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TAMBURLAINE'S SONNETS by Isabel Gortazar

While re-reading Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, I came across the following passage that belongs in Chapter LXV, volume VII. It refers to the fall of the city of Aleppo, besieged and brutally taken in 1401¹ by the hosts of Timour Lanc². Here is Gibbon's text, with the relevant words in italics: "Among the suppliants and captives, Timour distinguished the doctors of the law, whom he invited to the dangerous honour of a personal conference. (...) To these doctors he proposed a captious question (...etc). A prudent explanation restored his tranquillity; and he passed to *a more familiar topic of conversation*. 'What is your age?' said he to the cadhi. 'Fifty years.' — 'It would be the age of my eldest son: you see me here (continued Timour) a poor, lame, decrepit mortal, yet by my arm has the Almighty been pleased to subdue the kingdoms of Iran, Touran, and the Indies. I am not a man of blood; and God is my witness, that in all my wars I have never been the aggressor, and that my enemies have always been the authors of their own calamity.'... During this peaceful conversation the streets of Aleppo streamed with blood, and re-echoed with the cries of mothers and children and with the shrieks of violated virgins."

Gibbon's quotation ends here. This is Gibbon's corresponding footnote n° 35: "These interesting conversations (with the doctors of the law) appear to have been copied by Arabshah³ (tom. i. c. 68, p. 625 – 645) from the cadhi and historian Ebn Schounah⁴, a principal actor. Yet how could he be alive seventy-five years afterwards? (D'Herbelot, p. 792)":⁵ End of footnote. On the conversations in Aleppo, where he would not have been present, Arabshah writes as follows: "This is what I have copied from the words of Ibn Shanah as I found it".

At this point I was reminded of an ongoing debate, based on the grounds of Sonnets 89 and 37, as to whether Shake-spear⁶ (as his name appears on the title page of the Sonnets) was lame or not. Then I remembered the intriguing line in Sonnet 37:

So then I am not lame, poor, nor despis'd.

Despised, not *decrepit*. But we will find the word *decrepit* in the first line of the Sonnet. I mistrust that sort of coincidences, so I started to investigate. Here is the entire Sonnet; I have marked in italics what I believe to be relevant words.

Sonnet 37

As a *decrepit* father takes delight
To see his active child do deeds of youth,

1 According to one of my sources, Aleppo was taken in October 1400 (Safar 803.A.H).

2 Timour Beg, (or Timur, or Temir, or Timouri); also Timour Lanc, (or Tamerlang, Tamburlaine, Tamerlane, etc). The word Lanc means lame.

3 Ahmed Ibn Arabshah was born in Syria in 1392. An educated man and a scholar, he was captured as a child during the fall of Aleppo. In his Life of Timour Lanc, he describes Timour as a monster. Arabshah died in Cairo in 1450.

4 Also Ibn ash-Shihna.

5 It seems neither Gibbon nor d'Herbelot (1625-1695) realized that there were probably two Ebn Schounah, father and son, and that they were both involved here; the father, a famous architect from a distinguished Aleppo family, was the man conversing with Timour, and then the son wrote the narrative that was passed on to Arabshah. I have been unable so far to find Schounah's text if it exists.

⁶Throughout this article I will use the name Shake-spear for the official author of the Sonnets and Shaxpere for William Shakespeare of Stratford.

So I, made *lame* by Fortune's dearest spite,
 Take all my comfort of thy worth and truth;
For whether beauty, birth, or wealth, or wit,
 Or any of these all, or all, or more,
Entitled in thy parts, do crowned sit,
 I make my love engrafted to this store:
So then I am not lame, poor, nor despis'd,
 Whilst that this shadow doth such substance give
 That I in thy abundance am suffic'd,
 And by a part of all thy glory live.
 Look what is best, that best I wish in thee:
 This wish I have; then ten times happy me!

Apart from other intriguing possibilities suggested by the various words in italics, it seems that if we substitute line 9: *So then I am not lame, poor, nor despis'd*, for: *So then I am not poor, lame, nor decrepit*, we might be in Aleppo with Timour and the terrified cadhis.

