Having seen the persistence of medieval patterns in the secular drama of the Renaissance, we should not be surprised to find a distinctly medieval tinge to the plays of Christopher Marlowe. And yet Marlowe’s own life was so controversial, so downright violent in its storms of fortune, that it has always been tempting to view him as an arch-rebel mocking the old beliefs and exposing the old traditions as shams. Indeed, the temptation is a valid one; but in order to mock a belief, one must first take it seriously.

It is not the purpose of this discussion to try to settle the question of whether Marlowe intended his plays to encourage the “aspiring mind” or to warn against the dangers of “self-conceit”; such arguments have been developed elsewhere without any two critics’ ever coming to an agreement. Rather, for our purposes, it will be sufficient to examine the ways in which Marlowe used an old form for new purposes, the medieval Summons and Judgment in the “modern” context of Tamburlaine and Doctor Faustus.

There can be no doubt that Tamburlaine, even in Part I of the two-part play, is meant to appear audacious in the highest degree; a major portion of the first play is concerned with world-daring and god-daring boasts, with implied blasphemies and charges of blasphemy. But there is actually very little explicit
blasphemy until act 5, and that little is usually spoken by Tamburlaine’s enemies, either while bemoaning their own fate or while attributing blasphemous sentiments to Tamburlaine:4

_Bajazeth:_ Ah, villains, dare ye touch my sacred arms?  
_O Mahomet! O sleepy Mahomet!_  
_Zabina:_ O cursed Mahomet, that makest us thus  
_The slaves to Scythians rude and barbarous!_  

(I: 3.3.268-71)

_Cosroe:_ What means this devilish shepherd to aspire  
_With such a giantly presumption,_  
_To cast up hills against the face of heaven,_  
_And dare the force of angry Jupiter?_  

(I: 2.6.1-4)

Bajazeth’s and Zabina’s exclamations against Mahomet, of course, hardly carry the force that Tamburlaine’s will carry in Part II; the Turkish rulers have not yet become the pitiful suicides of act 5, and Elizabethan audiences would have been delighted to see the false god of Islam mocked and disthroned. As for Cosroe’s accusation, Tamburlaine has not yet “dared” Jupiter verbally but has, rather, claimed him as a model of behavior:

_Tamburlaine:_ The thirst of reign and sweetness of a crown,  
_That caus’d the eldest son of heavenly Ops_  
_To thrust his doting father from his chair_  
_And place himself in the empyreal heaven,_  
_Mov’d me to manage arms against thy state._  
_What better precedent than mighty Jove?_  

(2.6.12-17)

Tamburlaine’s own role, as he sees it in most of Part I, is not as a darer of gods but the beloved of God, “the scourge and wrath of God” who has been sent to overthrow the Turk (3.3.44–47) and conquer earthly princes. Although he rapidly forgets his holy mission, subordinating it to his own dreams of earthly glory, he continues to perceive himself as God’s anointed, for whom the heavens themselves will be turned in their courses:
Tamburlaine: The chiefest God, first mover of that sphere
Enchas’d with thousands ever-shining lamps,
Will sooner burn the glorious frame of heaven
Than it should so conspire my overthrow.

(4.2.8-11)

But that Tamburlaine was indeed seen as an atheist is evident from the spate of imitation Tamburlaines who appeared on the Elizabethan stage. Selimus, in particular—the eponymous hero of the 1594 play now attributed to Robert Greene—adds outspoken defiance of all gods to his echoes of Tamburlaine’s boasting. And Selimus is obviously meant to be a successor to Marlowe’s world-conqueror; if his actions alone do not make the message clear, references to Tamburlaine throughout the play, and the appearance of “Tonombey, Usan-Cassano’s son” (l. 2419), most definitely tell the audience where to look for precedents. Selimus’s aspirations certainly sound like echoes of Tamburlaine’s:

Selimus: But we, whose mind in heavenly thoughts is clad,
Whose body doth a glorious spirit bear,
That hath no bounds, but flieth everywhere,
Why should we seek to make that soul a slave,
To which dame Nature so large freedom gave?

(Selimus, II. 349-53)

Tamburlaine: Nature that fram’d us of four elements,
Warring within our breasts for regiment,
Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds.
Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend
The wondrous architecture of the world
And measure every wand’ring planet’s course,
Still climbing after knowledge infinite,
And always moving as the restless spheres,
Wills us to wear ourselves and never rest.

