



Tamburlaine the Great

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The story of the poor shepherd who becomes the conqueror of kings must have been attractive to Christopher Marlowe, son of a carpenter. In two parts, the play depicts Tamburlaine's rise from humble beginnings to his death, not in battle but from disease.

Marlowe's Tamburlaine yearns for conquest, not because he has any plan for progress or improvement but simply to glorify himself. That the 16th century could have seen such a man as heroic tells us much about that time. The play gave its audience a political model just as the first English empire was being formed.

Part of the play's appeal was the spectacle it presented: A famous scene brings Tamburlaine on stage in his chariot drawn by vanquished kings.

More important than the story, however, is the way that Marlowe tells it. This was the first English play to use blank verse, a ten-syllable line with the rhythmic alternation of weakly and strongly accented syllables. Some critics have called the language of the play bombastic, yet it created a sensation among playgoers and writers. Marlowe himself was to do better in later works, and the great dramatists who succeeded him found blank verse a suitable form for their histories and tragedies.

Bibliography:

Battenhouse, Roy W. *Marlowe's Tamburlaine: A Study in Renaissance Moral Philosophy*. 1941. Reprint. Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1964. Battenhouse contends that the play upholds traditional morality and the Christian worldview.

Friedenreich, Kenneth. *Christopher Marlowe: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism Since 1950*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1979. Eighty-three annotated citations to *Tamburlaine* point the reader to interpretive articles and books.

Knoll, Robert E. "Caesarism." In *Christopher Marlowe*. New York: Twayne, 1969. A good starting place for the general reader. Knoll considers the hero appealing in his diabolic aspirations.

Kocher, Paul H. *Christopher Marlowe: A Study of His Thought, Learning, and Character*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1946. Argues that Marlowe's view in *Tamburlaine the Great* is highly iconoclastic and unconventional.

Levin, Harry. "The Progress of Pomp." In *The Overreacher: A Study of Christopher Marlowe*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952. One of the most influential books on Marlowe. Presents the Marlovian hero as a rebel and explores the use of language and irony in *Tamburlaine the Great*.

Ribner, Irving, ed. *Christopher Marlowe's Tamburlaine Part One and Part Two: Text and Major Criticism*. New York: Odyssey Press, 1974. The most comprehensive book on the plays. Features an authoritative text edited and glossed by Ribner. Also reprints eleven influential essays (one from Ellis-Fermor's milestone 1927 book on Marlowe), and concludes with a useful bibliography. The final essay by Kenneth Friedenreich surveys the critical history of the plays.

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