“Proud disturber of thy country's peace” – Reading Social and Political Dissidence in Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*

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Tarkastelen tässä pro gradu -tutkielmassa Christopher Marlowen näytelmää *Edward II* (n. 1594) yhteiskunnallisesti radikaalina oman aikansa teoksena. Pyrin osoittamaan, että Marlowen näytelmä haastaa aikansa dominantteja käsityksiä poliittisista ja sosiaalisista ilmiöistä. Siinä missä Elizabethin ajan hallinto pyrki ylläpitämään yhteiskunnallista järjestystä välittämällä kansalaisilleen providentialistista maailmankuvaa, viime vuosikymmenten materialistinen kirjallisuuskritiikki on painottanut renessanssin ajan teatterin ja draaman roolia tämän ideologian vastustajana.

Käsittelen tutkielmassani *Edward II*:n radikaalisuutta useilla eri osa-alueilla. *Edward II*:sta puuttuu paitsi omalle ajalleen ominainen providentialistinen maailmankuva, mutta se myös kuvaa Englannin epävakaana ja jakaantuneena kansakuntana vastoin hallinnon ylläpitämää harmonista mielikuvaa pimeän keskiajan jälkeisestä poliittisesti vakaasta valtiosta. Lisäksi näytelmässä hovi esitetään vailla hierarkiaa ja teatraalisuutta, jotka olivat keskeisiä tekijöitä hallitsijan vallan ylläpitämisessä 1500-luvun Englannissa.

Toisaalta Marlowe käyttää hyväkseen myös renessanssin teatterin ideologista voimaa, sillä teatterissa myös kuningas voitiin asettaa tarkkailun alaiseksi, mikä mahdollisti esityksestä maksaneelle yleisölle tietyn autonomisen roolin hallitsijan arvostelijoina. Esittämällä Kuningas Edwardin sodomiittisen suhteen hyväksyttävänä, kyseenalaistamalla tämän pätevyyden hallitsijana sekä paljastamalla tämän salamurhan häikäilemättömänä poliittisena hirmutekona vailla moraalisia opetuksia Marlowe kritisoi hyveellisen hallitsijan ympärille muodostettua illuusiota. Tämän lisäksi tulee huomioida, että historianäytelmänä *Edward II* ymmärrettiin ajankohtaisen poliittisen ilmapiirin allegoriana eikä ainoastaan historiallisten tapahtumien kuvauksena.

Tutkielmani teoreettinen viitekehys sijoittuu kulttuurimaterialismin, uushistorismin ja marxismin alueille. Tutkimukseni keskeisimpiä kulttuurimaterialistisia kriitikoita ovat Raymond Williams, Jonathan Dollimore ja Alan Sinfield sekä uushistorismin puolelta Stephen Greenblatt ja Louis Montrose. Kulttuurimaterialistinen kirjallisuudentutkimus on pyrkinyt paikantamaan renessanssin ajan teoksista toisinajattelua, kun taas uushistorismi on usein tyytynyt esittämään tämän toisinajattelun ainoastaan vallitsevaa hegemoniaa voimistavana. Tavoitteenani on kuitenkin osoittaa, että teatterilla oli erityinen ideologinen asema Elizabethin ajan Englannissa, mikä teki siitä yhteiskunnallisesti merkittävän instituution. Tämä erityisasema on havaittavissa myös Marlowen näytelmässä.

Asiasanat: Marlowe, Christopher, kulttuurimaterialismi, uushistorismi, marxismi, ideologia, hegemonia, providentialismi

Contents

1. Introduction

In his 1943 study *The Elizabethan World Picture* E.M.W. Tillyard argued that the Elizabethans shared a collective view of the world based on an idea of a universal order, a chain of being that formed a rigid hierarchy stretching from "the foot of God's throne to the meanest of inanimate objects" (1998, 33). By arguing that the Elizabethan society was ruled by a sovereign who was collectively considered to epitomise God's image on earth, Tillyard regarded Elizabethan political and social order as one of the dominant ideas of the age which was "so taken for granted, so much part of the collective mind of people, that it is hardly mentioned except in explicitly didactic passages" (ibid., 17). Consequently, this notion of the 'universal order' of the cosmos represents an interpretation of the Elizabethan society maintained by several critics in the mid-twentieth century. Ultimately this view adhered to a tenet of an essentialist conception of human beings, one which argued for the existence of a timeless essence in humankind immune to change. Conservative critical tradition, such as exemplified by Tillyard, leaned on conservative imperatives such as 'order', 'tradition', 'human condition' and 'character' in their analysis of literature and drama (Dollimore 1984, 3).

However, new materialist directions in literary criticism during the past few decades have aspired to challenge this essentialist notion, offering instead "a view of the self as a construct, contingent upon circumstances and culture" (Watt 2002, 6–7). Therefore, instead of arguing for 'a universal order', contemporary literary criticism has begun to emphasise the material and historical conditions of literary works. This notion is embodied in Gramsci's argument that "there is no abstract "human nature", fixed and immutable...but…human nature is the totality of historically determined social relations" (1971, 133). Although it would be

misleading to claim that belief in the existence of an essentialist character in literature would have constituted the entire foundation of literary criticism until the 1980s, there was, as Montrose puts it, “a shift from an essential or immanent to an historical, contextual, and conjunctural model of signification; and a general suspicion of closed systems, totalities, and universals” (1996, 2).

Consequently, with the emergence of critical literary theories such as Cultural Materialism and New Historicism in the late 1970s and in the 1980s, new emphasis on the relationship between literature and history began to gain ground in Renaissance literature criticism; texts were discussed in the context of and seen as material products of specific historical conditions. As Wilson puts it, these directions marked a “return of history in literary criticism” (1992, 1). Hence, through a strong contextualising of the historical conditions in which literary works were created and instead of considering culture and literature a homogenous representation of a cosmic order and harmonious unity, literary critics began to interpret Elizabethan literature from a dissident viewpoint, accentuating the heterodox aspects of early modern England and producing subversive interpretations of the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Whereas formalists such as T.S. Eliot had criticised Renaissance dramatists for their “impure art” (Dollimore 1984, 5–6), Cultural Materialists and New Historicists regarded such elements as crucial in terms of subversion. Indeed, following the work of Raymond Williams, Cultural Materialists in particular began to identify subversion within the dominant ideology of Elizabethan society.

Accordingly, as the general disposition in Renaissance literary criticism has shifted towards discussing 'literature in history' in recent decades, a similar change in the field of criticism of the Elizabethan playwright Christopher Marlowe has also taken place. After having flourished in the 1580s and 1590s, Marlowe's plays suffered a loss of interest in the

1600s and 1700s after which they were reinstated in the literary canon in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Deats 2010, 4–5). Along with this deviation in critical attention throughout the years, the manner in which Marlowe's dramatic works have been interpreted has analogously altered, and the view maintained by New Criticism (the idea of regarding Marlowe's dramatic works as depictions of personal suffering and endorsing Elizabethan political orthodoxy) which prevailed in the mid-twentieth century has gradually been undermined during recent decades (Knowles 2001, 105). Hence the focus that previously lay in Marlowe's protagonists and within the individual sphere has shifted towards the depiction of social and political matters in his plays. Whereas critics such as Levin, Sanders and Brooke[1] considered Marlowe's plays primarily as depictions of the protagonists' personal downfalls, materialist literary criticism from the 1980s onwards has argued conversely that Marlowe's dramatic works often deal with political and societal matters rather than merely focusing on the individual and the private sphere.

Although it is appropriate to assert that the torment of Marlowe's overreaching protagonists forms a central part of his plays, my disposition, however, aligns itself with the view that has gained ground during recent decades; by resisting the ideological implications promulgated by the Elizabethan Crown, that is, the idea of early modern England as a politically and socially harmonious society, Marlowe's dramatic works discuss openly the politics of the contemporary English society and can be seen to challenge the Elizabethan absolutist orthodoxy. Indeed, by using the history play as an allegory of contemporary political and social circumstances of the 1590s, the playwright discusses topical matters in a

[1] For instance, Harry Levin in his seminal study *The Overreacher* argued that Marlowe "is not concerned with the state but, as always, with the individual" (1952, 88). Taking a more hostile approach and ultimately deeming the play a failure, Wilbur Sanders argued that "the most remarkable thing about Marlowe's *Edward II* is the fact that, although it has every appearance of being a play on a national and political theme, a play about kingship, it is yet an intensely personal play in which the public issues hardly arise" (1968, 121). Similarly, Brooke regarded *Edward II* as "a curiously exclusive play, lacking any serious interest in politics or the structure of a state" (1966, 102).

manner which had the potential of disturbing the dominant established order and ideology of the early modern period.

It is from this perspective that I intend to discuss Marlowe's *Edward II*[2] (written 1591–1592, published c. 1594). Using Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*[3] as his primary source, Marlowe presents the demise of the King of England whose disastrous reign ends gruesomely as a victim of a vile political assassination schemed by the Queen and the infuriated earls who consider Edward unfit to rule as a monarch. Edward, who remains seemingly indifferent to the matters of his realm and wishes instead to spend time with his beloved Gaveston, is murdered by the earls as a result of a clash in political leadership; the transgression of social hierarchy of the politically and personally intertwined relationship between Gaveston and Edward becomes unbearable for the earls who take action against the King in order to defend the 'right' of realm, that is, the homeland that they deem ideologically natural. Hence the play has a clear political dimension: rather than merely portraying the history of the nation within a providentialist framework and presenting a didactic tale on the suffering of an individual, Marlowe instead depicts England as a site of political, social and cultural conflict in which contrasting ideologies are explicitly discussed on the Renaissance stage.

Consequently, I intend to argue that contrary to the majority of earlier literary criticism that maintained a liberal humanist view of *Edward II*, the play is to be regarded as a provocative and radical dramatic work that does not offer a didactic view on history and portrays

[2] All quotations from *Edward II* appearing in this thesis are taken from the New Mermaid edition of the play (London: Benn, 1967), edited by W.M. Merchant.

[3] Published in 1577 and 1587 by Raphael Holinshed, the *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* comprises the history of Britain. As Brown (2002, 165) has shown, Holinshed's *Chronicles* differs radically from *Edward II* in its aspiration to glorify the history and culture of England in accordance with the Tudor sense of nationalism. Consequently, I shall refer to this source and its discrepancies between *Edward II* throughout the thesis. Whereas Tillyard had argued that the providential pattern of royal succession and divine hierarchy was commonly accepted by contemporary Elizabethan playwrights and citizens, Heinemann (1990, 179), among other critics, has pointed out that this ideological orthodoxy is in fact far more prevalent in the older chronicles and Elizabethan homilies than in a dramatic work like *Edward II*.

conventional ideas regarding the politics, societal matters and culture of Elizabethan England as problematic and contestable. Accordingly, my main hypothesis is that *Edward II* is ultimately anti-establishment in its nature, criticising and rejecting the implications of the ideological Elizabethan orthodoxy, that is, the hegemony which aspired to represent the state as a unified and harmonious entity with the monarch as the head of the state and God's representative on earth. Thus, working against this ideological stance, with *Edward II* Marlowe depicts the realm as a sphere of ideological contestation in which dissident voices are not suppressed or harnessed as a vehicle for the dominant ideology. Indeed, as a history play, *Edward II* had a distinct function since it was considered to place current events on display and any portrayal of a monarch on stage had the potential of subversion. Although my topic touches upon several themes in the play, my main focus lies in the manner in which Marlowe rejects traditional notions of social and political order, unity and hierarchy that the Elizabethan regime aspired to portray as immutable and natural.

Accordingly, my theoretical approach consists of Marxist criticism, New Historicism and Cultural Materialism (with critical emphasis being on the latter approach), thus situating the theoretical framework of this thesis in the field of materialist criticism. Marlowe has been studied quite vehemently during the last decades from these viewpoints (this applies especially to Queer studies) but, as Knowles (2001, 105) suggests, quite often this criticism has focused on discussing the personal sphere of the play, similarly as New Criticism did earlier. Consequently, I hope to avoid this tendency and hope to offer something new to the discussion on Marlovian drama.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this section I will discuss the theoretical framework of this thesis. I intend to approach *Edward II* mainly from a Cultural Materialist perspective, a theoretical approach that has spawned a number of highly influential studies in the field of materialist criticism in the past few decades. However, in addition to Cultural Materialism, my approach includes aspects of Marxist criticism and New Historicism that I have decided to include mainly for three reasons: firstly, the tenets of Marxism form the main theoretical foundation for Cultural Materialism. Secondly, all three approaches share similar critical notions (e.g. negating any universal or essential qualities in human beings). Thirdly, as Ryan points out, a methodological divergence within both Cultural Materialist and New Historicist criticism makes it problematic to clearly divide them into two separate critical practices: "[i]t is impossible to discern beneath the diversity of new historicist or cultural materialist practice a single, unifying theory or consistent theoretical method" (1996, x). Moreover, because of the certain confusion related to the definition and the differences between New Historicism and Cultural Materialism (cf. Brannigan 1998, 19–22), it is also beneficial to examine the main differences between these two critical approaches.

Accordingly, I have divided my discussion into three subsections: subsection 2.1. will focus on Marxist criticism, particularly on the concepts of *hegemony* and *ideology*, Louis Althusser's theorisation regarding the *Ideological State Apparatuses* and *Repressive State Apparatuses* and the possible problems related to Althusser's view on ideology as having a pervasive material essence. In subsection 2.2. I intend to discuss Cultural Materialism and notably its capability to interpret literature from a dissident viewpoint. Thirdly, subsection 2.3.

shall extend my discussion to New Historicism and its relationship with Cultural Materialism. In particular, I intend to discuss the paradigm of subversion and containment, a common dispute among these two forms of literary criticism.

2.1. Marxist Criticism: Ideology and Hegemony

Marxist criticism aims at refuting the universality and singularity of history (Brannigan 1998, 23) and the claim that immaterial spiritual essence constitutes our material existence (Selden and Widdowson 1993, 70). Rejecting any essentialist conceptions of humanity, Marx argued that philosophy had not addressed the issues of the real world and that the true goal of philosophy was genuine societal change. Indeed, in Marx's words, "philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" (1964, 653, original emphasis). Thus Marx disagreed with Hegel and his followers, who were of the opinion that societies are governed by ideas, and instead Marx argued that the material interests of the dominant class determine the manner in which people perceive human existence (Selden and Widdowson 1993, 70–71). For instance, ideological institutions such as legal systems are not the embodiments of human or divine reason, but rather reflections of the interests of the dominant class in different periods in history. Thus Marxism is essentially a materialist philosophy with the aim of explaining the world by negating the existence of forces beyond the natural world and focusing on concrete societal matters (Barry 2002, 156). Therefore, opposing idealist philosophy, Marx and Engels argued that "[l]ife is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (1964, 38), meaning that people's thoughts and existence are shaped by the material circumstances of a given society.

Therefore, Marxist criticism focuses on the material conditions of history and argues, as

Marx put it, that "[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (1988, 21). This struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeois entails that the interests of the dominant economic group are depicted as the interests of the entire society, while the interests of the working class are either without representation or represented as a minority (Brannigan 1998, 23). Hence, when Marx argued that "[t]he ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class" (1988, 36), he could – according to one interpretation – be said to claim that economics functions as the determining force in all societies and cultures and that the ruling mode of cultural production is determined by the ruling mode of economic production (Brannigan 1998, 24). Marx illustrated this view by the hierarchical metaphor known as the base-superstructure model, in which the base functions as the economic structure of society whereas the superstructure consists of, according to Eagleton, "certain forms of law and politics, a certain kind of state…certain 'definite forms of social consciousness'…which is what Marxism designates as *ideology*" (1976, 5, original emphasis). A crude form of Marxist thinking advocated the belief that by altering the economic structure capitalist ideology would be abrogated and replaced with the ideas, beliefs and values of a communist society (Brannigan 1998, 24).

However, this interpretation of the base-superstructure model, often regarded as a vulgar Marxist reading, was considered too deterministic and mechanical for modern Marxist critics, who instead focused on a different apprehension of Marxism, one that emphasised the function of cultural representation rather than economic factors (Brannigan 1998, 24). As Marx did not believe in the existence of culture as an autonomous phenomenon, but argued that the ruling class designates culture in its own use by employing cultural forms to represent its interests as the interests of all humanity, ideology should not to be regarded simply as the product of the dominant class, but it is central in producing the ruling class itself as well; the

ruling class comes to believe along with other classes that its interests are the interests of the entire society (ibid.). This situation, in which the proletariat holds disadvantageous beliefs about what its own interests are, is known as *false consciousness,* a central concept in Marxist criticism.

Therefore, instead of considering the economic base as the essence of society and the superstructure its reflection, modern Marxist critics argued that the relationship between these aspects is far more intricate, giving prominence to ideological power instead of material power (Barry 2002, 165). For instance, Raymond Williams, one of the key theorists in more modern Marxist thinking, rejected the view that a complicated human consciousness producing literature would have been formed by a mere economic mode of production (Wilson 1995, 33). Instead, Williams argued that the base and superstructure are not to be considered concrete, separable entities but rather complex, intertwined systems that cannot be crudely separated from one another (Williams 1977, 80–81). Hence the discussion on the relationship between economics and ideology in the field of Marxist criticism began to emphasise its interactive and dialectical nature.

Furthermore, the notion of *false consciousness* is closely associated with the concept of *hegemony.* The prominent Italian Marxist critic Antonio Gramsci saw ideological struggle as the root of all political and social change and argued that "men acquire consciousness of structural conflicts on the level of ideologies" (Gramsci 1971, 365). Therefore, for Gramsci, the problem was not of economics, but of ideology; Gramsci contrasted *rule* (direct political control) with *hegemony*, which, according to Williams, is "a lived system of meanings and values…which as they are experience as practices appear as reciprocally confirming" (1977, 110). Hegemony could thus be defined as an internalised form of social control, making certain views seem natural, 'the way things are'. As Williams points out elsewhere, hegemony

is to be differentiated from ideology, for hegemony is seen “to depend for its hold not only on its expression of the interests of a ruling class but also on its acceptance as 'normal reality' or 'commonsense' by those in practice subordinated to it” (1976, 118). Hegemony is thus something truly total, something that, as Williams puts it, “saturates the society to such an extent [that it] constitutes the substance and limit of common sense for most people under its sway” (1980, 37). Indeed, if

> ideology were merely some abstract, imposed set of notions, if our social and political and cultural ideas and assumptions and habits were merely the result of specific manipulation, of a kind of overt training which might be simply ended or withdrawn, then the society would be very much easier to move and to change [...]
> (ibid.)

Therefore, similarly to Gramsci, Williams argued that power functions according to a hegemonic logic in a society, and if ideology were composed merely of imposed ideas, true societal change would be much easier to achieve (Brannigan 1998, 27).

Acknowledging that ideology is not some grand delusion, but something that exists in concrete forms (as apparatuses and institutions) and operates for 'the common good' brings us to the structuralist Marxist theoretician Louis Althusser whose work has had a vast influence on the concepts of hegemony and ideology in the field of Marxist criticism. Althusser rejected the oversimplified view of ideology as false consciousness and defined the concept of ideology as “a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society” (Althusser 2005, 231). For Althusser, ideology has a material existence because it is built into cultural practices and institutions; societies continue to reproduce themselves ideologically in order to exist. Individuals are ideological subjects whose subjectivity is constructed by *Ideological State Apparatuses* (ISA) such as schools, the church and the media which function by ideology, whereas state power, *Repressive State*

Apparatuses, (RSA) such as the army, law courts and prisons, function by violence (Althusser 1971, 16–19).

Moreover, according to Althusser, although every state apparatus functions both by violence and by ideology (ibid.), repressive structures rely more on external force, whereas ideological structures operate more subtly via ideology, making us feel that we have a choice in what is in reality imposed upon us. Hence Althusser argues that ideology functions in a manner in which it "'recruits' subjects among the individuals...or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects" (ibid., 48). Individuals thus consider themselves as free and independent of social forces, although they are already *interpellated*, or hailed, by structures not controlled by physical force.

All in all, Althusser's influence in the field of Marxism has been extensive, and his depiction of the manner in which ideology functions in a given society has provided a subtler view on the concept and shown that ideological power is ultimately of greater significance than material power, which emphasises literature's potential as an effective force in society (Barry 2002, 165). Furthermore, Althusser's theorisation of the ISAs and RSAs has had an impact on other forms of Marxist-derived literary criticism, such as Cultural Materialism (and to a lesser extent New Historicism) which focus on discussing the existence of ideological system by examining its material practices (Brannigan 1998, 28). For instance, identifying Elizabethan ideological institutions (e.g. the church, state and court) and discussing their role and portrayal in the works of Renaissance dramatists forms a central aspect of both Cultural Materialism and New Historicism. In terms of Renaissance drama such as *Edward II*, discussing these ideological forces enables one to analyse power relations and ideological dominance in the Elizabethan state.

However, the problem that arises in the Althusserian concept of ideology is that it is

difficult to imagine criticism or transgression in literature in terms of individual resistance if individuals are born into an ideology that constructs their consciousness. Indeed, as the eminent Cultural Materialist critic Alan Sinfield argues,

> if our subjectivities are constituted within a language and social system that is already imbued with oppressive constructs of class, race, gender, and sexuality, then how can we expect to see past that, to the idea of a fairer society, let alone struggle to achieve it? How, indeed, could Althusser see what he did?
>
> (2005, 24)

Other critics have voiced similar criticism in recent studies,[4] and it seems that the central problem in Althusser's theorisation is that of dissidence and true ideological opposition to the dominant order. Furthermore, applying Althusser's concepts to early modern England in which the structure of society differs greatly from that of twentieth century may be problematic (although Dollimore (1984, 4), for instance, has suggested that a crude division of ideological and repressive institutions proposed by Althusser might actually be more suitable for the early modern period under which effective ideological control was more imperative). Nevertheless, Althusser's theorisation provides some of the key concepts that modern Marxist criticism has employed in its discussion of ideological power. Furthermore, Althusser's theory had a strong impact on Cultural Materialism (discussed in subsection 2.2.) in arguing that ideology has a material existence since it is reproduced in institutions.

All things considered, I feel that in order to describe ideological dissidence in literature one needs to turn to more recent theories on literature and focus on evaluating the relationship between art and ideology; is there room for subversion in the field of literary studies? According to Eagleton, "[a]ll art springs from an ideological conception of the world" (1976,

[4] For instance, in a recent study on royal power and authority in Shakespeare's late tragedies, Alisa Manninen acknowledges the problems in the Althusserian concept of ideological resistance and argues that "Althusser neglects the practices of individuals and with that their capacity to resist the ideology of the state" (2010, 15). Therefore, Althusser's theory on ideology seems to disregard the possibility of individual agency since it relies heavily on an external entity.

17), and thus it would be possible to argue, in a 'vulgar' Marxist manner, that literature would simply be an expression of the ideologies of its time, hence a mere reflection of the dominant ideology (ibid.). However, if this were the case, how can one explain the manner in which works of literature often appear to challenge the dominant ideological beliefs of their time? Indeed, how does one account for social change if true subversion did not exist? Therefore, it seems that a critical approach less rigid in terms of ideological resistance is needed. Consequently, in order to argue for the possibility of subversion and dissidence in literature, I will depart from Marxist criticism to Cultural Materialism, a literary theory that will be discussed in the following subsection.