(Tamb., I: 2.7.18-26)

Unlike Tamburlaine’s, however, Selimus’s words follow closely upon what may be one of the boldest statements of atheism on the Renaissance stage:
Selimus: Then some sage man, above the vulgar wise,
   Knowing that laws could not in quiet dwell
   Unless they were observed, did first devise
The names of Gods, religion, heaven, and hell,
   And 'gan of pains and feign'd reward to tell....
Whereas indeed they were mere fictions,
   And if they were not, Selim thinks they were:
And these religious observations
   Only bugbears to keep the world in fear.

(326–36)

But this is Tamburlaine’s imitator speaking, not Tamburlaine himself. For Marlowe’s audience, Tamburlaine’s “atheism” must have been an impression gained more from his actions than from his words. Much of the impression, to be sure, may be attributed to his rise from obscure birth to become a challenger of the established order, a disrupter of the hierarchy of kind given by God; even more may be attributed to his successful defiance of the rule of Fortune, that medieval quasi deity who herself had come to seem a Scourge of God in the Renaissance de casibus collections like Mirror for Magistrates. But most of all, it may spring from the ways in which Tamburlaine, either consciously or unconsciously, assumes the role of God in sending Death and Judgment.

Tamburlaine is frequently described physically as an emblem of Death. Menaphon, for example, tells Cosroe that “His lofty brows in folds do figure death” (I: 2.1.21) and Agydas turns this “figure” into a more literal emblem after he has received one of Tamburlaine’s death-dealing frowns:

Agydas: Upon his brows was portray’d ugly death,
   And in his eyes the fury of his heart,
   That shine as comets, menacing revenge,
   And casts a pale complexion on his cheeks.

(I: 3.2.72–75)

The glowing eye-sockets and pale countenance described here are reminiscent of descriptions of our old friend, the Dreary Death, just as Tamburlaine’s king-drawn chariot of Part II will evoke memories of the Triumph of Death.
It soon becomes clear, however, that Tamburlaine himself is not Death but rather the sender of Death. The dying Cosroe refers to Death first as Tamburlaine’s henchman and then as his “harpy”:

Cosroe: An uncouth pain torments my grieved soul,  
And Death arrests the organ of my voice,  
Who, entr’ring at the breach thy sword hath made,  
Sacks every vein and artier of my heart.  
Bloody and insatiate Tamburlaine! . . .  
... and now doth ghastly Death  
With greedy talents gripe my bleeding heart  
And like a harpy tires on my life.  

(I: 2.7.7-11, 48-50)

And Tamburlaine himself refers to Death as his “servant” (I: 5.1.117), later boasting of the trouble to which he puts this servant: “Where’er I come the Fatal Sisters sweat, / And grisly Death, by running to and fro / To do their ceaseless homage to my sword” (I: 5.1.454-56).

A generation of playgoers whose memories include both the moral interludes of Elizabeth’s reign and tales of the banned morality and mystery plays—playgoers whose churches were decorated with the Dance of Death and whose very hands displayed memento mori rings—could hardly fail to recognize, if only subliminally, the godhead that Tamburlaine assumes when he sends forth Death, his mighty messenger.

Agydas’s suicide in 3.2 of Part I, then, becomes an inversion of both the Summons and the Ars moriendi. After he has tried to dissuade Zenocrate from marrying Tamburlaine, not realizing until too late that Tamburlaine has been listening (a ubiquitous and omniscient God?), Agydas sees the frown on Tamburlaine’s face and immediately interprets it as his “soul’s overthrow” (3.2.87), in the death-emblem terms we have already noted. His interpretation is correct. Techelles and Usumcasane enter with a dagger, and Techelles says, “See you, Agydas, how the king salutes you. / He bids you prophesy what it imports” (3.2.88-89).
"The King" has indeed sent mighty messengers, and the "naked dagger" (S.D. 3.2.88) may as well have been a dart.