A Puzzle:

After that elaborate footnote naming Arabshah/Schounah as his source, one would have expected Gibbon to quote Arabshah's text, if not *verbatim*, at least very closely. That is not so; I was disappointed to find that, as far as Arabshah's text is concerned, Timour never said: *You see me here a poor, lame, decrepit mortal*, nor was the ensuing speech, about his not being "a man of blood", included in the Syrian's text. Gibbon might have been looking at corrupted sources, either mixing dialogues that took place at different times, or simply inventing a new text. Here is what Arabshah really wrote, quoting Ebn Schounah:⁷ "And the gate of familiarity being opened, Tamarlang said: '*I am half a man* and yet I have taken such and such countries', and he numbered all the kingdoms of Persia and Iraq and Hind, and all the countries of the Tatars⁸."

The reason why he would have described himself as *half a man* is that, according to the various sources, he had been wounded in his shoulder and his hip, which wounds had left him one handed and lame⁹. This sentence therefore would make much more sense than the one quoted by Gibbon. The conversation (according to Arabshah/Schounah) continues thus: "Then Tamarlang asked me (Schounah) about my age. 'I was born', I replied, 'in the year 749 and have now reached fifty-four years' Then he said to Quazi Sharafuddin 'And how old are you?' And he replied 'I am about one year older than he'. 'Therefore' said Tamarlang, '*you are of the age of my sons*¹⁰, but I have now reached the age of seventy five.'¹¹ As Timour was born in AD 1336¹², his age at the fall of Aleppo (1400/1), would have been sixty-five, as most

7 For the English translation of Arabshah, I have used throughout J.H. Sanders work. See bibliography, below.

8 Ibn Khaldun (see below, footnote 13) defines the Tatars as one of the Turkish tribes.

9 Ibn Khaldun (idem) writes that for short walks Timour dragged his leg, but for longer distances, "men carried him with their hands". The right hand wound took away two fingers. Other sources say his right hand was paralysed. As Ibn Khaldun personally met Timour after Aleppo, his description of the man's disabilities is as trustworthy as Arabshah's

10 Here is another discrepancy with Gibbon, who writes "the age of my eldest son".

11 The error in Timour's age seems to be present in all translations.

12 Although there is some dispute about most details of his life, the date of birth is generally agreed to have been the 8th of April 1336 AD (Sha'ban, 25, 736 A.H.). When Ibn Khaldun (see below) meets Timour in 1401, he reckons he is sixty-five, or sixty-six years' old.

editors have pointed out. However, what nobody seems to have commented on is that, if Arabshah had reported the conversation accurately, Timour would have fathered his son when he was ten-years-old. Which means not only that Arabshah is unreliable, but so, apparently, is Gibbon. However, it is interesting to note that, although Gibbon gives us such an inaccurate translation of Arabshah's narrative, when writing about this *son* (as opposed to Arabshah's *sons* in plural), he gets right the fact that Timour's eldest son, long dead, would have been around fifty years of age. Arabshah closes his report of the conversation saying: "Then it was the time of evening prayer..." and that is that. There are further dialogues between Timour and the cadhis of Aleppo, but Gibbon does not mention them.

But, wherever Gibbon may have found Timour's self-pitying words (unless he completely invented them), it is curious that at this particularly triumphant moment in his old age (he died in 1405), even an old, cynical rogue like Timour would have delivered such a whining speech in the presence of the terrified "doctors of the law". In reference to Arabshah's text, Gibbon specifically mentions Manger's translation (1757), as well as Vattier's (1658), but neither of those translations, nor the Arabic text that appears in Manger's bilingual edition, contains the words *poor, lame, decrepit mortal*.¹³ To make it even more puzzling, it seems that the first translation of the work into *any* European language was the Latin one printed by Jacob Golius of Leyden in 1636, which puts the lid on my idea that there may have been a Latin adaptation of Arabshah's text published previous to 1609. Still, Shake-spear could have read an Arabic text, but which text? Not Arabshah's apparently.

In his brief Autobiography, Ibn Khaldun¹⁴ recounts his many conversations with Timour during the long month he was with him in Damascus. None of these conversations includes anything remotely resembling Gibbon's text. So there doesn't seem to be an answer to my puzzle that remains therefore frustratingly unsolved until I can find a text *in any language* that includes the strange words quoted by Gibbon. So far I have not found such text, nor do the conversations in Aleppo get quoted by any of the pre-1609 sources I have checked (listed below). However, the more I delve into this, the more works appear that I have not yet checked; so if my patience holds, I might get lucky one of these days, but I wish Gibbon had been more careful when quoting his sources.

