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Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* and the Tragedy of Karbala

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This essay analyses Christopher Marlowe's play *Tamburlaine the Great* and its intricate interweaving of historical events and cultural nuances. Focusing on the character of Tamburlaine, the essay explores themes of power, revenge, and divine justice within the context of the broader Shiite-Sunni conflict and the tragic history of Imam Al-Hussein. By examining Marlowe's incorporation of historical accounts and creative narrative techniques, the essay highlights how the play provides insights into the complexities of human ambition, political manoeuvring, and the consequences of wielding authority. Ultimately, *Tamburlaine the Great* is shown to be a timeless exploration of the interplay between history, religion, and individual agency, inviting readers to reflect on the enduring relevance of its themes in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Keywords: Tamburlaine the Great, the tragedy of Karbala, revenge, Marlowe, Shiite-Sunni conflict

Introduction

The English playwright Christopher Marlowe presented the character of Tamburlaine—Timur lang or Temur the lame—as a Scythian shepherd who views himself as the scourge of God. Most scholars have conceded that Marlowe has depicted a character that "bore a great deal of resemblance to Timur himself" (Miller, 2006, p. 255).

In Marlowe's play, *Tamburlaine the Great*, Tamburlaine refers to himself as the "scourge of God" multiple times as a way to assert his power and portray himself as a divine instrument of punishment. This self-proclamation aligns with Tamburlaine's ambitious and megalomaniacal nature. By calling himself the "scourge of God", Tamburlaine presents himself as a force chosen by God to bring about divine retribution and punish those who oppose him.

Tamburlaine's repeated use of this title reflects his desire for conquest and dominance over others. He sees himself as a supreme ruler and believes that his military victories are a result of his divine mandate. By presenting himself as an instrument of divine justice, Tamburlaine justifies his actions and asserts his authority over nations and peoples he subjugates.

According to Arabic historical books, the 14th-century conqueror of Turco-Mongol descent Timur was Shiite—a member of a branch of Islam who believes that Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib (the cousin and the husband of Prophet Mohammad's daughter Fatima) and his descendants are the true successors of the Prophet.

To be Shiite is also to be a follower of a top Shiite saint and the grandson of the prophet Muhammad, Imam Al-Hussein, the son of Imam Ali by Fatima. Imam Al-Hussein was killed in a battle that took place in the year 680 in Karbala, which is in modern day Iraq. Shiites everywhere wear black mourning clothes, weep and beat their chests on the anniversary of the battle. The mourning reaches its climax on the 10th day of the Islamic

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month of Muharram, known as Ashura, on which the forces of Caliph Yazid killed the 72 individuals who fought, including Imam Al-Hussein, his family and supporters. Those who were left living were made prisoners and transported to Yazid's court in Damascus. The prisoners included women and children, but Lady Zaynab, Imam Hussein's sister, was among the most important of them all.

The killing of Imam Al-Hussein was part of an ongoing struggle between the two main Muslim sects—Sunni and Shiite—over the leadership of the Islamic community after the death of Prophet Muhammad.

Tamburlaine's Connection to Timur's Religious Identity

The religious affiliation of Timur remains a subject of speculation, with the potential that he could have adhered to either paganism or Islam as his belief (Vitkus, 2003, p. 45). Additionally, some historians consider the possibility that he not only embraced Islam but also may have identified with the Shiite branch of the faith. According to Ephraim Nissan (2008),

> A different ideology is reflected in the spurious claim, on his tombstone, taking his descent back to "Ali" (Imam Ali), thus endowing him with a genealogy of Imamic import to the Shiites, even though such Shiite affiliation of his is disputed. (p. 532)

But it is certain that Timur was a Shiite at one time of his life; Nissan points out,

> His leading theological adviser, the Hanafite cadi Abd alJabbar Khwarazmi, was reputed to be a Mutazilite or modernist while he himself, at one time at least, was regarded as a Shiite. Some scholars have queried this but it makes sense in that Shiite authoritarianism was frequently allied with Mutazilite modernism against Koranic fundamentalism and shara traditionalism. (2008, p. 532)