What follows is even more noteworthy. Agydas, upon receiving the Summons, makes no attempt to fight or fly; he recognizes its inevitability, greets it with the resigned fatalism of a character in the Dance, and implements the Summons by stabbing himself with the dagger. But his self-slaughter is not viewed as an act of cowardice or despair; Usumcasane refers to it, rather, as "manly," and declares that Agydas will now be given a "triple-worthy burial" (3.2.109-12), one of the few decent burials afforded to any of Tamburlaine's victims.

Why is Agydas's suicide "honorable," and the later suicides of Bajazeth and Zabina merely pitiable? Perhaps because Agydas has shown the proper behavior according to the humanist Treatise of Dieyng Well. Lupset, we remember, emphasized the need for courage in the face of inevitable death: "Let vs then take a lusty courage of this desperation, seinge there is no remedy: lette vs manfully go to it" (280). And Lupset, too, praised the exemplary pagan, Canius, who: "playde with deathe, and shortly his quiete harte gaue a foule checke mate to the tyrantes crueltie: he shewed hym selfe to be in spirite as farre aboue all kynges violente power, as these myghtye princes thynke to haue a stronge dominion ouer all theyr subiectes" (267-68). Agydas in like manner rejoices in his ability to stay "the torments he [Tamburlaine] and heaven have sworn," and to "wander free from fear of tyrant's rage" (3.2.99; 102), showing his "lusty courage" in the "manly" act of suicide. He does not rage or beg like Bajazeth; he does not wait until desperation overrides his love of life; like Canius, he manfully goes to it.

By itself, of course, this scene does not create the echoes of death literature that give Tamburlaine his aura of godhead. Nor do the deathlike descriptions of Tamburlaine alone suffice, or his own boasting of his power over death; both, after all, may be considered part of the tradition of the heroic beat—or even, as in the case of the King of Life, a sign of weakness. But the tents of Tamburlaine, and the emblematic properties that he assigns
to them, may very well raise him to the Judgment throne that he has not yet explicitly claimed for himself.

On the first day of a siege, when Tamburlaine pitches his white tents, mercy and forgiveness are offered to all who will repent. On the second day, when the tents are red, noncombatants receive mercy, but those who have offered resistance to Tamburlaine are slain. And on the last and fatal day, when the tents are black and Tamburlaine rides forth in his black clothing, the time of mercy is over; all will perish. John P. Cutts has speculated that the progression of colors—white, red, black—may be reminiscent of the sequence of the horses sent out in Revelation, a prelude to the sending forth of Death. Charles G. Masinton notes further that Elizabethan audiences associated black not merely with a progression toward death but with death and evil themselves. But there is more, emblematically, to the tents of Tamburlaine than a progression of color or a progression toward death; there is also a progression of damnation.

In this context, the white tents carry the warning of the Legend: although you have sinned, it is not too late; repent, amend your lives, and you will be saved and cherished by the mercy of God. The red tents, too, may be viewed as a second chance in either the Catholic or the Protestant sense: the evil that you have done must be purged away (whether in Purgatory or through the death of the sinful body), but the soul that has placed its faith in Christ will be rescued from eternal death. In this sense, the “guilty” civic leaders and “innocent” citizens may represent the deathbed debate between body and soul, in which the body (Governor) “dyes gladlye” to release the soul (governed) from earthly prison or eternal torment. And the black tents? To a generation steeped in traditions of the Four Last Things, those black tents could suggest nothing less than the moment after Divine Judgment.

That Tamburlaine himself sees his black tents in this light is evident from his famous speech to the virgins of Damascus:

Tamburlaine: Behold my sword; what see you at the point?

1 Virgin: Nothing but fear and fatal steel, my lord.
Tamburlaine: Your fearful minds are thick and misty, then,
For there sits Death, there sits imperious Death,
Keeping his circuit by the slicing edge.
But I am pleas'd you shall not see him there.
He now is seated on my horsemen's spears,
And on their points his fleshless body feeds.
Techelles, straight go charge a few of them
To charge these dames and show my servant, Death,
Sitting in scarlet on their armed spears.

(I: 5.1.108-18)

The first image of Death that he presents to his victims is that of a judge "keeping his circuit." But, he adds, he is "pleas'd" (like a "predestinating" monarch or deity) to turn the judgment over to his "horsemen"—and here, in the image of the charging horsemen with death on their spears, it is easy to envision the four horsemen of Revelation to whom Cutts alludes in his note on the progression of tent colors. We remember, surely, the charging horsemen in Dürer's Apocalypse, and the bodies falling beneath their horses' hooves. There hardly seems to be a doubt in Tamburlaine's mind about his right to send forth the apocalyptic horsemen, or about whose "mighty messenger" Death has become. The Summons to Judgment has been sounded, and Tamburlaine has spoken.

