

## The Play's the Thing Marlowe and the Archbishop

As the Church of England's persecution heightened against Puritans, Separatists, and Catholics in the spring of 1593, Christopher Marlowe was arrested on 20 May amid charges of heresy. Under the aegis of **John Whitgift**, the Archbishop of Canterbury, two nonconformist leaders had been hanged and a third faced execution. Rather than submit to torture like his fellow dramatist Thomas Kyd, Marlowe apparently staged his death ten days later in Deptford while free on bail. As a trusted government agent and moulder of public opinion, he evidently was shielded by his superiors on Queen Elizabeth's Privy Council. Lord Burghley, his superior and head of the secret service, had a history of protecting religious dissenters, and had assailed Archbishop Whitgift's methods as more draconian than the Spanish Inquisition.

History duly recorded that Marlowe died in a tavern brawl, but as new research has shown, Mistress Eleanor Bull's residence in Deptford where the knife fight took place housed a customs office associated with the Muscovy Company, a joint trade venture managed by his kinsman, Anthony Marlowe, that had close military, commercial, and familial ties to Burghley, Robert Cecil, and his other patrons at court. Several of the men involved in the sting had served as government agents and carried out similar operations. *Venus and Adonis*, the first work in Shakespeare's name, appeared on 12 June, just two weeks after Marlowe's 'death'.

As Donna B Hamilton shows in *Shakespeare and the Politics of Protestant England*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *King John*, *Twelfth Night*, and other Shakespearean plays subtly address contemporary relations between church and state, challenging the harsh policies imposed by Archbishop Whitgift and Queen Elizabeth in the spring of 1593. In *Hamlet*, the most autobiographical of the Shakespearean works, the critique includes references and allusions to Marlowe's epic struggle with the archbishop. In revealing how Claudius has masterminded his murder and seized the throne, Hamlet's Ghost puns on the name of Archbishop Whitgift, Marlowe's nemesis, who has lusted for power and acquired absolute moral and spiritual sovereignty over Queen Elizabeth:

***Ghost:***

*Ay that incestuous, that adulterate beast,  
With witchcraft of his wits, with traitorous gifts,  
O wicked wit, and gifts that have the power  
So to seduce; won to his shameful lust  
The will of my most seeming-virtuous Queen*

**Hamlet 1-5-47/51**

The First Quarto of *Hamlet* contains a version of this passage, but the word play on Whitgift's name did not appear until after the archbishop's death and the publication of the Second Quarto. By this time, Queen Elizabeth (who

referred to Whitgift as her *little black husband*, or spiritual spouse) had also passed away. The First Folio's capitalization makes the pun even bolder: *Oh wicked Wit and Gifts*.

In exposing his nemesis in the ghost's opening speech and later in the play-within-the-play, the poet hints at his own identity as the dramatist whose princely role on the English stage has been usurped by England's top prelate. Like Claudius, Whitgift oversaw censorship of plays and tried to silence the poet through character assassination, arrest, and execution.

The puns on Wicked Whitgift were especially daring because the archbishop's name was so prominent and lent itself to word play. When the prelate was still at Cambridge, Queen Elizabeth summoned him to preach before her for the first time. She "*tooke so great liking of him, for his method, and matter, that, hearing his name to be Whitgift, she said he had a white-gift in deede,*" records Sir George Paule, the archbishop's comptroller and biographer. "*And as his giftes were then esteemed white, so his Fortune afterward proved white, and happy: his good name, and reputation, white, and spotless.*"

In accusing Claudius/Whitgift of witchcraft and black magic, Marlowe further turns the tables on the cleric. The witchcraft imagery reaches a zenith in the chamber scene. In accusing his mother of being a harlot, Hamlet compares his stepfather with the animal familiars of a witch or wizard:

*For who that's but a Queen, fair, sober, wise,  
Would from a paddock, from a bat, a gib,  
Such dear concernings hide*

**Hamlet 3-4-204/206**

From the view of the Puritans, Separatists, and Catholics, the archbishop was the caricature of a spiritual leader. Instead of love and compassion, he governed with intimidation and violence. His bishops, disciples, and acolytes regularly sanctioned exorbitant fines, long imprisonment, and judicial murder for acts of conscience. Throughout the play, Prince Hamlet assails the king and queen with the rhetoric of religious reform.

