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## Tamburlaine the Great: “The Scourge and Wrath of God”

Ipek Uygur\*

*Adnan Menderes University, Aytepe Mevkii, Aydın 09100, Turkey*

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### Abstract

The relationship between religion and war appears to be a very complex one. Whether loved or abhorred they have always co-existed despite the fact that religion has continuously condemned acts of pillaging, destroying, or devastating. In essence, religion functions as a powerful force in fashioning the contours of all essential perceptions of war and peace; whereas, war mirrors and shapes human identity and purpose in a dreadful context of struggle where killing of ‘others’ is rendered not only urgent and legal, but also honorable. For the ancients, war was the means by which gods retained their divine order. It was declared against the enemy who had sinned against the gods, thereby making this ‘just war.’ Aristotle was among the first to comment on the theory of “just war,” for whom war was not an end in itself but a means to justifiable ends. His famous expression “war must be for the sake of peace” (*Politics* 1333b37) was influential on all those early modern English playwrights who were willing to translate the wars of religion fought between the Muslim Turks and the Christian Europeans to the English stage. *Tamburlaine the Great Part I and II* were the first plays Christopher Marlowe wrote for the Elizabethan audience with the purpose of playing up the popular sentiment of hatred against the Ottoman Turks, whose military victories in Europe had earned them the title of ‘the present Terror of the World.’ In this paper, I intend to argue that Marlowe’s rhetorical style transforms his military hero, Tamburlaine, from a merciless tyrant, indulging in the unjust profiteering of plundering, ravaging and killing to satisfy his insatiable lust for dominion, into “the Scourge and Wrath of God,” a divine agent adorned with God-ordained madness, to mete out punishment to those who have sinned against the God.

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +90 5333239147; fax: +256 2132812.

E-mail address: [iuygur@adu.edu.tr](mailto:iuygur@adu.edu.tr)

The relationship between religion and war appears to be a very complex one. Whether loved or abhorred they have always co-existed despite the fact that religion has continuously condemned acts of pillaging, destroying, or devastating. In essence, religion functions as a powerful force in fashioning the contours of all essential perceptions of war and peace; whereas, war mirrors and shapes human identity and purpose in a dreadful context of struggle where killing of ‘others’ is rendered not only urgent and legal, but also honorable. For the ancients, war was the means by which gods retained their divine order. It was declared against the enemy who had sinned against the gods, thereby making this “just war.” Aristotle was one of the ancient Greek philosophers to comment on the theory of “just war,” for whom war was not an end in itself but a means to justifiable ends. Claiming that human nature is the origin of war, for it arises from a person’s spiritedness which is, in Aristotle’s words, “a commanding and unconquerable thing” (*Politics* 1327b36), Aristotle draws our attention to the fact that a person either aspires not to be conquered or desires to command others. His famous expression “war must be for the sake of peace” (*Politics* 1333b37) was influential on all those early modern English playwrights who were willing to translate the wars of religion fought between the Muslim Turks and the Christian Europeans to the English stage.

*Tamburlaine the Great Part I and Part II* were the first plays Christopher Marlowe wrote for the Elizabethan audience with the purpose of playing up the popular sentiment of hatred against the Ottoman Turks, whose military victories in Europe had earned them the title of “the present Terror of the World.” The plays were staged at a time when Muslims and Jews, living in Western Europe, were not able to coexist peacefully with their Christian counterparts, and, above all, when religious conflicts between Protestants and Catholics were likely to go on unabated well into the seventeenth century. Despite having written some 150 years after the fall of Constantinople to the Grand Turk, who was, as the grandmaster of Rhodes, Jean de Lastic (1717 cited by Martene) put it, more infamous than Nero when it came to spilling Christian blood, ... and was bold and ambitious, and desired more than Alexander or Caesar to conquer the whole world, *Tamburlaine* plays gained the attention of early modern English audience for their momentous celebration of *Tamburlaine*’s defeat of Ottoman Emperor Beyazid I at Ankara in 1402 who temporarily rescued Constantinople, one of the “two lights of Christendom,” from falling into the hands of the sworn enemies of Christ, which was construed as providential, albeit indirect, triumph for Christendom over the increasingly powerful forces of Islam (Mathew, 2014). In this paper, I intend to argue that Marlowe’s rhetorical style transforms his military hero, *Tamburlaine*, from a merciless tyrant, indulging in the unjust profiteering of plundering, ravaging and killing to satisfy his insatiable lust for dominion, into “the Scourge and Wrath of God,” a divine agent adorned with God-ordained madness, to mete out punishment to those who have sinned against the God.

