

## Representation of Death in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great, Parts One and Two*

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In 1587, Christopher Marlowe introduced a new approach to theatre in *Tamburlaine the Great* and reformed the reigning theatrical practices. The popularity of the plays' main motif, Death, can be traced back to ancient Greek and Roman texts, but Marlowe's portrayal of the Death-topos differs from the traditional depictions on many levels. My main aim in this essay is to point out the Marlovian innovations concerning the theatrical representation of death by relying on contemporary popular culture. I also intend to emphasise the complementary relationship of rhetoric and imagery in order to prove the shared importance of verballity and imagery.

*Keywords:* Marlowe, theatre, death, violence, conquest, transformation

### 1. Introduction

The social beliefs of the English Renaissance era heavily relied on the heritage of antique Latin and Greek attitudes as well as Anglo-Saxon culture combined with Christian dogma. This rich compound proved to be a basis suitable for Marlowe to raise unpleasant but topical questions in his provocative works. The theatrical environment was perfectly fitting for such pieces since, as Neill notes, theatre offered the possibility of staging anxieties which were supposed to be repressed by the individual (Neill 2008, 32). All the seven plays written by Christopher Marlowe revolve around troublesome events and present challenging ideas most of which are recurrent in the plays, usually in different proportions. Marlowe generally chooses provoking motives like treachery or religious discrepancy as the core problem of the given play. The employment of themes such as religious heterogeneity, use and abuse of power, the art of deception, as well as the physical and the metaphysical limitedness of mankind had followed a long literary tradition. These topoi were widely discussed and well-known from the everyday as well: people encountered them at school while studying historical and literary texts of the classical corpus, at the same time they were also confronted with the religious connotations of such ideas by the church services. This religious emotional and visual experience had a notable effect on theatre, as Hardin remarks (Hardin 2006, 31). Marlowe

made ample use of the permanent presence of these concepts, with which he was thoroughly familiar. The omnipresence of their visual or literary representation had transformed these themes into integral parts of public knowledge, thus, the audience's familiarity with their meaning could be taken for granted.

As MacKenzie claims, the printing revolution of the 15<sup>th</sup> century gave rise to the popularity of emblem books in the households since they were affordable. Emblem books provided entertainment for both literate and illiterate people for the mottos and epigrams were to be considered together with a simple picture which illustrated the meaning of the text (MacKenzie 2010, xxiv–xxv). Marlowe, however, did not only use the traditional interpretations of the well-known images, he was ready to experiment and explore new possibilities offered by the medium of the theatre. Marlowe, instead of building upon the traditional reading of the prominent emblems, introduced a new kind of perception, since as MacKenzie asserts, “Marlowe’s manipulation of visual resources often seeks to challenge or extend the thinking of the playgoer.” The purpose of visual representation was shifted from impression and the expression of meaning became more important (xvii–xviii). Marlowe counted simultaneously on the audience’s knowledge of the classical interpretations and on their bewilderment, when being confronted with nonconventional representations of familiar concepts; in order to be able to do so, he had to rely on topics present in the Elizabethan popular culture.

## 2. Death in Elizabethan Popular Culture

The main motif Marlowe chose for his *Tamburlaine* plays is one which was ubiquitous in Renaissance England. The presence of death was in many ways inescapable. Foister states that “skulls were frequently worn in the sixteenth century as badges or other macabre forms of jewellery” (Foister 1997, 46). The plague, these memento mori objects and their depictions on church windows transformed death into an organic part of daily life. The main concept behind the literary and pictorial representations of mortality was not only to remember the dead but also to show the inevitability and omnipotence of death itself. Early medieval representations of death appear in various shapes, though, as Spinrad claims, the fleshless skeleton and the heavily decomposed corpse are considered to have been the most popular images of this era (Spinrad 1987, 2). Spinrad’s concept is underpinned by the increased number of depicted corpses with each of them showing a different stage of decomposition. On the one hand, it confirms the vogue of portraying decaying bodies but on the other hand, these images also enable the spectators to contemplate their own mortality. The depictions were a reminder that every human has to go through the

same stages of existence: from a living body to a bare skeleton. The usage of bodies in different states of decomposition also implies that death was viewed from a different perspective. Contrary to the present-day attitude, it was seen as a much less detached section of human existence, the line between the world of the living and the afterlife was rather blurred. Llewellyn claims that in opposition to the modern binary concept of life and death, the period between birth and the moment of death was regarded as a phase of dying, a lengthy process rather than a state of being (Llewellyn 1998, 15–16). This idea, however, can be traced back to Plato's works. The dialogues about Socrates's death do not give a picture of death but rather emphasise the continuous nature of dying. Plato expresses the importance of the preparational phase concerning death, and dying is described as a process in which Socrates is allowed to participate actively (Gavin 1974, 238–240). Considering life as a process of slow death enabled people to make preparations in advance concerning their own fate, thus, the whole of human life became a long *Danse Macabre*.

