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**Classifying Early Modern Sexuality: Christopher Marlowe,
Edward II, and the Politics of Sexuality**

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This paper argues that Christopher Marlowe's Edward II (1594) questions gender expectations and sexuality. The analysis finds that the same-sex attraction and affective relationship that develops between King Edward and Gaveston can be seen as neither simply sodomy nor exclusively as male friendship. Instead, the emotional bonds and marriage-like relationship between the king and his minion suggest that their identities are, in part, formed by their same-sex attraction.

Much of the criticism on early modern homosexuality identifies a strong difference between “pre-modern” homosexuality and “modern” homosexuality. According to Kenneth Borris, the phrase “pre-modern sexuality” addresses the historical and sociological development of sexual orientations: “pre-modern sexuality” focuses on sexual acts and assumes that any person might fall victim to the complex sin of sodomy while “modern sexuality” includes “same-sex preferences and consequent self-recognitions [which] only became possible . . . through medical and psychological development beginning in the nineteenth or sometimes eighteenth century.”¹ Modern understandings of homosexuality are based on a shift from the assumption that same-sex attraction is defined by sinful acts to an understanding that same-sex attraction is an aspect of an individual’s identity. Yet such historical categories beg the question: how did we get from one to the other? Where can we see the development of the “modern” in the “pre-modern?”

I argue that in the early modern stories of Edward II (1284-1327; reign 1307-1327), we can see authors attempting to conceive same-sex desire as something more than an act, but not as a pathology

1 Borris. *Same-Sex Desire in the English Renaissance*, 4.

– that is, something approaching an identity. Qualifying the works of Alan Bray and Jonathan Goldberg, I propose that the fluid nature of sexuality offers writers various ways to adapt the content to meet his or her own needs as an artist and a social commentator. In this paper I look specifically at ways that Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II* (1594) allows readers to see same-sex attraction as more than just an act, moving toward the development of an identity that is, in part, built on the emotional and sexual attractions between men.

The study of pre-modern constructs of sexuality has long held the idea that people of early modern England did not see sexuality as a category used to create one’s identity. Because sexuality, according to Michel Foucault, is always defined within specific social and historical contexts, critics and historians of pre-modern sexuality hold that the heterosexual/ homosexual dichotomy as terms used to define an individual’s identity did not exist in early modern England. Sex acts, rather than sexual identity, dominate the way historians and literary critics discuss sexuality in the early modern era. Social constructionists see sexuality as a social construct, not an innate quality within the individual. For instance, Jonathan Goldberg, in *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities*, qualifies his argument about sexuality in these terms: “I do not mean to suggest that anyone in the period [Renaissance], or that characters represented in literature, have modern sexual identities.”² Alan Bray, in his groundbreaking *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, addresses the sexual acts and moral paradigms as he closely examines legal records for cases of sodomy. The conclusion he draws is that these cases were primarily focused on the acts committed, examining the moral failings of the prosecuted.

Instead of analyzing sexuality in terms of an identity category, many scholars focus on how Renaissance texts discuss sexual behavior and sexual acts to define and discuss morality. Kenneth Borris calls critics such as Bray and Goldberg followers of “the acts paradigm” and refers specifically to them as “recent

2 Goldberg, *Sodometries*, 22.

constructionists” because of the focus on the relatively recent³ development of the identity category of homosexual.⁴ Joseph Cady suggests that the existence of the term “masculine love” outside the criminal and sinful acts of sodomy illustrates the difficulties surrounding a theory based in “new-inventionism,”⁵ his term for those who believe that homosexuality is a relatively recent invention, such as Bray and Goldberg. Cady’s “new-inventionism” corresponds with Borris’s term “recent constructionists.”

Despite these thoughtful and persuasive arguments, scholars have offered little insight into when the identity category begins to develop. Alan Bray, in *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, describes the emergence of the “Molly”⁶ in the eighteenth century as one of the first connections between one’s gender presentation and sexuality with an identity category. Yet most ideas, such as identity categories or political concepts, must emerge slowly over time before we recognize them as fully formed ideas. The slow development of ideas can be understood if we turn to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who describe such development in terms of layers, or strata, that build up to the point of a discernible meaning or concept. These strata build on one another, often with little distinction between them until the point that a new stratum is clearly visible. In their discussion of signs and signifier, they suggest that signs or words must emerge from the strata or particles that make up meaning. Concepts must be built of particles of understanding before language emerges to describe or name the concept. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of how ideas coalesce and emerge into language is useful when thinking of the history of sexuality and the use of sexuality as an identity category beyond the acts performed.

