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Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1z93087m>

Journal

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 16(1)

ISSN

0069-6412

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Publication Date

1985-10-01

Peer reviewed

**THE TRAGIC MODE
OF CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE'S
*Tamburlaine, Part I***

Marc Woodworth

In his provocative and eclectic study *The Death of Tragedy* George Steiner promotes the seventeenth century as that crucial dividing line where the purity of Hellenic tragedy shifts irrevocably to the more catholic form of subsequent tragic drama. As the century which bears the birth-marks of the modern world¹ it is the first to become partially comfortable with its secularity and emerge to some extent from the primacy of religious concern. This emergence to oversimplify though not misrepresent Steiner, is the cause of the death of what this critic considers high tragedy, for "tragedy is that form of art which requires the intolerable burden of God's presence."² We could not conceive of an *Oedipus* in which the things of the natural order are not subordinate to a supernatural power. As Steiner writes, a condition where "mortal actions are encompassed by forces which transcend man"³ is necessary for the high tragedy of Greek drama. The shift from such a condition to a more secular vision, then, provides the catalyst for the transfiguration of tragedy into the different form it takes on in the seventeenth century.

While the English dramatists of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries rarely struck what Steiner considers high tragedy — that "stringently negative, despairing view of man's presence in the world"⁴ which is largely dependent on a divine "intolerable burden" — it is still apparent, for example, in Shakespeare's *Lear* and *Timon of Athens*.⁵ Though the hand of God may have remained strong enough to encourage, occasionally, the strict vision of Greek tragedy, the majority of accomplished English drama written during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century by playwrights such as Marlowe, Webster, Ford, Middleton, Turneur and Shakespeare was a departure from it. The work of these dramatists does not maintain the stark singularity of vision, tone, and emotion of high tragedy. Neither does it remain consistent with the didactic purposes of the indigenous *De Casibus* tradition inherited from Medieval narrative verse. Instead we see a form emerge which often manipulates

established traditions to voice new concerns: concerns arising at a time when artists no less than scientists were beginning to assess the place of human beings in a secularized world.

Even if we don't fully agree with Steiner's assessment of tragedy⁶ or with his view that the burdens caused by the Gods' (or God's) presence are necessary to engender it, I think we must admit he has placed his finger on a crucial point in the development of the genre. Although it would be more obvious to assess Shakespeare's development of tragedy — certainly it would be rewarding in terms of Steiner's argument — I think assessing Christopher Marlowe's sense of tragedy will provide its own singular rewards. Marlowe was one of the first English dramatists scrupulously and consciously to manipulate received ideas of dramatic tradition and introduce a new mode of tragedy that did not depend on a universe controlled by a God who meted out a given punishment for a given transgression or by *Fortuna* who regulated her wheel so that those on top must necessarily fall to despair. Marlowe does not take time to celebrate man's freedom from the weight of God but immediately seizes upon the dangers inherent in the secular world. He was perhaps the first dramatist to perceive and confront that fully secular world and attempt to define the new kind of tragedy which arises from it. The form this tragedy takes, as in *Tamburlaine, Part I*, shows a chaotic world unmitigated by the justice of God or the regularity of Fortune where secular and humanistic values find their most dangerous extreme. Marlowe does not abandon received tragic forms, but rather manipulates and transfigures them in such a way as to point out in even greater relief a fresh conception of tragedy. It is my hope that this paper will suggest what Marlowe's conception of tragedy is and how he accomplished it through manipulating tragic form. I think it will also become apparent that while Marlowe's work does not fit into the classical mode of high tragedy, it does present us with a tragic sensibility that responds organically to the new concerns of his time and is compelling in its own right.

I.