2.2 The Politics of Dissident Reading: Cultural Materialism

> Culture is not by any stretch of the imagination – not even the literary imagination – a unity.
>
> (Dollimore 1985, 6)

Cultural Materialism emerged in Britain in the post-war period during which cultural studies began to gain ground in literary criticism. Although Cultural Materialism was established in the 1980s as a self-conscious literary theory, its origins can be seen to date back to 1958 with the publication *Culture and Society 1780 to 1950* by the British Marxist critic Raymond Williams. As a term, Cultural Materialism was first used by Williams in his 1977 seminal book *Marxism and Literature* in which he defined Cultural Materialism as

> a theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism...it is, in my view, a Marxist theory, and indeed that in its specific fields it is, in spite of and even because of the relative unfamiliarity of some of its elements, part of what I at least see as the central thinking of Marxism.
>
> (1977, 5–6)

For Williams, then, Cultural Materialism was first and foremost a Marxist theory, an

expansion of historical materialism. However, Williams viewed culture as more than simply a reflection of the economic base and for the critic culture included “practices, expectations, ways of seeing and everyday communication” (Colebrook 1997, 140). Thus, although art and literature had distinct features as a social practice, they were inseparable from the general social practice. Indeed, as Williams argued, “we cannot separate literature and art from other kinds of social practice, in such a way as to make them subject to quite special and distinct laws” (1980, 44).

Furthermore, Williams' theorisation of the *dominant*, *residual*, and *emergent* forms of culture and the *structures of feeling* form a fundamental basis for Cultural Materialist criticism. According to Williams, a cultural system cannot be defined merely by its dominant features but, additionally, one must also acknowledge the residual and the emergent forms of culture for they reveal the characteristic of the dominant (Williams 1977, 121–122). We still need to talk about the dominant, that is, the hegemonic, but the residual “has been effectively formed in the past, but...is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present” (ibid., 122). By residual elements Williams is therefore referring to social or cultural practices that are formed in some other period but are still actively affecting contemporary society. There might be residual elements of a former dominant system residing in the current system; certain experiences, meanings and values which have been formed in the past and cannot be expressed in terms of the dominant culture, but which “are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social and cultural institution of formation” (ibid.). This aspect of the residual is crucial since it may have an alternative or oppositional relation to the dominant culture, “from that active manifestation of the residual...which has been wholly or largely incorporated into the dominant culture” (ibid.).

Furthermore, emergent culture denotes "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships [that] are continually being created" (ibid. 123). Ultimately, identifying and producing a reading of these oppositional stances amid the dominant system constitutes the central idea of Cultural Materialist criticism.

In addition to these three forms of culture, Williams also coined the term *structures of feeling*, defined as "meanings and values as they are lived and felt" (Williams 1977, 132). Providing an alternative for Foucault's concept of *discourse*,[5] Williams' notion of structures of feeling refers to matters "antagonistic both to explicit systems of values and beliefs, and to the dominant ideologies within a society" (Barry 2002, 184). Thus, seeking to identify and oppose these dominant ideologies, Cultural Materialism is a form of literary criticism that is optimistic about the possibility of change and regards literature as a source of oppositional values. From this point of view Cultural Materialism resembles *historical materialism*, a methodological approach conducted by the Marxist thinker Walter Benjamin who argued that the task of historical materialists was "to brush history against the grain" (Benjamin, quoted in Brannigan 1998, 28). Therefore, in a similar manner, Cultural Materialists describe the process and forces of ideological hegemony but also aim at activating the dissidence and subversion which, according to Brannigan, "lies dormant in any textual manifestation of ideology" (ibid.).

These concepts created by Williams produce a means of comprehending the complex nature of culture and the manner in which culture can be seen to function. The quality of a given cultural moment in history is never static and unified but, rather, there are tensions between different forms of culture. As E.P. Thompson points out, history is not to be regarded as a unilinear progress, but, conversely, at any historical moment

[5] According to Foucault, power is gained through discourse in art, politics and science. I shall return to the concept of *discourse* in detail in subsection 2.3., in which I examine New Historicist literary criticism.

> there will be found contradictions and liaisons, dominant and subordinate elements, declining or ascending energies. Any historical moment is both a result of prior process and an index towards the direction of its future flow.
>
> (1978, 239)

Moreover, Dollimore points out that if we

> further recognise that there also exist subordinate and repressed cultures, then we see very clearly that culture itself is not a unitary phenomenon; non-dominant elements interact with the dominant forms, sometimes coexisting with, or being absorbed or even destroyed by them, but also challenging, modifying or even displacing them.
>
> (1984, 7)

Thus, acknowledging the heterodox nature of culture and the different forms of culture coexisting at any point in history led to the emergence of Cultural Materialism, a literary theory that worked from the premise of recognising oppositional and alternative positions to dominant forms of culture (Brannigan 1998, 41–42).

Consequently, the theorisations by Raymond Williams provided the platform for Cultural Materialism to begin to develop into an independent critical approach in Britain in the 1980s. Somewhat similar to the political atmosphere of Reaganism in the USA in the 1980s, the conservative right-wing politics led by Margaret Thatcher in Britain provided the circumstances under which Cultural Materialist critics revisited literary works (Brannigan 1998, 9, Watt 2002, 11). Thus the emergence of Cultural Materialist criticism was heavily influenced by the political climate of the time, and critics began to examine literary texts in relation to their role in perpetuating dominant ideologies.

In 1985 Cultural Materialist criticism took its most defined form with the publication of *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* by critics Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield. In this collection of Cultural Materialist and New Historicist essays Dollimore and Sinfield outlined the central tenets of Cultural Materialist literary criticism. According to Dollimore and Sinfield, Cultural Materialism can be regarded as “a combination of historical

context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis" (1985, vii). Consequently, I shall discuss next these four fundamental elements of Cultural Materialist criticism separately in the following paragraphs.

Firstly, by emphasising the historical context of literary works, Dollimore and Sinfield considered Cultural Materialist literary criticism to undermine "the transcendent significance traditionally accorded to the literary text" (1985, vii), that is, any essentialist or timeless characteristic applied to works of literature. Therefore Cultural Materialist criticism can be seen as a radical departure from formalist criticism that regarded literary works as objects in their own right, focusing on their intrinsic characteristics. Conversely, as Sinfield (1992, 49) argues, just by adhering to formal textual analysis one cannot conclude if a text is subversive, and thus the focus must lie in the historical conditions of the text. Similarly, Dollimore points out that "nothing can be intrinsically or essentially subversive in the sense that prior to the event subversiveness can be more than potential; in other words it cannot be guaranteed a priori, independent of articulation, context and reception" (1985, 13).

Hence, by contextualising history and bearing in mind Raymond Williams' (1980, 44) argument that the arts cannot be separated from the general social process, Cultural Materialism refuses to "privilege" literature, and in doing so "eliminates the old divisions between literature and its 'background', text and context" (Dollimore 1985, 4). Therefore, as Dollimore and Sinfield point out, Cultural Materialism is a study of "implication of literary texts in history" (1985, viii). Thus, for instance, a play by a Renaissance dramatist (such as Marlowe's *Edward II*) is related to the contexts of its production – to the economic and political system of its time and the institutions of cultural production such as the court, patronage, theatre, education, and the church (ibid.).

Moreover, in addition to discussing the historical context of literary texts, Cultural

Materialist criticism often includes the present moment in its discussion of works of literature. As Brannigan (1998, 169–170) points out, Cultural Materialists argue that the potential for dominance or dissidence in literature is constructed by history, and this potential is dependent on the historical context in which literature is interpreted. Analogously, Dollimore and Sinfield argue that what counts as a relevant history is not something that happened hundreds of years ago, but culture is constantly being made and texts are "reconstructed, reappraised, reassigned all the time through diverse institutions in specific contexts" (1985, viii). Therefore, Cultural Materialist literary criticism often aims at interpreting literary works in a manner that makes them relevant and meaningful in the context of contemporary politics and culture. This could be achieved for instance by examining a contemporary production of a play by a Renaissance dramatist.[6]

The second aspect brought forward by Dollimore and Sinfield is the emphasis on theoretical method, which aims at refuting the humanist consensus of the mid-twentieth century which dominated especially Shakespearean criticism. According to Dollimore and Sinfield, the "theoretical method detaches the text from immanent criticism which seeks only to reproduce it in its own terms" (1985, vii). Thus Cultural Materialist criticism leads us

> beyond idealist literary criticism – that preoccupied with supposedly universal truths which find their counterpart in 'man's' essential nature; the criticism in which history, if acknowledged at all, is seen as inessential or a constraint transcended in the affirmation of a transhistorical human condition.
>
> (Dollimore 1985, 4)

[6] Although my approach to *Edward II* does not include a contemporary literary source often associated with Cultural Materialism, I do acknowledge the fact that the manner in which we interpret literature is always dependent on the present moment in which we live. For instance, Catherine Belsey (1985, 1–2) notes that reading the past invariably results in an interpretation that is somewhat anachronistic, meaning that since one cannot reproduce the conditions of another century, the only way to examine the past is through textual analysis, and, to a certain degree, historical artifacts and maps. As Wilson puts it, "all history is textually and retroactively understood" (1996, xii). Insofar as history is concerned, my analysis of *Edward II* is inclined towards a New Historicist approach in that I will examine the play solely in its own period of time. Although I agree with Cultural Materialists in that interpretations of works of literature are always tied to the context in which they are read, I will not be interpreting the play in terms of any form of comparison with contemporary social phenomena.

Therefore, whereas liberal humanism (which advocated both essentialist and universal notions) centred around the belief that the essence of human nature does not change (cf. Belsey 1985, 1–10) and similarly, while formalist criticism considered literature a "discrete, apolitical and transcendent form of artistic impression" (Brannigan 1998, 4), Cultural Materialism rejects this essentialist view of human nature, arguing instead that individuals are products of society in history.

Therefore Cultural Materialist critics do no seek to affirm some sort of an aesthetic harmony or eternal truths in literary texts but instead actively seek to reveal traces of social conflict and contradictions within them (referred to as *faultlines* by Alan Sinfield). Similarly, by acknowledging Williams' theorisation that there are different forms of culture and oppositional values existing simultaneously at any point in history, Cultural Materialists refute the claim of 'a collective mind' of people. An example of this kind of an orthodox view maintained by several critics in the mid-twentieth century is known as the Elizabethan World Picture (which I will discuss in further detail in subsection 3.1.), a notion that Marlowe clearly undermines in *Edward II*.

Thirdly, Cultural Materialist criticism is politically committed, that is, by adhering to Marxist literary criticism it deviates from the conservative-Christian ideology that had previously dominated criticism of Renaissance drama (Barry 2002, 183). As Dollimore and Sinfield (1985, viii) argue, Cultural Materialism does not pretend to appear politically neutral, but rather it acknowledges the fact that no cultural practice is ever without political significance. Indeed, bearing in mind that interpreting literary texts is always a subjective act, Cultural Materialism

> does not, like much established literary criticism, attempt to mystify its perspective as the natural, obvious or right interpretation of an allegedly given textual fact. On the

> contrary, it registers its commitment to the transformation of a social order which exploits people on grounds of race, gender and class.
>
> (ibid.)

Cultural Materialism thus acknowledges its subjective standpoint in literary studies, approaching texts within the history of Marxist discourse.

Appropriately, the political commitment of Cultural Materialism entails a certain rejection of the traditional framework of criticism;[7] whereas the majority of previous critical approaches to literary texts worked under the premise that literature embodied a certain universal significance and could be treated in an ahistorical vacuum and thus saw itself as exceeding material restrictions, Cultural Materialist critics view literary texts as political vehicles, mediating "the fabric of social, political and cultural formations" (Brannigan 1998, 3). In short, the relationship between history and politics is inseparable, since, as Wilson points out, [e]verything is political and politically analysable because everything is historical and historicizable" (1995, 121).

Lastly, textual analysis forms an integral part of Cultural Materialist criticism. According to Dollimore and Sinfield, textual analysis "locates the critique of traditional approaches where it cannot be ignored" (1985, vii), hence opposing the traditional, formalist criticism. Furthermore, as Sinfield points out, textual analysis enables one to identify dominant ideology and its intrinsic dissident opposition: "[t]he reason why textual analysis can so readily demonstrate dissidence being incorporated is that dissidence operates, necessarily, with reference to dominant structures" (1992, 47). Therefore, even though it was pointed out that in terms of literary analysis, a mere textual analysis is not sufficient, but additionally the text's historical, social and political context must be taken into consideration, textual analysis

[7] I acknowledge that using the phrase "the traditional framework of criticism" entails an oversimplification since no such single framework or critical approach could be argued to have ever existed. The emphasis here is more on the new form of political engagement in literary studies that Cultural Materialism represents.

nevertheless forms a crucial aspect of Cultural Materialism. Fredric Jameson reminds us that "history is inaccessible to us except in textual form" (1982, 82), meaning that it is safe to say that we cannot be absolutely certain what Marlowe's contemporary audience felt or thought about, for instance, witnessing the deposition and execution of King Edward on stage. What we can do, however, is to review and discuss various texts from the Renaissance era in order to arrive at some conclusion about the thoughts that a play like *Edward II* might have provoked as it was staged in the late sixteenth century. This notion of the textuality of history is discussed in further detail in subsection 2.3.

Why, then, is a play such as *Edward II* especially suitable for analysis from a Cultural Materialist viewpoint and, generally, why are Cultural Materialist critics particularly interested in drama from the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods? According to Dollimore (1984, 18– 19), Renaissance writers had a sophisticated view on ideology and Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatic works often question essentialist concepts such as providentialism. This is certainly the case with *Edward II*, a play that is actively engaged in questioning the dominant ideology of early modern England by presenting a realm in a tumultuous situation without any providentialist or immutable order, essential individualism, royal hierarchy or visually spectacular court or ceremony. Furthermore, Marlowe portrays a protagonist whose subversive love for a man of low rank is depicted as an unexceptional affair, ultimately evoking the empathy of viewers and demystifying state power by depicting his violent execution without references to providential justice.

However, there has been criticism throughout the years of whether the subversive views presented by Marlowe are indeed radical and truly challenge the principles upon which authority is built, or whether they are contained and only ostensibly dissident, appropriated by the dominant ideology for its own purposes. This problem of subversion and its containment

brings us to the next subsection in which I intend to respond to this criticism and discuss New Historicism and its relationship to Cultural Materialism.

2.3. New Historicism and the Problem of Subversion and Containment

In a somewhat similar political atmosphere as in Britain in the 1980s,[8] the field of literary criticism known as New Historicism emerged in 1980[9] in the USA with the publications of Stephen Greenblatt's book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* and Louis Adrian Montrose's essay "Eliza, Queene of Shepheardes". Although Greenblatt coined the term New Historicism, both Greenblatt and Montrose shared a view on how literature could be used in the construction of power and considered literature inseparable from other forms of representation. Greenblatt saw the written word as "self-consciously embedded in specific communities, life situations, structures of power" (1980, 7) and, similarly, Montrose argued that "the symbolic mediation of social relationships was a central function of Elizabethan pastoral forms; and that social relationships are, intrinsically, relationships of power" (1994, 88). Therefore the New Historicist movement took an interest in the structures and techniques of power in Renaissance England, often focusing on the monarch and his/her reign (Brannigan 1998, 58).

Influenced by anthropology and especially the anthropologist Clifford Geertz' argument that "there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture" (1996, 7) and his notion that human beings must be understood as "cultural artifacts" (ibid., 8), New Historicism

[8] As was noted in subsection 2.1., the political climate in the UK in the 1980s was dominated by right-wing ideology of Thatcherism. Analogously, a similar conservative political disposition governed the climate of American politics with Reaganism.

[9] According to Brannigan (1998, 57), Stephen Orgel's 1975 study *The Illusion of Power* anticipated the tenets of New Historicism, but the literary approach took a more defined form with Greenblatt's and Montrose's publications. Additionally, it was Greenblatt who originally coined the term *New Historicism* although he personally preferred the more suitable term *Cultural Poetics*.

rejected the idea of culture as an organic unity, a view advocated by earlier theoretical approaches such as New Criticism, and instead followed the post-structuralist cultural historian Michel Foucault's view of Renaissance culture as a site of 'dividing practices' that had transformed people into modern subjects (Wilson 1992, 8). Therefore, similarly to Cultural Materialistic criticism, New Historicism did not regard Renaissance dramatic works as some form of a mystified presentation of eternal truths and human condition but, instead, considered them embedded in other written texts. Hence, the established New Historicist practice was highly textual and usually composed of a parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts,[10] often from the same historical period (Barry 2002, 172).

In his seminal 1980 book Stephen Greenblatt argued that his approach to literature entailed interpreting literary works "as a part of the system of signs that constitutes a given culture" (1980, 4). Therefore Greenblatt regarded culture as a construct in which human identities are processes fashioned through discourse, which reflects Clifford Geertz' view on humans as cultural artifacts. Even more so, Greenblatt's thinking is associated with Michel Foucault's theorisations, especially Foucault's notion of *discourse.* Foucault's influence is apparent in New Historicist criticism in his concept of the panoptic state that maintains its power through its discursive practices (Barry 2002, 175). Indeed, one of the central tenets of New Historicism could be said to be that "both truth and power are effects of discourse, created in and by language" (Watt 2002, 9) and that – in Foucault's words – "discursive formation really is the principle of dispersion and redistribution" (1972, 107). Hence discourse entails power and is regarded as a pervasive force diffusing throughout society and forming "the whole

[10] New Historicist critics often begin their analysis of a particular literary text by introducing a non-literary text from the same historical period (e.g. penal, colonial and medical documents), giving them "equal weight" and thus not privileging literary texts. However, as my approach does not quite include such a use of non-literary sources (apart from brief extracts from Holinshed's *Chronicles* and other contemporary texts), I am inclined towards discussing New Historicist views on Renaissance power structures and Michel Foucault's concept of power and discourse and their relationship with Cultural Materialist critics' view on subversion.

‘mental set’ and ideology which encloses the thinking of all members of a given society” (Barry 2002, 176). Thus in this sense it seems that, despite their differences, the notion of power and discourse as diffusive and pervasive forces in society has its similarities with earlier Marxist concepts. Indeed, when comparing Foucault’s concept of *discourse* to Althusser’s *interpellation* and Gramsci’s *hegemony*, it is similar in that it seeks to depict the manner in which “power is internalised by those whom it disempowers, so that it does not have to be constantly enforced externally” (Barry 2002, 176–177).

However, following Foucault's arguments, one of the weaknesses of New Historicist literary criticism is a general inclination towards a monolithic view on power. An example of this would be seeing Elizabethan culture and society as monolithic entities in which dissident voices and ideologies are contained. Indeed, one of the central arguments of New Historicism is on authority being constantly engaged in “producing its own radical subversion and powerfully containing that subversion” (Watt 2002, 10). Hence, one of the central differences between New Historicism and Cultural Materialism is the following: New Historicist literary critics usually examine the functions and representations of power and focus on the manner in which power contains any potential subversion, whereas Cultural Materialists discuss texts in relation to defiance, subversion, dissidence, resistance and political opposition (Brannigan 1998, 108). This line of thinking can be seen in Greenblatt's famous essay “Invisible Bullets” in which he argued – in relation to Harriot’s account of Christianity in the New World – that

> the subversiveness which is genuine and radical…is at the same time contained by the power it would appear to threaten. Indeed the subversiveness is the very product of that power and furthers it ends.
>
> (1992, 89).

We have already observed how this difference leads to what Sinfield called the “entrapment model of ideology” (1992, 24), by which Sinfield referred to a model in which

attempts to challenge the system only help “the dominant to assert and police the boundaries of the deviant and the permissible” (ibid.). According to Sinfield (ibid., 49) the entrapment model is curiously convenient for literary criticism since it excludes the need for examining the historical effectivity of texts. This line of thinking is indeed rather inefficient, since the pessimistic claim that subversion is always contained cannot be said to provide a fruitful discussion in terms of literary criticism. As Raymond Williams reminds us, “no mode of production, and therefore no dominant society or order of society, and therefore no dominant culture, in reality exhausts the full range of human practice, human energy, human intention” (1980, 43).

According to many practitioners of New Historicism, then, any form of dissidence is actually contained since any attempt to challenge the prevailing system is in fact helping to sustain it. Therefore there is a tendency in New Historicist criticism to regard the state as a monolithic structure and any attempt to alter this structure is deemed futile. An example of this kind of a New Historicist analysis would be Greenblatt's view (1980, 209) on Marlowe's main dramatic works (including *Edward II*) that Marlowe's protagonists are embedded within the Renaissance orthodoxy and, consequently, they are shaped by forces beyond their control, thus accepting their place in the social construction against which they struggle. Similarly, some critics have argued that the ending of *Edward II* reinstates order (cf. Bevington and Shapiro 1988, 274), although my view (which I believe most Cultural Materialists would agree with) is that it can be seen to subvert the traditional order by representing a closure without conforming to the dominant ideology, that is, a providentialist view of the cosmos.

However, the dichotomy between subversion and containment is more problematic than this, and as Sinfield (1992, 39) points out, not all New Historicist criticism is in favour of the entrapment model and argue that subversion is contained in all instances. For instance, Louis

Montrose, an eminent New Historicist critic whose work does not fall in the category of containment, points out that insofar as power relations are concerned, straightforward concepts such as subversion and containment are inadequate to fully explain the intricacies of the nature of power (Montrose 1996, 8–11). This is echoed in Foucault's argument, according to which power is to be seen as a more complex of a system:

> [p]ower's condition of possibility…must not be sought in the primary existence of a central point, in a unique source of sovereignty from which secondary and descendent forms would emanate; it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable.
>
> (Foucault 1990, 93)

Hence, even though often associated with a monolithic and pessimistic view on power, it could be argued that Foucault did not regard power as a wholly monolithic concept, one that remains static and unchanging. Montrose has similarly argued for a heterodox view on ideological power, which entails that "a closed and static, monolithic and homogenous notion of ideology must be replaced by one that is heterogeneous and unstable, permeable and processual" (1996, 12). This theorisation comes closer to that of Cultural Materialism and recalls Thompson's (1978, 239) argument on the heterodox nature of any moment in history as well as Williams' (1977, 121–127) reminder of the complex manner in which dominant and non-dominant forms of culture interact. As Foucault has famously pointed out, "power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (1990, 93).

Therefore, even though New Historicist criticism seems to have its deficiencies regarding its arguments on the containment of subversion (cf. Watt 2002, 10), it does provide useful perspectives on Renaissance drama, especially on the circulation of social energy, cultural practices and relationships among these practices (cf. Greenblatt 1988, 1–20). A case in point,

in *Edward II* power is circulated through different political entities and described through the complex military and personal relations between the barons and King Edward. As Sinfield (1992, 40) observes, whereas some New Historicist analyses have often argued that power circulated in an unbreakable circle in Renaissance England – from and to the monarch – whereas in reality the early modern state was ultimately dependent on its military force (as an example Sinfield mentions the rebellion of the Earl of Essex 1601).[11] This is also what is at stake in *Edward II*, that is, in Sinfield's words, "[i]deological and military power threaten to split apart; it is a faultline in the political structure" (ibid.). Consequently, these faultlines and the historical circumstances of Elizabethan England are discussed in the following subsection.

[11] Similarly, Mullaney (1988, 24) points out that Elizabeth had little real coercive power, but her claim to the throne depended primarily on political rhetoric and performance. This emphasises the precarious political situation of the time. Indeed, there were other uprisings against the Tudors as well, including the Northern Rebellion against Elizabeth in 1569 which illustrated that the northern part of England was too dangerous for Elizabeth to visit personally.

