

Plotting Mortality:  
Marlowe's Maps and Shakespeare's Distracted Globe.

In *2 Tamburlaine* Marlowe turns geographic representation of space into a dramatic plot through his use of Abraham Ortelius' *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1570) thus demonstrating a connection between mapping and the theatre as two relatively new spatial representative arts. And while early modern cartographers plotted out this world, Catholic and Protestant theologians debated the geography of the otherworld just as Marlowe's doctor of divinity attempts to pin down constructions of the afterlife when he asks Mephistopheles (who gives no satisfaction) "where is the place that men call hell?" and similarly, in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's reticent spirit refuses to tell the secrets of his postmortem habitation. This paper will explore representations of geographical, theatrical and eschatological space in *2 Tamburlaine*, *Doctor Faustus* and *Hamlet*. While Shakespeare's masterpiece is quite singular in its presentation of a questionable shape (the disturbingly ambiguous ghost of Old Hamlet) I will argue that, almost a decade earlier, questions on the geography of both this world and the other world, and thus the place of the dead, haunt two of Christopher Marlowe's most successful plays.

When Marlowe had to find further material for a sequel to his wildly popular *Tamburlaine* he turned to Abraham Ortelius' splendid maps. *2 Tamburlaine* opens with speeches that plot out movement across time and space. The references are highly specific, but rather than a catalogue of place names, Marlowe takes pains to present the territory in such a way that gives us a spatialised sense of the landscape.

Orcanes reports, “Now have we marched from fair Natolia / Two hundred leagues” and makes use of cartographical terms such as the “northern parallel” and “the arctic line” and we are told that Danubus stream “runs to Trebizon.” (1.1.25-37). Similarly, Gazellus tells us that Tamburlaine has marched “from Cairo northward with his camp / to Alexandria” (1.1.46-48). The audience is thus given a geography lesson (Cairo is south of Alexandria, Trebizon is downstream of Danubius) and invited to imagine these exotic locales as they exist in geographic relation to each other. The action of the opening of Marlowe’s sequel is cartographical and just as maps compress representations of time and space, so too does theatre present infinite riches in a little room.<sup>1</sup> When Marlowe “plots” out the character’s geographic progress the dramatic action is simultaneously “plotted” out for us and 2 *Tamburlaine* simultaneously maps both the globe and the imaginations of our own “distracted globes”.

Despite the play’s dramatization of constant forward movement and geographical expansion, there is a simultaneous movement in the opposing direction, toward confinement, and mortality. This sense of restriction in 2 *Tamburlaine* is characterized by a focus on the human body and the limitations of mortality. The play’s concern with the frailty of human flesh is portrayed most clearly in Zenocrate’s death, which is staged as a picture-perfect *ars moriendi* death bed scene. In the tradition of a good death Zenocrate accepts her mortality and sets her sights on the next life. She speaks of the comfort of her postmortem happiness and begs her husband to not let her thoughts turn to despair. Tamburlaine has long usurped the part of Death (as recognized by Zabina “Hell, death, Tamburlaine” (1 *Tamburlaine*

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<sup>1</sup> I am here borrowing from David Riggs insight into the connection between this wonderful phrase of Marlowe’s and the relationship between cartography and theatre (see Riggs 158-88).

5.2.254) ) but Death now reclaims his role and takes Zenocrate. And it is the failure of his own flesh that brings an end to the scourge of God when Tamburlaine feels himself “distempered suddenly” (5.1.216). Tamburlaine’s chariot, that symbol of movement, the vehicle for riding “in triumph through Persepolis” (*1 Tamburlaine* 2.5.49) that was another of his “sights of power” when drawn by bridled Kings, becomes a sight / site of confinement and is now the Great Emperor’s tragically grand wheel chair. Thus in the last act of the play, the chariot, that singular on-stage prop, becomes a focal point symbolic of the cessation of progress by the limits of mortality.

The tension between the play’s geographical forward expansion and simultaneous backward movement toward death and confinement culminates in the final scene when a map is brought out on stage. Tamburlaine traces his progress:

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;  
Thence marched I into Egypt and Arabia,  
And here not far from Alexandria,  
Whereas the Terrene and the Red Sea meet  
(5.3.126-132)

This moment is an odd reversal of what the play has worked toward from the opening, the dramatization of Ortelius’s map. In an inverse of what theatrical representation is all about (presenting vast spaces in a little room) Tamburlaine’s empire is now compressed. There is a collapse of time and space as the entire play implodes back into the map. The characters, sitting on stage outside the map, now exist in the outskirts of a medieval *mappimundi* plotted by those “blind cartographers /that make a triple region in the world” (*1 Tamburlaine* 4.4.75-76) who put Jerusalem at the centre of the world and death at all

corners outside.<sup>2</sup> Tamburlaine and his followers are off the map and now inhabit eschatological *terra incognita*.

