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“I cannot love, to be an emperess”: Women and Honour in *Tamburlaine*

WHAT CAN THE WORD *HONOUR* possibly mean in a play where the eponymous hero says, after witnessing the deaths of three of his prisoners, “such are objects fit for Tamburlaine, / Wherein as in a mirror may be seen / His honour, that consists in shedding blood / When men presume to manage arms with him” (I:V.i.475–478)?¹ The world of Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great* is at odds with conventional notions of honour and virtue: as Alan Shepard writes, “Tamburlaine practices virtual genocide against his enemies and ethnocide against their cities, religions, and ways of life,”² yet he cloaks his motives for bloodshed in the conventional terms used to describe battle undertaken for noble causes. Tamburlaine’s “working words,” as Theridamas calls his general’s elaborate rhetoric of battle (I:II.iii.25), are propaganda; he makes words work his way in order to inspire his soldiers to commit atrocities in his name and in the service of his quest for power over all the world. Thus, words like *honour*, *virtue*, and *faith* do not necessarily mean what we expect them to in *Tamburlaine*.

The meanings of these words are important for an understanding of the actions of Tamburlaine and his men, but they become particularly complicated when applied to the lives of women in the play. The representation of women in Marlowe’s plays is

¹ Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great, Parts I and II* (*Complete Plays and Poems*, ed. E.D. Pendry and J.C. Maxwell. London: Everyman, 1976, 3–121). References are to this edition and are cited in the text.

² Alan Shepard, “Endless Sacks: Soldiers’ Desire in *Tamburlaine*,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 46.4 (1993): 734.

interesting partly because it is rarely complex.³ A number of critics have been concerned to demonstrate the significance of this problem: for example, Velma Bourgeois Richmond suggests that the “masculine/feminine dichotomy [in the plays] is related to Marlowe’s religious ambiguity” (36); and Barbara J. Baines argues that “The balance between the masculine and feminine principles within the human psyche was Marlowe’s obsession,” saying that “He understood, as his plays demonstrate, that this balance was crucially linked with the desire to gain or relinquish power.”⁴ It does seem that, as Richmond says, *Tamburlaine* is exceptional among Marlowe’s plays in the amount of attention it gives to women’s points of view (37). In analyzing the function of women in *Tamburlaine*, however, most critics have been content to accept the traditional argument that Zabina, Olympia, and especially Zenocrate represent an alternative world of feminine gentleness, sympathy, and the Christian virtues, a world that contrasts sharply with the masculine and martial world of Machiavellian *virtù*, and which, whether Marlowe liked it or not, serves as an implicit criticism of Tamburlaine’s concept of honour.⁵

³ In “Renaissance Sexuality and Marlowe’s Women,” Velma Bourgeois Richmond says that “The woman character who is a recognizable person, not merely a type of evil dominance or good acquiescence, does not often appear in the plays of Christopher Marlowe.” She argues that “A more spontaneous and interesting variety of human value and the most successfully-balanced presentation of the woman’s point of view occurs in the *Tamburlaine* plays” (*Ball State University Forum* 16.4 [1975]: 38). While I agree that the perspectives of women are better represented in *Tamburlaine*, I disagree with Richmond about the way these women act within their martial environment.

⁴ Barbara J. Baines, “Sexual Polarity in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe,” *Ball State University Forum* 23.3 (1982): 17.

⁵ This line of criticism appears, for example, in the work of J. Steane, who says that Zenocrate is “the only character who at all effectively opposes Tamburlaine’s morality” (*Marlowe: A Critical Study* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1964] 82); Baines, who identifies Zenocrate with “the life-affirming feminine values (gentleness, peace, love, and mercy)” (9); and Richmond, who suggests that the attitudes of Zenocrate, Zabina, and Olympia “contrast sharply with Tamburlaine’s masculine egotism. Their alternative values of gentleness and a world view that is ordered towards eternity are the basic Christian attitudes” (38). Shepard argues instead that “it is Agydas and Calyphas who explicitly renounce male hegemony and thus subvert the violent frame of mind enjoined by Tamburlaine and his comrades” (735). Constance Brown Kuriyama argues emphatically that in the play “One is in general either kingly, strong, intelligent, masculine, and warlike or is slavish, weak, stupid, feminine, and amorous” (*Hammer or Anvil: Psychological Patterns in Christopher Marlowe’s Plays* [New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1980] 13); significantly, Kuriyama does not discuss Olympia.

