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# Edward II: Negotiations of Credit in the Early Modern Public Sphere

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***Edward II: Negotiations of Credit in the Early Modern Public Sphere***

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Jane E. Kuebler  
May 2018

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Elizabeth Rivlin, Committee Chair  
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## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the role that Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* plays in the establishing and expanding of an early modern public sphere. By examining the ways that power is earned, and wielded in the play, Marlowe demonstrates an economy of cultural credit that operates in both the financial and the socio/political spheres of public life in early modern England. Marlowe applies the logic of that economy beyond the realm of the common people and subjects the historical monarch to the same parameters of judgement that flourished in society, drawing parallels with the currently reigning Elizabeth I, and opening up a discourse that reexamines the markers of credit, power and birth-ordered hierarchies.

## DEDICATION

For my mother, late to the party, but who always believed in me, though she never expressed it well. After all is said and done, I love you.

And for my children, who loved me, encouraged me, rebuked me, and who will always be the best work I will ever produce. I hope you all live to be as blest as I have been in you.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Title Page .....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Identifying the Public.....	5
The Culture of Credit.....	12
Reading the Economies of <i>Edward II</i> .....	16
A Critical Conclusion.....	34
Works Cited.....	36
Background Materials.....	38

## ***Edward II: Negotiations of Credit in the Early Modern Public Sphere***

### ~~Introduction~~

In *Edward II* Marlowe dramatizes for his theater audience the notion that they are all equally the king's audience: a king must negotiate power in the same spheres, in the same way and with the same currency that builds public credit in the daily lives of all members of English civil society as well. The subjects that Marlowe's royalty must court are now to be found in the public spaces of the kingdom—the commons—spaces that as king Edward II is oblivious to in his single-minded pursuit of the privacy of “some nook or corner left / To frolic with my dearest” (iv.72-3). By collapsing history with contemporary issues, Marlowe creates in the staging of *Edward II* a drama that both illustrates, and speaks into, an early modern public sphere, in which the commoners have as much wit and place as the aristocracy, and royalty is accountable to all. Presenting a monarch who fails to earn credit with both his peers and with the common people of England, and in consequence loses his throne and his life, Marlowe opens up to his audience the possibility of social mobility, and political participation on all levels, and demonstrates the changing economies of power in early modern England.

In this essay, I argue that Marlowe's *Edward II*, using the markers of the social credit economy already in place, collapses the historical with the contemporary and places a medieval king on the early modern stage as an individual who is judged by his peers and his subjects in the same ways that theatergoers would have judged themselves and their neighbors. Breaking down structures of class and gender, Marlowe invites his audience to contemplate, as most of the play's characters do, “If I were king...” thus

bringing into question the nature and responsibilities of kingship, the powers that should entail to it, and the requirements inherent to the sovereign. Edward II creates for himself an imaginative space where he can pick and choose which elements of kingship he will embody, which responsibilities he will carry, and who will inhabit the roles of nobility and power in his presence. This detached air allows Marlowe to extend the performance space of the theater in which the play is staged out into the broader stage of the civil society of contemporary England casting it as one and the same with the representational space in which *Edward II* takes place, a space that takes shape in the imaginations of the theatergoing audience. Marlowe uses this imaginative space (Atwood 52) in the minds of the audience to move the story from Edward's own feudal realm into the contemporary social and political scene, making the onstage interplay of power and rumor a part of theater's ongoing participation in the establishment and evolution of the Elizabethan social and political economy, a credit economy of obligation and reciprocity.

A particular affordance of the dramatic form<sup>1</sup>—in the context of live theatrical performance—over the written history narrative is the space to both rework the story in ways that bring the history and the contemporary together, and to stage the narrative in the theater, a place

not exclusively or even primarily concerned with drama. Instead, it was a complex environment with its own temporality, offering multiple experiential levels and diverse events, which one absorbed and which absorbed one in return. . . . In this period the theater was not felt as an

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<sup>1</sup> For further explanation of the use of form in this context see Levine.



alienated spectacle that one viewed as if from outside it but as (literally) a circumstantial environment that one entered and in which one participated.

(West 114, 133)

Marlowe is one of the first early modern playwright to stage the medieval history drama, and as a playwright his rhetorical strategies make clear use of the powerful potential for change in the staging of drama. Often viewed as an outlier in the early modern literary canon, Marlowe is, in fact, part of an ongoing theatre based exploration of issues of monarchy, power, and position,<sup>2</sup> as well as discourse on social logic<sup>3</sup> and cultural credit,<sup>4</sup> two concepts he brings together in *Edward II*. By juxtaposing the failures and successes of the four characters that hold royal ruling positions in the play—Edward II, Mortimer, Queen Isabella, and the young Prince Edward, who becomes Edward III—Marlowe exposes the failures of the system of hierarchy rooted and upheld by God-ordained birth-ordered positions of authority, offering instead a ruling class and sovereign as just more neighbors to be surveilled and judged in the cultural economy of England beyond the theater. The characters on stage who succeed, do so at moments when they are exhibiting the various forms of wit and understanding that secure credit socially and politically; and they fail when they eschew those skills, and succumb instead to the folly of allowing passion and private pleasure, or ambition and pride to dictate their words and actions rather than reason.

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<sup>2</sup> See especially Shakespeare's *Richard II* and the *Henriad*, for example.

<sup>3</sup> I take this term from Adam Zucker's "The Social Logic of Ben Jonson's *Epicœne*."

<sup>4</sup> Similar logic is employed in, for example, Deloney's *Jack of Newbury* and Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*.

