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**THE THEME OF UNNATURALNESS IN ELIZABETHAN AND
JACOBEOAN TRAGEDY AND ITS TREATMENT IN MARLOWE'S
TAMBURLAINE**

As one reads the great Elizabethan tragedies and those that followed (I take this period to extend from about the late 1580's to the third decade of the seventeenth century.), one cannot fail but notice a common concern among the writers of this period. The echoes of this concern seem to resound throughout this span of time, and haunt the reader as he proceeds from one play to another. As my title suggests, this concern, which so forcibly reveals itself throughout the pages of these tragedies, is the question of Nature with all its entailing consequences: human nature; what is natural and what unnatural. It is this last aspect "the nature of the unnatural" that I shall try to trace in some plays (John Lyly's *Mother Bombie*, John Ford's *Tis Pity She's a Whore*, Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, Beaumont and Fletcher's *King and No King*, Cyril Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy*, and *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, *Edward II*, and *Doctor Faustus*), with particular emphasis on Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*.

In all these plays main or secondary characters deal with, explain or try to understand what Nature is, and what it is to be *natural*, while on the other hand they condemn or curse what in their opinion is *unnatural*. Before I examine what exactly the Elizabethans termed *unnatural*, I shall mention a few figures as an indication of the importance attributed to this matter. I say "indication" because I personally have little faith in numbers, and because I am also aware of the significance things acquire by virtue of their context.

In Lyly's *Mother Bombie*, written some time between 1588-90, characters play with the words *nature*, *natural*, *unnatural*, and even *overnatural*, using them over twenty times. A fine example is to be observed in a speech by Mother Bombie herself (the wise woman or witch who prophesies what is to happen):

"In studying to be overnaturall,
Thou art like to be unnaturall,
And all about a naturall."

V. ii. 15-18.

Apart from the play on words, the terms are used to refer to (a) the nature of a person (about which nothing much can be done, Risio: "It came by nature, and if none can take it awaie, it is perpetuall." I. ii. 19-20), (b) relationships between parents and children (Sperantus: "...Well, seeing that booking is but idlenesse, Ile see whether threshing be anie occupation: thy minde shall

stoope to my fortune, or mine shall break the lawes of nature." I. iii. 188-190), (c) instinctive impulses (Maestius: "...Yet this is our confort, that these unnaturall heates have stretched themselves no further than thoughts." III. i. 14-15), and (d) incest (Serena: "And I, deare brother, finde my thoughts intangled with affections beyonde nature, which so flame into my distempered head, that I can neither without danger smother the fire, nor without modestie disclose my furie." III. i. 3-5). This last-incest-is presented in almost exactly the same way as in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, written between 1629-33.

Serena: "That which nature warranteth laws forbid.
Straunge it seemeth in sense, that because
thou art mine, therefore thou must not be mine.

Maestius: So it is, Serena; the nearer we are in bloud,
the further we must be from loue;
and the greater the kindred is, the lesse
the kindness must be; so that between brothers
and sisters superstition both made affection
cold, between strangers custome hath bred
loue exquisite."

. *Mother Bombie* III. i. 9-24.

And in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*

Giovanni: "You

My sister Anabella; I know this:
And could afford you instance why to love
So much the more for this; to which intent
Wise nature first in your creation meant
To make you mine; else't had been sin and foul
To share one beauty to a double soul.
Nearness in birth or blood doth but persude
A nearer nearness in affection."

I. ii. 228-236.

The difference is that the characters in *Mother Bombie*, Maestius and Serena, refrain from practising the act, though, as is discovered in the end, they were never brother and sister in any case.

In Beaumont and Fletcher's *A King and No King*, written in 1618, the words themselves, *natural*, *unnatural*, etc. are used about 10 times, but there are also long passages dealing specifically with manifestations of *unnaturalness* (Arbace's long speeches, for example, in I. i. 483-506, III. i. 154-168, or IV. iv. 67-94). Individual words and passages refer to the same issues as in *Mother Bombie*, and the same arguments are used for incest as in the other two plays I have mentioned.

