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**The Identity of a Conqueror: Cruelty and Personality**  
**in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great***

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ABSTRACT: Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* relates the deeds of a Scythian shepherd becoming the conqueror of Asia until his downfall. Violence is constantly present in the play, which constitutes a basic element of Tamburlaine's identity. In this paper I aim to analyze how Marlowe presents, in the character of Tamburlaine, a combination of greatness and cruelty, both aspects going hand in hand. This will allow me to examine the conflict between individuality and society as a main subject of the play, as Tamburlaine breaks social hierarchy and obtains power and recognition without any kind of moral values. In addition, I will focus on the roles of Zenocrate and Calyphas which are the only characters that question Tamburlaine's extreme aggressive attitude, especially Calyphas, who offers an alternative figure of masculinity that is opposed to the one his father represents. As a whole, this paper will concentrate on how the identity of Tamburlaine as conqueror and tyrant is established but also indirectly criticized throughout the play, which seems to question the greatness in his deeds.

“The slave usurps the glorious name of war” –  
Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great*

## **I. Introduction**

Since ancient times the figure of the conqueror has been linked to that of the hero, both of them praised and immortalized through legends and testimonies; their battles have often become glorified. Curiously, the brave deeds that characterize a hero sometimes coincide with acts of aggression against a town and its people. There is a strong similarity between a hero and a conqueror; both of them must possess personality and ignite admiration, so people can follow them and they can finally be remembered. These typologies attracted the attention of Christopher Marlowe when writing *Tamburlaine the Great*. Divided in two parts, the play was written around 1587 and 1588 and then performed, followed by a great success in London's public stages. *Tamburlaine the Great* tells the story of a Scythian shepherd who eventually becomes conqueror of Central Asia, Marlowe's character is based on the actual nomad emperor Timur, who was both admired and feared, and whose name was also well-known in Europe and the Renaissance England. Marlowe offers an image both idealized and demystified of the conqueror, which grows darker as violence becomes more present throughout the play. Tamburlaine is for some a hero, for some a barbarian; the playwright constructs this way his identity in order to show the ambiguity between both aspects.

The purpose of this paper is to show how Marlowe creates this ambivalence in the character of Tamburlaine, exploring the aspects of violence and greatness in the subject of wars. Although the play was written in the Renaissance and for a Renaissance audience, the questions and the topics the playwright formulates are highly contemporary. These are questions that are relevant to our culture also today, in many ways: the role of violence in war and in the construction of identity, the connection between masculinity and aggression, and the role of the theatre in interrogating all this structure: all of these are themes that have become very relevant in the political and

philosophical thought of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The ambivalence towards war and the social constraints surrounding hierarchies and the performance of gender make this play highly contemporary and still worth to discuss nowadays.

In the present paper, I will try to discuss these topics in order to show how the role of the conqueror as hero is questioned by Marlowe. I will begin by introducing the function of the theater in Elizabethan times, in order to clarify the way in which the stage could be used for the interrogation of religion and of politics. Then I will turn to the discussion of heroism and of conquest in *Tamburlaine*, analyzing how Marlowe uses both concepts for dramatic purposes, but at the same time makes his audience think about them in critical terms. After that, I will explore the notion of masculinity and its connotations, showing how they are related to ideas of heroism and violence; I will show how Marlowe projects many doubts over the idea of the male “hero” and about the gender implications that are present in it. The dramatist makes the audience think about these aspects, and leads his public towards having an active role, thinking about these topics and examining their true value. I hope to show that *Tamburlaine the Great*, in its treatment of these subjects, can be seen as standing in the list of Renaissance plays characterized by universality and critical capacity, two characteristics that can be recovered in any place and time.

## **II. The function of theatre**

One cannot speak of theatre in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period without mentioning religion. Since the Reformation of the Church of England and the rise of Puritanism, a conflict began among different forms of religions and different interpretations of Christianity. Religion was no longer monopolized by a single faith.