In this thesis, I will begin by exploring the ways in which the idea of the public sphere has been addressed in early modern scholarship, including how the term public was perceived and used in early modern discourse, and follow that with the ways in which I see a public sphere at work in the time period. Then, I will look at the way that power was negotiated in the early modern society, examining the ways that social and financial markers worked together to create an economy of public credit. Bringing together these two forms of criticism, social-political theories and social-economic theories, I look at the way they worked together to create a sphere of political and social dialogue and influence, one which Marlowe illustrates and makes use of in *Edward II*. Finally, I look at the specific ways in which Marlowe's *Edward II* illustrates and acts in this public sphere, speaking against traditional ideas of class, gender, and privilege by both judging, and presenting for judgement, Edward II and the other characters in the play using the same markers of the social credit economy that critics have specifically noted in later urban comedies, but which I assert are also at work in Marlowe's historical drama.

~~Identifying the Public~~<sup>5</sup>

The use of the phrase “public sphere” is, of course, laden with meaning for those who are familiar with current early modern criticism.<sup>6</sup> However, the continuous attempt to stretch the meaning and boundaries of the terminology indicates a need for a re-

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<sup>5</sup> In formulating this section, I relied heavily on the work of Eoin Price in “The Politics of Privacy and the Renaissance Public Stage.”

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the work of Coldiron, Doty, Lake and Pincus, Yachnin, Eberhart, Prescott and Price.

examination of the commitment to begin the definition with Habermas's public sphere, a specific mid-twentieth century capitalist bourgeois Marxist model. I propose instead that we take Habermas's conception not as a model that must be maintained, but as a catalyst for thinking about the various ways that societies have created, intentionally or otherwise, a space in which information is shared; education and inspiration towards critical, rational thinking and response occurs; and the breaking down of boundaries is precipitated, whether in open pushback against authority, or as a slow, continual societal change. In other words, we must find public spheres not by the particulars of the forms they take, but by the evidence of the work that they accomplish. In the context of early modern scholarship, rather than asking with Habermas, as Calhoun encapsulates it, "What are the social conditions ... for a rational-critical debate about public issues conducted by private persons willing to let arguments and not statuses determine decisions?" (1), we should seek rather for the ways in which some form of public discourse was taking place that took England from "Tudor monarchs ... the most powerful English kings" (Summers 3) to the execution of a king by the Parliament and the people, and debates over full enfranchisement (male only, of course) in less than fifty years.

I propose that the diverse forms of communication and dialogue that fed these changes in thinking and action evidence a public sphere, when we contextualize and define our terms by historical usage an amorphous space where all voices that speak are public, and those who share a common responsibility and are held to a common standard judged by public others on the moral, religious, and financial attributes that earn

credit in the “economy of obligation” (Muldrew) that flourished in early modern England. Clearly, there were forces at work bringing about new ways of thinking about monarchy and hierarchy, individual identities and the place of a commonwealth ongoing at multiple levels. Marlowe’s plays come in the midst of the monumental changes taking place in England and figure as part illustrator, part enactor, and part actor in the public forum. Concerned with issues of religion, class and gender, all of his works speak to both individual identity and hierarchal power, as well as the ways in which people achieve and maintain credit among others, but none more so than *Edward II*.

As Claude Summers argues in *Christopher Marlowe and the Politics of Power*, political theory and action, as indeed all dictates of civil society in the early modern period, were underpinned by religious ideology, as they had been for centuries. Over the last century, however, the terms of the debates, and of who could enter the debate, were shifting. Protestant ideology, in marked difference to historic papal doctrine, allowed for individual readings and interpretations, offering a place in the religious dialog to any who could hold their own there, and access the forum of debate, whether in print media, or through some form of speech. With the Reformation, theological debate became public concern, in a way that it had never been before under a centrally governed church. Progressively, all spheres of life, public or private, being rooted in religious dogma, began to come under scrutiny at all levels, potentially by all people. And, as enclosure laws continued to change the landscape, dividing England into increasingly privately held property, and causing migration from the country to the cities, a phenomenon that Marlowe hints at in Edward II’s comment, “Make several kingdoms of this

monarchy/And share it equally amongst you all (iv.70-1), more people have access to the public gatherings and spectacles of power and debate in the larger towns and cities. It is in this environment that we can see the potential for a form of public sphere operating in the early modern period, as the changing dynamics of communication in the early modern age—the print industry, theater, ballads and street songs, themselves often repeated in theater productions and printed works—allow more and more people to enter the public conversation and have an impact. While, of course, not identical to Habermas’ bourgeois public sphere, and certainly containing more constraints and less mobility and opportunity, nonetheless, the forum was there, and would only continue to grow with expanding print media and literacy.

An important aspect of the public sphere model, as Habermas conceived it, was that of a place of dialogue that remained free of government interference and control, and allowed for an open pushback against government positions and actions (Habermas 27). As Peter Lake and Steven Pincus have shown, this aspect is not present, nor possible much earlier than Habermas himself locates it, situating the beginnings of a bourgeois public sphere with its beginnings in the Enlightenment. However, “the ‘public sphere’ has been moving backwards in time” (Lake and Pincus 1), requiring a ‘tweaking’ of the model and a redefining of the term itself. Thus, Pincus and Lake’s conception of an earlier public sphere is one that is distinctly different from the Habermas model: intermittent in appearance, and prompted and controlled by political actors seeking to manipulate public opinion for their own purposes. As they explain:

after the Reformation issues of religious identity and division came together with issues of dynastic and geopolitical rivalry to create a series of public spheres . . . . However, as recent research has revealed, many of the first and most sophisticated attempts to appeal to and mobilize various publics emanated from the centre of the regime itself. (3)

The deliberate mobilizing of opposing religious camps which in their turn issued “challenges through the pulpit, press, circulating manuscript, and rumor” and inspired “replies in kind, using the same media and the same styles of argument” in order to enact legislative policy on common wealth matters, “can usefully be seen as in itself constitutive of a sort of public sphere” (4). Indeed, it can, but it is a very different public and sphere from an unregulated educated bourgeois coffee house discourse, requiring a significant amount of tweaking to Habermas’ formulation.