3 “New-inventionsim” and “recent constructionists” both refer to homosexuality as an identity marker developing in the nineteenth century.

4 Borris. *Same-Sex Desire in the English Renaissance*, 4-5.

5 Cady, “‘Masculine Love,’ Renaissance Writing, and the ‘New Invention’ of Homosexuality,” 12.

6 Bray describes a “Molly” as a man who, in the privacy of a molly house or club, takes on a feminine identity and participates in same-sex relations.

The emergence of the word “homosexual” can only be coined once the concept of an identity that is formed around same-sex desire has begun to emerge.

Bray and Goldberg have argued that there was no such thing as a homosexual identity in the early modern period. Although the identity category did not exist, some writers who adapted the history of Edward II can be seen as trying to conceive such an identity. They describe same-sex desire in ways that exist outside of the two dominant categories for conceptualizing male relationships at the time – that is either “male friendship” or “sodomy.”⁷ The complex emotional connection between Edward and Gaveston do not always fit into either of these categories of same-sex relationships.

I contend that we benefit from looking at how early modern English writers begin layering definitions and identity categories using Edward II’s history. I am not arguing that those who represent Edward as an early modern construct create a definition of homosexuality as an identity category, but I do see his story and the way that writers address the details as layering meaning that ultimately builds toward the modern definition of homosexuality. In order to demonstrate this layering effect, I turn to Marlowe’s 1594 play because it is the best known of the Edward II narratives and, arguably the earliest.

While Marlowe *does* refer to the traditional definition of sodomy as a sinful act in the play, he also creates moments when same-sex attraction is discussed not as a solitary act, but as a component, good or bad, of a person’s nature. It is then that we can begin to see a glimpse of an identity formed around that same-sex attraction. The depiction of Edward’s relationship with Gaveston is often described as a form of supernatural possession or witchcraft which fits a Renaissance definition of sodomy. But at the same time, we can see that it is not the sex act itself that is being discussed;

7 Bray’s “Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England” discusses sodomy and the friendship as the only ways of understanding same-sex attraction in Renaissance England.

instead the bond, emotional or supernatural, is the focus of much of the writing. The idea that these two men have a bond that mimics heterosexual relationships begins to establish their same-sex attraction as something more than just a casual sex act.

In the first scene of the play, the newly crowned Edward II recalls Gaveston from the exile imposed by Edward I, and by examining the language, we can see how homoerotic qualities and gendered expectations are conflated to describe the affections between the king and his minion. As Gaveston plans his return to Edward's side, his soliloquy describes a homoerotic masque used to "draw the pliant king which way I please."⁸ This is the audience's first clear exposure to the sexual nature of the king's relationship with other men. Gaveston plans to use an Italian masque to seduce the king. The "lovely boy" dressed as Diana uses "an olive tree/ to hide those parts which men delight to see,"⁹ evoking the performance of gender. Goldberg points out that the masque Gaveston describes is not literally presented on the stage, a point he uses to dismiss its sexualized nature, but I would argue that the words Gaveston speaks on the stage create a picture of same-sex desire and transgendered images coming to life in the audience's mind. Diana is "a lovely boy" and Gaveston uses masculine pronouns to describe his parts and actions: "his naked arms," "his sportful hands," and "bathe him" (1.62-65). Gaveston's speech may present a transgendered boy, but never shies away from the fact that the person being observed by Actaeon is male.

Ultimately, the speech ends with "One like Actaeon" being killed for his transgression of looking at "those parts which men delight to see."¹⁰ One could argue that the Greek myth Marlowe uses to produce the image of same-sex desire and illustrate how early modern English culture might destroy that desire, foreshadows

8 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 1.52.

9 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 1.60, 64-5.

10 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 1.66.

Edward's own end. If, at the end of the play, we remember the destruction of Actaeon in Edward's murder, the link between the deaths may well incorporate same-sex desire and the punishment that that illicit desire earns. I disagree with Goldberg's idea that the speech must be seen as Gaveston "defining in advance precisely the kind of theatricalization *Edward II* will not offer, the sexual sphere in which the play does not operate."¹¹ This speech establishes the expectation of sexualized themes and the roles of sex and gender within the larger scope of the play.

