

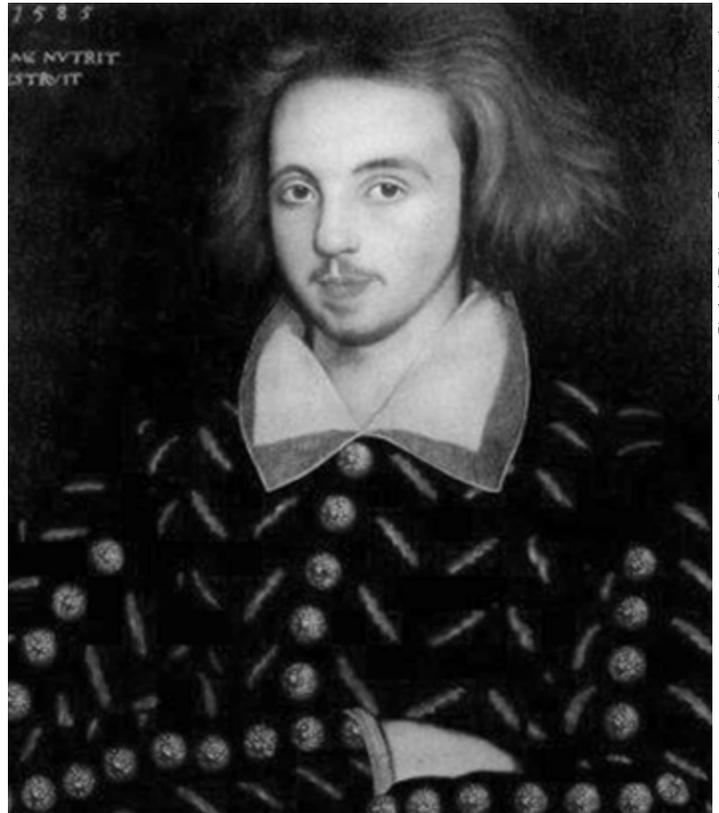
# Biography of *Christopher Marlowe*

Christopher Marlowe was a highly influential poet and playwright. Although his career as a playwright lasted only six years, he was well-known in Elizabethan England. Marlowe was baptized on February 26, 1564, in Canterbury, England, the son of a shoemaker and a clergyman's daughter. He attended King's School in Canterbury and went on to study at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge University, one of England's oldest and most prestigious universities. There is much speculation that Marlowe was also working as a "confidential agent" for the British government during his college years. He earned his bachelor's degree in 1584 and completed his master's degree in 1587.

The years after his graduation were marked by frequent scandal and trouble with the law. Marlowe had a brief stint in the army after college; he was dishonorably discharged as a result of his involvement in a money-counterfeiting scheme in the Netherlands. Afterward, Marlowe moved to London and quickly became known as a colorful and controversial character. He was arrested in 1589 for his part in a brawl during which a man was killed. In 1593, he was called before the Privy Council (advisors to Queen Elizabeth), on accusations of heresy prompted by his suspected involvement in a scandal referred to as the Dutch Church libel. Marlowe was released on bail and was killed shortly after, stabbed to death in a Deptford tavern. He was 29 years old. The circumstances surrounding his death are suspicious; some believe his murder was the result of a simple barroom fight over who would pay the tab, while others claim that his death was directly linked to his political activities.

Marlowe's canon includes seven plays: *Tamburlaine Parts I and II*, *Doctor Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta*, *Edward II*, *The Massacre at Paris* and *Dido, Queen of Carthage*. He also wrote several long poems. He is credited with establishing blank verse—the standard form for Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Blank verse—unrhymed iambic pentameter—is a form of poetry that includes lines of text consisting of 10 syllables split into five pairs, also called "feet," of two syllables each. Ben Jonson, a fellow playwright and poet, famously referred to blank verse as "Marlowe's mighty line," a phrase that eloquently captures the significance of Marlowe's innovation. One of the main stylistic differences between Marlowe and Shakespeare is rhyme: Shakespeare often used rhyming couplets, while Marlowe did so infrequently.

Marlowe's most significant contribution to playwriting was freeing the verse. Unlike his predecessors, Marlowe refused to be constrained by strict rules of poetic verse, though he wrote in iambic pentameter. He stretched the boundaries of iambic pentameter by writing sentences that spanned multiple lines and by using a more complex vocabulary. The result was a



The "Corpus Christi" Portrait, believed to represent a 21-year-old Christopher Marlowe, painted in 1585 but not discovered until 1953.

grand style of verse with a distinctive energy that produced a wholly new kind of theatrical experience.

