

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute 1980 Volume III: Drama

Marlowe and Faustus: Visceral Magicians of the Theater

Curriculum Unit 80.03.01 by Chris Angermann

I became fascinated with Christopher Marlowe last year while putting together a curriculum unit on Shakespeare. Marlowe's riotous life stood out in the boisterous atmosphere of Elizabethan times like a nova in an island universe. Temperamental and opinionated—"They be fools that love not tobacco and boys"—Marlowe loved to provoke. His reputation as an atheist, homosexual and frequent brawler qualifies him as something of a Renaissance *enfant terrible*. Although he studied to become a priest, he left Cambridge as soon as he had finished his degree and threw himself in to the London theater world with furious productivity. He also acted as a spy for Sir Thomas Walsingham, the head of Queen Elizabeth's CIA. And he was killed at the age of 29 (some say assassinated) in a tavern fight—a dagger thrust into his head above the left eye—that cut short his creative work as a playwright and poet and gave rise to reams of speculation about the dark side of his character over the next four centuries.

Just as Marlowe's life seems prime material for a play or movie, so his plays throb with the youthful energy of his life. His characters possess an adolescent ebullience. They are impatient, extreme, selfish and self-centered, insensitive and cruel on the surface. Like teenagers they strain against their limits, rebelling, flexing their muscles and imaginations. They disdain compromise, not because of some idealistic principle, but because they've not learned how. In Marlowe's plays they never learn. Instead they are punished for their insolent dreams of the absolute.

I want to concentrate on *Doctor Faustus*. The story of the scholarly scientist-sorcerer who seeks knowledge and power at the cost of his soul is bound to appeal to students. The play is about fantasy and desire—how to get what you want, how to achieve the impossible. Faustus feels frustrated and bored with his existence and the limits of his academic training. Since philosophy, medicine, law and religion don't change the fact that he is human and will die, he turns to magic and witchcraft for answers. Striking a bargain with the devil, Faustus gives up his salvation in return for unlimited power on earth for a period of twenty-four years.

Marlowe is aware of the ironies of Faustus' decision. To conquer death, space and time, to become God—or at least a god in his own eyes—Faustus accepts severe limits on his life and human freedom. On the one hand, his metaphysical rebellion is daring and impressive. On the other, his necromantic means of resisting God's authority turn on him and diminish him. Faustus quickly forgets his lofty ideals, preferring to revel in mundane and vulgar experiences. By the fourth act his 'miracles' have become pranks—tricking a farmer out of a horse and 40 dollars, having one of his legs pulled off—he has become one of the clowns in the play. Hedonism on earth, the surfeit of the present, leads to boredom and meaninglessness too.

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Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* represents a complex articulation of the archetypal human dilemma (related to the myths of Icarus, Prometheus and Don Juan) of how to achieve immortality and omnipotence in the face of death—if only for a little while. The stage on which the story unfolds and the limited playing time confine Faustus physically and temporally in a dramatic frame that becomes a metaphor for his essential condition. Faustus literally runs out of time before our eyes!

Like any archetypal character, Faustus focuses our attention on terrifyingly simple questions: What do we really want out of life? What is the point of our existence? Adolescents rarely ask themselves such questions—they experience them and act them out in their headlong rushing for thrills, their constant testing of boundaries, their feelings of confusion and emptiness. Faustus' issues have special resonances in their lives; and *Doctor Faustus* should prove fascinating for them, even if Marlowe's Elizabethan version of the myth is alien to their experience.

How to introduce students to the essential issues of the Faustus myth as they are expressed in Marlowe's play?

You might begin with a circle discussion. Go around the room and have everyone answer the following question, "If you could have anything you wanted, what would it be?" To make this work, you should have had students share information in a circle before. The first time getting everyone to say his or her name *clearly* and *loud* enough to be heard can be quite a challenge. You can expect lots of money fantasies—cars, dope, material goods—and some emotions: health, love, happiness. Include yourself in the circle; you may have to start out with a non-threatening example to break the ice.