A second strain of critical, scholarly thinking about public spheres in early modern critical work can be seen in the multi-disciplinary research project “Making Publics: Media, Markets and Association in Early Modern Europe.” Eberhart, Scott and Yachin outline the project; international team members

studied the formation of “publics”—forms of association built on the shared interests, tastes, and desires of individuals, most of them ordinary “private” people. The project argued that public making was enabled by new media and new cultural forms and was nested in an emerging market in cultural goods (1).

As a group, the members of the project rejected the existence of a Habermasian public sphere in the early modern period, opting instead to explore the presence and influence of a variety of “publics” (4), which Wilson and Yachin, describe as “concatenations of people, things, and forms of knowledge.” These publics created “new forms of association [that] allowed people to connect with others in ways not rooted in family, rank or vocation,” reshaping “dominant ideas about just who could be a public person” (1). This way of thinking about the possible presence of a public sphere in early modern England relies on particular conceptions of the terms public and sphere, and on some form of adherence to Habermas’ model and definition. An Elizabethan understanding of public and private, however, is very different from our modern ideas about two distinct spheres of space and authority.

The distinction between public and private as naturally separate realms of authority and operation is a modern one, and one not in sync with an early modern concept of overlapping spheres of authority in which a single individual could hold multiple roles and positions of authority both publicly and privately. Public, in this context, is not restricted to the holding of an official civil position or office, but rather reflects on any individual when acting in a way that is

an other-directed, non-selfish interest, sometimes expressed as serving the common good or public weal... Importantly in this context, it can be found not only in the discussion of ... offices we might designate as ‘public’: it is also evident in the moral specification of parenthood, husbandry, midwifery, philosophy and poetry, spheres that we might think

of as private, but which, to use modern terms, were ethically legitimated by a public end or rationale (Condren 21).

Within each sphere of public persona, an individual held both a moral authority and a moral responsibility.

The nature of these overlapping spheres left no room for the modern conception of a public as opposed to private morality. Private in social logic, then, was the role and activity that belonged to the person only when not serving in a role of public matter, but rather as one subject to the authority of another, or broadly applied, one at the bottom of the social and political hierarchies who remained in a passive position lacking in authority. The conflation of private and domestic, therefore, is out of place in the early modern social logic: the familial was a realm of authority of its own, having specific boundaries and responsibilities, and functioning within the commonwealth as part of the undergirding structure that stabilized and maintained society. Thus, the family, the domestic, was itself a function of the political, not a solely private sphere unto itself. Private motives and actions—that is, those which looked exclusively to the individuals benefit—were often seen as negative and worthy of suspicion (Condren 21-3). This connotation held even stronger sway among those classes that suffered at the enactment of enclosure laws, as land that had formerly been public, and held in common, became increasingly private property. The higher one was on the political hierarchy the less space there was for behavior of a private nature; for the ruling powers the private was not nonexistent, but would consist only of those activities that had no direct effect on the representation or performance of the role of sovereign.



By accepting modern conceptions of public and private, “something of modern preconceptions about the world is carried over to mislead with respect to the past” (20). Condren’s rejection of the “preoccupation with the public sphere [because it] has been a hindrance to historical understanding” (20) is marred, I think, only by the same adherence to the model definition of the terms that he himself opposes by other critics. Rather than rejecting entirely the historical presence of the public sphere in societies lacking Habermas’s basic requirements, we must situate its defining terms in the historical period we are examining, and judge by the evidence of activity and impact whether such a forum of discourse and influence is present. Thus, my use of the term public sphere is not intended to invoke the commonly used model, nor to cast any aspersion on its usefulness in other contexts, but rather to act as a descriptor for an early modern non-institutional arena of discourse and influence that crosses class, gender, educational and geographic boundaries creating a marketplace of ideas in which the common peoples of England function as a sounding board, reflection and rudder for the steering of political and civil policy. While itself an inclusive, non-spatial arena, the early modern sphere of which I speak includes within it specific spatial sites of discourse, locations of theatrical performance act as sites of intervention and interaction, part of an ongoing process of the changing cultural economics of power and in society.

~~The Culture of Credit~~

As the political was tied to the civic and the social, so were all three tied to the economic. As opposed to modern concepts of two kinds of credit—that of financial ‘responsibility’ judged by particular factors and extended by institutions, or that of the

idea of being responsible for something, that is taking credit for a thing, but each one distinct from the other—the early modern understanding of credit was one that involved more than wealth and financial acumen. Morality and ethics, domestic management, civil engagement, and displays of wit, cunning and reason were all incorporated into the social logic that built credit and reputation. This “economy of obligation” as Muldrew termed it, was one of reciprocity, and responsibility, monitored and maintained by neighborly surveillance.

To sue for damage to one’s reputation was not uncommon (Shepard 87), and suits over financial matters, in an age of limited literacy often based on verbal agreement, hinged as much on witness accounts of the character and “credibility” of the litigants as it did on any form of documentary evidence (Muldrew 179). Both Muldrew and Shepard examine the court records, finding in them confirmation of a culture which ties community relations and social obligation to the growing economic culture of credit; Panek and Shepard find markers of manhood as well:

relationships that were not marked by direct economic exchange nonetheless formed part of an individual’s complete constellation of interpersonal connections through which credit was constituted (Panek 65)

and, in Shepard:

If a man’s worth was doubted, he lost credit and economic standing and was excluded from the relations of trust which both bound communities and accorded status and agency. (87)

The obligations of credit and reputation crossed lines of both class and gender, because “although society was divided by hierarchical gradations of status and wealth, it was still bound together by credit relationships made all over the social scale (Muldrew 178).

It is in this culture of credit that Marlowe places his Edward II, and it is in this culture that Edward fails catastrophically. In the political realm of a medieval monarch Marlowe mirrors the early modern social and economic relationships of broken trust and failed credit, and the penalties that accompany such a loss, legally and socially. From the outset of the play, Edward II is shown as a man who fails to honor his word, who is financially irresponsible, and who seeks private pleasure over public duty.