Conspiracy theories often propose that Marlowe was the real author of the plays attributed to Shakespeare. While most scholars agree that this is unfounded, nearly all agree that Shakespeare's works, especially his early *Henry VI* plays, were deeply influenced by Marlowe. Perhaps the most important difference between the two men was their educational backgrounds. Both came from humble beginnings, but unlike Shakespeare, whose education was limited to the grammar school in Stratford, Marlowe won scholarships and ultimately graduated from Cambridge. Marlowe's plays were already being produced successfully in London when Shakespeare arrived from Stratford. In fact, *Tamburlaine* may have been the first play that Shakespeare saw in London. The play, with its grand scale and exciting theatricality, doubtless stirred Shakespeare's imagination. There is no question that Shakespeare was aware of Marlowe's work, because he quoted it relatively frequently in his own plays. Such "sharing" was common in the London playwriting community. For example, the famous line "Whoever loved that loved not at first sight?" from Shakespeare's later comedy *As You Like It* was actually written by Marlowe. Although he died before the age of 30, Christopher Marlowe made an indelible mark on English drama. While his contemporary and colleague Shakespeare went on to achieve far greater fame, Marlowe's influence remains profound and significant.

# Synopsis of *Tamburlaine the Great*

## PART I

The Persian King Mycetes, amidst fighting with his brother, Cosroe, prepares for the attack of an army of Turks and Tartars led by the Scythian shepherd Tamburlaine. Mycetes dispatches his captain, Theridamas, to conquer Tamburlaine's army. He then orders Menaphon to follow Theridamas, but

Cosroe urges Mycetes instead to install Menaphon as Viceroy of Assyria to prevent the Assyrians from revolting against Mycetes's monarchy. Swearing to punish him for this insult, Mycetes leaves Cosroe, who reveals to Menaphon a plot already afoot to crown Cosroe Emperor. No sooner has he revealed this plot than the Persian lord Ortygius arrives to crown Cosroe, who vows to redeem Persia from his brother's feeble government.

In Scythia, Tamburlaine's army has captured Zenocrate, the daughter of the Sultan of Egypt, to whom Tamburlaine vows to wed, despite her pleas for freedom. Tamburlaine's wooing is cut short by the arrival of Theridamas and the Persian army. Tamburlaine opts to parley with Theridamas, promising him that, if he joins Tamburlaine's crusade, Tamburlaine will reward him with great power in the empire to come. Tamburlaine succeeds, and Theridimas turns over his army to Tamburlaine, joining Techelles and Usumcasane as the third of Tamburlaine's generals.

Cosroe joins with Tamburlaine and Theridamas to conquer Mycetes. When Mycetes learns of this, he vows to overthrow Tamburlaine, despite the fact that Tamburlaine's army is now far larger than Mycetes's. As Tamburlaine's forces prepare to meet Mycetes, Cosroe reveals his expectation that he will be made King of Persia, and offers Tamburlaine and his lords great power in his empire. Tamburlaine's forces meet with Mycetes, who they quickly capture and defeat.

Cosroe pronounces himself Emperor, and names Tamburlaine the regent of Persia. Left alone with his supporters (Theridamas, Techelles, and Usumcasane) Tamburlaine vows to take the Persian Empire for himself. Tamburlaine conquers Cosroe's forces and kills Cosroe. Tamburlaine takes his crown and crowns himself King of Persia.



Tamburlaine and Zenocrate, from Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, 1597. Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

In Turkey, Emperor Bajazeth, aware of the spreading power of Tamburlaine, dispatches one of his subordinates to order Tamburlaine not to spread his empire beyond the bounds of Persia, or else Bajazeth will attack him.

Meanwhile, Zenocrate is becoming more comfortable with her life as Tamburlaine's empress despite the advice of her attendant

Agydas, who denounces Tamburlaine. Tamburlaine overhears Zenocrate's loving defense of him to Agydas, and, without a word, leads her away, glaring at Agydas. Agydas recognizes his doom, and when Techelles arrives bearing a dagger, Agydas seizes it and stabs himself.

In spite of Bajazeth's threat, Tamburlaine vows to triumph over Turkey and conquer Africa. Bajazeth soon arrives with his attendant kings and his Empress, Zabina. Tamburlaine and Bajazeth prepare for battle, Tamburlaine vowing that he will conquer and humiliate Bajazeth and give Zabina to Zenocrate as a slave. In the battle, Bajazeth is quickly overtaken. Imprisoning Bajazeth and Zabina, Tamburlaine crowns himself and Zenocrate Emperor and Empress of Africa.

In Egypt, the Sultan (Zenocrate's father) prepares for the arrival of Tamburlaine's army, vowing that he will fight with Tamburlaine and take Zenocrate from him.

