

Christopher Marlowe's Tamburlaine and the Politics of English Trade

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Abstract

The article considers the early modern dramatic work of one of the most famous playwrights of Shakespeare's age. It addresses Marlowe's play as a pioneering attempt at the orientalist approach of the English towards a chapter of Eastern history that fascinated Europeans at the time. Tamburlaine, the Eastern conqueror in Marlowe's play, presents the problem of a uniquely savage portrayal of the anti-hero that violates all the moral and historical expectations of the audience. The article addresses the issues of historiography as well as ideology that have made this play continue to perplex the critics since its first performance. Consequently, the protagonist is re-interpreted in the article by deploying the historicist methodology which locates this play and the themes and motifs it raises within the context of the mercantile and strategic concerns of sixteenth century English society. It considers the Anglo-oriental trade agreements made by the Elizabethans with the Russian, Ottoman and Persian rulers of the era with a view to explore the paradoxical and contradictory ideas inherent in the characterization of the major figures in the play.

'That men might quickly saile to *India*'. (V.iii.135).¹

A study of historical accounts, both primary and secondary, demonstrates that England's political and cultural engagement with the Ottoman Empire, beginning from 1579, was juxtaposed with its commercial policy involving the rival states of Tartars, Persians and Russians. These early Anglo oriental ventures paved the way for the English trade enterprises in the subcontinent of India and other regions of Southeast

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¹ *Tamburlaine* in *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*, Fredson Bowers (ed.), 2 Vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973, 1981), I. All further references to the text of the play are from this edition.

Asia, in the cusp of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when the East India Company was established in 1600. Thus, it is interesting to discover how the relationships which the English had with these different and, at times, opposing centers of power in the East, formed the complex background of their Eastern strategic and mercantile policy. It is this complex web of diverse economic and cultural forces that informs Christopher Marlowe's play *Tamburlaine*, and elides it with the nexus of vested interests of some Anglo-oriental mercantile groups who were promoting the advantages of the Russo-Persian routes as opposed to those that belonged to the Turkish Empire.

Such a reading of the play is based on the theoretical premise of the New Historicist critics, such as Stephen Greenblatt and Steven Mullaney, who had earlier argued for the idea of a 'poetics with a politics of culture', and that early modern literary texts acquired a role in the functioning of 'state power for the Tudor state [as it rested] in its capacity to produce forms of resistance and subversion, both in order to contain them and to use them to its own ends'.² In fact, this approach is, to a certain extent, relevant to an analysis of a play like *Tamburlaine* which, in retrospect, indicated the growing preoccupation of the government of Elizabeth I to turn to the East for the development of its strategic and financial institutions at a time when the English were besieged by the Spanish and Catholic forces both in Europe and by extension in its internal affairs as well. This pseudo-historical drama, based on an oriental theme and one of the first of its kind in the early modern era, acquires a topical meaning and resonance when it is located within the context of the Renaissance East-West alliances and struggles for power. Indeed, the significance of this play can be realized from the idea that it was probably the first play to have been seen by Shakespeare, along with his contemporaries, which had a 'life-transforming impact' on his mind and indeed on the careers of all the English dramatists such as the 'University Wits' who also tried their hand at writing this type of oriental drama. The play was not only a masterpiece of its kind but also posed a dilemma for its spectators, since its first startling performance. The impact of this play on the audience can be imagined, when 'all of the moral rules inculcated in schools and churches, in homilies and proclamations and sober-minded tracts were suspended', and 'the perfect

² Steven Mullaney, 'After New Historicism' in *Alternative Shakespeares*, Terence Hawkes (ed.), (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.17-37 (pp.26-7).

bliss and sole felicity' that could be attained was shown to be 'the dream of domination'.³

This article aims to bring into focus an understanding of the play-text that is of special significance to the audience and students of literature in our part of the world where the history of Tamburlaine was closely associated with the dynastic background of the Mughals in India who were also descended of the Central Asian people of Farghana. Although, the biography of Timur, the Lame, is well known to the Muslims of this region, it is significant how Marlowe employs its basic outline to construct his own version of the conqueror, that exposes the development of a singularly English approach towards the conqueror and his concepts of rule and governance, in a dramatic representation of his character that makes him almost unrecognizable to us. The central paradox of the play is the ambiguous portrayal of Tamburlaine as the conqueror who vanquished the Ottoman king Bajazeth. This re-enactment of a historic event is, in itself questionable, when we situate the performance of the play in its immediate context of England's persistent propitiation of the Turkish Sultan, for the grant of 'special trade capitulations', by the Ottoman government, 'in preferential terms', necessary for the emergent capitalist orientation of the English economy in 1579.⁴

Given the historical context of the establishment of English mercantile Companies and trading ventures such as that of the Turkey Company in 1579 and Levant Company in 1592, Marlowe's Tamburlaine assumes the function of displacing public hostility against the English government's newly forged alliances with Turks and other Muslim rulers of the East, as opposed to those of Europe. Hitherto, the Muslim world had been considered as the traditional foes of the West, in the aftermath of the crusade years and the continuous territorial expansion of the Ottomans inside Europe. According to Vitkus in his consideration of the specific historical context of the *Jew of Malta*, another play written later by Marlowe for the London stage, one thing that 'European Christians feared was the Islamic polity's absorptive capacity'.⁵ However, I suggest that it is remarkable that instead of presenting a figure from the East who is inimical to Christendom, the play of *Tamburlaine* offers a vision of an oriental conqueror, from within

³ Stephen Greenblatt, *Will and the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), p.189-90.

Daniel Vitkus, 'Turks and Jews in *The Jew of Malta*' in *Early Modern English Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.61-71 (p.63).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.65.

the Eastern empires, who represents English hopes and dreams of an Eastern ruler whose conquests aim to allow unhindered access of traders and merchants from the West, wishing to traffic in the East. In effect, Tamburlaine's vision of a consolidated Eastern empire under his hegemonic rule is represented as a redrawing of the world map to create a global free market. Tamburlaine, the Eastern hero, is able to erase the boundaries of states by wresting control of the Kingdoms of the East from the traditional and hereditary dynastic leaders such as the Ottomans or other Persian and Egyptian Kings whom he defeats and replaces:

And Christian Merchants that with Russian stems
 Shall vaile to us, as Lords of all the Lake.
 Plow up huge furrowes in the Caspian sea,
 Both we will raigne as Consuls of the earth,
 And mightie kings shall be our Senators (I.ii. 194-198).

The play proposes mercantile avenues of progress in the East, that appealed, not only to the public taste for exotic adventurism, but also to the mercantile English establishment that was looking for new markets in the East. Tamburlaine's character assumes the qualities of 'daring enterprise carried out heroically in dangerously exotic regions where piracy, slavery, fraud and violence were normal practices',⁶ that would be English merchants felt were essential for international commerce.

This English interest in seeking new directions for advancement in the East was occasioned by the imperatives of the English economy which had suffered crises after the excommunication and isolation of Elizabeth by the Pope in 1570. It is important to note that the Elizabethan embassy to the Sultan's Porte in 1579 became vital for the survival of England after it had been excluded from continental European markets by the Papal decree. There is no doubt that the Turkish Sultan's grant of privileges to the English traders had opened many Asian and African markets for English merchandise. In the third and last edition of his book (1600), dedicated to Sir Robert Cecil, Richard Hakluyt praised the 'special industrie' of merchants like Willaim Hareborne, Richard Staper and Edward Osborne for their efforts in pursuing the Levant trade:

together with the league for the traffike onely betweene her Majestie and the Grand Signior, with the great privileges, immunities, and favours obteyned of his Imperiall Highnesse in that behalfe, the admissions and residencies of our Ambassadors in his stately Porch, and the great good and Christian offices which her Sacred Majestie by her extraordinary

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.63.

favour in that Court hath done for the King and kingdom of Poland, and other Christian Princes.⁷

The passage, written after some years since the commencement of the Anglo-Ottoman trade, suggests the extremely beneficial effects of the profitable transactions. Hakluyt's comments confirm the English Queen's special relationship with the Sublime Porte that had enabled her to succeed in gaining the Ottoman Sultan's aid in European disputes.