Reason, a discerning understanding of oneself and of one’s fellows, and the ability to demonstrate that understanding, through wit and control of one’s self, is another essential key to establishing and maintaining a creditable reputation. As Botelho outlines, the ability to “earwitness,” to sift and tell the information that comes to the ear, effectively discerning rumor and managing fame to achieve the desired reputation (2) is a form of wit and cunning that secures credit in the public sphere economy. The contrasting ways in which each of Marlowe’s characters manages what they hear, and what they say, significantly affect audience perception of the character, and reflect as well on the larger issues at play, as Marlowe contrasts the skills of the commoners, the queen, and the young king Edward III, with those of the nobles and Edward II. Marlowe’s play clearly demonstrates how

early modern dramatic productions became potent cultural sites that challenged received notions of the gendered authority of information and

asserted the necessary role of the discerning ear as a way to not only authorize information amid the threatening buzz of the day, but also to secure or establish authority. (Botelho 7)

Managing rumor and reputation are key to maintaining power and position, and Edward II fails at both, unable to sift between truth and fiction in the rumors and suggestions that titillate his ear, and unwilling to act on what he hears.

Botelho attributes Elizabeth I's success to her powerful talent for managing reputation and rumor. Elizabeth I was skilled in the necessary performances that earned credit in both her domestic affairs and the broader commonwealth. According to Botelho, Elizabeth I is "the all-hearing authority of information, who severely complicates the notion of male informational authority" (13). Managing rumor, fame, and speech were crucial to negotiating one's own position at any level of society, but in the early modern period it was distinctly gendered in theory. Marlowe mirrors the gender disruption that Botelho sees in Elizabeth I; in *Edward II* it is Queen Isabella who is most skilled in this practice. Like "Elizabeth [she] actively engaged with rumors by paying particular attention to careful listening, discerning rumors that came to her ear" (14). But if skilled earwitnessing is the key to discernment and self-awareness, it is the ability to translate what one hears into action that truly secures power and credit. Controlling one's ear is the first step to controlling one's tongue, an equally crucial form of self-control at play in early modern society, as Marlowe illustrates on stage in *Edward II*.

Controlled speech is a form of wit that reflects control of self: wit, banter, and reasoned speech all form marks of power and competence in Marlowe's characters. Later

urban comedies connect wit and other forms of public credit with the specific location in which they take place;<sup>7</sup> however, Marlowe makes use of very similar strategies of public credit, but by divorcing the action from distinct spatial or temporal settings in *Edward II*, he shows how the same tools that earn credit among the characters of the urban comedy are already at work in all levels and locations in society in the 1590s. The skills that achieve power and authority include control of one's self—access to the presence and body of the individual, and to their private spaces, or domestic control; self-control—control of the tongue and the emotions; wit—part Botelho's earwitnessing, but including as well the ability to discern what is appropriate and not relative to position and place, and the skilled use of words and displays to assert superiority of understanding and skill over others, forms of "public" control; and gendered displays—femininity being marked societally as weak, childish, emotional, and gossipy, versus masculinity, marked as reasoned, controlled, mature, strong and responsible. Marlowe illustrates these same credit markers of city comedy in his earlier historical drama demonstrating that the nature of both the skills involved and the roles that they designate is performative, rather than inherently placed by status or gender determinations.

~~Reading the Economies of *Edward II*~~

The beginning of the play marks Edward II's transition into full manhood. Although marriage was usually the ceremony that propels the male youth into independent domestic authority, as son of the king, Edward, long married, remained as

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<sup>7</sup> See Adam Zucker, *The Places of Wit in Early Modern Comedy*. Zucker explores specifically, the aspect of access as a form of cultural credit in his chapter on Johnson's *Epicoene*.

much subject to his father and a part of the household of Edward I as if he were yet a youth. But as the play begins, we learn of the death of Edward I, and from the outset we perceive that Edward's body, identity and character are compromised:

‘My father is deceased; come, Gaveston,  
And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend.’  
Ah, words that make me surfeit with delight!  
What greater bliss can hap to Gaveston,  
Than live and be the favorite of a king?  
Sweet prince, I come... (i.1-6).

Until the sixth line, the audience is led to assume that it is the prince himself who speaks, and in his mouth the words are reasonable. But transposing them into the mouth of Gaveston, something shifts. First, the identities are confused and conflated, something that will continue to happen as Gaveston, and later Spencer, usurp, and the king willingly, happily, yields his voice and his authority to others.

Access to a sovereign, a noble lord, or even the private spaces of the home, is a controlled sphere, and control over the liminal space between public and private shows the power and credit of an individual in his society “the types of transfers ... between public and private spaces, define ... positions in the social hierarchy” (Zucker 64) Regulation of access “creates a sense ‘of inner and outer’ which he links to the opposition of ‘superior and inferior’ and elite and multitude” (63). While Edward II is a monarch with few strictly private spaces to retreat to, the principle remains; access to an individual's personal spaces, their mind and their body, indicates who has intimacy and

power in a relationship. Edward's indiscriminate intimacy with his followers, and the denial of the same intimacy to his queen, his son, and the peers of the royal court show that Edward is out of sync with the requirements of his position as king and man, and that he is unable to exert personal authority over his person or the spaces that should be under his control. As H. David Brumble asserts, "*Edward II* is much concerned with the necessity of control: personal, paternal, and kingly" (56). Unfortunately for Edward, the control exerted in the play is not by him; Gaveston and the nobles fight for kingly power, Mortimer and the Queen take charge of Edward's son, and the king's personal actions are all dictated by a desire to please his minions, actions seeking affirmation and ceding control.

