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**Sources of pure Joy: the execution scene -
orgies of violence and the empty moral space
in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the
Great, Part I and Part II.***

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Western dramatic tradition tends to disclaim the exorbitant performance of conspicuous violence in tragedy and to stress, in some of its qualified moments, restraint and moderation in the depiction of the physical brutal act. Aristotle attaches the production of the *catharsis* to the careful orchestration of the feelings of pity and fear in a plot designed by textual discipline and structural husbandry⁶⁹. The same control on the stage and

⁶⁹ In his famous definition, tragedy aims at ‘...effecting through pity and fear the catharsis of such emotions’ (*apud* RUSSELL, D.A., and WINTERBOTTOM, M, eds., *Classical Literary Criticism*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, The World’s Classics, 1989, p.57. *Lexis*, or the literary text, is given prominence over *opsis*, the spectacle, and the reverse would negate tragic pleasure in favour of the monstrous (*idem, ibidem*, pp.67-68).

on the page – or a zealous adjusted version of both – was elaborated on by neoclassical theory and *praxis*, refashioning a controversial classical legate into the clarity of the classical rule and the apollonian composure of the *decorum*. The formal dictates of an ideal tragic configuration did not achieve universal observance, even when the cultural and literary frame of reference was decidedly marked by the enthusiastic return to the golden age of Ancient Rome and Greece.

The English Renaissance, even in its flowering moment, never surrendered without any reservations to the magnetism of the new learning and rediscovery: the cradle of the innovation, Italy, was the exotic land of vice and excess, treason and perversity, and the land of the Pope, the Archenemy of the reformed militant nation. Poets were attentive to novelty, but new standards in literary creation were introduced into an existing tradition and a peculiar national picture: the Petrarchan sonnet goes hand in hand with the Shakespearean one, the Spenserian stanza claims successfully a place among poetic forms, blank verse expresses the canonical lyrical – and, later, dramatic as well – rhythm and measure. Homer and Vergil, Tasso and Ariosto, are promptly adjusted in a conflated operation that commits them to the

service of contemporary interests (Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* is a case in point). Academic drama at court and the Universities obeys codes and conventions of recurrent Humanist erudition, but vernacular popular drama absorbs medieval heritage and is pervaded by the vividness of festivity and ritual. One certainly oversimplifies a complex process on highlighting the emergence of an urban culture interpreted by the London crowds clashing against the existence of the happy few of the sophisticated milieu of scholars and courtiers. Sir Philip Sidney, in his *Apology for Poetry* (1595), speaks for the new trends in dramatic creation when, in his brief report of the state of poetry in England, pays homage to *Gorboduc* or *Ferrex and Porrex* (1561), a play written by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville, of academic configuration and instructive intention, allegedly the one that, in spite of notorious aesthetic drawbacks, preserves in its abundant 'stately speeches' the 'height of Seneca's style' and 'notable morality', and embraces the unities of place and time, 'the two necessary companions of all corporeal actions' and the fulfillment of 'Aristotle's precept and common reason'; the same critical guidelines, based on the idea of 'delightful teaching' as 'the end of Poesy', make him reject the promiscuity of hybrid

genres and, above all, the so customary incongruity of the work of contemporary dramatists, 'neither right tragedies, nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns' ⁷⁰without any solid reason. Unrestraint in design; but also potential accomplices favoured by that poetic license beyond control and discrimination, the intemperate representation of passions and conflict. A similar attitude – more substantiated, however, by dramatic experience -, can be found among Elizabethan dramatists. Ben Jonson vituperates the extravagance of Marlowe and his school⁷¹, the original and duplicates of the Scythian warrior that, hand in hand with the famous revengers

⁷⁰ SHEPHERD, Geoffrey, ed. , *Sir Philip Sidney: An Apology for Poetry*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1973, pp. 133-135.

⁷¹ MacLURE, Millar, ed. , *Christopher Marlowe: The Critical Heritage*, London and New York, Routledge, The Critical Heritage, 1979, p. 50. The ignorant are not excepted from 'The 'Articles of Agreement' celebrated between audiences and the author of *Bartholomew Fair*, as he wrote in *The Induction on the Stage* : 'He that will swear, *Jeromimo* or *Andronico* are the best plays, yet shall pass unexcepted at, here, as a man whose judgement shows it is constant, and hath stood still these five and twenty or thirty years. Though it be an ignorance, it is a virtuous and staid ignorance; and next to truth, a confirmeth error does well; such a one the author knows where to find him'. (CAMPBELL, Gordon, ed. , *Ben Jonson, The Alchemist and Other Plays*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, Oxford English Drama, Oxford World's Classics, 1995, p.330).