Arbaces: "I have liv'd

To conquer men, and now am overthrowne
Onely by words, Brother and Sister: where
Have those words dwelling? I will find um out
And utterly destroy them, but they are
Not to be grasp't let um be men or beasts,
And I will cut um from the earth, or townes,
And I will rase um, and then blow um up:
Let um be Seas, and I will drinke them off,
And yet have unquencht fire left in my breast:
Let um be any thing but meerely voice."

IV. iv. 117-126.

The characters, however, Arbaces and Panthaea, give into temptation only partially, but they, too, eventually discover they are not brother and sister. The only new element in this play is that there seems to be a differentiation between *natural* and *unnatural* sins. This idea is only implied in *Mother Bombie* although it is a classical and medieval common place.

Arbaces: "What will the world

Conceive of me? with what unnatural sinnes
Will they suppose me laden, when my life
Is sought by her that gave it to the world?"

I. i. 483-6.

In Cyril Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy*, written in 1607, *natural* and *unnatural* come up again as many times as in *King and No King*, but this time the play begins by discussing *Nature* and Man's *Nature*, a fact which obviously suggests the import of the subject. D'Amville who is far less scrupulous than either Arbaces in *King and No King* or Giovanni in *This Pity She's a Whore*, and who is an atheist, one in favour of adhering to Nature's laws, discusses the theme of incest in terms more radical than those of either Arbaces or Giovanni.

D'Amville: "Incest? Tush.

These distances affinitie observes;
Are articles of bondage cast upon
Our freedoms by our own subiections.
Nature allows a gen'rall libertie
Of generation to all creatures else.
Shall Man to whose command and vse all creatures
Were made subiest be lesse free than they?"

IV. iii. 140-147.

This, however, as I shall point out later, does not make his attitude toward incest more *natural*. There is an equal number of references to the same

words in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, published four years later (1611), but they all have to do with relationships between parents and children, or brother and sister, etc. Incest is not a central theme in this play, as it is not in Middleton's *Women Beware Women* (entered in the Stationer's Register in 1653), but in both plays the implication is that this form of behaviour is an *unnatural* act.

In Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* incest becomes the main theme, or possibly one of the main themes, from which standpoint the entire play may be considered a treatise on the *unnatural*. As far as numbers are concerned, however, Shakespeare's *King Lear* is an example par excellence. The word *nature* is employed thirty-eight times, *natural* and *Kind* (the latter having almost the same meaning as the former) fourteen times, *unnatural* and *unkind* ten times; in all, sixty-two occasions.

In Marlowe's *Edward II*, written probably in 1591 or 1592, the words themselves do not appear so often, but the play introduces us boldly to another kind of *unnaturalness*, homosexuality, never before so explicitly dealt with in Elizabethan dramaturgy.¹ This new form generates more *unnaturalness*, and we can easily detect at least four other manifestations in the play: Edward's behaviour towards his queen, his disregard of his kingdom, his lords and his subjects, the lords' and Kent's revolt and Isabella's final betrayal.

So far, then, my survey has shown that what is usually presented as *unnatural* in Elizabethan or Jacobean tragedies can be put in a list that would include (a) disobedience or disrupted relationships between mother and child, father and child, husband and wife, king and subjects, etc., (b) homosexuality, (c) unfaithfulness-although I suspect this might be called a 'natural sin'²- and (d) incest. All these, however, seem to me to be issues that pertain more to human beings rather than to any higher being, whether that be God, Fortune or something else. They are related to conventions or institutions established by man, slowly but steadily undergoing re-evaluation. We can follow the development from the earlier to the later plays or even within the same play. Livia, in *Mother Bombie*, for example, says, "Nature hath made me his child, not his slave," (l. iii. 190) and whereas incestuous feelings are present in the earlier plays, incest is only practised fully, with the partners' awareness of their crime, in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, a later play.

1. It had, of course, been the target of Roman satirists and one of Alanus's (Alanus de Insulis = Alain de Lille - b.c. 1128, d. 1202 - theologian and poet) issues in his clever satire on human vices "Plaint of Nature."

