

MARS OR GORGON? TAMBURLAINE AND HENRY V

Let him forever go!—Let him not, Charmian,  
Though he be painted one way like a Gorgon,  
The other way a Mars. (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.5.117-119)

Early modern audiences were fascinated with dramas that presented multiple views of reality, like the perspective painting that Cleopatra refers to above. Critics offer a number of explanations for the popularity at this particularly historical moment of highly ambiguous dramas. Joel Altman situates these plays within the rhetorical tradition of arguing on both sides of the question. According to Altman, the interrogative plays so popular during this time are constructed from a series of statements and counterstatements, both equally valid, thereby imitating the form of a sophistical debate in which thesis evokes antithesis yet without resolving synthesis. More central to my thesis, Ernest B. Gilman links the early modern admiration for multiple perspectives in literature to the period's fascination with dual aspect paintings that shift configurations with a shift in position, whereby from one perspective an image might appear as a Gorgon, from the other as a Mars (Altman 71, and Gilman 35-38).

However, although the multiplicity of the early modern drama has long been a commonplace, until recently, most of the criticism has focused on Shakespeare's plays, largely ignoring Marlowe's contribution.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I shall argue that long before Shakespeare created his famous dual aspect characters, Christopher Marlowe, the rival playwright, anticipated Shakespeare's famed complementarity, etching perspective portraits every bit as

multifaceted as those limned by Shakespeare. Although I realize that direct influence is a notoriously difficult nexus to validate, in this paper I shall suggest that in the character of Tamburlaine Marlowe depicts a Mars/Gorgon portrait that might have served as a model for Shakespeare's perspective portrait of Henry V, never a Gorgon perhaps, but from one view the ideal Christian Prince, from the other a calculating Machiavel.<sup>ii</sup>

For reasons of both brevity and symmetry, I shall treat only Part I of *Tamburlaine*, since the parallelism between Marlowe's and Shakespeare's plays breaks down in *Tamburlaine, Part II*. However, *Tamburlaine, Part I* and *Henry V* offer striking structural similarities:

1. . Both plays dramatize a martial hero who encounters a series of increasingly challenging political and military hurdles and overcomes them all through a combination of military force and rhetorical eloquence. The trajectory of each play is thus structured around a type of dramatic *incrementum*, a "form of speech which by degrees ascendeth to the top of something". Both *Tamburlaine, Part I* and *Henry V* achieve a stunning coherence between language and form by paralleling the two heroes' rhetorical use of *incrementus* with their martial and amorous ascents, as their increasingly hyperbolic victories parallel their increasingly hyperbolic language.
2. Both plays dramatize the military conquests of a warrior monarch.
3. In both plays, although the hero engages in highly questionable behavior, his actions are continually praised by friend and foe alike.
4. Both plays conclude with a marriage, in which the hero wins the hand—and presumably the love—of the daughter of his enemy and makes peace with his opponents.

5. Arguably, both plays stress the hiatus between words and deeds, juxtaposing high, astounding rhetoric with problematic actions.

## II.

Both plays were penned at a time of national crisis and the ambiguity in both plays might derive from the conflicting attitudes toward war roiling the political waters in the 1580s and 1590s. We are not sure when *Tamburlaine* was written but scholars speculate that it was probably composed while Marlowe was at Cambridge, probably around 1586; scholars date *Henry V* around 1599. England throughout the 1580s and 1590s, like post 9/11 America, experienced a national paranoia stimulated by fears of attacks from both internal and external enemies. Rumors of internal plots against the life of Queen Elizabeth continued for over a decade and for most of this time England was on red alert concerning an attack from Spain, an invasion realized in the famous Spanish Armada of 1588. However, although the English (assisted by the weather) defeated the first Spanish Armada, there was no assurance that another, more powerful fleet would not be mounted, and the overwhelming fear of a second invasion reached its apogee in 1599, the very year that Shakespeare composed *Henry V*. Moreover, the late 1590s were not only a period of tremendous anxiety over homeland security and terrorism, but also a period of rancorous political conflict between the war party of the Earl of Essex and Sir Walter Raleigh and the peace party of Sir William Cecil, Elizabeth's prime minister. Some citizens, seeking accommodation through diplomatic negotiations, favored Cecil and his peace faction, while others, desperate for an invincible military leader, found one in the Earl of Essex, a controversial figure who, according to some scholars, offered a prototype for Henry V.<sup>iii</sup> I suggest instead that in this period of political turmoil, Shakespeare, seeking to

embody in his hero his own ambivalent feelings toward war and conquest, might have turned to Marlowe's tremendously popular, multifaceted Tamburlaine as a model for his own warrior monarch.<sup>iv</sup>

