

## Two Renaissance Portraits

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Sarah Gristwood. 2003. *Arbella: England's Lost Queen*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. XXX pp. + xiv. Illus.

David Riggs. 2004. *The World of Christopher Marlowe*. New York: Henry Holt. XXX pp. + xv. Illus.

**RIGGS'S** comprehensive New Historicist study of the Elizabethan poet, playwright, and spy Christopher Marlowe (1564–93) makes a fitting companion to a review of Gristwood's scholarly recovery and rehabilitation of Arbella Stuart, England's "lost queen." Whereas many readers well versed in English Renaissance history will be newcomers to Arbella Stuart's life, Marlowe is infamous. That said, the adult years of Marlowe's life are fraught with conflicting interpretations as to motive and circumstance. Gristwood presents Arbella Stuart within the suffocating network of aristocratic relations, politics, and gender roles that ultimately impaired her physical survival (although Gristwood argues that Stuart's circumstances enabled her rich though troubled psychic life). Riggs's study, too, embeds Marlowe within the politics and class issues of his time. The Stanford

scholar's intelligent, dialectical strategy is ideally suited to the riddling possibilities bound up with Marlowe's history, especially when it comes to treating the mysteries surrounding his death. Was Marlowe killed in a barroom brawl, or was Elizabeth herself behind the playwright-spy's murder?

To flesh out the playwright's portrait and enable the reader to understand the complex motivations for Marlowe's work as both playwright and spy, Riggs vividly situates his subject within the institutions and environment that formed him and made him aware of the limited social and economic mobility his origins gave him. Beginning with the early education of this shoemaker's intelligent son at a free grammar school founded by the forward-thinking Archbishop Parker, Riggs takes the reader inside the Elizabethan educational system. Almost every aspect of Marlowe's education provides Riggs with an opportunity for meditation and further discussion of the rapidly changing world into which Marlowe was born. Among the most thought-provoking discussions is the one centered on the implications of the manual art of handwriting:

Elizabethan students did not just inscribe words and sentences. They sharpened their quills and laboriously worked their points across the surface of the parchment so as to avoid blots and blemishes [...]. The drawn-out, compulsory routines of transcription and regurgitation dissolved the antithesis between physical and mental labour. The pupil's hands gathered in (the literal sense of "apprehend") textual matter and inscribed it in the storehouse of memory [...]. When the sons of gentlemen bridled at this newfangled discipline [...] they created places for the sons of peasants. (38)

Once the reader joins Marlowe the scholarship student at Cambridge, she becomes intimately familiar with the university's routine and its pedagogy. In the six a.m. lectures on dialectic taught by one Mr. Jones, she discovers exactly how Marlowe and his peers learned this art of reasoning "on both parts [sides], of all matters that be put forth, so far as the nature of the thing can bear" (qtd. in Riggs, 80–81). In delving into the Cambridge milieu during the middle of the sixteenth century, Riggs infuses his writing with many discussions of Marlowe's titillating and famously unexplained absences. He posits several hypotheses yet in so doing never "fixes" his subject, an approach well suited to the playwright who gave us the famously shape-shifting characters of Dr. Faustus and Tamburlaine the Great. Throughout his discussion of the Cambridge years, Riggs reflects on the ways in which Marlowe's education affected the subjects of his plays and

his approaches to them. So Dr. Faustus emerges as the product of a thorough Cambridge education, and Tamburlaine, who often uses hyperbole, the trope that best conveys the cosmological reach of figurative language, manifests his author's grounding in classical rhetoric.

Perhaps the most illuminating discussion of Marlowe's Cambridge years focuses on the involvement with Ovid, whose unabashedly erotic *Amores* Marlowe translated, and whose protean philosophy runs through the plays to become the lifeblood of Marlowe's own vision. In a lucid analysis that is also an introduction to many classical texts, Riggs defines Ovid's philosophy as "naturalistic and libertine. Where Aristotle's universe is eternal and its God an unmoved mover, the *Metamorphoses* offers a universal history of changes" (88). Given the omnipresent importance of class and wealth in Elizabethan England, one immediately understands why Ovid's essentially fluid reality appealed to Marlowe who, despite his education, was ultimately confronted with a question that Riggs raises again and again: what would a shoemaker's son do with all this learning in the eminently class-conscious England of his day?

