

## Christopher Marlowe in Recent Fiction

Because of my long-term interest in the study of Christopher Marlowe, I have often been intrigued by his portrayal in popular fiction. In 1994 at the second of these conferences, then called the Dakotas Conference, I read a paper commenting on four novels that had appeared in 1993, the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Marlowe's death: Anthony Burgess's *A Dead Man in Deptford*, Judith Cook's *The Slicing Edge of Death*, Stephanie Cowell's *Nicholas Cooke: Actor, Soldier, Physician, Priest*, and Lisa Goldstein's *Strange Devices of the Sun and Moon*. Today I will be looking at a cluster of five novels that appeared between 2002 and 2005 in which Marlowe appears as a major character, if not necessarily the main character. These are Harry Turtledove's *Ruled Britannia*, Martin Stephen's *The Conscience of the King: Henry Gresham and the Shakespeare Conspiracy*, Leslie Silbert's *The Intelligencer*, Louise Welsh's *Tamburlaine must Die*, and Rodney Bolt's *History Play: The Lives and Afterlife of Christopher Marlowe*.

*Ruled Britannia* is an alternate history, a literary subgenre that posits a different outcome to some key historical event and builds its story on the hypothetical history resulting from that change. In *Ruled Britannia* the Spanish Armada had been successful in conquering England, and by 1597, when the novel is set, Philip II's daughter Isabella and her Austrian husband Albert are maintained on the English throne by an occupying Spanish army, Queen Elizabeth is imprisoned in the Tower of London, Catholicism has been restored, and the Inquisition pursues those who continue to uphold Protestant beliefs or practices. The novel focuses primarily on William Shakespeare and Lope de Vega, who in actual fact had sailed with the Armada, and who is depicted here as part of the occupying army. The plot centers on two plays that Shakespeare is writing. King Philip is dying, and the Spanish have recruited Shakespeare to write a

commemorative play to be performed upon his death. At the same time, Burghley and his son Robert Cecil believe that Philip's death will provide the opportunity for a revolt against Spanish rule, and they ask Shakespeare to secretly prepare a play that will arouse the patriotism of the English populace. The subject is to be Queen Boudicca's fight against the Roman conquerors of England. Turtledove's inspiration is obviously Essex's sponsoring of a performance of *Richard II* in hopes of gaining support for his revolt against Elizabeth, but the ploy is more effective in the novel than it was for Essex.

Martin Stephen's *The Conscience of the King: Henry Gresham and the Shakespeare Conspiracy* and Leslie Silbert's *The Intelligencer* both fall into the mystery-thriller category. Martin Stephen's *The Conscience of the King* has very little to do with actual history, though the historical color is quite rich. It is part of a series set in Renaissance England featuring the fictional Henry Gresham, a gentleman spy. In this novel he must solve two related mysteries. One involves the recovery of love letters written between King James and Robert Carr, Viscount Rochester. The second is the recovery of two play scripts stolen from the Globe Theater. Leslie Silbert's *The Intelligencer* involves a dual plot, one set in the present, and one in 1593. The first features Kate Morgan, an erstwhile Ph.D. student who has left academia to become an investigator for a high-powered private detective agency that works for private clients while simultaneously doing intelligence-work for the U.S. government. The second plot involves Marlowe's work as an investigative spy. The two plots are cleverly intertwined. Solving the mysteries that Kate is working on in the present requires her to translate a bound set of documents left by Thomas Phelippes, breaking a code created by Christopher Marlowe, and recovering a treasure that Marlowe had hidden four centuries earlier. Louise Welsh's *Tamburlaine must Die* adheres almost as closely to history as Turtledove departs from it. Her

novella opens on May 29, 1593, with Marlowe writing a chronicle of recent events. He has been summoned to a meeting at Deptford on the next day and is apprehensive about the outcome. If he does not return, the friend with whom he will leave his document is to secrete it away where it will not be found until far into the future. The last of these books is Rodney Bolt's *History Play: The Lives and Afterlife of Christopher Marlowe*. His title is intended to indicate that he is playing with history. His is a fake biography, complete with phony footnotes (mixed in with real footnotes), that assumes that Marlowe faked his death at Deptford, escaped to the continent, and supported himself by writing the plays that were smuggled back to England and presented as being written by Shakespeare. The last part of the book, where Bolt creatively imagines Marlowe's post-1593 meetings with a variety of historical figures and his participation in notable historical events on the continent, is the most satisfying part of the novel.

Back in 1994 I remarked how pleasing it was that none of the novels I was discussing presented Marlowe as Shakespeare, and I will confess that Bolt's premise irritates me, although his claim is that he is simply using this anti-Stratfordian theory imaginatively without trying to prove it. However, while only Bolt pushes the authorship question, the idea of Marlowe having survived Deptford turns out to be surprisingly popular among these novelists. Indeed, only Welsh avoids it. Her Marlowe heads for Deptford not knowing precisely what will happen. Turtledove's Marlowe is forced to flee when the Spanish begin arresting sodomites. He goes to Deptford, where he catches a ship to safety. Pursuing but not catching him, Lope takes a stoup of wine at Eleanor Bull's, the site of Marlowe's actual death. Having thus teased the reader with the possibility of a death at Deptford, Turtledove has his Marlowe return to London in disguise. Lope recognizes him and in the resulting fight stabs him above the right eye, killing him instantly, a wound that recalls Marlowe's actual death. Stephen's Marlowe not only faked his

death in 1593, with the help of Gresham, but he had done it again in 1602, this time fooling Gresham. Now, dying and demented by syphilis, he has returned to England to force the performance of a new play that he has written and to revenge himself on all of those he perceives to be his enemies, which includes Gresham. Silbert's plot could well have ended with Marlowe's death, and her "Author's Note" indicates that this was her original intention. However, she says that she was influenced by Marlowe's decision not to kill Leander in his "Hero and Leander" and decided to spare her Marlowe. His savior is Robert Poley, who orchestrates things so cleverly that Skeres and Frizer, the other men present, don't even realize that Marlowe is not dead.

