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# Staging Sex or Fighting Foreignness? Marlowe's Edward II as Xenophobic Drama

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STAGING SEX OR FIGHTING FOREIGNNESS?  
MARLOWE'S *EDWARD II* AS XENOPHOBIC DRAMA

by

James Douglas Baker

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## ABSTRACT

### STAGING SEX OR FIGHTING FOREIGNNESS?

#### MARLOWE'S *EDWARD II* AS XENOPHOBIC DRAMA

by James Douglas Baker

December 2015

Christopher Marlowe's drama *Edward II* has long been known for its representation of a close male, arguably homosexual, friendship between King Edward II and his favorite, the French Piers Gaveston, as well as their union's negative effects on the court. Indeed much criticism exists on the common belief that the characters' relationship is problematic in early modern England both because the two characters are male and because there is an obvious class divide. However, critics seem to have overlooked Gaveston's being French, even in light of the massive immigration to England during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This paper examines Marlowe's play as a xenophobic portrayal of a Frenchman and as a shrewdly reactionary push against immigrants from Catholic nations. To achieve this goal, Marlowe stages a play whose dealings are as political as they are sexual. Starting with Gaveston's undue sense of power in the first act and ending with the king's historically gruesome death-by-poker scene, *Edward II* leaves its audience aware that a life dedicated to a foreigner ultimately ends in death from a foreigner.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my older sister, Janie Baker, whose role as my sibling rival in large part drove me to write this thesis because I had to make up for losing to her undergraduate GPA by one-one hundredth of a point. Perhaps now she will consider the two of us on a level playing field.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Eric Tribunella for his guidance and insight during the time it took me to write this project. It took considerable patience on his part helping me work through multiple drafts of an argument that drastically changed since its beginning stages. Moreover, I owe a debt of gratitude to Drs. Jameela Lares and Mark Dahlquist, both of whom contributed a great deal of information and feedback in getting this thesis where it is now. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Luis Iglesias and the members of my research class from the spring of 2015, all of whom contributed invaluable criticism that really fueled the daunting but fruitful turn this argument took.

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## CHAPTER I

## STAGING SEX OR FIGHTING FOREIGNNESS?

MARLOWE'S *EDWARD II* AS XENOPHOBIC DRAMA

Christopher Marlowe's longest and most controversial play, *The Troublesome Reign and Lamentable Death of Edward the Second* (c. 1594), is significant for its representation of a problematic relationship between newly-crowned but incredibly ineffectual King Edward II and his lower-class favorite, the Frenchman Piers Gaveston, who arguably becomes the king's co-ruler as he quickly achieves and exercises power in the court, even over other nobles. This dynamic and abrupt political shift signifies the broader concern—both within the play's setting and in the minds of the playgoers—of a non-aristocratic foreigner's gaining access to the king and to the English government. The drama concerns both Edward II and Gaveston's relationship and the issues of nationality and political power or the lack thereof. *Edward II* lends itself to an ongoing discussion of power and nationality in the early modern English court. Other history plays generally place kings in one of two categories: strong and stalwart like Shakespeare's Henry V, or weak like Richard II. *Edward II* depicts the consequences of sovereign weakness but through a more specific lens: the king's relationship with a male French foreigner, a type of relationship unseen in other early modern dramas. This essay adds to the ongoing discussion about *Edward II*'s tacit and even debatable inclusion of a sexual element and attempts to provide a new reading that focuses on the intersection of class and nationality instead of on sex and of sexuality in the play.

*Edward II* opens with the French Piers Gaveston reading a letter from King Edward II that discusses the former's invitation to return to England after a period of

banishment under the late Edward I. Much to other aristocrats' dissatisfaction, the king quickly grants Gaveston a position of power and luxury, making him Lord Chamberlain over all men, a rank that Gaveston abuses in order to mark his dominance over other nobles such as the bishop and Mortimer Junior, whom he threatens to kill when his status is questioned. Edward II's infatuation with Gaveston leads him to ignore his political duties and grant his favorite power to the extent that the king loses his sovereignty. Instead of ruling with power, Edward II views himself as an equal to this non-aristocratic Frenchman, as "another Gaveston" (1.1.143). Gaveston then uses his power to attempt to banish those who question his problematic level of power in the court, threatening to make them "remain" outside the court without consulting the king (1.3.5). In turn, the other nobles conspire against and ultimately banish the king's favorite, thinking such a forceful action will cause the king to rethink his priorities. But Marlowe's representation of Edward II's weakness, his inability to rule with absolute sovereignty, as both a king and person, is obvious as the play's resolution approaches; the king's concurrent insistence that Gaveston not kneel before him but rather see him as an equal and his obliviousness regarding the Frenchman's negative effect in the court show that the favorite has "made [Edward] weak" (2.2.159). Even after Gaveston's banishment, the king reasserts his weakness by quickly naming Gaveston's replacement, Spencer Junior. Highly dissatisfied still, the conspiring earls, led by Queen Isabella and the virile Mortimer Jr., execute Spencer Jr. and persuade henchmen Matrevis and Gurney to arrange the king's gruesome death at the hands of the sadistic Lightborn. Once the conspirators execute their plan to murder the king, Prince Edward (now King Edward III) takes the throne and avenges his father's death by punishing the queen and Mortimer Jr.,



whose actions also display both taboo extramarital sex and its resultant power imbalance. Above all, the relationship between the queen and Mortimer Jr. also can be traced back to the original threat posed by one specific Frenchman who leads to all other chaos in the play in that Gaveston's role causes the king to ignore his wife.

Criticism of *Edward II* tends to look at the possible sexual relationship between the king and his favorite as the root cause of the court's issues, and critics debate whether Marlowe employs an accepting and seditious view of homosexuality or a scornful and hegemonic one. Queer readings of the play stem from both the queen's cry "I will endure a melancholy life, / And let [the king] frolic with his minion" (1.2.67-68), Mortimer Sr.'s assessment that the king's "mind so dotes on Gaveston" (1.4.388), and act V's gruesome execution scene, where in some editions Edward II dies from a hot poker shoved into his anus. Indeed viewing these occurrences in tandem with one another and focusing on the phallic nature of the poker lends some credence to the claim that the play represents, Edward's possible homosexuality.

However, such focus on sexuality in *Edward II* has caused critics to overlook another major issue that the drama presents: that of a foreigner's immigration to England and his quick and deleterious rise to power. I contend that this play constructs a way of seeing and staging the political effects that nationality, class, and biological sex demonstrate in the court, especially when they intertwine. *Edward II* portrays the early modern English fears of alien intrusion by focusing on Gaveston's foreignness and his being from birth a non-aristocratic male. I argue, moreover, that Marlowe's staging of this sort of anti-French xenophobia takes the specific form of an intimate friendship because this type of alliance shows that immigration carries with it certain dangers that

transcend those posed by military battles, which are fought externally and at greater distance from the court itself. Edward II and Gaveston's "forbidden intimacy" (Bray 42) is problematic not because it suggests a same-sex sexual relationship, for which there is no concrete textual evidence, but rather an issue of power transposition between men of different ranks and nationalities.

Current theoretical scholarship regarding *Edward II* exists in two main threads that both nonetheless hinge on an attribution of homosexuality and/or sexual desire to the king. David Stymeist claims that on the one hand, some ardent queer theorists view Marlowe as a "political subversive . . . [for he] critiques the scapegoating of homosexuals in his plays" (236). Gaveston's banishment and murder and Edward II's foul death at the hands of Lightborn reflect not only the other earls' ire but also feelings similar to the modern conception of homophobia, such as when Mortimer Jr. insists that he desires to "in the chronicle enroll his name / For purging the realm of such a plague" (1.4.270). This "plague," however, is not explicitly defined, though Stymeist interprets it as interchangeable with homosexuality. Stymeist also argues that the king's sexual distractions or passivity due to Gaveston's influence and attractions detract him from his duties as a royal husband, and Marlowe engages the play to align with the conspirators. Stagings of the death-by-poker scene arguably convey his own feelings regarding what the king and Gaveston have disputably done, as Marlowe reinforces "the use of the sodomite as a public scapegoat to police status and gender normativity" (Stymeist 248). Moreover, the play draws attention to the fact that Edward II has only produced one potential heir and leaves the queen to eventually "frolic" (1.2.68) with Mortimer Jr., a

more assertive man, though he too poses a problem insofar as he is of a lower social status.