Mortality and the death cult itself gained another set of meanings when considered in a religious context. The church recognised the advantages of using Dance of Death imagery featuring well-known figures, and used this for their own purposes. The emphasis was shifted to the spiritual preparation preceding death which was aided by the already existing, popular imagery and representative artefacts. The intent was to persuade people to lead a moral life and distance themselves from sin and temptation; furthermore, the appropriate way of dying also gained an important role. Marlowe does not only rely on these interpretations of the well-known imagery in the construction of his *Tamburlaine* plays, but his tragedies also draw on the long tradition of representing death on the stage. People were already familiar with the traditions of mystery and morality plays. Mystery plays presented well known biblical stories and the lives of saints, and many of these plays were much concerned with physical pain and suffering. The morality plays, on the other hand, offered allegorical representations of personified abstractions with moral features among them on the stage.

The themes on Christopher Marlowe's allegorical stage were not only familiar to the audience but also incredibly topical: conquests and mortality were topics immensely relevant to the state of England. The early modern age was the era of great explorations and, as Greenblatt states, Marlowe was "fascinated by the idea of the stranger in a strange land" (Greenblatt 1984, 194); the figure of "the Other" is a recurrent image in his tragedies, and in this respect the *Tamburlaine* plays are no exception. The other main theme of *Tamburlaine the Great*, the issue of mortality, was not only discussed in connection with the individual's life, death and after-life. The fact that the monarch was heirless evoked amongst citizens the question of the succession to Queen Elizabeth, which at the time of *Tamburlaine's* writing was still

in debate. The link between the theme of mortality and the figure of the sovereign can be established not only on the basis of the lack of an heir but also through the popularity of public executions in the Elizabethan era. According to Cunningham, the employment of violence and executions by the Tudors served as a means of power solidification. The success of these public events resided in their “quasi-dramatic” implementation: their structure relied on recognizable elements such as the fight of evil and good, the punishment of villains, and the triumph of righteousness. The accused person was put in the position of the antihero while the monarch was shown as the personification of justice; furthermore, the dead body became a prop of the “play” and was transformed into a symbol of justice and its omnipresence. That executions followed the same pattern draws a striking parallel between them and morality plays for “Jurists, defendants, even executioners responded with standardized forms and themes, as if in self-conscious accord with their roles in [...] a sort of ‘Everyman Goes to the Gallows’” (Cunningham 1990, 209–212). The proximity of scaffolds, bear-baiting places and theatre buildings enhanced the rivalry of the different spectacles for the attention of the audience; the theatre had to be able to offer entertainment of equal allure to animal-baiting or the punishment of criminals.

### 3. Violence on the Marlovian Stage

The contemporary popular culture incorporated these sets of meanings which could be used as a common ground of reference so as to establish a connection between Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great* and the theatre goers. The *Tamburlaine* plays could present the well-known brutality of the era through staging the torture of the body and, thus, their performances were well-established means of providing entertainment for the crowd. Both *Part One* and *Two* are immensely physical plays; like in many contemporary visual illustrations, great emphasis is put on substantial details, and on what happens to the tortured, dying or dead body. The copperplate engraving *A flayed man holding his own skin* by Nicolas Beatrizet, for example, shows a skinned muscle-man with a dagger in his right hand and his skin in the other. The figure is observing his own skin thoroughly without any visible sign of pain. Similarly, the dying characters in the *Tamburlaine* plays often reflect on their own death. As Greenfield asserts, “many of Tamburlaine’s victims (...) perform a verbal dissection as they die” (Greenfield 2004, 233–236). Marlowe realised the sensation evoked by physical wounds on stage and he began to use pain as a spectacle. Edwards explains that the “living corpse” embodies the paradox of a transitional state between life and death, implying some sort of limbo where being alive in death is possible (Edwards 2010, 109). Indeed,

many characters in *Tamburlaine* deliver a lengthy speech about the physical effects death has on their body. Cosroe, for instance, gives a detailed description of how he slowly departs this life:

COSROE. My bloodless body waxeth chill and cold  
 And with my blood my life slides through my wound.  
 My soul begins to take her flight to hell  
 And summons all my senses to depart.  
 The heat and moisture, which did feed each other  
 For want of nourishment to feed them both  
 Is dry and cold, and now doth ghastly death  
 With greedy talents gripe my bleeding heart  
 And like a harpy tires on my life.  
 (Marlowe 1997, *Tamburlaine Part One* II.VII.40–50)

Cosroe's speech about his wound and his own death illustrates the transforming power of the theatrical space and performance which, as Edwards explains, lies in their way of transgressing the boundaries of mundane life by which they seemingly are defined (Edwards 2010, 109). Unlike people off stage, Cosroe is able to stop time by reflecting on his own death while experiencing it. His need to describe the procedure is more important than giving in to the physical torment. Similar to the case of the Tudor executions, the theatrical power of suffering and wounds is made use of so as to evoke sensation on behalf of the audience. As Greenfield points out, a person who is in extreme pain is unable to describe his experience with the help of words since "pain destroys language" (Greenfield 2004, 237). This unusual response to a mortal injury in which language becomes superior to wounds grabs the attention of the audience and shifts the focus to the character delivering the death-speech; the aesthetic description of violence and death allows them to rule the stage in that particular extended moment of dying. Cunningham states that this way the characters transform everyone into audience (Cunningham 1990, 215). The role of the audience is not only assigned to the spectators in the auditorium but also to the other characters who are present on stage.