Tamburlaine arrives in Damascus with Bajazeth in a cage. Tamburlaine vows that he will keep Bajazeth for the rest of his life in the cage and that Zabina will feed him Tamburlaine's tablescraps. Meanwhile, the Sultan of Egypt and the Emperor of Arabia prepare to fight Tamburlaine. Zenocrate begs Tamburlaine to spare her father's life and make a truce with Egypt. Tamburlaine replies that, if the Sultan will give him Egypt and Arabia willingly, then he will spare his life. Tamburlaine then crowns Theridamas, Techelles and Usumcasane with the crowns of Bajazeth's attendant kings, as he prepares to conquer Egypt.

With the battle raging, the Governor of Damascus dispatches a group of virgins to plead with Tamburlaine for mercy. Entering the city, Tamburlaine orders the virgins to be killed. Tamburlaine then receives news that the Sultan and King of Arabia are approaching.

Theridamas convinces Tamburlaine to spare the Sultan's life. Tamburlaine then has Bajazeth brought in in his cage, where Tamburlaine leaves him while he prepares for battle. Bajazeth brains himself on the bars of his cage. Discovering Bajazeth dead, Zabina kills herself as well.

Receiving news that her father and the King of Arabia are going to battle with Tamburlaine, Zenocrate grieves for him, sure that he will die. Tamburlaine returns triumphant, but with the Sultan still alive, whom he delivers free to Zenocrate. Tamburlaine crowns Zenocrate Queen of Persia, and then leaves with her to solemnize their marriage.

## PART II

In Austria, the Muslim King Orcanes of Natolia arrives to parley for a truce with the Christian King Sigismund of Hungary so that together they can fight against Tamburlaine and free Callapine, the son of Bajazeth who Tamburlaine still keeps prisoner in Egypt. Sigismund arrives and, after much argument, the two kings swear to uphold a truce.

In Egypt, Callapine convinces his keeper Almeda to escape with him back to Turkey, where an army of Turkish kings waits to receive him and make him Emperor.

Meanwhile, Tamburlaine vows to continue his conquests, but questions the bravery of his three sons, Amyras, Calyphas and Celebinus. Amyras and Celebinus promise to fight, but Calyphas begs to stay behind. Tamburlaine denounces the boy as he prepares for war with the Turkish Empire.

King Sigismund decides to break his truce with Orcanes and attack as revenge for Orcanes's past aggressions toward Hungary. Orcanes tears apart the articles of peace and swears to conquer Sigismund's approaching army. Orcanes conquers the Christians and kills Sigismund.

Zenocrate lies dying as Tamburlaine prays to the gods to comfort her. When she dies, Tamburlaine announces that he will not inter her body and will bury her only after he dies. He orders the town where she has died to be set on fire and a statue of Zenocrate to be erected on the city's ruins.

Orcanes joins with the several Turkish kings to crown Callapine the Emperor of Turkey. Callapine prepares the Turkish armies for a new conquest against Tamburlaine's forces.

Tamburlaine and his sons complete their memorials to Zenocrate, after which Tamburlaine schools his sons in the practices of war. Calyphas expresses fear, and Tamburlaine demands that his son not fear injury. As demonstration of this, Tamburlaine cuts his own arm and orders his sons to wash their hands in his blood. Theridamas and Techelles

arrive at Balsera, where they ask the Captain of the city to surrender it to Tamburlaine. The captain refuses, and so they lay siege to the city and conquer it, killing the Captain. The Captain's wife, Olympia, stabs her child so that he will not live fatherless. Before she can kill herself, Olympia is found by Techelles and Theridamas, who take her to Tamburlaine.

Tamburlaine's army faces off with Callapine's, and war breaks out. During the battle, Tamburlaine's son, Calyphas, remains in his tent playing cards. Tamburlaine returns with Amyras and Celebinus leading the Turkish Kings as prisoners. Discovering Calyphas idle, Tamburlaine kills him. As the Turkish Kings denounce his tyranny, Tamburlaine vows to bridle the kings and use them to pull his chariot.

The grieving Olympia is discovered by Theridamas who begs her to be his queen. When she begs for death and refuses to love him, Theridamas threatens to take Olympia by force. Olympia offers to give Theridamas a magical ointment that will make skin impermeable to weapons. To demonstrate, she anoints her own neck and tells Theridamas to stab her there. When he does, the ointment is revealed as a trick, and Olympia dies.

Tamburlaine appears in a chariot drawn by the bridled Kings of Turkey. As Tamburlaine's sons are bridling Orcanes and the King of Jerusalem, the concubines of the former Kings of Turkey are brought in, and Tamburlaine orders his soldiers to use the concubines to satisfy their lust. Tamburlaine then rallies his army on to Babylon for their next siege.