Are Zenocrate, Zabina, and Olympia all consistently aligned with the feminine virtues? Is virtue in Marlowe the feminization of honour, while *virtù* is the masculine version of honour? Do Marlowe's women always desire to relinquish power, whereas his men desire to gain it? The relationship of women to political power in *Tamburlaine* is perhaps not so easy to characterize as Baines and Richmond have suggested. It is true that none of the three women has the power to conquer Tamburlaine, any more than his enemies can subdue his forces; it is true, too, that all three die—Zabina and Olympia as the victims of Tamburlaine's warfare, cornered with no options left aside from suicide—and Zenocrate as the much-lamented and eulogized wife of the great general. However, these women are not as weak as they seem: Zenocrate makes the choice to love Tamburlaine faithfully despite her reservations about his conduct; Zabina is a loyal wife to Bajazeth and vows to prolong hope for their lives as long as she can, and when that is no longer possible she responds with determination to follow him in death rather than submit to further torture from Tamburlaine; and Olympia resolves to save her son and herself from their enemies, outwitting Theridamas and forcing him to kill her so that she will not have to submit to the two alternatives he offers her, love or rape. Where does this strength come from for Marlowe's women? Is this the strength of Christian virtue, or might it have more to do with Machiavellian *virtù*? How does Zenocrate's way of preserving her honour compare with the methods of Zabina and Olympia to preserve theirs? Do these women die virtuous deaths? Perhaps *Tamburlaine* is exceptional not only in paying a good deal of attention to female characters, but also in showing how complex and interesting the concept of honour can be for Marlowe's women as well as for his men.

What is the moral order in this play?

Near the end of Part II, when sickness and death have "dare[d] distemper Tamburlaine" (II:V.i.217), and he is on his deathbed, Theridamas provides a lament for his friend and master that is similar to Tamburlaine's lament for Zenocrate:

Weep, heavens, and vanish into liquid tears.
 Fall, stars that govern his nativity,
 And summon all the shining lamps of heaven
 To cast their bootless fires to the earth,

And shed their feeble influence in the air;
 Muffle your beauties with eternal clouds,
 For Hell and Darkness pitch their pitchy tents,
 And Death, with armies of Cimmerian spirits,
 Gives battle 'gainst the heart of Tamburlaine. (II.V.iii.1-9)

The "pitchy tents" of this speech echo the darkness of Tamburlaine's famous opening line in Zenocrate's death scene, "Black is the beauty of the brightest day" (II:II.iv.1), and though Theridamas is not quite as eloquent as Tamburlaine, he stresses the same point, that without Tamburlaine there will be no light in the world. His next lines, however, make his speech slightly ambiguous: he says, "Now in defiance of that wonted love / Your sacred virtues pour'd upon his throne, / And made his state an honour to the heavens," and goes on to criticize the "cowards" who "invisibly assail his soul" (II:II.iv.10-13); although he surely means to say that it is Hell, Darkness, and Death who are the cowards, it is not entirely clear that when he says "Your sacred virtues" he is necessarily referring back to the "heavens," rather than to those other intervening personified nouns. It is just possible, therefore, that the sacred virtues poured on Tamburlaine have been the virtues of Hell, Darkness, and Death. His preoccupation in life has certainly been with death, and although he claims at various times to be concerned with virtue, it is difficult to reconcile the image of Tamburlaine the king, whose definition of kingship requires sprinkling fields "with the brains of slaughtered men," "wad[ing] up to the chin in blood," and above all, "Keeping in iron cages emperors" (II:I.iii.81; 84; 49), with any kind of heavenly virtue.

What does honour mean for Marlowe or for Tamburlaine? It certainly has to do with "reverence, accorded to exalted worth or rank," with "a mark or manifestation of high regard," and even with the funeral observances and "external marks of respect paid by troops" at the burial of a person of distinction; when used of women it carries the usual connotations of "Chastity, purity, as a virtue of the highest consideration;" but it seems to have little to do with "a fine sense of and strict allegiance to what is due or right."⁶

⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, definitions 1, 5a, 5d, 3a, and 2a respectively. See also Mark Thornton Burnett, who discusses the nature of individual codes of honour in "Tamburlaine and the Renaissance Concept of Honour," *Studia Neophilologica* 59.2 (1987): 201-06. He argues that "The conflict that arises when these codes come together accounts, in part, for our difficulty in directly engaging with the

The various historical meanings of virtue, some of which are now obsolete, also shed light on Marlowe's choice of the word to describe Tamburlaine: in addition to referring to "Conformity of life and conduct with the principles of morality," the definition Tamburlaine does not live up to, this word also meant "The power or operative influence inherent in a supernatural or divine being," "An act of superhuman or divine power," "Physical strength, force, or energy," "The possession or display of manly qualities; manly excellence, manliness, courage, valour," and "Superiority or excellence, unusual ability, merit, or distinction, in some respect."⁷ It is the qualification "in some respect" that makes Tamburlaine virtuous. Tamburlaine certainly sees himself as divine, strong, energetic, and courageous. His primary virtue, then is power. Rather than virtue in the conventional Christian or classical sense, Tamburlaine possesses *virtù*. In *The Prince* Machiavelli uses this word to mean, as Robert Adams translates it, "anything from 'strength,' 'ability,' 'courage,' 'manliness,' or 'ingenuity' to 'character,' 'wisdom,' or even (last resort) 'virtue'" (xviii). Tamburlaine's virtues are clearly not the theological virtues charity, faith, or hope, nor are they strictly the cardinal virtues of justice or temperance, though he does show courage and fortitude; they are more likely the virtues of power; and sometimes they are inverted, and seem to be the "virtues" of Darkness and Death.

