Knowledge, Love and Epistemic Uncertainty in Marlowe's *Edward the Second*

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In *Disowning Knowledge*, the American philosopher Stanley Cavell argues that Shakespearean drama offers one of the most perceptive diagnoses of early modern scepticism, which he sees as the refusal to acknowledge truths about oneself and one's relations to others. He also explores the multifarious motives, aspects and consequences of such a refusal, contending "that the advent of skepticism as manifested in Descartes's *Meditations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare."[1] Yet, whereas Descartes uses scepticism as part of a philosophical method aiming at determining whether knowledge can be securely grounded in a kernel of unshakeable, firm and absolute certainty—which he famously finds in the *cogito*, a first truth about the existence of the thinking subject leading in turn to the absolute certainty that both God and the world exist—Shakespeare's drama exemplifies—or so Cavell argues—a more tenacious, less provisional strain of scepticism. In the words of Cavell again, "what skepticism threatens is precisely irretrievable outsideness, an uncrossable line, a position from which it is obvious (without argument) that the world is unknowable."[2] While pointing out how ubiquitous such a threat is in Shakespeare's theatre, Cavell also insists that love, and especially marriage, is one of the possible responses to it. It is, in effect, Cleopatra's response to "Antony's abandonment; it is a return of the world through the gift of herself, by becoming, presenting herself, as whatever constitutes the world."[3] In other words, it is the loving subject, rather than the thinking subject, who constitutes the world.

Cavell, however, does not deal with Marlowe's theatre—which, admittedly, was not his prime concern. And yet, scepticism is just as present a threat in Marlowe's plays as it is in Shakespeare's, as many critics have realised.[4] In the words of William Hamlin, "it will come

[1] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, Updated Edition (1986; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3.
[2] Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 29.
[3] Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 28.
[4] The same view was also put forward long ago by the Victorian scholar J. R. Green who described the playwright's outlook as "a daring scepticism"; quoted in William M. Hamlin, "Casting Doubt in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 41, no. 2 (2001): 257. As will become manifest in the following discussion, an important distinction should be made between, on the one hand, "uncertainty" as a thematic and philosophical feature of the plays, and, on the other hand, the commonplace view that Marlowe's major plays are characterized by "inherent contradictions and pervasive ambiguities"; Carol Leventen Duane,

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as news to no one that Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* can be and has been deemed a skeptical play."[5] Similarly, in her essay dealing with "Marlowe and the new science," Mary Thomas Crane respectfully rejects Marjorie Hope Nicolson's now outdated suggestion that "had he lived longer […], the new philosophy would not have called all in doubt to Marlowe."[6] While Marlowe's "anxious epistemology"[7] now tends to elicit greater critical attention, reading the plays from the perspective of Cavell's discussion of early modern scepticism may still be a less well-trodden path. In this article, I therefore propose to apply Cavell's line of inquiry to the reading of Marlowe's *Edward the Second*, thus taking up Ruth Lunney's suggestion that one of the new directions for future research "would be to diversify critical narratives, delving into broader philosophical, historical, and cultural contexts and exploring such issues as identity, memory and place."[8] As will become apparent in what follows—or so I hope—discussing scepticism entails dealing with precisely those issues. Identity, memory and place dovetail with scepticism because the search for certain knowledge is inseparable from questions about time, space and the self.

