

# KIT AND WILL

By Dramaturg Philippa Kelly

Born in 1564, William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe were separated in age by just two months. William was the third child of eight to be born to his parents but the first to survive; Christopher was the second of his parents' nine children, and became the eldest when his sister died four years later. Christopher's father was a shoemaker, and William's a glover, as well as Bailiff (mayor) of Stratford. Despite their exact equivalence in age and the playwriting profession they would come to choose, the early locations and trajectories of their lives were quite different.

Shakespeare had a short but intense period of formal schooling. His father's fall in fortunes likely compelled 13 year-old Will to leave the up-market grammar school to which John Shakespeare's position had entitled him free attendance. Marlowe earned scholarships to study for a Bachelor's degree at the King's School in Canterbury, and a Master's degree – the highest degree at the time, as there was no PhD – at Cambridge University's Corpus Christi College. At Cambridge, Marlowe gained fluency in many languages, including Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and possibly Italian. We know nothing about Shakespeare's life in the years between the age of 13 and his marriage at 18 to 26 year-old Anne Hathaway. The absence of any educational records for Will has led scholars to speculate about his possible access to the private libraries of nobleman patrons in which he could read such influential sources as Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*. Because of the popularity of traveling theatre and the capacity to influence vast numbers of people via performance, noblemen gained stature by allowing writers to use their libraries. Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton, who “pass[ed] away the time merely in going to plays every day,” would famously become Shakespeare's major patron; but as he was aged only 8 at the time of Shakespeare's emergence on the scene, the mystery of Shakespeare's education remains unsolved. It is almost certain that Shakespeare received some of his dramatic education “on the job,” performing small roles in the many traveling productions of the day.

Kit Marlowe's Cambridge scholarship was awarded with the expectation that he would become a clergyman, but instead he became a playwright, and, according to many scholars, embraced atheism or perhaps agnosticism. Shakespeare came from a reputedly Catholic family whose faith had to be

publicly closeted in Protestant Elizabethan England. In all of Shakespeare's plays there are many references to pagan gods, but not a single direct reference to either Catholicism or Protestantism. Marlowe's plays — especially *Doctor Faustus* and *The Massacre at Paris*—have anti-Catholic sentiments, but they also do something quite remarkable for the time: Marlowe encouraged the idea that politics and religion should be kept separate. This was a radical and dangerous idea in a time and place where the queen's power was largely based on the belief that she was invested with God's divine authority, and where any whisper of treason could result in a writer getting his hand, ear, or even his life itself cut off. By the end of his own abbreviated life, Marlowe's plays openly condemned the violence being perpetuated on grounds of religious rectitude by the Elizabethan government. Who knows how that sat with Queen Elizabeth, for whose Secret Service Marlowe had for almost 10 years been a spy?

One huge influence that Marlowe brought to the stage was his use of blank verse, meaning verse that is rhythmically harmonic as iambic pentameter, but which does not use the end-rhyme that was so popular in the countless plays written for actors who were moving from company to company. Besides being popular with audiences as an inherited tradition, end-rhymes made “conning” the lines much easier for actors who were performing in several plays concurrently. In the prologue to *Tamburlaine*, Marlowe announces his departure from the “jigging veins of rhyming mother wits.” He found rhyming verse to be too narrow and “sing-song” in nature for the kind of expansive speeches he wanted to write. An example of blank verse can be found in *Tamburlaine*'s lines:

I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains,  
And with my hand turn Fortune's wheel about;  
And sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere  
Than *Tamburlaine* be slain or overcome

Had he used end-rhyme, Marlowe could, for example, have written something like (a Philippa Kelly invention):

And sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere  
Than *Tamburlaine* be slain or ta'en from here.

But he wanted to take audiences out of the comforting constraints of end-rhyme and into the wider realm of philosophical speculation. Shakespeare would emulate Marlowe in this, using blank verse to express his characters' dialogue and inner thoughts. Sometimes he would append blank-verse passages with a rhyming couplet to add an emphatic or conclusory note, as in the final lines of *Hamlet* IV.iv:

...while, to my shame, I see  
The imminent death of twenty thousand men,  
That, for a fantasy and trick of fame,  
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot  
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,  
Which is not tomb enough and continent  
*To hide the slain? O, from this time forth,  
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!*

My thoughts on the relationship between Will and Kit are extensive, but playbill space is short. I'll leave it to Liz Duffy Adams' ingenious and enthralling play, and the acting skills of Dean Linnard and Brady Morales-Woolery, to bring the two writers together as they pen *Henry VI* Part One. What will happen as they get acquainted in a little room in Mistress Plumley's tavern? Will it be rivalry, fear, inspiration, or even love?

*BORN WITH TEETH* by Liz Duffy Adams, directed by Josh Costello. Runs Sep 1-Oct1, 2023 at Aurora Theatre Company. For tickets and further info, visit [auroratheatre.org/BornWithTeeth](http://auroratheatre.org/BornWithTeeth)