

ON MAY 30TH, 1593,

a celebrated young playwright was killed in a tavern brawl in London. Or so the official version goes. Now Christopher Marlowe tells us the truth: that his 'death' was an elaborate ruse to avoid his prosecution for heresy; that he lived on in lonely exile, pining for his true love from across the Channel; and that he continued to write plays and poetry, hiding behind the name of a colourless merchant from Stratford – one William Shakespeare.

With the grip of a thriller and the emotional force of a sonnet, this extraordinary novel in verse brings the Elizabethan era to vibrant life as it gives voice to a man who was brilliant, passionate, headstrong and not altogether trustworthy. A cobbler's son who rose so far in society that he counted nobles among his friends, a spy in the Queen's service, a fickle lover and a declared atheist, he was always courting trouble. When it caught up with him, he was lucky to escape the hangman. But at what cost? Here is Christopher Marlowe's reckoning.

*Also by Ros Barber*

POETRY

Not the Usual Grasses Singing  
How Things Are on Thursday  
Material



SCEPTRE

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When a man's verses cannot be understood, nor a man's good wit seconded  
with the forward child understanding, it strikes a man more dead  
than a great reckoning in a little room.

Truly, I would the gods had made thee poetical.

*As You Like It*, III, iii

The way to really develop as a writer is to make yourself a political  
outcast, so that you have to live in secret. This is how Marlowe  
developed into Shakespeare.

Ted Hughes, *Letters*

Poetry is nearer to vital truth than history.

Plato



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## TO THE WISE OR UNWISE READER

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What can a dead man say that you will hear?  
Suppose you swear him underneath the earth,  
stabbed to the brain with some almighty curse,  
would you recognise his voice if it appeared?

The tapping on the coffin lid is heard  
as death watch beetle. He becomes a name;  
a cipher whose identity is plain  
to anyone who understands a word.

So what divine device should he employ  
to settle with the world beyond his grave,  
unmask the life that learnt its human folly  
from death's warm distance; how else can he save

himself from oblivion, but with poetry?  
Stop. Pay attention. Hear a dead man speak.



## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

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### Writers and Actors

Christopher Marlowe	poet, playwright, intelligencer
Tom Watson	poet, playwright, intelligencer
Thomas Walsingham	gentleman, literary patron
Robert Greene	writer of prose romances, playwright
Edward (Ned) Alleyn	lead actor, acting company manager/sharer
Thomas Nashe	prose satirist
Thomas Kyd	playwright

### Government

Sir Francis Walsingham	Secretary of State, head of intelligence
Lord Burghley	William Cecil, Lord Treasurer
Sir Robert Sidney	Governor of Flushing in the Low Countries

### Nobility

Northumberland	Henry Percy, 9th Earl of Northumberland
Southampton	Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton
Essex	Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, soldier
Sir John Harington	1st Baron Harington, first cousin to the Sidneys
Lucy, Countess of Bedford	his married teenage daughter
Arbella Stuart	first cousin to James VI of Scotland
Bess of Hardwick	Countess of Shrewsbury, Arbella's grandmother

### Intelligence

Robin Poley	intelligencer
Thomas Thorpe	publisher, intelligencer
Richard Baines	intelligencer
Gilbert Gifford	intelligencer
Anthony Bacon	head of the Earl of Essex's intelligence network

**Sundry**

John Allen

William Bradley

Hugh Swift

John Poole

Sir Walter Raleigh

Eleanor Bull

Venetia

Jaques Petit

William Peter

Ned Alleyn's brother, innkeeper  
publican's son

lawyer, Watson's brother-in-law  
Catholic counterfeiter

courtier, adventurer  
Deptford gentlewoman with Court connections

a maiden of Venice

Anthony Bacon's servant  
gentleman

# THE MARLOWE PAPERS





## DEATH'S A GREAT DISGUISER

---

Church-dead. And not a headstone in my name.  
No brassy plaque, no monument, no tomb,  
no whittled initials on a makeshift cross,  
no pile of stones upon a mountain top.  
The plague is the excuse; the age's curse  
that swells to life as spring gives way to summer,  
to sun, unconscious kisser of a warmth  
that wakens canker as it wakens bloom.

Now fear infects the wind, and every breath  
that neighbour breathes on neighbour in the street  
brings death so close you smell it on the stairs.  
Rats multiply, as God would have them do.  
And fear infects like mould; like fungus, spreads –  
folk catch it from the chopped-off ears and thumbs,  
the burning heretics and eyeless heads  
that slow-revolve the poles on London Bridge.

The child of casual violence grows inured,  
an audience too used to real blood;  
they've watched a preacher butchered, still awake,  
and handed his beating heart like it was love.  
And now the sanctioned butchery of State  
breeds sadists who delight to man the rack,  
reduce men from divine belief and brain  
to begging, and the rubble of their spines.

From all this, I am dead. Reduced to ink  
that magicks up my spirit from the page:  
a voice who knows what mortals cannot think of;  
a ghost, whose words ring deeper from the grave.

Corpse-dead. A gory stab-hole for an eye;  
and that's what they must think. No, must believe,  
those thug-head pursers bent on gagging speech,  
if I'm to slip their noose and stay alive.  
Now I'm as dead as any to the world,  
the foulest rain of blackened corpses on  
the body that is entered in my name:  
the plague pit where Kit Marlowe now belongs.  
For who could afford for that infected earth  
to be dug up to check identities?  
And so, I leave my former name behind.  
Gone on the Deptford tide, the whole world blind.

Friend, I'm no one. If I write to you,  
in fading light that distances the threat,  
it's as a breeze that strokes the Channel's waves,  
the spray that blesses some small vessel's deck.