If Tamburlaine's cartographical concerns lead backwards to a medieval *memento mori* recognition of his limitations—"And shall I die and this unconquered?" (5.3.150)—then Doctor Faustus' forward wit ultimately leads him in a similar direction. When Faustus aspires to go "as far as doth the mind of man" (1.1.62) his mind stretcheth only as far as geographers have thus far made possible. Despite his claim that a sound magician is a "mighty god" and his pledge to try his brains "to gain a deity", the doctor sets his sights firmly on this world as his fancy turns toward the new-found world. Faustus will send spirits to fetch "pleasant fruits and princely delicates"; he looks to "India for gold" and hopes to get "from America the golden fleece" (1.1.83-131). Faustus exhibits some cartographical spirit when he uses his demonic powers to prove astronomy and cosmography, but it is his thwarted attempts to gain any concrete knowledge of the geography of the afterlife, and the place of Hell in particular, that I would like to examine further.

Now it is notable that directly after Faustus has signed the deed for his soul and gained the power to have great Mephistopheles tell him whatsoever he demands, the first thing he demands to be told is the location of Hell.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Now, Faustus, ask what thou wilt.

FAUSTUS

First will I question with thee about hell.

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<sup>2</sup> William Engel explains that in many medieval and renaissance maps death "is discovered to be what frames the graphically depicted and highly idealized mirror of our world-in-miniature" (153). The Hereford World Map (c.1280) for example, does so by spelling out M O R S, one letter in each corner of the outskirts of the map. Later maps such as Jodocus Hondius' *Typus Totius Orbis Terrarum*" (c.1596) include the figure of death lurking in a far corner outside of the charted regions of our world (see Engel Fig. 4.9, page 144).

Tell me, where is the place that men call hell?  
MEPHASTOPHELES  
Under the heavens.  
FAUSTUS

Ay, but whereabouts?

Note Faustus' insistence on location, he wants to know specifically *where* Hell can be found. Mephistopheles' famous answer ("Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed / In one self place, for where we are is hell, / And where hell is, there must we ever be." (2.1.117-19)) is fascinating but markedly vague and completely unsatisfactory on the place of Hell. Indeed, Faustus is unimpressed—"Come, I think hell's a fable." (2.1.123)—and the daemon's inability to provide a specific location of Hell seems to buttress the doctor's belief that the doctrine of post mortem punishment is nothing but "mere old wives' tales" (2.1.131). And Faustus was not the only doctor of divinity at this time that was finding it difficult to pin down the place of Hell. Peter Marshall has shown that in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries debates over geographies of the afterlife were an ongoing concern of both Catholic and Protestant theologians. At a time when early modern cartographers were having great success in bringing this world into focus, the geography of the afterlife, once so vividly mapped out in the medieval imagination, was becoming despatialised, oblique and difficult to conceptualize.

This despatialisation of the afterlife, argues Marshall, began with the Protestant denial of Purgatory which in turn led to questions on the location of Hell. The general consensus was that Hell was in the centre of the earth, as implied by scripture that speaks of things "under the earth,"<sup>3</sup> and the Apostles' Creed that states Christ descended into

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<sup>3</sup> The passages are: Phil. 2:10, "And no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth..."; Rev. 5:3, "That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of *things* in

Hell.<sup>4</sup> The doctrine of the harrowing of Hell taught that Christ went down into Hell to liberate the righteous dead. This was unacceptable to Protestants who rejected any possibility of redemption after death and during the Jacobean “Descensus Controversy” disputing doctors of divinity quibbled over the translation of the phrase “he descended into Hell”. Attention to translation highlighted the fact that, as Samuel Richardson gleefully points out, “there is no word proper for hell” (5).<sup>5</sup> Richardson argues that just as it was not possible to find scriptural support for Purgatory, “so they are at as great a losse to prove Hell by a plain place of Scripture truly translated their Hell of torments never to end” (52), and he sets out upon the hunting down of Hell:

It is generally agreed that Hel [sic] is in the lower parts of the earth; but where these lower parts should be,... no man is able to define ...others, say Hell is below but how many ...miles it is to Hell they do not say...and some men seek hell in the bottom of the sea, because they know not where to find it...(37-47)

At the same time, however, a Hell within the earth could be used to contradict the eternity of Hell because as Richardson chides, after the Last Day, “where shall hell be then?”

Suffice to say that theologians were becoming increasingly reluctant to say exactly where Hell was, but rather “let hell be where it hath pleased God in his secret counsel to place

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heaven, and *things* in earth, and *things*, under the earth”; Rev. 5:13, “And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth...”; Rev. 10:6, “And sware by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are...” All scriptural quotes, unless otherwise noted, are from the 1611 King James Bible.

<sup>4</sup> The Apostles’ Creed is authorized by the Thirty Nine Articles of the English Church. Article III states, “Of the going down of Christ into Hell. As Christ died for us, and was buried; so also it is to be believed, that he went down into Hell.”

