Marlowe's Lucan
Winding-sheets and Scattered Leaves
Sarah Wall-Randell

Marlowe was a poet whose contemporaries enjoyed imagining him dead. Not only in the more or less conventional poetic epitaphs offered for him by Peele, Drayton, and others on the occasion of his early death in 1593, but also in less expected and more fantastical visions in the years that followed, those who knew him and his work called forth his posthumous presence in text. Shakespeare, of course, pays Marlowe the tribute of a direct quotation, when the lovelorn Phoebe in *As You Like It* muses 'Dead Shepheard, now I find thy saw of might, / Who euer lou'd, that lou'd not at first sight?' (1623, R4^v). With Phoebe's rustic, reverent invocation of *Hero and Leander* and of its author, Shakespeare makes Marlowe a poet known in Arden, and also, as many have interpreted this reference, dead in Arden.[1] Meanwhile, George Chapman, in the midst of his 1598 continuation of *Hero and Leander*, includes a remarkable, heated passage in which he calls upon the Muses' 'strangely-intellectuall fire' of inspiration to carry him to where Marlowe's 'free soule' dwells by their spring (F4^v). As Miriam Jacobson has observed, Chapman envisions a rapturous, sensual communion with Marlowe's soul, in which he imagines Marlowe bequeathing him the unfinished text of *Hero and Leander*, with the act of transfer figured as a toast or 'pledge' drunk in wine (G1^r), in exchange for Chapman's willingness to carry Marlowe's poetic child to full term: 'Tell it [Marlowe's soul] how much his late desires I tender, / (If yet it know not)', Chapman breathes, 'and to light surrender / My soules darke offspring' (G1^r; Jacobson, 183–4). In a way, Chapman takes two of the notorious aspects of Marlowe's life and death – drinking and sex – and transforms them into a drama of poetic immortality through posthumous collaboration.

---

[1] See, however, Adam Hooks (Chapter 7, this volume) for a provocative dissent from the assumption that Marlowe is the 'Shepherd' or that the *Hero* quotation is elegiac.

Even more elaborate than Shakespeare's dead shepherd or Chapman's passionate ghost, however, is the fantasy of the posthumous Marlowe contained in a prefatory epistle by the publisher Thomas Thorpe, attached to the 1600 first printing of Marlowe's translation of the first book of Lucan's first-century epic *The Civil War*. In this, the first publication to bear the stationer's name, Thorpe, who of course would later become the publisher of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, addresses his dedication to Edward Blount, his fellow-stationer, who had published *Hero and Leander* two years previously, and who seems to have at one time held the copyright to Marlowe's Lucan translation.[2] Thorpe's reference to a conjuring circle and to raising the dead within it must be a nod at Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, which, although not yet printed, had been staged through most of the 1590s. So this paratext to the Lucan translation is, viewed from one angle, a comic moment built around Marlowe's reputation as a playwright, in striking contrast to the dark foreboding and violence of Lucan's poem and to Marlowe's work here as a translator of Latin verse.[3] Generically, Thorpe is parodying the custom of dedications to noble patrons. As Sonia Massai notes, Blount was especially prone as a publisher to feature extravagantly flattering epistles to patrons, signed by himself, in his books (Massai, 2013, 133–8; see also Taylor, 2004), including his dedication of *Hero and Leander* to Sir Thomas Walsingham, in which he imagines *Hero* as Marlowe's posthumous child taking its 'first breath' in the 'gentle aire of your liking' (A2ᵛ). The dedication to *Lucan's First Book* jocularly transfers Blount into the role of the kind of patron Blount typically adulated and expresses Thorpe's thanks to Blount for his apparent part in enabling Thorpe to come into possession of the Lucan copy. At the same time, it records the complex circumstances of textual transmission itself, in language that points to the potential of print to convey words across time, as well as the possibility of print's failure to secure immortality. In this chapter, I want to suggest that Thorpe's dedication, working in combination with aspects of Marlowe's translation, points to important questions that early modern readers and writers had about the transmission of texts across time, and the robustness or fragility of print as a medium for conveying the matter of poetry and securing poetic fame.

---

[2] Thorpe was here neither the printer nor the distributor of the Lucan translation, but presumably the agent who brought copy, printer, and distributor together. On how to interpret the limited information available about the copyright history of the Lucan translation, see Kiséry, 2012, 364–71; see also Greg, 1944, 170–3, and Rostenberg, 51–2.

