

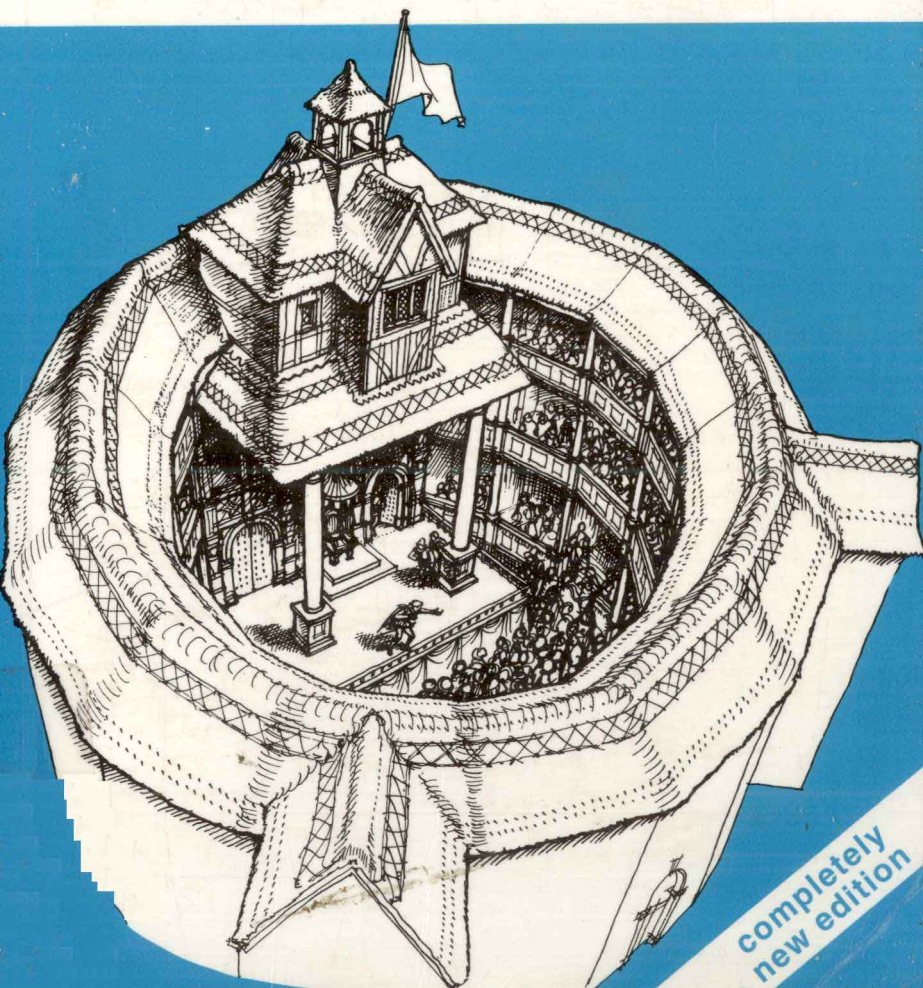
NEW MERMAIDS

# Tamburlaine

## Parts One and Two

**CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE**

edited by Anthony B. Dawson



completely  
new edition

# Tamburlaine Parts One and Two



CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE AUTHOR

DESPITE much that is known about Christopher Marlowe, there hovers around his figure a tantalizing sense of mystery, an interpretive ambiguity that plays through both his life and his writing. In 1587, he burst on to the London theatre scene with the first 'blockbuster' hit of the whole period – *Tamburlaine*, a play whose popularity was matched only by the notoriety of its author. Performed by the Lord Admiral's Men, with the great Edward Alleyn in the title role, the play was what we now call Part One, since Part Two had not yet been written. Its author, the son of a Canterbury cobbler, was born in 1564, the same year as Shakespeare. He must have shown great promise in his studies since, despite his relatively humble background, he attended The King's School in Canterbury and then proceeded to Cambridge at the age of sixteen, receiving his BA in 1584, and his MA in 1587 (*Tamburlaine* was thus probably written while he was still a student). The university authorities were reluctant to award him his final degree, perhaps because of his prolonged absences from Cambridge during the previous three years. They had to be persuaded by a stiffly worded note from the Privy Council itself, specifying that Marlowe had been employed 'in matters touching the benefitt of his Countrie' and hence 'deserved to be rewarded for his faithfull dealinge'.<sup>1</sup> His 'good service' almost certainly involved spying or undercover work of some sort – it certainly was *not* play-writing. Six years later, on 30 May 1593, he was killed in suspicious circumstances by one Ingram Frizer, who claimed that he acted in self-defence after a quarrel arose about the paying of a bill for food and drink at the house of a gentlewoman of Deptford, Eleanor Bull. Of the four men present, including Marlowe, at least three had known connections with the Elizabethan espionage system; not surprisingly, a great deal of speculation and ingenious scholarship has been devoted to establishing some sort of political or underground motive for Marlowe's murder. But proof remains elusive and it is unlikely we will ever know what really happened.

The uncertainty about his death is made all the more murky by the fact that Marlowe had a reputation as a notorious atheist

<sup>1</sup> See John Bakeless, *The Tragicall History of Christopher Marlowe* (Cambridge, Ma., 1942), I, p. 77, for a full text.



Map of Turkish Empire on which Tamburlaine's military campaigns can be traced