For a keenly intelligent man who refused to kowtow to anyone and yet someone viscerally aware of how his own lowly class origins hindered his ability to compete with landowners' sons for a place in the Church or at court, the theater proved a strange but very real sort of haven. In exploring Marlowe's decision to become a playwright, Riggs convinces the reader of the manifold reasons why the theater was spacious enough to satisfy Marlowe's voracious intellect: "The stage supplied Marlowe with an imaginative space commensurate with his intellectual reach" (160). Marlowe emerges as one hungry for both erotic and political freedom. Nonetheless, Riggs treats eros, specifically Marlowe's homosexuality, only as it arises in the plays and in the poetry, a circumstance that disappoints in this otherwise stellar biography. If the reader comes to the biography with only the sketchiest notion of the milieu of London's theaters, she is in for a real education. "The theatres," Riggs says baldly, "were unsavoury places" (192). An inextricable part of the growing urban landscape, they were often attached to brothels and other places of "vice." Yet the world of Elizabethan theater is deliciously more complicated than that, and Riggs's ability to explore every aspect of London's theaters enables the reader to form a multifaceted picture of Marlowe that includes his choice of theatrical subjects: the overreaching Dr. Faustus, whom Marlowe revolutionarily portrays as an atheist; the scourge conqueror Tamburlaine, "a pure

appearance out of nothing"; and the homosexual, ultimately tragic figure of Edward II.

Perhaps not so differently than in some places currently under the sway of one or another fundamentalism, the antitheatrical movement was afoot in Elizabethan England. It viewed the theater as a place of "heathen idolatry" and religious mockery. Instead of just critiquing this status quo, Riggs teaches the reader to see religion through Marlowe's eyes. For Marlowe, religion was less about faith in God and more a means to rise to a position of power within Elizabethan society. As such, religion emerges as a site of conflict rather than a realm of sacred truth.

Not only does Riggs familiarize the reader with the changing theatrical landscape of the 1580s, but he also places Marlowe's plays within the society from which they emerge. Tamburlaine emerges out of dire poverty, a fact that Riggs makes significant in focusing on such reasons for the increasing ranks of the poor in England at the time as the conversion of common lands into private hands, which drove tenant farmers onto the road, and the dissolution of the monasteries, a traditional site of poor relief (204). Even Dr. Faustus's turn to the occult finds a well-documented historical basis in the tendency among Renaissance scholars to proceed from astrology to magic in their careers. This movement spurs Riggs to launch an overview of English and Continental books on magic, including Giordano Bruno's *Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast* and *Hieroglyphical Monad* by John Dee, Elizabeth's own conjurer. In this regard and others, Riggs creates a framework for understanding the currents of ideas traveling through England and the Continent at this time.

If Riggs is absolutely thorough in his analysis of Marlowe's theatrical career, he is less knowledgeable when it comes to retracing Marlowe's work as a spy. Here, of course, Riggs is not to blame, for unlike the imaginatively free approach to Marlowe's life in George Garrett's *Entered by the Sun*, Riggs is hindered by the facts. Thanks to his own skills as a dialectician, however, he nonetheless turns a weak point to his advantage. Through a fine discussion of Marlowe's contemporary and acquaintance, the poet-spy Thomas Watson, Riggs brings the link between writing and spying into sharp focus: "Poetry and intelligence both involved the maintenance of client-patron relations. Poems and dedications enabled poets to enter households where secrets—the spy's indispensable stock in trade—were to be found" (256). Riggs ferries the reader inside the dangerous world of Elizabethan intelligence, a government practice on the rise in Marlowe's England for many reasons including the rising threat of Mary, Queen of

Scots to the English throne and the expansion of the Jesuit mission in England.

If Riggs is less than certain about Marlowe's movements in the protean realm of intelligence, he definitely understands spying's attraction for his subject, an attraction he explores via themes in Marlowe's works. For example, Riggs examines the moment in *The Jew of Malta* when Barabas says, "As good dissemble that thou never mean'st / As first mean truth, and then dissemble it; / A counterfeit profession is better / Than unseen hypocrisy" (Qtd. in Riggs, 156). According to Riggs, "An agent who sees another person's religion as a fiction has the advantage over a believer deluded by his own cant" (157).