In Babylon, the Governor refuses to yield his city to Tamburlaine. Tamburlaine gives orders for the Governor to be hanged in chains from the city walls and for the soldiers to shoot him as he hangs. The Governor offers to reveal to Tamburlaine the location of a massive store of gold, which Tamburlaine takes before ordering the Governor's execution. In order to demonstrate his supremacy over Mohammad, Tamburlaine burns all the Islamic holy books found in the Turkish temples. He then dares Mohammad to punish him for this act. His mood suddenly changes, and he experiences an unexplainable distemper.

As Callapine's army surrounds Babylon, Tamburlaine falls ill. A messenger reports that Callapine's army, seeing Tamburlaine's absence from the field, is launching their attack. Tamburlaine musters his strength to go and face Callapine's troops, which makes them flee. Returning to his tent, Tamburlaine calls for a map, with which he chronicles his conquests and shows his sons the lands remaining yet unconquered. Tamburlaine then crowns his eldest son Emperor and calls for the hearse of Zenocrate, in which he orders his body with hers to be interred. Finally, bidding his sons and captains farewell, Tamburlaine dies. 

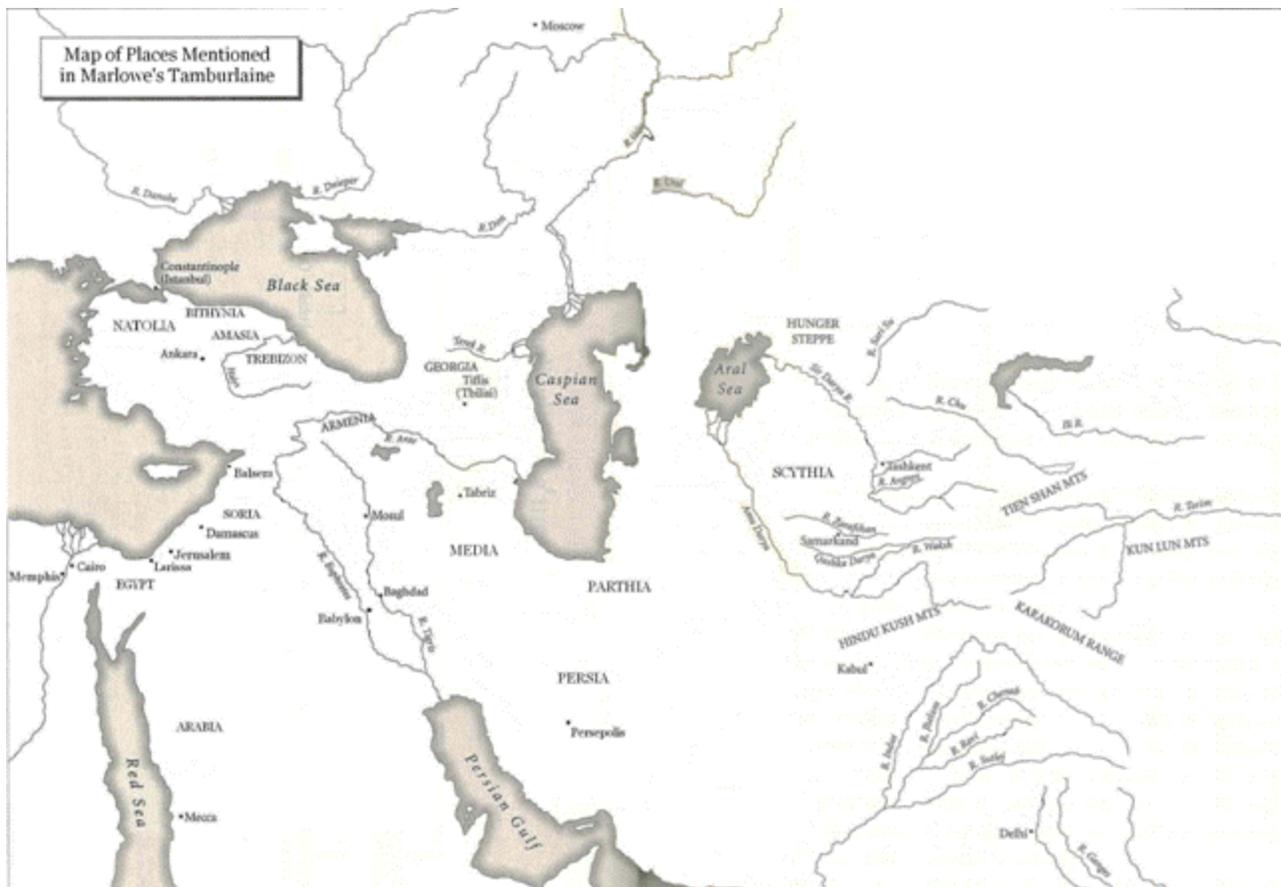
# The Geography of Tamburlaine

The geography covered in *Tamburlaine* is expansive and impressive and includes parts of present-day Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Geographical locations either visited, conquered or mentioned in the play include, in the following order: Persepolis (present-day Iran), Scythia (present-day Ukraine, Russia and Central Asia), Persia (present-day Iran), Turkey, Fez (present-day Morocco), Morocco, Argier (present-day Algeria), Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), Egypt, Arabia (present-day Saudi Arabia), Damascus (present-day Syria), Natolia (present-day Turkey), Hungary, Jerusalem (present-day Israel), Larissa (present-day Greece), Balsera (present-day Turkey), Aleppo (present-day Syria), Trebizon (present-day Turkey), Soria (present-day Syria) and Babylon (present-day Iraq). Many of these locations were very important because of their religious affiliations. Constantinople, for example, was the Eastern seat of Christianity. In the play, Tamburlaine overcomes Bajazeth and thus ends the siege on Constantinople. The intricate journey of *Tamburlaine* reflects the wide scope of Marlowe's geographical knowledge. He studied geography extensively as part of his master's degree and would have been very familiar with the history and scenery of the East.

In the moments before his death, Tamburlaine recounts his conquests to his remaining sons Amyras and Celebinus:

"Hence I began to march towards Persia,  
And thence unto Bithynia, where I took  
The Turk and his great empress prisoners.  
Then march'd I into Egypt and Arabia;  
From thence to Nubia near Borno-lake,  
And so along the Aethiopian sea,  
I conquer'd all as far as Zanzibar.  
Then, by the northern part of Africa,  