Even when characters believe they are using the word *honour* to mean "noble conduct," their speech is continually undermined by their actions. Meander, for example, tells Mycetes that they are "fighting more for honour than for gold" (I:II.ii.66), accusing Tamburlaine's men of greed, yet he holds out the temptation of the same spoils to the supposed men of honour: he says they will "Share equally the gold that bought their lives, / And live like gentlemen in Persia" (I:II.ii.70-71). And after Mycetes is defeated, Meander easily pledges his honour to Cosroe instead, "With utmost virtue of my faith and duty" (I:II.v.17). The significance of faith, honour, duty, and virtue is called into question when they

play and for the contradictory critical responses that it has provoked," and that the play "can be seen as an exploration or anatomization of honour at a time when the concept, affected by the processes of social, economic, and political change, was undergoing a transformation, losing [sic] old meanings and acquiring new associations and importance" (201).

⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, definitions 2a, 1a, 1c, 5a, 6a, and 7 respectively.

are exchanged so easily. It is somehow honourable, Ortygius says, for Cosroe to join ranks with Tamburlaine even against his own brother—Cosroe “seeks our honour / In joining with the man ordain’d by heaven / To further every action to the best” (I:II.i.51–53)—yet when Tamburlaine turns against them, Ortygius swears that they will be armed against him “In love of honour and defence of right” (I:II.vi.21). Honour is a shifting concept, an individual notion; it has more to do with self-interest and self-preservation than with noble behaviour in pursuit of what is right.

In Part Two of *Tamburlaine*, the example of the Governor of Babylon serves to emphasize just how changeable the definition of honour can be. At first he chides Maximus for wanting to surrender the city in the hope of saving their lives—“Villain, respects thou more thy slavish life / Than honour of thy country or thy name?” (II:V.i.10–11)—but later, when his own life is threatened, he resorts to bribery to save himself, and Tamburlaine scorns him for his weakness: “Then, for all your valour, you would save your life?” (II:V.i.119) Here Tamburlaine’s concept of honour, extreme and unforgiving as it is, is shown to advantage. Marlowe wants his audience to see the *virtù* of Tamburlaine highlighted by the weaknesses of other characters, and to value his strength; sometimes this happens even when Tamburlaine is committing atrocities, so that the audience’s own sense of what is honourable is manipulated. The “working words” of the play work on its audience and readers as Tamburlaine desires, “giv[ing] the world to note, for all my birth, / That virtue solely is the sum of glory, / And fashions men with true nobility” (I:V.i.188–90). It is easy to agree with Tamburlaine that it is character, not birth, that indicates true nobility, but his actions are not consistent with true nobility either—he just says they are.

Tamburlaine’s honour is particularly interesting in its relation to Zenocrate’s life. After taking her his prisoner, he expects her to love him, and even marry him. He swears to her father the Soldan that he has preserved her honour, her chastity, and that it is appropriate that they be married, now that he has conquered a significant part of the world (I:V.i.485–89). In a way, Zenocrate becomes part of the reason for Tamburlaine’s martial exploits, as he tells her he will not crown her until he has more kingdoms to offer her (I:IV.iv.140–41), and Anippe tries to comfort her after the deaths of the Egyptians, Bajazeth, and Zabina by saying that Tamburlaine “fights for honour to adorn your head” (I:V.i.376). It

seems hardly fair to Zenocrate to make her the excuse for genocide, no matter how much she loves Tamburlaine. But what does she think of his definition of honour? Does she accept it as she accepts his love? How does she see her own honour?

The temptation to be an empress: Zenocrate and Olympia

It is significant that Tamburlaine the warrior first appears on stage courting a woman and praising her beauty; perhaps this is why after he apostrophizes Zenocrate he is obliged to explain to Techelles that "women must be flattered: / But this is she with whom I am in love" (I:I.ii.107–08). In his usual habit of hyperbole, he claims that her "person is more worth to Tamburlaine / Than the possession of the Persian crown" (I:I.ii.90–91), yet almost immediately after this speech his attention is directed to the threat of "A thousand Persian horsemen [who] are at hand" (I:I.ii.111), and Zenocrate has no chance to answer her suitor, because his actions show that in fact the acquisition of the Persian crown is far more important than the acquisition of a beloved.⁸ On top of this, Tamburlaine greets Theridamas with a far more elaborate courtship speech than the one he has made to Zenocrate, enthusiastically offering him a kind of intimacy that he denies his future wife. Tamburlaine projects for Theridamas the possibility that "Both we will walk upon the lofty cliffs," "Both we will reign as consuls of the earth," and "we will triumph over all the world" (I:I.ii.193; 197; 173),⁹ whereas he offers Zenocrate all his "martial prizes," "garments ... made of Median silk, / Enchas'd with precious jewels of mine own," and the chance to ride in "an ivory sled" and "scale the icy mountains' lofty tops" (I:I.ii.102–04; 95–96; 98–100).