In the Renaissance, As Roy W. Battenhouse (1941) puts it, orthodox doctrine suggested that God punishes the wicked in two ways: internally, by sending maladies of the mind and perturbations of the passion; externally, by permitting the ravages of the tyrants who are made to serve God as his scourges. Accordingly, by deploying the second of the above-mentioned means of punishment, God unleashes evil agents with tyrannical souls upon those who have already sinned against Him in order to use the wicked tyrants as rods for punishing sins.

The Marlovian stage lets its audience enter a landscape filled with strangers and strange lands as the prologue of *Tamburlaine* leads us to the stately tent of war (Prologue 3), starting with Persia, moving across Asia, and extending finally to Egypt and Africa, “Where we shall hear the Sycythian *Tamburlaine*/ Threatening the world with high astounding terms, And scourging the kingdoms with his conquering sword (Prologue 3-6).” *Tamburlaine*, in Emily Bartels’ (1993) words, attempts to create a monological voice of power, authorized from above and distinguished from all below; however, the play challenges the idea that supremacy is given, and thus it strives to prove that supremacy is in fact ‘made, ironically, out of others’ visions and voice.

Historically speaking, the sixteenth century was a period of many victories and few defeats for the Ottomans in their struggle against the Europeans, as they had a well-armed and highly-disciplined army. However, chroniclers of the period did not interpret their sources with an eye to historical causation; instead, a rationale was developed to deal with the situation: The God was on the Turks’ side and thus He was scourging the Christian Europeans for their sins, which were deemed to have derived from the Christians’ reluctance to become a single body and soul. In a similar vein, Aeneas Sylvius (Pope Pius II; 1458-64), who had attributed the tragic loss of Constantinople to the

Ottoman Turks to lack of unity among the Christians, defined Christendom as a body without a head, without laws, without magistrates. Only after three quarters of a century, in his 1529 track *On War Against the Turk*, Martin Luther blames the Pope for his false teachings on the war against the Turk, as he passionately argues that the Pope does not have the right to aspire to a princely status either in time of peace or war, and if there is to be war against the Turk, it should be fought at the emperor's command, under his banner and his name, for the Turk attacks his subjects and empire, and it is his duty, as a regular ruler appointed by God, to defend his own. Luther furthers his discussion by drawing the attention of the community of Christians to the impossibility of fighting against the Turk's Allah, that is, his God, the devil, ... for this man is not to fight in a bodily way with the Turk ... [whose] Mohammed ... commands that ruling is to be done by the sword, and in his Koran the sword is the commonest and noblest work. Thus the Turk is, in truth, nothing but a murderer, ... God's rod or anger which punishes those who failed to join the Protestant Reformation. Accordingly, the triumphant Turks were deservedly construed as the instruments of God's will- His scourge, not His chosen people.

Similar to early modern English representations of Turks, who are both feared and admired, Tamburlaine, as Daniel Vitkus (2008) argues, is both glorious and monster, ... he is Alexander the Great and Satan combined, declaring in his first scene a transgressive ambition to rule the world along with his offer to make Zenocrate Empress of the East:

I am a lord, for so my deeds shall prove:  
 And yet a shepherd by my parentage.  
 But, lady, this face and heavenly hue  
 Must grace his bed that conquers Asia  
 And means to be a terror of the world, .....(1: 1.2.34-8)

Regarding his rapid rise to power from humble beginnings, the Scythian Tamburlaine, "a shepherd by my [his] parentage" (1: 1.2.35), is like the Scythian Atilla, and like all Turks. His elevation above the ordinary rules of history can be thought to have providential purpose because of the wickedness of the Persians, the irreconcilable Babylonians, and the seemingly unstoppable Turk, who in Luther's words, does not fight from necessity or to protect his land in peace, as the right kind of ruler does, but he seeks to rob and damage all lands, who are doing and have done nothing to him. Apparently, Tamburlaine stands as a rod for their chastisement. When Cosroe, the usurping brother of Mycetes assumes the Persian throne with covetous eyes gazing towards Asia, he promises that he will "march to all those Indian mine/ My [his] witless brother to the Christians lost/ And ransom them with fame and usury (1:2.5.41-3)." Whereas Cosroe's advisor Meander explains that Tamburlaine's goal is "To reign in Asia with barbarous arms/ To make himself monarch of the East (1:1.1.42-3)," for Tamburlaine too craves the gold quarries of India. Evidently, as Roy Battenhouse (1941) puts it, the destruction and slaughter which Tamburlaine undertakes in the lust for power but under the mask of piety are a scandal permitted under God's providential justice... [though] the conqueror's religion is war.

