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**LOGIC'S DOUBT: THE SPANISH TRAGEDY AND TAMBURLAINE**

by Mark Byron

Tragedie is to seyne a certeyn storie,  
As olde bookes maken us memorie,  
Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,  
And is yfallen out of heigh degree  
Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly.  
Chaucer, *The Prologue of the Monk's Tale*

E quel che voglio io, nessun lo sa;  
Intendo io; quel mi basterà.  
[And what I desire, nobody knows;  
I understand, that's enough for me.]  
Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*

*The Spanish Tragedy* and *Tamburlaine*<sup>1</sup> operate as political drama. The motif of tyranny for the individual subject is given a peculiarly personal status in the lives of Kyd and Marlowe: both suffered the suspicions of heresy and the violent intrigues of the Privy Council. Marlowe's life has been especially singled out by critics as an example and symptom of Elizabethan espionage. Both *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Tamburlaine* offer apotropaic gestures toward the Elizabethan political climate—particularly the espionage circle of Sir Francis Walsingham—but do so within the decorous mode of drama. Rather than add to, or stitch together, the numerous conspiracy theories and biographical readings of these two dramatists' work (often conflating the author's literary corpus and the habeas corpus of bio-criticism), this article seeks to investigate the texts on another political stratum. It is not sufficient to read the plays through a hermeneutics of suspicion, seeking literal "evidence" of Kyd's and Marlowe's experiences. Nor can the political temper of Elizabethan England be disregarded. Yet structures of political allegory may be detected through the strategies of linguistic tyranny, intrigue, and blood-revenge and the status of the individual in a system of political and metaphysical tyranny.

The two plays offer diametrical—and complementary—notions of tyranny and revenge. *The Spanish Tragedy* presents Hieronimo, its di-

<sup>1</sup>All references are to, respectively, Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, in *Two Tudor Tragedies*, ed. William Tydeman (Harmondsworth 1992); and Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Plays*, ed. J. B. Steane (Harmondsworth 1969). Act, scene, and cumulative line numbers are given rather than page references for *The Spanish Tragedy*, and part, act, scene, and line numbers are given for *Tamburlaine*.

minished hero, as the subject of a political tyranny operating through the rhetoric of diplomacy and contingent truth. His attempts to cut through the ambivalence of language and power seek refuge in a stable metaphysical order of revenge and blood justice. The world of the play does not provide such certainties, and Hieronimo's own linguistic competence splinters and corrodes, ending in silence. The drama is itself subject to modal and linguistic instabilities and metadramatic incursions. In a nearly absolute distinction, *Tamburlaine* offers itself as hermetic. Linguistic ambivalence and dramatic fragmentation is void: the world of *Tamburlaine*, seen through his eyes and spoken in his words, is as complete and totalizing as the dramatic structure that serves as its vehicle. The vagaries of world and word are eliminated by the vista, the visible and thus knowable world, mapped upon the stage as the beholden image of its absolute tyrant. The action of *The Spanish Tragedy* is motivated by doubt; that of *Tamburlaine* by a nihilistic certainty of rule.

*The Spanish Tragedy* has been located at the nexus of two traditions: Renaissance neoclassicism and the native medieval and Tudor morality and miracle plays. Consequently, the political and metaphysical motivation within the text trace a course between classical theology and English Protestantism, between the influences of Seneca's imperial Rome and the precarious political positioning of Elizabethan England. Kyd does not provide a political or metaphysical stability in the world of the play—his own historical role as “author” is equally unstable in the light of textual corruption and additions. (Ben Jonson is supposed to have been paid to add scenes to the play.) The function of *The Spanish Tragedy* as metadrama, a function located in much recent commentary, embellishes the characters' linguistic irony and deception. The metaphysical orders both in and of the play are rendered mutually unstable: the ambivalent status of author, audience, and state moves from the drama to its material possibility. Tyranny for the individual subject moves from the stage to the audience, into the tyranny of doubt and its corollary, the tyranny of silence.