Nonetheless, there was another intruder in the world of faith: the theater. Drama rapidly became a successful source of entertainment; for some, far more appealing than attending to church. As drama was starting to threaten (in some ways and for some citizens) the influence of the church, the theatre was therefore considered a place of sin and corruption. Many preachers and theologians, especially those belonging to the more radical and puritan positions, were strongly against it, because they perceived the capacity of drama to engage the affections of the public.

However, theatre and church are not as opposites as they may seem to be. Drama in fact compensated for some aspects what the official protestant church did not offer: it included ceremonialism; it offered a sense of sacred. It provided forms of emotional comfort that the protestant church had abandoned, and it also represented anxieties that religion could no longer address. Jeffrey Knapp argues that in Elizabethan times “The spectacles of the theater are presented as better than demystifying: they are made to seem sacramental. That is, Shakespeare appears to believe that his audience can draw spiritual strength from their experience of the theater (...)” (2002: 119) This does not necessarily mean that the theatre substituted the role of faith, but rather that it addressed and considered elements of life that had been formerly addressed by the church, and in some aspects were still being addressed by it. It also means that the most significant and transcendent aspects of morality and of ethics could be staged, and questioned on the stage.

Taking this into account, Marlowe definitely wanted to catch the attention of his audience in creating such a violent play. He wanted to make his audience confront aspects of morality that had been untouched or not questioned before him, and he did so in his treatment of the central aspect of heroism. Although *Tamburlaine the Great* is set in Central Asia, it would not be the first time a playwright uses the notion of the other to



represent and criticize his own society. Greenblatt notes this: “For despite all the exoticism in Marlowe (...) it is his own countrymen that he broods upon and depicts. (...) the “other world” becomes a mirror.”(1980: 194). The Elizabethan period was the time when the British Empire was at its best, thus, Tamburlaine’s attitude and goals might not differed that much from the British conquerors’ overseas.

In this way, we can see Marlowe using the theatre as a mean to question cultural values and assumptions. This included religious and philosophical aspects, and practically every aspect of ideology. As Jonathan Dollimore states:

(...) a system of illusionary beliefs held in the state of so-called false-consciousness, beliefs which serve to perpetuate a particular social formation or power structure; typically this power structure is itself represented by that ideology as eternally or naturally given- i.e as inevitable, immutable. Strikingly, this is the sense implicit in Christopher Marlowe’s reputed blasphemy to the effect that ‘the first beginning of Religion was only to keep men in awe’. (2003: 9)

We will never know if Marlowe actually said this last sentence quoted by Dollimore. But it is true that the sentence reflects aspects that we can see in this dramatist’s plays, insofar as they show a capacity to interrogate and question everything. In the following pages we will see how he questions specifically the notion of heroism and makes his audience think about its moral limits.

### **III. The heroic figure: a self-made hero or a man chosen by the Gods?**

Jonathan Dollimore describes Elizabethan and Jacobean drama as characterized by a high skepticism and a strong capacity for questioning power and its institutions. This topic is especially relevant in Marlowe’s play as Tamburlaine, a figure of power himself, defies social hierarchy and institutions by holding power himself. Power must be ‘deserved’ by ‘great deeds’, but in this play these deeds are conquering lands and taking power from others. Greatness thus

would seem to be very closely linked to the exercise of violence; we have to see, however, how the concept is defined through the play.

The act of conquest in itself was very glamorous in the age of empire; some of the patrons of the great commercial companies of the Elizabethan period presented themselves in this way, or saw themselves in these terms. But the idea of a conqueror seems to suggest something more, some kind of providence in the character holding power that justifies his right to hold power. This is certainly true in the character of Tamburlaine: his whole identity is constructed by the belief that he was meant to be something more than a simple shepherd. One of Tamburlaine's main characteristics is his insistence on his divine and heroic nature; that is to say, he establishes connections between himself and Greek heroes and Gods. This natural divinity has to be proved, has to be confirmed by great deeds.

