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■ HERCULEAN AMBIVALENCE IN MARLOWE'S *TAMBURLAINE THE GREAT*

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Tamerlan Veliki (1587), prvi značajniji komad Kristofera Marloa, posvećen je legendi o zavojevaču iz XIV veka, Tamerlanu, kome se pripisuje osvajanje i uništavanje Persije. Tokom Marlovljevog života, kritička interpretacija *Tamerlana* počivala je na dvema suprotstavljenim vizijama: na ideji da svaki grešnik mora da bude kažnjen za svoja nedela, ili pak, na ideji o romantičnom heroju, otelotvorenju renesansnog slobodnog duha. U radu ne dominira nijedna od ovih interpretacija, već se *Tamerlan* tumači kao Marlovljevo upozorenje protiv dominacije herkulovskog rezonovanja, čija je posledica, kao i kod *Doktora Fausta*, gubitak duše.

Ključne reči: kolonijalizacija, gubitak duše, herkulovsko rezonovanje.

Tamburlaine the Great (1587), Marlowe's first major play, is devoted to the legend of the fourteenth century conqueror, Timur the Lame, who was accused of destroying Persia. The books that are generally accepted as the historical sources for the play are Petrus Perondinus' *Magni Tamerlanis Scytharum Imperatoris Vita* (1553) and Pedro Mexia's *Silva de Varia Lection* (1542). Marlowe probably read them in the English translation by Thomas Fortescue in *The Forest* (1571) or in George Whetstone's account in *The English Mirror* (1586).

In Marlowe's time, the critical appreciation of *Tamburlaine* was twofold: Perondinus presented Timur as a savage, violent barbarian dominated by the will to power, whereas, in Mexia's version, Timur is seen both as a brilliant soldier and remorseless tyrant, merciless, but noble at the same time. As a result, Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* was usually regarded either as a traditional transgressor, e.g. a stock figure of evil whose preordained fall is an edifying punishment for his sins, or a Romantic hero, the perfect symbol of the Renaissance spirit and the spokesman of the author's own aspirations.

J.W. Harper in his *Introduction to the New Mermaids Edition of Tamburlaine* finds both these views of the play insufficient. On the one hand, Marlowe adds to the

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historical crimes of Tamburlaine horrors that are his own invention, and thus paints his hero in even darker colours than his predecessors. On the other hand, which is more important, Marlowe attributes to his character the virtues that could not be found in historical sources – his loyalty to his followers, his contempt for wealth, his love for Zenocrate. Furthermore, Marlowe describes his hero's savage acts as if he wanted to justify them, e.g. his adversaries are presented as equally, if not more vicious and cruel than Tamburlaine was. Obviously, Harper concludes, we are being made to marvel at Tamburlaine rather than to condemn him.

A possible contribution to the ambivalent effect of Tamburlaine is his association with Hercules. Most critics agree that Tamburlaine can also be regarded as a Herculean figure, Hercules being the favourite Renaissance symbol for the hero of active life. Thus Eugene Waith in his influential study *The Herculean Hero in Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare and Dryden* (1962) claims that Hercules, as he appears in Seneca, is revitalized in Tamburlaine (Waith 1962: 69).

But the Renaissance identification of ideal life as Herculean is very problematic, and raises questions as soon as some of the myth's history is considered. Seneca's *Hercules Furens* is based on the latter, classical form of the myth, in which Hercules has changed from the Goddess's son and lover, and defender against patriarchal Greek invaders, into their God and hero. Thus the enmity between the Goddess (Hera, or Juno in Roman version) and Hercules is a later motif, invented by the Doric and Achean Greeks in whose version Hercules' quest ends in triumphant apotheosis; having undergone a ritual death at the stake he is resurrected as Zeus' son, all resemblance with his mother – all memory of his former function as the champion of the Goddess and her values obliterated (Graves 1977: 100). It is this patriarchal Hercules that in the later phase of the myth and in Seneca's play is made the target of the Goddess's jealous revenge. Hercules' arrogant and hubristic transgression of traditional customs (for example, he kills a messenger, hitherto considered sacrosanct), arouses the wrath of Hera, who brings madness upon him in which he kills his wife and children – a fit symbolic punishment for the one who has mentally already turned his back on the Goddess and her female values.² His hubris thus, like that of Faustus, involves a crime against the natural bonds once protected by the primeval Mother Earth and preventing a sin against another human being. Having rejected their earthly human destiny, both Marlowe's Faustus and Seneca's Hercules appeal to Heavens as the symbolic site of the Father and divinized masculine virtues: intelligence, power, conquest. While the scholarly Faustus, alluding to Icarus, another over-reacher flying towards the sun, strains to beget a deity from his brain, Seneca's Hercules demands from Jove the access to the Heavens, hinting that the god may be afraid of his physical strength:

2 Ibid. The rejection of the Goddess and her female values, claims Graves, is especially conspicuous at the moment of Hercules' death:

The thunderbolts had consumed Heracles's mortal part. He no longer bore any resemblance to Alcmena but, like a snake that has cast its slough, appeared in all the majesty of his divine father. A cloud received him from his companion's sight as, amid peals of thunder, Zeus bore him up to Heaven in his four-horse chariot; where Athene took him by the hand and solemnly introduced him to her fellow deities (Graves 1977: 100).

