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Marlowe's Grisly Monster: Death in *Tamburlaine, Parts One & Two*

IMAGES OF SKELETAL DEATH TERRORIZED the walls and parchments of medieval and early Renaissance Europe, a ubiquitous statement of mortality's earthly preeminence and a reminder of the ephemeral nature of all human life. Marlowe's drama is suffused by death—from the carnival of savagery that parades through *The Massacre at Paris* to the scythe-bearing Mower of *Edward II*. We might suppose, since they are not tragedies, that the *Tamburlaine* plays would show less interest in such matters but this is not the case. In fact, the striking presence of death imagery in these two plays has drawn comment from a number of critics. Susan Richards suggests that *Tamburlaine* has attained “the ultimate power in terms of human life—the power of giving death, which is the essential power of the warrior-emperor, the cause and result of his position.”¹ Herbert B. Rothschild Jr. observes that “Marlowe repeatedly raises our expectation of *Tamburlaine's* overthrow and death only to defeat that expectation.”² Stephen Greenblatt calls *Tamburlaine* “a desiring machine that produces violence and death.”³

The imagery of death is mapped out mostly in the words of the hero himself but those who intersect with *Tamburlaine's* world are also apt to ponder mortality:

¹ Susan Richards, “Marlowe's *Tamburlaine II*: A Drama of Death,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 26 (1965): 375.

² Herbert B. Rothschild, Jr., “The Conqueror Hero, the Besieged City, and the Development of an Elizabethan Protagonist,” *South Central Review: The Journal of the South Central Modern Language Association* 3 (1986): 63. See also Don Cameron Allen, “Renaissance Remedies for Fortune: Marlow and the Fortunati,” *Studies in Philology* 38 (1941): 188–97.

³ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Chicago U Press, 1980) 195.

And Death arrests the organ of my voice,
 Who, entering at the breach thy sword hath made,
 Sacks every vaine and artier of my heart.
 (*Part One*, King Cosroe, II.vii.8–10)⁴

Cosroe's sense of surprise at his imminent death is typical of the *danse macabre* tradition. Death "arrests" his voice, as if it were a policeman arriving at the scene of a crime to bring him to account. Originally a species of theatre that developed in fourteenth-century Germany and France, the dance of death found wide popularity in late medieval Europe.⁵ Plays were performed in churchyards, with a troupe of actors representing the full range of human existence from pauper to emperor. In due course, skeletal Death figures would emerge, dressed in black, their bones painted in yellow. One by one, the earthly representatives would be seized by Death and led off stage to the grave. Typically, a victim would resist in some way, claiming a prior engagement or begging for mercy. But the smiling Death figures could never be assuaged. Soldiers, popes, emperors, peddlers—the full social spectrum of mortal life would be marched off to an equal destiny. As the play had started with a sermon, so it would end with one, affirming that Death was the great leveller and that none could escape his or her skeletal grasp.

In the sixteenth century, the most celebrated visual representations of the *danse macabre* appeared in two books of Hans Holbein. The first, *Imagines Mortis*, was published in Lyons in 1538, and the production of a third edition in Latin in 1542 confirmed its cross-European importance; the second, *Icones Historiarum Veteris Testamenti* (1547), was translated into English within two years and found enormous popularity across Europe.⁶ King Cosroe's lines, marked by both a sense of astonishment and indignation, are very much in keeping with many of the illustrations in Holbein's work and with those of his peers and near-contemporaries. For example, in print vii ("The Emperor") of Holbein's *Imagines Mortis*, Death snatches the crown from the Emperor's head at the very moment he is sternly lecturing one of his supplicants; in print xiii ("The Duke") Death grabs hold of the

⁴ All references to Marlowe's plays are taken from Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Plays*, ed. Mark Thornton Burnett (London: Everyman, J.M. Dent, 1999).

⁵ See Emile Mâle, *L'Art Religieux de la fin du Moyen Âge en France* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1908) 375–422.

⁶ Hans Holbein, *Imagines Mortis* (Lvgdvni, svb scvto coloniensi, 1545); Hans Holbein, *Icones Historiarum Veteris Testamenti* (Lvgdvni: apud Ioannem Freloniam, 1547). Holbein had strong English connections, spending much of his life at the court of Henry VIII and executing, it is believed, a dance of death series in Whitehall. The mural was subsequently destroyed by fire.

lapel of the Duke's ermine robe while the nobleman looks the other way; and in print xxxi ("The Knight") a victim twists in agonized horror as he looks back at the grinning Death who has skewered him with his own lance. There are echoes, too, in the works of other emblematisers. Claude Paradin's skeletal emissary in *Les Devises Heroiques* looks less than congenial as he prepares to slay a soldier who pleads for mercy.⁷ And Vincentio Saviolo's *His Practise, In two Bookes* (1595), on the subject of single combat and honourable quarrels, reveals a print of a ragged Death emissary gloating at a proud knight on horseback and pointing to a grim skeleton lying on the ground near-by.⁸ The epigram accompanying the print scorns mortality thus: "O Wormes Meate: O Froath: O Vanitie: Why Art Thou So Insolent." This standard *topos* of Death—brutal, irresistible, triumphant—was a familiar and brazen predator in the literary and artistic landscapes of Marlowe's time but less familiar images of Death lurk also in the shadows of the *Tamburlaine* texts.



