Letter from the new MSA President

It’s a fine time to be a Marlovian! I am excited to serve as president of the MSA for the next four years, and I look forward to promoting Marlowe in all of the ways that this organization does so well.

For more than a year, the MSA has expanded its communication with the scholarly community at large and its membership specifically by maintaining a Website (www.mightyline.org) and publishing its newsletter, combined recently with the formerly separate publication of book reviews. The time may come when electronic publishing will be the primary means of communication with our current and potential membership, but for now there is comfort in the familiar materiality of hard copy. However, the Website does enable us to provide information throughout the year, not just in spring and fall, and it will be the site soon of a directory of membership. Already, the Website has an archive of newsletters in its “Members Only” section. Available but for now underused is a listserv and blog.

The MSA has had two sessions at MLA for years, but that’s changing. The powers-that-be at MLA have decided that all affiliated organizations (including us, but also such as the Milton Society and International Spenser Society) will have only one session guaranteed. If we want a second one, we will need to apply for it, and priority will be given to inter-organizational sessions. So I will be courting Spenserians, Miltonists, and Shakespearean for 2009 to see if we can join forces to maintain our visibility at MLA.

Marlowe scholarship is booming. Placing the Plays of Christopher Marlowe, the latest editorial fruit of Sara Deats and Bob Logan, long-time nurturers of Marlowe research, came out in the spring of 2008. And early in 2009, Shakespeare Bulletin will publish a special issue edited by Pierre Heckler and me on Marlowe in performance. Elsewhere in this newsletter there is much information about the upcoming international conference in Canterbury. I know it will be fun; I know it will be stimulating; I wish every MSA member could be there.

I want to close with special thanks to out-going president, Bruce Brandt, for the leadership he has provided over the years in many capacities, but few so valuable as his four years at the head of the MSA. We are lucky to retain his services, along with those of also-past presidents Bob Logan and Sara Deats, on the executive committee. But I want to look ahead too. The MSA
Roslyn L. Knutson
University of Arkansas at Little Rock
President, Marlowe Society of America

Arriving in Canterbury and at the University of Kent for the MSA International Conference:

- By train: either station is fine, but Canterbury West is closer to campus. Taxis are available at the train stations; the Unibus is also available.
- Room keys: delegates with single rooms should go to Tyler Court Block A reception to pick up their keys; people with doubles should go to Eliot College reception for their keys; check-in from 2:00 pm; check-out before 10:00 am.
- Conference Registration: registration packets will be available in Grimond Foyer, Monday, noon to 6:00 pm, except during sessions, and Tuesday, 8:30 - 9:00 am.

Roma Gill Award
At the MLA Conference in Chicago in December, MSA President Bruce Brandt announced the recipients of the Roma Gill Award for 2004-2006.


MSA Election Results
The ballots have been counted, and The Marlowe Society of America has a new Executive Committee. A hearty welcome to our new members, and congratulations to all.

Roslyn Knutson, President
Georgia Brown, Vice-president
Pierre Hecker, Newsletter Editor and Webmaster
Sarah Scott, Membership Chair
Charles Whitney, MSA Book Reviews editor
Kirk Melnikoff, Treasurer
Paul Menzer, Secretary

MSA Website
Don’t forget to visit!
www.mightyline.org

MSA Newsletter publishes reviews of Renaissance, and especially Marlovian, drama; notices of recent and forthcoming publications; announcements; and brief articles or notes of interest to Marlovian scholars. The opinions expressed are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of the MSA. The editor reserves the right to refuse items, to ask for revisions, and to make stylistic changes that he deems appropriate.
Any and all inquiries, announcements, or submissions regarding the website, listerv, or Newsletter should be wrapped around a 1604 quarto of The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus and sent to:

Professor Pierre Hecker  
Marlowe Society of America  
Department of English  
Carleton College  
One North College Street  
Northfield, MN  55057

MSA Book Reviews publishes reviews of books on Marlowe and his period. Send reviews, suggestions for reviews, and inquiries to the Reviews Editor:

Professor Charles Whitney  
MSA Book Reviews Editor  
English Department  
University of Nevada  
Las Vegas, NV. 89154-5011

MSA web site: www.mightyline.org  
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MSA THEATER REVIEWS

Shakespeare Theatre’s Charm Offensive with Tamburlaine

To celebrate the long-awaited opening season of Shakespeare Theatre’s ambitious Harman Center for the Arts, Artistic Director Michael Kahn presented playgoers with Marlowe’s Tamburlaine and Edward II. When Shakespeare Theatre announced the 2007-2008 season, I was elated by the prospect of seeing Marlowe come to life in D.C., especially since these performances were my first opportunities to see these plays on the stage. Alongside this, a well-designed Marlowe Symposium was presented by Shakespeare Theatre in November featuring speakers including John Archer, Sara Munson Deats, Mario Di Gangi, David Riggs, and Leslie Silbert, as well as actors who read selections of Marlowe’s poetry.

