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# Giving the Tragic Boot to the Comic Sock:

## The Recoding of Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* from Low to High Culture

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*In his prefatory letter to the 1590 printed edition of Christopher Marlowe's popular Tamburlaine 1 and 2, the printer Robert Jones addresses the "courteous reader" and justifies excluding from this first published version of a major Elizabethan play certain "frivolous Jestures," likely comic scenes well-known from stage performances. Rather than seeing these editorial exclusions as an attempt to standardise 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 theatre, and Bakhtin's notion of carnival, help frame discussion of Tamburlaine as the site of conflicting social forces. John Frongillo is an Assistant Professor of Humanities at Florida Tech University. His primary research interests are in media studies and early-modern British drama.*

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TO THE GENTLEMEN-READERS AND OTHERS THAT TAKE PLEASURE  
IN READING HISTORIES.

Gentlemen and courteous readers whosoever: I have here published in print, for your sakes, the two tragical discourses of the Scythian shepherd Tamburlaine, that became so great a conqueror and so mighty a monarch. My hope is, that they will be now no less acceptable unto you to read after your serious affairs and

studies than they have been lately delightful for many of you to see when the same were shewed in London upon stages. I have purposely omitted and left out some fond and frivolous gestures, digressing, and, in my poor opinion, far unmeet for the matter, which I thought might seem more tedious unto the wise than any way else to be regarded, though haply they have been of some vain-conceited fondlings greatly gaped at, what time they were shewed upon the stage in their graced deformities: nevertheless now to be mixtured in print with such matter of worth, it would prove a great disgrace to so honourable and stately a history. Great folly were it in me to commend unto your wisdoms either the eloquence of the author that writ them or the worthiness of the matter itself. I therefore leave unto your learned censures both the one and the other, and myself the poor printer of them unto your most courteous and favourable protection; which if you vouchsafe to accept, you shall evermore bind me to employ what travail and service I can to the advancing and pleasuring of your excellent degree.

Yours, most humble at commandment,  
R[ichard] J[ones], printer<sup>1</sup>

### I

Since the 1960s, critics of Christopher Marlowe have often concentrated on the comic elements in his dramaturgy, especially *Doctor Faustus* and *The Jew of Malta*. From Clifford Leech's seminal essay "Marlowe's Humour"<sup>2</sup> followed other readings emphasising Marlowe's "darkly comic manner."<sup>3</sup> Erich Segal's deployment of "Schadenfreude" as well as Marlowe's technique of comic distancing have helped to break down the view of Marlowe as an artist who, in the words of an early editor, "could not don alternately the buskin and the sock."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps for reasons outlined in the printer's letter above, researchers have placed less weight on the comedy in the highly popular *Tamburlaine*, Marlowe's two part drama about a Scythian shepherd and his destructive rise to power as the "Scourge of God." Despite the printer's claim to "have purposely omitted" the "fond and frivolous gestures," some of the play's comic material, like a palimpsest, can still be detected, especially around characters like the weak king Mycetes or Tamburlaine's son, Calyphas. Fred Tromly highlights Tamburlaine's "teasing of audience" and "subordinates" in the play, revealing how "the horrific becomes indistinguishable from the humorous."<sup>5</sup> Along these same lines, this essay argues that the play's residual comic elements, especially the banquet scene involving Bajazeth and the toying with "crownes," among other things, parallel the carnival tradition of 16th century popular culture of which Elizabethan theatre formed an integral part.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to every major writer of the late-16th century mentioning *Tamburlaine*, Philip Henslowe, the theatre entrepreneur and diarist, records twenty-two performances of the play between 1594-1595, an exceptionally high

number. The enthusiastic following of *Tamburlaine* during the late-16th century helped to create one of Britain's first super-heroes. Because of the success of *Tamburlaine 1*, Marlowe penned a sequel that cites the audience's contribution. The prologue to *Tamburlaine 2* addresses this critical dialectic between author and audience: "The generall welcomes Tamburlain receiv'd/When he arrived last upon our stage,/Hath made our Poet pen his second part . . . (Prologue). The performance of *Tamburlaine*, whose stage history included a shooting of a pregnant woman and child in 1587 when a gun misfired into the crowd, is notable for its tendency to erupt into social disorder. We can read several well-rendered descriptions of the Elizabethan theatres and their clientele by natives and visitors alike. One such description of the rowdy theatrical life comes from Thomas Dekker's *Gull's Hornbook*, which condemns the theatres on many accounts not least the social disturbances engendered by certain performances at the play-houses:

Men come not to study at a Play-house, but love such expressions and passages, which with ease insinuate themselves into their capacities . . . or if it be on Holy days, when saylers, Water-men, Shoomakers, Butchers and Aprentices are at leisure, then it is good policy to amaze those violent spirits, with some tearing Tragaedy full of fights and skirmishes. . . I have known upon one of these Festivals, but especially at Shrove-tide, where the Players have been appointed, notwithstanding their bills to the contrary, to act what the major part of the company had a mind to; sometimes Tamerlane, sometimes Iurgurth, sometimes the Jew of Malta, and sometimes parts of all these, and at last, none of the three taking, they were forc'd to undresse and put off their Tragick habits, and conclude the day with the merry milk-maides. And unless this were done, and the popular humour satisfied, as sometimes it so fortun'd, that the Players were refractory; the Benches, the tiles, the laths, the stones, Oranges, Apples, Nuts, flew about most liberally, and as there were Mechanicks of all professions, who fell every one to his owne trade, and dissolved a house in an instant, and made a ruine of a stately Fabrick.<sup>7</sup>

