

## Social Mobility in *Edward II*

*Darby Burdine*

English

*Faculty advisor: Paige Reynolds*

Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* confronts several social conventions of both early modern society as well as its drama during the period, especially class, sumptuary laws, and traditional gender and sexual relationship roles. Comedic drama throughout this period is rife with homoerotic wordplay, as the actors were all male, which, in addition to the matter of cross-dressing, caused many religious leaders to abandon the theatre and encourage others to do the same. Additionally, sumptuary laws, laws that determined which social classes could wear certain types of fabric, were disregarded in the theatre setting. Actors of lower classes dressed up as kings, which enraged many upper-class citizens of the time. British citizens, particularly nobility, during this period placed emphasis on classes. Many were threatened and afraid of the social mobility that was rapidly occurring around them with the rise of the merchant middle class.

Within Marlowe's telling of *Edward II*, social mobility and issues similar to the breaking of sumptuary laws by actors as well as the emergence of a middle class during the time that this play was performed are central problems that each of the characters is forced to confront. Throughout *Edward II*, the courtiers, especially

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Mortimer, Jr., consistently point out that they are not enraged with King Edward and Piers Gaveston, his lowly born lover, because of the homoerotic nature of their relationship, but rather because Edward is giving Gaveston titles of nobility that he is not of the proper social class to have bestowed on him, therefore violating typical conventions regarding social class. As Bette Talvacchia says in her scholarly review of and debate against Derek Jarman's film interpretation of this tale, "... as a response to the king's love affair with Piers Gaveston, the intrigue in Edward's court had according to Marlowe, as much to do with Gaveston's class and nationality as it had to do with gender" (113). This viewpoint is mentioned by both Mortimer Jr. and Mortimer Sr.: the central issue is not Edward's personal relationship with Gaveston, but the way in which it effects his decisions publicly, such as giving titles to someone not of noble birth.

Marlowe bitterly reveals through Edward's tragedy the way in which Renaissance society categorizes people, particularly in reference to their social standing from birth, and the way in which anything outside of traditional social conventions is termed "unnatural." Both Gaveston's, and eventually Spencer's, social mobility and striving for more power and influence is referred to this way throughout the play. However, Marlowe still ends the play so that each character who was in any way involved in social mobility is severely punished for their actions, as they would have been within his own time, and through the death of Mortimer, Jr. —who has been the voice of maintaining social conventions— at the conclusion of the play, to a degree, he displays his own bitterness about having to meet these horrid expectations in order for society to be restored to its "natural" state, and to avoid punishment for producing a play that speaks out against social standards of the Elizabethan period.

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While Edward has not himself attempted social mobility—he is king, he cannot rise any higher to power than he already is—he has aided in it and neglected his nobles who had “earned” their titles by being born into them. Scott Giantvalley explains it well, stating “Marlowe’s *Edward II*, in the tradition of the chronicle or history play, focuses on the king and his failure as a leader of men, portraying the sexual relationship [with Gaveston] as the unworthy object of Edward’s attention which should be spent on the kingdom...” (11). He therefore argues that Edward is punished, not because of homoeroticism or even socially mobilizing the low-born Gaveston, but because he neglects his public life as king for his personal life with Gaveston, which is something that a king can never do and continue to remain a good ruler. Edward fails to reconcile the Body Politic to the Body Natural, and he allows them to bleed into each other in a way that causes destruction in both of these areas of his life. As Body Politic, Edward is expected to place the kingdom’s needs before his own, and his Body Natural and personal life should never conflict with state affairs. However, he allows this to happen by giving titles to those that his “Body Natural” cares about, rather than those that would suit the kingdom. I do agree that this is part of the reason why Edward is punished. However, it becomes more obvious exactly why he is punished in such a violent way when one more closely examines the character of Mortimer and his motivations and obstacles to achieving the social mobility that he, like every other character throughout the play craves.

In scene 1.4, near the beginning of the play, it is clear that the nobles are unsettled about the relationship between Gaveston and Edward II. However, it does not become clear what their exact reasoning is until Mortimer Sr. and Mortimer Jr. discuss it. Mortimer

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Sr., thinking that his son is disturbed by the clearly sexual relationship between Edward and Gaveston, tells him:

The mightiest kings have had their minions:/Great Alexander loved Hephaestion,/ The Conquering Hercules for Hylas wept, / And for Patroclus stern Achilles drooped...Then let His Grace, whose youth is flexible,/...Freely enjoy that vain, light-headed earl,/ For riper years will wean him from such toys (1.4.390-393, 397, 399-400).