Overall, Stymeist suggests that the play's representations are "inherently and invariably 'contained' by early modern ideology concerning sexual aberration"; the tacit portrayal of sex throughout *Edward II* is "strategically ambivalent" and can therefore be either seditious or hegemonic (236-37). What is more observable, I argue, is that the text does not hesitate to represent Edward II as a weak king, driven by personal interests over national welfare. Much like King Richard in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Edward II is "pliant" and poetic rather than strong and exacting: "Music and poetry is his delight" (1.1.53-54). Throughout the drama Edward II's poetic, dreamy demeanor leads to his ultimate downfall<sup>1</sup> as he concerns himself with matters of personal interest instead of the court and the nation's wellbeing. The king's nonaggressive temperament sets the stage for the sexual exploits that then lead to Gaveston's undue and unmerited authority. Overall the king's pleasure-seeking tendencies, such as his desire to "frolic with [his] dearest Gaveston" (1.4.73), override his sense of national duty and create inequity and tension within the court.

While Stymeist outlines both strands of inquiry into *Edward II*, other critics have argued on behalf of the play's either seditious or hegemonic treatment of same-sex desire. Ian McAdam argues that the work "invites no easy or comfortable moral judgment of the king" and therefore espouses a more hegemonic, negative view of Edward II and

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Rambuss aligns himself with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's claims in a discussion that links poetic forms with "compromising entanglements of same-sex desire" (254). This critical move does not make accusations based on what is at best implicit; however, it does set the stage for—and indeed draws closer attention to—the tenuous but commonplace linkage of Edward II's demeanor and his alleged homosexuality.

Gaveston's union through a homophobic or normative approach (208). The intense focus on the king's and Gaveston's punishments suggests that Marlowe is admonishing sodomy. Edward II's possible engagement in same-sex sex, moreover, signifies a loss of virility and "self-cohesion" (Stymeist 221). Because Edward II's alliance with Gaveston directly begat his enervation insofar as he continuously positions himself as subservient to a foreign, non-aristocratic Frenchman, he suffered alongside his court and the English as a whole. To that end, Mortimer Jr.'s empowerment throughout the play marks him as the king's foil—a strong medieval warrior with clear political interests and indeed also a heterosexual alliance with the queen. But while Marlovian critics, such as McAdam and Stymeist, discuss the important issues of sex itself, the implications of Edward's subordination to Gaveston are as much political as they are sexual since a focus on the homosocial relationship does not take into consideration Gaveston's being foreign and non-aristocratic. I argue that his national origin and status make his presence and alliance with the king even more objectionable.

While Stymeist and McAdam employ their queer theoretical approaches to *Edward II*, Andrew Lumsden adds a crucial point in the discussion of sex in Marlowe's drama: we should not "automatically ascribe our assumption that an impassioned male friendship entails genital sex" (28). To Lumsden, Edward II and Gaveston are "not lovers at all . . . [but] . . . blood brothers in the military style" (29). It is necessary, then, to distinguish between close friendship and outright homoeroticism. *Edward II* does not necessarily portray homosexuality but rather a relationship that is ambiguous and based on the value of platonic male friendship. Such claims regarding Edward II and Gaveston's union have "more to do with the homophobia of subsequent ages than with

Edward's own rule" (29). In fact, Marlowe's source, Holinshed's *Chronicles*, states that Gaveston was in the king's "high favor" but does not describe sexual contact between Edward II and his favorite (546). The problem that because homosexuality, even in the twenty-first century, still carries negative connotations, some stagings and readings assume that the play focuses on this issue as taboo. *Edward II* may appear to be "about" homosexuality, even though the play's political concerns are subject to much more interpretation. Because society still hesitates to accept homosexuality, it is still common to render this play controversial because it portrays two men being intimate, even though Edward II's political passivity and close alliance with a foreigner are the drama's chief concern.

Jonathan Goldberg comes closer to moving away from reading the play in exclusively sexual terms, instead more generally "recogniz[ing] Marlowe as a site of political resistance" (141). To be sure, Marlowe's play is intensely political, dealing with an immigrant and his effects in the court, whether or not these effects come from a sexual relationship with the king. In fact, Goldberg usefully posits that there "is nothing improper in [Gaveston's] relationship with the king," but rather that the favorite "has not remained in his proper place" (121). Goldberg's crucial addition to the ongoing conversation about *Edward II* questions "the criticism that invidiously defines homosexuality as an overindulgence in female pleasures" (138). After all, the accusations against the king involve both "frolic[king] with his minion" (1.2.68) and receiving a hot poker in the fourth scene of act V. But the conflation of these types of "female pleasures" and homosexuality is problematic because it assumes an orientation based on discrete activities. Goldberg's assessment that Marlowe "is defending sodomy" and actually

scorning those who execute the “sodomites” (124) means that there exists another cause or other causes for the play’s taboo representations of and punishments for the king and Gaveston’s alliance. But while I agree with Goldberg’s assessment that Marlowe’s play concerns itself as much with polity as with sexuality, I argue that Marlowe stages the play primarily in terms of xenophobia through Gaveston and is therefore still conservative in its overall approach, reinforcing the early modern opinions about the need to protect English culture from outsiders. Indeed, Marlowe’s play is seditious when it comes to a representation of sex—Goldberg has clearly identified that claim—but in another locus Marlowe pushes a xenophobic agenda: one against the foreigner, especially because he becomes an empowered male ruler who is not the king or even an English noble.

Even between heterosexual couples, this type of imbalanced alliance proves to be problematic since it involves a superior-consort relationship that overbalances that of the king and queen. Mortimer Jr. and Queen Isabella also are subject to early modern charges of misconduct since their relationship violates a class distinction and proves ruinous in the court and for the nation. However, their relationship is less emphasized because they adhere nonetheless to a normative cross-sex union and because Mortimer is a member of the English court. So the linkage between the king and his favorite on the one hand and the queen and Mortimer Jr. on the other largely stems from the issue of sexual relations that lead to mismatched and overextended power dynamics. Biological sex of course proves to be important in *Edward II* but mostly insofar as it violates social and political boundaries. The king’s same-sex alliance with Gaveston and the queen’s cross-sex relationship with Mortimer Jr. are cases in which biological sex makes the power imbalance both easier to succumb to and therefore more problematic.

And although I argue that nationality is as important as sex in the play, it is important to understand how critics have arrived at their arguments about homosexuality. In *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, Alan Bray highlights the most crucial claim regarding same-sex intercourse and relationships more generally during the early modern era: “To talk of an individual in [the early modern period] as being or not being ‘a homosexual’ is an anachronism and ruinously misleading” (16). That is, discursive concepts such as sexual orientation and gender identity did not exist. However, same-sex relations were primarily rendered taboo inasmuch as they sometimes crossed economic, authoritative, or other social boundaries and were against church law. Same-sex sex among members of dissimilar groups was condemned “not primarily because these relations [were] effeminizing, and not at all because they were homosexual, but because they reverse[d] hierarchies based on class” (Findlay 233). I argue that Findlay’s strong language provides for a sweeping generalization. Considering Castlehaven’s execution for rape and sodomy in 1631, it can be said that the issues of class surpassed those of sex. These precepts apply to Marlowe’s play, and I argue that the notion of nationality factors greatly into the taboo of Edward II and Gaveston’s relationship, given the political setting of the court. To examine what could be sexual intercourse between the king and Gaveston is limited theoretically and historically, for there is much to consider in terms of early modern Englishmen’s view of Gaveston’s qualities—French, Catholic, male, and non-aristocratic—that exist independently of any sexual act.