In Act V of *Part One*, Tamburlaine speaks of Death "seated on my horsemen's spears" (V.i.114) and, later in the same scene, positions himself as a warrior who has usurped the function of Mars:

The god of war resigns his room to me,
Meaning to make me General of the world.
(*Part One*, V.i.451–52)

In antiquity, Mars Ultor ("the Avenger") was commonly associated with Death. Vincenzo Cartari records in *Le imagini de i dei gli antichi* (1556) that in the palace of Mars, Death sits "offering sacrifices in goblets made with the skulls of men, and filled vp euen to the brim with humane blood; which oblation was consecrated to god Mars, with coales of fire (which set on flame the sacrifice) fetcht from many Citties, Townes and Holds, burnt and ruined by tyrannie of the Warres."⁹ He is the same barbaric and destructive

⁷ Claude Paradin, *Les Devises Heroiques* (Anvers: Christophle Plantin, 1561) 172b ("Improbis nullo flectitur obsequio"). Edward Hodnett in *English Woodcuts 1480–1535* (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1973), cites numerous woodcuts where Death indulges in the wanton slaughter of surprised individuals (Nos. 386, 605, 633, 1370, 1432, &c).

⁸ Vincentio Saviolo, *His Practise, In two Bookes, The first intreating of the use of the Rapier and Dagger, The second, of Honor and honorable Quarrels* (London: Iohn Wolfe, 1595) sig. K3r.

⁹ From Richard Linche, *The Fountaine of Ancient Fiction* (1599 facsimile rpt.; New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1976) sigs. X1^r–X1^v. Vincenzo Cartari's *Le Imagini de i Dei de gli Antichi* (Venice: 1571), was popularized in England through Richard Linche's 1599 translation.

Mars Ultor described in Stephen Batman's *The Golden Booke of the Leaden Goddes* (1577), the sixteenth-century English vulgate of classical lore, who when he "inuadeth, all thinges are lefte desolate, & destroyed."¹⁰

Curiously, though, English mythology had developed a rather affectionate relationship with Mars. For John of Gaunt, England was the "seat of Mars" (*Richard II*, II.i.41)¹¹ and legend held that Julius Caesar himself had declared that the Romans and the British had a common Trojan origin.¹² The notion of London as the "New Troy" (Troynovant) had been espoused at least since the thirteenth century and reiterated frequently, most authoritatively perhaps in Caxton's *Chronycles of Englande*.¹³ Further, the English considered their temperament to be distinctly Martian. Richard Argol, for example, describes the planet Mars as the controller of war-like England, and as the determinant of the English military disposition.¹⁴ The Mars of British legend was anglicized into a judicious, protective warrior, and not one disposed to indiscriminate bloodletting. Commentators like Gerard Leigh, William Wyrley, and Henry Peacham all characterize the English Mars as a valorous warrior guided by the moderation and humanity of Minerva.¹⁵

¹⁰ Stephen Batman, *The Golden Booke of the Leaden Goddes* (1577 rpt.; New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1976) sig. 6^r.

¹¹ See Clayton G. MacKenzie, "Paradise and Paradise Lost in Richard II," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37 (1986): 318–39. All quotations from Shakespeare's work are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

¹² Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Britonum*, ed. J.A. Giles (London: D. Nutt, 1844) 2. G.H. Gerould, in his article "King Arthur and Politics," *Speculum* 2 (1927): 34, believes that Geoffrey issued his history between 1136 and 1138.

¹³ William Caxton, *Chronycles of Englande* (St. Albans: 1483) Biiii (4).

¹⁴ Argol is here writing in a prefatory address to the reader in Gerard Leigh's (sometimes Legh) *The Accedence of Armorie* (London: 1562, first publ.; R. Tottel, 1591) sig. A5^v: "For this our clime being subiect to Mars . . . the people naturally must yeeld such effects, as that mighty planet imprinteth in these inferiour bodies his subiects. For as the heauens haue ruled old the earth, an vnmouable masse, with their beneficiall effects: so in this our region, the fire of honour mounting by martiall prowes, the chiefe aduancer of gentry, must of force so long last in this nation, as matter minstred from aboue maintaineth it."