Indeed, the refrain of the Last Judgment plays—"too late!"—echoes through all the talk about Tamburlaine's black tents. The virgins of Damascus, before they make what they know to be an ineffective plea for mercy, have remonstrated with their Governor in these terms:

1 Virgin: If humble suits or imprecations . . .
Might have entreated your obdurate breasts
To entertain some care of our securities
While only danger beat upon our walls,
These more than dangerous warrants of our death
Had never been erected as they be. . . .

(5.1.24-32)
We might easily be listening, here, to the cries of the damned—or to the bitter complaint of Soul to Body. And Tamburlaine himself answers the virgins’ plea with a contrast between the “sweet mercy” of his “milk-white flags” and the “terror” of his “coal-black tents,” explaining to them, as though their fate were a thing predestined by God, that their entreaties are now “too late” (5.1.67–73).

I do not mean to suggest that Marlowe shaped his whole play around an analogy with the Creation and Last Judgment plays of the Mystery cycles; had he wished to do so, there were precedents enough to make a convincing Devil of Tamburlaine, precedents more obviously used by the author of Selimus. But the echoes of Judgment remain in sufficient quantity to have shocked Elizabethan audiences, and it is small wonder that these audiences demanded a sequel to the play; they could hardly leave Tamburlaine on the throne of God without wanting to know “what happened next.”

What happened next was the fall of Tamburlaine, the translation of a sender of Death into a receiver of Death.

Tamburlaine does not “dye gladlye” in Part II. In fact, his death is a travesty on the counsels of dying well given by medieval Catholic, Renaissance Christian humanist, and Calvinist alike. Unlike Everyman, he never progresses beyond the stages of denial, anger, and bargaining; and unlike Lupset’s Canius or Strode’s dying Christian, he never develops a sense of nonchalance or humor. If anything, his conquering spirit creates a new kind of double bind for the dying man: there is one “lean conqueror” whom no mortal can defeat, and the more one tries, the more ineffectual the battle appears.

The seeds of Tamburlaine’s ways of dying have been planted as early as 2.4 of Part II, in which Tamburlaine rages against the death of Zenocrate. According to the traditions of the deathbed, everything that he does here is not only wrong but backward. Like the Consolers in the N-Town Lazarus, rather than comforting Zenocrate he rages so that she must comfort him, and she must also give him the required deathbed instructions that he should be giving her:
Zenocrate: I fare, my lord, as other empresses,
That, when this frail and transitory flesh
Hath suck'd the measure of that vital air
That feeds the body with his dated health,
Wanes with enforc'd and necessary change.

For, should I but suspect your death by mine,
The comfort of my future happiness
And hope to meet your highness in the heavens,
Turn'd to despair, would break my wretched breast,
And fury would confound my present rest.
But let me die, my love, yet let me die;
With love and patience let your true love die.
Your grief and fury hurts my second life.

(2.4.42-46; 61-68)

But while Zenocrate is composing herself to die, and trying
to compose her husband, Tamburlaine continues to rage in a manner that suggests that he is afflicted more by the affront to his own honor than by sorrow for the dying Zenocrate. When he speaks of "pale and ghastly death" now, it is of the "darts [that] pierce the center of my soul" (2.4.83-84; emphasis added), not Zenocrate's; and after Zenocrate has died, he rails at the Fates whom he formerly termed his servants:

Tamburlaine: What, is she dead? Techelles, draw thy sword
And wound the earth, that it may cleave in twain
And we descend into th' infernal vaults
To hale the Fatal Sisters by the hair
And throw them in the triple moat of hell
For taking hence my fair Zenocrate.

