

I wrote “With High Astounding Terms: Christopher Marlowe, Turkish Hysteria, and Subversion on the Elizabethan Stage” in April-May of 2004 as the final paper in a 16th Century English Literature class taught by Dr. Lawrence Green. Both this paper and the class for which it was written could not have been executed without Early English Books Online, as they both depend on the resource of rare materials offered by EEBO. Dr. Green’s class focused on the English Renaissance encounter with the Islamic world, and how this encounter affected Renaissance attitudes, ways of thinking, and anxieties. We read a wide variety of Renaissance-era publications, from news pamphlets to ambassadorial narratives to popular literature. As we were entering the last part of the class, which focused on the shaping of experience and history into popular stage dramas, I became interested in Christopher Marlowe, and I thus decided to write my paper about his treatment of popular conceptions about “The Turk” and how it relates to his subversion of Elizabethan morality, the sort typified in the broadsides, popular literature, and popular drama of the day.

I concluded that Marlowe indeed uses these popular conceptions as springboards to explore and subvert Elizabethan ways of thinking and anxieties, that in *Tamburlaine the Great*, Parts I and II, and in *The Jew of Malta*, he questions both the common assertion that Christian nations and peoples are naturally more righteous than the Turks, and that God favors Christians over Muslims and will let his will be known on Earth. I feel that this advances studies in Marlowe and Elizabethan culture in general because little scholarship has been done about either with an emphasis on Turkish hysteria during the English Renaissance.

Throughout the Renaissance, the mystery of the Muslim world captured the imagination of English writers, and to this Christopher Marlowe was no exception. His first major works for the London stage, *Tamburlaine the Great*, parts I and II, and *The Jew Of Malta*, deal very closely with the Islamic world. But what distinguishes Marlowe from other writers of his day is the subversive spin he applies to themes he deals with. While other writers of the period, such as Barnabe Riche and Thomas Preston, were writing stories that seemed to affirm traditional notions of the Islamic World and its relationship to Christianity, Marlowe sought to subvert and break down these notions (as well as a host of other traditions of stage and storytelling). This is apparent from the very beginning of Marlowe's career, from the Prologue to *Tamburlaine the Great*:

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.¹

What does the audience learn just from the Prologue to *Tamburlaine*? Firstly, that their playwright is going to take them from the "clownage" of other plays and give them a taste of real drama, the story of a base-born shepherd who vanquished kingdoms "with his conquering sword". Secondly, we know that Tamburlaine will threaten the world not in "jiggling veins" of drama written by "mother wits", but in a muscular blank verse filled "with high astounding terms".

Marlowe's subversive attitude extends beyond the mere structure of drama. As we learn in the final lines of the Prologue,

View but his picture in this tragic glass,

¹ Ln. 1-6, Prologue, *1 Tamburlaine*

And then applaud his fortunes as you please,²

Marlowe, unlike other playwrights, is not going to beat the audience over the head with a moral, or even reveal if his play has a moral. Rather, the audience is invited to judge Tamburlaine's fortunes however they would like.

This is the big theme that unifies Marlowe's plays: overreaching. As his characters push the limits of power, lust, greed, and knowledge, Marlowe pushes the limits of what was possible or acceptable to the Elizabethan audience. Where lesser authors conform to popular notions about the Turks, Marlowe sidesteps them. Where others portray Christians among Turks as more valorous, meritorious, and pious, Marlowe paints them as no better if not worse. Where the public credits divine intervention with the triumphs and setbacks of the Christian world, Marlowe rips apart the whole idea as ludicrous. In Marlowe's theatrical world, not all Christians are virtuous, and not all Turks are vicious, and God doesn't make his preferences for either one known. In this way, Marlowe overreaches the bounds of traditional Elizabethan morality.