Rather than looking to establish his position as king, Edward's first act is one of private pleasure, rather than public duty, recalling his favorite Piers Gaveston, and breaking an oath made to his father, as Lord Mortimer will later remind him. And far from controlling and limiting access to his body and presence, Edward quickly declares himself as under the control of another and lacking in personal identity: "knowest thou not who I am?/Thy friend, thy self, another Gaveston!" (i.141-2); Edward goes beyond declaring them intimates, or even "two of a kind," rather he identifies himself *as* the other, merging and obscuring his own identity, obliterating any liminal space between himself, and the other.

Throughout the play, Edward II seems equally unable to control who has access to him and his presence. He repeatedly commands others to withdraw, or be removed, and is ignored. As king, and as a man, Edward does not have the power to control his court or

his personal spaces. Moments such as the end of scene 1, when Edward calls out not “Guards” but “Who’s there?” a signal that provokes not an answer, but an entrance, and indicates his own lack of knowledge of who is near him, show this clearly. And later, Edward’s “Out of my presence! Come not near the court” is answered with Mortimer’s “I’ll not be barred the court for Gaveston” (vi.88-9)—indeed, he and the other nobles are not barred, at this point, or later:

Guard: Whither will your lordships?

Mortimer Junior: Whither else but to the King?

Guard: His highness is disposed to be along.

Lancaster: Why, so he may, but we will speak to him.

Guard: You may not in, my lord.

Mortimer Junior: May we not? (vi.130-5).

This exchange is followed immediately by Edward’s entrance and quick attempt to leave; he is stopped by Mortimer’s “Nay, stay my lord” (138) and remains there until after the nobles have left following line 196. Nor can Edward control the geographical spaces of the kingdom under his command; in the scene after Mortimer has arrived safely in France and been reunited with the Queen, Edward declares of him: “He is in England’s ground; our port masters/Are not so careless of their King’s command” (xvii.22-3). And while he is busy disputing with his peers, the King of France invades England’s continental territory, because in his financial irresponsibility, Edward has failed to pay the homage due. When the Queen, always on top of news and rumor, informs Edward that “That Lord Valois our brother, King of France,/Because your highness hath been slack in



homage,/Hath seized Normandy into his hands (xi.62-4), Edward replies, unconcerned, “Tush, Sib, if this be all,/.../But to my Gaveston” (66,68), turning again to private pleasures over public duty.

At the beginning of the play Gaveston asserts his own desire to “draw the pliant King which way I please” (i.52), indicating that all are aware of the king’s lack of self-mastery. After Edward II is captured by the nobles, his body is indeed drawn pliantly from place to place, but Edward’s continued health shows that he “hath a body able to endure/More than we can inflict” (xxiv.10-1), so his jailers turn to “assail his mind another while” (xxiv.12). “Another while” is fitting, as throughout the “while” of the play, Edward’s mind has been assailed by one individual after another quite effectively. That his mind is the clear subject of control is obvious in the way he continues to be “ventriloquized” by his minions. Edward often neither thinks for himself, nor speaks for himself; he is easily influenced and exhibits no filter between the words of his favorites and his own mouth. Edward, initially, has replaced his wife and queen Isabella with Gaveston as lover and consort, but has no thought of infidelity or torn loyalties on the part of his queen until Gaveston plants the idea in Edward’s head in this witnessed exchange:

Isabella: On whom but on my husband should I fawn?

Gaveston: On Mortimer, with whom, ungently Queen –

I say no more; judge you the rest, my lord. (iv.146-8)

A few lines later Edward says to Isabella, “Thou art too familiar with that Mortimer” (iv.154). Gaveston’s words have become Edward’s thoughts. Edward also parrots the

words of his minions; their commands become his. The power that seems to be exercised by Edward as king is merely the enactment of the will of others, who control the sovereign position and the man to enact their own personal credit and power. As king and individual, Edward fails to live or perform in the spaces that Queen Elizabeth managed so well, where she asserts power beyond her female birthright, but instead demonstrates a failure to perform power and earn credit, to enact the roles he is “born to.” Not by having favorites, common or otherwise, but by becoming the minion himself, Edward II cedes any power he might exert, as king, or as man. Regulation of access beyond the body’s liminal spaces, “what enters and leaves the body, the control of its borders, especially points of entry and egress” (Breitenberg 42), was tied to masculinity. Marlowe repeatedly demonstrates, however, that Edward’s failures are those of mind and will, not of physical behavior.

While in *Edward II* the issue of male relationships is vague, it is not the act of sodomy, the physical breaching of the body, that proves most dangerous, but the breaching of the mind, as Edward fails to control both what he hears, and how he responds. His inability to control his tongue or emotions equally marks him as subordinate, lacking in the skills of the successful patriarchal householder. On the few occasions when Edward speaks for himself, he demonstrates either a willful lack of understanding and discernment, or a childish, uncontrolled temper. When Mortimer and Lancaster describe their banners to him, he immediately discerns the meaning behind them, demonstrating his competence at discerning symbols when he chooses, but his angry response show his failure to make use of that competence by heeding their

warnings. Rather Edward again equates himself with Gaveston, and responds with violent hyperbole: “Tis not the hugest monster of the sea/Nor the foulest harpy that shall swallow him” (vi.44-5). This pattern of violent, over the top responses continues throughout the play:

I will have heads and lives for him as many  
As I have manors, castles, towns, and towers  
....  
If I be England’s king, in lakes of gore  
Your headless trunks, your bodies will I trail,  
That you may drink your fill and quaff in blood,  
And stain my royal standard with the same. (xi.132-3, 135-8)

Edward rants, as if by using extravagant expressions of savagery and evoking bloody imagery he can defeat his opponents with words rather than the actions that his position of responsibilities should elicit from him, marking him clearly as seeking status in the manner of youths and subordinates.

