Aspiring Souls (I): *Tamburlaine the Great*

The following pages look at peculiarly ambiguous or unorthodox representations of the soul and spirits in the *Tamburlaine* plays, and in *Dr Faustus*. It is of course hard to rigidly split any discussion of Marlowe’s writings from the highly colourful rumours about his impiety. ‘All they that love not tobacco and boys are fools…He would report that Christ did love St John with an extraordinary love…that Christ was St John’s bedfellow and that he used him as the sinners of Sodona’. Moses, meanwhile, ‘was but a juggler and…one Heriot’s being Sir Walter Ralegh’s man can do more then he’. Similarly, ‘the first beginning of religion was only to keep men in awe’. These and other memorable scoffs at Christianity have perhaps proved so compelling not just because of their outrageous blasphemy, but because of their tone and their peculiar exactness of detail. Even if such comments had been purely anonymous, we would probably still sense in them a figure who was more remarkable than any avowed ‘atheist’ of the Elizabethan age. The statements are so subversive, finally, not because they are astute or indignant or violently anticlerical. Rather, they seem to treat religion as a joke – as something whose greatest worth is its ability to help chip out the well-defined persona of this daring, impish, contemptuous freethinker.

To further enrich Marlowe’s already spicy reputation, we then have his possible association with Sir Walter Ralegh. Sometime before mid-May 1593, one Richard Chomley supposedly described Marlowe as ‘able to show more sound reasons for atheism than any divine in England is able to give to prove divinity’, and went on to claim that Marlowe, by his own admission, ‘hath read the atheist lecture to Sir Walter Raleigh and others’. Did Marlowe tutor Ralegh in atheism, or vice versa? Or neither? What, if anything, was the role of Thomas Harriot? Generally recognised as the most important English mathematician of the early modern period, Thomas Harriot has sometimes been presented as not just an individual freethinker, but as a member of a dangerously impious clique, centred on
the ‘Wizard Earl’, Henry Percy, and including Ralegh, the poet Matthew Roydon, and the natural philosopher William Warner.\(^3\)

Yet if anything has been more notorious than Marlowe’s supposed attitude to religion, it has been the difficulty of establishing evidence on this impious clique – evidence, at least, which goes beyond rumour, or the tantalising connection of one rumour to another. It has been argued that Percy’s ‘Northumberland Circle’ may not have existed in anything like the form once claimed.\(^4\) J. A. Downie, meanwhile, has taken some trouble to show that ‘we know next to nothing about Christopher Marlowe’, and that even his authorship of *Tamburlaine* is not entirely beyond doubt.\(^5\) While most critics do seem to agree about Marlowe’s authorship of the Tamburlaine plays, it is worth noting that Downie’s scepticism would, if justified, knock out one of the more secure pieces of evidence for Marlowe’s dangerous Elizabethan reputation. For when the (possibly envious) writer and playwright Robert Greene referred to one of his contemporaries as ‘daring God out of his heaven with that atheist Tamburlaine’, he certainly identified Tamburlaine, but not Marlowe himself.\(^6\)

In what follows I will try to avoid the clouds of Marlovian speculation and rumour by rooting the argument in details of text and staging, looking chiefly at the plays’ tendency to materialise soul and spirit, and at the implicit or overt roles of Homeric values, and of early modern medicine, in these materialising evocations. In this way it should be possible to say something new about the plays’ attitude to religion, and to do so with some degree of precision and reliability.

**Tamburlaine**

**Atmosphere and cosmology**

For all the uncertainties of the Marlovian biography, we can confidently say one thing about him. Marlowe loved energy. His plays are driven by it; his heroes self-destruct from an uncontrollable abundance of it. His verse crackled with it; and it may in part have been one last explosion of that unstable vitality which cost him his life in the tavern quarrel at Deptford in 1593.

If *Tamburlaine One* and *Two* are Marlowe’s best works, then it is substantially because they allow that ceaselessly agitated force of raw life to find its most logical expression. These plays are chiefly about power and about movement. Bursting from obscurity, Tamburlaine conquers Persia, North Africa, Damascus and Babylon. Why? For sheer love of glory, power, and a hurtling kinetic rush of momentum which at once sates and revitalises the furious rage of energy pulsing through his muscles and veins. In *Tamburlaine*, the hero’s biography licenses a plot which coheres largely