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**Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England**

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# A Feast of Strange Opinions: Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes on the English Renaissance Stage

Edited by Marco Duranti
and Emanuel Stelzer

S K E N È Theatre and Drama Studies

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info@skeneproject.it

Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzù
P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138

**CEMP - Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England**

The series of CEMP volumes offers studies and fully annotated scholarly editions related to the CEMP open-access digital archive. This archive includes texts pertaining to the genres of the paradox, of the paradoxical fiction, and of the problem, which were published in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and which are currently unavailable online and/or not open access (https://test-01.dlls.univr.it/teipublisher-cemp/apps/cemp-app/index.html). Our digital archive features diplomatic, semidiplomatic, and modernised editions of selected works, furnished with critical apparatuses and editorial notes, alongside related documentary materials, which, in turn, are relevant to poetic and dramatic texts of the English Renaissance. These texts provide fundamental testimony of the early modern episteme, functioning as a hinge joining widespread forms of the paradoxical discourse in different genres and texts and within the development of sceptical thinking.

The project is part of the Skenè Centre as well as of the Project of Excellence Digital humanities applied to foreign languages and literatures (2018-2022) Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at the University of Verona (https://dh.dlls.univr.it/en/).

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# Contributors

**Silvia Bigliazzi** is Professor of English Literature at Verona University, where she is the Director of the *Skenè Research Centre* devoted to drama and theatre studies. Her fields of interest include Renaissance poetry, literature and the visual arts, and translation for the theatre (co-ed. *Theatre Translation in Performance*, Routledge 2013). She has translated into Italian John Donne's poetry (Rizzoli 2012[2]), *Romeo and Juliet* (Einaudi 2012) and *Double Falsehood* (Rizzoli 2012), and, for the theatre, Q1 *Romeo and Juliet* (2016) and *Macbeth (*2016). On Shakespeare she has published two monographs (*Oltre il genere. Amleto tra scena e racconto*, Edizioni dell'Orso 2001; *Nel prisma del nulla. L'esperienza del non-essere nella drammaturgia shakespeariana*, Liguori 2005) and several miscellanies (*Revisiting the Tempest. The Capacity to Signify*, Palgrave 2014; *Shakespeare,* Romeo and Juliet*, and Civic Life*, Routledge 2016; *Shakespeare and Crisis. One Hundred Years of Italian Narratives*, John Benjamins 2020). In 2019 she published *Julius Caesar 1935: Shakespeare and Censorship in Fascist Italy* (Skenè). Her recent researches include: the reception of classical drama in the English Renaissance, the reception of Graeco-Roman paradoxical and sceptic traditions in the English Renaissance, and the study of the Italian novella tradition behind Shakespeare's plays. She is the co-General editor of *Skenè. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies*, as well as of the series *Global Shakespeare Inverted* (Bloomsbury) and *Anglica* (ETS). She is the PI of the digital projects SENS (Shakespeare's Narrative Sources, Italian Novellas and their European Dissemination) and CEMP (Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England).

**Fabio Ciambella** is Research Fellow of English Language and Translation at Sapienza University of Rome. Previously, he was a Research Fellow of English Language and Translation at the University of Tuscia, Viterbo, and Junior Research Fellow at the same university. He received his European PhD in English Language and Literature from the University of Rome "Tor Vergata" (2015). His privileged fields of research include the relationship between dance and early modern and Victorian literature and language, historical pragmatics, corpus linguistics, and Second Language Acquisition, topics about which he has published extensively. In 2013 he published a book about dance in nineteenth-century England (from Jane Austen's novels to Oscar Wilde's *Salome*). In 2016 his PhD thesis was awarded by the Italian Association of English Studies (AIA) and his study about dance and the Copernican Revolution in Shakespeare's canon was published the following year. His latest book, *Dance Lexicon in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries: A Corpus-based Approach* (Routledge, 2021), is a corpus-based analysis of dance-related lexis in the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. He is currently writing a volume on how to teach English pragmatics through Shakespeare (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). He contributes to the digital projects SENS (Shakespeare's Narrative Sources: Italian Novellas and their European Dissemination) and CEMP (Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England).

**Francesco Dall'Olio** is currently a postdoc fellow at Verona University. He obtained his MA in Philology and History of Antiquity from the University of Pisa, Scuola Normale Superiore, in 2013, and in 2014 the Scuola Normale's diploma. In 2019, he received his PhD in Philology, Literature and Linguistics from the University of Verona. Twice a visiting research fellow at the Gallatin School for Individualized Studies (NYU) as part of his PhD programme, he has extensively worked on the reception of Greek literature in the early modern age, with a focus on early modern English literature and drama. His publications include articles on Alexander Neville's translation of Seneca's *Oedipus* (2018), Thomas Preston's *Cambises*

(2020), and on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. A book-length study on the early modern English reception of Greek notions of tyranny is forthcoming. He contributes to the digital project CEMP (Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England).

**Marco Duranti** holds a PhD in Greek literature from the Universities of Verona and Freiburg i. Br. (2017) and is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Verona. His present research focuses on the reception of ancient Greek literature in early modern England. He has published articles and book chapters on Aristophanes' dramaturgy, Euripides' tragedies, with a focus on *Iphigenia Taurica*, as well as on the reception of Greek theatre in early modern continental Europe and England. He is the author of *"Ecclesiae et Rei Publicae": Greek Drama and the Education of the Ruling Class in Elizabethan England* (Skenè Texts and Studies, 2022). He contributes to the digital project CEMP (Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England).

**Francesco Morosi** is a post-doc fellow at the University of Pisa. He studied at the Scuola Normale Superiore and the University of California-Berkeley. His main interests are in the field of ancient Greek drama and its modern and contemporary reception. He has devoted most of his studies to Aristophanic comedy and to Aeschylean as well as Sophoclean tragedy. He also works on performance studies and is a theatre practitioner himself, as a dramatist and translator: recently, he translated Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* for Robert Carsen's production in the Greek Theatre in Siracusa (2022). He is currently working on the reception of ancient Greek and Latin comedy in Elizabethan and Jacobean England and on a commented edition of Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. He is part of an international project on the theory and practice of translating classics.

**Beatrice Righetti** is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Aosta Valley and a former doctoral student in Linguistics, Philology and Literature at the University of Padua. Her doctoral project deals with the reception of paradoxical writing and the *querelle des femmes* as regards the literary figure of the talkative woman in six-

teenth- and seventeenth-century England and Italy. Her main case study is the literary and theatrical character of the English shrew and the Shakespearean shrew in particular. She has published on Renaissance women writers and Shakespeare's plays, mostly *The Taming of the Shrew*, focusing on both the use of paradoxes and the relationship between metamorphosis, gender-based violence and power relations. She contributes to two digital projects directed by Silvia Bigliazzi ("Shakespeare's Narrative Sources: Italian Novellas and their European Dissemination", SENS; and "Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England", CEMP) and to "From Paradise to Padua" directed by Alessandra Petrina.