The lengthy elaborations on the dying process and the spectacular staged violence, such as the suicides of Bajazeth<sup>1</sup> and Zabina, present death as theatrical

<sup>1</sup> Brown notes that Marlowe's treatment of Bajazeth is surprisingly reminiscent of the one observed in John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*, also known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (Brown 1971, 40–45). Although Marlowe relied on one of the most significant writings of Protestant history and martyrology, his aims of depicting Bajazeth as a tyrant or as *Tamburlaine's* footstool differ greatly from Foxe's. Foxe's description becomes reused and animated on the Marlovian stage in order to show the artistic complexity of the scene's enactment. Unlike in *Actes and Monuments*, Marlowe's focus is rather on the imagery than the sacred or moral aspect of the scene.

means of entertainment. This attitude towards mortality can also be observed in contemporary visual arts. “The Knight” from *The dance of Death* (1538) by Hans Holbein the Younger, for instance, presents a knight fully dressed in armour, stabbed by a skeletal figure. The living embodiment of death smiles at the stabbed man, enjoying his reaction to being pierced; the skeleton does not only observe the knight on its own but also invites the spectator to be entertained by the view, similarly to the people on stage who deliver a death speech. The various eye-pleasing presentations of dying together with the extraordinary rhetoric nature of speeches compel the audience to observe the events in awe so much so that even “Jove viewing [Tamburlaine] in arms looks pale and wan” (Marlowe 1997, *Tamburlaine Part One*, V.II.390). The emphasis is put on having an immediate effect on the spectators which is achieved by establishing a connection through mundane, worldly ideas and wealth. Tamburlaine is rarely concerned with the thought of spiritual riches after death or the afterlife itself. The significance of temporal prosperity is clearly expressed in the following excerpt:

TAMBURLAINE. The thirst of reign and sweetness of a crown,  
 That caused the eldest son of heavenly Ops  
 To thrust his doting father from his chair  
 And place himself in the empyreal heaven  
 Moved me to manage arms against thy state.  
 What better precedent than mighty Jove?  
 Nature that framed us of our elements  
 Warring within our breasts for regiment,  
 Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds:  
 Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend  
 The wondrous architecture of the world  
 And measure every wand’ring planet’s course,  
 Still climbing after knowledge infinite  
 And always moving as the restless spheres,  
 Wills us to wear ourselves and never rest  
 Until we reach the ripest fruit of all,  
 That perfect bliss and sole felicity?  
 The sweet fruition of an earthly crown.  
 (Marlowe 1997, *Tamburlaine Part One*, II.VII.12–29)

Tamburlaine delivers a speech which explains that even gods consider “the thirst of reign and sweetness of a crown” of main importance. Despite referring to superhuman beings, they are described as being involved in events similar to those in which Tamburlaine participates in the two plays, but no thought is devoted to divine deeds or events after conquering or death. This also implies that Tamburlaine considers himself closer to gods than to humans. Parker, however, notes

that the crown speech has significant religious overtones despite being primarily focused on material values. The lines about “[the] souls, whose faculties can comprehend / The wondrous architecture of the world” (Marlowe 1997, *Tamburlaine Part One*, II.VII.21–22) present an allusion to *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by John Calvin, more specifically to the passage which defines the powers attributed to the soul. Parker also remarks that the “earthly crown” may be interpreted as Christ’s crown of thorns (Parker 2007, 221–222). The image of the crown made of thorns automatically implies the close relationship of physical suffering and sovereignty; this body-centric approach is observable regarding Tamburlaine’s reign. Levin argues that Tamburlaine focuses on great achievements in material terms (Levin 1965, 51). This statement is supported by Act two, Scene seven in Part one, where, immediately after Cosroe’s death, Tamburlaine reaches for the Persian ruler’s crown proclaiming that “Not all the curses which the Furies breathe / Shall make [him] leave so rich a prize as this.” (*Tamburlaine Part One*, II.VII.53–54). Such earthly riches are closely related to the motif of conquest for the physical “earthly crown” of Cosroe and those belonging to the other oppressed kings, which are earned through conquering their countries.

