

Henry Irving Speech at Marlowe Memorial Unveiling 16/9/1891

We are here today to pay tribute to a great memory and repair a great omission. England has always set much store by men who helped to save the State in the supreme crisis of her history. The statesmen and warriors of the Elizabethan times have never lacked a grateful recognition from their descendants. The literature which was the flower and crown of that period of our National growth has remained our chief glory to these days, and the works of its greatest representative are the most enduring possessions of all who speak the English tongue. Of Shakespeare there are memorials which attest at almost every turn of our daily lives our reverence for his surpassing genius. But to 'til today we have presented to the world no conspicuous symbol of our enormous debt to a man who was contemporary with Shakespeare and in one sense his tutor, and was the first to employ with a master hand the greatest instrument of our language. It was natural enough that the fame of Christopher Marlowe would be overshadowed by that of William Shakespeare, but it is some discredit to Englishmen that the fine sense of Marlowe's gifts and services to letters, which scholars have always had, have hitherto found no substantial shape in some trophy for the acclamation of the world. (Hear hear!).

Today this long oversight has been repaired. (Hear hear!). Here, in the birthplace of Marlowe, rich as it is in the commanding associations of our history, you have erected a monument which to future generations will speak with a voice no less potent than the historic echoes of this city.

What kind of man Marlowe was in outward seeming I suppose nobody knows, but even if it were familiar to us, the counterfeit presentment could not have the force and significance of the beautiful figure which we owe to the art of the sculptor; but it is not with Marlowe the man that we need busy ourselves, even if there were more material than there is for the judgement of his brief life and career, for it is the ideal of the poet whose *"raptures were all air and fire"* that must be constantly present to our minds as we gaze on this image of his worship. It recalls some of his own lines which are eloquent of his devotion.

*Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend
The wondrous architecture of the world,
And measure every wondering planet's course,
Still climbing after knowledge infinite
And always moving as the restless sphere,
Will us to wear ourselves and never rest
Until we reach the ripest fruit of all.*

Cheers !

The man who struck such chords as these is not unworthy of a monument in his native place. (*Hear hear*). It was Marlowe who first wedded the harmonies of the great organ of blank verse which peals through the centuries in the music of Shakespeare. It was Marlowe who first captured the majestic rhythms of our tongue and whose "mighty line" is the most resounding note in English literature. Whatever may be thought of his qualities as a dramatist, and whatever place he may hold among the great writers who framed the models of English tragedy, he stands foremost and apart as the poet who gave us, with a rare measure of richness, the literary form which is the highest achievement of poetic expression.

I do not pretend to do justice to Marlowe in this very imperfect utterance of some thoughts which are in your minds. It is a great privilege for me to come here today to perform an office that might have been placed in far worthier hands (*Cries of "no, no"*). But I am glad to have an opportunity of speaking as an Englishman of the claims of Marlowe's fame to be prized and cherished by his Countrymen. His reputation should be an abiding element of our national pride. And finally, as an actor, I am proud to remember that Marlowe's work, like Shakespeare's, was written primarily for the stage, that, if not an actor himself, Marlowe was intimately associated with the actor's calling, and that the Elizabethan dramatists, with Shakespeare, the actor at their head, in employing the stage as the first medium of their appeal to posterity, linked it together with an imperishable glory. (Cheers)