Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare

3 | 1981

Théâtre et idéologies : Marlowe, Shakespeare

The Alchemy of Beauty: aesthetic principles in Tamburlaine and their relationship to the hermetic ideology

Sybil Truchet

Marie-Thérèse Jones-Davies (ed.)

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/427>

DOI: 10.4000/shakespeare.427

ISSN: 2271-6424

Publisher

Société Française Shakespeare

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 November 1981

Number of pages: 9-24

ISBN: 2-86433-016-4

Electronic reference

Sybil Truchet, « *The Alchemy of Beauty: aesthetic principles in Tamburlaine and their relationship to the hermetic ideology* », *Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare* [Online], 3 | 1981, Online since 01 November 2007, connection on 22 January 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/427> ; DOI : 10.4000/shakespeare.427

SOCIETE FRANCAISE SHAKESPEARE

Actes de Congrès-1981

THEATRE ET IDEOLOGIES :

Marlowe, Shakespeare

DIRECTEUR DE LA PUBLICATION

M.T. Jones - Davies

JEAN TOUZOT Libraire - Editeur

38 , rue Saint-Sulpice 75278 PARIS CEDEX 06 1982

©1982 Jean Touzot Libraire-Editeur, Paris.
Reproduction et traduction même partielle interdite.
Tous droits réservés pour tous pays
y compris l'U.R.S.S. et les pays scandinaves.

ISBN 2-86433-016-4

AVANT-PROPOS

L'opposition soulignée par Horace entre éthique et esthétique — *Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae* — que les Elisabéthains aiment à évoquer, pourrait être le lien qui rattache les unes aux autres les communications, rencontres et table ronde de notre troisième congrès (1981) sur le thème : « Théâtre et Idéologies : Marlowe, Shakespeare. » Toutefois, le résultat de nos échanges montre un dépassement possible de l'alternative éthique / esthétique, puisqu'il met en valeur l'insertion d'idéologies susceptibles de transformer la fonction même de la littérature.

Les pièces analysées dans le contexte de leur temps révèlent de multiples aspects de la vision du monde et de la place que l'homme y occupe, tels que les projette le théâtre anglais au tournant du XVI^e et au début du XVII^e siècle.

Une exploration du langage et de la pensée des deux grands dramaturges aboutit à un commentaire sur les courants philosophiques ou religieux, sur les idées parfois contradictoires et sur la curiosité intellectuelle jamais assouvie qui se font jour à travers la rhétorique de la scène et le jeu dramatique, du *Faust* de Marlowe à *La Tempête* de Shakespeare.

M. T. Jones-Davies

Présidente de la Société Française Shakespeare

SOCIETE FRANCAISE SHAKESPEARE
Actes de Congrès-1981

THEATRE ET IDEOLOGIES :

Marlowe, Shakespeare

DIRECTEUR DE LA PUBLICATION

M.T. Jones - Davies

JEAN TOUZOT Libraire - Editeur
38 , rue Saint-Sulpice 75278 PARIS CEDEX 06 1982

Illustration de la couverture : affiche de Valerio Adami,
spécialement conçue pour les Journées Shakespeare 1979
au Centre Georges Pompidou

170 FF.

TABLE DES MATIERES

M.T. JONES-DAVIES	Avant-propos	5
<i>Théâtre et Idéologies : Marlowe, Shakespeare</i>		9-236
S. TRUCHET	The Alchemy of Beauty : aesthetic principles in <i>I Tamburlaine</i> and their relationship to the hermetic ideology.	9
D. PRUDHOMME	L'idéologie du <i>Juif de Malte</i> et du <i>Marchand de Venise</i> .	25
D. GOY-BLANQUET	De Hall à Shakespeare : quelques glissements idéologiques opérés par la dramatisation dans <i>Henry IV</i> .	37
M.T. JONES-DAVIES	Le Monde du «si» : Idéologies Incertaines dans <i>Comme il vous Plaira</i> .	51
G. VENET	Temps et Idéologie : Marlowe, Shakespeare.	69
J. RICHER	Les Sept Caractères et les Quatre Tempéraments dans <i>Jules César</i> de Shakespeare.	79
F. LAROQUE	En marge de l'Idéologie : Antimasque et Grotesque dans le <i>Dr Faustus</i> et <i>La Tempête</i> .	99
A. LECERCLE-SWEET	Conscience et Méconnaissance dans <i>Edward The Second</i> de Marlowe.	115
M.A. CONEJERO	Shakespeare's Aesthetic Scheme. (<i>Extrait</i>).	133
P. STEWART	Shylock, Shakespeare's Alien. (<i>Royal Shakespeare Company</i>)	137
J. RUSSELL BROWN	The Romantics' Shakespeare.	157
R. GILL	The Christian Ideology of <i>Dr Faustus</i> .	179
J. JACQUOT	Marlowe : de quelques problèmes d'interprétation.	201

