Marlowe and the Topicality of Textual Encounters

“Did he not draw a sorte of English priestes,
From Doway to the Seminary at Remes
To hatch forth treason ‘gainst their natural queen?”

In The Massacre at Paris, Marlowe alludes to the English Catholic seminary in Rheims, that he is said to have visited1, if we are to believe the Privy Council letter to the authorities of Cambridge University. The history of the English College is of great interest to specialists of English and French history. Not only was it thought in England to have been implicated in the Babington plot against Elizabeth I, it was also a place of special cultural and textual encounter in the sixteenth century, since it is there that the members of the College completed their English translation of the Scriptures known as the Douay-Rheims Bible. It stood as the place (both locus and topos) of an exegetical battle, a site of controversial textuality where sacred and superstitious were liable to meet.

Therefore, it seems particularly relevant to host a conference about Marlowe in Rheims, devoted to cultural, social, religious, political or textual clashes and encounters in or around his works.

With the reference to the “Seminary at Remes”, uttered by King Henry III after the assassination of the Duke of Guise, Marlowe was using a topical allusion, almost an effet de réel, that endowed the text of his play with a daring religious and political topicality. The Rheims seminary itself was the subject of much controversy throughout the 1580s and 1590s. Rheims is thus most often associated with Rome in book titles at the time. Back in England, much effort was devoted to the correction of errors committed by “the traytous seminarie at Rhemes”2. Not unlike the “Temples of that Mahomet” (Part 2, 5. 1. 172), which Tamburlaine

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2 Quoting from the title of A defense of the sincere and true translations of the holie Scriptures into the English tong against the manifolde cauls, friuolous quarels, and impudent slaunders of Gregorie Martin, one the readers of popish diuinitie in the traytouers Seminarie of Rhemes. By William Folke D. in Diuinitie...., London: printed by Henrie Bynneman, 1583. There are numerous editions of this work, under various titles, well into the first half of the seventeenth century.
proudly rages against, it was seen by some as housing “heapes of supersticious booke(s)” (Part 2, 5. 1. 171) that blurred the lines between the sacred and the blasphemous. Marlowe’s allusion to the Rheims seminary creates both a moment of ideological tension within the text of the play and a moment of unsettling aesthetic disturbance. Couched between the lines of this history of a foreign, French massacre, lies the drama of internal rifts and turmoil, the tragedy of an impossible reconciliation not only of opposites but also of self with self. Oppositional differentiation is conflated with the ambivalence of disruptive/disrupted sameness, testifying to Marlowe’s distinctively radical art. Similarly, in The Jew of Malta, Marlowe has Barabas use the word “Jebusite” (2. 3. 302), drawn from the Bible (Judges 1:21) but also, as John Parker noted, “a term of opprobrium for the Jesuits then infiltrating England”3. It so happens that William Fulke used the word in his attack against the Rheims seminary4. This occurrence speaks possibly less to Marlowe’s disputed political and religious allegiances, than to his ability to pin-point tensions and their embeddedness in words that become, as it were, privileged verbal sites of his intense dramatic art.

This perspective on Marlowe’s texts allows us to reconsider his art of writing not only as one of borrowing or imitating, a practice he had in common with the authors of his time, but also as one of creating tensions, clashes, oxymora, or on the contrary innovating through unexpected and often distorting appropriation and integration. These complex textual encounters are thematic as much as they are aesthetic, and enable Marlowe to engage dialogically and critically with his own texts. In Edward II, Marlowe refers in passing to Hero and Leander by having Gaveston say,

    Sweete prince, I come, these, these thy amorous lines
    Might have enforst me to have swum from France
    And like Leander gaspt upon the sande (Edward II, 1. 1. 6-8).

This reference creates multi-layered textual and cultural encounters, between the play and the poem, between Gaveston and Edward as well as between Leander and Neptune, and between Europe and Asia, as if Marlowe was insisting on the fluidity and instability of texts that are “on the edge”, as Lisa Hopkins puts it5. Marlowe’s art of writing can be envisioned through such productive connexions and confrontations, as well as through his astute use of topoi, classical or early modern, as well as literary or visual to shape his own worldview. But also to open up new avenues for future re-explorations of his textual encounters and their renewed topicality: Chapman’s later addition to Marlowe’s poem, for instance, signals how later re-writings and adaptations of Marlowe’s works, can become relevant in other cultural milieus, and suggests how Marlowe’s text has been, in turn, reworked into topoi. His correlations of “hot extreames” (Tamburlaine, Part 1, 5. 1. 46) and powerful layering of conflicting references could only encourage topical re-uses and fruitful textual appropriations.

From Rheims to Wittenberg to Malta to Persepolis, at once loci and topoi, Marlowe’s poems and plays open up new worlds for readers and audiences and interrogate ideas of difference and sameness between a variety of situations or contexts, and, perhaps more importantly yet for the purpose of this conference, between different texts. For indeed, more than they are simply shaped by context, Marlowe’s texts seem to have the power to found, body forth and address new contexts.

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4 W. Fulke, op. cit., p. 505.
5 Renaissance Drama on the Edge, Farnham, Surrey, Routledge, 2014: “In Edward II, Marlowe revisits both the Hero and Leander narrative and the edge between Europe and Asia. Here it is specifically national borders which are seen as permeable, unstable, and sometimes literally fluid, and this is something which the play insistently connects to sexual transgression” (p. 54).
The conference welcomes in particular papers and panels—offering fresh explorations of textual references in Marlowe’s plays and poetry (mythological, biblical, political…),—addressing Marlowe’s complex or ambivalent relation to texts, both sacred and profane, and their authority,
-Marlowe and modes of exegesis,
-Marlowe and early modern textual circulations,
-Marlowe and textual appropriation and translation,
-Marlowe and controversial literature,
-Marlowe’s explorations of geographical places as politically and aesthetically charged topos
- The topicality of (re)editing Marlowe’s text
-Marlowe’s mediation in culture through manuscript, print, and later editions
-The topicality of Marlowe’s oeuvre regarding such questions of belief, race, gender, and sexuality, travel, and migration.

A selection of papers will be proposed for publication in a collection of essays.

Please send your proposals (300 words) for individual papers with a short CV (1 page max) by the 1st of December 2021 to the following address: MarloweInReims@gmail.com

Notifications of acceptance will be sent by 20 December 2021.

Event website: https://marlowefestival2022.wordpress.com/

Organising committee:
Rory Loughnane (University of Kent), Anne-Marie Miller-Blaise (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle), Elen Riot (Université de Reims), Christine Sukic (Université de Reims).

Scientific committee:
Claire M. L. Bourne (Pennsylvania State University), Nandini Das (University of Oxford), Lisa Hopkins (Sheffield Hallam University), Ladan Niayesh (Université de Paris), Thomas Nicklas (Université de Reims), Mickaël Popelard (Université de Caen), Anne Teulade (Université Rennes 2).