[3] Greg, on the other hand, read the dedication not as comedy but as invective (1944, 170–1).

'Rotten ragges' and Poetic Monuments

Thorpe begins his appeal to his 'patron' with an uncanny image, asking the reader to imagine Marlowe's spirit as a restless ghost:

> *BLount*: I purpose to be blu[n]t with you, & out of my dullnesse to encounter you with a Dedication in the memory of that pure Elementall wit *Chr. Marlow*; whose ghoast or *Genius* is to be seene walke the *Churchyard* in (at the least) three or foure sheets. Me thinks you should presently looke wilde now, and growe humorously frantique vpon the tast of it. Well, least you should, let mee tell you. This spirit was sometime a familiar of your own, *Lucans first booke translated*; which (in regard of your old right in it) I have rais'd in the circle of your Patronage. (A2ʳ)[4]

In the dedication, Thorpe brings back the dead shepherd in a material, textual form: Marlowe's ghost walks among the booksellers' stalls of St. Paul's Churchyard, the shroud that would have wrapped a sixteenth-century corpse transposed into multiple 'sheets' of paper that travel through the printing press and become books, the matter and *raison d'être* of the district. András Kiséry has noted the deep historical resonance in Thorpe's words of the 1549 clearing of the charnel house of St. Paul's, in which the accumulated bones of generations of Londoners, no longer relevant to Reformed thinking about the relationship between the living and the dead, were removed from the cathedral's vault and dumped in Finsbury Fields, and the chapel above them demolished, making way for commercial development, including the bookshops for which the district of St. Paul's would become famous. Kiséry situates Thorpe's invocation of Marlowe's ghost, clad in the very substance of the book trade, within an awareness of the many uneasy spirits to whom those dispersed bones belonged, who might be wandering among the bookshops of the church-yard in 1600 without a resting place (2012, 372–3).

---

[4] Notably, Thorpe's invocation of a walking ghost to accompany *Lucan's First Book* suggests that he was an attentive reader of the text itself, which features several fugitive spirits and opened graves. The poem begins with a lament that the Romans waste time on civil war while more pressing matters go unresolved and 'slaughtered *Crassus* ghost walks vnreueng'd' (B1ʳ). Later, as dark portents multiply in the streets of Rome, '*Sylla's* ghost / Was seene to walke, singing sad Oracles, / And *Marius* head aboue cold *Tav'ron* peering / (His graue broke open) did affright the Boores' (D3ʳ). Indeed, Thorpe as well as Blount seem to have been readers of great discernment, to judge by the writers they published: Shakespeare, Jonson, Chapman, Lyly, Montaigne, Cervantes, and others. Recent work by scholars such as Zachary Lesser and Massai has invited us to think more deeply about the work of publishers as readers, interpreters, and rhetorical shapers of literary texts, not just mechanical producers. Thorpe here provides an example of such careful, curatorial reading. For more on Blount's epistle, and on Blount's and Thorpe's work in the shaping of Marlowe's memory and the construction of a literary community in early modern London, see Hooks (Chapter 7, this volume) and Kiséry (Chapter 11, this volume).

Sheets, then; but why 'three or four'? Editors and scholars have proposed a remarkable variety of answers. W. W. Greg thought Thorpe could be referring deprecatingly to 'the slender bulk' of Blount's 1598 edition of *Hero and Leander*, with 'three or four sheets' meant to indicate meager length, or, the possibility Greg thought more likely, to 'the manuscript of the Lucan walking the Churchyard in search of a publisher' (1944, 171). Roma Gill glosses the 'three or four sheets' as a breezily inexact synecdoche for Marlowe's titles then in print (1987, 246); J. A. Downie reads the phrase similarly and takes it as a reminder that Marlowe was known at this point only for a small oeuvre (28). David Kathman also reads the sheets as a synecdochal bibliography, but as standing particularly for those works by Marlowe first published after his death (2004). In his popular account of Marlowe's murder, Charles Nicholl explains the sheets as the three editions of *Hero* then extant (1598 by Blount, 1598 by Linley, and 1600 by Flasket; Nicholl, 70). Kiséry, most recently, has read them as the four Marlowe publications offered for sale by 1600 at the Black Bear bookshop (2012, 365).