<i>Table Ronde Sur Marlowe</i>	239
<i>Rencontres entre Universitaires et Gens de Théâtre</i>	247-258
Vendredi 4 décembre 1981	— Stuart Seide : Présentation du <i>Songe d'une nuit d'Eté</i> . Mise en scène pour le Théâtre de Chaillot janvier 1982
	247
	— A propos d' <i>Edouard (II)</i> de Bernard Turle
	251
	Bernard Turle : Métamorphoses de l'auteur et de l'écriture dramatiques. Intervention de Colin Harris (metteur en scène)

**THE ALCHEMY OF BEAUTY :
AESTHETIC PRINCIPLES IN *I TAMBURLAINE*
AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THE HERMETIC
IDEOLOGY**

One of the major characteristics of the Renaissance was its veneration of beauty. Beauty was generally regarded in accordance with the Neoplatonic ideology as a divine attribute, together with Truth and Goodness. It was the splendour of God, some act or ray penetrating all things, and as it irradiated earthly life, so it became a vivifying force, releasing energy and transforming perceptions and responses. As Marsilio Ficino put it in his *De Amore* : Beauty «adorns the Mind with the order of ideas, fills the Soul with the series of concepts, strengthens Nature with germs and extols Matter with forms» . We can therefore speak of the alchemy of beauty in the widest figurative sense, since just as alchemy transformed base metals into gold, so what was merely human could become transfigured and made almost divine by the «virtue» or power of beauty.

In the name of beauty Renaissance historians did not hesitate to transform Timur the Lame into a being of perfect physical handsomeness, this better befitting his heroic career as the Scourge of God. Marlowe goes even further and places by Tamburlaine's side an imaginary Queen of radiant loveliness, «divine Zenocrate», the ideal companion for such a conqueror. Through the influence of her ravishing charms, Zenocrate elevates Tamburlaine's mind to the very Idea of beauty, and she succeeds in transmitting to the barbaric conqueror some notion of goodness and mercy, since touched by her pleas, he spares her father, the Soldan of Egypt, and does not apply to him the full rigour of his law of conquest. Here, beauty's power corresponds to the usual concepts of Neoplatonic thought, whereby the beauty of things is the lure that attracts the soul of the lover to God, the source of all goodness.

However, this is not the whole, nor even the main function of beauty in the play, for the Neoplatonic idea of the moral impact of beauty is strictly limited. It is true that Tamburlaine spares the Soldan of Egypt, but he has no pity on the Virgins of Damascus, condemning them to a cruel

death. The very horses sent to ride them down, as Zenocrate herself says :

Began to check the ground and rein themselves,
Gazing upon the beauty of their looks.

(V,i,333-4)

But Tamburlaine, the self-avowed worshipper of beauty, remains unmoved. Nor does Zenocrate, the supposed epitome of beauty that is goodness, appear flawless throughout the play. She feels no qualms at the sight of Bajazeth and his empress Zabina being tormented, and it is only when she is confronted with their corpses that she expresses any compunction about her passivity. Judged therefore from the usual moral standpoint of Neoplatonism, Marlowe's presentation of beauty is inconsistent and aesthetically unsatisfactory, and this has led to a certain questioning of Marlowe's dramatic technique. It is however the object of this paper to suggest that Marlowe's vision of beauty refer to a slightly different ideology, a more specific form of platonism, in that it owes more than is generally recognized to Hermeticism. It is by exploring the implications of Hermetic thought and its relationship to beauty that we hope to demonstrate that the aesthetic principles of *I Tamburlaine* are more logically displayed than is sometimes conceded.

*

* *

Hermeticism was based essentially on the collection of treatises known as the *Corpus Hermeticum* or the *Pimander* (from the name of the first treatise). The *Corpus* was well-known to intellectuals throughout Europe thanks to Ficino's Latin translation of it. Though these works date in reality from the 2nd or 3rd centuries A.D., they were supposed in the 16th century to have been composed by Hermes Trismegistus, an Egyptian philosopher, the reincarnation of Thoth, the god of wisdom, and this legendary figure was believed to have lived long before Plato and to have been the contemporary of Moses. Hermetic writings were part of the «*prisca theologia*», the original revelation, that for some adepts such as Giordano Bruno, was superior in authenticity to much of Christian thought that had

become corrupted with the passage of time . If what we are told about Marlowe's temperament is true, it is not surprising that he should have been attracted to these esoteric works, that challenged Christian orthodoxy and were somewhat subversive.

