

Chapter IV

MARLOWE'S RELIGIOUS HERESY

We have an "incriminating" literary fingerprint pointing to Marlowe as the author of the First Folio. But do we have an adequate motive for his use of a pseudonym? It seems to me that the answer should be obvious. Marlowe had been charged with religious heresy at a time when conviction meant almost certain death. Whether he or his patron chose the pseudonym of "William Shakespeare," or whether there was a working agreement with the actor William Shakespeare from Stratford-on-Avon to use his name as a protective device, is not clear and, at this point in the argument, is of subordinate importance. The choice before Marlowe was a matter of life or death, for to risk conviction on the charge of heresy was to risk being burned at the stake—just as Francis Kett, also of Corpus Christi College, had been convicted and burned only a short while before.

Marlowe had undoubtedly been given scholarships at Corpus Christi College with the idea of preparing him for the Christian ministry. But because he possessed a venturesome and inquiring mind, when he came to examine the claims of religion he felt obliged to take essentially

what we would call today a liberal or Unitarian position. There is documentary evidence to show that he was accused of writing a pamphlet against the Doctrine of the Trinity in which he rejected such orthodox teachings as the Virgin Birth, the Deity of Jesus, and the Verbal Infallibility of the Bible. We do not possess a copy of that pamphlet but its substance can be inferred from Thomas Beard's *Theatre of God's Judgments*, published in 1597, and from Richard Baines' *Report of Marlowe's Blasphemies*, which was received by the Queen's Privy Council on May 29, 1593 (see Appendixes VIII and IV).

Let us bear in mind the age in which Marlowe lived. It was a time of vast religious upheaval both in Great Britain and on the continent of Europe. The theological struggle then going on, not only between Protestants and Catholics, but also between Protestants and other Protestants, was comparable in violence and intolerance to the ideological struggle going on today between the Communist and non-Communist worlds as well as within the ranks of Communism itself.

In the sixteenth century, Christians who differed slightly from other Christians were called heretics and even atheists. In 1555, Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley were put to the torch for their religious convictions. In the following year, Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, was condemned for heresy. Even his high office, which crowned the heads of England's monarchs, could not save his own head. He, too, was burned at the stake. In 1593, when Marlowe was charged with being both a heretic and an atheist, this cruel spirit of religious intolerance was still in full force. Knowing what had

happened to Latimer, Ridley, Cranmer, and scores of others similarly charged, including Francis Kett in 1589, Marlowe would naturally desire to avoid paying the price of martyrdom for his convictions if at all possible. He undoubtedly was a heretic, but he was obviously not an atheist.

In *Doctor Faustus* he clearly reveals his own faith in a divine moral order in which men are punished by their sins, not for them. Even in *Tamburlaine, Part II*, where Tamburlaine defies Mohammed by ordering his soldiers to burn copies of the Koran within the gates of Babylon, it is not God but merely a man-made god who is defied (see Appendix VII).

Tamburlaine:

“Wel souldiers, Mahomet remaines in hell.
He cannot heare the voice of Tamburlain,
Seeke out another Godhead to adore,
The God that sits in heaven, if any God,
For he is God alone, and none but he.”

In these lines Marlowe was believed by some of his contemporaries to be voicing his own theological views and was charged with being an atheist, but today he would not be so charged by many of our theologians. If he were living today, instead of being arrested, he probably would be offered a chair in one of our leading theological seminaries. In his day, however, a man with his liberal beliefs and a record of having declared them was in mortal danger.

He had to flee for his life, and the deception at Deptford provided by confidential agents of his powerful

patron, Thomas Walsingham, was the only course open to him to escape the awful predicament he was in; then to go into voluntary exile, perhaps to journey on the continent of Europe as far as Italy; and later on, after the fury against him had subsided, return to England and there, under the pseudonym of Shakespeare, continue his literary labors.

In fact, in his prologue to *The Jew of Malta*, published forty years after the date of his alleged murder, Marlowe declares that this is precisely what took place:

Albeit the world think Machevil is dead,
Yet was his soul but flown beyond the Alps,
And now the Guize is dead, is come from France
To view this land and frolic with his friends.
To some, perhaps my name is odious,
But such as love me guard me from their tongues,
And let them know that I am Machevil,
And weigh not men and therefore not men's words:
Admired I am of those who hate me most.
Though some speak openly against my books
Yet will they read me, and thereby attain
To Peter's Chair: and when they cast me off,
Are poisoned by my climbing followers.
I count religion but a childish toy,
And hold there is no sin but Ignorance,
Birds of the air will tell of murders past;
I am ashamed to hear such fooleries. . . .
But . . . I come not, I,
To read a lecture here in Britain,
But to present the tragedy of a Jew . . .
I crave but this, grace him as he deserves,
And let him not be entertained the worse
Because he favors me.

Surely this is the author speaking about himself. Robert Greene, a contemporary poet, had called Marlowe "Machiavellian."¹⁵ Hence Marlowe's slanted reference to himself as "Machevil." The Duke of Guize was the prosecutor of the heretical Protestants in Marlowe's drama *The Massacre of Paris*. Richard Baines who had originally charged Marlowe with heresy died not long thereafter. Here then is the author declaring that since his prosecutor has died, he—Marlowe "is come from France to view this land and frolic with his friends." Note especially the lines:

To some, perhaps my name is odious,
But such as love me guard me from their tongues.

Again note:

Birds of the air will tell of murders past;
I am ashamed to hear such fooleries. . . .

Here the author seems to warn his friends that his real name can no longer be mentioned aloud and to deny that he had any part in the deception that took place at Deptford.