Marlowe's conception of Christians and Turks

The overwhelmingly popular notion of Christian-Turkish relations set up an easy dichotomy between the two groups, with virtuous, noble Christians on one side and impious, ignoble Turks on the other. This contrast is imparted in a number of broadsides from the period. As the Ottoman armies made steady progress through the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and the Mediterranean, news reports trickled into England telling of their cruel barbarity. This characterization was common throughout the era, such as in a 1565 pamphlet entitled, "Newes from Vienna the 5. day of August. 1566. of the strong towne

² Ln. 7-8, Ibid.

and castell of Tula in Hungary xi. myles beyond the riuer Danubius, which was cruelly assaulted by the great Turke, but nowe by Gods mighty working relieued, the sayd Turks marueilouslye discomfited and ouerthrowen"³. The author describes a horrific scene, reporting that when Christians are captured by the Turks, the men are starved to death, the old are hacked up into pieces, the women are raped, and with the infants they take them out "very cruelly and stick them on long poles to gore them to death without pity or mercy"⁴. A 1645 pamphlet entitled "Newes from the great Turke" declares, "All Christians may take notice of the great Pride and horrid Blasphemy of the *Turkes*"⁵.

Meanwhile, Christians in these same broadsides are consistently depicted as brave and valorous. A first-hand account of the 1565 Siege of Malta begins with a lengthy description of the numerous wounds the author had received from the Turks, and later gives a roster of a number of knights killed at a recent engagement. From the above-mentioned tract about Vienna is a description of a "most valiant man...the Captain of Orla, [who] setting most valiantly upon [the Turks]...killed about eight hundred of them"⁶.

Barnabe Riche's characterization of Turks and Christians in his *Farewell to the Military Profession* reveals a binary relationship between good Christians and bad Turks common in the popular literature of the day. One of his protagonists, Aramanthus, is a prince who is raised as the son of a Muslim fisherman in the Turkish Empire. But when he joins the army, his rise is meteoric, for his "baseness of bringing up, could not conceal

³ Image 1

⁴ Image 3

⁵ Image 1

⁶ Image 3

the nobility of his birth”⁷. Another of his protagonists, Fineo, a gentleman of Genova, makes a similarly rapid matriculation through the ranks of the Turkish military when he goes from captured slave to one “very dear unto the king, to that in lesse than the space of one whole year”⁸. The implication here is that Christians, especially noble Christians, are so innately superior to Turks that when competing against Turks in a Turkish meritocracy, they quickly outdo the Turks and end up on top of their own power systems.

The Turks of Riche’s stories, meanwhile, are painted with a similar brush as the Turks in contemporary broadsides, as fierce, capricious men, shrewd and cruel military tacticians, and as sexually rapacious lechers. Aramantus’s Turk devises a cunning scheme to invade a city by feigning conversion to Christianity and later his own death to take the town from within. The Turkish King in “Of Fineo and Fiamma” has his concubines lie with him in the order he has bought or received them, and still has “a whole yeare and a halfe” until he exhausts his supply⁹. The same Turk, “though he were barbarous, and cruel of nature, that the Ire and hatred which he had conceived against them before, was then converted and changed into pity” when witnesses the longing and tears between Fineo and his love¹⁰. The literary conception of the Turk is violent in all matters of his life, from his war-mongering ways to his conquest of women to the volatile nature of his heart.

Marlowe takes these conceptions of Christians and Turks and turns them upside down. The Christian kings of *Tamburlaine the Great, Part II* are not conspicuously valorous, brave, or pious. In the very first scene, Sigismond, the King of Hungary, is

⁷ Image 70, *Farewell to the Military Profession*

⁸ Image 43, *Ibid.*

⁹ Image 47, *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Image 49, *Ibid.*

shown to be not a great soldier. Orcanes, King of Anatolia, upbraids him when he arrogantly offers him a sword with which he may either choose to make war or peace.

Orcanes asks Sigismond if he remembers that at Vienna, Sigismond,

...then County Palatine,
The King of Boheme, and the Austric Duke,
Sent heralds out, which basely on their knees,
In all your names, desir'd a truce of me¹¹?

In Act II, Sigismond turns out to be not very steadfast in his oath to King Orcanes. He turns out to be a flip-flopper, if you will. Two of his nobles tempt him to break off the oath he made in Christ's name by arguing,

...with such infidels,
In whom no faith nor true religion rests,
We are not bound to those accomplishments
The holy laws of Christendom enjoin¹².