(2.4.96-101)

His rage grows worse and worse, as he threatens to make war on heaven, reviles the "amorous Jove" who is cuckolding him by stealing Zenocrate to be "queen of heaven" (2.4.107-08), and, in a rush of fetishistic or sympathetic magic, orders that the town where Zenocrate died be burnt to the ground. Marlowe's audience would hardly expect, as their Catholic ancestors would have done, Tamburlaine to offer up prayers and good works for Zenocrate's
soul; such practices were by now looked upon as papist superstition. But they would certainly expect him to erect a noble monument, in Renaissance style: a human work of beauty in stone, paint, or poetry to keep Zenocrate’s fame immortal before the eyes of the world. Instead, Tamburlaine gives the world dust and ashes, mortality rather than immortality. And Zenocrate’s “statue” (2.4.140), placed in the wreckage, will make her a hated symbol of the devastation, an ironic memento mori in her own right.

The truly noble monument, which he keeps only for his own viewing, is itself a misuse of the traditional symbol. Zenocrate is to be embalmed and placed in a gold coffin, which Tamburlaine will take with him everywhere, and which, in fact, he will demand to have near him as he himself is dying. She thus becomes for him a perverted memento mori of another kind: one that will cause him, not to remember death, but to forget it: “Though she be dead, yet let me think she lives” (2.4.127). To be sure, he may have been provoked into this excess, originally, by Theridamas’s premature counsel that does not allow for normal grieving: “Ah, good my lord, be patient. She is dead, / And all this raging cannot make her live” (2.4.119–20). But his subsequent actions—the portage of the coffin and his addresses to it—show that in fact he does continue to deny the separation that death entails.

We who have inherited both the Jacobean and the Caroline versions of this raging, and the modern Romantic’s injunction to “Rage, rage against the dying of the light,” may applaud Tamburlaine’s violence in the face of death. Certainly, George Chapman, who so obviously modeled his ultraheroic protagonists on Marlowe’s mighty line, applauded it; Byron, for example, goes raging to his own death for nearly two hundred and fifty lines, meanwhile bargaining, railing against injustice, and threatening to slaughter the executioner and bystanders alike:

Byron: Out, ugly image of my cruel injustice!
Yet wilt thou be before me? Stay my will,
Or by the will of Heaven, I’ll strangle thee!

Vitry: My lord, you make too much of your own body,
Which is no more your own.
Nor is it yours;
I'll take my death with all the horrid rites
And representments of the death it merits;
Let tame nobility and numbed fools
That apprehend not what they undergo,
Be such exemplary and formal sheep.\textsuperscript{12}

We may assume, then, that the Jacobean transformation indicates approbation of Tamburlaine's behavior. But did Marlowe himself feel such unqualified approbation? The sources and structure of Part II suggest that he did not.

Both Eugene M. Waith and Douglas Cole have likened Tamburlaine to Seneca's Hercules and have seen his raging in the light of Senecan convention.\textsuperscript{13} But Cole further points out that such excess of emotion is generally a mark of weakness in Seneca, and that "Tamburlaine's companions . . . are related to the Senecan line of rational confidantes [sic] who try to calm an impassioned sufferer" (110). And the fact that Marlowe gives Tamburlaine an extra opportunity to rage against death—Zenocrate's death does not appear in Marlowe's sources\textsuperscript{14}—may be an indication that there is meant to be a note of ironic warning in the first opportunity: a variation, misapplied by Tamburlaine, of the old Legend.

The contrast, too, of other deaths with Tamburlaine's in Part II points up a failing in the heroic posture. As we have noted, Zenocrate herself, a model of right, makes a "good" death. She accepts the inevitability of mortality ("I fare, my lord, as other empresses"), cautions Tamburlaine against the deathbed temptations, counsels her children, and turns with hope to heaven. Although hers is not an explicitly religious death, it would have satisfied Renaissance Christians; she is an exemplum of faith, patience, hope, and courage. Since there is no remedy, she bravely (one is tempted to say "manfully") goes to it, and dies during the playing of music, that Renaissance symbol of harmony.

Olympia and her young son also provide patterns of dying against which Tamburlaine's may be measured. Like Agydas in Part I, Olympia chooses death before dishonor; to prevent capture and torture by Tamburlaine's men, she resolves to kill her
son “gently . . . and quickly” (3.4.24-25) and then commit suicide. Her son “manfully” agrees:

_Son:_ Give me your knife, good mother, or strike home;
The Scythians shall not tyrannize on me.
Sweet mother, strike, that I may meet my father.

