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“RELIGION BUT A CHILDISH TOY”:
‘ATHEISM’ AND CYNICISM IN THE LIFE
AND DRAMA OF CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Nouh Ibrahim Saleh Alguzo
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
August 2012

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Title: “Religion but a Childish Toy”: ‘Atheism’ and Cynicism in the Life and Drama of Christopher Marlowe

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This study examines the religious beliefs of Christopher Marlowe by studying the inter-relationship between Renaissance understanding of ‘atheism’ – conveyed through contemporary treatises and grounded in humanism’s challenge to Judeo-Christian traditions, its representation in modern biographies of Marlowe, as well as the plays themselves – *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (c. 1586), *Tamburlaine, Part 1* (c. 1587), *Tamburlaine, Part 2* (c. 1587 – 1588), *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1589), *Doctor Faustus* (c. 1592), *Edward II* (c. 1592), *The Massacre at Paris* (c. 1593).

Unlike the modern definition of ‘atheism’ which generally means the denial of the existence of God, ‘atheism’ in the sixteenth century was a fluid term that was applied to anyone who held beliefs at odd with the religion of the Protestant state. As an umbrella term, ‘atheism’ included black arts, homosexuality, Machiavellianism, Arianism, Catholicism, Judaism, Turks and sedition among others who held beliefs incompatible with the laws of the Church of England. My study, unlike modern scholars who do not deal with ‘atheism’ in this broader sense, examines how the subcategories of ‘atheism’ manifested themselves in the life and plays of Marlowe.

The theoretical approach of New Historicism offers two valid positions for this study: first, in terms of the circulation of discourse between Marlowe’s plays and treatises regarding ‘atheism’; second, through the idea that any concept of Marlowe the playwright can only be a

representation. As New Historicists explicitly refuse to acknowledge the idea of objectivity and truth, biographies cannot give definitive truths about the life of Marlowe. However, while this dissertation will not provide absolute answers about the faith of Marlowe, it will offer a comprehensive study of the 'atheistic' utterances attributed to Marlowe in both his plays and his life.