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Marlowe on Immortality

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requirements for the degree of:

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2011

I assert my moral right to be identified as the author of
this work.

Christopher St Johanser

February 2011

Hoc opus, hic labor est.

Virgil, Aeneid VI, 129.

Abstract

“Marlowe on Immortality” considers the work of Christopher Marlowe (1564-93) for its ideas of immortality. He employs varying genres to represent differently the intersections which arise between concepts, encounters which often reflect the historical collisions of ideologies. The question for research is “How do Marlowe’s texts function to represent conflicts in the late sixteenth century among and between classical, Christian and gnostic concepts of immortality?” The thesis employs an eclectic approach, including generic analysis and close reading of references in Marlovian texts to immortality. An introductory biographical chapter precedes a focus in Chapter Two upon the influence of Ovid in Marlowe’s works. Under consideration here are his translation *Ovid’s Elegies*, the play *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, an epitaph, a dedicatory epistle, and a mythic interlude in *Hero and Leander*.

Chapter Three is concerned with the stars, as stellar discourse impinges upon ideas of immortality. The first section is on the classical process of stellification in Marlowe’s work. The second is on the *Tamburlaine* plays; their focus shifting from stellification motifs arising within a classical cosmology, to discussions of stellar influence. The third concerns the astrology and astronomy in *Doctor Faustus*. An Appendix is attached which provides background to sixteenth-century understandings of cosmology. It is suggested that Marlowe does not employ Copernican thinking, but foregrounds an Aristotelian perspective against a Neoplatonist conception of the Heavenly spheres.

Chapter Four provides a reading of *Doctor Faustus*. The play is considered in the light of allegory; with Faustus figured as Everyman, as Icarus, as Lucifer, and as Simon Magus. Allegoresis is suggested as supporting also a unitary approach to the play. Attention is drawn to oblique referencing of gnostic beliefs figured in the partnership of Faustus and Helen, reflective of an alternate approach to immortality. An Appendix focused upon patristic accounts is provided to support this claim. The reading also addresses the Calvinist interpretation of Hell as it impacts upon Faustus, and argues that this theme is not diverted by Faustus's late attention to Pre-Socratic solutions to problems posed by conflicting ideas of immortality.

Preface

This study examines references to immortality across the full range of Christopher Marlowe's writing: poetic, dramatic and other. Marlowe represents ideas of immortality deriving from different traditions and perspectives which frequently overlap. These include: the poetry of Ovid, epic, the Olympian cosmogony, various philosophies, stellar influence and stellification stories, the histories of Christian conceptions of, and conditions for arriving at afterlives in Heaven and Hell, and gnosticism. He employs varying genres to represent differently the intersections which arise between these concepts, encounters which often reflect historical collisions of ideologies. Not all of his work has this focus, but many of his texts can be read for their referencing of immortality. The theme continually resurfaces, when it is looked for. My purpose has been to read those works in order to find out what Marlowe has to say on immortality, and to present my own critical thoughts and conclusions on the meanings of his words. In the process, I have learned much about ideas on immortality as they have arisen through the ages. I have learned also how ignorant I am, have been, and am certain to remain, of the breadth of thought and scholarship devoted over millenia to this subject. That awareness in particular makes all the more impressive to me the scholarly, poetic and dramatic achievements of Christopher Marlowe, as he addressed the theme of immortality in his brief life as a writer.

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Abstract | iii |
| Preface and Acknowledgements..... | v |
| Table of Contents | vi |
| | |
| Chapter One: Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter Two: Immortal Fame and Love | 12 |
| Chapter Three: Stars, Stellification and Astrophysics | |
| <i>A. Marlowe's Stars</i> | 33 |
| <i>B. Tamburlaine's Stellar Influences</i> | 37 |
| <i>C. Faustian Astrophysics</i> | 53 |
| Chapter Four: Helen and Hell | 70 |
| Chapter Five: Conclusions: Conflict and Resolution . | 100 |
| | |
| Appendix A: <i>On Sixteenth-Century Cosmology</i> | 108 |
| Appendix B: <i>On Simon, Helen and Gnostic belief</i> | 121 |
| | |
| Works Cited | 127 |