Tamburlaine is continually emphasizing that the Gods are on his side, especially in the first part of the play. He believes that he has the right to conquer and to perform violence because the Gods and other almighty deities permit it. He also highlights the fact that his loyal followers will be as blessed as himself: "For fates and oracles from heaven have sworn/ To royalize the deeds of Tamburlaine,/ And make them blest that share in his attempts." (20) This idea of being chosen not only justifies his actions, but also prevents others from questioning what he does. As Dollimore argues: "If the beliefs which constitute ideology are understood as eternally true or naturally given, they are never likely to be consciously questioned." (1989: 9). Tamburlaine knows that some will admire his transition from shepherd to emperor, but that there will also be some others, mostly his enemies, who will constantly despise him for that same reason: "What means this devilish shepherd to aspire/ With such a giantly presumption, / To cast up hills upon the face of heaven/ And dare the force of angry Jupiter?" (26). Because of this constant interrogation against him, he, who is a self-made hero, is aware

of the need to reinforce the idea that he was destined to be emperor; according to himself, his destiny was not to be a shepherd. As he says, “I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains/ And with my hand turn Fortune’s wheel about,/ And sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere/ Than Tamburlaine be slain or overcome. (13) He not only compares himself to the sun, he puts himself symbolically above it, as if his destiny was to be part of the universe, and was already written in the stars. Tamburlaine as other conquerors, “(...) devise myths, largely for political purposes, that we are manipulated into believing.” (Logan, 2004: 65)

Marlowe decided to change Timur’s noble origins for those of a shepherd; this change, and especially the desire of the character to rise above a humble social position, supposes the character’s first defiance to the world he lives in. Since only nobles could aspire to the title of emperors, this implies that Tamburlaine manages to ascend and defy social hierarchy by his own merits; or by his own crimes, depending on the perspective one chooses. Despite breaking the social hierarchies of his time, Tamburlaine recreates that same system in order to put himself at its highest position. However, this implies some limitations: such a privileged position as the one he seeks is inevitably bound to put in proximity to people who are highly competitive as well, and who may become dangerous when his downfall approaches. This proves that, despite defying the system and fighting to build an identity where he is at the highest, he is at the same time limited and put in danger by that high position. Greenblatt notes this in his epilogue, he argues how in most of Renaissance texts, there were “(...) no moments of pure, unfettered subjectivity; indeed, the human subject itself began to seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society.” (1980: 256)

#### **IV. War, Violence and Masculinity**

Probably the most prominent aspect of Tamburlaine is his brutality in his ways of organizing war: his violence and his rage increase throughout the play in a progressive manner. From letting his soldiers take women and jewels alike from the King of Jerusalem, burning a whole city to the ground (with the only reason to do so being the fact that his wife Zenocrate is dying there), to murdering his own son Calyphas. The rest of the characters are made very uncomfortable by his actions, and we can imagine that the audience itself would feel so: “Injurious tyrant, wilt thou so defame/ To exercise upon such guiltless dames/ The violence of thy common soldiers’ lust?” (120).

Such violence in a play might be upsetting, but taking into account the fact that it is depicting the actions of a conqueror and the consequences of its wars, Marlowe represented a reality. So in a sense, it could be said that there is a realistic side to his work, to the extent that he is allowing for aspects of political violence and of the aggression of conquest to emerge, and to be made present in front of his audience.

There are other aspects of Tamburlaine that complicate his role as a tyrant. At the same time, and despite his terrible deeds, Tamburlaine still maintains some kind of sensibility and elegance in his conversation: “His talk (is) much sweeter than the Muses’ song” (33). If Marlowe intended only to criticize “the glorious name of war”, it is strange that he should have given to Tamburlaine such a delicate gift. As Robert A. Logan notes:

“Notorious for his acts of cruelty as a warlord, he also achieved fame as a patron of the arts. Marlowe appears to dramatize these two contradictory sensibilities when Tamburlaine turns abruptly from ordering acts of wholesale slaughter to give a rapturous lyrical description of his beloved’s

beauty and a semi-philosophical disquisition on the power and importance of possessing a sense of beauty, necessary even for a warrior.” (2004: 67)

