

HOMOPHOBIA IN MARLOWE'S *EDWARD II*

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Drawing on queer theory, this essay demonstrates how homophobia motivates the plot of usurpation in *Edward II*, by Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), a play in which complex power relations can be verified. The main characters, King Edward II, Pierce of Gaveston, Mortimer Junior, Mortimer Senior and Queen Isabella, together with the nobles and the clerics, interact in a world of fierce political dispute. Power relations are at the core of the play and involve, on the one hand, the characters who envy and dispute Edward II's royal power. On the other hand, the king suffers the effects of the power of his own homosexual drive and affective ties with Gaveston.

As the drama advances, the nobles and clerics carry on their actions to usurp Edward's kingship. Ironically, Edward himself contributes in his own decadence as a result of subverting an established social order, both because of his homosexual behavior, and because of the transgression against his body politics,¹ so that his antagonists take advantage of the political consequences of his homosexual relation. Bredbeck, for example, explains that the presence of Gaveston, a plebeian, breaks down the temporal body to the body politics:

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Homoeroticism is foregrounded as a temporal or fleshly weakness and thereby becomes the sign of stigma that can remove the story of Edward from the realm of the body politic to the realm of the temporal body (56)...For Gaveston, the prospect of a homoerotic reunion with Edward already intermingles the temporal and the politic, and the broad division of the king's two bodies in other tales here becomes a conscious conflation of them. In a lengthy vision of his life with Edward, Gaveston delivers a passionate idyll of mythological love...(58)

Gaveston, therefore, represents a threat to the established order, since his relationship as Edward's minion intermingles the temporal and the political dimensions, with a dominance of the first one over the latter. Edward, as a result of being led by his individual nature and ignoring his body politic, becomes a weaker King as he, rather than meeting political demands, enjoys a plebeian life with Gaveston.

This problem is brought to Edward's attention and he receives several warnings. Lancaster tells him to "Learn then to rule us better and the realm." (I, iv, 39) With the clerics, Canterbury also demands: "Either banish him [Gaveston] ... or I will presently discharge these lords of duty and allegiance due to thee." (I, iv, 60-2). Edward, however, arrogantly threatens everyone: "I will have Gaveston, and you shall know what danger 'tis to stand against your king" (I, i, 96-7).²

Such behavior of Marlowe's character Edward II appears to be coherent with the historical King who, according to Rowse, neglected his public role: his individual nature was not inclined to politics and "found the ways of politicians unbearably boring" (4). Because Edward is incapable of wielding his royal power due to his deep feelings towards his minion Pierce of Gaveston, their affair becomes a major reason for the peers to depose the King and, consequently, usurp his power.

This thesis is supported by Bray, who draws on John Taylor's narrative of the reign of Edward II in his book *The English Monarchs* to

emphasize the idea that Edward's fall was due to his "immoderate love" for Gaveston (26). The King's love also is an act of offence against the established social order because it violates the Judeo-Christian institution of heterosexual marriage. The nobles and the clerics needed a strong reason to challenge Edward's position in order to transfer his royal power to someone who would really meet the humanist ideal of kingship, which, according to Skinner, "tended to endorse the familiar 'quattrocento' assumption that the highest ambition for any leading members of a commonwealth should be that of attaining honour, glory and fame" (234).

Although the King's homosexual relationship was used to weaken him, Sterling explains that Edward was not doing anything unusual by relating with Gaveston and deferring his own wife. What made Edward lose his power to his opponents was that his "adulterous affairs cause[d] the monarch to neglect his kingly responsibilities and prosperity of his nation ... [he] loses power and dies because he cannot balance his love for his minion with his duties as king" (Sterling 111-112). Sterling also shows that the king's favorites "control[ed] patronage, receive[d] innumerable expensive presents, flaunt[ed] their power and insult[ed] the hereditary nobles"(102).

In addition to restating the problem of violation of the body politic, Sterling argues that homosexuality was common during the Renaissance, so that homosexual relationships between kings and their minions were an accepted aspect of courtly intimacy. Sinfield also explains that homosexual affairs were not a problem as two individuals of the same social class related (42). Yet the various presents given to Gaveston by the King, even a noble title, provoked and alarmed the court. As soon as the nobles and the clerics perceive how unstable and weak Edward becomes when Gaveston is far from him, they decide to put pressure on both of them by exiling Gaveston. As early as the first act, Mortimer Senior says that "The king is love-sick for his minion" (I, iv, 87). Thus, homophobia emerges as a dominant response to the King's incapability to govern and allows for the conspirators to achieve their

goal of deposition. Knowing how much Edward adored his minion and lover, they begin their plot by separating Gaveston from the King, which unsettles him emotionally and weakens him. Edward's sadness and melancholy just reinforce his incompetence to exert his royal role and thus Mortimer Senior and Mortimer Junior advance their actions to see Edward deposed. Early in the play, for instance, Mortimer Junior already supports the rejected Queen using a patriotic discourse: "Madam ... the king shall lose his crown, for we have power, and courage too, to be revenged at full" (I, ii, 56, 59, 60). They plan to bring Gaveston back to England, in order to "accidentally" murder him. The Queen joins the conspirators as she perceives their plan as a necessary action, accepting Mortimer's point of view: "This which I urge is of a burning zeal, to mend the king and do our country good" (I, iv, 256-7).