The Hermetic ideology differed from Christian thought among other things, by presenting the first man as a divine creature, attracted down to earth by the beauty of Nature, by whom he engendered the human race. Thus in Hermetic thought there is no original sin, and man's divine creative power remains intact in him, and the power of his intellect, exemplified in the Magus especially, permits him to attempt an ascent back to divinity. The divine aspect of human nature is stressed in several treatises of the *Corpus*, and that there is a connection between the *Pimander* and *Tamburlaine* was pointed out long ago by Jean Jacquot in an article published in the *Etudes Anglaises* for 1953 . Jacquot demonstrated here the similarity existing between the *Corpus* and Marlowe's conception of his hero as a mortal god: «L'homme terrestre est un dieu mortel, le dieu céleste un homme immortel» it says in the 10th treatise of the *Corpus*. Such ideas were familiar to all Elizabethan scholars, thanks not only to Ficino, but also to his fellow Hermetist and Neoplatonist, Pico della Mirandola, whose work Sir Thomas More had helped to popularize in the reign of Henry VIII. The affinity between *I Tamburlaine* and Pico's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* is recognized by all modern critics, and this oration reflects the influence of Hermetic concepts. (It is here, for example, that Pico quotes directly from the great Hermetic treatise known as the *Asclepius* : «Man is a great miracle» .) A third possible source of Hermetic influence on Marlowe is to be found in the works of Giordano Bruno. Marlowe was still a student at Cambridge when the Nolan came to England, that is between 1583 and 1585, and although presumably Marlowe had no direct contact with him, it is reasonable to suppose that he would have had access to the works published by Bruno during his stay and that are key documents in the development of Hermetic thought in England.

It is a striking fact that whereas esoteric concepts have been explored in depth in Shakespeare's works by Frances Yates and others , the analysis of Hermetic thought in

Marlowe's plays has remained limited to a study of Tamburlaine as an earthly divinity and to Marlowe's use of the occult in *Dr Faustus*. Consequently certain aspects of Hermeticism, relevant to *Tamburlaine* in particular, have been passed over. For one thing, the doctrine expressed in the *Corpus* seems to correspond more closely to Marlowe's portrait of Zenocrate than orthodox Neoplatonism, insofar as it does not always associate the beautiful with the good. In treatises 6 and 10 for example, it is explicitly stated that the world is a visible god that is beautiful, but not good. We may find here the justification for Marlowe's tendency in *Tamburlaine* to replace ethical notions by aesthetic ones. More important is the particular stress laid by Hermetic writings on the dynamics of change in a world of eternal becoming. Treatise 14 for instance explains how change is necessary as a constant purifier of created nature that slides irresistibly into degeneration, while treatise 16 presents the universe as subject to a continual process of dissolution and renovation. This provides the ideological background to Marlowe's vision of human beauty as an active power that can change not only the personality of the lover but also the face of the whole world. Indeed, we can say of Marlowe that his presentation of beauty as something essentially transmuting and dynamic foreshadows what Shaftesbury was to declare later : «The Beautifying, not the Beautified, is the really Beautiful».

We must also take into consideration here the occult sciences intimately connected with Hermeticism, that allowed the initiate to dominate the processes of change, for they are fundamental to Marlowe's interpretation of Tamburlaine's career. The great extent of Marlowe's magical and astrological lore needs no illustrating, but what is particularly important with regard to *Tamburlaine* is his mastery of the concepts of alchemy. «Heavenly alchemy», as Shakespeare was to call it in *Sonnet 33*, was the Hermetic science *par excellence*, for it proposed concrete recipes for the transmutation of matter onto a higher level, and its most venerated document was the *Emerald Table*, supposedly written by Hermes Trismegistus himself. Even more significant was the esoteric value attached to the alchemical processes of the Great Work, for they were regarded as a gnosis, a way to self creation. As the alchemist went

through the prescribed manipulations, so he attained wisdom and divine powers, transmuting, as it were, the lead of his base existence into the gold of immortality. This helps to explain why alchemy should have lent itself so easily to poetical conceits and structures in Renaissance works. Marlowe seems thoroughly conversant with the techniques of alchemy, judging by the passage in *2 Tamburlaine* where Olympia describes in detail to Theridamas an ointment «which a cunning alchemist distilled from the purest balsamum» (IV, ii, 59-66). The whole of *1 Tamburlaine* glitters with references to gold, and as we shall see Marlowe uses alchemical terms and colours for certain specific purposes, among them his portrayal of beauty.