According to Dekker, those attending have erased the borderline between actor and audience, life and art. The mob demands his plays, "Tamerlane" and "The Jew of Malta." The audience, as this narrator recalls, is interested not in "studying" history: they are not "gentlemen readers," but the working class, "the mechanicks of all professions" with free time to cavort "at leisure." The audience's activities become dangerous especially upon "Shrove-tide" or "upon one of these festivals" or "Holy days." "During carnival time," Bakhtin writes, "life is subject to its own laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom . . . it has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal."<sup>8</sup> During carnival an atmosphere of excessive eating, drinking, swearing, and clamouring are at their apex. In addition, the renewal of the world is accomplished with belligerence, appropriate to those "violent spirits" interested in "fights and skirmishes." The roles of audience and actor during the carnival are suspended as the crowd dictates what plays will be performed "notwithstanding their bills to the contrary." Resisting this collective will—"the popular humour"—

instigates a forceful reprisal by all the people because this festivity concerns all the people. Their idea of social renewal, however, is ambivalent since it hinges on a destructive exercise of “all professions.” This destruction of the “stately Fabrick” is both re-creation and recreation, an energetic break from the rigid social hierarchy and a leap into a world turned head over heels, topsy-turvy. Even the temporary freedom from social ranking provided by the right theatrical experience might inspire the working class to question all that seems fixed, eternal, and divinely appointed. *Tamburlaine* aids this interrogation of the Tudor status quo.

## II

Recent commentary on *Tamburlaine* shows renewed interest in recovering the comic Marlowe; at the same time, as one of the first major Elizabethan plays to become printed literature, *Tamburlaine* has also re-emerged as a significant document in the conflict between stage and page, a tension partly created by the new commercial motives of publishers. This conflict between theatrical performance and the printed book unfolds in the Printer’s letter that prefaces the 1590 printed version of the play, alerting the “Gentlemen” and “curteous readers whosoever” to editorial changes to the drama. This letter is the starting point for Kirk Melnikoff’s essay that correctly identifies the major impact the printer, Robert Jones, exerted over poetic miscellanies and courtly literature in the late sixteenth century.<sup>9</sup> After scrutinising the printer’s various business practices, Melnikoff concludes that the printer’s acknowledged omissions were designed to fashion a “*Tamburlaine* for the established print market of collected poetry and chivalric literature”.<sup>10</sup> This transition from an “ear” to an “eye,” the recoding from the mainly oral environment of the playhouse to the visually-oriented printed page that Lucas Erne mentions, is a concern over genre, literary decorum, and classical correctness, part of the “refueledization of culture” in the late sixteenth century.

How did *Tamburlaine*, originally entitled “two comical discourses,” become a tragedy without comedy? The growing standardisation of literary genres is a major influence. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle observes that tragedy depicts characters of higher virtue whose fall affects many, while comedy portrays characters of inferior virtue. Over several centuries of translations and adaptations, Aristotle’s theory of the proper subject for comedy and tragedy evolved social and not just ethical distinctions: comedy became associated with the general populace, and tragedy with nobility. Diomedes, the fourth century Roman grammarian, writes “Comoedia a tragoedia differt, quod in tragoedia heroes, duces, reges, in comoedia humiles atque privatae personae.”<sup>11</sup> In 1555 French Renaissance theorist Jacques Peletier confidently proclaims comedy depicts men of “base condition,” and tragedy depicts “kings, princes, and great lords.”<sup>12</sup> The Spanish commentator on Aristotle, Alonso Lopez Pinciano, in 1596 likewise summarises that tragedy properly represents “action of illustrious persons,” and comedy “inferior folk.”<sup>13</sup> All three writers perpetuate a reading of Aristotle that aligns tragedy with nobility and elevated language, and comedy with ordinary subjects and a lower style. English Renaissance critical theory echoed the Continental ideas and often sought to standardise generic boundaries

by separating tragedy and comedy. It is tragi-comedy's lack of theatrical decorum that Sir Philip Sidney condemns in his well-known *Apology for Poetry* (published in 1595). He declares that Elizabethan plays, based on those he had seen, abandon the Aristotelian unities of time, space, and action. What is worse, he continues, they intermingle "kings and clowns" in the same play or scene, producing a mongrel genre "neither right tragedy nor right comedy."<sup>14</sup> Sir Philip Sidney might have been describing Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, a popular play that originally had many comic scenes mingled with its tragic action.

When he makes his introduction in a letter prefacing *Tamburlaine 1* and *2* in 1590, Robert Jones writes within this pseudo-Aristotelian tradition. The comic scenes contained in the performed version of *Tamburlaine* never survived the printer's press. Noting these scenes had some theatrical value once, he decides "the worthiness of the matter itself" and the "eloquence of the author" make these few comic parts "in my poor opinion, far unmeet for the matter, which I thought might seem more tedious unto the wise than any way else to be regarded." Jones's letter like Sidney's *Apology* reflects a concern over "mixing" comic digressions with stately tragedy. This anxiety partly derives from the readership for this particular edition of the play: the "gentlemen and courteous readers whosoever" addressed in the letter who can provide "courteous and favorable protection." Jones recodes *Tamburlaine* for them. In this view, the serious subjects of tragedy and history are for the upwardly striving literate class that can afford printed books. It is assumed they have no interest in reading comedy; comedy is for the semi-literate populace that attends the play's performance. The "Two comical discourses of Tamburlaine," the original title in the Stationer's Register, yields to the "two Tragical discourses" in the printed version because of this shift from stage to page. By excluding the comic as extraneous and frivolous - digressions perhaps implanted by the players - Jones concentrates on the seriousness of *Tamburlaine* as a tragedy ("two Tragical discourses") and history ("so honorable and stately a historie") in order to make it a vehicle for social advancement for "gentlemen readers." While this same upper-class audience most likely attended the live performance of the play, they are by no means the "vaine conceited fondlings" gaping with open mouths at the foot of the stage platform that Jones derogates. Jones's letter re-aligns audience with genre, marking a social and an aesthetic boundary. These questionable assumptions about audiences foreground the antagonism between the upper and lower classes as well as the differences between tragedy and comedy. For the printer, the study of serious literature like tragedy/history has not only intellectual utility for the individual reader, but also social value as "higher education": printed books, not live performances, signal social prestige and exclusivity.