I suggest, however, that Thorpe's 'three or four sheets' may instead, or also, describe, in a strikingly accurate and literal way, the quantity of paper needed to print each copy of the Lucan translation itself, and thus that Thorpe is asking us to imagine Marlowe's ghost dressed in this particular text. *Lucan's First Book*, as Fredson Bowers noted, is a 'quarto-form octavo', organized like a quarto in four-leaf signatures, but with the chain-lines of the paper running vertically, as would be expected in an octavo, revealing that it was printed on half-sheets (1981, 275). These were produced by cutting nonstandard paper, larger and squarer than the typical sizes used for printing in England in the sixteenth century, into two.[5] *Lucan* consists of fifteen leaves (a possible, blank sixteenth leaf is now missing from all four of the extant copies), so it would be logical to assume that it had been printed using four of these half-sheets of paper. But 'three or four' is arguably even more apt, because *Lucan* consists of a two-leaf unit for the title page and Thorpe's dedication (likely printed last), followed by the text of the poem itself in three four-leaf units plus a final, single leaf (A^2 B-D^4 E^1). As a publisher who would have had to negotiate with printers over the cost and quantity of paper necessary to produce an edition, Thorpe would surely have been aware of the sheet-count of the *Lucan*,

---

[5] Advice and consultation provided by David Whitesell, for which I am most grateful, were essential to my understanding of the *Lucan* imposition, here and throughout this paragraph. Any errors that remain in my analysis are my own.

and his 'three or four' describes its imposition with remarkable fitness: three complete (half) sheets, B, C, and D, plus the equivalent of another sheet in two separate parts, A and E, which may or may not have originally been one, and which (because of the missing final leaf) may or may not add up to the full area of a sheet: thus, indeed, more than three, but not quite four. So Marlowe's ghost wears the Lucan translation, the very text Thorpe is presenting and we are now reading, as a winding-sheet. The ghost brings Marlowe's poetry with it, out of death's undiscovered country, wearing the lines' material support, that which enables them to live beyond their author's brief mortal span, as its grave-clothes.

The relationship between winding-sheets and paper sheets in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries may begin with a paradox: since their owners never finished using them, never wore them out, winding-sheets were perhaps the only category of household or personal linen that would *not* have ended up sold to a ragpicker to be turned into paper.[6] But Thorpe's play on 'sheets' nevertheless goes much deeper than a throwaway pun. Much evidence suggests that winding-sheets in the sixteenth century (also called shrouds, grave-clothes, or cerecloths), even those for people of modest means, were almost always made of linen, like the used garments and other textiles that were ultimately turned into paper.[7] The shroud was often a bedsheet from the household's stock (Litten, 71) or could be commissioned specially: Claire Gittings cites numerous documentary records of early modern funeral accounts showing charges for sheets of 'holland' or 'osnaburg', terms for different qualities and kinds of linen (Gittings, 111–13). A powerful testimony to the strength and persistence of the English preference for linen in grave-clothes is encoded in the Act for Burying in Woollen of 1666, which attempted to thwart the custom, decreeing that 'Noe person or persons whatsoever shall be buryed in any Shirt Shift or Sheete made of or mingled with Flax Hempe, Silk, Haire, Gold or Silver or other than what shall be made of Wooll onely' (Raithby, 598). A revised version in 1677–8 imposed a fine of £5 for those who defied it and clarified that the purpose of the act was specifically 'for lessening the Importation of Linnen from beyond the Seas and the encouragement of the Wollen and Paper Manufactures of the Kingdome' (Raithby, 885–6). The need for a fine to give teeth to the law clearly points to widespread disobedience; even after the establishment of the

---

[6] David Cressy notes that linen had enough value that records exist of shrouds having been stolen from new graves, so perhaps it is not unequivocally true that no shrouds actually became paper (431).

[7] The custom of using linen shrouds may have been influenced by the contemporary belief that Christ was buried in linen (Cox, 1998, 115).

penalty, those with means still preferred to flout the law and use linen (Gittings, 113).

As Joshua Calhoun has shown, poets and readers alike in the period remained constantly aware of paper's origin in linen fabric and clothes' future as paper (Calhoun, 2011b, 333–7). Calhoun cites Henry Vaughan, who, in his lyric 'The Book', celebrates God's omniscience that extends to the histories of inanimate objects such as paper: 'Thou knew'st this *papyr* … Before 'twas *drest* or *spun*, and when / Made *linen*, who did *wear* it then' (Vaughan, 1655, G8ᵛ; qtd. in Calhoun, 2011b, 329). On paper and grave-clothes specifically, we might turn, perhaps unsurprisingly, to Donne, who famously commissioned a memorial statue of himself in his winding-sheet, for a poetic pairing of page and shroud in the 'Funerall Elegie' for Elizabeth Drury (1611):

> Can these memorials, ragges of paper, giue
> Life to that name, by which name they must liue? . . . .
> And can shee, who no longer would be shee,
> Being such a Tabernacle, stoope to bee
> In paper wrap't; Or, when she would not lie
> In such a house, dwell in an Elegie?   (B7ʳ)

Paper sheets and winding-sheets, then, are linked through more than name only; readers in the period could scarcely have missed the fact that books and shrouds were quite literally cut from the same cloth.

