

[Note] Kit's Cinematic Afterlife: Post-1990 Films about Christopher Marlowe

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Christopher Marlowe appears far less frequently in cinema than William Shakespeare. However, Marlowe plays a significant role as a historical figure in several films. Among English-language films that received wide release after 1990, five films feature Marlowe: *Edward II* (1991), *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), *Cradle Will Rock* (1999), *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013), and *Bill* (2015). In these five films, Marlowe's unique status as a rebellious playwright is utilised in the representation of art. This note discusses how these films portrayed Marlowe and contributed to his public image as a canonical early modern playwright in Shakespeare's time.

Edward II

Marlowe's plays have not often been cinematized, in part because he left behind only a few works. In 1991, however, Derek Jarman directed *Edward II*, focusing on the play's queer aspects, and its critical success brought more cinematic attention to Marlowe. Because of Jarman's distinct queer aesthetic and the rise of queer studies of English Renaissance drama, Marlowe emerged as a rebellious and queer historical figure. Marlowe's works have been regarded as fitting well with queer literary analysis, and his sexuality has been a subject of speculation since he was alive (Clark 2013, 232). Although very little is known about the private lives of Elizabethan poets, including Marlowe, Jarman's art film has been so influential that modern filmgoers almost

automatically tend or want to imagine Marlowe as a talented gay artist with a queer aesthetic, like Jarman himself. This film was a milestone in the reception of Marlowe in the world of cinema.

Shakespeare in Love

Shakespeare in Love, directed by John Madden, was the first widely distributed film featuring Marlowe as a character. Tom Stoppard and Mark Norman co-wrote the screenplay. In this film, Marlowe is depicted as a more experienced playwright than Shakespeare.

This film's portrayal of Marlowe's sexuality is controversial. Openly gay actor Rupert Everett played Marlowe, making this an important queer role in his filmography, as Everett also wrote, directed, and starred in *The Happy Prince*, a 2018 film about another iconic queer playwright, Oscar Wilde. It could be argued that Everett's performance as Marlowe in *Shakespeare in Love* led to *The Happy Prince*. However, the film erased Marlowe's sexuality. When Mark Norman visited Stephen Greenblatt in preparation, Greenblatt suggested a same-sex romance between Shakespeare and Marlowe, but Norman dismissed this idea (Greenblatt 1999). Critics have criticised the heteronormative storyline of *Shakespeare in Love*, including the omission of Marlowe's sexuality, and such criticism may have been influenced by the image which Jarman created. In *Shakespeare Remains*, for example, Courtney Lehmann says, "Most likely, *Shakespeare in Love* would have been more interesting... under Greenblatt's 'direction'" (2002, 220n4). Art film fans, theatregoers, and researchers would perhaps rather have seen Everett perform a more Jarman-like Marlowe.

The theatrical adaptation of this film, which was first performed in London in 2014, proves this. In this play, Marlowe's role is much more prominent than in the film. He is obviously but not ostentatiously gay, and his interaction with Shakespeare subtly hints at his kind, somewhat romantic affection for his

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literary rival (Collins 2014). It was much easier to be explicit about Marlowe's sexuality in the 2010s than in the 1990s, and it could also be argued that theatre was more open to such portrayals than Hollywood cinema.

Cradle Will Rock

A year after *Shakespeare in Love* came *Cradle Will Rock*, a film directed by Tim Robbins. Based on historical facts, it tells the story of the first performance of Marc Blitzstein's musical *Cradle Will Rock* in 1937, a production supported by the Federal Theatre Project, a New Deal program for theatre. Because of its left-wing political leanings, conservative politicians attacked the project.

In this film, Marlowe does not appear, but is mentioned as a symbol of creativity in theatre, full of progressive political views and artistic challenges. The film shows how fiercely Orson Welles rehearsed Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. As the film explains, Welles staged the now-famous *Voodoo Macbeth* in 1936 and directed *Doctor Faustus* and *Cradle Will Rock* in 1937. This film links Welles's over-the-top brilliance to Marlowe's rebellious talent.

The film also portrays Hallie Flanagan, the Federal Theatre Project's director, as a woman determined to keep Marlowe's spirit alive. She is called before the House Un-American Activities Committee and discusses Marlowe in front of the politicians. The committee members know nothing about Marlowe and ask Flanagan whether he is a communist. As Geoffrey Block suggests, the committee scene in the film is almost "surrealistic," but it is based on her actual testimony (Block 2009, 182). While the scene satirises the committee's ignorance and antitheatrical bias, it also implies that Marlowe represents what the conservative American audiences hate: passionate, political, intelligent, and avant-garde theatre that encourages the audience to think.

Only Lovers Left Alive

Only Lovers Left Alive, a vampire film directed by Jim Jarmusch, prominently features Marlowe. The leading characters are two vampire lovers: Adam, played by Tom Hiddleston, and Eve, played by Tilda Swinton. Adam is a reclusive musician living in Detroit, and ghostwrote music for Franz Schubert. Eve is a literature-loving polyglot living in Tangier. Since they are undead, they have loved each other for a long time. They both depend mostly on the medical supply of blood to avoid killing people.

