

“Looks” as a Framework for Princely Power in *Tamburlaine*

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Though a sixteenth-century humanist education emphasized the importance of verbal rhetoric for gaining and maintaining authority, Marlowe wrote *Tamburlaine the Great* at a time when the eye was privileged in its status as the organ most capable of communicating truth. He was also writing for the stage, and as a dramatist he was likely to note that the politics of the time emphasized a visual aspect to power that could be performative but also traded on the idea that the prince was deserving of leadership.¹ Though the power of *Tamburlaine’s* images are difficult to miss, scholarship on the play has not examined whether Marlowe creates a larger connection between visuality and power that extends beyond his titular conqueror. A pervasive focus on the character of Tamburlaine himself and his own claims to power in studies following Stephen Greenblatt’s in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, while frequently illuminating, fails to address the broader visual context of Tamburlaine’s meteoric rise.² This article argues that a language of “looks” and looking establishes throughout *Tamburlaine* a consistent visual framework within which all of its princes operate, not only Tamburlaine himself, emphasizing for early modern audiences the deeply rooted visuality of princely power.

¹ See, for example, Caitlin L. Jorgensen, “Diversity in Unity: Elizabeth’s Coronation Procession,” in *Acts and Texts: Performance and Ritual in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Laurie Postlewaite and Wim Hüsken (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2007), 82–83. Roy Strong’s work routinely focuses on Elizabeth’s visuality: see for example *Art and Power: Renaissance Festivals, 1450–1650* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

² Greenblatt suggests the “illusion” of Tamburlaine’s project of gaining a “power which is graphically depicted as the ability to transform virgins with blubbered cheeks into slaughtered carcasses” in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 218–19. David Thurn establishes a visual relationship between Tamburlaine as subject and the rest of the play’s characters as objects that he argues remains stable throughout the play—“fixed lines of sight”; see “Sights of Power in *Tamburlaine*,” *English Literary Renaissance* 19, no. 1 (1989): 4. In this reading, the “structure of specularity” upon which rests Tamburlaine’s sovereignty, a “delusional space in which absolute sovereignty becomes possible,” is eventually undone by his death, and shown to be somewhat lacking in actual substance—a view that this article challenges (14, 5). For Thomas Pavel, Tamburlaine is so described in the text because he holds within his own body the potential for world-making; see “Incomplete Worlds, Ritual Emotions,” *Philosophy and Literature* 7, no. 1 (1983): 48–58. Vanessa Correderra has recently examined the language of “astrological physiognomy” in *Tamburlaine*, arguing that the characters’ descriptions of others using stars and signs utilize a specific astrological vocabulary and plumb a depth of meaning which would have resonated with audiences in Early Modern England; see “Faces and Figures of Fortune: Astrological Physiognomy in *Tamburlaine* Part 1,” *Early Modern Literary Studies* 18, no. 1/2 (2015): 1–26. This idea is key to an understanding of “looks” as appearance, which I will note below, and is useful for thinking about how visuality is in focus for all princes in the play.

From the very beginning of *Part 1* of *Tamburlaine the Great*, the play employs the term “looks” in connection with power. Mycetes first uses the term with Theridamas: “Go [...] thy words are swords, / And with thy looks thou conquerest all thy foes” (*I Tamburlaine*, 1.1.74–75).³ The parallel between words and looks in these lines suggests that looks are even more powerful than words, for a prince—where words are tools of war, looks themselves do the conquering. The idea of a prince’s “looks” is then key for both Tamburlaine and Theridamas when they square off in the first act to discuss the coup against Mycetes himself. According to Theridamas, Tamburlaine’s looks “menace heaven and dare the gods” (*I Tamburlaine*, 1.1.158).⁴ When he likewise sizes up Theridamas, Tamburlaine follows up by reaffirming the other man’s potential as well:

TAMBURLAINE. Noble and mild this Persian seems to be,
If outward habit judge the inward man.
TECHELLES. His deep affections make him passionate.
TAMBURLAINE. With what a majesty he rears his looks!—
In thee, thou valiant man of Persia,
I see the folly of thy emperor.
Art thou but captain of a thousand horse,
That by characters graven in thy brows,
And by thy martial face and stout aspect,
Deserv’st to have the leading of an host? (*I Tamburlaine*, 1.2.162–71)

Stakes are high for Tamburlaine here; his correct judgment of Theridamas is crucial to his own success if he is to use the proposed coup to his advantage, and he bases this decision on looks. We should note that Theridamas’s looks are said to give him more of a claim to rule than his own king has. This passage suggests, then, that looks are both the evidence of *and* the potential for power. The contest of looks between these two powerful men is resolved in the same terms, with the same parallel that Mycetes suggested earlier: Theridamas concedes, “Won with thy words, and conquer’d with thy looks, / I yield myself, my men, and horse to thee” (*I Tamburlaine*, 1.2.228–31). Looks seem even to have the power to win battles before they’ve begun. Distinct from the sway of verbal rhetoric, wielded as a sword might be, the look of a

³ Citations refer to Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine, Parts One and Two*, ed. Anthony B. Dawson (London: A & C Black, 1997).

⁴ In this initial exchange between Tamburlaine and Theridamas, Correderra argues that “the moment’s physiognomic nature is evidenced by Theridamas’s belief that Tamburlaine’s features reveal his character (he menaces heaven) and thoughts (he devises stratagems) from Tamburlaine” (“Faces and Figures,” 13). While it is worth noting that looks here are clearly tied to physical features, I will argue that, as we see throughout the play, looks transcend a purely physical description of good omens in a prince’s appearance.

prince in these opening scenes gives the impression of being deeply rooted, intrinsic, and always oriented toward conquest. From this early exchange, then, we have several senses in which looks are not only tied to power, but perhaps even *are* power. Much later, Techelles, the subordinated King of Fez, will describe Tamburlaine as “our earthly god, / Whose looks make this inferior world to quake” in a bid to please the conqueror and maintain a subordinate position in his empire (2 *Tamburlaine*, 1.6.11–12). It is worth taking a moment to consider how the word “looks” was used in sixteenth-century England so as better to understand how Marlowe employs the term in various ways throughout *Tamburlaine*.

Two different definitions for “looks” were in circulation in England in the latter decades of the sixteenth century when Marlowe was writing and publishing *Tamburlaine*. One definition is “a person’s (or animal’s) appearance, esp. that of his or her countenance; expression of the eyes or the face; personal appearance or aspect.”⁵ This meaning was also in use before and after *Tamburlaine* was published in both parts: for example, the *OED* shows that Greene writes in *Menaphon* (1589), “At last her eyes glaunced on the lookes of Melicertus.” In general, we should think of this meaning for “looks” as all of the ways in which one’s physical appearance might signify to a viewer, including gestural elements (note “countenance” and “expression of the eyes”). We find Theridamas’s and Tamburlaine’s exchange above drawing on this definition—Theridamas’s “stout aspect,” for example, makes him worthy of leadership. This use of “looks” draws on contemporary Neoplatonic thought that posited consistency between one’s internal character and outward appearance.⁶ Moreover, the influence of Greek perceptual theories and St. Augustine’s teachings had led early modern Europe to develop a pervasive ocularcentrism in which eyes were the key gateway to truth, “organs of power, liveliness, speed, and accuracy.”⁷ The dominant visual theory of the period played into this idea: a standard Aristotelian model seemed to provide reasonable mechanical explanations for how seeing communicated reality to the brain.⁸ According to this “intromissive” theory, *species*, a kind of particle, were said to travel

⁵ “look, n.” *OED Online*.

⁶ I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this point. For more on how Tamburlaine’s facial descriptions may have communicated certain specific ideas to an early modern audience, see Correderra, “Faces and Figures of Fortune.”