To the lofty regions of the universe on high let me make my way, let me seek the skies; the stars are my father's promise. And what if he should not keep his word? Earth has no room for Hercules, and at length restores him unto heaven. See, the whole company of the gods of their own will summon me, and open wide the door of heaven, with one alone forbidding. And wilt thou unbar the sky and let me in? Or shall I carry off the doors of stubborn heaven? Dost even doubt my power? (Seneca 1976: 958-965)³

I am not sure that Harper is fully aware of these mythic and moral implications when he associates Marlowe's Tamburlaine with Seneca's Hercules as a prototype of the Renaissance heroic ideal. Harper admits that they both display the assurance of a demigod rather than a piety of a good man. But when he admits that, or says that, like Hercules, Marlowe's Tamburlaine is both egoistic and altruistic, cruel and beneficent, illustrative of both human limitations and divine potentialities, these ambivalences are not an interpretative problem for him, nor do they qualify his admiration for both heroes:

Hercules, the eloquent patron of eloquence, the boaster who made his boasts good, the demi-god of divine appearance, the god's scourge against tyrants, was a man of wrath who in Seneca's treatment, rejoiced in his earthly deeds while never forgetting that he was destined to become a star... He was cruel to women because of his devotion to his *arete*, but Renaissance writers added a capacity for love. The Hercules of tradition finally accepted his agonizing death with calm fortitude, and the dirge with which the second part of *Tamburlaine* concludes could as well have been applied to the Greek hero as to the Scythian. In turning history into art Marlowe created one of the finest examples in one of the great Renaissance modes of art, the image of Heroic Man. (Harper 1971: 20)

However, I do not believe that Marlowe was interested in merely adding another example to the tradition of the Renaissance Heroic Man. His main interest was not to endorse but to explore and problematize that tradition: the play, for example, questions the concept of *arête* which Harper uses uncritically. Male *virtue* that depends on cruelty to women and even Tamburlaine's alleged "capacity to love" is critically examined in Marlowe's plays and, I will argue, found to be false.

3 It is not a coincidence then that T. S. Eliot used the words of Hercules as he returns to sanity, having in madness killed his wife and children as an epigraph for his poem *Marina*:

Quis hic locus, quae region, quae mundi plaga?

(What is this place, what country, what region of the world)

Marina is a daughter of Pericles in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* by Shakespeare. In Shakespeare's play she is born at sea, then, as still a baby abandoned by her father, believed by him to be dead, and, in womanhood, restored to him miraculously. Apparently, there is a contrast between these two plays: *Pericles* seems concerned with truth and revelation as miraculously wonderful experiences. In *Hercules Furens* the hero, Hercules, has been driven mad as a punishment for his masculine arrogance, and instead of reconciliation, he emerges from his murderous insanity to a discovery of horror. The choice of the motto for Marina from *Hercules Furens* indicates that Eliot, despite the differences in the two plays, understood them as versions, one fatal, the other capable of correction, of the same archetypal error – the betrayal of the female – and wanted both to be actively present in his poem.

This can be seen in the way Marlowe's Tamburlaine is compared with Pheathon, which suggests an analogy not only with Icarus but also with Francis Bacon's favourite, Prometheus. Tamburlaine moves and lives in the element of fire, but fire, Marlowe demonstrates, is an element which not only aspires but consumes everything in its way. He is repeatedly compared to the sun in its glory, from whom the meaner planets take their light. This is the image of man Ficino has already warned the Renaissance audiences about: Tamburlaine, like Faustus, becomes the emanation of the Promethean myth as Ficino understood it, the hero, if not of scientific conquest of nature, than of the equally destructive ambition to conquer territories and nations. In fact their goals, like those of the contemporary scientific-industrialist-military alliance, often sound the same: Faustus desires infinite knowledge to create "new, stranger machines of war", Tamburlaine speaks of "engines never exercised" that he will use in order to:

Conquer, sack and utterly consume
 Your cities and your golden palaces,
 And with the flames that beat against the clouds
 Incense the heavens and make the stars to melt,
 As if they were the tears of Mahomet
 For hot consumption of his country's pride. (II, 4.2.190-196)

Marlowe, aware of the danger of this ideal, supplied Tamburlaine with the consort, Zenocrate. She is compared to the cold contemplative light of the moon; together she and Tamburlaine should form the active and passive principles of life in its balanced totality. But, this Promethean/Herculean hero does not use the opportunity given to him in Marlowe's play to prove that he can also become Orpheus, the artist and the lover, who, inspired by his love, subdued wild animals, not by any coercive power but by the power of his song. Zenocrate's love cannot inspire Tamburlaine to abandon a destructive warrior ideal as Shakespeare's Antony did upon discovering in the Egyptian Cleopatra his 'content absolute'.

