

Christopher Marlowe's "Unholy Fascination": Performing Queer *Edward II* in the 1990s

Angela K. Ahlgren

There are those who believe King Edward II was a homosexual, and those who believe he was not. A very few extant descriptions, centuries-long rumor, and Christopher Marlowe's 1592 play have led to Edward II becoming known in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as a homosexual, a sodomite, and a sexual deviant.¹ Accounts of the historical Edward's "brotherly" relationships convince some that he engaged in intimate sexual relationships with men, while others insist that the absence of firm evidence and the fact that he produced children mean he could not have had sex with men.² That Marlowe himself is thought to have had male sexual partners only adds to Edward's mystique. Whether or not the historical Edward II actually had sex with men is at this point inconsequential. There is and can be no definitive proof, no catching-in-the-act, that would finally answer the question of his sexual predilections. Still, it is a homosexual Edward II that has "capture[d] the popular imagination."³ Writing in 1968, literary critic Wilbur Sanders laments the "unholy fascination" readers have with Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*, and, in keeping with long-held notions of homosexuality as a mental illness, worries that readers "confuse the deep satisfactions of great imaginative literature with the idle pleasure of indulging [their] curiosity about the fringes of human sanity."⁴ Later, Edward's purported affairs with Piers Gaveston inspired Chris Hunt's 1992 novel, *Gaveston*, which narrates the long-standing love affair from Edward's point of view. Explorations of Edward II's sexuality, then, may be less about uncovering truths about his past than about using the past to interrogate contemporary ideas about homosexuality.

Marlowe's *Edward II* resonates with twentieth- and twenty-first-century notions of homosexuality, depicting Edward as a character that contemporary audiences easily read as gay. The play exhibits many examples of desire openly expressed between men and acknowledged by other characters. When Edward II succeeds his father on the English throne, he lavishes affection and unwarranted titles on Piers Gaveston, a man hated by Edward's court because of his low birth. Mortimer Senior, an elder in the court, dismisses Edward's obvious obsession with Gaveston

Angela Ahlgren earned her PhD in performance as public practice at the University of Texas at Austin in 2011. She is currently working on a book project based on her dissertation, "Drumming Asian America: Performing Race, Gender, and Sexuality in North American Taiko." Her research interests include queer, feminist, and Asian American performance, and her writing on taiko drumming has been recognized with awards from American Society for Theatre Research and Congress on Research in Dance.

as a youthful transgression to be overcome with age. "The mightiest kings have had their minions," he reasons, listing examples of great men who have loved boys throughout history.⁵ Edward should "freely enjoy that vain, light-headed earl" while he is young "[f]or riper years will wean him from such toys."⁶ Mortimer's words resonate with twentieth-century sentiments that homosexuality is something to be outgrown. In other words, it's just a phase. Meanwhile, Edward's wife, Queen Isabella, becomes jealous of Edward's love for Gaveston, lamenting that "never doted Jove on Ganymede / So much as he on cursed Gaveston."⁷ Finally, Edward's death is often cited as evidence of his homosexuality: his executioners thrust a hot iron poker into his body cavity through his anus, in a poetic mockery of anal sex.⁸ Regardless of how Marlowe's historical sources depicted Edward II, Marlowe's play emphasizes Edward's weakness for male companions.

Moreover, the play's performance history since the 1950s suggests that directors interpret the play according to contemporary notions of sexuality. At mid-century, as gay American playwrights like Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee were masking gay themes in codes and innuendo to avoid detection by censors and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC),⁹ British directors were interpreting Marlowe's Edward as an openly homosexual man.¹⁰ Toby Robertson, a prominent television and stage director in the 1960s and 70s, directed an *Edward II* in which Edward and Gaveston share a long kiss. In a 1964 interview, Robertson reflects, "The homosexuality in the play is treated without the reserve, almost hesitancy, found in Tennessee Williams The lack of shame about homosexuality in *Edward II* perhaps partly created the enormous interest."¹¹ Robertson directed Ian McKellen, who came out publicly as gay in 1988, in the title role at the 1969 Edinburgh Festival and later for television in 1970. A *Time* magazine reviewer writes of the Edinburgh production: "McKellen and Director Toby Robertson have confronted with stark candor the fact that *Edward II* is a play by a homosexual about a king who was a homosexual who indeed ruined himself for an infatuation." The production openly depicted gay intimacy with a "searching kiss" between Edward and Gaveston, and staged the murder scene as a seduction, with Lightborn seducing Edward before turning him "legs up" for his "cauterization."¹² Like these mid-twentieth century productions, Gerard Murphy's Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) production in 1990 and Derek Jarman's 1991 film of *Edward II* both connect the play to current notions of sexuality. These artists' anachronistic use of the term "homosexuality" notwithstanding, it is clear that the play's insistence on desire between men has been appealing to contemporary theatre artists.

Since the mid-twentieth century, many gay Edwards have sauntered across the boards, infusing Christopher Marlowe's play with contemporary notions of sexuality and identity politics; yet, very little scholarship centers on the production history of the play, let alone the explicitly queer versions. Much has been made of Jarman's film, which overtly brings contemporary queer politics into the play,¹³

but performance scholarship barely acknowledges the RSC production, the first major stage production of *Edward II* to explicitly tie the play to contemporary queer activism. Patrons of large national theatres like the Royal Shakespeare Company or regional theatres that produce period plays (the Guthrie Theater and its ilk) may be surprised when a production departs from its previous (and often conservative) interpretations. When the RSC production opened in 1990, reviews were mixed, some lauding the queer interpretation and others condemning it as unfaithful to Marlowe's text.¹⁴

Looking at overtly queer productions of *Edward II* allows us to trace the ways theatrical performance has concerned itself with gay, lesbian, and queer politics. I use the term "overtly queer" to describe productions that depict Edward and other characters as recognizably gay characters, or that otherwise draw connections between the play and contemporary ideas of gay, lesbian, and queer identity. Contemporary productions of Early Modern drama are particularly crucial sites for queer analysis precisely because they call into question a host of assumptions about the vexed nature of same-sex desire in the West across historical periods. They question the notion that, as Jonathan Goldberg writes, "[T]he only sexuality that ever obtains is a transhistorical heterosexuality."¹⁵ After all, the term homosexuality predates the concept of heterosexuality,¹⁶ yet heterosexuality's status in the distant past is less often questioned. Marlowe's *Edward II* is just one example of Renaissance drama to suggest that gender and sexuality are mutable and historically contingent.