Bayazid's Cage

Once I had started combing the possible sources for this quotation and having apparently reached a dead end, my hopes were raised when I came upon a second puzzle, which indicated that there were many texts I had not yet seen: Where had Marlowe found in 1587, the year he wrote the First Part of *Tamburlaine the Great*, the story of Bayazid's iron cage?

D'Herbelot declares that the "cage" story is not contained in any of the more authentic histories, "not even in those written by his (Timour's) enemies, such as Arabshah," but he goes on to say that there is an *Othoman Chronique* in which the iron cage episode is narrated. The *Othoman Chronique* was translated into Latin by Leunclavius in 1588 (one year too late to be consulted by Marlowe).¹⁵ However, saying that the cage episode does not appear in the

¹³ I believe there is an Arabic MS of Arabshah's work in the MS Hunter Collection in Glasgow, dating from 1517, but there is no reason to believe it is different from the Arabic text reproduced by Manger.)

¹⁴ Abd Al-Rahman Ibn Muhammad, known as Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) was a philosopher-scientist, historian, diplomat and statesman, born in Granada. His Autobiography is attached to the last part of his monumental work, *Kital al-Ibar*.

¹⁵ *Annales sultanorum othmanidarum, a turcis sua lingua sripti*: First published in quarto in 1588.

more authentic histories, implies the existence of *less authentic* histories, which D'Herbelot seems to have known and dismissed as not authentic enough. My hope now was that if Marlowe had come across some of these less authentic stories, finding there the iron cage, he could also have found in one of them the line in the Sonnet. I was mistaken. Indeed, there are at least two early sources, ignored by D'Herbelot, relating the episode of the iron cage, both of which sources are previous to Leunclavius and previous to the Leyden translation of Arabshah;¹⁶ the most important one is Pedro Mexia's *Silva de varia lección* (Seville, 1543), translated as *The Foreste*, by Thomas Fortesque (London 1571-1576);¹⁷ the other one is Perondinus' *Vita Magni Tamerlanis* (Florence 1551). While it appears that the story of the cage may have been introduced by Pope Pius II in one of the sources quoted by Mexia,¹⁸ neither Perondinus nor Mexia mentions the capture of Aleppo at all, let alone the conversations with the cadhis. This might suggest that the first author to mention such conversations was Arabshah, as Gibbon says; but we now know this may not be true.

Mexia seems undoubtedly to be the main source for Marlowe's First Part of *Tamburlaine the Great*. The nine-page chapter that he devotes to Tamerlan¹⁹ gives a detailed explanation of the three tents (pabellones/pavilions), white, red and black, that Timour used to set up on three consecutive days before the city he was planning to attack; Marlowe uses the colours when describing the siege of Damascus. In the original Spanish text, Mexia mentions *tiendas* (tents), and *pabellones* (also tents). Marlowe mentions *tents*, (*he pitched down his tents*), but Fortesque translates the Spanish word *pabellón* as *enseigne*, to mean flag instead of tent, which has led some scholars to assume that Marlowe had read Mexia's work in Spanish²⁰. An even more intriguing possibility was proposed by Ethel Seaton²¹, who suggested that Marlowe had been to Rheims²² and seen the stained-glass window in the Cathedral, showing the siege of Jerusalem by Vespasian, where three coloured flags are shown. In Marlowe's text it isn't just the tents that are of different colours: The first day the tents are white; "*white is their hue*", but the second day "*Scarlet is his furniture*", while the third day "*Black are his colours, black pavilion*"; it seems that, to be on the safe side, Marlowe uses the colours to describe tents (*my coal-black tents*), flags (*streamers white, red, black*), furnishings, and even

Leunclavius o Löwenklau travelled in Turkey for about three years from 1582, learned Turkish and later established himself in Vienna. The original manuscript of this work written by Muhammed ibn Hasanhan called Saadeddin, was brought from Constantinople by Hieronymus Beck in 1551. It was translated into German by Joannes Gaudier, alias Spiegel, and from this Leunclavius made the Latin version. Another of Leunclavius' translations, *Historia Musulmana*, was published in 1591.

16 I must thank Carlo Dinota for sending me the article of Prof Leslie Spence, *Tamburlaine and Marlowe* (publ. by Modern Language Association), where I realized that Mexia's and Perondinus' texts had already been established by Prof. Spence as sources for Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*.

