Revista de Lenguas Modernas, N° 11, 2009 / 19-23 / ISSN: 1659-1933

Discourses of Empowerment in *Edward II*: (Homo) Erotic and Political Desires

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Abstract
This article's focus is how desire gives way to particular forms of empowerment in Christopher Marlowe's play *Edward II*. During a historical period when "abnormal" sexual practices (as Michel Foucault would ironically call them in *The History of Sexuality*) such as homosexuality and female desire circulated in society but were not yet labeled as such, Marlowe composes a brilliant piece about discourses that are precisely uprooted in needs or desires that are the very core of humanity.

Key words: Early modern culture, erotic discourses, desire, empowerment, Edward II, Marlowe

Resumen
Cómo el deseo da pie a singulares procesos de empoderamiento es el tema de este artículo sobre la obra de teatro *Eduardo II* de Christopher Marlowe. En una época en la que existían pero aún no había términos para definir prácticas sexuales "no normativas" (como irónicamente las llama Michel Foucault en *Historia de la sexualidad*) como el homosexualismo y el deseo femenino, Marlowe escribe una brillante obra sobre discursos que nacen precisamente de esas carencias o deseos tan básicos del ser humano.

Palabras claves: Cultura moderna temprana, discursos eróticos, deseo, empoderamiento, Eduardo II de Inglaterra, Marlowe

At the end of Christopher Marlowe's play *Edward II*, the assassination of a king, the beheading of a lord Protector and the imprisonment of a queen, apparently all on account of a "base and ignoble minion," would lead one to think that Hamlet rightly portrayed Fortune as a strumpet since she favors only those who, led by her tinsel promises, are momentarily on top of her. But power, like fortune is lamentably transitory. That is precisely why in the ensuing pages, discourses of empowerment will be analyzed as outgrowths of different types of desire since, curiously, what empowers Piers Gaveston, Edward II, Isabella of France and Sir Roger Mortimer is precisely their lack of power. It is, paradoxically, their own shortcomings, defenselessness

and impotence, along with an intense longing, what actually gives them the shortest detour to ephemerally get hold of power and bask in the glory of being inconstant Fortune's minions.

The opening lines of the play show Fortune flirting with Piers Gaveston, who in the minds of the English barony, is but a "minion" (1.2.67), an "ignoble vassal" (1.4.16), and a "loon" (1.4.82) among other not so favorable epithets. Gaveston`s brief accession to power lies in Edward's uncontrollable desire for him, a desire that springs from Gaveston's sexual and social differences. He knows it and takes advantage of Edward's willingness to share the kingdom with a man he considers a friend, a brother and even a part of himself. Indeed, Marlowe brilliantly plays with the ambiguity spurred on by the image of "those parts which men delight to see" (1.1.64). In the context of the theatrical conventions of the Renaissance and assuming the heteronormativity of the audiences, it would certainly mean a female body part, but in the context of Edward's attraction to Gaveston, Marlowe definitely meant a phallus. So, Gaveston's lack of those parts that heterosexual men delight in seeing is one of the elements that empowered him since he was well aware that the king had a homoerotic attachment to him and, thus, desired him instead of his own wife Isabella. Understanding the king'psychosexuality makes him use his otherwise debauched sexuality as a weapon to "draw the pliant king which way [he] please[s]" (1.1.52). It even makes him bold enough to dare manhandle the bishop of Coventry, squander the funds of the royal treasury, laugh at the queen and the nobles for what he considers foppish attire, and even threaten and boldly defy the earls and barons with a sound "Were I a king" (1.4.27). The other element that favors his closeness to the throne and, therefore, to power over the political and religious institutions of his day is, as Lancaster bitterly complains, his "base and obscure" origins (1.1.100). His ignoble birth paradoxically empowers him in the eyes of Edward II's court, and the more they call him belittling names and despise him for violating the social hierarchy, the more attractive to his lover and the more noble titles are created especially for him and, therefore, the more powerful he becomes. In fact, the image of the night-grown mushroom perfectly befits him since it conveys his vertiginous rise as a king's favorite, but it also points at the short-lived affair he had with Fortune.

Where does the power of a king lie if he cannot have whatever he wants? That seems to be Edward II's logic. Thereby, not having his minion pushes him to demand and gives him strength to oppose his earls and barons. That is, Edward's homoerotic desire for Gaveston gives him the power that otherwise, he would probably not have, to impose his will unfortunately not on matters of state. As early as the first scene of the play, Edward asserts that "In spite of them/ [he] will have his will (1.1.76-77). The more resistance he finds in Mortimer junior and his noble peers, the more resolute he is to not "brook these haughty menaces!" as he adds "Am I a king and must be overruled?" (1.1.134-135). Marlowe cunningly employs imagery and word choice to develop Edward's growth as the potentially resolute and indomitable king he could have been had he not fallen head over heels for the carnal pleasures of love. What Edward calls