2. The relation between husband and wife was spoken of as "natural". Hence adultery was seen as a violation of the natural, divinely instituted order. In contrast with homosexuality or incest, it was not a violation of "natural" appetite.

In most of the plays I have already mentioned what evidently makes the person or the act in question unnatural is a lack of measure, a lack of moderation, which, according to William Cornwallis, causes. "...the wit of man /to/ serve a wrong master; without moderation, the body will rebel against the soule, without moderation, the soule yeelds to the body; in a word vumoderated, both soule and body perisheth. This is shee that makes the distinction betwixt vertue and vice; this is she that makes courage valor, that without moderation would be anger, and then fury; this is she that separateth iustice and cruelty, prouidence from feare, power from tyranny, maiesty from pride."³ It is certainly lack of moderation and "misdirected desire or worldly goods"⁴ which make D'Amville say,

"All the purposes of Man
Aim but at one of these ends; pleasure
Or profit," (IV. iii. 125-7)

when he makes his unsavoury proposal to Castabella, taking his *nature* to *unnatural* extremes. The "unnatural revolt" of Edward's nobles might not have taken place, since they were prepared to accept that "The mightiest Kings have had their minions," had the king not lost all sense of temperance. Mortimer Junior makes this clear when he says,

"While others walk below, the king and he
From out a window laugh at such as we,
And flout our train, and jest at out attire.
Uncle, 'tis this that makes me impatient."

I. iv. 415-418.

Intemperate passions of greed and lust turn Goneril, Regan and Edmund in *King Lear* into inhuman, *unnatural* creatures, capable of horrifying atrocities. Because of her excessive motherly love, and because she is over-anxious to secure a comfortable life for her children, Vicinia in *Mother Bombie* replaces her son and daughter with the children she was nursing, thus creating *unnatural* situations or, as Mother Bombie sums it up, "In studying to be ouernaturall, / Thou art like to be vnnaturall, / And all about a naturall." (V. ii. 16-18).

The one form of *unnaturalness* that my list did not include is that of pride or hubris, that is, the attempt of man to become God, for as Faustus says, "When all is done, divinity is best." This is a kind of *unnaturalness* that involves God or gods, or any supernatural forces governing man's life. It does not deal with relationships among human beings, but with man's relationship to the Supernatural. It concerns man's efforts to transcend his

3. Roy W. Battenhouse, "Tamburlaine's Passions" in *Marlowe: A Collection of Critical Essays* ed. Clifford Leach (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), p. 59.

4. Ibid.

nature, whatever he conceives that to be. The theme is treated incidentally in Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* ("...why, I hold fate/Clasped in my fist, and could command the course/Of time's eternal motion," V. v. 10-13), and in Marlowe's *Edward II* ("Base Fortune, now I see that in thy wheel / There is a point, to which when men aspire / They tumble headlong down." V. vi. 59-61), but it becomes the central theme in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and *Doctor Faustus*. In this respect Marlowe was a pioneer among the Elizabethan writers, who questioned and probed well-established institutions, but dared not discuss religious dogma. Marlowe, on the contrary, was eager to discover whether Du Bartas' doctrine⁵ was true, whether in fact, fury was of two kinds, "humane" and "heavenly."

"Questioning traditional morality and reaching out to new possibilities of human endeavour and experience,"⁶ he deplores "the irresponsibility with which the universe functions,"⁷ with "mocking disrespect for the universe's governors."⁸ Above all, "he considers... the immutable elements in man which can be matched against the universe... and forces us to look at man face to face with God, where no other man can stand beside him."⁹

In *Tamburlaine* and *Doctor Faustus*, Marlowe "wander/s/ in fields where curiosity is forbidden to go," and is "busied in speculations which are the rottenest part of the core of the fruit that fell from the tree of knowledge."¹⁰ In dealing with the first of these works, I shall endeavour to show how the particular form of *unnaturalness*, pride or hubris, is presented.