**Emanuel Stelzer** is a researcher at the University of Verona. He is the author of *Portraits in Early Modern English Drama: Visual Culture, Play-Texts, and Performances* (Routledge, 2019) and of *Shakespeare Among Italian Criminologists and Psychiatrists, 1870s-1920s* (Skenè Texts and Studies, 2021). Together with Silvia Bigliazzi, he has edited the volume *Shakespeare and the Mediterranean:* Romeo and Juliet (Skenè Texts and Studies, 2022). His articles have appeared in journals including *Critical Survey*, *Early Theatre*, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, *English Studies*, *Notes and Queries*, *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, and *Skenè: Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies*. His main interests are early modern English literature and drama, textual studies, and theatre history. He contributes to the digital projects SENS (Shakespeare's Narrative Sources: Italian Novellas and their European Dissemination) and CEMP (Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England), of which he coordinates the early modern section. His work on William Sampson has earned him the *Huntington Library Quarterly* Centennial Essay Prize; he has also translated into Italian Philip Massinger's *The Picture* (Aracne, 2017) and John Milton's *Comus* (ETS, 2020). He is managing editor of *Skenè: Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies* and contributes to *The Year's Work in English Studies*.

**Carla Suthren** is a researcher at the University of Verona, working with Silvia Bigliazzi on the 'Early Modern English Choruses' database (Prin 2017). She received her BA and MSt degrees from

the University of Oxford (Magdalen College), and her PhD from the University of York in 2018. Since then, she has been a researcher on the *Crossroads of Knowledge in Early Modern England* project led by Subha Mukherji in Cambridge, and has taught at Cambridge and at UCL. She has published on Jane Lumley's *Iphigenia*, and Gascoigne and Kinwelmersh's *Jocasta*, and she is currently working on her first monograph, entitled *Tyrannous Passions: Shakespeare and the Renaissance Reception of Euripides.*

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# “I know not how to take their tirannies”: Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* and the Praise of the Tyrant

Francesco Dall’Olio

Abstract

The eponymous protagonist of Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* represents an anomaly amongst the tyrants of Elizabethan tragedy. Unlike many of his peers, he neither loses the support of his friends and subjects nor does he suffer the pangs of a bad conscience. On the contrary, he dies surrounded by his friends and children, still in possession of the thrones he usurped and still saluted by them in an honourable, kingly fashion. Moreover, more than once his actions reveal a noble side of his character, while his opponents are never characterised as more positive than him. Such anomalies of Tamburlaine’s behaviour are compared, in this essay, with two paradoxical praises of tyrants written in the second half of the sixteenth century, Girolamo Cardano’s *Neronis encomium* (1562) and William Cornwallis’ “Praise of King Richard the Third” (printed 1616, but presumably written in the 1590s). I will underline in how all these works, both the paradoxes and Marlowe’s tragedy, the overturn of the traditional image of the tyrant offers a critical reinterpretation of the contrasting depictions of the tyrant and the good king in Renaissance political theory, thus unmasking the ideological foundations behind them and questioning its ethical and political use as an evaluation of the good rule of a sovereign.

Keywords: Christopher Marlowe; tyranny; paradoxes; *Tamburlaine*; Machiavelli; Girolamo Cardano; William Cornwallis

## 1. Introduction: Is Tamburlaine a Tyrant?

From its first appearance on the English stage (1587-1588),[1] the protagonist of Marlowe’s tragedy has been identified as a tyrant.

[1] Cf. Thomas and Tydeman 1994, 69-70. Success was instantaneous, as evidenced by the almost immediate publication of *Part One*, while *Part Two* would be printed only in 1606: see Marlowe 2011, xxvi.

In the course of the two parts of *Tamburlaine*, the titular character is called "tyrant" ten times (five in each play), while his actions are defined as "tyranny" seven times (once in *Part One*, six in *Part Two*), usually by the kings he has defeated and now submits to degrading acts of humiliation. In addition, on the title-page of the first printed edition of *Tamburlaine, Part One* (1590) it is written that Tamburlaine "for his tyranny . . . was tearmed, the Scourge of God".[2] Moreover, some important features of his personality, such as his boundless ambition, his stubbornness to always impose his will and his aforementioned cruelty towards his enemies, link the character both to the typical description of the tyrant in Renaissance political theory and to the ways in which other characters described as 'tyrants' were depicted in other early modern English plays. Even if his story does not end in the conventional manner for a tyrant,[3] it would nevertheless seem that Tamburlaine's characterisation meets the expectations of the time regarding the character of the 'tyrant'.

A closer reading of the tragedy, however, reveals that things are more complex. Not only is Marlowe's hero innocent of some of the vices usually attributed to such a figure (in fact, he is capable of actions that can be defined as virtuous), but the same 'tyrannical' inclinations of his personality can be interpreted as a paradoxical reversal of virtuous inclinations taken to excess. This makes him a complex character, who seems to resemble more the 'good king' modelled on the figure of Cyrus the Great rather than the traditional 'tyrant' (cf. Rhodes 2013, 211-12; Grogan 2014, 127-34). In the following pages, I will offer a reading of the ambiguous characterisation of Tamburlaine in Marlowe's play, set within the more general framework of Renaissance political theory.[4] I intend to show how Marlowe reverses the traditional condemnation of

[2] Quotations refer to Marlowe 2011.

[3] Tamburlaine dies at the end of the tragedy, but his death, as pointed out by Duxfield 2020, is not explicitly presented as a consequence of divine punishment: see also Vitkus 2003, 63; Thornton Burnett 2004, 139-40; Ragni 2018, 103-4.

[4] In doing so, I will address an aspect of the tragedy that has received relatively little attention in the albeit abundant critical literature on *Tamburlaine*, despite the well-known stature of the tragedy as a work of criticism of certain political and religious theories of the time.

the 'tyrant' as the bad king, presenting some of his qualities as beneficial to the king and pivotal in granting a successful political action. Marlowe's tragedy can thus be interpreted as a paradoxical 'praise' of the tyrant, in a similar way to two texts from the second half of the sixteenth century, Girolamo Cardano's *Neronis encomium* and William Cornwallis' "Praise of King Richard the Third". In those works, two figures traditionally considered among the greatest examples of tyranny were shown to have been good rulers, not because they were innocent of any crimes, but because their behaviour was fundamentally beneficial to the state. I will argue that with *Tamburlaine*, although moving on a different ground, Marlowe performs a similar operation in presenting a 'tyrannical' character as an example of true sovereignty.

## 2. How Is Tamburlaine a Tyrant?

> . . . [a] good king conformeth himselfe to the lawes of God and nature . . . a tyrant treadeth them vnder foote: the one striueth to enriche his subiects, the other to destroy them: . . . the one spareth the honour of chaste women, the other triumpheth in their shame: the one taketh pleasure to be freely admonished, and wisely reprooued . . . the other misliketh nothing so much, as a graue, free, and vertuous man: the one maketh great account of the loue of his people, the other of their feare: the one is neuer in feare but for his subiects, the other standeth in awe of none more than of them: the one burtheneth his as little as may be, and then vpon publike necessitie, the other suppeth vp their bloud, gnaweth their bones, and sucketh the marrow of his subiectes to satisfie his desires: . . . the one hath no garde or garrison but of his owne people, the other none but of straungers: the one reioyceth in assured rest, the other languisheth in perpetuall feare. (La Primaudaye 1586, 262)

This passage from the encyclopaedic treatise *The French Academie* by Pierre de La Primaudaye in its first English translation (1586) presents one of the most comprehensive descriptions of the two opposite models of the good king and the tyrant offered by Renaissance political theory. That was the result of a long cultural tradition, dating back to classical Greek works such as

Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Politics*, and Xenophon's *Hiero*,[5] where fundamental concepts such as the identification of the tyrant's misrule with a disordered and vicious personality, the tyrant's distrust of his subjects, and his ultimate fate of loneliness were discussed for the first time. Later, Latin authors such as Seneca and Tacitus accentuated certain psychological traits of the tyrant, relocating them in a context in which he enjoyed absolute power.[6] It is in the works of these authors that the tyrant becomes the cruel and strong-willed character, prey to inordinate passions, who in the Middle Ages will be set in opposition to the good ruler as Satan was opposed to God.