The question then arises from which sources Marlowe obtained this information to write and stage his drama. Marlowe’s historical information comes chiefly from

Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*<sup>2</sup>, which had a major impact on both playwrights, including and especially Shakespeare and Marlowe, and also on the early modern public more generally. Holinshed traces Gaveston's effects on King Edward II's reign from its beginning, when Gaveston returns to England from his exile in France and becomes "received . . . into most high favor," and gaining the status "lord chamberlain of the realm" (546). Here Holinshed establishes that Gaveston's status as the king's favorite sets him up for undue political power that is made even more excessive by his recent banishment from England. Holinshed traces Gaveston's effects as he continues to exercise his power in the court, stating that because of the favorite, Edward II "gave himself to wantonness" because he "furnished his court with . . . flattering parasites" who "had his nobles in no regard" (546). Much like the play itself, Holinshed moves quickly as he describes a rapid but crucial chain of events that leads to the king's execution. Once he establishes that Gaveston had been exiled and that the nobles still decided that the king's wanton "practices would not serve their turn," Holinshed describes the execution scene in which the killer "thrust up into his body a hot spit," leading to a "cry [that] did move many within the castle and the town of Berkeley to compassion" (587). Holinshed's final description of the king not as a failed sovereign (though he was) but rather a victim of punishment proves to be a strategic, xenophobic move. The descriptions of Gaveston's contagious debauchery incriminate the French favorite more

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<sup>2</sup> Critical editions of Marlowe's works, including but not limited to Vivien Thomas and William Tydeman's *Christopher Marlowe: The Plays and their Sources* (1994), attribute an overwhelming majority of the playwright's claims to Holinshed, with only minute attention to other chroniclers, such as Edward Hall and John Stow.



so than the king himself, and here the *Chronicles* almost condone the Englishman's iniquity because he is seemingly victimized by circumstances.

Society's opinions about foreign aliens reinforce Marlowe's treatment of the French Gaveston further. A general sort of xenophobia pervaded Renaissance London, to the extent that citizens displayed a perpetual "fear of fraudulence and debasement" (Kermode 127). To that end, all constituents guarded themselves against outside threats. They feared other governments, especially those associated with the Catholic Church, and also infiltration created by heightened immigration. In fact, such fears were so widespread that Lloyd Kermode credits to this society an overarching anxiety of "English inferiority" (21). Garrett Mattingly considers the dual effect of England's defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, which both fueled patriotism and heightened a veritable "hatred of foreigners" (346). The protection of England from alien influences stemmed from both pride and anxiety of losing such confidence. This fear of the alien also inhibited English travel to other lands, meaning that alongside xenophobia existed a feeling of insularity. Sara Warneke posits that contact with strangers inside or outside England "revealed a deep sense of vulnerability" (14). The English were as scared to leave England as they were of foreigners entering the nation because they were afraid to bring any foreign qualities back to their homeland. Citizens believed that they had to preserve their Englishness on both personal and national levels in order to counter the seeming threats of interlopers, and these fears stemmed from governmental and religious roots.

Much of this disdain stemmed from the post-Reformation aversion to Catholicism, and so religious matters greatly affected early moderns' opinions of foreigners, considering the numerous struggles between England and other European

nations, chiefly Spain, Italy, and France. For example, early modern scholar Roger Ascham (1515-1568) warned against travel to and association with Italy based on his voyage to Venice. Calling the Italians “condemners of marriage” and accusing them of “secret countenances,” Ascham still argued that these detestable qualities were still “not so great as this of Religion,” (234) which of course existed in France and Spain, both of which already threatened England militarily.

England’s overall adoption of Protestantism serves as another reason for the opposition to the influx of immigration during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Even after the Elizabethan Settlement of Religion, which extended a degree of tolerance to English Catholics, many believed that these recusants who wished to “return . . . to the old Catholic faith,” had or would gain the support of powerful Catholic nations, such as Italy, France, and especially Spain (Unwin 20). This intra-national anxiety only fueled England’s xenophobia and fear of foreigners, and Laura Hunt Yungblut states that even though Elizabeth I’s Settlement called for such a compromise between Protestants and Catholics, the commoners’ fears of a Catholic overthrow existed also in the court, especially given the violently anti-Protestant beliefs of Mary Queen of Scots, Elizabeth’s staunchly Catholic cousin, and the effects she might have on the Protestant nation. But knowing that England could act as a refuge for Protestants from other countries, the court “publicly supported the strangers” as they provided a safe haven for refugees from other nations (Yungblut 4). This move, however, was more politically savvy than it was truly accepting. Elizabeth wanted to keep the peace more so than her sectarian relatives, but fears nonetheless existed that affected “Elizabeth’s foreign policy considerations”: “the greatest suspicions centered around the issue of national security and the machinations of

Catholic powers to overthrow Elizabeth” because of the growing violence between Protestant natives and Catholic immigrants (Yungblut 2, 132). The English government, once the provider of a safe haven for aliens, became skeptical of their presence. Therefore, I argue that even the more tolerant political approaches to immigration still proved to be more complex than accepting. The court also had ulterior motives or concerns but at the dissatisfaction of English commoners, which led to resentment toward aliens in the court itself.

The English government sought potential advantages from these immigrants’ arrivals in their country. According to Yungblut, Elizabethan immigrants “differed in significant aspects from those of earlier periods” (5). Many of these foreigners were “urban artisans with a wide variety of technological skills, a potentially great boon for a country that was technologically backwards compared to its Continental neighbors” (Yungblut 5). The court sought to capitalize on these successful emigrants’ skill levels and craftiness. In this regard, foreigners contributed to England’s sense of and potential for commercial superiority. However, Yungblut also establishes that commoners could gain little benefit from these new arrivals, who threatened them in the marketplace (10). Foreign craftsmen, moreover, sought to live where their professional English counterparts resided, and so there were pockets where the demographics fluctuated. This “concentrated settlement” made society look like it had changed dramatically in terms of residents’ national origin (Yungblut 9). Newfound competition between the English and the immigrants for trade and sustenance traveled up the socioeconomic ladder and by and large overturned the possible benefits these foreigners provided. Yungblut states that this dynamic “fuel[ed] latent xenophobia” throughout England (9).

Seeing Kyd's, Marlowe's, and other playwrights' representations of foreigners on the stage, then, was just as political as the issue of immigration itself. These dramas reinforce E.M.W. Tillyard's idea that concept of *order* constituted "one of the genuine ruling ideas of the age" (vii). The Elizabethans did indeed propose a hierarchy that explained life, and I argue that in order to achieve this idea of order, the early modern English sought to maintain distinct groups based on class and nationhood. And this issue of maintaining order due to fear of the alien became even more important when considered with the different religious backgrounds that these foreigners—often from France or Spain—posed on the overwhelmingly Protestant nation.

