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The State of Marlowe Studies

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Sarah K. Scott and M. L. Stapleton, eds., *Christopher Marlowe the Craftsman: Lives, Stage, and Page*, Padstow, Cornwall, England: Ashgate, 2010. x + 261 pp.

This collection of fifteen interrelated essays, edited by Sarah K. Scott and M. L. Stapleton, taps into the recent move in criticism among historians and literary scholars to focus on issues of craft as opposed to artistry. The book centers broadly on the idea of Christopher Marlowe as craftsman, specifically "the ways he conceives an idea, shapes and refines it, then remakes and remodels it, only to refashion it further in his writing process" (p. 1). Throughout the volume, a wide range of scholars considers Marlowe as a thinker and re-thinker of ideas and as a model for later Elizabethan poets who aimed to utilize similar processes of inclusion as well as exclusion in the crafting of plays, poems, and translations. In one sense, the book represents the product of critics working from a core theme with centrifugal force. The collection's unifying principle promises to be the consideration of Marlowe as a working artist. But the book functions at a different level as well: it seeks to assess the field of Marlowe studies, to consider recent trends in scholarship, and to suggest new directions for future growth while honoring scholars' perennial fascination with subjects like biography and *Doctor Faustus*. In this way, it serves as both an argument for and an example of current developments in the study of Marlowe.

Christopher Marlowe the Craftsman was compiled under the auspices of the Marlowe Society of America, a fact that goes far in explaining the book's continued and communal interest in the health of Marlowe studies at large. The editors' introduction, for instance, offers not only an

overview of the included essays but also a contextualization amidst other recent publications in the field. Likewise, the first piece in the collection, "Marlowe Scholarship and Criticism: The Current Scene," features a survey by Robert A. Logan of twenty-first century developments in the field. With the idea of the craftsman in mind, Logan issues a call for scholars to engage in reinvigorated close readings alongside issues of theater and stage history. "Is it not time," he asks, "to attempt a revised version of a close reading of the texts, one that takes more into account Marlowe the professional strategist well aware of the effects of dramaturgical and poetic techniques?" (p. 21). In all of this, Logan pushes for a broader, less "reductive" (p. 19) reading of Marlowe the working writer.

In the spirit of his editors, Logan deals diplomatically with questions of "reductive" scholarship. The real issue here seems to be the legacy of new historicism and its tendency toward a type of biographical criticism that makes much of the sparse details of Marlowe's life, that tends to paint him as more of a subversive figure than is perhaps deserving, and that analyzes Marlowe's dramatic characters in terms of his own biography. Lukas Erne famously characterizes this critical tendency as "a vicious hermeneutic circle" that reads the playwright's characters as versions of himself such that "the mythographic creature thus constructed informs the criticism of his plays."[1] And certainly Logan, as well as Scott and Stapleton, must in their assessment of Marlowe studies acknowledge the backlash that has taken place against such kinds of biographical criticism. Constance Kuriyama's 2002 biography stands out as a hallmark of this trend; in it, she turns her attention to the primary documents of the playwright's life and from them reconstructs a significantly more restrained portrait of the man and his works.[2] But here's the problem: it's Marlowe as a possible subversive that continues to hold the most fascination for scholars and non-specialists alike. There is a reason that, as Logan verifies, Marlowe biography and *Doctor Faustus*

[1]Erne, "Biography, Mythography, and Criticism: The Life and Works of Christopher Marlowe," *Modern Philology* 103 (2005): 28.

[2]Kuriyama, *Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

remain the most popular subjects in the field. And other essay collections that have attempted to completely eschew new historicism/biographical criticism were chided along two lines: 1) it is difficult, if not impossible, to completely reject a new historicist framework and 2) rejecting new historicism without offering a robust alternative creates more problems than it solves.

Faced with these difficulties, editors Scott and Stapleton choose to include a variety of approaches within their volume, which is divided into three parts and begins with a section on "Lives: Stage and Page." J. A. Downie's essay, "Reviewing What We Think We Know about Christopher Marlowe, Again," demonstrates how our views on Marlowe's scandalous religious and political leanings tend to come only from second- or third-hand sources. Likewise, Rosalind Barber assesses this same, scant biographical evidence to interrogate the common assumption of Marlowe as a violent man. She finds that, just as his death by tavern continues to be mischaracterized as a brawl, "the most reliable evidence suggests that Marlowe, like other creative intellectuals drawn to express themselves forcefully, favored words rather than blows" (p. 59). If Barber and Downie participate in the recent return to primary sources and its accompanying critical restraint, heterogeneity prevails with the inclusion of Richard F. Hardin's essay, "Marlowe Thinking Globally." Hardin proposes that the anti-ethnocentrism present in Marlowe's work, most notably *Tamburlaine* and *The Jew of Malta*, must be related to his early experiences in Canterbury and Cambridge, places of international and polyglot influence that inculcated in Marlowe a sense of a world outside Britain. Hardin's study represents how biography and literary output can be read alongside one another in a productive, non-reductive way.