(3.4.28-30)
The resolution shown by both Olympia and her son, who are at this moment standing over the body of Olympia’s dead husband, is particularly interesting when it is compared with the reaction of Zabina in _Part I_, who goes mad when she discovers her husband dead. Olympia allows herself only four lines of mourning (an apostrophe to “ugly Death” in 3.4.11-14) before she turns her attention to what must be done next, so that her decision to die seems a result, not of an excess of grief, but of a rational process of thought.

This is not to suggest that Olympia is totally cold in her response to death. Her four-line apostrophe to the personified figure is almost as emotional as Tamburlaine’s longer one:

_Olympia:_ Death, whither art thou gone that we both live?
Come back again, sweet Death, and strike us both!
One minute end our days, and one sepulcher
Contain our bodies! Death, why com’st thou not?

(3.4.11-14)
But this emotion, like Magdalen’s in the _N-Town Lazarus_, is catharsis rather than despair or denial. And Olympia’s attempted suicide is obviously not meant to be mistaken for despair, because before she turns the knife on herself, she calls upon her god for pardon almost in the manner of the medieval Moriens:

_Olympia:_ Ah, sacred Mahomet, if this be sin,
Entreat a pardon of the God of heaven
And purge my soul before it comes to thee.

(3.4.31-33)

Although Olympia’s attempt is interrupted and she does not die until she later tricks Theridamas into killing her, she receives
the same accolade for her attempt as Agydas did for his success—
Techelles's exclamation that "'Twas bravely done" (3.4.37). Interest­ing enough, when Theridamas and Techelles lead her away to Tamburlaine, from what they think death to what they think life, Theridamas's words suggest that they are preparing her for death-in-life. Like the grim summoner in the Dance of Death, he tells her, "you must go with us—no remedy" (3.4.79), and she responds in kind:

Olympia: Then carry me, I care not, where you will,
And let the end of this my fatal journey
Be likewise end to my accursed life.

(3.4.80-82)

It is tempting to claim Sigismund, along with Zenocrate and Olympia, as another "good" death, but I cannot agree entirely with Douglas Cole, who takes Sigismund's dying speech at face value: "Sigismond [sic] looks upon his affliction not only as a punish­ishment, but as a way of spiritual purgation; his prayer is that the physical pain of his wounds and death will be accepted by God, along with his personal contribution, as satisfaction for his sin of perjury."

It is true that Sigismund says all the correct things at the moment of death; he appears to have acknowledged his sins, repented, done penance, and asked God for mercy:

Sigismund: O just and dreadful punisher of sin,
Let the dishonor of the pains I feel
In this my mortal well-deserved wound
End all my penance in my sudden death;
And let this death, wherein to sin I die,
Conceive a second life in endless mercy.

(2.3.3-9)

But when Orcanes enters afterward, not having heard this death­bed repentance, Marlowe creates a set of dramatic ironies that must be absorbed either by Orcanes or by Sigismund. Sigismund is now dead and cannot speak for himself or make restitution to the living. Orcanes, unaware of Sigismund's "state of grace," if such it be, consigns Sigismund's soul to Hell and his body to
beasts of prey, denying him a decent burial. And perhaps most significant of all, Orcanes takes what he assumes to be Sigismund's damnation as a sign of Christ's power, becoming, if not a convert to Christianity, at least a respecter of Christ who defends His power against the doubts of a skeptic:

Orcanes: What sayest thou yet, Gazellus, to his foil,
Which we referr'd to justice of his Christ
And to His power, which here appears as full
As rays of Cynthia to the clearest sight?
Gazellus: Tis but the fortune of the wars, my lord,
Whose power is often prov'd a miracle.
Orcanes: Yet in my thoughts shall Christ be honored,
Not doing Mahomet an injury,
Whose power had share in this our victory.

(2.3.27-35)

There is certainly a good deal of ambiguity in this scene. If Sigismund is saved and Orcanes mistaken, then Orcanes's quasi conversion is based on error and Christ is made to look ineffectual. On the other hand, if Christ has manifested Himself in the defeat of Sigismund, and Orcanes is correct about his damnation, then Sigismund's repentance is as dubious as all such deathbed repentances had become in the current treatises on dying. Furthermore, Gazellus's skepticism about such cause-and-effect "miracles" will later add to the ambiguity of Tamburlaine's burning of the Koran and subsequent illness. Is Tamburlaine's death a form of retribution from heaven? Or merely a "fortune of the wars" and his own choleric nature? And is it really blasphemy to repudiate a false god in what seems to be a tentative quest for the Almighty? Tamburlaine says:

Well, soldiers, Mahomet remains in hell;
He cannot hear the voice of Tamburlaine.
Seek out another godhead to adore—
The God that sits in heaven, if any god,
For He is God alone, and none but He.