With the development of Italian Humanism, the contrast was reinterpreted according to the new culture by authors such as Francesco Patrizi (*De regno et regis institutione*, 1481-1484), Giuniano Maio (*De maiestate*, 1492) and Giovanni Pontano (*De principe*, 1493).[7] In their works, the tyrant becomes the negative model of the uneducated ruler, unable to control his passions, and therefore unfit to rule. The conclusions of the Italian intellectuals were rephrased for a more international readership in Erasmus' *Institutio principis christiani* (1516), which became the model for all educational texts in the Renaissance. Specifically for England, Erasmus' work was the model for Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Governor* (1531), the educational text par excellence in the Elizabethan age, where Elyot continually evoked famous tyrannical figures from both the antiquity and English history, as negative examples of uneducated men and bad rulers.

But it was in the 1550s that the problem of tyranny became a grave matter for English culture. During that time, some renowned Protestant authors (John Ponet, Christopher Goodman, John Knox), exiled during Mary I's reign, wrote treatises where they justified the right of the subjects to depose and kill the tyrannical king who did

[5] See Bushnell 1990, 47-9; Dall'Olio 2017, 481-6; Humble 2017, 424-6. Regarding the birth and development of the character of the 'tyrant' in ancient Greece, Lanza 1977 remains the reference text.

[6] See the last chapter of Lanza 1977 for a summary of the history of the 'tyrant' after classical Greece; cf. Bushnell 1990, 29-36.

[7] See Gilbert 1939, 461-4 for an effective survey of the depiction of the ideal prince in those works.

not respect the word of God and subverted the laws of the country.[8] The idea in itself was not new. Both Xenophon and Aristotle had already stated that the king reigned over willing subjects, while the tyrant oppressed unwilling subjects and ruled only for his pleasure and not for the good of the kingdom (Xen. *Mem.* 4.3; Arist *Pol.* 4.1295a; cf. Bushnell 1990, 11, 26-9). As for the right of the subjects to depose and kill the tyrant, that had already been advocated by some important authors of the Middle Ages, like John of Salisbury (*Policraticus* 8.7) and Thomas Aquinas (*Sententiae* 2.quaest.44. art.2). In the works of the Protestant resistance writers, these two distinct political traditions were united. Their conclusions were later developed even further by George Buchanan in his dialogue *De Iure Regni Apud Scotos* (written shortly after Mary Stuart's deposition by the Scottish nobility in 1567), where the whole difference between a king and a tyrant came to be seen in his attitude towards the laws of the country: the good king respects them, the tyrant violates them and therefore is to be punished (see Mason and Smith in Buchanan 2004).

The various tyrannical characters appearing on the Elizabethan stage from the 1560s[9] onwards re-proposed those patterns. The protagonist of Thomas Preston's *Cambises* (1560-1561, printed 1569), a king who rules for his own pleasure, is represented as proud, deaf to good advice, intemperate, cruel, and suspicious (cf. Dall'Olio 2017, 491-2). This characterisation would be revised in the light of Seneca's tragedies, first translated into English in the 1550s and 1560s, which would offer Elizabethan playwrights a model of what we might call the 'psychology of the tyrant', i.e. a description of how a tyrannical personality is developed.[10] By an interesting coincidence, precisely

[8] See Woodbridge 2010, 138-49, for this literature of resistance and its impact on the description of tyranny.

[9] I exclude here earlier theatrical genres such as mystery and morality plays, although the character of Herod may be considered a forerunner of the Elizabethan tyrants: cf. Bushnell 1990, 106-15.

[10] This justifies the great interest of the young members of the future Elizabethan elite in these works: as Jessica Winston argues, translating Seneca was a way to 'study' the mechanisms of power and prepare themselves for their future as statesmen (see Winston 2008). Linda Woodbridge goes further, and proposes to consider the translation of the Senecan corpus

in 1587, the year *Tamburlaine* was first staged, Thomas Hughes' tragedy *The Misfortunes of Arthur* was performed before the Queen (cf. Dall'Olio 2017, 492-4). The antagonist of the play, Mordred, is an almost exact embodiment of the tyrant as conceived by the Elizabethan culture of the time: he desires the throne in order to satisfy his ambition, is deaf to good advice, and refuses to give up, even when tormented by dark fears about his future. Although the plot of the tragedy does not allow him to demonstrate a particularly vicious behaviour, his insistence on always seeking the satisfaction of his own desires is enough to qualify him as a tyrant. There is a new element in Mordred's characterisation, which puts Hughes' tragedy in tone with an important development of Elizabethan political theory. During the 1570s and 1580s, Elizabeth promoted the birth of a new official theory, according to which it was only permissible for subjects to rebel against a sovereign whose title was illegitimate. If the king ruled with a legitimate title, instead, subjects were forbidden to rebel against him, even if he proved a bad king: in that case, they could only pray God for deliverance (see Armstrong 1946, 161-81; Bevington 1968, 141-67; Dall'Olio 2017, 477-8). In *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, Mordred usurped Arthur's throne, and this is presented as both a consequence and a confirmation of his tyrannical inclinations.

This is an important point, because the identification between usurpation and tyranny constitutes the main reason for which Marlowe's protagonist is recognised as a tyrant. When Tamburlaine first appears on stage, in *Tamb. 1* 1.2, one of the first things he does is to refuse his 'natural' social status: "I am a lord, for so my deeds shall prove, / And yet a shepherd by my parentage" (*Tamb. 1* 1.2.34-5). Immediately after, he affirms his intention "to be a terror to the world, / Measuring the limits of [my] empery / By east and west as Phoebus doth his course" (39-41). The foundation of an empire is presented as a consequence of Tamburlaine's revolt against the established social order, in the name of a personal desire for kingship.[11] It is then no coincidence that the first recurrence of the

a proper 'resistance project' against tyranny (see Woodbridge 2010, 141-62).

[11] For the relation between Tamburlaine's attitude and the class conflicts in Elizabethan England see Vitkus 2003, 67; Thornton Burnett 2004, 130-1;

term 'tyranny' in connection to Tamburlaine's rule is to be found in the mouth of Mycetes, the first sovereign deposed by Tamburlaine: "I know not how to take their tirannies" (*Tamb. 1* 2.7.41). This is the first in a long list of passages, where the several opponents of Tamburlaine either call him a tyrant or define his actions towards them as 'tyranny', thus highlighting both his cruelty and the illegitimacy of his power, borne out of the 'unnatural' ambition of a peasant aspiring to go beyond his status. In the last of those recurrences, this is made explicit: in promising Callapine victory, the King of Amasia calls Tamburlaine "that base-born tyrant" (*Tamb. 2* 5.2.18). Like with Hughes' Mordred, the usurpation of a throne is at the same time a consequence and a confirmation of the 'tyrannical' inclinations of Tamburlaine's personality.