This is a very interesting aspect, because Marlowe is suggesting that there is no opposition between culture and violence; on the contrary, this aspect of Tamburlaine seems to bring both aspects together. In giving two very opposite talents to Tamburlaine, Marlowe ensures that his character will inspire both admiration and hatred in his followers and enemies, and that this double effect will also play its part in the play’s audience. Tamburlaine’s cruelty is balanced, and therefore justified, by his poetical side. According to Logan, Marlowe’s plays on Tamburlaine must be seen as greatly influential and important, in their exploration of violence and war, for two main reasons: on the one hand, because of “their popularity” and, on the other hand, because of “the tantalizing ambivalence and ambiguity to our response to Tamburlaine.” (Logan, 2004: 67). Marlowe might have intended to depict in Tamburlaine the way in which humans both idealize and despise wars: he makes the character both admirable and inhuman, both cultured and aggressive. In this way the notion of greatness that is associated with him is made attractive and repulsive at the same time.

This deep ambivalence towards the character is also present in those who surround him, or in the audience who watches the plays, not knowing whether to admire him or to despise him. In fact, Tamburlaine questions his own ambivalence as well, and concludes that both aspects of his personality are necessary in order to be who he is. At some points, it seems that he perceives some contradiction between savagery and culture. He says, for instance: “But how unseemly it is for my sex./ My discipline of arms and chivalry, / My nature, and the terror of my name,/ To harbor thoughts effeminate and faint!” To say that it is unseemly for his “sex” to have “effeminate

thoughts” is to identify a discrepancy between the role of a conqueror and those of a man with feelings and delicacy. But then, he continues saying: “...Save only that in beauty’s just applause,/ With whose instinct the soul of man is touched/ And every warrior that is rapt with love/ Of fame, of valour, and of victory,/ Must needs have beauty beat on his conceits... ” (59) So the applause that is brought on by beauty and with the instinct of harmony seems also to be important to him, insofar as they can contribute to the creation of his public personality.

It is important to notice that we have come to other aspects of Tamburlaine’s personality: the interconnection of masculinity and violence. As we have seen, the conqueror is afraid of the effects that a more delicate, feminine sensibility might have on his construction of a public figure. He does not want to be perceived as an “effeminate” character in any way; he knows very well that the expression of sensibility can be perceived as a weakness and as a lack of masculinity. It’s as if he was willing to accept that side within himself, but only to the extent that it is not perceived by his followers or victims as an absence of virility.

This means that Tamburlaine is aware of the cultural links between masculinity and violence; it also suggests that he is very preoccupied with the perception that others have of him, and wants them to preserve their image of him as a male hero. Although, to a certain extent, he accepts this ambivalence within himself, towards the end of the play (after Zenocrate’s death) cruelty tends to predominate strongly in him. This culminates when he kills Calyphas, because he considers that he is not worthy of being his son, since he has refused to kill, and therefore has refused to follow his father’s path: “I know, Sir, what it is to kill a man. / It works remorse of conscience in me. / I take no pleasure to be murderous, / Nor care for blood when wine will quench my thirst.” (110).

Concepts such as conscience or remorse certainly do not fit in the categories that Tamburlaine has established for himself; it is quite clear that Calyphas is very different from him in this respect; because of this, Calyphas is considered and referred to as an “effeminate brat” (114). Calyphas does not want to perform the same roles of masculinity that his father or his brothers indulge on; he decides not to be violent.

However, if we judge Calyphas as being either violent or non-violent, as masculine or as feminine, we will be entering into the same kind of reasoning that Tamburlaine accepts, and that implies an opposition between these extremes. It would be perhaps possible to see Calyphas as representing an alternative masculinity, one that does not depend so much on the continual exercise of violence. As Mery G. Perry has stated:

“Marlowe’s depiction of Tamburlaine as the ultimate warrior, who kills innocent virgins, needlessly tortures and humiliates conquered people, and heartlessly murders his own son for failing to perform proper masculinity, serves to foreground and problematize the soldier hero as a man and a father to his sons and his people.” (2008: 105)

But if this is the case, then we can see Calyphas as offering an alternative, another possible model of masculinity. Calyphas has to die because he does not want to imitate the aggressive model offered by his father. In this character, then, Marlowe is complicating the models of male behavior that his society offers and he is offering possible alternatives, trying to question the limits of the accepted stereotypes. Both Tamburlaine and Calyphas, in their opposition, can appear as part of this interrogation brought about by the dramatist.