I argue that Murphy's RSC production and Jarman's film of *Edward II* reflect notions of queerness circulating in the 1990s because they stage violence, same-sex desire, and references to contemporary gay political issues, while imagining a better future for gay, lesbian, and queer people. While these two contemporaneous productions were in development and production, activist groups in London and New York were recuperating the derogatory slur "queer" to call attention to the presence and plight of gays and lesbians using performative protests like kiss-ins and antiviolence campaigns with slogans like "Bash Back." Theorists Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, among others, were also developing nuanced ways of thinking about sexuality, as part of what would come to be called "queer theory" during the late 1980s and early 1990s. These theorists' contributions offer more expansive ways of theorizing these two productions.

This production history of Marlowe's *Edward II* in the 1990s highlights the multiple and often contradictory ways queerness was being theorized at the time, not only through academic routes but also on the streets and stages. Performance, like scholarship and activism, is a kind of embodied theorizing that demands an immediate response. Each of these productions employs a different set of strategies for intervening in debates about sexuality, turning to the Renaissance as a usable past that engages with the queer politics of their own historical moment. This

article demonstrates the multiple ways queerness circulated during this fruitful and contentious period. In what follows, I introduce the theoretical and historical context of my argument, locating the performances at the intersections of queer activism, queer theory, and theatre practice in the early 1990s. Next, I examine the ways Murphy's RSC production used onstage violence and sexuality to elicit sympathy for its homosexual Edward. I, then, turn to a brief analysis of Jarman's film, which not only draws on violence and sexuality but also rewrites Marlowe's script to include scenes of contemporary queer activism.

Despite the attention Murphy's queer *Edward II* drew from London press, it remains more or less absent from theatre's historical record. Derek Jarman's film, likely due in part to its wide availability on VHS, has been more adequately theorized. Only a few print reviews of Murphy's production were available online when I began this research in 2004. In 2005, I traveled to the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon, where the RSC archives are housed. The archive provided me with photocopies of all production reviews collected by the RSC (many of which included press photos), select photocopied pages of the stage manager's prompt book, and viewing access to the VHS recording of the production. While the photocopies remain in my possession, a single VHS viewing is no less fleeting than attending a single production. All of these materials offer limited access to the performance itself, but taken together, the archival materials provide a substantial picture of the production's aesthetics and politics, and the ways it was received by its critics.

The Queer Nineties: Activism and Theory

These two productions of *Edward II* happened in a particularly queer moment, when the word "queer" was being recuperated in both activist and academic circles. What now often serves as an umbrella term that refers to gays and lesbians, as well as bisexual and transgender people (among others), initially connoted an oppositional stance. In their 1991 essay on Queer Nation, Jeffrey Escoffier and Allan Berube write, "The new generation calls itself *queer*, not *lesbian*, *gay*, and *bisexual* *Queer* is meant to be confrontational—opposed to gay assimilationists and straight oppressors while inclusive of people who have been marginalized by anyone in power."¹⁷ Not to simplify too much, queer activism employed performative tactics and redirected violence in order to reclaim power, while theorists in the academy engaged the term "queer" to reconsider a broad spectrum of deeply entrenched notions of sexuality and other structures of power.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, gays and lesbians—still considered sexual deviants—recuperated the anger and violence that had been directed against them, and the eroticism for which they had been condemned, and operated under the name "queer." In England and the United States, this was a time when AIDS activism, gay and lesbian activism, and social conservatism collided, necessitating new strategies

for social change. Queer activism recirculated violence as an aggressive force for change, using violence and anger as a counterattack on its oppressors. Many gays and lesbians in England feared a backlash of homophobia after Section 28 of the Local Government Act was passed in 1988. This legislation “threatened local authorities with prosecution for actions that ‘promoted’ homosexuality.”¹⁸ In other words, homosexuality was not tolerated in any setting regulated by government, such as in published documents or schools. This legislation was later repealed, but only after years of debate. Lisa Duggan similarly characterizes the US during the 1980s as an embattled terrain upon which the “sex wars” were raging: “[B]attles over the regulation of pornography, the scope of legal protections for gay people, the funding of allegedly ‘obscene’ art, [and] the content of safe-sex education,” to name a few, were being fought in politics and popular culture at the time.¹⁹

Out of this atmosphere, explicitly queer activist groups emerged in both England and the US, seeking to radicalize existing gay rights strategies that some saw as assimilationist. London-based activist group OutRage!, founded in the spring of 1990, opposed “assimilation into straight society and conformity to the unjust, oppressive status quo.” Through tactics that “expose, embarrass, ridicule and shame” homophobic individuals, OutRage! secured visibility and media attention for queer rights.²⁰ American activist groups ACT UP and Queer Nation also formed in 1990. By that time, the gay community had recognized AIDS as a crisis, but the US government’s initial failure to provide support and funding to people with AIDS prompted aggressive activism from the gay community. Members of ACT UP, a New York City-based group of AIDS activists, formed Queer Nation, choosing to fight for equality beyond AIDS-related issues. Writer Michael Cunningham describes Queer Nation as “a peculiar mix of outrage and wackiness” that addresses the “intricate combination of rage and terror that constitutes the gay zeitgeist of 1992. There’s a virus ticking its way through the arteries of people we love But what’s driven some of us around the bend is the fact that, even as our friends keep dying, the hatred of homosexuals flourishes.”²¹ For Cunningham, the double threat of AIDS and homophobia set the stage for radical queer activism in the early 1990s.