### ***3.1. Death and Conquest on Stage***

Tamburlaine aims to become the most powerful ruler of the world through victorious battles. In the second play he is seen as a potent and mighty ruler, superior to other kings, one who has already conquered most of the then known world. The Scythian seems to be omnipotent like the Tudor monarchs, especially in the first part but a significant difference is observable concerning his character in Parts One and Two. MacKenzie proposes that in the first part, Marlowe relies heavily on the English military tradition of heroic chivalry and the classical Roman image of Mars Ultor. The following excerpt illustrates how Tamburlaine fits into the tradition of “military chivalry”:

TAMBURLAINE. Though Mars himself, the angry god of arms,  
And all the earthly potentates conspire  
To dispossess me of this diadem,  
Yet will I wear it in despite of them  
As great commander of this eastern world,  
If you but say that Tamburlaine shall reign.  
(Marlowe 1997, *Tamburlaine Part One*, II.VII.58–63)

Tamburlaine clearly puts Mars into the position of his opponent and shows himself as a person who accepts the crown only if the crowd's approval is granted. This quasi-democratic attitude, however, undergoes a sudden change, as MacKenzie points out. Tamburlaine begins to resemble the image of Mars Ultor and evolves into a fearsome warlord, so much so that "the god of war resigns his room to [Tamburlaine], / Meaning to make [him] general of the world" (Marlowe 1997, *Tamburlaine Part One*, V.II.388–389). This presents how Marlowe's protagonist has abandoned the attitude of the English type of Mars (MacKenzie 2007, 13–14). The shift to a less human and more godlike identity results in Marlowe's protagonist being presented as a force mightier than everyone else and his conquest is strongly connected to death itself. The connection gains importance not only because Tamburlaine is the cause of many people's death on and off stage but also for being based on the complex relationship of Death and the Scythian.

Tamburlaine often refers to Death as his servant, but their relationship is much more layered than a simple master-servant partnership. The first play seems to identify Tamburlaine as the superior character and Death as an inferior entity. Tamburlaine decides over life and death, he is in command, and this power relation seems firm and consistent. The second play, however, alters the power structure. As Tamburlaine strives for a superhuman state of being, his portrayal alludes more and more to the various representations of death. The image of Tamburlaine being drawn in his chariot by kings is a recognisable reference to the Triumph of Death motif, which, according to Neill, presents King Death as an equalising entity (Neill 2008, 88) since "it is no longer the personal confrontation between man and death, but the collective power of death" (Ariès 1981, 119). The Triumph of Death, however, is not the only reference in terms of macabre art: the allusions to the tormenting skeletal death is apparent in connection with the tortured victims, such as Bajazeth or the Governor of Babylon, but also in terms of conquest since violence is at the core of his military actions.

Tamburlaine's conquest is not only present on the corporal level but also in connection with verblivity. His speech expresses sublimity in the sense of triggering fear and awe, as the prologue promises in advance. This sublimity, however, is considered "false sublimity" in Longinian terms, since Tamburlaine uses his grand speeches to describe worldly issues and the "grandeur of spirit is corrupted by worldly concerns and the ephemeral values to which it is subjected" (Doran 2017, 56).

From jiggling veins of rhyming mother wits  
And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay,  
We'll lead you to the stately tent of war,  
Where you shall hear the Scythian Tamburlaine  
Threat'ning the world with high astounding terms  
And scourging kingdoms with his conquering sword.  
View but his picture in this tragic glass,  
And then applaud his fortunes as you please.  
(Marlowe 1997, *Tamburlaine Part One*, Prologue.1–8)

As Levin remarks, the audience is invited to observe the events on stage in awe (Levin 1965, 48). Immediately at the beginning, even before action takes place on stage, the audience is prepared for the importance of the ensuing auditive and visual stimuli through the employment of expressions such as “rhyming”, “scourging”, “conquering”, and most importantly: “picture” and “hear”. Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* plays are extraordinarily language centric dramatic pieces. Tamburlaine is not only able to subdue his enemies physically, but he is also able to dominate his opponents by his words. His dominance on the verbal level is underpinned by the fact that he is able to decide over life and death of the other characters, furthermore, as Levin shows, Tamburlaine's superiority is also supported by the number of lines spoken by him; thirty-three percent of all lines are uttered by the protagonist in the first part and this number grows to thirty-eight percent in the second play (Levin 1965, 211). The central role of language is not only apparent when considering statistic evidence, it also becomes clearly recognisable through the examination of death's description: both early biblical and Renaissance methods of representation are observable. According to Neill, the description of death in Genesis is metaphorical. Language played a fundamental role in substantiating it: the first step in creating an allegorical persona was to address Death in speech, this development lead to the incarnation of the fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse. It is not until the thriving popularity of macabre art towards the late fourteenth century that a personality is bestowed upon Death (Neill 2008, 3–5). Spinrad asserts that in the early sixteenth century the representation of death went through a noteworthy change: the skeletal figure of death was moved to the background; this become a widespread motif amongst portrait painters (Spinrad 1987, 16–18). I argue that a similar method of portrait painting is applied in *Tamburlaine the Great*, but Marlowe uses a different medium for the portrayal of his protagonist. Marlowe produces the same image of Tamburlaine and death with the employment of language. Tamburlaine is in focus, but Death lurks permanently in his immediate ambience. This compositional strategy is observable not only in the events of the play but also concerning the construction of Tamburlaine's persona. The verbal de-