### III.

Meander explicitly introduces the perspective puzzle of Tamburlaine, a paradox sparking heated debate for over four hundred years: "Some power divine, or else infernal, mixed / Their angry seeds at his conception" (2.5.11-12). The Prologue offers a clue to this enigma while simultaneously announcing Marlowe's new dramatic credo: he will present a drama that not only eschews the doggerel and comic antics cluttering the stage at this period, but one that also rejects the strident and reductive didacticism that often turned early modern dramas into sermons, the stage into a pulpit. The Prologue proclaims that Marlowe's play, instead of holding up a homiletic mirror to magistrates, will project a speaking picture in a tragic glass that audience members can judge for themselves. Thus, the audience is explicitly invited to view Marlowe's titanic hero as either a Mars or a Gorgon, depending upon its critical perspective.

Critical consensus accepts Tamburlaine's role as an archetypal overreacher, an emblem of ruthless ambition and martial prowess. At issue is the expected audience response to Tamburlaine's Herculean strengths and cruelties. In view of the wealth of praise lavished on Tamburlaine by friend and foe alike, as well as his stunning successes and magnificent rhetoric, it is hard to deny that the events of *Tamburlaine, Part I* support the Scythian's amoral vision of history. Moreover, critics have argued that in his final disarming and truce in Part I, Tamburlaine achieves a Hegalian synthesis between the play's martial thesis and its more pacific antithesis, a

triumphant union of opposites celebrated by both a coronation and a wedding (Duthie, 209-36; Smith, 156-66). . Furthermore, despite the audience uncertainty provoked by Tamburlaine's barbaric actions—particularly his slaughter of the innocent virgins and his cruel torture of his Turkish captives —no surviving character censures Tamburlaine at the end of the play; Zenocrate loves him still, in spite of his savagery; and all of his enemies are either dead or converted (Cole, 102).

However, other commentators view the text differently, identifying the verbal and visual ironies permeating the play while suggesting that Marlowe's irony often encompasses not only his characters but also the more unaware members of his audience (Hardin, 207-27). Searching for contrasting voices offering viable moral alternatives to Tamburlaine's "might makes right" credo, commentators have focused on the gentle Zenocrate. According to this argument, Zenocrate serves a number of crucial functions: she not only provides an essential moral alternative to Tamburlaine's ruthless creed of conquest, but also, like Kent in *Edward II* and Enobarbus in *Antony and Cleopatra*, she guides the audience's vacillating reaction to the hero. During the third and fourth acts, Zenocrate cements audience alignment with Tamburlaine by her unquestioning support of her lover's cause, an allegiance stressed not only in the slanging match with Zabina (3.3) but also in her disturbing encouragement of Tamburlaine's vicious baiting of the captured Bajazeth and Zabina (4.1). However, her later plaintive threnody over the brained corpses of the two Turkish rulers introduces a very different Zenocrate, and constitutes the most significant ethical challenge to Tamburlaine's cult of power. In her poignant lament for the sacrifice of the "sun bright troop of heavenly virgins" and "the barbarous deaths of the Turk and his great empress," she boldly questions her lover's

code, a creed to which she had given implicit adherence earlier in the play. The only character in the play to achieve even a rudimentary enlightenment, she also acknowledges Tamburlaine's cruelty and pride while repenting her own former inhumanity (5.1.317-69). Thus, so the argument goes, Zenocrate guides the audience to question and even to condemn Tamburlaine's brutality and presumption. (Fanta, 14-17; Richmond, 38-41; Deats, "Marlowe's Interrogative Drama," 114-115).