The doubt that saturates Kyd's neoclassicism, and his use of the native dramatic heritage, is invoked in a larger theatrical irony. The very language and staging of *The Spanish Tragedy* display the underside of an optimistic Renaissance humanism. Characters determine their fate (unwittingly) by what they say and do in an oppressive political climate. Perhaps this play only illuminates the less obvious political and metaphysical doubts of Erasmus and More. Yet a dark cloud also descends upon Kyd's neoclassical sources of the Senecan drama, the figure of Orpheus, and the allegorical persona of Revenge (an allegorical figure also in morality and miracle plays).

The influence of Seneca upon Renaissance drama is well documented. More recently, this influence has been contested,<sup>2</sup> where Seneca's tragedies are seen to have attracted attention partly through their mere survival.<sup>3</sup> (The plays were translated onto the English stage by Jasper Heywood in the mid-sixteenth century and compiled by Thomas Newton in 1581 as *Seneca His Ten Tragedies*.) Few critics detect the ironic use Seneca is put to by Kyd and the curious affinities in their political milieux. While Kyd lived in a nation threatened by both Rome and Spain from without and the instability of the throne and "popist" sympathies from within, Seneca (tutor to Nero) lived in "one of those times when 'foreign superstitions' were under government attack."<sup>4</sup> He also endorsed the views of his father, Seneca the Elder, who saw three causes of social deterioration: "a political cause, the loss of republican liberty; a moral cause, the idleness and indiscipline of sensation-seeking youth; and finally, the mere malevolence of the natural order which lets nothing stay at the peak of its development."<sup>5</sup>

Kyd's probable torture in 1593, on the charge of possessing heretical documents, fulfils the Senecan promise of "political deterioration." Conversely, however, *The Spanish Tragedy* does not invoke a firm moral schema in a world of Machiavellian policy and illustrates human action undermining the ebb and flow of any natural order. The play is not anarchic. Its instability is written into its structure, and the uneasy coexistence of several dramatic levels does not preclude the Aristotelian trivium of literary worth: *prodesse, delectare, movere*. They are simply made more explicit in the dramatic contract under negotiation with the play's audience. Tydeman notes in his editorial introduction

<sup>2</sup>See, for one example among many, G. K. Hunter, "Seneca and the Elizabethans: A Case Study in 'Influence'," *Shakespeare Studies* 20 (1967) 17–26. For a representative rebuttal of this view, see Joost Daalder, "The Role of 'Senex' in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*," *Comparative Drama* 20.3 (1986) 247–260. Other critics see Seneca's influence in the context of other classical sources, as with Eugene D. Hill, "Senecan and Vergilian Perspectives in *The Spanish Tragedy*," *English Literary Renaissance* 15.2 (1985) 143–165. Still others critique the inadequate way scholars have simply tallied parallel passages in an attempt to identify influence, and thus call into question the very notion of direct and simple influence: see chapter 1, "Heavy Seneca," of Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy: The Influence of Seneca* (Oxford 1992), and chapter 6, "Toward Shakespeare," of Gordon Braden, *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger's Privilege* (New Haven and London 1985).

<sup>3</sup>"Some critics have claimed to find unappreciated merits in these plays; but when we contemplate the amount of feeble rant that fills play after play, we may conclude that they have let faith triumph over plausibility." Richard Jenkins, "Silver Latin Poetry and the Latin Novel," in the *Oxford History of the Roman World*, ed. John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, and Oswyn Murray (Oxford 1991) 324–325.

<sup>4</sup>Donald Russell, "The Arts of Prose: The Early Empire," in Boardman, et al., 300.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 293.

that Kyd embodies “a powerful awareness that a play for the public arena had to entertain and excite before it could instruct and inform.”<sup>6</sup>