Tamburlaine's response to the charges of illegitimacy also apparently fits into the traditional behaviour of a tyrant. Firstly, he dismisses them by defining his "tyrannies" as simply "war's justice" (*Tamb. 2* 4.1.145-6), thus refusing to consider them serious accusations. Then, he cruelly punishes those who utter them. Bajazeth (who calls Tamburlaine 'tyrant' thrice: *Tamb. 1* 4.2.10, 21, 100) is first used as a footstool, then caged and kept like a dog, Orcanes and his allies (collectively, they call Tamburlaine 'tyrant' six times, between *Tamb. 2* 4.1 and 4.3) are chained to Tamburlaine's chariot to train it, like horses. This resembles a dramatic pattern familiar to Elizabethan audiences: someone blames the tyrant for his actions, the tyrant first dismisses them and then either kills them or makes them suffer, as a punishment for having spoken. The most notable example can be found in Preston's *Cambises*, where the tyrant kills the son of one of his noblemen, Praxaspes, because he dared reprimand him for his drunkenness.[12] On the surface, Marlowe seems to replicate the same pattern with Tamburlaine and his victims.

And yet, here we also see the first of the many differences between Tamburlaine and his predecessors. Traditionally, when

Grogan 2014, 128-9; Ragni 2018, 88-91.

[12] The story comes from Herodotus (Hdt. 3.34.1-5) and Seneca (*De ira* 3.14.1-2), and enjoyed some fortune as a traditional *exemplum* about wrath: see Dall'Olio 2020, 114-20.

a tyrant punishes someone who dares to reprimand him, this character is either a good adviser trying to counsel the tyrant or an innocent refusing to submit to his unjust desires. In *Tamburlaine*, the kings humiliated by the protagonist are "all shown to be power-hungry infidels" (Whitfield White 2004, 71), none so virtuous that the audience should feel he is suffering unjustly.[13] Tamburlaine never punishes any of his friends or loved ones, even in the few instances they contradict him.[14] What is more, all his acts of cruelty, both those towards the defeated kings and those towards innocents (as the virgins of Damascus), are all presented as part of his self-representation as "the scourge and wrath of God" (*Tamb. 1* 3.2.44). The traditional datum of the tyrant's cruelty is thus transformed: Tamburlaine's deeds resemble a lucid political strategy,[15] rather than the inordinate actions of a disordinate personality.

This reinterpretation of Tamburlaine's cruelty is indicative of how Marlowe re-elaborates the traditional portrayal of the tyrant: while the actions and words of the character seemingly fit the conventional depiction of the tyrant, at the same time they are either set in a context which gives them a very different meaning, or developed in a way which deprives them of every evil undertone. Tamburlaine's treatment of Zenocrate is particularly significant in that regard. If their first encounter can be interpreted as an "offensive rape" (*Tamb. 1* 3.2.6), and as such it fits one of the traditional crimes for a tyrant, lust, the subsequent evolution of their relationship paints a much more complex picture. On the one hand, Zenocrate

[13] Zenocrate does pity Bajazeth and Zabina in *Tamb. 1* 5.2.289-91, and invites the audience to "behold the Turk and his great empress" (291, 295, 299) as a testament to the fickleness of Fortune, but nothing in Bajazeth's characterisation presents him as a virtuous king suffering unjustly. On the contrary, he is a representation of 'the Turk' as the enemy of Christianity: see Vitkus 2003, 72-4.

[14] The only notable exception is the killing of his son Calyphas, but that happens the third time Calyphas refuses to follow in his footsteps: the first two times it happened, Tamburlaine only chastised him.

[15] For Tamburlaine's exploitation of his self-representation, see Whitfield White 2004, 72-3, 86; as for the suffering of the innocents, "Elizabethan providential theory agreed that many good people suffer when entire nations are scourged" (Whitfield White 2004, 71).

comes to truly love Tamburlaine, becoming his fervent admirer (cf. Ragni 2018, 90); on the other, while somehow continuing to regard her as a prey of war,[16] not only does Tamburlaine not abuse her, but even goes so far as to temporarily alter his behaviour out of love for her. Their exchange at *Tamb. 1* 4.4 is particularly significant. During a banquet Tamburlaine notices that Zenocrate seems sad, and asks her why; she replies that she suffers from the ongoing war between Tamburlaine and her father, and pleads for a truce. This scene recalls a similar one in Preston's *Cambises*, also set in the context of a banquet. There, Cambises noticed that his wife wept, and asked her the reason. When she replied that she was mourning the fate of Smirdis (Cambises' brother, killed by the king for fear that he would steal his throne), Cambises orders her immediate killing. The dramatic movement of the two scenes is very similar (we could even suspect Marlowe is purposely rewriting Preston's scene),[17] but it also highlights how starkly different its conclusion is: Tamburlaine, unlike Cambises, does not punish Zenocrate, and even promises her to spare her loved ones (4.4.84-9). Later, in his only soliloquy in the entire play (5.2.72-127), the conqueror admits to being touched by Zenocrate's pain, and after a brief debate with himself, accepts to be vanquished by love.[18] Consequently, not only does he spare her father the Sultan's life, but he also restores his kingdom to him after the battle (5.3.384-6), in a scene that seems to represent the birth of a new order after the upheaval brought about

[16] See Thornton Burnett 2004, 135-6, for Zenocrate as a symbol of Tamburlaine's power. However, I find it excessive to conclude that "Tamburlaine aestethicize[s] . . . Zenocrate in such a way as to rob her of a meaningful sexuality" (id., 135).

[17] Thomas Preston's tragedy enjoyed a lasting fortune well beyond the 1560s, with reprints in 1581, 1584 and 1590. It would not be unlikely, then, for Marlowe to craft a scene reminding the audience of *Cambises*, in order to highlight the novelty of his creation. It is also worth noticing that, while Bajazeth's mistreatment can be found in Marlowe's sources, the character of Zenocrate, and everything regarding her, is his own invention.

[18] Cf. Rhodes 2013, 209-10 on the reprisal of concepts and ideas from Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* in the soliloquy. The story of Tamburlaine and Zenocrate is itself modelled on that of Cyrus and Panthea in Xenophon's work: see Grogan 2014, 130.

by his conquests (cf. Thornton Burnett 2004, 134).[19] The destroyer Tamburlaine is shown here to be capable of sincere affection, which is in stark contrast with the traditional description of the tyrant as a lustful ravisher of women.

The relationship between Tamburlaine and his friends is another aspect of his figure where Marlowe's hero emerges as radically different from the traditional tyrant. At the beginning of the tragedy, as he persuades Theridamas to desert his king and join him, Tamburlaine proudly presents his other two followers, Techelles and Usumcasane, as "my friends in whom I more rejoice" (*Tamb. 1* 1.2.241). He promises Theridamas that "by the love of Pylades and Orestes / . . . Thyself and them shall never part from me" (1.2.243, 245). The allusion to the well-known classical example of perfect friendship is by no means ironic: on the contrary, Tamburlaine keeps his friends close throughout the tragedy and constantly rewards their loyalty. In turn, Techelles, Usumcasane and Theridamas turn into 'inferior' versions of him: in their first appearance in *Part Two* (*Tamb. 2* 1.6.47-91), they proudly describe to Tamburlaine how they have continued to enlarge his empire, in words that sound in every way identical to his (see Vitkus 2003, 74). While the tyrant described by La Primaudaye does not tolerate the presence of virtuous men around him (also because he is afraid they would take away his power), Tamburlaine openly seeks it out, exhibits it as a further demonstration of his skill as a ruler, and never doubts their loyalty towards him.[20]

The only other instance of tyrannical inclinations (aside from cruelty) in Tamburlaine's character can be found in his desire for riches, which recalls the traditional datum of the tyrant's greed.