Perhaps Riggs's greatest strength is his tenacious drive to explore every possibility of Marlowe's life, a strength he applies to Marlowe's intelligence work. Chapter Twelve, "Double Agents," opens with the statement, "On 18 September 1589, between the hours of two and three in the afternoon, the flesh-and-blood Christopher Marlowe flashes into view" (250). As the picture comes into focus, the reader learns that Marlowe and Watson are fighting with an innkeeper near the theater in Shoreditch. After being arrested, they are manacled within a dungeon known as Limbo in Newgate prison. In a moment reminiscent of Faust's encounter with the Devil, Marlowe there meets John Poole, an employee of Ferdinando Stanley, Lord Strange, the heir to the earldom of Derby, who had an excellent claim to the English throne. After narrating Marlowe's release from Newgate, Riggs pursues his subject's shadowy involvement with Lord Strange, who patronized a company of London actors, appropriately called Strange's Men, and counted the playwright Thomas Kyd among his personal servants. How deeply Marlowe became involved with Strange remains a mystery. But Riggs does foreground the fact that Marlowe shared rooms with Thomas Kyd before leaving for the Continent in 1591. So too, Strange's Men performed Marlowe's last play, *The Massacre at Paris*, in January 1593.

Through Riggs's thorough exploration of Marlowe's limited mobility, the reader fully comes to understand why the netherworld of Elizabethan intelligence offered so many opportunities for the playwright, Riggs lays forth all the opportunities available to Marlowe, a particularly apt strategy in approaching the duplicitous, shifting world of intelligence. "In gathering information [...]," Riggs writes, "Marlowe stood to gain in two ways[: . . .] he could sell his discoveries to Watson's friend Thomas Walsingham [Elizabeth's secretary], or he could pursue relations with the rebel faction. Both options remained available to a skilled double agent. But he also stood

to lose in two ways: if the agent neither succeeded in penetrating the other side, nor had any intelligence to sell, he fell into grave jeopardy” (254). In addition to hypothesizing the possibilities and complications Marlowe faced, Riggs excels at asking questions of his subject, a strategy that strongly appeals to this reader because it fully engages her own intelligence and challenges her to interact with a subject who is always coming into focus just before eluding her grasp, as it does for the biographer and even in history. One of the biography’s finest moments—the presentation of Marlowe’s death in a tavern brawl—shows Riggs at his interrogative best. Readers will remember that Marlowe’s assailant, Francis Frezer, killed him almost instantly by stabbing him in the eye with his own dagger. Although the Queen’s Coroner dismissed the killing as the result of a quarrel over “the reckoning” (bill for food and drink), Riggs explores the reasons why Elizabeth and her counselors may very well have ordered Marlowe’s death.

By the time the reader arrives at the tavern chapter entitled “In the Theatre of God’s Judgements,” she understands that Elizabeth herself had reason to want Christopher Marlowe dead, in large part because of his outspokenly avowed and Machiavellian atheism. Riggs opens this last chapter with these questions: “Was Marlowe dispatched in an act of sovereign power or in a tavern brawl? Was he guilty—and if so, of what?—or innocent?” (316). Although Riggs does not definitively answer these questions, he explores both sides of them, even going so far as to show how Marlowe’s murder “was scripted into a mythic confrontation between God and man” (342) by Marlowe’s supposed god-fearing contemporaries, who used his death as evidence of God’s judgment on Marlowe’s sins. Thanks to Riggs’s thorough examination of Marlowe’s skeptical attitude toward religion, the reader is left wondering how Marlowe would have responded to this posthumous morality lesson. Again thanks to Riggs, she knows enough about Marlowe to conclude that he would have relished the fact that even in his own murder he managed to elude his pursuers/interpreters. “Was the great poet a good man?” Riggs asks in the Epilogue (346). Having trained his reader well in Marlowe’s own beloved art of dialectic, a method Riggs shares, this reader immediately takes issue with the possible definitions of “good.”

Born into the Lennox family of Scottish nobility, Arbella Stuart (1575–1615) was eighteen at the time of Christopher Marlowe’s death. In the first portrait of her, painted when she was just a toddler, the artist included the Lennox family motto, *Pour parvenir, j’endure* (I endure in order to succeed). The peculiar aptness of endurance in describing Arbella is a key

theme in Sarah Gristwood's *Arbella: England's Lost Queen*, a comprehensive and intelligent portrait of James VI's contender for the English throne after Queen Elizabeth I. Arbella's father was Charles Stuart, the Sixth Earl of Lennox and brother to Henry Stuart, better known as Lord Darnley, the ill-fated husband of Mary, Queen of Scots. Her mother was a wealthy daughter of the gentry, Elizabeth Cavendish. Arbella's paternal great-grandmother was Margaret Tudor, the elder sister of Henry VIII and the wife of James IV of Scotland. Despite this distinguished lineage and her very real claim to the English throne, being of both Tudor and Stuart descent, Arbella remains a shadowy figure in English Renaissance history. This shadowiness is Gristwood's motivation for telling her story: "Though her writing had sparked interest in academic circles, the general public showed no recognition of her name, and I was bewildered that she could have disappeared so completely [...] deserv[ing] better than to be just one of those ghosts who linger on the edge of memory" (xi).

