The “real” is tenuously understood by academics to be “a fantasy that helps to satisfy a desire for certainty, but one that never carries the certitude of ‘reality’” (Thompson 1054). The Academy Award winning film, *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), mixes historically accurate information with fiction, making it difficult to determine the “real” from the make-believe. Still, “[what] we should like to know is precisely what kind of fiction the film is…what has been done to render Shakespeare not only palatable but apparently irresistible to a contemporary mass-market audience” (Keevak 115). The film follows the love affair of “Will” Shakespeare (Fiennes) and Viola De Lesseps (Paltrow), a relationship that provides the backdrop for the writing of *Romeo and Juliet* (*Rom.*). While Viola acts as Will’s muse throughout the penning of the play, it is “Kit” Marlowe (Everett) who provides the framework within which the play comes to life. The truth is, we don’t know who Marlowe was, nor do we know his *exact* relationship to Shakespeare or to his plays. As Erne points out:

> Which academic would like to start a seminar or a lecture on Marlowe by candidly admitting that we know next to nothing about the playwright? Who was Marlowe? We don’t know. Was he an atheist? We don’t know… Was he homosexual? We don’t know… What is the relationship between the outrageous heroes of Marlowe’s plays and their creator? We don’t know. Clearly, this Marlowe does not sell, neither in theaters, nor in bookshops, nor in seminars. (30)
The ability to “sell” Marlowe is birthed out of his transformation into a mythographic figure, a constructed persona who explains Shakespeare and the plays he penned. Erne goes on to say:

Marlowe’s cultural and, in particular, academic capital results to no slight degree from a mythographic creation with which it is in our best interest to be complicit. Marlowe was an atheist, and people who think differently and subversively matter. Marlowe was a homosexual, and sexual difference matters. So Marlowe matters. (30)

In *Shakespeare in Love*, Marlowe matters because he acts as one half of a Rosetta stone for understanding *Romeo and Juliet* (the other half being Shakespeare’s relationship with Viola). Two examples of how a constructed Marlowe “explains” Shakespeare and makes the apprehension of the “true” interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* possible are his conversation with Will in a tavern concerning the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* and the impact Marlowe’s death has on Will in the writing of the play.

In estimating the merits of English Renaissance drama, Ribner points out that Marlowe and Shakespeare are often considered together as it is commonly believed “Marlowe laid the foundations for Shakespeare’s dramatic artistry” (41). ¹ Ribner does not subscribe to this view and is not alone in his assessment of Marlowe’s influence on Shakespeare. In his review of Robert A. Logan’s book, *Shakespeare’s Marlowe: The Influence of Christopher Marlowe on Shakespeare’s Artistry*, Brandt highlights the fact that Logan, like Ribner, does not claim Marlowe is a “source” for Shakespeare. Instead, he claims that “while the assertion that one playwright has influenced another presumes the perception of a discernible link between their

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¹ Ribner goes on to explain, each of the playwrights represent reactions to Elizabethan life that are entirely opposed to one another with each developing “a poetically valid vision of reality...[concerning] the crucial issue’s of man’s position in the universe at a time in history when old conception of universal harmony, order, and degree were breaking down under the pressure of an awakening and expanding world” (41)
works, it may not be as concrete and as deliberate as the linkage implied by ‘source’ (754). Still, Logan admits that no less than “twenty of Shakespeare’s plays bear the marks of Marlowe’s influence, including eight plays that contain actual quotations from Marlowe’s works” (755). While some academics claim Marlowe as foundational source and others as inspiration (Logan and Ribner), *Shakespeare in Love* sides with the former; Marlowe is a Shakespearean source and by understanding Marlowe we can understand Shakespeare.

In the film, Marlowe acts as unofficial advisor to Will and provides the essential plot for *Romeo and Juliet*: “Romeo is…Italian. Always in and out of love,” Marlowe says thoughtfully, “[until he meets]… Ethel…The daughter of his enemy… His best friend is killed in a duel by Ethel's brother or something. His name is Mercutio.” “Mercutio,” Will repeats, “…good name.”