When everyone has said *something*, go around again with, "What would you be willing to do in order to get what you wanted?" Or conversely, "What wouldn't you be willing to do? Where would you draw the line?" With luck someone, probably one of the macho guys, will say, "I'd be willing to kill for it, if I could be sure to get away clean." You can count on a lively discussion about that one and other, less violent possibilities. (There are people who will bump off someone unknown—no media personality—for 75 dollars!)

Another activity, probably best as a homework followup, is this writing assignment:

Imagine that you're walking in a strange town where you've never been before. There are shops on both sides of the street. In one of them you see the thing you most want in the world. You walk into the shop and ask the proprietor for it. The proprietor names a price. You realize that you don't have enough money on you to pay it. You decide to bargain, to convince the proprietor to let you have the thing you most want for what you can afford.

In telling the story, describe in as much detail as possible the thing you most want in the world, the interior of the shop, the proprietor and what bargain you strike.

This assignment often produces surprisingly imaginative and detailed responses from students whose writing is normally cramped, vague and general.

Both the circle discussion and the writing are designed to put students in touch with the magnitude of desire—recall Faustus', "'Tis magic, magic that hath ravished me"—and the notion that there is always a price! The next warmup activity, *Ask-Reject*, addresses their feelings more directly.

Divide the class into teams of two. One member of each duo is to imagine that the other has something he/she is dying to have. The thing can be real—a ring or bracelet the partner is wearing—or imaginary, but it

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should be an object rather than a feeling or a favor. Concreteness counts here. The Asker has 2 minutes to persuade the Owner (Rejector) to give the object up. The Asker may use any means of persuasion short of physical force. The Rejector's task is to refuse, to say, "No!", to reject the Asker for the duration of the time period. After two minutes, let the teams reverse roles and do another round. Given the right chemistry between couples, this game can get quite noisy. Some kids get very involved and serious about what they want. You should not participate yourself, but walk around, encourage people to persevere when they get frustrated enough to toss in the towel, and monitor the time. Call out, "One minute!" and "30 seconds left!" for an extra turn of the screw.

Be sure to allow plenty of time for discussion followup. Ask about what happened. Did the Rejectors yield at some point to the Askers' wishes? Or did they remain firm and callous? How did it *feel* to say "NO!" all the time? Was it easy or hard? How did it *feel* not getting what they wanted? Did hearing how much time was left change their feelings? Did they change their tactics along the way? What kind of strategies did people use—pleading, bargaining, bribing, seducing, hassling, threatening? It is important *not* to tell students what you think or observed about their experiences, but to let them discover for themselves as individuals and as a class how they *felt*, how their reactions vary, how they're alike.

Later on when you're actually doing *Doctor Faustus*, you can refer to the activity, "Remember when we played *Ask-Reject*...?", to illuminate particular aspects. Essentially, the game is a mini-scenario of the emotions underlying most drama:

- 1) What do you want?
- 2) What prevents you from getting it?
- 3) What do you do to get it?

By answering these questions, you obtain a simple dialectic—desire obstacle praxis—that moves from motivation to acting. Students can analyse any scene or monologue from *Doctor Faustus*, or even the whole play, in terms of this progression. Since they have *experienced* it themselves, they should have an easy time discovering how it works for a dramatic character in a play.

Ask-Reject can elucidate other issues in *Doctor Faustus* as well. The 2 minute limit, for example, relates to the central problem of Faustus' situation—he never has enough time. His twenty-four years are over too quickly; at the end of the play he has only "one bare hour to live." You might examine the sense of desperation in his final soliloquy in terms of *Ask-Reject*. What strategies does Faustus use to escape damnation? How does his awareness of time passing—the clock striking—change his approach? What does he really want? What is he willing to settle for?

Since *Ask-Reject* is obviously designed to put students in touch with frustration over not getting what they want, the game also provides an emotional basis for a discussion of the relationship between Faustus and Mephostophilis. ² In Marlowe's play the devil is actually a canny Rejector. He appears to give in to Faustus' demands for information and knowledge—as part of the agreement Faustus signs with his blood, Mephostophilis promises to be the doctor's servant and to "do for him and bring him whatsoever." But, in fact, Mephostophilis subtly avoids Faustus' bidding. He quashes Faustus' desire for marriage by presenting him with a hag and turning his thoughts to courtesans and easy sex. He refuses to answer questions about Heaven. While offering semblances of real experiences—disembodied spirits and sophomoric pranks—he keeps Faustus in a permanent state of frustration and dissatisfaction. Whatever Faustus achieves, it is never

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guite what he had hoped for.