In usual early modern English burial practice, the corpse was put naked into the winding-sheet, which was gathered and tied at the head and foot but not otherwise secured, so as not to inhibit the movement of the body on the day of Resurrection (Gittings, 112): shrouds were made for walking.[8] Until then, of course, body and winding-sheet decayed together. The fact of that co-decomposition perhaps further deepens the paradoxical association between shrouds and paper. Material disintegration is a crucial part of the process of converting cloth into paper. This work of decay begins with wearing, as a new garment slowly becomes, through use, a rag, and continues in the paper mill, where washed and sorted linen rags were placed in a covered vat or bin, soaked in water, and left to decompose for a period of weeks, fermenting and even growing fungus. This process, called 'retting', rendered the fibers softer and more easily broken down

---

[8] Julian Litten notes that Donne's own famous funeral monument, which shows the poet in a dynamic, standing position, his arms and legs seemingly beginning to stir, 'set a fashion for "resurrection" figures', funeral statuary that portrayed the dead stepping forward as if greeting Christ on Judgment Day (66).

when they went into the stamper to be turned into pulp (Hunter, 1978, 154; Barrett). Poets as well as papermakers were aware of the role of decay in papermaking; Thomas Churchyard, whose 1588 poem 'A Description and Plain Discourse of Paper' was dedicated to Sir Walter Raleigh, evokes the 'sundry sec[r]ete' processes through which the paper mill 'makes rotten ragges, to yeelde a thickned froth' that is 'then flong on frame, and hangd to dry' (D1ᵛ), becoming the 'sheets' that fed the printing press and dress Marlowe's ghost. In a convincing account of paper as an 'ecosystem in which decay and renewal are symbiotic' (2011a, 65), Calhoun has argued that early modern readers' knowledge of papermaking practices allows poets to respond generatively to the problem of human mortality with a model in which it is the decomposition of linen fibers that creates the possibility, not only of their own recomposition as paper but also of the creating and preserving of human art on that paper (2011a, 67–70). Looked at from this angle, the sheets that wrap Marlowe's ghost in Thorpe's preface are the promise of the poet's rebirth in paper, even as his body lies in the grave; paper is the material resurrection of art, the medium for the maker's immaterial escape from the ravages of time.[9] 'So long as men can breathe or eyes can see', Shakespeare promises the addressee of the *Sonnets*, 'So long liues this, and this giues life to thee' (1609, B4ᵛ): 'this' is the page, the paper on which his lines are printed, offering, as Calhoun puts it, 'one way to convert biological decay into textual production' (2011a, 65).

For the vegetable matter of paper, then, decay is the beginning of renewal; this is its particular virtue, in contrast to human bodies, which only decay, irrecoverably, at least until the day of Resurrection. But this distinction between bodies and paper may be less absolute than it first appears, and in their entwining we can see an even more profound connection between paper and grave-clothes. The precise chemistry of retting in early modern papermaking is not fully understood. The rettery would have its own population of ambient microoganisms that helped break down the linen fibers, like a bakery in which yeast cultures are established; some papermakers also added calibrated amounts of lime to assist the retting (Barrett). At the same time, other substances present in the old clothes and sheets, mortal traces of the human bodies that wore the garments, such as skin cells, sebum, and sweat, may have been part of what rotted. Timothy Barrett proposes the following:

---

[9] Indeed, the durability of pre-1800 linen rag paper is impressive, vastly exceeding that of later wood-pulp papers.

> It is worth exploring the role washing soaps, diet, and personal hygiene may
> have played in affecting the nature of these old hempen and linen rags before
> they came to the paper mills … [R]esidual components in the old rags
> themselves may have played a key role in the ability of a pile of rags to
> support enzyme-secreting organism growth in a relatively short time.