The major dramatic debt owed to Seneca in *The Spanish Tragedy* is in the tragedy as a study of the passions: *Thyestes* centers upon hate and blood-revenge; *Medea* upon jealousy; *Agamemnon* and *Oedipus* upon murder and its consequences; and *Hippolytus* upon love.<sup>7</sup> (This debt is indirect, however, for the tradition of the Italian *novelle* invokes revenge as a narrative force; indeed, the first tale of book 4 in the *Decameron* centers upon blood revenge in a character named Geronimo.<sup>8</sup>) The three principal Senecan quotations in *The Spanish Tragedy* are all inaccurate, and much critical discussion has ensued over the intentionality and significance of these errors.<sup>9</sup> It is certain, at least, that the passages (from the *Agamemnon*, the *Troades*, and the *Oedipus*) do not directly concern the nature of revenge. Yet they each arise at dramatically critical moments, giving a rhetoric to the graphic currency of revenge: the *dissecta membra* of mutilated bodies and eclipsed sanity. The Senecan tragic model, of a metaphysical order directing terrestrial action, is overturned in both *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Tamburlaine*. In radically divergent ways, this order is diminished into a dramatic order: in *The Spanish Tragedy*, the ghost of Don Andrea and Revenge sit in the theatre balcony, apparently immune from the action upon the stage, and the infernal order of vengeful justice becomes urbane spectatorship. *Tamburlaine* defies any effective transcendental power, replacing it with his own semiotic upon the field of battle—the three flags of Revelation (white, red, and black). Metaphysics is deferred for metadrama.

The tyranny of doubt overshadows Seneca upon the stage of *The Spanish Tragedy*. His plays appear in the hand of Hieronimo during the “Vindicta mihi!” speech in act 3, scene 13. This speech sees Hieronimo figuring himself in the hubristic role of divine legislator,<sup>10</sup> a theatrical

<sup>6</sup>William Tydeman, “Introduction,” in *Two Tudor Tragedies*, ed. William Tydeman (Harmondsworth 1992) 23.

<sup>7</sup>Fredson Thayer Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587–1642* (Princeton 1959) 41.

<sup>8</sup>Boccaccio also contributes to the *De Casibus* tradition from which much Elizabethan tragedy gains force. This tradition was naturalized in Lydgate’s *Fall of Princes* (ca. 1431–1439) and the Elizabethan compendium *A Mirror for Magistrates* (1559).

<sup>9</sup>A summary of the debate may be found in Hill, “Senecan and Vergilian Perspectives”; and an earlier appraisal is made in Scott McMillin, “The Book of Seneca in *The Spanish Tragedy*,” *Studies in English Literature* 14 (1974) 201–208.

<sup>10</sup>Note Deuteronomy 32.34–35:

The Lord remembers what their enemies have done;  
he waits for the right time to punish them.  
The Lord will take revenge and punish them;  
the time will come when they will fall; the day of their doom is near.

move that affords him the metaphysical protection to determine his own actions on earth. Seneca is thus figuratively present at this metaphysical and dramatic crisis. This act of overreaching transforms the knight marshal of Spain into the nihilistic "author and actor in this tragedy" (line 2621). Seneca then appears in the travestied form of the aged Senex (or "Old Man"). Hieronimo, in his state of vengeful ecstasy, figures Senex first as his dead son Horatio, then as a classical Fury, and finally as "the lively image of my grief" (line 1994). This disturbing power of metamorphosis is projected onto a man who shares with Hieronimo the death of a son:

Come on, old father, be my Orpheus,  
And if thou canst no notes upon the harp,  
Then sound the burden of thy sore heart's grief,  
Till we do gain that Proserpine may grant  
Revenge on them that murdered my son. (III.xiii, lines 1951–1955)

The culminating request for a mutual language of revenge is equally miscast as Hieronimo's faith in a metaphysical order of vengeful justice.

The classical figure of Orpheus functions as an emblem of fragmentation in a world of political intrigue and of the psychological tyranny of revenge. Hieronimo's request, "be my Orpheus," provides the classical locus for his symbolic *descensus ad inferos*. Both Hieronimo and Orpheus seek to subvert the natural order by returning a dead loved one to the terrestrial realm. Hieronimo, however, seeks a reunion in metaphor, transposing the crime of murder from his son onto the victim of his revenge. Orpheus is torn apart by the enraged Bacchides after failing to retrieve Eurydice; Hieronimo tears legal documents with his teeth. He rejects his social and political role as knight marshal and a linguistic order that feigns meaning. He invokes not the tragic failure of pastoral romance, but the infernal order of ecstatic revenge.