I came at last to Graecia, and from thence  
To Asia, where I stay against my will;  
Which is from Scythia, where I first began,  
Backward and forwards near five thousand leagues.  
Look here, my boys; see, what a world of ground  
Lies westward from the midst of Cancer's line  
Unto the rising of this earthly globe!  
And shall I die, and this unconquered?  
And from th'Antarctic Pole eastward behold  
As much more land, which never was descried,  
Wherein are rocks of pearl that shine as bright  
As all the lamps that beautify the sky!  
And shall I die, and this unconquered?"  
(act 2, scene 17)

This final speech details the spectacular geographical journey of the play. The breadth of Tamburlaine's travels and conquests sparks the imagination to wonder what that world would have looked and sounded like. The landscape and culture of the East was relatively unknown to the average Elizabethan playgoer but Marlowe's vision brought it vividly alive onstage. 



# The Real Tamburlaine

The character of Tamburlaine is based on a real-life historical figure, a Mongol conqueror of Central Asia and India named Timur Leng, which means Timur the Lame. He lived in the 14th century, circa 1336 to 1405, in Kesh, near Samarkand, a city located on the "Silk Road," the trade route between China and Europe, in present-day Uzbekistan. The son of a tribal leader, Timur claimed to be descended from Genghis Khan, the famous Mongolian conqueror, and used the connection to reclaim lands that had been bequeathed to the Khan's son but lost over the years. The real Timur was a complicated figure. He was a great admirer of scholars and religious men and a patron of many cultural and academic institutions. He was also a ruthless conqueror capable of mass destruction and terrible cruelty. His actions were governed by a combination of the laws of Islam and the actions of his ancestor Genghis Khan; he applied those laws that suited his purposes and disregarded any that did not.

How did Marlowe discover Timur's remarkable story? Timur was a known figure in Elizabethan literature and, judging from the wealth of details found throughout the play, Marlowe clearly did ample reading and research beyond what was immediately available about his historical subject. One of his major sources was a book called *The English Mirror: A Regard Wherein All Estates May Behold the Conquests of Envy*, written by novelist George Whetstone in 1586. Whetstone's book was divided into three parts: the first part covered the history of envy, the second part explored Queen Elizabeth's defeat of various types of envy during the early years of her reign, and the final part discussed the dangers of Atheism and immorality. Whetstone tried to show that all Atheists were eventually punished by God, but Tamburlaine's story appeared to be the exception as he avoided negative consequences despite his Atheism. Whetstone rationalized that

Tamburlaine wasn't punished because he saved Constantinople, the Eastern capital of Christianity, from the Turkish siege.