Once students have gone through the warmups I'd give them a brief introduction to the historical Dr. Faustus, highlighting the occult aspects of his history, and begin to read Marlowe's play out loud with them. I'd skip the prologue and the first soliloquy and start with Faustus telling his disciple Wagner to summon Valdes and Cornelius (line 61). Although this breaks the overarching structure of the play—a long monologue by Faustus at the beginning and the end—it has the advantage of getting right into the essential issues of black magic, sin and damnation without having to wade through a lot of Latin phrases and esoteric falderal. ³ (The Good and Bad Angels appear almost immediately—line 67—to set forth the implications of Faustus' choice.)

During the reading I'd ignore most of the classical allusions and cabalistic terminology. They're unimportant details, especially for a first runthrough with students. (Because of his university training Marlowe was more academically literary in his dramatic poetry than Shakespeare. But, I suspect, students will find Marlowe's language easier in the long run, since his lines are syntactically simpler, containing fewer enjambments than Shakespeare's.)

Doctor Faustus contains much spectacle, magic and buffoonery—the Good and Bad Angels, the devils cavorting on stage, the Masque of the 7 Deadly Sins, Faustus' conjuring up Alexander and Darius, and Helen of Troy, Faustus losing a leg, being decapitated, making antlers appear on Benvolio's head... Considering teenagers' fascination with magic and witchcraft—how else can one explain the popularity of *The Exorcist*, *The* Omen and a whole slew of B-movies related to the occult—all the pageantry and special effects in Marlowe's play are likely to delight them.

The most immediate problem is students' lack of background knowledge about literary and historical characters who appear in the play. I prefer to discuss them briefly as they come up, but a short preparatory lecture a day ahead of time works also well. At least gloss the following figures for them: Lucifer, Belzebub, Alexander the Great, Darius of Persia, Charles V of Germany (The Holy Roman Empire), and Helen of Troy.

B.C. by johnny Hart

(figure available in print form)

Bruno and the Italian Pope also need a bit of discussion. Mention the political power the papacy exercised during the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance; how some Popes raised armies and went to war themselves. There were frequent disagreements among the kingdoms and empires of France, Spain, Holland, Germany and England, that became exacerbated during the Reformation. After Henry VIII declared himself Head of the Church of England (because the Pope would not grant him a divorce), antagonisms among Puritans, Anglicans and Catholics ran high. When Pius V excommunicated Elizabeth (as a favor to Spain's Phillip II), anti-Catholic fever reached a high pitch, leading to riots and burnings of Jesuit priests. Marlowe lived during that time, spied on English Catholics abroad in Reims for Walsingham, and flirted with atheism. Bruno in *Doctor Faustus* is a fictitious character, supposedly appointed as an alternative German Pope to the Italian Hadrian. The whole sequence in Rome is viciously anti-clerical—(H)Adrian uses the captive Bruno as a footstool; Faustus snatches food and drink from the Pope's hand and later beats up his friars. Under the guise of attacking the papacy, Marlowe could safely give vent to his anti-religious feelings. Considering the strong religious upbringing—Catholic and Baptist—of many of New Haven's ethnic students, it might be useful to underplay this section and content yourself with the historical explanation.

Another problem may be students' unfamiliarity with Elizabethan stage conventions, particularly the appearance of the Good and Bad Angels. I'd first discuss them as voices of conscience and temptation. No

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doubt students have experienced the "Should I Shouldn't I" arguments inside their own heads. Ask them about their conflicts over going to parties when their parents said no, over stealing, over cheating. If you preface your question with "When you were younger did you ever...?" you'll probably get more candid responses.

Heathcliff

(figure available in print form)

The point to lead up to is that Marlowe takes those internal voices and gives them visual expression on stage. That is one of the marvelous opportunities of theater—to show concretely what people normally only experience, to make emotional realities manifest.