Goldberg's willingness to dismiss the transgressive qualities of this speech because no man "wears dresses" oversimplifies the possibilities for subversive sexualities being demonstrated. Goldberg seems to ignore the fact that in the sixth scene of the play, Mortimer accuses Edward of being a weak king through his reference to fact that "The idle triumphs, masques, lascivious shows,/ And prodigal gifts bestowed on Gaveston/ Have drawn thy treasure dry and made thee weak."¹² The masque that Gaveston describes early in the play seems to have taken place within the world of the play, despite the fact that Marlowe does not show it on his own stage. We cannot dismiss the opening speech simply because it was not performed on Marlowe's stage. Instead, we should see that Gaveston blends gender performance and sexual desire to complicate the understanding of same-sex attraction.

While the sexualized masque may never appear on the stage, the reunion between Edward and Gaveston does, demonstrating not a sexualized relationship, but an emotional one. Instead of Marlowe simplifying this reunion to a question of social status and dismissing the representations of same-sex desire in it, he uses the titles offered to Gaveston upon his return to England as emblems of Edward's devotion to him, saying "Thy worth, sweet friend, is far above my gifts,/ Therefore, to equal it, receive my heart."¹³ The intimacy and

11 Goldberg, *Sodometries* 115.

12 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 6.157-9.

13 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 1.160-1.

emotional bond between the king and his minion is paramount here. We see the emotional depth expressed in the king's gifts to his returned lover instead of a bewitched king and power-hungry minion. The language of emotion mimics the love of heterosexuality.

As Edward is forced to banish Gaveston in scene four, Marlowe's language illustrates the emotional bond between the king and his minion. While the banishment, driven by Canterbury and the power of the pope, presents a very clear anti-Catholic sentiment of the power-driven Church controlling the will of an English king, the emotional distress that Edward expresses helps the viewer see the depth of Edward's love. He loves Gaveston even though "the world hates [him] so."¹⁴ Edward's desire to prevent the banishment focuses on Gaveston's feelings toward the king; Edward loves Gaveston "Because he loves me more than all the world."

This line is ambiguous: either Gaveston loves the king more than the whole world loves Edward, or Gaveston loves Edward more than Gaveston loves the world. Either Edward feels unloved by his people or Gaveston has convinced the king that his minion truly loves the king beyond all worldly pleasures. The image of a king unloved by his barons and his people is more in keeping with the play. It seems that Gaveston's love of earthly pleasures is well established, in his own lines about sharing wealth with Edward and in Edward's own promises that during Gaveston's exile, Edward "will send gold enough."¹⁵

More importantly, Edward's language reflects a shared soul, that these two men are one being. Gaveston is banished "from this land, I from myself am banished."¹⁶ The physical banishment of Gaveston is simple, but for Edward, he sees the loss of Gaveston as a loss of his true self. His understanding of himself is inextricably

¹⁴ Marlowe, *Edward II*, 4.76-77.

¹⁵ Marlowe, *Edward II*, 4.113.

¹⁶ Marlowe, *Edward II*, 4.118.

linked to his relationship with Gaveston. Gaveston seems to share this view because he does not mourn losing a physical place in his banishment; instead he grieves “to forsake you [Edward], in whose gracious looks/ The blessedness of Gaveston remains,/ For nowhere else seeks he felicity.”¹⁷ Gaveston’s happiness is sought only in the looks from Edward. By being removed from the king’s grace, Gaveston loses his own understanding of himself. While this may reflect a loss in social status for Gaveston, the language of his grief focuses more on Edward’s person. Their happiness exists only with their reunion. When parted, they are “most miserable.”¹⁸ Words become too difficult and they embrace instead of speak.

Once they are truly parted, the language that the king uses to mourn his loss continues to blend the emotional bond with social class. He suggests that he “would freely give [his crown] to [Gaveston’s] enemies” in exchange for Gaveston’s return.¹⁹ His grief causes him to wish he could abdicate his throne and simply be with Gaveston. He even suggests his own death at the hands of “some bloodless Fury” would be better than the pain he experiences at the loss of Gaveston.²⁰ His own life lacks any value or purpose without his other half. Interestingly enough, Marlowe places Isabel the queen, on the stage, to hear the king’s grief over his minion. In order to retain her marriage, nominally at least, she is forced to convince the barons to allow Gaveston to return. She is rewarded with “A second marriage” to Edward because she is able to secure the repeal of Gaveston’s banishment. Marriage here seems more about social status or a reward than an act of love between two people. The contrast between the mournful love that Edward feels at his loss of Gaveston and the social status of marriage is striking.