and free-thinker, a rebel against morals and religion, and was the subject of government investigation on that account. It is possible he used his unsavoury reputation as a kind of cover to gather information, although if this was the case it is likely that some government spies in the loosely structured, overlapping networks that made up the Elizabethan secret service, were unaware of it. Towards the end of his life, he seems to have been the victim of a smear campaign designed to discredit him and some of his associates (including, perhaps, Sir Walter Raleigh).<sup>2</sup> Just days before he was killed, a government agent named Richard Baines delivered a note to the Privy Council detailing Marlowe's 'damnable Judgement of Religion', e.g. that 'Moses was but a Jugler' and that the 'first beginning of Religoun was only to keep men in awe'. A few weeks earlier, Thomas Kyd, a former friend and fellow playwright, imprisoned and tortured as the suspected author of the 'Dutch Church libel' (an attack on foreigners that was signed 'Tamburlaine'), had informed against Marlowe, citing the latter as the owner of an incriminating 'atheistic' treatise (since shown to be harmless enough) found in Kyd's lodgings. Marlowe was detained, but he was not charged and remained free under supervision (even this has been cited as evidence for a plot against him since it allowed for the fateful meeting at Deptford a few weeks later). Shortly after Marlowe's death, Kyd, attempting to clear himself, wrote a pair of letters to the Lord Keeper attributing to his onetime fellow-lodger various outrageous and illegal opinions, including, for example, that the Apostle John was Christ's 'Alexis', i.e. his homosexual lover.<sup>3</sup> The letters probably reflect what Kyd had earlier told his interrogators. Just as Marlowe's undercover activities are impossible to reconstruct with complete confidence, so we will never know for certain what he really thought; the best evidence we have is the plays, which certainly do contain radical challenges to accepted views, but they are dramatic texts and tell us nothing definite.

Nevertheless, such uncertainty has not prevented scholars and critics from reading the plays as an expression of a single overarching vision proceeding from a mind concerned with its own workings and aspirations. Over and over, *Tamburlaine* has been interpreted, in the words of one influential critic, as the product of the 'recklessly courageous' playwright whose act of play-making 'spurn[s] and subvert[s] his culture's metaphysical and

<sup>2</sup> See Charles Nicholl, *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe* (London, 1992), for an historically detailed, but highly speculative account of Marlowe's life as a government agent.