This may also be a good lead-in for getting students to appreciate the audio-visual aspects of the script. Since their imaginations aren't verbally oriented, they'll probably have difficulties realizing all the actions and sounds implied by the lines and stage directions. 6 Short of seeing *Doctor Faustus* on stage, the best alternative is to make it happen in your classes.

How to involve a large number of students in the staging of a script so dominated by a central character who loves to talk and reflect? How to communicate the magic of *Doctor Faustus* on the one hand, and theater on the other? I would take the most action-oriented, spectacular scenes and stage them in the most surreal manner possible.

First, two fine warmup activities: Statues and Symphony .

For Statues find an open space in the school or pile all the desks into the corners so that you can make a big circle, everyone standing. You call out the names of 3,4 or 5 students and quickly add a noun—wedding cake, safari, forest, guitar. The students rush into the center of the circle and strike a pose appropriate to the noun, preferably the first thing that comes to mind. The idea is to move as fast as possible and then freeze so that the others can get a good look at the resulting statue.

Things to keep in mind about this activity: 1) Start out with 'easy' words that describe a process or game students can 'act out'—baseball, church, disco, Elvis Presley. 2) Graduate to single items—icecream cone, sailboat, rifle, skyscraper. If this works well you can 3) mix it up and go as abstract as you want—love, the Blues, Mississippi, stomach ache. 4) After students are comfortable with the game, add the rule that everyone has to be connected to someone else in the statue (as a way of giving it structural support).

Depending on how loose your group of students is, you may have to warm them up with a more structured approach. Divide the class into groups of four or five, and give each group a different title for a statue (out of earshot of the other groups). Give them time to figure out how to stage their statues (2-4 minutes). Then have each group present their statue to the class, who should try to guess the title. If this goes well, then the 'looser', 'instantaneous' statue building will work great and be a lot of fun.

For *Symphony* pick a topic—springtime, church, fire—and divide the class into different sections—4-5 students apiece—like in an orchestra or chorus. Tell them that they will become specific instruments in unison. Each group should come up with a different sound, associated with the topic—i.e. mooing, dogs parking, leaves rustling, birds twittering. Give each group the opportunity to warmup while the others listen. Then conduct them like a classical symphony, bringing their various 'themes' into play, raising and lowering volume and pitch, introducing counterpoint, ending up in a huge cacophony of noises that includes everyone all at once at maximum decibel level. The whole project takes about 15 minutes. Do it toward the end of class, though. The

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closer you can finish to the bell the better, since the energy freed along the way will make it hard for kids to settle down and do anything *constructive* afterwards.

The following day I'd work on staging Act II, ii, the scene that includes Faustus arguing with Mephostophilis, the Good and Bad Angels, the first appearance of Lucifer and Belzebub and the Masque of the 7 Deadly Sins. ⁷

Give the large speaking roles to the better, *louder* readers. While they rehearse alone and with each other, assign another group to stage the 7 Deadly Sins. Have them develop statues, tableaus or moving units that convey visually something essential about each Sin. Team members can take turns, reading the lines that go with each stage-picture (you'll probably need to prepare them, perhaps simplifying some of the names: i.e. covetousness—greed). Make another group responsible for sound and noise effects to establish atmosphere. What sounds are appropriate for devils? How might the Good and Bad Angels be introduced? Can they invent a characteristic sound for each of the Sins? Encourage them to explore thunder, barks, howls, fire, wind, heaven, hell. Suggest that they think about the sounds in television cartoons if they get stuck.

The final task is to put it all together. Once again you'll be the director orchestrating the whole shebang. You'll need to set entrances and exits, determine what's stage, what's audience. There will be a lot of laughter—nervous and hearty. The important thing is to maintain high energy and an inexhaustable reservoir of patience. Even if it works only halfway, your students will have shared in a magic experience. Their excitement will carry over into the rest of the play. With luck they'll have a visceral connection to *Doctor Faustus* that wasn't there before. Whatever else they may get out of Marlowe's play, as a play, as a story, as a myth, they'll have experienced it at the gut-level of theater.