[19] Tamburlaine's decision could also be interpreted as an act of Realpolitik, made to confirm his power through the use of clemency. In this case, it would recall Julius Caesar and his well-known use of *clementia* as a political tool: a not unlikely conclusion, since one of the models for the characterisation of Marlowe's hero is the portrayal of the Roman dictator in Lucan's *Pharsalia* (see Ward 2008, 318-27).

[20] On that subject, Tamburlaine, as many scholars noticed, "never loses faith in himself or falls into despair" (Ward 2008, 321). He thus avoids completely one of the most traditional features of the tyrant's portrayal, fear (on which see the essays presented in Bigliazzi 2017).

However, just like cruelty, this apparently traditional feature is also deeply reformulated. Unlike La Primaudaye's tyrant, Tamburlaine does not strip his subjects to enrich himself: his desire for material wealth is aimed at other lands and other kings. It is not even wealth in itself that he desires: the possession of riches is part of his more general desire for glory. This aspect appears from Tamburlaine's first scene in the play, when the prisoner Zenocrate begs him to free her by demanding a ransom, and Tamburlaine disdainfully refuses (*Tamb. 1* 1.2.84): "Think you I weigh this treasure more than you?". The same answer he gives later to Bajazeth, when the defeated Turk king also asks to put a ransom on him: "What, think'st thou Tamburlaine esteems thy gold?" (*Tamb. 1* 3.3.262). Both times he proves not to be the "sturdy Scythian thief" (*Tamb. 1* 1.1.36), "famous for nothing but for theft and spoil" (*Tamb. 1* 4.3.66) some of his enemies regard him as. This leitmotiv shall continue in *Part 2*, where Tamburlaine shows he loves his sons "more . . . / Than all the wealthy kingdoms I subdued" (*Tamb. 2* 1.4.18-19), and declares (not unjustly) to have become "arch-monarch of the world . . . / For deeds of bounty and nobility" (*Tamb. 2* 4.1.149, 151). Once again, then, Marlowe offers a new spin on a traditional element: while Tamburlaine's lust for conquest does show a materialistic side (see Vitkus 2003, 73-5), nothing in this behaviour shows him to just covet riches to enrich himself, as a traditional tyrant.

To sum up, the protagonist of *Tamburlaine* is characterised in a way that makes it impossible to place him completely within the traditional portrayal of a tyrant. While Tamburlaine does present some fundamental aspects of this figure, such as cruelty, ambition and to some extent greed, those are revised in a way that goes beyond their traditional viewing. The result is that Tamburlaine ends up being almost the opposite of his predecessors: while Cambises and Mordred are negative characters overwhelmed by uncontrolled passions, Tamburlaine is instead shown as always in control of his impulses, capable of either turning them to virtuous conclusions or simply keeping them in check (and, in the case of cruelty, even using them to confirm his power). This contributes to make him (unlike his predecessors) a paradigm of success: the presence in his personality of tyrannical inclinations never turns into weaknesses that either hinder his path to power, or acts as

indicators that something is not right within his kingdom or himself. On the contrary, sometimes the play seems to suggest that those same tyrannical traits are a vital component to his success. Such a suggestion brings Marlowe's play close to two other texts of the time, two paradoxical praises of tyrants, where the traditional condemnation of such figures was reversed, and they were shown as model of ideal kingship.

## 3. Who is Really a Tyrant?

> Saepe numero accidit in iudicio ferendo . . . ut deterior pars meliorem vincat. Etenim orta . . . vulgari opinione, quod Nero improbus esset, ac crudelis, adeo permanavit in omnium mentes . . . ut . . . si quis contradicere, vel illum laudare tentet, paradoxa dicere videatur.
>
> [It often happens that, in making a judgement . . . the negative element takes precedence over the positive one. Thus, when the vulgar opinion arose . . . that Nero had been dishonest and cruel, it entered so far into the minds of all . . . that . . . if anyone ever says otherwise or tries to praise him, he appears to be telling a paradox][21]

Right from the start the *Neronis encomium* by the Milanese physician and philosopher Girolamo Cardano (printed 1562) clearly states its thesis: the tradition that portrays Nero as a cruel and bloodthirsty tyrant is the result of collective ignorance. Nero, on the contrary, was a shining example of good governance, slandered after his death by the senate "in exemplum caeterorum qui regnaturi essent ne talia adversus illos auderent satagebant" ("to warn future rulers not to give any hostile attitude towards them"). This sentence alone is sufficient to make clear that the work is much more than a simple literary game: Cardano's revisionism of the historical perspective on Nero is a form of social criticism.

Starting from a re-examination of the accounts of Suetonius and Tacitus, the philosopher goes so far as to explicitly challenge the entire Humanist educational tradition, guilty of not having been able to define well "qualis sit optimus princeps" ("what makes the worthiest prince") and "quae . . . sint officia optimi principis"

[21] I quote the Latin text from Cardano 1562, 138; all translations are mine.

("what are the duties of the worthiest prince"). On the contrary, the Humanist writers mixed up and confused the information so much "ut optimi habeantur tyranni, improbi vero qui optime regunt" ("that excellent rulers are considered tyrants and evil ones excellent rulers"). With his rehabilitation of Nero, Cardano intends to propose a complete reinterpretation of the model of the good king and create the alternative model of a ruler who would really do what is good for the State – that is, combat the excessive power of the nobility and support the lower classes, re-establishing an authentic social justice.[22] Nero, says Cardano, tried to do that during his ill-fated reign, and failed only because Fortune was adverse.

The mention of Fortune reveals the influence of Machiavelli's political theories on Cardano's thought. Other traces of such an influence can be found in other passages.[23] In defending Nero against the accusation of cruelty, i.e. of having committed crimes without motive, Cardano points out how the emperor either killed people who were a danger to him or the state (such as Britannicus or Agrippina), or acted 'cruelly' only against the guilty. His was therefore a "crudelitas . . . opportuna", of which "nulla melior ad continendum regna" ("cruelty . . . in time and place . . . most useful to preserve the kingdom"). The passage is a reprise of Machiavelli's definition of "crudeltà bene usate . . . che si fanno . . . per la necessità dello assicurarsi"[24] ("well-used crimes . . . made . . . to ensure power"). Cardano also rejects the historiographical tradition of enumerating Nero's private vices: "Quae delinquit princeps in saevitia, in rapinis, in iudiciis, non tuendo fines imperii, populum premendo fame, haec principis sunt vitia. At si immodice se vino dedat, aut crapulae, aut libidini, aut aleae, aut delicatiori vitae: haec non malum principem

[22] To this end, Cardano ventures into two lengthy digressions, the first aimed at demonstrating which is the fairest form of government, and the other how the solidity of the state depends on the prince's ability to keep the authoritarian tendencies of the nobles at bay. See Di Branco in Cardano 2008, 25-34 for the connection between these passages and the political conditions of the Duchy of Milan at the time.

[23] The idea that the prince must support and favour the poor is derived by Machiavelli's *Discourses over the first decade by Livy*: cf. Di Branco in Cardano 2008, 19-25.