Mortimer Jr. understands his father's confusion, but corrects him, stating: "Uncle, his wanton humor grieves not me, / But this I scorn, that one so basely born/ Should by his sovereign's favor grow so pert" and goes on to state that Gaveston "jets it in the court" with clothes made from fabrics that he is not of the proper social class to wear (1.4.401-03, 407). Mortimer, who was born into nobility--into the right to wear luxurious clothes, and into the right social class to receive the sorts of titles that Gaveston has thus far received from Edward-- is highly offended that his king would dote on someone who was low-born, when he clearly has several loyal subjects who are of a class deemed "socially appropriate" for him to dote upon and give titles to. Gaveston, apart from the implied sexuality of his and Edward's relationship, is occupying what Mortimer sees as his rightful place in the King's court, and so he will do anything to empty that place so that he can step into it.

So, while a contributing factor to the disastrous outcome is certainly Mortimer's rage, another issue is Edward's choosing to raise Gaveston into a higher station. Meg F. Pearson describes the play as "The infamous story of Edward II—a man whose disastrous affection for the *wrong* man leads to civil war and his own death..." (97). Pearson implies, as does Mortimer within 1.4, that the issue is

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with whom the relationship is occurring, someone unworthy of the king's attention because of his "base" class. On the surface of the play, this would certainly seem to be the case. However, many scholars continue to debate over whether Mortimer is being truthful about his disgust for Gaveston and the king at this point. Joan Parks, in her comparison of the historical figures of Edward II and others to Marlowe's interpretations of them, frequently equates Mortimer Jr. with an actor, saying that he "only act[s] for himself" (288). This side to Mortimer is clear throughout the rest of the play as well, particularly in his manipulative interactions with Isabella and Prince Edward, eventually Edward III, throughout the rest of the play. His "acting" is what enables him to convincingly manipulate characters throughout the play in order to see Edward overthrown.

Throughout *Edward II*, Mortimer tries to seduce Isabella, but she is loyal to her husband despite his abuse and neglect of her. However, she eventually gives into Mortimer's seduction, allowing him to achieve social mobility just as Gaveston has. In 5.2, he states his intentions quite clearly to Isabella, saying "And he [Edward] himself lies in captivity. / Be ruled by me and we will rule the realm" (5.2.4-5). This mirrors Edward's letter to Gaveston in the opening lines of the play, in which he says "Come, Gaveston, / And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend" (1.1.1-2). However, in the letter to Gaveston, Edward, the person who is already in a higher place of power, attempts to "share the kingdom" with Gaveston, who has no power apart from the king. In the circumstance between Mortimer and Isabella, while Mortimer is somewhat powerful, being a noble, Isabella is the Queen, and therefore more powerful than him. However, rather than her extending an offer of social mobility to him, he forces his way into social mobility by forcing himself upon her, thus arguably committing a more treacherous violation of social

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conventions than Gaveston has, by “inviting himself” into a higher place of power.

Ironically, Mortimer, who claims to be angry at Gaveston for trying to raise his social status through association with the king, commits the same act with the queen. He also attempts to control the prince and once he comes to power after Gaveston and Spencer killed, and Edward has been imprisoned. Katherine A. Sirluck puts it this way “Gaveston and Mortimer are both overreachers, both aspirers to godly power, the one through passion and the other through action” (17). Mortimer, Jr. attempts to become the new king’s favorite, just as Gaveston and Spencer did with the last king. However, Edward III sees through his acting and schemes, and when the queen attempts to get Edward to come with herself and Mortimer, he says, wisely, “Mortimer will wrong me” (5.2.110). He has already seen Mortimer wrong his father, his father’s favorites, and defile his mother. He does not want anything to do with the sins of the past regime, either Mortimer’s ambition or his father’s favoritism of those who were not born into privilege.

So how do Mortimer’s speech and actions determine the actual cause of Gaveston and the King’s death? Also, if he is justified in his thoughts, why does he also die? Marlowe uses the manipulative and equally wrong decisions of Mortimer, as well as his ultimate demise, as a way to defy the social conventions and theatrical expectations that were placed upon playwrights of this period. Attempts at social mobility were frowned upon by upper class who were born into their station at this period in time, so everyone that attempts or aids in social mobility throughout the work is punished: Edward, Gaveston, and Spencer. However, Mortimer is executed as well, in the final scene of the play, by Edward III. He is guilty of attempting social mobility, but moreover,