The first production of *Tamburlaine* created quite a stir in Elizabethan England. It was both successful and controversial. The play was considered blasphemous, because of its theme of Atheism (considered a major

offense in Protestant Elizabethan England), and was criticized for being vulgar, coarse and common. Audiences embraced it, however, and performances attracted great crowds, making *Tamburlaine* a popular success. The anti-hero's shocking behavior was unlike anything seen onstage before, and the resulting controversy contributed to the play's appeal. The popular success of *Tamburlaine* firmly established the reputation of its 23-year-old playwright and inspired other writers to attempt to replicate its remarkable achievement. The play's themes of colonialism, monarchy, government, rebellion and religion resonated deeply with Elizabethans. At the time, England was growing in size and confidence and beginning to play a larger role on the global stage. Tamburlaine's successful and repeated conquests appealed to the Elizabethan public as the nation sought to expand territories throughout the world.

Despite its immense popularity during its own time, *Tamburlaine* is not often performed today. Its length and the repetitive nature of the plot make it a challenge to direct successfully. It's essentially two full-length plays. The second half is generally considered inferior to the first, and it is widely thought that Marlowe wrote the second half in response to the immense success of the initial play. On a more practical note, the play calls for a sizeable cast and a variety of settings, which can be costly in terms of sets, costumes and actors.

In the mid-17th century, the play took a 300 year break before being revived professionally in 1951. The first modern professional production of *Tamburlaine* took place at England's Old Vic Theatre, under the direction of Tyrone Guthrie. That production was followed in 1976 by Peter Hall's, which opened the new Olivier Theatre at the National Theatre complex in London and starred actor Albert Finney. Hall's production was renowned for its impressive use of color, symbolism and pageantry. England's Royal Shakespeare Company produced the play most recently in 1993. The challenging title role requires an actor with exceptional stage presence. The first actor to play Tamburlaine, Edward Alleyn, won immense critical acclaim for his portrayal, and the role won distinction for contemporary actors like Finney as well.

Like the title character in *Richard III*, Tamburlaine is evil but also oddly appealing. Tamburlaine's charisma and charm engage the audience, who find themselves rooting for the anti-hero. Despite his evil doings, Tamburlaine isn't entirely ruthless. The play has several moments in which Tamburlaine's more humane side is revealed (especially those involving his wife, Zenocrate). Like *Richard III*, *Tamburlaine* is a theatricalized account of the conqueror's life—embellishing and altering Timur's real life story to create a better play. Whether or not the portrayal is entirely accurate, Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* is immensely entertaining and makes for an intense theatrical experience. **S**



A portrait of Timur from 19th-century India.

# Limits of Power

Power and persuasion play important roles in *Tamburlaine*. Tamburlaine's passion for absolute power leads him to destroy all obstacles in his path, namely other rulers who are not willing to give up their authority and lands. In addition to his zeal to conquer, however, Tamburlaine also seeks willing followers to support his efforts and is often successful in converting his enemies to friends. While Tamburlaine may promise his followers a share of the spoils, there is little doubt that he will retain absolute authority.

Most historical monarchies, although headed by a king or queen, also incorporated the advice and counsel of other trusted officials. In the play, Tamburlaine acts without advice from his allies and without regard to the impact on others. His absolutism is complete, even though he seems to provide choices to his captives.

The following passage (act 1, scene 2) provides an example of Tamburlaine's awe-inspiring physical presence:

TECHELLES:

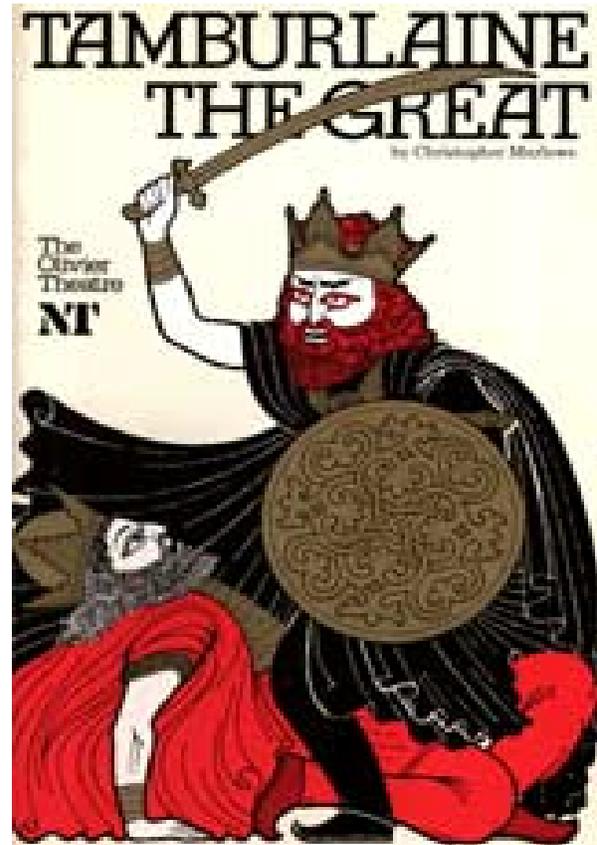
As princely lions, when they rouse themselves  
Stretching their paws, and threatening herds  
of beasts,  
So in his armour looketh Tamburlaine.  
Methinks I see kings kneeling at his feet,  
And he with frowning brows and fiery looks  
Spurning their crowns from off their captive  
heads.