More Arabic historic sources are talking about Timur as Shiite. One of these books is by Ahmad ibn Arabshah, the Arab writer and traveller who lived under the reign of Timur, and the author of the biography book, *Aja'ib al-Maqdur fi Naw'aib Taimur* (*The Wonders of Destiny of the Ravages of Timur)*, which was written in Damascus 1435 and was translated and printed first time in Latin in 1636, which is considered by many critics as a major source for Marlowe's description of Tamburlaine and the play, because of a knowledge of Arabic that he might have gained through his studies at Cambridge, a knowledge made possible by the presence of Jewish scholars who migrated there, as Howard Miller (2006) states in an essay about the play and the translation of Arabic sources (p. 255). Ibn Arabshah mentions that Timor was a Shiite and that when he occupied Aleppo, he went to its castle and summoned its scholars and judges and asked them about Imam Ali and his enemy Muawaya, Yazid's father, who assassinated Ali in order to be the Caliph after him. When the scholars and judges tried to be neutral and did not take any side, Timur became very angry,

> He said that Ali was on the right path, while Muawiyah was unjust and Yazid was a corrupted one. He also mentioned that the people of Aleppo were followers of the people of Damascus, who were Yazidis and had killed Al-Hussein. (2008, p. 190)

In his book *Taʾrik̲h al-ʿAlawiyin*, or *The History of Alawites* (1924), the Arabic historian Moḥammad Amin Ghaleb al-Ṭawil states that Timur was a Nusayri, a member of a Shiite offshoot now known as Alawites, and he sought revenge over the killing of Imam Hussein bin Ali (pp. 325-330).[1] Al-Ṭawil also states that Timur occupied

[1] Al-Ṭawil's book, published in 1924, is a product of the modern era, yet it takes inspiration from historical origins. Unfortunately, this work lacks a bibliography or references to its sources. However, Matti Moosa's exploration of al-Tawil's text reveals references to ancient materials dating back to the era of Timur.

Damascus to avenge the killing of Imam Hussein (p. 325). According to Matti Moosa's book, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects* (1988),

> Timur also attempted to win over the Shiites. As a gestor of his support for them, he occupied Damascus to avenge the killing of the Imam al-Husayn in 680 by the lieutenants of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid, on the promise that Damascus was the capital of the Umayyads. Timur is thought by some … to have been a Shiite. … the fact remains that he greatly favored and supported the Shiites, who gained the upper hand in the Islamic countries under his control. (p. 273)

Tamburlaine's Revenge and Shiite Influences

In *Tamburlaine the Great*, there is certainly no mention whatsoever of Imam Al-Hussein, but there are some evidences in this drama showing that Marlowe was aware of the history of the tragedy of Imam Al-Hussein and that he wanted to reflect on the revenge of Tamburlaine on the followers of those who killed Imam Hussein and his companions.

First of all, the idea of revenge is clearly revealed in the play. Like Hamlet who views that his mission is one of divine justice:

> but heaven hath pleased it so
> To punish me with this and this with me,
> That I must be their scourge and minister.
> (Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, year, Act 3, Scene 4, Lines 194-196. The Folger Shakespeare. n.d.)

Tamburlaine also thinks that he is God's agent to punish the sins of his enemy: "I that am term'd the scourge and wrath of God,/The only fear and terror of the world" (*Tamburlaine the Great*, 2008, Part I, Act III, Scene III).

Because of the disputed nature of Timur's Shiite identity, Marlowe found another way to show his first audiences the Shiite affiliation of Timur by changing his identity from Mongol to Persian.

In her essay "'A warre … commodious': Dramatizing Islamic Schism in and after Tamburlaine", Jane Grogan sheds light on what she sees as "neglected aspects of the play: its engagement with a more complex and varied idea of Islam" and the "intra-Islamic conflict and schism" (2012, pp. 45-78).