scriptions of Tamburlaine often allude to different well-known representations of death, but it is never explicitly stated that he is the human manifestation of Death. Through the relationship between Death and Tamburlaine, Death gains a special role in the play: it is both visible and invisible at the same time. Invisibility is to be understood in terms of traditional impersonation on stage. Death is not staged by the employment of an allegorical figure like in the case of *Revenge* in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. Addressing Death like a person and presenting violent and spectacular deaths, such as those of Bajazeth and Zabina, or the execution of Babylon's Governor, create the persistent presence of Death as an idea on the stage. The allegorical persona, however, is not completely missing from the play, but it is much less didactic than in Kyd's tragedy. Tamburlaine's figure is adorned with the pomp and levelling power of King Death, he is even presented as an allusion to the biblical Horseman of the Apocalypse before the gates of Damascus. The colours of Tamburlaine's tents, however, are not only a reference to the Apocalypse, but the colours white, red, and black were also closely associated with the tradition of mourning. Llewellyn explains that while black is usually regarded as the colour of grief, white was traditionally associated with mourning the loss of an exemplarily virtuous person, while red represented redemption and the blood of Christ. He also notes that the combination of black and red had been considered as imperial since classical Antiquity (Llewellyn 1997, 89). These associations and sets of meaning do not only emphasise the omnipresence of death and its inseparable bond with Tamburlaine, but they also strengthen the implications of the apocalyptic allusions and foreshadow the inevitable fate of the citizens of Damascus.

### ***3.2. The Transforming Power of Death***

The close relationship of Death and Tamburlaine undergoes a significant change in the second *Tamburlaine* play. The stable hierarchy of the first play is replaced by turbulence in terms of power relations. Tamburlaine is seen aiming to enlarge his empire and at the beginning of the second play he seems to have achieved the highest position imaginable: his kingdom is growing, he is superior to several kings, he has a happy marriage and heirs to follow in his footsteps. Death, however, is not shown as inferior to Tamburlaine anymore: in fact, he is presented as an equally powerful force as "the scourge of god". Tamburlaine's rapid growth of political weight seems to threaten the power of King Death. Death evolves from an ally into an opponent and calls forth the central key event by which the major changes in the play are evoked. Zenocrate's death strikes Tamburlaine at the peak of his private and political career, and it is the first time he is confronted with loss on a personal level. This loss trig-

gers a change in Tamburlaine's perception of Death: the collective power of death is replaced by the protagonist's personal confrontation with death itself. Kübler-Ross argues that the suffering of another person reminds the individual of its own limitedness and mortality (Kübler-Ross 2009, 8). Indeed, Tamburlaine realises the physical boundaries of human existence and immediately tries to deny his own limits by declaring war on heaven. He uses his wife's death as *casus belli* and instructs his men to "Raise cavaleros higher than the clouds / And with the cannon [to] break the frame of heaven, / [to] Batter the shining firmament" (Marlowe 1997, *Tamburlaine Part Two*, II.IV.102–106). Due to the loss and suffering, Tamburlaine is metamorphosed into a vengeful warlord who aims to achieve super-human status and extend his terrestrial conquest to transcendental realms.

Despite not being present in Marlowe's sources, Zenocrate's death gains a determining function and serves as a catalyst in many aspects. It triggers a change in terms of Tamburlaine's attitude and identity, furthermore, it also calls forth change concerning the allegorical figure of Death, but the transforming power of the event does not end here. The death of Zenocrate is presented as an example of the good way of dying. Spinrad highlights that the dying queen accepts the inevitability of death as a natural part of life, as the line "I fare, my lord as other empresses" (Marlowe 1997, *Tamburlaine Part Two*, II.IV.42) indicates. She also tries to comfort and prepare Tamburlaine and her sons for her death; this way of acceptance transformed her into an exemplary figure of patience and courage in the eyes of Marlowe's audience. The exemplary nature of her death is also emphasised by the application of music in her death scene, for music symbolised harmony in the Renaissance era (Spinrad 1987, 134). The commendable way of her death is intensified through Tamburlaine's wrong response to it: according to Spinrad, he acts contrary to the deathbed tradition and does the opposite of what should be done (131). The scene draws parallels between Tamburlaine's behaviour and Xanthippe's reaction to Socrates's death in Plato's *Phaedo*. Gavin asserts that while Xanthippe is present "on stage" she acts hysterically and is removed from Socrates's side since she cannot provide help in the dying process and is unable to learn from her husband's death (Gavin 1974, 239). Tamburlaine shows similar behaviour at Zenocrate's deathbed: he rages against death; it is not him that comforts the dying empress, but it is him who has to be calmed down<sup>2</sup>. The improper attitude to the loss of his queen continues even after she has passed away.

