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**The Portrait of Mr Christopher Marlowe
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In Oscar Wilde's short story 'The portrait of Mr WH', Cyril Graham becomes convinced he has discovered the identity of the mysterious man Shakespeare addressed his sonnets to. It is Willy Hughes, a young actor with whom the playwright had become enamoured. The hypothesis is a fine one, supported by an intimate knowledge of Shakespeare's work and an intelligent analysis of the poems. There's only one drawback; there is no evidence that an actor named Willy Hughes ever existed.

Graham is so infatuated with the theory that he manufactures proof, secretly commissioning a portrait of the actor. Inevitably the deceit is discovered. The shame destroys Graham and like that other poetic, young forger Chatterton he ends his own life.

For a while the narrator of Wilde's story is also convinced of Willy Hughes's existence. He conjectures that, 'No doubt, Marlowe was fascinated by the beauty and grace of the boy-actor and lured him away from the Blackfriars Theatre that he might play the Gaveston of his *Edward II*.' The story associates Marlowe not for the first or last time, with intrigue, ambient sexuality, Shakespeare and questions of authenticity. It also associates him with a mystery and a portrait.

Although there are many theories and disagreements about Christopher Marlowe's life and death we can be certain that he existed. What we cannot be certain of is what he looked like.

There is a fascination with portraits of the dead. As a child I pinned a reproduction of a painting of Mary Queen of Scots preparing for her execution to my

bedroom wall. Her violent end was undoubtedly part of the appeal, but the portrait itself also lured me. The eyes of a woman who would soon kneel beneath the executioners axe gazing out across hundreds of years.

The Elizabethan portrait of a young man in a flame slashed doublet inscribed *Quod me nutrit me destruit* (That which nourishes, me also destroys me), which hangs in the panelled dining hall of Corpus Christi College Cambridge is generally supposed to be of Christopher Marlowe, though the college itself is careful to refer to the attribution as ‘apocryphal’ or ‘putative’. A student discovered the picture in 1952 during renovations to the building where he was lodging. A building which coincidentally also housed the rooms that Christopher Marlowe had occupied centuries before. An inscription on the portrait states it was painted in 1585 and that its subject is twenty-one-years-old, the age that Marlowe would have been in that year.

The youth who stares out of from the portrait is not particularly handsome. He has that pale, flabby look that authors take on towards the end of their book. His face is slightly too round for modern tastes. His brown eyes are round too, set evenly beneath well-shaped brows. It is his mouth that draws us. The lips are more generous than the Mona Lisa’s, but their expression is equally enigmatic. Seen one way the youth appears to be smiling, yet in another light his lips seem slightly pursed, the mouth of a hard man ready for a standoff. It is easy to believe that this is a man with a secret.

The evidence pointing towards the portrait’s authenticity is well documented, notably in Park Honan’s recent biography, *Christopher Marlowe Poet and Spy*¹, which also contains an exciting account of the painting’s discovery. The proof is

¹ Park Honan, *Christopher Marlowe Poet and Spy*, Oxford University Press (2005) P.119

circumstantial. As well as the coincidence of Marlowe's age it involves analyses of the poet's character, conjecture about his financial status and the dismissal of other candidates. It is the kind of evidence that has hung innocent men. And yet almost every biography or text involving Marlowe employs this picture on its front cover. This is the face that we conjure when we think of the poet.

Marlowe left us a brilliant body of work. But we want more. Like the movie fan with her head bowed to the pages of a celebrity magazine we want to get closer. We want to put a face to the poet, to look into Marlowe's eyes and possess him as he possesses us.

But though the picture may meet our sense of the man we cannot be sure that it portrays him. And so the portrait of Mr Christopher Marlowe remains, like so much about his life and his death, a mystery.