<sup>3</sup> For the full texts of the Kyd and Baines documents, see Millar Maclure, ed., *Marlowe: The Critical Heritage 1588-1896* (London, 1979), pp. 32-8.

ethical certainties'.<sup>4</sup> In such a scenario, Marlowe himself becomes the ultimate Marlovian hero. To some extent, it must be admitted, Marlowe invites this response: he continually *dares* his audiences, challenging them to follow his speculative dramatic paths, creating aspiring, restless heroes who push beyond prescribed limits. We can imagine him on the afternoon of that first performance in 1587: only twenty-three but bold beyond his years, flushed with the excitement of secret government work and buoyed by artistic arrogance. He takes pleasure in provoking an audience both shocked and delighted by the challenges they could hardly help but feel. To begin to take the measure of Marlowe's effect on his contemporaries, we need imaginatively to resurrect the excitement at the brand-new Rose Theatre when Edward Alleyn began to speak the young writer's intoxicating words – much imitated and lampooned in the years to come but at that moment startlingly original, unlike anything that had been heard before.<sup>5</sup>

## THE TAMBURLAINE PLAYS

### Sights of Power

The first thing the audience heard was a prologue, spoken perhaps by Alleyn, though more likely by a less eminent member of the company. Like the rest of the play, the prologue is a kind of dare, and it offers a few clues about audience experience, which are corroborated to some degree by contemporary testimony:

From jiggling veins of rhyming mother wits  
And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay,  
We'll lead you to the stately tent of war,  
Where you shall hear the Scythian Tamburlaine  
Threat'ning 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.

This is clearly a challenge, almost a manifesto: away with the old, here comes the new (and considerably better). No more doggerel rhymes or clownage, but real poetry: 'high astounding terms' which the auditors will hear and respond to with necessary

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago, 1980), p. 220.

<sup>5</sup> There is no clear evidence that the earliest performances were at the Rose, but since Alleyn was performing there in the 1580s and since a few years later Henslowe's *Diary* indicates that both *Tamburlaine* plays were performed there, it is certainly not impossible.

awe. Notice the commanding tone and the nervous forward thrust of the future tense, different from the deference and the relaxed ease of the present tense typical of Shakespearean prologues (as, for example, in the Chorus speeches of *Henry V*). Where Shakespeare requests our attention, Marlowe simply declares: we *shall* hear and (it seems) be astounded. Marlowe's 'mighty line', in Ben Jonson's famous phrase, will take hold of us, exorcising all memory of the jiggling veins of unskilled rhymers. But our experience will not be all aural. In fact, the sounds blend imperceptibly with the ravages of Tamburlaine's sword and the 'picture' that we are told to 'view'. The theatre is a mirror, a 'tragic glass', producing 'sights of power to grace my victory' (1, V, ii, 412), as Tamburlaine later puts it. He deploys these 'sights' to illustrate and confirm his power; he creates a design with the dead bodies of kings and potentates – the Turkish emperor in his cage, his hapless queen nearby, and the defeated king of Arabia; they are arranged on stage as signs of victory, marks of invincibility. Both Tamburlaine and Marlowe create visual emblems that lead to applause, even perhaps to wonder.

And so the prologue pushes us toward awe before we have even seen Tamburlaine, but then pulls back in a surprising but characteristic Marlovian move: 'And then applaud his fortunes as you please.' The last three words seem tossed off with casual aggressiveness; partly a concession to that original audience, they invite spectators to judge but then seem to disdain whatever judgement might be made. The final phrase also pushes us to reconsider the force of Tamburlaine's rhetoric as defined earlier in the prologue; it drives a wedge between the responses of his onstage and offstage audiences. Cosroe and Orcanes may be astounded, but will we also be? The curious falling away at the end of the prologue catches an ambivalent attitude that is recurrent not only in Marlowe's work generally but in his life as well. Consider his supposed portrait, which hangs in the dining hall of Corpus Christi, his Cambridge college. It carries the motto *Quod me nutrit me destruit* – whatever sustains me also brings me down; his expression is assured, his doublet rich (for a scholarship boy it seems lavish), his stance confident. But the motto casts what we see into ironic perspective. It delivers a hint of the ambiguous mixture of commitment and betrayal that seems to have characterized his life as a spy as well as a poet, a suspected Catholic sympathizer as well as a government agent, an 'atheist' as well as a believer.<sup>6</sup> His plays, his portrait, his

<sup>6</sup> The portrait was only discovered in 1953 and may not even be Marlowe – another mark of uncertainty. See Nicholl, pp. 5–9.

biography, all challenge us to know, but keep hidden from us the means to do so; like Mephistophilis with Faustus, they tease us with uncertainty and then seem to scorn us for wanting to be certain.