Interpreters stressing the ironic undercutting of Tamburlaine further insist that a moral uncertainty blurs the victorious resolution of *Tamburlaine, Part I*. Although the events of the drama appear to uphold Tamburlaine's imperialistic ambitions, the audience regards the truce, marriage, and coronation against the backdrop of Zenocrate's still reverberating lamentations for the impaled virgins, the Turkish suicides, and her slain betrothed. Moreover, Tamburlaine delivers his exultant victory speech on a stage strewn with human corpses, the tableau stressing the tension between "the visual image of man's descent into brutality and the auditory image of man's quest for divinity" (Lever, 422). Costume further underscores visual irony; at the end of the play when Tamburlaine and his retainers remove their armor and don scarlet robes (5.1.523), their red garments blend with the bleeding corpses on the stage; thus, Tamburlaine's pledge of truce with all the world is made against a blood-red stage, the image saying what the words repress (Shepherd, 23-24). According to this ironic interpretation, therefore, although his final triumph seems to vindicate Tamburlaine and the ethos he represents, Zenocrate's choice of love and mercy over honor and violence complements the pervasive disparity between glorious words and barbarous deeds to render the play's ethical system highly problematic.

## IV.

Karl P. Wentersdorf crystallizes the controversy seething around *Henry V*, asking: Is *Henry V* an epic celebration of Shakespeare's ideal Christian monarch, as many critics affirm, or is it a trenchant satire, not only of its Machiavellian protagonist but also of war in general, as other commentators insist? Norman Rabkin identifies *Henry V* as a perspective puzzle, positing that "in *Henry V* Shakespeare created a work whose ultimate power is precisely the fact that it point in two directions, virtually daring us to choose one of the two interpretations it requires of us" (Wentersdorf, 265; Rabkin, 34). Supporting Rabkin's interpretation, my paper asserts that, following the pattern established in *Tamburlaine, Part I*, *Henry V* can be read as either a celebration of an eloquent, ebullient conqueror and his astounding victories or as a probing deflation of both rhetoric and war, depending on the perspective from which the text is viewed.

As with *Tamburlaine*, the wealth of praise lavished on Henry by friend and foe alike, his stunning successes, and his magnificent rhetoric make it hard to deny that the events of *Henry V* affirm Henry's French campaign and his moral stance toward war. This view would focus on the panegyrics honoring the warrior king delivered by the Chorus, who many critics see as a mouthpiece for the playwright, and the plaudits awarded Henry by the Archbishop, his fellow soldiers, and even his enemies, the King and Constable of France. Ultimately, no one in the play criticizes Henry except the haughty French knights, and they will learn at Agincourt that Henry is indeed the scion of a mighty stock who deserves admiration and respect.

The action of the play, like its laudatory language, seems to elevate Henry as he moves easily from one triumph to another, overcoming all opposition by wit as well as will, rhetoric as

well as arms. First, with political savvy Henry wins support from the Church for his foreign war; second, he shrewdly discovers the betrayal of his treasonous followers, and tricks them into pronouncing their own doom; having displayed his political acumen, he reveals his eloquence, conquering the city of Harfleur, not with arms but with thunderous words alone; next, his St. Crispian Day oration—one of the great set speeches in Shakespeare—forges his “ruined band” into a “band of brothers,” inspiring his battlefield fraternity to extravagant feats of courage and the magnificent victory at Agincourt; finally, with remarkable élan, Henry woos and wins the French princess as his bride. Successful in all his enterprises, Henry emerges as the authentic Renaissance Prince—statesman, orator, soldier, lover. Moreover, as in *Tamburlaine*, the play concludes with the promise of a marriage, no surviving character censures Henry, the warrior king appears to have won the love of his Princess, and all of his enemies are either dead or converted.

An ironic interpreter would insist that the above reading skews the evidence and ignores the dark moments shadowing Henry’s incandescent victories. First, an ironic reader would insist that the Chorus functions as another character in the play, not as the mouthpiece for the playwright, a view finding support in Greek drama where the Chorus often represents traditional community values, not the attitude of the author. In defending this reading, the ironic interpreter would highlight the disparity between the descriptions of the Chorus and the actions of the play. An example of this occurs when the Chorus presents Henry’s midnight ramble before the battle of Agincourt as a source of consolation, whereby “every wretch, pining and pale before, / Beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks” (4.0.41-42). However, this is not what the audience sees in the following scene. Instead of the succoring leader, the

audience discovers a muffled and troubled figure who instigates a totally unnecessary altercation with Michael Williams, an honest soldier whose only fault is to candidly speak his mind to a stranger. Moreover, Williams (whose name recalls his creator) offers one of the most trenchant interrogations in the play of the legitimacy of Henry's foreign war.

