

## Shakespeare's Contemporaries

**Christopher Marlowe** was born, like Shakespeare, in 1564. He attended school in Canterbury and then studied in Cambridge, where he seems to have become an agent working for Queen Elizabeth's secret service. Besides poems, Marlowe wrote plays including *Tamburlaine*, *The Jew of Malta*, *Edward II* and *The Massacre at Paris*, but he is best known for *Doctor Faustus*, based on the German legend of a scholar who sells his soul to a devil called Mephistophilis. Marlowe was a member of the circle around Sir Walter Raleigh that included the alchemist, astronomer and mathematician Thomas Hariot. He was killed in mysterious circumstances in a tavern in Deptford, near London, in 1593, during a fight with the other men present, all agents, claimed was about the bill. Marlowe was known for his 'mighty line', bringing poetry into plays, as here, where Mephistophilis agrees to 'conjure up' Helen of Troy:

FAUSTUS One thing, good servant, let me crave of thee,  
To glut the longing of my heart's desire:  
That I might have unto my paramour  
That heavenly Helen which I saw of late,  
Whose sweet embracings may extinguish clean  
Those thoughts that do dissuade me from my vow,  
And keep mine oath I made to Lucifer.

MEPHASTOPHILIS Faustus, this, or what else thou shalt desire  
Shall be performed in twinkling of an eye.

Enter HELEN.

FAUSTUS Was this the face that launched a thousand ships,  
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?  
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss;  
Her lips suck forth my soul, see where it flies!  
Come Helen, come, give me my soul again;  
Here will I dwell, for heaven be in these lips,  
And all is dross that is not Helena.  
I will be Paris, and for love of thee  
Instead of Troy shall Wittenberg be sacked,  
And I will combat with weak Menelaus,  
And wear thy colours on my plumèd crest;  
Yea, I will wound Achilles in the heel  
And then return to Helen for a kiss.  
O, thou art fairer than the evening air  
Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars;  
Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter  
When he appeared to hapless Semele,  
More lovely than the monarch of the sky  
In wanton Arethusa's azured arms,  
And none but thou shalt be my paramour.



**Thomas Kyd** was born in 1558 in London, where he went to a good school. He soon became a popular playwright, most famous now for having written *The Spanish Tragedy*. In 1593 he was arrested and tortured because he was suspected of unorthodox religious views. He died in 1594. *The Spanish Tragedy* was an example of a 'revenge tragedy', a very popular genre when Shakespeare was beginning to write. In this part of the play Hieronimo has persuaded the murderers of his son to take part in the performance of a play within the play, during which he really kills them, before delivering a speech to his audience, of which this is a part:

HIERONIMO Haply you think — but bootless are your thoughts  
 That this is fabulously counterfeit,  
 And that we do as all tragedians do:  
 To die to-day (for fashioning our scene)  
 The death of Ajax or some Roman peer,  
 And in a minute starting up again,  
 Revive to please to-morrow's audience.  
 No, princes; know I am Hieronimo,  
 The hopeless father of a hapless son,  
 Whose tongue is tuned to tell his latest tale,  
 Not to excuse gross errors in the play.



**Sir Philip Sidney** (1554-1586) wrote sonnets, a romance called *Arcadia*, and a work about the imagination: *An Apology for Poetry*.

**George Chapman** (1559-1634) wrote plays for Philip Henslowe, but is best known for translating Homer into English.

**Sir Francis Bacon** (1561-1626) advocated the scientific method to control the natural world and establish an empire. Among his works are the *Novum Organum*, *New Atlantis* (a utopian plan for an ideal society) and a series of brilliant essays.

**Ben Jonson** (1572-1637) is best known for the plays *Every Man in his Humour*, *Volpone*, *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair*.

**John Donne** (1572-1631) was a writer of poetry and prose (including the famous line 'No man is an island'). His daughter married the actor Edward Alleyn.

**Thomas Dekker** (1572-1632) is most famous for a play about ordinary Londoners, *The Shoemaker's Holiday*. A poem of his, 'Golden Slumbers', was used by the Beatles on the album *Abbey Road*.

**John Marston** (1576-1634) is best known for *The Malcontent*, which was performed at the Globe.

**John Fletcher** (1579-1625) collaborated with several other playwrights, including Shakespeare. Initially very popular, his plays later fell out of fashion.

**John Webster** (c. 1580- c. 1634) is the author of two dark, poetic plays, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, now regarded as of the same quality as Shakespeare's

**Thomas Middleton** (1580-1657) wrote the comedy *Women Beware Women* and (probably) *The Revenger's Tragedy*. He collaborated with Shakespeare.

**Francis Beaumont** (1584-1616) wrote *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* as a satire, before collaborating with John Fletcher.

[Michael Mitchell]