The only deception it is necessary to charge against Marlowe is the use of a pseudonym. But many a religious heretic of that same period hid behind such a protective device. To mention but a few among the many:

David Jorvis as John of Bruges
Paola Ricci as Camillus Renatus
Sebastian Costellio as Martin Bellius

Bernadino Ochino as Antonius Corvinus
Casper Schwenckfeld as Eliander
Michael Servetus as Michael Villeneuve¹⁶

When Michael Servetus, the Spanish priest, was branded as a heretic early in his career, by John Calvin of Geneva, for denying the Doctrine of the Trinity, he escaped to Paris, changed his name to Michael Villeneuve after his native city in Spain, temporarily abandoned his theological pursuits, and prepared himself for a career in medicine. Years later he served as physician to the Roman Catholic Bishop of Lyon. Eventually, he was able to resume his old interest in theology. He wrote a book, *The Restoration of Christianity*, in which he argued in greater detail against the unscriptural Doctrine of the Trinity. His book was published anonymously, but Servetus could not resist the temptation to identify himself; so he put the initials of his name in small capitals—M.S.V. (Michael Servetus of Villeneuve)—just before the word "Finis" in the last chapter of his book. John Calvin, his theological adversary in Geneva, noticing these initials, jumped to the correct conclusion that Dr. Michael Villeneuve was but the pseudonym for Michael Servetus, the former heretic. Under the assumed name of William Laye, Calvin wrote to inform the Catholic Inquisitor in Lyon about the presence in his city of Michael Servetus, a dangerous heretic—dangerous to both the Roman Catholic and Protestant communions. Michael Servetus was arrested and jailed. Through the help of friends he managed to escape and then threw himself on the mercy of John Calvin whom he hoped to

convert to his own point of view. But failing, he was finally burned at the stake, just eleven years before Marlowe was born.

By the same token it must have been an exasperating experience for Marlowe to keep from revealing his own name. Many of the Sonnets attributed to Shakespeare proclaim the sadness of a man who is obviously in exile and desperately anxious to tell the world who he really is, but not quite reckless enough to do so.

Here are excerpts from Sonnets 26, 36, and 76.

Lord of my love to whom in vassalage
Thy merit hath my duty strongly knit,
To thee I send this written embassy,
To witness duty, not to show my wit.

Let me confess that we two must be twain
Although our undivided loves are one. . . .
I may not evermore acknowledge thee
Lest my bewailed guilt should do thee shame
Nor thou with public kindness honor me
Unless thou take that honor from thy name.

Why write I still all one, ever the same,
And keep invention in a noted weed,
That every word doth almost tell my name,
Showing their birth, and where they did proceed?

"That every word doth almost tell my name." The name of the author is given as "Shakespeare." Obviously, this cannot be the author's real name. Surely the author and the young man he addresses, whoever he was, shared a common grief. Mr. Calvin Hoffman argues in his book,

The Murder of the Man Who Was Shakespeare, that this is Marlowe trying to comfort his patron and himself in their mutual sad fate. Mr. Hoffman quotes several other passages from the Sonnets to indicate that the author is a tortured and frustrated soul trying to tell his friends who he really is without betraying his guarded secret to his enemies and potential prosecutors.

It seems to this writer that this argument is most convincing whether Mr. W. H. is eventually identified as Walsingham, as William Hatcliffe as Leslie Hotson maintains, as Willie Hughes as Oscar Wilde has suggested, or as someone else.

In spite of the peril involved, the author's impulse to identify himself seems to have been irresistible, for in *As You Like It* there is still another instance. *As You Like It* was registered at the London Stationers' Office in 1600 with the caveat "a booke to be staid." It was not published until 1623. One of the obvious reasons was a direct reference in Act III, Scene V, to the line of Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*:

"Dead shepherd! now I find thy saw of might,
'Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?'"

Furthermore, there is a character in this play bearing the name "William" who is a rustic and a simpleton. Touchstone, the Clown, says to him in Act V, Scene i:

". . . for it is a figure of rhetoric that drink being poured out of a cup into a glass, by filling the one doth empty the other; for all your writers do consent that ipse is he; now, you are not ipse, for I am he."

What does this mean? It has no relevance to the rest of the play, and apart from the theory of the author's attempt to identify himself, it has no meaning whatsoever. Here the author, under the guise of a clown, is telling the world that "all the writers recognize that I myself am the real author of the works attributed to you, William. You are not ipse, for I am he. I have merely emptied my cup of fame into your glass, which should be as obvious to all but simpletons as it is to those who know what it means to write creatively." Surely, here the author is protesting that his real name is not "William."

Who was capable of writing *As You Like It* and was at the same time under the agonizing necessity of having to conceal his real name? I agree with Calvin Hoffman that this is Marlowe making one more desperate but calculated effort to identify himself without endangering his own life or the lives of his friends and supporters. It is no wonder that *As You Like It*, first registered in 1600, was not published until 1623. By that time the author was probably dead, or the original charge of heresy was deemed to have been made so many years before—thirty years before—that there was little risk of its being renewed.

Even in 1623, the well-kept secret of Marlowe's authorship could not be publicly acknowledged without bringing disgrace and recriminations on those still living who had helped him in any substantial way to escape the customary penalty for his heresy.

This number could have included even highly placed churchmen who, though not holding heretical beliefs themselves, were firmly opposed to the cruel religious

intolerance of the time that would persecute the heretic even to the point of death at the stake.

Thomas Walsingham, Marlowe's patron, was such a highly placed churchman—a member of the Anglican Church in Chislehurst, Kent. He had been knighted by Queen Elizabeth several years after Marlowe's arrest at Scadbury Park. Walsingham was still living when the *First Folio* was published and did not die until several years later, August 11, 1630.