Thus Hieronimo is marginalized from the language of the Spanish court (he fails to gain access to the king's ear due to the Machiavellism of Lorenzo), and his rhetoric moves through a passionate disorder to an eventual extinction when he bites out his tongue. Orpheus, we recall, "son of Apollo, was held to be the first orator."<sup>11</sup> The Ovidian harmony "between the Orphic blend of words and music and the *discordia con-*

and Romans 12.19:

Never take revenge, my friends, but instead let God's anger do it.

For the scripture says, "I will take revenge, I will pay back, says the Lord."

<sup>11</sup>Thomas Edward McAlindon, *English Renaissance Tragedy* (London 1966) 66.

*cors* which metamorphoses Chaos into Cosmos<sup>12</sup> is reversed by Hieronimo. He makes an application to Senex for an infernal song; he desires a painting that can voice its cry (a travesty of Sidney's *ut pictura poesis* thesis in *A Defence of Poetry*); and he self-consciously inverts the court's rhetorical tyranny into a Babel of deathly misunderstanding:

Oh, no, there is no end: the end is death and  
madness! (lines 171–172, Addition D)

The stage itself is a locus for the overthrow of decorous eloquence. The *locus amoenus* that situates the pastoral romance of Horatio and Bel-imperia becomes the *locus asper* of Horatio's murder. This bower of bliss, already violated, is torn down by Isabella in her madness. Its structure is replicated behind the curtain of the apocalyptic masque, *Soliman and Perseda*, where Horatio's body hangs awaiting Hieronimo's *coup de théâtre*. This correspondence between theatrical dimensions upon the stage again figures the world of the audience as an implicit object of linguistic and political ambivalence. Peter Sacks locates a "loss of faith in the power of art's reply" where art includes "the no less artificial mediations of justice and the law."<sup>13</sup> The radical doubt that enters the literary economy of the pastoral elegy, and the subsequent "shrinkage" of the vegetation deity into a mere flower, may be symptomatic of broader political upheavals. The sphere of the spectator is riven with uncertainty: greater parliamentary powers replace the absolute rule of the monarchy, and medieval theology wanes before the rise of humanism. *The Spanish Tragedy* presents this social schism in the allegorical corruption of the bower of bliss into a blasted heath:

The blust'ring winds, conspiring with my words,  
At my lament have mov'd the leafless trees,  
Disrob'd the meadows of their flow'ring green,  
Made mountains marsh with spring-tides of my tears,  
And broken through the brazen gates of Hell. (III.vii, lines 1472–1476)

Immutable political and metaphysical principles are dislodged from their government of worldly action, producing "the entire climate of unhingement between sacred principles and secular practices."<sup>14</sup>

The tyranny of doubt emerges through the absence of secular justice in Hieronimo's world and has as its metaphysical personification the

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>13</sup>Peter Sacks, "Where Words Prevail Not: Grief, Revenge, and Language in Kyd and Shakespeare," *English Literary History* 49 (1982) 576.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 578.

figure of Revenge. The opening scene presents the ghost of Don Andrea with Revenge, due to a collapse of judgment in Hades. The three judges of the underworld (Minos, Eacus, and Rhadamant) cannot decide between a martial or connubial resting place for Don Andrea—he is both warrior and lover. He is sent down “the middle path . . . to the fair Elysian green” (I.i.72–73) to receive judgment from Pluto:

Whereat fair Proserpine began to smile,  
And begg'd that only she might give my doom.  
Pluto was pleas'd and seal'd it with a kiss. (I.i, lines 78–80)

This sinister smile is transferred to Revenge, who is instructed to take Don Andrea to the scene of the play, where they witness the action as an ironic audience. Revenge operates passively, merely observing the paths the characters mark out for themselves. The absence of Fate or any observable metaphysical authority releases the drama from the cycle of action and retribution, figured as Ira (Anger) in miracle plays: “Revenge does not direct or control anything, but represents the element of disorder and destruction that operates in the affairs of mortal men.”<sup>15</sup> Revenge is stripped of his allegorical function, that of “crying mindlessly for Vengeance,” and observes the human order of being, “a natural corollary to sin—the diabolical answer to justice.”<sup>16</sup>