### III

*Tamburlaine* is not Marlowe's only play to have been edited in print for political reasons. *Doctor Faustus*, his tragedy of the scholar who sells his soul to the devil for forbidden knowledge and god-like power, comes down in two distinct printed versions: an A text from 1604 closer to the author's lifetime, and

a B text from 1616 that contains additional scenes and signs of theatrical use. The B text of *Doctor Faustus* was altered according to the *Act to Restrain Abuses of Players* sometime during or after 1606. The changes instituted by this new Act of Parliament attempted to eliminate the use of profanity and key religious words like “God” and “Jesus Christ.” This forced shift in the language allowed in theatres marks this B text as the “theatrical” version (as opposed to “authorial” version of the A text) even as it altered radically the language of Marlowe’s play. As an example, consider the final moments of Faust’s life. The A text reads, “My God, my God. Look not so fierce on me!” while the B text, “O, mercy, heaven! Look not so fierce on me!”<sup>15</sup> The Old Man of the A text says, “I go . . . / Fearing the ruin of thy hopeless soul,” the B, “I go . . . /Fearing the enemy of thy hopeless soul.” These small changes have huge hermeneutical repercussions as scholars have debated. For example, it has been argued that the earlier 1604 A text is more stridently Protestant, and the later B text is more Anglican. Leah Marcus argues, “Damnation in A is a matter of inward conviction. . . .[i]n B, his damnation is sealed through outward ceremonies” (167).<sup>16</sup> Other critics contend that in comparison to the shorter A text, the B text is livelier theatre, filled with allegorical characters, stage machinations, and abundant devils.<sup>17</sup> Few of the critics, however, focus heavily on the possibility that the additional scenes of the B text might represent populist agitation.

If the B text is closer to the theatrical version of the original play, then it might include material calibrated for the mixed audience of the public theatre, perhaps adding scenes sympathetic to the working class that often attended the performances. The 1604 A text of *Doctor Faustus* lacks the following scenes that were included in the 1616 B text: the rescue of German Emperor Charles V’s religious ally “Saxon Bruno” from the Pope, the establishment of the disgruntled knights and their attack against Faustus, the clowns at the tavern and their attempted robbery, Lucifer arriving to claim Faustus’ soul, the portraits of heaven and hell by the Good and Bad Angels, and the discovery of Faustus’s broken body. These additional scenes from the B text stage a clear and steady challenge to the social order, ranging from the religious threat of Catholic invasion to the landed aristocracy being mocked by men “base of stock,” to home robberies by drunken clowns. Each of these additional groups of scenes - those focused around the Pope, the knights, and the clowns particularly - presents a potential threat to the Tudor regime and its privileged, segregated position at the pinnacle of society. What might have concerned the Elizabethan administration and the privileged class about these additional scenes was not just the spectre of bloody religious war pitting Catholics against Protestants, but also the growing sense that feudal society was crumbling. They were being invaded by the lower classes in the form of beggars, the unemployed, vagabonds, rogues, counterfeit-cranks, alms-seekers, lunatics, Poor-Toms, and all manner of needy people flooding into London. The threat to the established social order from these impoverished people was so large that the Poor Laws of 1563, 1572, 1576, 1597, and 1601 were promulgated and enforced as partial remedies for the changing social conditions.

The first threat presented to the established social order, however, comes from a familiar source, the Catholics (3.1. 54-201 and 3.2. 1-56). A fierce piece of Catholic propaganda, this first additional scene of the B text shows the Pope humiliating “Saxon Bruno,” his political prisoner, and spouting the argument against the Protestant rule of Germany. In a flamboyant manner the Pope ascends his prisoner like a footstool in order to sit in “Saint Peter’s chair” with a triumphal flourish of “trumpets.” The Pontiff then threatens to overthrow the monarch of a Protestant realm, Germany, although the reference could just as easily have been to England: “We will depose the Emperor for that deed/And curse the people that submit to him. . . So we will quell that haughty schismatic/And, by authority apostolical,/Depose him from his regal government”(126-145). A burlesque mix of religious mockery, comic disguises, and political rhetoric, this scene realises the view of the Pope as his “sacred Holiness” eager to wage war against his enemies, eager to regain control of rebel realms, and eager to curse Protestant “souls to hellish misery.”