17 Thomas Fortesque translated the work from a French translation by Claude Gruget, published in Paris in 1552.

¹⁸ Pedro Mexia: *Silva de Varia Leccion*; see Bibliography, below. Ref: José Luis Martínez Dueñas Espejo; *Pedro Mexia and Christopher Marlowe Revisited*; Universidad de Granada.

¹⁹ Pedro Mexia: Vol 1, Part 2, Chapter XXVIII. *Del excelentísimo capitan y muy poderoso rey, el Gan Tamerlan. De los reinos y porvincias que conquistó y de sus disciplina y arte militar.*

²⁰ Although there is the possibility that he read George Whetstone's *The English Myrror. A Regard wherein all States may behold the Conquests of Envy*. 1586. Whetstone's source is Mexia's Spanish text and he definitely refers to tents.

²¹ Ethel Seaton: *Fresh sources for Marlowe*, Review of English Studies, Vol V, 1929, pp 385-401, Ref. Martínez Dueñas, op cit.

²² This suggestion is particularly interesting in relation to the letter sent to the Cambridge Authorities by the Privy Council on 29th June 1587. For the full text of the letter: <http://www.marlowe-society.org/marlowe/life/govtagent2.html>

Tamerlan's outfit: *Enter Tamburlaine all in black.* (Act 1,1)

But after this digression, I still have the first puzzle unsolved. Of course, the Sonnet would have been written much later, well in time for Marlowe to have read the Leunclavius' translations, *Turkish Annals* and *Musulmanica Historia*, (both of which were among the books found in Mr Le Doux's trunk),²³ however, neither of these two books mentions the specific phrase that would link Timour to the Sonnet.

Meanwhile, pending further research, I keep on asking myself the following questions:

1) As Gibbon is definitely *not* quoting Arabshah as he says he is, whom was he quoting, unless he did he re-write the scene, inventing whole sentences?

2) How likely is it that the line in Sonnet 37, together with the inclusion of the word "*decrepit*" applied to a fond father, could be a simple coincidence, in respect of Gibbon's later text?

3) And, even if Shake-spear's text had nothing to do with Timour, what was Gibbon's source?

4) And if the line in the Sonnet were not a coincidence after all, which of the Shake-spear Authorship Candidates other than Christopher Marlowe would have been quoting what appears to have been Tamburlain's self-pitying description of himself?

And now, leaving this puzzle unsolved, I will move on to examine some thoughts provoked by my research on this subject.

The passionate lover

As a matter of curiosity, I would like to point out that Zenocrate, Tamburlaine's beloved wife as described by young Kit in 1587, is a total fabrication. It seems that, when he wrote the two parts of *Tamburlaine the Great*, Marlowe disregarded (or was unaware of) the information about his wives and concubines who, as Arabshah writes, *were more than can be numbered*.

According to Arabshah, of Timour's four (mentioned) wives only one died before him (as Zenocrate does); her name was Jalban, and the Syrian tells us that: "she was like a moon when it is full and the sun before its setting. (...) Timour had her put to death for some fault which was told him concerning her; but it was false; but he dealt with her according to the opinion of him who said. 'Whether it is true or false, it is a fault that she is suspected'."

There are different versions, however²⁴. In 1405, an Embassy was sent by Henry III of Castile to visit Tamerlan in Samarkand. A man called Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo wrote a detailed narrative of their voyage, describing everything they saw, including their impressions of Tamerlan and his family²⁵. Clavijo talks of nine wives, of which at least the two most important, Caño (Khanum) and Quinchicano, seem to have survived their husband. However,

23 Lambeth Palace Archives: the Bacon Papers. Mr Le Doux, a French gentleman who appears to have been one of Essex' secret agents, may well have been Christopher Marlowe. See AD. Wright: Shakespeare: New Evidence. Adam Hart Publishers, London 1996, and Peter Farey at www2.prestel.co.uk/reyl/

24 No two sources of Timour's life agree on the information. I have done my best to make a summary based on the most reliable of those sources.