Part of what makes theater so fascinating, like magic when it works for us, is its ability to surprise us, to change our way of looking at the world. As Gregory Bateson said in an interview once, in a different connection:

The witch, when looked at without fear, creates puns on the context in which she is. You go to the soothsayer to see if you should buy land or have a baby. But during the time you spend in the room, she's changed her position, changed your position, changed the frame. A witch changes frame. 8

That is way Mephostophilis is so compelling. As creator of audio-visual wizardry, artifice, art, he constantly changes the frame on Faustus. No wonder that Faustus falls for him, although he discovers toward the end of his life that he has achieved nothing but illusion.

As you finish reading *Doctor Faustus* with your students, concentrate on the final soliloquy. If you can recall for them the tension between the exciting parts and the somber, desperate undercurrent throughout the play, which surfaces at the end, Faustus' pleading, suffering and damnation will become moving and urgent for them. Have them write a paper on the question, "If they had only one hour to live, what would they do?" What haven't they done yet with their lives that they want to accomplish?

Once you've dealt with the finality of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, you can return to the present and the question of what to want out of life by showing the film *The Old Man and the Devil*. Available at Winchester Film Library, it retells the Faust myth in contemporary idiom and dress. Faustus is an old man in a nursing home, frustrated with senility and institutional confinement. Mephostophilis is a black leather motorcycle hood who holds out the return of youthful energy, promising girls, grapes and zest. Your students will not only enjoy it—it is a funny film by itself—but watch it with a deeper appreciation for the profound issues that it raises in a sleight-of-hand fashion.

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APPENDIX: Suggested Cuts for Doctor Faustus.*

Prologue—lines 1-27 Act I, i—1-60—This eliminates long monologues and gets right into the action: Faustus taking up magic.

I, iv—1-55—The whole scene between Wagner and the Clown (Robin). The language is too dense and academic in its puns to be funny in a mere reading. The transition from I, iii to II, i (two shorter soliloquies by Faustus) works well without the 'comic' interruption.

Act II, ii—lines 10-70—This is the astronomy discussion between Faustus and Mephostophilis. Unless you're seriously into Elizabethan cosmology this makes for dull and esoteric reading. Act III, i—lines 5-23—The geographical account of Faustus' travels through the air before arriving in Rome. The prologue to Act III and Faustus' first 4 lines give ample suggestions of the journey without the surfeit of details.

Act IV, prologue—lines 1-17—The following scene IV, i makes perfectly clear that Faustus is at the court of the German Emperor. You may need to bridge the gap from Mephostophilis' last line in III, iii, "I'll wing.../Unto my Faustus, to the Great Turk's Court," explaining that the following scene is with one of the many heads of state Faustus visited.

Epilogue—lines 1-8—The religious moralizing is excessive and so unnecessary. The rest of the play makes the point quite well on its own.

Notes

Originally I intended this unit as a complement to my unit on Shakespeare. Marlowe's life fits in nicely with discussions of Elizabethan culture and the London 'literary scene.' *Doctor Faustus* makes an interesting companion piece to *Macbeth*: they both contain supernatural, demonic events and ambitious characters who gradually deteriorate as a result of their infernal choices and end up destroyed. Since there is more dramatic tension between characters in *Macbeth*, I'd begin with that play. Once students were comfortable with Elizabetahn language and stage conventions, I would do actual scenes from *Doctor Faustus* with them, in more elaborate versions than the informal stagings of *Macbeth*.

In the course of exploring how to accomplish that with Marlowe's play, I have come to change my views

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^{*} I have used the Signet Classic edition of *Doctor Faustus*, edited by Sylvan Barnet, available in paperback (New York: New American Library, 1969), as my basic text for classroom use.

^{1.} For a more detailed discussion of the cultural, historical, linguistic problems raised by Elizabethan theater in the inner city classroom, as well as specific suggestions for bridging the 400-year gap through oral, acting and translation exercises, see Angermann, *Shakespeare: Active and Eclectic* and Ramadei, *Shakespeare for the Developmental Reader*, in *Strategies for Teaching Literature*, YNHTI Vol. V, 1979.

somewhat. I would try to stage scenes now from the start. This would require going back to *Macbeth* and working out a similar progression of theater warmups and activities as I have done for *Doctor Faustus*.

