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Marlowe and Shakespeare at the Crossroads: Reviewing Critics on the Two Playwrights

Yuzo Yamada

1

There has been continuing interest and enthusiasm about the mystery of Marlowe's death since the tavern brawl that he was killed in, which took place in Deptford in June 1593. In June 1992 two books were published which followed on the theme "who killed Marlowe?".¹⁾ Charles Nichol's *The Reckoning* is a notable work of a most fertile imagination in which he asserts that this bloody affair was schemed by some circumspective political power. Nichol advances the reasoning that Mr. Skeres, who was charged with an important commission for atheists, exercised control over the others playing cards with Marlowe on the day of the brawl. Whether this is reliable or not, his reasoning is stimulative enough.

Over the past centuries ardent literary detectives have pointed out "real" criminals from diverse fields as politicians, clerics and comrade writers and others who committed heinous capital crimes. Even Ben Jonson was suspected as being the assassin of the affair. For, public records tell that Jonson killed an anonymous actor and thus was jailed when he was in his twenties. This document brought about a fanciful reasoning that the assassinated was the very man Marlowe. Though this reasoning is a far-fetched story, as a matter of fact, it is none the less symbolic when we consider Marlowe's threat which Jonson the late-comer must have suffered from him in the theatre world.

Then why do people never take up Shakespeare as a suspect? Strangely, Shakespeare has been regarded as the last person to stab Marlowe, though they were exactly rivals in the theatre business in London for a while. So far, the two have been thought of as if they belonged to essentially different worlds. It is, we may assume, the personal characters forged and certified by numerous comments on the two playwrights

over centuries that have fashioned such a differentiation between the two. The following is too common a description of the two playwrights:

Marlowe, proud and violent, "intemperate and of a cruel heart" . . . was both a scholar and a criminal. Shakespeare had naturally the courtesy of a gentleman ("gentle Shakespeare"); others called him "friendly shakespeare", and he held something of a record in never getting himself jailed.²⁾

Who can ever argue that Shakespeare the benign gentleman was on good terms with Marlowe the notorious rogue, as long as the description above is true?

However, this convention of differentiating the "university wit" from the ex-actor, or in other words, the aggressive rogue from the gentleman tends to make it obscure that the two were of the same common stock and shared theatrical activities with each other in 1589-1593. The differentiating convention, we may assume, has a parallel relation with the literary criticism which argues the rivalry of the two.

2

In the celebrated work of the historical study, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (written in 1944), E. M. W. Tillyard argued that Shakespeare synthetically represented the 200 years' history of England in the ten history plays in terms of the historical vision, the vision that under the reign of Henry VII England retrieved order and peace, clearing herself off the chaos which ineptitudes of the precursors had brought about. Yet, Marlowe's stance toward the Tudor vision was ambiguous, for his history comprised subversiveness that could not be wiped out after all. No more does Mortimer Junior who revolts against tyranny retrieve order in England than Edward II who exercises tyranny does. We are faced with nothing but the incessant turn of Fortune's Wheel in the culmination of *Edward II*. Fully recognizing that Marlowe's history was an annoying obstacle for his argument, Tillyard may have deliberately kept Marlowe's play out of his thinking.

Edward II shows no prevailing political interest: no sense of any

sweep or pattern of history. What animates the play is the personal theme: Edward's personal obsession, his peculiar psychology, the humor and finally the great pathos of his situation. Marlowe shows no sense of national responsibility. . . . This is not to decry the play; it is only to suggest what kind the play is or is not.³⁾

Obviously Tillyard attempted to differentiate one from the other to the degree that they could not get along with each other as artists. Thus he definitely adapted the convention of differentiation into literary studies with an authoritative view that Marlowe wrote private plays while Shakespeare produced public plays on a larger scale, being responsible for the matter of the state.

Irving Ribner reiterated and rewrote Tillyard's view in the history of Marlowe-Shakespeare criticism.