In the next group of scenes (4.1.-3.), Doctor Faustus, the self-made scholar, “base of stock,” ridicules the aristocratic elite, in one of their homes no less and in front of the king. This threat from a member of lower rank against a knight produces class friction that culminates in violent conflict. We first see knights preparing for an important visit from the king with entertainment provided by the magician. In a way, the knight’s home is invaded by the king and by Faustus, one above and one below his social order. The first two knights’ excitement over the royal occasion with “The Wonder of the world for magic art” is contrasted with Benvolio’s lack of interest: “all this day the sluggard keeps his bed”(20). He comes to the window in a “nightcap buttoning.” Benvolio undiplomatically shrugs off the king’s arrival, preferring to fight off a hangover. His last words promise revenge against an adversary: “Well, go you attend the Emperor. I am content . . . I have a charm in my head shall control him [devil] as well as the conjurer, I warrant you”(45-46). The two remaining scenes of this group (4. 2. and 4. 3.) escalate the antagonism between the upstart scholar and Frederick, Martino, and Benvolio. The courtiers are now joined by “Soldiers.” This combination of personal grudge and armed men pits the aristocracy’s capital against the working class Faustus. The knights plot an “ambush” against the Master Doctor with “our servants and our followers . . . behind the trees”(16-17). Benvolio urges on his mercenaries with a couplet: “Come, soldiers, follow me unto the grove./Who kills him shall have gold and endless love”(24-25). No longer just a personal grudge, the scenes show the outbreak of class warfare with each side supplying soldiers with weapons. Striking at Faustus’s head, the source of his power, the knights are surprised when the headless Faustus continues to speak to them. These members of the aristocracy are made “laughing-stocks to all the world” by the Good Doctor who has out-fought them, humiliated them, run them from their home, and displaced them at court.

The last B text scenes (4.5 and 4.6 36-125) are perhaps the most challenging to the Tudor regime. These scenes concern the lowest members of society whom we know mostly by their trades or occupations: a horse-courser, a carter, a hostess, and a clown. Congregating at the alehouse, an important place

for local organising and radical political activity, these workers launch a heated attack against their economic situation, mentioning debt and credit issues. The clown complains, "I am eighteen pence on the score" and wonders to the hostess if the "score still stands." She replies, "Ay, there's no doubt of that, for methinks you make no haste to wipe it out"(13-14). In succession, they complain of Dr. Faustus's business practices that swindled them of "three farthings" and "forty dollars." Motivated by their shared economic abuse, they, like others before, vow to retaliate against the arrogant Dr. Faustus: "Hark you, we'll into another room and drink awhile, and then we'll go seek out the doctor"(57-59). Their collective financial mistreatment galvanises their support for each other. Going into a more private "room" to talk about good Dr. Faustus suggests they are secretly plotting. The audience watching the play knew that the pub was not only a locality for a beer or a joke, but also a place to talk politics, to criticise the administration, to complain of social problems, or, as in this case, to plot an attack against those that repress them.

By contrast to the deprivation expressed in the pub, in his next scene Faustus is shown conjuring "grapes" with the devil's help for the Duke and Duchess of Vanholt. The additional material of the B text begins with the stage directions "The Clowns bounce at the gate, within." The Duke shouts, "What rude disturbers have we at the gate?"(35). The clowns have plotted a home invasion. Once again the lower classes have invaded the home of the higher class. They force themselves in, demanding "to speak with Dr. Faustus." When he appears, the Horse-Courser threatens, "fill us some beer, or we'll break all the barrels in the house and dash out all your brains with your bottles"(66-67). Faustus obliges, calling the hostess for beer. When she serves them, the magician charms them all dumb including the hostess who repeats her persistent economic complaint, "Who pays for the ale . . . now you have sent away my guests? I pray, who shall pay me for my a—" (116-118). Faustus, however, fails to pay her or the others whom he has tricked. This robbery is foiled comically, but the sight of the lower classes armed and attacking the aristocracy in their own homes, like the scene of the upstart scholar ridiculing the knight, is a politically dangerous expression that might have made the Elizabethan authorities uncomfortable. They might also have felt uncomfortable at witnessing Faustus, the rebel scholar, ideologically recovered, so to speak, by the two younger scholars who, rather than understanding him as a salutary warning, turn him into a martyr for scholarship. The A text ends with Faustus's death immediately followed by the epilogue warning of his "hellish fall." The B text inserts the additional scene before the epilogue of the two younger scholars returning to Faustus's study, collecting his dismembered body, and promising to give the Master Doctor "due burial" with all the students "clothed in mourning black." This ideological "recovery" of Faustus's body is yet another significant difference that separates the B text from the A text. Their gathering of his scattered limbs asserts his role as the state's enemy whose example might lead other unwise scholars to "wonder at unlawful things" and "to practice more than heavenly power permits."



The earthly power of the Tudor regime did not want audiences at the theatres to “wonder at unlawful things.” Elizabethan authorities removed scenes from popular plays in print and in performance because of their radicalism, not because they contain frivolous, jesting, digressive indecorum next to such weighty matters of tragedy and “serious study.” Severe political consequences ensued for publishing or writing such un-approved material. Through the Master of Revels, the Elizabethan administration sought to suppress “populist” scenes that might lead to political organisation and social disturbances, an increasing fear as the late- sixteenth century playhouses and audiences multiplied. The censorship of populist-tinged drama is not without precedent or infrequent. *Sir Thomas More*, a play worked on by Shakespeare among many others, was altered over and over and censored because it showed too much sympathy for popular complaints and issues of poor people who opposed the Tudor reign. *The Isle of Dog* incident involving Ben Jonson and the *Richard II* incident involving Queen Elizabeth provide two more easy examples of government suppression of potentially dangerous material.<sup>18</sup> But most importantly, the printer of *Tamburlaine*, Robert Jones, knew firsthand the risk for publishing unapproved material because he was arrested several years earlier in 1583 after issuing a “pamphlet” that did not meet the government’s approval.<sup>19</sup> This earlier experience with prison, I suggest, affected him significantly. He did not want to repeat this mistake in the publication of *Tamburlaine*. Because *Tamburlaine’s* success as public entertainment derives from its tragic-comic form and its strategic sympathies for the common folk, Jones made the politically safe, but still lucrative, decision of eliding the humorous scenes as much as was feasible in order to avoid further unwanted attention from the authorities.