Grogan points out that, Marlowe's audiences were probably acquainted with the relatively recent institution of Shiite Islam as the Persian state religion under the Safavid kings. This transforming of the Mongol Timur into a Scythian shepherd-turned-Persian emperor allows Marlowe's audiences to read Tamburlaine as a Shiite ruler, and to read his hostility to the people of Damascus as a kind of revenge.

Even in Marlowe's stage directions of Damascus scene in Part 1, Act V, Scene I (Enter Tamburlaine, all in black and very melancholy), we see Tamburlaine in mourning cloths because Damascus was the base of the Caliph Yazid who sent the army to fight Imam Hussein and the place where the sister, the women, and children of Imam Hussein were brought as hostages. Drawing upon historical accounts, it is noted by Ahmad ibn Arabshah that Timur, during periods of mourning, would don attire of somber black. Furthermore, he would extend this custom to his military forces, as evidenced by their wearing of black garments upon occasions such as the passing of his own grandson (2008, p. 287). However, as per Ibn Arabshah's account, the siege and capture of Damascus did not occur during the month of Maharam. Expanding on the earlier point, it's pertinent to acknowledge the significant Shiite maxim: "Every Day is Ashura, Every Land is Karbala".

In the case of Damascus, Tamerlane's conquest followed a series of military campaigns in the region. He led his forces, which consisted of a formidable army of cavalry and infantry, into the Levant and besieged the

city. Tamerlane's forces were known for their ruthless tactics and military prowess, and they overwhelmed the defending forces of Damascus.

After a prolonged siege, Tamerlane's army breached the city's defenses and gained control over Damascus. The city was subjected to the pillaging and destruction that often accompanied Tamerlane's conquests. The exact details of the siege and the subsequent events may vary in historical accounts, but it is generally agreed that Tamerlane's forces were able to conquer and subjugate Damascus through a combination of military might, strategic planning, and ruthless tactics.

As per historical records, Tamir's strategy in capturing Damascus exhibited cunning and tactical prowess. He employed a calculated approach by initiating peace negotiations, causing the city's leaders to lower their guard. Once their defenses were weakened, he executed a decisive attack. According to historical accounts from Ahmad ibn Arabshah and numerous other Arab historians, Tamerlane dispatched two men ahead, positioned atop the besieged walls of Damascus. They proclaimed loudly that the prince, Tamir, was seeking reconciliation. This ploy garnered the attention of the city's inhabitants.

Subsequently, the citizens selected the chief judge, a respected figure, to engage in dialogue with Tamerlane regarding this matter. This representative descended from the city walls and met with Tamir, only to be deceived by the prince's seemingly kind words. Tamir cunningly stated that he had spared the city of prophets, Damascus, as a charitable act in honour of Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him), safeguarding the lives of his own offspring. The chief judge, swayed by Tamir's rhetoric, commended the conqueror and attempted to dissuade the people from further resistance, advocating for submission.

This approach triggered a division among the citizens. One faction aligned with the chief judge's stance, while another vehemently opposed it, resolved to continue fighting. The situation persisted throughout the night, and by the morning, the viewpoint of the chief judge had prevailed. He firmly resolved to solidify a peace treaty with Tamerlane, and those who resisted this decision faced the threat of execution.

In the aftermath, Timur wreaked havoc on Damascus. Mosques, schools, theaters, residences, grand buildings, military structures, markets, and bathhouses were all laid to waste, reduced to nothing more than ruins and deserted edifices. The once-thriving city lost its vibrancy, replaced by desolate remnants and abandoned outlines. The streets were strewn with the corpses of the fallen, and only children, numbering in the thousands, remained among the living—some barely clinging to life, others having tragically perished.