¹⁵ Gerard Leigh, *The Accedence of Armorie*, considers the anglicized war-god as Pallas' [i.e., Minerva's] knight, "an armed Mars, A champion pollitique in fieldes to fight, or at home to defende" fol. 129^v. William Wyrley, in *The Trve Vse of Armorie, Shewed by Historie, and plainly proued by example* (London: J. Jackson for Gabriell Cawood, 1592), quotes a great English soldier as declaring: "For highly was my knightly seruice deemd, / As well for Mars as prudent Pallas grace" (135). Henry Peacham in *Minerva Britanna: Or A Garden of Heroical Devices* (London: Wa. Dight, 1612), suggests that: Though Mars defends the kingdome with his might, / And braues abroad his foe, in glorious armes, / Yet wiser Pallas [Minerva] guides his arme aright, / And best at home preuentes all future harmes (44).

Although Tamburlaine was not an English warrior, Marlowe was writing in the golden age of sixteenth-century English militarism, and one broadly synchronous with the rise and fall of the Spanish Armada, English expeditions in the Low Countries, and daring adventurism in the New World.¹⁶ John Gillies has demonstrated how “the mood of 1588 helps explain the presence of geographic wish-dreaming in *Tamburlaine*”¹⁷ and it seems a reasonable supposition that Marlowe’s audience would have read matters of England and Englishness into the exploits of the play’s hero. As they watched the rise of a superman, groundling and literati alike may well have measured his Martian pretensions against their own sense of anglicized deity. They would have been immensely proud of the heroic inheritance and reputation of English military chivalry; and, in equal measure, horrified by the atrocities of a Spanish army in Holland in the 1570s, where the inhabitants of a string of besieged cities had been put mercilessly to the sword (Rothschild, 57), and by the wholesale slaughter of Huguenots by Catholics in Paris—an episode so topical that Marlowe used it as the basis for *The Massacre at Paris*. Was Tamburlaine to be the English Mars, embracing chivalry and valour, or was he to be the Classical Mars Ultor, the patron of Death and indiscriminate savagery?

The line between heroic conquest and depraved subjugation seems clear enough in Tamburlaine’s first animation of the Mars myth in *Part One*. He begins almost democratically, distancing himself from “Mars ... the angry god of arms” (II.vii.58) and avowing that he will accept the Persian crown only if the people so desire (II.vii.59–63). But the mood soon changes. Here is Tamburlaine outside the gates of Damascus:

Now hang our bloody colours by Damascus
 Reflexing hues of blood upon their heads
 While they walk quivering on their city walls,
 Half dead for fear before they feel my wrath.
 Then let us freely banquet and carouse

¹⁶ Emily C. Bartels in “The Double Vision of the East: Imperialist Self Construction in Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine Part One*,” *Renaissance Drama* 23 (1992): 21–22, suggests that “If we are tempted to conclude that Marlowe shows us imperialism only happening this way ‘out there,’ in the ever-raging reaches of the East, and not in England, both the play and history caution otherwise Though Marlowe takes us East of England, in displaying the ‘high astounding terms’ of empire, in all their ambivalence, he simultaneously brings us home, to a world in which gods and fiends were being made of men, all in the name of power.”

¹⁷ John Gillies, “Marlowe, the Timur Myth, and the Motives of Geography,” *Playing the Globe: Genre and Geography in English Renaissance Drama*, ed. John Gillies and Virginia Mason Vaughan (London: Fairleigh Dickinson U Press; Associated U Press, 1998) 205–07.

Full bowls of wine unto the god of war
 That means to fill your helmets full of gold
 (*Part One*, IV.iv.1–7)

It soon becomes clear, not least through his cruel execution of the Virgins of Damascus, that Marlowe's Tamburlaine has little in common with the English Mars. To kill the Virgins is reprehensible enough, but to toy with them about "Death" and his "slicing edge" (V.i.110–15) suggests, as Lisa S. Starks has contended, that all this has the "makings of a sadistic fantasy."¹⁸ Tamburlaine's descent into the fearsome domain of Mars Ultor in *Part One* seems irreversible. In Act V he usurps the mantle of the deity, styling himself as a substitute for Mars: "The god of war resigns his room to me" (V.i.451). His further requirement that "grisly Death" (456) should do "ceaseless homage" (457) to his sword is reminiscent of the brutal excesses described by Cartari and Batman. Tamburlaine has become a classical death-dealer, wreaking vengeance on the world, an augury of suffering and misgiving. It is intriguing that in the second play allusions to Mars are sparse. The only reference to the God of War uttered by Tamburlaine occurs in a ritualistic speech (III.ii.115–29), laden with Christian undertones, in which he cuts his arms and invites his sons to wash their hands in his wound, declaring that "Blood is the god of war's rich livery" (line 116).