Michael Goldman, in a perceptive essay, has drawn attention to the motif of *ravishment* in Marlowe – how his characters are ravished by a vision of bliss associated with a particular object, such as the crown in *Tamburlaine*, which is then discarded as mere trash, nothing but a stage prop, entirely external and hence worthless.<sup>7</sup> The same might be said for the audience's experience as Marlowe constructs it in both the prologue and the play as a whole. The picture created in and by the theatre induces wonder, but then that wonder is reduced or trivialized. We can make of it what we please. However, it is precisely in this arena that Marlowe's irony comes fully into play, not to disable wonder but to redirect it, to give it an intellectual edge. The combination of awe and disdain is at the core of the distinctively Marlovian form of theatrical wonder, and the effect is to place sceptical thought at the centre of the experience. Theatrical experience involves being ravished, but it also involves thinking about ravishment and even discarding it. T. S. Eliot used the phrase 'tragic farce' to describe Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*; the almost impossible doubleness in the term catches something of the ambivalence in the experience that I am describing.

Marlowe's audience was not immune to the poetics of ravishment. At the same time, there were those who reacted to the extravagant acting style of an Alleyn with disdain – suggesting a division among Elizabethan playgoers that reflects the text's ambivalence and in some ways parallels the controversies of modern critics. Joseph Hall, a satirist writing ten years after *Tamburlaine* was first produced, attacks the still popular play, but in doing so gives us a strong sense of its effect on its auditors: he imagines a high-pitched poet (a thinly disguised sketch of Marlowe), creating on

his fainèd stage

The stalking steps of his great personage,  
Graced with huf-cap termes and thundring threats  
That his poor hearers hayre quite upright sets.

If intellectuals like Hall scoffed, they may indeed have been reacting to an invitation built into the text; ordinary theatregoers were not so fastidious:

<sup>7</sup> 'Marlowe and the Histrionics of Ravishment', in Alvin Kernan, ed., *Two Renaissance Mythmakers* (Baltimore and London, 1977), pp. 22–40.

There [i.e. on the stage] if he can with termes Italianate,  
 Big-sounding sentences, and words of state,  
 Faire patch me up his pure *Iambick* verse,  
 He ravishes the gazing Scaffolders.<sup>8</sup>

Ravishing the scaffolders involves both wonder and magic. Magic, of course, is dependent on language; *words* have magical force (witness even in the popular imagination the force of a phrase like '*abracadabra*'), and are contained in secret books. This is the subject of Marlowe's most famous play, *Dr Faustus*, where the bliss and dross of magic are both foregrounded: 'Tis magic, magic, that hath ravished me' (I, i, 111), says Faustus at the outset, but the audience is then treated to an increasingly degraded display of magical tricks. Tamburlaine too is magical; he borrows omnipotence from the gods and displays his power in a series of shows designed to provoke wonder. Theatrical magic depends on both words and 'sights' of power; it starts, especially in the open Elizabethan theatre, with the actor and the person he plays. Thomas Nashe, in 1592, defending the theatre from some of its vociferous enemies, praises an actor for resurrecting the English hero, Lord Talbot, in Shakespeare's *1 Henry VI*:

How would it have ioyed brave Talbot [asks Nashe] to thinke that after he had lyne two hundred yeares in his Tombe, he should triumphe againe on the Stage, and haue his bones newe embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least, (at seuerall times) who in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding.<sup>9</sup>