When Sigismond is still not convinced that promises to the Turks just don't count, one of the nobles rejoins with a call "to venge our Christians' death, / And scourge their foul blasphemous paganism"¹³. This appeal for revenge suddenly convinces Sigismond to launch a surprise attack on the Turks. In these instances, Sigismond turns out to be invalorous, blasphemous, and easily swayed by bloodlust, descriptors usually reserved for the invading Turk.

The Christian characters of *The Jew Of Malta*, meanwhile, commit a whole laundry list of un-Christian deeds. While Barabas is the main character and primary evildoer of the play, betraying his fellow Jews, killing suitors, a convent full of nuns, his own daughter, a pair of friars, his ex-servant and a prostitute, Ferenze, the play's chief

¹¹ I.i.94-7

¹² II.i.34-7

¹³ II.i.52-3

Christian, is just as deceitful and just as villainous as he. When he seizes Barabas's money, his hypocritical rationalization justifying the taking of his estate is the same hypocritical rationalization Barabas uses to justify keeping it. Ferenze tells Barabas that they are taking his wealth and property "To save the ruin of a multitude, / And better one want for a common good / Than many perish for a private man"¹⁴. Barabas argues,

Some Jews are wicked, as all Christians are;
But say the tribe that I descended of
Were all in general cast away for sin,
Shall I be tried for their transgression¹⁵?

Each man tells the other that he is misusing religion and scripture for his own personal gain. And both of them are correct. It's a sad day for sanctimonious Christians when they cannot even justifiably claim moral superiority over an evil, murderous, mustache-twirling caricature of a villainous Jew like Barabas.

In a scene that parallels II.1 of *Tamburlaine the Great, Part II*, Ferenze changes his mind about his tributary arrangement with the Turks just as easily as Sigismund decides to opt out of his truce. But the big rhetorical difference between these two scenes is distinct: while the nobles of *Tamburlaine* argue around Christian morals and use vengeance as a selling point, they are points that the analogous characters in *The Jew of Malta* don't even consider. Rather, Martin Del Bosco's argument, and Ferenze's acquiescence to his argument, are purely business decisions. Del Bosco cannot sell the Turkish slaves he has captured at sea in the Maltese slave market while Malta is in league with the Turks, and Ferenze would like to wage war with the sum of money he has collected from the Jews of Malta. So it is deliciously ironic when Ferenze declares that he

¹⁴ I.ii.98-100

¹⁵ I.i.113-116

will not pay the tribute to make the statement to the Turks, "Claim tribute where thou wilt, we are resolv'd,-- / Honor is bought with blood, and not with gold" when both men are acquiring gold in dishonorable ways¹⁶. And like the hapless Sigismund, Ferenze plans a surprise attack, a deceitful stratagem usually reserved for those tricky Turks.

Speaking of the Turks, their portrayals in *Tamburlaine* and *The Jew of Malta* can be said to be, in a sense, more generous than those Marlowe gives to his Christian characters. They have the tendency to lie and deceive less, and actually follow through on their promises. Unlike Sigismund, when Tamburlaine wants to make battle with someone, he lets it be known, without any pretension of a surprise attack. To make the Persian crown his own in *I Tamburlaine*, he orders Techelles to

...take a thousand horse with thee,
And bid him turn him back to war with us,
That only made him king to make us sport:
We will not steal upon him cowardly,
But give him warning and more warriors¹⁷.

In Act III, when Tamburlaine faces off against Bajazeth, Emperor of the Turks, he tells him that

Thy fall shall make me famous through the world!
I will not tell thee how I'll handle thee,
But every common soldier of my camp
Shall smile to see thy miserable state¹⁸.

And sure enough, Tamburlaine defeats Bajazeth and gains great renown, then locks him in a cage and drags him around the Middle East to serve as his footstool. At the siege of Damascus, he is so steadfast in his promise to kill everything that lives on the third day of the siege that he slays the whole city in spite of the attempted swayings of the town's

¹⁶ II.ii.55-6

¹⁷ II.v.99-103

virgins, for they “have refus'd the offer of their lives, / And know my customs are as peremptory / As wrathful planets, death, or destiny”¹⁹.