It must be stated from the start of this essay that scepticism is here taken in the broadest possible sense of the word as referring to the view that the world is a fundamentally "unknowable" place, to borrow Cavell's phrase. Although the following discussion will rely on Descartes as a point of comparison and reference, an important difference must be emphasized. In Marlowe's *Edward the Second*, I will contend, scepticism is neither a conscious, thinking process nor a philosophical instrument for the discovery of truth—two cognitive attitudes respectively illustrated by Montaigne and Descartes, for example—but rather the epistemic consequence of a dramatic trajectory that leads the characters from buoyant certainty to a state of utter cognitive and sensory confusion and uncertainty which often serves as a prelude to death. The entry for skepticism in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* "identifies skepticism with respect to a field of propositions *F* as the claim that

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"Marlowe's Mixed Messages: A Model for Shakespeare?," *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 3 (1986): 51. While the two issues are not unrelated, my concern is not with the contradictions per se, and whether they should be explained away, criticised as flaws or praised as products of Marlowe's "conscious and consummate artistry"; (Duane, "Marlowe's Mixed Messages," 51), but rather with their dramatic and epistemic effect and the halo of uncertainty they create.

[5] Hamlin, "Casting Doubt," 257.

[6] Mary Thomas Crane, "Marlowe and the New Science," in *Christopher Marlowe in Context*, ed. Emily C. Bartels and Emma Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 252.

[7] Eric C. Brown, "Shakespeare's Anxious Epistemology: *Love's Labor's Lost* and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*," *Texas Studies in English Literature* 45, no. 1 (2003): 20–41.

[8] Ruth Lunney, "*Dido, Queen of Carthage*," in *Christopher Marlowe at 450*, ed. Sara Munson Deats and Robert A. Logan (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 42.

the only justified attitude with respect to propositions in *F* is suspension of judgment."[9] But in Marlowe's dramatic universe, and in *Edward the Second* more particularly, scepticism is not a philosophical stance which the characters consciously take: rather, they tend to have scepticism "thrust upon them" (as Malvolio might say) as a result of the disappearance of love from their dramatic lives.

This essay will therefore aim at analysing the knowledge/love nexus in light of Cavell's twofold hypothesis that scepticism amounts to the position that the world is fundamentally unknowable and that love is often presented as one of the possible remedies to uncertainty, in so far as it constitutes what Cavell calls a "return of the world," that is to say a possible way of acquiring at least a modicum of certainty. In Marlowe's dramatic universe, however, love often proves to be more of a trompe-l'oeil solution than a real and solid escape out of scepticism, as the absence of absolute certainty and the fragility of love ultimately lead to the destruction of the loving subject.

"It shall suffice me to enjoy your love": Love and Epistemic Certainty in *Edward the Second*.

If scepticism, loosely defined as a thinking subject's complete and fundamental lack of certainty about either the world or themselves, pervades the Shakespearean canon, the same is true of at least some of Marlowe's plays, including *Edward the Second*. According to Patrick Cheney, "the truncated state of Marlowe's works confounds attempts at holistic commentary, rendering our efforts tenuous and controversial. Students of Marlowe might view this predicament as less a warning than as a challenge. The question is: how can we view clearly what is inherently opaque?"[10] Interestingly enough, such epistemic opacity binds Marlovian scholars to their chosen object of study, for it is not just the corpus as a whole that appears "inherently opaque." So, too, is the dramatic world in which Marlowe's characters fumble and grope their way around. If scholars sometimes find it difficult to view the corpus clearly, Marlowe's characters often experience a similar difficulty in understanding the situations they are made to deal with. As far as they are concerned, opacity is the rule, not the exception. Although the bulk of this essay will deal with *Edward the Second*, a brief look at *Dido, Queen of Carthage* may serve as both an introduction to, and a foil for my main

[9] Juan Comesaña and Peter Klein, "Skepticism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2019 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/skepticism/.
[10] Patrick Cheney, "Introduction: Marlowe in the Twenty-First Century," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Patrick Cheney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 7.

argument about the love/knowledge nexus. Let us consider Aeneas's reaction on first seeing the city of Carthage.[11] One of the striking aspects of the scene is the way Aeneas fails to understand where he stands or who he interacts with. As if reflecting his confused state of mind, his first line takes the form of a question: "Where am I now? These should be Carthage walls," to which Achates answers with another question pointing to Aeneas's perplexity: "Why stands my sweet Aeneas thus amaz'd?" (*Dido, Queen of Carthage*, 2.1.1–2).[12]

