

Humanities Institute  
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## ***Tamburlaine*** (1587)

Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)

*Elizabethan Poetry* The genius of poetic creation in Elizabethan culture assumes multiple forms: the epic of *The Faerie Queene*, in which Spenser dazzles us with original stanzaic strategies; the Platonic romanticism of Sir Philip Sidney, who in *Astrophil and Stella* and in his *Defence of Poetry* gives heart and soul to the expressions of love; the sonnets of Shakespeare, unparalleled for their blend of passion with perfect subtlety. (The theatrical legacy of Shakespeare is of course the world summit of the British gift to culture.) The British tradition of poetic eminence is fully launched well before the advent of what we later called the Metaphysicals, in the early Jacobean Age.

*The Young Marlowe* Christopher Marlowe was one of the generative forces in Elizabethan literature. He was not of the high born. He was born to John Marlowe and Elizabeth Archer, in Canterbury, in 1564. His father was a shoemaker, and an aggressive one, who had a volatile temper like his son, and early became familiar with street fighting. In 1589, when he was twenty five, the younger Marlowe was involved in a violent confrontation, in which a man was killed. Marlowe was briefly imprisoned, but not dissuaded from engaging not only in further fights but in behaviors that had his downfall inscribed upon them. Whether through calumny or his own recklessness, Marlowe managed to create around him a sturdy reputation for blasphemy and atheism—particularly for scorn for Islam-- and for including a furious burning of the *Koran* in the play *Tamurlaine*-- for homo-eroticism, for street brawling, and above all for espionage, of which he was accused by his enemies, whose constant charge was that Marlowe was a crypto-Catholic, in league with Elizabeth's sturdy army of Protestant agents, who were scattered throughout Western Europe.

*Marlowe no street ruffian* All of which is not to say, however, that Marlowe entered his culture at a ruffian point, a sensibility of the streets, for in fact he was indebted to Cambridge University for a much needed scholarship, for which he had made use, in order to position himself for a broad education in Greek and Latin. One thinks, in the Marlowe case, of Francois Villon, and the wonderful if gross ballads he wrote straight off the streets of Paris, a century earlier; another scholar-lyricist, who was far from the elegance of literary salons.

*Tamburlaine and the other plays* Our topic, *Tamburlaine*, joins other Marlowe plays—*The Jew of Malta*, *Dido*, *Queen of Carthage*, *Doctor Faustus*, *Edward II*—in refusing banality, shocking artfully, and daring the waters of brilliant lyrical-dramatic language. It can be no surprise, in addition, that Marlowe's dramatic work reflects the impulsive life of the young man behind it. The *Tamburlaine* play is set in an exotic Hellenistic and Central Asian past in which intense theatrical emotions—sadism, brutality, scorn—play a rarely so exercised role. A robust language, befitting the energy and freedom of the period, is generously allotted to this 'modern drama which by the mid seventeenth century was to be vied more as bombastic than powerful, having suffered critical rebuffs from such opinion establishers as Ben Jonson, for the often overblown language of the play seemed vulgar. Ben Jonson condemned 'the Tamerlanes and Tamer-chams of the late age, which had nothing in them but the scenical strutting and furious vociferation to warrant them to the ignorant gapers.'

*The Language* It is no surprise that the iambic pentameters of Marlowe should have struck such finer critics as Ben Jonson as heavy handed. We miss, in this language, much of the finesse of Shakespeare, for instance, and yet Marlowe slams himself strongly into his expressions and themes, and gives his language little opportunity to relax. Listen to the peroration of *Tamburlaine* to his arch enemy, and now defeated foe, the Persian Bajazet:

*Inside this language* The iambic hexameter line of Marlowe drives a heavy cargo of emotions-- hate, scorn, fury, debasement, terror—which, given the restlessness of the entire play, is never able to come to

a pause. (Shakespeare wins first prize for his skill at changing scenes and tones, miming the diversities of the 'wide world.' Marlowe appals and shocks with occasional outbursts of stunning beauty.)

*Plotting around the language* Built through richness and intensity of language, Marlowe's plot rivets our attention to the single figure of Tamburlaine, himself barely developed, except as a line of coherence within the ebbs and flows of emotive language. Formulated abstractly, the plot of *Tamburlaine* simply tracks the name of this figure who was a shibboleth for mysterious eastern power in the world of those Hellenistic and central Asian silk roads which even our time inherits, as a trace memory of jugular power groups, moving over the rocky turf. The course of Tamburlaine's rise to power, and ultimately toward ruling the world, is his readiness to move with the flow of history—to woo and win the daughter of the King of Egypt, Zenocrate, to win over and employ the soldiers of his enemy Mycetes, and finally—but in quick succession—to conquer and then humiliate the Turkish Emperor, Bajazet, eventually caging him, feeding him on table scraps, and only occasionally releasing him, though then only by allowing him to serve as footstool for Tamburlaine. (No wonder that Bajazet kills himself soon against the bars of his cage while his wife Zabrina soon follows suit. That humiliating demise does not, in the flow of the text, do more than punctuate the slowly soaring grandiosity of Tamburlaine.)

