

Why did the  
tamburlaine plays  
have such  
extraordinary appeal  
for sixteenth-centur...



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The Tamburlaine plays are two works written by Christopher Marlowe. In this essay I will discuss why the plays were so appealing to audiences in Marlowe's time and whether they are still as appealing to a modern audience and why. The character of Tamburlaine can be compared to some historical characters the most accurate being Timur the Lame, a historical ruler over most of central Asia. Richard Wilson compares him to Tsar Ivan IV, commonly known as Ivan the Terrible, the 16th Century Emperor of Russia, whose tyrannical rule, may well be replayed in Tamburlaine. (pp. 51, R. Wilson, 1996.)

The first of the two Tamburlaine plays was performed in 1587, following Marlowe's graduation from Cambridge. The second was most probably written and performed later following the success of Tamburlaine Part 1 in the theatres. Some critics however believe that the two plays were written and performed together;

'in November 1587... Philip Gawdy describes how in a piece recently presented by the Lord Admirals Men an actor, called onto fire a gun at one of his fellows tied to a stake, missed his aim killing a pregnant woman, a child and maiming others. This has often been taken to refer to Tamburlaine's execution of the governor of Babylon in the final act of Part II, but the assumption cannot be verified.'

(pp. 69, V. Thomas and W. Tydeman, 1994)

Also

'in 1588 Robert Greene... could allude to Marlowe 'daring God out of heaven with the Atheist Tamburlan', a far less ambiguous reference to the scene in which Tamburlaine... orders the destruction of the Koran and defiantly daring Mahomet to come down and punish his impiety.'

(pp. 69, V. Thomas and W. Tydeman, 1994)

Conversely it may be possible that in the eyes of a 16th Century audience, Tamburlaine's actions would not be considered heretical because the Elizabethans knew Tamburlaine to be an infidel and would not see the Qu'ran as a Holy book compared to their own Bible. Had he burned the Bible the case would have been very different. The issues of holy texts were hotly debated during this time as in each English church there had now been placed a new English language bible, which was in many parishes regarded as an alien book. The emphasis on holy text would have resonance for an Elizabethan audience having suffered over the last 40 years the changes between English and Latin Bibles and the Catholic and Protestant religion.

Tamburlaine often refers to God as Jove, the Roman divine ruler, but only when he is expressly defying God.

'Tamburlaine: The God of war resigns me to his room,

Meaning to make me general of the world;

Jove viewing me in arms looks pale and wan,

Fearing my power should pull him from his throne.'

(Act V, scene ii, line 388.)

This quote shows Tamburlaine referring to God as Jove while believing he has the power to overthrow god, he says God fears him. This could show a certain awareness of the heretical nature of his deeds. He would rather refer to a God that he does not believe in than use the one he does. A part of him does fear God but Tamburlaine does not want to recognise it. To show fear is weakness. Weakness is not acceptable in a man in Tamburlaine's position of power and his self-importance. Tamburlaine although essentially Muslim, seems to be indecisive in his religious beliefs. In the first play he refers extensively to the way of Mohammed or Mahomet as he is called in the text, then nearing the end of the second play he denounces him as 'not worthy of being worshipped' and burns the Qu'ran. This act which would cause uproar today especially to British Muslims, if not Muslims of all nationalities, would not have had the same effect on a sixteenth-century audience, in 1587 there were few if any British Muslims, they were thought of and referred to as infidels, ungodly and wicked.

A recent production of Tamburlaine at the Barbican in London in 2005, directed and adapted by David Farr, censored this part of the text in order to not incite religious reprisals, 'key references' to Mohammed were also cut from the play especially from the book burning scene;

'Simon Reade, artistic director of the Bristol Old Vic, said that if they had not altered the original it " would have unnecessarily raised the hackles of a significant proportion of one of the world's great religions".

The burning of the Koran was "smoothed over", he said, so that it became just the destruction of "a load of books" relating to any culture or religion. That made it more powerful, they claimed.'

(D. Alberge, 2005)

In my opinion the final sentence of this quote is inappropriate because I feel that the burning of the Qu'ran is an incredibly important part of the play, without it being the Qu'ran it completely changes what the scene means and how controversial it would be to modern audience. The Qu'ran is a holy text, burning just 'a load of books' renders the scene completely unnecessary and irrelevant to the play and takes Tamburlaine's death, completely out of context, if indeed his death is an act of God, for him burning the Qu'ran, as many interpretations claim. Terry Hands the director of Tamburlaine by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1992 and Charles Nicholl, the author of *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe*, opposed this censoring as did Inayat Bunglawala, the media secretary of the Muslim Council of Britain, who said 'In the context of a fictional play, I don't think it will have offended many people.' Britain was a wholly and strongly Christian nation in 1587; no one would oppose the destruction of a book of another holy order, which they believed to be blasphemous.