3. Contextualising History: Elizabethan England

“Always historicize!” was the opening statement of the 1981 study *The Political Unconscious* by the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson (1982, 9) who insisted on rejecting any form of criticism that was based on an ahistorical approach. Conversely, the critic emphasised the importance of history in the study of literature. Indeed, as Eagleton (1976, 6) points out, in order to study a work of literature one needs to understand the’ social mentality’ of its age and the complex relationship between a literary work and the ideological world it inhabits. Therefore, as a Marxist-based critical approach, Cultural Materialist literary criticism gives prominence to the social and political circumstances under which literature is produced and, instead of separating literature from its historical context, Cultural Materialists study “literature *in* history” (Brannigan 1998, 3, original emphasis). Consequently, before moving on to examining the subversive elements in *Edward II*, I shall discuss briefly the historical contexts of the play.

Firstly, I intend to discuss the concept of ideology in Elizabethan society. Especially the notion of providentialism (i.e. the orthodox view reiterated by the state to legitimise its authority) forms a central element in understanding dramatic works of Renaissance England. Similarly it is essential to comprehend that not all Elizabethans would have adhered to the dominant form of ideology (thus contesting Tillyard's notion of the 'collective mind of the people') but, instead, like all societies throughout history, Elizabethan culture was comprised of a myriad of competing ideological forces and tensions. Moreover, in the second subsection I will discuss the politics of the Renaissance theatre, especially its potentiality as a subversive ideological force in early modern England. Lastly, pertaining to the idea of the theatre as an influential ideological institution in Renaissance England, the third subsection comprises a

discussion of the characteristics of the history play which had a particularly distinct status in Elizabethan culture, thus further providing historical evidence for the subversive nature of *Edward II*.

3.1 Providentialism: Religion and Ideology Intertwined in Elizabethan Society

As a dominant form of thinking in the early modern period, providentialism functioned as the ideology that the Crown used to justify its absolute power: the king was not appointed but the position of the monarch was derived from God whose representative the sovereign was on earth (Brannigan 1998, 102). According to Dollimore, established providentialism

> aimed to provide a metaphysical ratification of the existing social order. God encoded the natural and social world with a system of regulative (and self-regulating) law. The existing order, give or take a few aberrations, is the legitimate one. To depart from it is to transgress God's law.
>
> (1984, 97)

Therefore, with the sovereign as God's regent on earth as the head of a divine hierarchy, disobeying the laws of the state were not only a violation against the realm, but also "a sin against God" (White 2004, 70). This strong metaphysical notion about a cosmic order obviously discouraged any dissidence towards the prevailing system and was used by the Crown to legitimise its order, for instance through reiterated, divinely-sanctioned public executions and ideological apparatuses. As Sinfield and Dollimore (2002, 205) point out, instead of comprising merely a set of ideas, this Tudor ideology also had a material nature; it was intertwined with "the fabric of everyday life", that is, through ideological institutions, such as education, law and family. Therefore, as Dollimore (1984, 10) has observed, one needs an understanding of both a cognitive and materialist conceptions of Elizabethan ideology since both were inextricably intertwined in the early modern society.

However, whereas earlier mid-nineteenth-century humanist criticism adhered to such a fusion of politics and divinity – as in Tillyard's 1943 study in which he argued that in Elizabethan literature "political order...was always part of a larger cosmic order" (1998, 7) – materialist criticism of the 1980s rejected this view. As Dollimore (1984, 6) argues, the validity of the argument that Shakespeare or his contemporaries would have adhered to the so-called Elizabethan World Picture has long been repudiated. Bearing in mind Raymond Williams' view on the different forms of culture and the importance of viewing culture as a heterodox phenomenon consisting of contrasting views and tensions, it is essential to view the providentialist ideology as a formula that the Crown adhered to in order to represent and reproduce itself ideologically. As Sinfield points out, "the insistence in representations upon unity in a simple hierarchy does not mean that that is how the state actually worked, only that this is the way major parts of the ruling fraction represented it as working" (1992, 81–82).

Thus by reducing the Elizabethan society into a fully absolutist state is misleading and overestimates the centralisation and concentration of power in an absolutist state and it oversimplifies the relationship between power and ideology (ibid.). Dissident voices exist even in seemingly orthodox states, and even though

> the Tudor state sought to legitimate itself by means of its integration into a providentially ordered cosmos…it could not effectively contain the ideologically anomalous realities of heterodoxy, nor arrest the social flux, that it had helped to set in motion.
>
> (Montrose 1996, 21)

It is therefore important to note that although the Elizabethan state strived to represent itself in the light of this world view, this providential conception was by no means shared by all. If anything, the dissident voices intensified during the last two decades of Elizabeth's reign since there was "a strong sense of impatience and disillusion with the royal mythology" (Orgel 2011, 20).

In *Edward II* this concept of a providentialist view of the cosmos is clearly undermined; instead of a centralised conception of power that is derived from the king, Marlowe presents a Machiavellian power struggle in which the actions of decentred subjects are not sanctioned by God. As Summers points out, Marlowe's depiction of the world of *Edward II* does not represent the divinely ordered state portrayed in *The Mirror for Magistrates* or the Elizabethan Homilies (1988, 222).[12] Whereas many earlier critics regarded this as an inherent flaw in the play (cf. Sanders 1968, 121–142), this is hardly the case: with *Edward II* Marlowe refuses to moralise history and instead presents a heterodox view on politics and the realm which is to be regarded as a radical standpoint considering the political atmosphere of the early modern period.

3.2 Subversion, Censorship and the Politics of Elizabethan Theatre

In his influential essay "Invisible Bullets" Stephen Greenblatt, in an analysis of Shakespearean drama, argued that the theatre's ability to create subversion is the "very condition of power" (1992, 108) and, subsequently, even though appearing to be subversive, drama "contains the radical doubts it continually provokes" (ibid.). These arguments put forward by Greenblatt – although misinterpreted to some degree (cf. Wilson 1995, 62–63) – ultimately form one of the central ideas of New Historicist criticism and a pessimistic view on power; any active subversion to the dominant order is virtually impossible, and the production

[12] *The Mirror for Magistrates* was "a collection of tales about kings and others who came to a sticky end through offending against the universal order, [and it] preached both the supremacy of degree and the duty of obedience" (Elton 1991, 397). Thus it was an ideological doctrine that served the needs of the Crown, cautioning people of any attempts at disobedience towards the Tudor regime and 'the natural order' or ideas concerning egalitarianism. Similarly, the Elizabethan Homilies, a series of sermons, were used to justify the political order as the natural order of things (ibid., 396). In this respect, they resemble Holinshed's *Chronicles* that aspired to glorify English history and identity (cf. Brown 2002, 164–187).

of subversion only reinforces the prevailing hegemony.

However, as Howard (1994, 11) and Montrose (1996, 8–9) point out, these arguments have been rightly criticised. For instance, according to Howard, it does not seem that Renaissance literature always served the established power, but "the drama enacted ideological contestation as much as it mirrored or reproduced anything that one could call the dominant ideology" (ibid., 7). Indeed, theatrical power in Renaissance England was real power, and the contemporary public theatre could be seen to encourage ideological contestation and social change (ibid., 18). Similarly, Orgel argues that "[t]heatrical pageantry, the miming of greatness, is highly charged because it employs precisely the same methods the crown was using to assert and validate its authority" (2011, 23). Thus the royal power was subjected to the power of the dramatist which meant that "[p]ower relations were reversed or challenged even as they were apparently affirmed" (Howard 1994, 11).

Furthermore, Montrose (1996, 24) points out that the Elizabethan government actively tried to suppress polemical and religious drama. Similarly, Dollimore (1984, 22–23) argues that the existence of this type of censorship in theatres in early modern England indicates that the authorities of the time feared the institution: Renaissance theatre carried the potential of subversion and the officials often claimed that theatres were "a breeding ground for irreligion, corruption and riots" (ibid.). A famous instance of this is the production of *Richard II* that caused a stir in the court because the production took place out in the streets instead of the sphere of the theatre, hence obscuring the division between illusion and reality (Dollimore 1985, 8). Thus, in addition to the subversive nature of the theatrical institution, the location of the theatres was also a factor. In his compelling analysis of the Renaissance theatrical space, Mullaney (1988, 26–31) points out that after the year 1576 public theatres in Elizabethan England were usually located in the outskirts of the city, which as a marginal position allowed

more ideological and artistic freedom for the playwrights from the city officials.

All in all, the Elizabethan period was strongly characterised by political censorship. As Dollimore (1984, 24) points out, the stage and the theatre caused concern among the state officials since it functioned as an alternative to church; people were abandoning the "principal institution of social discipline and control [and] were frequenting instead an alternative which contradicted and challenged much of what it stood for" (ibid.). Moreover, dramatists in early modern England were imprisoned or harassed by the state for producing plays that were considered seditious (ibid.). On the other hand, Heinemann (1990, 165) argues that new Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre companies were primarily dependent on a paying audience which, in terms of sovereignty, allowed the company a good deal of independence. Indeed, dramas in London theatres in the 1580s and 1590s indicate a relative dramatic freedom compared to following decades as state control was tightened (ibid., 167). Therefore, the theatre did have autonomy to a certain degree, and it also empowered the audience in that they were able to pay for entrance to a play they were free to judge for themselves. However, it would be misleading to interpret Renaissance drama without acknowledging the existence of wide censorship in early modern England.

Indeed, according to Bryson (2007, 72–73), even though plays in Elizabethan England were tolerated, they were strictly regulated: The Master of Revels licensed all dramatic works and made sure that companies performed in a manner that he considered respectful and orderly. Similarly, Clare (1987, 169–170) points out that there was a strict policy regarding publication of a history with a topical nature and, in particular, in the 1590s the censorship of drama concerned especially the history play. *Edward II*, published most likely in 1594, would have therefore been performed during a turbulent decade in terms of censorship. In this respect, as Barker and Hinds (2008, 115) point out, *Edward II* is to be regarded as a radical

play that certainly would have been a cause of disturbance among the contemporary Elizabethan audience.

Considering the rather strict censorship of the time, how was it possible for Marlowe to get *Edward II* published and staged in the first place? White (2002, 79–80) argues that judging by the subversive nature of the play and the fact that the play escaped the censorship a certain amount of political discussion had to be tolerated by the state. Additionally, Knowles (2001, 106) has suggested that by using the form of tragedy Marlowe presents subversive ideas alongside with orthodox politics, which might explain why the subversive aspects in *Edward II* (e.g. the deposition of Edward) were not touched by the censor at the time. As Howard argues, "drama often accommodated ideologically incompatible elements within a single text [which] can be read as traces of ideological struggle" (1994, 7). It therefore seems that the ambiguity and complex nature of *Edward II* that has led modern critics to produce such a variety of contesting interpretations of the play also explains why *Edward II* was allowed to be acted out on stage in sixteenth-century England.

3.3 The History Play as a Vehicle for Social Commentary

Marlowe's *Edward II* was a crucial innovation in terms of the history play, a dramatic genre that is still very much alive today.[13] In Elizabethan England, however, the history play had a unique status, and instead of presenting the audience with an emotional account of events

[13] This particular genre has been current throughout the twenty-first century with the publication of films such as *The Queen* (2006) by Stephen Frears and, a more recent production, *The King's Speech* (2010) by Tom Hooper, which is remarkably similar to *Edward II* in several respects. For instance, both *The King's Speech* and *Edward II* present the story of somewhat reluctant and politically insecure monarchs whose private affairs are reflected upon their public figures as the sovereign, which affects their reign. Furthermore, they both represent the monarch in a sympathetic manner despite the obvious deficiencies in their political capacities, thus aiming to evoke the sense of empathy in the spectator regardless of his/her attitude towards the institution of monarchy. From a Cultural Materialist perspective, a study on the depiction of monarchy in *Edward II* compared to these two films, including a discussion of the ideological status of monarchy in present-day Britain, would constitute an intriguing topic.

long ago, the history play – as Bryson points out – was conversely perceived as a kind of "mirror reflecting present conditions" (2007, 127). Indeed, according to Ribner, the history play "used the past as documentation for political theory and for the light which it might throw upon contemporary political problems and thus serve as a guide for present political behavior" (1955, 243). The history play was therefore a dramatic vehicle embodying a political significance for contemporary dramatists; it provided them with a platform to comment on the current social and political issues without addressing them directly, but rather, through historical events.

Renaissance history plays, then, had a social and political function as they offered the spectators a "'demystification' of the mystery of the state" (Heinemann 1990, 177), that is, they revealed the ideology of political power to be something not derived from God but from the will of individuals and hence provided instructive and potentially subversive viewpoints on current affairs. Furthermore, history plays humanised kings and public figures and portrayed the contradiction between the mystical royal power and the individual (ibid., 178–179), that is, the gap between those who ruled and those who were ruled was diminished. This is apparent in *Edward II* in which the King of England is humanised and depicted as a mere fallible mortal.

Additionally, the audience shared an understanding of the role of the history play. As Heinemann points out, the English history play

> appealed to the audience's intense interest in history as such, but also to their anxieties, resentments, and grievances about current politics. Fusing the popular dramatic tradition with new humanist or 'politique' history and argument, it helped both to create a consensus of support for a powerful monarchy and, paradoxically, to undermine it.
>
> (1990, 177)

Therefore the history play had another specific quality since it empowered the audience; by

observing the play and paying for the entrance the audience gained the position of weighing and judging the action (ibid.), thus exercising power and forming their own opinions on what was presented on the stage. Hence, in an institution already considered potentially threatening and subversive, the history play had a culturally specific status, one that was recognised by the contemporary audience. Although it should be remembered that *Edward II* was among the first history plays performed and thus the collective understanding of the genre would not have been formed until some years later as more representatives of the genre started to appear, by the time the play was staged in the late 1500s and early 1600s the audience would have been able to recognise the distinct characteristics of the genre and interpret the plays accordingly. Moreover, Marlowe most likely had a clear objective with his groundbreaking dramatic work which goes to prove the playwright's will to renew the contemporary theatrical institution[14] as well as his fascination with portraying political matters in his plays.

In this regard *Edward II* is typical in terms of the history play genre since it provided the audience with several politically and socially controversial topics, all of which share a similar subversive nature and a potential threat to the state. Consequently, the contemporary audience could witness several matters to which they could relate, such as the anti-providential notion of political power, the portrayal of an incompetent ruler and, most importantly, the deposition of a sovereign allegedly appointed by God. All these concepts reinforced the audience's ability to comprehend and discuss current conflicts in their realm. As Barker and Hinds (2008, 114) point out, the theatre dealt with themes that were pertinent to its audiences, so a play such as *Edward II* would have reminded the spectators of topical and sensitive political issues. An example of a historical event made current in *Edward II* would be – as White (2004, 80) has observed – the Archbishop of Canterbury's threat of absolving the barons of allegiance to the

[14]Marlowe had already renewed the theatrical form in 1587 with the first part of *Tamburlaine the Great* that featured his effective use the blank verse, i.e. what Jonson called the playwright's 'mighty line'.

throne, an implication that the contemporary audience must have been able to associate with Elizabeth's own excommunication from the Catholic Church in 1570. Accordingly, these topical aspects and the potential subversion they implied are discussed in the following subsections.

4. "What are kings, when regiment is gone" – Rule, Order and Degree in *Edward II*

As was mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, the majority of previous literary criticism on Marlowe's plays has focused on the individual. This has especially been the case with *Edward II* which many critics considered primarily a play dealing with personal rather than public matters.[15] However, as Knowles (2001, 105) points out, it is particularly vexing that New Criticism regarded *Edward II* first and foremost as play that hardly deals with issues beyond the personal sphere whereas public matters such as rebellion and civil war, the relationship between the church and state, rulership and tyranny, and the problem of the royal favourite are rather clearly discussed in the play. Additionally, the audience would not have regarded the dramatization of Edward's reign merely as a chronicle history but, in addition, as a reflection of topical issues conflicting with Tudor orthodoxy (ibid.).

Indeed, it is difficult to ignore the quite explicitly portrayed political and social dimensions in the play. Weismann suggests that previous criticism on the play has perhaps found deficiencies in the play because of a need to find something that *Edward II* clearly does not offer:

> The scholars who argue that Marlowe lacks a coherent view of history are baffled because the picture that he consistently presents is not what they would like it to be: orthodox, optimistic, providential, moral, or didactic. In the cases of Tillyard and Sanders, their impressions of what a *Shakespeare* history play is or should be

[15] New Criticism on Marlowe often focused on the personal tragedy of Edward, and this view is still topical as Knowles (2001, 116) notes. However, although I also point out that, for instance, Edward's main motivator for his actions against the earls is the murder of his companion Gaveston, this does not entail a lack of political commitment or that public matters would not be discussed in the play. On the contrary, the personal is intertwined with the public in the play (which is examined in detail in section 5.), and Edward's infusion of the body politic with the personal has political consequences that dictate the action throughout the play. For instance, Gaveston represents the personal sphere in that he is Edward's companion, but his inclusion in Edward's leadership causes social and political transgression that invades the public space, that is, the body politic. Similarly, Marlowe's omission of a providentialist framework is in itself a political act; although it emphasises human agency, Marlowe simultaneously attacks the dominant ideology of his time by portraying the hypocrisy behind the providentialist faith that the Crown aspired to convey to its citizens.

> (including the above list of characteristics) so color their notions of the genre that they refuse to accept deviation.
>
> (1999, 24–25)

Therefore it seems that because critics had emphasised certain characteristics that were thought to be quintessential in Renaissance history plays, *Edward II* was deemed a failure since it does not fall in the category of an orthodox and providentialist drama.

Conversely, with *Edward II* Marlowe presents a heterodox view on religion, politics and societal matters which is illustrated especially in three areas: firstly, King Edward rules without any providential or ecclesiastic justification of power, but his reign is motivated by his own human agency. Secondly, the realm is presented as a chaotic ground for Machiavellian power struggle, free of providential order and harmonious cultural unity which contradicts the ideology behind Holinshed's *Chronicles*, *Mirror for Magistrates* and other contemporary texts adhering to the political absolutism of the Tudor ideology. Lastly, by means of theatricality and visual recourse, Marlowe omits and distorts social and royal hierarchy and the spectacle of ceremony, thus providing subversive commentary on order in early modern England.

4.1. Challenging the Legitimacy of Sovereignty: Edward's Irreligious Rule

> Many will talk of title to a crown:
> What right had Caesar to the empery?
> Might first made kings...
>
> (*The Jew of Malta*, Prologue, 18–20)

This quotation from the prologue of *The Jew of Malta* – in which a character titled Machevil counts religion “but a childish toy” (*The Jew of Malta*, Prologue, 14) – goes to show that *Edward II* is not Marlowe's only play to question not only the tenets of religion, but also any celestial justifications of the power of a sovereign. Indeed, Marlowe is well-known for

depicting scenes that demystify divinely-sanctioned leadership and emphasise human agency in the world of political conflict. Indeed, as Cunningham (2002, 142) has noted, Marlowe's main dramatic works are abundant in references to either usurpation or the precarious status of the sovereign. For instance, when offering Cosroe Mycete's crown Tamburlaine instructs him in terminology that could be considered highly contentious by the Elizabethan Crown:

> Hold thee, Cosroe! wear two imperial crowns;
> Think thee invested now as royally,
> Even by the mighty hand of Tamburlaine,
> As if as many kings as could encompass thee
> With greatest pomp, had crowned thee emperor.
> (*Tamburlaine the Great, Part I*, II.v.1–5)

Similarly, the blasphemous Faustus wishes to elevate himself superior to sovereigns who, unlike Faustus, possess no divine capabilities:

> All things that move between the quiet poles
> Shall be at my command: emperors and kings
> Are but obey'd in their several provinces,
> Nor can they raise the wind, or rend the clouds;
> (*The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, I.i.55–58)

Indeed, as Hattaway (1996, 201) points out, all Marlowe's political plays are outright secular; there is no divine retribution, but their themes revolve around "gaining, maintaining, and losing power" (ibid.).

However, *Edward II* differs from these plays in that it portrays the actual historical events pertaining to the legitimacy of the power of the sovereign, which made the play highly topical considering the political atmosphere of the 1590s. Indeed, as the central theme of *Edward II* revolves around the legitimacy of kingship and rule, Marlowe problematizes these concepts by the omission of special providence that ascertained the divine power of the monarch. For instance, what are we to make of the deposition of King Edward who, according to the providentialist doctrine of the Elizabethan orthodoxy, was nevertheless a divinely-sanctioned

ruler?

Whereas Shakespeare's *Richard II,* a contemporary play (published c. 1597) which analogously deals with the deposition and murder of a sovereign, is abundant in references to the divine justification of the power of the monarch, *Edward II* omits practically all discussion related to this ideology. Indeed, with *Richard II* we have numerous instances in which Richard's position as the monarch is portrayed as divine and appointed by God. For example, the ideology of providentialism is often brought up by the character John de Gaunt who refuses to take action against the king who, in his view, is "God's substitute / His deputy anointed in His sight" (*Richard II,* I.ii.37–38). Furthermore, Shakespeare portrays King Richard himself as a character strongly convinced of his celestial status; he is certain that "The breath of worldly men cannot depose / The deputy elected by the Lord;" (*Richard II,* III.ii.56–57).

Compared to *Edward II,* the difference in the justification of the power of the sovereign is salient; even though King Edward does appeal for the legitimacy of his power, his reasoning is personally and politically motivated, lacking any religious justifications. For instance, after hearing about the death of his beloved Gaveston, Edward curses his opponents in a vividly blood-thirsty manner:

> Treacherous Warwick, traitorous Mortimer!
> 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,
> That so my bloody colours may suggest
> Remembrance of revenge immortally
> On your accursed traitorous progeny,
> You villains that have slain my Gaveston.
>
> (*Edward II,* III.ii.134–142)

Revenge is the only thing that matters to Edward; avenging the death of his companion does

not require a providentialist motive, but a personal vendetta will suffice. This attitude of Edward's continues throughout the play and, as Ribner (1955, 249) has observed, at no point is there any reference to the divine rights of kings in the play.

Conversely, Edward's references to his power and his disgust towards the traitorous earls seem to be motivated by Gaveston's death, not by any offences to his providential status as the sovereign appointed by God. For instance, as he holds the barons as captives, Edward wishes to lay his personal vengeance upon them: “traitors, 'tis time / To be avenged on you for all your braves, / And for the murther of my dearest friend” (*Edward II*, III.iii.40–42). Similarly, when Spencer Junior suggests that the tragic situation of Edward could be seen in the anger of the heavens, Edward's reply is simple: “The gentle heavens have not to do in this” (*Edward II*, IV.vi.75). His actions are not guided by an external ideological framework, but they originate solely from his own personal motivations. As Brooke puts it, “there is a sense of kingship, as power, but not as divine right; no sanction is provided for Edward's authority beyond the personal ability to exercise it” (1966, 102).