On the other hand, what is of interest in considering the politics of Tamburlaine, is that even before this crucial turning point, Englishmen had already made an advance towards Asia via a Russian route through the efforts of the Russia or Muscovy Company. The Russian land route towards the farthest Eastern states offered a possibility, albeit a dangerous one, of contacting rich nations such as those of the Shah of Persia and 'the Mogul' of India. Earlier, in pursuit of securing these Eastern trade routes, the Queen had already sent the intrepid traveller of the Central Asian steppes, M. Anthonie Jenkinson, to approach the 'Sophie' of Persia, or 'Shah Tamas'. In her letter, dated 25 April 1561, she requested permission for English trade:

If these holye duties of entertainment, and sweet offices of naturall humanitie, may be willingly concluded, sincerely embraced, and firmly observed between us, and our Realmes, and subjects, then we doe hope, that the Almightye God will bring to passe, that of these small beginnings, greater moments of things shall hereafter spring, bothe to our furniture, and honors, and also to the great commodities, and use of our peoples: so it will be knowen, that rather the earth, the seas, nor the heauens, haue so much force to separate us, as the godly disposition of naturall humanitie, and mutuall beneuolence, haue to ioyn us strongly together.⁸

In retrospect, the tone of Elizabeth's letter to the Persian King suggests her desire for cordial relations and a greater identity of purpose than in her formal negotiations with the Ottoman Sultan, later published

⁷ Richard Hakluyt, *The Principall Nauigations, Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation* (London: Imprinted by George Bishop and Ralph Newberie, Deputies to Christopher Barker, 1589), STC 12625. For a modern edition, see Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, 12 Vols. (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1903), Vol. I, p.lxix.

⁸ Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, *ibid.*, Vol. I. p.362 and also the same text for all further references.

by Hakluyt.⁹ Whether this greater sympathy with the Persians was reflected in the literary and dramatic writings of the time is a question that needs to be addressed in any interpretation of Marlowe's play, in which the Turks and Persians are juxtaposed as rival powers contending for the East and its wealth. It is this choice of alliances with the contending Eastern rulers and a consideration of the options before the English government at that juncture which is crucial to our understanding of the dramatic figure of Tamburlaine and his Central Asian and Persian arenas of conflict. Marlowe endows him with an aura of imperial discovery and exploitation that invited the English audience to applaud his successes and 'become and remain his 'accomplices' as the nature of power becomes progressively clearer and its price steeper'.¹⁰

However, unlike critics like Greenblatt and John Gillies who see an identification of colonial aspirations in the audience's response to the Tartar, I suggest, that at the time when England was just beginning its explorations into the East, and dynastic imperialism could only be a very remote possibility for England in its desperate economic state, Tamburlaine offered a paradigm for the absolute control of worldly riches, that indicated the accessibility of the East in commercial rather than military terms for the English. The Eastern despotic hero is a kind of ruler whom the English actually wished to gain as their ally and who would facilitate the furtherance of their trading ventures in Central Asia and further East. It appears to me that the idea of actually becoming colonial and military rulers of the Eastern kingdoms was premature and beyond realization for the English, at the time when they had just begun to approach the Russians, Ottomans and Persians as supplicants in order to gain the privilege of trade in their rival territories. A British Empire could still only be a dream or a fantasy. At best they could envision proxy Eastern rulers who would carry out their designs for the profitable success of English ventures.

A consideration of historical travel records shows that in pursuit of these oriental riches, Jenkinson, an English merchant, for his part, succeeded in persuading the capricious Tsar of Russia, Ivan, to renew his grant of privileges to the indefatigable English merchants in 1567.¹¹ This

⁹ Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Nauigations, Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation*, *op.cit.*, This first publication documents all the negotiations between Elizabeth and her Eastern Allies.

¹⁰ John Gillies, 'Tamburlaine and Renaissance Geography' in *Early Modern English Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 35-49 (p.41)

¹¹ Richard Hakluyt, *op.cit.*, p.397.

was necessary if they were to reach the Persian, and eventually Indian, markets by the land routes.

However, the Tsar had his own reasons for favouring the English merchants, as suggested in his proceedings with Jenkinson. He had intended a secret alliance with the Elizabethan government that went beyond the mercantile concerns of the English. He intimated his disappointment with the English government in his complaint to Jenkinson in May 1572:

....we haue well considered, and doe perceauce that our secrete message unto you committed was done truley according to our minde (although we were aduertised to the contrary) and now we are by you fully satisfied, And when we did send our Ambassador into England, about those our great, and weightie affaires, to conclude the same with the Queene our sister, our Ambassador could ende nothing for want of such assurance as was requisite in princely affaires, according to the manner of all countreyes, but was dismissed vnto us againe, with letters of small effect, touching the same and no Ambassador sent with him from the Queene.¹²

The Tsar's 'favours' to the English merchants continued intermittently even though the English could place no reliance on his volatile policies. English ambassadors were ill-treated to such an extent that their residence in Russia became a source of continuous trial and suffering meted out to them by the Russians. An example given by Hakluyt is that of the heroic patience of Sir Hierome Bowes, who was imprisoned in his embassy in 1583 and kept under constant Russian surveillance. At his protests, the new Tsar:

did make cauill, that the English merchants did bring him nothing that was good, and compared olde gaberdines of his own skarlets as the merchants had then brought him....seeming as though he would make no more reckoning to haue any amitie with the Queenes Maistie.¹³

Hakluyt devotes much of the first edition of his work to these English activities in Russia and Persia during the 1570s and 1580s, before the Turkey trade became an integral part of English political and commercial life. Conversely, while the political and strategic undercurrents in the Anglo-Russian exchanges adversely affected the Muscovy traffic, the Turkish trade flourished and led to greater cooperation in other Anglo-oriental affairs.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.432-33.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.494.

Clifford Leech¹⁴ believes that the significance of these obscure English negotiations with the Tsar and the Persian King are worth pursuing for their implications in a play like *Tamburlaine*, which had the Central Asian regions for much of its dramatic background. Russian matters were in vogue in both the ruling and mercantile circles in England, before they were relegated to the background in the aftermath of events that followed the Anglo-Ottoman alliance. For a reinterpretation of Marlowe's play, it is necessary to analyse the effects of this not inconsiderable Russian and Central Asian traffic that initially played a part in the evolution of English ambitions in the East.

Due to Hakluyt's painstaking compilations of the letters of the Sultans and Shahs, the English readers had a rare opportunity of learning about the direct impact made by rulers of Turkey, Persia, Tartary and Russia on the English nation and its economy. The general availability of this kind of material is surprising and highly significant for its time. It lends credibility to the claim that Hakluyt's volumes had considerable influence in informing and developing middle class literary interests.¹⁵ We can, therefore, assume a varying degree of awareness of the vicissitudes of Anglo-oriental alliances, among the theatre audiences of the time.

Hakluyt, in his earliest edition of 1589, extolled the early exploits of the merchant adventurers who had made contact with the rulers of Muscovy and Persia: 'wherein the Companie of Moscovie Marchants to the perpetuall honor of their Citie, and societie, have performed more than anyone, yea then all the nations of Europe beside'.¹⁶ The second edition of this work (1598), dedicated to Charles Howard, the Lord High Admiral of England, revealed that it was the Admiral's father who was credited with originally establishing the Muscovy Company:

...when I found in the first Patent graunted by Queen Marie to the Moscovie companie, that my lord your father being then lord high Admirall of England, was one of the first favourers and furtherers, with his purse, and countenance, of the strange and wonderfull Discoverie of Russia, the chiefe contents of this

¹⁴ Clifford Leech, *Christopher Marlowe: Poet for the Stage*, Anne Lancashire (ed.), (New York: AMS Press, 1986), p. 152. Leech has noted the irony of the political scene of the 1580s when Elizabeth was regarded as to some extent an actual, and certainly a political, ally of Ivan the Terrible.

¹⁵ Louis B. Wright, *Middle Class Culture in Elizabeth England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), p.530.

¹⁶ Richard Hakluyt, *op.cit.*, p.xxvi.

present Volume, then I remembered the sage saying of sweet Isocrates, That sonnes ought not onely to be inheritors of their fathers substance, but also of their commendable vertues and honors.¹⁷

These references to the Muscovy Company in Hakluyt's work, of which a large portion is dedicated to the several journeys made by Englishmen to Russia and further East, indicate the early importance of the Muscovy trade for Elizabethans in search of Eastern markets.¹⁸ Before the English had been granted permission to trade in the vast Ottoman territories, the Muscovy route had presented the possibility of opening up the Persian markets for the English by avoiding the Turkish areas. It would also have allowed the English to make considerable profit from valuable trade in Persian silks. This diversion of commerce from the Ottoman lands would have meant the avoidance of tolls and customs that were normally given to the Sultan. In fact, other European countries had used the Russo-Persian trade as a form of economic warfare against the Ottomans.¹⁹

For the English, however, the Muscovy trade never created a major market for their commodities and it was the establishment of the Turkish trade that achieved the desperately needed breakthrough for the sale of English goods in the East. The success of the Anglo-Turkish alliance meant that the English mercantile establishment came to frown upon the earlier preference for the Muscovy trade.