The typical dance of death images of medieval and early Renaissance Europe were created to warn and to terrify. Countless grinning skeletons on church and cathedral walls, on all manner of domestic paraphernalia and in both secular and religious books reminded those who viewed them that this—the skeletal image—is what *they* would come to be. Like Hamlet looking upon the skull of Yorick, they were unwittingly looking upon themselves. Death was inevitable and the joys of heaven or the torments of hell would be judged by deeds performed on earth. To the man or woman who had cherished mortal things at the expense of piety there was every reason to be filled with abject terror at the approach of Death. But for those who had spent their lives in the pursuit of goodness, or whose suffering had ripped from them all joys of mortal existence, why should not Death be welcomed?

¹⁸ Lisa S. Starks, "'Won with thy words and conquered with thy looks': Sadism, Masochism, and the Masochistic Gaze in *1 Tamburlaine*," *Marlowe, History, and Sexuality: New Critical Essays on Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Paul Whitfield White (New York: AMS, 1998) 183.

In *Tamburlaine, Part Two*, Olympia proposes suicide to her son. She has just seen her husband die from bullet wounds and fears that she and her son will soon perish cruelly at the hands of barbarous Scythians. Olympia envisions a destiny in heaven, asking the “God of heaven, / [To] purge my soul before it come to thee!” (III.iv.32–33). The Death she envisages is not at all the fearsome scavenger of the emblem books:

Death, whither art thou gone, that both we live?
 Come back again, sweet Death, and strike us both!
 One minute end our days, and one sepulchre
 Contain our bodies, Death, why com'st thou not?
 [*She draws a dagger.*]
 Well, this must be the messenger for thee.
 Now, ugly Death, stretch out they sable wings
 And carry both our souls where his remains;
 (*Part Two, Olympia, III.iv.11–17*)

It is not grief at the death of her husband that drives Olympia's desire for death but, rather, the fear of the torments that may be inflicted on her and her son by their captors. Death as an escape from physical torture was a well established maxim in Marlowe's day. Recalling the brutalities of the sixteenth century Catholic inquisition, James Morice, in *A briefe treatise of Oathes exacted by Ordinaries and Ecclesiasticall Iudges* (1590), notes that the “lengthe of torture succeeded in taking from Death his due title of King of terrors, and making him a welcome friende, that endes so manie miseries.”¹⁹

The idea of desirable death as an escape from the trials of mortal life constructed a lesser known but distinctive *topos* in Renaissance art. It is perhaps best illustrated in the work of Georgette de Montenay, one of the few known female emblematisers of the sixteenth century.²⁰ In one print an affable skeleton helps an elderly man who willingly steps out of a symbolically hollow world. The comforting, dainty hand he lends to the old man casts him in the guise of a carer rather than of a demonic slayer of mortality. A Latin motto, “desiderans dissolvi” (the desire of dissolution), is written in the clouds above the old man's head. So, too, Arnold Freitag in *Mythologia Ethica* (1579) offers an image in which Death, arrow in hand,

¹⁹ James Morice, *A briefe treatise of Oathes exacted by Ordinaries and Ecclesiasticall Iudges, to answeere generallie to such Articles or Interrogatories, as pleaseth them to propound. And of their forced and constrained Oathes ex officio, wherein is proued that the same are unlawfull* (London, 1590) 156.

²⁰ Georgette de Montenay, *Emblematum Christianorum Centuria* (1571, first publ.; Tigvri [Zurich], 1584) 89r (emblem LXXXIX).

advances mercifully on an over-burdened traveller.²¹ There is nothing fearful or gloating about this species of Death. On the contrary, his coming is to be desired.

In longing for “sweet Death,” then, Olympia draws on a discreet but discernible tradition of Death as a liberating friend rather than an aggressive foe. However, this religious repudiation of physical life and the commensurate celebration of spiritual life—neatly summarized in George Wither’s motto “Death is no Losse, but rather, Gaine; / For wee by Dying, life attaine”²²—cannot fully explain the rejection of mortality by other characters in the Tamburlaine plays. Here is the King of Arabia (affianced to Zenocrate) wounded and at the point of death in *Part One*:

Then shall I die with full contented heart,
Having beheld divine *Zenocrate*
Whose sight with joy would take away my life,

Since death denies me further cause of joy,
Depriv'd of care, my heart with comfort dies
Since thy desired hand shall close mine eyes.

[*He dies.*]

(V.i.418–20, 431–33)

Arabia is content to die, even desirous of death, for distinctly non-spiritual reasons. Having been robbed by approaching death of the world’s joys and its cares, Arabia declares himself to be happy at the sight of his beloved Zenocrate and her apparent safety, and at the thought that she will close his eye-lids in the moments following his death. The contentment with death is a visual and tactile contentment, a recollection of touch and sight and a projection of a companionship for a brief space beyond the boundary of physical life. This celebration of the joys of earthly love is unusual but not without precedent in medieval and Renaissance funereal monuments. The marble de la Warr Chantry at Boxgrove Priory is showered with Cupids, and on one column a maiden is represented gathering fruit thrown down by her lover in the tree above—a paean to earthly life that neatly conjoins the ideas of youth, temptation, and mellowed fruit. And in Chichester Cathedral, the tomb of a knight and his lady holding hands in the most affectionate and casual of ways, a posture celebrated in Philip Larkin’s poem “An Arundel Tomb,” celebrates not a life to come but a life

²¹ Arnold Freitag, *Mythologia Ethica* (Antwerp, 1579) 11.