In *The Jew Of Malta*, Calymath distinguishes himself by being a power player who keeps his promises. After the Maltese break the tributary league, one of his bassoes promises Ferenze that

...Selim Calymath shall come himself,
And with brass bullets batter down your towers,
And turn proud Malta to a wilderness
For these intolerable wrongs of yours²⁰.

And sure enough, Calymath swiftly invades the island of Malta. During the invasion, he tells Barabas that if he can deliver for him a military victory against the Christians, he will make him Governor of Malta. Calymath takes the island and makes Barabas Governor by the very next scene.

Reversing character stereotypes is only a part of the subversion Marlowe engages in. From there he goes on to subvert Christian notions of divine retribution, sin, and merit.

Marlowe's Conception of Divine Justice

Since Christians are so very good, and since Turks are so very evil, God would be logically predisposed to favoring Christians and using his omnipotence to give them a hand once in a while and smite a few infidels while He's at it. At least, this was a widespread idea in Renaissance England. And like the typical preconceptions of Turks and Christians, the idea of Divine Justice is one Marlowe challenges in his plays.

¹⁸ III.iii.84-6

¹⁹ V.i.126-8

In Renaissance-era news reports of Turkish campaigns against Christian countries, there is a consistent motif of divine intervention. That is, Christian victories, especially those achieved in spite of great odds, are credited to God's work. A news report from 1593 which tells of a Christian military win in Croatia credits God with the victory in its very title, "A true discourse wherein is set downe the wonderful mercy of God, shewed towards the Christians...against the Turke, before Sysek in Croatia" (Image 1). It ends with the declaration, "Thus hath almighty God wonderfully protected the Christian soldiers 9which in number were nothing comparable to those of the Turkes" (Image 5). News of a victory from the 1565 siege of Malta, "[C]ertayn and tru good nues, fro the syege of the Isle Malta", attributes it to "the favor of God"²¹.

Thomas Preston's 1570 play *Cambises* reiterates this notion that God will make his will known on earth by interceding in worldly affairs. After murdering his way through the whole play, executing ministers, killing the children of his critics, and slaying members of his family, divine justice finally catches up to the Persian king Cambises in the play's final scene, in which he stumbles onstage, a sword piercing his side, moaning,

Who but I in such a wise his death's wound could have got?
As I on horseback up did leape, my sword from scabard shot,
And ran me thus into the side, as you right well\ may see:
A meruell's channce unfortunate, that in this wise should be²².

The message is clear: God punishes sinners for their transgressions. To emphasize this point, the last words out of Cambises's mouth are that his death is "A just reward for [his] misdeeds"²³.

In contrast to both the popular press and Thomas Preston, in *Tamburlaine* we do

²⁰ III.v.24-7

²¹ Image 1

²² Image 22

not find evidence of a supreme being who punishes sin and rewards faith. This can be seen in the way that Marlowe treats the notion that Tamburlaine is “the scourge of God”. The author of *The Foreste or Collection of Histories*, the history which served as Marlowe’s primary source material for *Tamburlaine*, writes that “it is to be supposed that god stirred him up an instrument, to chastise these princes, these proud and wicked nations”²⁴. In this framework, Tamburlaine is much like the sword of Cambises, God’s judgment of the wicked made manifest on earth. But as the play progresses, it becomes clear that Tamburlaine’s military victories are not due to the fulfillment of God’s will, are rather in spite of God’s will. Tamburlaine is not the scourge of God, but is rather God’s scourge.

Tamburlaine’s trajectory from lowly Scythian to ruler of an empire defies the idea that monarchs rule by a divine right. Tamburlaine was born a base shepherd; as Bajazeth boasts to him in part I, “those that lead my horse / Have to their names titles of dignity”²⁵. Yet Tamburlaine wins victories over his foes in spite of being born a shepherd. As Tamburlaine vanquishes one king after another, it becomes clear that none of them are very competent rulers. Mycetes admits in the very first scene that his brother, Cosroe, has more wits than he. Cosroe, meanwhile, is far too presumptive that he has gained the Persian crown before Tamburlaine takes it from him. Bajazeth suffers from haughtiness and arrogance, and the Governor of Damascus makes the mistake of waiting until the third day of the siege on his city before trying to get a truce. And Tamburlaine does all of this without the help of God, swearing “By this my sword that conquer'd Persia”²⁶ that he

²³ Image 23

²⁴ Image 93

²⁵ III.iii.79-80

²⁶ III.iii.82

will defeat Bajazeth when he swears that the Turks will win “By Mahomet my kinsman’s sepulcher, / And by the holy Alcoran”²⁷. In Marlowe’s conception of the raw-knuckle world of Geopolitics, victory is not granted by the grace of God, but gained by those who are driven to seize it.