[24] I quote the Italian text from Machiavelli 2020; my translation.

efficiunt" ("The vices of a prince are cruelty, robbery, unjust judgments, failure to defend the borders of the empire, reducing the people to starvation, not an inordinate love of wine, good food, sex, gambling or a life devoted to pleasures"). Here too, Cardano is expanding on a concept present in *The Prince*, where Machiavelli distinguished between the vices the prince needed to avoid, "quelli . . . che gli torrebbono lo stato" ("those . . . that would take away his state"), and the others, from which he should "guardarsi, s'e' gli è possibile: ma non possendo, vi si può con meno respetto lasciare andare" ("beware if it is possible: if not, he can indulge in them with fewer scruples").

The two passages show how much Cardano departs from traditional Humanist political thought and its usual association of bad kingship with vicious personality. To Cardano, the sovereign's personality is irrelevant if he, in his public activity, nevertheless pursues the common good;[25] he even affirms that some crimes can be justified as the deed more profitable for the state: "plura sunt . . . quae sub pietatis specie fiunt, apud Deum maxime impia" ("many acts . . . that are done with religious scruples are often the most ungodly").[26] Nero's cruelty falls into the latter category, also because, as Cardano shows, the emperor tried instead to be mild anytime he could. In the face of this fundamentally just attitude, it matters little that he was too devoted to certain pleasures such as theatre or sex.

Another criticism that Cardano makes against the previous Humanist tradition concerns the lack of consideration of the historical context: "Compara, si recte libet iudicare, homines hominibus, tempora temporibus, non simpliciter hominum facta" ("If you want to judge rightly, compare men with men and times with times, not simply human actions"). In this, Cardano is following the

[25] In this, Cardano anticipates a development of European political theory that will be fully realised in the 1570s: see Bushnell 1990, 49.

[26] Yet another echo of a notorious passage of *The Prince*: "se si considera bene tutto, si troverà qualche cosa che parrà virtù, e seguendola sarebbe la ruina sua: e qualcuna altra che parrà vizio, e seguendola ne nasce la sicurtà e il bene essere suo" ("if one considers everything well, one will find something that will seem virtue, and following it would be its ruin: and some other that will seem vice, and following it would be its safety and good being").

example of contemporary historians such as François Baudouin (*De institutione historiae universae*, 1561) and Jean Bodin (*Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem*, 1566). As highlighted by Anthony Grafton, both these authors, in contrast with the previous Humanist way of writing history, "emphasized the need to read in a critical manner, with an eye always on the credibility of the sources" and argued that the historian had to be capable "to set events into their political and legal contexts" to better understand them (Grafton 2007, 68-9). Cardano's aforementioned critical reading of Suetonius and Tacitus, and his insistence on judging Nero's actions according to the ethos of his time perfectly fits within this method. This allows Cardano to show how good Nero was in mitigating the abuses of the powerful, thus proving he was a true servant of the laws, and not the tyrant described by previous historical tradition.

To sum up, with his *Neronis encomium*, Girolamo Cardano presents a profound critique of the traditional Humanist political theory. He accuses his predecessors of endorsing the ideal of a sovereign that served to sustain an unjust social system. They ignored both what the true duties of a sovereign were and what was important in determining the goodness of their reign, and focused instead on an abstract ideal divorced from history. With Nero, Cardano proposes a different model of a sovereign, ready to be cruel if the good of the state requires it, but only against the powerful, while instead showing mercy to everyone else and acting justly towards the poor, of which he defends the rights. Cardano's *Neronis encomium* is ultimately a work of rupture, where the literary genre of paradox is used to promote 'subversive' ideals in the name of social justice.

By a curious coincidence, it was precisely in England that Cardano would find an imitator. It is probable that William Cornwallis the Younger's "Praise of King Richard the Third"[27] (printed in 1616, but probably written in the 1590s: cf. Medori in Cornwallis 2018-2019, 8-9) took the *Neronis encomium* as its model, as the presence of a direct quotation from Cardano in the text seems to prove (*Culpatur factu, non ob aliud, quam exitum*; "they

[27] The authorship of this text has long been questioned, but scholars now agree that it belongs to Cornwallis: see Medori, Cornwallis 2018-2019, 9.

approve, or disprove all things by the ending", Cornwallis 1616, C2*r.*). Anyway, even if Cornwallis is not directly imitating Cardano, still he is undeniably moving in a similar direction. As the Italian author did with Nero, so Cornwallis, in presenting Richard III as the victim of an erroneous popular opinion, reviews all the crimes traditionally imputed to him. He either reverses them into positive actions, or points out that there is no definitive proof of his guilt, at the same time emphasising the goodness of his government: "He was no taxer of the people, no oppressor of the commons . . . no suppressor of his subjects, to satisfy either licentious humours, or to enrich light-headed flatterers" (Cornwallis 1616, C2*v.*).

The terminology of this sentence, with its use of terms specific to English political culture, highlights the biggest difference between Cornwallis and Cardano: as a whole, the "Praise of King Richard the Third" lacks the polemical edge of the *Neronis encomium*. While Cardano used his historical revision to denounce an entire cultural tradition, Cornwallis merely accuses the sovereign's contemporaries of being biased towards Richard.[28] Also absent from Cornwallis' text are the digressions about the nature of the excellent prince and his actions. If the Italian author set out to question the political theory of European Humanism, his English colleague merely attempts to re-evaluate an ill-treated historical figure.[29] This is not to say that Cornwallis' text does not contain some provocative passages. Following Cardano, Cornwallis justifies the killing of Edward V and his brothers as necessary for the welfare of the country: "The removing such occasions of civil wars in a well-ruled commonwealth, is most profitable, most commendable; being no cruelty, but pity, a jealousy of their subjects, and a zealous regard of their own safeties" (Cornwallis 1616, C4*r.*). We find in this

[28] Not just them: Cornwallis also accuses his own contemporaries, who prefer to give credence to "the partial writings of indiscreet chroniclers and witty play-makers, than his [Richard's] laws and action" (1616, C3*r.*). We do not know whether Cornwallis includes Shakespeare among the "play-makers"; in any case, Richard III had also starred in other plays: see Medori, Cornwallis 2018-2019, 40n61.

[29] The work ends with an afterword, "Yet for all this know, I hold this but a paradox" (Cornwallis 1616, E3*r.*), which can be seen as an attempt to defuse any possible 'subversive' reading.

passage traces of the Machiavellian theory of the necessary cruelty: a significant presence, given the poor reputation of Machiavelli's theories in England.[30]

More interesting still are two brief theoretical digressions in Cornwallis' text. The first concerns the principle that subjects cannot really judge the actions of kings. Firstly, their knowledge of facts is limited: "our knowledge extends to things equal or inferior . . . in terrene matters (if surpassing our estates) they are only snatched at by supposition" (506-7, 508-10). Secondly, very often the judgement of subjects does not take into account that "what is meet, expedient in a Prince, in a lower fortune is utterly unmeet, inexpedient" (497-9). In a sense, here Cornwallis is going further than Cardano: if the Italian philosopher was declaring the fallibility of the traditional model of the sovereign, Cornwallis is declaring its inadequacy. Kings move on another plane than their subjects, therefore any judgement on their actions requires the assumption of a different perspective. In this, one can see the insistence of the Elizabethan official ideology on affirming the sacredness of kingship as an institution beyond the behaviour of the person.[31] In the hands of Cornwallis, this same principle becomes the justification for a kind of ethical *aporia*: not only does it justify acts of cruelty as responding to a logic other than that of morality, but it also suggests that if it is not possible to know exactly what motivates the actions of kings, then any moral judgement is worthless.