Analyzing the flyers Queer Nation distributed in its early days, E. J. Rand notes that part of the power of “queer” (as opposed to gay and lesbian) comes from its relationship to violence.²² Queer Nation circulated flyers emblazoned with phrases such as “I Hate Straights” and “Bash Back” and also used tactics that heightened the public visibility of queer bodies, such as going “en masse to straight bars and hockey games, where they kiss their lovers passionately.”²³ According to Rand, these flyers indicate “that the legacy of violence against queers can be symbolically reversed and recuperated as queer rage. Being queer, in this sense, is no longer associated with passivity or victimization but with anger, strength, and the ability to defend oneself.”²⁴ Queer Nation’s tactics, then, retained and redirected, rather than erased, the violence of gay-bashing.

Queer also carried with it the recognition of eroticism, a reaction against more assimilationist strategies working at the same time. Derek Jarman, someone who has experienced “queer” as both insult and empowerment, remarks, “My first feeling was that queer was erotic—it put sexuality back into a sanitized world where we lived with our ‘partners,’ not ‘boyfriends.’”²⁵ More than just a fashion or design motif, Murphy and Jarman’s visions of *Edward II* reflect their queer moment because they incorporate aspects of violence and overt eroticism in the service of imagining a better future for queer people.

In addition to queer activism’s advent in the 1990s, theorists in the academy, influenced by Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1978), also developed nuanced ways of understanding the centrality of sex and sexuality to structures of power in Western culture. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), remains a key text in queer studies for its valuable insights into the ways sexuality, in particular a homo/heterosexual binary, structures Western thought and culture.²⁶ Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity posits that gender is performative rather than inherent, a series of repeated acts that do not necessarily line up with biological sex. This unhinging of biological sex and gender also had vast implications for theorizing sexuality.²⁷ Later in the 1990s, Michael Warner’s theory of heteronormativity expanded the notion of queer to include a critique of not only sexuality, but a host of other structures that shape social relations and reinforce heterosexuality as “normal.”²⁸ In the realm of performance, Jill Dolan’s *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988) reworked feminist film theory to critique the presumptive heterosexual white male perspective in realist theatre, providing a model for feminist and lesbian spectatorship.²⁹ For many of the theorists and activists working in the early nineties and later, “queer” held promise as a term that would not only confront oppression but also unite its varied constituents—gay men, lesbians, transgender people, and others who fall outside the “normal”—together in struggle.³⁰ These theorists, among others, inform my readings of these two performances.

Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* is especially pertinent to studies of Renaissance sexuality that emerged in the 1990s. She begins her inquiry from a critique of the “powerful mechanism of the open secret,” or the widespread truism that one can’t know anything about homosexuality in the distant past.³¹ As Jonathan Goldberg notes, “Sedgwick’s elaboration of an epistemology of the closet provides a supple analytic tool for investigating the regimes of unknowing and unacknowledgability that structure the place of homosexuality in Renaissance culture.”³² Largely indebted to Sedgwick, Renaissance scholars such as Goldberg, Jonathan Dollimore, Valerie Traub, and others imagined new frameworks through which to evaluate sexuality across historical periods.³³ My analysis proceeds from the premise that Early Modern texts, such as Marlowe’s *Edward II*, provide a “usable past” through which to examine contemporary modes of sexuality, violence, and power. Indeed, Murphy and Jarman certainly make use of this past as they

theorize—through performance—about the stakes of sexual acts and desires within well-established structures of power.

The Royal Shakespeare Company's "Daring" *Edward II*

Gerard Murphy's 1990 RSC production of *Edward II* opened at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, on July 10, 1990, starring Simon Russell Beale as Edward and Grant Thatcher as Piers Gaveston. Newspaper reviews—of which there were many—boasted playful titles such as "Butch Boys in the Mist"³⁴ and "Lovers or Just Good Friends?"³⁵ Through interviews and program notes, the RSC carefully positioned the production as both daring in its staging of contemporary queer politics and conservative in its faithfulness to Marlowe's text. Following a tradition of "gay" Edwards in 1960s and 1970s versions of *Edward II*, Murphy explicitly aligns the play with gay and lesbian politics in the 1990s by staging same-gender love and eroticism, by creating sympathy for Edward through his violent death, and through contemporary costuming. In some respects, Murphy's production may have pushed boundaries of the RSC audience with its political agenda, seeming quite radical in the context of a theatre dedicated to canonical work. In other ways, this production was perhaps less radical in its interpretation of the text than Jarman's film would be the following year.

Sandy Powell and Paul Minter's costume design helps establish the production's indebtedness to gay culture.³⁶ Edward's attire joins vaguely period attire with contemporary motifs. One reviewer notes a "gold silk shirt (with cowboy piping) and black satin pants with a black, gold and silver codpiece."³⁷ In a nod to gay leather culture, Gaveston wears a black leather jacket in a contemporary cut, studded with silvery spikes down the sleeves, over a collared shirt and trousers. When he returns from exile, ready to flout the opinions of Edward's court, he appears dressed flamboyantly all in white, looking like Elvis Presley. Queen Isabella's gold lamé dress alludes to disco culture and paints her as a diva. These costumes all appear against a darkly abstract set and a similarly mournful score of heavy string music.