Given this context, we may better understand why, when beauty is traditionally represented by a female form, Marlowe should choose in *1 Tamburlaine* to depict two complementary figures of brilliant and awe-inspiring beauty, one male : Tamburlaine himself, and one female : Zenocrate. Marlowe seems to have decided here to place the progress of the action under the aegis of twin figures, using imagery and symbolical allusions to suggest to the initiated a resemblance to the enigmatic Red King and White Queen of alchemical emblems. Representing the conjunction of opposites, the mystic union of Sulphur and Mercury, Tamburlaine and Zenocrate preside together over the Great Work, the Scythian's career of conquest, that will lead to the transmutation of the world, the establishment of a golden era of peace and unity. In this grand design we may discern the esoteric ideal of the Renaissance, the dream of universal harmony, the attainment of the One.

Zenocrate is a fully humanized dramatic figure of womanly tenderness and concern, but Marlowe embellishes his creation with poetical ornaments that add an extra dimension to her, he makes of her a mortal goddess, a Venus to Tamburlaine's Mars, a Juno, a Flora, a Diana. Her supernatural beauty is reinforced by the use of astrological imagery : she is identified with the Moon and the stars, her eyes are brighter than the lamps of heaven. She is associated with the liquid element, with the Nile; and with the beauty of the earth, for she is «Fairer than rocks of pearl and precious stone» (III, iii, 118). Above all, she is a figure of silvery purity and snowy virginity :

Brighter than is the silver Rhodope,
 Fairer than whitest snow on Scythian hills.
 (I, ii, 88-9)

Her shimmering white beauty is set against a pure white background of icy mountain tops, milk-white harts and ivory sleds. Richard Hillier in his study of the imagery of colour, light and darkness in Marlowe's works, found no comparable example of white beauty standing in a white decor in the whole of Elizabethan poetry, so that Marlowe's poetic description must have a special significance, and we suggest that Marlowe was evoking here the emblem of the White Queen of alchemy, who presides over the Minor Work that turns all to silver.

Such an esoteric interpretation of Zenocrate's role is supported by the mystical power that is ascribed to her beauty. Her arrival at Tamburlaine's camp marks the infusion into the world of the play of a higher quality of life that lifts the Scythian above the mundane, mediocre level of the Persian court and their low opinion of him as a thief and a fox. She operates on him the necessary release of energy that allows him to cast off his shepherd's weeds and stand revealed as the future world conqueror. It is her beauty that enables Tamburlaine to deny the restriction of birth as the basis of a fixed social hierarchy, and to start his ascension, declaring: «I am a lord for so my deeds shall prove» (I, ii, 33). The impulsion given to Tamburlaine's warlike spirit by beauty is an essential component of the conqueror's rise to earthly divinity. «That virtue solely is the sum of glory And fashions men with true nobility» (V, i, 189-90), he says, and we can accept here Michael Allen's suggestion that the words «that virtue» are meant to indicate a demonstrative and not a conjunction. Tamburlaine assimilates the effect of beauty upon him to the process of dissolution, the resolving of the «icy mountains' lofty tops» (I, ii, 100). This may be an echo of the Platonic heat of love breaking up the lover's hardened shell, as described in the *Phaedrus*; but it is also and above all an alchemical explanation of how the influx of energy provided by beauty operates a metamorphosis in the earthly sphere. Beauty is at the origin of this Hermetic world of becoming, and just as heat transforms ice into water, so beauty changes the fixed into the fluid and allows Tambur-

laine to embark on his existential career.

Tamburlaine uses alchemical terms again to express the general manner in which beauty affects the world. It inspires poets to make their «heavenly quintessence of poesy» (V, i, 165), a distillation made by the highest reaches of the mind, so that through beauty's worthiness they can approach, though never reach, the Absolute, the ultimate mystery of life. Beauty cannot be «digested» that is in alchemical terminology, it cannot be dissolved by heat. It therefore escapes a final formulation, and in so doing, keeps its power of inspiration intact. So strong is beauty, so irresistible is its call, that it exerts its power over the love of Mnemosyne, the mother of the Muses. Tamburlaine reverses this process, for impelled upward by Zenocrate's beauty, he casts off his original nature as a shepherd, an ordinary man, and starts to mount the steps that lead to a deity.

The figure of Zenocrate gains enhanced prestige from those sacrificed under her aegis. The Virgins of Damascus succumb to the weakness of their position as victims of the Governor's stubbornness, but the beauty and the chastity they represent re-emerge, intensified, in Zenocrate herself, a phenomenon that makes the juxtaposition of the massacre of the Virgins and Tamburlaine's eulogy of Zenocrate's beauty, more logical than is usually conceded (see note 3). In the same way, Arabia is overcome by one greater than himself, but his testimony to the power of Zenocrate's charms adds to her glorification, as does the action of her father, the Soldan, who sets out against Tamburlaine to revenge her supposed ravishment. The energy deployed by them all, and that ends in tragedy for some, is transmuted by Zenocrate's divine grief into silvery beauty, as is described in Tamburlaine's eloquent apostrophe to her :

Like to Flora in her morning's pride,
Shaking her silver tresses in the air,
[Thou] Raint on the earth resolved pearl in
showers

And sprinklest sapphires on thy shining face .