Yet, it is of some literary interest to trace the vicissitudes of the brief relationship between the Russian and English monarchs, and its ultimate demise. I believe that the personality of the Tsar that emerges from a cursory survey, prefigures characters of such dramatic significance as Tamburlaine, who is also described within the context of the Volga and the Caspian regions. A historic perspective, informed by the role played by the Russian emperor in Anglo-Eastern trade, enriches

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.xxxiii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.339-504. The account of M. Anthonie Jenkinson is relevant as it relates to his first voyage to 'the citie of Mosco in Russia, to the citie of Boghar in Bactria, in the yere 1558', pp.365-74. Another voyage, undertaken by him from 26 July 1571 to 23 July 1572, gives us an outline of his proceedings as the English ambassador to Russia, pp.426-36. There is also a description of Persia by Jeffrey Duckett. He mentions the 'Shawgh' whom the English erroneously called 'the great Sophy' and refers to the Petroleum lakes in Persia, indicating the detailed interest the Englishmen took in Persian society and geography, pp. 422-25.

¹⁹ Dorothy M.Vaughan, *A Pattern of Alliances, 1350-1700* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1935), p. 209.

our appreciation of the Eastern emperors depicted on the contemporary stage. Reasons for the English disenchantment with Russian routes are not difficult to ascertain.

The pretensions of Ivan the Terrible (1538-84) and his successor were a major factor in both the commencement and eventual decline of the English trade towards the East, via the Caspian route.²⁰ Ivan, had established a reputation as an enemy of the Islamic world when, in 1552, he captured the great Moslem city of Kazan on the Volga and initiated a strong eastward expansion 'of Christendom'.²¹ Moreover, he was feared within his realm for his brutal methods of government and absolutist control over his territories. According to the account of the pioneering English traveller to Russia, Anthony Jenkinson, the 'Emperor of Muscovia' was a petty tyrant who enjoyed his displays of power very much in the style of Marlowe's hero:

[He] hath used lately great cruelty towards his nobyllyte and gentlemen by puttynge to death, whyppyng, and banyshynge, above four hundred with confyscatyon of Lands and goods for small offences, and specyally toward four of theym, viz., one wurried with beares, of another he cutt of his nose, hys tonge, hys eares, and hys lypes, the thyrd was sett upon a pole, and the fourth he commanded to be knocked in the head, and putt under the yse in the Ryvar.²²

Nevertheless, the merciless ruler of the Volga region was tolerated by the Elizabethans as long as there was some hope of advancing trade links with the Central Asian markets, further East. Thus, before being dissuaded by the hazardous nature of the route, the Elizabethan establishment had contemplated the idea of close ties with the Russian monarch, if only for mercantile reasons. But despite earlier optimism, the Russian traffic gradually succumbed to the pressures of the inordinate expectations of the Tsar.

Documentation concerning the negotiations between the English Queen and the Tsar indicate that Ivan was not only directly involved in

²⁰ Richard Hakluyt, *op.cit.*, pp.432-33.

²¹ Dorothy M. Vaughan, *op.cit.*, p.176. Philip of Spain, on his arrival in England to marry Mary Tudor, had also taken advantage of his encounter with the Russian delegation there to arrange for the supply of arms and particularly artillery to the Tsar for use against the Ottomans.

²² *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia by Anthony Jenkinson and other Englishmen with some account of the first intercourse of the English with Russia and Central Asia by way of the Caspian Sea*, E. Delmar Morgan and C.H. Coote (eds.), 2 Vols. (London: printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1886), II, 187.

this trade but also hoped to receive military supplies from England for his imperial ventures. He had been encouraged to harbour an exaggerated opinion of Elizabeth's willingness to ally herself to the Russians. The Queen's desire for cooperation with her Russian counterpart, as stated in her letter to the Tsar of 18 May, 1570, had been received as a formal expression of commitment to Ivan's idea of an Anglo-Russian defence pact:

Which league wee will so obserue and keepe foreuer, as to bind ourselues with our commen forces to (withstand and) offend all such as shalbe commen enemies to us both, and to defend both our princely honours, the estate of our Realmes and countries.²³

However, Hakluyt's publication of the accounts of Anthony Jenkinson and Sir Hierome Bowes in Russia suggests that Elizabeth was unwilling to undertake any concrete measures to aid Russia's strategic designs in the East.²⁴ English merchants and ambassadors kept their contact with the notoriously tyrannical Muscovite only as long as he could prove of some value to their trade. The arbitrary methods of administration by the succeeding Tsar also undermined Anglo-Russian commerce to the extent that it was ultimately superseded by the better prospects and freedom of the Ottoman market. Gradually, the opposing claims of the earlier Russian traffic were relegated to the background in the euphoria over the Turkey trade. Nevertheless, a conflict of interest must have arisen between the merchants who preferred the earlier trade route to those who believed that the Ottoman Empire offered a better means of reaching Asian markets.

It should not be forgotten that in the beginning of the enthusiasm over the Eastern trade, the Muscovy trading Company had included, in its list of shareholders, such powerful men as the Queen's councillors, Walsingham and William Cecil.²⁵

There is, therefore, sufficient evidence to reiterate that the association of the Privy Councillors, Walsingham and the Lord Admiral, with the convoluted politics of the Eastern trade, together with their promotion of acting companies that performed plays, about Central Asian war-lords, Turks and Persians, presents a combination of factors, that I believe, need to be addressed in any interpretation of the relevant

²³ *Ibid.*, p.288.

²⁴ Richard Hakluyt, *op.cit.*, pp.432, 433 and 494.

²⁵ Kenneth R. Andrews, *Trade, Plunder and Settlement: Maritime enterprise and the genesis of the British Empire 1480-1630* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp.76-7.

plays. I suggest that this congruence of commercial and dramatic interests provided a political context to the drama based on the East and offers a key to the apparent anomalies in the different dramatic portrayals of Eastern rulers which reflected the changing priorities of Eastern trade in the crucial years between 1580 and 1624.

I suggest that this critical method is particularly useful in the study of this play it requires an awareness of these political and social concerns. John Michael Archer has mentioned that Marlowe's career as a playwright and possibly a spy, associated with the Elizabethan intelligence network, had dramatic implications because 'if Marlowe's public affected his plays, the plays reacted in turn upon their audience'.²⁶

However, in the analysis of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, the response of the dramatist to the changing Anglo-Turkish relationship and its vicissitudes has generally been disregarded. For example, Harold Bloom concedes that there is a need for an 'appreciation of Marlowe as a poet who dealt subtly and ironically with the tensions between the secular and religious values of his day, complexly exploring the relation between the human and the divine and challenging the paradoxes and hypocrisies of theology and religious institutions'.²⁷

Yet, the play considered here is evidence of the tacit acceptance of the English advance towards the East with its immense wealth and power. Moreover, Turco-Persian rivalry is the other aspect of this Eastern theme in both the two plays of *Tamburlaine* (1587/88-9). An appraisal of this play presents to us a distinct attempt of one of the most popular English dramatists of the Elizabethan era, to portray, in his own individual way, the diplomatic and militaristic conflicts of the Persian and Ottoman Empires in the light of the official policy of the English regime. By inference, the drama also offers the possibility of the strategic advantage that the Europeans could conceivably take of the disunity of these Eastern nations. Moreover, an effort has also been made by the dramatist to resolve the opposing demands of the religious and commercial imperatives according to which the Islamic regimes were perceived, on the one hand, as enemies of Europe, while on the other, the Eastern trade was viewed as essential for the survival of the European economies. It is this contradiction in the ideological versus pragmatic

²⁶ John Michael Archer, *Sovereignty and Intelligence: Spying and Court Culture in the English Renaissance* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993), p.93.

²⁷ See *Christopher Marlowe* (ed.), introduced by Harold Bloom, (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002), p.17.

aspects of the English policy that forms the core dramatic problem of the play.

Marlowe's attempts to resolve this English dilemma by depicting a polarization of power in the East between the Turks on the one hand and on the other, nations such as those of the Central Asian war lords and Persians. The Turks were indeed presented as the ideological foe but the Persians were the potential foil with whom Christendom could have an identity of interest. Furthermore, to complicate the dramatic issues, antagonistic impulses of the various European nations who competed with each other to attain the cherished Eastern markets, and favours of the Turkish and Persian monarchs, are also to be detected in the play world.

In this context, I believe it is interesting to trace the progress of the main protagonist of *Tamburlaine*, in Part I and then in II.²⁸ As has already been noted above, in Marlowe's portrayal of the conqueror, the emphasis is on 'the thirst of raigne and sweetness of a crown' (I *Tamb.* II.vii.12). The dramatist has conflated all of the major personages of the Eastern world in his portrayal of the multiple personalities of Tamburlaine. Through various transformations, the protagonist gradually progresses from the role of a Scythian rogue of Volga who becomes a Tartar war lord, only to take on the mantle of the King of Persia. Finally, he defeats and destroys the Ottoman Sultan to become the leader of an Afro-Asian Empire which includes all of the Muslim nations of the world.

