

# It Was Marlowe.

A Story of the Secret of Three Centuries.

By

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*"It is not for any man to measure, above all it is not for any workman in the field of tragic poetry lightly to take on himself the responsibility or the authority to pronounce what it is that Christopher Marlowe could not have done."—Algernon Charles Swinburne.*

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TO MY WIFE,  
WHOSE PRAISE IS AMPLE MEED  
FOR MY WORK;  
AND  
TO THE MEMORY OF MY MOTHER,  
THE ONE WHOSE ENCOURAGEMENT WAS THE  
KEENEST SPUR FOR BEST EFFORT,  
THIS BOOK IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED.

*Wilton Gleason Zeigler*

*June 8, 1898.*

## PREFACE.

*Nature doth strive with Fortune and his stars  
To make him famous.*

—*I Tamburlaine, ii, 1.*

*Nature and Fortune joined to make him great.*

—*King John, iii, 1.*

A number of years ago I read the plays of Christopher Marlowe; and as evidence of the impression they made upon me, there is still among my recent notes gathered for this romance, the extracts I then wrote down from his *Tamburlaine* and *Faustus*. There was something in them to excite more than the passing interest of a boy; and for a long time I mourned over the accepted account of the untimely and disgraceful ending of that unfortunate poet—"our elder Shelley," as Swinburne has termed him. Later the Bacon-Shakespere controversy attracted my attention; and while I became skeptical concerning the authorship by William Shakespere of the dramas that bear his name, I could not attribute them to the pen of Francis Bacon.

There are many reasons for my disbelief in the solution of the mystery as presented by the Baconians, but it has not arisen from my failure to study the proofs and argument. One reason, however, must be mentioned. A man, so solicitous of his

fame as to leave it in his will "to foreign nations and the next ages," would not, if he had written the plays, have departed this life without some \* mention of them. Whoever wrote them was not blind to their merits; and of his knowledge of their enduring quality we have the author's own opinion in the lines:

"Not marble, nor the gilded monuments  
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme."

Shakespeare also left a will, as mean and petty in its details of "gilt boles," "wearing apparrell" and money to "buy them ringes," as though conceived by a tiller of the soil whose eyes had never been raised above his plow-handles. It had been carefully prepared three months before his death, and subscribed while his "mind was yet unclouded;" but, as in the case of Bacon, we listen vainly for one word from the testator concerning the grandest productions of all time. Ye who have sweat in striking "the second heat upon the Muse's anvil," think of the utter indifference of both these men concerning the "living lines" of Hamlet and of Richard!

With the fame of Shakespeare thus rudely shaken, and that of Bacon firmly set upon the enduring monument of law and philosophy which he alone had raised for himself, I began groping for a solution of these mysterious questions. Who wrote the plays? Why was their authorship concealed?

As to the first inquiry, my belief that Christopher Marlowe could have written the plays, had

his life been sufficiently prolonged, was supported by the opinions of Phillips, Collier, Dowden, Malone, Swinburne and Dyce [notes 1-6.]

This belief was founded upon the striking similarity of the strongest portions of his acknowledged works to passages of the Shakespere plays; the tendency of each to degenerate into pomposity and bombast in passages of tragic pathos [note 7]; the similar treatment of characters, and the like spirit that pervades them. (The Shakespere plays, free as they are from any trace of a hand during the period when it was moved by an immature mind, seem like a continuation of the works of the earlier master, and evolved when the author was at the meridian of his power.)

It has been said that "Marlowe could not don alternately the buskin and the sock," and that he "never attempted to write a comic scene," and thus it would have been impossible for him to have written the light and witty portions of the plays. The conclusion of Bullen, above quoted, is not well founded. There are comic scenes in *Faustus*, and originally there were like scenes for "vain, conceited fondlings" in the "stately history" of *Tamburlaine*.