Hieronimo, of *The Spanish Tragedy*, by Thomas Kyd, or the desperate Roman nobleman of *Titus Andronicus* that in the late eighties and early nineties ravished London audiences:

‘The true Artificer will not run away from nature, as hee were afraid of her; or depart from life, and the likenesse of Truth; but speake to the capacity of his hearears, and though his language differ from the vulgar somewhat; it shall not fly from all humanity, with the *Tamerlanes*, and Tamer-Chams of the later Age, which had nothing in them but the *scenicall* strutting, and furious vociferation, to warrant them to the ignorant gapers’.

Shakespeare himself, whose plays would hardly be tolerated by Sidney’s judgement – one can imagine how shocked by the apparent outbursts of gratuitous fury and the conspicuous loosen structure of *King Lear* the accomplished scholar and courtesan would be, and how indifferent to the appeal to the redeeming role of imagination of the famous Prologue of *Henry V*, - urges, *via* Hamlet, the players to observe contention and *decorum*:

‘Suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose

end, both at first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; ...'⁷².

Wise statements in the controversial picture of the 'war of the theatres' and the growing supremacy of players and spectacle over textual guidance and dictates of moderation. Not to run away from nature, not to overstep the modesty of nature: what's the use of such precepts when nature itself was infused with a vital energy of conquest, and the voracity of the crowds demanded the persistent supply of strong emotions? Tamburlaine proclaims the irrepressible vibration of his expansive essence -

'Nature, that framed us of four elements
Warring within our breasts for regiment,
Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds:

/.../'⁷³ -

⁷² GREENBLATT, Stephen, general editor, *The Norton Shakespeare based on the Oxford Edition*, New York and London, W. W. Norton & Company, *Hamlet*, 3. 2. 15-18.

⁷³ BURNETT, Mark Thornton, ed., *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays*, London, J.M.Dent, and Vermont, Charles E. Tuttle, 1999, *Tamburlaine The Great, Part One, Act Two, Scene Seven*, ll. 18-20. References to Marlowe's plays concern this edition.

and Faustus, at the beginning of his quest, feverishly engages in a perilous exploit that will vibrate rather in the sound and fury of the personal resolution than in the cadence of any deliberate sense of balance endorsed by classical authority –

‘O, what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence
Is promised to the studious artisan!’

/.../

This night I’ll conjure, though I die therefore.’⁷⁴

The enthusiasm of audiences encourages and regulates the growing commercial and popular theatre, and advertising testifies to the cross-fertilization of dramatic creation and production for the market, as the Prologue to *Tamburlaine the Great, Part Two*, among so many examples, eloquently illustrates:

‘The general welcomes Tamburlaine received
When he arrived last upon our stage
Had made our poet pen his second part,

/.../’⁷⁵

⁷⁴ *Doctor Faustus* (1604 Text), *idem, ibidem*, Act One, Scene One, ll. 55-57; 168.

⁷⁵ *Idem, ibidem*, ll. 1-3.

Readers – ‘Gentlemen Readers: and others that take pleasure in reading Histories’ - might be spared the most prodigal expressions of delirious whim (a cautious measure directed perhaps against the unrestrained improvisation of actors) as carefully stated in the printer’s note to ‘the two tragical discourses of the Scythian shepherd, Tamburlaine, ...’ –

I have (purposely) omitted and left out some frivolous jestures, digressing and (in my poor opinion) far unmeet for the matter, which I thought might seem more tedious unto the wise than any else to be regarded – though, haply, they have been of some vain conceited fondlings greatly gaped at, what times they were showed upon the stage in their graced deformities.’⁷⁶

Criticism focuses above all on improper representation and clumsy or defective conception, and even open enemies of theatre and drama, when scourging the stage, do not see in any mimetic effect of violence a qualified drawback. In Philip Stubbes’ *The Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), an emblematic exposure of performances and their nefarious consequences, what was at

⁷⁶ *Idem, ibidem*, p. 3.