Tamburlaine, written around 1587, is one of Marlowe's plays, which he probably started while he was still at Cambridge. At this early stage of his career, Marlowe, who had studied theology and had found no satisfaction in the old teachings, presented his thesis. "His plays," says I. Ribner in his introduction to Marlowe's plays, "give evidence that he did not accept without question the ordinary Tudor notions of man's relation to society and to God... Marlowe reflected in his plays his own changing and developing vision of man's place in the universe... He seems to have been influenced in particular by Polybius, who in his history of Rome had exalted individual prowess, who had seen historical event as the product of human ability and will in a world ruled by a blind fortune. The hero of such a view of history could assert his will in opposition to fortune and master it for a brief time."¹¹

5. Ibid., p. 65.

6. Judith O'Neill ed., *Critics on Marlowe* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1969), p. 7.

7. Clifford Leech ed., *Marlowe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, op. cit., pp. 9-10.

8. Ibid., p. 10.

9. Judith O'Neill ed., *Critics on Marlowe*, op. cit., p. 25.

10. Ibid., p. 16.

11. Irving Ribner ed., *The Complete Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (New York: The Odyssey Press Inc., 1963), p. xviii, xxv, xxvi.

Roy W. Battenhouse argues that Elizabethan intellectuals and writers "held... that man's passions are beneficial, provided they are kept temperate."¹² Marlowe questions this particular point, that is, whether, passions should be kept temperate or not, and how *natural* or *unnatural* man is when he allows them to govern his life. Ortygius asks,

"What god, or friend, or spirit of the earth,
or monster turned to a manly shape,
Or of what mold or metal he be made,
What star or state soever govern him,

.....
Whether from earth, or hell, or heaven he grow,"

(II. vii. 15-23)

and Marlowe, I believe, wanted his audiences to at least ask themselves the same question even if they were not in a position to provide the answer.

Of the forms of *unnaturalness* I mentioned earlier in this essay, pride or hubris has the longest history, "The urge to excel was the very temptation that had spoken through the serpent to Adam and Eve: 'And yee shall be as Gods, knowing good euill'" (Gen. 3.5.).'¹³ In another form it becomes the myth of Prometheus. In the Middle Ages, when religion had managed to more or less stifle any opposing voices, pride was the first sin and the beginning of all sins. "...for both the rebellious angels and the first man, Adam, are conceived to have fallen through the sin of pride,... It thus becomes clear that the essential paradox is concerned with man's fall or descent, from God, when man turns to himself, instead of God, as the highest good, and attempts to become director of his own destiny; and this is the essential definition of pride... it is essential that man turn to God as the highest good, recognise his dependence on God, and submit his will to God; or, in other words, man must rectify his will so that it is consonant with God's will."¹⁴ It is this relation, however, that Marlowe questions, as I have intimated earlier, and asks his audience to contemplate as the prologue very clearly indicates,

"We'll lead you to the stately tent of war,
Where you shall hear the Scythian Tamburlaine
Threat'ning the world with high astounding terms
And scourging kingdoms with his conquering word.

12. Roy W. Battenhouse, "Tamburlaine's Passions," op. cit., p. 57.

13. Harry Levin, "The Dead Shepherd" in *Marlowe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, op. cit., p. 31.

14. Bernard S. Levy, "Gawain's Spiritual Journey: Imitatio Christi in *Sir Gawain and the Greek Knight*," *Annalis Medievalis*, V. 7, 1965, p. 72.

View but his picture in this tragic glass,
And then applaud his fortunes as you please."

Prologue: 3-8.

What, up to now, has been considered the "first sin" must be viewed in another light, and people must decide whether they will "applaud."

Tamburlaine, "the Scythian" who threatens "the world with high astounding terms," is in my opinion Marlowe's most theatrical character and, therefore, the most impressive. The image of his power is vividly presented at the very beginning, in the prologue; Mycetes' ludicrous incompetence, of the opening scene, serves as the first canvas against which Tamberlaine will be judged. Eugene M. Waith shows how he is later contrasted with Cosroe, the emperor Bajazeth and Zenocrate, acquiring an ever-increasing stature¹⁵.