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<sup>2</sup> McCarthy remarks that Zenocrate's death scene proves Marlowe's knowledge of the *ars moriendi* traditions. The queen's behaviour corresponds to the suggested patient acceptance of death while Tamburlaine's raging is presented as "the sin of impatience" (McCarthy 2012, 64–65). Marlowe, however, manipulates the traditionally expected attitude in Tamburlaine's death scene. It is not due to his firm belief in the Christian God he becomes able to ascend to Heaven: Tamburlaine considers himself as a divine figure, thus, he has the power to ensure his own way to the celestial realms.

Marlowe's Tamburlaine distorts and twists several conventions throughout the play. He is unable to accept the mortality and the limits of his wife's human body and tries to immortalise her in his own way. After her death, Tamburlaine has her body embalmed. He follows the tradition of preserving the memory of the deceased. When observing the treatment of the dead queen, it becomes apparent that her body is dismantled, but unlike in the case of most of Tamburlaine's victims, not in the physical sense but according to the different levels of function. Llewellyn describes the human body as a conjoint construction established through the combination of a person's natural body, social body, and monumental body (Llewellyn 1997, 46–48). Tamburlaine, however, does not completely distinguish these approaches of Zenocrate's realisation. Instead of following the Renaissance tradition by immortalising her virtue through a solid monument or other forms of art, he opts for another way of perpetuation. According to Llewellyn, the preparations of the natural body preceding the burial were primarily meant to delay the process of putrefaction; the aim was to provide a lifelike representation of the deceased person's physique without signs of corruption rather than to preserve their human remains (Llewellyn 1997, 54). Zenocrate's natural body is transformed into a monumental body through the employment of precious material and embalming her in order to preserve her social body as virtuous empress and wife. Through this objectification, Zenocrate is transformed into a twisted form of memento mori object who is meant to be at Tamburlaine's side until his own death. Tamburlaine's means of immortalising his wife, however, involve decay and destruction to a large extent. Ironically, Tamburlaine chooses embalming as the technique of preserving Zenocrate, this, however, has only a temporary result and is unable to stop the process of corruption permanently (Llewellyn, 54). He also produces an apocalyptic landscape as a reminiscence of his wife making a threatening exclamation according to which "This cursèd town will [he] consume with fire / Because this place bereft [him] of [his] love: / The houses burnt will look as if they mourned" (Marlowe 1997, *Tamburlaine Part Two*, II.IV.137–139). This image of destruction again, calls forth the omnipotence of Death and hints at the similarities of the protagonist's character and the very same Death, whose existence he desperately tries to leave out of consideration. Cole claims, that Tamburlaine's most intense outbursts are rooted in the loss of his wife and the loss of his self-image as a super-human being (Cole 1962, 112). These two factors are hardly separable since it is precisely Zenocrate's death which triggers the change in Tamburlaine's perception. It is then that he realises the lack of his omnipotence and starts to fight against the limitations of his power. Cole proposes that Tamburlaine's extreme urge to reach super-humanity through martial victories results unavoidably in inhumanity (113).

### 3.3. "*Tamburlaine the scourge of God must die*"

The importance of territory is also emphasised by not only earthly riches and prosperity (such as gaining crowns through conquest) but also by the death scene of Tamburlaine. The expansion of Tamburlaine's terrene empire stops when "sickness prove[s] [him] now to be a man" (Marlowe 1997, *Tamburlaine Part Two*, V.III.44). At this point, Tamburlaine still tries to deny his mortality and the limits of his physical being. As Tamburlaine's body becomes weaker, he shifts his focus from worldly battles to the empyreal realms as the following lines show:

TAMBURLAINE. Techelles and the rest, come and take your swords  
 And threaten him whose hand afflicts my soul;  
 Come let us march against the powers of heaven  
 And set black streamers in the firmament  
 To signify the slaughter of the gods.  
 Ah friends, what shall I do? I cannot stand –  
 Come, carry me to war against the gods  
 That thus envy the health of Tamburlaine.  
 (Marlowe 1997, *Tamburlaine Part One*, V.III.46–53)

Richards points out that Tamburlaine refuses to consider himself as dying, which, for him, is but proceeding with the expansion of his kingdom and reign (Richards 1965, 387). In this sense Death is put into the position of a loyal servant (one might even regard death as an ally) ensuring a peaceful death for Tamburlaine and helping him to proceed to the afterlife for further conquest. On his deathbed he asks for a map depicting the territory he has already under his control. Neill describes mapping as a means of depicting territory already known and conquered (Neill 2008, 2). Tamburlaine is proceeding to a land completely unknown to him, a new *terra incognita* which has to be discovered. By leaving his worldly heritage to his sons and preparing to ascend to heaven at the same time, Tamburlaine distinguishes his physical body from his soul, thus acquiring a spiritual body, which adds another layer to the threefold body-theory of Llewellyn. Marlowe's protagonist leaves behind both his social body and his natural body, dividing the monumental body into two abstract parts. The lines "My flesh divided in your precious shapes / Shall still retain my spirit, though I die, / And live in all your seeds immortally." (Marlowe 1997, *Tamburlaine Part Two*, V.III.172–174) clearly show the division of "flesh" and "spirit". Tamburlaine immortalises himself both in the physical world through his offspring and the empire he has built and also in the metaphysical dimension: he finally steps over the boundaries of human existence and grows to be a superhuman entity. By evolving into a superior being similar to Death, he becomes capable of entering a domain perceived as uncanny by ordinary mortals. According