Why does Arbella Stuart deserve better? Gristwood makes the case for her being a woman of endurance and intelligence who was prevented from marrying. As a married woman, Arbella Stuart would have held a respected place within Elizabethan and Jacobean society. In the ways that her birth and education both crippled and enabled her, Arbella Stuart is the unlikely but very real counterpart to Christopher Marlowe. And like Marlowe, she lived in what she wrote.

One of Gristwood's primary sources is the archive of Arbella Stuart's letters at the British Library. Sara Jayne Steen's 1994 Oxford edition of the letters in 1994 is key to Gristwood's reading. The letters bring to life a woman who used writing for far more than communication. At points, Gristwood argues that—and dramatizes the ways in which—Arbella wrote in order to sustain herself, though she referred to her letters and journal-keeping as a "scribbling melancholy" (173). Writing became essential to maintaining her sanity during the late 1580s, years of confinement when she lived as the ward of her self-serving and extremely ambitious grandmother, Bess of Hardwick, remembered by Renaissance historians as Mary, Queen of Scots' gaoler/keeper. Writing became especially important to her during the four years that followed her secret and forbidden marriage in 1610 to William Seymour. After her arrest and imprisonment by James VI, Arbella was virtually buried alive in the Tower of London.

Arbella Stuart's education and intelligence were on par with Elizabeth I's, in large part because "good lady grandmother" Bess raised her in the hope that she would one day inherit England's throne. Unlike Henry VIII's

daughter, however, Arbella was politically naïve, a fact that Gristwood accentuates. Like *The World of Christopher Marlowe, Arbella: England's Lost Queen* richly grounds the reader in the late years of Elizabeth's reign as well as in the early period of her radically different successor, James VI. Arbella's letters from James's court to her uncle and aunt, Gilbert and Mary Talbot, Earl and Countess of Shrewsbury, provide a vivid and censorious window into the decadent world that Arbella never came to value or to understand.

If there is one flaw in this learned biography, however, it lies in the fact that the reader—like Gristwood herself—struggles to really “see” Arbella before 1603 (which year Gristwood arrives at only on page 154 in her 400-plus page biography). Chapter Two (titled “A mind distracted”) of Part Three begins,

The letters Arbella Stuart wrote from Hardwick, in the last months of what she had come to see as her captivity [life with Bess], are bizarre and wonderful documents. The longest single letter runs to some seven thousand words, and the content is often so confused as to lead contemporaries to question Arbella's sanity. For the biographer hitherto starved of the subject's voice, this sudden explosion of words is an *embarras de richesse* hard to handle gracefully. (154)

Although Gristwood handles this explosion both gracefully and dynamically, up until this point, one feels hungry for Arbella's voice. Like Riggs, Gristwood plunges the reader into the environment that shaped her subject, in this case the political intrigue and ambition of the Elizabethan aristocracy. In her portrait, however, such an enmeshed canvas of relationship and politicking is a large and complicated one to cover. In addition to extensively outlining England's political climate, Gristwood is most thorough and engaging in fleshing out the situation of upper-class and aristocratic women under Elizabeth—and later James:

Few indeed were the paths open to an unmarried woman in the seventeenth century, when even the law recognized only wives, widows and children [...]. Arbella's was a culture that saw marriage as the only successful destiny for a woman...The only other career open to a female member of the gentry or nobility was to take service as gentlewoman to a lady of higher rank. But the only woman of higher rank than Arbella was the queen herself.” (134–35)

Gristwood's analysis of Renaissance womanhood is essential to appreciate Stuart's strengths and to understand the formation and personalities of powerful women like Bess of Hardwick and Queen Elizabeth.