17 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 4.119-121.

18 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 4.129.

19 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 4.308.

20 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 4.315.

As the king's reunion with Gaveston takes place, once again, each man confesses his love for the other, illustrating an emotional bond. They are both overcome with joy to be reunited; Edward suggests that the sight of Gaveston "Is sweeter far than was thy parting hence/ Bitter and irksome to my sobbing heart."²¹ The reunion compensates for the agony of being away from each other. The union between them can overcome the forced exile, as Gaveston points out, as spring makes up for the "biting winter's rage."²² Their love for each other outweighs the struggles of the exile, but cannot force the barons to accept Gaveston. Together, within a few lines of the scene, Gaveston and Edward exile the barons from court for their rudeness toward Gaveston. The king allows Gaveston the voice to banish them, saying that he, Edward, would be Gaveston's "warrant" against the barons. The love they feel toward one another motivates their reaction to restructure the peers of England. Certainly we see class come up here, but I argue that the sentiment that the two men feel toward one another is paramount in motivating them to act against the barons. The "Base, leaden earls" are seen as less socially significant than the reunited king and minion.

When, as Goldberg points out, Edward loses Gaveston, he finds another man (Spencer) instead of returning to his wife.²³ If the Renaissance construct of sodomy is, in Foucault's words, "a temporary aberration"²⁴ that Bray suggests "could break out anywhere,"²⁵ one must wonder why Edward finds love with yet another man. Goldberg writes, "The substitution of man for woman is irreversible."²⁶ Goldberg, though he does not see the play as creating an identity category centered on same-sex desire, he does

21 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 6.57-8.

22 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 6.61.

23 Goldberg, *Sodometries*, 125.

24 Foucault, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 43.

25 Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, 25.

26 Goldberg, *Sodometries*, 125.

see that Edward does not simply end his “temporary aberration” of being attracted to men. How, then, if Edward is permanently attracted to men, is he not, in part, defined as a man who loves men?

While the emotional bond between the two men goes beyond the traditional definition of sodomy, and thereby violates the act theory, Marlowe contrasts the love felt between the king and Gaveston with the king’s tempestuous relationship with his queen. The play specifically places Gaveston on stage as the replacement of Queen Isabella emphasizing that the playwright sees the male lover as competition for the queen’s position. The queen illustrates how her position at court has been subverted when she asks Gaveston, “Is’t not enough that thou corrupts my lord/ And art a bawd to his affections, / But thou must call mine honour thus in question?”²⁷ Here we see the competition between the king’s minion and his queen, which offers the reader an opportunity to question the traditional roles of marriage and love.

Marlowe stages this competition quite literally. Both Isabel and Gaveston suggest that the other is trying to “rob me of my lord”²⁸; Isabel insinuates that Gaveston has stolen the affections of the king from her and taken her rightful place at his side while Gaveston insinuates that his second exile is caused by the queen’s manipulation. We see the two argue about who deserves Edward’s love more, culminating with Isabella referring to Gaveston as Edward’s “Ganymede,”²⁹ a common reference to homoerotic relationships in the Renaissance³⁰. They argue over which more fully deserves to be at Edward’s side, each seeing the other as a rival for the same position in Edward’s life. Goldberg suggests that the fact that the king may have both a wife and a male lover “makes

27 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 4. 150-2

28 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 4.161.

29 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 4.180.

30 Bray, *Homosexuality* 13. Bray argues that the classical reference to Zeus’ cup-bearer and male lover would have been a commonplace term in Renaissance England for a sodomite.

those relations separate and supplementary.”³¹ If they are indeed separate from each other, why then must these two characters fight constantly for Edward’s affections?