It seems that nothing motivates the pens of some scholars more than the personal scandals in the lives of the literary figures they study. The question of Marlowe's atheism, while often treated as naughty scuttlebut, is discussed by Paul Kocher in a manner neither gossipy nor superfluous.⁷ While comments such as those depicting Christ's homosexuality (" . . . St. John the Evangelist was bed fellow to Christ and . . . used him as the sinners of Sodoma"⁸) might lead one to think of Marlowe only as a bawdy and blasphemous wit, Kocher persuades us that, "far from being a mere jester at religion," he "was a serious

thinker"⁹ where atheism was concerned. The comments recorded in the Baines note, Kocher argues, "represent a carefully designed attack on Christian dogma."¹⁰ I do not want to defend or delineate Kocher's argument further; his thorough working of the subject speaks for itself. What is entirely germane to this brief study is Kocher's conclusion that Marlowe was the first Elizabethan to synthesize and present the rising "revolutionary dissidence"¹¹ of his time. Kocher asks, "Of whom among the Elizabethans have we such another record?" and can find no one.¹² Marlowe's attack on Christianity, as we have it through the Baines note, marks a new stage in conscious, considered secularism — one that can hardly fail to affect his dramatic output.

Because Marlowe to a greater degree than any of his contemporaries synthesized the "mutter of revolutionary dissidence" and the "free thought" that had stirred England "in a vague, unorganized way during the last fifty years of the [sixteenth] century,"¹³ he truly put himself on the leading edge of the new human secularism. Precisely due to his *conscious* rendering of this development, we can look for its conscious mark upon his dramatic work. A playwright who disavows the divine order which governs conventional tragedy must necessarily create a different mode of that genre — one which asserts itself within the secular boundaries its author prescribes. It is in Marlowe's work that we first encounter the transformation of tragedy into a new form responding to the modern world. I do not believe it is too great a constriction to assess the dividing line Steiner sees in the seventeenth century specifically in terms of Marlowe's tragedies. In focusing on *Tamburlaine, Part I* we can see a masterful depiction of the new secularity emerging from the standard theism even as a new mode of tragedy rises from the conventions of the old.

II.

In *Tamburlaine, Part I* Marlowe grandly manipulates familiar forms of tragic drama and points out their unsuitability for the secular world he finds himself in. In the play's prologue, the playwright invites the audience to:

hear the Scythian Tamburlaine
 Threatening the world with high astounding terms
 And scourging kingdoms with his conquering sword.
 View but his picture in this tragic glass,
 And then applaud his fortunes as you please.¹⁴

With the penultimate line of this passage Marlowe reiterates the conception of tragedy his audience was used to seeing on the English stage. His description of the play as a "tragic glass" would have led a contemporary audience to

assume that the drama would follow the traditional form of tragedy set out in *A Mirror for Magistrates*,¹⁵ that extremely popular and influential Renaissance volume of historical tragedy and commentary which went through seven editions in Elizabeth's reign alone.¹⁶

A Mirror for Magistrates contained Lydgate's translations of Boccaccio's *The Fall of Princes* while adding many more verse narrations based on English history. The book manifests the central conception of Renaissance tragedy. In Thomas Nashe's words, tragedy is "a mirror wherein the penalties of sin were to be seen in relation to the sin itself"¹⁷ and as a glass which shows

. . . the ill successe of treason, the fall of hasty climbers,
the wretched end of vsurpers, the miserie of civil dissention,
and how just God is evermore in punishing of murther.¹⁸

The volume presents a limited sort of tragedy used as a didactic tool to warn against such vices, especially in the political arena, as those enumerated above. The "chiefest end" of the *Mirror* according to one of its main editors and contributors, William Baldwin, is to serve as a "loking glas" for magistrates to "see (if any vice be in [them]) how the like hath bene punished in other[s] heretofore" and to move them "to the soner amendment" of it.¹⁹

Certainly, as Lily B. Campbell suggests, the tragic conception detailed in *A Mirror for Magistrates*, while central to later Elizabethan drama, is not tragic in a complex or aesthetically satisfactory way. It is, however, essential in that it "anticipates the ideas of the later and greater [Elizabethan] tragedy."²⁰ The stiff didactic plots we find in the *Mirror* cannot account for the brilliant successes of Renaissance tragedy but they do provide a central convention around which many of these successes were achieved. It is this conception of tragedy, in which God's just punishment countered sin and princes fell, that Marlowe's audience brought to his play — a conception the playwright manipulates in the prologue before *Tamburlaine, Part I* goes on to unabashedly challenge it.