Zenocrate has hitherto resisted Tamburlaine's wooing, asking him to pity her plight (I:I.ii.7) and grant her and her followers liberty (I:I.ii.71), insisting that "The gods, defenders of the innocent, / Will never prosper your intended drifts / That thus oppress poor friendless passengers" (I:I.ii.68–70). Tamburlaine, however,

⁸ In a parallel moment in Part Two, Tamburlaine vows that his sons are "more precious in mine eyes / Than all the wealthy kingdoms I subdu'd" (II:I.iii.18–19), though not long afterwards he murders one of them.

⁹ At this point he seems to me to prefigure Milton's Satan in both *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*: having tempted the woman, he offers the man the chance to rule the kingdoms of the world. In Marlowe both fall; neither can resist the temptation of worldly power.

offers Zenocrate and Agydas this choice: "If you will willingly remain with me, / You shall have honours as your merits be; / Or else you shall be forc'd with slavery" (I:I.ii.254–56). The choice appears to be between honour and slavery, although surely the honourable thing to do would be to choose slavery. At this point it is Agydas who makes the choice for Zenocrate, and she merely answers "I must be pleased perforce" (I:I.ii.259), but she does not resist yielding to Tamburlaine for long, and soon discovers her love for him. It might seem that Zenocrate has no agency within the play, that her choices are made for her and that therefore she cannot be held accountable for them. James Robinson Howe, for example, argues that "she is stunned by her captor's magnetism" and "Her will is no longer fully her own."¹⁰ But her perspective is still distanced enough for her to see the horror of Tamburlaine's warfare throughout the play, and surely she bears some responsibility for the fact that she loves a man whose actions she finds despicable. She may not have a real choice about remaining with him, as Agydas answers for her, and she may not even have the choice about whether or not to marry him, as her father gives her to Tamburlaine, but within these constraints her conscience is free, and she is not obliged to love him, or to enjoy the riches and status he offers her.

Agydas sees that Zenocrate loves her captor, and warns her, "Let not a man so vile and barbarous, /... / Be honoured with your love but for necessity" (I:III.ii.27–30). Although he has determined that the best course of action is to submit to Tamburlaine temporarily and wait for rescue, Agydas now sees the consequences of his compromise, and for upholding too late the ideal of Zenocrate's honour—"Yet be not so inconstant in your love, / But let the young Arabian live in hope / After your rescue to enjoy his choice" (I:III.ii.56–58)—he must die. And because of his manly action in committing suicide, he will receive appropriate funeral honours: Usumcasane tells Techelles that "it was manly done; / And since he was so wise and honourable, / Let us afford him now the bearing hence, / And crave his triple-worthy burial" (I:III.ii.109–12). When Usumcasane praises Agydas for being "so wise and honourable" (I:III.ii.110), he presumably means these words to apply to his

¹⁰ James Robinson Howe, *Marlowe, Tamburlaine, and Magic* (Athens, OH: U of Ohio P, 1976) 51.

choice of death; the audience, however, may see that Agydas was in the end wise and honourable in advising Zenocrate to resist loving the man who was the cause of her "offensive rape" (I:III.ii.6).¹¹

Zenocrate's love for Tamburlaine is called into question in her lament for the deaths of the Egyptians, the Virgins of Damascus, and Bajazeth and Zabina (I:V.i.319–71), where she speaks of seeing the virgins "hoisted up" that they may "guiltlessly endure a cruel death," and shrinks from seeing the bodies of the emperor and empress as "another bloody spectacle" (I:V.i.328–29; 339).¹² It is of course significant that she says the lives of the Egyptians "were dearer to Zenocrate / Than her own life, or aught save thine [Tamburlaine's] own love (I:V.i.337–38), as she clearly has trouble reconciling these deaths with her love for Tamburlaine, but her own life seems dearer to her than even his love. Zenocrate is not the long-suffering, virtuous type; she makes pragmatic rather than honourable choices. She says in this speech that she feels sympathy for the dead, yet she goes on to marry Tamburlaine at the end

¹¹ Shepard clarifies the meaning of this "offensive rape" as the arrest rather than the physical rape of Zenocrate (749). Unless Tamburlaine is lying to the Soldan in Act Five, when he says that "for all blot of foul in chastity, / I record heaven, her heavenly self is clear" (I:V.i.486–87), Zenocrate's honour (at least in the sense of chastity) is intact throughout Part One. It seems reasonable to believe Tamburlaine here, as he can see Zenocrate only in heavenly rather than human terms anyway; as C.L. Barber writes, it is only after "he can summarize his conquests on a cosmological scale" that "he is ready to celebrate his marriage to Zenocrate, whom he has chastely and worshipfully cherished since her capture" ("The Death of Zenocrate: 'Conceiving and subduing both' in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*," *Literature and Psychology* 16 [1966]: 16). According to Zenocrate, however, he has not consistently cherished her, as her complaint to Agydas is that, as Agydas says, "he leaves those looks, / Those words of favour, and those comfortings, / And gives no more than common courtesies" (I: III.ii.61–63).