In part, Aeneas's confusion can be accounted for by his deep sadness or what Jennifer Lodine-Chaffey, discussing Andrew Bozio's book chapter on "Marlowe and the ecology of remembrance," calls "evidence of an affective struggle."[13] After all, he wishes he could "sail back to Troy and be revenged" (2.1.18). This, of course, is the primary reason why he mistakes the Libyan shore he has just landed on for the burning city of Troy he was made to leave. His grief is so intense that it makes him hallucinate: "O, Priamus is left, and this is he! / Come, come aboard! Pursue the hateful Greeks!" (2.1.21–22). Aeneas's confusion, however, is not shared by his companions. Achates tries to instil some sense into his friend ("What means Aeneas?," 2.1.23) before concluding that "[his] mind, that would have it so, deludes [his] eyesight" (2.1.31–32). For his part, Ascanius gently comforts his troubled father: "Sweet father, leave to weep; this is not he, / For were it Priam, he would smile on me" (2.1.36).

But there is more to Aeneas's confusion than mere sadness. What Achates calls Aeneas's "delusion" outlives his bout of hallucinating grief. Having pulled himself together a little, Aeneas still fails to recognize his former friends, whom he mistakes for some "lords of his town" (2.1.39). His speech is characteristic of what may perhaps be called a state of intense epistemic bewilderment:

> Lords of this town, or whatsoever style
> Belongs unto your name, vouchsafe of truth
> To tell us who inhabits this fair town,
> What kind of people and who governs them;
> For we are strangers driven on this shore,
> And *scarcely know within what clime we are.* (My italics, 2.1.39–44)

Aeneas is anxious to know where he stands and who he is talking to. Not only does he fail to

[11] On the recent critical interest in place in *Dido*, see Jennifer Lodine-Chaffey, "The Year's Work in Marlowe Studies: 2020," *The Journal of Marlowe Studies* 2 (2021): 73.
[12] All quotations from Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage* are taken from Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Plays*, ed. J. B Steane (1969; repr., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986). Quotations from *Edward the Second* are taken from Christopher Marlowe, *Edward the Second*, ed. Charles R. Forker (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).
[13] Lodine-Chaffey, "Year's Work," 74. See also Andrew Bozio, *Thinking Through Place on the Early Modern English Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 68.

recognize his fellow Trojans, he also proves incapable of trusting his senses—the word "clime" meaning both "a tract or region of the world" or "a climate," as the *OED* reminds us. Aeneas cannot ascertain what the country *feels* like. He therefore seems to be experiencing a form of radical scepticism akin to Descartes's methodical, hyperbolic doubt, or Cavell's definition of scepticism as "a position from which it is obvious that the world is unknowable": his past experiences and his present senses can no longer be trusted. Besides, there is something infectious about Aenaeas's perplexity for all his friends suddenly come to doubt their senses too: "I hear Aeneas' voice but see him not, / For none of these can be our general" (2.1.45–46); "Like Ilioneus speaks this nobleman, / But Ilioneus goes not in such robes" (2.1.47–48). Realising that these are his friends indeed, Aeneas eventually asks them to dispell his doubts and tell him everything, "for [he] long[s] to be resolved!" (2.1.61). The characters of the play in general, and Aeneas in particular, fumble their way through a mist of existential uncertainty so intense that they lose more than their bearings: they also forget who they are. Meeting Dido for the first time, Aeneas shows great humility, which prompts Dido's gentle rebuke: "remember who thou art; speak like thyself: humility belongs to common grooms" (2.1.100–101). True, Aeneas's mistake is of a social, rather than metaphysical nature, but what is striking about his attitude is that, like Descartes, he comes to doubt not just *what* he feels, but also *who* he is (although his scepticism is not so radical as to extend to doubting the very fact that he exists as a human being).