Indeed, Edward wishes to rule without subjecting himself to any hierarchies, including a religious order. The attitude towards such an order becomes evident already at the beginning of the play where furious King Edward sends the Bishop of Coventry to the Tower (*Edward II*, I.i.174–206). This hostile attitude towards the Catholic church – echoing the general political atmosphere of Elizabethan England[16] – continues in the contemplation of divine authority by King Edward, portrayed in a forthright manner, more than typical of Marlowe: “Why should a king be subject to a priest?” (*Edward II*, I.iv.96). This straightforward attack on religious hierarchy – which White calls an “implicit condemnation of the intervention of

[16] Following the Act of Uniformity in 1559, Protestant faith was restored in England. As a consequence, clergy were ordered “to observe the royal supremacy and preach against superstition and papal usurpation; images, relics and miracles were attacked” (Guy 1988, 291). Edward's reference to papal authority would have reminded the audience of the excommunication of Elizabeth in 1570 (Knowles 2001, 106).

ecclesiastical authorities in secular rule" (2004, 80) – emphasises Edward's inclination to rule independently of religious ideology. Edward's reign is not based on hierarchies, but on the access of favourites to his counsel which undermines the traditional notions about the manner in which a king should rule his realm.[17]

This omission of providential framework is indeed exceptional in terms of Elizabethan drama. For Thurn (1991, 127) the fact that Marlowe omits all references to the divine rights of kings emphasises the arbitrary nature of political power. This view is shared by Summers who argues that *Edward II* "fails to promulgate a political lesson compatible with Tudor orthodoxy" (1988, 222), meaning that the play refuses to represent a providential view of history. Indeed, there is no representation of any kind of a 'cosmic order' that would be presented to dictate the actions of the characters or legitimise the power of the king. Although there are certain references to Christian notions, McElroy (1984, 207) points out that they only seem to be contributing to the dramatic function of the play.[18] Thus kingship is demystified and diminished to a construct that is subordinated by the very people who were supposed to remain subjected to their sovereign.

Indeed, the King is repeatedly subjected to the will of his underlings and thus his authority is blatantly undermined. For example, in his lengthy soliloquy in captivity Edward states this subordination of his: "My nobles rule, I bear the name of king; / I wear the crown but am controlled by them" (*Edward II*, V.i.28–29). Additionally, earlier in the play Edward is commanded by Leicester to "go to Killingworth" (*Edward II*, IV.vi.81), to which the vexed

[17] I will discuss the notion of hierarchy and rule in further detail in subsection 4.3.

[18] McElroy (1984, 207) argues that there is nothing in the play to suggest that it endorses any form of Christian faith. This is also my stance, and it is this lack of religious framework that makes the play also politically viable; by excluding one of the central concepts of Elizabethan rule (the notion of providentialist order of the cosmos), Marlowe exposes the hypocrisy behind this orthodox ideology since the responsibility of actions in the play lie solely on human agency. The Elizabethan orthodoxy aspired to claim that disobedience towards the appointed sovereign was disobedience against God. However, this divine justification is omitted in *Edward II*, which again illustrates the political engagement that the play represents.

sovereign replies, “Must! 'tis somewhat hard, when kings must go” (*Edward II*, IV.vi.82). Later Edward understands that his authority no longer carries any weight among his subjects: “What, fear you not the fury of your king?” (*Edward II*, V.i.75). Hence, the play presents its audience with a situation in which the King is not located as the head of a natural or providential hierarchy, but he is subjected and treated as a pawn in the world of political conflict. The play thus invites the Elizabethan audience to imagine the subjection of a sovereign, as well as his deposition and demise. Kastan (1999, 163) points out that although entertaining such ideas were not considered treasonous in the playhouse (provided that they did not convey a specific political intent), the censorship at the time demonstrates the potential subversive force of the theatre and the fear of spreading of such revolutionary ideas among the general public. Portraying this kind of an ideological notion (i.e. the subjection of a sovereign) would have therefore carried the potential of subversion.

Marlowe indeed had a clear objective; instead of presenting a divinely-sanctioned monarchy and a world structured by order, with *Edward II* he seeks to demystify the power of the sovereign and historical events that are continually subjected to conflict and political turbulence. As Cartelli puts it, *Edward II* “presents a decidedly direct and demystified portrayal of power politics at work, showing political positions to be little more than transparent extensions of the personal desires and ambitions that motivate them” (2004, 158). This was topical at the time since, as Dollimore (1984, 14) points out, during the time of Elizabeth religion was increasingly being regarded as a tool for legitimising power and subjection. By stripping *Edward II* of religious framework Marlowe illustrates that it is indeed 'might' that makes kings, not divine right.

Additionally, pertaining to the idea of the subjection of a sovereign, one the most radical elements in *Edward II* is the deposition of King Edward. Indeed, the deposition remains as

one of the most politically contentious events ever staged in Elizabethan theatre. If the sovereign was to be regarded as God's regent on earth (as promulgated by the Elizabethan state), what ramifications did a deposition of a monarch potentially cause? Thurn (1991, 116) suggests that the deposition of kings in history plays in Renaissance England posed a serious threat to the legitimacy of royal rule, as well as to the rightful successors to the throne. Unlike the deposition scene in *Richard II*, the deposition of Edward in *Edward II* was not subjected to censorship, which has led some critics to argue against any possible ideological or political subversion (cf. Clare 2000, 75). However, the fact that it nevertheless was staged in front of a contemporary audience might have contributed to the demystification of divine rule.

The first act, then, presents the earls contemplating the deposition of Edward. It is then when the furious Mortimer Junior declares: “Curse him if he refuse, and then may we / Depose him and elect another king” (*Edward II*, I.iv.54–55). However, 'to elect' another king would have been an impossible concept in terms of the Elizabethan orthodoxy since, as Knowles (2001, 107) points out, the idea of revolting against the king and electing another one would have constituted an oxymoron within the providentialist framework. Thus Mortimer Junior tries to circumvent this notion by devising a plot to depose Edward with his peers and the bishop of Canterbury; he tries to ensure that by constructing a theory the deposition would be legitimate. “Then”, says Mortimer, “may we lawfully revolt from him” (*Edward II*, I.ii.73). However, only shortly afterwards he contradicts himself and acknowledges that what they are about to do counts as treason, no matter how they seek to justify it: “For howsoever we have borne it out, / 'Tis treason to be up against the king, / So shall we have the people of our side” (*Edward II*, I.iv.280–282). Thurn (1990, 125) has noted that the earls aspire to set up artificial accusations to preserve the illusion of order even though the king is about to be deposed. Hence, Marlowe seeks to portray a highly arbitrary

picture of kingship, one that can be conveniently dismantled by devising a pact that serves one's own needs.

Indeed, to present such a questioning of the sovereign's power on the Elizabethan stage would have been considered highly contentious. *Edward II* differs radically from the contemporary texts that the Crown used in order to promulgate its own providential ideology to its citizens. For instance, "An Homelie against Disobedience and Wylfull Rebellion" from 1570 directly offers a warning to subjects against any rebellion, even in the case that the king is a tyrant:

> kinges and princes, aswell the evill as the good, do raigne by Gods ordinaunce, and that subjectes are bounden to obey them [...] Whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinaunce of God; and they that resist shall receave to them selves damnation.
>
> (1987, 210–211)

However, this ideology promulgated by the Crown is drastically different from *Edward II* in which the idea of the deposition of a king is explicitly entertained. King Edward's compelling soliloquy emphasises the fact that the sovereign can indeed be deposed, even 'without cause':

> Ah, Leicester, weigh how hardly I can brook
> To lose my crown and kingdom without cause,
> To give ambitious Mortimer my right,
> That like a mountain overwhelms my bliss,
> In which extreme my mind here murthered is.
> But what the heavens appoint I must obey;
>
> (*Edward II*, V.i.51–56)

In this lamentation for his deprived crown, Edward does indeed make a reference to heaven. However, this is problematic in that a divinely-sanctioned ruler could not be deposed and stating that 'the heavens' have appointed another sovereign would have constituted an oxymoron in terms of the Tudor orthodoxy. In his discussion of *Richard II*, Pye has noted that "only the king may unking himself. And that is an impossible act" (1999, 155). Indeed, as Knowles (2001, 107) points out, this calls into question the hereditary right to the throne and

thus the entire institution of succession.

These discrepancies in the providential belief continue throughout the play. For instance, Brown (2002, 165) has observed that when providence pertaining to the legitimacy of the sovereign is briefly brought up in the play, it is portrayed as a construct that is questioned and challenged rather than presented as some absolute truth. For instance, before the battle between the troops of King Edward and Mortimer Junior, the patron saint of England is placed on the treacherous side of Mortimer: "Saint George for England / And the baron's right!" (*Edward II*, III.iii.33–34). Only seconds later King Edward makes a similar kind of divine appeal for his own legitimacy: "Saint George for England and King Edward's right!" (*Edward II*, III.iii.35). The irony here is obvious: this type of ideology is appropriate for legitimising warfare but, as in this case, the opposing sides are so blatantly and transparently contrasted that the spectators must have been able to see through these appropriations of divine justifications. Hence the play presents a situation in which both sides claim their right to the throne by referring to their divine entitlement, which only emphasises the transparent and arbitrary nature of these prerogatives to divinity.

Finally, one of the most notable characteristics of *Edward II* – compared to Marlowe's other main plays – is the subdued and somewhat abrupt soliloquy at the end in which Edward III finally claims the throne. Young Edward, addressing the severed head of Mortimer, is not concerned with a divine retribution or a sanctified right to the throne, but is – similarly to his father – motivated by personal grief and political motives:

> Go fetch my father's hearse where it shall lie
> And bring my funeral robes. Accursed head,
> Could I have ruled thee then as I do now
> Thou hadst not hatched this monstrous treachery.
> Here comes the hearse, help me to mourn, my lords.
> Sweet father, here unto thy murdered ghost
> I offer up the wicked traitor's head

> And let these tears distilling from mine eyes
> Be witness of my grief and innocency.
>
> (*Edward II*, V.v.94–102)

The soliloquy, deemed flawed by some critics,[19] is rather exceptional in terms of Renaissance drama. For example, as Brooke (1966, 103) points out, even though the play does end with a closing soliloquy and with Edward III assuming power, there is no reference to God, a most unusual characteristic for an Elizabethan drama. On the basis of this, it could be argued that what Marlowe represents is blasphemous since here the judgement rests solely on the human subject, not on divine script. For instance, compared to the ending of *The Jew of Malta*, in which Barabas is subdued in the burning pit, *Edward II* does not include the kind of celestial justification made on the death of Barabas: "So, march away, and let due praise be given / Neither to Fate nor Fortune, but to Heaven" (*The Jew of Malta*, V.v.122–123). Additionally, this is emphasised also in the line "the Heavens are just" (*The Jew of Malta,* V.I.53), an allusion that *Edward II* similarly lacks.

As was noted earlier, whereas some critics regard the ending as a restoration of traditional order, others bring forward problems related to such interpretation of the ending. It is true that Edward III restores some political balance in the realm by finally claiming the throne as the successor of his father, but the omission of the king's divine rights to the throne emphasises the fact that young Edward's motivations derive from personal will, not from some external and organic hierarchy that ought to be obeyed. Accordingly, Lunney (2008, 39–40) points out that the omission of heaven should be regarded as legitimacy and order taking over usurpation and disorder, thus the death of Edward must be reinterpreted as the result of treachery rather

[19] For instance, Steane (1964, 206–207) considers Edward III's soliloquy far inferior to the speeches in *The Jew of Malta* and *Doctor Faustus.* Maintaining a similar view but still considering the play as an artistic success, Waith (1964, 59) regards the entire dialogue of *Edward II* as lacking in comparison to Marlowe's other main plays. However, in my view, the entire dialogue and especially the final soliloquy in *Edward II* parallel the general atmosphere of the play; the dialogue is deprived of any characteristics of grandeur and, instead, is marked by a sense of austerity.

than providential justice.

Similarly, Heinemann (1990, 184) points out that Marlowe seeks to show that the deposition of Edward was not justified, but an inevitable result of Edward's actions. Therefore, the baron's rebellion does not have any divine characteristic but, rather, it is motivated by human agency. Indeed, it seems that Edward III is solely concerned with personal grievances with Mortimer and the Queen and grieves for his "loving father" (*Edward II*, V.vi.41). In fact, throughout the play, the young Prince Edward never appeals to heaven when talking about his father's right to the throne but is more concerned with personal motives. Hence young Edward resembles his father in that his main motivator in his actions is the tragedy bestowed upon his loved one, not breaches to a providential order. Therefore, Marlowe is undermining what the Tudor reign sought to highlight; that politics do not lean on a pre-determined, celestial order, but on precarious power relations between individuals occupying political positions.

All in all, it can be stated that with *Edward II* Marlowe offered the Elizabethan audience a play that takes on a critical approach to the divine legitimacy of the sovereign. As Lunney (2008, 38–39) points out, we cannot with certainty assert whether the individual Elizabethan play-goer actually believed in a providential order of things. However, it is known that all subjects were forced to attend church on the penalty of a fine but, on the other hand, a vast amount of people remained absent from church and took part in other activities instead (Guy 1988, 295 – 296), thus possibly communicating an attitude of indifference or disbelief in the concept of providentialism. Furthermore, Gonzáles Fernández de Sevilla (1990, 90) suggests that the Elizabethan World Picture became increasingly distorted because of the discrepancy between the ideal concept of providentialism and the actual practice which led people to become politically aware and oppose the concept.

This is exactly what the contemporary Elizabethan audience were confronted with in *Edward II*; even though the characters make occasional references to providentialism, it is only to justify their own actions which emphasises the whimsical basis for political power. Still, for the most part, providentialism is completely omitted and sovereignty is but a transient concept that is the result of human actions alone. Indeed, as Ribner puts it, "Marlowe sees the events of history not as the working out in human affairs of a divine providence, but rather as the products of human strength and will which shape worldly events independently of any supernatural power" (1955, 246). This, as I have noted, is not to argue that *Edward II* is to be regarded as a play in which public issues hardly arise. On the contrary, Marlowe's decision to omit providentialist belief in the play emphasises the political nature of *Edward II*; by portraying the notion of divine kingship as an artificial construct Marlowe undermines the doctrine that the Elizabethan Crown sought to portray as an essentialist truth.

4.2. Ideologies at War: The Illusion of Political Unity

> EDWARD
> Why do we sound retreat? upon them, lords;
> This day I shall pour vengeance with my sword
> On those proud rebels that are up in arms,
> And do confront and countermand their king.
> SPENCER JUNIOR
> I doubt it not, my lord, right will prevail.
> (*Edward II*, III.iii.1–5)

Georgia E. Brown (2002, 164) has insightfully argued that the aforementioned scene in *Edward II* functions as an example of how Spencer Junior interprets his conception of the legitimacy of rule solely on the basis of his own political and personal values. In the scene, the confident Spencer Junior assures King Edward on the eve of battle that they shall be victorious for the reason that they quite simply represent the 'right' side of the rule. However,

as Brown (ibid.) points out, to judge what is ‘right’ in *Edward II* is a difficult task since the play depicts conflicting interests to rightful rule, that is, ideologies that are legitimated only by the characters' personal senses of validity. To illustrate this incongruity between the characters' moral stances, Mortimer Junior makes a similar appeal to moral righteousness in the following act, in which he confidently assures the Queen that “right makes room / Where weapons want” (*Edward II*, IV.ii.50–51), hence echoing the claim made by Spencer Junior on the opposite side.

This statement by Mortimer aptly depicts the world of *Edward II* that is completely unconstrained by providentialist hierarchy or order and inhabited by characters who adhere to a Machiavellian policy. Indeed, it is a world of solipsism and self-aggrandizement in which one “must be proud, bold, pleasant, resolute, / And now and then stab, as occasion serves” (*Edward II*, II.i.42–43). Thus, Marlowe undermines the unity of the realm and national stability by introducing characters whose loyalty to any ideological cause seems secondary to their will to political scheming. Accordingly, Tillyard noted that with *Edward II* “Marlowe shows no sense of national responsibility” (1966, 115), which is indeed true and certainly not a disadvantage; not only does the play portray the institution of kingship as a precarious, factitious construct (as was observed in the previous subsection), but the play also challenges notions about the unity of the realm; Marlowe creates his own interpretation of historical events which gives voice to contrasting views on history and depicts the precarious state of England instead of adhering to the ideology of Tudor orthodoxy.

As I have noted earlier in this thesis, the majority of mid-twentieth-century literary criticism aspired to portray *Edward II* in terms of the dominant Elizabethan orthodoxy. For instance, Christopher Morris argued that the political line of thinking in *Edward II* is “almost ostentatiously correct” (1953, 96). This 'correctness' of politics refers to a state of things that

transcends time and aligns itself with the Tudor political orthodoxy of natural order and harmony of the state achieved through the obedience towards the monarch. However, as I have pointed out, the case with Elizabethan society and culture was not quite this straightforward. Furthermore, this orthodoxy is not applicable to the tumultuous circumstances of the feudal society in the Middle Ages either. As Holderness (1992, 53) suggests, the Middle Ages was not a period that was dominated by order and the undisputed sovereignty of the monarch but, rather, it was a time of turbulence during which conflicts between the Crown and the feudal barons were continuous. Thus, the precarious political circumstances in *Edward II* shared certain similarities to Marlowe's contemporary Elizabethan society. As Knowles (2001, 106) points out, the politics of the early fourteenth century coincide with contemporary politics of the late 1580s.[20]

Therefore, there were similarities between the political circumstances of the Middle Ages and early modern England. Indeed, as Cunningham (2002, 134–135) points out, during the Tudor era a remarkable amount of legislation was concerned with treason, especially the fear over succession and the legitimacy of the power of the sovereign. Analogously, Shepard (2002, 2) suggests that the 1580s and the 1590s were precarious times since the security of the state was constantly under public discussion and the Crown had tightened its legislation accordingly. Indeed, whereas traditional New Historicist criticism has depicted power moving

[20] According to the Tudor myth, the era under the Tudors was as a time of balance and harmony after the ‘dark’ Middle Ages. However, the danger and fear of political instability did exist during the Tudor period, as substantiated for instance by the strict censorship of contemporary plays. Indeed, as White (2004, 79) points out, plots aimed at overthrowing Elizabeth were not uncommon and circulated among the Puritans and the Catholics. Thus, ideas pertaining to the deposition of a monarch were common although labeled treasonous by the Crown, even at the level of thought (Cunningham 2002, 134).

Pertaining to this instability, Knowles (2001, 106) brings forth one of the common political thoughts known as the resistance theory which originated in the late Middle Ages. It was a form of political thought that focused on the idea that subjects had the right to object to a sovereign. This theory was not unfamiliar during the times of Elizabeth and, for instance, the reasoning by Mortimer Junior on the deposition of Edward has its roots in this particular theory: ”Curse him if he refuse, and then may we / Depose him and elect another king” (*Edward II*, I.iv.54–55).

from and returning to the king, in reality the early modern state was dependent on military force and the risk that the sovereign was unable to control the military force was apparent (Sinfield 1992, 40). Therefore, portraying these ideas explicitly on the Renaissance stage was considered potentially threatening as the on-going censorship indicates. The importance of the military apparatus for the King is best pointed out in the probably most famous line from *Edward II* in which King Edward states the futility of the sovereign without the existence of military force that will recognise his/her power: "But what are kings when regiment is gone / But perfect shadows in a sunshine day?" (*Edward II*, V.i.26–27).

The theme of uncertainty related to the precarious relationship between different political forces (namely between the barons and the sovereign) lies at the heart of the play as both sides constantly appeal to shared cultural values, that is, positions such as 'country' that both parties take for granted as being their own. For instance, Brown (2002, 164–185) has observed how Marlowe with *Edward II* purposely deviates from the Holinshed's *Chronicles* which, in accordance with the Tudor myth and its nationalist ideology, strove to glorify English history and culture by portraying the realm in impeccably orthodox terms. Similarly, Heinemann (1990, 179) has also observed that the kind of providential pattern or divine hierarchy deemed as the collective mind of the people by Tillyard is evident in the older chronicle sources than in a drama like *Edward II.* Indeed, Marlowe resists these ideological implications of a monolithic conception of Englishness by distorting the unity of the state and national identity; in *Edward II* we are presented with a reality that is chaotic.

For example, the word *unnatural* that occurs several times in the play as both sides aspire to label each other in terms that represent a deviation from the norm, that is, from their own ideological stance. For instance, Edward calls the Queen "that unnatural queen, false Isabel" (*Edward II*, V.i.17) and as for the rebellious barons, they are, according to Edward, "inhuman

creatures" as well as "monsters" (*Edward II*, V.i.71, 74). Edward is thus undermining their humanity and their difference from the 'self-evident' state of affairs and the 'good' of the realm that he perceives he represents. However, both sides seem to have an understanding of *unnatural*, which is conveniently used to suit their own purposes. For instance, Queen Isabella speaks of "Unnatural war where subjects brave their king" (*Edward II*, III.ii.86) and the earl of Kent talks of an "unnatural king" (*Edward II*, IV.i.8) or, later on, pleads with God to "punish this unnatural revolt" (*Edward II*, IV.v.18).

However, there is nothing *natural* (as in essentialist) in the world of *Edward II*; instead there are individuals motivated by their own ambitions which relates to their conception of the 'good' of the country. Sinfield and Dollimore (2002, 204–205) argue that instead of seeing history and the human subject occupying universal notions they should be conversely regarded in terms of social and political process. Accordingly, the right to the throne in *Edward II* is not presented as an immutable or unalterable notion, but human opposition is explicitly portrayed without a transcendental understanding of history. Similarly to the representation of providentialist belief in the legitimacy of the power of the sovereign, allegiance to a cause is represented as a debatable construct which changes according to one's point of view. Furthermore, it is also noteworthy that the word *natural* occurs only once in the entire play, and hence everything seems to be labelled as something that it should not be. The fact that both parties seek to depict themselves as the self-evident representative of justice and brand the other as *unnatural* only emphasises the arbitrariness of the ideologies at work in the play.

Similarly, both parties continually appeal to shared values and speak of *country* in relation to ownership. Cunningham (2002, 143–144) points out that all of Marlowe's dramatic works include characters appealing to their country's 'good'. This is especially the case with *Edward*

II in which the characters – depending on which side they are on – continually refer to their right to defend the realm in a manner they deem 'correct'. For instance, Warwick speaks twice of his "country's cause" (*Edward II*, II.v.22 and III.i.11), in both instances referring to the execution of what he regards as a potential disruptor of his country's peace, Gaveston. Similarly, Mortimer Junior talks about banishing Gaveston as doing "our country good" (*Edward II*, I.iv.257) and later, he sees the rebellion against Edward as serving "our country's cause" (*Edward II*, IV.iv.19). Furthermore, furious about Edward's decision to banish him from the court, Kent regards an allegiance with Mortimer as a service to his "country's cause" (*Edward II*, IV.i.3). Finally, Isabella, the 'unnatural' queen in the eyes of Edward, is convinced of her stance in the matter: "Care of my country called me to this war" (*Edward II*, IV.v.74).

Therefore the play portrays a realm that consists of a complex network of contrasting ideologies in which the characters aspire to position themselves on the legitimate side of the rule, however arbitrary that may be. Cunningham (2002, 143) points out that similar rhetoric was employed in the Babington trials[21] in which those accused of rebellion saw that their actions were for the good of the country. Indeed, by appealing to 'shared cultural positions', both the followers of Mortimer and the allies of Edward consider it their right to act in accordance to their homeland and their sense of legitimacy. For Mortimer, Edward represents a tyrant whose incompetence and disregard for the realm constitute a reason for deposition. As for Edward, on the other hand, Mortimer and the earls are rebellious conspirators whose actions put England in jeopardy and challenge the 'self-evident' position of the sovereign.

