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Queer Edward II: Postmodern Sexualities and the Early Modern Subject

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Queer Edward II is the title of the book that Derek Jarman published as a companion piece to his recent film, Edward II (1991), in order to itemize and emphasize points that he wanted to make in excess of those he felt able to make in the film. I have put the book’s title to work in the heading of this essay because it highlights, in a direct and aggressive manner, the film’s affinities with contemporary queer theory which it is at least part of my purpose to examine here. According to Michael Warner, the “preference for ‘queer’” in contemporary gay discourse “represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minorizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal.” Jarman’s affiliation with queer theory is evinced less by his film’s predictably sympathetic representation of the relationship of Edward and Caveston than by his vigorous integration into the film of militant gay liberation positions, including actions of resistance undertaken in their behalf by actual members of OutRage, described as “the Gay Activist Group” in the book’s introductory matter. The book’s debt to positions associated with the contemporary queer movement is even more pronounced and is paraded in the aggressive slogans that frame Jarman’s generally more anecdotal commentary on the successive sequences of the film, the film’s development, and his own, now concluded, struggle with AIDS.

These slogans operate in a wry but conscientiously polarizing manner and aim to privilege both homosexual and homophobic positions at the expense of the insistently demystified protocols of heterosexuality. Most of the slogans — “YOUR CLOSET IS YOUR COFFIN” “gender is apartheid” (36); “DEVIAIE or die” (88); “LAW S MAKE NATURE” (150); “HETERO PHOBIA liberates HOMOSEXISM empowers” (168) — plainly reject accommodation to the residual biases of the resisting heterosexual reader. In their
insistence on a thoroughgoing transformation of the “regimes of the normal,” the slogans also underwrite the similarly unaccommodating construction of the heteronormative in Jarman’s film.

But what, Jarman provokes one to ask, does all this have to do with Marlowe’s Edward II, the presumptive occasion around which both book and film are assembled? In Queer Edward II Jarman offers competing answers to the same question. On his dedication page, Jarman rather archly writes: “How to make a film of a gay love affair and get it commissioned. Find a dusty old play and violate it.” Marlowe’s play becomes, in this formulation, merely an enabling medium or ruse that affords Jarman the means/financial backing to stage something else entirely: “a film of a gay love affair.” A few lines down, however, Jarman adds, “Marlowe outs the past — why don’t we out the present?,” thereby appearing to enlist Marlowe as a kindred spirit or collaborator who has done for the past what Jarman hopes to do for the present. Throughout both book and film, Jarman maintains this same casual ambivalence about his actual debt to Marlowe. One gets the sense that should Jarman attribute too much to Marlowe as a violator of his age’s presumed heterosexual consensus, Jarman will have less to claim for his own violations or interventions. There is, on this account, quite a bit of strategic self-congratulation on Jarman’s part, premised on a recognizably postmodern embarrassment at having to deal at all with “a dusty old play” that may have helped get his film funded but lacks the panache of the “pop songs” which, as he says elsewhere, only “the best lines in Marlowe sound like.”

Although Jarman would undoubtedly prefer to sustain both the mystery and erotic charge carried by the word violation, he provides a more accurate — and modest — explanation of his aims in the running-head printed across each of the facing pages of Queer Edward II, which reads “EDWARD II improved by DEREK JARMAN.” In the sections of Queer Edward II that refer directly to Marlowe’s play, Jarman promotes his film as an improvement of Edward II in two primary respects: (1) it unqualifiedly displays and celebrates, in the best postmodern manner, homoerotic behaviors that Marlowe allegedly presents in a more qualified, constrained way; (2) it replaces Marlowe’s allegedly neutral perspective on the play’s action with a militantly partisan point of view that champions homosexuality and demonizes heterosexism, if not heterosexuality itself. Having measured Jarman’s claims against my own understanding of Marlowe’s play, I would suggest that by selectively foregrounding issues that the play’s critics — as opposed to Marlowe himself — have chosen either to marginalize or to treat from a moralized perspective, Jarman has done more to hasten the
demise of an already unraveling critical consensus on Edward II than he has to improve a play that, in many respects, invites the treatment Jarman has given it.4