USUMCASANE:

And making thee and me, Techelles, kings,  
That even to death will follow Tamburlaine.

Attracted by his larger than life charisma and his unwavering determination, Techelles and Usumcasane assume that they, too, will benefit from Tamburlaine's successes and be named kings themselves. Techelles uses animal imagery to describe Tamburlaine, comparing the conqueror to a "princely lion" rousing, stretching and threatening. These terms contribute to the sense of urgency and impending action present throughout the scene and create a strong visual image of both his strength and power.

Although not a statesman, Tamburlaine is able to convert enemies to followers with very little



Poster for the Olivier Theatre's 1976 production, directed by Peter Hall.

effort. He is extremely persuasive, as his speech to the Persian lord Theridamas in the second scene of the first act reveals:

Forsake thy king, and do but join with me,  
And we will triumph over all the world...  
And when my name and honour shall be  
spread...  
Then shalt thou be competitor with me,  
And sit with Tamburlaine in all his majesty.

Tamburlaine recognizes that his own ambitions of domination are to a certain degree universal, and, with some notable exceptions, he correctly assumes that everyone he conquers aspires to be part of such greatness. Theridamas is an excellent example: despite orders from his king, Mycetes, to apprehend Tamburlaine, Theridamas is easily and completely convinced by the Scythian

shepherd-turned-conqueror and willingly joins his ranks:

Won with thy words, and conquer'd with thy looks,  
I yield myself, my men, and horse to thee,  
To be a partaker of thy good or ill,  
As long as life maintains Theridamas.

Theridamas' allegiance to Tamburlaine extends to "good or ill" and for the length of his life, an impressive commitment.

Tamburlaine's confidence and promises of a share in his fame and glory are extremely persuasive, but he adds to these the threat of slavery for any who resist him. Despite their pleas for freedom, Tamburlaine provides Agydas and Zenocrate (the beautiful captive who will become Tamburlaine's wife), with the following ultimatum:

And now, fair madam, and my noble lords,  
If you will willingly remain with me,  
You shall have honours as your merits be;  
Or else you shall be forc'd with slavery.

Faced with the prospect of slavery, the captives relent and agree to support Tamburlaine. Bajazeth, the Emperor of the Turks, and his wife, Zabina, are the exceptions because they do not give in to Tamburlaine but rather remain firmly against him and, in doing so, die. Many of Tamburlaine's followers take the "if you can't beat him, join him" approach to dealing with the difficult conqueror, but not the Turkish Emperor and his wife, whose pride keeps them from converting. Tamburlaine tortures and abuses his captives, humiliating them by keeping them in a cage and, in a memorable scene, by using Bajazeth as a footstool. The fate of these two, who ultimately commit suicide, is telling of Tamburlaine's lack of tolerance for people who try to challenge him.

Tamburlaine is a powerful, awe-inspiring figure. His unwavering confidence attracts followers who risk their lives on behalf of his conquests. He converts enemies to supporters with magnetic appeal and they remain with him to his death. Both in the play and in real life, this proves to be the ultimate limit for the tyrant's power—he has no authority nor persuasion to forestall his wife's or his own death.



*The Armada Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I, 1588-89 by George Gower. Commissioned upon Elizabeth's defeat of the Spanish Armada, confirming her place among the most important European rulers of the day.*

# Give Me That Old-Time Religion

The reigning monarch, and consequently the state religion, changed frequently in England during the 1540s and 1550s. Henry VIII began the cycle with the introduction of Anglo-Catholicism and was succeeded by his children: Edward VI, who instituted radical Protestantism; Mary I, who returned the country to Roman Catholicism and earned herself the nickname “Bloody Mary” for the violence that resulted; and finally, the relatively moderate Protestantism of Elizabeth I, who reigned during the lifetimes of Marlowe and Shakespeare.