a stake is a comprehensive range of vices 'such wanton gestures, such bawdy speeches, such laughing and fleering, such kissing and bussing, such clipping and culling, such winking and glancing of wanton eyes, ...' : murder, robbery, or treason (and for sure also their potential disturbing effects) are included in a wide catalogue more concerned with deceit and lasciviousness than with cruelty⁷⁷. No wonder, violence was a fact of daily life: torture was merciless and savage, in spite of the selective operation of its proceedings⁷⁸, public execution, an impressive public occasion, performed as a kind of bloody passion play, obeyed to a detailed choreography including ritual hanging and mutilation (beheading as an alternative, depending on the nature of the crime or the social condition of the convict), and heads of the victims were left on the walls of the Tower Bridge as a persuasive appalling deterrent. Dog fighting and bull fighting, or the famous bear-baiting, were popular entertainments, and

⁷⁷ *Apud* POLLARD, Tanya, ed. , *Shakespeare's Theatre:A Sourcebook*, Oxford and Victoria, Blackwell, 2004, p.121.

⁷⁸ Skepticism concerning torture seems, however, to qualify this practice in Elizabethan England (MAUS, Katherine Eisamen, *Inwardness and Theatre in the English Renaissance*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp. 82-5).

many theatre buildings were flexible enough in their structure to accommodate that kind of pastime (the Red Bull evokes in its very name such manifold possibilities). As a matter of fact, violence and its corrupting consequences seemed to be relevant in a most pragmatic view, when they jeopardized the established order, favouring riots and sedition, it was not of any special concern when related to the unscrupulousness of *mimesis*, so crucial in the thought of Plato and Augustin, among so many others.⁷⁹In the crude performances of medieval *Miracle Plays*, bloodshed and brutality, finding its climax in the passion and crucifixion of Christ, depicted the ritual sacrifice of cleansing and served the devotional purposes of religious celebration as an instrument of moral exhortation, but what happens if the play, in the course of its emancipation as drama, gives full vent to the appealing force of excess and brutish sensation? It is at this juncture that violence on the stage, in its crudest expression, claims its rights: not as the companion to any organic conception of the excessive plot, duly depicted by congenial resources

⁷⁹ See, for a classical account of this issue, BARISH, Jonas, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1981.

granting verisimilitude, rather in the sensationalist and populist activation of emotions and the sadistic manipulation of fascinated crowds served by the enticing power of words. This happens whenever depiction of extreme suffering or shocking brutality on the stage go openly beyond demands of intense action or the mere aesthetic illustration of ferocious conflict: the pure gratification of repressed desires or the redress by proxy of social frustration and resentment may be an easy alternative to imagination and criticism. How bracing is humiliation of our betters and defeat of our oppressors! And one should perhaps keep in mind that many of the dramatist's overreachers – Faustus, Tamburlaine, Gaveston, ... - rise above their class extraction and deliberately cross the boundaries of a humble origin. 'I am a lord, for so my deeds shall prove,/ And yet a shepherd by my parentage.', Tamburlaine proclaims at the beginning of his adventure, Faustus' parents are 'base of stock', 'that base and obscure Gaveston' rises in the court at the expense of the nobility. The morbid inclination of the provocative gesture in tragedy (or, for that matter, between 'scornful matters as

stirreth laughter' mixed with 'delightful teaching'⁸⁰, and sheer and savage gratification in farce, as the case of *The Jew of Malta* might illustrate), tends to erase casualties from the picture and make them objects, make sacrifice banal and attractive, 'strange images of death' and horror 'normal', discharging audiences of any moral discrimination and providing them with the joyful indifference to suffering.

If one intends to examine moral and aesthetic dilemmas of tragic conception and achievement, 'execution scenes' and images of mutilation and suffering in *Tamburlaine the Great* may be a good starting point. The general moralistic reference to *the casibus virorum illustrium*, of Christian medieval extraction, or any decisive contribution of the classical comprehension of tragic vision and tragedy, would seem out of place in these *Tragical Discourses*: the hero transcends the condition of the poor shepherd to become a war lord and the builder and sovereign of a vast empire, and social, moral and political structure and place, world arrangement, cosmic order or providential design cannot dictate rules to the pure energy in motion that creates its own

⁸⁰ As Sir Philip Sidney lectured (SHEPHERD, Geoffrey, ed. pp. 136-137).

universe. Tamburlaine's choice is absolute, it lies beyond good and evil, such is the prerogative of the heroic voice, no conjecture can explain its ways and there are no general rules to discipline his course. That's why his behaviour can hardly be adjusted to common moral patterns: in fact he is unique in his inclination to come close to the gods and to share their nature, suggestively a powerful primitive myth, maybe strong and eloquent as Hercules, in the reference Eugene M. Waith elaborates on in his known study,⁸¹ evoked since the moment he deprives himself of his shepherd's clothes before Zenocrate – 'Lie here, ye weeds that I disdain to wear!/ This complete armour and this curtle-axe/ Are adjuncts more beseeming Tamburlaine' , I. II. 41-43 – and assumes the providential role of the scourge of God and conqueror of the world.