Indeed, as Brown has put it, *Edward II* is "a fragmentary text that dissipates the assessment of history among a number of conflicting perspectives thereby undermining any single

[21] In 1586 (c. six years prior to the publication of *Edward II*), thirteen conspirators led by Anthony Babington were arrested for devising a plot with the Spanish to invade England, enthrone Mary Queen of Scots and assassinate Elizabeth I (Cunningham 2002, 135). Subsequently, Mary Queen of Scots was arrested for being implicated in the assassination (Guy 1988, 334).

teleological narrative" (2002, 184). Thus Marlowe presents culture as a site of conflict and tensions which emphasises the subjectivity of history. These arguments recall Thompson's (1978, 239) view on culture as a heterodox phenomenon abundant in contradictions. This is what *Edward II* clearly stands for and by giving voice to contrasting ideas concerning the realm and England the playwright presented to the Elizabethan audience a heterodox view on contemporary politics. Montrose reminds us that the drama in Elizabethan playhouses was always capable of creating a multiplicity of perspectives and, "within the context of an absolutist ideology, such multiplicity signified an inherent capacity to produce heterodoxy" (1996, 85).

Indeed, *Edward II* portrays no divine retribution but, rather, the play and its characters are guided by 'policy' that does not follow any moral or divine guidelines. In fact, even though the earls (Mortimer Junior in particular) seem to be genuinely concerned about the fate of their homeland, their hatred towards Edward and especially Gaveston appears to be triggered by personal insults to their pride. Indeed, especially for Mortimer Junior, England is secondary in comparison with his insulted ego:

> While others walk below, the king and he
> From out a window laugh at such as we
> And flout our train and jest at our attire.
> Uncle, 'tis this that makes me impatient.
>
> (*Edward II*, I.iv.415–418)

Hence in *Edward II* political decisions are ultimately made on the basis of self-interest, not for the good of one's own country. As McElroy puts it, Marlowe presents "a world deprived of transcendental significance, bereft of universally valid moral guidelines, and lashed by the winds of anarchic individualism" (1984, 208).

This ideology is explicitly demonstrated by a number of characters who, although they first claim loyalty to one side, eventually align themselves with the opponent. For instance, Queen

Isabella – who was shown earlier to appeal movingly for the good of her country – has an interesting role in *Edward II* in terms of allegiance and treason. As Cunningham (2002, 143) points out, the Queen first flees to France where she does not receive the welcome she had wanted: “Ah boy, our friends do fail us all in France; / The lords are cruel and the king unkind” (*Edward II*, IV.ii.1–2). Afterwards she travels to Flanders where she gathers an army and then talks about England in patriotic terms: “Now lords, our loving friends and countrymen, / Welcome to England all with prosperous winds” (*Edward II*, IV.iv.1–2). Hence Isabella, who moments before was ready to leave England behind her, now employs patriotic and emotional rhetoric to convince her “countrymen” that their rebellion is justified.

Furthermore, the capriciousness that the characters portray in their beliefs in the legitimacy of royal power is best exposed in the character of Edmund (the earl of Kent and Edward's brother) who remains undecided about the ‘right’ side of the rule throughout the play. Although having his doubts about the titles given to Gaveston: “Brother, the least of these may well suffice / For one of greater birth than Gaveston” (*Edward II*, I.i.157–158), Kent appears to be adamant about defending his brother against the defiant earls at the beginning of the play: “Yet dare you brave the King unto his face; / Brother revenge it, and let these their heads / Preach upon poles for trespass of their tongues” (*Edward II*, I.i.115–117). Yet he later abandons Edward and proceeds to make a compelling speech for the earls about the love he feels for his homeland:

> My lords, of love to this our native land,
> I come to join with you and leave the king,
> And in your quarrel and the realm's behoof
> Will be the first that shall adventure life.
>
> (*Edward II*, II.iii.1–4)

After a change of heart, he makes an appeal for Edward in prison: “Oh miserable is that commonweal where lords / Keep courts, and kings are locked in prison!” (*Edward II*, V.iii.63–

64). Kent's lack of loyalty and his inability to choose a side that would favour his homeland ultimately results in his own execution by the fierce Mortimer: “Strike off his head! He shall have martial law” (*Edward II*, V.iv.88).

Interestingly, Marlowe also depicts Kent as the only character in the play who directly appeals to God for vengeance for a rebellion against a divinely-sanctioned sovereign. As was pointed out earlier, Kent deems the rebellion initially *unnatural*: “Rain showers of vengeance on my cursed head, / Thou God, to whom in justice in belongs / To punish this unnatural revolt” (*Edward II*, IV.v.16–18). To illustrate the hypocrisy of divine rule and providentialist views, Marlowe ironically shows Kent to deem Edward an “Unnatural king” (*Edward II*, IV.i.8) only moments before. Therefore, similarly to other characters, Kent tries to justify his allegiance by referring to a natural state of affairs, which only results in an arbitrary notion about what is ‘good’ for the realm. However, Kent is depicted as the only true character with a providential belief and yet he is simultaneously the character of least faith in the cause he represents. He epitomises the whimsical basis for divine rule and hence represents a contrast not only to the providentialist ideology of the Tudor state but also to the Crown's effort to portray the realm as a culturally and socially harmonious unity.

What Marlowe portrays, then, is a multivocal description of the realm, one that does not align itself with the Elizabethan orthodoxy; the characters of *Edward II* share dissimilar political notions by appealing to similar and shared cultural positions. As Hattaway puts it, “[l]iterary texts...provide evidence not necessarily of the realities of the period nor of the opinions of their authors but rather of the imaginative and ideological constructions, the *mentalités* of a period” (1990, 95). This is what Marlowe achieves with *Edward II*; he reveals the ideological heterodoxy of the time and undermines political hegemony. Edward, Mortimer Junior and Queen Isabella undermine any sense of wholeness regarding the realm but, instead,

they are engaged in a war of ideologies in which any sense of unity must fail.

4.3. Subversion of Social Hierarchy and Royal Ceremony

New Historicist criticism often deals with the relationship between the visibility of power and its appropriations. Indeed, New Historicist critics regard the Renaissance stage as a platform on which topical events could be acted out, thus forming a space where power relations and matters of the state were openly discussed (Brannigan 1998, 6–7). Hence the stage had a distinct place in early modern England since politics and society had a specific theatrical dimension. As Greenblatt puts it, “Elizabethan power...depends upon its privileged visibility” (1992, 108). Indeed, displaying a magnificent royal spectacle and ceremony was essential for the sovereign for it bolstered the ruler's hegemony in the eyes of the subjects (Heinemann 1990, 178). Consequently, this theatricalism was crucial for Elizabeth who aspired to represent herself as a figure of wisdom and power through means of display, ceremony, and decorum which were considered “the whole theatrical apparatus of royal power” (Greenblatt 1980, 167).

Additionally, this visual nature of Renaissance power was closely linked with hierarchy, especially in court. Decorum was intertwined with order and functioned as a constant visible reminder of one's position in society. Indeed, Elizabethan England was a deeply hierarchical society, and the traditional hierarchy of birth formed the basis of the entire English state (Voss 1982, 520). As Dollimore argues, ”social stability depended crucially on people staying just as they were...where they were...and doing what they always had done” (1991, 291). Therefore, this notion of a static structure of society emphasised one's position in a certain natural, God-given hierarchy. However, as Dollimore (1984, 6) has pointed out elsewhere, Renaissance

drama often displayed a certain rejection of any such order – whether that related to cosmic or social notions or notions about the human subject – and portrayed it as an ideological misrepresentation. This is certainly the case with *Edward II* which distorts both societal and royal hierarchy as well as undermines the royal spectacle and thus demystifies the theatrical dimension of Renaissance politics.

The potential threat to social hierarchy is made evident in the very first soliloquy, in which Gaveston rather flagrantly declares that he – although not a man of title – shall submit only to the King, thus circumventing the traditional societal hierarchy: "Farewell to base stooping to the lordly peers; / My knee shall bow to none but to the king" (*Edward II*, I.i.18–19). However, later on Gaveston states that even the King himself shall not subordinate him: "I must have wanton poets, pleasant wits, / Musicians, that with touching of a string / May draw the pliant king which way I please" (*Edward II*, I.i.50–52). This attitude this shared by King Edward who considers Gaveston his equal:

> What Gaveston! welcome! kiss not my hand;
> Embrace me Gaveston as I do thee;
> Why shouldst thou kneel; Knowst thou not who I am?
> Thy friend, thy self, another Gaveston;
>
> (*Edward II*, I.i.139–142)

Hence, despite his low status, Gaveston is an equal peer for King Edward who regards himself as merely "another Gaveston". This could be regarded as rather disturbing comparison, considering the privileged and idealistic status of the sovereign. Shortly after, continuing the theme of reducing the concept of royal hierarchy into an artificial construct, Edward makes Gaveston "Lord High Chamberlain, / Chief Secretary to the State and me" (*Edward II*, I.i.153–154) to which Gaveston replies, incisively, "My lord, these titles far exceed my worth" (*Edward II*, I.i.156). Finally, to conclude this sudden upward mobility, Gaveston is even appointed "lord bishop" (*Edward II*, I.ii.193).

This seemingly random and capricious provision of political titles is abhorrent to the barons, especially Mortimer Junior who expresses his indignation towards Gaveston and his social standing by accusing him of wearing a “lord's revenue on his back” even though he is “so basely born” (*Edward II*, I.iv.406, 402). This difference in the social class between the 'base' Gaveston and the barons is emphasised further as the barons are subjected to ridicule by Gaveston:

> Base leaden earls that glory in your birth,
> Go sit at home and eat your tenants' beef,
> And come not here to scoff at Gaveston,
> Whose mounting thoughts did never creep so low,
> As to bestow a look on such as you.
> (*Edward II*, II.ii.74–78)

This scene of ridicule explicitly places any essential notions of hierarchy under scrutiny. Indeed, Gaveston's mockery is unsettling for the barons for it “raises the spectre of resemblance that undermines the noble claims of natural privilege” (Thurn 1991, 130), that is, Gaveston deprives the barons of their social rank that they themselves deem natural. As Lancaster pleads to Edward: “My Lord, why do you thus incense your peers, / That *naturally* would love you and honour you?” (*Edward II*, I.i.98–99, emphasis added).

Indeed, if the main strategy of ideology is to strive to represent the social order as immutable and unalterable (Sinfield and Dollimore 2002, 205), Gaveston's demeanour is an immediate threat to this conception of organic hierarchy. The attitude of the earls is apparent in the following exchange between them and Edward:

> EDWARD
> Will none of you salute my Gaveston?
> LANCASTER
> Salute him? yes; welcome, Lord Chamberlain.
> MORTIMER
> Welcome is the good Earl of Cornwall.
> WARWICK
> Welcome, Lord Governor of the Isle of Man.

PEMBROKE
Welcome, master Secretary.
(*Edward II*, II.ii.64–68)

This humorous scene reveals the mockery from the earls as well as the fact that the titles given to Gaveston have no meaning for them since they will not acknowledge the leadership based on royal favourites that Edward tries to instigate.

Hence, as Thurn (1991, 127) has observed, the depiction of the random nature of political and royal standings in *Edward II* emphasise the unstable and arbitrary world of political power. Marlowe is thus revealing the illusion of royal power and depicting royal authority as an artificial and contrived construction instead of it having some form of divine essence, an ideology that the Crown tried to communicate to its subjects. This is exactly what Gaveston threatens to subvert with his disregard to hierarchy, and in the eyes of the barons he is a threat to the England they find inherently correct. When Mortimer Junior calls Gaveston a "proud disruptor of thy country's peace" (*Edward II*, II.v.9), he deems Gaveston the unnatural force in the natural ideological construction he takes for granted, a new element in a traditional and static society.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the threat Gaveston poses does not simply entail a distortion of the established hierarchy but a real political and military danger for the earls. Therefore the barons are not solely worried about Gaveston disrupting royal hierarchy for the sake of decorum but, once he has access to the King, he poses a considerable threat, as Mortimer Junior points out:

Know you not Gaveston hath store of gold
Which may in Ireland purchase him such friends
As he will front the mightiest of us all,
And whereas he shall live and be beloved,
'Tis hard for us to work his overthrow.
(*Edward II*, I.iv.258–262)

It should therefore be remembered that Gaveston's alliance with Edward carries potentially drastic consequences for the barons since Gaveston's existence does not only threaten the existence of the prevailing political and social hegemony but also the very existence of the barons as well.

Therefore, it seems that the barons are not concerned with the suggested homoerotic nature of the relationship between Gaveston and Edward and the otherness and 'un-Englishness' that Gaveston represents with his ”short Italian hooded cloak” (*Edward II*, I.iv.412) but, rather, they are concerned about their relationship because it subverts social order and the whole political status quo. As Mortimer Junior states to his uncle about Edward's inclination, “his wanton humour grieves not me” (*Edward II*, I.iv.401). Hence, as Hopkins (2008, 42–43) points out, contemporary Elizabethan spectators would not have been that abhorred by the fact that the play suggests strong homoeroticism between Edward and Gaveston[22] but, rather, Marlowe's contemporaries would have most likely been alarmed by the disruption of the established social hierarchy.

Indeed, as Voss (1982, 519) suggests, Gaveston presents a threat to the natural order of the kingdom in which power was shifted from the king to the prince according to custom shared by the king and the nobles whose support was essential to the sovereign. The introduction of Gaveston to this environment threatens the custom that ensured the realm's ideological reproduction:

> MORTIMER JUNIOR
> Mine uncle here, this Earl, and I myself,
> Were sworn to your father at his death
> That he should ne’er return into the realm;
> And know my lord, ere I will break my oath,
> This sword of mine that should offend your foes,
> Shall sleep within the scabbard at thy need,

[22] I will discuss this aspect of the play in further detail in subsection 5.1.

> And underneath thy banners march who will,
> For Mortimer will hang his armour up.
>
> (*Edward II*, I.i.81–88)

Here, Mortimer appeals to the custom of the land (the code of chivalry) and the hereditary order of things to which he is accustomed. However, the fact that Edward does not share Mortimer's vision signifies a break between two contrasting ideologies: one that favours a hierarchically structured society governed by natural order and one that regards such hierarchies as obsolete. Kelly (1998, 5) points out that by ignoring the barons' wishes concerning the natural order of society Edward subverts the tree of genealogy, that is, the hierarchy of titles by birth-right, and transforms the premise under which identities and power are founded in his realm. Thus he robs the barons of their identities which are based on their position in the hierarchy that they deem natural.

Edward is therefore attempting to create a new form of realm, one that is not structured according to ancient law.[23] Hence, in order to usurp the throne according to ancient custom, Mortimer Junior cannot disrupt the system by completely ridding the realm of its King but he must create the illusion of a King by transforming Edward III into a puppet sovereign and exercising power through him. Indeed, although preparing to order the assassination of the King, Mortimer does not label himself as the sovereign (contrary to Bolingbroke in *Richard II*) but defines his power as deriving from the young King. He does regard himself as superior to the queen and the young prince: “The prince I rule, the queen do I command” (*Edward II*, V.iv.47) but, at the same time, Mortimer does not dismantle the institution of kingship by

[23] There seems to be a division between critics on this issue. For instance, Voss (2002, 523) has argued that Edward's politics are revolutionary whereas Perry (2000, 1065) is of the opinion that Edward's political ideas are traditional as he wishes to rule according to old-fashioned patronage. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Marlowe presents the audience with a highly unstable realm that is politically divided and in a tumultuous situation without any clear order or rule. This has the potential of conveying subversion that was not necessarily as easily contained as the traditional New Historicist criticism has argued (cf. Montrose 1996, 78–79). Hence, this goes to show that Marlowe's representation of theatricalism is not to be considered a form of political absolutism.

appointing himself king: “the queen and Mortimer / Shall rule the realm, the king” (*Edward II*, V.iv.64–65).

This is strikingly similar to Gaveston's wishes at the beginning of the play where he rejoices in being able to influence the king (*Edward II*, I.i.50–52). Thus, although Mortimer previously appeals to the ancient law of the realm and the code of chivalry, he seems to act in full contradiction to these principles as his Machiavellianism is highlighted towards the end of the play. For Mortimer, then, decorum and hereditary institutions seem to be essential in terms of rulership only as long as they can be exploited. Despite his earlier patriotic speeches embellished by chivalric rhetoric, he shares several similar opportunistic characteristics with Gaveston who has been demonised as the main threat to the realm's stability. Hence Marlowe continues the theme of contrariety in his portrayal of royal rule which further emphasises the hypocrisy and demystification of political power.

Moreover, in order to emphasise the subversion of royal hierarchy, Marlowe purposely deviated from Holinshed's *Chronicles* in certain aspects. For instance, Summers (1988, 226) has shown that Marlowe altered Gaveston's social rank; in the play Gaveston is made a commoner whereas historically Piers Gaveston was in fact a knight in the service of Edward I. Therefore, this alteration not only contributes to the dramatic tension between Gaveston and the nobles, but it also demonstrates how Marlowe is making a statement on class and one's standing in society. Similarly, Marlowe made further modifications by making Spencer a servant and, analogously, the rank of the Spencer is also altered (Summers 1988, 226). This goes to show that Edward disregards any hereditary right to titles and instead surrounds himself with individuals who appeal to him personally, not hierarchically:

BALDOCK
My name is Baldock and my gentry
I fetched from Oxford, not from heraldry.

EDWARD
The fitter art thou, Baldock, for my turn;
Wait on me, and I'll see thou shalt not want.
(*Edward II*, II.ii.242–245, emphasis added)

Indeed, Orgel (1996, 46–47) has also noted that this alteration in the play goes to show that Marlowe was clearly interested in contemporary social matters in the play.

Analogously, pertaining to the depiction of royal hierarchy in *Edward II*, Marlowe was also clearly interested in the myth of the royal spectacle. Indeed, the deprivation of social and royal hierarchy is continued in Marlowe's depiction of the theatricality of royal power; in addition to problematizing the royal hierarchy governing the realm, Marlowe undermines one of the central elements of royal power, the spectacle of court and ceremony which was used to legitimise the power of the sovereign. As Bevington and Shapiro have noted, with *Edward II* Marlowe portrays a form of royal power that is to a great extent deprived of its theatricality and filled instead with anti-ceremonial characteristics which "mark a shift from order to disorder" (1988, 269).

Indeed, the court, for instance, does not seem to communicate any symbolic power or theatrical magnificence in *Edward II*, but disorder has rendered it obsolete. When Gurney orders Edward to be conveyed to the court, Kent replies, "Where is the court but here, here is the king" (*Edward II*, V.iii.59), hence emphasising the confusion related to the court which has ceased to signify anything. In Elizabethan England the court could not be separated from the sovereign but, in the world of *Edward II* where symbolic institutions such as the court have lost their ideological force, it does not carry any true political value. Similarly, significant events that normally would have been marked through a magnificent royal spectacle do not receive any attention in the play. For instance, the passing of Edward's father is abruptly disregarded as the play commences: "My father is deceased" (*Edward II*, I.i.1), the

murder of Gaveston[24] is similarly oddly dismissed in a couple of passing sentences: “Warwick in ambush lay, / And bare him to his death, and in a trench / Strake off his head” (*Edward II*, III.ii.118–120), as is Mortimer's execution: “My lord, here is the head of Mortimer” (*Edward II*, V.vi.93), and the execution of Edward is concealed and committed in the most untheatrical terms possible.[25] If, as Orgel argues, in Renaissance England “[p]ower was asserted only through analogies, faith affirmed only through symbols” (1975, 88), this is drastically undermined in *Edward II* and would not have gone unnoticed by the contemporary audience.

Consequently, one of the central anti-ceremonial signs lies in the barons' behaviour. Indeed, it is interesting that although decorum seems to be an important factor to the barons, they flagrantly violate it throughout the play. For instance, Lancaster draws his sword in the presence of the king and wounds Gaveston after his ridicule (*Edward II*, II.ii.74–86). This violation of decorum is repeated shortly after when Mortimer Junior displays his sword to Edward in a threatening manner (*Edward II*, II.ii.150–153). Before this, Mortimer Junior and Lancaster have rushed to the King in order to seek ransom, not interested in Edward's wishes to remain undisturbed (*Edward II*, II.ii.130–138).

All these instances – especially revealing weapons amidst the court and the King – would have been regarded with horror among Elizabethans (Bevington and Shapiro 1988, 271). This once again clashes with the barons' opinions; although they enthusiastically defend their ideology, they do not act according to their own principles. The very individuals who are depicted as representing a natural order and decorum in the play do not function accordingly but devise their own rules, thus emphasising the arbitrariness and hypocrisy of their beliefs in a natural hierarchy and decorum. This is brought up again towards the end of the play in the

[24] Stymeist (2004, 244) points out that Piers Gaveston was in fact executed in a ceremonial manner in the presence of the nobles and other spectators.
[25] The murder of Edward is discussed in greater detail in subsection 5.3.

soliloquy by Mortimer:

> The prince I rule, the queen do I command,
> And with a lowly congé to the ground
> The proudest lords salute me as I pass;
> I seal, I cancel, I do what I will;
> Feared am I more than loved, let me be feared,
> And when I frown make all the court look pale.
>
> (*Edward II*, V.iv.47–52)

As Bredbeck (1991, 68) points out, Mortimer manifests a similar kind of dismissal for decorum as he did when condemning Gaveston. This scene offers yet another instance of the kind of contrarieties that occupy the world of *Edward II*. Similarly, throughout the ending of the play, Mortimer shows no reverence towards titles that meant the utmost importance to him earlier:

> Think therefore, madam, that imports us much
> To erect your son with all the speed we may
> And that I be protector over him,
> For our behoof will bear the greater sway
> Whenas a king's name shall be under-writ.
>
> (*Edward II*, V.ii.10–14)

Here Mortimer has completely forgotten violations to the decorum that sparked the barons' wrath towards Gaveston in the first place. Mortimer has, in essence, transformed into 'another Gaveston', that is, an upstart social climber.

However, Marlowe does ultimately depict the royal spectacle in *Edward II* but, in so doing, the playwright distorts and represents it in a critical manner. An example of this is the emblematic scene in which Gaveston sits on the Queen's throne, once again shocking the barons with his disregard of court etiquette:

> EDWARD
> What? are you moved that Gaveston sits here?
> It is our pleasure; we will have it so.
>
> (*Edward II*, I.iv.8–9)
>
> MORTIMER SENIOR
> What man of noble birth can brook this sight?

(*Edward II*, I.iv.12)

This flagrant violation of royal hierarchy and court etiquette can be seen as direct criticism towards any divine aspects that the sovereign claimed to possess, and this is achieved through critique towards one of the central royal symbols, the throne of the sovereign. This is not uncommon in Renaissance drama, as Howard (1994, 31) argues, since the stage enabled the dramatist to place privileged royal symbols into cultural circulation, depriving them of their sanctified value and thus enabling the audience to take on a critical rather than a reverential attitude towards them.

Therefore, whereas Greenblatt had argued earlier that "the form itself, as a primary expression of Renaissance power, helps to contain the radical doubts it continually provokes" (1992, 108), the theater and the playwrights were in reality much more than simply apologists for the Tudor regime. Indeed, as Heinemann (1990, 178) points out, theatrical spectacles were rarely uncritical representations which would have reinforced the myth of the divinity of the monarch. Similarly, Hattaway has pointed out that "[d]ramatists acted as intelligencers to the nation, not only seeing through the cult of monarchical magnificence...but also subjecting the whole institution of the court to a more radical critique" (1990, 101). Thus, as in the aforementioned scene from *Edward II,* it empowered the audience in that it invited them to draw their own conclusions about the distorted image of the throne, hence enabling them to enter the realm of political discussion. It therefore altered the social narrative of the utmost royal symbol, transforming the ideology from imperative to dialectical in that it invites the audience to judge the implied meaning of the scene.