25 *Life and Acts of the Great Tamerlane: With a description of the Lands of his Empire and Lordship*. Written by Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo. See details below. It is immediately obvious that Clavijo, unlike Arabshah, has sympathy and respect for Timour.

this is not the end of it, because in the Introductory *Life of Timour Beg*²⁶ that precedes Clavijo's narrative,²⁷ in the edition published by Elibron Classics Series, we are told again a different story: Timour married Aljaz Turkhan Aga, daughter of Ameer Mashlah, shortly after 1355, so he would have been nineteen years' old. This apparently beloved wife died in 1366. Arabshah does not mention her; if she was the mother of the "eldest son" to whom Timour refers in Aleppo, in 1400/1 this son would have been about forty five years' old. But Marlowe could not have been drawing Zenocrate from Aljaz Turkhan Aga because, in *Tamburlaine the Great, Part 1*, the hero marries Zenocrate at the end of the play, after the fall of Damascus; by then Bajazeth is dead. In reality, Bayazed was captured in 1402, and died in 1403, only two years before Timour and thirty-six years after Aljaz Turkhan Aga.

I wish to believe that the passionate and tender love of *Tamburlaine* for his invented Zenocrate was how Marlowe, at twenty-three, may have imagined true love and married bliss.

The name.

In theory, the name *Timour* derives from *Demir* and means *of iron*, also in the sense of *iron will*. The adjective *Lanc, lame*, is first given to him by Arabshah, who never loses a chance of rubbishing him and usually refers to him as *Satan*. However, I was amazed to discover that *Timour* also means *will shake* (or *shall shake*). A famous Sheikh to whom the child's father took him shortly after he was born gave this name to him. The Sheikh was meditating on the 67th Surah of the Quran, verse 16: "*Are you sure that He Who is in heaven will not cause you to be swallowed up by the earth as in an earthquake? And, behold, it will shake!* (Tamuraü)"²⁸ According to Markham, "the Sheikh then stopped and said: We have named your son Timour".

"For *will* and *shall* best fitteth Tamburlaine..." (Part 1, Act 1 scene 3.)

Unfortunately, Markham does not disclose his sources for this episode, so once more we are probably looking at a fantastic coincidence. Moreover, according to Arabshah "they say that on the night on which he was born, something like a *helmet* appeared in the sky." Is this supposed to be the helmet of Pallas Athena, the Spear Shaker? Arabshah, however, does not explain what this heavenly sign might have meant to his contemporaries. M. Frohnsdorff discovered some years ago a line in Spencer's *Fairy Queen*, about which we dared not make any conjecture. The line appears already in the 1590 version of Spencer's Poem²⁹:

*Yet gold all is not, that doth golden seeme,
Ne all good knights, that shake well speare and shield, (Etc)*

Note the *well*: Shake *well* speare; not just shake spear. The *well* is the reference to Pallas Athena's helmet. The name William (Will-helm) is derived from *Hwyll*, the Welsh name of

26 Beg means Lord. Timour Beg would have been one of his official names.

27 Preface: Introductory *Life of Timour* and notes by Clements R. Markham, F.R.G.S. Markham is taking his clue from Clavijo and, perhaps, from the Jesuit P. Mariana, who devotes a chapter of his work (lib XI, cap XI) to the "great Tamerlane". *Historiae de rebus Hispaniae* first appeared in twenty books in Toledo in 1592. Markham also says that Gibbon derived his knowledge of Clavijo's Embassy from Mariana. Ref: From a facsimile edition published in 1859 by the Hakluyt Society, London.

28 Surah 67-16: Aamintum man fee alssama-i anyakhsifa bikumu al-arda fa-itha hiya tamooru. I have done my own adaptation of the Surah, with the help of an expert Arabist, and the Sheikh's sentence as reported by Markham. Obviously, the last sentence could also be translated as: And behold, it shall shake!

29 *The Fairie Queene*, Book 2, Canto 8.

the god of light, the Greek equivalent to Apollo; *helm* means helmet. Both Apollo and Athena wore golden helmets and held long spears. Athena's helmet moreover was known as the helmet of invisibility, which would have been particularly useful to the "dead" Marlowe. So the full name of anybody seeing himself as the *spear shaker*, like Apollo and Pallas Athena, particularly if he wanted to remain "invisible", would have incorporated the word *will* as well as *shake* and *spear*.

In the name of Timour, we have a *Will* and we have a *Shake*, but we do not have a *spear*. I doubt however that Marlowe would have been aware of the meaning of his hero's name, at least not in 1587; but the reference to Pallas Athena in Spencer does suggest that by 1590 somebody was *shaking well spears*. And although this may have nothing to do with Tamerlane, I cannot help wondering whether William Shaxpere or Shakespeare of Stratford may not have been eventually chosen for the role of front-man, among other reasons because his name could so easily be transformed into Will Shake-spear and Marlowe did not expect to use his services (and name) for long³⁰.