²² George Wither, *A Collection of Emblemes, Ancient and Moderne* (1635), ed. Rosemary Freeman (Columbia: U of South Carolina Press, 1975) 21 (Emblem XXI).

that has been. Here is no commemoration of the vermiculation of the grave or of the ethereal reconstitution of spiritual being. On the contrary, this is mortal life in its most cherished guise, something that is both valued and intrinsically valuable.

It is one thing to choose heaven over mortality but quite another to prefer the “nothingness” of death over earthly life. The joys and sorrows and hopes of Arabia are all clasped in those few moments before physical oblivion. His death is an indictment of what has become, under Tamburlaine’s sway, a mutilating and annihilative world. It is hard to believe that Tamburlaine’s apparition of empire would have sat any more easily on the minds of a period audience than it does on our own. Elizabethan literatures abound with images of positive kingship that compare cruelty and vindictiveness unfavourably with compassion and tolerance. Geoffrey Whitney’s *A Choice of Emblemes* (1586), for example, has a deal to say on the appropriate and inappropriate powers that rulers may exercise over those around them. In “Pietas in patriam” (111) a king is commended for sparing the life of a worthy opponent; in “Impar coniugium” (99) the wicked ruler Mezentius is reviled for executing his opponents by tying their living bodies to the corpses of plague victims. The moral implication of these and other emblems is that a monarch’s duty is to respect the sanctity of human life, and to rule with control and compassion. The early signs in the *Tamburlaine* plays are not good. Menophon’s first description of Tamburlaine hints that the rising hero may fall short of Whitney’s ideal.

His lofty browes in folds, do figure death,
And in their smoothness, amitie and life;
About them hangs a knot of amber hair
Wrapped in curls, as fierce *Achilles* was,
On which the breath of heaven delights to play,
Making it dance with wanton majestie;
(Tamburlaine, Part One, II.i.21–26)

At this stage, Tamburlaine is not in a position to exercise his “wanton majestie” but it is perhaps indicative of Marlowe’s fractured heroic intention that the protagonist is presented to us as god-like but fundamentally flawed. One critic observes that lines 23–24 “recall the description of Achilles in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XIII, 162,”²³ and the association with a deity noted both for the excellence of his valour and for his petulant vindictiveness offers a disturbing harbinger of things to come.

²³ Burnett (ed.), *The Complete Plays* 541.

When, in Act II, scene i of *Part One*, Cosroe envisions the death of his foolish brother, King Mycetes, he does so in terms that suggest an expiry of the gentlest sort:

And when the princely Persian diadem
 Shall overweigh his weary witless head
 And fall like mellowed fruit, with shakes of death
 (Cosroe, II.i.45–47)

His words echo the image of falling fruit etched on the alabaster columns of the de la Warr Chantry in Boxgrove Priory and draw to mind, as well, the pacifying image of Death in Georgette de Montenay's woodcut of an old man stepping out of a symbolically hollow world. Yet, in practice, the process of death in the two *Tamburlaine* plays is insistently turbulent—and not least in Cosroe's case. While the world that Tamburlaine has shaped is both awe-inspiring and monumental, its darker side concedes a swathe of human unhappiness that haunts and subverts the accomplishments of its hero. Tamburlaine's achievements may testify to the power of humanity over death, and even of mortality over immortality, but all this comes at the price of extravagant human suffering.

Mark Thornton Burnett has explored the patterns of bodily mutilation that run through the plays, suggesting that “Opening up his foes . . . is not enough for Tamburlaine, and he inflicts upon them other hallmarks of the ‘grotesque.’”²⁴ These actions are not driven by the desire for honourable reputation but by what Johannes H. Birringer calls the “the violent fantasies of unconditional power.”²⁵ Tamburlaine's reach for empire is paralleled by an abnegation of humanity. In the 1580s England itself stood on the cusp of empire. Marlowe wrote *Tamburlaine* a decade before the East India Company, the greatest trading company in history, had even been formed. Jonathan Burton makes the valid point that in 1579 when England established formal relations with Ottoman Turks—upon whom Tamburlaine vents his militarist spleen—it occupied no colonies or territories outside the British Isles and was “a bit player on the world stage, a latecomer seeking a niche in

²⁴ Mark Thornton Burnett, “Tamburlaine and the Body,” *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* 33 (1991): 35. The matter of dismemberment has also been considered by Bridget Smith Pieschel in “Kingship, Language and Dismemberment in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great, Parts One and Two*,” *Publications of the Mississippi Philological Association* (1990): 158–63.