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he is guilty of hypocrisy. Mortimer's death is Marlowe's own self-satisfactory "murder" of typical social conventions, as he cannot do anything about it within his actual life, or indeed within the rest of the play. He "murdered" those who are stuck in tradition and condemn anything deemed "unnatural," most especially social mobility and the attempts to further oneself in life. I am not stating that Marlowe kills Mortimer because he is rebelling against the condemnation of homoeroticism during the period. However, many scholars, particularly modern ones, as well as filmmakers such as Derek Jarman, have debated about whether or not this is truly the central issue within *Edward II*. David Stymeist, in his article "Status, Sodomy, and Theater in Marlowe's *Edward II*," states that within this debate of the emphasis that Marlowe is trying to place on homoeroticism within the work is "divided into two distinct and opposed camps. One camp...argues that Marlowe was a political subversive who actively critiques scapegoating of homosexuals in his plays...a second critical camp contends that Marlowe's representation of sodomy is inherently and invariably "contained" by early modern ideology concerning sexual aberration" (236). Rather than outright supporting homosexual relations or rebelling against religious convictions, Marlowe expresses an overall disregard for social conventions about anything deemed "unnatural," whether it be homoerotic relations or attempts at social mobility.

Mortimer has Gaveston killed, and indeed later dies, because he is jealous of Gaveston, not in the typical romantic sense of the word, but rather because he knows that Gaveston is able to relate to the king in a way that he himself is not. Throughout Renaissance drama, women use their sexuality as currency to further themselves in society. However, they never gain or get what they desired as a

result of it, rather they either become shamed, fallen women, or they die as punishment for their sins. Throughout this play, this typical convention of Renaissance theatre is reversed, and two men are seen using their sexuality as currency to reach a place of higher social influence and respectability: Gaveston with Edward, and Mortimer with Queen Isabella. However, just as happens to women that attempt this throughout Renaissance drama, this does not end well for either of them, and they are punished for their attempts to rise into a higher class by means of seduction.

Mortimer's jealousy and anger is further clarified through the manner in which Edward is murdered in scene 5.5, which Mortimer has arranged with Lightborn. The grotesque and graphic way in which Edward is executed is a highly symbolic reminder of the sexual acts that the court was aware of between himself and Gaveston. Thus, through this, Mortimer once again takes revenge for his inability to socially further himself by use of sexuality as currency with Edward II.

However, Mortimer is killed as well, which is Marlowe's outlet for his anger at Early Modern society's attachment to categorizing people into class without drawing dangerous attention to himself. Lenora Leet Brodwin states that "Mortimer's Machiavellianism is not only rejected but subordinated in the author's sympathies to Edward's pathetic attempt to base a life on love rather than policy," meaning that Mortimer is essentially punished for punishing Edward, even though Edward had to be punished--within the context of both the play and history--for his inability to rule effectively (143).

Mortimer is the last person to be killed within the play, and his death is determined by Edward III, who has seen everything that

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Mortimer has done to destroy his family as well as his family's relationship with their own nobles. Edward III has Mortimer's head brutally brought out before him after the execution has taken place, and he then states "Help me to mourn, my lords. /Sweet father, here unto thy murdered ghost/ I offer up this wicked traitor's head;/ And let these tears distilling from mine eyes / Be witness of my grief and innocency!" (5.6.98-102). These are the last lines spoken within the play; Edward departs with a severed head, reminding the audience of his complete innocence of all of the political scandal that has taken place beforehand. This violent image is the last that the audience is left with in *Edward II*. Marie Rutkoski characterizes Edward III, who the audience does not hear from until after the imprisonment of Edward II toward the end of the play, as "the solution to the problems that harass Edward II's reign: favoritism, homoeroticism that alienates the politically homosocial, and a king's inability to act" (291). I agree with this characterization of Edward; throughout the play every other character has had selfish motivations for gain, social mobility, or sexual pleasure. Edward III is the absence of all of his father's former sins, as well as of Mortimer's sins of deception, hypocrisy, and jealousy. Although it is rather a graphic image, the head with him, as well as his tears of mourning, represent simultaneously his acknowledgement of the wrongs done to as well as by his father and the total separation of his reign from the former corrupted one.

Social mobility is a major theme within many Renaissance plays, but it is nearly hyper emphasized throughout *Edward II*, as every character other than *Edward III* is somehow either engaged in, supporting, or fighting against social mobility. Marlowe uses Mortimer's character to show the hypocrisy of citizens during his lifetime who opposed social mobility as well as unnatural

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relationships, and somewhat uses him as a scapegoat to reveal his dissatisfaction with the social conventions of Elizabethan society.

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