To me and to others who attended both of the plays, the better production of the two was Tamburlaine. The play was a combination of Parts I and II, directed by Kahn and edited to a runtime of three hours and twenty or so minutes. Although he offers several reasons for wishing to stage this work, Kahn’s attraction to Marlowe’s story of Tamburlaine is surely rooted in a fascination with the playwright’s linguistic pageantry. And, in addition to Marlowe’s elaborate verbal displays, which are engrossing in and of themselves, Kahn no doubt realized an opportunity to show off the new Sidney Harman Hall, a remarkably beautiful, well-considered space. Staging Tamburlaine afforded Shakespeare Theatre opportunities to display both Marlowe’s mighty lines and the talents of their entire production organization to subscribers and to new audiences.

The production included lavish costumes, huge thrones of gold, a large, iron-barred cage, thundering drums, flags of war, a map that took up ¾ of the stage—and the impossible-to-miss giant chariot, which, if it had not appeared, would have been a disappointment. What better play to accord with the mission of Shakespeare Theatre “to provide vital, groundbreaking, thought-provoking, vibrant and eminently accessible theatre in a uniquely American style”? Kahn’s staging of Tamburlaine allowed for massive amounts of pageantry on the Harman’s 74 x 45 stage.

Considering this, his choice in casting Avery Brooks as Tamburlaine can be understood to make sense. Well-recognized for his roles as Star Trek Captain Benjamin Sisko and as Hawk in Spenser: For Hire, and for his deep, commanding voice, Brooks likely drew audiences in who may have been reluctant to see a “new” play with “old” language. For several early modern theatre scholars in attendance, however, Brooks was still finding his way into the role. In one performance, for instance, he tripped over his lines at least three times, thus giving show to what Gale Edwards (Director of Edward II) describes as the problem of keeping Marlowe’s lines “buoyant.” I found myself having a hard time believing Brooks’ interpretation of Tamburlaine; I suspect this has to do with Kahn’s direction to focus on the “human moments.” And yet, while considering the older Brooks to be a boyish, ambitious shepherd was difficult, his display of reluctance regarding his sons’ leadership abilities and his tender mourning for Zenocrate were easier to believe.

Strangely, numerous images of silver and white were edited out of the script. My heart sank with the absence of lines from speeches in 1.2 that included “Affecting thoughts coequal with the clouds” and “Brighter than is the silver of Rhodope, / Fairer than the whitest snow on Synthian hill.” Similar omissions occurred in Tamburlaine’s 5.1 speech “Ah, fair Zenocrate!” However, to find so many other lines come alive was a delight. Memorable moments included Zenocrate’s dying speech and numerous allusions to Livy and Ovid. The doubling of Bajazeth and the First Physician was also a treat.

The highlights of the performance were many, in part because I’ve longed to see these plays on the stage. A director and friend who shares my enthusiasm for Marlowe reiterated to me after seeing the play that “staging Marlowe presents all sorts of difficulties that staging Shakespeare does not.” My agreement with him on this matter makes me all the more appreciative to have seen and learned from Kahn’s production.

Sarah Scott  
Mount St. Mary’s University

Why Tamburlaine?
The Shakespeare Theatre Company opened its new Sidney Harman Hall in the Harman Center for the Arts in the fall of 2007 with productions of three plays by Christopher Marlowe: Tamburlaine, parts one and two, opened to the public on 28 October, and Edward II on 27 October. In various forums and announcements to audiences, Michael Kahn, Artistic Director, explained the choice of Marlowe’s plays to inaugurate the new stage. “Without Marlowe,” he argued, “there would not have been Shakespeare,” certainly not as Shakespeare became. Kahn thus opined that “to begin” was to begin with Marlowe. The choice to pair the Tamburlaine plays with Edward II was to dramatize Marlowe, early and late.

The “why” for Marlowe scholars would be expressed a little differently. Most of us do not need the justification of Shakespeare-in-waiting to bring us to performances of Marlowe’s plays. We have too few opportunities to see any of the plays. Certainly for me, living in Little Rock, Arkansas, those opportunities are fewer still, so the Harman Hall multi-bill was not to be missed. And part one of Tamburlaine is my favorite Marlowe play. So, I looked forward to seeing the extravagant staging and to swooning at a testosterone-pumped Tamburlaine as he delivered that mighty, magnificent blank verse. The Kahn production fulfilled my expectations in the former, but Avery Brooks disappointed in the latter.