At a social level, Claudius and Gertrude's *o'er hasty marriage* (2-2-60) in *Hamlet* signifies the unholy matrimony between the Crown and Church of England. The king's ultimate gift, the tainted cup of wine, further alludes to corrupted religious doctrines. It is associated with the cup of the whore of Babylon in the book of Revelation. Indeed, administered in the form of a large pearl (known as a union) the cup's poisonous contents allude to the counterfeit union of Church and State that is at the heart of Marlowe's critique of Elizabethan society. In rejecting such unholy ties, Hamlet forces the poison down his uncle's throat:

*Here thou incestuous, murd'rous, damnèd Dane,  
Drink off this potion, is thy Union here?*

**Hamlet 319/320**

The opening of the drama in which Claudius slays King Hamlet by administering poison in his ears complements the ending. As the Ghost recalls:

*. . . sleeping within my Orchard,  
Upon my secure hour, thy Uncle stole  
With juice of cursed Hebona in a vial,  
And in the porches of my ears did pour  
The leperous distilment, whose effect  
Holds such an enmity with blood of man,  
That swift as quicksilver it courses through  
The natural gates and alleys of the body*

**Hamlet 1-5-63/71**

As literary critics have pointed out, King Hamlet's death echoes passages in Marlowe's plays featuring the same poison or method of assassination:

*. . . the blood of Hydra, Lerna's bane,  
The juice of hebon, and Cocytus' breath*

**The Jew of Malta 3-4-102/103**

*Or, whilst one is asleep, to take a quill  
And blow a little powder in his ears,  
Or open his mouth and pour quicksilver down.*

**Edward II 5-4-33/35**

The wordplay in *Hamlet* pointing to Wicked Whitgift's incestuous reign and diabolical hold over Queen Elizabeth is concealed within the single most harrowing passage in the entire play. In contrast to Marlowe's circumstances, there is nothing to suggest that William of Stratford wrote these lines. The only personal connection between the archbishop and the provincial actor occurred in 1582 when, as bishop of Worcester, Whitgift waived the banns (public announcements) on the proposed marriage of Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway. (Stratford fell within the diocese of Worcester, and Anne was several months pregnant at the time.) While some may argue that being unhappily married is worse than being bound to the stake, the only literary revenge Shakespeare appears to have taken is to draft a will leaving his second best bed to his wife.

The play's registration date offers a further clue to the identity of the principal author. As researcher John Baker has observed, *Hamlet* was first entered in the Stationers' Register in London on 26 July 1602, St Christopher's Day, the anniversary of Marlowe's namesake and the saint who providentially watches over, and spirits away, people in danger! The first edition of *Hamlet* was published by Nicholas Ling, who registered an early edition of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, and composed by Valentine Simmes, a dissident printer who had been arrested and tortured by the archbishop's pursuivants and who later printed Marlowe's most daring theological play, *Dr Faustus*. Shakespeare's

Sonnets were registered on 20 May 1609, the anniversary of Marlowe's arrest, by Thomas Thorpe, who had published Marlowe's translation of Lucan's First Book. The First Folio was brought out by Marlowe's friend, publisher, and literary executor Edward Blount.

As Hamlet soliloquizes when devising the play-within-the-play:

*For murder, though it have no tongue will speak  
With most miraculous organ*

**Hamlet 2-2-544/545**

In identifying Wicked Whitgift as the murderous usurper of England's ancient liberties and seducer of the queen, the author of Hamlet points to his own hidden identity as Christopher Marlowe.

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Alex Jack, an American writer and teacher, is the editor of the new 400th Anniversary edition of *Hamlet by Marlowe and Shakespeare*. He presented his book at the 2005 Authorship Conference at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London. The 400th Anniversary edition is in two volumes:

1. The Play (160pp)
2. History & Commentary (480pp)

It is available at <http://www.shakespeareandmarlowe.com>

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