to the Platonic idea, certainty is unachievable in terms of death for it is myth and therefore incompatible with rational interpretation and worldview. This vagueness, however, leaves room for hope, since it is possible to grow in an elusive context. Death may be perceived as a passageway to another life which can be used as means of transmitting knowledge and growing (Gavin 1974, 241–242). Tamburlaine's death may be interpreted as a necessity which has to be endured in order to gain entrance to the unknown territory as it is suggested by the following exclamation:

TAMBURLAINE. In vain I strive and rail against those powers  
 That mean t'invest me in a higher throne,  
 As much too high for this disdainful earth.  
 Give me a map, then let me see ow much  
 Is left for me to conquer all the world,  
 That these boys may finish all my wants.  
 (Marlowe 1997, *Tamburlaine Part Two*, V.III.120–125)

Tamburlaine clearly plans to conquer the heavenly realms, leaving the earthly terrain for his sons with the intention of providing the maintenance of his social body through their actions. This attitude shows serious preparation on behalf of Tamburlaine, which implies a different approach to his own death than to Zenocrate's dying.

The procession of Tamburlaine's death is contrasted to Zenocrate's way of dying on several levels. The first striking difference is the perception of Tamburlaine and his role in each case. While Zenocrate's death makes him automatically observe the events from the family member's point of view, his own death puts him into the position of the experienter. The image of Death changes accordingly to the shift in Tamburlaine's perception in Marlowe's play similarly to the alteration in terms of visual representation at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Neill asserts that staged tragedy confronted the audience with their own mortality and compelled them to contemplate their individual fate. This encounter also served as a didactic practice to rehearse ways of responding to death (Neill 2008, 31–32). Tamburlaine makes use of the educational quality of Zenocrate's performed death-ritual and, correspondingly to Plato's implications, learns and grows through her death. By the time he is forced to face his own death, Tamburlaine is able to react properly. Although Tamburlaine's denial of his own mortality might be interpreted as a weakness of character or as the failure of a great warlord to die in a dignified manner, I argue that it is precisely this attitude of his which allows him to die a death more elevated than those of the other characters' in the play. Tamburlaine's death differs not only from the deaths of Marlowe's other protagonists, but it is also unique in the dimension of the two *Tamburlaine* plays. Llewellyn maintains that preparation

preceding death was regarded as an essential part of the procedure; furthermore, sudden deaths were thought to result in spiritual damnation and social stigmatisation (Llewellyn 1997, 28). When observing the deaths in both plays, it becomes apparent that most of them are sudden and violent; the characters who die in such a manner are deprived of the possibility of preparation; thus, they are not allowed to die a proper death in Protestant interpretation. Zenocrate's death is exceedingly different from the usual bloody executions and it is regarded as a "good death" in terms of preparational phase and the patient and virtuous acceptance of mortality and death, emphasised by the harmonious music during the process of dying. Her death, however, is not left spotless, since the procedure is not allowed to follow the deathbed conventions due to Tamburlaine's excessive outbursts. This extreme reaction and the neglect of funeral customs are needed to show the transforming power of Zenocrate's death. Tamburlaine's attitude towards Death as an allegorical being changes immediately: he recognises him as a potent opponent and the battle for terrestrial hegemony begins between them. Tamburlaine tries to weaken Death's power, as Zenocrate's preservation exemplifies, and he also aims to show that he is capable of similar cruelty as it is demonstrated by the execution of the Governor of Babylon. Tamburlaine's own death seems to be another turning point regarding their relationship. By the time of Tamburlaine's illness, he has developed a new attitude towards death: he accepts Death's power, but he does not see dying as a sign of being defeated. Amongst the several dying characters on stage, he is the only one who is allowed to perform an ideal death. Although the emergence of his disease is quite sudden, Tamburlaine still succeeds in making preparations before the moment of his death: he sees his successor being crowned, comforts the ones left behind, and prepares for his spiritual journey to the metaphysical realms. Contrary to Zenocrate, Tamburlaine does not accept his own mortality and, thus, his supposed weakness becomes the factor which can lead to a potential change of identity. Zenocrate dies willingly as a human in a physical world; unlike her, Tamburlaine does not regard death as an end but rather as a threshold leading to a new domain where, due to its vagueness, he might grow into the superhuman entity he aims to become.