Queen Elizabeth I reinstated Protestantism as the national religion when she took the throne in 1558, ending the tumultuous five-year period of Catholicism during her half-sister Mary’s reign. The constant changes in the nation’s religious affiliation during this period forced citizens to be flexible in their beliefs, or at least to appear to be so. Queen Elizabeth I was Head of the Church of England during her reign, and, as England was a Protestant nation, it meant that all English citizens were expected to be Protestants and to attend services regularly. Religious persecution was part of life in Elizabethan England for anyone who publicly dissented from the mainstream. Being English meant being Protestant, and to outwardly practice Roman Catholicism was dangerous and potentially deadly.

It isn’t hard to understand why Marlowe would have been attracted to Atheism given the uncertainties of religious belief during his lifetime. Atheism is broadly defined as the absence of belief in gods or deities. In addition to Atheism, Marlowe was also accused of blasphemy. Blasphemy refers to the defamation or slandering of religion and religious figures; in Elizabethan England it was viewed as an extreme lack of respect for the institution of the Church of England and by extension the Queen. Needless to say, an accusation of blasphemy and Atheism was serious business due to the lack of separation between church and state.

In 1593, a religiously charged incident referred to as the Dutch Church libel occurred, incriminating Marlowe. Someone put a provocative and hateful anti-immigrant posting (referred to as a “libel”) on the wall of London’s Dutch Church. The term libel refers to a written attack, usually false.



A portrait of Temur from 17th-century Germany. Bridgeman Art Library



The famous 1951 production of *Tamburlaine* at the Old Vic Theatre in London.

At this point, there were several small communities of immigrants (mainly Protestant refugees) living in London, and those individuals were often subject to abuse. The posting was signed “Tamburlaine” and contained a reference to another Marlowe play, *The Massacre at Paris*, leading the authorities to assume it was written by Marlowe. They searched the workroom that Marlowe shared with fellow playwright Thomas Kyd and found incriminating papers, all of which Kyd claimed were Marlowe’s. The papers evidently contained heretical and blasphemous material, enough to warrant Marlowe’s arrest on May 18, 1593.

The relationship between power and religion is explored throughout *Tamburlaine*, particularly the concept of the Divine Right of Kings. The Divine Right of Kings was a medieval European doctrine stating that monarchs were chosen to rule by God. In *Tamburlaine*, the Divine Right of Kings is invoked by the Scythian conqueror when he claims to be “the scourge and wrath of God” and refers to the “fates and oracles” on his side as he reassures his followers:

For fates and oracles of heaven have sworn  
To royalize the deeds of Tamburlaine,  
And make them blest that share in his attempts  
(act 1, scene 4)

Tamburlaine justifies his overwhelming confidence by claiming that he has the full support of heaven, although it is interesting to note that Tamburlaine’s claim is negative—he is the “scourge and wrath of God,” as opposed to a benign or beneficial force. However, he never specifies how he found out about his special heavenly status, rightly assuming that no one would dare to question him.

Religions referenced in *Tamburlaine* include Christianity, Greek/Roman mythology and Islam. Tamburlaine’s confidence and conviction in his conquests results largely from his belief that his power comes to him directly from God. Marlowe’s interpretation of religion, particularly Tamburlaine’s Atheist qualities, intrigued Elizabethan audiences, for whom religion was an essential part of daily life.



## Who's Who in *Tamburlaine*?

### Scythia

Tamburlaine—A Scythian shepherd who rises to become an emperor

Techelles—Follower of Tamburlaine who becomes King of Fez

Usumcane—Follower of Tamburlaine who becomes King of Morocco

Amyras—Son of Tamburlaine and Zenocrate

Calyphas—Tamburlaine's middle son who is terrified by war

Celebinus—Son of Tamburlaine and Zenocrate

### Persia

Mycetes—King of Persia

Cosroe—Brother of Mycetes who overthrows his brother and becomes King of Persia

Theridamas—In service to Mycetes but is persuaded by Tamburlaine to change his allegiance

Menaphon—Follower of Mycetes and then Cosroe

Ortygius—A Persian Lord

Ceneus—A Persian Lord

### Egypt

Sultan of Egypt—Ruler of Egypt, conquered by Tamburlaine

Zenocrate—Daughter of the Sultan of Egypt and Tamburlaine's wife

Anippe—Zenocrate's maid

### Turkey

Bajazeth—Emperor of the Turks whom Tamburlaine imprisons in a cage

Zabina—Bajazeth's wife

Callapine—Son of Bajazeth and Tamburlaine's prisoner

Ebea—Zabina's maid

King Orcanes of Natolia

### Additional Characters

Alcidamus—Emperor of Arabia

King Sigismund of Hungary

Governor of Damascus

King of Jerusalem

Governor of Babylon