In *Tamburlaine the Great*, the fall of Damascus is depicted with dramatic intensity and theatrical flair. After conquering Africa, Tamburlaine proclaims himself emperor of the entire continent and shifts his focus to Damascus. He faces the task of defeating his father-in-law to reach the city. His wife, Zenocrate, pleads with him to spare her father, leading Tamburlaine to make him a tributary king instead. In the midst of the conflict, the governor of Damascus sends virgins as an offering to Tamburlaine's army. However, he responds by having them brutally killed and their remains displayed on the city walls. In the end, Tamburlaine emerges victorious in the battle.

Symbolism of Flags and Connection to Shiism

During the siege and conquest of Damascus, the character, Tamburlaine employs flags of varying colours. Raising white, red, and then black flags "reveals an apocryphal story meticulously arranged to inspire a mixture of horror and wonderment at the conqueror and his 'costumbre' ('custom')" (Menna, 2022, p. 618). However, the use of coloured flags as symbolic communication is a powerful literary device that often transcends its

narrative context to evoke cultural, emotional, and historical connections. Tamburlaine strategically deploys flags to convey his intentions and emotions during the conquest of Damascus. Remarkably, this use of flags, while a product of Marlowe's creative narrative, draws intriguing parallels to real-world practices. Specifically, the symbolic association between Tamburlaine's flag usage and the Shiite traditions observed during the mourning month of Muharram, particularly in the commemoration of Ashura, offers an intriguing lens through which to explore the thematic depth and cultural resonances of Marlowe's play. This discussion delves into the dynamic interplay between Marlowe's fictional narrative and the real-world symbolism of coloured flags, shedding light on the possible connections between Tamburlaine's actions and Shiite practices, particularly those observed during Muharram.

In Act V, Scene I, the stage directions read: "Enter the GOVERNOR OF DAMASCUS with three or four CITIZENS, and four VIRGINS with branches of laurel in their hands".

When Tamburlaine sees them, he says,

> TAMBURLAINE. What, are the turtles fray'd out of their nests?
> Alas, poor fools, must you be first shall feel
> The sworn destruction of Damascus?
> They knew my custom; could they not as well
> Have sent ye out when first my milk-white flags,
> Through which sweet Mercy threw her gentle beams,
> Reflexed them on their disdainful eyes,
> As now when fury and incensed hate
> Flings slaughtering terror from my coal-black tents,
> And tells for truth submission comes too late? (Act V, Scene I)

In this passage, Tamburlaine expresses his contempt and frustration towards the people of Damascus. He questions whether the timid and helpless inhabitants of the city, referred to as "turtles", have been frightened away from their homes. Tamburlaine mocks them, considering them foolish for being the first ones to experience the devastating wrath he has sworn upon Damascus. He criticizes their lack of foresight, suggesting that they should have recognized his reputation and sent the inhabitants away when his peaceful and merciful flags were raised. Now, as Tamburlaine's fierce and hateful army approaches with their black tents, filled with fury and slaughter, he declares that it is too late for the people of Damascus to surrender and submit, as the time for mercy has passed.

In Act IV, Scene II, Tamburlaine says,

> So shall he have his life, and all the rest:
> But, if he stay until the bloody flag
> Be once advanc'd on my vermilion tent,
> He dies, and those that kept us out so long;
> And, when they see me march in black array,
> With mournful streamers hanging down their heads,
> Were in that city all the world contain'd,
> Not one should scape, but perish by our swords.

In this scene, Tamburlaine uses different coloured flags to convey specific messages. He uses a bloody flag, presumably red, to signify a state of war and imminent danger. When this flag is raised on his vermilion tent, it signals that those who have opposed him will face death. In contrast, when Tamburlaine marches with black flags

and mournful streamers, it indicates a somber and merciless intent. In this state, Tamburlaine suggests that no one within the city will be spared, and all will perish by his sword.

This use of flags as symbols represents Tamburlaine's intention to communicate his intentions and evoke specific emotions or responses in his adversaries. The colours and imagery associated with the flags serve as visual cues to convey the severity of his actions and the impending consequences.