### ***3.4. Death as Means of Theatre***

The transforming power of death, however, is not only observable concerning Tamburlaine's character development and regarding the various aspects of the human body, but also in the metatheatrical sense. Death is used as the most frequent spectacle on Marlowe's stage and due to its complex representation, many facets

of the phenomenon are displayed in the play. Scholars, such as Levin (Levin 1965, 64–65) and Cole (Cole 1962, 87), usually draw attention to the central role of language. Similarly, to the theme of violence, language is used as a theatrical device in order to evoke change. Language itself has an immense transforming power and it can, as it is exemplified in the biblical development of the death-image, substantiate elusive phenomena. Linguistic expression, however, is not always enough to describe certain things, since some things are indescribable (Levin 1965, 9). Cole declares that “the visual action undercuts the nature of the speech” for the contrast between the glorious language and the executions evokes irony (Cole 1962, 109). I argue that the striking difference between staged brutality and the magnificence of speech are used in a combination to create an interpretation of the staged matter more complex than any form of art would be able to do on its own. Homan states that “literal deeds are continually set against the poetry itself as words alone convert what is physical and horrid to something metaphorically grand. The play in this sense is [...] a testament to the theatre’s own alchemic power.” (Homan 1969, 395). Visual representation combined with overwhelming rhetorical speeches also alludes to the limitations of human beings as shown in the following lines:

TAMBURLAINE. Behold my sword, what see you at the point?

[FIRST] VIRGIN. Nothing but fear and fatal steel, my lord.

TAMBURLAINE. Your fearful minds are thick and misty then,

For there sits Death, there sits imperious Death,

Keeping his circuit by the slicing edge.

But I am pleased you shall not see him there.

He now is seated on my horsemen’s spears,

And on their points his fleshless body feeds.

Techelles, straight go charge a few of them

To charge these dames, and show my servant Death

Sitting in scarlet on their armed spears.

(Marlowe 1997, *Tamburlaine Part One*, V.II.45–55)

Tamburlaine invites the virgins, and through them the audience, to observe the visual manifestation of death which they are unable to see for he is invisible to the ordinary human eye. Although the audience of the theatre shares humanity and its limits with the virgins, Parker claims that they do not have to be confronted with their “terminal limits”; instead they encounter the limits of Marlowe’s own medium: theatre itself (Parker 2007, 227).

Death as a motive is ritualised on the Marlovian stage. The two *Tamburlaine* plays feature several exclusively death-related events such as executions, sacrifices, and suicides which are all procedures following conventions. Another layer of the ritualistic realisation is language itself, since it is used accordingly to rhetorical

conventions as it is observable in Tamburlaine's lengthy speeches. Both facets are applied in the theatrical context, which itself is heavily rooted in ritualistic performance. The ritualistic approach to performative arts has a decidedly religious implication. The cyclical concept is evidently present in the repetition of performances: as the play is performed, the characters die but through the next performance, the same characters are reborn; repetition, however, also implies the obligatory reliving of suffering as well. The topos of rebirth is present manifold in the *Tamburlaine* plays. The motif is observable in the identity-shift of the actor since he has to "die" symbolically in order to gain a new identity through the impersonation of someone else. The third layer of rebirth is rooted in the relationship between character, play, and playwright: as the real-life character of Timur Lenk died and was reborn, reshaped, and reinterpreted in the newly contextualised world of Marlowe's plays.

#### 4. Conclusion

Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* plays are manifestations of the playwright's genius in terms of stagecraft displaying the artistic complexity of his medium. The two parts of *Tamburlaine the Great* testify Marlowe's familiarity with the contemporary mind: he made use of the popular and topical themes in Elizabethan England and incorporated them as crowd-tickler features in his plays. He relied heavily on conventions and public knowledge to make his plays both relevant and easily digestible for his audience. At the same time, he showed the familiar themes from a different, provocative angle and often manipulated the familiar implications so as to puzzle the spectators' minds.

Although he chose an ancient theme as the central motif of his *Tamburlaine* plays, the traditional connotations are displayed in a different, renewed manner. Marlowe's depiction of Death on stage does not only draw on the medieval heritage of morality and mystery plays, but also on the contemporary pictorial representations. I claim that the appearance of Death on the Marlovian stage became revolutionary in the sense of combining different branches of art in order to express its manifold presence. Contrary to previous portrayals, the interpretation of Death was not limited by the boundaries of descriptive language or the means of fine arts. Although it is the central role of rhetoric which is usually highlighted, the visualisation of the same theme proves to be of equal importance. The combination of these two branches allows a more complex and less limited perception.

The fruitful match of complexity and ambiguity is of major importance in terms of dramatic development since, as the Platonic idea maintains, it provides the basis for the individual's growth. Character development and identity shift are not

only rooted in the altering quality of Death but also in the transforming power of theatre itself. Death and language become ritualised in the theatrical context. The ritualistic repetition of the performances does not only repeatedly present the play but also implies some form of re-displaying the same motives again and again. As a result, the audience is able to rediscover and redefine mortality, similarly to the Marlovian practice of reusing and reinterpreting death as the theme of the greatest conceptual and figurative complexity in his plays.

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