The Turks follow the Persians in the stations of the hero's ascendant course. One of the illuminating examples of atrocities is to be found in the clash between Tamburlaine, the powerful warrior and cunning schemer, and the boastful and pompous Bajazeth. The lion and the fox, emblems of the versatile

⁸¹ WAITH, Eugene M. , *The Herculean Hero in Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare and Dryden*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1962.

successful prince in Machiavelli's definition, had already been tested in the victory over Mycetes and Cosroe, and the persuasive orator that impresses Theridamas, or entices Zenocrate (Venus surrenders to Mars, with the intimidating frame of the victorious legions in the back – 'I must be pleased perforce, wretched Zenocrate', are her desolate words of resignation at the end of I.II.⁸²) will now translate sublime dreams of potency into action: the formidable energy gives literal substance to hyperbole, and the unconquerable will is given a local habitation and a name. The Turk had been depicted as a proud tyrant and a vane collector of titles, in III. I. , and before the two antagonists come face to face, the Scythian warrior is, in

⁸²The play's dialectic of cruelty and glory is acted out in the eyes of Tamburlaine's admirers, embodied at this point in the captured Zenocrate. It is the world's amazement that also helps transform the negative into the positive and validates Tamburlaine's role in the estimation of his worshipers; but what the worshipers are in fact kneeling at is the altar of their own pent-up aggression, the image of which they can freely applaud in the glorious conqueror Tamburlaine, the incarnation of their own 'base Scythian dreams' , PROSER, Matthew N. , *The Gift of Fire: Aggression and the Plays of Christopher Marlowe*, New York, Washington, Peter Lang, Renaissance and Baroque Studies and Texts vol. 12, 1995, pp. 75-76.

III. III. given the image of the liberator intending to rescue Christian prisoners:

'I am term'd the scourge and wrath of god,
The only fear and terror of the world,
Will first subdue the Turk, and then enlarge
Those Christian captives which you keep as slaves,
/.../

I.III.44ff

'The sympathy of the audience is enlisted for the hero in this short debate, for Bajazeth is represented as a man whose thoughts are solely of destruction, whereas Tamburlaine is represented as one who would choose to conquer by beauty rather than force. The same spiritual contrast is evident throughout the episode, for even when Tamburlaine boasts of his martial power, his images transcend those of Bajazeth', as Virginia Meehan argues at this juncture⁸³. Zenocrate and Zabina replicate in low profile the combat that opposes the brave Scythian and the futile Bajazeth, and it is the conqueror's Muse

⁸³ MEEHAN, Virginia M. , *Christopher Marlowe – Poet and Playwright: Studies in Poetical Method*, The Hague/Paris, Mouton, 1974, p. 30.

who crowns the victor; the Turk and his queen will join the spoils of war. But this glory will not stop at that: before the walls of Damascus, Tamburlaine rejoices in the cruel humiliation of the captives. The impressive image that certainly ignited the feverish imagination of the crowds of *The Rose* or *The Fortune* will be revisited later, in 1597, by John Donne in his poem *The Calm* : 'Like Bajazeth encaged, the shepherd's scoff,/ Or like slack-sinewed Samson, his hair off, / Languish our ships. ...' : such is the resilience of qualified expressions of popular lore. To the procession of the conqueror's train attendance followed by the pageant of the prisoners in their cages, abused and vituperated by the crowd, certainly the echo of the ritualistic ceremony of public executions, is added the extravagant abasement of Bajazeth, now the footstool of the lord of life and death that ascends his throne, an impressive image that certainly spellbound the imagination of the populace. The gratuitous gesture may evoke the mysterious presence of an inflexible God in the submission of the tyrant and in the redemption of the oppressed Christians, along the tradition of John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1570) and the emblematic representation of the Pope prostrated before Henry VIII and used by the English king as a

stool; and the memory of the example provided by the episode, illustrating the precarious condition of Man and the mysterious ways of Providence, would revive in Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World*:

'For seeing God, who is the Author of all our tragedies, hath written out for us, and appointed us all the parts we are to play: and hath not, in their distribution, been partial to the most mighty Princes of the world; ... that appointed *Bajazeth* to play the *Grand Signior* of the *Turks* in the morning, and in the same day the *Footstool* of *Tamerlane* ...; of which examples many thousands may be produced: why should other men, who are but the least worms, complain of worms, complain of wrongs? Certainly there is no account to be made of the ridiculous world, than to resolve, that the change of fortune on the great Theatre, is but as the change of garments on the less...'⁸⁴

Tamburlaine shall not be moved by gold or intimidated by the garrisons of Africa and Greece Bazajeth threatens to activate against his captor. The speech of victory is, as expected, grandiose, categorical in its unshakable convictions (the future

⁸⁴ HAMOND, Gerald, ed. , *Sir Walter Raleigh – Selected Writings*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1986, pp.146-147.

tense anticipates the future in the instant) and the orator's prospect devoted to rewrite the map of the world vibrates in the catalogue of places evoking the fascinating age of discovery and the vast world of power and omnipotence promised to the scourge of god:

'Those wallèd garrisons will I subdue,
And write myself great lord of Africa:
So from the east unto the furthest west
Shall Tamburlaine extend his puissant arm.
The galleys and those pilling brigandines
That yearly sail to the Venetian gulf
And hover in the straits for Christians'wreck,
Shall lie at anchor in the Isle Asant
Until the Persian fleet and men-of-war,
Sailing along the oriental sea,
Have fetched about the Indian continent,
Even from Persepolis to Mexico,
And thence unto the Straits of Jubalter,
Where they shall meet and join their force in
one,
Keeping in awe the Bay of Portingale

And all the ocean by the British shore:

And by this means I'll win the world at last'.

III.III.244-260.

What the triumphant hero has in store for his captives bursts all limits of sadistic imagination. 'Thy names and titles and thy dignities/ Are fled from Bajazeth and remain with me, / That will maintain it against a world of kings': Tamburlaine's words in IV.II.79-81 seem to embrace a cannibalistic logic of assimilation, in tone with the insidious suggestions of the banquet scene to follow. In a demented extravagance of nightmarish horror (IV. iv), Bajazeth is forced to eat scrapes of food from the point of the sword of his torturer, with the raucous laughter and uproarious joy of the victors, delighted with the suffering of the victim and his queen. How far we are from the classical dictates of *decorum* and the central role of fear and pity! And how embarrassing it is sometimes to feel this surrender to the brutal fascination orchestrated by an accomplished artist that translates into his creation his defiant and subversive inclinations! ⁸⁵J. B. Steane has

⁸⁵ One should resist, however, the temptation to identify this apparent inclination to destructive and perverse energy to an alleged brutal and

a point when, a long time ago, he commented on this iconoclastic moment of the theatre of cruelty and the awkward effects it is liable to have on readers and audiences :

‘There has been baiting, cursing, stamping, flinging food to the ground. The violence and distastefulness of the scene are the more marked in that they take place at a banquet, where orderly ceremony should prevail: this is a violation of everything civilized. The appeal is an appalling one. Nevertheless, it is an appeal: to those forces which make us bully, attract us towards the infliction of pain and discomfort upon others, make us want to kick over the traces and break things – in fact, to the evil and disruptive within our nature which civilization can normally

provocative temperament. Richard Baines, the author a famous note concerning Marlowe’s impious and blasphemous behavior, or Thomas Kyd, the dramatist’s friend and room companion in London, who wrote an incriminating account of the Canterbury’s dramatist, are, anyway, not reliable biographical witnesses: Baines was involved in counter-information activities most probably dictating the suppression of the poet and spy, Kyd produced his testimony under torture (relevant documents can be found, *inter alia*, in HONAN, Park, *Christopher Marlowe, Poet & Spy*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 374-381).

discipline or refine; and, in Marlowe's presentation it is this appeal which is uppermost.⁸⁶

Suicide will be the expected reaction of a man beyond his senses and doomed to be kept in his cage as long as he lives: he smashes his head against the bars, and the poor Zabina, mad with grief, joins him into the abyss of death. The appalling scene will certainly inscribe the most vivid impression in audiences, and Zenocrate, that in the banquet scene had shared the comedy of evil, later on (V.i.), with Annipe, will be compassionate and vividly moved by the scene of those bloody spoils: 'Behold the Turk and his great emperess!' is the insistent verse in the litany of pain and regret. Damascus will not be spared, in spite of Zenocrate's entreaties, and the poor supplicant Virgins, sent to implore peace (too late, the unwise Governor had not surrendered in time), were to be sacrificed without pity: black is the colour, which means total annihilation, no more red, which would exempt inhabitants from the cruel death, or white, the first step in the sinister progression in the unwavering pronouncements of the conqueror, his 'common rites of arms',