I would like now to explore a bit more the characters of Calyphas and Zenocrate. Both of them are presented as the weakest characters of the play; both of them show non-violent attitudes and end up dying; even though their opinions are never taken

seriously by Tamburlaine, they are the only characters that dare to question his actions and decisions. When Tamburlaine wounds himself, in order to show his sons how to be supposedly brave and strong, he states: “Now, my boys, what think you of a wound?” and Calyphas responds: “I know not what to think of it. Methinks ‘tis a pitiful sight.” (99). This brief exchange indicates a serious contradiction, a difference of perspective, between them: Calyphas is not only questioning his father but also his ideals. Tamburlaine could have killed his own son because of that reason; it seems that Calyphas, the “effeminate brat”, could be the real menace to the image and reputation that Tamburlaine has been constructing with so much effort. This menace could be more dangerous than all the enemies that threaten his position as emperor, because it could project some doubts upon the values of masculinity that it embodies. The Elizabethan audience would probably have a double reaction here: on the one hand, it would probably be shocked and fascinated, but on the other hand, it would understand that the values of aggression and of violence could easily become inhuman. They were values that were being used, at that very moment, by the conquerors of the English empire overseas; the audience would very probably recognize them as values that were much extended among the nobility and the powerful. In this way, the audience would be able to reconsider, even if it was only for a moment, some of the dominant attitudes of its time.

Zenocrate, Tamburlaine’s wife, also questions the basis of war and her husband’s obsession with it: “when wilt thou leave these arms/ And save thy sacred person free from scathe/ And dangerous chances of the wrathful war?”(78). She, in a way that is quite similar to that of her son, understands that war creates more damages than benefits. Tamburlaine answers that he will never leave war, and concludes his response to her by saying: “Sit up and rest thee like a lovely queen.” This sentence is



very significant: it makes clear that he, despite appreciating beauty, will never take into account his wife's opinion simply because she is a queen, because she is a woman, and according to his beliefs, she is too effeminate and delicate for the matters of warfare. Marlowe is showing to his audience the way in which stereotypes and common descriptions of what it is to be male or female condition thoughts and actions. As Perry has described it:

“By foregrounding the effects of a limiting and proscriptive masculinity on both males and on the father/son relationship and by illustrating the power of language to shape reality and social beliefs, Marlowe offers his audience the simultaneous opportunity to valorize, accept, or critique patriarchy, power imbalances, and traditional notions of masculinity training and the politics of gendered subjectivity.” (Perry, 2008: 110)

In this way, the theatre allows for a questioning of established values and beliefs. But the play also shows how the loss of these gendered concepts can be dramatic for those that have created them, and who maintain them artificially. Zenocrate represents beauty and sensibility for Tamburlaine: this implies that, at the moment when she dies, Tamburlaine will lose this part of himself, so that he will be left with violence and rage alone. After Zenocrate's death, his violent actions go further than ever: he burns the whole city where she fell ill and died and “forbids the world to build it up again” (96); it is as if he was responding to that loss with a proportional increase of his anger and aggression. To a certain extent, then, he is a victim of his own preconceptions and of the prejudices that he projects upon reality: he needs these preconceptions in order to maintain his self-image, and he can only respond violently when they are put in doubt, as they are by Zenocrate's death.

## **VI. De-activating tragedy**

Finally, I would like to consider how the ending of the plays brings about yet another questioning: the idea of the tragic ending as moralistic and cathartic. These ideas are part of the central European tradition since Aristotle; they are very deeply related to the idea of heroism, since the tragic hero that was considered by Aristotle and by his disciples and followers in the dramatic theory of the Renaissance, was seen as the most noble kind of protagonist, a figure whose disastrous end could provide a “catharsis”, through the effects of pity and fear. That catharsis that could lead to a release and also a quietening of passion in the audience, helping them to achieve a more serene and wise perspective. But even this is put in doubt in *Tamburlaine*.