Sidney Harman Hall is a huge space. Its orchestra and mezzanine have terrific sight lines (the balcony, not so much). The stage itself is enormous, and Kahn’s production filled it with properties and players, exploiting the Cecil B. DeMille dimensions of the play. The doors onto the stage—especially the central door—were outsized, and through them came properties that dwarfed the humans to which they belonged. At the opening, for example, Mycetes comes swooping in seated on a throne-and-a-half. Tamburlaine later appropriates this property for his confrontation with Bajazeth, who has a throne-and-a-half of his own. The face-off of III.i takes place with the warlords thus seated, and there is plenty of room on the cushions of each for Zenocrate and Zabina to exchange insults when the men exit to battle. The cage is a giant cart; the wheels, to one of which Tamburlaine is tied, move around the stage with an odd hitch in his step—yet another friend called it “arthritic”—that made me think too often of the character’s historical counterpart, Timur the lame.

Michael Kahn’s Tamburlaine is the first production of the play that I have seen live. I have watched an archival, taped version of the RSC production starring Antony Sher, which was filmed in the Pit at the former London home of the company and not at the Swan (its original venue). I thus have little more than my imagination to influence my opinion. Too much like Charles Lamb in his objection to staging King Lear, I am very glad to have seen Tamburlaine at the Harmon Center but disappointed not to have seen the Tamburlaine constructed for me on the page by Marlowe.

Roslyn L. Knutson
University of Arkansas at Little Rock

Life is a Cabaret, Old Chum: Edward II

It feels churlish to complain about Shakespeare Theatre Company’s production of Edward II. After all, beggars can’t be choosers, and we are certainly beggars when it comes to full-scale productions of Marlowe’s plays, usually happy when the odd theatrical bone is tossed our way. Many of us were understandably excited at the prospect of Tamburlaine and Edward II being the choices to inaugurate the new (and hugely expensive) home of STC. Great productions can lead to renewed interest in performing an author’s plays, and perhaps this would be a watershed. After all, it’s been ten years since Rupert Everett’s cameo in Shakespeare in Love, and Johnny Depp’s Marlowe doesn’t seem ready to materialize anytime soon—we need something to keep us going!

Well, we should have moderated our hopes. These were not game-changing productions. If anything, the shows left audiences and certainly many critics more convinced than ever that Marlowe’s principal interest is as a gauge of Shakespeare’s greatness. The new Sidney Harman Hall has been much written about, I’ll just add that the acoustics of the place leave something to be desired, and the actors were still struggling to make the space work for them. The result was a whole lot of yelling—a mode that the company could just about get away with for Tamburlaine, but which for Edward II did not work so well.

Gale Edwards, the director for Edward II, sets the play in a quasi-Edwardian period, a fantastical Roaring 20s, with gaudy costumes, semi-naked and (anachronistically) cut bodies, waxed chests, jazz, champagne, and everything else one could hope for at a half-decent parade. Just in case we don’t get it, we are treated at one point to one of the bishops, dressed in his clerical robes, being fellated by a kneeling acolyte—or maybe it was just a random boy toy. The society in this version of Edward II, in other words, has a thriving gay subculture, replete with elaborately designed and choreographed all-male Bacchanals. Edwards does have an eye for pageantry (or maybe her set designer Lee Savage and costumer designer Murell Horton do),
but it all felt a bit like *Cabaret* without Joel Grey or even Alan Cumming, which is not a *Cabaret* I’d be quick to recommend.

In the play Christopher Marlowe wrote, Edward’s real crime isn’t that he’s in love with a man, it’s that he’s a weak king. His sybaritic inclinations are far more damaging than his homosexual ones; it’s his frivolity and decadence, his inattention to matters of state, that really get him into trouble. As for Mortimer (a suitably sinister Andrew Long) *et al.*, they act less out of homophobia than out of a mixture of (at best) patriotic concern for the welfare of the realm and (at worst) greed and hunger for power.