Perhaps we must see the queen’s role as wife as a social role and the role of Gaveston as an emotional one. But if, as Goldberg suggests, the relationships of wife and minion are “supplementary,” the queen and Gaveston fail to see how one supplements the other. They struggle quite publically against one another. They compete for the king’s attention and affections, which indicates that they vie for the same place in his life. Because the king’s own wife sees herself competing with a man for her husband, the text begins to show Edward as somehow defined by his love for Gaveston in a way that Deleuze and Guattari might say will lead to a modern understanding of homosexuality, even if the concept, or a word naming the concept, does not yet exist. Marlowe’s play, as well as other adaptations of Edward’s story, contributes to our understanding and our construction of a modern concept of sexuality.

Isabel sees the flaws in her own marriage when in the fourth scene she wishes she had never married Edward. She imagines her own death, by poison or by strangulation, as better than the eventual loss of her husband’s affections. She wishes she had drunk poison at her marriage so she would not have to admit that her husband cares more about Gaveston than he does for her. Edward forbids Isabel from court until she is able to convince the barons that Gaveston should return to England. Her dismal situation is highlighted when she compares her own tragic situation to Juno who is forced to accept Jove’s relationship with Ganymede. In fact, Isabel’s suffering outweighs that of Juno because “never doted Jove on Ganymede/ So much as he [Edward] on cursed Gaveston.”³² She is in an impossible situation; she has no role in court until Gaveston is allowed to return, but if he returns, Edward will dote on him and ignore Isabel. Either

31 Goldberg, *Sodomities*, 125.

32 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 4. 180-1.

way, she is displaced. Her marriage contract does not guarantee her a place in Edward's sphere. Instead she must reunite her husband with his lover if she hopes to be allowed to come to court.

As the fourth scene continues, the topic of marriage centers on the concept of love. Isabel tells Mortimer that her husband "confesseth that he loves me not."³³ In response, Mortimer suggests she "Cry quittance," relieving herself of any obligation to love Edward. She should stop loving Edward, the insinuation that love and marriage are not directly connected. Mortimer seems to think that she has the option of not loving her husband but does not suggest that the marriage end. Isabel sees marriage and love, on her part at least, as being wholly intertwined: "No, rather will I die a thousand deaths./ And yet I love in vain; he'll ne'er love me."³⁴ Isabel's emotional bond with Edward does not allow her to separate love from marriage, no matter how much Edward dotes on Gaveston.

The struggle between queen and minion for Edward's affections is quite clear. She protests constantly when accused of being the lover of Mortimer. As civil war begins, she says in her brief soliloquy that "I love none but you" after Edward accuses her of being Mortimer's lover for a third time.³⁵ Her problem is not that she is having an affair with Mortimer, but that she cannot keep her husband from his lover: "From my embracements thus he [Edward] breaks away." Instead he prefers the "embracements" of Gaveston. When the barons interrupt her soliloquy, she tells them that she is exhausted by the loss of her husband's affections: "These hands are tired with haling of my lord/ From Gaveston, from wicked Gaveston"³⁶ She has lost her husband to Gaveston once again, and Edward ignores her attempts to win his affections; instead of listening to her, "He turns away and smiles upon his minion." His love for Gaveston trumps his social contract with Isabel.

33 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 4.195.

34 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 4.196-7.

35 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 8.16-17.

36 Marlowe, *Edward II*, 8.27-9.

These examples of how Marlowe complicates the nature of same-sex desire both resist easy categories of sodomy or male friendship. Gaveston's opening speech illustrates the transgressive nature of his desire for the king, but also refuses to allow the existence of same-sex desire to be hidden in a heteronormative manner. Marlowe further complicates the emotional relationship of Edward and Gaveston by displacing Isabella's role as queen with Gaveston. Marlowe does not create a simple message about kingly power, sexual desire, or rebellion. The play refuses to present one thesis. Instead we must examine how Marlowe's portrayal of same-sex desire fits into a complicated social and political world. By seeing same-sex desire as part of the struggle, together with social status and marriage roles, we see that Marlowe presents a play in which same-sex desire can become part of Edward's identity, even if Marlowe's language did not possess a word to describe that desire.

Michael John Lee is an associate professor of English at Columbia Basin College in Pasco, WA, where he teaches composition and literature. He earned his PhD in English and the Teaching of English from Idaho State University in 2012. His dissertation, "Adapting Edward II: Eight Representations of Early Modern Sexuality," argues that same-sex attraction can be seen, in part, as an identity marker in early modern adaptations of the history of Edward II.

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