¹² It is in these deaths, Tamburlaine declares, that "His honour" may be seen "as in a mirror" (I:V.i.476–77). Terry Box argues that this mirror does adequately reflect Tamburlaine's "honour," "but the reflection is not what he thinks it to be"—"his exultation at the end of the play is, then, ironic, especially when the results of his accomplishments are considered: two caged human beings commit suicide, and virgins are slaughtered." Box concludes, "This irony illustrates the truth that Tamburlaine is not what he fancies himself to be, and in mistaking his own worth, he is no different from all the overconfident foes he has previously conquered" ("Irony and Objectivity in the Plot of *Tamburlaine, Part I*," *CLA Journal* 36.2 (1992): 204–05).

of the very same scene. And thus she gets to be an empress without ever having to admit she wanted to be one. Like Meander and Cosroe, Zenocrate has an instinct for self-preservation, and her marriage to Tamburlaine, coming as it does immediately after such horrific deaths, is a pragmatic choice.

The other character who highlights Zenocrate's choice to love Tamburlaine is Olympia, who emphatically does not choose to love the enemy, even when she is cornered and appears to have little choice. Olympia, more than anyone else in the play, is concerned to preserve her religious and moral virtue, her feminine honour, and her independence and strength. After her husband dies and she decides to kill herself and her son to avoid torture, she prays to Mahomet to purge her soul if what she is doing is sin (II:III.iv.31–33). She then refuses to love Theridamas because of her grief and sorrow for her husband and son, and rejects his offers of riches and a crown because

No such discourse is pleasant in mine ears,
But that where every period ends with death,
And every line begins with death again.
I cannot love, to be an emperess. (II.IV.ii.46–49)

The resolution of Olympia is admirable under the circumstances. Granted, she was married to the Captain, whereas Zenocrate was only engaged to Arabia, and she is being courted by one of Tamburlaine's men rather than by the great and eloquent man himself,¹⁵ but nevertheless she is like Zenocrate in that she is captured and offered two impossible alternatives—in her case, love or rape

¹⁵ Theridamas has been studying his general's speech and attempts to adopt his "working words." Like Tamburlaine, he includes classical references in his seduction speech, offers his lady expensive fabrics—"costly cloth of massy gold" (II:IV.ii.40), and praises the power of her beauty to light the world. When he and Techelles first encounter Olympia, Techelles even copies Tamburlaine's speech almost exactly: he says that Nature draws from Olympia's face "the shining lamps of heaven" (II:III.iv.75–77), echoing Tamburlaine's praise of Zenocrate as "the world's fair eye, / Whose beams illuminate the lamps of heaven" (II:I.iii.1–2). Theridamas makes the mistake of wooing Olympia mostly by praising Tamburlaine (II:III.iv.45–67), and after making short speeches in praise of her, he turns impatient and forceful—unlike the confident Tamburlaine—insisting to Olympia that "if nothing will prevail, / I'll use some other means to make you yield" (II:IV.ii.50–51).

rather than honour or slavery—yet she has the power to invent a third choice for herself.¹⁴

When Zenocrate addresses herself as “wretched Zenocrate” (I:I.ii.259; I:V.i.319) or describes herself as a “cursed object” (I:V.i.413), it means that she is about to yield to Tamburlaine; when Olympia calls herself “Distress’d Olympia” (II:IV.ii.1) or refers to her “accursed life” (II:III.iv.82) she means to act and to change things. Zenocrate is seduced by words—“his talk much sweeter than the Muses’ song” (I:III.ii.50)—and her virtue is undermined by virtue of a certain kind of language, whereas Olympia asserts that she will hear “No such discourse.” Like Castiza in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, who refuses when Vindice (as Piato) asks her to “think upon the pleasure of the palace” (II.i.195)¹⁵ and accept Lussurioso, Olympia resists worldly and sexual temptation. Like Anne Frankford in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*—who says to Wendoll that his tongue “hath enchanted me” (vi.159)¹⁶—Zenocrate easily submits to her seducer’s words, despite some moral qualms, and like Castiza’s mother Gratiana she sees the choice “to love, to be an emperess” as a great temptation. Gratiana, when she hears what riches Lussurioso offers her daughter, exclaims, “Oh if I were young / I should be ravished!” (II.i.189–90). Olympia is stronger than Castiza, Heywood’s Susan, or Jonson’s Celia because she is not only willing to submit to death to preserve her virtue, but to bring death upon herself; unlike Antonio’s wife in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, who kills herself to avoid shaming her husband, Olympia seeks death in order to preserve her honour for herself. In Part One of *Tamburlaine*, Zenocrate’s submission to her suitor builds up Tamburlaine’s power: he is gaining power over kingdoms, soldiers, and women. Near the end of Part Two, Olympia’s rejection of one of Tamburlaine’s soldiers signals the decline of complete control over his empire. It is the first sign of real weakness.¹⁷

¹⁴ Roy W. Battenhouse (*Marlowe’s Tamburlaine: A Study in Renaissance Moral Philosophy* [Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1941]) also contrasts Olympia, “a woman of true love and virtuous conscience, who would rather choose death than to be an empress,” with Zenocrate, who “delights above all else to be an empress” (168).