Hieronimo portends his own death by assuming a transcendent justice (albeit infernal) that will vindicate itself in the face of courtly sophistry. Don Andrea also rejects his potential status as an Orphic figure. He overreaches in his request at the conclusion of *The Spanish Tragedy*:

Then, sweet Revenge, do this at my request:  
Let me be judge and doom them to unrest. (IV.iv, lines 2720–2721)

It is this fascination with revenge-as-justice that sees potentially positive characters deceived into justifying their own destructive actions. The loss of metaphysical certitude (the “is” of Aristotelian ethics tempered with scholastic theology) is replaced by a logic of action that desperately attempts to recover such certitude (the ill-perceived “ought” of Horatian ethics, a guide rather than a guarantee). This category mistake is prompted by the functional mechanism of transferred power: given by Pluto to Proserpine, passed to Revenge, and negotiated

<sup>15</sup>Donna B. Hamilton, “*The Spanish Tragedy*: A Speaking Picture,” *English Literary Renaissance* 4 (1974) 204.

<sup>16</sup>Elizabeth Maslen, “The Dynamics of Kyd’s ‘Spanish Tragedy,’” *English* 32 (1983) 121.

by a hopeful Andrea from Revenge. The power to bestow “unrest” spells out the intractable collusion of dramatic levels in the play, which ironically thwarts the closure of revenge in its fragmentation and incompleteness. In this light, Hieronimo contributes to his marginal linguistic status in the Spanish court, unable to see the power of rhetoric and subtle Machiavellism as a means to acquire his revenge. Don Andrea’s impatience with Revenge’s passivity, “demonic parody of patience,”<sup>17</sup> heightens this dramatic irony. Revenge is even found asleep at one point. Yet his foreknowledge of events signifies a metadramatic rather than a metaphysical logic of action.

Hieronimo finds himself in a complex abyss of doubt. He questions the wisdom of the gods, but does not understand the agency with which he must speak and act:

O sacred Heavens, if this unhallow'd deed,  
 If this inhuman and barbarous attempt,  
 If this incomparable murder thus  
 Of [son of] mine, but now no more my son,  
 Shall unreveal'd and unrevenge'd pass,  
 How should we term your dealings to be just,  
 If you unjustly deal with those that in your justice trust? (III.ii, lines 1080–1086)

Hieronimo signals his breach from order in the metric “over-reaching” of the final line in this passage. He cannot find earthly justice in the Spanish court, but feels obliged to maintain the legal order in Pedrignano’s trial. He does not assimilate his desires into the sophistic order of the court, and ends by frustrating any linguistic expression in his act of silence by mutilation. While succeeding in revenge outside of language—the court masque is spoken in four languages, and reaches its crisis through dramatic action that transgresses into the world of the larger play—Hieronimo’s inevitable end arises in his failure to tread a “middle path” in the political realm, to feign a “peace conditional” that masks his intentions and ensures his survival. That Elizabethan England trod such a path between Spain and Rome only heightens this irony. The audiences must also have felt for Hieronimo’s plight in a society of unstable political and theological doctrines: “his role as passionate definer and critic of the boundaries of public domain, made him an intriguingly dramatic figure for an audience so nervously self-conscious about the altering relation between the individual and his society.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup>McAlindon, *English Renaissance Tragedy*, 61.

<sup>18</sup>Sacks, “Where Words Prevail Not,” 580.