Shepard describes the ways that dependent males asserted their masculine prowess in a society that gave them no domestic sphere of power:

Transience, prodigality, physical bravery, and comradliness made one a true man among journeymen, in sharp contrast to the master’s virtues of thrift, reliability, and stability... similar alternatives were being asserted ... in the form of drinking bouts, collective misrule and daring spectacles, and carefully calculated displays of violence, excess and disorder. (102)

Following his victory over the nobles Edward proclaims, “Thus after many threats of wrathful war,/Triumpheth England’s Edward with his friends;/And triumph Edward with his friends uncontrolled” (xvi.1-3). Like a child who has won a game, he celebrates the victory, giving no weight to the issues that inspired the conflict, nor the people who have died in it. Edward fails to understand that his actions have consequences; that the kingdom is not a toy he can pick up and toss at will; it is only in this sense that he sees it as “Edward’s England.” Lacking in the master’s virtues, Edward sees himself as “England’s Edward,” a reversal of the responsibilities that are his, for as sovereign, it is “Edward’s England” that should be looked to, but Edward II is interested in being “Edward with his friends uncontrolled.” Ironically, Edward fails to discern that while his friends are uncontrolled, Edward is totally under the control of his friends.

Edward II’s failures are tied to economic irresponsibility from the beginning of the play as well. At his reunion with his favorite Gaveston he offers, “Want thou gold? Go to my treasury” (i.166). Gaveston has already shown himself to be both poor and inclined to extravagance: “I’ll have Italian masques by night,/Sweet speeches, comedies, and pleasing shows;/And in the day when he shall walk abroad,/Like sylvan nymphs my pages will be glad” (i.54-7). And as Mortimer later charges Edward, it is exactly this sort of prodigality towards his favorites, and profligacy towards his responsibilities that brings Edward under public condemnation:

The idle triumphs, masques, lascivious shows,  
And prodigal gifts bestowed on Gaveston  
Have drawn thy treasure dry and made thee weak;

The murmuring commons overstretched hath. (vi,154-7)

England is a common space, its wealth is a common wealth, not Edward's own to lavish on his favorites. Rather Edward's England is a space of responsibility, his household, as it were, that as king he is bound to defend and care for, jobs that he ignores to frolic as minion with the favorites who rule him. Edward is concerned neither with the mechanisms that earn cultural credit, nor with the need for control of financial credit in monetary expenditures. If Gaveston inspires Edward to extravagance, Spenser himself takes control of the wealth of the monarch, sending Levune to France with a bribe for the king, on the condition that "all aid may be denied" (xiv.48) to Edward's queen, and son, leaving them stranded and friendless in a foreign land. There is no indication Edward is aware of this maneuver until Spenser informs him of the results later. Not only does it show a lack of control over the financial capital that is his to maintain, it also exhibits the way that Edward fails as both provider and protector of those within his household.

Edward is a man caught not by his "unnatural" physical desires, but by his own willful ceding of identity and position to his passions. Comradliness and violent excess mark Edward's response to his favorites on the one hand, and any opposition he incurs on the other. In Edward's own imaginative space, his fantasy world, there are only two spaces in which he can reside: with Gaveston, later Spencer, wherever that may be, or without him. Like a child, Edward's defining characteristics are his passion and his irresponsibility. Left to his own devices he seems to exist separately from the realm he is meant to reign over, living in a fantasy love story in which he and his lover are interchangeable and the two can frolic without responsibility, seeking a place of

transience where England is a realm disconnected from reality: “Ere my sweet Gaveston shall part from me, / This isle shall fleet upon the ocean / And wander to the unfrequented Inde” (iv.48-50). Unwilling to look to the responsibilities of his various public roles, “[Edward’s] attachment to Gaveston represents freedom from responsibility and escape into a world of eroticism at variance with his social identity” (Summers 233). In Edward II’s own imaginative space, his crown and England’s wealth exist to bestow favor on his favorites, or to bargain with the lords, the church, and the parliament to ensure the presence and pleasure of his favorites.

As sovereign, Edward is expected to perform to power. McAdam explains:

[Edward] fails both personally and politically in the construction of this necessary illusion. Fictions and works of art demand skill, discipline and control in their constructions; social fictions also require careful reading of contexts, an assessment of the relative strengths of both oneself and others. Edward opts for indulgence in fantasy rather than for skillful artistic control and mastery of self-fashioning. (221)

Edward II must construct for the audience of his life a public face that will earn the credit and respect that should accompany his position, and that is necessary to power the role.

But on Marlowe’s stage, the monarch is judged by more than a constructed face, Edward II must act in ways that earn him credit with the people as well. As Mortimer charges

Edward:

Thy court is naked, being bereft of those  
That makes a king seem glorious to the world –

I mean the peers whom thou shouldst dearly love.

Libels are cast against thee in the street,

Ballads and rhymes made of thy overthrow (vi.171-5).

Through Mortimer's words, Marlowe brings the public sphere of ballads and street life into the dialogue of political confrontation. The peers who should fill his court and reflect glory and importance on the sovereign are missing, and their places have been filled with those who should serve the king in private. Edward is at risk of losing his position and his power because he has lost credit; he is being judged by the people, as they would judge one another, and he has failed.

The Queen Isabella, in contrast to her husband Edward II, and in a subtle reflection of Marlowe's own Queen Elizabeth, survives and flourishes, both earning and expending cultural credit skillfully. While she ends the play imprisoned by her son, Edward III, Marlowe's theater-going audience would likely have been aware that the historical queen was liberated and returned to a position of influence in her son's court, outliving Mortimer by twenty-eight years. In Marlowe's play, Isabella performs her royal and individual roles in a way that builds and secures her position. She is presented as a princess of France in her own right, and initially, as the conscientious and loving wife of Edward II; as a responsible queen, guardian and protector of the realm of England and its kingship; and as the concerned mother of the younger Edward. Jennifer L. Sheckter presents Isabella as using her performance of gender and a Machiavellian character to achieve her own premeditated ends, a potentially uncomplimentary assessment, but a dramatic improvement over her husband who neither recognizes nor attempts to enact the

personal performance necessary to leverage power and credit in the social and political economies his position requires. Isabella, by contrast, is the consummate “earwitness,” and a capable performer, like England’s Queen Elizabeth, until she makes the mistake that Elizabeth carefully avoided, succumbing to her own passion for a man.