¹⁵ *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, ed. Brian Gibbons (London: A&C Black, 1991).

¹⁶ Thomas Heywood, *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, ed. Brian Scobie (London: A&C Black, 1991).

¹⁷ Burnett also argues that Olympia’s death points to “Tamburlaine’s growing cruelty and waning power and authority”—but he mistakenly refers to Theridamas as Olympia’s lover (203).

What does it mean to be an empress?: Zenocrate and Zabina

Zenocrate is Marlowe's addition to the story of Tamburlaine: C.L. Barber says, "there is no suggestion of her part in the histories."¹⁸ Zabina too, in her madness after Bajazeth's suicide, is Marlowe's creation; in both cases, as Richmond writes, these additions provide "evidence of a deliberate creation of the woman's point of view."¹⁹ The two women come together in Act Three of Part One, when they mirror the offstage battle of Tamburlaine and Bajazeth in their own conversation. Tamburlaine has told Zenocrate to "manage words" with Zabina, "as we will arms" (I:III.iii.131), but it is Zabina, secure in her own position as "empress of the mighty Turk," who first insults Zenocrate, calling her a "Base concubine" (I:III.iii.167; 166). Each woman offers a prayer for her beloved's success; surprisingly it is Zabina whose words are strongest. Zenocrate speaks more calmly, asking that Tamburlaine might emerge as conqueror, while Zabina calls on Mahomet to "solicit God himself / And make him rain down murdering shot from heaven, / To dash the Scythians' brains, and strike them dead" (I:III.iii.195–97). Zenocrate is not yet an empress, and has not adopted her beloved's language of absolute power. The fact of her more subdued speech, along with her real concern for Tamburlaine's safety—"And may my love, the King of Persia, / Return with victory and free from wound!" (I:III.iii.132–33)—seems to indicate her reserve, her sympathy, and thus the contrast with Tamburlaine's point of view. Yet she does not ever become a powerful empress: she does not speak like one, in the way that Zabina does; she is gentler than Zabina; and her only power as the consort of Tamburlaine lies in her beauty, which inspires him to war. She eventually enjoys being an empress, but she is not very good at "managing words"; though she does try to compete with Zabina in insults, if anyone it is Zabina who wins.

Richmond argues that Zabina is "a fairly typical, dependent woman unable to sustain either sanity or life when her husband died," and says that "Zenocrate, by contrast, has a clear sense of the nature of being."²⁰ But it is Zabina who shows the fiercest independence and sense of her own position in their battle of words, while Zenocrate only attempts to follow Tamburlaine's or-

¹⁸ Barber, 15.

¹⁹ Richmond, 39.

²⁰ Richmond, 40.

ders. Zabina's inability to remain sane after Bajazeth's death is not a sign of weak dependence on him, it is a natural response to a horrific scene: both of them have been tortured and tormented by Tamburlaine, and Bajazeth has just brained himself against a cage. In fact, a sign of Zabina's independence is that she tries to keep some hope alive in her husband to the end. Both of them have been railing against their fate, but when Bajazeth asks for some water, she responds lovingly, "Sweet Bajazeth, I will prolong thy life / As long as any blood or spark of breath / Can quench or cool the torments of my grief" (I:V.i.282–84). Her suicide indicates not her dependence and her inability to exist without her husband, but her courage to follow him in death rather than submit to further torture. Rather than remain Tamburlaine's prisoner and victim, Zabina chooses to act, and to free herself from his tyranny in the only way open to her. Like Olympia and Zenocrate, her options in Tamburlaine's world are limited. Like Olympia, she acts boldly and makes the only active choice available to her, instead of staying on as a passively accepting figure like Zenocrate.

Zabina is a strong and courageous empress, and a loyal wife. Zenocrate too is loyal, but her loyalty is a matter of making a virtue of what she perceives as a necessity, in order to survive.²¹ One indication of her method of survival in Tamburlaine's world is that she does not speak very often in his presence; Marlowe's investigation of her character is through private speeches to others, not public performances of the duty of an empress.²² Although Zenocrate does express her resistance to Tamburlaine's methods of warfare,

²¹ Zenocrate's marriage to Tamburlaine is comparable to Gwendolen Harleth's union with Grandcourt in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. Both women choose to marry an evil man rather than submit to something they feel is beneath them, like slavery or governessing: they choose "to love, to be an emperess." Gwendolen is also attracted by Grandcourt's words: although she does not love him, during his proposal she feels "a momentary phantasmal love for this man who chose his words so well" (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967; 347). Another parallel is that Gwendolen feels she has no choice about accepting her suitor—"A fish honestly invited to come and be eaten has a clear course in declining, but how if it finds itself swimming against a net?" (345); the difference is that Zenocrate really loves Tamburlaine in spite of everything, whereas Gwendolen soon realizes how evil her husband is.