The weak, degenerate Mycetes asks others to speak or fight for him, chooses the wrong metaphors when he tries to exceed himself,¹⁶ and has submitted unheroically to the fact that "time passeth swift away. / Our life is frail, and we may die today." (I. i. 67-8) Tamburlaine wins his first enemy with "persuasions more pathetical" than a God could use, and at the dawn of his career as conqueror he is confident that he will become an emperor ("Till with their eyes they view us emperors" I. ii. 67), "a consul of the earth." More than that, he aspires to become immortal ("Both we will reign as consuls to the earth, / And mighty kings shall be our senators. / Jove sometimes maskèd in a shepherd's weed, / And by those steps that he hath scaled the heavens, / May we become immortal like the gods." I. ii. 196-200). Even if we allow for grandiloquence meant to beguile the "valiant men of Persia," it is obvious that he believes this to be possible as his famous speech to Theridamas clearly indicates:

"I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains,
And with my hand turn Fortune's wheel about,
And sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere
Than Tamburlaine be slain or overcome."

I. ii. 173-176.

The reasons for his *modus vivendi* and for his grandiose plans are explained in his speech to the dying Cosroe, the second of his foes.

"Nature, that framed us of four elements
Warring within our breasts for regiment,

15. Eugene M. Waith, "Tamburlaine" in *Marlowe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, op. cit., pp. 69-91.

16. Addressing Theridamas, Mycetes says, "...Go frowning forth, but come thou smiling home, / As did Sir Paris with the Grecian dame" I. i. 65-66. Paris, however, in returning home with "the Grecian dame" became indirectly responsible for his country's destruction. Mycetes' metaphor, therefore, is wrong by virtue of its gross inappropriateness.

Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds.
 Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend
 The wondrous architecture of the world
 And measure every wandering planets course,
 Still climbing after knowledge infinite,
 And always moving as the restless spheres,
 Will us to wear ourselves and never rest,
 Until we reach the ripest fruit of all,
 That perfect bliss and sole felicity,
 The sweet fruition of an earthly crown."

II. vii. 18-29.

The paradox, discussed by many critics, of the "aspiring mind," "climbing after knowledge infinite," being easily content with "an earthly crown," is at least partially resolved by his aspirations to immortality and by his speech at the end of Part II.

"Come, let us march against the powers of heaven
 And set black streamers in the firmament
 To signify the slaughter of the gods."

Part II, V. iii. 48-50.

Nonetheless, Tamburlaine's ambition in its *unnatural* dimensions is not all that clearly defined. Marlowe has not yet formulated his objective as well as he does later in *Doctor Faustus*.

Tamburlaine's religious creed is even more equivocal. Meander speaks of "dreaming prophesies," and Tamburlaine himself believes that "gracious stars" and "Jove himself" will shield him and offer him "That perfect bliss and sole felicity, / The sweet fruition of an earthly crown." And yet there are numerous hints in the play that not only undermine all the above but also serve as an ironic pattern for the man who seems to hold the same maxim as Chapman's Bussy d'Ambois. "Who to himselfe is law, no law doth neede, / Offends no Law, and is a King ideede." (II. i. 203-4) Tamburlaine, sure, to a point of hubris, challenges the gods:

"Nor are Apollo's oracles more true
 Than thou shall find my vaunts substantial."

I. ii. 211-12.

or

"Our quivering lances shaking in the air
 And bullets like Jove's dreadful thunderbolts,

 Shall threat the gods more than Cyclopien wars,"

II. iii. 18-21.

and finally in "drunken" exaltation, blasphemes against the gods he professes to believe in:

"Jove, viewing me in arms, looks pale and wan,
Fearing my power should pull him from his throne."

V. ii. 288-390.

His threat to "march against the powers of heaven" is probably more blasphemous, but being the raving of a dying man does not carry the same kind of powerful ebullience as that of its counter part at the end of Part I. Marlowe will more confidently and straightforwardly convey the same irreverent, *unnatural* attitude in his more mature, later play, *Doctor Faustus*.