These two men [Marlowe and Shakespeare] represent diametrically opposed reactions to the complex of Elizabethan life, each in his own way forging a poetically valid vision of reality beyond the comprehension of the other.⁴⁾

Such critical discourses as Tillyard's and Ribner's did more than represent "diametrically opposed" playwrights of quite different temperaments. Comparing Marlowe's tragedies with Shakespeare's, Ribner continued:

Marlowe's tragedy, in short, can only offer a view of death and damnation as the fate of those who would seek to escape the limitations of the human condition, whereas Shakespeare can offer a compensating view of order emerging to expel evil from an essentially harmonious universe.⁵⁾

He insisted that Marlowe's plays were the works of anachronism, which were too crude to maintain the world of order forged by the Tudor vision. Along this line, the discriminators not only kept distance between Marlowe and Shakespeare but formed a common viewpoint among critics, the viewpoint that Marlowe was heretical while Shakespeare was orthodox. Marlowe was decisively expelled out of the Tillyardean "Elizabethan world picture", when Ribner asserted:

If Marlowe had disciples in his age, Shakespeare was not one of

them; they were. . . the Jacobean dramatists who were Shakespeare's later contemporaries.⁶⁾

3

While many critics were dominated by the influence of Tillyard, Nicholas Brooke was alone radically distinct in 1960s. Though he agreed that the two playwrights were of different temperaments, he still arguably insisted that there was a reciprocal influence working on the both of them.

Marlowe seems to have been for Shakespeare not only a great poet, as his stributes imply, but the inescapable imaginative creator of something initially alien which he could only assimilate with difficulty, through a process of imitative re-creation merging into critical parody.⁷⁾

Though conscious of the convention that the two were different types of writers, Brooke analyzed how Marlowe's writings provoked the early Shakespeare and how he managed to assimilate them in his provocative essay. Besides, Brooke slightly implied that Shakespeare was inclined to parody Marlovian drama. (And this suggestion strongly affects the Marlowe-Shakespeare criticism of later periods.)

Admittedly Brooke was provocative in that he drew attention to the mutual influence between the two playwrights, but the span of the influence was restricted only to a few years (1589-93) when Shakespeare trod the boards.

However much they may owe indirectly to Marlowe, Shakespeare's later plays never (as far as I know) show any direct dependence. The provocative agent has taken seat in the Establishment.⁸⁾

Here we may recognize that Brooke's provocative attempt is still contained in the dominant current, Tillyardean convention of Marlowe-Shakespeare criticism. What is Brooke's point in the last sentence (quoted above) of the essay? Could it be that Shakespeare was haunted by Marlowe only in his few early years as a playwright but not in the mature period when Shakespeare was free to write the universal masterpieces at will?

While Tillyardean historicism is harshly criticized as old-fashioned

by recent criticism, the historicism of M.C. Bradbrook, another Cambridge scholar seems to win the sympathies of contemporary critics. This is, we may infer, partly because there is mild humanism beneath her analysis and partly because her historicism is based on disinterested and neutral research of historical documents. Bradbrook observed that Marlowe was an intimate rival (not a provocative agent) for Shakespeare.

With the introduction of the rival poet. . . , the play of fancy bounds from self-confidence to utter dejection, culminating in two sonnets (85 and 86) where the poets appear as rivals in verse competition. . . . The relation of *Hero and Leander* to *Venus and Adonis* makes it possible that the rival was Marlowe, and “the proud full sail of his great verse/ Bound for the prize of all too precious you” fits both his style and his temperament.⁹⁾

Bradbrook analyzed the psychology of the playwrights, focusing on their rivalry for being an Anglican Ovid. Such a rivalry is quite arguable if we consider the severe reality at the time when theatres were closed due to the plague. In reality, playwrights, if any, could not be better off without dedicating poetry to their patrons. However, the rivalry which Bradbrook had in mind was so mild and benign that it tended to mystify the harsh reality. She continued, employing the celebrated “Dead shepherd, how I find thy saw of might” in *As You Like It*, where Shakespeare directly quoted phrases from *Hero and Leander*:

It is also an oblique recollection of the sudden death in a cramped room in a Deptford tavern, during a quarrel about “the reckoning”. Marlowe had always been for Shakespeare the poet of love as well as of conquest.¹⁰⁾

This was a quite heart-warming picture of human relationship, where mature Shakespeare gently paid a tribute for the dead youth.