Marlowe offers an ambiguous point of view towards any notion of providentialism: in his representation of Tamburlaine as a heroic figure, it seems that the human will to power is a more powerful force than fate or destiny of any kind. But the ending of *Tamburlaine* also seems to confound expectations, and in doing so, it seems to “decentre” (as Jonathan Dollimore puts it) any stable idea of society and order. As Dollimore argues: “man had been understood in terms of his privileged position at the centre (actual and metaphysical) of the cosmic plan; to repudiate that plan was, inevitably, also to decentre man actually and ideologically)” (1989: 19) In portraying such an ambitious character as Tamburlaine achieving his goals and getting corrupted, Marlowe shows that a firm or stable structure in the universe or in society might perhaps be non-existent. But then, at the very ending of the play, there is another reversal: we might expect to see the dying Tamburlaine as representing a fallen man, a broken man who pays for his mistakes. This would place the character firmly in a classic orbit, and would give to his story a conventional ending in tragic terms.

As Dollimore has put it, “central to the development of essentialist humanism is a view of tragedy which sees it almost exclusively in terms of man’s defeated potential.

But it is a kind of defeat which actually confirms the potential.”(Dollimore, 1989: 49)

In the case of Tamburlaine, the final defeat does not correspond to the potential, nor can it confirm it: in this ways, the expectations that we might have from other tragedies or from the inheritance of the classical tradition are undone again. His only defeat is death, but this death is not presented by the dramatist as tragic. It does not include any of the elements we might associate directly with a tragedy: he is not aggressively murdered, his position and empire are not lost, and basically, after having killed his own son, the reader and the audience will have no pity for him. The feelings of the audience are not engaged enough for a true final catharsis to take place.

We cannot say, therefore, that the ending presents the conqueror as a failed hero. There is a fascination created in the audience by the dramatic work of Marlowe, but that does not lead to a catharsis in the Aristotelian sense. The true moment of his defeat and the loss of any emotional connection with his audience come when murdering his son Calyphas: it is then when he loses admiration from both his followers who plead Tamburlaine to forgive his son. His enemies, knowing what he has done, consider him worse than the devil itself: “O damned monster, nay, a fiend of hell/ Whose cruelties are not so harsh as thine,/ Nor yet imposed with such a bitter hate!”(114). Since Marlowe has ensured that the audience can share this perception, there is no sense of failed potentiality in his death. Tamburlaine does not inspire a sense of what could have been and was not; unlike other tragic heroes, he fulfilled everything that he could have done, and most of it was extremely harmful, both to himself and others. Thus, the audience cannot react with any pity, and catharsis does not occur; the hero’s death does not involve a clear moral teaching, because the hero does not inspire any admiration or compassion. In this way, Marlowe completes his serious and relentless demystification of the figure of the conqueror, which had conventionally been seen as a hero.

## VI. Conclusion

I have tried to show that, as a dramatist, Christopher Marlowe was able to experiment with the preconceptions, the expectations and the ideas of his audience. He was able to write beyond the conventions of his time, addressing some of the main subjects and preoccupations of his public; but he did so in a way that was both fascinating and uncomfortable, and which remains very relevant today. This occurred in a historical moment when the ideas of conquest, of political violence and of masculinity were being idealized and promoted for economic, social and geo-political reasons. As a writer, Marlowe was able to confront these subjects and discuss them bravely, and this is the reason why *Tamburlaine* is still being read and staged today.

Marlowe's main character in *Tamburlaine* defies social hierarchy and becomes an emperor despite his shepherd origins; however, this does not transform him into an epic or a tragic hero. We have seen how basic ideas of masculinity and conquest were examined dramatically by Marlowe through this character, and we have seen how he, as a dramatist, was able to interrogate and question these ideas. This does not imply that Marlowe was offering a clear, fixed alternative to these notions; he does not offer a pacifist or revolutionary alternative, nor does he justify any specific position in theoretical or philosophical terms. What he did in *Tamburlaine* was to offer a dramatic creation that introduced powerful elements of critical thought in his historical moment, and which can still be relevant in our time, in modern approaches and modern questionings of the figure of the conqueror.

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