killing him.

During his short career as a dramatist, Marlowe gained a significant reputation on the basis of four dramas. Other than his first play, *Tamburlaine*, he was also the author of *Faustus* in 1589 or 1592, *The Jew of Malta* in 1589, and *Edward II* in 1592. In addition to his dramatic pieces, he translated Lucan's *Pharsalia* and Ovid's *Amores*. He also wrote poems, among which his most famous are "The Massacre of Paris" and "Hero and Leander."