#### IV

Though Jones stripped *Tamburlaine 1* of its comic elements, some of the comic residue, especially around the weak King of Persia, the witless Mycetes, remains. The leftover comic elements in the two parts of *Tamburlaine* tend to parallel important elements of carnival that celebrate the subversion of traditional authority such as kingship. Mycetes, for example, is the first king turned jackass but not the last. As some others have noted, Mycetes often speaks in rhyme, making him the “rhyming mother wit” of the prologue perhaps.<sup>20</sup> In *Tamburlaine 1* during 1.1, we witness his transformation from King of Persia to the royal butt of jokes through a series of exchanges and a pun. Openly insulted by his court which laments “to see the follie of their King,” Mycetes prepares a “royal” edict: “Well here I sweare by this my royal seat. . . .” Before he can finish, Cosroe cuts him off with “You may doe well to kisse it then.” The subtle derision of the King continues in 1.2 when Meander, his general, brings bad news: *Tamburlaine* has more men. With bravado, Meander looks on the impending war positively, adding “Sprong of the teeth of Dragons venomous/Their careless swords shal lanch their fellowes throats/And make us triumph in their overthrow.” Totally out of tune, Mycetes inquires, “Was there such brethren, sweet Meander, say,/That sprong of teeth of dragons venomous?” “So Poets say, my Lord,” affirms the general. Mycetes then jokes, “And tis a pretty toy to be a Poet”(2.2.43-53). In 2.4. Mycetes and *Tamburlaine* play hide-and-seek with the

former's crown. Mycetes performs like a spoiled child bullied by Tamburlaine for refusing to play with his toys: "Come give it me. . . You lie, I gave it you. . . No, I meane, I let you keep it."

This child's play, however, quickly turns to rougher jesting with the degradation of the Turkish Emperor, King Bajazeth and his Queen Zabina, sworn enemies of Tamburlaine. In this central scene, we witness not just a king ridiculed but kingship itself. This captured king has been transformed suddenly into a slave or worse, a "foot-stoole of great Tamburlain." We watch Tamburlaine remove this former king from a cage and mount him to ascend his chair. The ultimate humiliation involves a reversal of roles in the play, an important part of Bakhtin's carnival. This switch occurs when Zenocrate, Tamburlaine's queen, allows her own "Handmaid," Anippe, to assume control of the former queen Zabina. The haughty maid threatens the persecuted queen: "Let these be warnings for you then my slave,/How you abuse the person of the king:/Or els I sweare to have you whipt stark nak'd"(14.2.72-75). Like the first play, the sequel repeats the burlesque ridicule of kings. A chariot drawn by captive kings with horse bridles in their mouths and Tamburlaine with reins and a whip yelling above them, "Holla, ye pampered Jades of Asia" evokes more laughter than horror. The stage directions help picture the stage action: "Tamburlaine drwen in his chariot by Trebizon and Soria with bittes in their mouthes, reines in his left hand, in his right hand a whip, with which he scourgeth them"(4.3.) Once again, however, the ridicule of high subjects is laden with political danger no matter how much laughter surrounds it. Tamburlaine and his generals, emboldened by victories, engage in word play in the sequel. Answering a curse by the captive Orcanes, Theridamas, a general, suggests to Tamburlaine, "Your Majesty must get some byts for these." Techelles, yet another military commander adds, "we will break the hedges of their moths," and Usumcasance, still another general, promises a means to restrain "These coltish coach-horse tongues."

The darkly comic manner of Marlowe reaches its apogee in the central scene of *Tamburlaine 1*: the "Banquet," a carnivalesque feast of food and foolery. Feasts, as Bakhtin notes, are "linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man."<sup>21</sup> This particular feast accompanies the crisis of kingship in the play, marking its summit. Its ambivalence like all elements of carnival is pronounced; it is a feast fit for the new king with the old king as the feast: "eat it, or I will make thee slice the brawnes of thy arms into carbonadoes, and eat them," Tamburlaine threatens after stamping on a piece of meat. This scene offers a theatrical version of the literal meaning of carnival (*carne-vale*), the before-Lent "farewell to meat" in which people consumed animals and generally acted like them. Tamburlaine holding out a dagger with a piece of meat on the point's end, parallels the carnival image of the spit that often holds meat, especially pig.<sup>22</sup> Tamburlaine continues to make jokes at Zabina, comparing her to an animal being prepared for slaughter: "dispatch her while she is fat." The last joke at the former king and queen's expense happens when they are starving and begging for more food. Still in their cages they lick their plates clean. "[W]ilt thou have a cleane trencher?" Bajazeth asks for "more meat." Tamburlaine instead denies him and insists he

ought to be “dieted” since “too much eating will make you surfeit.” His general Theridamas adds insult with “specially [since they] have so small a walke, and so little exercise” (4.4.100-107). All this rough treatment and play with meat highlights in a comic way the movement from feast to Lenten famine for the imprisoned royalty.

