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## MARLOWE'S *TAMBURLAINE THE GREAT* AND WESTERN IMPERIALISM

**ABSTRACT:** Many critics associate Marlowe's plays, particularly *Tamburlaine the Great*, with Machiavelli's political theory. In the following discussion on *Tamburlaine* and Western imperialism, I hope to demonstrate that Marlowe's views cannot be identified with Machiavelli's, as many critics seem to believe, and that on the contrary, they are much closer to Montaigne's scepticism about political power and colonial expansion. Marlowe's significance today is certainly bound up with the fact that imperialist tradition, far from being the thing of the past, persists in new and more insidious guises – *Tamburlaine the Great* is the spiritual and literary ancestor of such modern heroes like Joseph Conrad's Kurtz and J.M.Coetzee's Jacobus Coetzee and Eugene Dawn.

**KEY WORDS:** real/true man, imperialist tradition, scepticism, patriarchy, matriarchy.

Many critics associate Marlowe's plays, particularly *Tamburlaine the Great*, with Machiavelli's political theory. Being a student at Cambridge, Marlowe was familiar with Machiavellian ideas and especially interested in the secular understanding of the political power as a force for both good and evil, a view that was identified with the discourse of Machiavelli's *Il Principe* (*The Prince*) (1513) and *The Discourses* (1517). Like most Renaissance authors, whose main subject was man as he is, rather than as he ought to be according to some pre-existing religious model, Machiavelli was interested in "real man"<sup>2</sup>: the accurate secular knowledge of man's real nature he considered rightly a condition of viable political theory and good government. But how accurate his own insight was is still a matter of dispute. Machiavelli's view of "real man" is pessimistic, and can be called a secular version of Augustinian doctrine of man's inborn depravity: men, according to Machiavelli, are greedy, deceitful, self-interested and concerned primarily with preserving or achieving power at any cost. An ideal ruler, therefore, is the one who does not hesitate to use any repressive means at his disposal to control his subjects. He must use force to create an 'ideal' society reflected in the government that could protect man from himself. Machiavelli's heroes are princes like Cesare Borgia and Ferdinand of

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<sup>2</sup> See Bogdan Suhodolski, "Čovek kao društveno biće", in *Moderna filozofija čoveka*, Nolit, Beograd, 1972, p. 352

Aragon, heroic not because of their goodness, but because of their strength, cunning and success. Political dishonesty is legitimate, claims Machiavelli, because in an imperfect world, a prince cannot be morally perfect without effecting his own destruction. Although it would be preferable for a prince to appear to be virtuous and good in the eyes of his people, history shows that he must compromise the standards of goodness and virtue whenever necessary:

..[F]or that man who will profess honesty in all his actions must needs go to ruin, among so many that are dishonest. Whereupon it is necessary for a prince, desiring to preserve himself, to be able to make use of that honesty, and to lay it aside again, as need shall require.<sup>3</sup>

Thus Machiavelli's motto - "the aim justifies the means" - involves among other things a cynicism on the part of the ruler whereby he strives for the appearance of rectitude, which the world values and he himself does not care for, and discards this appearance whenever he decides that the circumstances call for open cruelty. Indeed one of the chief means that Machiavelli believes a prince must not hesitate to use is cruelty, because cruelty makes people fear him, and because "it is much better to be fear'd, than to be lov'd." In short, since the Machiavellian prince must lie, cheat and break his word, it is logical that, during his rule, morality is not to be given serious consideration:

And it suffices to conceive this, that a Prince, and especially a new Prince, cannot observe all those things, for which men are held good; he being often forc'd, for the maintenance of his State, to do contrary to his faith, charity, humanity and religion; and therefore it suits him to have a mind so disposed as to turn and take the advantage of all winds and fortunes; and as formerly I said, not forsake the good, while he can; but to know how to make use of the evil upon necessity.<sup>4</sup>

For Machiavelli, virtue is strength and worldly success; a major aspect of that success is a successful conquest of foreign territories and subjugation of other nations. Machiavelli thus becomes one of the first Renaissance defenders of European colonial project. For him, establishing colonies, besides enhancing the power of the prince, represented an abundant source of wealth to the colonizers, and cost nothing, since all the expenses were paid and the damage suffered by the colonized poor:

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<sup>3</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, in *Three Renaissance Classics*, ed. Burton A. Miligan, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1953, p.58

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.59

Not much is spent on colonies; they can be sent out and kept up without any expense, or very little; this method damages only those – and they are a very small part of the new state – whose fields and houses are taken away in order to give them to the new inhabitants; those whom the prince damages, since they are scattered and poor, can do no harm, and all the others are undisturbed and uninjured.<sup>5</sup>

The method described would be brought to monstrous perfection in the XIX century European colonial system in Africa.