The Recipient:

And now we have arrived to crux of the matter. To whom was this Sonnet addressed? While it is obvious that the individual sonnets have different *addressees*, men and women (I even suspect Marlowe addressed Sonnet 112 to himself), the two "lame" sonnets have something in common, their tone is decidedly avuncular, even paternal. They are not *love* Sonnets, yet they are *loving* Sonnets. If we look for the possible recipient of these Sonnets, we might easily come to the conclusion that the recipient is Shake-spear's son, or at least, a youth for whom he feels the fond tenderness of a father. The connection with Timour's sentence, practically in the same breath as the reference to his son, supports this impression. The *son* of Sonnet 37 (if that's who he is), is however not a child but a youth, and we are told that he has *beauty, birth, or wealth, or wit*, all of which contribute to make the author proud of the young man. The *decrepit father* takes delight in this *good-looking, nobly born, wealthy and witty, son*. Nor should we forget the line: *Entitled in thy parts, do crowned sit*.

Interestingly, if we take Sonnet 89 (with its reference to the author's pretended lameness again) to be perhaps dedicated to the same person, this youth seems to be ashamed to be seen in the company of the author, to the extent that the author promises, out of love, to keep away from the youth and remain a stranger so as not to embarrass him:

*Thou canst not (love) disgrace me half so ill,
To set a form upon desired change,
As I'll my self disgrace, knowing thy will,
I will acquaintance strangle and look strange:
Be absent from thy walks and in my tongue,
Thy sweet beloved name no more shall dwell,
Lest I (too much profane) should do it wrong:
And haply of our old acquaintance tell.³¹*

These last two lines are intriguing: In what way could the author dwell on the recipient's

³⁰ In similar circumstances, Martin Luther had disappeared, reported dead though not officially, and reappeared a year later to continue with his religious Reformation, once the risk of being burned by the Catholic Church had passed. Protected, like Luther, by a powerful Patron (the Earl of Essex), Marlowe probably expected to be "back to life" within a few years at most.

³¹ Sonnet 89.

sweet, beloved name that it could *do it wrong*? Also we need to decide whether we are to take that *haply* as *perhaps*:

*And perhaps of our old acquaintance tell,
or as happily:
And happily of our old acquaintance tell.*

So, who could be the addressee of these two Sonnets? Speculation aside, the information we have been given is unambiguous: Whoever he may be, the addressee is a youth for whom the author has, at least at this point, the unselfish affection of a father. We are told that this youth has *birth, wealth and wit*, and that he is *entitled* and *crowned*, in other words that he is a titled aristocrat who is ashamed of what sounds like a long-standing, close relationship with the author.

In the light of previous speculation by various academics, as well as the information on the title page of Thorpe's publication (1609) two names stand out as possibilities for this mysterious youth, their names are supported by the dedication of the book to W.H, *the only begetter*: Henry Wriothesly, Earl of Southampton and William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke. In the context of these two Sonnets, the word *begetter*, (specially if we are looking for Tamerlane's *son*), is particularly suggestive: The author would be the *begetter* (father) not only of the Sonnets, but perhaps also of this young man. In any case, being the source of the author's inspiration, the recipient becomes the *only begetter* (the real father).

Southampton was only nine years younger than Marlowe, so the avuncular/paternal tone of the two Sonnets seems hardly justifiable. Nevertheless, it is just possible that nine years were in those days a much wider age-gap between two men than they are now. In the early days of the first seventeen Sonnets, Marlowe might have felt protective of the young Southampton, only to find years later that the adult Earl, busy in his entrepreneurial plans for the New World³², did not have much time for the returned but always clandestine poet: the poor, old, *despised* Christopher Marlowe. The inclusion of the adjective *lame*, converting this *loser* once more into the Great Tamburlaine, might be a typical Marlovian reaction to such a humiliating situation. This scenario however obliges us to speculate as to *when* did the *crowned* Earl of Southampton become ashamed to be seen in Shake-spear's company: *And haply of our old acquaintance tell*.