<sup>5</sup>A note on 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century scriptural translation of “hell”: in the King James Bible the Hebrew word *sheol* is rendered variously as “Hell”, “the grave”, and “the pit” in the O.T., and in the N.T. Hell is translated from the Greek *Hades* and *Gehenna* (*OED* hell n.). The Geneva Bible differs, sometimes using “grave” where the KJV uses “hell,” for example in Ps. 16:10.

it” (Smith quoted in Partrides 280). Not only was the location of Hell uncertain but to inquire of it too closely was considered presumptuous and dangerous.

The fate of Faustus is effective in demonstrating the dangers of presumptuous inquiry, and the play supports eternal punishment: “hell, ah, hell forever! Sweet friends, what shall become of Faustus, being in hell for ever!” (5.2.25-6). I would argue, however, that almost fifty years before the orthodox doctrine of eternal punishment was explicitly questioned by the likes of Samuel Richardson, Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* enters into theological debates on constructions of the afterlife. Implicit in questioning the place of hell, as we have seen, is that the inability to pronounce definitively on a location is fodder for the idea that hell is a fable. Indeed, some theologians worried that inquiring too closely into questions of eschatological space would lead to doubts about the very existence of an afterlife (Marshall 129). And while in Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* and *Doctor Faustus* we see these doubts as through a glass darkly, questions on the nature of eschatological space are explicitly entertained in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

Revenge seeking ghosts are a Senecan convention but in *Hamlet* the theological nature of the ghost is at issue and this is something different. I would like to consider the debate on the nature of the ghost in *Hamlet* in light of early modern debates over the afterlife. The ghost refers to purgatorial flames when he introduces himself to Hamlet:

I am thy father’s spirit  
Doom’d for a certain time to walk the night,  
And for the day confin’d to fast in fires,  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purg’d away.

(1.5.9-13)

But the cagey illusion will not provide us with a local habitation and a name and although the spirit will not will not say *where* he is from, he makes it clear that he comes from someplace horrific:

But that I am forbid  
To tell the secrets of my prison-house,  
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word  
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,  
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,  
Thy knotted and combined locks to part,  
And each particular hair to stand on end,  
Like quills upon the fretful porcupine.

(1.5.13-20)

Just like reformation theologians, the ghost will not get caught up in questions about where exactly “the dead be.” Further, the spirit’s claim that he is forbid to tell the *secrets* of his prison house echoes the sentiment of several eminent Protestants on the question:

According to Tyndale, this [the residence of the dead] was ‘a secret laid up in the treasury of God’, and Frith remarked that ‘God would that we should be ignorant where they be.’ [and]...John Calvin, expressed himself in almost identical terms by noting that ‘many torment themselves greatly with discussing what place they occupy...It is foolish and rash to enquire into hidden things.’

(Marshall 117)

Thus the ghost’s enigmatic explanation of the afterworld, combined with his assertion that he cannot disclose the truth, reflects contemporary theological debate over the place of dead. And his vivid description of the hair-raising result of the tale he *could* tell of the horrors beyond would definitely catch the conscience of anyone concerned the dead may be in distress. Indeed, old Hamlet wields a parent’s ultimate weapon: guilt. The presentation of a spirit from an uncertain, yet horrific place, demanding that his closest kin “Remember me” (1.5.91) might very well harrow up the souls of Protestants unclear on the location and state of the dead. In this way, the questionable ghost is a

manifestation of contemporary religious controversy, come to the Globe theatre to demand, and subsequently evoke, his rights of memory.

In the medieval worldview a regular traffic between this world and the next was taken for granted. Promoted by the doctrine of Purgatory, the living interceded for the dead and the dead continued to care for the living. Thus there was a backward and forward system of exchange between the living and the dead and it is, perhaps, the loss of this traditional way of managing relations between this world and the next that is “Forward and backward anagrammatized” (*Doctor Faustus* 1.1.9), in a reflected and refracted way, in the playworlds discussed herein. In his last hour Tamburlaine relives his story of conquest “from Scythia, where I first began / Backward and forwards near five thousand leagues” (5.3.142-144). It is this forward and backward, backward and forward movement that in both *Doctor Faustus* and *Tamburlaine* describe the ultimate entrapment of these restless early modern pioneering spirits seeking geographical expansion and knowledge infinite. And I would suggest that these two works by Marlowe are influential in Shakespeare’s staging of his perturbed spirit, who returns from that undiscovered country from where no traveler returns. The intrusive spirit dominates the first act of the play repeatedly appearing to march restlessly back and forth across the stage. When the ghost calls out from under the stage, and Hamlet makes the most of this metatheatrical scene by repeatedly calling the audience’s attention to the fellow in the cellarage, the Globe theatre—“this distracted globe”—becomes an eschatological space and during the performance of *Hamlet* the place of the dead is in the playhouse. And when we view the plays the plotting of mortality is mapped out in the imaginations of our own distracted globes.

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