Tamburlaine’s comeuppance seems inevitable by the end of part I. At the end of Act II, Cosroe stumbles onstage, mortally wounded from battle, and wishes for “fearful vengeance”²⁸ upon Tamburlaine and his crew. Undaunted by Cosroe’s warning of revenge, Tamburlaine pucks the crown off of Cosroes’ head and puts it on, declaring that “Not all the curses which the Furies breathe / Shall make me leave so rich a prize as this”²⁹. He then goes on to directly defy the god of war,

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 world³⁰.

At the end of Act III, Bajazeth is pursued onstage, defeated in battle. After Tamburlaine seizes his crown, Bajazeth promises that “Though the glory of this day be lost, / Afric and Greece have garrisons enough / To make me sovereign of the earth again”³¹. In act V, before Zabina brains herself against Bajazeth’s cage, she screeches, “Tamburlaine, Tamburlaine!--Let the soldiers be buried.--Hell, death, Tamburlaine, hell!”³². If Tamburlaine were to follow a plot arc anything like *Cambises*, Tamburlaine would be in a position in which he should double-check his scabbard before mounting his steed. But

²⁷ III.iii.75-76

²⁸ II.vii.92

²⁹ II.vii.93-4

³⁰ II.vii.98-103

³¹ III.iii.241-3

Marlowe doesn't have divine punishment in store for Tamburlaine. After all of that killing, and after foreshadowing that God is going to crush Tamburlaine, the play ends with him planning to "rites of marriage solemnize" with his bride Zenocrate³³.

In Part II, Orcanes credits his military victory over Sigismund to "justice of his Christ / And to his power, which here appears as full / As rays of Cynthia to the clearest sight"³⁴, to which one of his lieutenants responds, "'Tis but the fortune of the wars, my lord, / Whose power is often prov'd a miracle"³⁵. The same could be said of Tamburlaine's death, which occurs soon after he burns the Koran; maybe God is punishing him, maybe he isn't. Tamburlaine dies, but he dies an old man, of sickness. As he is dying, he even has the comfort to whip out a map and review all that he has conquered. The real tragedy of the play's final scene is not that Tamburlaine sees the error of his ways when it is too late, but that since he will die, he will be unable to defeat his latest enemy, Callapine, and conquer the rest of the known world.

In *The Jew of Malta*, the manifestation of a just and vengeful God is just as absent as it is in *Tamburlaine*. The moral framework of the play is the opposite of what the Elizabethan audience would expect (except from a playwright like Marlowe). Machevil the Prologue sets forth this morality-in-reverse aspect of the play when he declares, "I count religion but a childish toy / And hold there is no sin but ignorance"³⁶. Throughout the play, characters use religion as a tool, as a cover-up or excuse for their personal misdeeds. And in the end, the victors are not the most virtuous:, nor are the vanquished the most vicious: those who are rewarded are the most cunning, and those who are

³² V.i.315-7

³³ V.i.534

³⁴ II.iii.28-30

punished are indeed the most ignorant.

As with *Tamburlaine*, Marlowe once again draws upon history for the basis of his story, although the historical connection this time around is much looser than it is between *Tamburlaine* and its source material. In setting his story in Malta, and having Turks threatening invasion cast as major movers, Marlowe was undoubtedly thinking of the circumstances around the 1565 Great Siege of Malta, when the Turks really did try to invade Malta. The event held a particular poignancy with Christians not unlike the one the people of Middle Earth had towards Helms Deep. The vastly outnumbered Knights of St. John, an order of Knights Hospitallers that dated back to the Crusades, the regular Maltese army, and later a force of Spaniards, fought off an invasion from the much more powerful Turkish military that lasted four months. Their victory was credited in contemporary news reports, as usual, to the valor of the Christian soldiers and to the generous mercy of God. As with *Tamburlaine*, Marlowe takes this conceit, that God makes his will and judgment known on earth, and turns it on its head.

