Discussion Questions: *A Tip for the Hangman*

"Words, Words, Words" Book Club—March 2023

1. What are your first impressions of the novel? If asked, what would you say this novel is about?

2. Epstein is one of many novelists who have written about Christopher Marlowe as a possible spy for the crown. Why do you think this is such a popular topic for early modern historical fiction? What does Epstein do in her novel that might set it apart from the others? Will this portrayal carry with you when you come across his name in the future?

3. On page 150, Mary observes "When tragedy is not beautiful, we do not care enough to call it tragedy." Do you agree or disagree? What would you consider the tragedies of this book?

4. How closely do you read the epigraphs in novels? Why do you think Epstein organized hers by plays? How did they affect how you read the following section?

5. William Shakespeare appears as a very minor character, characterized as less rowdy than the rest of the acting company. What do you think of this depiction? Were you expecting to see him more throughout the novel? Is it distracting to have him appear?

6. Theatrical imagery is rich throughout the novel. What are the different parts that characters play throughout the book? What are some of the dualities you see reflected?

7. Kit is shown as a bold character prone to action. How does this boldness help or hinder him in his role as a spy? In his romance with Tom?

8. "He'd done nothing wrong. Now that was a lie for the ages" (page 8). From the first scene of the book, we are let into Kit's inner thoughts regarding same-sex attraction. How does his sexuality help and hinder his ability to be an effective spy? How does his queerness (and knowing that 'sodomy' is punishable by death) inform the risks he undertakes in his espionage?

9. Damnation was a huge concern in early modern England and is prevalent throughout the book. How does damnation serve as a motif in Kit's experiences of queer love? Through his profession as a spy?

10. As a queer person, a spy, and a writer, Kit exists between his visible (public) world and invisible (private) world. What do you think the character means when he talks about being "part of these men, these powerful anonymous men…Plays were one thing, but this was another sort of immortality" (page 212).