The second “course of crownes” after the feast points to the central theme of carnival and *Tamburlaine*: “uncrowning the old and crowning the new.”<sup>23</sup> As the “primary carnivalistic act,” this ritual of monarchic succession is parodied in *Tamburlaine*. “Crownes” and “crowne” are mentioned over 30 times in this play, including several scenes involving a transfer of power. As noted before, the scene of Mycetes hiding his “crowne” turns the symbol of monarchic power into a football. Kings are not born; they are made, often suddenly. Besides Tamburlaine’s toying with Mycetes, “crownes” factor heavily in the overthrow of Bajazeth. After victory, a general proclaims, “We have their crownes”(3.3.215). Zenocrate offers to crown her lord but Tamburlaine objects, proposing instead another option: “Nay take the Turkish Crowne from her, Zenocrate, And crowne me Emperour of Affrica.” The defeated Queen Zabina refuses to release the object until Theridamas, according to the stage directions, “takes it from her, and gives it Zenocrate.” “Give her the Crowne Turkesse, you were best,” he advises. Later, after the feast, the “second course of Crownes” is served, during which Tamburlaine crowns his three generals Theridamas, Techelles, and Usumcasane kings of Argier, Fesse, and Morocus. He distributes the crownes like cakes after dessert, calling them “cates” (cakes) only kings should “feede with.” The play concludes comically with Tamburlaine’s marriage to and coronation of Zenocrate as “Queene of Persea.”

*Tamburlaine 2* continues to highlight thematically the idea of “crowning” by focusing on the escaped king Callapine who now wears the “Emperiall crowne.” We see the familiar pattern of mocking the sacred and royal. In an attempt to enrage Tamburlaine at their meeting, Callapine fashions a battlefield crowning of Almeda the jailor that sets him free and betrayed Tamburlaine. The scene degenerates into comedy when Almeda, shaking in terror before Tamburlaine, refuses the crown handed him: “Come Almeda, receive this crowne of me.” Orcanes reveals the stage action saying to him, “What, take it man.” Almeda, in one of the funnier moments of the play, then asks Tamburlaine, his former commander and king, if he can take the crown. Tamburlaine jokes, “Go too sirha, take your crown, and make up the halfe dozen”(3.5.135-136). And lastly, before he dies, Tamburlaine hands over his crown to his son Amyras: “First take my Scourge and my imperiall Crowne,/And mount my royall chariot of estate./ That I may see thee crown’d before I die”(5.3.177-179). The accumulation of all these crownings and uncrownings is not to emphasize the importance of kingship, but rather its instability. As Bakhtin writes, “Crowning/decrowning is a dualistic ambivalent ritual, expressing the inevitability and at the same time . . . the joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position.”<sup>24</sup> The ambivalence of these staged moments in which power is violently wrested from long-established kings

is felt most sharply by the Elizabethan monarchy whose position as final authority is being challenged on stage.

Tamburlaine, more than anyone, is a humourist, generating laughter and terror equally. Both serious and comic, a killer and a clown, he enjoys mocking his opponents and delights in derisive humour, "schadenfreude," especially when directed at kings. His parody of the triumphal procession, with captured kings as horses, both glorifies his power and derides his opponents in the most extravagant manner. When he first appears on stage in the second scene of *Tamburlaine 1*, he is disguised as a shepherd. This costume certainly signifies his plebeian origins and lack of royal genealogy, but more importantly it shows Tamburlaine likes to play practical jokes. He is his own Master of Revels. He toys with his enemies and his friends alike: consider his (mis)treatment of his future wife, the beloved Zenocrate, whom he deceived at their first meeting. She addresses him unknowingly as "Shepherd . . . (If as thou seem'st, thou art so meane a man)" (1.2.7-9). When he marries her at the end of the first play the ritual is accented by the funerals of her former fiancé, the King of Arabia, and the burial of his enemies, Bajazeth and Zabina. Death and rebirth in the play are inseparable. This final arrangement ordered by Tamburlaine shows his merging of the comic and the tragic aspects of existence on equal terms. His identity fluctuates, like Proteus, because he rejects boundaries imposed by proper behaviour. This instability of self makes for incongruous comedy. The laughter in *Tamburlaine*, I have tried to argue, formed the basis for its popularity with the lower classes. We can imagine the laughter of the audience joining Tamburlaine's own laughter at the fate of his enemies throughout the play's performances and into the sequel. Their collective laughter, according to Bakhtin, is a "victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts."<sup>25</sup> The political and religious profanity of Tamburlaine, the cursing of deities and royalty alike, the fondness for deriding kings, spotlights the inside-out, upside-down world of carnival that rejects the ideology of a contemporary culture structured on social inequality. This play's use of familiar carnival elements helps make it a defiant expression of popular resistance to everyday material life outside the confines of the theatre.

## V

The misrepresentation by some critics of Marlowe's drama continues in the erroneous interpretation of the famous prologue to the play. This six line prologue, the second framing device after the printer's letter, addresses a different audience than the reader. These six lines have been much discussed and, I would argue, much misread:

From jygging vaines of riming mother wits,  
And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay,  
Weele leade you to the stately tent of War:  
Where you shall heare the Scythian Tamburlaine,  
Threatning the world with high astounding tearms  
And sourging kingdoms with his conquering sword.