Historians can point to early modern drama's representation of these Catholic nations in order to unearth the interrelationship between this time period's literature and sense of polity. Shakespeare's *Henry V* employs an anti-French sentiment, and this move is fitting, considering both the play itself and early modern England were involved in political unrest with France. The Chorus demonstrates this specifically anti-French view: "The confident and over-lusty French / Do the low-rated English play at dice" (3.0.18-19). *Henry V* establishes a dichotomy between the haughty and disdainful French and the seemingly downtrodden English, and this contrast calls attention to France's dangerous anti-English politics. *Henry V*'s use of "propaganda" (Henke and Nicholson 212) by way of the Chorus scorns France while simultaneously upholding England by comparison: "the Chorus . . . bolster[s] an initially shaky sense of English solidarity by presenting the French as infantile, boastful, and indulgently arrogant, in contrast to the sturdy honesty and forthright courage of an exemplary English-leaning Fluellen and a Welsh-inclined king" (Henke and Nicholson 212). The stage works to isolate the dangerous French from

the independent but allied nation of Wales. This strategic move of championing an independent Protestant nation bolsters the religious-political divide between England and its Euro-Catholic counterparts. It is one problem to deal with the “infantile” French internationally and politically, but it is an entirely new and more difficult battle if these troublesome Catholic foreigners continue to fight personally, as Yungblut states, with Protestant natives in their rural villages, where it would be difficult to send military troops due to their isolation and ubiquity (132).

Indeed any exceptions to early modern drama’s xenophobia include positive representations of Protestant nations. For example, Scott Oldenburg usefully notes that some early modern literature takes a more progressive approach to the rising immigration of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but to make such an argument, he overlooks English attitudes to immigration from Europe’s Catholic nations. From the Welsh parson in Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to the Dutch shoemaker in Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, there are comical, lighthearted, and positive representations of immigrants, hence their existence in comedies that are “inclusive rather than xenophobic” and that suggest that “English itself . . . is a multicultural project” (Oldenburg 100). It is important, however, to note that these examples of tolerance of immigrants come from positive representations of characters from Protestant nations. Even in Oldenburg’s representation of and argument for a less partisan, more accepting England than history generally admits, the nation’s treatment of foreign Catholic nations presents itself as an issue too complex for this assessment to be holistic. One needs only to look at a contemporary document from London’s Court of Common Council, published in 1606, to see that Oldenburg’s claims are exceptions to the rule rather than

the rule itself. Concerned with the physical brawls between the English and the immigrants and the aliens' Catholic influence, officials submitted a proposal that would "prohibit all strangers borne, and forrainers, to use any trades, or keepe any maner of shops within this citty, liberties and freedoms thereof" (Windet 1). This document represents the sentiment found in the historical and literary representations of foreigners—especially Catholic ones—in Elizabethan England. Although some dramas were more accepting of and positive about aliens, by and large the people and the government expressed partisan and xenophobic sentiments.

One such example of early modern drama's dealings with Catholicism is Marlowe's underappreciated but at the time popular *The Massacre at Paris*—a play that does not "scapegoat the French" but rather "rhetorically joins French and English Protestants in a battle against Catholic forces" (Oldenburg 16-17). Here we see that even a nuanced approach to early modern English xenophobia still takes issue with an important quality that many foreigners demonstrated, and that issue of course is Catholicism. Oldenburg also discusses *The Jew of Malta*, *Tamburlaine*, and *Doctor Faustus* as Marlovian examples of the anti-religious sentiments that would later affect Marlowe's textual treatment of foreigners. Oldenburg claims that Marlowe's dramas exemplify "a rebelliousness against nature itself," with plays comprising both "anti-Protestant" and "anti-Catholic" elements (64-65). To be sure, both *The Jew of Malta* and *Doctor Faustus* present condescending views of Christianity, through the Christians' ruthlessness toward Barabas and overall representation of atheism, respectively. The *Tamburlaine* plays go even further with respect to polity as the shepherd Tamburlaine captures other nations and engages in warfare that transcends national origin and

arguably represent England's thirst for war and empire (Oldenburg 63-65). In this case, *Tamburlaine's* take on nationality is that England is the problem, not the more vulnerable foreign nations.

Oldenburg addresses a great deal of the Marlovian canon but does not discuss *Edward II*, which is rooted in historical fact and did not appear on stage until the mid-1590s. Marlowe did not stage *Edward II* until after *The Spanish Tragedy* had time to establish the blending of cultures and nationalities. *The Massacre at Paris*, Marlowe's only other play with specific historical roots and *Edward II's* only successor, overlooks the specific issue of immigration due to its focus on the religious massacre itself, leaving only *Edward II* as a specific example of Marlowe's dealings with immigration to England. Moreover, the antagonist's characteristics epitomize early modern England's anxieties. *Edward II* presents the favorite Piers Gaveston as a figure that the early modern English would have feared in that he is from a staunchly Catholic, pre-Reformation France but manages to gain power and status from the king.

So through a nationalistic lens, *Edward II* adopts a conservative worldview, with the French Gaveston's excessive level of power representing a national anxiety with which the audience would identify. Seeing Edward II as a political companion to an outsider warns the playgoers that England too will lose its independence if foreigners continue to achieve political sovereignty, especially in England. Problematic in Marlowe's play is not so much homosexuality or even sex itself but rather the results of violating boundaries of power and nationality. The failures of the sovereign are less about a sexual relationship between the king and his favorite, as the longstanding criticism suggests. Rather, I contend that Gaveston's role is problematic through a combination of

his being male, French, and non-aristocratic. Indeed, the drama presents its audience with imagery that arguably possesses a sexual charge, but this inclusion uses an intimate same-sex friendship as a vehicle for addressing anxieties about foreigners. The play's first publication in the 1590s marks it as one of the first plays after Kyd's 1587 publication of *The Spanish Tragedy* to deal primarily with the relationship between foreign characters. Indeed, the late sixteenth century experienced such a disdain toward foreign subjects since the defeat of the Spanish Armada and the skepticism regarding Catholicism were so recent. The play's second major emergence came in 1622.<sup>3</sup> This date aligns with the Huguenot rebellions of France, which caused many French citizens—albeit mostly Protestants—to immigrate to England. This specific influx caused the English to feel that the foreigners were “[e]ncroaching upon” them, taking valuable resources, and so the natives demonstrated an “obvious link between economic depression to xenophobia” (Cottret 195). To that end, play's reemergence seems as political as the play itself and its original introduction. To see the play through this nationalistic lens, I contend that we must first reevaluate Edward II's gruesome death scene in terms of foreignness. The drama employs Gaveston's treatment of the bishop, the similar dynamics of king's replacement of Gaveston with Spencer Jr., Edward's strained relationship with the queen, and Isabella's relationship with Mortimer Jr. to lead up to a climax with meanings and repercussions that are as much nationalistic as they are sexual.

Both queer arguments and mine about xenophobia largely hinge on act V's execution scene because it demonstrates penetration, on the one hand, and on the other

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<sup>3</sup> In a nineteenth century critical edition of Marlowe's plays, J.C. Nimmo outlines the major years associated with some of Marlowe's publications and stagings.



hand, the audience sees a foreign subject force a foreign object into the king's bowels. Because the king's actions have transferred power to an otherwise inferior subject, the play capitalizes on Lightborn's murderous deed and links it with power rather than sex, even though criticism tends to view the murder as an explicit criticism of Edward's sex life, exploiting "the sodomite as a public scapegoat to police status and gender normativity" (Stymeist 248). This scene places the king at Lightborn's mercy but at best implies an ongoing sexual tryst between the king and his favorite since Lightborn does, after all, meet with the king in private to carry out a violent punishment. More important and indeed observable is Edward II's status as the weak, passive actor in the scene. Here Lightborn mimics Gaveston insofar as he reduces the king's sovereignty. After Lightborn suggests that the exhausted king lie down on the bed, Edward II replies, "I see my tragedy written in thy brows. / Yet stay a while; forbear thy bloody hand, / And let me see the stroke before it comes" (5.5.73-75). Even though the king is clearly at Lightborn's mercy, there exists little to no sexual charge in their interactions, and there is no evidence—not even in this scene—that explicitly portrays a sexual relationship between the king and his favorite. Because such a reading would in large part hinge on this scene's typical deployment, then we must infer that more observable and by extension consequential issues about Gaveston serve as this drama's focus. Lightborn's role is important but as a foreign, situational and physical superior, not a representatively sexual one.