⁸⁶ STEANE, J. B. , *Marlowe: A Critical Study*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1964, P.84.

his 'customs', 'as peremptory/ As wrathful planets, death, or destiny' (V.i.127-128). When the action of *Part I* closes, with the act of mercy that responds to Zenocrate's entreaties and spares her father, the Soldan of Egypt, and Tamburlaine celebrates his union with his paramour and 'takes truce with all the world', readers and audiences are not to recognize in the outline and nature of the action any traces of the tragedy or any echoes of the tradition of the *romance* or the *casus virorum illustrium* of medieval legacy. There is certainly no *catastrophe* and the hero is not hit by disgrace; he never repents, no pity and awe are suggested by his fortune, only admiration, and the heroic voice, beyond any moral code⁸⁷, is still absolute, ratified by the final landscape of devastation beautified with his last victims:

'And such are objects fit for Tamburlaine,
Wherein as in a mirror may be seen
His honour, that consists in shedding blood
When men presume to manage arms with him'.

V. 476-479.

⁸⁷ For chivalry and moral codes, see JONES, Robert, *Knight: The Warrior and World of Chivalry*, Oxford, Osprey Publishing, 2011, pp. 144-177 *et passim*.

But the show must go on. In *Tamburlaine Part II* Marlowe will restate the most exorbitant performance of the comedy of the grotesque. Zenocrate's death, in Act II, scene I, fittingly celebrated in the touching elegy opening with 'Black is the beauty of the brightest day;', seems to provide the conqueror with a ravishing and inordinate course of action. His Muse does not share his dreams of glory: when her death approaches, she is above all a mother protecting her sons and deeply concerned about their future. Calyphas, his mother's boy, declines the prospects of glory promised by his father and will pay that offence with his life. But meanwhile only a sequence of ruin and destruction can follow the loss of Tamburlaine's lady and love. Above the sounds of the battle his apocalyptic voice thunders dreadfully:

'So burn the turrets of this cursed town,
Flame to the highest regions of the air,
And kindle heaps of exhalations,
That being fiery meteors, may presage
Death and destruction to th'inhabitants',
III.ii.1-5.

And so with the sinister background of Larissa in flames, Trebizon and Soria, the vanquished kings, and the rest of the captive potentates, will be debased to the condition of horses and forced to drive the barbarous conqueror to Babylon: 'Holla, ye pampered jades of Asia!' is the famous verse opening the savage discourse of the 'scourge of highest Jove'.

Also here the extravagant infliction of suffering, giving palpable substance to hyperbole and metaphor, may well put Tamburlaine's adventure in perspective, as J. R. Mulryne and Stephen Fender, among others, suggest:

'We might have expected to take all his talk about making Bajazeth his footstool, or harnessing the kings of Trebizon and Soria, as figures of speech for his assumption of their political power, or as metaphors for any number of ways in which he might humiliate them. But what the audience gets is Tamburlaine *really* making the kings pull his chariot, and again and again. His relentless turning of metaphor into fact is both glorious and ridiculous. His ability to carry out his word emphasizes his power and suggests its limitations, in that it forces him to carry out his promises literally. And we cannot resolve this ambivalence by choosing to interpret or produce the

play in one way or another. The ambivalence is built into the text'.⁸⁸

And Mary Elizabeth Smith has perhaps a good point when she sees the *reduction ad absurdum* of a proclaimed liberty that physically is grounded in the circle described by the warrior's chariot, turning around on the stage while the proud victor delivers his long solemn speeches⁸⁹.

Nobody escapes: every gesture of treason, or any evidence of pusillanimity or hesitation, will be punished with death, ⁹⁰no matter if transgressors are soldiers in the battlefield, captives,

⁸⁸ MULRYNE, J. R. , FENDER, Stephen, 'Marlowe and the 'Comic distance'', in MORRIS, Brian, ed. , *Christopher Marlowe* , London, Ernest Benn Limited, Mermaid Critical Commentaries, 1968, pp. 54-55.

⁸⁹ SMITH, Mary Elizabeth, 'Hell Strives with Grace; Reflections on the Theme of Providence in Marlowe', in MAGNUSSON, A. L. , MCGEE, C.E. , eds. , *Elizabethan Theatre XI* , University of Waterloo, Ontario, 1990, p. 147.