Violence and the disorder of war was part of contemporary Elizabethan England. Public execution and punishment in gruesome manners was a form of entertainment at the time of the Tamburlaine plays. As was making an example of those executed, as Tamburlaine's victims are hung on the city walls, many beheaded criminals had their head displayed on spikes to warn

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others. Many plays performed at this time used war or famous historic heroes of war as a basis for their storylines and often had what is to a modern eye grotesque and appalling episodes of violence. This is shown in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1584), without doubt his most bloody play.

'Marlowe achieved far greater fame and popularity than Shakespeare at the same point in their theatrical careers (both born 1564).'

(pp. 95, C. Bright, 1996)

With the exception of *Titus Andronicus* Shakespeare did not really come into his own until the early 1590's and was not recognised as great playwright until his later life, whereas Marlowe was celebrated through his early life before he died at the age of 29. Marlowe was genius and his work was well known and widely performed by the time of his death.

The language in much of Shakespearean text is very elaborate and although a sixteenth-century audience may have been able to understand it better than a modern audience, Marlowe's language is much more direct. This gives much more impact and 'says what it means' leaving the dramatic potential for the delivery.

'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 glad 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 arm'd spears.'

(Act V, scene ii, line 47)

This quote shows how Marlowe uses a straightforward and more direct form of language than Shakespeare's and this is and was part of his appeal to contemporary and modern audiences.

The aggressive and ego-centric speech is impossible to perform in a retiring and introverted manner and the stage presence of the actor is larger than life. In accordance with modern audiences, sixteenth-century audiences loved a character that they can hate, Tamburlaine can be compared to more modern comedic characters such as Flashheart in *Blackadder* and Jafar in Disney's *Aladdin*. These words and others in the play need to be performed to understand the full effect of what Tamburlaine is saying. He is teasing the virgins, he is making a joke out of the fact that they begged for mercy and he is still going to kill them. This ruthless and cruel nature is what makes Tamburlaine the man he is, it makes him such a loathsome character.

Despite being a dislikeable character Tamburlaine is also a very passionate character, his determination and victory in all his conquests, his love for

Zenocrate, his mercy shown in sparing her father after conquering Egypt almost make him a worthy role model for the 16th century man.

'Audiences were not necessarily intended to understand Tamburlaine; such was his shock value and his capacity to break through the very fabric of society with his ceaseless conquests and unquenchable thirst for power. (novelguide. com, 2009)'

This quote describes Tamburlaine as shocking character which he is; he is designed to shock and inspire an audience, his inspiration may not be as noticeable today in a less barbaric and more modern way of life, but to a 16th Century audience it would have been obvious, Tamburlaine's enthusiasm for war was what England at the time wanted from its people for the impending war with Spain. He is a ruthless, power hungry, slaughterer who does not give the audience a chance to see how he would cope with defeat.

Defeat is not an option for Tamburlaine, just as defeat was not an option for Queen Elizabeth I when she launched the fire ships against the Spanish Armada just a year later in 1588. Tamburlaine shows determination but it also shows him going too far, he forgets that he's mortal and he is still down here on the ground. He is still subject to God, although he heretically believes himself to be more powerful.

All Elizabethans knew that a strong sometimes even aggressive leader was essential for their safety in the 16th Century. Their experiences in the reigns of Edward VI and Mary Tudor both weaker monarchs in their capacities

of leadership and war must have been unsettling and remembered by theatre  
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goers. Strong dynamic leaders such as Henry VIII and the later Elizabeth I gave a sense of peace and safety to at least part of the nation although there were still dissidents. The appeal of Tamburlaine as play could be partly because people could discuss him and his activities without fear of being thought treasonable. His strength as leader would have been commendable.

'A Prince ought to have no other aim or thought, nor select anything else for his study, than war and its rules and discipline; for this is the sole art that belongs to him who rules, and it is of such force that it not only upholds those who are born princes, but it often enables men to rise from a private station to that rank.'

This quote from Machiavelli's *The Prince* was a European view on how a prince or other leader should be, it states how a person of a lower status can raise himself up from private to Prince as Tamburlaine has done from shepherd to King. It states that a prince's sole study should be the art of war in his role as protector. Tamburlaine is a strong leader, his subjects are safe from any surrounding forces as shown in the way that Tamburlaine has fought off two advances from Callapine, the son of Bajazeth the former Turkish ruler whom Tamburlaine tortured and humiliated. His knowledge and performance in war is unmatched.

In conclusion the Tamburlaine plays would have appealed to a 16th century audience for a number of reasons. Mainly for the various ways in which the character of Tamburlaine presents himself, as villain but also as an inspiration, as a man who has become drunk with power, but also a strong leader who knows what he is doing on the battlefield. Tamburlaine's self

contradictions are endless. A 16th Century audience would have enjoyed the build up to ultimate power then the anti-climatic downfall of their 'hero'!