Tamburlaine, Part I seems almost comic in its refutation of the purpose of tragedy set forth by Thomas Nashe and quoted above. Who more than the Tamburlaine we see in Marlowe's play serves to refute the ideas that treason meets with ill-success, hasty climbers fall, usurpers reach a wretched end, and God always punishes transgressors justly for their crimes? It is both treason and usurpation which gain Tamburlaine the crown so quickly after he is appointed "regent" and "general lieutenant" of Persia by Cosroe. No sooner does Cosroe leave the stage than Tamburlaine and his men begin to covet the crown of their newly-found ally. And who could be better described as a "hasty climber" than Tamburlaine, who at the play's outset is said to be a

“sturdy Scythian thief” (I.i.36) and “shepherd” (I.ii.54) but by the end of the second scene of act III is King of Persia and conqueror of Africa? As Harry Levin has noted in *The Overreacher*, Marlowe’s heroes “make their fortunes by exercising virtues which conventional morality might well regard as vices”²¹ and Tamburlaine is a prime example of such a character. On a rather obvious level we see that Marlowe, by allowing his protagonist to commit these common tragic transgressions without being punished in the end by the “just God” of Nashe’s description, is presenting his atheism as well as defying the conventions of tragedy his age accepted.

The play, however, does not reduce to such a simple manifesto of rebellion. If *Tamburlaine, Part I* was merely a forthright refutation of Christianity and the tragic mode which relied upon it, an Elizabethan audience would not have tolerated fourteen performances of it between 28 August 1594 and 12 November 1595.²² Assuming, as I think we must, that Kocher is correct in perceiving that Marlowe was ahead of his contemporaries in accepting and assimilating the “free thought” which was then circulating, we can also assume that the average contemporary play-goer would not have encouraged a blatant staging of such ideas. There is certainly far more going on artistically and intellectually in *Tamburlaine, Part I* than a straight-forward renunciation of God. As Frank B. Fieler shows in his study *Tamburlaine, Part I and Its Audience* Marlowe makes the audience identify with Tamburlaine in a positive way — a fact which tempers their perception of him as an unpunished transgressor. It was Marlowe’s ability to present an historical character who “by sixteenth-century standards was morally despicable” and present him “so that he evoked admiration,”²³ which allowed the playwright to create a tragedy that did not exist because of “the intolerable burden of God’s presence.”

Within this complex structure, where Marlowe forces his audience’s moral revulsion at Tamburlaine while undeniably exciting their admiration for him, *Tamburlaine, Part I*’s innovative structure becomes apparent. As Fieler writes, “no Englishman earlier than Marlowe can be said to have attempted to stage the morally disturbing paradox of a glorious villain seriously contemplated.”²⁴ Although Fieler notes that both *Gorboduc* and *Alexander and Campaspe* precede *Tamburlaine, Part I* and employ heroes “recognized for greatness of power,”²⁵ he concludes that neither play grapples with the inherent ambiguity such characters would have evoked for an Elizabethan audience in any complex way. Marlowe’s willingness to explore the moral dimension of such a situation further substantiates his position on the leading edge of a new sensibility.

As it represents an important departure from the tradition of tragedy Marlowe inherited, perhaps it would be wise to show how the playwright presents the paradox of a glorious villain. As we have noted, usurpation and treason are crimes which strongly went against the moral convictions of an Elizabethan, in theory if not in practice.²⁶ Therefore, when Cosroe (the brother of the rightful King) joins forces with Tamburlaine in act II, scene iii to take the crown from Mycetes, an Elizabethan audience's moral indignation would have been piqued in spite of the fact that Mycetes' incompetence as a leader must have disposed the play-goers against him to some degree. Because the entire order of Elizabethan society relied on each person's acceptance of place within a divinely ordained chain of being, anyone who did not accept his or her lot was seen as jeopardizing the entire system. Threatening a king was the worst possible offense as he was directly ordained by God as the head of society and his downfall would necessarily effect everyone on the chain of being below him. In planning to dethrone Mycetes, Tamburlaine, a lowly shepherd, is jeopardizing that order on a grand scale. Cosroe's treasonous design is also rendered in a pejorative light — not only is he contemplating treason but he is the King's own brother as well. The advice Tamburlaine gives in the passage below should have at least made the audience question his and Cosroe's morality for many of the reasons I have mentioned:

Then haste, Cosroe, to be king alone,
 That I with these my friends and all my men
 May triumph in our long expected fate.
 The king your brother is now hard at hand;
 Meet with the fool, and rid your royal shoulders
 Of such burdens . . . (II. iii. 42-47)

This speech includes many of the transgressions that in a typical tragedy would mark the character for divine retribution; usurpation, hasty climbing, treason, slandering God's ordained secular leader, and dis-satisfaction with one's position. Certainly in this brief example alone we see enough evidence against Tamburlaine to make the audience question his transgressions against the order of their society, despite the attractiveness of his rhetoric and martial prowess.

Marlowe, however, does not allow his audience to become comfortable with their feelings toward Tamburlaine. Along with presenting Tamburlaine and Cosroe as morally insufferable, the playwright also casts Mycetes in a questionable light which makes one feel that either man would prove a better king than he. In the first speech of the play Marlowe shows Mycetes to be an ineffectual leader who is unable to give proper voice to his grievances let alone do anything to remedy them:

Mycetes: Brother Cosroe, I find myself aggriev'd
 Yet insufficient to express the same,
 For it requires a great and thundering speech.
 Good brother, tell the cause unto my lords;
 I know you have a better wit than I.

(I.i. 1-5)

Certainly this character, unable to carry out his kingly duties and self-admittedly "insufficient" and lacking in "wit," would fall well short in the audience's estimation of what a ruler should be. As Cosroe goes on to give an able speech, his merit increases while that of Mycetes continues to pale.

In act II, scene iv Marlowe depicts Mycetes' weakness even more strongly. The stage direction opening the scene calls for the king to come out alone "with his crown in his hand, offering to hide it" so that, as Mycetes states, "shall not I be known" (II. iv. 13) during the impending battle. Certainly this is ignoble and cowardly behavior for the king of a prominent country to display on the battlefield. Any doubts the audience might have had about Mycetes' ability to rule are confirmed by his actions here. Marlowe, then, does not allow the audience an easy choice. While they are compelled to condemn Tamburlaine and Cosroe for their deposition of the king, they are also forced, against the conventions of their day, to question Mycetes' position and to entertain the probability that Persia would prove more stable if Cosroe, supported by Tamburlaine, were to rule it.

This example serves, I hope, to illustrate the new demands Marlowe is making on the "tragicall discourse" of Tamburlaine. As with any accomplished art, its maker must refuse to allow it a simplicity which belies reality; but beyond that Marlowe in *Tamburlaine, Part I* presents a complexity that leads to a truly novel manipulation of received form. By leading his audience to judge Tamburlaine as morally wrong while simultaneously making them question a king's fitness to rule, the playwright is calling into question the entire religious system wherein a transgressor is duly punished and a king is God's choice for ruling the secular world. Despite an accepted view such as that expressed in the following passage from a Tudor homily where the author writes that

. . . we may not resist, nor in any waies hurt,
 an anyoynted kyng, which is God's lieutenant,
 vicegerent, and highest minister in that country,
 where he is kyng²⁷

the audience of *Tamburlaine, Part I* is made to question what for them was not to be questioned: How could an ineffectual king, who is frittering away the

security of his country, be ordained by a just God? How could a murderous, treasonous villain such as Tamburlaine be allowed to prosper in a world controlled by a just God? What is the nature of such a God? Does he exist? Perhaps many viewers enjoyed the play for its warring, bloody, exotic, and outrageous aspects without considering the questions encouraged by Marlowe's carefully rendered contradictions. Enough critics have misconstrued the play that we might be justified in assuming Elizabethans also missed the point. However, Marlowe undoubtedly crafted this play in order to raise just such questions and in doing so radically altered the nature of traditional tragedy as an audience of his day would have expected to see it rendered on stage.