Lightborn continues to exercise his power over the king by claiming that his presence is one of support and not malice. Lightborn says, "These hands were never stained with innocent blood, / Nor shall they now be tainted with a King's" (5.5.80-81).

Here the play establishes a dichotomy between innocence and Edward II's imbalanced kingship which has been plagued with negligence, lasciviousness, and a lack of priorities. Current criticism generally reads a sexual affair as taking place between the king and his favorite<sup>4</sup>. However, given the debatable nature of the king and Gaveston's relationship, the audience witnesses a king vastly different from a sinner or let alone a sodomite, even when Lightborn thrusts the poker into him. Just before Lightborn kills Edward II, the latter cries, "Assist me, sweet God, and receive my soul" (5.5.108). By crying out to God and asking for his assistance, the king reasserts his usual position as passive and receptive to different sorts of authority. But in this case the audience sees the king as a repentant sinner and as a believer who trusts in God's power to help him, not just a woebegone, failed sovereign. The king has failed as a leader but demonstrates some semblance of hope for the afterlife. In fact, I argue that this scene exiles and condemns Lightborn more than the king himself. The king is at least English, and the general religious understanding is that the afterlife trumps this one. However, like Gaveston, Lightborn, with his name etymologically resembling Lucifer's, is inherently evil and also an outsider. The play's descriptions do not mark him as having any type of involvement with the English throne or even the nation more broadly, and the association with Lucifer presents Lightborn as a fundamentally destructive alien, one that warrants the early moderns' anxieties by working undercover in the castle to rid the nation of its sovereign. Both Lightborn and the king's favorite demonstrate power that the king relinquishes, and

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<sup>4</sup> McAdam and Stymeist—and other critics who have focused on either thread of the argument regarding sex in this play, such as Bert Cardullo, Marie Rutkoski, and Jonathan Crewe—read the play under the common assumption that the king and his favorite have or have had sex.

as respective outsiders, they are the irredeemable sources of the king's demise who are quickly exiled once they have served their controversial purposes.

Though the presence of the hot poker exists in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, its role in Edward II's death presents itself more observably in terms of foreign fear than it does in terms of homosexuality or homophobia. The crude execution scene, though arguably sexual, suggests death from and by a foreign object. Moreover, Sir Matrevis's line immediately following the execution, "I fear me that this cry will raise the town, / And therefore let us take horse and away" suggests this Englishman's desire to remove himself further from the presence of foreign use of force (5.5.113-14). Edward's scream is so violent that his execution causes the henchmen to abandon their post, showing the play's keen awareness of and anxiety about the gruesome outcomes of displaced power with a foreign subject. So I argue that the poker does not in the context of this play represent only a sexual punishment because there is no concrete proof that Edward II had such prior contact with Gaveston. However, the murder weapons are indeed foreign to the king's body and therefore are dangerous and undesired objects. The king's mingling with and bestowal of power upon a foreigner signifies that such deeds prove ruinous and end up troubling those who demonstrate high levels of foreign tolerance. In short, championship of a foreigner only begets death by a foreigner.

Once Lightborn executes the king, he reveals himself as another foreigner who desires power and praise. He asks, "Tell me, sirs, was it not bravely done?" (5.5.115). Lightborn's contact with Edward II has transferred similar feelings of foreignness linked with power, especially since Lightborn is also unassociated with England, originally coming from the Catholic Italy, where he "learned in Naples how to poison flowers, / To

strangle with a lawn thrust through the throat” (5.4.30-31). The notion that two otherwise dissimilar characters embrace similar desires demonstrates an issue that transcends their social boundaries. In response to Lightborn’s question, Gurney replies, “Excellent well. Take this for thy reward” right before he stabs Lightborn, killing him instantaneously (5.5.116). Gurney rapidly ends the scene here, but I argue that he implies that he too connects his murder of the outsider Lightborn with something greater, with political clout and preservation of England in mind. Even though Lightborn exacts the deed the nobles desire to carry out, Gurney kills him instantly and “casts the body in the moat” before “bearing the King’s [body] to Mortimer” (5.5.117, 118). The disregard for Lightborn after the execution signifies the exploitation of this foreigner. Once Lightborn serves his temporary purpose, he is killed, deposited, and quickly forgotten. Lightborn is exterminated before his skills threaten the other Englishmen. Gurney’s idea of rewarding Lightborn for his deed places the former as dominant, in control of the murderer’s compensation and life. This association suggests the value the drama places on power through nationality, which current scholarship has deemphasized in favor of more sexuality-based readings.

Edward II’s relationship with Gaveston—in terms of both sex and political power—is the most important relationship throughout the drama. The drama’s delineation of the effects of their union and power begins with Gaveston’s opening lines of the play. In a letter from the king, Gaveston reads, “My father is deceased; come, Gaveston, / And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend” (1.1.1-2). Already the audience sees Gaveston’s unearned power in the court and how the new king views his father and predecessor’s death and Gaveston’s arrival as a sort of one-for-one exchange.

The king's first action in the play in no way reflects the governmental duties Edward II should desire to execute after the recent death of his father, Edward I. Instead, the new king invites Gaveston out of exile and quickly grants him the status of his favorite. The death of Edward I, a more virile and capable leader,<sup>5</sup> signifies the death of an effectual political system and of capable authority more generally. Edward I's departure moves the kingdom from active to passive, as the court moves from having a strong and capable warrior to what the play portrays as a weak, impressionable, and unwise king. A literal father and national father figure has left the throne and nation vulnerable. But Edward II does not fill this void. Political issues become unimportant to the sovereign, and the new king welcomes an outsider, much to the dismay of the early moderns who were concerned with preserving English culture. The new king's first action is personal and nepotistic, which grants Gaveston power from the beginning of both the play and Edward II's reign. The king's desire to "share" the entire kingdom lays the foundation for Gaveston's political triumph. Edward II and his favorite now share a kingdom, which I argue proves ruinous both within and outside the court independent of any presumed sexual activity. In this kingdom Edward II pays little attention to political duties; rather, he wishes to "frolic" alongside his favorite (1.2.67).

Quickly and clearly Gaveston responds to the king's urges to engage in personal affairs instead of political ones. In a passionate outburst, Gaveston cries that he loves London merely because it "harbors" Edward II, "upon whose bosom" Gaveston wishes to

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<sup>5</sup> Many historical sources, including and especially Michael Prestwich's book *Edward I* outlines that our protagonist's father was both physically intimidating—hence his nickname Longshanks—and a strong, capable, and virile ruler, unlike his son and successor to the throne.

“die” (1.1.13-14). The language of physical closeness to both the king and London, not necessarily sexual, illustrates Gaveston’s undue power and access to the throne, using the king’s corpus and political position as sources of his comfort and eventual rise in power. Already, this lower-class Frenchman has violated national boundaries and the king’s power. The Frenchman’s desire to use Edward II’s “bosom” places Gaveston in a role that eventually supplants the relationship the playgoers and early modern society expect the king to have with the queen. Though this image of Gaveston at the king’s breast seems to place Gaveston in need of the king’s nurture, it actually represents the early modern fear that immigrants would come to England only to take advantage of the resources that would make them stronger and more threatening to that same nation. Gaveston’s outcry, which evokes the image of a nursing baby sets the stage for this marginalized, seemingly parasitic Frenchman to become powerful.

