

# Performative Masculinity and the Crisis of Kingship in Shakespeare's *Henry V* and Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines how performative masculinity underpins and destabilizes legitimate kingship in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* (1587–88) and William Shakespeare's *Henry V* (1599). Drawing on gender theory and New Historicist approaches, it argues that both plays stage male authority as theatrical performance rather than divinely ordained or innate virtue. *Tamburlaine* constructs an exaggerated, histrionic warrior masculinity through spectacle and rhetoric, exposing kingship as conquest-driven artifice. *Henry V*, by contrast, masters performative kingship through calculated rhetoric, disguise, and appeals to brotherhood, yet his success reveals an underlying crisis: royal power depends on audience belief and theatrical efficacy rather than essential legitimacy. The comparison highlights a shift from Marlowe's subversive spectacle to Shakespeare's more contained, patriotic performance, reflecting late-Elizabethan anxieties about monarchy, succession, and masculine authority in an age of theatrical politics.*

**Keywords:** performative masculinity, kingship, New Historicism, gender theory, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, *Tamburlaine the Great*, *Henry V*, theatricality, early modern drama

## I. INTRODUCTION

In late sixteenth-century England, the theater became a space to interrogate power, gender, and legitimacy. Both Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* and William Shakespeare's *Henry V* dramatize the rise of extraordinary male figures to sovereign authority, yet they do so through markedly performative means. Masculinity in these plays is not a fixed essence but a constructed performance—rhetorical, visual, and behavioral—that must be constantly reenacted to sustain power.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity (gender as repeated acts that constitute identity) provides a useful lens, extended here to royal masculinity: kingship emerges through staged behaviors rather than divine right alone. New Historicist criticism further situates these performances within Elizabethan concerns—succession crises, the cult of Elizabeth I's virginity, and anxieties over masculine rule in a female-led realm. *Tamburlaine*, the Scythian shepherd-turned-conqueror, embodies hyperbolic warrior masculinity through bombastic speeches and spectacular violence. *Henry V*, the reformed prince, performs ideal Christian kingship via oratory, disguise, and battlefield camaraderie. Both figures reveal a crisis: legitimate rule is theatrical, contingent on persuasion and spectacle, vulnerable to failure if the performance falters. This paper compares how each play exposes the artifice of masculine kingship, arguing that Marlowe's radical subversion gives way to Shakespeare's more ideologically managed performance.

**Methodology.** This study employs a comparative close-reading approach informed by gender theory (Butler) and New Historicism (Greenblatt), analyzing primary texts alongside historical contexts of Elizabethan monarchy and theater. Key scenes of rhetorical self-fashioning, disguise, and public spectacle are examined to reveal performative mechanisms. Secondary scholarship on Marlowe's influence on Shakespeare (e.g., theatrical borrowings in *Henry V*



from Tamburlaine) and on early modern masculinity supports the analysis. No quantitative methods are used; interpretation relies on textual evidence and contextual reconstruction.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

**Tamburlaine: Histrionic Warrior Masculinity and the Fabrication of Kingship**

In *Tamburlaine the Great*, Marlowe presents kingship as pure performance. Tamburlaine begins as a low-born shepherd but ascends through sheer rhetorical and martial spectacle. His masculinity is histrionic: exaggerated, theatrical, and self-consciously staged.

Menaphon's description in Part I emphasizes physical and visual signs of power—"Of stature tall, and straightly fashioned... Such breadth of shoulders as might mainly bear / Old Atlas' burden" (I.ii.179–85)—yet these are performative markers, not innate traits. Tamburlaine's rise depends on costume changes (from shepherd to armored conqueror), color-coded pavilions signaling wrath, and iconic tableaux like parading captive kings in his chariot.

His speeches enact performative dominance: "Nature that framed us of four elements / Warring within our breasts for regiment, / Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds" (Part I, II.vii.18–20). This rhetoric constructs masculinity as aspirational theater—Tamburlaine performs the role of world-conqueror until the audience (onstage and off) accepts it as reality.

Kingship here faces crisis because it lacks divine or hereditary sanction. Tamburlaine seizes crowns through force and persuasion, exposing monarchy as artifice. His sons' effeminacy in Part II ("This effeminate brat") contrasts his hyper-masculine performance, underscoring that kingship requires constant reenactment; failure to perform leads to collapse. Marlowe's play thus subverts traditional hierarchies, presenting masculine authority as dangerously theatrical and unstable.

**Henry V: Managed Performance and the Legitimation of Kingship** Shakespeare's *Henry V* refines this theatricality into a more controlled performance. Henry masters the art of performative kingship, using rhetoric, disguise, and spectacle to legitimize rule. The famous speeches—"Once more unto the breach" (III.i) and *St. Crispin's Day* (IV.iii)—are virtuoso acts of persuasion, transforming a weary army into a "band of brothers." Henry performs ideal masculinity: warrior, orator, Christian king. Yet the play reveals artifice: he disguises himself as a common soldier before Agincourt, testing loyalty and exposing the gap between royal persona and private self. The Chorus repeatedly reminds audiences of theatrical limitations—"Can this cockpit hold / The vasty fields of France?" (Prologue)—mirroring Henry's need to stage his legitimacy. His claim to France rests on tenuous Salic law arguments and performative conquest, echoing Tamburlaine's self-made empire. Unlike Tamburlaine's unchecked spectacle, Henry contains performativity within patriotic and divine frameworks. Victory at Agincourt is attributed to God, masking the constructed nature of his authority. Still, crises emerge: soldiers question the king's responsibility for souls (IV.i), and the *Eastcheap* lowlifes parody heroic masculinity. Henry's success depends on audience belief—much like an actor's.

**Comparative Crisis: From Subversion to Containment**

Both plays expose kingship as performative, but differ in ideological outcome. Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* revels in subversion: masculine power is violent spectacle without moral anchor, challenging Elizabethan divine-right ideology. Shakespeare's *Henry* contains this threat, channeling performativity into national unity and providential victory—reflecting late-1590s anxieties over succession and Irish wars.

Marlowe's influence on Shakespeare is evident: echoes of Tamburlaine's rhetoric appear in Henry's oratory, and the chariot motif recurs metaphorically. Yet Shakespeare tempers Marlowe's radicalism, offering a more stable (if still fragile) model of masculine kingship.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

*Tamburlaine the Great* and *Henry V* reveal early modern kingship as inherently performative. Masculinity must be staged through rhetoric, costume, and action; failure to convince audiences precipitates crisis. Marlowe exposes the



artifice radically, portraying self-made rule as thrilling yet anarchic. Shakespeare manages the crisis, presenting performative kingship as necessary for national strength.

These plays reflect Elizabethan theater's role in negotiating power and gender amid political uncertainty. Future research could extend this analysis to other histories or consider performance adaptations. Ultimately, both texts remind us that sovereignty, like gender, is enacted—not given.

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