Murphy's production relies on images of homosexuality that would be recognizable, if not challenging or oppositional, to a mainstream audience. An interview with the director in *Plays International* reveals the extent to which Murphy intentionally aligned his production with gay and lesbian activism of the time. He says, "Gaveston, [Edward's] favourite, dies early on. Then the king wears Spencer, his second favourite, rather like a Gay Lib badge . . . [I]n a way he's the first modern Gay Lib man, saying 'this is what I am. Deal with it.'³⁸ From a historical perspective, Murphy's conflation of a medieval king with a twentieth-century gay man is suspect. It is clear, though, that as an artist he aims to highlight contemporary queer politics through the play. Murphy's ascription of Edward's "This is what I am. Deal with it" sentiment echoes Queer Nation's slogan, "We're here. We're queer. Get used to it." Murphy does not simply interpret Edward as a

sexual deviant, but aligns the entire production with contemporary politics. Perhaps anticipating a conservative audience, Murphy says, "People are frightened of this play. It is long, and there is homosexuality in it . . . I don't intend to shy away from that, not at all."³⁹ While it is certainly common to infuse canonical work with contemporary references, Murphy's interview reveals that he anticipated a degree of scandal with this particular "updated" production.

The production's program notes suggest that the Royal Shakespeare Company took pains to show that their interpretation was justified by the original play text, Marlowe's alleged sexuality, and the play's recent production history. Blurbs by artists and other cultural figures involved with past productions of *Edward II* appear on two pages of the playbill, weighing in on the value of reviving the play and addressing the potential scandal involved in staging *Edward II*. John Tydeman of BBC Radio cites Marlowe's "daring treatment of homosexuality" as what drew him to the play, while Ian McKellen, who had played the role of Edward twenty years prior, writes, "One of the most appealing things about the play is that, apart from the Queen, no-one objects seriously to Edward's sexuality. But then Marlowe, probably gay, was partial." Theatre director Nicholas Hytner refers to Marlowe as a "gay atheist." By aligning Murphy's interpretation with Marlowe's intentions and his supposed homosexuality, these remarks seem designed to convince a skeptical audience that the interpretation is legitimate. Finally, both McKellen and James Laurensen (who played Gaveston, opposite McKellen) refer to the scandal caused by their "Shock Kiss" in the 1969 production of *Edward II*, perhaps in the hopes that in 1990, a male-male kiss would not come as such a shock.⁴⁰ The insistence with which the program notes rehearse the play's own allegedly queer past point to how contentious Murphy's interpretation was expected to be, and perhaps indicate how contentious queer politics became at that time.

The production itself foregrounds contemporary political issues through allusions to gay marriage and gay bashing, issues that would have circulated in mainstream English and American news in the early 1990s. Although gay marriage did not have the traction in 1990 that it now has in public discourse, it was certainly on gay and lesbian activists' agendas. Murphy's staging of a "marriage" scene establishes unquestionably the nature of Edward and Gaveston's affection for each other; the scene does not leave room for the audience to interpret the men's affection for each other as mere friendship. That the marriage immediately precedes Gaveston's exile and the two men's separation heightens the sense that the two are star-crossed lovers, rather than friends. Gaveston kneels gazing up at Edward, grasping his hands, in an emblematic proposal tableau. In one respect, Gaveston appropriately lowers himself before his king, but the exchange of rings reads like a contemporary marriage proposal. After exchanging rings, Edward also kneels. Both on their knees, face to face, they kiss tenderly.⁴¹ Edward's kneeling can be read as an abnegation of his status, symbolically lowering himself to become Gaveston's

equal. The scene, however, also reads as romance. Murphy's male leads enact a tender proposal and marriage ritual. Radical activists, whether under the banner of "queer" or not, had already dismissed marriage rights as an assimilationist political move. Nonetheless, a scene that enacts a recognizable marriage ritual between two men in a Renaissance play would certainly instigate conversation in the early 1990s. Whether the insertion of this marriage-like ritual is interpreted as radical or assimilationist, the production ultimately points to the futility and tragedy of their marriage rites, since Gaveston is later murdered in large part because of his intimate relationship with the king. Where the play text indicates that Gaveston is hated by Edward's court because he is not of noble birth, Murphy's production suggests another possibility: that Gaveston's death is punishment for flaunting their desire too openly.

Murphy's production also revels in its staging of erotic encounters between—and among several—men. Murphy's Edward, along with his group of favorites, engages in acts of overt homoeroticism. Edward and Gaveston kiss and embrace often, and at one point, Edward "wriggles on to his throne with a silly grin, playing with the hair of the man [Gaveston] between his knees."⁴² Other male-male couplings and choreography underscore the production's queer sensibility. In one scene, Spencer and Baldock, who later become Edward's favorites (and in this production, lovers), frolic in bed together, wearing nothing but underpants; and in another scene, three muscular and scantily-clad men perform erotic dances for the pleasure of the king. On one hand, the scene works diegetically, as part of the play's plot. But the dancing men offer not only Edward, but also the RSC audience, a moment of queer spectatorial pleasure. If the marriage ritual early in the play seems assimilationist, the play's moments of overt homoeroticism clearly invite moments of queer spectatorship and dovetail with queer activist aims of making queer eroticism public and visible—if not within the play's narrative, then at least within the space of the RSC's audience.

Murphy's production elicits sympathy for Edward through a vivid and explicit staging of his violent murder scene. The spectacle of violence in this scene creates sympathy for Edward, who can be read now not only as a tragic king but also the victim of a gay-bashing. Murphy stages the murder as a seduction of Edward by Lightborn, which culminates not in a sexual climax but in the violent death of the king. The murder scene is both erotic and violent. Playing this scene as a tender seduction designed to lure the starved and delirious Edward to his brutal and fatal rape invokes the specter of queer-baiting and queer-bashing. One reviewer describes the scene as "a sado-masochistic coupling which gets out of hand: it's made very explicit that the professional assassin . . . enjoys his job."⁴³ Another writes that Murphy's production "presents an Edward who is kissed and groped by Lightborn, then stripped, splayed, and spitted while screaming, and finally left naked on his back on the stage," a spectacle he describes as "the most graphic,

horror-filled dramatization of the King's murder probably ever presented on the legitimate stage."⁴⁴