"kingly regiment" is his ordinarily pleased disposition when he has his will, that is Gaveston: "I will have Gaveston, and you shall know/ what dangers 'tis to stand against your king" (1.1.95-96). Edward's words definitely are those of a man who will not be contradicted. At a certain point he declares that if it is the baronial will to rule the king he could not be happier to just have a nook of the kingdom to frolic with his minion, but he is only playing a rhetorical game with them. He still wants the throne as proven when he assents to Gaveston's banishment. Yet he will still have his will as he convinces Isabella to plead the barons and earls to repeal his dear Gaveston. Twice during the whole play Edward ponders on the ifs of being a king. It might sound like hesitance to confront his royal right, but Edward is actually pondering about the real scope of power. Unfortunately, his are only the musings of a power-drunken man, and he is unable to produce any affirmative action. Knowing that his battle against Isabella and proud Mortimer is lost, a captive king fittingly asks himself: "what is he whom rule and empery/ Have not in life or death made miserable?" (4.7.14-15), "what are kings, when regiment is gone/ But perfect shadows in a sunshine day?" (5.1.26-27). Even at the end, when he is being entreated to abdicate, he will not give up his power so easily as he pleads that he could "be king till night" and "gaze upon this glittering crown" (5.1.58-59). When he finally acquiesces, Edward II emerges as a more mature person who had an ephemeral grip of power, and seeing his end approach he wants his son to rule better than he did. Ironically, it is a man of lower birth who gives Edward the wings to have a taste of power and really enjoy it while Fortune favors him.

In Isabella's case, not having Edward, the man and the husband, is what seems to empower her and make her grow in daring until she claims the throne through her son Edward III. Ironically, her defenselessness helps her to get anything she wants but the love of her husband. Because the earls and barons commiserate her and desire her to be merrier, is that Isabella begins to empower herself:

> LANCASTER. Look where the sister of the King of France
> Sits wringing of her hands and beats her breast.
> WARWICK. The King, I fear, hath ill entreated her.
> PEMBROKE. Hard is the heart that injures such a saint.
> MORTIMER JR. I know 'tis long of Gaveston she weeps. (1.4.187-190)

This is her strategy to make Mortimer convince his peers to repeal the king's darling. "Your Highness knows it lies not in my power" (1.4.59), she responds to Edward's earlier wishes of getting the barony's retraction. Interestingly enough, she persuades them, not because she really desired him to come back, but because she still had a strong desire to posses her husband's will. It is the "tears that drizzle from [her] heart," "the pining heart," the "inward sighs," "the hands [that] are tired with haling of" the king, what gives her "power to mollify" (2.4.19-26), first, the noblemen's resistance and, then, Edward II`s "kingly regiment." Although she finds herself forlorn and self-exiled, fickle Fortune comes

disguised as friends and allies who help her ease her pain during hard times and makes her envisage the possibility of seizing political power for herself and for Mortimer. So she channels her desire for the man into desire for the throne, which she as a consort queen cannot have unless she gets rid of Edward II, who by then has become but a nuisance. This, however, proves to be Isabella's downfall since she becomes a weak character the minute she stops feeling her burning desire for Edward II. That is, when humiliation after humiliation she realizes that she cannot have her husband's attention, she quenches her internal fire with Mortimer, but rather than remaining powerful, she becomes a puppet in his hands: "Fair Isabel [. . .] ./ Be ruled by me and we will rule the realm" (5.2.1-5). Finally, she blindly relies on him and becomes heedless of any change of fortune: she forgets that they are "sure to pay for it when [her] son is of age" (5.4.3).

Mortimer's initial want for justice turns into a desire for power that he temporarily obtains as Isabella's lover and as Edward III's Protector. One could say that at first Mortimer's sole motivation is the kingdom's well-being and that as his peers' spokesman, he wants what is politically best for Edward II and for England. The earls and barons had promised the former king that Gaveston should never return and they were determined to do so. Besides, they felt that England lacked presence in her borders. Perhaps they felt that they were altruistically doing the right thing, but as the saying goes, even the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Thus, as Mortimer's character evolves, one is able to perceive a noticeable change in his tone; "either have our wills or lose our lives" (1.4.45) he clamors in the midst of a heated argument with Edward II. His is a tone that reveals not necessarily blind obedience to the late king, but an avowed rebellious attitude towards his new king. Little by little, as Mortimer unfolds his real self, Marlowe draws a more individualized portrayal of the proud nobleman: he dares to "curse [his king] if he refuse[s]" and proposes that they "depose him and elect another king," devises a plan to get rid of Gaveston, and suggests a popular uprising against Edward II (1.4). His metaphor of the cedar upon which an eagle is perching rightly portrays him as someone who wishes to have the power to control. Just as the eagle is on a superior position, so does he see himself, above the authority of Edward II. But he knows he lacks the right to reign as a king and instead patiently waits until Edward II provokes his own downfall, then does he choose to serve as Edward III`s Protector, much to his advantage since the king is still under age. However, he does not realize that he has become like the very night-grown mushroom he wanted to free the kingdom from. He starts interrupting the queen's public speeches, gets rid of Kent, imposes himself as the prince's Protector, and makes decisions concerning the fate of Edward II without listening to him. But Fortune is as changeable as the moon, and inevitably he loses the young king's support.

In the play *Edward II*, Marlowe masterfully links three apparently unrelated issues as are sexual or erotic desire, politics and chance. To a certain extent, Gaveston, Edward II, Isabella and Mortimer have or eventually develop a strong erotic attachment to a person that enables them to savor political power.

Tempted by Fortune, all four of them develop the need to establish a political stance and prove their power, and all four of them indulge in fantasies of everlasting rule. No wonder why in seeing the end of his days swiftly approach him, Mortimer exclaims: "Base Fortune, now I see that in thy wheel/ There is no point to which when men aspire/ They tumble headlong down" (5.6.59-61). There are times when desire alone is not enough to keep such an illusory status. Those who are today on top of the wheel may tomorrow be crushed by it, as the king, his minion, his queen and her lover realized.

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