This appears to be a curiously subversive response to the problems posed by the idea of Eastern trade begun so enthusiastically by the Elizabethan government. A re-examination of this dramatic text will show that more than any other play, it is the definitive work that represents the oppositional aspirations of some Englishmen at a juncture

²⁸ *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*, I, p.75. Bowers estimates the date of the play to be 1587 for Part I and 1588 for Part II. He assumes that the text indicates that Marlowe saw Paul Ive's *Practice of Fortification* (1589) in manuscript form. All further references to the text of the play are from this edition. For an assumption of the later date of 1588-89 for the play, see U. M. Ellis-Fermor (ed.), *Tamburlaine the Great in Two Parts*, (London : Methuen & Co Ltd., 1930), p.9. Ive's work is considered to support the later date of the play. See also Christopher Marlowe, 'Tamburlaine The Great', J.S. Cunningham (ed.), *The Revels Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), pp. 2-3. Cunningham assumes the latest date of the play as 1588 on the basis of a remark by Robert Greene regarding the emergence of a new extravagant theatrical style associated with the 'Atheist Tamburlaine' (p.3).

of Anglo-Ottoman relation when the options presented by the earlier Muscovy-Central Asian trade routes to Persia were still viable, despite the new Turkish treaties.

If we deconstruct the character of Tamburlaine by exposing its anomalies, it appears that Marlowe's choice of his hero-villain was initially made to exploit the official promotion of Eastern enterprises. Yet, the protagonist is relentless in his pursuit of his role as 'the scourge and wrath of God' and 'the only fear and terror of the world' (I.Part. III.iii.44-45). The 'nihilistic destruction' ²⁹ perpetrated in the Ottoman lands and in all the Muslim states of the region appears to be a punishment that is meant to avenge the defeats and humiliations of Christendom. To corroborate this view, Martin Wiggins also finds that:

the most memorable and copied images in the two plays focus on acts of humiliation against defeated potentates: Bajazeth, once Emperor of the Turks now confined to an iron cage and fed with scraps on the end of his master's sword, and, in the sequel, Tamburlaine's entrance onto the stage in a chariot drawn by conquered kings instead of horses. Both landscape and people are figured as things to be dominated, and the audience is imaginatively aligned with the hero who grasps so eagerly for dominion: part of the play's appeal is that of fantasy of power.³⁰

Indeed, the spectacle of the humiliation of rulers who represent Eastern states was particularly reactionary in its impact, given the new sympathetic approach in Elizabethan policy towards the Turkish Empire. With regards to Eastern trade and travel, Kenneth Parker's assessment of the tentative, and perhaps contradictory, impulses of the English at this early juncture of Anglo-Turkish compacts can explain, I believe, many of the critical problems posed by Marlowe's play:

the predominant English hope was that what they saw as the inhuman scourge of Christianity that Milton several times calls 'the Turkish tyranny' would soon be defeated. Until that time, they hedged their bets.³¹

²⁹ Harold Bloom (ed.), *Elizabethan Drama* (Philadelphia: Chelsea Publishers, 2004), pp.1-26 (p.4). Bloom's introduction comments on the nihilism of the type of hero-villains common in not only Marlowe's play but also in the drama of the other playwrights of the era.

³⁰ Martin Wiggins, 'New Tragedies for Old' in *Elizabethan Drama*, Harold Bloom (ed.), (Philadelphia: Chelsea Publishers, 2004), pp.47-64 (p.51).

³¹ Kenneth Parker (ed.), *Early Modern Tales of Orient: A critical anthology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp.1-35 (p.29).

In the absence of a consideration of popular travel literature and the official records of state policy, the problem posed by the hero's brutal exploits have perplexed the critics so much that some, such as Harold Bloom, tend to dismiss the play as nothing more than a sensationalist work composed in the heroic style. Bloom contends that there is no morality, aesthetics or logic in Marlowe's work and that it is only the rhetoric of power that prevails.³²

However, the historical background, which I have brought to light within the context of my literary inquiry, reveals that the play, is more than a mere expression of Marlowe's 'impiety, audacity, worship of power, ambiguous sexuality, occult aspirations, defiance of moral order, and above all else a sheer exaltation of the possibilities of rhetoric, of the persuasive force of heroic poetry'.³³

I suggest that the play achieved unprecedented success in its day, not only due to its 'portrayal of passion' and the 'multiplicity of Marlowe's vision',³⁴ but primarily because it exploited the suppressed anxieties and hopes of the English public towards the topical matter of Anglo-Turkish commerce that was, as I have demonstrated, common knowledge by 1589.

This perspective is borne out by the portrayal of the chief protagonist. Whether in the persona of the thief of Volga or the Persian King, the character of Tamburlaine is primarily meant to challenge the monopoly of the Ottomans in the East. He is the facilitator, par-excellence, of western trade in the East as he annihilates all national boundaries and dominates Muslim lands, enabling the free movement of traders and merchants, both of the East and West. Moreover he voices the latent and suppressed animus against the Muslims that was the abiding sentiment in Europe due to the failure of the crusades and the Turkish defeat of the Byzantine Empire in 1453.

Set against this tradition of past hostilities, Tamburlaine, represents the cautious response of the English who were, perforce, confronted with the exigency of the new English and Ottoman relations. If the English were seeking a saviour, from within the East, to present them with an alternative to the Anglo-Ottoman alliance then it would have had to be either the Russian monarch or the King of Persia, as can be seen in the official communications between London, Moscow and

³² Harold Bloom (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.15.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.11.

³⁴ Eugene M. Waith, 'Marlowe and the Jades of Asia', *op.cit.*, pp.65-80 (p.66).

Esfahan.³⁵ Symbolically, Tamburlaine was the only legendary figure of Central Asia who could combine within his persona, the role of the two monarchs with their own individual agendas in the East. Marlowe, therefore, constructed his Tamburlaine in the tradition of European historians of the continent for whom the fabled life and deeds of Tamburlaine (1336-1405) had become a favourite subject. Renaissance writers like Jean Du-Bec Crespin portrayed him as an *exemplum* of martial success.³⁶ The Tartar warrior had gained his extraordinary reputation in Europe principally because he had successfully challenged and ultimately defeated the might of the Ottoman Empire. In 1402, when he destroyed the forces of Sultan Bajazeth of Turkey (1347-1403), he prevented the Ottomans from conquering Constantinople for another fifty years. For this reason, 'Christians came to regard Tamburlaine's victory over the infidel as an instance of providential intervention, and hence to enlist the invincible warrior as an unlikely ally in the struggle with Islam.'³⁷

Thomas Newton succinctly described his achievements in *A Notable Historie of the Saracens* (1557): 'Tamburlaine king of Scythia a man of obscure byrthe and pedagrew, grew to such power, that...He vanquished the Persians, overcame the Medians, subdued the Armenians, and spoiled all Egypt'.³⁸

For these early modern writers, the Scythian king became an inspirational figure for the beleaguered West. From his example, Europe could envisage the possibility of defeating the advancing Ottoman forces. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, European scholars of war and military strategists continued to study the life and achievements of this Tartar warrior.³⁹ He was the only oriental conqueror who had successfully launched a counter attack against the Ottomans from the Eastern borders of their vast Empire.

³⁵ See Richard Hakluyt, *op.cit.*, Vol.I.

³⁶ See Jean Du Bec-Crespin, *The Historie of the Great Emperour Tamerlane*, London, 1597, *The English Experience: Its record in Early Printed Books*, published in Facsimile, 38 (Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum Ltd., 1968).

³⁷ Vivien Thomas and William Tydeman (eds.), *Christopher Marlowe: The Plays and their Sources* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 73.

³⁸ Caelius Augustinus Curio, *A Notable Historie of the Saracens. As also of the Turkes, [etc] wherunto is annexed a compendius chronycle of their yeerely exploits, from Mahomets time tyll 1575. Drawen out of Augustine Curio and sundry other authors by T. Newton* (London: William How for Abraham Veale, 1575), *STC* 6129 and *STC* 18512, p. 129.

³⁹ Vivien Thomas and William Tydeman (eds.), *op.cit.*, p.70.

English historians like Knolles were careful to note that Tamburlaine's victory over Bajazeth had avenged the wrongs done to neighbouring principalities which had been oppressed by the hitherto unopposed forces of the Sultan:

In this great and bloodie warre, wherein the Othoman empire had almost taken end, the Sultan of Egypt had (as is aforesaid giuen) aid to Baiazet: which Tamerlane tooke in so euill part, as that he resolved to be thereof reuenged. For as he was vnto his friends of all others most kind and courteous, so was he to his enemies no lesse terrible and dreadfull. Yet thinking it good before his departure out of the lesser ASIA, to take some good order with these his new conquests: and finding nothing more honourable to resolute vpon, he restored vnto the poore Mahometane princes [...] and the rest before fled vnto him for refuge) all their ancient inheritance, with something more; as he did diuers cities and countries of NATOLIA vnto the Greeke emperour...⁴⁰

It is interesting that in this celebration of the Tartar who vanquished the Turks, Marlowe appealed to the nostalgia for the days when the Ottomans had been discomfited. This effort to reproduce the bygone era of Turkish disintegration suggests an initial resistance to the Elizabethan efforts to solicit Ottoman cooperation at the official level.