While there is a total lack of evidence that suggests anything like this ever occurred, neither is there any proof the two playwrights did not share ideas in such a way. This scene provides an explicit working out of the notion that *Shakespeare in Love’s* constructed Marlowe not only laid the foundation for Shakespeare’s later works but also acted as the source for *Romeo and Juliet*. A second example of how Marlowe explains Shakespeare in the film is through his death.

When Will, disguised as Viola’s cousin Wilhelmina, is interrogated by Lord Wessex (Firth) as to whether a playwright has been by Viola’s house, Will answers in the affirmative and names Marlowe the perpetrator. Shortly after, Marlowe is killed. “Ned” Alleyn (Affleck), upon hearing of Marlowe’s death says, “He was the first man among us. A great light has gone out,” and Will, thinking the infelicitous information given to Lord Wessex the cause of Marlowe’s demise laments, “Oh…what have I done?... It was I who killed him!... God forgive me!” Only later does Will discover that Lord Wessex had nothing to do with Marlowe’s death. Ned explains, “it was a tavern brawl…Marlowe attacked, and got his own knife in the eye. A quarrel

\[2\] At the time Marlowe gives Will advice on the play; it is titled *Romeo and Ethel the Pirate's Daughter*. 
about the bill.” This explanation of Marlowe’s death echoes the official report given by the Coroner’s Inquisition: “Marlowe lost his temper over the issue of the payment of some bill and attacked Frizer, who, in self-defense, stabbed Marlowe with a dagger, inflicting on him ‘a mortal wound over his right eye of the depth of two inches & of the width of one inch’” (Erne 32). However, biographers such as Nicholl and Tannenbaum have often doubted the sincerity of this report and have developed alternative theories citing political intrigue, conspiracy, and assassination as the “true” causes of Marlowe’s death.

Whether the film espoused the traditional view of Marlowe’s death or one of the more fanciful explanations matters little. The remorse Will feels in thinking he is the cause of Marlowe’s death is the overriding concern of Shakespeare in Love. The thought that Marlowe’s death is on Will’s hands coupled with the acknowledgement that he and Viola cannot be together introduces a level of depression that allows for Romeo and Juliet to be written as a tragedy and not a comedy. Here again, we see how a constructed Marlowe “explains” Shakespeare and guides the writing of Romeo and Juliet.

As Roland Barthes points out in his essay “The Death of the Author” (1968), academic criticism has typically focused on “the man and his work.”

The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism…the explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always, in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, the voice of a single person, the author “confiding” in us. (1322) Barthes’s commentary on the obsession with the author as the source of a definitive explanation of a text is an idea that continues to hold sway but is markedly absent in Shakespeare in Love.
Instead, Will’s life forms the basis for a “tissue of quotations” that serves to create *Romeo and Juliet* with Marlowe and Viola being the principle architects in creating the structure on which the play is built. In *Constructing Christopher Marlowe*, J. T. Parnell writes, “Teasingly elliptical and suggestive as it may be, the documentary evidence neither supports the common-places about Marlowe’s involvement in espionage, his alleged atheism and homosexuality, nor adds up to anything like a meaningful biography” (qtd. in Erne 50). Similarly, Downie points out in “Marlowe: Facts and Fictions,” that “we know next to nothing about Christopher Marlowe. When we speak or write about him, we are really referring to a construct called ‘Marlowe’” (qtd. in Erne 50). The Marlowe construct presented in *Shakespeare in Love* is attractive, well regarded by his contemporaries, and generously offers advice to a struggling Shakespeare. This constructed Marlowe, when combined with Will’s romantic affair with Viola, provide a unique interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* that is so convincing, so “palatable,” that we want to believe it’s true.

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3 Barthes refers to the text, in this case *Romeo and Juliet*, as a “multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend, and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture.” *Shakespeare in Love* certainly espouses this notion.
Works Cited