Moreover, the scene has a distinct iconoclastic function in that it diminishes the symbol of royal power, the throne. This attack on the visual backbone of the power of the sovereign is intensified by Gaveston's subversive exclamation "Were I a king!" (*Edward II*, I.iv.27) whilst

sitting on the throne. Not only does Gaveston's presence on the throne and his fantasy about being the sovereign subvert the gender roles of the royal institution, but it quite literally dismembers the ideal and harmonious picture of the sovereign by placing an external element in the centre of an institution that was claimed to be organic and natural by the Tudor orthodoxy. In this respect the scene disrupts the royal display of power in both ideological and physical manner; it undermines the symbolic meaning of the throne, but also the physical picture of the sovereign. Furthermore, Gaveston's threat to social order is yet intensified by placing him on the throne and portraying his political aspirations – this time achieving no less than kingship. Thus, once again, Gaveston's equality with the King is highlighted.

This particular scene is closer to the spectacles that Marlowe incorporated in his other plays, and it does stand out in the otherwise minimalistic atmosphere of *Edward II*. However, on the whole, *Edward II* is austere in its depiction of theatricality which illustrates Marlowe's will to demystify the monarch's power. Greenblatt, although arguing for the containment of subversion on the Elizabethan stage, does entertain the idea that Marlowe's dramatic works would have had the potential of demystifying the monarch's power: "[i]f the theater normally reflects and flatters the royal sense of itself as national performance, Marlowe struggles to expose the underlying motives of any performance of power" (1980, 253). This struggle, however, is not merely contained but Marlowe presents some genuinely radical notions about the performance of power in Renaissance England. For instance, Bevington and Shapiro (1988, 268–269) have noted that Edward's hostility and his indifference towards ceremony alienate him from the very thing that validates his authority. This is applicable to the entire notion of the theatricality that justified the sovereign's power in Elizabethan England; perhaps the sight of a sovereign indifferent to the visibility of power and the notion of theatricality could have not only undermined the power of the monarch but also helped to deprive the

institution of monarchy of the mystification that surrounded it.

5. "Know that I am king" – Sodomy, Subjection and Public Display of Power in *Edward II*

After examining aspects related to religion, the realm and hierarchy in *Edward II*, we now move on to the portrayal of the sovereign in the play. Although I have argued that (contrary to the general view maintained by New Criticism) *Edward II* is a play that actively confronts and discusses political and social issues of early modern England, it can still be stated that the depiction of the monarch occupies a central position in the play. As Brown (2002, 182–183) points out, the private and public dimensions cannot be comfortably separated in the play, since the personal always has political consequences. Indeed, the personal tragedy of Edward and the historical and political conditions of the play are intertwined in a complex pattern consisting of the private and the public. However, this does not imply an approach typical of liberal humanism which would separate the play from its historical context and emphasise the static nature of human nature and any essentialist truths that the protagonist allegedly communicates. Conversely, I shall examine King Edward in the light of societal and political issues; I am interested in the manner in which Marlowe depicts the sovereign in order to challenge and subvert the dominant orthodox views maintained by the Elizabethan Crown.

Accordingly, discussing the portrayal of a monarch on stage in Elizabethan England provides an interesting viewpoint since depictions of a sovereign were always potentially contentious as well as topical. For instance, Kastan (1999, 153) has suggested that Queen Elizabeth often interpreted contemporary plays from a personal perspective, that is, she regarded them as direct reference to her own reign even though they did not explicitly bear any resemblance to her.[26] Thus, bearing in mind the special status of *Edward II* as a history

[26] A famous example of this would have been Elizabeth's exclamation "I am Richard II. know ye not that?" in

play, the character of Edward would have been emphasised and it would have most likely been regarded as a metaphor for Elizabeth herself (at least in the later productions). Analogously, Orgel argues that miming the monarch was “a potentially revolutionary act” (2011, 23), and therefore any depictions of the sovereign on stage always communicated a potential element of subversion. Indeed, as Kastan points out, history plays inevitably undermined royal authority since “on stage the king became a subject – the subject of the author's imaginings and the subject of the attention and judgement of an audience of subjects” (1999, 151).

I have divided the discussion on the sovereign into three subsections, all of which focus on King Edward but maintain a perspective on the various political and social matters in the play. The first subsection focuses on the concept of sodomy in *Edward II*; if portraying the monarch always carried the potential of subversion, presenting him as a sodomite certainly entailed a possible disturbance to the Crown. Secondly, I will discuss the manner in which the sovereign is depicted in terms of rulership, and I intend to argue that by portraying King Edward as an incompetent ruler Marlowe distorts the ideal picture of the Renaissance sovereign promulgated by the Crown. Finally, the last subsection forms a discussion concerning the execution of Edward and how Marlowe's portrayal of Edward's death can be seen to challenge the ideology behind the contemporary practice of state-organised executions.

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regards to the staging of Shakespeare's *Richard II* over 40 times in the play-houses and open streets (Dollimore 1985, 8 and Montrose 1996, 79). Although Montrose (ibid.,, 80) points out that this should not be taken literally as a reference to the several occasions that the play was staged but, rather, as a metaphor for the continuous presentation of treason on stage, the implication of the threat the theatre posed to the Crown remains clear. Orgel has similarly pointed out that the Crown was worried about the representation of monarchs on stage, illustrated by Queen Elizabeth's statement ”We princes...are set on stages, in the sight and view of all the world duly observed” (Orgel 1975, 42). Similarly, as Mullaney (1988, 11) has suggested, public appearances such as the coronation procession of Elizabeth subjected the monarchs and placed them under public scrutiny.

5.1. Sodomy and the Politics of Sexuality

The reason why I wish to discuss the concept of homoeroticism, or to be more precise, the concept of sodomy in *Edward II* is that in early modern England it was ultimately conceived as a political phenomenon and hence it was intertwined with other social processes. Furthermore, it was also a concept inherently linked with societal order and transgression of God-given hierarchy.[27] In the previous subsection I discussed the subversion of social hierarchy, and it was noted that this distortion of order would have been more abhorring for the contemporary Elizabethan audience than witnessing a homosexual sovereign,[28] which also applies to the manner in which the earls perceive the matter. However, as Thurn (1990, 116) points out, it would be a mistake to overlook the homoerotic relationship between Gaveston and Edward, and I feel that the concept needs to be discussed in closer detail. Indeed, the portrayal of the relationship between Gaveston and Edward is – as Summers points out – unique in terms of Elizabethan drama for the casual portrayal which does not offer condemnation: "[m]ore heterodox even than the play's refusal to subscribe to a comforting Tudor political myth is its resolute failure to condemn homosexuality" (Summers 1988, 222).

Therefore, Summers regards *Edward II* as a truly unique play in terms of sixteenth-century drama because of its casual representation of homoeroticism (although it should be noted that Shakespeare, for instance, seems to maintain a similarly accepting view in *Twelfth Night*).

[27] Shepherd (1986, 199) points out that when Elizabethans referred to sodomy or buggery they meant debauchery which entailed different forms of disorder and unnaturalness, and hence it did not necessarily entail sexual relations between the same sex. Moreover, Bray (1995, 16–17) argues that Elizabethans regarded debauchery as a temptation to which everyone had an inherent inclination. Furthermore, Crewe clarifies the concept by pointing out that the term sodomy was conceived as a "threat to sexual, hence political, order rather than same-sex relations exclusively: atheism and sedition were typically linked to sodomy in denunciations or legal charges" (2010, 386). Thus, when discussing this concept in this subsection I am referring to the sixteenth-century understanding of the term *sodomy.*

[28] The term *homosexuality* should be approached with caution, since the concept originates from the nineteenth century, and thus it did not exist in early modern England in the same way we perceive it today (Shepherd 1986, 199). Indeed, as Foucault (1990, 43) argues, sodomy was related specifically to acts and homosexuality did not exist as an identity as it is understood nowadays. Hence the term *homoeroticism* is preferable in this context.

Even though Orgel has argued that "English Renaissance culture does not appear to have had a morbid fear of male homoerotic behavior" (Orgel 1996, 58), Stymeist (2004, 233) points out that sodomy could form a threat in early modern England especially if combined with transgression of one's social standing. Therefore, the concept of sodomy in Marlowe's England – where any distortions to providentialist hierarchy and order were considered threatening by the state – was closely associated with class and social hierarchy. What was feared above all, then, were liaisons that were regarded as a digression from this natural order.[29]

However, it seems that sodomy was not merely condemned in case it involved class transgression, nor was it generally considered acceptable in early modern England, despite only a small number of legal proceedings (Crewe 2010, 389). On the contrary, Summers (1988, 222) points out that homosexual practices were depicted as corrupted behaviour that posed a threat to both the church and the state. Similarly, Bray (1995, 7) suggests that instead of regarding the Renaissance era as some form of celebration of artistic and homosexual freedom (as some critics argued at the turn of the twentieth century), homosexuality was, in fact, a source for deep horror in Renaissance England. Henry VIII's Buggery Act from 1533 – which was reinstituted by Queen Elizabeth I – functions as an example of this since it equated sodomy with bestiality, among other appalling concepts (Goldberg 1992, 3). My interest, in this respect, lies in the political implications of Marlowe's refusal to condemn the homoerotic relationship between Edward and Gaveston as well as his depiction of the adulterous relationship between Queen Isabella and Mortimer Junior. In other words, by portraying both relationships (between Edward and Gaveston as well as Isabella and Mortimer) as

[29] As Bray (1995, 25) points out, homosexuality was not regarded as a part of the created order but, rather, it was a part of its dissolution and "a potential for confusion and disorder in one undivided sexuality" (ibid.). Indeed, whereas sodomy meant treason and disorder as a social phenomenon, in the metaphysical sense it was conceived as a force against divine creation.

sodomitical, Marlowe undermines the negative implications that sodomy entailed in early modern England.

Stymeist (2004, 236) points out that before the emergence of New Historicist approaches the majority of criticism depoliticised the concept of sodomy in *Edward II*, that is, there was a tendency to see Marlowe subjecting sodomites to poetic justice for their sins (e.g. the execution of King Edward). Indeed, such biographical interpretations often dealt with Marlowe's own alleged homosexuality which was seen to be extended to his characters that were thought to represent sexual deviates with sexual perversions. For instance, Steane suggests that Marlowe might have been drawn to Edward II's reign as a source because of the "sex and sadism" (1964, 234) that it supposedly entails. Additionally, this line of thinking is rather clearly echoed in Wilbur Sanders' argument that Marlowe possesses an impulsion to "do dirt on humanity" (1968, 140).

However, as Shepherd (1986, 198–199) points out, these views had the purpose of labeling Marlowe as a compulsive deviant which undermined the political commentary he provides in the play. Indeed, to approach the concept of sodomy from this viewpoint is to disregard one of the crucial elements in the play, that is, sodomy as a social and political phenomenon that is intertwined with issues of class, gender and rulership. This is illustrated, as Godlberg (1992, 122) points out, at the very beginning of the play in which Edward invites Gaveston to share the kingdom with him (*Edward II*, I.i.1–2), thus instigating a sodomitical order, one that rejects traditional notions of the politics of the realm that the king was supposed to preserve.

The play, then, opens with Gaveston's explicit references to homoeroticism as he states his longing for King Edward:

> Sweet prince I come; these, these thy amorous lines
> Might have enforced me to have swum from France.
> And like Leander gasped upon the sand,

So thou wouldst smile and take me in thy arms.
(*Edward II*, I.i.6–9)

Furthermore, in the following passage Gaveston continues to express his desires in eloquent terms in the famous and widely-celebrated passage which draws its influence from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and is directly aimed at the antitheatricalists of the time (Goldberg 1992, 106):[30]

Sometime a lovely boy in Dian's shape,
With hair that gilds the water as it glides,
Crownets of pearl about his naked arms,
And in his sportful hands an olive-tree
To hide those parts which men delight to see,
Shall bathe him in a spring, and there hard by
One like Actaeon, peeping through the grove
Shall by the angry goddess be transformed,
And running in the likeness of an hart,
By yelping hounds pulled down, shall seem to die;
Such things as these best please his majesty.
(*Edward II*, I.i.60–70)

In addition to being a spectacular piece of writing, the soliloquy is rather distinguishable from the otherwise rigorous dialogue of the play. In fact, it appears that the most eloquent speeches made in the play are often about the relationship between Gaveston and Edward (or by Edward after realising his own impending demise). Indeed, in the world of *Edward II* that is dominated by somewhat austere rhetoric, Marlowe is at his most eloquent in describing Gaveston and Edward.

This eloquence, conversely, is contrasted with Isabella and Mortimer whose interaction is always described in a dispassionate and political manner. Instead of using eloquent

[30] Elizabethan antitheatricalists saw the theatre as an institution that entailed dangerous moral corruption and accused it of vices such as transvestism, homosexuality, voyeurism and sadism (Goldberg 1992, 106). Phillip Stubbes, for instance, who famously opposed the theatre with fierce conviction, regarded the institution as a breeding ground for vice and corruption (ibid., 118). It seems that with Gaveston's eloquent soliloquy Marlowe is quite explicitly rebuking such claims made against the theatre and, instead, the playwright offers a vivid celebration of the "wanton spectacles" (ibid., 106) that antitheatricalists such as Stubbes deemed harmful and dangerous for the contemporary society.

expressions Mortimer calls Isabella “Fair” (*Edward II*, V.ii.1) to which the Queen's answer is simply “Sweet Mortimer, the life of Isabel, / Be thou persuaded that I love thee well” (*Edward II*, V.ii.15–16), which seems excessively formal in comparison with Gaveston's earlier speech that celebrated their love and was embellished with mythological terminology. Additionally, when Isabella does attempt to convey strong emotions she is blatantly interrupted by Mortimer: “Ye must not grow so passionate in speeches” (*Edward II*, IV.iv.16). However, even in this instance her passion was directed at the realm, not Mortimer personally.

Hence, Marlowe depicts Edward and Gaveston in an elevated and poetic language whereas the rhetoric between Isabella and Mortimer is subdued and their relationship is more of a political nature. Throughout the play Gaveston and Edward's love is not hinted to represent a deviation of any kind, but it is portrayed in natural terms. For instance, Summers (1988, 223) has noted that the word *unnatural* which occurs several times throughout the play (as I have noted earlier in this thesis) is never used in reference to homoeroticism. Indeed, the word is used in describing rebellion and the threat of political mutiny to the state (aspects to which sodomy was closely linked in Renaissance England), but Marlowe refuses to depict homoeroticism in these terms. As Hattaway has observed, “[p]ower is related to sexuality and both are related to language” (1990, 120), and in the rhetoric of homoeroticism Marlowe exercises that very power.

Furthermore, the speech by Mortimer Senior emphasises the fact that even the earls, who despise Edward, are indifferent to the homoeroticism displayed by the king:

> The mightiest kings have had their minions,
> Great Alexander loved Hephaestion,
> The conquering Hercules for Hylas wept,
> And for Patroclus stern Achilles drooped:
> And not kings only, but the wisest men:
> The Roman Tully loved Octavius,
> Grave Socrates, wild Alcibiades;

> Then let his grace, whose youth is flexible,
> And promiseth as much as we can wish,
> Freely enjoy that vain light-headed earl,
> For riper years will wean him from such toys.
> (*Edward II*, I.iv.390–400)

This compelling reasoning by the older Mortimer not only appears to decriminalise sodomy in the play but, additionally, it shows that the personal relationship between Edward and Gaveston is not condemned but accepted as normal and not seen as disturbing in any manner. Indeed, as Goldberg points out, this is a striking passage in the play precisely because "it is usual to suppose that social and sexual irregularities are mutually causative and equally to be condemned" (1992, 117). Thus one of the most radical aspects of the play is the fact that homoeroticism does not constitute a problem, and no objections rise to the relationship between Gaveston and Edward as long as it is between the master and the minion which involves no class transgression, that is, Gaveston's social mobility.

Furthermore, as Stymeist (2004, 239–240) suggests, references to great warriors such as Hercules and Alexander indicate that Edward's practice of sodomy does not render him effeminate, and thus any biblical and legal arguments of the emasculation of sexual deviance are rejected. Additionally, as was pointed out earlier, Mortimer Junior too makes it clear that he does not consider Edward's sexual inclination towards Gaveston a problem: "Uncle, his wanton humour grieves not me" (*Edward II*, I.iv.401). Similarly, the barons do not regard Edward's homoeroticism as something that would make him unfit as a sovereign, but the reason for their outrage lies in social transgression and Edward's incapability to manage his responsibilities as the realm's sovereign.[31] As Thomas (2004, 4) points out, the 'wanton humour' is not reprehensible because of its homoerotic nature, but the subversion originates

[31] Edward II could be compared to another known homosexual king, James I, whose homoerotic relations did not constitute a political problem during his reign since he did not promote his favorites in a similar manner as Edward does, that is, he did not provoke class transgression. In fact, as the king of Scotland, James VI was regarded as a strong leader (Perry 2000, 1056).

from the fact that this' wanton humour' interferes with the King's regal duties.

What is also noteworthy in Marlowe's portrayal of homoeroticism in *Edward II* is the striking difference to the Holinshed's *Chronicles* in which the love between Edward and Gaveston is described – as Brown puts it – as "a disease and a sin" (2002, 171). Indeed, Holinshed's account of Gaveston's influence on Edward is rather different as he describes Edward as "so corrupted, that he burst out into most heinous vices" as well as "other filthy and dishonorable exercises" (Holinshed, quoted in Tromly 1998, 123). Thus it seems that whereas the *Chronicles* tend to portray Edward inherently incompetent and 'unnatural' because of his homoerotic relations, these ideological implications relating to homoeroticism are completely omitted in Marlowe's *Edward II*. Conversely, the play differs considerably from Holinshed's accounts in this manner as the homoeroticism itself clearly does not constitute a political problem, but it is the hierarchical breach that Edward and Gaveston instigate that is unbearable for the barons, as well as Edward's rejection of his royal prerogatives.

Consequently, for Goldberg (1992, 119) the radical nature of *Edward II* originates from the fact that the play sees homoerotic relationships as a commonplace phenomenon whereas class transgression is portrayed as sodomitical. Indeed, as Goldberg (ibid.) convincingly argues, the peers' desire for Edward's love is highly similar to Gaveston's, and in the play every single character refers to each other by terms of endearment. For instance, when Mortimer Senior desires to persuade Edward, he speaks of love: "If you love us, my lord, hate Gaveston" (*Edward II*, I.i.79). Additionally, Isabella makes a similar exclamation: "Now is the King of England rich and strong, / Having the love of his renowned peers" (*Edward II*, I.iv.365–366). The line between the personal and the political is thus obscured as the rhetoric in the political world is charged with terms of intimacy. Moreover, it is not particularly troublesome to

discover implicit homoerotic rhetoric in the language of the barons: “Come uncle, let us leave the brainsick king / And henceforth parley with our naked swords” (*Edward II*, I.i.124–125). Thus Marlowe presents a clear congruity between the personal and the public; Edward's rhetoric concerning his private affairs and the earls' speeches on the matters of the realm share a similar kind of intimacy. Hence the tendency of New Criticism to focus solely on the private sphere in the play has indeed neglected this infusion of the public and the personal.

However, this viewpoint has had some resistance from critics and, for instance, Perry (2000, 1061–1062) regards Goldberg's argument concerning the rhetoric in *Edward II* as problematic and argues that the play differentiates between two kinds of love, one of political nature and the other of personal. He nevertheless asserts that the peers regard monarchy as personal and royal favour in intimate terms. Similarly, Bredbeck (1991, 61–63) considers this amalgamation of the private and public spheres as an example of infusing the king's temporal body and the body politic,[32] that is, the division between body politic and the body natural becomes distorted in the play; the king rebels against his own body politic. Similarly, Thomas (2008, 1) has observed the congruity between sodomy and the king's two bodies; there is a disturbance between Edward's natural body and the body politic as Edward allows Gaveston to interfere with the politics of his reign. However, to further problematize this notion, Marlowe portrays Mortimer Junior and Queen Isabella in exactly similar terms; their private relationship affects the political decisions they make in the play. For instance, Isabella is

[32] According to Kantorowicz (1981, 7–23), the notion of kingship (the king's two bodies) which emerged in the late Middle Ages consisted of two inseparable conceptions, the body politic and the body natural. The body politic, consisting of policy and the government, was considered immortal, transcendental and was infused with divinity. The natural body, on the other hand, was mortal and subject to death and other weaknesses similar to the bodies of all human beings. Hence the saying: 'The King is dead, long live the King'.

This notion about the king's two bodies is referred to in the play by Edward: “But Edward's name survives, though Edward dies” (*Edward II*, V.i.48). Similarly, Edward seems surprised that his temporal body remains although he has been deposed, that is, his body politic has ceased to exist: “I feel hell of a grief; where is my crown? / Gone, gone! and do I remain alive?” (*Edward II*, V.v.89–90). As Kantorowicz points out, “the Crown without the king was incomplete and incapacitated” (1981, 365).

manipulated by Mortimer Junior, which has political ramifications and ends in the assassination of Edward. As Mortimer Junior proclaims “the queen do I command” (*Edward II*, V.iv.47), he justifies his own infusion of the political and the personal.

Bearing in mind Goldberg's argument on class transgression and sodomy, it should be noted that the adulterous relationship between Queen Isabel and Mortimer Junior renders them sodomites as well. Indeed, a relationship between a man and a woman outside the institution of marriage constituted an act of sodomy in early modern England (Goldberg 1992, 123). Along with this reading, Mortimer Junior and the Queen are also sodomites in the sense that they are treasonous. What is radical in Marlowe's depiction of the relationships between Gaveston and Edward and Isabella and Mortimer is that although they are both depicted as sodomites, the love between Gaveston and Edward is portrayed in eloquent terms whereas Isabella and Mortimer are cold, political and neutral.

All in all, portraying the sovereign as a sodomite was potentially a subversive act considering the circumstances at the time. Although the term sodomy is never mentioned in the play (Thomas 2008, 1), Edward's relationship with Gaveston would have been deemed sodomitical in the eyes of the sixteenth-century audience.[33] Theatrical players were seen to undermine their identity and place in that they were deviating from what God had made them (Dollimore 1991, 290). Hence, bearing in mind that the play radically deviates from this hierarchical ideology by portraying the sovereign himself as a sodomite would have been contentious enough. However, the manner in which Marlowe goes further in his portrayal of homoeroticism in casual terms is indeed exceptional for Elizabethan drama. For Summers Marlowe's portrayal of homosexuality in “casual, occasionally elevated, frequently moving,

[33] Elizabethan audience would have been accustomed to rumours concerning the corruptive influence of the royal favorite as Elizabeth herself was said to be under the influence of a certain 'corruptor' of court (Perry 2000, 1058). Furthermore, as Bray (1995, 20) points out, when Marlowe himself was accused of heresy, homosexuality and treason by Richard Baines, he was also labeled a sodomite in order to make the allegations more severe.

and always human terms" (1988, 222) is what makes *Edward II* unique compared to other contemporary plays.

Furthermore, the fact that Marlowe altered Gaveston's rank goes to show that, similarly to issues related to class and hierarchy, homoeroticism was a matter that Marlowe wished to discuss in his play, which he does in a surprisingly explicitly manner. It is true that Edward's desire to engage in a sodomitical relationship with Gaveston causes irreversible turbulence in the realm which ultimately leads to his own demise. However, the fact that this demise is brought upon Edward as a consequence of class transgression and breaches to social hierarchy – not because of the homoerotic nature of their relationship *per se* – is what makes Marlowe's portrayal of King Edward revolutionary. As Tromly (1998, 130) has noted, there is nothing inherently sinful (as opposed to the dominant attitude towards sodomy) in Marlowe's depiction of their relationship. Indeed, Marlowe's decision to portray the sovereign as a sodomite without condemning his homoerotic relationship as being inherently immoral or a threat could be regarded as a subversive act.