Moreover, present day critics, unaware of these undercurrents, have been perplexed by the dramatist's valourization of Tamburlaine in spite of his savage excesses and cruel exploits and have merely located him in the context of colonial concerns. There are also various inconsistencies in the depiction of his progress within the two parts of the play that require an investigation into the images of imperial conquest. Its style and manner influenced most of the subsequent plays about the East, even if the ideas projected through the portrayal of Tamburlaine were not unanimously adopted by later playwrights. There is a general consensus among critics that there were numerous performances of this play by the Admiral's men before and during 1595, as well as constant references to its popularity in the early seventeenth century.⁴¹

An extensive survey of modern critical voices reveals that the play has continued to invite speculation and interest. Attempts have been made to find some meaning that transcends a simplistic view of this work as just another historical spectacle that exploited the Elizabethan

⁴⁰ Richard Knolles, *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* (London: A. Islip, 1603), *STC* 15051, p.223.

⁴¹ U.M. Ellis-Fermor (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.62.

taste for exoticism and military heroics.⁴² Elizabethan spectators might well have been prompted to compare the activities of Tamburlaine with European pioneers and travellers of the East in their own time.

Basically, the play dramatizes Timur the Lame's victorious progress in the East and his defeat of the two Muslim states that menaced Christian Byzantium. Brian Gibbons states:

Though in the short term this brought relief to the Christians, in the long run it led to their defeat. Though sixteenth century European knowledge of Asia was imperfect in substance and muddled in method, the colossal scale of the subject was obvious. That Marlowe takes with utmost seriousness the secular significance of this background may be seen in his focus on 'the nature of imperialism, both as a cultural phenomenon and in its individual human embodiment in the hero. Tamburlaine, in short, is not a play concerned with the past; indeed its hero asserts that he will make all the map of the world obsolete by discovering new regions, and his new map of the world will have his conquest of Damascus at its meridian.⁴³

Despite this cultural context, some commentators have assumed that the play is no more than a projection of a young dramatist's own egoistic ambitions.⁴⁴ Developing this idea in wider political terms, William Zunder asserts that Marlowe's protagonist reveals 'the radical individualism of Part I of *Tamburlaine* which saw no boundary of any kind to human aspiration, moderated by a sense of natural limit in part two'.⁴⁵ Yet, it is pertinent to the historical background that the challenge to orthodox social and moral thinking presented by Tamburlaine is not confronted in the heroic plays that followed.⁴⁶ Clearly, there seems to be

⁴² Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.147.

⁴³ Brian Gibbons, 'Romance and the heroic play' in *English Renaissance Drama*, A. R. Braunmuller and Michael Hattaway (eds.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 2003), pp.197-227 (p.213).

⁴⁴ For a psychological analysis of Marlowe's creative development, see Mathew N. Proser, *The Gift of Fire: Aggression and the Plays of Christopher Marlowe*, Renaissance and Baroque Studies and Texts, Vol. 12 (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

⁴⁵ William Zunder, 'Discourse and dialectic: the work of Christopher Marlowe' in *Writing and the English Renaissance*, William Zunder and Suzanne Trill (eds.), (London and New York: Longman, 1996), pp.33-50 (p.49).

⁴⁶ Brian Gibbons, *op.cit.*, p.214.

a political implication in the Eastern scenario dramatized in the play that was specifically related to the 1580s.

In broader historical terms, Stephen Greenblatt finds that the play is relevant because it subverts the assumptions of the traditional cautionary tale. It is the providential view of history that is undermined by Marlowe. The dramatic intent is 'to challenge the habit of mind that looks to heaven for rewards and punishments, that imagines human evil as 'the scourge of God'.⁴⁷ This interpretation ascribes a secular historical intent to the plot and characterization.

Emily C. Bartels represents another modern approach to the play. She perceives the amoral aspect of early modern imperialism in the play which mirrors contemporary concepts of the 'alien' nations. In her view, Tamburlaine is neither 'a god or a fiend nor spirit of the earth, but an imperialist, strategically constructing a self of remarkable ignominy or nobility from his spectator's expectations'.⁴⁸ The Eastern personages are characterized in this manner in order to 'display a contemptible barbarity and an admirable 'might' demanding our containment'.⁴⁹

These critical ideas are generally based on the premise that Marlowe's Tamburlaine displays the Renaissance urge to embark on an aggressive imperialist course against the East. I suggest, on the other hand, that the English strategic perceptions of Eastern warriors were distinct from that of the rest of the European writers because of the unique nature of Anglo-Eastern relations at that juncture. It is clear from the actual state of English negotiations and mercantile ventures in the East that such notions of domination were premature at that stage of history. What is more credible is that Englishmen were on the brink of a revolutionary choice in their economic and political field of action, as can be noted in Hakluyt's works. The options that the English could explore in the East were directly related to monetary rather than colonial gain. At that point in time, the English government and merchants were constrained to choose between the Turkish as opposed to the Russo-Persian markets. Thus, it is pertinent to consider the military exploits of the dramatic character of Tamburlaine in the light of the English national aspirations and trade in the East.

⁴⁷ Stephen Greenblatt 'Marlowe and the Will to Absolute Play' in *New historicism and Renaissance Drama*, edited and introduced by Richard Wilson and Richard Dutton (London and New York: Longman Group Limited, 1992), pp.57-82 (p. 66).

⁴⁸ Emily C. Bartels, *Spectacles of Strangeness: Imperialism, Alienation, and Marlowe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1993), p.66.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.59.

In this regard, it is relevant to discover how Marlowe employs historical material for his own purposes. Earlier in this century, critics like Chew and Fermor had also indicated that Marlowe introduced changes in Tamburlaine's history that were anachronistic. Allusions to contemporary experiences of travellers in the East suggest that the playwright's thoughts were 'upon conditions in his own day rather than upon those of the beginning of the fifteenth century'.⁵⁰ Indeed the entire imagery of the two plays is imbued with allusions to traders and merchandise. In the first Act of Part I, Tamburlaine's occupation of Persia is occasioned by the 'folly' of its kings to control the trade routes with the result that the 'maimed empery' with its rich resources has suffered depredations from foreign exploitation:

Men from the farthest equinoctial line
Have swarmed in troops into the Eastern India,
Lading their ships with gold and precious stones,
And made their spoils from all provinces. (I. Tamb. I.i.120-123)

In my view, the basis of Tamburlaine's desire for the Persian crown is given mercantile motivation in the play. The insatiable greed for power and empire are justified in terms of precious mineral and geological treasures that were prized by merchants travelling to the Persian regions. Babylon's destruction under the command of Tamburlaine is also conveyed in the vivid images of its governor hanging in chains on the battered walls of the city, pleading for his life with tantalizing promises of 'Limnasphaltis lake/ There lies more gold than Babylon is worth' (I. V.i.115-116).

It is tempting to compare these descriptions of the riches of the Middle Eastern regions with Hakluyt's publications of the commercial affairs of the Muscovy trading company in the same areas. In this way, these historical records become pertinent to our understanding of plays like *Tamburlaine*.

A reminder of the crosscurrents of internal European rivalry over the exploitation of Eastern markets at the time the play was written is long overdue. I also believe that if we were to specifically explore the contentious matter of the Turco-Persian conflict and England's commercial stake in the region, the character of Tamburlaine and the many personae he adopts acquire dramatic meaning and clarity. The

⁵⁰ Samuel Chew, *The Crescent and the Rose* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937), p.472. See Ellis-Fermor's 187n. and 235n. for the geographical information Marlowe appears to have had about the topography of India and Persia. This kind of detailed awareness of oriental maps is also to be found in Hakluyt.

historical context of Elizabethan concerns with the Central Asian routes and the problems posed by Russo-Persian hostility to the Ottomans, impart a symbolic purpose to the portrayal of Tamburlaine's encounters with different Turkish and Eastern dominions. Considered in this light, Marlowe's work becomes charged with the energies of the social and ideological changes of the 1580s that affected the allegiances of Englishmen who were not accustomed to viewing the Ottomans as anything but foes. The re-orientation of English policy in favour of the Turks was bound to be problematic issue for many brought up with the traditional notions of East-West conflicts.⁵¹

The play appears to revive the medieval hostilities of the Turks, Persians and Tartars and is therefore relevant to a late sixteenth century climate of uncertainty in the outcome of the English pacts with the different nations of the East. I suggest that the moral ambiguity due to the contrary political and mercantile impulses driving Elizabethan policy towards the Turks and Russians in the 1580s, is pivotal to Tamburlaine's own confrontations with his enemies. The antithetical opinions which either advocated friendship with the Ottomans or resisted the concept by favouring the Russo-Persians, inform the imagery and theme of the play. This aspect of Marlowe's dramatic work is endorsed by the fact that it appeared at the transitional stage of Elizabethan economic development when the commerce with Turkey was still in its infancy and the Russo-Persian alliances with England had not yet been rejected.