Unlike her husband, Isabella maintains control of her self—her body and access to it, and her self-control, guarding her words and actions, until Mortimer is threatened and her passions overrule her reason. Throughout the play, except when overruled by Edward II, it is Isabella who controls her movements and who approaches her. In her first appearance in the play, she enters an already full stage, but not as one entering into the others presence; Isabella is instead passing through, on her way to the forest to express her emotions privately, she asserts. Edward II, though king, seems unable to act on his own desire for a retreat, but Isabella goes where she wills. Mortimer instructs her, “Madam, return unto the court again” (ii.56), but she remains onstage until all exit. Early in the play, it is Isabella in control of her relationship with Mortimer: “Sweet Mortimer, sit down by me a while” (iv.225), a prelude to taking him aside to talk privately. At the end of scene viii, Mortimer again tries to dictate her movements, “Madam, stay you within the castle here” (51) and “Nay, rather sail with us to Scarborough” (53), but Isabella continues to control her choices, deciding her own movements: “My son and I will over into France” (66). A few scenes later she manipulates Edward into sending her and her son, by a subtle reminder of her own filial relationship with the King of France. Later, denied the support of her brother and exiled without support in France, Isabella takes control and chooses to leave with her son and seek succor elsewhere. Having been



rejected by her husband for another, Isabella denies him authority over her subsequent movements, demonstrating both her own control of self, and Edward's inability to exert control over the members of his household.

Isabella also exhibits control of her own speech, guarding her words, and always aware of the dangerous potential of the tongue. Tasked by her husband with securing the baron's support for the return of Gaveston, she carefully pulls aside Mortimer to achieve her task. It seems clear early on that Mortimer has an interest in the Queen, and though there is no indication that that interest is mutual, Isabella makes use of it. What is said in their private chat remains unknown; the audience doesn't hear, and neither party reveals specifics, leaving the Queen safe, from rebuke, or guilt. It seems unlikely, based on her own hedging later in the play, that she would openly suggest to Mortimer the murder of Gaveston, but she is able to skillfully prompt him to think, and proceed patiently and cunningly, rather than rashly. Isabella exhibits throughout the play a skillful understanding of when and where to speak.

Later, she says to her son, "I dare not speak a word" (xxiii.93), when Mortimer orders the execution of Kent. This line reads two ways, one, as her own fear to speak against the ever-growing tyranny of Mortimer, and, two, as Isabella's own recognition that Edmund does indeed pose a threat to the lives of both herself and her son. This is the same danger that leads her to conclude of her husband Edward II, much as Elizabeth did with Mary, Queen of Scots, that "as long as he survives/What safety rests for us, or for my son?" (21.42-3). While to a modern reader, this seems harsh and Machiavellian, to an early modern English audience, well aware of the dangers of civil war and the succession

disputes in the wake of Henry VIII's death, it is not an unreasonable or extreme conclusion on Isabella's part. That it is perhaps an unwelcome one she shows in her next words: "I would it were, so it were not by my means" (45). Isabella clearly recognizes both the precariousness of her position and the dangers of an uncontrolled response to that precariousness. Like England's Elizabeth I, Isabella is a discerning earwitness who hears and exerts control over the rumors that fly about her. Aware that as a female and as the wife of a weak and troubled monarch her position is precarious, she ably manages both herself and those around her, not for her own ambitious ends, but rather for self-preservation and the future of her beloved son. Unlike Elizabeth, however, Isabella allows herself to fall under the sway of her own emotions for Mortimer, losing discernment, and ceding control of her self, as he usurps a male headship over her, her son, and the kingdom. We see the beginning of this transformation at the beginning of the rebellion when Mortimer seems to warn her, as if he registers her movement away from reason, resulting in a more impassioned and intemperate speech than is wise before their audience. Marlowe's portrayals of Queen Isabella, Edward II, and Mortimer all allow the play to speak to the binaries of both masculine/feminine and passion/reason, demonstrating that the characteristics of gender, and the skills of intellect, are tied neither to sex, nor to birth-ordained position.

In contrast to his queen Isabella, who maintains her royal role at all times, Edward alternates between desperate lover and petulant child, but never husband, father, or any other authoritative role. When faced with the loss of his favorites, Edward repeatedly offers to divide or give away his kingdom, or trade its wealth for the return of his minion.

It is in part this disregard for both his position and the welfare of the kingdom that leads to Edward's downfall—he fails to perform his role as king and to enact it, but Edward also fails to secure credit in the social and political economy of the public sphere by refusing the responsibilities of his positions, and by failing to control access to his self, or to exhibit self-control. In the realm of the court, and in the very public space of the urban and country commons, his refusal to act as his public office requires, indulging instead in the pursuit of both private pleasure, and of a place of privacy to retreat to, adjuring all responsibility, has lost him the confidence and approval of both the peers of the realm, and of the common people. He is mocked by the common people in ballads, pamphlets and gossip for his failure to enrich and safeguard the kingdom; he is disrespected by the nobles that he is unable to control; he is abandoned by the once-faithful queen. In each of these arenas Edward flounders, either by refusing to perform, or by ceding his authority and power to others, seeking neither to earn credit nor to enter into the cultural economy of obligation of the country that he is supposed to rule.

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In the final scene Edward III is in power now, a power that he has earned through his own skillful use of the markers of credit. From his first appearance on stage, the young Edward has exhibited an understanding of the weight and responsibility of the kingship that will one day be his. Charged with carrying messages to France after the French king has seized Normandy, the future Edward III urges his father:

Commit not to my youth things of more weight

Than fits a prince so young as I to bear.

And fear not, lord and father; heaven's great beams  
On Atlas' shoulder shall not lie more safe  
Than shall our charge committed to my trust (xi.74-8).