Along similar lines is the second digression concerning ambition, presented as a 'natural' condition of kings: "Princes are naturally ambitious . . . ambition makes them to effect their desire . . . princes err against nature, if they aspire not" (1-2, 7-8). Richard's decision to take the throne is thus also justified on the basis of this 'naturalness'

[30] Which however did not prevent his dissemination. *The Prince* was translated twice in English, and both translations survive in manuscript form: see Petrina 2009. On the *PLRE*, a Latin translation of *The Prince* is found in the library of a scholar, Edward Higgins, in 1588 (149.106), and a French translation of the *Discourses* in that of a Member of Parliament, Sir William Fairfax, in 1591 (264.11).

[31] It is the famous theory of the 'two bodies' of the king, which English jurists transferred from the ecclesiastical to the secular sphere to strengthen the monarchy: see Mack 1973, 7.

of ambition as a characteristic worthy of a prince. Cornwallis even goes so far as to say that Richard "wanted nothing to make him an accomplished Prince, but that he was not ambitious enough" (1616, C3*r*.). This notation is particularly interesting because, as we saw, ambition is the tyrant's original sin in Elizabethan political theory. In his attempt to demonstrate how Richard was an excellent ruler, Cornwallis thus ends up advocating that the benefit for a prince to assume 'tyrannical' characteristics such as ambition and 'necessary' cruelty. In this, Cornwallis' praise truly denounces an ideal proximity to *Tamburlaine* and Marlowe's questioning of the model of the tyrant that we saw in Part 1.

## 4. The Good Tyrant

> It is written of him that in all his assaults . . . he usually would hang out to be seen of the enemy an ensign white, for the space of one full day, which signified . . . that if those within would in that day yield them, he then would take them to mercy without any their loss of life or goods. . . . The third day he ever displayed the third [ensign] all black, signifying thereby that he then had shut up his gates from all compassion and clemency, in such sort that whosoever were in that day taken . . . should assuredly die for it . . . Whence assuredly it cannot be said that he was very cruel, though otherwise adorned with many rare virtues. But it is to be supposed that God stirred him up an instrument to chastise these princes, these proud and wicked nations.

The passage comes from one of Marlowe's sources, Pedro de Mexia's *Silva de Varia Leción* in the English translation by Thomas Fortescue (1571).[32] Up to this point, Tamburlaine has been praised as an ideal leader, and it is therefore with some reservation that the author has to tell about the cruelty shown by him against innocents, thus acknowledging the presence of a negative psychological element amidst his hero's virtues. The passage is indicative of the ambiguity underlying the figure of Tamburlaine in all of Marlowe's sources, where on the one hand "the Mongol conqueror" was "extolled

[32] I quote Fortescue's translation in the version found in Thomas and Tyndelman 1994, 88.

. . . as a modern hero" (Ribner 1954, 354), but on the other each author inevitably had to also relate the stories concerning his cruel behaviour. Usually, the answer was the same as in Fortescue: pointing out the providential framework behind Tamburlaine's actions, so that the tyrant's cruelties would fall within his nature as a heaven-sent scourge.

As underlined by many studies, in his tragedy Marlowe questions such an interpretation of Tamburlaine's story (cf. Vitkus 2003, 59-64; Whitfield White 2004, 70-3). Despite several characters invoking a divine help, no action in the play can be clearly identified as the result of a heavenly intervention; and as for Tamburlaine's claims to be an heaven-sent scourge, those are heavily put in doubt by the tyrant constantly changing the identity of the God whose will he is supposed to perform.[33] No providentialist explanation can then be applied to the action of *Tamburlaine*, which means that the negative sides of the protagonist's character can no longer be dismissed as a side-effect of a divine plan. This strengthens the paradox of his figure as it has been described in Part 1: the elimination of a providential framework makes it even more difficult to determine whether Tamburlaine is to be regarded more as a good king whose positive upward parabola leads to the founding of a new empire, or a bloodthirsty tyrant who conquers power with a skilfully planned use of violence.

From this point of view, Tamburlaine's ambiguity recalls that of another central figure in Elizabethan culture: Cyrus the Great,[34] founder of the Persian empire and recognised figure of ideal ruler in Renaissance culture, thanks above all to Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, a founding text of Humanist educational literature (see Grogan 2007, 65-7).[35] In England, the work had been read in universities since the

[33] The final impression is either that this is mainly a political strategy to justify his actions (as suggested by Whitfield White), or that the true God whose cult Tamburlaine is spreading is actually himself (see Ragni 2018).

[34] Marlowe was not the first to establish a comparison between Tamburlaine and Cyrus: Fortescue's aforementioned biography opened with an episode in which the boy Tamburlaine, elected king in jest by his peers, already proves himself adept at ruling (cf. Thomas and Tydeman 1994, 84), just as Cyrus in Hdt 1.114.1-2.

[35] On the fortune of the *Cyropaedia* in the Renaissance see Humble 2017,

1540s, and then translated in its entirety by William Barker (1567), who extolled the character of Cyrus as an emblem of a perfect sovereign, ruler of an ideal country where all citizens are subject to a strict social education regarding civic virtues. This made Xenophon's text, Barker pointed out, an educational text not only for princes, but also for subjects (see Grogan 2014, 50-2, 55-6). And yet, just as for Tamburlaine, for Cyrus too this official exemplary status concealed a far more ambiguous assessment. On the one hand, a different cultural tradition derived from the Middle Ages, and supported in the Renaissance by the rediscovery of Herodotus' *Histories* (whose first two books were printed in English translation in 1584), presented a very different portrayal of Cyrus as a haughty tyrant (see Grogan 2013, 32-4). On the other hand, the *Cyropaedia* lent itself to a reversed interpretation of Cyrus' exemplarity: the Persian king's rise to power in Xenophon's text hints at aspects of violence, cruelty and deception (cf. Newell 1988, 118-21; Grogan 2014, 60-4). This ambiguity justifies the 'sceptical reading' of the *Cyropaedia* in Machiavelli's *Prince*, where Cyrus is described as a shrewd politician capable of making his people respect him so as to better satisfy his own ambitions.

All these aspects can be found in the figure of Tamburlaine, whose path in the tragedy recalls in its dramatic structure that of Xenophon's Cyrus (see Rhodes 2013, 209-12), and whose behaviour can well be interpreted in the light of the Machiavellian 'sceptical' reading of the *Cyropaedia*.[36] As Cyrus, Tamburlaine avoids giving in to vices that would alienate the favour of his allies (he respects and honours Zenocrate, always rewards his friends, does not deprive his subjects of their riches) and instead commits those that serve to demonstrate and consolidate his power (he has no mercy for his enemies, shows no respects for divine or human laws, robs and pillages the lands of other kings). Tamburlaine thus retains the exemplary stature he has in the sources, but with a very different meaning: the providentialist theory that justified Tamburlaine's crimes as a consequence of a divine will is replaced by the more

418-23, 426-30 and, more recently, Humble 2020.

[36] Irving Ribner already recognised an influence of Machiavelli's theories on Tamburlaine's characterisation: see id. 1954, 354-6.

'concrete' ideal of a ruler capable of behaving in the right way in order to gain and retain power.