In the seminal article quoted above, William Hamlin contends that Cavell's approach to Shakespeare fails to take into account the Pyrrhonian and Academic "forms of philosophical skepticism to which Shakespeare and Marlowe could have been exposed," thus privileging a Cartesian interpretation of Shakespeare's plays that is "fundamentally ahistorical."[14] He also points out that Descartes embraces a groundless world only to reject it. This is why "his skepticism, however radical, is always already an instrument in the discovery of truth, and, when coupled with an appropriate method of investigation, allows for the perpetuation of dogmatic philosophy."[15] Hamlin is probably right to insist that Cavell underestimates the influence of the Pyrrhonian tradition as manifested, for instance, in Philippe du Plessis-Mornay's *De la Vérité de la Religion Chrestienne* (1581), a treatise that was translated into English in 1587 by Sir Philip Sidney and Arthur Golding.[16] This

[14] Hamlin, "Casting Doubt," 258.
[15] Hamlin, "Casting Doubt," 258.
[16] This tradition of classical, Pyrrhonian scepticism should not be underestimated. It promoted doubt over dogmatism, or in Hamlin's words, a form of scepticism that was "an antidote rather than a substitute for dogmatism […] and the avoidance of rash judgement and a heightened sensitivity to epistemological questions,

reservation is all the more crucial to the present discussion as Marlowe likely travelled to France in the mid-1580s, thus raising the possibility that he encountered the writings of Montaigne over a decade before Shakespeare became acquainted with the *Essais* through Florio's English translation of the book. And yet, in spite of this important philosophical and historical caveat, Hamlin does not reject Cavell's understanding of scepticism altogether: rather, he redefines it in terms of the reciprocity of doubt and desire so as to better apply it to the interpretation of some of Marlowe's plays (in his case, *Doctor Faustus*).

In *Edward the Second* the characters seem to embark on a journey which takes them in the opposite direction from Aeneas's (or Descartes's), as they travel from certainty and self-confidence to doubt and confusion. To them, love is more than a much sought-after passion that gives meaning and shape to their lives. It is also, and perhaps primarily, a stabilising force which enables them to make sense of the world they "live" in—in the dramatic sense of the word—thus providing them with the kernel of truth or "*point d'Archimède*" which Descartes needed to secure in order to rebuild the entire edifice of philosophy.[17] The first half of *Edward the Second* is pervaded by a sense of unshakeable certainty that stands in marked contrast with the thick epistemic haze Aeneas could be seen groping through in *Dido*. Here, the characters know exactly where they stand and what they want. Unlike Aeneas, who was not certain what shore he had reached, Gaveston has no trouble finding his bearings. Leslie Thomson rightly points out that, although "*Edward II* is often discussed in terms of the language of Fortune's Wheel […], what a playgoer actually *sees* is horizontal movement, namely entrances and exits," so that "the comings and goings can be seen as integral to the staging of this story."[18] But such horizontal movement does not preclude a certain degree of spatial anchoring and emotional rootedness. In Gaveston's case, for instance, there is no geographic confusion or hesitation at all:

> Sweet prince, I come. These, these thy amorous lines
> Might have enforc'd me to have swum from France,
> And, like Leander, gasped upon the sand,
> So thou wouldst smile, and take me in thine arms.
> The sight of London to my exiled eyes

distinctions and anxieties." See "Casting Doubt," 262.

[17] See René Descartes, *Six Metaphysical Meditations Wherein It Is Proved That There Is a God and That Mans Mind Is Really Distinct from His Body*, trans. William Molyneux (London, 1680), 11–12: "Archimedes required but a point which was firm, and immoveable, that he might move the whole Earth, so in the present undertaking great things may be expected if I can discover but the least thing that is true and indisputable. Wherefore I suppose all things I see are false, and believe that nothing of those things are really existent, which my deceitful memory represents to me; 'tis evident I have no senses, that a Body, Figure, Extension, Motion, Place, &c. are meer Fictions; what thing therefore is there that is true? perhaps only this, there is nothing certain."