It was hard to tell in this production whether Edward and Gaveston’s public displays of affection were meant to be shocking to the onstage court, or to us, or both. But if Edwards thought she could *épater le bourgeois* with a little bit of guy/guy kissing she either underestimates her audience, or hasn’t watched TV in 20 years. I mean, even Republican politicians in D.C. have gay children these days. Marlowe here is again less concerned with sex than with class – what’s really appalling about Gaveston isn’t that he’s homosexual, but that he’s – brace yourself, grandma – a commoner. So, ok, Edwards wants to make a statement. But as numerous other critics have noted when discussing this production, Tony Kushner already made it in *Angels in America* (in 1990, almost 20 years ago – can you believe it?!). *Angels* was radical then; this, by contrast, in its apparently heartfelt attempt to be outré, seemed almost, well, quaint.

The play’s (in)famous ending is one thing you want to get right. This massive upping of the dramatic ante – so horrific, so base, so fraught in its meanings – should lay waste to an audience, should leave it in speechless shock. At the performance I saw, the choreography of the brutal moment was sloppy, awkward, and not even remotely persuasive. The director’s reluctance to fully reckon with the bleakness of the ending was compounded by something new: in this version, Gaveston comes back as an angel (wings and all, hence the talk about Kushner) and he and Edward lovingly dance together. Is there an *Edward II* B-text I don’t know about?

The performances were uniformly decent, if uninspired. Edward’s *beard* queen, played by Deanne Lorette, learns over the course of the play the kind of cunning and guile it takes to survive in the English court, and Lorette did a good job of playing that arc. Wallace Acton and Vayu O’Donnell, as Edward and Piers respectively, were both good, their performances full of clarity and specificity (if not a lot of range). But I was – and this, in the end, is the harshest criticism of all – unmoved by any of them.

Was it a bad production? No, not bad. Nor was it particularly good. It all just felt like a squandered opportunity, a missed chance to show that Marlowe is a great playwright in his own right, and not just as an appetizer to Shakespeare.

Pierre Hecker
Carleton College

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**A Plea to MSA Members**

We would like to be a better resource of information and notices for all things Marlowe, and to make better use of our listserv. But to do so we must rely on the support and involvement of our members. So, if you know of a performance, or event, or any other tidbit of Marloviana, please, please, please pass it on to us. The most efficient way is to email me directly with your news: phecker@carleton.edu

Also, we would love to expand our range of contributors; if you’ve got an idea for a piece or a review, please get in touch.

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**MSA BOOK REVIEW**

Charles Whitney, Editor
University of Nevada at Las Vegas

John Parker’s important new book is a sweeping account of the Christian heritage of pre-Shakespearian drama. The book interrogates this heritage at its roots, offering a reading of the biblical and medieval pretext of Marlovian drama that, by virtue of its sheer scope, stands to energize religious-minded criticism of early modern drama as well as Marlowe scholarship. Parker’s argument is that the anti-Christian strain of Marlovian theater marks not the secularization of Christian drama but its precondition, a function of the myth of Antichrist lying at the heart of Christian aesthetics. The book develops this thesis over four chapters and a lengthy introduction, beginning with the gospels and early Christian commentary—in which Parker establishes the necessity of Antichrist as play-actor and image-maker for the early church’s assertion of Christ’s divinity—and closing with readings of Marlowe’s The Jew of Malta, Tamburlaine, and Doctor Faustus. In between, Parker shows how medieval drama, from the cycles to Everyman, relied on this Antichristian hermeneutics to mask an economic and commercial underpinning that anticipated the post-Reformation professional stage. The weight of the supporting research is extraordinary. Parker brings to bear on medieval and professional stage. The weight of the supporting research is extraordinary. Parker brings to bear on medieval and Reformation criticism a vast cross-section of New Testament, apocryphal, and patristic scholarship, largely uncharted by early modern literary studies. Marlowe features as a bookend in this ambitious study, but one that supports Parker’s claim that the sacred and secular always constituted “adjacent rooms” (p. viii) implied by one another in Christian aesthetics.