5.2 The Subjection of the Sovereign

The play begins with Gaveston reading a letter containing a startling invitation from the King of England himself: "'My father is deceased; come Gaveston, / And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend.'" (*Edward II*, I.i.1–2). Not only does Edward casually dismiss his succession as a result of the death of Edward I (a crucial event in terms of his hereditary right) with one passing sentence, the indiscreet exclamation concerning the unity of the realm would have not been ignored by the Elizabethan audience who were more than accustomed to the absolutist Elizabethan orthodoxy that the monarch was as an infallible figure appointed by

God.[34] As was pointed out earlier in this thesis, according to the providentialist ideology maintained by the Crown the sovereign functioned as the head of a natural and divine hierarchy. Thus, as Orgel (1975, 42) points out, the ruler was considered an exemplary figure in the era of the Renaissance and the sovereign had to appear virtuous. This notion, however, is continually questioned by Marlowe as he portrays Edward's character and governance as incompatible with this dominant Renaissance ideology promulgated by the Crown.

Indeed, as was pointed out above, on the Renaissance stage even the king himself was made a subject in the sense that he was placed under scrutiny by an audience of subjects (Kastan 1999, 151). This would have been the case especially with *Edward II* since, as Bredbeck (1991, 53) points out, it was well known that Edward was a bad ruler through various chronicles to which ordinary citizens would have had access. Thus, even though Marlowe did deviate from the chronicles in certain matters to emphasise aspects he saw important, he did not alter Edward's incompetence as a sovereign. In this regard the portrayal of the King in *Edward II* carried the potential threat of undermining the authority of the sovereign. Furthermore, considering the distinct status of the history play in contemporary England, Marlowe's depiction of a flawed ruler could have been regarded as an analogy for Elizabeth herself once the genre had fully established itself. Therefore the play was viewed by an audience aware of both the historical character of Edward as well as the implied societal and political meaning communicated by the history play.

The play, then, opens with Edward's explicit devolution of his royal prerogatives. This incompetence of the sovereign to manage his royal duties continues after Gaveston reads Edward's letter as the play moves on to suggest that the King is as an object of manipulation. Indeed, Gaveston rejoices in the possibility of manipulating the oblivious king with his

[34] According to Guy, “Elizabethan literature was crammed with identifications of the queen as empress of the world, defender of religion and justice, guardian of virtue, and restorer of peace” (1988, 372).

'lascivious shows': "I must have wanton poets, pleasant wits, / Musicians, that with touching of a string / May draw *the pliant king* which way I please" (*Edward II*, I.i.50–52, emphasis added). Edward seems oblivious to Gaveston's political aspirations and his feelings towards his minion appear genuine; when Mortimer Junior asks Edward "Why should you love him whom the world hates so?", Edward answers sincerely, "Because he loves me more than all the world" (*Edward II*,I.iv.76–77). Whether Gaveston truly shares these feelings with his King remains uncertain – even though his will to power and his political aspirations might state otherwise – but, nevertheless, the fact that the King is subjected to Gaveston's political games does suggest that the sovereign's role in their relationship is to validate Gaveston's wishes.

However, critics (cf. Merchant 1967, 63) have also noted that almost immediately after Gaveston's death the object of Edward's desire alters and he communicates a certain desire towards Spencer Junior. Although Edward's feelings for Spencer do not appear to convey a similar kind of erotic passion as with Gaveston, he does seem to show clear signs of devotion towards him: "Spencer, sweet Spencer, I adopt thee here, / And merely of our love we do create thee / Earl of Gloucester and Lord Chamberlain" (*Edward II*, III.ii.144–146). Additionally, even before receiving these new titles Spencer seems to acquire a similar kind of desire for upward political mobility as Gaveston and fantasises about a political position in words that resemble Gaveston's exclamation on the throne: "Were I King Edward" (*Edward II*, III.ii.10). This might indeed indicate that Edward's feelings for Gaveston were secondary to his will to seek objects of desire and discovering a way to escape his regal duties. Indeed, Edward does wish for a "nook" or a "corner" to "frolic" with his beloved Gaveston (*Edward II*, I.iv.72–73), and so the desire to rule his realm appears to remain secondary.

This particular notion of King Edward as a flawed ruler forms yet another aspect of the play that subverts the providentialist and harmonious view of the institution of monarchy.

Heinemann (1990, 163) argues that although the monarch's royal position granted him control over foreign policy and authority over religion, it was nevertheless assumed that he would use his powers "in accordance with ancient law and custom" (ibid.). However, Edward takes no interest in this, but he remains adamant about the autonomy of his power that for him does not entail taking the earls' opinions into account. This is illustrated in Edward's frequent, somewhat vehement outbursts: "Rebels! Will they appoint their sovereign / His sports, his pleasures, and his company" (*Edward II,* III.ii.174–175). What Edward fails to acknowledge is that this is exactly what his peers would have done since, as Thomas points out, the King could not make certain decisions without consulting the peers: "the king will always act in consultation with the peers to preserve the tripartite relations between king, Crown and the kingdom" (2008, 3). Thus, throughout the play, there is a theme conflicting ideologies between the earls and Edward who does not seem to be able to situate himself and his status on the political map.

Furthermore, Edward's political competence is seriously undermined by his own capricious actions. For example, when faced with a heated political argument with the earls, the unstable Edward seems to react impulsively and rather hastily to the situation and is ready to even abdicate his crown and offer his throne to Mortimer Junior to sit on:

> EDWARD
> Nay, then lay violent hands upon your king;
> Here Mortimer, sit thou in Edward's throne,
> Warwick and Lancaster, wear you my crown;
> Was ever king thus overruled as I?
>
> (*Edward II*, I.iv.35–38)

These are not the words of a strong king, and it would seem that Edward is rather reluctant towards his position as the sovereign which has led to a passive stance that Edward portrays throughout the play. He has yielded in the discussion above, and it appears that Gaveston's

characterisation of Edward as a 'pliant king' was an apt one.

However, even more disturbing than Edward's lack of will is his decision to divide the kingdom in order to please the barons:

> EDWARD
> My lord, you shall be Chancellor of the realm,
> Thou, Lancaster, High Admiral of our fleet,
> Young Mortimer and his uncle shall be earls,
> And you lord Warwick, President of the North,
> And thou [To PEMBROKE] of Wales; If this content you not,
> Make several kingdoms of this monarchy
> And share it equally amongst you all,
> So I may have some nook or corner left
> To frolic with my dearest Gaveston.
>
> (*Edward II*, I.iv.65–73)

Once again Edward's impulsiveness undermines his political leadership. For Edward the unity of the kingdom is not an issue since he does not rule according to ancient custom or hierarchical order. Furthermore, this division of the realm as well as political standings represents an example of Edward's willingness to confuse body politic and the temporal body; for Edward, body politic and body natural are inseparable for his political decisions are guided by his personal motivations. What Edward fails to see, however, is that his personal actions have political ramifications. Indeed, this is exactly what has infuriated the barons throughout the play.

Edward's decision not to separate the political and personal spheres comes at a price. Ribner (1955, 251) argues that the idea of a divided kingdom in Elizabethan England was abhorred and, therefore, Edward explicitly entertaining the idea of a dismantled realm would have been a cause of great concern among the Elizabethans. A divided kingdom entailed instability and posed the threat of a civil war, a genuine fear in Renaissance England (cf. Sinfield 1992, 40). As Merchant (1967, 22) suggests, securing the integrity of the realm was Elizabeth's main preoccupation, and this courting of a civil war would have been regarded as

a fundamental disregard of royal duty. Thus, by proposing to disunite the kingdom in order to entertain his personal desires with his beloved Gaveston, Edward represents a sovereign whose actions are motivated by personal indulgence instead of the good of the kingdom which drastically conflicts with the ideal and deified picture of the ruler promulgated by the Tudor regime. Indeed, portraying a monarch as dismissive towards the unity of the realm would have directly contradicted the Elizabethan orthodoxy and hence undermined the mythology surrounding the deified image of the sovereign.

Moreover, Edward's abilities are further questioned by the barons' mockery, which is aimed at Edward's disastrous war with the Scots at Bannockburn:

> MORTIMER JUNIOR
> When wert thou in the field with banner spread?
> But once, and then thy soldiers marched like players,
> With garish robes, not armour, and thyself
> Bedaubed with gold, rode laughing at the rest,
> Nodding and shaking of thy spangled crest,
> Where women's favours hung like labels down.
> (*Edward II*, II.ii.182–187)

For the barons, Edward's outlandish garments and his unorthodox demeanour function as an allegory of his incompetence as a military leader. Lancaster continues this mockery by referring to Edward's performance on the battlefield as “England’s high disgrace” (*Edward II*, II.ii.189), hence evoking the sense of patriotism and aspiring to portray Edward as an entity not belonging to the realm he wishes to serve.

Furthermore, Edward is depicted not only as an incompetent military leader, but his inadequacies seem to extend to the Crown's financial matters as well. For example, in the scene where Mortimer Junior accuses Edward of frivolous spending of the realm's assets on idle things, the King is once again subordinated by his own subjects in terms of political leadership:

MORTIMER JUNIOR
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.
(*Edward II*, II.ii.157–160)

Therefore, according to the barons, in addition to his flaws in the battlefield, Edward also seems to spend the realm's assets on trifle things which seem to have no purpose. Edward's desire to merge the two bodies of the king has hence led to a weakened political position that ultimately costs him his throne. The play, then, presented the Elizabethan audience with a sovereign who is easily manipulated, incompetent in terms of warfare as well as managing the realm financially. When Edward is appalled at the barons' resistance, Lancaster once again instructs the King: “Learn then to rule us better and the realm” (*Edward II*, I.iv.39).

Moreover, in addition to being subjected to continuous doubt from his peers, it is Edward himself who seems to remain unsure about his role as the leader of the realm. As Brown (2002, 176) has pointed out, Edward himself ponders his own position as the sovereign and often communicates a sense of reluctance:

Full often am I soaring up to heaven
To plain me to the gods against them both;
But when I call to mind I am a king,
Methinks I should revenge me of the wrongs
That Mortimer and Isabel have done.
(*Edward II*, V.I.21–25)

It does seem that Edward is somewhat indifferent to his own status. This is emphasised by Edward's constant use of the conditional when referring to his own position as the sovereign: “If I be England's king” (*Edward II*, III.ii.135), “If I be King” (*Edward II*, I.iv.105) and “If I be cruel and grow tyrannous” (*Edward II*, II.ii.206). These doubts cast by Edward demystify the divine power of the sovereign, as he is humanised and shown to question his own judgment. This is common in Elizabethan drama and, for instance, Montrose (1996, 84) has

observed that by allowing the common audience to listen to the King's soliloquies in *Henry V* Shakespeare demystified the realm's secrets on stage. Similarly, with *Edward II* Marlowe reveals the sovereign's inner thoughts, but also portrays the King as suffering from feelings of doubt, similarly to all mortals. Indeed, Marlowe aims to portray, as Heinemann puts it, "the contradiction between the sacred royal office and the fallible human individual who holds it" (1990, 179). The King is no longer something of a mystical or celestial being but a human as much as the actor portraying him. Renaissance absolutism promoted the idea that the King was never to be considered a subject (Kastan 1999, 149), but throughout the play Edward is subordinated, either by his underlings or his own feelings. These feelings might be personal, but on Renaissance stage they became explicitly political.

Moreover, Edward is constantly making remarks that undermine the matters of the realm and celebrates the personal, which again entails a certain degree of confusion surrounding the body politic and the temporal body. Edward's rhetoric is strikingly dramatic: "Ere my sweet Gaveston shall part from me / This isle shall fleet upon the ocean / And wander to the unfrequented Ind." (*Edward II*, I.iv.48–50). For Edward, the fate of the realm is dependent on the fate of Gaveston, and one cannot quite simply exist without the other. Indeed, Edward goes as far as talk about the destruction of England if he is unable to spend time with Gaveston. This emphasises Edward's indifference to the matters of the realm which are quite insignificant in comparison to the yearning he feels for Gaveston.

In addition to indifference towards domestic political matters, even a direct military threat from abroad does not seem to bother Edward. For example, Mortimer Junior, bearing news about the arrival of foreign troops on England's soil, grows impatient towards Edward's indifferent demeanour:

LANCASTER
My lord.
EDWARD
How now, what news? is Gaveston arrived?
MORTIMER JUNIOR
Nothing but Gaveston; What means your grace?
You have matters of more weight to think upon;
The King of France sets foot in Normandy.
EDWARD
A trifle; we'll expel him when we please;
(*Edward II*, II.ii.5–10)

Belittling a foreign threat by labelling it a trifle is indeed a great offence against the royal duties of the sovereign. Considering the political circumstances of the late sixteenth century, this would not have gone unnoticed by the contemporary audience and it would have functioned as a reminder of the war with Spain. For instance, Shepard (2002, 1–2) has noted the anxiety around the security of the state at the time which manifested itself by the increase in public discourse on foreign threats to England. Thus, despite emerging victorious against the Armada, the imminent perils of foreign powers would not have been forgotten. Witnessing a sovereign indifferent to matters of national security could have caused controversy and sparked public outrage.

Interestingly, this lack of political commitment and leadership displayed by Edward throughout the play is contrasted with the traitorous Queen Isabella who is portrayed as a passionate character whose strong commitment to the realm (although she seems to be primarily motivated by her lust for power) grows stronger as play progresses. Even though she first appears as a victim of Edward's emotional neglect and wishes to retire into the woods to “live in grief and baleful discontent” (*Edward II*, I.ii.48), her demeanour rapidly alters as she is portrayed as a fiery defender of the fate of the realm:

QUEEN
Now, lords, our loving friends and countrymen,
Welcome to England all with prosperous winds;

> Our kindest friends in Belgia have we left,
> To cope with friends at home; a heavy case
> When force to force is knit, and sword and glaive
> In civil broils make kin and countrymen
> Slaughter themselves in others, and their sides
> With their own weapons gored. But what's the help?
> Misgoverned kings are cause of all this wrack,
> And, Edward, thou art one among them all,
> Whose looseness hath betrayed thy land to spoil
> Who made the channels overflow with blood.
> Of thine own people patron shouldst thou be,
> (*Edward II*, IV.iv.1–13)

Although this eloquent speech comes to an abrupt halt by the politically and emotionally impatient Mortimer, "Nay, madam, if you be warrior / Ye must not grow so passionate in speeches" (*Edward II*, IV.iv.15–16), it illustrates Isabella's political commitment which is sharply contrasted with Edward's lack of political will. The irony in this has already been noted since the Queen previously fled from England in order to seek help from her homeland France. Thus by portraying a French queen as more adamant to preserve the unity of the realm than the King of England – the allegedly God-appointed sovereign – Marlowe clearly manipulates the contemporary political atmosphere; the most vigorous defender of the realm is not the monarch but a representative of a foreign power from the home of the Guise and Catholic faith.[35]

However, Edward does seem to be able to show signs of strength in the time of need. For example, when hearing of the murder of his beloved Gaveston, he goes on to deliver a fiery soliloquy in which he swears to revenge his death:

> EDWARD
> [*Kneeling*] By earth, the common mother of us all,
> By heaven, and all the moving orbs thereof,
> By this right hand, and by my father's sword,
> And all the honours 'longing to my crown,

[35] Pertaining to the idea of a foreign threat, Pye (1999, 153), in his discussion on *Richard II*, notes that the Crown discovered the first foreign plot to assassinate Elizabeth in 1582 which involved both the Duke of Guise and Mary Queen of Scots.

> I will have heads and lives for him as many
> As I have manors, castles, towns, and towers.
> Treacherous Warwick, traitorous Mortimer!
> 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,
> That so my bloody colours may suggest
> Remembrance of revenge immortally
> On your accursed traitorous progeny,
> You villains that have slain my Gaveston.
> (*Edward II*, III.ii.128–142)

Sanders (1968, 140) has argued that Edward is completely out of character in this soliloquy and cannot be regarded as the true speaker of these lines. However, Sanders seems to define Edward solely as a weak character (the critic is clearly frustrated with the ‘compulsive’ Edward), thus underestimating Edward's capacity to assume different roles. Edward is clearly capable of portraying a fierce ruler as well. Although it is true that these lines uttered by Edward are motivated by Gaveston's death, not by a threat to his homeland – Edward's passion is finally triggered by the loss of his lover – Edward does portray a strong will. This will, however, does not originate from his sense of patriotism (i.e. not from the body politic) but from the private sphere. This nevertheless drives him into warfare with the earls and hence renders him into a politically viable character in the play. As Edward exclaims, “defend your sovereign’s right” (*Edward II*, III.iii.182), he finally seems to take an interest in his sovereignty. Thus Marlowe depicts Edward’s character and the political choices he makes as a complicated infusion of the political and private, which cannot be simply dismissed as inconsistencies in his character.

Hence, in conclusion, the play offers a complex dilemma; King Edward is portrayed as an incompetent and weak ruler but, according to the providentialist ideology, he should still be

regarded as a sovereign appointed by God.[36] Marlowe is thus portraying a multivocal perspective on kingship, one that allows critical commentary on notions of any celestial qualities of the sovereign. However, does Edward's murder then undo any voices of subversion that Marlowe might have been communicating? Indeed, does the killing of an incompetent ruler then simply contain possible radicalism? Consequently, I shall discuss this notion in the following subsection.

5.3 The Murder of Edward – Undermining the Practice of Renaissance Executions

Throughout the years much has been written about Marlowe's extraordinary depiction of the murder of King Edward. Whereas earlier criticism often focused on interpreting Edward's demise as poetic justice, that is, as the traditional Christian notion of punishment for his 'sin' of sodomy,[37] modern criticism has conversely aspired to emphasise the potentially subversive manner in which Marlowe portrays the execution. Indeed, instead of aligning the murder with traditional notions of cautionary tales (a familiar characteristic of *De Casibus* tragedies) or poetic justice, Marlowe describes the murder without offering any moralising voices or providentialist justification. Conversely, as the execution is shown to be the result of political scheming by Mortimer and Isabella and their personal and political will to power, Edward's death is transformed into a provocative commentary on the practice of executions organised by the Crown. Portraying the murder of a sovereign on stage in early modern England was

[36] Incidentally, this constituted a problem with the trial of Mary Queen of Scots who argued she was above any earthly power due to her status as a sovereign ruler (Guy 1988, 334–335). Consequently, the disastrous example of Edward II's covert murder led to a public execution of Mary, according to official statute (ibid., 336).

[37] Merchant points out that critics have commented on the congruity of Edward's sin and his death: "That suffering and death should bear an appropriate relation to his sins committed is a commonplace of medieval thought, theological, literary or aesthetic" (1967, xxi). This view, however, is contrary to my interpretation since, as I pointed out in subsection 5.1., the play does not portray homoeroticism as inherently 'sinful', nor is the relationship between Gaveston and Edward condemned.

highly precarious as it was considered a treason to even imagine the death of a monarch (Cunningham 2002, 134), and therefore the portrayal of the execution of a sovereign in *Edward II* posed a potential threat to the Elizabethan absolutist orthodoxy.

Regardless of one's interpretation of the murder of Edward, the vile nature and the abhorrence of the scene remain unquestionable. As Brooke (1966, 103), among many other critics, points out, the murder of Edward and the ordeal he must endure throughout the latter part of the play is exceptionally vile even in terms of Elizabethan drama that is abundant in depiction of violence (take, for instance, Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*) and the appalling side of humanity. Indeed, Edward is subjected to relentless psychological and physical torment before he is murdered in the most heinous manner. Firstly, he is deprived of food and drink and appears to survive on will alone: “Within a dungeon England's king is kept, / Where I am starved for want of sustenance; / My daily diet is heart-breaking sobs” (*Edward II*, V.iii.19–21). Afterwards, the appalling conditions of Edward’s dungeon are revealed: “This dungeon where they keep me is the sink / Wherein the filth of all the castle falls” (*Edward II*, V.v.55–56). Finally, moments before his death Edward is subjected to a ruthless emotional torture and humiliation by the vicious assassin Lightborn (*Edward II*, V.v.41–105), who takes it upon himself to indulge in the act before ultimately murdering Edward by thrusting a red hot spit through his anus to his bowels. Indeed, not only would this appalling treatment of the sovereign have evoked the sympathy of the contemporary Elizabethan spectators but, as Bevington and Shapiro (1988, 275) suggest, it would have presented them with a startling reminder of the precariousness of all worldly existence.

Hence, the atmosphere of the ending is more than sinister, differing considerably from Marlowe's other plays. Furthermore, the tone throughout *Edward II* stands out in comparison to Marlowe's main dramatic works. Marlowe often incorporates scenes of spectacles in his

plays and this applies especially to the depiction of violence. For instance, everything is made spectacular and grand in *Tamburlaine I* and *II*, *The Jew of Malta* and *Doctor Faustus* as the language is embellished by an extensive use of the hyperbole (the famous 'Marlowe's mighty line'), while the scenes themselves are also of extraordinary nature and visually spectacular. For example, enemies are harnessed and forced to drag their conqueror's chariots (*Tamburlaine the Great, Part II,* IV.iii.), the 'criminal mastermind' Barabas builds a spectacular cauldron and ultimately perishes in his own cunning trap (*The Jew of Malta,* V.v.1–88) and supernatural spirits make grand appearances on stage (*Doctor Faustus,* II.ii.85–174).

Edward II, on the other hand, differs in this respect. For instance, Steane suggests that "the dominant spirit [of the play] is one of belittlement" (1964, 228), which seems like an accurate description of the somewhat plain and immediate characteristic of *Edward II* in which most of the scenes in the play are downsized and austere, especially the scene featuring the actual murder which is everything but visually spectacular:

> EDWARD
> I am too weak and feeble to resist;
> Assist me, sweet God, and receive my soul.
> LIGHTBORN
> Run for the table.
> EDWARD
> O spare me, or dispatch me in a trice.
> LIGHTBORN
> So, lay the table down, and stamp on it,
> But not too hard, lest that you bruise his body.
> (*Edward II*, V.vi.107–112)

Indeed, this austere ending in which the murder is not even actually described[38] – some

[38] Orgel (1996, 47–48) argues that critics are too eager to read the murder as a reference to the act of sodomy and suggests that instead of being murdered with a red hot spit, Edward is instead pressed to death. However, it would seem that this reading would make Lightborn's earlier request for Matrevis futile: "[G]et me a spit and let it be red-hot" (*Edward II*, V.v.30). It is true that the spit is not mentioned after this remark, but the details concerning Edward's murder were so widely known among the Elizabethans that it would not have been

versions of the play include additional information, but no stage directions – differentiates *Edward II* from the other plays since it conveys a strong naturalistic and realistic feeling. As Hattaway points out, the emblematic endings of Marlowe's other plays share "a sterile, antique, and unresonant quality" (1996, 209), whereas *Edward II* makes an exception in this regard. Additionally, it is also the only murder in *Edward II* that is explicitly staged in front of an audience; Edward is not escorted out of sight like Gaveston, Kent and many other characters who meet their demise in the play, but his execution is committed at plain sight, in front of everyone, thus inviting the audience to witness the heinous murder of a sovereign.