Although Nashe is probably referring here to Richard Burbage, the point he is making carries over to Burbage's great rival, Edward Alleyn, and indeed opens a window to an understanding of actorly representation on the Elizabethan stage generally. The passage conflates actor and historical character as the *source* of theatrical effect. It records a 'triumph' (a word suggestive of Tamburlaine) on the part of the actor as well as the character. 'Triumph' was in fact a technical term for a ceremonial funeral display, a rite that was as much secular as religious and that represented the power of the deceased in a grand theatrical show.<sup>10</sup> The action in the theatre thus becomes a 'triumph' in several senses: as a victory for both character and actor, and as

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Hall, from *Virgidemiarum* (I, iii), in Maclure, p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penilesse, His Supplication to the Diuell* (1592). Ed. G. B. Harrison (London: Bodley Head, 1924), p. 87.

<sup>10</sup> See Michael Neill, '“Exeunt with a Dead March”: Funeral Pageantry on the Shakespearean Stage', in David Bergeron, ed., *Pageantry in the Shakespearean Theater* (Athens, Ga., 1985), p. 154.

a memorial for an historical hero. Nashe conflates the actor's power with that of the man he represents and locates the effect of the theatrical experience in the living body that revives the dead person.<sup>11</sup>

Much has been made about the differences between Alleyn and Burbage, the former usually depicted as old-fashioned and histrionic, the latter as 'modern' and psychological, commanding that inwardness that seems required by Shakespearean tragedy (Burbage was the first Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth). From a host of contemporary accounts it seems clear that Alleyn's style could be unabashedly sensational (Jonson called it 'scenically strutting and furious vociferation' and Shakespeare satirized it in Ancient Pistol, the braggart soldier in *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*). But Thomas Heywood, writing in 1632, remembered Alleyn in different terms: he won

The Attribute of peerelesse, being a man  
Whom we may ranke with (doing no one wrong)  
Proteus for shapes, and Roscius for a tongue,  
So could he speake, so vary . . .<sup>12</sup>

By 1600 or so, Alleyn's style had no doubt become old-fashioned; we can catch a glimpse of it in the player-king in *Hamlet*, an affectionate tribute to such acting that counter-balances the satire in Pistol, and note the change in style indicated by Hamlet's advice to 'suit the action to the word, the word to the action . . . [but] o'erstep not the modesty of nature' (III, ii, 17–19). But that such acting was undeniably effective is clear from the player-king's Hecuba speech, itself a close imitation of Marlowe's *Dido Queen of Carthage*. And judging from Heywood's testimony, it did not preclude an ability to change shapes at will, like Proteus, nor to speak subtly and eloquently, like Roscius, the greatest of Roman actors.

So the differences between Alleyn and Burbage may not have been so marked as has often been claimed. A change of style usually brings with it a noisy rejection of what came before, which obscures the many continuities. The key to imagining Alleyn's Tamburlaine is to recall not just the tendency to strut or to pour the soul into extravagant rhetoric; such moves Alleyn undoubtedly mastered. But, as Heywood reminds us, he was also a 'Proteus for shapes': he could 'vary' quickly and easily.

<sup>11</sup> I have developed an analysis of the 'person' of actor and character on the Elizabethan stage, and the participatory power generated by the actor's presence, in 'Performance and Participation: Desdemona, Foucault and the Actor's Body' in James Bulman, ed., *Shakespeare: Theory and Performance* (London, 1996), pp. 29–45.

<sup>12</sup> For the Jonson and Heywood quotations, see Maclure, *op. cit.*, pp. 50 and 49.

And there is the key – for without variation, furious vociferation would soon get wearisome. We may be apt to regard *Tamburlaine* as an unvarying series of high rhetorical speeches and linguistic conquests, but this is to miss the frequent shifts and changes of mood that a great actor needs to bring out on the stage. *Tamburlaine* can turn from unfeelingly ordering the slaughter of the Damascus virgins to a meditation on the beauty of Zenocrate and the failure of language to express it. He can condemn a man to death with a wrathful look (1, III, ii) or shift from despair over the death of Zenocrate to a disquisition on military fortification (2, II, iv).