As I mentioned earlier, it is the fact that Tamburlaine is not punished in the end for his transgressions which destroys an otherwise conventional tragic progression. Instead of the final scenes depicting God's retribution against the tragic protagonist, *Tamburlaine, Part I* ends with a convention typical of a comedy — a marriage. In the play's final line Tamburlaine says to his fiancé Zenocrate, "We will our rites of marriage solemnise" (V. ii. 472). Although this ending belies the play's typical tragic structure, much of the action beforehand leads us to expect a conventional tragic outcome that is never delivered. Because the play is designated as a tragedy, Tamburlaine's many expressions of hubris lead us to expect his ultimate downfall. Take the following two passages, for example:

I hold the fates bound fast in iron chains
And with my hand turn Fortune's wheel about

(I. ii. 174)

Though Mars himself, the angry god of arms,
And all the earthly potentates conspire
To disposses me of this diadem,
Yet will I wear it in despite of them

(II. vii. 58-61)

In the context of conventional tragedy such passages would unmistakably signal a degree of pride and self-assuredness too great to go unnoticed and unpunished by the supernatural powers operating in a tragedy. Likewise, Tamburlaine's rise from shepherd to the most powerful monarch in the world would prefigure an imminent fall. By employing the conventional characteristics of a tragic protagonist without presenting that character's downfall Marlowe draws attention to the play's refutation of tragic form.

I do not believe, however, that because Marlowe in *Tamburlaine, Part I*

chooses not to follow through with the conventional tragic progression that the play can be said to lack a tragic sense. The play should not be seen as Una Mary Ellis-Fermor sees it, as a celebration of man's unbridled possibility in a new age when the human will has become the primary impetus behind all things.²⁸ In fact, it is precisely the unbridled actions of the human will which make *Tamburlaine, Part I* tragic. While the pomp of Tamburlaine's speeches and the grandeur of his victories often inform our view of him, it is the actions caused by his over-bearing and unchecked human will which underscore the play's tragic nature. The most striking example of the human will's implacability occurs in act V, scene ii when Tamburlaine refuses to over-ride the established fashion of his three-stage siege tactic (wearing white to express his mercy on the first day, red to signal his growing intolerance on the second, and black indicating his bent on total destruction on the third) and orders the supplicant virgins from Damascus to be brutally killed and displayed. Techelles' answer to Tamburlaine's question of "Have your horsemen shown the virgins Death?" is the single most disturbing representation of Tamburlaine's nature and of the vile possibilities of the human will. Techelles answers:

They have, my lord, and on Damascus' walls
Have hoisted up their slaughtered carcasses.

(V. ii. 67-68)

It is the depiction of the human will at a destructive extreme which finally, I think, forms Marlowe's new conception of tragedy. In a Godless world human beings are left with nothing to check their will, for good or ill, and exercising it without restraint can lead to a "negative, despairing view of man's presence in the world"⁴ that rivals any produced in "true" tragedy.

Although Fieler argues that Marlowe's evocation of tragic conventions in the play works to assure the audience of Tamburlaine's impending fall.²⁸ I am inclined to see the playwright's use of them as a way to point out the very different tragic sense created in *Tamburlaine, Part I*. After all Tamburlaine doesn't fall in this play and it would be unfair to look ahead to his ultimate demise in *Tamburlaine, Part II* as evidence to support Fieler's claim. Even if we, with Fieler, believe that Zabina's tempestuous speech starting at line 176 of act V, scene ii was not written by Marlowe to have its "feeling of horror . . . dominate the audience,"²⁹ I think it at least sums up well the underlying despair that the playwright evokes throughout *Tamburlaine, Part I*:

Then is there left no Mahomet, no God,
No fiend, no fortune, nor no hope of end
To our infamous, monstrous slaveries.