Between 1593 and 1599, when the bulk of the Sonnets is supposed to have been written, Marlowe could hardly have been in a position to decide whether or not he wanted to walk about in Southampton's company. Even disregarding the "John Mathews" theory,³³ Southampton went to Ireland with Essex in March 1599; he was imprisoned in the Tower from February 1601 until April 1603, during which time, moreover, his title and estates were forfeited to the Crown³⁴. So, these walks from which Marlowe appears to have been willing to "absent" himself, would have happened after April 1603, which would mean that not all the Sonnets were written before 1599.

As for William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, he has often been conjecturally identified as W.H.

³² Southampton was involved in the Virginia Company. Although the First Charter was granted in 1606, preparations and plans would have started long before that.

³³ By which theory Marlowe was in Spain, posing as a seminaries priest under the alias of Christopherus Marlerus, from 30th May 1599 till after the Queen's death in March 1603.

³⁴ So, during those years he was plain Mr H.W:

Although those were his initials until 1601 (when his father died and he succeeded to the title), at the time when the Sonnets were published in 1609, those initials should no longer have been used; on the other hand, he would then have been *crowned* as Earl of Pembroke. Born in 1580, William Herbert would have been a youth of between seventeen and nineteen years when the majority of the Sonnets were written, around 1598-9. At that time the initials W.H. were still appropriate. However, as the Sonnets were not published until ten years later, we have no idea whether any number of them may have been added at a later date; if William Herbert was the recipient of the “lame” Sonnets, and if he was already *crowned*, the implication would be that these two Sonnets were written after the old earl’s death. As with Southampton, so with Pembroke, if either of them was W.H., the “lame Sonnets” would have been written after, respectively, 1601 or 1603.

But although there must have been a relationship of sorts between Shake-spear and Southampton, as proven by his dedication to this Earl of the poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucreze*, as well as the possibility that the first seventeen Sonnets were written for him, we have no real evidence of a relationship between Shake-spear and William Herbert, except from a documented letter, now lost, in which the Countess of Pembroke prompted her son, William, to invite the King to Wilton House with the comment “the man Shakespeare is with us”.³⁵ That said, some Marlovian scholars such as John Baker, have defended the extraordinary idea that Marlowe was William Herbert’s real father; which would mean he would have had an affair with the Countess at the age of sixteen. I find this difficult to believe but I am not completely dismissing any possibility at this stage. In 1577, at the age of fifteen, Mary Sidney became the third wife of Henry Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, the eldest son of William, Earl of Pembroke. In a webpage (www.tudorplace.com) dedicated to Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, we read the following sentence: “but this subtle old Earl (William) did see that his faire and witty daughter-in-law would horne his son, and told him so, and advised him to keep her in the Country and not to let her frequent the Court”. Mary Sidney does have a –perhaps unmerited- reputation of having had several lovers, though I have not yet found a reliable source that would allow us to consider this as anything but gossip.

However unlikely this conjecture may be, there is no escaping the fact that a titled, wealthy *son*, would be the ideal addressee for the “lame” Sonnets. The self-deprecating adjectives in Sonnet 37 may have been metaphorical and meant in jest; on the other hand, Marlowe (though not Shaxpere) would surely have been *poor*, and, as has been debated, he may even have been *lame*, and, looking at Sonnet 89, he appears to have been in some way *despised*, but even as late as 1609, he would hardly have been *decrepit*, except to a youth. Nevertheless, the author made a point of introducing that adjective in the Sonnet, in reference (as in the case of Timour), to a fond father, thus completing the curious sentence attributed to Timour Lanc by Gibbon.

My conclusion at this point is that Sonnets 37 and 89 are not telling us that Shake-spear may have been lame, but that he was speaking through the mouth of Timour Lanc. The evidence that emerges from these two Sonnets is that at some time after 1601-3, the author was confronted with the humiliating experience of being socially and emotionally rejected by a man much younger than himself, for whom he had paternal/avuncular feelings; these feelings could be based either on the fact that the young man was his grand, illegitimate son, or on the

³⁵ The letter seems to have been written sometime in October 1603. In fact, the Court was at Wilton House from October 24th to December 12th, 1603. I am indebted to John Ulatowski for sending me the information concerning Mary Sidney’s letter.

more probable fact that he was someone who, in the past, had been an admiring adolescent and a friend.

In either case, the reaction (so true to character) of the rejected author is to don the cloak of the Great Tamburlaine, sitting in Aleppo at the summit of his glory, to remind this heartless youth that although he may appear to him as a *poor, lame, despised* half-man, he is nevertheless the Scourge of God and the Conqueror of the World.

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