⁷ Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 9–10.

⁸ Another competing theory, dubbed perspectivism, was also popular, but was so similar to the Aristotelian model that at times the two overlapped significantly. Both were intromissive models. By the time that Marlowe was writing *Tamburlaine*, the Aristotelian theory had been dominant in the education system for over a century. See David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 144–47.

from objects directly to the eye, where they were then interpreted in the brain, meaning that seeing was, to a degree, an absorption of the subject's essence.⁹ As we can see in the passage above, Tamburlaine seeks to "judge the inward man" of Theridamas by his "outward habit," drawing on the definition of "looks" as appearance or aspect to make his appraisal of the prince. Looks are used in this sense throughout the play when looks are given as evidence of innate power: certain physical and gestural signs displayed by Tamburlaine, Theridamas, and others indicate their fitness—even worthiness—to rule.

The second definition of "looks" in the period was "action or an act of looking; an act of directing the eyes or countenance in order to look at someone or something; a glance of the eyes."¹⁰ For simplicity's sake, let us refer to this definition of looks as gaze. The word so defined was in use elsewhere by Marlowe's contemporaries, often communicating a sense of action: Shakespeare writes in *Venus and Adonis*, for example, that "lookes kill love, and love by lookes reviveth," suggesting its active potential (line 464). Marlowe makes use of this outward sense of looks, too, as we see in the passage above ("won with thy words and conquered with thy looks"). The active gaze in *Tamburlaine* seems an important key to princely ambition and success, one the play chooses to emphasize throughout—stage directions in Act III, for example, specify only a gaze: Tamburlaine "looks wrathfully on Agydas, and says nothing" (*1 Tamburlaine* III.2).¹¹

Likewise, Tamburlaine and others describe their future conquest in terms of scenes that have been written but yet to be staged, and all of these descriptions focus on the visual spectacle of the victory. Consider Tamburlaine's prediction that he will be seen making "but a jest" to take the Persian crown (*1 Tamburlaine*, 2.5.97), Callapine's detailed visual prediction of future glory in victory (*2 Tamburlaine*, 1.3.28–31, 45), and an almost ekphrastic passage in which Tamburlaine describes himself at length riding "in golden armour like the sun" through the streets with "troops of conquered kings" (*2 Tamburlaine*, 4.3.114–33). The most striking example of this sort of imagined victory is Tamburlaine's call for a map on his death bed. Though Tamburlaine admits that his "martial strength is spent," he desires to "see how much / Is left [...] to conquer all the world," speaking to the sons he hopes will carry on his kingdom (*2*

⁹ Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 14–16.

¹⁰ "look, n." *OED Online*.

¹¹ The verb form of "looks" aligns very clearly with its second definition as "gaze," and should be considered alongside the noun forms as participating in creating the play's visual framework.

Tamburlaine, 5.3.119, 123–24). Tracing his gaze along the path of conquest he has cut thus far, he implores his sons to share in the spectacle:

Look here my boys, see what a world of ground
Lies westward from the midst of Cancer’s line,
Unto the rising of the earthly globe,
Whereas the sun declining from our sight
Begins the day with our antipodes (2 *Tamburlaine*, 5.3.145–49).

Add to this all of the land east of the “Antarctic Pole [...] / As much more land, which never was described, / Wherein are rocks of pearl that shine as bright as all the lamps that beautify the sky.” “And shall I die and this unconquered?” asks the dying king (2 *Tamburlaine*, 5.3.154–58). This passage illustrates what D. K. Smith has called the “cartographic imagination” of the period, one that does not “just provide the descriptive context for Tamburlaine’s conquests [but] provides the actual means by which he accomplishes them,” though the focus for Smith is still on Tamburlaine alone and his self-conscious use of verbal rhetoric, not the role of this cartographic imagination in a larger visual framework for power.¹² As we are quickly reminded by the text, Tamburlaine’s fiery spirit may have been capable of all of this but the gaze is ultimately tied to the body, and so with him it perishes (though, of course, it may pass to his sons). These passages outline the role of the princely gaze and visual imagination in anticipating and meeting with success.