*The place of language in the creation of character.* Marlowe's Tamburlaine is of course made of language, and is thus a measure of the place of language development in the creating of the modern mind. This is to say, of course, that Tamburlaine is only what he says, coupled to what the playwright says Tamburlaine says. What people can simulate in language, whatever we call them, is their acting themselves out as character. And Tamburlaine will for sure, on his path to the end, need to act himself out of the future entirely. His final wish is for his children to rule the world, having stamped out all his enemies. We should be ready to believe, in this connection, that Marlowe—whose personal life boils with elements of self-will and reckless domination—found in Tamburlaine a ready-made creation image for his own aspirations.

*Tamburlaine as a mirror of the Renaissance man* Early modern man, as we feel it out in these entries, differs sharply from mediaeval man or woman, who have in their time not yet acquired those aspirations, for controlling nature, for travelling and conquering vast spaces, for constructing weapons and transversing earth and mountains—or, to wrap it up in a sentence—for taking charge of the universe. That latter aspiration, which in our time we have seen as a kind of driver in the vision-worlds of such as Henry Ford, Andrew Carnegie, Elon Musk or Eminences of global perspective like Pope Francis, Winston Churchill, or Karl Marx—was barely imaginable in the early modern period, but was implicit in the thinking of a Marlowe, of those utopian-city visionaries (More, Campanella, Bacon; *The New Atlantis*), or of Pascal, Milton, or Bunyan, who followed their creator's mind tracks into places where spirituality seemed to crack open unexpected places for the global human imagination to grow. The thinking of Descartes and Montaigne, similarly, touched base with thick earth, with pragmatic problems, which could be addressed with down to earth thinking. From the pragmatic thinking of these two persistent and realistic Frenchmen rose the thought scaffoldings on which the imaginative visions of our own age would grow.

*Tamburlaine again* The swashbuckling overreach of Tamburlaine, who as it were comes out of nowhere in order to overwhelm the world with his visions of world conquest, is a fitting example of the power of imagination. Marlowe's text itself exemplifies the power of transformation, here of a Spanish original—Pedro Mexia's *Silva de varia leccion*, turned first into French and then into English—from which texts Marlowe drew the main lines of his story; while the minor characters of the play were largely drawn from Marlowe's imagination.

*Historians* Historians of Marlowe's time provided the requisite details concerning the stupendous power of the actual Mongol Empire ruled by Timur (Timur the Lame, Tamburlaine) and dominant, throughout the fourteenth century, throughout Central Asia—Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan. From the rude power of this Mongol dynasty, credited with having killed five percent of the globe's population at its time, to the brawling and tempestuous imagination of Christopher Marlowe at the University of Cambridge, two centuries later, is the distance between the raw materials of power and the extravagant imagination that transforms that power into culture.

*A sample of dialogue*

*Tamburlaine*

The chiefest god, first mover of the sphere  
Enchas'd with thousands everlasting shining lamps,  
Will sooner burn the glorious frame of heaven  
Than it should so conspire my overthrow.  
But, villain, thou that wishest this to me,  
Fall prostrate on the low disdainful earth,  
And be the footstool of great Tamburlaine.  
That I may rise unto my royal throne.

*Bajazet (Emperor of the Turks)*

First shalt thou rip my bowels with thy sword,  
And sacrifice my heart to death and hell,  
Before I yield to such a slavery.

*Tamburlaine*

Base villain, vassal, slave to Tamburlaine  
Unworthy to embrace or touch the ground  
That bears the honor of my royal weight;  
Stoop! Villain, Stoop! Stoop! for so he bids  
That may command thee piecemeal to be torn,  
Or scattered like the lofty cedar-trees  
Struck with the voice of thundering Jupiter.

*Study guide*

What relation do you see between Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and Pico de la Mirandola's *Oration on Human Dignity*? This question may seem outrageous, given the contrast between the viciousness of Tamburlaine the ruler and Pico's ambitious character model for the power of the human. What could there be in common? The key is to recognize the superhuman potential of Pico's model, a human figure to be sure but at the same time a transcending figure, a model of the supreme powers inherent to man. (Pico's model might perhaps best be compared with Nietzsche's superman, or the Prometheus Bound of Aeschylus, images of a supreme model of fidelity to man, and resistance to Zeus.) By seeing Pico's 'man' in that setting, we may note that he is a figure of great power, capable of protecting as well as harming us. Has Tamburlaine any benign traits? Is he a mere ruffian? Or is he man at the apex of power?