His famous speech on beauty and poetry is a manifestation of a new susceptibility invading the armour of his heroic stature, and requires an answerable acting style, one capable of registering a slightly bewildered access to a hitherto unexamined inner life:

What is beauty saith my sufferings then?  
 If all the pens that ever poets held  
 Had fed the feeling of their masters' thoughts . . .  
 If all the heavenly quintessence they still  
 From their immortal flowers of poesy,  
 Wherein as in a mirror we perceive  
 The highest reaches of a human wit,  
 If these had made one poem's period  
 And all combined in beauty's worthiness,  
 Yet should there hover in their restless heads  
 One thought, one grace, one wonder at the least,  
 Which into words no virtue can digest.

(1, V, ii, 97–110)

Although he has just declared that he would never 'change my martial observations . . . for the love of Venus' (59–61), he is, like Othello, deeply tempted to do just that. Michael Goldman notes how the 'sense of the body resting in protective comfort . . . of melting into repose . . . is as important in Marlowe as the strenuous excitement of aspiration' (p. 36). *Tamburlaine* here reveals his susceptibility to such a sensual urge, the very feeling that he rejects so cruelly when it manifests itself in his slothful son in Part Two (evidence perhaps that in destroying his son he is lashing out against a part of himself). The power of beauty at least temporarily defeats his characteristic mastery of his world. And, at the same time, he registers the restless aspiration of poets to capture in words the fullness of their imaginings and recognizes that such an aspiration, like his own desire for conquest, can never be fulfilled.

Of course his meditation carries him through to a resolution *not* to 'harbour thoughts effeminate and faint', but even that is

couched in ambivalent terms and a tortured syntax that bespeaks the almost unresolved conflict:

But how unseemly is it for my sex . . .  
 To harbour thoughts effeminate and faint!  
 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 –  
 I thus conceiving and subduing both . . . (1, V, ii, 111–20)

The syntax and even the semantics of the lines keep urging us to take them in a different way, most powerfully at line 117 when 'rapt with love' seems to keep us in the tempting realm of Venus, but then reveals itself in the next line to be referring to what warriors are *supposed* to love – valour and victory, the world of Mars. The struggle is revealed too in the fact that the long clause beginning with 'Save' has no main verb. Tamburlaine, usually so precisely articulate, is here disordered in his thinking and it takes a special effort of his extraordinary will to 'subdue' what he has conceived. It is the mark of the great man, as it is of the poet, to conceive beauty, but the conquering hero must also subdue it. Both actor and character must engage with beauty, with poetry, with softness, and then thrust them firmly back into their proper place so that he can declare at the end that 'virtue [in the sense of personal and military power, what the Italians called *virtù*] solely is the sum of glory'. Again, the intellectual current in the wonder, the mixture of ravishment and disdain, calls for an alert, subtle style of acting, and evokes a parallel response in the audience.

### Appraising the Hero

How, overall, are we to react to Tamburlaine? That is the most vexed and most debated question about the play. Does Marlowe temper our admiration with ironic displacements or is the whole thing one mighty, nose-thumbing hurrah for a figure who challenges many of the pieties of Elizabethan orthodoxy? Most of the original audience, if we are to trust the many contemporary reports that Richard Levin has compiled, were delighted with Tamburlaine, even if Joseph Hall or Marlowe's ambivalent friend, Robert Greene, disapproved. Greene accused Marlowe of 'daring God out of heaven with that Atheist Tamburlan'<sup>13</sup> and critics of our own time have been equally troubled. Uneasy about

<sup>13</sup> From Greene's *Perimedes the Blacksmith* (1588); see Maclure, p. 29.





Portrait of Tamburlaine, from Paulus Giovius, *Elogia Virorum Bellica Virtute Illustrium*, 1575 (by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library)