²² Shepard notes that this lack of speech in Tamburlaine's presence "establish[es] her passivity," and says also that "Most often, she silently cooperates with his aggression toward her and toward the world" (746).

it is a hidden resistance, as in her sympathetic response to the deaths of her people and Bajazeth and Zabina (I:V.i.319ff.), in her conversation with Arabia (I:V.i.412–16), and in her debate with her conscience about the fact that “My father and my first-betrothed love / Must fight against my life and present love” (I:V.i.388–89). In the latter speech she berates herself for inconstancy: “the change I use condemns my faith, / And makes my deeds infamous through the world” (I:V.i.390–91). She recognizes her faults, but cannot give up Tamburlaine.

In showing sympathy for the deaths Tamburlaine causes, Zenocrate does present a contrast with him, but although her words are in the right place, her deeds are not consistent with what she says. Just as Tamburlaine uses noble words to disguise ignoble deeds, Zenocrate speaks as if she represents feminine, possibly Christian virtue, but she acts in such a way as to negate the value of what she says.²³ Tamburlaine says to her, “I am a lord, for so my deeds shall prove” (I:I.ii.34), meaning to justify himself by action rather than by birth. She might well say she is Tamburlaine’s empress, for that is what her deeds prove. She does not prove herself to be an example of moral virtue. Both Tamburlaine and Zenocrate try to prove themselves through words, but reveal themselves in their actions. Zenocrate sacrifices her honour to Tamburlaine, and proves her lack of virtue by marrying him even after he has committed his worst crimes yet. Her method of survival reveals something along the lines of *virtù*, however, as she shows she has the worldly wisdom and most importantly ingenuity to negotiate her own life in the midst of martial power.

The deaths of Zenocrate the empress and Olympia “the queen of chastity”

When Zenocrate dies she becomes a symbol for Tamburlaine of his own inspiration. He sets up her picture for the world to admire, but its main purpose is to “shed such influence in my camp / As if Bellona, goddess of the war, / Threw naked swords and sulphur-balls of fire / Upon the heads of all our enemies” (II:III.ii.39–42). Projecting his own desires onto the image of the

²³ This inconsistency between word and deed is also related to Marlowe’s habit of expressing horrifying things in beautiful poetry, as he does, for example, in the blazon that defines the “scourge and terror of the world” (II:I.iii.74–84).

dead wife who can no longer object to his warfare, even in private, Tamburlaine makes Zenocrate his goddess. While she is on her deathbed he speaks of her repeatedly as “divine Zenocrate,” and some critics have suggested that Zenocrate is the medium through which he experiences or hopes to experience God. Barber, for example, writes that Tamburlaine “envisages for a moment atonement with God through Zenocrate.”²⁴ However, Tamburlaine’s later enthronement of Zenocrate as Bellona belies the earlier Christian references to “The cherubins and holy seraphins / That sing and play before the King of Kings” (II:II.iv.26–27), references which Barber interprets as an indication that “Marlowe’s sensibility is reaching, through the figure of Zenocrate, towards the divine” (22). Tamburlaine already considers himself the king of kings, so it is unlikely that he is truly in search of divine grace. Tamburlaine praises Zenocrate for her divine and “sacred beauty” (II:II.iv.85), and he compares her primarily with Helen of Troy. What does it mean, then, for him to praise Zenocrate’s virtue when she is both goddess and temptress? Roy W. Battenhouse argues that because Zenocrate is portrayed as “the very pattern of pagan, earthly beauty,” and because the pagan beauties Tamburlaine compares her to “were considered by the Elizabethans to be as morally reprehensible as they were physically attractive,” it is safe to conclude that she is “intended to represent earthly [beauty], endowed with nature’s gifts, but devoid of religion and conscience.”²⁵ Perhaps the conjunction between goddess and temptress indicates that Zenocrate is connected not only with female honour, but also (as Bellona) with the honour of the battlefield, and that (as Helen) she is cunning, like a temptress. The appearance of these qualities again lends strength to the suggestion that she possesses *virtù*.

Olympia too possesses *virtù*. For her it is the strength and courage to resist Theridamas and to face death. Shepard suggests that she is “Like Cleopatra evading Caesar” in that “she refuses to service Theridamas as a trophy of his victory over her husband.”²⁶ Baines argues that the reason Olympia must die in this scene is that “Tamburlaine’s world of war denies the nurturing, life-sustaining roles of wife and mother,” and so “Without these roles Olympia

²⁴ Barber, 21.

²⁵ Battenhouse, 166–67.