Indeed, Edward's death is appalling and empathy-evoking in its careful naturalism which, as Brooke puts it, "makes the horror more immediately felt" (1966, 103). There is neither formal speech nor staging to distance and alienate the audience from the death of Edward but, on the contrary, the act of horrid violence is both immediate and represented in a naturalistic manner. Shepherd (1986, 36) argues that although Elizabethan violence is often seen merely as iconographic, it has the potential to convey a political statement, one that is beyond mere sensationalism. This, I believe, is the case with the execution scene in *Edward II* that features no signs of extravagance but is described in terms of striking naturalism.

As regards the practice of executions in Elizabethan England, they were organised by the Crown as public spectacles that were highly theatrical, following carefully-devised scripts and conveying eternal 'truths' to the spectators. Thus the executions had a certain instructive nature which Stephen Greenblatt refers to as the "culturally dominant notion of repetition as a warning" (1980, 201), by which the critic means the state repeating precise patterns with the purpose of conveying moral values to individuals from one generation to the other in order to

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necessary to explicitly describe the act itself. Also, Edward screams so loud that it could "raise the town" (*Edward II*, V.v.113) which would probably be physically impossible if he was being crushed to death.

form obedient and God-fearing subjects. Furthermore, in addition to teaching the tenets of religious and social orthodoxy to the people, the state also exercised its power to inflict torment and death upon its subjects as an edifying caution:

> Each branding or hanging or disemboweling was theatrical in conception and performance, a repeatable admonitory drama enacted on a scaffold before a rapt audience. Those who threatened order...were identified and punished accordingly. […] This idea of the "notable spectacle," the "theater of God's judgements," extended quite naturally to drama itself [...]
>
> (ibid.)

This notion of the production of ideology by the state is closely associated with Althusser's argument that the political conditions are reproduced by the ideological and repressive state apparatuses (1971, 16–19). Indeed, as Sinfield reminds us, the state claims "a monopoly of legitimate violence, and the exercise of that violence is justified through stories about the barbarity of those who are constituted as its demonized others" (1992, 34).

Therefore, as Foakes (2003, 36–37) suggests, Elizabethan dramatists wrote for an audience who were more than used to witnessing public spectacles of torture and violence in the form of executions, and theatres would capitalise on the public fascination towards violence.[39] In particular, the Elizabethan audience would have been familiar with the *exemplum*, a form of rhetoric that conveyed 'truths' to the spectators, for instance about the universe, political behaviour or human nature (Lunney 2002, 74). They were also a structure of interpretation in that they helped the audience to make sense of what they were witnessing as they would identify the exempla and interpret them accordingly (Lunney 2008, 30).

Consequently, a traditional interpretation of Edward's death as a punishment for his homoeroticism would be seen as an exemplum, a cautionary tale of a sinner. Stymeist,

[39] Additionally, as Cunningham (1990, 213) points out, Marlowe himself – in addition to having access to various trials and executions through several literary sources – most likely witnessed a number of actual executions. Similarly, emphasising Marlowe's own experiences, Sales (1996, 124) suggests that the manner in which Edward is subjected to psychological torture and deprivation may have its origins in the practises that took place in Elizabethan prisons.

although acknowledging that the sympathy that Edward evokes in the spectator may challenge the "cultural legitimacy of admonitory displays against homoeroticism" (2004, 246), argues that the execution of Edward could have functioned as a warning to people of the dangers of practising an alternative sexuality:

> In the early modern period, physical punishment was expected to precisely fit the crime, for executions rituals were much more than simply the beheading of hanging of a criminal. Public execution functioned as the preeminent form of ritual removal of the criminalized scapegoat; in this ceremonialized murder, every mark and act upon the physical body had its symbolic value.
>
> (ibid., 244)

However, as Lunney (2002, 83–84) points out, Marlowe refashions the common cautionary tale by ignoring any moral lessons and emphasising the immediate experience of Edward's death. Therefore it is the spectacle of the King's suffering that draws the audience's attention to Edward and his torture rather than any moral lessons. Hence Edward's suffering does not convey any edifying totalities or eternal truths to the spectators.

Moreover, Lunney (ibid.) has also observed that the language used towards the end of the play is highly emotional, including constant references to grief and sorrow; Edward speaks of "endless torments" (*Edward II,* V.i.80) and then doubts his own sanity for his sorrow and torture: "This grief makes me lunatic" (*Edward II,* V.i.114). Afterwards he acknowledges the impact of his torment: "This usage makes my misery increase" (*Edward II,* V.iii.16), and refers to his "poor distressed soul" (*Edward II,* V.iii.38). Furthermore, Edward regards his downfall as figuratively branded onto humanity as he sees Lightborn's face embellished with characteristics of his own death: "I see my tragedy written in thy brows" (*Edward II,* V.v.73). Even though Edward states during his deposition that he cannot express himself: "I have no power to speak" (*Edward II,* V.i.93), it seems that the closer Edward is to his own demise, the more eloquent is his speech. This danger of Edward evoking the citizens' (as well as the

audience's) empathy is also noted by Mortimer Junior: “The king must die or Mortimer goes down; / The commons now begin to pity him” (*Edward II*, V.iv.1–2). Thus, instead of representing the execution as a cautionary tale and demonising 'the other', Marlowe subverts the tenets of the exemplum. As Lunney puts it, “the death scene suggests to the audience that cautionary tales are irrelevant…the spectators are first distracted, then absorbed by the spectacle of the king’s suffering” (2008, 36).

Furthermore, in addition to deviating from the traditional use of the exemplum, Marlowe distorts the traditional pattern of Renaissance execution by adding rhetoric that challenges the justification of executions. According to Cunningham (1990, 211–212), any form of spontaneous speech during Renaissance executions had to be suppressed for it endangered the providentialist nature of the spectacle, meaning that the illusion of divine containment that the Crown aspired to represent through public spectacles of power might have been distorted by any form of uncontrolled speech. Indeed, the spectacles were rigorously scripted and the language used during the executions was carefully policed, and hence the officers of the Crown conveyed to the public the impression that God was in total control of the events (ibid.). Therefore the dominant ideology supporting a providentialist order of things – one in which the condemned was given no sympathy – functioned as the governing principle of Elizabethan spectacles.

However, in *Edward II*, where speech forms an integral part of the latter part of the play, no such suppression of the speech of the condemned is presented. Conversely, as was noted earlier, Edward’s lamentations and his *contemptus mundi*[40] are vividly portrayed, evoking empathy towards the protagonist:

[40] *Contempt of the world*. There is a distinct change in Edward's character and demeanor after his capture: he seems to transform from an individual agent into a symbol of grief.

> And there in mire and puddle have I stood
> This ten days' space, and lest that I should sleep,
> One plays continually upon a drum;
> They give me bread and water being a king,
> So that for want of sleep and sustenance
> My mind's distempered and my body's numbed,
> And whether I have limbs or no I know not;
> Oh would my blood dropped out from every vein
> As doth this water from my tattered robes;
> Tell Isabel the queen, I looked not thus
> When for her sake I ran at tilt in France
> And there unhorsed the Duke of Cleremont.
>
> (*Edward II*, V.v.58–69)

Furthermore, the importance of the suppression of the victim's speech is portrayed in the scene of the execution where Matrevis fears that Edward's screams will reveal their actions: "I fear me that this cry will raise the town" (*Edward II*, V.v.113). This fear portrayed by Edward's tormentors highlights the fact that their deed is to remain a secret. As Tromly (1998, 131) points out, whereas Holinshed's *Chronicles* suggest that Edward's cry during his murder offers a restoration of order,[41] this viewpoint is not only omitted in the play but, conversely, the threat of the scream being heard outside the dungeon is described as being dangerous, thus emphasising the injustice taking place in the prison. Thus speech and voice and the fear of their repercussions form a fundamental part of the murder, contrary to the contemporary custom of public executions.

Furthermore, other allusions to secrecy regarding Edward's murder can be found throughout the play. For instance, when giving instructions on the manner in which Edward is to be killed, Mortimer Junior orders Lightborn to "do it bravely and be secret" (*Edward II*,

[41] Holinshed provides the following description of Edward's murder, implying a justification of Edward's crime: "His cry did move many within the castle and town of Berkeley to compassion, plainly hearing him utter a wailful noise, as the tormentors were about to murther him, so that diverse being awakened therewith (as they themselves confessed) prayed heartily to God to receive his soul, when they understood by his cry what the matter meant" (Holinshed, quoted in Tromly 1998, 131). Additionally, the manner in which Marlowe foregrounds Edward's murder (notably the physical and psychological deprivation) cannot be found in Holinshed's account of the murder.

V.iv.28) and “so it be not spied” (*Edward II*, V.iv.40). Mortimer does not adhere to this concealment only to hide any traces of violence on Edward's body, but it also functions as a means of power. For example, Thurn (1991, 124) points out that the play makes several references to decapitation[42] and that the decapitation of an enemy could assert and preserve political power. For instance, Edward III addressing the severed head of Mortimer illustrates his power over the usurpers. However, because King Edward is denied this ‘privilege’ of decapitation, he is also deprived of the dignity that the nobility enjoyed in terms of executions. This further emphasises the fact that the execution does not follow any script to which the audience would have been accustomed. According to the decorum of the early modern England, the nobility would have been executed in front of spectators and the means of execution would have invariably been decapitation. This is omitted in *Edward II* in which the murder is portrayed without any decorum, hence demystifying the formal nature of Renaissance executions that strove to eliminate any sympathy that the audience might have elicited towards the condemned.

Moreover, as regards the manner of execution, the murder of Gaveston by decapitation raises questions as well; the fact that Gaveston, a man who is “basely born” (*Edward II*, I.iv.402) – as commented by Mortimer Junior – is executed by decapitation is problematic: “soldiers away with him; / We'll send his head by thee;” (*Edward II*, II.v.52–53). Although it is true that, as Arundel states, Warwick had him killed like a common thief: “But ere he came, Warwick in ambush lay, / And bare him to his death, and in a trench / Strake off his head” (*Edward II*, III.ii.118–120), Gaveston is still given the courtesy of being decapitated which signifies a certain sense of dignity of which Edward is certainly deprived. Stymeist (2004, 244–245) points out that Pierce Gaveston was executed in somewhat ceremonial

[42] The word *head* appears more than 40 times in the play, signifying the importance of the theme.

circumstances in front of a crowd, and the fact that Marlowe altered this event suggests a congruity between his crime and the secretive manner of his execution. However, the reason why Marlowe decided to portray Gaveston's execution in a trench might lie in the fact that the playwright had to compress approximately thirty years into five acts (Ribner 1955, 245), thus forcing him to alter certain historical facts (similarly, the head of Mortimer is delivered to Edward III in a matter of minutes after the his orders). Rather, it seems that the fact that Gaveston is decapitated and the King is not highlights the incongruity between the true motives behind the murders and the practice of executions that the Crown maintained in order to preserve an illusion of righteousness.

Furthermore, Cunningham notes that the Crown aspired to portray the body of the condemned as a "triumph of right" (1990, 210), that is, it was literally branded with the punishment deemed suitable and considered an object more than a human body. Indeed, as Stymeist puts it, "spectacles of execution intended that the victim be entirely objectified so that their suffering did not move the audience" (2004, 246). However, as I have already pointed out, Edward's death does evoke the audience's sympathy. In addition, it seems that Edward's physical body is able to endure the horrors it is forced to undergo; according to Matrevis, Edward "hath a body able to endure / More than we can inflict and therefore now / Let us assail his mind another while" (*Edward II*, V.v.10–12). This quality of Edward poses a threat since any sign of resistance from the body of the condemned potentially threatened to demystify the power of the monarch as well as the providential pattern of the execution (Cunningham 1990, 212). Edward's body is not docile, but it resists the torture it is subjected to and thus becomes a site of conflict that potentially threatens the state's monopoly of public violence.

Furthermore, towards the end of the play, it is not only the physical body of Edward that is

ravished and deprived of all dignity but, additionally, the same applies to the notion of kingship; as a result of policy, sovereignty and the body politic is similarly debased and diminished as Edward's own temporal body as a subject of torture and deprivation. Throughout the play, Edward has infused the concepts of body politic and his personal body which results in his own demise, and this theme continues in his humiliation and execution. Finally, acknowledging the injustice of his deposition, he invites the spectators to witness his downfall and remember that they are observing the demise of a sovereign: "Know that I am a king" (*Edward II*, V.v.88).

Finally, the lack of providentialist framework as well as any moralising script in Edward's execution is embodied in the character of Lightborn, Edward's executioner. This ferocious assassin with a diabolical name[43] – who does not appear in Holinshed's *Chronicles* (DiMatteo 1999, 234) – is portrayed as a vicious murderer exhibiting a disturbing sense of pride and pleasure towards his atrocious profession in an eerie account of his trade:

> 'Tis not the first time I have killed a man;
> I learned in Naples how to poison flowers,
> To strangle with a lawn thrust down the throat,
> To pierce the wind-pipe with a needle's point,
> Or whilst one is asleep, to take a quill
> And blow a little powder in his ears,
> Or open his mouth and pour quicksilver down,
> But yet I have a braver way than these.
>
> (*Edward II*, V.iv.30–37)

Sales (1996, 123) notes that not only is Lightborn's demonic name problematical, but he also possesses a vast repertoire of execution methods of which he takes pride, a peculiar characteristic for an executioner. Indeed, in addition to enjoying his work, he also yearns for applause for his deeds: "Tell me first, was it not bravely done?" (*Edward II*, V.v.115). Yet he is

[43] Levin (1952, 101) points out that the name *Lightborn* is an Anglicized version of *Lucifer*, thus conveying strong diabolical undertones in terms of Christian mythology. This might indicate a metaphor of Edward's torment as he is trapped in his own figurative Hell in which Lucifer himself is sent to torture him.

depicted as being on the side of the rule that aimed to represent itself as a divine authority in contemporary Elizabethan England.

Similarly, if the practice of execution in early modern England had the objective to transform the condemned into a figure of evil whereas the monarch and justices were portrayed as representations of good (Cunningham 1990, 210), it is problematic that the executioner in *Edward II* is depicted as having a diabolical nature. With Lightborn, Marlowe reverses the roles of the condemned and the executioner; the demon, in this case the state, avails itself of the diabolical rhetoric that was used to portray the condemned as the sinner, whereas the condemned, normally 'the demonized other' (in Sinfield's words), represents the side of the rule, thus exposing the arbitrariness of divine rule.[44] Furthermore, Lightborn is murdered only seconds after the execution which further illustrates the whimsical world of ruthless political scheming the characters inhabit.

Hence Marlowe clearly seeks to undermine this divine script maintained by the Tudor state, and the argument is supported further by the fact that Marlowe deliberately added the character in the play, thus deviating from his original source. As was already pointed out in subsection 4.3., Marlowe made similar deviations with Gaveston's social standing, so the deliberate alterations to the original source emphasises Marlowe's will to add subversive elements in the play. Hence, the murder of Edward does not entail any form of a divine justification, but it is committed because of political and personal reasons. By stripping the murder scene of any traditional notions of cautionary tales and divine justifications, Marlowe aims at depicting it in terms of human agency, simultaneously attacking the institution of

[44] Although one possible interpretation could suggest that Lightborn's diabolical nature reinforces the Elizabethan providentialist orthodoxy in that the murder a sovereign is committed by a representative of evil (i.e. the murder of a monarch is a sin against God), the radical nature of *Edward II* as well as the fact that Marlowe added the character in the play (along with other aspects that draw attention to the play's various problematic social and political notions) might state otherwise.

public punishment in early modern England.

6. Conclusion

My main objective in this thesis has been to point out that the subversion that Marlowe provides in *Edward II* originates from the playwright's refusal to offer essentialist truths about politics, society or culture. Hence with *Edward II* Marlowe presented to the Elizabethan audience a world deprived of any transcendental significance in which hierarchy and order are but transient formulations of human agency. This decision to omit any moralising voices clearly undermines the hierarchical and absolutist notions that the Elizabethan Crown aspired to promulgate to its subjects. Indeed, it has now become evident that – contrary to the general view in Marlovian criticism in the mid-twentieth century – *Edward II* should not be simply regarded as an apologist for the Tudor orthodoxy but as a truly radical dramatic work which challenges many of the dominant cultural, political and social notions of its time. In the static Elizabethan society that aspired to portray itself as a harmonious entity, *Edward II* functions as an example of the fact that this ideology was by no means an unquestioned orthodoxy; whether the play is examined as a critique of providentialism, political harmony, the existing social order or the entire institution of monarchy, the heterodox portrayal of history and society remains as one of its most provocative aspects.

Indeed, contradicting the orthodox illusion conveyed by contemporary texts (such as the *Chronicles* or *The Elizabethan Homilies*), Marlowe gives voice to what the Tudor regime aspired to suppress. Marginalised ideas such as the deposition of a sovereign, sodomy and the hypocrisy behind the justification of state-organised violence were therefore openly discussed on the Renaissance stage. Hence, what remains as perhaps the most compelling and radical feature of *Edward II* is the explicit portrayal of contrasting ideas regarding the realm instead of a single, unified political vision. As Thurn puts it, Marlowe presents history as a “sphere in

which mutually exclusive possibilities are contested and sometimes held in exquisite tension" (1991, 119). This tension aptly describes for the multivocal description of history presented by Marlowe; the world of *Edward II* is rooted in subjectivity and any external hierarchies such as providentialism are depicted as artificial constructs that the characters exploit to justify their own lust for power.

This, however, does not undermine the political dimension of the play and – as I have pointed out – matters related to numerous political and social phenomena are explicitly discussed and problematized in the play. Consequently, the lack of providentialism is what most likely led some critics to argue that play is merely a depiction of the tragedy of an individual without having any form of political or social meaning. It is true that the personal occupies a central position in the play; Edward's reign is torn apart because of his refusal to separate his body politic from his personal matters. However, I would argue that Marlowe had a clear political purpose in doing so as this portrayal of Edward as an infallible mortal would have invariably demystified the myth surrounding the royal office. Furthermore, the omission of providentialist framework in the play goes to show that Marlowe wanted to avoid adhering to such external beliefs (as exploited by the Crown), and instead depict history in terms of human subjectivity.

Moreover, this subjectivity – that was quintessential for the political plays of the time – manifests itself in the difficulty in aligning oneself with either Edward or Mortimer Junior. Indeed, although the audience's sense of empathy towards Edward is invariably evoked as his torment grows ever more abhorrent, it is challenging to comfortably identify with him either. For example, what are we to make of Edward's tyrannical treatment of the bishop of Coventry: "Throw off his golden mitre, rend his stole, / And in the channel christen him anew" (*Edward II*, I.i.186–187). This might imply Edward II's true nature as a ruler which

could have alienated the contemporary Elizabethan audience from the monarch.[45] Ultimately, the scene in which Matrevis and Gurney shave Edward's beard and similarly 'christen' him in the channel (*Edward II*, V.iii.1–48) parallels this tyranny of Edward. Indeed, *Edward II* does not offer any clear answers or objective 'rights' and 'wrongs', but it is a world defined in terms of power relations.

It seems that it was this moral ambivalence that made critics who regarded history plays as having to portray a strong voice of morality (i.e. a providential framework) in order to be counted as 'genuine' representatives of the genre uncomfortable with *Edward II*. For instance, when Sanders called Marlowe a "man-degrader" (1968, 139) and Tillyard accused the play of having "no sense of any sweep or pattern of history" (1966, 115), it seems that both critics were alienated by the play's omission of any divine responsibilities and the fact that the play does not explicitly condemn for instance the usurpation of the throne by Mortimer Junior. Conversely, the play is exactly what Marlowe intended it to be in order to provide a dissident voice against essentialist notions about humanity. Indeed, discovering a simple didactic guideline to align oneself with in the play is challenging, nor is that the purpose of the play in the first place.

This is not to say that the world of *Edward II* is completely amoral, but it does lay bare the myriad of contrasting ideological forces that shape history which, in turn, have their origins in rather cold-blooded human agency. Hence, *Edward II* is a play that actively seeks to reveal any illusion of coherence and stability and in so doing challenges the very foundations of the Elizabethan orthodoxy which was built around the reiteration of a rigid social order as a part

[45] For instance, Bredbeck (1991, 52–53) brings forth gruesome details concerning Edward II's disregard for the well-being of his realm, including the devastating famine sweeping the nation at the time. The contemporary audience's attitude towards Edward might have been affected by their understanding of Edward II's disastrous reign which was commonly known through the earlier chronicles.

of a divine order. Indeed, what *Edward II* provides is mobility within a dominantly static environment and this social, cultural and political mobility is best embodied in the character of Gaveston through his protean nature.

Accordingly, one can see why earlier liberal humanist criticism might have regarded the play predominantly as an apology for the Tudor orthodoxy. For instance, pertaining to the portrayal of sodomy in the play, a traditional Christian interpretation might view Edward as a sodomite who is punished accordingly for his 'sin' of sodomy. However, this interpretation is hardly plausible considering the various subversive elements in the play; for instance, I have drawn attention to the empathy solicited towards Edward, the elevated rhetoric on the relationship between Edward and Gaveston, the character of Lightborn or Marlowe's refusal to align himself with cautionary tales or the traditional framework of Renaissance executions. Conversely, Marlowe's subversive portrayal of sodomy aligns itself strongly with the heterodox discussion of other political and social matters in the play, which challenge the prevailing Elizabethan orthodoxy.

It seems that it is Marlowe's careful manipulation of orthodox politics with heterodox ideas that forms the dual nature of *Edward II.* Indeed, this might be the reason why the hand of the censor did not touch the play and, unlike *Richard II*, the deposition scene in *Edward II* was acted out as it was written down. For instance, Knowles (2001, 116) suggests that in order to escape the censorship Marlowe specifically altered the tone of the latter part of the play in which Edward's potential tyranny is highlighted, Mortimer Junior is turned into a Machiavellian caricature and the play makes allusions to the tenets of providentialist tragedy. This is quite understandable as the censorship would have banned all explicit references to contemporary politics and religion and therefore any such discussion would have prevented the play from ever being staged as it is in front of an audience. Therefore, working in an

environment hostile to such an open form of political discussion, Marlowe was evidently forced to assimilate the dominant ideology of his time in his play in order to have his play presented to paying spectators who, in their decision to contribute financially to the theatrical institution, also exercised a form of power and autonomy.

However, this does not entail lack of radicalism in the play. Whereas New Historicism has often focused on arguing for the containment of such subversion, this, as I have argued, is not so straightforward. Thus, presenting these ideas on the contestable Renaissance stage and including the audience in the sphere of political discussion is what makes the play potentially radical. If the emergence of the notion of subjectivity in Renaissance literature should be regarded in terms of materialism and not of essential humanism (Dollimore 1984, 249), *Edward II* works as a prime example of such a conception of subjectivity. Whereas Sanders argued that *Edward II* "fails to address itself to much that is human in us" (1968, 141), it seems that the fact that Marlowe refused to do so provides the play with its greatest strength; *Edward II* does not pretend to convey transcendental notions about humanity but, instead, its portrayal of political, societal and cultural matters reflect Gramsci's argument that humans are to be viewed as constructs contingent upon the ideological and historical forces that surround them. As Sinfield puts it, "dissident potential derives ultimately not from essential qualities in individuals…but from conflict and contradiction that the social order inevitably produces within itself, even as it attempts to sustain itself" (1992, 41). This is what *Edward II* represents; it is a source of conflict within the dominant order attempting to perpetuate itself.

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