(V, i, 140-3)

Zenocrate, the White Queen, fashions men with true nobility, she calms the fury of the conqueror, she extracts the quintessence of worthiness from them all, and her coronation is a fit tribute to her majesty.

Stronger than Zenocrate, is Tamburlaine himself, the male principle of beauty, the Red King of alchemy, associated with air and fire and solar imagery. When Tamburlaine ascribes to himself the splendour of the sun, he is invoking the second god of the Hermetic doctrine that gives an extremely important place to the great planet. The 11th treatise in the *Corpus Hermeticum* declares for example : «Ainsi l'Eternité est image de Dieu, le monde image de l'Eternité, le soleil image du monde, l'homme image du soleil» . So that when Tamburlaine exclaims :

For I, the chiefest lamp of all the earth ...
Will send up fire to your turning spheres
And cause the sun to borrow light of you.
(IV, ii, 36-40)

he is attributing to himself the power of the sun as a demiurge. His beauty radiates the absolute power of the sun, dispelling darkness, inspiring love and wonder, inflicting inexorable justice on those who deny his deity.

The physical beauty of Tamburlaine inspires the lyrical passages where Marlowe, through his hero, exalts the mortal divinity of Man. Tamburlaine models the world about him into new shapes and new forms, and the active principle that allows him to do this, is beauty. Theridamas, who thought of Tamburlaine as the mere leader of a Tartar horde, once in his presence is completely subjugated by the Scythian's beauty «embellished With Nature's pride and richest furniture» (I, ii, 155-6). He compares Tamburlaine's fiery eyes with those of Hercules, a demigod, and allows himself to be won over by the Scythian's oratory and conquered with his looks. Menaphon continues the Herculean comparison, and to describe Tamburlaine adequately to Cosroe borrows inspiration from classical statuary to convey his impression of perfect male beauty bathed in an aura of superhuman power. Such is the attractive force of Tamburlaine's beauty, he says, that it inspires love in the very elements, the breath of heaven delights to play with his curling amber locks, making them «dance with wanton majesty». We have here one of the most sumptuous descriptions of male beauty in Elizabethan poetry.

Menaphon's portrayal of the conqueror as a Zeus-Man-World, with his head as the universe and his eyes as spheres, is reminiscent of a passage in the *Corpus Hermeticum* 10 and

finds its ultimate origin in the *Timaeus*, but Marlowe expands and extends such comparisons in a manner quite alien to Platonism. At the beginning of the play, comparisons with the pagan gods are mere rhetorical flourishes : Zenocrate is cast in the role of Juno to Tamburlaine's Jove to flatter her. But then Jove is said to have accorded his special protection to the Scythian, who finds in the god's adventures a specific source of inspiration, inciting him to seize power and overthrow his rivals as Jove had done. By the end of the play, Tamburlaine can declare himself to be the equal and rival of the gods :

The god of war resigns his room to me,
Meaning to make me general of the world;
Jove, viewing me in arms, looks pale and wan,
Fearing my power should pull him from his
throne. (V,ii, 450-453)

This is not mere empty boasting, but a transposition into poetic terms of the Hermetic dynamic vision of life where Man can be the «moulder and maker» of himself.

Not only has Tamburlaine the power and the physical splendour of a Jove, he also possesses the eloquence of a Hermes. As Theridamas exclaims : «Not Hermes, prolocutor to the gods. Could use persuasions more pathetic» (I, ii, 210-1). The beauty and the force of his «working words» are so great that they have the impact of a Logos, and they allow him to place on acts the ethical implication he pleases. The moral aspect of deeds becomes malleable in his declarations, and he prints on them whatever pattern suits him. Thus he transforms the nature of Theridamas' abandonment of Mycetes, from that of betraying his lawful sovereign, to that of becoming Tamburlaine's trusty friend and lieutenant. Love and friendship are exalted by him and transfigured into new types of religion, such as :

The love of Pylades and Orestes,
Whose statues we adore in Scythia. (I,ii, 243-244)

His words are uplifting and inspiring, communicating to his followers a new sense of the beauty of life, a higher estimate of human existence, and a nobler conception of their own capacities. Tamburlaine teaches them to think of themselves as monarchs. He in his turn judges men by their beauty, exclaiming of Theridamas : «With what a majesty he rears his looks !» (I, ii, 165). He promises Theridamas that they

will be more than lords, since kings will be their senators and they will be able to aspire to immortality like the gods. It is clear that Marlowe is using here again the Hermetic vision of man as «a sacred creature clothed in human flesh» to justify his dream of a new society dedicated to the ever fuller development of human potentialities.