- 2. Marlowe's original spelling. Many modern editions, however, following Goethe's *Faust*, have Meph *i* stophilis.
- 3 For further suggestions on how to cut *Doctor Faustus* , see the appendix at the end of the narrative.
- 4. B.C. by permission of Johnny Hart and Field Enterprises, Inc., copyright 1980.
- 5. Reprinted by permission, copyright 1980 by McNaught Syndicate.
- 6. Prints of paintings by Breughel and Hieronymus Bosch of Hell, Purgatory and Death are great for showing how hallucinogenic the religious imagination of Renaissance artists and visionaries was.
- 7. Other scenes that might work well are Act IV, iii—Benvolio lying in wait for Paustus and decapitating him—end Act III, iii—the Pope's banquet, if you enjoy a little blasphemy.
- 8. "The Magic of Gregory Bateson," in Psychology Today, June 1979, p. 128

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Since there is no definitive edition of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* , any number of versions will do. For students and general classroom use I'd recommend:.

Barnet, Sylvan, ed., Doctor Faustus . New York: New American Library, 1969.

For your own use, look at:

Boas, F.S., ed., Doctor Faustus . New York: Gordian Press, 1966.

The notes and references on words, historical details and necromantic bits in the text are quite adequate without being overwhelming.

I found a number of articles especially useful for an understanding of the many issues *Doctor Faustus* raises as a play, dramatic text and theater piece, as well as a literary work:.

Barba, Eugenio, " *Dr. Faustus* : Textual Montage," in Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theater* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), pp. 79-87.

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This article offers a good look at what a contemporary director might do with a classical play to make a completely new statement. For his production Grotowski rearranged scenes and cut characters, but kept the original text, in order to emphasize Faustus' martyrdom in the face of an unyielding God.

Brown, John Russell, " *Doctor Faustus* at Stratford-upon-Avon, 1968," in Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, ed., Sylvan Barnet (New York: New American Library, 1969), pp. 194-206.

For an account of a different production this is a nice contrast to Grotowski. The performance Russell describes emphasized the demonic aspects of Marlowe's play.

Greg, W.W., "The Damnation of Faustus," in Clifford Leech, ed., *Marlowe: A Collection of Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1964), pp. 92-107.

The most straight-forward, concise explication of Faustus' deterioration after his bargain with the devil. Greg quotes extensively from the play and pays scrupulous attention to what the text means.

Kernan, Alvin, ed., Two Renaissance Mythmakers: Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson . Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977.

This volume contains four articles of importance:

Garber, Marjorie, "Infinite Riches in a Little Room: Closure and Enclosure in Marlowe "pp. 3-21; Goldman, Michael, "Marlowe and the Histrionics of Ravishment," pp. 22-40; Greenblatt, Stephen J., "Marlowe and Renaissance Self-Fashioning," pp. 41-69; and Snow, Edward A., "Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* and the End of Desire," pp. 70-110.

Analysing recurrent images, metaphors and key words in Marlowe's plays, these articles represent close, sensitive readings. Although they're more traditionally academic than the articles above, they make for fascinating reading. They all attribute the energy of the plays to their central characters' efforts to forge an identity for themselves.

General works on Christopher Marlowe's exciting life and death:

Hotson, J. Leslie, The Death of Christopher Marlowe. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925.

Includes the deposition concerning Marlowe's death, which Hotson discovered in 1913. A xerox copy of the document might provide an interesting addition to class discussions of Marlowe's life.

Rowse, A.L., Christopher Marlowe: A Biography . London: MacMillan and Co., 1964.

A pleasant, witty biography; probably the easiest way to get an overview of Marlowe's life.

Tannenbaum, Samuel A., The Assassination of Christopher Marlowe . Hamden: The Shoestring Press, 1928.

The political conspiracy theory of Marlowe's death, based on young Christopher's involvement with Walsingham's spy service. Tannenbaum builds his case on tenuous evidence and seemingly convoluted arguments. But who knows? The original claims for conspiracy in Job F. Kennedy's assassination were based on evidence just as circumstantial.

Wraight, A.D., In Search of Christopher Marlowe: A Pictorial Biography . New York: The Vanguard Press, 1965.

Brimming with pictures, documents and photos of the places where Marlowe lived and worked. The text becomes cumbersome, but the documentation is wonderful. Best used as a picture-book supplement to Rowse.

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