²⁵ Johannes H. Birringer, “Marlowe's Violent Stage: Mirrors of Honor in *Tamburlaine*,” *ELH* 51 (1984): 130.

a mercantile economy which had left it behind.”²⁶ Those who would prefer the comfort of Death (among them Arabia, Olympia, and Bajazet) rather than the ignominy of life under Tamburlaine’s imperial sway, lend credence to the notion that Marlowe did not intend his audience to compass the savage mistreatment of Turkish captives as acceptable practice but rather as a warning about the potential excesses of empire at a time when England itself was nucleating its own imperial ambitions.



When Tamburlaine speaks of a “Shaking and quivering” Death who “flies away at every glance” (*Part Two*, V.iii.68 and 70), he opens up the seemingly unthinkable possibility that Death itself is conquerable. The idea that Death may be assuaged or deferred or pacified was a *non sequitur* in the letters of medieval and Renaissance Europe. However, philosophers and cognoscenti alike argued that there were intellectual or spiritual ways of “defeating” death. The road to piety, as expressed in John Donne’s “Death, be not proud,” leads to the eternity of heaven and, in a sense, represents a conquest of Death which may hold sway only over things ephemeral—“Death, thou shalt die,” as Donne puts it in the last words of the poem. This, of course, required religious belief. To those lacking piety, and enamoured of earthly life, it was small consolation. Another possibility presents itself in the first illustration in George Wither’s *A Collection of emblemes Ancient and Moderne* (1635) which reveals the mirror image of a scholar on one side of a tree and skeletal Death on the other.²⁷ On the side of the scholar, the tree is full of leafy life; on the side of Death, the branches are bare and barren. The emblem’s motto reads “By Knowledge onely, Life wee gaine, /All other things to Death pertaine,” suggesting that the accumulation of knowledge (which may be passed on as a body of learning to future generations) is another way of defeating Death.

²⁶ Jonathan Burton, “Anglo-Ottoman Relations and the Image of the Turk in Tamburlaine,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30 (2000): 125–56. Burton suggests that “the manifestation of Tamburlaine’s savagery, marked by a contrasting humanization of Bajazeth and Zabine, closes the play with an implied sense of misgiving In Bajazeth’s last speech we have no ranting tyrant but a broken man of ample nobility” 130. Burton’s view runs contrary to a number of critics, including William J. Brown, in “Marlowe’s Debasement of Bajazet: Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* and *Tamburlaine, Part 1*,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 24 (1971): 41, who notes that Marlowe closely follows his source, Foxe, who “characterizes Bajazet as a cruel tyrant and a persecutor of Christians As Marlowe does later, Foxe portrays Tamburlaine’s harsh treatment of Bajazet with complete sympathy and approval.”

²⁷ George Wither, *A Collection of Emblemes, Ancient and Moderne* 21.

But how could a soldier like Tamburlaine, noted neither for his piety nor for his learning, conquer Death? William Wyrley, a celebrated Elizabethan military commentator, suggests that fame itself may defeat mortality:

True golden fame, blacke death cannot defile,
Glistening honor buds from dustie graue,
Ech noble Lord that beareth glorious stile
Spend most his life eternall praise to haue.²⁸

Everlasting fame has been a traditional compensation for death, and it is a theme that finds statement and restatement in the work of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Yet when Wyrley speaks of “Glistening honor” that “buds from dustie graue” we have to wonder just how much glistening honour there is in Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* plays. Sarah Emsley suggests that “Even when characters believe they are using the word honour to mean ‘noble conduct,’ their speech is continually undermined by their actions.”²⁹ Lisa S. Starks believes that “Tamburlaine’s sadism . . . is obvious in his aggressive desire to break laws, torture victims, kill virgins,” arguing further that Tamburlaine believes in “a kind of ‘moral’ structure in the universe, an inversion of traditional moral order in promoting evil in its purest form.”³⁰ No honour here then.

Tamburlaine’s achievements may not have earned him honour in the chivalric sense of that word but certainly he has found an enduring historical and military (and even theatrical) niche. His own sense of immortality, though, seems to push much further than this. Refuting the possibility that death can ever touch him, he declares: “Sickness or death can never conquer me” (V.I. 220). David H. Thurn offers the intriguing insight that Tamburlaine “creates a delusional space in which absolute sovereignty becomes possible.”³¹ Within this delusional space it is conceivable that Tamburlaine believes he will never die. Coming at a moment of such pointed physical weakness, the assertion reminds us of the vain defiance of emperors and kings in the passing parade of the medieval *danse macabre*. The claims of invulnerability, the appeals for exemption, the statements of defiance: all compose the litany of misapprehension that typifies the end of

²⁸ Wyrley, *The True Vse of Armorie* 58.