"All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command...
Here try thy brains to get a deity!"

I. i. 56-64.

Tamburlaine's contradictory religious behaviour, however, is not the only inconsistency of the play. Paul H. Kocher points out two such conflicting ideas: "The earlier and more significant one is that a law of nature commands him [Tamburlaine] and all other men to seek regal power. The later is that in his conquest he is acting as the Scourge of God." Kocher proceeds to explain why these two concepts conflict, on the basis of what he calls "most remarkable [doctriness] in the Renaissance."¹⁷ But he concludes, "...most Elizabethan dramas were not minutely wrought masterpieces, each bit fashioned in clear-sighted relationship to every other bit."¹⁸

Nevertheless, there are other basic concepts wrought in the play with greater consistency than that of the religious doctrine, such as the idea of human transiency and that of kingly fate.

"For kings are clouts that every man shoots at,
Our crown the pin that thousands seek to cleave,"

(II. iv. 8-9)

says Mycetes, and though both Cosroe and Tamburlaine call him a fool in the preceding scene, the former's short-lived kingship, and the latter's whole career bespeak the "fool's" truth.

Critics have celebrated Tamburlaine's stately acceptance of death. "For Tamburlaine, the scourge of God, must die," is always used to point out Tamburlaine's gradual realisation of his transient nature. But Tamburlaine is aware of temporality — that of his body, at least — at the very beginning of his turbulent life.

17. Paul H. Kocher, *Christopher Marlowe: A Study of his Thought, Learning and Character* (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1962), p. 71.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

"Thus shall my heart be still, combined with thine,
Until our bodies turn to elements,"

(l. ii. 234-235)

he says, sealing his pact with Theridamas.

Is this "warring king," then, being *unnatural* in his incessant strife for power? He is, when he kills his son, as he becomes an *unnatural* father by anybody's standards. When he answers Zenocrate's question, though, "...when wilt thou leave these arms" with

"When heaven shall cease to move on both the poles,
And when the ground whereon my soldiers march,
Shall rise aloft and touch the hornèd moon,
And not before, my sweet Zenocrate,"

(l. iv. 9-15)

an assessment is more difficult to make.

It seems to me that in spite of "the absurdity of man's trying"¹⁹ in the face of imminent destruction, one should hesitate to condemn Tamburlaine's "aspiring mind," since the same kind of mind —hankering after immortality— does exist in every one of us, even if it is buried under heaps of conventional or "natural" ideas."²⁰

19. Clifford Leech ed., *Marlowe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, op. cit., p. 10.

20. I am aware of the fact that by using the word "condemn" in this last paragraph I possibly introduce the notion of moral judgement. That was not my intention. I only meant to draw the reader's attention to what is actually the aim of much of literature, namely, recognition of the fault condemned in one's own self.

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Αλίκη Μπακοπούλου-Χωλς, *Το «αφύσικο» στην Ελισαβετιανή και Ιακωβιανή τραγωδία κι η αντιμετώπισή του στον Ταμερλάνο του Μάρλοου*

Καθώς ο αναγνώστης διαβάσει τις μεγάλες Ελισαβετιανές τραγωδίες κι αυτές που ακολούθησαν (παίρνω για χρονικά όρια το 1580 και την τρίτη δεκαετία του 17ου αιώνα), δεν μπορεί παρά να παρατηρήσει ότι υπάρχει ένα θέμα που απαντά στα έργα των περισσότερων κι αυτό είναι η *Φύση* με τα συνακόλουθά της: ανθρώπινη φύση, τι είναι φυσιολογικό και τι αφύσικο. Το δοκίμιο αυτό εξετάζει τι ακριβώς θεωρείται «αφύσικο» σε έργα συγγραφέων αυτής της περιόδου με ιδιαίτερη έμφαση στον *Ταμερλάνο* του Κρίστοφερ Μάρλοου.