*Tamburlaine* invokes notions of language and character almost polar to those of *The Spanish Tragedy*. The realm of the confidential (with its texture of deceit, of the *volte-face*) is expunged by the declamatory: the low silhouette of the Machiavellian dissolves before the icon of the Hero. Similarly, the oppressive doubt of the political, metaphysical, and linguistic orders that consumes the “players” of *The Spanish Tragedy* (including Don Andrea and Revenge and the characters of *Soliman and Perseda*) contrasts with the blasphemous affirmation of these orders in *Tamburlaine*. Kyd, and the author(s) of the additional scenes, provide an unstable text. His dramatic palimpsest spans four theatrical dimensions—which themselves intertwine—and provides through this mechanism varying degrees of dramatic irony. *Tamburlaine*, much like its title character, consumes any possible instability or uncertainty into a unity. Such integrity, however, acts as a powerful dramatic irony of the first degree. Kyd is closer to Seneca in his (ironic) development of an explicit moral theme, yet Marlowe follows the Senecan five-act dramatic structure in each part of *Tamburlaine*. The structure of Marlowe’s play joins with the language, action, and fate of *Tamburlaine*: mystery and dramatic complexity are replaced by a saturating and encompassing worldview, a unity of world and drama. The text can thus celebrate its *flagellum dei* and display the totalizing irony of his fall.

The movement of *Tamburlaine*—from Scythian shepherd, to glorious over-reacher and conqueror, to the dying martial who does not even die in battle—has a logic contained in the language and imagery of the play. His death operates under the aegis of his “policies”: the need for conquest, for linguistic tyranny, for the love of Zenocrate, and for an heir to continue his work. The political tyranny of conquest is realized within two inseparable conceptual fields. *Tamburlaine* follows a policy of epistemological tyranny: he must conquer the world to know it, and to reach the sublime state of completion he must exhaust the unknowable. This is a phenomenal policy<sup>19</sup> motivated by metaphysical tyranny: *Tamburlaine* must elevate himself to the divine realm and, to achieve unity, possess all metaphysical power. He must murder the gods themselves.

*Tamburlaine* traces this pursuit and failure to realize a complete cognitive framework. One critic posits a corresponding hubris in Marlowe himself, whose lust for impossible desire “assumes the shape of

<sup>19</sup>This term is a slight modification of the philosophical doctrine of phenomenalism, which “rejects the notion that there are forever inaccessible objects shrouded behind the veil of appearance, by reducing all talk of things perceived or perceivable to talk about actual or possible perceptual appearances.” See the *Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Antony Flew (London 1984) 266. I mean that *Tamburlaine* defines reality by what is knowable, and thus to fully realize himself, he must know all.

thirst for power, of thirst for beauty, of thirst for knowledge.”<sup>20</sup> Anticipating later Elizabethan tragedy (particularly *Othello* and *Coriolanus*), the seeds of this failure are present throughout the action of the play. The audience is drawn into the world of *Tamburlaine* through the prologue. This induction maintains a distance from the world of the play, and is thus the only vehicle of dramatic irony beyond the hermetic sphere of the drama itself. The prologue dissembles, however, both juggling its self-consciousness as a prologue to drama that the audience may judge from a distance, and collapsing this distance through a rhetoric that leads the audience into the sphere of action, literally into a theatre of war.

We'll lead you to the stately tents of war,  
 Where you shall hear the Scythian Tamburlaine  
 Threatening 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. (lines 3–8)

This induction anticipates the prologues of Jonson's drama and their mimetic strategies, yet forbids the fulfillment of its invitation to participate in the world of the drama.

The audience may sympathize with Tamburlaine until the dramatic *trompe l'oeil*, where the saturating irony of his doomed policy forces an impenetrable distance between the mutually exclusive worlds of drama and life. This process of complicity and alienation of the audience is evoked through the language of the text. Tamburlaine's linguistic register is foreign and over-determined. He is a Uzbek (or Scythian) warlord, sharing with Genghis Khan the mythos of the central Asian steppes, and yet he mobilizes the rhetoric and mythical imagery of classical Rome. Further, he rejects the rhetoric of the *genus humile* suitable for a shepherd and invokes the *genus grande* as a machinery of conquest and perfectibility. This process has its justification (as it must) early in part 1:

Jove sometimes masked in a shepherd's weed,  
 And by those steps that he hath scal'd the heavens  
 May we become immortal like the gods. (part 1, I.ii, lines 199–201)

Such a speech establishes the rhetoric of the Titanomachy found so conducive to Elizabethan tragedians, and it demarcates the Senecan