²⁹ Sarah Emsley, “‘I Cannot Love, to Be an Emperess’: Women and Honour in Tamburlaine,” *Dalhousie Review* 80 (2000): 173.

³⁰ Starks, “‘Won with thy words and conquered with thy looks’ 180.

³¹ David H. Thurn, “Sights of Power in Tamburlaine,” *English Literary Renaissance* 19 (1989): 5

earthly pomp. Tamburlaine may claim “a close relationship to the gods,”³² as Roger E. Moore put it, but it is not quite close enough to avoid death.

As this truth dawns on him, Tamburlaine begins to concede ground on his physical mortality:

See where my slave, the ugly monster Death,
Shaking and quivering, pale and wan for fear,
Stands aiming at me with his murdering dart,
Who flies away at every glance I give,
And when I look away, comes stealing on.
Villain, away, and hie thee to the field!
I and mine army come to load thy bark
With souls of thousand mangled carcasses—
Look, where he goes! But see, he comes again
Because I stay. Techelles, let us march,
And weary Death with bearing souls to hell.

(*Part Two*, Tamburlaine, V.iii.67–77)

The image of a tentative, unconfident death “Shaking and quivering, pale and wan for fear” is not one that is familiarly portrayed in the emblem books. A 1592 woodcut in Theodore de Bry’s *Emblemata* reveals a faithful lover bringing a rose to his slightly bashful skeletal bride or lover.³³ A variation on this theme appears in the Parish Church of St. Mary Magdalene at Newark-on-Trent where a shy early-Renaissance cadaver, her legs splayed in the familiar antic disposition of the *danse macabre*, offers a carnation to the suavely dressed young man in the panel next to her. But these are images of coyness, and neither suggests the evasion or intimidation of death. Pierre Coustau, in *Le Pegme de Pierre Coustau* (1560), presents the image of Death fleeing from a human pursuer.³⁴ Death looks back as he runs, perhaps hesitant but still smiling, the accompanying verse advising “La mort ne peut payer tribut ne taille, / Necessité ne permet que l’on donne” (214)—suggesting that this is not, in fact, an image of Death on the run but a metaphor for his lack of accountability. While the domestication of death, as revealed in the somewhat amusing Elizabethan tribute to John Thomas Hylocomius on the south aisle wall of St. Alban’s Cathedral, is not uncommon, the idea that Death may be rebuffed or hectored is rare in the art of the age.

³² Roger E. Moore, “The Spirit and the Letter: Marlowe’s Tamburlaine and Elizabethan Religious,” *Studies in Philology* 99 (2002): 131.

³³ Theodore de Bry, *Emblemata* (Frankfurt am Main, 1592) “Fui, non svm es, nō eris” (no pagination).

³⁴ Pierre Coustau, *Le Pegme de Pierre Coustau* (Lyons: Barthelemy Molin, 1560) 214.

Tamburlaine's image of hesitant Death is peculiar not only with regard to the iconography of Marlowe's day but also with reference to the imagery of the *Tamburlaine* plays. Death has dallied in the folds of Tamburlaine's brows (*Part One*, II.i); it has arrested Cosroe's voice like the sergeant death who arrests Hamlet in the last act of Shakespeare's tragedy (*Part One*, II.vii); it has perched precociously on the spears of Tamburlaine's horsemen (*Part One*, V.i); and has granted Olympia relief from the pain of life (*Part Two*, III.iv). Now, suddenly, Death is afraid and hesitates to assail great Tamburlaine. This tentative, timorous Death occurs in other sixteenth-century drama. In *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, Death is caricatured by Rafe as a kind of scallywag inventively trying to drum up business by mischievously slipping into a shop, wearing a tradesman's blue apron, in order "To cheapen *Aqua-vitae*" (V.iii.155) before fleeing under the protection of a cloud of pepper.³⁵ There is also an interesting account of "fallible" Death in Shakespeare's *Richard II* when the king is murdered in the Tower of London:

The murderers [Exton and servants] rush in [armed].

KING RICHARD. How now, what means Death in this rude assault?

Villain, thy own hand yields thy death's instrument.

[*Snatches an axe from a Servant and kills him.*]

Go thou and fill another room in hell.

[*Kills another.*] *Here Exton strikes him down.*

That hand shall burn in never-quenching fire

That staggers thus my person.

(V.v.105–09)

The dance of death *topos* is here transformed into a dramatic animation, offering both dramatic spectacle and embedded meaning. Death, the great leveller, has come to seize a victim—in this case a king—who will be reduced to dust like any other mortal being. But what we have here is more than a simple mimetic process. Richard slays two of his "Death" attackers, an outcome uncharted in the standard iconographies of the dance of death. Has Richard conquered death in some sense by slaying a theatricalized emissaries of the *danse macabre*? Has his courage and ingenuity postponed, however temporarily, the preordained moment of his passing—the moment, as Gilles Corrozet tells us in *Hecatographie* (1543), that none of us may know or change?³⁶

³⁵ Francis Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, ed. Andrew Gurr (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1966).