In this speech Tamburlaine is expressing his intentions regarding the fate of his enemies. He states that if his adversary, who has been keeping him out for a prolonged period, surrenders before the bloody flag is raised on his tent, that enemy will be spared along with the rest. However, if the flag is raised before surrender, that enemy and those who obstructed him will be put to death. Furthermore, when Tamburlaine enters the city wearing black attire and with mournful banners hanging down, no one within the city will escape his wrath. All will perish by the swords of his forces.

Shiites bear flags of black and red. The black flags of the Shiites serve as a symbol of remembrance and sorrow, reflecting their devotion and grief. On the other hand, red flags in Shiite tradition hold a dual significance, representing both the unjust shedding of blood and a call for seeking justice for those who have been slain. It was a longstanding Arab custom as well to hoist a crimson flag at the tomb of someone who had suffered an unjust death, keeping it raised until vengeance was attained.

During the Ashura commemoration, Shiites partake in a ritual within the sacred city of Karbala, a gathering that historically took place in secret due to political opposition, and is now commonly attended by numerous Shiite followers. As part of the Muharram mourning rituals, the customary red flag that usually adorns the dome of the Shrine of Imam Hussein (AS) is replaced by a black flag.

In Tamburlaine's case, the use of black flags and mournful streamers may evoke a similar sense of mourning and somberness. While his motives and actions differ from the historical events of Karbala, the symbolic use of black flags can evoke a connection to the idea of loss, tragedy, and the seriousness of his intentions.

Marlowe's Treatment of Characters and Shiism

Marlowe included characters of the virgins in Act Five of his play, which were part of the historical accounts of Timur's campaign, suggesting that Marlowe was aware of these events. In this act of the play, the governor of Damascus, besieged by Tamburlaine's army, sent four virgins to plead for mercy, but Tamburlaine had them slaughtered and hoisted on the city walls.

> Tamburlaine: What, have your horsemen shown the virgins Death?
> TECHELLES. They have, my lord, and on Damascus' walls
> Have hoisted up their slaughter'd carcasses.

To some critics, Marlowe must have taken some liberties with historical accuracy in this scene, which they name as "petitioning children" which took place in other city and that Marlowe's choice of Damascus is surely a technical, plot related necessity. According to Ahmad ibn Arabshah, the virgins were petitioning children sent by the governor of Ispahan when conquered and occupied by Timur to pity them and spare their remnants, but they ended up under hooves (2008, pp. 69-70).

> ZENOCRATE. Wretched Zenocrate! That liv'st to see
> Damascus' walls dy'd with Egyptians' blood,
> Thy father's subjects and thy countrymen;
> The streets strow'd with dissever'd joints of men,

> And wounded bodies gasping yet for life;
> But most accurs'd, to see the sun-bright troop
> Of heavenly virgins and unspotted maids
> (Whose looks might make the angry god of arms
> To break his sword and mildly treat of love)
> On horsemen's lances to be hoisted up,
> And guiltlessly endure a cruel death;
> For every fell and stout Tartarian steed,
> That stamp'd on others with their thundering hoofs,
> When all their riders charg'd their quivering spears,
> Began to check the ground and rein themselves,
> Gazing upon the beauty of their looks.

In this passage from Marlowe's play, Zenocrate laments the tragic events unfolding in Damascus. She expresses her anguish at witnessing the walls of Damascus stained with the blood of Egyptians, her father's subjects and fellow countrymen. The streets are filled with dismembered bodies and wounded men on the verge of death. Zenocrate is particularly devastated by the sight of the innocent virgins and maidens, whose beauty could inspire even the war god to abandon aggression and embrace love, being impaled on the spears of horsemen and cruelly killed.