(5.1.196–200)
Surely such a test (and failure) of a false god would be familiar to Marlowe’s audience, who had biblical examples before them of the prophets who had challenged the false gods in similar ways.16

But only fifteen lines later Tamburlaine is struck by a sudden illness, which later proves fatal. Roy W. Battenhouse has pointed out that theological tracts of the time viewed acts of sacrilege against even false gods as comprising religious impiety, and that “Calvin had said that if idolaters lift themselves up against their own forged gods they thereby show themselves contemners of all divine power.”17 Cole, however, sees the scene with the Koran as Marlowe’s way of satisfying Elizabethan audiences both ways:

Given the terms of this challenge... it would be unreasonable to expect lightning to strike at this precise point, for that would “prove” Mahomet a deity. By introducing the first traces of Tamburlaine’s affliction some lines later... Marlowe has perhaps solved the problem of showing some kind of retribution for Tamburlaine’s overreaching pride and inhumanity while avoiding the implication that Mahomet is responsible for it.18

But neither of these viewpoints explains the shock effect of the scene, or, for that matter, the incongruity of the contrast between Sigismund’s retributive death and Tamburlaine’s. In the first, the true God’s hand is believed to be present in the visible world of battle but absent in the invisible world of the soul. In the second, the false god’s hand is believed to be absent in the visible world of the burning of the Koran but present in the invisible world of Tamburlaine’s malady.

Ambiguity heaped upon ambiguity—it is small wonder that so much scholarly ink has been spilled in an effort to understand Tamburlaine’s death. Even the Governor of Babylon adds to the confusion. When first confronted by his own death, he SPLUTS: TAMBURLAINE-like defiance at his captors:
Governor: Vile monster, born of some infernal hag
And sent from hell to tyrannize on earth,
Do all thy worst! Nor death, nor Tamburlaine,
Torture, or pain can daunt my dreadless mind.

(5.1.11-13)

But the moment Tamburlaine (like Mephistophilis) threatens to tear his flesh ("up with him, then! His body shall be scarr'd" [5.1.114]), the Governor begins to bargain for his life, much in the manner of Everyman, Doctor Faustus, Chapman's Byron, and Tamburlaine himself. And like all his fellow bargainers, he finds his bargaining to be in vain.

To enumerate all the ways of dying in Tamburlaine, Part II, would be both tedious and virtually endless; even Susan Richards, in her excellent study of the subject, has had to select and summarize more than I have done here. Like a Renaissance Dance of Death, Marlowe's play takes an almost infinite variety of personalities through their mortal paces to the grave, ending with Tamburlaine, the "kynge liggying dede & eten with wormes."20

And Tamburlaine, for all his boasting, makes almost as bad a death—given the standards established in the rest of the play—as does the Governor of Babylon. Although he has earlier claimed that "Sickness or death can never conquer me" (5.1.220), his deathbed raging is a form of denial and bargaining that violates the standards for a courageous death set forth in the death literature of the Middle Ages and Renaissance alike. Theridamas, like the religious treatises on dying, must counsel him to "leave these impatient words" (5.3.54), to stop denying and "grudging against" the word of God and the lot of humankind. Techelles, next, must remind him of Lupset's counsel on the stoical acceptance of pain: "Sit still, my gracious Lord; this grief will cease / And cannot last, it is so violent" (5.3.64-65).21 But Tamburlaine pays no attention to either of them.

Toward the end, Tamburlaine attempts to find immortality both in heaven and on earth, but his hope of heavenly immortality is vested in the gods whom he has already repudiated, and the earthly, in sons whom he must pretend to be parts of himself:
Tamburlaine: In vain I strive and rail against those powers
That mean t' invest me in a higher throne,
As much too high for this disdainful earth. . . .
My flesh, divided in your precious shapes,
Shall still retain my spirit, though I die,
And live in all your seeds immortally.