This is not to suggest that Jarman brings nothing new to Edward II’s realization. Jarman makes a series of political interventions that do, indeed, “improve” on Marlowe by substituting a clearly positioned emphasis on gay victimization and empowerment in place of Marlowe’s generally unpositioned fascination with power and the powerful. Although Marlowe initially situates his audience in sympathetic relation to Edward and Gaveston’s carnivalesque reign of misrule, playgoers are ultimately directed to accommodate themselves to the drama’s often shifting fields of force and the dramatic agents who command them. As I have argued elsewhere, gravitation to power, not to sexual orientation, is the play’s prevailing medium of receptive engagement.5 Jarman, however, appears to assume that the homosexual subject — even in the guise of a king — is always the victimized object of an established heterosexist power structure. He consequently positions the filmgoer in sympathetic relation to whatever forces of resistance he can enlist to recuperate the play’s potential to promote the cause of dissident sexualities. Superimposing a militantly homoerotic point of view on the play’s reconstruction, Jarman energizes its dramatically foreclosed capacity to stage resistance to heterosexist aggression.

That Marlowe’s play succumbs to an identification with power is at least in part owing to the historical untenability of exactly the kind of oppositional sexual politics Jarman’s film provides.6 By the same token, Marlowe’s capacity to generate, most notably through his characterization of Gaveston, a staging-ground for the operation and development of homosexual agency provides Jarman with a fertile site on which to structure his improvements.7 While scholars like Alan Bray consider it “anachronistic and ruinously misleading” to identify “an individual in [the early modern] period as being or not being ‘a homosexual’” (16-17), and while neither Edward nor Gaveston confines himself to same-sex encounters, it nonetheless seems clear, as Bruce Smith has argued, that in his constructions of both characters, “Marlowe introduces us to the possibility of a homosexual subjectivity.”8 Moreover, he does so in a manner that stands in much the same relation to other early modern constructions of Edward and Gaveston as Jarman stands in relationship to Marlowe.

As in other histories of Edward’s reign, Marlowe casts Gaveston as the more profoundly sexualized figure, unmoored from the normative attachments of family, social, and political obligation.9 Unlike them, he does not seek to explain, clarify, or judge Gaveston’s sexual or social exceptionalism. It is, on this account and
others, worth comparing Marlowe's conception with Michael Drayton's construction of Gaveston in a poem datable to 1593-94 whose dedication suggestively states that Gaveston's name "hath been obscured so many yeeres, and over-past by the Tragedians of these latter times."\(^{10}\) Gaveston notably speaks in his own voice throughout this sustained dramatic monologue and is given a good deal of sympathetic access to his readers in shaping his versions of events. Implicitly countering the conventional charge of unnaturalness leveled against his relationship with Edward, Gaveston speaks of a "naturall attracting Sympathie" (164), adding

O depth of nature, who can looke into thee?
O who is he that hath thy doome controuled?
Or hath the key of reason to undoe thee:
Thy workes divine which powers alone doe knowe,
Our shallow wittes too short for things belowe.
(164)

The naturalness of Edward and Gaveston's love appears to extend to its physical realization as Gaveston states,

And like two Lambs we sport in every place,
Where neither joy nor love could well be hid
That might be seal'd with any sweet embrace.
(182)

But Drayton's Gaveston is elsewhere made to proclaim "What act so vile, that we attempted not?" (167) and to moralize regretfully on sexual practices that are now graphically presented as unnatural acts:

My soule now in the heavens eternall glory,
Beholds the scarrs and botches of her sin,
How filthy, ugle, and deformed shee was,
The loathsome dunghill that shee wallowed in.
(202)

A similar ambivalence attends the representation of Gaveston and his relationship to Edward in the history of Edward II authored by one E. F. in 1627, but now generally attributed to Elizabeth Cary. Cary mines what we will recognize as a stereotypical vein of homosexual inscription in stating of Gaveston that "the most curious eye could not discover any manifest errour, unles it were in his Sex alone since he had too much for a man, and Perfection enough to haue equal'd the fairest Female splendour that breath'd within the confines of this Kingdom."\(^{11}\) But Cary puts this overendowed sexuality into play in relation to Edward in a manner that romantically idealizes their attachment: "A short passage of time had so cemented their hearts, that they seem'd to beat with one and the self-same motion; so that the one seem'd without the other, like a Body without a Soul, or a Shadow without a Substance" (4-5). She later adds that "their Affections, nay their very Intentions seem'd to go hand in hand" (20), thereby appearing to naturalize what she had initially presented as a kind of excess of, or deformity in, nature itself. Cary's initial difficulty in accepting as natural these indisputable signs of reciprocal attachment is, however, recuperated in a still later formulation where she writes that "Such a masculine Affection and rapture was in those times without president, where Love went in the natural strain, fully as firm, yet far less violent" (28). Excess seems, finally, the distinguishing marker employed by Cary to designate where the natural ends and the unnatural begins. As such, it serves to map that space of difference a later age will come to identify — in other words, through other signs — as homosexuality.