Adding to these moments, many passages throughout *Tamburlaine* describe the active gaze as “fiery” or otherwise beam-like, and here we see Marlowe depart from the intromissive Aristotelian model of sight to embrace the idea of “extramission,” a rival theory in which the eye itself contains and emits rays of light. This concept, originating with Plato and Empedocles, had a long history in European natural philosophy.¹³ Extromissive eye-beams were said to lance out and comingle with particles emitted from objects as well as other eye beams—though it had long been out of favor with natural philosophers by the time that he was writing *Tamburlaine*, it was the active nature of this model that still gave it currency with early modern poets, who often

¹² D. K. Smith, *The Cartographic Imagination in Early Modern England: Re-writing the World in Marlowe, Spenser, Raleigh and Marvell* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 129–35.

¹³ Working with Greek sources, Abu Yusuf Ya’qub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi further developed and perpetuated this idea in the ninth century. Thirteenth-century thinkers such as Roger Bacon and John Pecham, who developed models that were both intromissive and extromissive, continued to appeal to Al-Kindi’s wisdom on the subject. See Lindberg, *Theories of Vision*, 32.

focused on the erotic potential of the “comingling.”¹⁴ Spenser, Shakespeare, Chapman, Donne, and other sixteenth century poets frequently employed the idea to imbue the gaze with active potential, even power.¹⁵ Marlowe takes this extramissive literary tradition and applies it to the political sphere in *Tamburlaine*: the titular conqueror’s “frowning brows and fiery looks” are clearly extramissive and, as I will show, the poetic bent of Marlowe’s emphasis on the power of the gaze positions the active look as a force in the world, not only indicative of a prince’s power to remake the world as he *sees* fit but often a tool in that very process. Both senses of “looks”—as appearance and as gaze—create in *Tamburlaine* a specific framework for power.

All of the princes in the play operate within this system of looks and looking, to various degrees of success, and both senses of the word (as the two different models of sight) are often entangled as we encounter the princes considering their own power. We have already seen how Theridamas and Tamburlaine exchange appraisals of each other’s looks during their first encounter. After he joins up with Tamburlaine, Theridamas reflects on the reasons why “a god is not so glorious as a king.”

I think the pleasure they enjoy in heaven,
Cannot compare with kingly joys in earth;—
To wear a crown enchas’d with pearl and gold,
Whose virtues carry with it life and death;
To ask and have, command and be obey’d;
When looks breed love, with looks to gain the prize,—
Such power attractive shines in princes’ eyes.

(*1 Tamburlaine*, 2.5.63–64, emphasis mine)

Theridamas employs both senses of looks as he enumerates the pleasures of kingly rule: the looks that “breed love” are those of the magnificent prince—the right to rule, a “power attractive.” When subjects witness the prince’s looks, they appreciate the power invested in

¹⁴ Eric F. Langley, “Anatomizing the Early Modern Eye: A Case Study,” *Renaissance Studies* 20, no. 3 (2006): 343–44.

¹⁵ In Sonnet 1, for example, Shakespeare evokes the idea but turns it inward: “...thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes, / Feed’st thy light’st flame with self-substantial fuel” (1.5–6). Sonnet 49 likewise refers to the lover’s eye as a “sun,” in Sonnet 139 the eye has the power to kill (notably this sonnet also contains the other definition of “looks” as appearance), and in Sonnet 153 the fire of the lover’s eye rekindles Cupid’s brand. Quotations from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 5th edition, ed. David Bevington (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004). Langley locates expressions of this idea in the late sixteenth-century poetry of Richard Lynche, Edmund Spenser, George Chapman, and Thomas Lodge (“Anatomizing the Early Modern Eye,” 343–344). In *Vanities of the Eye*, Clark draws attention to the “lethal gaze” in use in Petrarchan and Platonic verse (23). See also John Hendrix, “The Neoplatonic Aesthetics of Leon Battista Alberti,” in *Neoplatonic Aesthetics: Music, Literature and the Visual Arts*, ed. Liana de Girolami Cheney and John Hendrix (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), 177.