The situation in *The Jew of Malta* is similar to this historical incident, but thoroughly twisted. In Marlowe's play, God does not intervene to cast judgment or lend assistance. Although Barabas fits the mold for a villain ready for a Last-Act comeuppance due to his murderous actions and vile nature, Ferenze is arguably also worthy of a comeuppance since he is not only a hypocritical Christian for using scripture for his own personal gain, but he is also a foolish and selfish political leader for putting his want of money before Malta's security by withholding the money meant for Turkish tribute to instead satisfy his cravings to "wage war" against the Turks. But in this evenly

³⁵ II.iii.31-32

³⁶ Prologue, 14-5

matched contest of vice between Ferenze and Barabas, the ultimate victor is not decided by goodness or religion³⁷.

In the end, Ferenze's victory is not due to any overflow of valor or piety on his part. Rather, he ends up on top because he is the most opportunistic backstabber between himself, Barabas, and Calymath. Ferenze is a remorseless Machiavellian when he kills Barabas, blinding the better instincts of Barabas with the promise of an astronomical sum of money, "a hundred thousand pounds", for his part of betraying Calymath³⁸. Barabas is not struck down for his previous sins and deceptions. Rather, the path to Barabas's death leads right back to the point in the play where he foolishly gives up being governor of Malta for money and security and then trusts the execution of his scheme to kill Calymath to the person whom he has just betrayed. His willingness to have faith in Ferenze's word is not in this case a Christian virtue but the Machiavellian sin that gets him killed.

Calymath is so upright in comparison to the other characters that when Barabas and Ferenze are playing out the end of their grand Machiavellian game, Calymath doesn't even know he's playing, asking Ferenze once all the murdering is done, "let me go to Turkey, / In person there to mediate your peace"³⁹. But when you play games with Machiavellians, the most cunning, not the most noble, wins in the end. It is a victory of the Christians against the Turks, but not a Christian Victory against the Turks.

Marlowe's Christians are not innately predisposed for virtue and deliverance; nor are Marlowe's Turks innately predisposed for wrongdoing and damnation. Most

³⁷ II.ii.27

³⁸ V.v.20

³⁹ V.v.114-5

importantly, Marlowe's God is not predisposed to doing anything at all. He stands by and lets the low-born shepherd Tamburlaine build an empire with his charisma and his sword. He does nothing to interfere with the Machiavellian power plays of ignoble Christians. He allows victory to come to the most powerful and the most cunning, not to the most Christian and the most pious. In short, he is nothing like the God of the Elizabethan popular imagination whom Marlowe subverts.

Conclusion

What makes Christopher Marlowe's subversion so resonant, so effective is that it plays on common tensions and anxieties in the Elizabethan public consciousness. By showing just how easily vice and virtue can slide between Christians and Turks, he reveals just how unimportant these monikers really are. By displaying how faith and virtue do not necessarily translate into victory, he plays on the suspicion that yes, Machevil has indeed arrived in England. By portraying his Christian characters as hypocrites hiding behind the Aegis of religion for their own self-advancement, he mocks the self-righteous invocation of God into worldly affairs. In short, he takes every preconceived notion his audience would have about their place in the religious world and turns them upside down.

This subversion would especially touch a nerve to the Elizabethans, who saw themselves as defending their fledgling religion from not only local, but from continental, and by extension, Turkish influences. After all, if Christians, Turks, Jews, (and Tartars even) all have the potential to be villains, what is it that really sets them apart? Where is the unique Elizabethan identity in this way of looking at things? Christopher Marlowe,

like his cast of Overreachers, tears down the traditional models of Elizabethan morality by asking such questions that no one before had thought to ask. In the end, we are left in a world that yes, is without God. But in his place we have the notion that we don't really need him to get ahead in life. Whether true merit is charisma, martial prowess, cunning, guile, or simply being in the right place at the right time to catch your antagonist in his own trap, we have no need for God in Marlowe's world. All we need is the will to reach beyond our peers and the strength to hold on tight.

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