If, no matter how sparse the primary documents on "Christofer Marly" really are, issues of biography continue to intrigue us, scholars also regularly gravitate, like flies to honey, toward comparative readings of Shakespeare and Marlowe. Logan suggests that a recent trend, and one that could stand to increase even further, is the comparative readings of Marlowe with dramatists and poets other than Shakespeare. (This recommendation is especially powerful coming from Logan, who recently wrote, if not *the* book, an extensive intertextual analysis of works

Shakespeare and Marlowe.[3]) Again editors Scott and Stapleton take an even-handed approach to this trend. They have included Robert Darcy's suggestive essay on Marston and Marlowe, which assesses the structure of *The Metamorphosis of Pigmalions Image* and *Certaine Satyres* in terms of Marlowe's "*cursus*" (p. 150). Darcy argues that Marlowe's legacy directly inspired Marston and other satirists of the late 1590s, and that the continued critical privileging of Shakespeare and the literature of "inwardness" (p. 158) at the expense of satire upholds, in a certain way, the Bishops' Ban of 1599. These are strong words against the Bard. But Meredith Skura's comparative reading of Shakespeare and Marlowe, provocatively titled "What Shakespeare Did to Marlowe in Private: Dido, Faustus, and Bottom," demonstrates that there's still rich ground to be tilled in cross-reading the two most prominent dramatists of their day.

Skura's essay is included in the second part of the book, "Stage: Theater, Dramaturgy," along with Alan C. Dessen's "*Edward II* and Residual Allegory," which considers how, in the case of Marlowe as well as other playwrights of the 1590s, allegory doesn't cease to exist so much as it goes underground. Dessen's argument, which shows how Marlowe uses the features of allegory for his own sardonic or anti-didactic purposes, is followed by two essays on *The Jew of Malta*. Sarah K. Scott invites us to consider how the play, often dismissed as a travesty, reflects the development of city comedy that would soon dominate the stage in the early 1600s, and Ruth Lunney shows how the play, as well as Marlowe's other works, helped to revolutionize the direct address as a feature of Elizabethan drama. Part three of the book, "Page: Texts and Interpretations," is subdivided further into two categories. The first of these, "Marlowe the Ovidian," turns to issues of poetry, beginning with Stephen Booth's witty and invigorating essay, "On the Eventfulness of *Hero and Leander*," which demonstrates how "*Hero and Leander* generates more mental events in its listeners per square metric foot than another poem . . . in English literature" (p. 125). If *Hero and Leander* is one of the most appreciated poems in the English language, yet according to Booth, it deserves more appreciation, part three closes with two essays on rather

[3]Logan, *Shakespeare's Marlowe: The Influence of Christopher Marlowe on Shakespeare's Artistry* (Aldershot, Hampshire, England, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007).

neglected works. M. L. Stapleton turns his critical attention to "Marlowe's First Ovid"—the *Amores*, in particular the fragmentary version of it that was interdicted by the Bishops' Ban—while Dympna Callaghan assesses "Marlowe's Last Poem," the Epitaph on Sir Roger Manwood, in terms of both its Ovidian and historical Elizabethan context. From a discussion of Ovid, the concluding section of "Texts and Interpretations" turns finally to three somewhat disparate topics under the rubric of "Marlowe's Reach": Brett Foster offers a careful reading of Rome in Faustus as a hub of symbolic, religious, and geopolitical meanings; Carolyn Scott reveals the surprising Pauline subtext and Eucharistic motifs in *Tamburlaine: Part One*; and Paul Menzer, in his essay on "Fractional *Faustus*: Edward Alleyn's Part in the Printing of the A-Text," looks at the textual indeterminacy of Marlowe's most famous play.

Experience says that organizations, just like people, have particular points of view. Yet refreshingly, this work of the Marlowe Association of America blends together a variety of theoretical and critical approaches. The breadth, inclusiveness, and robust heterogeneity of this collection speak to the willingness of Scott and Stapleton as editors to allow a wide range of established scholars to share what is freshest and most interesting to them. And if the resulting book is only loosely tied to a study of craft, of Marlowe as "*artifex*" (p. 1), this speaks to the strength of the book, not its weakness.

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