symbols like the “crown enchas’d with pearl and gold” (appearance) and recognize his station above them as ordained by a cosmic order. On the other hand, one can easily read these “looks” again as the active gaze of a prince upon their subjects, gaining the “prize” of leadership with command.

With the rival Bajazeth and to an entirely different degree with Tamburlaine, “looks” may be a “power attractive” to entice, but they also work by invoking terror—Zenocrate’s loyalty to Tamburlaine shows some results of both of these functions. Both definitions of “looks”—gaze and appearance—also crucially involve another entity. As Theridamas’s belief about power itself suggests, “looks” in fact *rely* upon others as witnesses to the power of rule. When Emperor Bajazeth reacts to the encroachment of Tamburlaine’s forces upon his territory, the King of Argier assures him that “all flesh quakes at your magnificence.” In return, Bajazeth is quick to add “and tremble at my looks” (*I Tamburlaine*, 3.1.48–49). Bajazeth’s need to add to his servant’s statement alone is worth a second glance as a self-conscious affirmation of the prince’s power as it appears (or should appear) visually to others. The passage aligns “quakes” with “trembles,” as might be expected, but also associates “magnificence” with “looks.” Yet to “tremble,” as though in fear, is more likely to indicate being seen than looking upon something. The meaning of “looks” here is uncertain, then, and we may find reason to apply both definitions above: Bajazeth’s subjects either look upon him and tremble, or they tremble within his line of sight, affected by his gaze. The passage also reaffirms that “looks” in both senses involve others who join in a visual exchange with the prince. Clearly, this process is important to Bajazeth at a critical moment, as he steels himself and his followers for battle. We begin to see how looks and looking function as a framework in which power is gained and maintained.

Zenocrate’s visuality further establishes and elaborates this framework. Tamburlaine credits Zenocrate—his war bride—with powerful looks that can “clear the darkened sky / and calm the rage of thund’ring Jupiter” (*I Tamburlaine*, 3.3.117–22). These lines clearly complement much of Tamburlaine’s self-description: her active looks can calm his turbulent, conquering ones. In another parallel with Theridamas’s description of Tamburlaine, her extramissive eyes “are brighter than the lamps of heaven,” and she wears his crown while he is away (*I Tamburlaine*, 3.3.120). In the scene where he describes her thus, Tamburlaine leaves her to rule in his stead, relying on her to watch his success even as he considers her looks: another exchange in which power is invested primarily visually. Clearly, as with Theridamas,

Tamburlaine respects Zenocrate's looks as both appearance and active gaze. Zenocrate's death amplifies this role in *Part 2*, as her looks are literally transformed into the battle standard for Tamburlaine's armies. Having always valued her looks as central to their shared power, Tamburlaine knows that he can continue to harness them even if her agency is gone. Her "looks will shed such influence in [the] camp," we are told, "[a]s if Bellona, goddess of the war, / Threw naked swords and sulphur balls of fire / Upon the heads of all [Tamburlaine's] enemies" (2 *Tamburlaine*, 3.2.25–40). Even after death, her power lies not only in her looks as appearance (a standard) but as gaze—note the strikingly active nature of her looks that will be like thrown swords and balls of fire.

At this point, though his visuality is striking and his momentum singular, I have shown that Tamburlaine is far from the only figure in the play whose looks—in both senses—are bound up with the exercise of political power. Instead of describing a phenomenon of hollow glory tied to the tragic fate of the play's central character, the play develops, via this language of looks and looking, a visual framework of power that applies generally to all in positions of some authority and influence, including Theridamas, Bajazeth, Callapine, and Zenocrate. A brief foray into how others develop their looks brings us back, however, to the unique success of the play's titular conqueror. The remainder of this article will argue that Tamburlaine succeeds within this visual framework because he is the prince who best understands the power of looks.