What emerges as the circumscribing fact of Arbella's life is her predicament as an aristocratic, unmarried woman with a claim to the throne whom both Elizabeth I and James VI saw as a possible threat (though for James, the threat was much more real than for Elizabeth). James VI, who springs to troubled and troubling life in Gristwood's hands, is portrayed as having less than no use for a learned woman. Upon being told that Arbella was fluent in several languages, James quipped, "But can she spin?" (235). James kept Arbella unmarried in order to ensure that she—and by affiliation a husband and their supporters—could never contest his reign. For most of the biography, Arbella is by turns the carefully kept ward of her grandmother, the captive player of James VI's court, or his prisoner in the Tower of London. Yet she becomes a person of endurance and great strength, thanks to Gristwood's provocative analysis of Arbella's writing. "It has been suggested that as a writer Arbella was deliberately building a fantasy world," Gristwood writes. But Gristwood corrects this misassumption by showing how Arbella created a version of the self in writing with some measure of autonomy, even if that autonomy was exclusively one of the mind. "Writing was a mechanism to maintain self-respect," adds Sara Jayne Steen, "In the world she created on paper, a strong and beloved woman rightfully rages against her oppressors" (qtd. in Gristwood, 166).

The portrait of Arbella that takes shape in her own writing is of a woman both strong and worthy of love, a woman with a sharp and well-trained wit, and a woman whose morality provides a curiously forceful touchstone for her times, especially as revealed in her observations on James VI's court. In a letter of autumn 1603 to Gilbert and Mary Talbot, her close confidants, she confesses, "I dare not write unto you how I do, for if I should say well I were greatly to blame, if ill I trust you would not believe me I am so merry. It is enough to change Heraclitus [the 'weeping philosopher'] into Democritus [the 'laughing philosopher'] to live in this most ridiculous world, and enough to change Democritus into Heraclitus to live in this most wicked world" (231–32). Gristwood's revelation of "a nature in which shocks went deep" (206) becomes strangely triumphant and simultaneously a portrait of great waste. Some four years after her imprisonment for her secret marriage to Seymour, Arbella died a prisoner in the Tower. Gristwood argues that in "daring to die," Arbella triumphed over

her captors. The cause of her death was self-starvation, and her doctors recognized her illness as one of *Agritudo* (sickness) as opposed to *Morbus* (disease) (340). As Gristwood's inclusion of this detail shows, in addition to firmly anchoring Arbella within aristocratic Elizabethan and Jacobean culture, the biography creates a vivid picture of Renaissance medicine and contains a superb appendix entitled "Arbella and porphyria." (Porphyria is a nervous disease whose symptoms include hysteria and delusional thinking.)

Ultimately, after a lifetime of imaginative living in writing and a very real fight to claim her own future through marriage to Seymour—to whom she wrote shortly before their attempted escape from England, "I shall think myself a pattern of misfortune in enjoying so great a blessing as you so little a while" (265)—Arbella stopped fighting. Building on a seedling argument by literary scholars, Gristwood makes a convincing case for Arbella as the model for the resilient heroine of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. "She seems to me," Gristwood concludes, "to represent how far the human spirit can fall into frustration and despair without giving up completely" (368).

In Gristwood's portrait, Arbella Stuart steps forth as a woman of her class and times as well as a figure of Everywoman, for her desperate need to fight stasis and do something with her life, as well as her use of writing and illness (including starvation) to affirm or gain a measure of control over her identity, seem disturbingly female and speak troublingly of aspects of women's experience today. Because Arbella Stuart's experience as a woman resonates so strongly over four hundred years later, her restoration from the shadowy margins of Renaissance history becomes even more important.

Although Arbella Stuart and Christopher Marlowe came from profoundly different strata of English Renaissance society, key aspects of their histories are troublingly similar. Both lives reveal the limitations of inherited social station in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Because Arbella Stuart was the close female kin of Elizabeth and James, she was kept the unmarried prisoner of both monarchs. Despite his Cambridge education, Christopher Marlowe's lowly origins prevented him from achieving a much-coveted post within Elizabeth's government or her Church, such a post his education having taught him to believe within his reach. By virtue of their intelligence, however, both Marlowe and Stuart challenged their "place" in English society, with dire results. Had Arbella been a less intelligent woman, she might have settled for the sensual games of James's court and learned to live on its colorful margins. Had Marlowe settled for a post in some rural backwater, he may very well have lived to

old age. Ultimately, Arbella Stuart and Christopher Marlowe failed to survive because they were overreachers. In an odd but very real way, both could have claimed the Duchess of Malfi's predicament—"the misery of us, that are born great"—as their own.