Gape, earth and let the fiends infernal view
 A hell as hopeless and as full of fear
 As are the blasted banks of Erebus,
 Where shaking ghosts with ever howling groans
 Hover about the ugly ferryman,
 To get a passage to Elysian.
 Why should we live? O wretches, beggars, slaves!
 Why live we, Bajazeth, and build up nests
 So high within the region of the air,
 By living long in this oppression,
 That all the world will see and laugh to scorn
 The former triumphs of our mightiness
 In this obscure infernal servitude?

(V. ii. 176-191)

This lament resonates beyond Zabina's individual situation. It speaks to a world without a supernatural structure — Christian, Moslem, or Pagan; one in which man's will defines it fully. Such a world will be precisely "as hopeless and as full of fear" as we ourselves make it and if the implacability and malevolence of a Tamburlaine represents one way to exercise the will, then we, along with Zabina, should fear the "obscure infernal servitude" that results from it. In *Tamburlaine, Part I* Marlowe creates a new tragic mode which operates not within "the intolerable burden of God's presence" but within a fully secularized world where the despair is created solely of man's own will. It is a kind of tragedy that speaks to us perhaps more truly than any other.

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NOTES

1. Bertrand Russell in his book *The History of Philosophy*, for example, writes that "the seventeenth century contains the greatest names and marks the most notable advance since Greek times." (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), p. 525.

2. George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) p. 353.

3. Steiner, p. 193.
4. George Steiner, p. xii
5. Steiner, p. xiii.
6. It should be noted that Steiner does not condemn the new form of tragedy as exemplified in Shakespeare for example. He makes the distinction, however, between the strictness of classical tragedy and the more embracing and catholic world-view of Shakespeare and other dramatists.
7. Paul Kocher, *christopher Marlowe, A Study of his Thought, Learning, and Character*. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1946)
8. Quoted in Kocher, p. 35.
9. Kocher, p. 42.
10. Kocher, p. 42.
11. Kocher, p. 68.
12. Kocher, p. 68.
13. Kocher, p. 68.
14. U.M. Ellis-Fermor (Ed., *Tamburlaine*. (New York: Gordian Press, 1966) p. 68. All subsequent quotations and references are made from this edition and will be indicated by act, scene, and line numbers in my text.
15. Frank B. Fieler in his excellent study *Tamburlaine, Part I and Its Audience*, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1961) gives his view of how the Mirror functions in relation to the play (p. 77). My view differs somewhat as shall be apparent by the end of this study.
16. Lily B. Campbell, *Collected Papers of Lily B. Campbell*. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968) p. 291.
17. Campbell, p. 299.
18. Thomas Nashe quoted in Campbell, p. 301.
19. Baldwin quoted in Campbell, p. 293.
20. Campbell, p. 299.
21. Harry Levin, *The Overreacher* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952) p. 30-1. While Levin's study is often elucidating, I do not agree that we should accept *Tamburlaine, Part I* only as "a resonant fanfare and a pictorial spectacle, pure action uninhibited by passion." While it certainly contains those elements, Fieler and others have shown that there is much more than brash theatricality working in the play. Furthermore, while it is true that *Tamburlaine* is a kind of "superman" who disregards "the canons of good and evil" and challenges "his destiny" in the mold of Seneca's Hercules, we should not lose sight of Marlowe's obvious censure of such unbridled will because of his character's pomp and larger-than-life aspect.
22. Ellis-Fermor, p. 62.
23. Fieler, p. 1.
24. Fieler, p. 6.
25. Fieler, p. 6.
26. ". . . the Elizabethans had common moral standards which, even though their own actions did not always conform to them, were brought to bear upon the action of

others, particularly in literature and history where moral judgements are more or less invited." Fieler, p. 11.

27. Quoted in Campbell, p. 288.

28. Quoted in Fieler, p. 1.

29. Fieler, p. 77.