We find evidence that Tamburlaine is keenly aware of the impact of his own visuality early in *Part I*. In the second scene, the stage directions indicate that Tamburlaine undergoes something of an on-stage costume change from shepherd to soldier, which he follows with the remark, "Lie here ye weeds that I disdain to wear! [...] This complete armour and this curtle-axe / Are adjuncts more beseeming Tamburlaine" (*1 Tamburlaine*, 1.2.41–43). Even at this early juncture, Tamburlaine's "aspiring mind" leads him to carefully consider his own looks and to array himself appropriately for the conquering work he is to undertake. And this choice has its desired effect: it is telling that upon seeing Tamburlaine in his armor thereafter, Techelles immediately anticipates "kings kneeling at his feet / And he, with frowning brows and fiery looks, / Spurning their crowns from off their captive heads" (*1 Tamburlaine*, 1.2.55–57). Following in the same scene, Tamburlaine has his initial exchange with Theridamas, who recognizes his powerful looks and becomes allies with him for the purposes of the coup. In this scene, the audience witnesses Tamburlaine's visual transformation grant him real power and

influence—the initial momentum that will build and sustain him throughout the rest of the play in both parts.

It is Tamburlaine’s looks that are given most space in the play, of course, and of all of his features, Tamburlaine’s eyes figure most prominently in descriptions of his might. When his looks are in focus, they vary depending on the situation and/or the viewer. They are also nearly always linked with action. One clear example of this may be found in Agydas’s description of Tamburlaine to Zenocrate, and her reply, when she admits her love for the Scythian:

AGYDAS. How can you fancy one that looks so fierce,
Only disposed to martial strategems? [...]
ZENOCRATE. As looks the sun through Nilus’ flowing stream,
Or when the morning holds him in her arms,
So looks my lordly love, fair Tamburlaine (*I Tamburlaine*, 3.2.40–41, 47–49)

Agydas turns to Tamburlaine’s famed visual ferocity as indication of the man’s character and priorities in a way that, by now, we should find familiar. Zenocrate responds with a different view of the same visual phenomenon. Both descriptions here share a kind of intensity, though of different sorts—Agydas sees terror where Zenocrate sees a kind of effulgent radiance—but both construct his character visually in the course of their conversation. These differences emphasize the subjective nature of viewing a magnificent prince like Tamburlaine. Once again “looks” carries dual meanings: both appearance and gaze are strikingly possible as interpretations in all three uses of the word here. The statements describe how Tamburlaine appears fierce or looks fiercely upon others; how the sunlight looks refracted by the Nile, or how the sun actively looks through it; and how Tamburlaine both appears and gazes in like manner.

In command, Tamburlaine cultivates the looks of his soldiers even as he uses his gaze to drive them forward. Preparing for war, he asks, “Do not my captains and my soldiers look / As if they meant to conquer Africa?” (*I Tamburlaine*, 3.3.9–10). Later, A messenger asks the Sultan in the fourth act of *Part 1* if he has seen “the frowning looks of fiery Tamburlaine, / That with his terror and imperious eyes / Commands the hearts of his associates” (*I Tamburlaine*, 4.1.12–15). The conqueror’s extramissive eye beams not only seem to direct his troops, but inspire them, as though all of their endeavors rely upon his gaze. Of course, Tamburlaine is gazed upon even as he gazes, and this visual exchange reifies a system that has placed princes like him on their thrones. Tamburlaine’s men are said shortly thereafter to be clad in armour, “threat’ning shot,” ready for war, in a visual description that Marlowe situates in a parallel construction with that of

their leader's visage (*I Tamburlaine*, 4.1.20–27). It is as if the entire structure of Tamburlaine's military establishment is constructed by his gaze, his own powerful appearance extended to the troops.