In this respect, *Tamburlaine, Part One* presents some really interesting contacts with the fore-mentioned reappraisals of Nero and Richard III in the texts of Cardano and Cornwallis. We could even say that Tamburlaine sometimes seems to be a sort of scenic correspondent of the 'good tyrant' described in the two paradoxes: he 'performs' those aspects of Nero and Richard III's behaviour praised by Cardano and Cornwallis, thus confirming himself as a 'new' model for the ideal king. If Cornwallis had justified ambition as a royal trait, and criticised Richard for not having enough of it, Tamburlaine's main psychological characteristic is boundless ambition, which leads him to his path of endless conquest (see above, p. 7). If Cardano had emphasised the irrelevance of the king's personal vices when they are not harmful to his action, by respecting Zenocrate Tamburlaine manages to reverse his bad reputation with Zenocrate's father and even win his respect, despite his original kidnapping. "I am pleased by my overthrow / If, as beseems a person of thy state, / Thou hast with honour used Zenocrate" (*Tamb. 1* 5.2.418-20), says the same Soldan that previously roared against "the rogue of Volga", that "holds . . . / the Soldan's daughter, for his concubine" (*Tamb. 1* 4.1.5-6). If, finally, both authors affirmed the necessity of crimes to maintain power, Tamburlaine's use of spectacular acts of violence is shown as pivotal in striking terror and spreading his fame among his enemies, as shown by the fear of the Governor of Tyrus for his city: "I fear the custom proper to his sword, / Which he observes as parcel of his fame / Intending so to terrify the world" (*Tamb. 1* 5.1.13-5). The two paradoxes and Marlowe's tragedy thus find themselves united in the common attempt to propose a new conception of the ideal sovereign, one where the 'goodness' of a king is determined by his ability to act in the best way for the state or for himself.

It remains to be understood how *Tamburlaine, Part Two* fits in this framework, since the differences between the two parts are so profound that many critics have come to recognise them as dialectically opposed to each other (cf. Ribner 1954, 356; Vitkus 2003, 73-5; Wilson 2004, 214-7). Significant, in this regard, is the fact that Tamburlaine's first action in this play, the mourning for Zenocrate, is

also his first defeat (cf. Thornton Burnett 2004, 128). What follows is a series of events that denounce Tamburlaine's increasing difficulty to contain the world of drama within his will: his son Calyphas refuses to follow in his footsteps, and his follower Theridamas fails to repeat with Olympia the seduction Tamburlaine accomplished with Zenocrate (cf. Thornton Burnett 2004, 128-9). At the same time, some of the 'tyrannical' traits of Tamburlaine's personality also tend to worsen. The desire for riches seems to become sometimes predominant over that for glory, as emerges from both his speech in *Tamb. 2* 4.3.96-133 (with its images of pomp and triumph) and the one at the moment of his death. There, Tamburlaine laments he shall leave numerous parts of the world unconquered, and the description he gives of them insists more on their material wealth than on the glory he shall achieve from their conquering (on which see Vitkus 2003, 74-6). Also, his cruelty partially loses its function as a political tool and increasingly becomes a desperate attempt to maintain his grip on the world: the burning of the city where Zenocrate dies is borne out of pure personal pain, and the bridling of the Eastern kings resolves in the grotesque spectacle of a chariot almost unmovable (cf. Thornton Burnett 2004, 135-8). The ideal stature of Tamburlaine is thus lowered, and it is tempting to see "signs of Marlowe's disillusionment" (Ribner 1954, 356) in the ideals he expressed in *Part One*.

However, even with this unmistakable diversity of tone, *Tamburlaine Part Two* still retains the ideological foundations of *Part One*, as proven by the first two acts of the tragedy, dominated by the two stories of Callapine, son of Bajazeth, convincing his gaoler Almeda to let him go, and of the Christian king Sigismund's betrayal of his alliance with the Turk king Orcanes. The episodes mirror the first events of *Part One* (Tamburlaine persuading Theridamas and Tamburlaine betraying the Persian king Cosroe), those that had initiated the conqueror's rise to power, and the characters are represented as "mini-Tamburlaines" (Thornton Burnett 2004, 128). Both these elements serve as an ironic confirmation of how successful the new 'model' of ruler proposed by Tamburlaine is: even his enemies are now imitating him. The story of Sigismund also serves as the most explicit questioning of the providentalist political theory (see Vitkus 2003, 57-8; Whitfield White 2004, 72),

thus confirming its substantial refusal: the world created by Marlowe is confirmed to be a purely human world, where the actions of the characters only have to contend with Fortune.[37]

This establishes another link between tragedy and paradoxes. In the *Neronis encomium*, Cardano, as we saw, affirmed the importance for human actions of "bona fortuna quaedam, sine qua nil arduum inter mortalia perficere . . . licet" ("a certain good fortune, without which nothing serious can be achieved in the world"). In a lesser tone, Cornwallis suggested that only Fortune prevented Richard from being recognised as a good ruler: "had he lived . . . Fame would have been no more injurious to him than to his predecessors" (1616, C2*r*.). Marlowe's tragedy seems to offer a theatrical counterpart to what the two authors wrote. In *Tamburlaine, Part One*, Fortune had consistently been on Tamburlaine's side, so that he could not unreasonably boast to "hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains, / And with [his] hand turn Fortune's wheel about" (*Tamb. 1* 1.2.174-5). In *Tamburlaine Part Two*, the reverse is true: Fortune now is his enemy, and slowly but progressively works against him. However, this happens through no fault of him; in fact, despite the worsening of his 'tyrannical' inclinations, Tamburlaine commits no serious error that really undermines his power. He is still victorious on the battlefield, his friends remain loyal to him, and his sons agree to follow his example (Calyphas being the only exception). Even in the face of Fortune's blows, Tamburlaine never comes to a complete breaking down, and still succeeds in maintaining his power until the very end, where he states that the only reason he is now dying is that "those powers / That meant t'invest [him] in a higher throne" (*Tamb. 2* 5.3.120-1) have decided not to favour him anymore. And even at that moment, he dies surrounded by his friends and sons like Xenophon's Cyrus. *Tamburlaine Part Two* thus ends on a note which confirms the message of *Part One*, thus affirming once more the leading character as an exemplary model of a new type of ideal sovereign, where even his more negative, 'tyrannical' features are

[37] Ribner recognises in this conception of the world elements of a non-Christian, classical idea of history: see Ribner 1953. It is also possible to see an influence of Lucan, the Latin poet author of the *Pharsalia*, whose first book Marlowe translated: see Ward 2008, 318-29.

essential to his success.

## 5. Conclusion

Answering the question from which this article takes its cue: yes, Tamburlaine is a tyrant, but for Marlowe this is not a demerit. On the contrary, as it has been pointed out, in *Tamburlaine* the traits of the protagonist's character, which would traditionally identify him as a tyrant, are presented as part of a successful political action. Tamburlaine's 'tyranny' is not a negative model of sovereignty, but a positive alternative to the traditional one. In this sense, *Tamburlaine* can be interpreted as a paradoxical eulogy of a tyrant, similar to those of Nero and Richard III by Girolamo Cardano and William Cornwallis. There, the condemnation of the two tyrants was overturned in the name of a renewed, different conception of sovereignty, whose basis could be found in Machiavelli's writings. Some aspects of Tamburlaine's characterisation recall what was written by Cardano and Cornwallis in those texts: a proof, if not of direct influence, at least of Marlowe's careful reception of the political debate of Renaissance Europe at the time, which the young playwright thus represents on stage. It was a daring operation, which paved the way for the Elizabethan theatre to discuss, more or less covertly, political issues like what it means to be a king, how the latter differs from a tyrant, and how the latter comes into being.

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