After deconstructing the Chorus, the ironic interpreter might adduce the multiple episodes that implicitly undercut Henry's veracity and humanity, especially those that stress the hiatus between words and deeds. These include the following: The opening scene between the scheming prelates which exposes the Church's financial support of the war with France as a bribe and thus calls into question the legitimacy of Henry's campaign; the "tennis ball" episode, in which Henry presents his invasion of France as an indignant response to the Dauphin's insults, even though he has publically announced his plans to invade France in the preceding scene; the exposure of the three traitors, which establishes Henry as a cunning and calculating politician. Particularly troubling is Henry's harangue before the gates of Harfleur, in which Henry warns of deflowering virgins and slaughtering infants. Although Harfleur mercifully surrenders rather than call Henry's bloody bluff, the audience is left with the queasy feeling that if the town had remained intransigent, Shakespeare's "mirror of all Christian princes" might have followed Tamburlaine in sanctioning carnage to fulfill his not so heroic boast.

The Battle of Agincourt offers Henry both his greatest victory and his greatest moral crisis, with his magnificent St. Crispian Day speech followed by his decision, whether for tactical reasons or revenge, to cut the throats of all the prisoners. The play implies that the lack of sufficient soldiers to guard the prisoners dictates Henry's decision, but, following the tactics that he had employed earlier in the "tennis ball" episode, Henry strategically uses the massacre

of the luggage boys by the French as a justification for his killing of the French prisoners, although he has earlier announced to the audience his intention to slay the captives. Thus, here as elsewhere, Henry cloaks *realpolitik* in the garment of self-righteous indignation. Most damaging of all, Henry's slaughter of the prisoners at least partially explains the uneven body count of the battle and thus diminishes the glory of Henry's victory.

The play, of course, ends in a triumphant victory for Henry, whereby Henry not only preserves his own throne and acquires many French lands but also gains the French diadem for his heir. However, even Henry's fairy tale marriage to the French Princess is undercut as the Chorus reminds the audience that all of Henry's military gains will be lost by his son, and that the dismembered legs, arms, and heads envisioned by Michael Williams will be sacrificed for nothing. Significantly, *Tamburlaine II* implies that all of the Scythian warrior's conquests will also be lost by his ill-prepared sons, but, of course, that is another play and another story.

Ultimately, I would posit that both the celebratory and ironic readings of *Tamburlaine, Part I* and *Henry V* have validity because in the figures of their eponymous heroes Marlowe and Shakespeare have depicted multifaceted portraits. Viewed from a moral perspective, these dual aspect characters may reflect Marlowe's and Shakespeare's ethical ambivalence toward war and violence. However, viewed from the aesthetic perspective of the practicing playwright, ambiguity of this type provides a sure-fire technique for keeping an audience engaged (Logan, "Violence, Terrorism, and War,"<sup>74</sup>). Perhaps both moral and aesthetic factors coalesced to produce these fascinating perspective puzzles.

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<sup>1</sup> Exceptions to this tendency include Joel Altman, who approaches Marlowe's plays as a species of explorative rather than demonstrative drama, 322-88; Lawrence Danson, who casts Marlovian drama in an interrogative

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mode, 183-205; James Shapiro, who comments on Marlowe's juxtaposition of heterodox behavior and moral closure, *Rival Playwrights*, 96; and Emily Bartels, who discusses the dialogical nature of Marlowe's plays. However none of these commentators focuses specifically on the ambiguity permeating the *Tamburlaine* plays. For critics treating this aspect of the plays, see Sara Munson Deats, "Marlowe's Interrogative Drama," 113-117; and Robert Logan, "Violence, Terrorism, and War," 65-81.

<sup>ii</sup> Although Logan presents Tamburlaine as a model for Shakespeare's Henry V, his development of this parallel is very different from mine; see *Shakespeare's Marlowe*, 143-165. Moreover, even though I have examined the dual aspect portraits of both Tamburlaine and Henry V in previous essays (see "Marlowe's Interrogative Drama" and "Henry V at War"), I have never before compared the two.

<sup>iii</sup> For an illuminating analysis of the relationship between the Earl of Essex and Henry V, see Shapiro, *A Year In the Life of William Shakespeare*, 85-103.

<sup>iv</sup> For discussion of the national paranoia consuming England at this time, and particularly in 1599, see Nick de Somogyi, 2-3, 118. For an examination of the political turmoil of this period, see Alison Weir, 24-46. Two other books useful in situating both *Tamburlaine* and *Henry V* within their military contexts are Nine Taunton, *Drama and Militarism* and Alan Shepard, *Marlowe's Soldiers*.

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