By a similar effect, in *Part 2* we see Tamburlaine maintaining the power of his court as the king of kings. As a show of loyalty before battle, Theridamas enters with a royal train but makes a show of laying his crown at the “great and mighty” Tamburlaine’s feet, calling him “lord,” the “Arch-monarch of the world” (*2 Tamburlaine*, 1.5.2–3). After enumerating the resources he brings to Tamburlaine’s attack on Natolia, Theridamas is rewarded by having his own crown ceremonially returned. The crown becomes a concrete focus for the visual exchange of power between Tamburlaine and his subordinated kings as, with an air of ritual, this pattern is repeated twice in the following scene. Each in turn, the kings of Morocco and Fez lay their crowns at Tamburlaine’s feet as they pledge their troops and resources to the coming conflict. Techelles, King of Fez, addresses Tamburlaine as their “earthly god,” claiming his looks “make this inferior world to quake” (*2 Tamburlaine*, 1.5.11–12). When Tamburlaine returns their crowns, joining with them in predicting success in the battle ahead, his gaze plays a central part in their reincorporation into his empire. If all of heaven opened wide, we are told, it would not please him more than the sight of these kings gathered before him. What Tamburlaine means, of course, is the sight of loyal and obedient kings who know their place. The audience, as those present in Tamburlaine’s chamber, is aware that the king of kings could simply keep the crowns for himself; returning them reifies the relationship between kings and arch-monarch in visual terms. This ritualistic exchange of such concrete visual objects—one in which each party elaborately describes scenes of anticipated victory in a common cause—thus underscores the extent to which Tamburlaine’s empire is established and maintained by looks.

Likewise, we note that Tamburlaine’s enemies also respond to his looks, describing the military threat posed by him and his armies in visual terms. The Sultan’s messenger advises caution that Tamburlaine’s momentum cannot be snuffed out so easily. From white, to red, and finally to black, the messenger directly links Tamburlaine to his forces, and their power to a visual symbol: each colour suggests Tamburlaine performing different levels of threat and intention of conquest (*I Tamburlaine*, 4.2.48–63). Tamburlaine himself references this colour palette; for example, when threatening the governor of Babylon, he compels him to the “view of our vermillion tents, / which threatened more than if the region / Next underneath the element of

fire / Were full of comets and blazing stars” (*1 Tamburlaine*, 5.1.86–90). Once again, Tamburlaine’s power is not only affirmed but extended through his troops, and with it, aspects of his looks—bearing, threat, and even mood in the form of colour. Even more intriguing, however, is the Sultan’s reaction to his messenger’s description of Tamburlaine. The Sultan states that he wishes to “send [Tamburlaine] down to Erebus / To shroud his shame in darkness of the night,” as though truly ridding the world of the Scythian would require that he no longer be visible—the threat that he poses is inextricable from his visual appearance (*1 Tamburlaine*, 4.2.45–46). One of the city’s virgins echoes this sentiment shortly thereafter, in a desperate prayer:

Grant that these signs of victory we yield
May bind the temples of [Tamburlaine’s] conquering head
To hide the folded furrows of his brows
And shadow his displeased countenance
With happy looks of ruth and lenity (*1 Tamburlaine*, 5.1.56–59).

The prayer beseeches the heavens to allow for this victory to sate Tamburlaine’s lust for conquest, but it does so with a request to literally shroud and alter his looks. One is reminded of Mycetes’s early attempt to deal with Tamburlaine before the conqueror can “...display / His vagrant ensign in the Persian fields” (*1 Tamburlaine*, 1.1.44–45). In these moments, it is nigh on impossible to separate Tamburlaine’s looks from his power to conquer and control others: the act of looking is the act of conquering, and the look of power is power-at-the-ready, a kind of potential energy. How striking that in this passage we do not hear these things from Tamburlaine, but from his enemies. I have emphasized that Marlowe’s visual framework for power does not only apply to Tamburlaine, that he is only the most effective in understanding and embracing the power of looks for his own ends.