Their immediate objective is to destroy their relationship through Gaveston's death and weaken Edward at once. Yet the first attempt fails. In order to achieve their goal of deposition, they often claim that Edward is not a king, loving Gaveston more than his country and his people. Textual evidence supports the fact that the nobles and clerics react strongly to Edward's actions. Mortimer Junior, for instance, speaks openly against the King and his lover: "The idle triumphs, masks, lascivious shows, and prodigal gifts bestowed on Gaveston have drawn thy treasure dry and made thee weak ..." (II, ii, 155-7). Mortimer Junior further reinforces his point of view: "Thy court is naked, being bereft of those that makes a King seem glorious to the world. I mean the peers whom thou shouldst dearly love" (II, ii, 172-4). Finally, Mortimer Senior tells his nephew to "Leave now to oppose thyself against the king. Thou seest by nature he is mild and calm, and seeing his mind so dotes on Gaveston. Let him without controlment have his will" (I, iv, 386-9).

Gaveston's vulnerability is gradually accentuated through a catalogue of homophobic qualifiers. In Act I, scene iv, Gaveston is blamed as a traitor, a villain, a plague, a detested vile torpedo, vain, basely born. In Act II, scene v, he is further blamed as a disturber of the country's peace, a corrupter of the king, a base flatterer, shame and

dishonour to a soldier's name. Lancaster actually calls him "monster of men"(II, v, 14). Gaveston is finally killed and Edward swears revenge: "I will have heads and lives for him as many as I have manors, castles, towns, and towers. Treacherous Warwick! Traitorous Mortimer!"(III, ii, 132-4). Yet Edward ends up weakened, alone, and does not succeed in revenging his lover, while his new minions, the Spencers, are persecuted and killed, too. Through these events, homophobia is seen as a political strategy used by those who want to achieve power. The construction of the homophobic discourse is associated with the scapegoating of a King who is considered weak to exert power.

At this point in his life, Edward has no one else to help him nor to trust. He is completely alone and has no more strengths to do what he has never done, to exert his royal power. If, as Foucault argues, an individual is led by the strength of his most powerful drive, Edward falls pray to his own emotional drive, while Mortimer Junior rises because he is motivated by his political drive(20). Ribner compares Mortimer Junior to the Machiavellian hero, who is capable of managing his instincts to achieve and wield power, while Edward lacks the royal virtues that would enable him to remain in control.

The split of the temporal and political bodies, which has served as an excuse to condemn the King is obvious at Edward's fall. Mortimer Junior and the Queen, supported by the other nobles and clerics, rush to move their plan on by deciding to take off their path anyone who can mean a danger to their plan to attain the royal power. They kill the king's brother, Edmund, leaving the royal prince, Edward, alive. After imprisoning the King, they tell Lightborn to kill him in a way nobody else can see how. Edward is horribly murdered by an insertion of a hot poke into his anus.

When Mortimer Junior and Isabella, with the nobles and clerics, think that their plan has been completed, the enthroned king, Edward III, decides to revenge his father and condemns Mortimer Junior. Although Mortimer Junior's attitude can be justified by his peers as a heroic act in destroying those individuals accused 'of unnatural

behavior' by the nobles and the clerics, his condemnation implies a reversal in the conspiracy action. Mortimer is beheaded for the crime he has committed against Edward II. Isabella, the new king's mother, is imprisoned in the tower until her judgement day.

By constructing the plot thus, Marlowe seems to suggest that homosexuality cannot be perceived as immoral in this play. The beheading of Mortimer in effect indicates that the conspiracy against Edward was unjust, even though Edward's powerful feelings for Gaveston reinforced his incapability to govern, blinding his reason and making it impossible for him to realize the political situation around him.

It becomes more understandable as one draws on Bredbeck's explanation regarding the construction of homophobic discourse. Bredbeck compares Marlowe's *Edward II* with Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* where the same sort of homophobic discourse is found against Patroclus (33). In order to intervene in Patroclus' ascension, a discourse against his homosexual behavior is created to block his path (34). Homophobia again serves the purposes of the powerful class to stratify society and forbid those who ascend politically to continue their way up the hierarchy of power. In Marlowe's *Edward II*, a similar discourse is used against Gaveston, mainly because his ascension subverts both the social and the political orders.

The homophobic attitude against Edward and Gaveston is ultimately punished as Edward III reacts to what has been done to his father. Edward III's condemnation of the conspirators leads the reader to perceive that the murder of Edward II is not justified by his homosexuality. Otherwise, why would a 'hero' [Mortimer] be executed? Mortimer's and the nobles' and clerics' conspiracy was motivated by their clear craving for power. Marlowe's play shows us that homosexuality was persecuted not because of itself, but because of the existence of a plan to make power remain in the hands of those who could maintain the established social order at any price.

In Marlowe's *Edward II* the price is Edward II's and his lover's deaths. Edward III's attitude conveys the playwright's dramaturgical solution concerning the unjust homophobic opposition and execution that Edward II suffered. In addition, there is a topical significance in this choice: one sees an argument made quite openly by Marlowe against the illegality of homosexual relationships since the reign of Henry VIII.

It is relevant to remember that Marlowe lived during the reign of Henry VIII's daughter, Queen Elizabeth I. Marlowe, then, by mixing characters of different times, created a plot that is topically dense. In it, Edward III's reaction to what happened to his father can be read as a subtle reaction to the homophobic discourse which had been held by the dominant class in England since the early 1500s. Ribner, in his compilation of Marlowe's works, addresses the insertion of characters who were not contemporary to Edward II's reign. Marlowe also took advantage of the historical facts of Edward III's decision to condemn his father's opponents in order to establish his own topical perspective. It can be concluded that Marlowe's *Edward II*, besides exposing the complexity of monarchical power relations, develops a counter-discourse against homophobia.

Notes

- 1 "Body politics" is everything regarding the royal role, not only of the King himself but of all the State affairs which concern him as the representative of a nation. See Bredbeck, 1991 and Kantorowicz, 1957.
- 2 All quotations from Marlowe's *Edward II* are from the Ribner edition, 1963. The references indicate the Act, scene, and line numbers of this edition (ex. I, i., 96-7).

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