## (Prologue)

The prologue to *Tamburlaine* has traditionally been interpreted as Marlowe making a very self-conscious shift to a different type of drama: that it marks a turning away from clumsy language and the loose plotting of earlier Tudor dramatists toward the "high-astounding terms" of his blank verse and his exclusive focus on the tragic hero. Steane summarises this point of view and the significance of this opening passage: "The lines contain aggressive dramatic criticism and the promise of a new programme. . . The fine contemptuous force in the mincing vowels of 'jigging . . . wits' contrasts with the open strength and finality of 'War' which is the goal, or the pole furthest from the despised 'clownage.'"<sup>26</sup> Steane sees these lines as Marlowe's departure from dramatic tradition and the heralding of a new dramatic order of verse and subject matter purified of despised "clownage." On the contrary, "clownage" would not have been despised by the average playgoer or Marlowe or the actors who specialised in clown roles. The lines are not referring to language of the play or any other great change in verse or form. Instead, more conventionally and less prophetically than most assume, these lines advertise, like a movie trailer perhaps, a tragi-comedy coupling "jygging" and "conquering," "clownage" and "kingdoms," "wits" and "war." The play's audience, unlike the audience for the printed version, anticipates comic digressions, gestures, and actors; the first part concludes with a wedding between Tamburlaine and Zenocrate, the traditional outcome of comedy. Most importantly, the Lord Admiral's Men profited from this wide-ranging genre of tragi-comedy and maintained actors in the company who specialised in both. Because the Lord Admiral's Men played for many different audiences, they had to be flexible and play to the interests of both the Court and the countryside, a delicate balancing act like juggling. From an economic perspective, tragi-comedy, because of its positioning of the lower class types on stage next to Kings and Queens, allowed the Lord Admiral's Men to market their performances more frequently to a wider audience.

## VI

As readers only of the printed version of *Tamburlaine*, we can never completely know the carnival *Tamburlaine* that inspired riots and stirred loyal patronage by Elizabethan audiences. We can only guess at those "frivolous Jestures" Richard Jones chose to delete. But based on other examples of the Master of Revels censoring contemporary dramas, and on similar editorial exclusions in the case of *Dr. Faustus*, it is a reasonable assumption that some of the edited or censored material that Jones excludes from *Tamburlaine* might have had populist sympathies. This same type of dramatic material would prove inappropriate for the audience targeted by Jones's letter, the "gentlemen and courteous readers" who could afford the books, not a minor concern then, and more importantly who could profit from the cultural capital that accompanied "higher learning." Jones is not making an aesthetic choice as he indicates in his letter when making his deletions so much as he is making an economic one. He is attempting to profit from the momentum of an immensely popular play that

challenges the status and privilege of “gentleman readers” for whom he is fashioning a “Tamburlaine.” Jones’s printed version does what the playhouse’s collective oral experience cannot: separate the aristocracy from the commoner.

Sir Philip Sidney’s discussion of the state of English drama in his *Apology for Poetry* includes a plea for court-worthy decorum. He says, after censuring the lack of classical unities:

besides these gross absurdities, how all their plays be neither right tragedies nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns, not because the matter so carrieth it, but thrust in the clown by head and shoulders to play a part in majestical matters, with neither decency nor discretion; so as neither the admiration and commiseration, nor the right sportfulness, is by their mongrel tragic-comedy obtained.<sup>27</sup>

He continues:

I know the ancients have one or two examples of tragicomedies . . . But, if we mark them well, we shall find that they never, or very daintily, match hornpipes and funerals. . . So falleth it out that, having indeed no right comedy, in that comical part of our tragedy we have nothing but scurrility, unworthy of any chaste ears, or some extreme shew of doltishness, indeed fit to lift up a loud laughter and nothing else.<sup>28</sup>

This complaint concerns “loud laughter,” bad timing and inappropriate manners, “doltishness” and “hornpipes,” hardly surprising considering the author is England’s Courtier *par excellence*, a member of the aristocracy’s most well-connected families, and the embodiment of the Elizabethan ideal for proper behaviour. Sidney’s lament about “mingling kings and clowns” or “hornpipes and funerals” is a social anxiety masquerading as an aesthetic one: on the one hand, tragicomedy, he assures us, is a lesser genre, achieving neither tragic heights, nor comic ecstasy; on the other, from the social perspective of Sir Philip Sidney, social separation must be maintained even on stage. Thus the printed version of *Tamburlaine* attempts to address the mongrel mixture of aristocracy and commoner congregating around the stage and threatening public stability.

*Tamburlaine*’s type of carnival humour is not “loud laughter and nothing else.” The play’s jokes are not delightful as Sidney would have it, but festive and ferocious, triumphant and mocking, but mostly overlooked by modern readers and Marlowe interpreters. It was not overlooked by Elizabethan audiences standing in the pit or by the authorities hovering in the background who often interpreted the play’s performance as a political expression. Because the Elizabethan administration granted ownership by selling licences for printing presses, they also regulated this new technology. In print, it was feasible to promote a narrow range of government- approved images, texts, and messages. *Tamburlaine*’s staging, as evidenced by contemporary accounts, was not as easy to control. Though the script had to pass the Master of Revels’ inspection, a play’s performance still depended on the actor’s actual execution of the script, and any play no matter how popular, or because it was popular, might be suddenly prohibited. In any performance of live theatre, parts of speeches might be

improvised or forgotten depending on the actor's memory, intention, or inebriation. Additional scenes could be added or deleted at the last minute, parts exchanged, and importantly in the case of *Tamburlaine*, the script could be adapted to the needs of an Elizabethan audience representing a cross-section of society and not just a select group of aristocrats. This populist orientation of the play in performance allowed ordinary subjects to see themselves and their interests voiced next to the speeches of Kings, Queens, and other luminaries. Although he tried to negate any possibility of a populist decoding of *Tamburlaine* in print by deleting those comic elements that he notes in his letter, Robert Jones was not entirely successful. By expunging any representation of the lower classes from the first printed version of the play for alleged aesthetic reasons, Jones was attempting to silence their growing historical significance.

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<sup>1</sup> All references to *Tamburlaine* are to Fredson Bowers, ed, *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Works* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> Clifford Leech, "Marlowe's Humour," in *Marlowe: a collection of critical essays*, ed. Clifford Leech, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 167-178.