A quite different view of man and a quite different understanding of the political ideal is provided in Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, the ideal that looks back to Pelagius and joins the tradition of Italian humanists Pico and Ficino. Unlike Machiavelli, More differentiates between "real man" and "true man"<sup>6</sup>. Real man, according to More, is an aberration of true man: man is not inherently evil, his depravity is a social product. Authentic, original or true man is capable of love and justice. Justice in fact, claims More, anticipating Edward Bond, is man's birthright. According to Bond, the imperative need for is the essence of man's humanness, which has been corrupted by ideology, but which can be recovered through dramatic art, whose chief purpose is the revelation of social injustice, as a precondition of improvement.<sup>7</sup> More does not speak of drama, but just like Bond, he insists that the only way for the real and true man to become one is the society where the unequal distribution of wealth has been abolished, that is, the one based on common property:

Though, to speak plainly my real sentiments, I must freely own that as long as there is any property, and while money is the standard of all other things, I cannot think that a nation can be governed either justly or happily: not justly, because all things will be divided among a few (and even these are not in all respects happy), the rest being left to be absolutely miserable...<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 62

<sup>6</sup> See Suhodolski, *Moderna filozofija čoveka*, p. 352

<sup>7</sup> See Edward Bond, *Freedom and Drama, Plays 8*, Methuen, 2006, p. 207. The whole of Bond's essay is, in fact, relevant to More/ Machiavelli issue. In the context of his larger discussion of the function of drama, Bond rephrases More's view of crime and punishment in contemporary terms. For Bond, the need for justice is a human imperative, and is inborn. But in an unjust society 'crime may be the expression of the need for justice – just as the child's destructive anger may represent its need for justice. The criminal commits his crime to express his innocence. This is a cliché in the trials of martyrs under tyranny. ... The cliché becomes a raw truth when unjust democracy convicts and punishes criminals. – and we do not like to admit it'. (Edward Bond, *Plays: 8*, Methuen Drama, London, 2006, p.218)

<sup>8</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia*, in *Three Renaissance Classics*, ed. Burton A. Milligan, Charles Scribner's Sons, p. 102

Therefore, in devising his Utopian government, More rejects kings and like Plato adopts republic. His ideal society is a peaceful system of communism, where the distribution of wealth is equal, which means that every man may have his share of wealth, but only by working for it. There are people nowadays who claim that More was a supporter of imperialism but in his Utopia he mentions the possibility of armed interventions only when the neighbouring country asks for help against the foreign aggressor.<sup>9</sup>

Another Renaissance thinker who opposes Machiavelli's theory of 'might is right' is Michel Eyquem de Montaigne. He is the originator of the personal essay, devoted to the journey of the mind, as he himself called it. His *Essays* are explicitly against the main assumption of imperialism - the superiority of European man. *Of Coaches* and *On Cannibals* in fact are his most eloquent denunciation of Europe's narrow-minded self-centredness, its arrogance, its Machiavellian dishonesty and cruelty.

Since Europe's knowledge of the world, though extensive, is incomplete, the discovery of Americas might represent a glorious event in its history, a possibility to expand European knowledge by studying the ways, customs and beliefs of the people of the New World. Thus, in contradiction to orthodox view of them as savages, Montaigne insists that the native peoples of America, who have built magnificent cities like Cuzco in Peru and Mexico City, have plenty of things to teach the conquerors. But the conquerors, instead of benefiting from their culture, impose on it their own prejudiced and arrogant views and thus corrupt it:

I am much afraid that we shall have very greatly hastened the decline and ruin of this new world by our contagion, and that we will have sold it our opinions and our arts very dear. It was an infant world; yet we have not whipped it and subjected it to our discipline by the advantage of our natural valor and strength, nor won it over by our justice and goodness, nor subjugated it by our magnanimity. Most of the responses of these people and most of our dealing with them show that they were not at all behind us in natural bright of mind and pertinence.<sup>10</sup>

Far from civilized, that is, magnanimous or even tolerant response to those peoples, the conquerors used methods against them that could only

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<sup>9</sup> Needless to say, this kind of intervention has nothing to do with cynical humanitarian wars waged by US and its European satellites in 20<sup>th</sup> century in a true Machiavellian fashion. As for slavery, More allows for it only as forced labour - a punishment for those who refuse the opportunity to earn their living by working freely. Even then the conditions in which those slaves lived were such that citizens from neighbouring countries would rather become slave in Utopian than remain free in their native lands.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, "Of Coaches", in *The Bedford Anthology of World Literature*, Bedford, St. Martin's, New York, Boston, 2004, p. 104

be called savage and which resulted in the ‘extermination of all the brutes’, as, at the much later phase Conrad’s Kurtz summed up the truth of the European ‘civilizing mission’ in the Belgian Congo. About three centuries earlier, Bartolome de las Casas, the first defender of human rights for Indians, reported on the effect of Spanish colonisation of the Indies in much the same terms:

We are assured that our Spaniards, with their cruelty and execrable work, have depopulated and made desolate the great continent, and that more than ten kingdoms, larger than all Spain...although formerly full of people, are now deserted. We give as a real and true reckoning, that in the said forty years, more than 12 million persons, men and women, and children have perished unjustly and thorough tyranny, by the infernal deeds and tyranny of the Christians.<sup>11</sup>

Marlowe might have read Montaigne, and Machiavelli he certainly did read. In the following discussion on *Tamburlaine* and Western imperialism, I hope to demonstrate that his views cannot be identified with Machiavelli’s, as many critics seem to believe, and that on the contrary, they are much closer to Montaigne’s scepticism about political power and colonial expansion.

As for the Elizabethan conquerors, for *Tamburlaine* the vast expenses of the still unexplored world, which the Renaissance audience would unmistakably identify as the newly discovered Americas, are a lure for conquerors, to be reduced to a map and inscribed with their own names:

I will confute those blind geographers  
That make a triple region in the world,  
Excluding Regions which I mean to trace,  
And with this pen reduce them to a Map,  
Calling the Provinces, Cities and towns  
After my name and thine Zenocrate. (I, 4.4.1715-20)

At his death, the map still stretches before him, but nothing bears his name except the play:

Give me a Map, then let me see how much  
Is left for me to conquer all the world,  
That these my boys may finish all my wants. (II, 5.3.4516-18)

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<sup>11</sup> Bartolome de las Casas, “Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies”, in *The Bedford Anthology of World Literature*, Bedford, St. Martin’s, New York, Boston, 2004, p. 106

But as I already suggested, the *Tamburlaine* plays do not support but question and invalidate the idea of imperialism: in the words of Francis Yates, they demonstrate that the imperial triumph does not establish justice and peace<sup>12</sup>. In this, he is in stark contrast to the Elizabethan imperialist cult, so ardently supported by Spenser. Spenser's idealisation of the Empire is undermined by Marlowe's description of imperial cruelty and tyranny. This contrast, writes Yates, was probably enforced by Marlowe on purpose, so that the audience could recognize various elements on the stage from courtly ceremonies performed in the honour of the Queen in the staging of *Tamburlaine* and respond to it critically.

Like Francis Yates, most of the New Historicists consider the *Tamburlaine Plays* subversive of the English imperialist politics. For example, Stephen Greenblatt starts his essay *Marlowe and the Will to Absolute play* with the documentary account of John Saracoll, the merchant, in whose report of the voyage to the South Seas, casual, unexplained violence of the English crew towards the natives of Sierra Leone is described. Greenblatt ironically refers to this enterprise as 'one of the glorious achievements of Renaissance civilisation' (193), the achievement which is in stark contrast to the humanist trust in man's innate goodness and creative potential that More and Montaigne were pleading for. He claims that if the same crew, on returning to England, went to see the performance of *Tamburlaine the Great* they would have seen the meditation on the roots of their own behaviour. Indeed, the seemingly unmotivated violence in Saracoll's reports sounds very much like Tamburlaine's excesses of cruelty.<sup>13</sup>

Marlowe's significance today is certainly bound up with the fact that imperialist tradition, far from being the thing of the past, persists in new and more insidious guises - he is the spiritual and literary ancestor of such modern heroes like Joseph Conrad's Kurtz and J.M. Coetzee's Jacobus Coetzee and Eugene Dawn. The mad ambition of mastering the wilderness led Conrad's Kurtz to the point of savagery where he exhibited severed

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<sup>12</sup> See Frensis Jejts, *Hermetička filozofija i elizabetansko doba*, SKC Beograd, 1999, p. 115

<sup>13</sup> The description is very important and must be quoted in full:

The fourth of November we went on shore to a town of the Negroes, which we found to be but lately built: it was of about two hundred houses, and walled about with mighty trees, and stakes so thick, that a rat could hardly get in or out. But as it chanced, we came directly upon a port which was not shut up, where we entered with such fierceness, that the people fled out of the town, which we found finely built after their fashion, and the streets of it so intricate that it was difficult for us to find the way out that we came in at. We found their houses and streets so finely and cleanly kept that it was an admiration to us all, for that neither in the houses nor streets was so much dust to be found as would fill an egg shell. We found little in their houses, except some mats, gourds and some earthen pots. Our men at their departure set the town on fire, and it was burnt (for the most part of it) in a quarter of an hour, the houses being covered with reed and straw. (quoted in Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980, p. 193)



heads of the natives as his trophies; this was his personal contribution to what he came to see as the white man's mission in Africa: it is contained in the outcry "Exterminate all the brutes!", that he scribbled at the end of otherwise dignified and noble pamphlet on the suppression of savage customs. Just as in the case of Tamburlaine or Faustus, his intelligence remained lucid all the time, it was his soul that had gone mad.