The remnants of the antiquated habit of perceiving the Turks and other Muslim rulers of Egypt and Asia as the inveterate enemies of western Christendom while at the same time assuming that the Scythian-Tartars could reinforce the defence of Europe, appears to form the underlying ideology of *Tamburlaine* and the depiction of the protagonist's wars in the East. It is this dramatic design which is revealed in the following analysis of Tamburlaine's several identities in the two parts of Marlowe's play.

Significantly, in Part I, the play focuses on the regions of Asia that included the mercantile route of the Volga and the Caspian which lead to the Persian Empire. It is certainly no coincidence that these were the geographical regions about which Hakluyt wrote extensively in connection with the Muscovy trade, in the first edition of the *Principall Nauigations* (1589).⁵² The concurrence of the later date of the play and

⁵¹ Matthew Dimmock, *Dramatizing Islam and the Ottomans in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p.161. Dimmock finds the Ottoman Turk to be the focus of Christian fears about Islam.

⁵² Richard Hakluyt, *op.cit.*

the publication date of Hakluyt's volume suggests either that Marlowe was familiar with Hakluyt's writings, if only in manuscript form or that the reports of the early voyages of Anthony Jenkinson had already been in circulation since the 1570s.⁵³ Clearly, the playwright was inspired by the currency of this issue and the threatening prospect of the alternative commerce with the Ottoman lands. An analysis of the several guises assumed by Tamburlaine in the first part of the play suggests that the cumulative effect of his various roles is to reinforce the message of conquest in terms of commerce and profit.

The Russo-Tartar area is particularly mentioned in the accounts of early travellers like Anthony Jenkinson whose mercantile journeys were undertaken mainly in this part of the world.⁵⁴ In his first edition (1589),⁵⁵ Hakluyt republished extracts of the traveller's experiences, implying that they were still of interest to his readers. Based on textual evidence, it is my contention, that Marlowe drew certain parallels between the Russian Tsar and Tamburlaine. The possible influence of Jenkinson's aims and ambitions on the portrait of the Tartar and Persian king requires some consideration. Beyond a brief reference by Chew⁵⁶, the narrative of Jenkinson's experiences has not attracted the attention of critics. Although the account was in circulation since the 1570s, the idea of its connection with Marlowe's Tamburlaine has not yet been mentioned.

Moreover, the Tsar's reputation and inhuman treatment of Russian subjects implies a parallel with the Scythian Tamburlaine and his brutal behaviour towards his Muslim adversaries. Tamburlaine's barbarous treatment of opponents loses some of its horrifying effect when considered in the light of the contemporary English tolerance of the Tsar's methods of government.

⁵³ Edward Webbe's 'The rare and most wonderful things' (1590), with its reference to the earliest journeys of Englishmen like Jenkinson to the Russian regions in *Early Modern Tales*, Kenneth Parker (ed.), (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 36-47 (p.37). For the possibility of the link between Marlowe and the group of intellectuals, including Hakluyt, patronized by Lord Northumberland, see A. D. Wraight and Virginia F. Sterns, *In Search of Christopher Marlowe: A Pictorial Biography* (Chichester: Adam Hart, 1965, 1993), pp.148-49.

⁵⁴ Edward Webbe, 'The rare and most wonderful things (1590)' in *Early Modern Tales of the Orient*, *ibid.*, pp.36-47. He writes of the Crim-Tartarians who were known as the 'New Christians' and regularly 'made war upon the city of Moscow' (p.38).

⁵⁵ Richard Hakluyt, *op.cit.*, pp.365-74.

⁵⁶ Samuel Chew, *op.cit.*, pp.207-13.

References to the 'rogue of Volga' (I.iv.4) hint at a conflated image of the Tartar and the Muscovite. Tamburlaine, himself, proudly refers to his 'martiall prises with five hundred men,/ Won on the fiftie headed Volgas waves' (I.ii.102-103). English merchants, who had read accounts of travellers like Jenkinson and were aware of the contacts between England and Russia, could easily draw comparisons between the exploits of the mythical Tamburlaine and the petty tyrant in 'Muscovia'.

Ivan the Terrible's campaigns in the region have some similarity with the style of Tamburlaine's challenges to the dynastic ruler of this region, the King of Persia. Tamburlaine's rebellion against the incumbent king is designed to overthrow his reign before he can progress to conquer the rest of the East. As a Tartar renegade in charge of his 'lawless traine', he defies the Persian king's monopoly over 'Trading by land unto the Western Isles' (I. I.39). The Persians, in turn, accuse him of being the 'sturdie Scythian thiefe/ that robs your merchants of *Persepolis*' (I.i.37), indicating that Tamburlaine challenges the rights of Persian merchants to traffic in this region. It is with these tactics that he means to 'reigne in Asia' (I.i.42). The Persians, for their part, hope to 'Passe into Grecia, as did Cyrus once.../ subdue the pride of Christendom' (I.i.130-132). In contrast, Tamburlaine, as cited above, emerges as a champion of the Christian merchants with the ambition of gaining 'conquered kingdoms' and 'Cities sackt' (I.ii.192) of the Islamic lands.

The metaphors used to describe Tamburlaine reveal that the dramatist took some pains to portray him in the light of all that was admired and lauded in the western tradition. To the Persian nobility, itself a reminder of the classical past, he is no less than a heroic figure:

Menaphon: A pearle more worth, then all the world is plaste:
Wherein by curious soveraintie of Art,
Are fixt his piercing instruments of sight:
Whose fiery cyrcles beare encompassed
A heaven of heavenly bodies in their Spheares
That guides his steps and actions to the throne,
Where honor sits invested royally:
Pale of complexion: wrought in him with passion,
Thirsting with soverainty, with love of armes:
His lofty browes in foldes, do figure death,
And in their smoothnesse, amitie and life:
About them hangs a knot of Amber heire,
Wrapped in curles, as fierce *Achilles* was,
On which the breath of heaven delights to play,

Making it dance with wanton majestie:
 His armes and fingers long and sinowy,
 Betokening valour and excesse of strength:
 In every part proportioned like the man,
 Should make the world subdued to *Tamburlaine*. (II.i.12-30)

Significantly, allusions to 'Pale' complexion, 'Amber heire', 'fierce *Achilles*' and Tamburlaine's boast that his 'Camp is like to *Julius Caesars* Hoste' (III.iii,152), lend a Caucasian and European identity to the image of the Scythian shepherd. This portrayal of the hero who vanquishes the 'circumcised Turkes' and 'warlike bands of Christians renied' (III.i.8-9), is at odds with the usual Eastern historical perception of Tamburlaine as an oriental who led an insurrection against the Ottomans from within Asia. In this way, Marlowe takes liberties with not only the topography and ethnology of the man but also exploits the various Latin, Spanish, French and English biographies to reinvent the Tartar.⁵⁷

Again, the English audience is invited to establish a sense of affinity in motives and intentions with the mythic figure of the Scythian when he meets the Turks after he has assumed the mantle of the Persian king. He is consistently glorified as the conqueror who defeats and humiliates Bajazeth, the Ottoman Sultan. Tamburlaine's war with the Turks is shown as a means of diverting the Ottomans from usurping the Byzantine Empire and advancing into Europe:

Theridamas. Even he that in a trice vanquisht two kings,
 More mighty than the Turkish Emperour:
 Shall rouse him out of Europe, and pursue
 His scattered armie til they yeeld or die (III.iii.36-39).

Tamburlaine, in the guise of the newly established Persian king, commences this 'crusade' when he sets out to deliver the nations from the Turkish yoke:

Tamburlaine. I that am term'd the Scourge and Wrath of God,
 The onely feare and terrour of the world,
 Wil first subdue the Turke, and then inlarge
 Those Christian Captives, which you keep as slaves,
 Burdening their bodies with heauey chaines,
 And feeding them with thin and slender fare,
 That naked rowe about the Terrene sea. (III.iii.44-50)

⁵⁷ See *Christopher Marlowe: The Plays and their Sources*, for the study of the sources of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and his use of the material to create his own character.

Thus, from his origins as a Scythian shepherd, he evolves into a world ruler who can measure 'the limits of his Emperie/ By East and west' (I.ii.39-40). The dramatist elevates Tamburlaine's mercenary intention to secure oriental trade routes, by conveying his desire to emancipate the Christians held captive by the Turks. Repetitive invocations to a godhead, whose terms of reference are classical rather than medieval, suggests an attempt to lend a divine sanction to Tamburlaine's progress. His fate is ruled by a power that is in direct opposition to the ostensibly Islamic faith of his victims, as admitted by the resigned Bajazeth: 'But such a star hath influence in his sword,/As rules the Skies, and countermands the Gods.' (V.i.232-233).