⁹⁰ In the web of structural homologies established between **Part I** and **Part II** , the unsuccessful attempt of Theridamas and the disgraceful lot of his unassailable mistress evokes the wooing of Venus by Mars, i. e. the union of Zenocrate and Tamburlaine. 'The most probable function of Theridamas and Olympia episodes is to insist on the spread of death around Tamburlaine', PAVEL, Thomas G. , *The Poetics of Plot – The Case of English Renaissance Drama*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, Theory and History of Literature 18, 1985, p. 58.

women or civilians⁹¹. Zenocrate's attendant, Agydas, had been directed to his suicide, in *Part I* Act III. II, and the brave Olympia, the widow of the unfortunate Captain of the unfortunate Balsera, immolates her noble son, in III.IV, and evades the advances of Theridamas, leading the frustrated lover to kill her, in IV.II. Damascus and their supplicant Virgins, as referred above, had also been sacrificed without mercy, in the first *tragical discourse* of mighty Tamburlaine, V. I. , and now the long pageant of atrocities is still on the way: the Turkish concubines are given to the joy division of Tamburlaine's soldiers⁹², the Governor of Babylon is hung in chains against the walls of the ruined town and shot to death, the inhabitants are tied and drowned in the bituminous lake. And then comes the fatal hour of Calyphas. 'Accursed be he that first invented war!'

⁹¹ The massacre of civilians was very common when besiegers met fierce resistance and suffered many casualties: 'If attacking troops did carry the breach, and did break through to the town beyond, the massacre would be among the garrison and unlucky civilians; custom allowed a three-day sack for the troops to vent their fury. A timely surrender could prevent this final tragedy', ARNOLD, Thomas, *The Renaissance at War*, London, Cassell, Cassell History of Warfare, 2001, p. 66.

⁹² And the cursed status of Calyphas entitles the concubines to bury him.

had Mycetes, the weak king of Persia, said on the verge of his defeat and capture (*Part I*, II.IV); when Tamburlaine lectures his heirs on the rudiments of war (*PART II*, III. II.), the degenerate son discloses his outrageous disqualification before the prospect of war action: 'My lord, but this is dangerous to be done:/ We may be slain or wounded ere we learn». And because 'Blood is the god of war's rich livery', Tamburlaine cuts his own arm and makes his sons wash their hands in the blood, but the appalling gesture does not impress the reluctant fighter, who comments on the cruel exhibition with disappointing and even, in such a context of exalting military virtue, ludicrous fallstaffian words: 'I know not what I should think of it; methinks 'tis a pitiful sight' (III. II. 131). During the battle, Caliphas remains in the tent playing cards and passing the time in idle conversation; his father wins the day and comes back from the field to settle accounts with him. The demi-god cannot be appeased by the entreaties of his soldiers or his son Amyras: such a weakness cannot be forgiven, that 'Image of sloth and picture of a slave' has to be erased from the picture of the triumphant hero. In a ritual gesture, as though he got rid of an 'unworthy part of

himself',⁹³ Tamburlaine, this time performing himself the execution ceremony on the stage, returns that fainting soul to Jove (IV.I). Performance would certainly bring to the fore the violence of the barbarous Abraham immolating his son in the name of the warrior patriarch, and the vulnerability of the victim, silent and pale before the tremendous speech that sentences him, would certainly be revolting, as Bruce R. Smith among others states⁹⁴.

The homology established between the virtue of words and the power of the sword is a conspicuous one in these plays⁹⁵: Heracles is traditionally an accomplished orator. Mycetes orders his ambassador to make the best of his rhetorical talents to

⁹³ WAITH, M. Eugene, *The Herculean Hero in Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare and Dryden*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1962, pp. 80-81. See also SALES, Roger, *Christopher Marlowe*, Basingstoke and London, Macmillan, English Dramatists, 1991, p.80ff.

⁹⁴ SMITH, Bruce R. , *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England – A Cultural Poetics*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1994, p.209.