The main effect of Tamburlaine's beauty however is to precipitate a separation between himself and the lower representatives of monarchy in the play. The imagery used emphasizes the elementary nature of this separation, that is made to resemble an alchemical process of sublimation. As Theridamas puts it, in forsaking their legitimate sovereigns, Tamburlaine's followers are rejecting unworthy monarchs like Cosroe, who is :

gross and like the massy earth

That moves not upwards . (II, vii, 31-32)

It is therefore natural for them to espouse the cause of the Scythian who is «lift upwards and divine», compounded of air and fire. Cosroe dies defeated because he remains static, fixed like the earth, the basest element, unable to understand the new principle of change entering the world.

The strangest men that ever nature made !

I know not how to take their tyrannies (II, vii,
40-41)

is all he can find to reply, when Usumcasane explains the mainspring of Tamburlaine's action. The Scythian takes as his rule of life that he must forever strive upwards, pursuing power and knowledge, soaring above the highest sort, aspiring like Jove himself to the supreme position. This means a world in a state of perpetual fusion, where one ruler is replaced by another, just as a grosser substance yields to a subtler.

Cosroe is not the only sovereign to be associated with the lowest element. Mycetes' vulgarity is of the earth, earthy, and in an apt metaphor, Tamburlaine compares the foolish king of Persia with a burden «as outweighs the sands And all the craggy rocks of Caspia» (II, iii, 47-8). Bajazeth, though far greater than the others, is dragged irresistibly downwards in the course of his imprisonment, rather as the dregs of the cosmos were supposed to drain downwards to the earth. Looking down to the world of darkness for inspiration in his curses against Tamburlaine, Bajazeth betrays

his affinity with the black centre of the terrestrial globe. All of the vanquished kings are linked with mortality and decay, devoid of the higher aspirations so characteristic of Tamburlaine. Mycetes refers to the brevity of life :

Return with speed, time passeth swift away,
Our life is frail, and we may die today . (I,i,67-68)

Cosroe invokes

all the stars that make

The loathsome circle of my dated life. (II,vi,36-37)

While Bajazeth is overwhelmed by the fragility of his physical frame, a slave to the flesh, he finds himself at the mercy of his natural appetite : « Unless I eat, I die » (IV, iv, 96). All this constitutes a background of weakness and mortal frailty that sets off the superhuman endurance of the conqueror.

But we may go further and discern in these inferior kings an esoteric significance. It is tempting to see in them a representation of what the alchemists called the *Materia Prima*, that is the brute matter from which gold was to be extracted. One after the other the monarchs appear, all framed of the same substance, the relationship between them being indicated by the monotonously similar speeches of defiance and denigration that they utter before entering Tamburlaine's presence. Thus what critics have decried as a lack of aesthetic judgement on Marlowe's part , can be regarded as a deliberate technique, intended to convey a specific idea. All the rulers are representatives of created Nature that has degenerated, and their defeats and deaths are a necessary part of the process of purification. As the *Emerald Table* of the alchemists expresses it : « Thou shalt separate the Earth from the Fire, the subtle from the gross ». The play demonstrates then how Tamburlaine in the course of his triumphant career, a very paradigm of the Great Work, demands the sacrifice of these lesser, earthy beings who oppose him and obstruct his fiery will. There is no generation without corruption, said the alchemists, so just as the *Materia Prima* is subjected to the action of various corrosive acids for the finer elements to be extracted from it, so these grossly debased kings must undergo a process of disintegration. Moreover the anguish expressed by Zabina and Bajazeth in particular, seems to convey in a poetical and symbolical form the agony experienced by this base matter. Bajazeth's «retorqued» thoughts follow the endless repetit-

ion of the harsh manipulations he is subjected to, until he escapes into death, his soul «resolved in liquid air» (V,ii,300) While Zabina's madness shows us matter losing its shape and melting into formlessness. This dissolution into elements of Tamburlaine's enemies is not just wanton sadism, it has a clear purpose : it allows the rise of a nobler monarch, who represents the finer essence of the others' corrupt natures. This may help to explain why the lesser kings at certain points of the action are made to use the same mode of rhetoric as Tamburlaine and his followers. Again we may interpret this as not a fault in the aesthetic presentation of the work, but as an indication of the basic unity of matter, when life is considered from the alchemical point of view.