Christopher Marlowe, another vampire with literary talent, is portrayed by John Hurt. This film adopts the Marlovian theory of Shakespeare's authorship; namely, that Marlowe faked his death and was the ghostwriter of Shakespeare. Although Shakespeare himself does not appear as a character, "Marlowe is defined by that very absence" in this film (Hatfull 2024, 156), as radical alternative to Shakespeare.

This film clearly defines Marlowe as a gay poet. In one scene, Marlowe, old and weakened, is missing his romantic encounters with men in his salad days. He sincerely cares for Eve, providing her with blood. Eve also regards Marlowe as a father figure. As Ruby Rich suggests, Swinton's casting is a homage to Jarman, as she played Isabella in *Edward II* (Rich 2013, 71). Marlowe's sexuality is revealed casually and openly, in stark contrast to the revelation of his name. In the prior exchange between Eve and Marlowe, Eve addressed him as "Christopher Marlowe," which alarmed Marlowe. In *Only Lovers Left Alive*, sexuality, often regarded as something unspeakable, is treated as an open and ordinary fact of life, while the name, generally seen as something everyone knows, should be hidden because it suggests its owner's immortality. The film subtly subverts the rules of how people handle information about their identities.

Marlowe lives in Tangier with an aspiring writer, Bilal, played by Slimane

[Note]Kit's Cinematic Afterlife: Post-1990 Films about Christopher Marlowe KITAMURA Sae Dazi. Bilal is a human being who knows Marlowe's secret. Marlowe's death scene reminds the viewer of another queer expatriate playwright, Oscar Wilde. Jarmusch originally studied English and American literature and said that his favorite quote was Wilde's "Life is far too important to be taken seriously" ("Jim Jarmusch" 1999). In this film, Adam has his own wall of fame covered with portraits of artists, and Marlowe is aligned with Wilde. The interspecies bond between Marlowe and Bilal, who deeply respects Marlowe as his mentor, is Wildean, resembling that of the Prince and the Swallow in "The Happy Prince" (Wilde 2008, 95-103). Although Marlowe's old age and failing health deprive the relationship of sexual connotations, their close bond, marked by shared intellectual interests, is romanticised. On his deathbed, Marlowe praises Bilal, gives his last drop of good blood to Adam and Eve, and dies surrounded by them. This shot is designed to look tragic and divine, almost like an early modern religious painting. Here, Marlowe, a playwright famous for his rebellious Machiavellian works, is transformed into a self-sacrificing divine figure. He is also a dying undead, a literal self-contradiction. In contrast to the title *Only Lovers Left Alive*, Marlowe, the undead playwright whose life was filled with love, is not left alive. In this film, Marlowe subverts everything.

Considering Jarmusch's filmography, Marlowe's portrayal in this film is an important step. Throughout his career, Jarmusch has always shown a keen interest in poetry and music. After this film, in 2016, he made *Paterson*, a film about poetry, which is a homage to William Carlos Williams' poem *Paterson*. This film features several talented poets writing for themselves with little desire to publish their works. Marlowe and Adam in *Only Lovers Left Alive* directly lead to the poets in *Paterson* because they create art for their own pure enjoyment. In Jarmusch's films, these people are true artists who are unique and subversive. Marlowe in *Only Lovers Left Alive* represents Jarmusch's archetypal artist.

Bill

Bill, a film directed by Richard Bracewell in 2015, was inspired by the success of *Horrible Histories*, a CBBC TV series that started in 2009. The series is a comedy sketch show targeting children and focusing on history. Many cast members in the film are actors who participated in *Horrible Histories*.

Basically, *Bill* is a family comedy version of *Shakespeare in Love*. Like *Shakespeare in Love*, it does not follow the historical facts, but presents a more modernised, comical retelling of Shakespeare's career. Marlowe is called "Chris" instead of "Kit," and, according to Laurence Rickard, a member of *Bill*'s creative team, this name is adopted to show that the story is "not the historically verified stuff" (Rickard 2024, 53). The heterosexual relationship between Shakespeare and his wife, Anne, is a focus. Marlowe's queer aspects are not portrayed, but he is still unconventional. In this film, he is portrayed a talented but troubled artist with financial problems. After moneylenders threaten him, he tries to falsely incriminate his co-worker and friend Shakespeare, only to be murdered. After his death, Marlowe appears as a ghost and encourages Shakespeare to finish the play, like Hamlet's father in *Hamlet*. The portrayal of Marlowe in this film is much more light-hearted and comical than the other films.

Conclusion

After *Edward II* was released, Marlowe was juxtaposed with Shakespeare in films and presented to the audience as what Shakespeare was not: more rebellious and canonical but less well-known. When Shakespeare's heterosexual romance is the focus, Marlowe's queerness is downplayed or omitted. Jarmusch's *Only Lovers Left Alive* explored Marlowe's image most deeply. The connections between Marlowe and Wilde should also be noted, as both are now

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regarded as quintessentially queer playwrights. Together, these post-1990 films suggest that Marlowe is increasingly seen as an alternative queer genius to Shakespeare.

* This paper is partly based on "Kit's Afterlife in Cinema: *Shakespeare in Love*, *Cradle Will Rock*, and *Only Lovers Left Alive*," presented at the Marlowe Society of America, 8th International Conference, on July 10, 2018.

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