Tied in directly with his sycophantic tendencies is the foreigner’s love of London. It is in this city that Gaveston cries, “the sun shines both day and night” (1.1.17). This poetic sentiment, though, speaks not only to London’s seeming beauty but also to Gaveston’s ability to reap power continuously, as though the sun never sets on his rise in power. For Gaveston, this shared kingdom is not a site from which to better the nation as a whole but rather is the site of his infiltration and consequent authoritative gains. When Gaveston claims that his “knee shall bow to none but to the King,” he displays the desire to submit only to Edward II (1.1.19), although this wish also falls short as the play progresses and Edward II demonstrates no authority over his favorite but rather lets him exert powers that the audience would rightfully expect from only the sovereign, not someone who should merely sit at his throne. This direct political contact with the king

already demonstrates that Gaveston has more power than the other nobles, to whom he refuses to answer and over whom he now has authority. Gaveston's role in the text places himself as the dominant ruler and Edward II as the more passive, inferior leader in their kingdom.

Once Gaveston is actually present in the court, the play expounds upon their imbalanced relationship's deleterious effects on the court and the English government as a whole. Because early modern society condemned unions more when they involved an imbalance of power and nationality (Findlay 233), Edward and Gaveston's relationship represents more than one specific anxiety, and already in the first scene the king and his favorite act against a church official. The fact that Walter Langton, the Bishop of Coventry, refers to the king's French favorite as "that wicked Gaveston" draws attention to Gaveston's disruptive presence (1.1.177). To that end, Gaveston's close association with the court is hazardous. Edward II responds with the notion that Gaveston has returned to "be revenged" on the bishop, who according to the king was "the only cause of [Gaveston's] exile" (1.1.178-79). By transferring the blame onto the Church and the previous régime, Edward II continues to separate himself from the problems of displaced class and nationhood that affect his court and his kingdom, favoring his connection to the foreigner Gaveston above all others.

And the commonly discussed sexual actions themselves serve as pretext for the national issues underlying the king and his favorite's relationship. Gaveston's status as a "royal consort" disrupts affairs to a great extent (Stymeist 238). The bishop attempts to reconcile the king and his government by suggesting that Gaveston be exiled again, but the aftermath of this suggestion demonstrates the Frenchman's ability to disrupt English

governmental standards. Gaveston manhandles the bishop as the conflict arises,<sup>6</sup> when he disingenuously states, “you must pardon me,” and then “Throw[s] off his golden miter” (1.1.186-87). Through the violation of physical boundaries, Gaveston shows that his presence subverts the court’s natural order, which calls for adherence to parliamentary procedure and respect for English titles. Moreover, Gaveston’s jostling of the bishop displays his attempt to take on even more power through aggressive anti-nationalism. Edward II and Gaveston’s shared government rests upon the exploration of and engagement in the king as a passive receptor to Gaveston’s undue and problematic political dominance. Gaveston asserts his power out of context and tries to exact it unfairly over other members of the court.

Edward II abets this disruption in the court. In this same scene, after Gaveston physically assaults the bishop, the king demands that his favorite disposes of the bishop’s “golden miter” and that he “rend his stole / And in the channel christen him anew” (1.1.187-88). The bishop’s miter reinforces his ecclesiastical authority in England alongside his spiritual authority, and so by removing it from his head, the king and his favorite unman an important religious and political representative. The phrase “christen him anew” undermines the bishop’s influence even more. This suggestion places the bishop as a religious and social inferior. Because christening—both in a religious context and otherwise—suggests one’s entrance into a new community, to “christen” the bishop himself “anew” inserts him into a new entity, meaning that he is now different than he was before the blasphemous ritual. The result of this action is that he is foreign and

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<sup>6</sup> The play includes the stage direction “{*Manhandles Bishop*}” in Kinney’s critical anthology of Renaissance drama, and this instance occurs in staged adaptations.



unknown and thereby dangerous, much like Gaveston himself. Gaveston claims that this fight ensues as part of a motive for revenge: “Let him complain unto the see of hell; / I’ll be revenged on him for my exile” (1.1.191-92). Gaveston’s decision to take vengeance shows his political authority over one of the court’s most revered officials. He executes punishment without formal recourse or approval from the king, suggesting his undue sense of power that seeks to overturn the politics of the English court. Without such power over the king, Gaveston would not have the power even to appear in the court. But as a result of his relationship with the king, Gaveston’s position is elevated and now overrides a position that holds both religious and parliamentary authority. The king’s allotment of the bishop’s material goods to Gaveston finalizes his favorite’s depositional powers: “And take possession of his house and goods. / Come, follow me, and thou shalt have my guard / To see it done and bring thee safe again” (1.1.202-04). So now Gaveston reaps tangible rewards for his procedural and ethical violations against the bishop. These possessions underscore the anxieties regarding foreign acquisition of wealth through aggressive and at times amoral tactics that Yungblut suggests existed in the marketplace (10). But Edward II altogether ignores this flagrant abuse of power while he instead focuses on his relationship with the very same character who informs these anxieties.

Because of the interrelationship between the king’s bestowal of power to Gaveston and the political charge of their alliance, Edward II ignores both his duties as a husband in the bedroom and his responsibilities in the court and to the nation. The king’s cry to the queen “Away then; touch me not. Come, Gaveston” (1.4.159) demonstrates his abandonment of important people both within and outside his court. Gaveston’s relationship with the king leads to Edward II’s from all other areas of his life: his

marriage to the queen, his relationship with Prince Edward, and his reign over England. With this understanding of the role exchange between the alien favorite and the queen, the king essentially exiles his wife, making her seem foreign and untouchable. Moreover, Edward II cannot allow the queen to touch him because that would add to her power as a consort and detract from Gaveston's authority. The Frenchman's biological sex intertwines with his nationality to establish a more problematic dominant/passive union. Gaveston's being male allows him the greater possibility to act as an aggressive authority in place of the failed Edward II, setting him even farther apart from Queen Isabella. Even though they are both of French origin, Gaveston's being male poses more of a threat as an actual French takeover. But on the other hand, the French queen is a woman and supposed to be subservient according to societal standards, regardless of her nationality.

Moreover, as a wife and mother, Isabella has also relinquished the power and honor tied to virginity—the same tenets of early modern England's general respect for the single, childless Elizabeth I (Bucholz and Key 121). The French-married-English queen, then, proves to be innocuous as an original outsider through her renunciation of virginity and birth country. However, her royal title still causes her to have political significance in England, and the king's neglect of her in favor of a Frenchman raises issues that could lead to a loss of English pride, nationalism, and power. In particular, since the queen is originally not English but instead hails from a Catholic nation with immigrants bound for England, the king would be expected to use their marriage to manipulate her familial ties to protect England against excessive French influence.

But instead the empowered Gaveston attempts to banish legitimate nobles from the English court, and this problematic exercise of power represents a national failure or

concession to other European competitors. Gaveston's position in the court makes his home nation seem superior to England, but this havoc occurs because of the interrelationship between his being French and male. The same cannot be said for the queen, whose being French alone never proved to be an issue. Shortly after Gaveston meets the Earl of Lancaster, he threatens the earl's life for bruising his pride, even though the earls are rightly upset because a foreign favorite has power. Gaveston's cry to Lancaster that "The life of thee shall salve this foul disgrace" (2.2.83) and the king's agreement that Lancaster and Mortimer Jr. will "aby this riotous deed" (2.2.88) demonstrate the favorite's quick rise to English power and the king's subsequent relinquishment of the power that normally comes with the English throne. In effect, the Frenchman Gaveston controls the English because he has successfully usurped power with the king's unabashed approval. Meanwhile, Isabella, who had expatriated from France to become Queen of England through marriage, suffers under the same regime that attempts to reinsert problematic foreign influence with no censure from the king.