Against the theory of the authorship of Marlowe, was the record of his death in June, 1593, when at the age of 29 years, a period of life all too short to have enabled him to have produced much, if any, more than the work which is known, beyond reasonable doubt, to be his. The accredited ac-

count is that he was slain with his own sword in a tavern brawl. Upon a careful examination of all the reports, I found them loose and contradictory. In September, 1593, Harvey wrote that his death was from the plague [note 8]; in 1597, Beard, the Puritan, wrote that he was killed in the streets of London [note 9]; in 1598, Meres referred to Beard's account without correcting it [note 10]; in 1600, Vaughn wrote that he was killed by "one named Ingram" [note 11]; in 1600, Rowland attributed the death to drinking [note 12]; about 1680, Aubrey wrote that he was the victim of the famous duel of 1598, when Ben Jonson killed his adversary [note 13]; and the burial register of the parish church of St. Nicholas, in Deptford, contains the entry that he was slain by Francis Frazer [note 14].

But no investigation brought to light what became of his slayer. There is no record yet discovered of his escape or trial. Although Ben Jonson was thrown into prison and "brought near the gallows" for his duel on Bunhill, the alleged slayer of "kynd Kit Marloe" appears to have vanished so utterly that it was not until within the last quarter of this nineteenth century that even his name written in the burial register became correctly known to the world.

It might be said that this obscurity concerning the death of Marlowe was occasioned by the dearth of facilities for the conveyance of news, but we can not close our eyes to the fact that it was not an

ignorant age, but one of criticism, violent controversial correspondence, and pamphleteering. And then it was not the case of an obscure person suddenly removed from the walks of life. Although violently attacked a few years previously by contemporaries [note 15], for his allusion to "the jiggling veins of rhyming mother-wits" [note 16], and for the innovations that his genius brought about upon the English stage [note 17], the height of his fame and the reverence in which he was held by the English intellectual world was shown by Petowe, Chapman, Peele, Blunt, Harvey, Chettle, and Drayton [notes 18-24]. It was praise that emanated from the lips of these poets and writers before the close of the year 1600. To them he was "the famous gracer of tragedians," "the highest mind that ever haunted Paul's," the "king of poets," "the muses' darling," that

"Free soul whose living subject stood  
Up to the chin in the Plerian flood."

How striking appears this praise when contrasted with the meager contemporary notices of Shakespere by obscure writers [note 25]!

Among this crowd of admirers we catch no glimpse of the man from Stratford-on-Avon, whom the most devout of his followers recognize, in the earliest of the plays, as merely a "pupil" of "the earlier master." If it were his voice that was then uttering the "parrot-like note of plagery,"\*

\* "Study of Shakespere," by Swinburne, p. 52.

how unpardonable seems his silence, standing, as he did, in the presence of the mighty dead!

These tributes to the memory of Marlowe, all with the omission of the exact nature of his death; and on the other side, the full but contradictory reports by rancorous Puritan scribblers, of the killing of "this barking dogge,"\* led me irresistibly to an answer to the second question. Why was the authorship of the plays concealed?

The most plausible answer was that that master spirit labored until his death under some tremendous fear. What else but the fear of arrest and capital punishment for some crime could have kept him silent until, unwarned and unprepared, he entered "the undiscovered country?"

Was it not possible that this crime was committed in 1593? If so, would it not have kept this "king of poets" hidden in just such condition of darkened vision, isolation and solitude as Frederic Schlegel [note 26] deemed imperative for the production of these austere tragedies? Suppose this condition had existed for five years; that is, from 1593 to 1598; all of the stronger plays which it is possible to attribute to the pen of one man could have been written. And what occurred during those five years? Several of Marlowe's acknowledged dramas were published under his name [note 27], and at least *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard II*, and *Richard III* appeared without the name of any author on their title

\* Thomas Beard's, the Puritan, Account of Marlowe's Death in Bullen's Marlowe, p. 63.



pages [note 28]. In 1598 the name of "W. Shakespere" made its first appearance [note 29] on some of the editions. Did Marlowe die in 1598, instead of 1593? Was Aubrey right?

Upon these conjectural answers to the questions of who was the author, and why did he conceal his identity, I have built the story of "It Was Marlowe," and I trust that in its narration I have made my theory plausible. But whether or not such has been the result, if through this effort I have awakened, or increased the reader's interest in a being as grandly illumined with the flame of pure intellect as any who have, since his consecration, knelt at the shrine of ideal beauty, or aspired to ideal power, my work has not been entirely futile.

THE AUTHOR.