Tamburlaine's other enemies are also given some opportunity by Marlowe to express the alternative views about the controversial Tartar. The vanquished from the ranks of the ancient royalty of Egyptians, Arabians and Turks, perceive him to be 'the great Tartarian thiefe' (III, iii, 171), 'Gorgon, prince of Hell' (IV.i.17) and 'The Scum of men, the hate and Scourge of God' (IV.iii.9). However, these voices of dissent are drowned in the general celebration of his victories that provide their own justification.

Renaissance apologists for Tamburlaine were emphatic about his stature as an admirable monarch in the history of empires and warfare. Assertions of his good faith can be found in Jean Du Bec-Crespin's work on the Emperor. Tamburlaine is endowed by the author with a deep commitment to justice and respect for all religions, including that of his Christian allies, such as the Greeks: 'for I cannot believe but God is delighted with the diuersity of religions, hating only those which are without any religion'.⁵⁸

It is, therefore, not surprising that the play does not depart from tradition when it incorporates the divine purpose in Tamburlaine's progress as evident in the repeated invocations to some deity or other in every scene and by almost every character. What is noteworthy is that the physical struggles on stage are given a religious connotation when the protagonist fights the Muslims nations, chiefly represented by the Turks.

Sultan Bajazeth fulfils his role as the symbol of Ottoman repression without any ameliorating characteristic, transforming Tamburlaine's war against the Turk simply into an anti-Muslim struggle, even though Tamburlaine was in fact a Muslim himself, historically. The political and strategic wars between the Tartar ruler and Turkish emperor had no religious basis according to historical records.

⁵⁸ Jean Du Bec-Crespin, *op.cit.*, p.127.

Marowe's play does not suggest that the two antagonists in fact shared the same religious tradition. There is also no mention of the fact that when his Tartar and other Muslim soldiers deserted him, Bajazeth was aided by Christian troops who remained his loyal tributaries:

Who neuertheless with his own men of warre, especially the Janizaries, and the helpe of the Christian souldiers brought to his aid from SERUIA, and other places of EUROPE, with great courage maintained the fight.⁵⁹

Bajazeth's futile prayers and laments represent him distinctly as the Islamic champion (III.iii.75-76), regardless of the historical fact that Serbian and other Balkan Christians formed a substantial part of his followers.

The dichotomy between the Scythian and the Turk is nowhere more apparent than in Bajazet's impotent and ineffectual rage at his humiliating loss of power. He is a foil to enhance the virility and power of Tamburlaine who declares with comfortable assurance that 'Turkes are full of brags/And menace more than they can wel performe' (III.iii.3-4). The romanticized treatment of Tamburlaine's character, metamorphosed into the role of the Persian Emperor, favours the conqueror to the detriment of the Turk who is shown as a suicidal and decadent character, contrary to the actual image of Bajazeth's heroic stance in history.

Tamburlaine is personified as the iconoclast who defeats and humiliates the traditional representatives of Islamic power like Bajazeth (III.iii), his allies and subjects: the King of Arabia and the governor of Damascus (V.i.). The 'Souldane' of Egypt, Zenocrate's father, is another defeated Muslim ruler whose land suffers the atrocities of war wrought by Tamburlaine. However, in contrast with Knolles' account, the Souldan's kingdom is returned to him as a token of Tamburlaine's love for his daughter and a sign of Tamburlaine's magnanimity ((V.i.447-449). This gesture is aimed at distracting the audience's attention from previous scenes of bloodshed, torture and the pathetic suicide of the Sultan and his wife (V.i.287-318). Most horrifyingly, the massacre of virgins, which was seen to accompany Tamburlaine's conquest of Damascus (V.i.121-128), is swiftly replaced by sublime contemplations on Zenocrate's 'Beauty, mother to the Muses' (V.i.144).

Not only is Tamburlaine's resistance to the Turk and the atrocities he commits validated by his union with the Egyptian princess, there is also an assertion of the religious mood which equates his ascendancy with a destiny that transcends human scruples. Thus the

⁵⁹ Richard Knolles, *op.cit.*, p.219.

destruction and genocide of entire populations that are seen to have been intransigent appears to need no excuse or apology. Tamburlaine rejects all pleas for mercy by invoking the laws of Nature: 'And know my custumes are as peremptory/ As wrathfull Planets, death, or destinie' (V.i.127-8). The responsibility for the slaughter of the virgins of Damascus is unequivocally the Governor's who, in the words of the Virgins, should have considered their 'securities' instead of his 'obdurate' pride (V.i.29-30). Tamburlaine's destructive policy of inflicting punishments on his defeated foe appears, paradoxically, to have some rationale. He promises to consolidate the *Souldan* of Egypt's kingdom in a gesture that appears both self-vindicating and righteous:

Since I shall render all into your hands.
And ad more strength to your dominions
Than ever yet confirm'd th' Egyptian Crown
The God of war resignes his rounge to me,
Meaning to make me Generall of the world (V.i.447-451).

The spectacle of the Tartar warrior's sweeping successes evoke the image of the pagan Mongol hordes on the Eastern plains in the era of Gengiz Chan two centuries before, as Tamburlaine appears to be a reincarnation of his ancestor who caused such devastation to the Islamic East. Contrary to all historical accounts, there is an absence of any Islamic quality in Tamburlaine, both in his speeches and in all his confrontations with his Islamic adversaries in part I. This may be an attempt by the dramatist to portray his hero as the agent of revolutionary change in the Eastern lands.

The dramatist's revival of Tartar victories of the medieval age seeks to obliterate time and space between the eras of Gengiz and Tamburlaine, as if intervening history could be erased. The protagonist consumes all the civilizations he encounters in his march across the Asian continent. Marlowe's Tamburlaine embodies the medieval Christian policy towards the Tartars. According to this strategy, which conflated the religious imperative with political necessity, Pope Innocent had sent his apostolic mission to the Tartars to convert them. Many European rulers had in the fifteenth and sixteenth century sent ambassadors to the Persian Safavi kings to also involve them in their grand designs to create an alliance against the Turks that, however, did not receive any response from the Persians.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ See Ghulam Sarwar, *History of Shah Ismail* (Muslim University, Aligarh: Published by the author, 1939), pp.86-9. Sixteenth century documents reveal a correspondence that took place between the first ruler of the Safavi dynasty and the Emperor of Germany, Karl V, the King of Switzerland and

Marlowe privileges the Tartar/Persian like those European historians who supported closer ties with Persia as a strategic manoeuvre to provide a diversion for Ottoman forces in Asia and deflect the Turkish offensive from Europe. By implication, Marlowe appears to have undermined the contemporary English policy that perceived greater advantage in friendship with the Turks.

The dramatist's legitimizes his Eastern hero's materialistic progress by making the oriental warrior the nexus of ambitions that conflate worldly ambition with the force of divine vocation to punish the transgressors in the East. In the guise of the Persian King, Tamburlaine becomes an almost democratic inspiration to overthrow corrupt monarchies in the East represented by the Souldane of Egypt, the Syrian rulers and the prince of Arabia, regardless of any collateral damage, suffered by the victims. Tamburlaine is given the role of the new demagogue without lineage or royal prerogative, irrespective of several histories that did accurately describe him as the descendent of the Mongol dynasty who had inherited his crown from his uncle.⁶¹ The only claim of Marlowe's adventurer to fame and fortune is the innately masculine principle of chivalric valour in which murder, rape and pillage are subsumed to assert the grand ideal of waging wars of attrition. Combined with his role as the wrath of God, his ruthless aggression earns him the right to be the conqueror of the East who 'Shal give the world to note, for all my byrth,/That virtue solely is the sum of glorie' (.V.i.188-189). Marlowe attempted to transmute all that was repulsive into a transcendent image of surpassing grandeur.

However, in part II, we detect some shift of perspective when Marlowe uses the Orcanes versus Sigismund sub-plot to suggest the hypocritical and expedient element in Turco-Christian alliances. In this episode of the Tamburlaine saga, it is the Turks who emerge as relatively more sincere than their antagonists. When the King of Hungary and the Turkish Orcanes take a religious oath to confirm their treaties, it is the Christian who reneges on it 'with expedition to assail the Pagan,/ And take the victorie our God hath given' (II.i.62-63). The Turk, who has remained faithful, wins this battle, as if to endorse the belief that divine aid is with those who keep their contracts, regardless of their particular religion:

Orcanes: Now lie the Christians bathing in their bloods,
And Christ or Mahomet hath bene my friend (II.ii.10-11).

the king of Hungary. This suggests their desire for collaboration with Persia for strategic purposes in Asia.

⁶¹ Jean Du Bec-Crespin, *op.cit.*, p.15.