With a certain irony Marlowe makes Tamburlaine's opponents invoke against the Scythian the very process of destruction that will be used on themselves. Jupiter, says Cosroe, thrust his enemies under the hills and «pressed out fire from their burning jaws» (II, vi, 6). Though Cosroe applies this to the prospect of his victory over Tamburlaine, in fact his remark is prophetic of what will actually happen to Tamburlaine's enemies. The same phenomenon can be observed in the curses of Bajazeth and Zabina :

Let all the swords and lances in the field
Stick in his breast as in their proper rooms;
At very pore let blood come dropping forth
(V, ii, 225-7)

shrieks Zabina, but she is describing the fates of the Scythian's adversaries, for one after the other they undergo dissolution in torment, their vital essences are forced from their panting bodies, and distilled, drop by drop, into the conqueror's greater glory. As the *Emerald Table* has it, the Great Work receives «the force of things, superior and inferior», so that as his foes crumble, so Tamburlaine receives strength and energy from them. On the concrete level, he wrests from them their crowns, their troops, and their gold, all this contributing to the «sweet fruition of an earthly crown» (II, vii, 29). On the symbolic level, the blood spilt by the kings, and the fiery energy they display in defiance, are so many sources of greatness for the Scythian, who emerges magnified from each combat.

Mycetes, like the *Materia Prima* contains a few seeds of gold in his humble earthy person, in the form of his surpri-

sing intimation of beauty. He admires the «dainty show» made by the red blood he imagines on his white horses' legs, a characteristically debased vision of alchemical things to come, for the three colours, white, red and black to be used by Tamburlaine as an essential part of his ritual of conquest are, in a different order, those of alchemy. Cosroe, a greater monarch of larger vision, possesses potential elements of grandeur, for his plans of conquest extend over several countries and include the project of recapturing the gold mines of India. But they are only a pale forecast of the universal victories and immense riches that the Scythian will actually achieve, thanks to the reinforcement of his purpose by Cosroe's downfall. Bajazeth serves of course literally as Tamburlaine's footstool to glory, but his contribution goes far beyond this concrete fact. His invocation of Mahomet impels Tamburlaine to elevate his mind to the true form of divinity, as he addresses «the chiefest God, first mover of that sphere» (IV, ii, 8). Bajazeth's love for his faithful Zabina is purified by his sufferings, his mind is lifted up to the highest level it can reach by the attachment he shows to his Empress, «fair Zabina», but it is left to Tamburlaine to take this further in his glorification of «divine Zenocrate». While the enormous extent of Bajazeth's empire, that united under the same ruler a multitude of different peoples, is outdone and completed by the establishment of Tamburlaine's reign over two whole continents. Finally the Soldan of Egypt, Tamburlaine's noblest adversary, is saved from the worst consequences of his attack on the Scythian by the crusade that he undertakes in defence of his daughter's supposedly ravished virginity. After his defeat, his veneration for Zenocrate's purity reaches its most exalted form thanks to Tamburlaine, who arranges an alliance with the Soldan and crowns Zenocrate as a divine Virgin Queen, Latona's daughter, before concluding a truce with the whole world. As his lords and loving followers don their scarlet robes to celebrate the occasion, we can see that the correct order of the alchemical colours has in fact been respected. The first part of the play reflected the blackness or «nigredo» of the dissolution of the kings, then came the fulfilment of the «albedo», the Minor Work that transmuted all to silver – the work of Zenocrate's influence, the White Queen, the spirit of philo-

sophical Mercury. Lastly we witnessed the triumph of the «rubedo», the Major Work of the Philosopher's Stone, that in the form of Tamburlaine's power, made the whole sky red and transmuted a dull leaden world into a brilliant golden one.

Therefore we suggest that the structure of the play with its complex ambivalences, still all too often accused of being episodic and monotonous, takes on aesthetic coherence when it is regarded as corresponding to the Hermetic ideology and the alchemical principles connected with it. The action illustrates the upward ascent to divinity of Hermeticism, combined with the three stages of esoteric alchemy, seen as a gnosis devoted to self-realization. The imagery by focussing on the mythological and the elemental reinforces these esoteric principles by stressing the unity of the cosmos. «What is Above is like what is Below» says the *Emerald Table*, both heavenly and terrestrial levels of existence are fluid and plastic, linked together by the essential force of beauty. The spectator or reader is thus initiated into a logically ordered world, where Renaissance Hermeticism, in the form of the alchemy of beauty, has metamorphozed the conqueror's barbaric career of conquest into a statement of Man's highest capacities. Man is *capax dei*, according to Hermetic thought, and when he hunts for vestiges of the divine in nature, he becomes divine. Marlowe's purpose then in *I Tamburlaine* may be defined as showing how mankind can be released from its age-old stasis, and through the power of beauty be permitted to adopt a dynamic, protean mode of existence that is the pre-requisite for progress. That is the principle that urges the hero on to create a new world, a second Golden Age of peace and union. The pattern breaks down, it is true, in *Part Two*, but that is another story.