⁹⁵ The homology of Tamburlaine's pen, that rewrites the map of the world, his sword and Marlowe's pen is examined by António M. Feijó in 'Inveigling writing in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, Part I', in ALVES, Isabel, *et alii*, *XVI Encontro da Associação Portuguesa de Estudos Anglo-Americanos*, Vila Real, Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, 1996, pp. 203-213.

prevail upon Tamburlaine ('Go, stout Theridamas, thy words are swords,/ And with thy looks thou conquerest all thy foes.', *Part I*, I.I. 74-75), but the deputy is dazzled by the warrior's eloquence ('Not Hermes, prolocutor of the gods,/ Could use persuasions more pathetic.', he admits in *Part I*. I. II. 210-211) and changes sides, Zenocrate is asked to keep Tamburlaine's crown during the combat against Bajazeth and challenges Zabina in a battle of words ('And manage words with her as we will arms', *Part I* III.II.131), the debate of poetic beauty and martial achievement is given a graceful dialectic expression (the speech beginning with 'What is beauty, saith my sufferings, then?', *Part I*, V. I. 160 ff), just to name some examples in the first *tragic discourse*. In *Part II*, however, those examples seem to dwindle as the imperious command of the protagonist fades: it is now Callapine, Bajazeth's son, who persuades Almeda, his jailer, to set him free, in I.II, and it is Olympia, in IV.II., who triumphs over Theridamas in IV. II., Tamburlaine's outbursts of pride and glory while riding his chariot are not very convincing, and he cannot impose his argument upon Calyphas, as also stated above. But *Tamburlaine the Great Part II* is not a tragedy: there is no *anagnorisis* and no retribution, and acceptance of death, when it finally occurs, is in

part transformed into a desired fulfilment, as Eugene M. Waith suggests⁹⁶ , and the scourge of God 'perceives death as a rite of initiation to a new life, the prelude of apotheosis'⁹⁷ and, ultimately, he never surrenders, blames the gods and falls in glory⁹⁸. Fair global scrutiny would stress speech melody and rich imagery, energy and resonance of words, rich drapery of evocative names and places, the force of rhetorical assertion: the beauty of words may sway readers and audiences and drag them into the maelstrom of violence, above all when strangeness turns into the familiar and depicted atrocities becomes trivial. This is not the whole story: we are a long way from the old anti theatrical fears of imitation, the magical belief that *mimesis* defiles performers and audiences, stimulating them to give free vent to inordinate desires. Critical distance tells a different version of the effects of art upon life: studying circles and spheres do not make

⁹⁶ In WAITH, Eugene M. , *The Herculean Hero in Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare and Dryden*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1962, p. 82.

⁹⁷ ANDREWS, Michael Cameron, *This Action of Our Death – The Performance of Death in English Renaissance Drama*, Newark, University of Delaware Press/ London and Toronto, Associated University Presses, 1989, p.27.

⁹⁸ TRUCHET, Sybil, *Le Théâtre Médiéval en Angleterre et son influence sur l'oeuvre de Marlowe, Kyd et Lyly: contribution à l'étude du drame pré-shakespearien*, Lille, Université de Lille III, 1980, p.272.

you round shaped, you do not accommodate your body to a new physical configuration for studying lines and squares.

Dark thrillers or sinister detective stories, horror and violent action narratives or performances and hard boiled adventure stories: this is our daily experience of mass consumerism on standing demand. And the literary and dramatic canon has since a long time accepted provocation and excess, heterodoxy and impassioned controversy. Judgement does not depend on moral standards and dominant social values, and any work of art goes well without the prerequisites of authorized biography or moral biased considerations. The historical identity of Shakespeare and Keats do not help readers much to understand their work; the temptation to read Milton or Byron with reference to their lives is certainly more suggestive. And Marlowe, the sceptic and iconoclastic scholar, the heterodox poet and the adventurer in the service of the crown, the blasphemous and quarrelsome tavern figure, celebrated by a tradition written mostly by his rivals and detractors. Be as it may, Joe Orton, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Jean Genet, and Christopher Marlowe, for that matter, are studied in our Universities, and depiction of violence or the most brutal conflict is simply the product of the fertile and unforeseen

operations of poetic imagination giving birth to an aesthetic artefact not dictated by any moral order or any imperative *decorum*. Writers and dramatists are entitled to a wide range of choices, and so are readers and audiences, invited to judge and discuss controversial and delicate issues so often touching an unfamiliar conscience or unexpected points of view and wider unsuspected territories of existence. In Marlowe's time, the inclusive popular commercial drama joined people of different social extractions and different expectations; some were enticed by the appeal of language or to the rich play of connotations and classical allusions to Ovid, Lucan, Virgil or Juvenal; others, also attentive to the convincing energy and beauty of the Marlovian mighty line, could well go without the mythical or scholarly rhetorical devices, but they were certainly there for a good story. In our time *Tamburlaine the Great* still activates fantasies of power while opening for many a moral vacuum requiring critical engagement to fill in, and readers and audiences expect a good story in a piece of dramatic fiction that is also a source of absolute joy.

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