

GRADUATE SEMINAR IN THE SCHOOL OF DRAMA (DRAMA 571A)  
BIOGRAPHIES OF SHAKESPEARE AND MARLOWE

Professor Thomas Postlewait

Autumn Quarter 2007; Hutchinson Hall, Rm 150, Tues/Thurs, 2:30—4:50pm

This seminar in theatre historiography will examine the amazing variety of biographies that have been written on William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe. The lives of both playwrights, for different reasons, offer major challenges in historical investigation, documentary sources, argumentative evidence, and historical narrative. Marlowe's mysterious death has allowed for the wildest of conjectures and assertions. Was he a spy for the Elizabethan government? A Catholic double agent? An atheist? A lover of tobacco and boys? Where is the evidence, and what, if anything, do these conjectures have to do with his playwriting? By contrast, Shakespeare's life was seemingly less sensational, but the conjectures and claims about his activities and beliefs have been just as various and uncertain as those put forward to explain Marlowe's life. Most notably, dozens of biographers have argued that his plays were actually written by someone else (e.g., Francis Bacon, Edward de Vere, the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford). And as we will see, it is possible (if not probable) to make the case that even Christopher Marlowe wrote Shakespeare's play. What are the assumptions and justifications for such claims; how is evidence developed and used? How can we determine the historical reliability and credibility of biographical scholarship?

In the process of reading several biographies on each playwright, we will investigate how biographical study has developed and changed in theatre studies, generation by generation. In the case of Marlowe, we want to take the measure of the biographical scholarship that has emerged since the 19<sup>th</sup> century; in the case of Shakespeare, we will consider the biographies of the last three hundred years, extending from Nicholas Rowe (1709) to the recent outpouring of biographies. Why, given the impressive documentary scholarship on Shakespeare by E. K. Chambers (1930) and S. Schoenbaum (1975), have so many new biographies appeared? New methods? New evidence? New theories? And what do we make of the recent surge of biographies on Marlowe? Besides examining individual biographies, we will also consider how biographers and critics explained the possible relationship between the two playwrights in the 1580s and 1590s. And we will also read fictional narratives on the lives of the playwrights in order to compare and contrast how historical storytelling and the problems of evidence operate in biography and fiction (e.g., Anthony Burgess's two novels: *Nothing Like the Sun: A Story of Shakespeare's Love-Life* and *A Dead Man in Deptford*, which fictionalizes Marlowe's life).

**Class Requirements:** beyond the class readings and a research paper (topic open), each student will write three short book reviews on (1) a biography of choice on Marlowe; (2) a biography of choice on Shakespeare from the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; and (3) a recent biography of Shakespeare from the last 20 years (e.g., R. Dutton, A. Holden, P. Thomson, E. Sams, R. Fraser, D. Price, D. Shellard, J. Southworth, M. Wood, K. Duncan-Jones, C. Asquith, J. Bate, D. Ellis, J. Hope, E. A. J. Honigmann). Our aim is to take the measure of the uses, misuses, and abuses of historical evidence and narrative tactics in the biographical scholarship on these two playwrights.

**Class Readings: to be selected from these likely texts.** (All of these books are available from me—at reduced price. I will also provide two bibliographies that identify most of the biographical studies on Shakespeare and Marlowe.):

Samuel Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, revised edition  
S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life*  
Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare For All Time*  
J. O. Halliwell-Phillips, *Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare*, 2nd ed.  
James Shapiro, *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*  
Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*  
Park Honan, *Shakespeare, A Life*

David Riggs, *The World of Christopher Marlowe*  
Park Honan, *Christopher Marlowe: Poet and Spy*  
C. Nicholl, *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe*  
C. Kuriyama, *Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life*  
Lisa Hopkins, *Christopher Marlowe: A Literary Life*  
A. D. Wraight & V. Stern, *In Search of Christopher Marlowe*  
Rodney Bolt, *History Play: The Lives and Afterlife of Christopher Marlowe*