According to Al-Ṭawil's *The History of Alawites* which was quoted in English by Matti Moosa in his book, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects*, it says that

> Timur's march against Syria led the Nusayris (Alawis) … to avenge them against their enemies, …. We are informed by al-Tawil that before Timur stormed Damascus, an Alawi woman, Durr al-Sadaf, the daughter of Saad al-Ansar (one of the men of Mamluk Sultan al-Zahir), accompanied by forty Alawi virgins, tearfully asked Timur to avenge the family of the Prophet particularly the daughters, including al-Husayn's sister Zaynab, who was taken as a captive after his murder, to the Umayyad Caliph Yazid in Damascus. (1988, p. 274)

Timur promised Durr al-Sadaf that he would avenge the family of the prophet. She accompanied him to Damascus with 40 virgins, who sang songs against the Umayyads (1988, p. 129).

It seems that Marlowe made changes on historical events. He changed the number of virgins from 40 to four for the stage need and he made the virgins to be slaughtered first of all to focus on the brutality of Tamburlaine. This can be linked to another event of the bride that is mentioned in al-Tawil's account.

> When Timur entered Damascus, he offered amnesty to its inhabitants and asked them to find him a woman from among the dignitaries of the city to be his wife. When a maiden was found, he ordered that she be marched naked through the city. When the people refused, Timur said to them, "Who, then, gave you the right to bring the daughter of the apostle of God [i.e. imam Al-Hussein] uncovered to your city?" Then he ordered them killed. (Moosa, 1988, p. 129)

Timur tried to remind the people of Damascus how Imam Hussein's sister was brought to Damascus as a hostage after the battle and he wanted to avenge that. Probably, Marlowe fused both events in one scene that ends tragically to show the excessive brutality of his protagonist.

The historical accounts serve as a catalyst for contemplating the potential creation of a female character. Examining Marlowe's portrayal of the character Zenocrates in his play reveals his inspiration from these historical sources, even though Zenocrates is a fictional entity. Al-Ṭawil's *The History of Alawites* and the narratives of figures like Durr al-Sadaf and the bride provide intriguing insights into the historical context that likely influenced Marlowe's narrative choices. These sources illuminate the events and emotions that could have

influenced Zenocrates' character. Marlowe adeptly adapts and blends elements from these historical accounts, culminating in a portrayal of Zenocrates and the ensuing tragic events that resonate with his overarching narrative themes. Through Zenocrates, Marlowe effectively highlights the brutal nature of Tamburlaine, further accentuating the character's role in the unfolding drama.

We can also understand Tamburlaine's hostility to the emperor of the Turks in both parts of the play as a kind of revenge for Imam Al-Hussein. The name of the emperor in the play is Bajazeth which was originally Bayazid in Turkish, equivalent to Aba Yazid or the father of Yazid in Arabic language. Shiites throughout history hate and curse Yazid which is the name of the caliph who killed Imam Hussein. Knowing these facts, Tamburlaine's humiliation and the caging of Bajazeth can make more sense.

Ahmad ibn Arabshah recounts the tale of how Timur captured Ottoman Sultan Bayazid, also known as Ibn Uthman, and highlights sectarian tensions by mentioning the antipathy towards Yazid as a driving force behind the animosity towards the sultan:

> When Timur captured Ibn Uthman, … he seized whatever had come into his possession from the group of Ibn Uthman—their sanctities, wealth, treasures, and servants … He adhered to his age-old practices, extracting treasures, capturing souls, and enslaving women. He made Ibn Uthman stand before him each day, treating him with affection, extending kindness and courtesy towards him, alternately ridiculing and laughing at him. [One day, when] the crowds converged, and when the place was packed with people, Ibn Uthman was swiftly summoned. He arrived with trembling heart, shackled and shivering. His heart then settled, and his terror dissipated. He improved his posture, and the scowls on his face eased through his blandishments. [Timur] commanded the instruments of joy, and they spun around … Ibn Uthman looked and saw the cupbearers—his concubines and their veiled companions. His world darkened in his eyes, and the bitterness of his agony intensified at that moment. His heart cracked and ignited, his pain multiplied, his liver disintegrated, his sighs increased, his losses multiplied, his wound bled, his affliction nourished, and over the wound of his affliction, the butchers of grief scattered salt. (2008, pp. 278-279)[2]