The drama capitalizes on the notion that the sovereign so often represents England as whole and seeks to establish differences between the political sovereignty of Elizabeth I and Isabella's comparative weaknesses as a wife and consort of a failed king. Especially during Elizabeth I's reign, the queen and England shared a relationship that the nation viewed as almost sacrosanct. Mandell Creighton's statement that Elizabeth "represented England as no other ruler ever did" shows how she surpassed both political and gender boundaries (304). For this reason, England held her in high esteem and championed her authority. The early modern playgoers would have even more readily linked Edward II's neglect of his wife in favor of Gaveston with his disregard for the nation altogether,

especially since he leaves the court without an apt ruler. Elizabeth's sexual purity meant unhampered political progress and the assurance of her national priorities. But Isabella's honor differs from that of the sovereign Elizabeth I insofar as the former is married and sexually experienced; therefore, she could garner neither power nor respect from the English as an autonomous female leader. Edward II's sidelining of Isabella threatens his wife's honor and by extension England's sovereignty through the fact that Isabella's resultant illegitimate association with Mortimer Jr. risks what little virtue she has, even though her husband's exploits yield this moral lapse. This key difference between the chaste Elizabeth I, on the one hand, and the unchaste queen and her wanton king, on the other, makes for two crucially different versions of England. Elizabeth I's chastity and resultant sovereignty foster a nation of pride, hope, and power, while Edward II's relinquishment of power to a Frenchman and Isabella's lack of power as a married woman both fuel the very same nationality-based anxieties that early moderns maintained—especially when a foreigner influences national polity.

As tensions rise based on the injurious effects of Edward II and Gaveston's relationship, the drama ensures that the playgoers witness a foil character, one that demonstrates loyalty to England. To create such an effect, the play relies on the king's brother Edmund, Earl of Kent, who serves as the play's stalwart representation of pro-English values. According to Charles R. Forker, early modern playwrights employ such characters to enforce "moral guidelines" and represent "communally shared feelings" (196). These shared, "communal" values apply to the characters, the playgoers, and early modern England more generally. Edmund serves as the play's moral compass; he is at first loyal to the king but also grounded in reality and his sense of national duty, causing

him eventually to disown his allegiance. Once Edward II's relationship violates English nationalism, Edmund declares to the conspirators, "I come to join with you and leave the King" (2.3.2). In this case, Edmund's relationship with both the conspirators and with England supplants his conditional loyalty to Edward II. *Edward II* shows that only a relationship based on the court and the nation's respective welfares—not a political relationship with a foreign and powerful favorite—can allow a nation to thrive. So it is Edmund's lack of troublesome alliances and indeed his stalwart defense of English ascendancy that makes him the play's anti-alien character and by extension its moral and political compass. Edmund foils Edward II insofar as his allegiance is to England instead of to a French male flatterer.

Alongside its representation of Edmund's undefiled relationship with England, the audience, and the conspirators, the play exiles the French Gaveston, much to Edward II's discontent. Even the drama in the third act favors Edmund over the king. Once Edmund proves to be this stalwart nationalist, the text works against the king. It is in the first scene of the third act that Edward II learns of Warwick and his men's seizure of Gaveston. Upon realizing that he will no longer get to see his favorite, the king banishes Queen Isabella and Prince Edward to France: "We will employ you and *your* little son; / You shall go parley with the King of France" (emphasis added, 3.1.70-71). This particular banishment presents a national dichotomy between Isabella and Gaveston. Both are of French origin, but Edward II's disdainful approach toward his wife shows that France is inherently inferior and exists as a place of banishment and punishment. But this penalty also re-presents the king's problematic relationship with Gaveston. At no point does Edward II demonstrate a problem with his favorite's national origin, much to

the vexation of the typical early modern citizen and to English members of the court. The departure of England's supposed representative (the queen) to France and the undue power of a Frenchman in England shows the precarious nature of the king and his favorite's relationship in both the nation and its sociopolitical inferiors.

This moment of Gaveston's banishment demonstrates that without the possibility to continue his imbalanced relationship with Gaveston, Edward II has the opportunity to reach his governmental apex. However, his hasty decision to replace Gaveston with a new—albeit English—favorite via Spencer Jr. displays Edward II's permanent inability to govern with autonomy. Such inability causes the king to remove himself altogether from the reminders of his heterosexual alliance and his overarching union with England, meaning that although his foreign favorite is gone, the effects of his anti-nationalist move still affect his political abilities. Edward II delegates to Queen Isabella sole ownership of and responsibility over Prince Edward. By calling the prince *her* son, the king withdraws himself from all forms of fatherly, husbandly, and national duty. In practically disowning his son, Edward II consequently also banishes his bloodline and successor. Because he has allowed Gaveston's foreign and unearned powers to compromise his political sovereignty, the king is incapable of making independent decisions, which in turn affects the nation, the court, and the family. Mortimer Jr. laments that the king's "prodigal gifts bestow'd on Gaveston / Have drawn the treasury dry, and made [him] weak" (2.2.159-60). The king has neither the monetary capital nor the political sovereignty to make amends for the foreigner's ill effects. Moreover, the queen's familial "melancholy life" due to her resolution that the king will "ne'er love" her (1.2.67, 1.4.197) extends to the court and to the nation, both of whom are without an effectual ruler who prioritizes

England's welfare. This result of Gaveston's power ensures that the king is stuck in a powerless position, and as a result, England has to deal with an inept ruler.

Moreover, Gaveston's role as the king's favorite creates animosity against Spencer Jr. when Spencer Jr. finally replaces Gaveston after spending much time in the Frenchman's following. Mortimer Senior's first line in the play sets up the similarity between Gaveston and Spencer quite early: "If you love us, my Lord, hate Gaveston" (1.1.80). This juxtaposition places the French Gaveston at odds with all other English nobles and suggests that Edward can only serve one and not the other. Once word spreads of Gaveston's power, the other earls take note and clarify their complaints, as when the Earl of Warwick sarcastically<sup>7</sup> claims, "All Warwickshire will love him for my sake" (1.1.128), and this sentiment is followed by Lancaster's warning that the Frenchman's presence will cause England to "float in blood" (1.1.132). And indeed the earls' fears of this French takeover amplify when the king calls himself "another Gaveston" (1.1.143). Although these issues and admonitions apply to only Gaveston in act I, the sycophantic Spencer Jr. plots to follow in the Frenchman's footsteps, for Gaveston "loves [him] well," so that he can encourage Gaveston to marry his betrothed, Lady Margaret, and then become the king's new favorite (2.1.12). To that end, Spencer Jr. allies himself with France and sets himself to become the successor to what is currently a Frenchman's position. These issues culminate in Gaveston's banishment and Spencer Jr.'s adoption of the Frenchman's former titles.

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<sup>7</sup> In Kinney's edition of this play, the word *sarcastically* appears in the stage directions before Warwick mutters this line.

Because Edward's pro-French action marks him as irredeemable to the court and because Spencer Jr. has allied himself with French influence, the nobles seem equally disgusted with Spencer Jr. Although Spencer Jr. maintains his allegiance to the failed sovereign, the king has proven to be anti-nationalistic, and so Spencer Jr. by association is just as threatening as the king himself to the court and to the nation. Spencer Jr.'s only clear action as Gaveston's replacement shows him acting diplomatically with another Frenchman, Levune, encouraging international trade with an enemy nation. When Levune posits that he will "clap so close / Among the Lords of France with England's gold / That Isabel shall make her plaints in vain, / And France shall be obdurate with her tears," (3.2.91-94) he essentially places England in France's debt and champions the French agenda to maintain its power of the nation and the queen. Isabella's "vain" grievances and France's "obdurate" stalwartness makes it even more of a threat to England's flagging bargaining position. To that end, Spencer Jr.'s insistence that Levune "Proclaim King Edward's wars and victories" seems impossible, for the English king has nothing to gain except increasing reliance upon the implacable French (3.2.96).