Excess and the unnatural operate as the privileged spaces of homosexual activity in Francis Hubert's unqualifiedly negative appraisal of Gaveston in his 1629 History of Edward II, which, like Drayton's "Peirs Gaveston," is also structured as a verse monologue but this time spoken by Edward himself. In Hubert we discover the fully demonized face of the professed sodomite, appraised by Edward as "This highest Scholler in the School of Sinne, / This Centaure, halfe a man, and halfe a Beast," who "acted all" as "Plantaganet was turn'd to Gaveston."\(^{12}\) Seductive as the serpent in the garden, Hubert's Gaveston pleads the case of pleasure as alluring bait "to tye [Edward] still in streighter bands" (13), reducing civil laws to "servile observations / Of this, or that, what pleas'd the Makers mind" (14) and making "the golden law of Nature, / Sweet Nature, (sweetest Mother of us all)" (15) the sole arbiter of approved behavior.

These competing representations of Gaveston and "masculine" love demonstrate how simultaneously settled and unsettled the categories for representing homosexuality were in the early modern period. For his part, Marlowe, in Edward II, effectively obviates the dispute regarding the natural and unnatural by representing homosexual behavior as one among many material practices that are motivated by irregular blends of affection, compulsion, and opportunism and that operate beyond the reach of moral or idealist categories. Where Drayton and Cary inscribe Edward and Gaveston as both sexually other and romantically the same, as at once perfectly and imperfectly natural, Marlowe approaches difference itself from the point of view of indifference, thereby implicitly
normalizing the avowedly exceptional acts of the homosexual subject. And it is, I would submit, precisely in this refusal to impose normative binaries on homosexual practices that Marlowe’s violation of his age’s heterosexual bias becomes most apparent.13

The materialist basis of Marlowe’s position may, in fact, be said to constitute another salient early modern marker of homosexual agency, as Hubert’s conflation of Gaveston’s Machiavellian discourse and sodomitical behavior indicates. The argument Hubert delegates to Gaveston regarding the social construction of laws — which he terms “scar Crowes [invented] to keepe [men] in some awe” (14) — falls squarely in the range of damnable opinions that were characteristically delegated to atheists and sodomites alike in the period, and that were specifically attributed to Marlowe in the wake of his violent death.14 Indeed, the argument is remarkably consistent with statements regarding the social construction of religion attributed to Marlowe in the Baines Note (“That the first beginning of religion was only to keep men in awe”) which appear alongside even more provocative celebrations of homosexual practices. The Baines Note itself may either be construed as a particularly rich repository of early modern queer theory — if we accept Marlowe’s authorship of its notorious opinions — or of early modern theory about queers — if we assume, instead, that it was deliberately constructed to implicate Marlowe. I assume that it is both and that its travesties of normative beliefs and behaviors in claims like “St John the Evangelist was bedfellow to Christ and leaned alwais in his bosom, [and] used him as the sinners of Sodoma” need not have been exactly rendered by Marlowe to be considered Marlovian.15 Should we, nonetheless, choose to accept Marlowe’s authority for such pronouncements, we will have established an early modern precedent for Jarman’s postmodern sloganeering, one that makes Marlowe a more outspoken advocate of transgressive knowledge and practices than Jarman would appear to allow.

The role played by travesty in marking the space of transgression is, of course, equally prominent in Marlowe’s Edward II, where it is less theirlovemaking than the practice of Edward and Gaveston to “flout our train, and jest at our attire”16 that Mortimer finds objectionable. Compelled by the peers to stand outside the socially constituted realm of the natural, Edward and Gaveston play at, and against, orders of behavior that are established and dictated by the heteronormative consensus. Sexual difference thus becomes the enabling site for the production of both emulative and alternative discourses and behaviors. This is made even more abundantly clear in Jarman’s film in scenes which feature Edward and Gaveston’s exuberantly abandoned dancing to the music of a string quartet.

their respective entertainment of a sensuous snake-charmer and a poet’s suggestive re-signifying of Dante’s “I came to myself in a dark wood where the straight way was lost,” and in their wholesale reconfiguration of court life as a privileged preserve of play and fantasy. In such scenes, the “straight way” is travestied in the very act of being superseded by a “crookedness” that has developed aesthetic and moral parameters of its own.