<sup>20</sup>John Addington Symonds, *Shakspeare's Predecessors in the English Drama* (New York 1969) 486.

tragic field in *Tamburlaine*.<sup>21</sup>

The two parts of *Tamburlaine* are threaded with the hero's project of self-deification and world conquest. As made clear in the prologue, his ascent has already begun at the outset of the action. The opening speeches of the play anticipate the lack of any profound character development or strict pattern of dramatic tension. The king of Persia opens the dialogue: he has recently been defeated by *Tamburlaine*, and already the linguistic economy of complete dominance and submission is in place. Mycetes has lost the power of rhetoric, the more valuable of political assets:

Brother Cosroe, I find myself aggriev'd;  
Yet insufficient to express the same,  
For it requires a great and thundering speech. (part 1, I.i, lines 1–3)

When *Tamburlaine* appears in the following scene, he demonstrates a rhetorical virtuosity that will win him a wife:

Come, lady, let not this appal your thoughts.  
The jewels and the treasure we have ta'en  
Shall be reserv'd, and you in better state  
Than if you were arriv'd in Syria,  
Even in the circle of your father's arms,  
The mighty Soldan of Egyptia. (part 1, I.ii, lines 1–6)

Such political diplomacy demonstrates a shrewdness in *Tamburlaine* to be more than a mere tyrant. He is prepared to win allegiances and attain world conquest by enveloping subordinates under his mantle; his betrothal to a conquered princess and his ruling by delegation recalls the similar actions of Alexander the Great.

By the opening of the second scene of the play, we see *Tamburlaine* forging order from chaos. (He may thus figure as a demonic magnification of Orpheus rather than an inversion.) This control is gained by political rhetoric and martial action. David Thurn locates a merging of word and action as the driving strategy of *Tamburlaine*'s politics: "Arms and learning, violent conquest and 'the restitution of the tongues,' the deification of the image-worshipping tyrant and the tower of Babel: these terms define the theatrical spaces of *Tamburlaine*."<sup>22</sup> In contrast to *The Spanish Tragedy*, language and action are subordinated into a closed order. This aspect of *Tamburlaine*'s phenomenalism ren-

<sup>21</sup>Gordon Braden, *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition* (New Haven and London 1985) 184.

<sup>22</sup>David H. Thurn, "Sights of Power in *Tamburlaine*," *English Literary Renaissance* 19 (1989) 3.

ders his control through “the violent reduction of meaning to the terms of sight.”<sup>23</sup> His epistemological tyranny (over)reaches a point of reducing the world to the cognitive map that he draws:

I will confute those blind geographers  
That make a triple region in the world,  
Excluding regions which I mean to trace,  
And with this pen reduce them to this map,  
Calling the provinces, cities, and towns,  
After my name and thine, Zenocrate. (part 1, IV.iii, lines 81–86)

Word and action are joined in a totalizing ideology: “Tamburlaine translates the act of conquest into an act of writing and nomination, his sword a bloody stylus systematically reducing unknown region to the fixed and visible relations of the map.”<sup>24</sup> He could be seen as mapping his identity upon the world in the course of his conquests. The triple inscription on Zenocrate’s pillar-headstone (in Arabic, Hebrew, and Greek) completes the biconditionality between Tamburlaine and his world: in conquest he consumes the foreign and merges it into his identity.

The equation of the visible with the knowable proves well enough in Tamburlaine’s world, until it proves the fatal flaw in his metaphysical tyranny:

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! (part 2, V.iii, lines 67–71)

He provides death a personification, but translates his own fear into that of something remaining just out of sight. Aristotle’s *Poetics* stresses that death requires an image to be conceivable. Yet even this attempt to render what is unknowable into a mimetic discourse fails for Tamburlaine: “death appears only when sight fails.”<sup>25</sup>

The absorption of the world into Tamburlaine’s words and actions, and the mapping of his persona onto the epistemological field he conceives as the world, excludes the drama from a Jonsonian mimetic economy. It is epic, to be viewed with a cold eye, rather than immersing the viewer in its action. Marlowe provides a dramatic artifice, acknowledged in the prologue to part 1, of the stage-as-world, rather than

<sup>23</sup>Thurn, “Sights of Power,” 3.

