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Christopher Marlowe was born in Canterbury in February 1564, two months earlier than Shakespeare whom he was to precede to London. Canterbury at this time was a thriving market town, as well as the possessor of England's premier cathedral. Its industry had benefited from the settling there of French and Dutch Huguenots, who had escaped the Catholic persecutions. Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris*, about the slaughter of Protestants in Paris on St Bartholomew's Day in 1572, drew on information from these people and from his later visit(s) to France.

Christopher's father, John Marlowe, was a shoemaker. He employed apprentices, was a Freeman of the City and was active in civic affairs – the sort of man who would stand surety for another's debts and forget to pay his own. His wife Katherine came from Dover. Little else of importance is known of her except that she had a relative who was a Doctor of Divinity. She, rather than John Marlowe – whose rumbustious nature is clear from the legal affrays he was involved in – was anxious to further Kit's education. Eventually Kit was awarded a scholarship to King's School, the famous public school adjacent to Canterbury Cathedral that was to give him his pre-university education.

When another male child survived (Kit had two small brothers who died) he became a choirboy, probably again at Mistress Marlowe's instigation. The five sisters who from Canterbury records appear rather unruly, settled in their native town.

Childhood in Canterbury was not much different from today. Boys played in the ruins of St Augustine's Abbey and in the streets. On an outing into the country they saw orchards, green lanes and tall trees. Church bells pealed, including the great

neighbour's will when he was visiting Canterbury in November 1585.

One of John Marlowe's daughters was in trouble in Canterbury for blasphemy, as Dr William Urry discovered in the Canterbury archives. Kit earned his reputation later in London – except for one affray when he visited Canterbury from London in 1592. His father, it is interesting to note, became more respectable as he grew older – though he still sometimes neglected to pay his bills.

In Elizabethan times 'Marlowe' was spelt in various ways. At Cambridge Christopher was 'Marlin', 'Marlen', 'Marley', 'Marly', 'Marlyn', 'Marlye' and 'Merling'; and he entered King's School as 'Marley'.

He may have received tuition at King's School before he was awarded his scholarship there, as his uncle Thomas Arthur, who was unmarried till the time Kit received the scholarship, may have previously paid for his nephew to be a day scholar. Kit was almost fifteen when he took up his scholarship on 14 January in the Michaelmas term of 1578–9.

King's School was the oldest public school in England. Henry VIII had intervened in 1541 to grant a charter to the dean and chapter which provided for masters, an usher and fifty scholars who were to eat at the common table. The statutes specified that the fifty boys should be 'destitute of the help of friends, and endowed with minds apt for learning, who shall be called scholars of the grammar school, and shall be sustained out of the funds of our Church'. Though Kit was by no means destitute some of the scholars were even less so, as gentlemen's sons were given preference.

Some actually wore shoes made by Kit's father – a few bills of John Marlowe the shoemaker from this time still exist. Perhaps the picture of Bajazeth in a cage, which was in the library, and which was later used in *Tamburlaine*, impressed Kit because he wished to treat similarly boys who were contemptuous of his father's menial status!

Lessons at King's School began at six in the morning with a

library at King's School. He later used pastoral imagery, and was referred to as 'dead shepherd' by Shakespeare in *As You Like It*.

A line in *The Jew of Malta* – 'There's a dark entry where they take it in' – recalls the name given to the passage between King's School and the cathedral cloisters through Prior Sellingegate, which the pupils often used. Christopher heard stories associated with it, and certainly this passage is mentioned later in the *Ingoldsby Legends*; it was the place where the monks buried Nell Cook after she had served the canon with poisoned pie, and was sufficiently atmospheric to give rise to many stories. In *The Jew of Malta* Barabas's servant takes a pot of poisoned broth into the nunnery through the dark entry, killing all the nuns, including his daughter.

If Marlowe did base Barabas's daughter Abigail on his sister Margaret it was for similar personality, not story. Nevertheless, five noisy sisters might have suggested to him how trying life would be in a nunnery.

Medieval Canterbury was a city of narrow streets and haphazard buildings, with little lanes running between or behind them. The thin river Stour was flanked by houses, including those of Huguenot weavers; some still stand today. There was a ducking-seat for misdoers at Hoppers Mill. Between two houses was a wall with a hole like that used by Pyramis and Thisbe in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Busy Mercery Lane, leading up to the Christchurch Gate of the cathedral, held traders including George Ansell the grocer. Other streets held markets. The gate itself is impressive, bearing coats of arms, figures and decorations. Once inside the gate, the calm of the cathedral absorbs a person. Christopher felt this difference when he returned to King's School from the shoemaker's shop – the bustle disappeared and the new atmosphere enveloped him. It is unlikely that Cambridge University had been considered for John Marlowe's son, but Kit's ability, and confidence increased by education in the Cathedral close, added a new dimension to his ambition.

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source material for *Tamburlaine*. *Cosmography* particularly inspired a boy at this time when the land discoveries by English sailors were exciting enquiring minds. He was later to meet the explorer Walter Raleigh. Kit was to find another well-stocked library at Corpus Christi, but King's School laid a solid foundation. There was also time to meditate at King's School, and, apart from the books, Kit found the music inspiring – for example, in *Tamburlaine*:

The cherubins and Holy seraphins,
That sing and play before the King of Kings,
Use all their voices, and their instruments
To entertain divine Zenocrate:
And in this sweet and curious harmony,
The god that tunes this music to our souls
Holds out his hands in highest majesty
To entertain divine Zenocrate.

This passage begins 'Now walk the angels on the walls of heaven', describing a painting in Canterbury Cathedral which has an angel walking on a heavenly mount.

The Canterbury Kit was leaving was a community of 4,000 souls, containing a great variety of people. It had been a gathering place for pilgrims to Becket's tomb until twenty-five years before, and was still a centre for refugees and travellers because of its position on the main road from Dover to London. The Cambridge for which he was destined was a distinguished, homogeneous city. While he probably considered Cambridge the more congenial, Canterbury had given him a picture of human nature unrivalled for comprehensiveness. Though his first play, *Tamburlaine*, was idealized, his later works drew on the human characteristics he observed in Canterbury's mixed population.

Since the Marlowe household had moved several times because of non-payment of rent, when Kit was accepted for Cambridge University gossip may have suggested that his family had ideas