<sup>3</sup> For a representative sample of scholarly articles emphasising Marlowe's dramatic and non-dramatic comic techniques see the following: Amy Cook and Bryan Reynolds. "Comedic Law: Projective Transversality, Deceit Conceits, and the Conjuring of *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus* in Jonson's *The Devil Is an Ass*," in *Transversal Enterprises in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries: Fugitive Explorations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 85-111; Elizabeth Bieman, "Comic Rhyme in Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*," *English Literary Renaissance* 9. (1979): 69-77; Roy Eriksen, "Insula est Melita: Marlowe's Urban Comedy and the Poetics of Predation," in *Urban Preoccupations: Mental and Material Landscapes* (Pisa, Italy: Fabrizio Serra, 2007), 123-142; Mutsumi Nozaki, "The Comic Sense in Marlowe Reconsidered," *Shakespeare Studies* 9.(1970): 1-27; Mark Thornton Burnett, "*Tamburlaine*: An Elizabethan Vagabond," *Studies in Philology* 84.3 (1987): 308-323; Robert Ornstein, "The Comic Synthesis in *Doctor Faustus*," *ELH* 22.3 (1955): 165-172. Charlotte R. Kesler, "The Importance of the Comic Tradition of English Drama in the Interpretation of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*," *Dissertation Abstracts* 25 (1955): 1387-1388; Roy T. Eriksen, "The Misplaced Clownage-Scene in *The Tragedie of Doctor Faustus* (1616) and Its Implications for the Play's Total Structure," *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature* 62.3 (1981): 249-258. Lukas Erne, "Biography, Mythography, and Criticism: The Life and Works of Christopher Marlowe," *Modern Philology* 103 (2005): 28-50.

<sup>4</sup> Erich Segal, "Marlowe's Schadenfreude: Barabas as Comic Hero," in *Veins of Humor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972) 69-91. The early editor is A. H. Bullen, *Introduction to the Works of Christopher Marlowe*. London: 1885, 1: xxvii-xxix.

<sup>5</sup> Fred B. Tromly, *Playing with Desire: Christopher Marlowe and the Art of Tantalization* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1998) 74.

<sup>6</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984) and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). See also Michael Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Christopher Kendrick, *Utopia, Carnival, and Commonwealth in Renaissance England* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Tom Pettitt, "'Skreaming like a pigge halfe stickt': Vernacular Topoi in the Carnavalesque Martyrdom of *Edward II*," *Orbis Litterarum: International Review of Literary Studies* 60.2 (2005): 79-108.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Dekker, *Gulls Horn-book* (1603) quoted in A. M. Nagler, *A Source Book in Theatrical History* (New York: Dover, 1959). See also Richard Levin, "The Contemporary Perception of

Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*," *MRDE* 1 (1984):51-70; Thomas Cartelli, *Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the Economy of Theatrical History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Charles Whitney, *Early Responses to Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Kirk Melnikoff, "Jones's Pen and Marlowe's Socks: Richard Jones, Print Culture, and the Beginnings of English Dramatic Literature," *Studies in Philology* 102.2 (2005): 184-209.

<sup>10</sup> Melnikoff, 209.

<sup>11</sup> "Comedy and tragedy differ because in tragedy [we have] heroes, leaders, kings, in comedy, humble people and private individuals." Diomedes quoted in S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (New York: Dover, 1984), 236.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Peletier, *L'art poétique* (Lyons, 1555) quoted in Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theater: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 71.

<sup>13</sup> Lopez Pinciano, *Philosophia antiqua poetica*, 3 vols. (Madrid, 1593) quoted in Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theater: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 59.

<sup>14</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, editors Geoffrey Shepherd, and R. W. Malsen, *An Apology for Poetry, or, The Defence of Poesy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 112.

<sup>15</sup> *Doctor Faustus* references are taken from Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, ed. David Scott Kastan (New York: Norton, 2005), 1-54.

<sup>16</sup> Leah Marcus, "Textual Instability and Ideological Difference: The case of *Doctor Faustus*," *Renaissance Drama* 20 (1990): 38-54.

<sup>17</sup> See Eric Rasmussen, "The Nature of the B-text" in *A Norton Critical Edition: Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus*, ed. David Scott Kastan (New York: WW Norton, 2005) 171-179; Michael J. Warren, "The Old Man and the Text," *English Literary Renaissance* 11 (1981): 111-129; Kirk Melnikoff, "'[I]yggging vaines' and 'riming mother wits': Marlowe, Clowns and the Early Frameworks of Dramatic Authorship," *EMLS* 16 (2007): 8. 1-37.

<sup>18</sup> *The Isle of Dogs* is a play by Thomas Nashe and Ben Jonson performed in 1597. It was immediately suppressed, and no copy of it is known to exist. Three of the players were thrown in prison for a time. The play's content is rumoured to have been a satire of courtiers and perhaps even Queen Elizabeth. *Richard II* was revived as part of an armed rebellion led by the Earl of Essex against the Queen who understood the political ramifications of the play saying, "I am Richard, know ye not that?" The deposition scene is absent from the first three printed quartos and finally included in the 1623 first folio. Essex was executed.

<sup>19</sup> Melnikoff, 188.

<sup>20</sup> Erne, 39.

<sup>21</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Pettitt, 95.

<sup>23</sup> Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 219.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 124.

<sup>25</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 92.

<sup>26</sup> J. B. Steane, *Marlowe: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964) 88-89.

<sup>27</sup> Sidney, 112.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 112.