4

Any further opinions on the link of Marlowe with Shakespeare were seldom offered in the 1970s criticism. This was partly because Tillyardean differentiation of the two was latently dominant, and partly

because the rivalry of them was, if ever, argued only in the light of poor biographical documents. It was not a writing of the Elizabethan studies but that of Harold Bloom that stimulated and revived the issue of the Marlowe and Shakespeare linkage by this radical theory. *The Anxiety of Influence* marked an epoch, in that it argued how the rivalry of writers produced literary texts. His theory was built on the assumption that a poet appealed not so much to his contemporary readers as to the dead poets who influenced and still haunted him. The theory was unhistorical, in that it focused on the psychology and the struggle of creative minds.

Battle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites, Laius and Oedipus at the crossroads; only this is my subject here, though some of the fathers, as will be seen, are composite figures. That even the strongest poets are subject to influences not poetical is obvious event to me, but again my concern is only with *the poet in a poet*, or the aboriginal poetic self.¹¹⁾

With this revolutionary theory, the way how literary texts had been produced could be argued not in the light of artistic genius of an individual writer but in the light of the rivalry of writers.

Bloom's theory affected not only the literature of post-Romanticism but also that of various ages. For all such possible adaptation of it, Bloom himself regarded the Elizabethan period as "the giant age" and excepted the literature of the period out of the argument of "anxiety of influence".

The greatest poet in our language is excluded from the argument of this book for several reasons. One is necessarily historical; Shakespeare belongs to the giant age before the flood, before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness.¹²⁾

As Renaissance artists mystified the world of Graeco-Roman classics as a pastoral utopia where poets had willfully produced works without feeling "anxiety of influence", so did Bloom do the same for the Renaissance. (Yet, arguably we may infer that no other age has never experienced such a flood of numerous influences as the Renaissance.)

The main cause [why Shakespeare is excluded from the argument], though, is that Shakespeare's prime precursor was Marlowe, a poet

very much smaller than his inheritor. . . . Shakespeare is the largest instance in the language of a phenomenon that stands outside the concern of this book: the absolute absorption of the precursor.¹³⁾

Bloom evaded being absorbed in the issue of the link between Marlowe and Shakespeare, the link which the convention had deliberately broken up. Underneath the evasion lied the determined influence of the convention of differentiating the two playwrights.

5

Recently, there occur some critical movements against Bloom's "anxiety of influence". The theory of Bloom is put in question. Indeed, it invites attacks from feminist critics against its patricentricism, but what is at issue here is an opposing view against unhistoricity of the theory. Bloom's practice of the theory is criticized, too. This criticism is from scholars of pre-Shakespeare literature who vigorously protest against his view that Shakespeare's prime precursor was Marlowe, a poet small enough to be ignored.

In the stimulative writing, *Shakespeare's Mercutio*, Joseph Porter assumes that Shakespeare's rival consciousness (or unconsciousness) is projected into a character he makes up. Shakespeare, Porter argues, projected himself into Romeo while he cast the shadow of Marlowe in the role of Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*.

The basic sort of relation. . . between Marlowe and Shakespeare is apparent between Mercutio and Romeo, with Mercutio aggressively subversive, as well as ambiguously prior, and eliciting from Romeo a response of attempted containment.¹⁴⁾

Porter's psycho-analysis links the three types of dichotomy — Mercutio/Romeo, Marlowe/Shakespeare and subversive violence/ideological morality. That is to say, as Romeo rejects Mercutio's homosexual love, so Shakespeare gets rid of theatrical expression of corporeality that love follows on stage, and so the Elizabethan ideology contains homosexuality and corporeality.

Porter's assumption that Mercutio is a portrait of Marlowe has another

significance. It is a view commonly accepted among critics that Shakespeare had mentioned not a word about Marlowe until he recollected Marlowe's words in rather nostalgic manner in *As you like It*. However, Porter challenges this common view, too.

This authoritative Marlovianness suggests that in Benvolio's brief elegy for Mercutio Shakespeare performs an elegy for Marlowe, dead some two years, and hence that the fictional dramatic character serves in some ways as a simulacrum of the dead competitor.¹⁵⁾

Though this seems somewhat far-fetched, the assumption is provocative enough to draw critical attention to the tension of the rivalry between Shakespeare and Marlowe, this tension which has been totally ignored under the convention of differentiation.

James Shapiro seems quite sympathetic toward Porter's view when he emphasizes the rivalry of the two playwrights. Porter retraces the way how the rivalry between the two is psychologically projected into dramatic characters. On the other hand, Shapiro illustrates that the rivalry is presented not only by characterization but also by the parody-act of words in *Rival Playwrights*.