The presence of sweat in the old clothes may be hinted at by
Churchyard, as he describes the work of the paper mill:

> For cloth and silke, and mettalles fine or bace,
> are wrought of thinges, that haue a substance great,
> This [paper] findeth form, and stampe in straunger cace,
> as Water mill, made rags and shreds to sweate.   (D2ʳ)

Pounded by the stamping hammers of the mill, the 'rags and shreds' of
clothing themselves 'sweate', or undergo distress, perhaps reminding the
reader of the human sweat that might have clung to their weave. Did
residues of the human body in the fibers of discarded clothes, traces of
animal decay, find their way into, and in fact enable, the process of
vegetable renewal that resulted in paper? Churchyard's phrase 'in straunger
case' is ambiguous; in addition to 'in a stranger way', might it also, taking
advantage of the early modern sense of 'case' as 'an item of clothing; an
outfit' (*OED* case n²), mean 'from a stranger's garments', conjuring the
memory of the unknown former owner, now personally absent but still
physically, chemically present in the linen?[10] If we allow that the generative
recycling of flax into paper may have depended on the decay of human
remains within the fibers, we may begin to see all paper, all sheets, as
shrouds, with mortality embedded in their very grain.

There are, then, substantial reasons for Thorpe to associate books with
shrouds, and to imagine Marlowe, dead too soon, yet so present in his
works and in the minds of his contemporaries, as a fugitive from the grave.
It is worth pausing a moment, however, to consider the implications of
Thorpe's rhetoric of the departed author as a ghost, and the text as his
clinging, decayed, and decaying shroud, made from paper that itself
contains the traces of human mortality, and how different they are from
the typical early modern imagery of what happens when poets die and how
their works preserve them. 'Thou art a Moniment, without a tombe', says
Jonson in the First Folio, 'And art aliue still, while thy Booke doth liue /
And we haue wits to read, and praise to giue' (A4ᵛ). Shakespeare himself

---

[10]   The text of Churchyard's poem included in John Nichols's *The Progresses and Public Processions of
       Queen Elizabeth* (1823) has been amended to read 'in a straunger's cace', apparently reflecting
       Nichols's view that the line refers to clothes (2.596).

had of course struck this triumphant note in the *Sonnets*: 'Not marble, nor the guilded monument, / Of princes shall out-liue this powrefull rime' (D4ʳ). The book is the monument; the lines are eternal, immortal, as good as carved in stone. There may be no need even for a plinth, when the book is so substantial and durable. 'WHat neede my *Shakespeare* for his honor'd bones, / The labour of an *Age*, in piled stones', asks Milton in the Second Folio:

> [E]ach part,
> Hath from the leaves of thy unvalued Booke,
> Those Delphicke Lines with deepe Impression tooke
> Then thou our fancy of her selfe bereaving,
> Dost make us Marble with too much conceiving (A5ʳ)

The poet's reputation, preserved in the book, is deeply impressed and solid as rock. *Liber longus, vita brevis*: the textual legacy of the poet, in this conventional view, is his material remnant when his body dematerializes and turns to dust. Such a narrative grants to paper the ability to convey into readers' minds memories and admiration that have the firmness and permanence of stone. But what if the printed legacy does not lie as still and firm as marble; what if, as here, the remnant is a revenant? Perhaps, for comparison, we should put Marlowe beside another poet who died too young; we might note Henry Constable's first 'Sonnet to Sir Philip Sidney's Soul', part of the prefatory material to the 1595 printing of Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*. Constable praises 'thy song, / Which nowe with ioyfull notes thou sing'st, among / The Angel-Quiristers of heau'nly skyes' (A2ʳ). Sidney is safely sitting among the angels, having resolved restless love songs into a divine harmony, while Chapman's Marlowe is drinking wine by the Muses' spring; but Thorpe's Marlowe, by contrast, is an unquiet ghost, still stalking this world, clad in rustling, crumbling, grave-dank paper sheets.

The dream of poetic fame is that textual greatness transcends time, and that the voices of the past can speak to us through written media: that their impression in paper makes words last forever. But texts can also be lost, or corrupted, or fragmented. Poets such as Marlowe, who only translated one of the ten books of the *Civil War*, and indeed Lucan, who planned a twelve-book epic but only wrote ten, can die (Marlowe at twenty-nine, Lucan at twenty-five) before their work is complete, whole volumes of their intentions lost forever. Marlowe's translation should be a perfect example of the humanist revival endeavor, proving that texts really do live forever: as Laurie Maguire describes it, the 'project of bringing the dead back to life:

recovering the Romans, re-membering the Greeks' (2000, 147). Instead, I want to argue here, Thorpe's odd, seemingly throwaway image of Marlowe's ghost, wound in the sheets of his poem, highlights the vulnerable and tentative aspect of the posthumous book. Thorpe's vision of the ghost in sheets can be read as an alternative, darker model of how early modern readers thought about textual survival and textual peril, especially but not only from antiquity to the present. Poetic immortality, for Marlowe or Lucan, does not always coalesce safely into marble monuments of fame; sometimes, even when the books exist, their survival is uncertain. Instead of triumphant claims for eternal glory through publication, Thorpe offers a model of books as subject to fragmentation, decay, and loss, and he reminds us that, as with paper itself, mortal corruption may reside in their very material.

'Ydle leavs': Sibyls and Textual Rupture

In conjuring the specter of textual decay, Thorpe may be responding to similar concerns that emerge in Marlowe's translation. One way in which Marlowe's text itself engages with the question of the durability or fragility of books, I will argue, is through crucial references to the Classical Sibyls and their well-known prophetic books, inserted into the narrative by Marlowe where they are not explicitly present in Lucan, which signal Marlowe's own awareness of the shadow of loss behind the glory of the everlasting textual monument.

The Renaissance had inherited from antiquity a pervasive association between the Sibyls and the fragility and vulnerability of text as a medium for transmitting meaning and fame across time. In the *Aeneid*, which most would set alongside the *Metamorphoses* as the most central works of all Latin poetry to the English Renaissance, Virgil has Helenus describe to Aeneas the cave of the Cumaean Sibyl, and the insecure materiality of her prophecies. The Sibyl writes her 'signs and symbols' on leaves but then abandons them to be taken and scattered by the winds: 'when at the turn of a hinge a light breeze has stirred them, and the open door has scattered the tender foliage, never thereafter does she care to catch them ... nor to recover their places and unite the verses; inquirers depart no wiser than they came' (Virgil, 403). Later, when Aeneas encounters the Sibyl directly in Book 6, he remembers Helenus's words and sternly instructs her to speak her prophecy to him instead of writing it down: here orality is more reliable as a medium of transmission than written text. Ultimately, however, the Sibyl's words are contained and preserved within books that

become prized possessions of the Roman state. In Sir John Harington's stand-alone translation of Book 6 (prepared by him in manuscript as a gift for James I's son Prince Henry in 1604),[11] Aeneas promises to collect and venerate the Sibyl's utterances:

> My nacion shall thy worthy prayse reherse
> and keep records of all thy learned speech,
> this sole I crave, sownd owt thy sacred verse
> and cast not all away I thee beseeche
> whear skattring wynds may all the words reverse
> wrytt but in ydle leavs of brittle beeche.   (Cauchi, 10)

Harington's marginal note in the manuscript here is as follows:

The Romans made great accownt of Sybillas books, in which were strawng prophecies as I note heerafter evn of our savyor Chryste. yt is sayd that one of the Sybills wch lyvd in the tyme of Tarquinius offrd ix of her books of prophecyes to the sayd Tarquin at the pryce of many thowsand crowns, but he sayd they wear to deer, then she burned 3 of them & offerd the other six, which he rejecting at the same price in some skornfull fashion she burnt 3 more of them, and then for the last 3 demawnded her first pryce at wch the king amazed, supposing thear wear rare secrets in them did consent to her pryce: thease bookes wear kept with great ceremony, and in any extraordinary calamyty or dawnger of ye citty Libri Sibillini the books of sybill wear lookt into.   (11)

In this legend, for which Harington's source may have been the *Attic Nights*, the commonplace book of Aullus Gellius (ca. 180 CE), the Sibyl teaches Tarquin to value the archive of her prophecies with an economics of scarcity; at the same time, she engages in a terrifying demonstration of the vulnerability of books to destruction. (The flammability of books is a vulnerability that might have been particularly present in Thorpe's mind as he published Marlowe's Lucan, since surreptitiously printed copies of Marlowe's other translation of Latin poetry *Certain of Ovid's Elegies* were ordered to be burned in 1599 under the Bishops' Ban.)