Despite the fact that the annexation of Bajazed's principalities in Africa and Asia, as well as Cosroe's Persian dominions, to Tamburlaine's territories cement Tamburlaine's reputation both as a warrior and an emperor, Stephen Greenblatt (1980) compares Tamburlaine to a machine which cannot slow down or change course, once set in motion. Accordingly Tamburlaine is doomed to conquer, for he allows nothing to hinder him. His enemies shudder at his ruthlessness since "His spear, his shield, his horse, his armour, plumes/ And jetty feathers, menace death and hell (1: 4.1.61-2)!" Above all, "Without respect of sex, degree or age, / He razeth all his foes with the fire and sword (1: 4.1.62-3)." The excess of barbarity reflected in the metonyms "fire and sword" alludes to the common oath of the Scythians made by the sword and fire, for that they accounted these two special divine powers which should work vengeance on the perjurers (Spencer, 1805). In *Tamburlaine, Part I*, Tamburlaine's responses to Turkish threats not only distance him from Islam but also earn him the title of Europe's protector. However, soon after Europe stands secured from the Ottoman threat, Tamburlaine's brutality becomes more conspicuous. Tamburlaine's monstrous slaughter of the innocent virgins of Damascus appears as an excess in violence, "since I [Tamburlaine] exercise[s] a greater name/ The scourge of God and terror of the world' and thus he must apply himself to fit those terms (2: 4.1.153-5)." On the other hand, Zenocrate, distressed by the slaughter of "heavenly virgins and unspotted maids" (1: 5.2.263), the sight of "streets strowed with dissevered joints of men/ and

wounded bodies gasping yet for life” (1: 5.2.260-1), and finally the “bloody spectacle” (1: 5.2.277) of Bajazeth and Zabina, pleads for mercy from “mighty Jove and holy Mahomet” (1: 5.2.301), and unexpectedly attaches the title “the Turk” (1: 5.2.292), “great Turk” (1: 5.2.306) to “Tamburlaine! my [her] love! sweet Tamburlaine! That fight’st for scepters and for slippery crowns (1: 5.2.293-4).” The more Tamburlaine’s cruelties exceed any enacted by the Turks, the more vividly his manipulation of rhetoric of legitimacy is revealed. Even in his last grasps of breath, Tamburlaine is burning with an unappeasable desire to accumulate imperial honor and material wealth rather than his god-ordained authority as a divine scourge, which he wisely deploys to justify the legitimacy of his rhetoric. Daniel Vitkus argues that Tamburlaine describes his serial conquests as a process of material accumulation, calling himself a “scourge .../ That whips down cities and will control crowns/ Adding their wealth and treasure to my [his] store (2: 4.3.99-101).” Accordingly, the anti-providentialist message of Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine, Part I and II* implies that there is no metaphysical, divine will that controls events, [since] there is no motive for Tamburlaine beyond the possession and control of a global network that will funnel wealth and commodities back to him (Vitkus 2008). In his death scene Tamburlaine defines an imaginary map which he aspires to materialize. Nevertheless, aware of his impending material death, he tries hard to express his dying will on a map that is shorn of divine possessions despite its abundance in earthly gains. Inclusive of his previously-conquered lands, the map Tamburlaine envisages promises for the projection of a world empire with easy access to India and “all the golden mines, inestimable drugs, and precious stones / More worth than Asia and the world beside (2:5.3.151-3):”

Here I began to march towards Persia  
 Along Armenia and the Caspian Sea,  
 And thence unto Bithynia where I took  
 The Turk and his great Empress prisoners.  
 Then marched I into Egypt and Arabia,  
 And here, not far from Alexandria,  
 Whereas the Terrane and the Red Sea meet,  
 I meant to cut a channel to them both,  
 That men might quickly sail to India

.....  
 Here, my sons, are all the golden mines,  
 Inestimable drugs and precious stones,  
 More worth than Asia and the world beside;

.....  
 And shall I die, and this unconquered  
 Here, lovely boys what death forbids my life  
 That let your lives command in spite of death (2:5.3.126-168)

Tamburlaine’s gradual loss of divine power as a consequence of his insatiable desire for worldly gain confronts him with the fact that he has reached the end of his earthly life. Lamenting his failure to fulfill his ambition to “cut a channel” (2: 5.3.132) connecting the Mediterranean and Red Seas, and thus become a world monarch controlling all the global trade networks, Tamburlaine leaves the stage as the seeker for absolute power rather than as a divine agent. In essence, Tamburlaine’s interest in trade and envisioning the world in terms of mercantile commodities can be either considered as reflective of Turks’ ambition to dominate trade to India by both land and sea, for digging of a Suez Canal had been discussed since the days of Suleiman the Magnificent, or interpreted as a reflection of the acquisitive energies of English merchants, entrepreneurs and adventures (Greenblatt, 1980), in spite of the fact that Elizabethan government had no plans or prospects for dominating either the Ottoman Empire, the only regional power with a standing army, or challenge Catholic control over established routes to the East until the last two decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* plays portray a complex and unsettling European relationship with the East rooted in an unappeasable desire to dominate and control one another in the face of religious schism in Christendom.

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