Sybil TRUCHET

NOTES

1. P.O. Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, Columbia U.P., 1943, p. 265.
2. P.O. Kristeller, *ibid.*, p. 268.
3. Criticism has been particularly severe on the juxtaposition of the Massacre of the Virgins of Damascus and Tamburlaine's eulogy of Zenocrate's beauty. It has for example been found absurd by Michel Poirier, *Christopher Marlowe*, London, 1951, p. 110; called «a glaringly unsuitable prelude» by F. Boas, *Marlowe*, Oxford U.P., 1940, p. 86; «a violent incongruity» by Frank Fielier, «*I Tamburlaine and its audience*», *U. of Florida Monographs, Humanities* 8, 1961, p. 76; «an obfuscation» by V.M. Meehan, *Christopher Marlowe : poet and playwright*, Mouton, 1974, pp. 24-6. Other critics have tried to justify the clash : G.I. Duthie, «The Dramatic Structure of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, parts 1 and 2», *English Studies* 1, 1948, pp. 108-9 sees it as part of the conflict between Love and Honour; C.M. Masinton, «Marlowe's Artists», *Ohio Univ. Review* 11, 1969, pp. 23-4, as a question of tragic dualism; Judith Weil, *Christopher Marlowe : Merlin's Prophet*, Cambridge U.P., 1977, p. 130 as divine madness; J.S. Cunningham (ed), *Tamburlaine the Great*, Revels plays, Manchester U.P., 1981, p. 48 as «rival aesthetics».
4. Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, London, 1965, p. 11.
5. Jean Jacquot, «La Pensée de Marlowe dans *Tamburlaine the Great*», *Etudes Anglaises* 6, 1953, pp. 332-337.
6. A.J. Festugière (ed), *Corpus Hermeticum*, Paris, 1945, p. 126.
7. Pico della Mirandola, *Oration : On the Dignity of Man*, ed. Stevie Davies in *Renaissance Views of Man*, Manchester U.P., 1978, p. 65.
8. Frances Yates, *ibid.*, p. 150.
9. W.C. Curry, *Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns* Louisiana State U.P., 1937; Paul Arnold, *L'Esotérisme de Shakespeare*, Paris, 1955; Frances Yates, *A Study of Love's Labour's Lost*, C.U.P., 1936; *Shakespeare's Last Plays*, London, 1975; Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, London, 1980.
10. Paul Kocher, *Christopher Marlowe : a Study of his Thought, Learning and Character*, Chapel Hill, 1946 and Johnstone Parr, *Tamburlaine's Malady and other Essays on Astrology in Elizabethan Drama*, U. of Alabama P., 1953 are the basic studies of these themes. Faustian works were the object of a *Cahier de l'Hermétisme*, Albin Michel, 1977, but the article devoted to *Dr Faustus*, p. 77-86 does not discuss the Hermetic thought of it.
11. Ernst Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, London, 1953, p. 197.
12. Stanislas Klossowski de Rola, *Alchemy : the Secret Art*, London, 1973, pp. 7-22. The text of the *Emerald Table* is given p. 15.
13. Richard Hillier, «The Imagery of Color, Light and Darkness in the

Poetry of Christopher Marlowe», *Elizabethan Studies in Honor of G.R. Reynolds*, U. of Colorado Studies (Humanities) 2, 1945, p. 105.

14. Michael Allen, «*Tamburlaine* and Plato : a colon, a crux», *Res. Op. in Ren. Drama* 23, U. of Kansas, 1980, p. 23.

15. Festugière, *ibid.* ..., p. 153. The heliocentricity of Hermetic thought is stressed by Frances Yates, *op. cit.*, p.152. M.E. Rickey, «Astronomical Imagery in *Tamburlaine*», *Ren. Papers*, 1954, indicates further implications of the solar imagery, p. 63-70.

16. Festugière, *ibid.*, p. 137.

17. Pico, *ibid.*, p. 67.

18. Pico, *ibid.*, p. 69.

19. Donald Peet, «The Rhetoric of *Tamburlaine*», *E.L.H.*, 26, 1959, p. 152.

20. Katherine Lever comments on the discrepancies in Marlowe's use of the three colours in «The Image of Man in *1 Tamburlaine*», *P.Q.* 35, 1956, p. 423. It can be noted also that in *2 Tamb.* the colour red dominates the last day, see V, i, 86 and 103.

21. U. Ellis Fermor (ed), *Tamburlaine the Great*, London, 1930 (1951), p. 55; John W. Velz, «Episodic Structure in Four Tudor Plays», *Comp. Drama* 6, 1972, p.90.

22. Frances Yates, *ibid.* ..., p. 278.