<sup>24</sup>Thurn, “Sights of Power,” 10.

<sup>25</sup>Thurn, “Sights of Power,” 21.

"all the world's a stage." The tensions in Tamburlaine's identity, between the shepherd and the conqueror, his eloquence and violence, diplomacy and enforcing humiliation, are the means by which the audience may gain ironic distance from the play. He engenders a rupture in decorum: "The final criterion for excess, indecorum, is the stylistic self-consciousness induced by the text or social situation. Decorum is present when we don't notice it, and vice versa."<sup>26</sup>

Birringer reads the emblematic tableau of the banquet scene (part 1, IV.ii) as a point of rupture in decorum: "the medium is pushed to its limits by creating a curious mixture of the coherent and the absurd, the powerful and the petty, the heroic and the trivial."<sup>27</sup> Crowning his subordinates, Tamburlaine at once enacts and parodies his strategy of diplomacy, for he forces the caged Bajazeth to eat from the tip of his sword. Mark Burnett locates a Bakhtinian carnival of the body at this point, where the closed "classic canon" of the body (the hero or superhuman) intersects with the body as open in "grotesque realism" (the shepherd or mortal).<sup>28</sup> Tamburlaine cuts his own body late in part 2: an ironic emblem of martial valor and of his own mortality. The emblematic codings of the play create an ironic inversion: Tamburlaine is himself isolated by his linguistic tyranny and phenomenal policy. He exists as a dramatic emblem whose immortality traces the locus of suspension between the polarities he erects:

Meet heaven and earth, and here let all things end,  
For earth hath spent the pride of all her fruit,  
And heaven consumed his choicest living fire.  
Let earth and heaven his timeless death deplore,  
For both their worths will equal him no more. (part 2, V.iii, lines 249–253)

As with the prologue, but now within the world of dramatic action, Marlowe could be seen to sign his own *contrat théâtral* that places the audience (if not the characters) at a distance from Tamburlaine's political tyranny. For the Elizabethan audience, this offers some relief from the discomfiting proximity of allegory and political fact that recent criticism proposes: "it is highly suggestive on Greenblatt's part to link the Marlovian hero to the emergent violence and rapaciousness of Tudor colonialism in the New World."<sup>29</sup>

*Tamburlaine* suggests to its audience the limits of direct allegorical

<sup>26</sup>Richard B. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berkeley 1991) 45.

<sup>27</sup>Johannes H. Birringer, "Marlowe's Violent Stage: 'Mirror' of Honour in *Tamburlaine*," *English Literary History* 51 (1984) 229.

<sup>28</sup>Mark Thornton Burnett, "Tamburlaine and the Body," *Criticism* 33 (1991) 31.

<sup>29</sup>Birringer, "Marlowe's Violent Stage," 224.

codings. Its non-mimetic modality precludes any one-to-one correspondence with the world of Elizabethan England, and instead opens up a field of dramatic irony. The Titan is murdered by his own hubris; he exhausts the human potential for infinite knowing, and its corequisite, infinite being. *Tamburlaine* establishes a dramatic dimension for its action and its hero, but does not cut across that space to the world of the audience. It is discrete and, in this sense, hermetic.

*The Spanish Tragedy* and *Tamburlaine* thus embody almost polar political environments. This is reflected in the corresponding strategies that the individual may operate with and ultimately succumb to. The Spanish court challenges Hieronimo's plot through a saturating tyranny of doubt. He faces Machiavellian sophistry and shares a basic suspicion of the validity of meaning through language. By violating a system from which he has been marginalized, Hieronimo cuts across the levels of theatre and audience and shows their tenuous and violable natures. *Tamburlaine* provides its logic of doubt by tracing a faith in language to its endpoint, as a system of violation and total conquest. *Tamburlaine* may seek a closed epistemological and metaphysical system, yet this closure is the very mechanism by which the hero silences himself. Both plays arouse doubt concerning the political function of language: *The Spanish Tragedy* in its nihilistic failure, *Tamburlaine* in its catastrophic success.

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