Ibn Arabshah continues to employ well-known Arabic proverbs to highlight the issue of sectarianism, as he mentions Timur's act of releasing certain dignitaries who have been held captive by Ibn Uthman,

> "And this is not due to my love for Ali—may Allah honor his face—but it is due to my aversion to Muawiya," I said.
> Muawiya didn't reject the love for Ali, but rather, he sought to secure the succession of his son Yazid.
> Another perspective suggests that it's not due to his affection for him that he extends his kindness, but due to his hatred for certain individuals among us. (2008, p. 280)

In Marlowe's play, Tamburlaine is portrayed as an agent of divine justice, with his conquests and retaliatory actions seemingly aimed at rectifying the wrongs suffered by the Shiite people and their imams. However, this perspective also highlights Marlowe's flawed understanding of Islam and Shiism with the scenes of burning the Turkish Quran and cursing Mahomet, as well as Timur's own misconceptions regarding Shiism. From a historical perspective, Timur unfurled a banner displaying the Arabic expression, "Ya la-Tharat al-Hussein", which can be rendered in English as "O ye avengers of Hussein", in order to further his personal interests. Similarly, the Abbasids leveraged the memory of Karbala to a great extent to garner public backing against the Umayyads (Cornell, 2007, pp. 117, 118). However, once they achieved triumph, they subsequently turned against the followers of Imam Hussein.

Finally, Marlowe kept the issue of revenge over the killing of Imam Al-Hussein implicit in the play because he was writing a play meant to amuse the Elizabethan audience rather than to boost an idea about Imam Al-

[2] All translations are mine.

Hussein as the play "draws upon the anti-Islamic discourse that had developed over the centuries in Christian Europe" (Vitkus 2003, p. 52).

Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* is a complex and multi-layered play that engages with a wide range of historical and cultural issues. According to Miller, "Marlowe chose from his sources many incidents that had a basis in actual history" (2006, p. 266). Marlowe's use of historical and cultural references to the tragedy of Karbala and the Shiite-Sunni conflict adds depth and complexity to the play, highlighting its relevance to contemporary issues of religious conflict and political power struggles. By portraying Tamburlaine as a figure of divine retribution, Marlowe's play remains a powerful and thought-provoking work that continues to resonate with audiences today.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* intricately weaves historical events and cultural nuances to create a complex narrative that resonates with both its Elizabethan audience and modern readers. Marlowe's portrayal of Tamburlaine as a scourge of God draws parallels to Timur's conquests and strategies, as well as the broader religious and sectarian tensions of the time. By using the character of Tamburlaine, Marlowe delves into the themes of power, vengeance, and divine justice, alluding subtly to the tragic narrative of Imam Al-Hussein and the ongoing Shiite-Sunni discord.

Marlowe's incorporation of historical accounts, such as Timur's use of flags and his interactions with the people of Damascus, adds depth to the play's dramatic intensity and provides a window into the political and religious intricacies of the era. The manipulation of historical events and characters serves not only to entertain but also to shed light on deeper themes, such as the idea of revenge and the complex relationship between power and religion.

While Marlowe's understanding of Shiism and the events surrounding Imam Al-Hussein's tragedy may be imperfect, his play remains a captivating exploration of human ambition, conflict, and the consequences of wielding power. The themes of vengeance, political maneuvering, and the interplay between historical events and creative narrative make *Tamburlaine the Great* a timeless work that continues to offer insights into the complexities of human nature and the pursuit of dominance.

In this intricate tapestry of historical and cultural references, Marlowe's play ultimately invites audiences to contemplate the far-reaching consequences of power struggles and the intricate interplay between history, religion, and individual agency. Through Tamburlaine's journey, Marlowe prompts us to reflect on the ways in which past events shape the present, and how the pursuit of power can lead to both triumph and tragedy. As a result, *Tamburlaine the Great* remains a compelling piece of theatre that resonates with audiences across time, highlighting the enduring relevance of its themes and messages.

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