²⁶ Shepard, 747.

has no identity.”²⁷ She may have lost these roles, but she quickly assumes a new role as a brave warrior; as she tells Theridamas when he finds her and asks what she is doing, she is “Killing myself, as I have done my son, / Whose body with his father’s I have burnt, / Lest cruel Scythians should dismember him” (II:III.iv.35–37), and Techelles recognizes her courage—“’Twas bravely done, and like a soldier’s wife” (II:III.iv.38)—but thinks that her reward should be to become the wife of a viceroy or a king. Instead of accepting this reward, Olympia proves that she has some of the qualities of a soldier, not just of a soldier’s wife, and she turns the project of temptation around on Theridamas, tempting him with the only thing that he might yield to—magic, an ointment distilled by a “cunning alchemist” (II:IV.ii.59). Olympia’s choice to “Let this invention be the instrument” of her death is clever (I:IV.ii.13), and allows her to make choices in a world that does not offer her many alternatives. Her death both saves her feminine honour, and is honourable in that it is a manly feat of courage and wit. It is difficult to see Olympia as Richmond does, as one of the representatives of Christian virtue and therefore of weakness in the play, if only because her death is not honourable in a Christian sense. She is a classical rather than Christian heroine who uses *virtù* to defend herself against her enemies.

Virtue or Virtù?

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli outlines the characteristics of the fox and the lion that are necessary for a prince to remain in control:

Since a prince must know how to use the character of beasts, he should pick for imitation the fox and the lion. As the lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves, you have to be a fox in order to be wary of traps, and a lion to overawe the wolves. Those who try to live by the lion alone are badly mistaken.²⁸

²⁷ Baines, 10.

²⁸ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. and ed. Robert M. Adams (New York: Norton, 1977) 50.

It is possible to see Zenocrate as a fox, accommodating herself to circumstances, negotiating her survival, and avoiding the trap of slavery to become an empress instead. It may also be possible to see in Zabina something of the lion: she responds with energy and daring in braining herself immediately upon discovering her husband's death. And it is Olympia who tries to live (or die) by both the lion and the fox: thwarted in her lion-like attempt to replicate Zabina's suicide after her own husband dies, she resorts to the wiliness of the fox in order to outwit Theridamas. She reveals her fierce will and her own brand of martial prowess.²⁹

In *Tamburlaine*, all Marlowe's characters are influenced in some way by Machiavellian principles. The problem of Zenocrate and Zabina may be that they live, respectively, by the fox or the lion alone. The strength of Olympia is that she is the "prudent prince" who lives by both. Why, then, is her part in *Tamburlaine* so small? Did Marlowe feel the presence of a woman whose *virtù* was like Tamburlaine's as a threat? Perhaps he was reluctant to allow her critique of Tamburlaine's warfare a forceful voice, and surely Olympia's powerful reaction against Theridamas as a representative of Tamburlaine is a more powerful criticism than the private remarks of Zenocrate. Olympia acts out her criticism, which is something Zenocrate never does. All Zenocrate can say is to advise her boys to resemble her in death, "And in your lives your father's excellency" (II:II.iv.76), which does not bode well for the future of the family. Zenocrate and Zabina both possess some aspects of *virtù*, but it is Olympia who is the strongest woman in the play, even though Marlowe does not allow women to have this quality

²⁹ Olympia is not the first of Marlowe's aggressive women: as Matthew N. Proser notes, "we see Marlowe's aggressive spirit even in his earliest tragic figure, a female, Dido. The victimized Dido turns Tamburlainian at moments, and in such cases her language augurs the cruelty and omnipotent clamor in the rhetoric of Marlowe's rampaging Scythian" (*The Gift of Fire: Aggression and the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* [New York: Peter Lang, 1995] 72). Dido, however, has far more power than Olympia, even though it does not turn out to be effective in achieving her desired ends. And, as Baines points out, Marlowe "underplays the dignity of [Dido's] suicide scene. Dido does not reveal masculine courage with a sword [as she does in Virgil's account], she throws herself into the flames only to be quickly and unceremoniously imitated by Anna and Iarbus" (4). Olympia, on the other hand, dies by the sword.

nearly as much as Tamburlaine does.³⁰ Rather than representing Christian virtue and offering a critique of martial values, Zenocrate uses her limited power for self-preservation, as she discovers a way to live within Tamburlaine's world, while Olympia's stronger powers are used to critique it in a more effective way. If Christian virtue has any voice in this play, there may be faint traces here and there that can be associated with women. But *virtù*, prowess and cunning are important for women as well as for men in *Tamburlaine*, and this is part of the way Marlowe shocks both his Elizabethan and his contemporary audiences. It may be comforting to hope that Marlowe's women represent familiar definitions of virtue and the sympathy of femininity and Christianity, but instead the things that count for them as well are shrewdness, strength, and power.³¹

³⁰ Can these women be princes in the Machiavellian sense? It is possible to talk about them as having the *virtù* of princes because while they are not in control of principalities, their lives are inextricable from the administration of the state. They may not be in charge, but they act and make choices that affect the state.

³¹ I would like to thank the Killam Trust and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for supporting my research.