Another contemporary example is provided in J.M.Coetzee's novel *Dusklands*. Coetzee wrote this novel in an attempt to show the continuity between historically distant aggressions. The time references in the novel are the 18<sup>th</sup> century colonization of South Africa on the one hand, and the Vietnam War on the other. The characters from the two novellas are completely different, both in their experience and in character. But what they have in common with each other, as well as with Kurtz, and Heaney's Hercules is a dissociated sensibility: they both possess a cold, calculating intelligence divorced from emotion and guided instead by the Machiavellian principle that the aim justifies the means no matter how cruel and heartless those means are.

In *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee*, the protagonist, the explorer and "the tamer of the wild", goes on a hunt for elephants and unexplored territories of South Africa. His meeting with the Hottentots, the fever and exhaustion provoke lucid and at the same time demented meditations on the relationship between white man and the wilderness. In a delirious state of mind, the objective reality is completely denied and he sees the world as the subjective reality of his consciousness. He feels threatened by the vastness of the space, strangeness of the experience and the unbearable solitude to the point at which he starts to fear that all his "life might be a dream"<sup>14</sup>, that he is just "a transparent sack with a black core, full of images, and a gun"<sup>15</sup>. The physical need for the gun becomes metaphysical and he starts shooting at everything he sees, for "the gun saves us from the fear that all life is within us".<sup>16</sup> In the annihilation of all that is "not I" he hopes to find a proof of his own existence. As a result, he causes a massacre of an entire Hottentot tribe, claiming that he is "a tool in the hands of history"<sup>17</sup>. White man's mission is "to open what is closed, to bring light to what is dark"<sup>18</sup>, and if he fails to do so with his mind, he has to resort to the gun. He considers the Hottentots barbaric, ignorant people whose souls are without the light of Christian faith just as dark as their skin and their continent. Far from feeling any guilt, he calls the murders of "the dark folk" a "God's judgement" hypothetically asking: "Who knows for what unimaginable crimes of the spirit they died through us?"<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> J.M. Coetzee, *Dusklands*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1983, p.78

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.78

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.79

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 106

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.106

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.106

Two centuries later, Eugene Dawn, a specialist in psychological warfare, writes his life work "The Vietnam Project" with the purpose of defeating the combatant Vietnamese. After all the American bombing runs, brutal killings, massacres and propaganda services have failed to make the enemy yield, Dawn comes up with a more powerful strategy – the conversion into a new myth which would break the spirit of the Vietnamese. The original Vietnamese myth is that of sons of the land who fight the sky-god, the father, but are given a refuge by the earth mother who "hides her sons in her bosom, safe from the thunderbolts of the father"<sup>20</sup> until they "emerge to unman him and initiate a new fraternal order".<sup>21</sup> The strength of the myth lies in the fact that despite all dangers and attacks, the mother is protected and must not be annihilated. Realizing this, Dawn suggests a counter strategy by which the mother Demeter will not be destroyed but turned into Athene, the goddess of technical skills who voted for the father principle being herself bred not from the female womb but from the male head. As in Heaney's *Hercules and Antaeus*, here too the replacement of the matriarchal by the patriarchal world view is represented as a moral disaster. The Renaissance Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, standing half way between Hercules and Eugene Dawn, is about the consequences of this victory.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 25

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 25



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**TAMERLAN VELIKI KRISTOFERA MARLOA  
I IMPERIJALISTIČKA TRADICIJA ZAPADA**

***Rezime***

Mnogi kritičari povezuju drame Kristofera Marloa, a naročito dramu *Tamerlan Veliki*, sa makijavelističkom političkom teorijom. Predmet ovog rada jeste da se pokaže da je Kristofer Marlo bio mnogo bliži stavovima koje je zastupao Montenj, a koji su se zasnivali na skepsi vezanoj za ostvarivanje političke moći i kolonijalne ekspanzije. Kroz problematizaciju odnosa između Marlovljevog Tamerlana i imperijalističke tradicije zapada, u radu će se posebno istaknuti značaj Kristofera Marloa danas – kolonijalna praksa ne samo što nije ostala u prošlosti, već se danas javlja u novim, skrivenijim oblicima. Konradov Kurc i Kucijevi junaci Džekobus Kuci i Judžin Don su samo neki od savremenih književnih junaka čiji je duhovni i književni predak Marlovljev Tamerlan Veliki.



# ИСТРАЖИВАЊА