While reviews cast the murder scene as lurid and tasteless, production photos and documentation in the stage manager's prompt book suggest a more layered interpretation. Lightborn's treatment of Edward—initially seducing and later murdering him—can be interpreted as inordinately cruel, or perhaps, as an attempt at kindness. As Edward deliriously foresees his impending death, Lightborn holds his hands, embraces him, and kisses him. Edward, “rocking back & forth weeping thru words,”⁴⁵ says, “I feel a hell of grief! Where is my crown?” He lays his head on Lightborn's chest and asks whether he is still alive. Lightborn responds, “You're overwatched, my lord; lie down and rest.” When Edward lies down on the mattress, Lightborn “mounts” Edward, giving him a “long, passionate kiss.” After it is clear Edward is asleep, Lightborn instructs his assistants to lay a table on top of Edward's body, “[b]ut not too hard, lest that [they] bruise his body.”⁴⁶ The rest—thrusting the hot poker into Edward's body—is only indicated by the words “Assault—scream” in the prompt book. A production photo shows the dead—or dying—Edward lying on his back, arms spread-eagle, his upper body bare except for remnants of a robe or sheet hanging from one arm.⁴⁷ His stomach, white and vulnerable, shines in the bleak stage light. His head is turned to the right, eyes closed in an expression of tired relief, as if released from the agonizing torture of his long imprisonment and violent death. The pose is reminiscent of a crucifixion—or of other young men tied up and then beaten. The scene's staging of seduction and, then, sexual violence becomes more than the play text's poetic mockery. Lightborn lulls Edward to sleep before he completes his assigned task. One way to read the scene is that Lightborn is not only a sodomite himself (he “enjoys his job,” according to Geckle), but also a sadist whose seduction is another form of torture for Edward. I believe, however, that another reading is possible, and that Lightborn, in fact, comforts and flatters Edward out of kindness, lulling him into a comfortable sleep so he cannot anticipate the horror of his death.

Murphy's production of *Edward II* clearly engaged with the queer politics of its historical moment through references to specific issues, such as marriage, and through the staging of violence and male-male desire. In the context of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Murphy's production was “daring,” and took pains to endear itself to a potentially skeptical audience. While some of the language Murphy used in interviews to draw connections between Marlowe's era and his own historical moment lacked the nuance that queer theorists would develop, it is important to acknowledge that he was theorizing—through performance—the ways same-sex desire may persist across historical periods.

Derek Jarman's “Loving Violation”

As the RSC finished its run of *Edward II*, British filmmaker Derek Jarman's film of the same title was released in 1991, featuring Steven Waddington as Ed-

ward, Andrew Tiernan as Gaveston, and Tilda Swinton as Queen Isabella. Although *Edward II* was one of the last films Jarman made before he died of complications from AIDS in 1994, it was not the first of his films to showcase queer historical figures, which he also did in *Caravaggio* (1986) and *Sebastiane* (1976). In the dedication page of his screenplay book of the film, Jarman writes, "How to make a film of a gay love affair and get it commissioned. Find a dusty old play and violate it."⁴⁸ The film was hailed as part of what lesbian film critic B. Ruby Rich defined as "New Queer Cinema," a host of queer-oriented films that opened in the early 1990s. She writes, "There, suddenly, was a flock of films that were doing something new, renegotiating subjectivities, annexing whole genres, revising histories in their image."⁴⁹ She acknowledges that all the queer films are not aesthetically or politically identical, but she sees them as connected by a common thread: "Definitively breaking with older humanist approaches and the films and tapes that accompanied identity politics, these works are irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive. Above all, they're full of pleasure. They're here, they're queer, get hip to them."⁵⁰ Very much included in this genre—the "epiphanic moment" of one festival—is Jarman's *Edward II*, which mixes "OutRage demos and gay-boy calisthenics . . . with minimalist period drama."⁵¹ The film is also, as Susan Bennett writes, "breathhtakingly misogynistic"⁵²—with the marvelous Tilda Swinton playing an alternately pathetic and ruthless Queen Isabella⁵³—a view, which can be well supported, that demonstrates an important limit of queer critique.

Like the RSC production, Jarman's film connects *Edward II* to 1990s queer politics through stagings of violence and eroticism. But rather than elicit sympathy through a violent ending, Jarman rewrites the murder scene as an enactment of hope. Working in the genre of independent film allowed Jarman to use editing techniques to rearrange the narrative, creating a more streamlined script that focuses on Edward and Gaveston, and downplays the other sociopolitical themes of the play. Jarman's film is more explicitly tied to queer activism than Murphy's production. Eschewing any sense of a linear temporality, Jarman's film is (g)littered with references to 1990s queer culture, including OutRage! activists, Thatcherites, and a cameo appearance by diva Annie Lenox.

The film opens with a particularly erotically charged scene. Gaveston, dressed in a long white nightgown, enters a room furnished only with stone walls and a single brass bed, carrying two cups of coffee and a postcard from Edward II, which conveys news of Edward I's death and an invitation to Gaveston to return from exile. Already in the room, another man, who we later learn is Spenser, dresses in front of the rumpled linens of the bed. Gaveston tells Spenser of his fantasies about life at court with Edward, while two anonymous, naked white men engage in sex play on a bed behind them. The scene is carefully choreographed to mask the frolicking men's full nudity, as Gaveston and Spenser move just at the moment when we would otherwise see everything. Jarman crowds the frame with the male

body: the two, fully clothed men in the foreground remain still, but the lovemakers gently writhe away just behind them, constantly demanding the viewer's attention. This moment is queer, but not just because it shows two men having sex. It is queer because of its excessive eroticism, and because it does not sanitize gay sex: they are not part of the love story or confined to "the privacy of their own home." They are simply there, engaging in apparently anonymous sex. The *mise-en-scène* suggests that the space—no more than a bed, stone walls, and a dirt floor—is clearly not a domestic bedroom set up for private, monogamous coupling. Gaveston and Spenser's presence during the sailors' tryst indicates, on the contrary, that it is a space for multiple and varied sexual encounters.