It was not just wind and fire that could endanger Sibylline texts, as early modern readers knew, but also time. The *Oracula Sibyllina*, a corpus of apocalyptic prophecies attributed to the Sibyls, was available to a wide sixteenth-century European readership in Latin editions. Authorized by Lactantius, Augustine, and other early Christian writers, and valued for

---

[11] Harington says he chose Book 6 to translate because it is the book of the *Aeneid* most referred to in St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* (Cauchi, 1); Augustine's use of Virgil has much to do with his own interest in the Sibyls.

passages that seem to predict the birth of Christ and to elucidate the book of Revelation, the *Oracula Sibyllina* were believed by many learned readers to have been passed down in a direct scribal lineage from the books the Cumaean Sibyl sold to Tarquin.[12] Elizabethan writers including Sheltco à Geveren (*Of the End of this World, and the Second Coming of Christ* [1577]), John Napier (*A Plain Discovery of the Whole Revelation of Saint Iohn* [1593]), and John Carpenter (*A Preparative to Contentation* [1597]) quoted extensively in English from the Sibylline oracles (Bauckham, 169–70), and John Foxe, in his *Acts and Monuments* (1570), credits them with foreseeing the invention of the printing press, God's providential gift to Protestantism (837). Yet by the end of the sixteenth century, doubts about their authenticity that had always shadowed the Sybilline prophecies had begun to dominate learned discourse with new cogency, and eventually to spread outward to public opinion. In his 1599 Latin edition of the *Oracula Sibyllina*, the German scholar Johannes Opsopoeus conclusively discredited the oracles as a post-Classical forgery, using the philological skills and new awareness of the shape of history that had been sharpened through Renaissance humanistic textual practices (Grafton, 172–7). Isaac Casaubon, in his book [*D*]*e rebus sacris et ecclesiastici* (1614) disproving the antiquity of the *Corpus Hermeticum,* another supposedly ancient collection of wisdom, included Opsopoeus's debunking of the *Oracula*. In *The History of the World* (1614), Raleigh recounts his disillusionment with the Sibylline prophecies:

> Of the *Sybilline* praedictions I haue sometimes thought reuerendlie: though not knowing what they were (as I thinke, few men know) yet following the common beleefe and good authoritie. But . . . that learned and excellent worke of master *Casaubon* . . . did altogether free me from mine errour; making it apparent, That . . . those prophecies of *Sibyl*, wherein *Christ* so plainely was forshewed . . . were no better than counterfeited peeces. (Nnnnnn5^r)

Thus, in the time when Marlowe was making his translation of the *Civil War*, as part of a growing humanist awareness of the material vulnerability of ancient texts to corruption and error, Sibyls and Sibylline oracles tipped from cultural centrality to cultural marginality. In this way, the entirety of the extant *Oracula Sibyllina* was in a sense, in the early seventeenth century, in the process of being lost to early modern culture. The actual text remained, but readers' access to ancient voices, that textual avenue to the divine, to antiquity, and to the cultural legacy of Rome, was itself being

---

[12] See Raybould, 17–31, and Malay, 4–53.

scattered, like the Sibyl's leaves. The Sibyl, now as always, was associated with texts that are fragile, unreliable, in jeopardy, and lost.

The context of the association between Sibyls and textual impermanence informs a reading of *Lucan's First Book* in ways that I argue are deeply resonant. The relevance of prophecy and access to divine admonition is clear in *The Civil War*, and in Marlowe's translation. As Caesar and his army approach Rome, 'apparant signes arose, / Strange sights appear'd, the angry threatning gods / Fill'd both the earth and seas with prodegies' (D2ʳ), spurring the citizens' panic. Animals speak, comets blaze, ghosts walk; the prophets are summoned to explain, and a bull sacrificed by an augur turns out to have hideous, misshapen entrails. The final words spoken in the book are those of a 'Matron', an ordinary woman, a kind of lay sibyl, who is possessed by Apollo and runs through the streets helplessly narrating her visions of the wars to come, then collapses, 'tir'd with fury' (E1ʳ).

Rendering this apocalyptic cityscape into English, Marlowe clarifies and highlights two specific references to the Sibyl that are not explicitly present in Lucan's Latin. Amid the turmoil, Lucan has the people talking among themselves of the prophecies of the 'Cumaean' (ll. 564–5), while the Galli, the self-castrated, transvestite priests of the goddess Cybele, wail dire portents (ll. 566–7). Marlowe's rendering merges the two and changes 'Cumaean' to the more explicit Sibyl: Lucan's Galli become '*Sibils* priests', who, 'Curling their bloudy lockes, howle dreadfull things' (D3ʳ). Soon after, as the Roman city leaders attempt a consultation with the gods, priests and seers gather, including the official keepers of the secret prophecies, as well as again the devotees of Cybele. Marlowe turns Lucan's 'qui fata deum secretaque carmina servant' (l. 599), 'those who preserve the utterances of the gods and the secret songs' (Lucan, 1928, 47), into 'they that keep and read *Sibylla's* secret works' (D3ᵛ). Thus again Marlowe specifies the Sibyl by name as the intermediary for the gods and makes clear that it is written works, not simply songs, that carry the prophecy; our knowledge of what happens to written documents in the Sibyl's possession – scattering and burning – must surely color our reading. Thanks to Thorpe's dedication, the *Civil War* comes to the reader accompanied by Marlowe's ghost, an emblem of disorder, who tells us that even now, in the age when new knowledge of the classics and the new technology of print were making the past live again, all that is material is still subject to loss.