Unlike Bevington, Parker asks how medieval drama anticipated Marlowe by looking backward, not forward. The guiding insight of The Aesthetics of Antichrist is that the romantic conception of Marlowe’s Faustian bid is not a problem of modernity but of medieval drama’s deeply biblical tradition. Jesus himself, Parker argues in the first part of the book, had the original “Faustian appearance” (p. 27) in that the central task for both gospel writers and commentators like Tertullian, Origen, and Augustine was to distinguish the orthodox Christ from the dialectical counterpart of his anti-Christian and heretical imitators. The myth of Antichrist thus served to overlay the “oppositional mimesis” (p. 38) constitutive of Christianity with the significance of a typological drama, whereby Christ emerges both as an image of the demonic miracle worker and its spiritual and apocalyptic supercession. Parker’s aims here are both polemical and programmatic. In the Hegelian overtones of his preface, Parker wishes to establish that Christianity is a form of “pure spirituality...because it is art” (p. x). This is a critique of Christianity, and by it Parker means that Christian allegoresis attempts to substitute an aesthetic discourse for its own internal divisions, a problem which Parker sees reproduced in literary criticism’s tendency to equate medieval drama with forms of the sacred. Parker has in mind here scholars like Sarah Beckwith, whose powerful notion of “sacramental theater” as participatory community idealizes, he suggests, the more basic challenge of mimetic representation at stake in the York and Chester cycles’ depiction of biblical miracula—namely, the elaborate suspension of disbelief required of a medieval audience to affirm the dramatic images of Christ’s miracles over those of his mimetic counterpart, Antichrist (p. 68). In Chapters 2 and 3, Parker turns this critique toward a more positive case about the role of money and commercial exchange in the eucharistic and “parabiblical” economy of late medieval drama. These pages are some of the most serious and persuasive of Parker’s book. Chapter 2 shows, for instance, how the figure of filthy lucre, or blood money, in Mankind, Everyman, and the Towneley plays stems from the early Christian tradition of Judas as Antichrist, whose exchange of money for blood refigures the “price of blood” (pretiosus sanguinis) in the Latin Vulgate as Christ’s “precious blood” (pretiosus sanguis, pp. 105-6). At the heart of the dialectical aesthetics of Antichrist, in other words, is the fetishization of capital, whereby eucharist and atonement anticipate Barabas’s “infinite riches,” just as medieval drama contains within it the germ of the commercialized, secular stage.

Lingerin throughout these chapters is the specter of the Baines’ note, whose language of Moses as “Jugler” and the New Testament as “filthily written” derives, Parker implies, from Christianity’s own contrafactual logic. Chapter 4 on Marlowe makes the analogy explicit, opening with an extended comparison of Marlowe to Thomas Beard. The “two future adversaries and scholars of Antichrist” at Cambridge in the 1580s, Parker claims, would become dialectical counterparts— “One of them a clear-cut Christian, the other his demonic opposite” (p. 183). This somewhat strained anecdote sets up a reading of Beard’s Theatre of Gods Judgments, in which Parker sees a similarity between the iconoclasm of Beard and Marlowe, in that both embraced a dramatic aesthetic in which “God appears in Satan” (p. 192). The rest of the chapter follows this ampersandic approach, with readings of The Jew of Malta and (the biblical) Barabbas, Tamburlaine and Paul, and Doctor Faustus and Simon Magus. Parker’s fascinating section on The Jew of Malta revives the issue of blood money, reading the New Testament exchange of the thief Barabbas for Christ (both are named “Jesus” in early Matthean accounts) as a trace that aligns Marlowe’s Barabas with the mimetic and economic confusion of the Gospel story of redemption. This reading is important, for it offers The Jew of Malta criticism a way outside the controlling Reformation idioms of Jewish-Christian typology, with its relegation of the Judaic figure to the sign of the “dead letter” superceded by the aesthetics of Christian tragedy. The material on Tamburlaine and Doctor Faustus is perhaps less consequential. Parker reads in both plays a gnosticism inherent in Pauline theology and the apocryphal legends of St. Peter, which seek to displace Antichristian threats (Paul’s own anti-Christian past, and Peter’s magical competitor Simon Magus) by recourse to a theology of Word and Spirit. In Tamburlaine’s soliloquy on beauty, “Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend” (2.7.21), and Faustus’s vision of Helen, Parker sees the Marlovian aesthetic as a dramatic imperative to “see the invisible” (p. 236). What we might normally historicize as Reformation problems here, Parker ascribes to Marlowe’s “resacralization” (John Cox’s term) of the “belated and depraved divinity” of historical Christianity (pp. 197, 244).

On this point, The Aesthetics of Antichrist does not answer the question Marlovians will most want to ask of it: Is Marlowe a symptom (and thus victim) of the dramatic effect encoded by the contradictions of medieval and biblical Christianity, or is he the “demonic” subversion that exposes its corrupt core? An epilogue to the book would prove helpful here; yet Parker’s
ambition—Parker’s book charts a new path that will surely realign the critical conversation.

Joel M. Dodson
University of Notre Dame


Thank you and congratulations to this year’s presenters at the two Marlowe Society of America sessions at the MLA Conference in Chicago, seen below rocking some fashionable name tags and discussing all things Marlowe. Georgia Brown had to miss the fun; her paper was read in absentia by Roslyn Knutson.

Sarah Scott and Mathew Martin  Laura Grace Godwin  Kirk Melnikoff and Su Fang Ng