In fact, Marlowe's treatment of Tamburlaine/Hercules is closer to another, modern version of the Herculean myth presented in the poem *Hercules and Antaeus*, by Shamus Heaney. Here, Heaney retells the struggle between two mythological traditions: patriarchy, represented by Hercules, a sky-born son of god Zeus and matriarchy, represented by Antaeus, the mould hugger, a child of the earth goddess Gaia and the protector of the people who till the soil. As opposed to the classical and Renaissance celebration of Hercules as a great hero slaying dangerous monsters, Heaney takes a much more critical view. His Hercules is an invader, a usurper who destroys without cause or right and does so in pursuit of his own personal glory. His greatest strength is his intellect, compared in the poem with lightning, whereas Antaeus' bond with the world is emotional: he draws his strength from the earth – the cradling dark of its caves, its river veins and secret gullies. Using his intelligence like a blue fiery prong, Hercules separates Antaeus from his protective maternal element and lifts him in the air, his arms shaping a remorseless V. Hercules' victory initiates a deep psychological change in the psyche of Western man. It is manifested as extreme rationalism, the repression of soul by reason. But also, as the poem makes clear, this inner psychological colonization has

its equivalent in the Western colonizing politics: Balor, Byrthnoth and Sitting Bull 'will die', prophesies the poem. However, there is an alternative to this destructive option, according to Heaney. Antaeus is not simply killed, he falls

Into a dream of loss
 And origins,
 the cradling dark
 the river-veins, the secret gullies
 of his strength,
 the hatching grounds
 of cave and souterrain,
 he has bequeathed it all
 to elegists. (Heaney 1990: 76)⁴

Antaeus' fall may lead thus to a rebirth: his dream about the mysterious sources of power that are completely opposed to Herculean power, bequeathed to elegists and artists in general, may arouse a conviction that a different world from ours is possible and a desire to create it.⁵

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4 For a further discussion of Heaney's *Hercules and Antaeus* and the struggle between two contrasted traditions (matriarchy and patriarchy) see Petrović (2004b).

5 Another modern author who believes that a different world from ours is possible and, as an artist, desires to create it, is Edward Bond. In *A Writer's story*, Bond says:

So at twenty I wrote a play
 The laws of plays must be cause - and - use
 To break necessity and show how there may be justice
 Like all who lived at the midpoint of this century or were born later
 I am a citizen of Aushwitz and a citizen of Hiroshima
 Of the place where evil did evil and the place where good did evil
 Till there is justice there are no other places on earth: there are only these two places
 But I am also the citizen of the just world still to be made.
 (Petrović 2004a: 390)

SUMMARY

HERCULEAN AMBIVALENCE IN MARLOWE'S *TAMBURLAINE THE GREAT*

Marlowe, the author of the *Tamburlaine Plays*, is hardly an elegist, but these plays can certainly be regarded as his critical examination of the Herculean mind, and a warning against the nascent colonialism. Although many critics observe that Tamburlaine dies a natural death, i.e. suffers no retribution, Marlowe makes it prophetically clear that the price to be paid for military omnipotence and colonial success is loss of the soul – the fate of Dr. Faustus, and of all Marlowe's tragic heroes. Marlowe's Tamburlaine, a prototype of the Renaissance heroic ideal, has been frequently identified with Seneca's Hercules. However, I do not believe that Marlowe was interested in merely adding another example to the tradition of the Renaissance Heroic Man. His main interest was not to endorse but to explore and problematize that tradition: male *virtue* that depends on cruelty towards the weak ones is critically examined here. Thus these plays can certainly be regarded as Marlowe's critical examination of the Herculean mind, and a warning against the nascent colonialism. Although many critics observe that Tamburlaine dies a natural death, i.e. suffers no retribution, Marlowe makes it prophetically clear that the price to be paid for military omnipotence and colonial success is loss of the soul – the fate of Dr. Faustus, and of all Marlowe's tragic heroes.

KEYWORDS: Herculean hero, Herculean ambivalence, military omnipotence, colonialism, loss of the soul.

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