In both cases, importantly, Marlowe has an immediate source at hand for the Sibyl's name. As Roma Gill has shown, Marlowe must have used a particular 1551 edition of Lucan, published in Frankfurt, that thickly frames the text of the poem with columns of commentary by Giovanni Sulpizio, or

Sulpitius, and Phillipo Beroaldo, Classical scholars of the Italian quattro-
cento. As Gill demonstrates, Marlowe is so heavily indebted to Sulpitius and
Beroaldo that at times he is translating directly from the commentary, not
from the text (Gill, 1973, 406); by setting Marlowe's Lucan alongside this
edition, we can reconstruct Marlowe's reading and thinking in a way that is
almost uncanny, almost ghostly. At both junctures in which he mentions the
Sibyl by name, replacing an allusion or ambivalence in Lucan, Marlowe
found her in the notes in this edition. Beroaldo clarifies the first passage,
with its one-word reference to the 'Cumaean', as 'Sibyllina', and gives
a concise version of the story of Tarquin and the burned books, with
references to Pliny and Lactantius (Sulpitius, D4ʳ). In the second passage,
Sulpitius glosses Lucan's reference to the Quindecimviri and includes
'deorum in libris Sibyllinis contenta' (Sulpitius, D5ʳ), which apparently led
Marlowe to specify that the divine utterances are '*Sibyllas* secret
works' (D3v).

Marlowe's choice to place an increased emphasis on the Sibyl in his
translation, likely a response to English interest in Sibylline prophecies, at
the same time sets up readers like Thorpe, and like us, to think in Sibylline
terms: the terms of textual materiality and textual fragility. This repeated
surfacing of the Sibyl in Marlowe's text, floating up from the fifteenth-
century notes in this mid-sixteenth-century edition of Lucan, to the page
of Marlowe's poem, itself printed on the cusp of the seventeenth century,
represents, at first, a triumph of textual preservation. Marlowe's ability to
access this ancient epic and the history of commentary on it, to read
Lucan's millennium-old text printed in crisp type and neatly framed by
accumulated editorial wisdom, proves that poetry survives and that the
poet's name, carried forward in the pages of his books, lives forever.
The effect of her appearances in the text, however – the effect on
Marlowe's readers, then and now – is slightly more complicated. To talk
about Sibyls and their scattered leaves is always to talk about material
textuality and its vulnerability to fragmentation and loss; the early modern
association between the Sibyl and textual destruction is evident in
Beroaldi's inclusion of the Tarquin story in his notes on Lucan.
Meanwhile, the erosion of scholarly confidence in the *Oracula Sibyllina*
during the sixteenth century meant that the Sibyl's own ancient texts were
being exposed as having fallen victim to corruption. Somewhere the text
had gone wrong in the millennium between the guardianship of the
Quindecimviri and the printing press, casting into doubt the whole idea
of the integrity of the textual tradition, and the whole authority of material
containers, parchment, paper, ink, and type, to guard and preserve either

ancient divine revelations or the poems of the Muses' modern darlings, such as Marlowe.

There was no guarantee when Thorpe wrote to Blount in 1600 that the works of 'that pure Elementall wit *Chr. Marlow*' would survive into the future. Thorpe, unlike Chapman, pointedly avoids a vision of the late poet entering the company of the immortals, his name to live forever in fame. Instead he offers an uncanny image of a ghost who is all too material, dressed in grave-clothes, and all too present in the now, rather than transcending time in an unbroken channel between ancient Rome and the future of humanity. Whether of Sibyls or poets, written words can become dust and ashes. The sheets of the dead – decaying, disintegrating – form an emblem, not always of continuity with the past and future, not always of the glorious potential of the printed monument, but sometimes of rupture, loss, oblivion.