It is particularly through his elaboration of alternative subject positions for Edward and Gaveston to inhabit that Jarman is able to extend and move beyond the circuit of Marlowe’s comparatively more emulative travesties of the heterosexual consensus. Whereas Marlowe’s Gaveston is, for the most part, a reactive character, miming and mocking the sober behaviors of the peers, Jarman’s Gaveston is a decidedly more unpredictable figure, who draws on passions and resources that are conspicuously different from those of Mortimer and his supporters. As played by Andrew Tiernan, Jarman’s Gaveston operates both within and against contemporary stereotypes of homosexual behaviors. In the first place, he betrays a good deal more passion and commitment for Edward than Gaveston does even in Marlowe’s play, transforming the early modern space of sexual excess and Machiavellian opportunism into a site of erotic preference and romantic solidarity. In keeping with Jarman’s desire to insist on differences to which Marlowe was indifferent, Tiernan’s Gaveston generally keeps the space of lovemaking free of the impulse to travesty that characterizes his other appearances. For example, in the farewell scene that features Annie Lennox singing a Cole Porter lovesong and that would consequently appear ripe for parody, Tiernan chooses to play Gaveston romantically “straight,” unsettling even further the stereotypes within which he would otherwise be confined.

In other appearances, Tiernan variously plays Gaveston as loutish, vicious, and demonic. For example, in taunting Mortimer by performing naked acrobatics on Edward’s throne (sequence 15), Tiernan, as Jarman writes, “pulled out all the stops, turning himself into a frightful clucking demon” (30). In another sequence (#22) in which he thuggishly supervises the merciless beating of the archbishop, Tiernan “looked as if he’d stepped from ‘The Krays’” (44), a recent film that conflates homosexual practices and homicidal pathologies. Tiernan is so adept at sexually arousing, and subsequently taunting, Isabella in the next sequence that he provokes Jarman to remark, rather defensively, that “Not all gay men are attractive. I am not going to make this an easy ride. Marlowe didn’t” (46).

In refusing to ennoble Gaveston, Jarman reminds us that homosexual subjectivity does not consist of one or more enduring
attributes, but issues from the conditioned force of homosexual agency which has historically been compelled to operate in — and as — resistance to enforced constraints. Jarman does not allow these constraints to rationalize Gaveston's behavior. But in exaggerating their strength in scenes like the one in which an exiled Gaveston is first made to pass through a gauntlet of cursing and spitting priests, Jarman makes palpable the fierce repressiveness that church, state, and "civil" society can muster in the face of resistance and also indicates why resistance may come to resemble what it opposes. As the closing sections of the film make plain, Gaveston's enjoyment of the license to brutalize is, in any event, summarily revoked when this heterosexist consensus re-establishes its control over king and court. Aware of the raised stakes of this moment, Jarman chooses to transpose several of these scenes to the present and to stage Edward's final contention with Mortimer in the form of militant gay resistance to police repression. His decision to delegate Edward's actual execution to the province of nightmare is, however, altogether more problematic.

While consistent with his transformation of Edward's long-lost struggle against members of his own ruling class into a more hopeful contemporary battle between opposed sexualities, Jarman's ending magically elides the very relation between past and present oppressions that he otherwise seeks to document. (History, in this respect, becomes a nightmare from which we all too easily awaken.) Jarman seems specifically unwilling to allow a too powerful imaging of the material oppression of homosexuals to carry over into the present without simultaneously providing a way out. His decision to have Lighthouse cast his hot-poker away, and to embrace Edward as a lover, has the added effect of making fantasy seem the preferred medium of resistance in the battle for homosexual rights. This particular "improvement" of Edward II arguably constitutes the most indisputable violation of Marlowe's play in Jarman's film.

It is, moreover, decidedly less effective than Jarman's inspired imaging of the future in the cross-sexed person of Edward III who, at the end of Jarman's film, orchestrates the demise of the caged Mortimer and Isabella to the tune of "The Sugar Plum Fairy." Although just as fantastical as the elision of Edward's murder, this is a victory that the film may claim to have earned. I say this in light of Jarman's similarly inspired treatment of the young Edward throughout the film, whose questions, perceptions, and experiments in gender displacement speak eloquently on behalf of subjects and sexualities still in the process of formation.

Jarman's construction of Isabella is, however, considerably more problematic and symptomatic of his indifference to contemporary efforts to reconcile queer and feminist political agendas. Jonathan Goldberg, for example, argues that in embracing adultery, Marlowe's Isabella "refuses the boundaries of the licit" and operates in much the same transgressive space as Edward. According to Goldberg, "what Marlowe intimates, insofar as it is possible to think of Isabella as a sodomite, is that the possibility for 'strong' female behavior lies outside of marriage and its regularization of gender" (123). He pointedly concludes that "her 'strength' as a woman lies in refusing the limits of marriage" (126).