By inference, the paradoxes inherent in the Elizabethan policy towards the Russo-Caspian area are brought to the fore. There is an admission of the lack of Christian solidarity and distrust of the motives of Christian statesmen. Critics have assumed that this indicates a deeply pessimistic approach towards religion.⁶² I suggest, on the other hand that a change of emphasis was brought about by introducing the idea that Muslims are better at keeping faith than Christians, in political terms and contracts. It indicates that the English government could no longer rely on the sense of Christian unity in a Europe that was deeply divided by sectarianism. Although the English merchants were still pursuing the Muscovite trade, the current English policy was paving the way for greater access through the Turkish and Muslim regions. Thus, the second part of the play indicates a shift in the dramatist's allegiance, with the Turkish cause receiving greater sympathy and objective treatment. Victims of Tartar aggression, such as Olympia (III.iii), show courage and fortitude of a kind not seen in the plight of the virgins of Damascus in the first part. This is also evident in the predicament of Bajazeth's son, Calapine, who was imprisoned by Tamburlaine (I.ii.) and kept by his humane jailor, Almeda. The 'Scourge of God' motif is also trivialized as Tamburlaine's sons are shown wrangling over who should inherit the title (I.iii. 61-62) as if it were a game.

Tamburlaine's role suffers a degeneration in its qualities as he loses the element of grace symbolized by Zenocrate who dies leaving him to be scourged by 'the Scourge of the Immortall God' (II.iv.80). While Tamburlaine's barbaric persecution of his enemies remains the same, it no longer appears to have any divine function and is merely 'wars justice' (IV.i.147). When the Turkish concubines are distributed ruthlessly among his soldiers (IV.i 160-161), Tamburlaine's repeated claims of exercising divine power lack conviction and are not accompanied by any thoughts on Virtue or Nobility, as in Part I. Indeed, the body of Calyphas, the son Tamburlaine murders, only reinforces the image of arbitrary and self-destructive cruelty (IV.i.162-164), and forecasts the eventual decline of Tamburlaine's empire.

The principle of conquest has lost its grandeur but the high note of commercial travel and geographical knowledge is again reasserted in Tamburlaine's dying speech. He summarizes his life by charting his progress on the map of the East, in the manner of a business tycoon rather than a tyrant:

Here I began to march towards *Persea*,
Along *Armenia* and the Caspian sea,

⁶² Stevie Simkin, *Marlowe: The Plays* (London: Palgrave, 2001), p.104.

And thence unto *Bythinia*, where I tooke
 The Turke and his great Empresse prisoners,
 Then marcht I into *Egypt* and *Arabia*,
 And here not far from *Alexandria*
 Wheras the Terren and the red sea meet,
 Being distant lesse than ful a hundred leagues,
 I meant to cut a channell to them both,
 That men might quickly saile to *India*. (V.iii.126-135).

Tamburlaine is seen to die of his own excesses. The pseudo-scientific explanation given by the physician resists any moral interpretation of his death as a judgement for his blasphemous acts:

The Humidum and Calor, which some holde
 Is not a parcell of the Elements,
 But of a substance more divine and pure,
 Is almost cleane extinguished and spent (V.iii.86-89)

Critics have noted and debated on the scenes of his death. He is shown to have fallen ill soon after repudiating Islam in one of his final proclamations. In my view, the problem posed by this act, which has no historical veracity, of repudiation exposes it as nothing more than Marlowe's ironic strategy in playing to the gallery while at the same time subverting the assumptions of Elizabethan Christian morality. Even when Tamburlaine burns the holy book of Muslims, he is made to echo the Muslim creed of the One God. Thus, the defiant act is meaningless and may indeed suggest Marlowe's tacit acknowledgement of his historical sources in which Timur the Lame believed, as a Muslim, in the oneness of God and was never an apostate from the Muslim point of view.

Seek out another Godhead to adore,
 The God that sits in heaven, if any God,
 For he is God alone, and none but he. (V.i.199-201)

This anomalous passage has created a contentious issue among critics about Tamburlaine's death that happens soon after the burning of the holy book. It has led many English critics to conclude that Marlowe's hero is a victim of his own blasphemy. Martin Wiggins states that 'Tamburlaine is guilty of sacrilege only in Islamic terms alien to playgoers who were Christian by law and habit even if not by zealous personal conviction and so there can be no easy moral reading to the guide the audience: it must in the words of the previous play's prologue, applaud his fortunes as it pleases'.⁶³ Even in Marlowe's day, there was some doubt as to how this scene was to be interpreted. On the one hand,

⁶³ Martin Wiggins, *op.cit.*, pp.47-63 (p.53).

there was an allegation by his enemies that Marlowe may have believed in the Turkish faith. In fact, in 1598, William Rankins referred to Marlowe and condemned him for his association with the enemy, a common charge against one presumed to be an atheist:

Such as have hell-borne Atheisme taught,
Accounting scriptures customes that are naught,
Such as are earnest Turks, where is a Turke,
And call the Alchoran a godly worke.⁶⁴

In analysing this extremely contradictory passage, critics have drawn parallels with Marlowe's dissident religious views which were considered to be the basis for Richard Baines'⁶⁵ libel and the dramatist's eventual arrest.⁶⁶ Even if we were to assume that the Elizabethans considered the refutation of Islamic belief synonymous with atheism, I do not find that the play suggests such an unequivocal reading. Tamburlaine's rejection of the Holy Book in the play is deeply offensive as far as Muslims are concerned, but at the same time this gesture is rendered meaningless as Tamburlaine recites the Islamic statement of belief that confirms the Oneness of God and is the witness or 'shahadah' to the unity of God who is wholly and utterly indivisible and unique in essence and attributes. He proclaims a part of the Islamic 'Tawhid' that is the sum total and the very basis of Islamic theology: 'there is no god but God and Muhammad is God's Messenger'.⁶⁷ Thus, Marlowe has left a question about his own belief that has continued to engage the critics in controversy to this day.

In fact, the cause of Tamburlaine's fatal illness (Tamb.V.iii.82-99), according to the 'Phisitian', does not indicate a palpable association between his death and his subversive pronouncement. On the contrary, the natural cause of death given in the play concurs with the account of Silva de Varia Lecion,⁶⁸ considered to be one of Marlowe's sources. The hero's death is no more than the inevitable closure of an extraordinary

⁶⁴ Millar Maclure (ed.), *Marlowe: The Critical Heritage 1588-1896, The Critical Heritage Series*, B.C.Southam (gen.ed.), (London, Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 42-3 (p.43).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.36-8.

⁶⁶ William Urry, *Christopher Marlowe and Canterbury*, Andrew Butcher (ed.), (London, Faber and Faber, 1988), p.81.

⁶⁷ Reza Aslan, *No god but God: The origins, Evolution and Future of Islam* (New York: Random House, 2005), p.150.

⁶⁸ Vivien Thomas and William Tydeman (eds.), *op.cit.*, p.89.

episode in history. In any event, it is 'the pivotal moment representing the toppling of the all conquering Tamburlaine from his seemingly unassailable status'.⁶⁹

It is therefore plausible to assume that in Tamburlaine's end, Marlowe brought the successful career of a man, destined to be the Scourge of God and conqueror of the East, to a natural conclusion. In my view, the protagonist had served his function and accomplished Marlowe's mission of presenting the European movement towards the East on the basis of mercantile, as well as religious motives for Englisemen.

I suggest that it is not the nature of Tamburlaine's demise that is significant but the diminished anti-Turkish or pro-Persian rhetoric. It is this change that offers an insight into Part II. While Part I conveyed the dual nature of the English policy towards the East, and the doubts about the Turkish alliance, Part II indicates an expedient compromise with a *fait accompli*. The violent sentiments of the earlier part are subtly transformed by the introduction of a more ambivalent and a less than celebratory tone in the characterization of Tamburlaine in Part II. The decidedly cynical note of the sequel reveals that the dramatist may have exhausted his subject. It also suggests the fact that the Anglo-Ottoman treaties were an integral part of the new direction the Elizabethan government had taken and the idea of any threat to this lucrative trade was no longer admissible. Christopher Marlowe's play remains of interest to us to this day because it demonstrates how the processes of vested politics and national interests are implicated in the intellectual and historical method of representing the East in literary works. The literary writers task in English literature appears, after all, to take the chronicles of history and arrange them in a spectacle by characterizing the chronicle in terms of 'inaugural motifs'.⁷⁰ Marlowe wrote his play to inaugurate the new chapter of British history by introducing the motif of world trade, at whatever cost, to the English audience for which purpose England would eventually become a power not only in the middle East but also in South East Asia. The establishment of the East India Company in 1600 clearly showed the success of England's trade policy in Turkey which allowed the English merchants a safe passage into the ports necessary for its access to the greater markets of the Indian subcontinent, very much in the manner of Tamburlaine's projected international trade.

⁶⁹ Stevie Simkin, *op.cit.*, p.85.

⁷⁰ See Hadyen White, 'Introduction to Metahistory', in *Literature in the Modern World*, Dennis Walder (ed.), (Oxford: OUP, 2004), pp. 444-49.