In *Part 2*, Tamburlaine revisits his calculated visual portrayal of looks while instructing his sons. Two of them aim to succeed their father in the business of world conquest, but the third, Calyphas, is a more peaceful soul—quite unlike his father and brothers. Tamburlaine lays out the keys to his success, teaching all three young men the ways of warfare and how to carry on his legacy. Admonishing Calyphas, the conqueror outlines the true looks of a leader who deserves to rule Persia, claiming it to be he “whose head hath deepest scars, whose breast most wounds, / Which, being wroth, sends lightning from his eyes, / And in the furrows of his frowning brows / Harbours revenge, war, death, and cruelty” (*2 Tamburlaine*, 1.4.73–78). Later, after Zenocrate’s death, he continues the education by first suggesting they prove themselves in extreme

challenges of warfare. When Calyphas objects to this program of study, Tamburlaine responds by cutting open his own arm. “View me,” he commands as blood drips from the wound, “...Now look I like a soldier” (*2 Tamburlaine*, 1.4.110–17). The wound is meant to teach the boys to “bear courageous minds” (*2 Tamburlaine*, 1.4.129). Celebinus and Amyras immediately ask for their father to likewise wound them. These scenes illustrate Tamburlaine’s keen awareness of his own looks and their effects upon others. Moreover, they position that awareness as key to his success—if his sons are to follow in his footsteps, though martial prowess and battle strategy is important, this understanding of how to command the looks of a prince is the core of what they should learn from him.

We are reminded near the end of *Part 2* that Tamburlaine’s violent self-image is no mirage. In Act Five, the Governor of Babylon seems unshaken by Tamburlaine’s visual displays, remarking as the Scythian arrives that they have “no terror but his [Tamburlaine’s] threat’ning looks” (*2 Tamburlaine*, 5.1.23). This is a far cry from the response of most of the princes in the play who witness Tamburlaine—Babylon purports to see through this conqueror’s looks and refuses to be terrified. Yet when the moment arrives, Tamburlaine’s forces march on Babylon all the same. The governor’s payment for failing to recognize that Tamburlaine’s looks *are* his power is, somewhat appropriately, to become another display for Tamburlaine, being hung up on the walls and shot. Drawing on all of the preceding violence of the play, this passage near the end thus cements the link between Tamburlaine’s looks and deeds. His visuality is no hollow projection of power, but a very real force moving through the world. As with the cutting of his arm, the look of power here is not purely performative, but built upon real physical violence.

In the dynamic between looks as appearance and looks as gaze examined above, we find Marlowe both privileging and complicating the visuality of princely power. *Tamburlaine* was enjoying success on stage at a time when many thinkers were already beginning to doubt the “standard” Aristotelian explanation for how people visually experienced the world. The proven capacity of the mind for sensory error cast some doubt on its ability to faithfully process visual information. Likewise, a boom in the production and enjoyment of deliberate ocular illusions similarly called into question the degree to which one could trust one’s own eyes, and a pan-European obsession with demonology suggested that agents of darkness were not only capable of distorting truth by distorting one’s sensory perceptions of the world, but that this might be the

central means by which they affected humankind.¹⁶ At the same time, we must remember that early modern society prized vision as the most important of all senses. Marlowe’s dynamic mixture of both intromissive and extromissive sight, in looks as both appearance and gaze, creates a visuality in *Tamburlaine* that would be difficult to define as measurable or scientific. Nor are looks wielded with precision as swords (and words) might be. Instead, the play suggests that the link between looks and power is more deeply rooted, even instinctive, which is all the more striking when we consider that for Tamburlaine—who understands this—it enables violence, cruelty, and the conquest of the known world.

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¹⁶ See Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*.

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