Although Jarman brings similar conceptions of Isabella to bear in the course of his film, in the end he resists Goldberg's reconciliation of feminist and queer agendas by transforming the Queen into a bloodsucking vampire in evening dress, bent on exacting the cruelest revenge on Edward and his supporters. Moreover, he does so while extending, in a predictably extreme manner, the conventional appraisal of the lovesick queen into the representation of a scorned woman who, however illicit her adulterous arrangements, remains firmly committed to the established regimes of the normative, if not the normal. Dressed to kill any suggestion of normality, Jarman's Isabella is nonetheless presented as well-practiced in the protocols of self-regarding mastery and royal control, and repeatedly placed in the company of the most banal representatives of social conformity. Heterosexual adultery in no way qualifies the Queen to operate in the space of sodomy Goldberg explores which, as far as Jarman is concerned, has "men only" inscribed on the door, as the slogan that closes the book on Queer Edward II indicates. While the slogan — HETEROPHOBIA liberates, HOMOSEXISM empowers — is no doubt meant to function in the same wryly overstated manner as are the others scattered through the book, it also suggests that as far as women are concerned, it is every man for himself.

Notes

1. In his repeated attacks on the vicissitudes of dissident filmmaking in Britain, Jarman indicates that he was unable to be as forthright in Edward II as he was in Queer Edward II. Indeed, although the film starts with two of the play's "poor men" making unabashed love as Gaveston reads Edward's letter, the film is generally a good deal more inhibited in its representation of homosexual practices than Jarman indicates in his book.
3. Derek Jarman, Queer Edward II (London, 1991), 8. All subsequent references to Jarman's text will be to this edition and placed in


6. According to Alan Bray, "What determined the skewed and recurring features of homosexual relationships [in the early modern period] was the prevailing distribution of power, economic power and social power, not the fact of homosexuality itself." See Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London, 1982), 56.

7. As Jonathan Goldberg observes, "it is possible, imperative, to recognize in Marlowe a site of political resistance" (141).

8. Bruce Smith, 223. It is, according to Smith, worthy of note that "In Edward and Gaveston we have, not a man and a boy, but two men" (213-14).

9. Bredbeck notes that "a number of anecdotal summaries of the king's life, all written between 1590 and 1650, were widely reprinted," and offers illuminating accounts of several of them in *Sodomy and Interpretation* (48-50; 53-56).


13. See Goldberg: "On the basis of the illicit, a defoundational site that cannot be read through or merely as a reflection of the licit, Marlowe's play negotiates difference — in gender and in sexuality — differently. Modern heterosexual presumptions are not in place" (125).

14. The full text of Gaveston's argument reads as follows:

   For what are Lawes, but servile observations
   Of this, or that, what pleas'd the Makers mind?
   The selfe-conceited sowers Imaginations
   Of working braines, which did in freedom find
   Our humaine state, wh they forsooth would bind

15. See Bray: "Baines' depositions should . . . be taken as documents which have been carefully constructed but which are none the less based on Marlowe's actual opinions" (63).


17. I am attempting to work here with Paul Smith's distinction between the human agent, on the one hand, and the human subject, on the other. According to Smith, the agent may be seen as "the place from which resistance to the ideological is produced or played out, and thus as not equivalent to either the 'subject' or the 'individual.'" See Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis, 1988), xxxv. The subject may be understood "to describe what is actually the series or the conglomerate of positions, subject-positions, provisional and not necessarily indefeasible, into which a person is called momentarily by the discourses and the world that he/she inhabits" (xxxv).

18. As Goldberg writes, "Marlowe affirms as proper what his society sees as warranting death; his unflinching representation of the death of Edward is one sign of this, a making manifest of sodomy as the ungrounded truth of the play" (129).

19. Kathleen Anderson has recently made a strong case for abandoning the commonplace appraisal of Marlowe's Isabella as "an inconsistent, lovesick" character, "motivated mainly by her need to have a man love her" (31), in favor of a more expressly Marlovian conception of "a powerful political figure who uses her sexuality, her son, her position, and all of the gender stereotypes available to her to get and hold on to power" (39). See Kathleen Anderson, "'Stab as Occasion Serves': The Real Isabella in Marlowe's *Edward II*," *Renaissance Papers* (1992), 29-39.