Because of his sycophantic relationship with the king and with France in general, the burgeoning leader Prince Edward joins forces with the king's opposition in the court with a desire to return to nationalistic leadership: "The King of England, nor the court of France / Shall have me from my gracious mother's side, / Till I be strong enough to break a staff, / And then have at the proudest Spencer's head" (4.2.22-25). The prince places the English king on par with France's court, suggesting that they are both equally inept in returning the English queen to her son. Both have threatened the court's Englishness by exacting French power inside and outside the court. The prince's desire to bring his



mother back marks his attempt to rid the court of its weakness and its French influence, since the queen has aligned herself with the English nationalists. Prince Edward's desire to behead the "proudest Spencer," moreover, removes the last bit of French sycophancy and undue power other than that posed by Edward II himself.

The prince's plan is not to suggest, however, that Isabella does not create her own problematic alliances. Although Marlowe's drama indeed focuses mainly on Gaveston and the king's relationship, there is also a heterosexual union that—albeit to a lesser extent—demonstrates the problematic nature of general imbalance in the court: the relationship between Queen Isabella and Mortimer Jr. The king demonstrates one of his only instances of heteronormative power in this fourth scene of the first act, in which he scorns Isabella for "being too familiar with that Mortimer" (1.4.154). Edward II's intuitiveness here is not surprising because even before Gaveston's arrival at court, his entire court has shown poor leadership and a disproportion of authority, and here the king can see the same type of imbalance occurring with two other characters—one that his negligence quite possibly caused. Isabella does not explicitly deny Edward's accusation but rather accepts them through her actions with and through her later allegiance to a more capable figure. The queen's involvement with Mortimer Jr., then, reflects not a personal desire to engage in sexual intercourse with a heterosexual man—for which there is also no concrete evidence either—but rather England's desire to unite with a more capable, more nationalistic, and more aggressive ruler.

However, even the queen—who claims to endorse her court and her nation's best interests through her fight against Gaveston—overlooks the nation's welfare due to her own agenda and thus in this instance acts in tandem with her husband. The queen's

actions with Mortimer Jr. are hasty. Isabella rapidly changes her tone in act II, once Gaveston has taken the king's full attention. In fewer than forty lines she goes from "continual mourning" over the loss of her husband to Gaveston and the political consequences of their union to stating that she could live with "sweet Mortimer / . . . forever" (2.4.25, 59-60). So therefore Mortimer Jr. dominates the queen's emotional state, altering it for the purpose of political clout, even though he is originally of a lower status. This action yields another problematic dominant/passive relationship, albeit one less taboo than that of Gaveston and Edward II. And although the Isabella/Mortimer Jr. alliance does not defy heteronormativity and patriarchy, the play's focus on power imbalance renders this union inappropriate and illegitimate, independently of its being an extramarital affair. Though to a great extent understandable, given the strained relationship between the sovereign and his wife, the relationship between the queen and Mortimer Jr. demonstrates the problems with an off-balance relationship between a superior and his or her inferior. As with Gaveston and Edward II, the queen and Mortimer Jr. engage in a relationship that is problematic not only because of sexual norms but also because of improper power relations.

After Queen Isabella returns from her banishment and reunites with Mortimer Jr., both she and her new partner engage in a public but implicit exchange of political desires. The queen states that "Misgoverned Kings" have been the ruinous causes of England's present turmoil, and she says that Edward II is "one among them all, / whose looseness hath betrayed" the entire nation (4.4.9-11). The queen's incorporation of the word "looseness" reminds the audience of not only the king's internal weakness but also his moral and indeed political degradation from his sacrifice of English royalty to a

Frenchman. By the end of act IV, the audience has seen the king's unreliable service to the nation and his desires that cause him to avoid his royal and husbandly duties. The fact that she harps upon her husband's troublesome reign with such passion contrasts with the fact that she soon afterwards lets Mortimer Jr. interrupt her rant. This sudden shift from dominance to subjugation (further playing out the dominant/passive role dynamics in the play) implies Mortimer Jr.'s newly acquired ascendancy over the queen, who outranks him.

Mortimer's disruption of the queen's diatribe shows the undue power that he has achieved in ways similar to Piers Gaveston. Such an abrupt disruption shows his dominance over the queen's "passionate," and this disruption represents Mortimer Jr.'s newfound and undue power (4.4.16). Queen Isabella's passion threatens Mortimer because it reminds him of his originally inferior status, among other issues, such as his taboo attempt to replace the sovereign via his royal consort and presages his eventual punishment from Edward III for his actions. However, because the play has clarified the dangers of displaced power, Mortimer Jr. stops the queen's rage with a reminder of his political superiority. Mortimer Jr. builds upon his power with his assertion that he comes to avenge Edward II's weak reign "with the sword," the ultimate phallic and thereby masculine symbol (4.4.23). The "sword"—an object capable of deep and harmful penetration—indicates Mortimer Jr.'s sense of power. He now has the clout not only to depose Edward II in his role as the sole penetrator in a cross-sex union—but also he is now capable of ending the king's weak reign forcibly and permanently.

Although Queen Isabella's sexual union with Mortimer Jr. sets the scene for Edward II's untimely death, they clearly do not benefit England as a whole either.

Mortimer Jr.'s obsession with killing Edward II has as much to do with personal revenge as a slighted noble as it does with England's welfare. Therefore, the young but wise King Edward III punishes both his mother and Mortimer Jr., securing the legitimate descent to the throne and ridding the court of its power illegitimacies. After making Mortimer privy to her son's knowledge, the dejected queen says, "Now, Mortimer, begins *our* tragedy" (emphasis added, 5.6.23). Queen Isabella and Mortimer's relationship, which mirrors that of the king and his favorite, also ends with their mutual suffering. It is through their punishment at the hands of King Edward III that England may finally be on the right course for political success. The new king's banishment of his mother demonstrates a conscientious decision to remove proscribed polity from the court, signifying a potential return to sound and effectual rule. To exercise this rightful power suggests the opposite of Edward and Isabella's impolitic priorities. Moreover, when the First Lord presents Edward III with the "head of Mortimer" (5.6.79), the play shows not only an end to authoritative inequity in the court but also presents the playgoers with a gruesome reminder of the bloody ends to a court infiltrated by both foreigners and lesser nobles.

*Edward II*, then, achieves an important role in the canon of early modern history plays. Playgoers certainly had admired other history plays, such as Shakespeare's *Henriad* and the *Richard* plays, which suggested the commoners' interest in learning about early modern Britain through the temporary alienations that medieval settings provided. But Marlowe's work uses an historic same-sex alliance to clarify the problems faced by the early modern court. This understanding of the play as nationalistic and xenophobic adds to the common viewpoint that Marlowe's play is primarily about sex and even challenges readings that primarily hinge on the concept of homosexuality or

even sex more generally. The drama's conservatism proves to be as political as it is sexual. Gender and sex are important in Marlowe's play and achieve even more powerful significance when considered in the play's assessment of English and French polity. So through this play's resourcefulness in using the nation's past to highlight key issues of the early modern period, the audience sees not only the medieval past but also the political present, when immigration had increased along with the resultant frustration with and skepticism concerning those of foreign blood—especially those from Catholic nations who were believed to pose a threat to the Protestant queen.

This play's conventional approach to xenophobia, nationalism, and heteronormativity warns against having authority figures in any positions of subservience, especially to those from other parts of the world, including developing and competing European nations. Through the king's role and ultimate demise due to a foreigner's presence, the audience solidifies its anxieties about the dangers of a weak male ruler, about which they would have read in historical texts, such as Holinshed's *Chronicles*, whose passivity seems more feminine to the early modern English than it does masculine. And through Isabella's experience of neglect and engagement in her own taboo relationship, the playgoers could also reaffirm their value of Elizabeth's status as an unmarried queen. If she does not perform subservient political acts, she is much less likely to place someone else—especially a French or otherwise foreign interloper—in a position of national power. So in the end, Marlowe's allegedly seditious play does all it can to reinforce class boundaries and English nationalism, using gender mostly to reinforce pride in and preservation of England.

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