Jarman also re-imagines a scene in which Edward and Gaveston banish the bishop to prison over a conflict about the church's stance on homosexuality, which itself is one avenue for antigay violence. Gaveston and Edward confront the bishop (called "priest" in Jarman's film), flaunting the fact that Gaveston has returned from exile and is back in the king's favor. The priest, who supported his exile, blunders at Gaveston: "Thou shalt back to France," but he is powerless now that Edward II has taken the throne. In this moment, Jarman imagines the separation of church and state, and their subsequent powerlessness, once separated. Edward tells Gaveston, "Use him as thou wilt," which Gaveston takes as his cue to humiliate and imprison him. In a departure from Marlowe's play, the scene cuts to a dungeon, where the priest stands shaking, wearing nothing but socks. Gaveston forces the priest to his knees and grinds the priest's head into his groin in a simulation of fellatio. After this moment of vengeful abuse, Gaveston orders the guards to "[c]onvey this fucking priest to the tower." The once-powerful priest is now the bloodied, beaten victim of violence, while the queer Gaveston in his sharp black suit looks down at him triumphantly. Rather than showing only the violence that has been exacted upon queer bodies by those in power, Jarman shows Gaveston fighting back when he momentarily has power of his own. This scene is a queer revenge fantasy, in which Jarman turns the violence and abuse of the church back onto itself through unsettling and violent imagery.

Jarman's film not only depicts violence and revenge, but also deploys moments of queer love and hope. The 1990s queer turn to violence, anger, and eroticism is not about destruction, but about the creation of a new world in which queer people live without violence. David Román writes that a central concern of AIDS activism has been to shift public thinking away from "victim" status to political centrality. "In these attempts to revise the cultural psyche about AIDS . . . hope emerges as a political means to bring social change." Attempts to change public feelings are also attempts to change the future. Hope, according to Román, is a political impetus, not simply a yearning or a wish. He distinguishes between hope as a vehicle for social change and the kind of hope that is "closely related to a politics of deferral," which is synonymous with "wait and see."⁵⁴ While Román's discussion of hope

focuses on AIDS discourse, I suggest that queer activism in the 1990s mobilizes hope in the same way. More importantly, queer and AIDS activism, especially at this time, were not entirely discrete phenomena. Queer activism, in its insistent performance of what *should be*, operates under the assumption that change is possible. The violence and anger that characterized queer activism at this time was only one side of a coin, the other side of which was hope as a vehicle for change.

In another departure from Marlowe, Jarman intercuts footage of riot police at an OutRage! protest with a scene in which Queen Isabella delivers a speech, hoping to take control of the kingdom. Gaveston has just been murdered at the hands of the police, who beat him and choked him to death with a billy club. The protest that Jarman inserts into this scene works as Edward's response to Gaveston's murder. Three images are woven together in the protest scene: Isabella delivering her speech, alone in the dark with only a spotlight; riot police behind plastic shields pounding the earth rhythmically with their clubs; and Edward leading a protest with OutRage! activists. Isabella begins the scene, delivering her speech in a cool, calm tone. The scene then cuts to the riot police in a straight line facing the camera, backlit and marching forward ominously to a regular, insistent rhythm. Finally, the scene cuts to Edward leading a crowd of protesters in a rousing chant, after which they all furiously blow their rape whistles and begin marching. The scene contrasts state power—alternately embodied in Isabella's dispassionate oratory and the police's militant violence—with the excessive, disorderly passion of the queer protesters.

The scene flips between these three parties until the protesters and the police come together in a chaotic clash, the plastic shields encroaching upon the angry protesters, who carry signs that say "Stop Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men" and "Get Your Filthy Laws Off Our Bodies." The protesters are clearly marked as queer people: a woman with short cherry-red hair, a man dressed as a nun, a man with multiple facial piercings and a megaphone. The protest is not resolved within the narrative of the film and does not necessarily lead to an immediate change for any of the characters. Poised as it is, though, between Gaveston's murder scene and the subsequent scene in which Edward exacts his own revenge on Gaveston's murderer, it provides a moment of public queer outrage. Without this public protest scene, Edward's revenge is merely personal (or pathological); here, injustice is made visible, and in this protest lives the hope of changing the future. Moreover, the queer protesters match the power of the police, in contrast to the power imbalance between the lone Gaveston and his numerous attackers. Through a performance of rage, the protesters challenge the violence of state power.

Perhaps the most radical gesture of hope Jarman brings to his version of *Edward II* is in the way he ends his film. While Murphy elicited sympathy and horror by staging a violent rape/murder scene, Jarman refuses to participate in Edward's punishment, allowing this violent act to happen only in Edward's dream. Scenes of Edward's imprisonment—which happens after Isabella and Mortimer overthrow

him in act IV—are interspersed throughout, so that the entire film anticipates his terrible death. But in the penultimate scene, as Edward awaits death in the dungeon, he sees his own murder in a dream: in front of fiery red light, six men hold him face-down on a stone slab while Lightborn, the hired killer, lifts his glowing hot poker out of the fire and thrusts it into the king's body. We see Edward from the front, just his head lifted off the stone in a horrifying scream. But he wakes up again in the dungeon, having awakened himself out of the dream with his scream. When he wakes, Edward is afraid of Lightborn, who has, after all, been hired to kill him. As Lightborn approaches Edward with his poker, however, an apparent change of heart leads him to throw the glowing hot weapon into a nearby pool of water. They embrace, and the implication is that they escape together. Although it may be an unconvincing narrative move, it is a moment in which Jarman produces hope through a revision of history. As Susan Bennett writes, the film's "insistence on a future that might emerge at the interstices of transgression, dissidence, and desire confronts the shortcomings of its own historical moment not, in the end, by looking back but by resolutely looking forward" to the struggles and pleasures ahead.⁵⁵ Rather than yet again reproducing images of violence against queers, Jarman writes an ending to this story that gestures toward hope for a better queer future.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Murphy and Jarman staged overtly queer versions of *Edward II* in the early 1990s. While they were not the first to stage homoeroticism between Edward and Gaveston, their productions both drew explicit connections between the play and contemporary gay, lesbian, and queer politics through restaging the specter of antigay violence, overt homoeroticism, and specific references to contemporary politics. Reviews of these productions further indicate that if the artists meant to perturb audiences' feelings about queer politics through their interpretations, they succeeded in pushing those buttons. Marlowe's 1592 play offered a lens through which artists in the 1990s could critique their own sexual politics.

