Giving the Tragic Boot to the Comic Sock: The Recoding of Christopher Marlowe’s Tamburlaine from Low to High Culture

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Abstract

In his prefatory letter to the 1590 printed edition of Christopher Marlowe’s wildly popular Tamburlaine 1 and 2, the printer Robert Jones addresses the "courteous reader" and justifies excluding from this first printed version of a major Elizabethan play certain "frivolous Jestures," likely comic scenes well-known from stage performances of the play. Rather than seeing these editorial exclusions as an attempt to standardize the genres of Elizabethan tragedy and history, this essay argues that the cultural context of the recoding of Tamburlaine from stage to page reveals a social tension between Elizabeth’s administration and the unruly margins of popular dissent, between the "gentlemen" readers of books and the raucous play-going "mechanics." Besides Jones’s letter, Sidney’s Apology for Poetry, scholarly discussions of the textual problems of Marlowe’s plays, contemporary accounts of the performance of Elizabethan theater, and Bakhtin’s notion of carnival help frame discussion of Tamburlaine as the site of conflicting social forces.

Full Text:
Christopher Marlowe contributed greatly to English literature. He developed a new metre which has become one of the most popular in English literary history, and he revitalised a dying form of English drama. His short life was apparently violent and the man himself was supposedly of a volatile temperament, yet he managed to write some of the most delicate and beautiful works on record. Marlowe's plays comprise The Tragedy of Dido, Queen of Carthage (possibly with some collaboration from Nashe), Tamburlaine parts one and two, The Jew of Malta, Edward II, Dr. Faustus and The Massacre at Paris. Up to the time of Tamburlaine, written in 1587-8, there had been a few so-called tragedies. With Tamburlaine, Marlowe swept the Elizabethan audiences off their feet. Christopher Marlowe's life, Christopher Marlowe's works, Christopher Marlowe's style and popular poems, more about Christopher Marlowe. Initially, the University hesitated to award him Master of Arts, for there were rumors that he wanted to go to the English college at Rheims, and was preparing for ordination to become a Roman Catholic Priest. However, Marlowe was awarded the Master of Arts when the Privy Council intervened on his behalf, and praised Marlowe for his "good services" to the Queen. It, however, did not clearly state the nature of his services, though it sent a letter to the authorities of Cambridge about this connection. This led to speculations about Marlowe being a spy working for Sir Francis Walsingham, a famous Marlowe must have read his famous book, The Prince and derived this idea of ambition and spirit from him. Marlowe discarded the old concept of tragedy as decent from greatness to misery and supplanted it greatness by the greatness of individual worth. His heroes truly reflect the new Spirit of Learning because he himself was the product of Renaissance. The Inner Conflict: Another great achievement of Marlowe was to introduce the element of conflict in the tragic hero especially in Dr. Faustus and Edward II. The conflict may be on the physical or spiritual plane. The spiritual and moral confl...