(5.3.120-22; 170-72)

Unfortunately, much of this equivocal acceptance sounds a bit like “make-do,” coming as it does so closely on the heels of the most convincing part of his raging: his diatribe to Death, a speech made directly to the familiar, personified “ugly monster” of the Dances:

Tamburlaine: See where my slave, the ugly monster, Death,
Shaking and quivering, pale and wan with fear,
Stands aiming at me with his murdering dart,
Who flies away at every glance I give,
And, when I look away, comes stealing on.
Villain, away, and hie thee to the field!
I and mine army come to load thy bark
With souls of thousand mangled carcasses.
Look, where he goes! But see, he comes again
Because I stay. Techelles, let us march
And weary Death with bearing souls to hell.

(5.3.67-77)

Medieval audiences would undoubtedly have seen a great deal of futility in such a speech, reminiscent as it is of the “bad” responses of the Legends and the Dances. Had Everyman, Humanum Genus, or the King of Life responded in this way, his soul would have been damned to Hell; denial of death admits of no repentance. But that was in another century; and besides, the age was dead.

Tamburlaine’s duel with the medieval skeleton is, in fact, symptomatic of the feverish duel of contrasts in the Elizabethan age. The very bravado that typifies such figures as Sidney, Ralegh, and Gloriana herself may be called—if the anachronism will be forgiven—a form of future shock, in which human society must
run as fast as it can simply to stay in the same place, and twice  
as fast to get anywhere. In such a promising young age, one can  
either fulfill the promise or stay young; Time the Destroyer keeps  
one from doing both. Defeat is inevitable; but one cannot admit  
to defeat.

We have seen, in earlier chapters, how the figure of Death  
gave way to the figure of Time toward the end of the sixteenth  
century, while Death as a personage became an artistic figure of  
fun. Tamburlaine's own mockery of the "ugly monster" is part  
of this tradition—but there is something more dreadful than the  
skeleton that is overtaking Tamburlaine, something that he has  
been fighting throughout both parts of the play: mutability. And  
"fighting" is the operative word.

By assuming the role of Death-sender, Tamburlaine has  
denied the inevitable from the first scene of Part I. He has trans­  
lated his own fear, and the fears of his audience, into a role of  
action in which he is always sending death away from himself;  
and only in such carnage can he be safe. As G. K. Chesterton's  
Guthrum, the great leader of the Danes in The Ballad of the White  
Horse, was to explain it centuries later,

"The heart of the locked battle  
Is the happiest place for men;  
When shrieking souls as shafts go by  
And many have died and all may die;  
Though this word be a mystery,  
Death is most distant then.

"Death blazes bright above the cup,  
And clear above the crown;  
But in that dream of battle  
We seem to beat it down.

"Wherefore I am a great king  
And waste the world in vain,  
Because man hath not other power,  
Save that in dealing death for dower,  
He may forget it for an hour  
To remember it again."22
Like Guthrum, Tamburlaine is happiest when he is wading in blood "up to the chin" or instilling in his sons the joy of doing so (II: 1.3.69–101; 3.2.95–129). His response to the death of Zeno-crate is to burn and pillage; and his response to his own impending death is to threaten men and gods alike with bloody wars. But despite his half-believed declaration that the last battle with Callapine will "recure" him (5.3.105–06), when he returns from the field his condition worsens and he remembers death again. At the last, like Guthrum whose "heart fail[ed] thereat" (229), he must "read what is written / So plain in clouds and clods" (230); and with his last breath he utters the moral of the Legends and the Dances: "For Tamburlaine, the scourge of God, must die" (5.3.238).

Is Tamburlaine's death, then, cautionary or exemplary? Probably both. Marlowe himself seems to have delighted in eliciting horrified gasps from his countrymen, whether he believed his own bold statements or not; and he also seems to have discovered that part of the horrified gasp is grounded in a perverse admiration: humankind's repressed wish to "get away with murder" even while it condemns the murderer. Such a gasp had certainly made the comic Vice popular in the old Moralities; and such a gasp was enough to make the outrageous Tamburlaine outrageously popular. There may indeed be a moral implicit in the death of Tamburlaine. But it can easily be drowned out by the gasp.