Since then, many more productions have staged overtly queer interpretations of the play. In 2007, the Shakespeare Theatre Company (STC) in Washington, D.C. produced *Edward II* at the then-new Sidney Harman Hall, directed by Gale Edwards. Reviews suggest that the practice of staging a queer Edward has become the norm, rather than a shocking exception. Rachel Evans, in a *Theatre Journal* review, describes the STC production's design as "a hazy male phantasmagoria, [sic] not entirely unlike an R-rated, gender-bending burlesque a la *La Cage aux Folles*."⁵⁷ *New York Times* critic Charles Isherwood, somewhat more acidly notes that the two actors playing Edward and Gaveston, "[m]atching blonds of similar size and dimensions, would look lovely atop a gay wedding cake."⁵⁸ These reviews not only suggest that the director intended the audience to read Edward, Gaveston, and others

as contemporary gay men, but that the time has passed when this interpretation is a shocking one, even in a national theatre space such as STC.

As Marvin Carlson has written, ghosts of earlier histories and performances always haunt theatrical performance.⁵⁹ In Gale Edwards's production, Gaveston's winged ghost watches over Edward's death and his mutilated body.⁶⁰ A production photo reveals Gaveston's wings as a gaudy accessory to a campy gold lamé suit.⁶¹ Perhaps early in the play they read as flamboyant camp, but in the death scene, shielding the audience from the full effect of the violence, the ghostly wings are themselves haunted by past queer performances, both theatrical and everyday: the wings of the angel in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1991), commemorating those who have died of AIDS; or the counterprotesters who with giant wings shielded Matthew Shepard's mourners from Fred Phelps's hateful antigay rhetoric at Shepard's funeral. Unlike Hamlet, no ghosts speak in Marlowe's *Edward II*. But, as Gaveston's glittering wings illustrate, productions often recall a play's multiple pasts: the queer Edwards of Murphy and Jarman, the unknown past of the historical Edward II, and the memory of those other ghosts, the countless queer people whose untimely deaths this play calls to memory.

Notes

1. Andrew Lumsden, "The Fairy Tale of Edward II," *The Gay & Lesbian Review* (March-April 2004): 27.

2. 27-29.

3. 29.

4. Wilbur Sanders, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea: Studies in the Plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968) 141.

5. Christopher Marlowe, *Edward II, Doctor Faustus and Other Plays*, ed. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995) 1.4.391.

6. 1.4.400; 1.4.402.

7. 1.4.180-81

8. The manner of Edward's death is specified in Holinshed, but not always in versions of Marlowe's text. In the Bevington edition, the stage direction simply reads, "[*The King is murdered*]" with an explanatory footnote. In the Royal Shakespeare Company production text, the stage directions state, "[*They assault EDWARD, who screams and dies*]." It is unclear whether earlier productions staged or simulated Edward's death on stage, but the major productions since 1958 simulated the death scene in some way (Performance Code ED2199007, Royal Shakespeare Company Archives, The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, The Shakespeare Centre, Henley Street, Stratford-upon-Avon, CV37 6QW.) All subsequent archival materials are from the same performance code and archive, hereafter identified as RSC Archive.

9. Jill Dolan, "Lesbian and Gay Drama," *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, ed. David Krasner (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005) 487.

10. Bertolt Brecht's 1924 adaptation of *Edward II* also depicts Edward as a homosexual. This paper is concerned with productions of Marlowe's play, rather than other adaptations of the story.

11. Toby Robertson, "Directing *Edward II*," Interview with John Russell Brown, *Tulane Drama Review* 8.4 (1964): 177.

12. "A Double Crown," *Time* (19 Sept. 1969): 71. The same *Time* writer offers an interesting comment on the success of this production. S/he writes, "The sum is a better play about that too-fashionable subject than anything overt or covert recently on or off Broadway. It is sensuous, unpleasant, funny, guilt-obsessed—and intensely masculine." Implied in this comment is that the theatre scene must host an abundance of plays dealing with homosexuality, perhaps in ways that focus on identity politics

("overt") or that try to communicate sexual themes subtextually ("covert"). The other implication here, of course, is that audiences would not expect a play about homosexuals to be masculine; and, perhaps, the writer views these other "too-fashionable" plays as being distinctly (and unappealingly) feminine.

13. See Susan Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

14. See J. Horger, "Derek Jarman's Film Adaptation of Marlowe's *Edward II*," *Shakespeare Bulletin* (Fall 1993): 37-40; and Claude J. Summers, "Sex, Politics, and Self-Realization in *Edward II*," *A Poet and a Filthy Play-maker*, ed. Kenneth Friedenreich (New York: AMS, 1988) 221-40.

15. Jonathan Goldberg, "Introduction," *Queering the Renaissance*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham: Duke UP, 1994).

16. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990) 2.

17. Qtd. in Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 171. While inclusion was certainly one aim of early queer activists, many have since noted the movement's limited effectiveness for addressing differences in gender, race, and nationality. Performance artist Ana Maria Simo, for example, "hate[s] the word 'queer' because it's a word that homogenizes us It's very useful for academia, but troubling to me, to lesbians and to people who are not white." (See "From the Invisible to the Ridiculous: The Emergence of an Out Theatre Aesthetic," a conversation among Moe Angelos, Susan Finque, Lola Pashalinski, Everett Quinton, Ana Maria Simo, and Doric Wilson, moderated by Don Shewey, *The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater*, eds. by Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla [New York: New York UP, 2002] 147.)