To be sure, few novelists would be happy to conclude with a death that was the result of an unmotivated brawl over the dinner tab. Questions about the coroner's report have been raised ever since it was first unearthed by Lelie Hotson Poley, but Welsh and Silbert both refer to Charles Nicholl's 2002 revised edition of his very popular and very readable *The Reckoning*. Nicholl there moved away from his earlier thesis that the Earl of Essex was strongly implicated in Marlowe's death, but he continued to argue that Marlowe was murdered as a consequence of a plot against Raleigh. Bolt cites the 1992 edition, which could have affected the 1993 novels, though its influence is not clear. What is clear is that in the earlier novels Marlowe's death was real, not faked, and political intrigue and fighting was evident in three of them. The current emphasis on Marlowe's survival may suggest that we have become more fascinated with the idea that history does not tell the truth.

Of course, the idea that Marlowe's death may in some way be mysterious relates to the understanding that he was a spy. I tend to agree with Constance Kuriyama that we ought to be cautious about the inferences we draw from the documentary record, but that record does contain some tantalizing details, including the letter from the Privy Council affirming Marlowe's service

to his country and intelligence-gathering connections of those present at his death. It is precisely these connections that Turtledove exploits. In a series of mysterious meetings, Marlowe introduces Shakespeare to Thomas Phelippes (best-known now for his role in uncovering the Babington plot and helping to convict Mary Queen of Scots). Phelippes then sends Nicholas Skeres to take Shakespeare to a meeting with Sir William Cecil, Lord Burghley, who proposes the play on Boudicca. Ingram Frizer, the man who actually stabbed Marlowe at Deptford, appears in order to eliminate two men who threaten the plot. In short, Marlowe and individuals we associate with him create the novel's background of intrigue and violence.

Silbert's vision of Elizabeth politics and intelligencers also forms a complicated web. On one side is Robert Cecil, who because of an urgent need for money has tried coining (which involved Marlowe) and is selling arms illegally to the Barbary pirates through the Muscovy company. Robert Poley and Ingram Frizer work for Cecil, and when Marlowe starts investigating the arms deal (done through the Muscovy company), Cecil wants Marlowe killed. On the other side is Cecil's foe, the Earl of Essex, who is served by Thomas Phelippes. It is Phelippes who had hired Marlowe to investigate the Muscovy Company, but not expecting anything to come of it, he was also setting up Marlowe to be tortured into informing on Cecil by creating the Dutch Church libel and arresting Kyd. Richard Baines and Nicholas Skeres work for Phelippes. Stephen's Gresham is aware of undercover work undertaken by Marlowe, and Bolt creates additional spying adventures for him. Only Welsh, limiting herself to the events of his final days, creates no elaborate James-Bond-like adventures for Marlowe.

What Welsh does is to weave a tale that connects the actual events of Marlowe's final days. She begins with Marlowe's being called before the Privy Council to answer charges that a heretical document in Thomas Kyd's possession was actually his, that he is an avowed atheist

who has converted others to atheism, and that he was the author of a libel signed Tamburlaine that had been attached to the door of the Dutch church. Marlowe determines that to clear himself he must learn the identity of Tamburlaine. This sleuthing is, of course, Welsh's contribution to Marlovian history, and to help in his search she gives him a best friend, an actor named Thomas Blaize. It becomes clear that powerful people want Raleigh's death and that the Dutch Church libel, the allegations tortured out of Kyd, and the Baines note were all designed to force Marlowe to betray Raleigh in order to save his own life. However, John Dee warns Marlowe that taking sides against Raleigh would be as dangerous as aiding those who are plotting against him. It is no wonder that Welsh's Marlowe is uncertain about what will befall him at Deptford.

In Turtledove's novel, Marlowe actually contributes nothing to the plot once he has introduced Shakespeare to Phelippes. His appearances are solely for color: he smokes his pipe and praises tobacco, he chases young men, he blasphemes, and he is incautious about expressing his opinions. This is a far remove from Welsh's focus on the actual events of Marlowe's final days, yet to a large extent this is what these five novels have to tell us about the role that Marlowe plays in our cultural imagination. They confirm that Marlowe fascinates most people not because he was very arguably the best playwright of his day (which ended before Shakespeare came into his full strength as a writer), but because of his reputation for religious and sexual heterodoxy, because of his apparent connections to the world of Elizabeth intelligencers, and because of his violent death. If Shakespeare appears, it is because he is a writer, or someone who is pretending to be a writer. Marlowe is always Tamburlaine, daring the gods out of the heavens.

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