Porter's work — grounded in psycho-biography, and focusing on Shakespeare's handling of character — is complementary to my own and may help explain what my emphasis on verbal recollection cannot: where was the relationship being played out in the mid-1590s, before the period marked by extensive parodic engagement and nostalgic tribute?¹⁶⁾

Unlike the preceding critics, Shapiro observes the rivalry in a quite longer span of time; the rivalry starts with Shakespeare's entry to the stage (1589) and ends around the turn of the century (1601). His argument can be epitomized in this point; it is not until the turn of the century that Shakespeare recollects Marlowe's words after a long silence since he failed to appropriate Marlowe in 1589-1593, and this can be fulfilled under the social and political changes at the turn of the century. Obviously Shapiro owes the idea of "anxiety of influence" to Bloom, but he evaluates it in the historical light.

I am interested in why Shakespeare returned to Marlowe — that is, what combination of personal, cultural, and historical forces shaped his responses to his dead rival. I pursue a historicized approach to influence, though one rooted in the intertextual recollections that signal key moments in their literary encounter.¹⁷⁾

Shapiro's suggestion opens up a new vista of Marlowe-Shakespeare criticism, through which we can recognize how earnest Shakespeare was faced by "anxiety of influence" from Marlowe throughout the whole years of his activity.

6

It is not worthless to consider the reason why people have never taken up Shakespeare as a possible criminal instigator of Marlowe's murder. Even such a joke that Shakespeare killed Marlowe has been made impossible, partly because of the biographical common sense that the former is a generous gentleman while the latter is a reckless rogue, and partly because of the literary convention that attempts to differentiate Shakespeare from Marlowe. Indeed, Shakespeare could not get rid of Marlowe as a historical fact, but as a trope, he might plausibly erase Marlowe's name from the literary canon of the modern period — especially, of the 17th and 18th century as Thomas Dabbs points out — through his intentional appropriation and parody of Marlowe's words.¹⁸⁾ Marlowe was, as Bradbrook observes, always for Shakespeare "a poet of love as well as of conquest", so Marlowe was branded by Shakespeare as a poet who belonged to the bygone age or a poet in the pre-modern pastoral world. And actually in this line, Marlowe has been regarded as a pre-modern playwright over the centuries by critics.

Throughout his case studies of rivalry permeates Shapiro's sharp awareness that rivalry works overtly or covertly as a dynamic convention in any kinds of writing societies. (In this sense, we should not fail to recognize that Shapiro intentionally removes "the" from the title of the work, *Rival Playwrights*.) While he positively approves of conventions that set limits on activities in any kinds of writing societies, he

attempts to evaluate individual roles of writers and critics under such a limited condition. As Shakespeare faced himself with the convention in the writing circle, or the rivalry with Marlowe, so critics are faced with a new stage where the differentiating convention of the two playwrights which Tillyard initiated should be “conceived and subdued both”.

NOTES

- 1) See Alan Haynes, *Invisible Power: The Elizabethan Secret Services c. 1570-1603*, (Alan Sutton, 1992); Charles Nicholl, *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe*, (Jonathan Cape, 1992)
- 2) M.C. Bradbrook, *Shakespeare: The Poet in his World* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1978), p. 43.
- 3) E.M.W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (Chatto & Windus, 1948), pp. 108-9.
- 4) Irving Ribner, “Marlowe and Shakespeare”, in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15 (1964), p. 41.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- 7) Nicholas Brooke, “Marlowe as Provocative Agent in Shakespeare’s Early Plays”, in *Shakespeare Survey* 14 (1961), p. 44.
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- 9) Bradbrook, p. 85.
- 10) *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- 11) Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford U.P., 1973), p. 11.
- 12) *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 13) *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 14) J.A. Porter, *Shakespeare's Mercutio: His History and Drama* (North Carolina U.P., 1988), p. 140.
- 15) *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- 16) James Shapiro, *Rival Playwrights: Marlowe, Jonson, Shakespeare* (Columbia U.P., 1991), p. 81.
- 17) *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- 18) See Thomas Dabbs, *Reforming Marlowe: The Nineteenth-Century Canonization of a Renaissance Dramatist*, (Associated U. P., 1991).