18. Lawrence Normand, "Edward II, Derek Jarman, and the State of England," *Constructing Christopher Marlowe*, eds. J. A. Downie and J. T. Parnell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 182.

19. Duggan and Hunter 1.

20. OutRage! website, accessed 16 December 2004. <<http://outrage.nabumedia.com/>>. (Changed to <http://www.petertatchell.net/>, accessed 2 December 2006.)

21. Michael Cunningham, "If You're Queer and You're Not Angry in 1992, You're Not Paying Attention; If You're Straight It May Be Hard to Figure Out What All The Shouting's About," *Mother Jones* 17.3 (May/June 1992): 8.

22. E. J. Rand, "A Disunited Nation and a Legacy of Contradiction: Queer Nation's Construction of Identity," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 28.4 (October 2004): 295.

23. Cunningham 3.

24. Rand 295.

25. Qtd. in Cherry Smyth, "Queer Questions," *Sight and Sound* 2.5 (Sept. 1992): 34.

26. Sedgwick 2.

27. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

28. Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993). See also *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

29. Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1988).

30. At the opening plenary of University of Michigan's 2010 "Doing Queer Studies Now" conference, panelists Valerie Traub, Esther Newton, David Halperin, and Gayle Rubin expressed their ambivalence about the efficacy of the term "queer." In particular, Esther Newton explained that before "queer," the terms "gay" and "homosexual" were also seen as progressive terms that would change the landscape for gay people. Valerie Traub noted that the most enduring legacy of the term is the tension Eve Sedgwick elucidated between the minoritizing and universalizing impulse of "queer."

31. Sedgwick 53.

32. Goldberg 5.

33. See Goldberg, *Queering the Renaissance*. See also *Reclaiming Sodom*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (New York: Routledge, 1994); Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991); and, Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (New York: Columbia UP, 1995). While Bray's title ahistorically ascribes homosexuality to a period before the term existed, his early work on Renaissance sexuality, nonetheless, was influential for later scholarship.

34. Patrick Marmion, "Butch Boys in the Mist," rev. of *Edward II*, by Christopher Marlowe, dir. by Gerard Murphy, Royal Shakespeare Company, Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, *What's On* 18 July 1990, RSC Archive.

35. Alan Bray, "Lovers or Just Good Friends?" rev. of *Edward II*, by Christopher Marlowe, dir. by Gerard Murphy. Royal Shakespeare Company, Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, *Guardian Weekly* 15 July 1990, RSC Archive.

36. No costume designer is specified in the playbill. Powell and Minter are listed as the Designers, which I take to mean both set and costumes.
37. George L. Geckle, rev. of *Edward II*, dir. Gerard Murphy, Royal Shakespeare Company, *Shakespeare Bulletin* Winter 1991, 13.
38. Liz Gilbey, "Actor into Director," *Plays International* (July 1990): 10. Here, Murphy is playing on the popular activist slogan, "We're here. We're queer. Get used to it."
39. 11.
40. Program Notes, *Edward II*, by Christopher Marlowe, dir. by Gerard Murphy. Royal Shakespeare Company, Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 10 July 1990, RSC Archive.
41. This description, and others that follow, is based on viewing the VHS recording of this production at the RSC Archive.
42. Benedict Nightingale, "Rushing, Roaring Marlowe," rev. of *Edward II*, by Christopher Marlowe, dir. by Gerard Murphy. Royal Shakespeare Company, Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, *The Times* 11 July 1990, RSC Archive.
43. Charles Osborne, "A Sexually Hyperactive Monarch at Stratford," rev. of *Edward II*, by Christopher Marlowe, dir. by Gerard Murphy. Royal Shakespeare Company, Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, *Daily Telegraph* 12 July 1990, RSC Archive.
44. Geckle, rev. of *Edward II* 12-13.
45. Prompt Book, RSC Archive.
46. The note in the Bevington and Rasmussen edition of *Edward II* explains that Lightborn "specializes in secretive forms of murder that leave the body outwardly unharmed to make detection of the crime difficult . . . and here he expresses concern that the body not be bruised." While it is hard to imagine that this particular method of execution would leave no outward traces, it nonetheless provides an explanation of the table and bruising.
47. Geckle, rev. of *Edward II* 13.
48. Derek Jarman, *Queer Edward II* (London: BFI, 1991), dedication page.
49. B. Ruby Rich, "New Queer Cinema," *Sight and Sound* 2.5 (Sept. 1992): 30.
50. 31.
51. 31.
52. Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia* 110.
53. Further study of Isabella's role in these performances is warranted. Her character in Marlowe's play—as well as Murphy's and Jarman's interpretation of her in their productions—demonstrates the mutability of gender roles.
54. David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture & AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998) 213-15.
55. Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia* 115.
56. Thomas Cartelli makes a similar argument in "Queer Edward II: Postmodern Sexualities and the Early Modern Subject," *Marlowe, History, and Sexuality: New Critical Essays on Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Paul Whitfield White (New York: AMS, 1998). Cartelli considers the ways Jarman has "violated" (he uses Jarman's own word playfully) Marlowe's text, and offers that this final scene makes "fantasy seem the preferred medium of resistance in the battle for homosexual rights" (220). Fantasy, however, does not capture the radical revisioning that utopian performative implies.
57. Rachel Evans, rev. of *Edward II*, *Theatre Journal* 60.3 (October 2008): 483.
58. Charles Isherwood, "Shakespeare's New House Makes Room for Marlowe," *New York Times* 15 November 2007.
59. Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001) 2.
60. Evans, rev. of *Edward II* 483.
61. Carol Rosegg, photo, Shakespeare Theatre Company website, 2007-2008 season, Photo Gallery, <http://www.shakespearetheatre.org/plays/photos.aspx?id=112>.