³⁶ Gilles Corrozet, in *Hecatographie* (Paris: Denys Ianot, 1543), presents a print of a smiling skull resting on Fortune's wheel, with a clock hand pivoted on the bony forehead. The

The same questions may be asked of Tamburlaine but the answers are equally uncertain. As Tamburlaine sees Death approach and retreat, arrow in hand, he acknowledges that he is in the thrall of the *danse macabre* and his efforts to assuage and weary Death by providing him with a surfeit of alternative corpses savours of the desperation that animates the faces of the victims of dance of death murals on church walls across Europe.³⁷ But Death at least pays him the compliment of a measured campaign rather than a rough, brutish assault—stalking him with guile and caution, wary that this is no ordinary prey.



Tamburlaine's life ends with the words "Tamburlaine, the scourge of God, must die" (V.ii.249) but, in a line laden with ambiguity, it is unclear whether the "must" is a rueful admission or a statement of determination. In attempting to elude physical death, he has first tried to fight off his skeletal adversary, then claimed that he will rule in a better, ethereal place, and finally affirmed that he will survive through his sons. All of these signify, as Susan Richards has noted, that Tamburlaine lacks "the perception of man's limitations—even that most irrevocable of his limitations, his mortality."³⁸ And this, she contends, denies the play the fullest sense of tragedy. Certainly, the arrival of Death brings to Tamburlaine no great illumination or insight, as Sir Walter Raleigh supposes it should.³⁹ In the end, he may lay claim to only the slenderest of advantages: that of all the deaths that occur in these plays, his is among the more comfortable. If Marlowe has not entirely reaffirmed the standard moral and religious aphorisms of the *danse macabre*, the play at least ends with the tacit affirmation that, after all is said and done, the greatest of earthly monarchs is still Death itself. At the close, Death stands as a simple variation on the invincible adversary of the

verse adage neatly summarizes an old aphorism: "Pour mourir n'est iour assigné, / De mort est incertaine l'heure" Niiii.

³⁷ For example, the *danse macabre* appears in frescoes in the Chapel of Kernascléden in Brittany; and in the remarkable sixty foot long mural at the Church of St. Mary in Berlin, prompted by the plague of 1484. One of the most haunting and vivid presentations is to be found in a late medieval fresco in the Church of St. Mary at Beram (Istria) in Croatia, revealing the representatives of society, adults and children, being led to the grave by an assortment of jiggling, grinning, scythe-bearing and trumpeting skeletal figures.

³⁸ Susan Richards, "Marlowe's *Tamburlaine II*: A Drama of Death" 387.

³⁹ Sir Walter Raleigh, *Selections from his Writings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1917), writes of Death: "He holds a Glasse before the eyes of the most beautifull, and makes them see therein, their deformitie and rottenness; and they acknowledge it" (117).

emblem books, unusually tentative and unnerved, as is fit for a foeman of mighty Tamburlaine, but equally indefatigable and ultimately irresistible.

While some of the representations of death in the *Tamburlaine* plays fall within the recognizable ambit of popular Elizabethan culture, others undergo a process of subtle disordering which puts at risk, or even repudiates, the meanings that an audience would expect to glean from a play title that carries the sobriquet “Tamburlaine the Great.” Those members of the Elizabethan ruling elite who attended the first performances of *Tamburlaine* may well have been unsettled by what they saw. The violent and arbitrary nature of Tamburlaine’s rule had at least some connections with the cruelties, indiscretions and murkiness of their own political world. Subversion came easily to Marlowe’s drama, as perhaps it did to the playwright himself. Marginalized by his sexual proclivities, his political unorthodoxy, and the habitual disingenuousness of espionage, Marlowe’s survival in an intolerant, unforgiving age must have required subtlety and obfuscation.

Marlowe’s ability to offer simultaneous and competing narrative discourses in his drama, and his willingness to manipulate and undermine death *topoi* familiar to his contemporaries, perhaps reflect this natural propensity and talent for subversion. His guile in the *Tamburlaine* plays is that he sets out ostensibly to describe an instance of superlative humanity but, in so doing, deftly unfolds an alternative and damning reading of his grand hero—as brutish, perverted, uncivilized, evil. That his Muslim prisoners long for the mercy of death and that his vision of empire is viewed through a blood-red film of extravagant suffering both testify to the fatal flaws in Tamburlaine’s grand plan. As Elizabethan England stood on the edge of its own great empire, envying the fortunes of longer-established competitors, the *Tamburlaine* plays stand at once as a celebration of the potential of superlative militarism and as a stark warning against the excesses that can so easily flow from the impunities of conquest.