This Edward is fully aware of the gravity of the situation, of his own shortcomings, and of the importance of being trustworthy—credible. It is this creditworthiness that aids the new king to secure the support of his peers when “Into the council chamber he is gone/To crave the aid and succor of his peers” (xxv.20-1). Edward III recognizes his position, and the reciprocity entailed in it; he seeks to further the relationships that bring stability to the commonwealth. In doing so, he re-establishes the monarchy as a position of honor and repute.

As the play ends, the stage has been swept clean of the previous generation—those who have bankrupted their credit are gone, supporters of the God-ordained birth-ordered status quo replaced with unnamed lords. In contrast to his father, who offered no allegiance or honor to his recently deceased father as the play opened, Edward III situates himself as a son seeking revenge for the death of his father, his mother banished to await judgment not for treason, but for the unnatural crime of killing her husband. Though Edward III mentions treachery, there is no mention of treason, the overthrow of authority, or the killing of Edward II as king. Presumed are both Edward II's failures, and the need for Edward III to prove himself. This scene is played out as a family drama and domestic authority, not one of court machinations. Edward III acts to demonstrate his control in the domestic sphere, establishing his competency in the most basic arena of public office that is his.

Having secured the support of his nobles and assumed the power of his formerly titular position of king, Edward III immediately begins to control access to his presence. Mortimer is hauled out and immediately executed, the head returned as proof of the efficacy of the young king's commands. His mother, though still Queen, is also quickly removed from his presence, lest her emotions, and his love for her, influence him unwisely. In this move, he demonstrates his clear control of both access to his person, and his self-awareness and self-control. By removing even his own mother, whom he obviously dearly loves, from his presence, he refuses to allow himself to be swayed into unwise actions by the power of that love. Unlike his foolish father, and most recently, his mother, Edward III recognizes the danger of uncontrolled emotions and access, and consciously chooses to guard himself and the kingdom from his own potential failings. Edward puts his moral and civic obligations, his public sphere duties, above his own personal and private feelings.

The final tableau features both Edward II, dead in a horrible mimicry of the physical penetration implied in his submissive minion relationships, and Mortimer, who having usurped a headship and position that was not his to have, has now lost his head. Presiding over them is Edward III, an ungendered (except as son, a relationship that innately acknowledges the blend of male and female in his identity)<sup>8</sup> youth who has earned and negotiated his own power and credit. In this moment, Edward asserts, not his

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<sup>8</sup> This positioning, as child of both male and female, reflects back to Mulcaster's presentation of Elizabeth I in her London coronation pageant, reinforcing the parallels of questionable inheritance and the need for the crowned sovereign to earn approval and prove their capability in the face of potential challenges to the succession. See Scuro for more parallels.

right to authority, but his “grief and innocency” (xxv.102). Innocent of the bloodbath that has preceded this moment, Edward is a son who appropriately grieves his father, recognizing the importance of the domestic sphere, and restoring harmony and peace to the commonwealth. Marlowe’s *Edward II* offers up a recasting of power as the result of individual behavior—earned credit, rather than of strict patriarchal and religious birth-ordered hierarchies, an economy in which both social and political credit and position can be earned by the skillful representations of identity of each individual player.

*Edward II* begins with ambiguous identities, merging the voices of commoner and king in the mouth of Piers Gaveston, and ends with the new king Edward III situating the deaths of both Edward II and Mortimer Junior as tragedies in the context of personal family drama. In between, Marlowe repeatedly emphasizes the importance of the public voice, the common people of England. At key points in the narrative, the tide of power is changed by the intervention of commoners, and throughout the drama the players make reference and appeal to the people’s approval and the power of public opinion. Once Edward II signs the document banishing Gaveston, Lancaster declares, “Give it me; I’ll have it published in the streets” (iv.89), and Pembroke responds, “This will be good news to the common sort” (93). Edward II is restrained from executing Mortimer after his capture because, “I dare not, for the people love him well” (vi.232), and later Mortimer is motivated to rid himself of Edward because, “The king must die, or Mortimer goes down;/The commons now begin to pity him” (xxiii.1-2). These assertions indicate a power of the common people; both Edward II and Mortimer fear to act against their will.

Marlowe indicates the competence of the commoners in the characters of Gaveston, Spenser, and Baldock, as well, all of whom demonstrate wit, cunning and skillful use of the markers of credit.

In an England that is becoming increasingly more physically restrictive as ever expanding enclosure laws “make several kingdoms of this monarchy” (iv.70), Marlowe’s theatrical staging opens the social and political conversation to the displaced commoners of his audience, inviting them to dialogue with the lords, the royals, the merchants, and the players with whom they share the space of the theater, and negotiate new terms of power and understanding, regardless of sex or class, creating a public sphere of possibility that expands out into the kingdom.

~~A Critical Conclusion~~

When we as critics begin our work, we must situate our analysis within the context of the culture we are speaking of, both historically and linguistically. Models can, of course, be helpful in developing our thinking and enhancing our understandings, but we must remain aware of their limitations. When speaking of a public sphere—a forum where there are forces and voices beyond the political and civil ruling class at work affecting policy and political and social change, we must be open to finding these forums where they are located whether they fit neatly into a predefined model or not; to refashion the evidence, or “tweak” the model beyond all original meaning, does neither our own work, nor the model justice. That there was a public sphere of sort at work in sixteenth and seventeenth century England is obvious based on the momentous changes that took place, and the evidence of its presence, such as we see in Marlowe’s *Edward II*. It must

be understood that the public sphere in the early modern culture will be shaped and defined by early modern parameters and understandings, conceptions of public very different from that of a later capitalist bourgeois Marxist modelling. Marlowe's *Edward II* serves us well as a way to begin shaping a new early modern model in the way that it exposes the forces at work in the cultural economy, mirroring and reinforcing the negotiations of credit that must surely have been enacted both within the theater audience, and beyond.



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