[18] Leslie Thomson, "Marlowe's Staging of Meaning," *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 18 (2005): 21.

> Is as Elysium to a new-come soul;
> Not that I love the city or the men,
> But that it harbours him I hold so dear (*Edward the Second*, 1.1.6–13)

Of course, the passage is not wanting in dramatic irony, for the reference to Leander is strangely dissonant with Gaveston's buoyant and optimistic mood. As Charles R. Forker points out in his edition of the play, the mythological allusion "quickly establishes the erotic nature of [Gaveston's] relationship to Edward and ironically foreshadows his own death."[19] But it also serves to emphasize the connection between love and certainty that lies at the heart of this essay, since the ability to find one's bearings and reach one's desired destination is a common metaphor for the epistemic journey from error to truth.[20] More importantly perhaps, Gaveston's imaginary reunion with Edward is depicted in terms expressing the absolute certainty that the smiling King will be waiting for him on the shore and that he "will take [him] in [his] arms." Because Gaveston does not acknowledge the tragic undertones of his own reference to Leander, he seems to be totally oblivious of the fact that the bond existing between two lovers can be broken by time or adverse circumstances.

That things will end tragically is immaterial in the context of the present discussion (at least, as far as this first section is concerned). Rather, what matters here is that love is presented as a beacon of certainty. On the one hand, the loving relationship constitutes—quite literally for Gaveston, as it happens—"a return of the world" (to take up Cavell's phrase). But, on the other hand, it is also a powerful antidote to scepticism insofar as it offers the lover what he sees as a first, indubitable basis in which to ground his vision and appreciation of the world. Further confirmation of the link between love and truth in the play may perhaps be found in the King's clinging to both philosophy and the company of Baldock and Spencer shortly before being taken prisoner by his enemies:

> Come Spenser, come Baldock, come sit down by me;
> Make trial now of that philosophy
> That in our famous nurseries of arts
> Thou sucked'st from Plato and from Aristotle.
> Father, this life contemplative is heaven (4.7.16–20)

At the beginning of the play, the characters often appear to share Gaveston's initial confidence that they can find some solid ground on which to stand. Certainty is an achievable

[19] Marlowe, *Edward the Second*, 1994, 141.
[20] The viatic metaphor is repeatedly used by both Bacon and Descartes, for example. See in particular Bacon's *Instauratio Magna* and Descartes's *Discourse on Method* where the image of the epistemic journey is made abundant use of.

goal—that is to say, one that is never quite out of the characters' reach. That love is precisely the one (and maybe only) thing which guarantees a secure position from which to stand on one's two feet and either think clearly or act resolutely is an idea that is given considerable emphasis in the course of the play. Leicester's rhetorical question in 4.7.50 ("What cannot gallant Mortimer with the queen?") points to more than just Isabella's political significance. On a more superficial level, of course, Leicester is stating the obvious: with the help of the Queen, Mortimer becomes an indomitable adversary. But on a more profound level, this line also emphasizes how much moral and intellectual strength ultimately depends on love in the play, as the polysemy of the adjective "gallant" indicates. Mortimer is a "gallant" (i.e. bold) knight *because* he is a "gallant" lover. Love is the great empowering force in the play. This, as we have seen, is also Gaveston's belief, which he repeats a few lines further down, albeit in a slightly different form:

> It shall suffice me to enjoy your love,
> Which whiles I have, I think myself as great
> As Caesar riding in the Roman street
> With captive kings at his triumphant car (1.1.170–173)

By comparing himself to Caesar, Gaveston implicitly takes up the viatic metaphor of his opening speech while endowing it with a conquering dimension. In that regard, one cannot help but notice how often love is expressed in spatial terms in *Edward the Second*. Edward, for example, is so certain that he will never be separated from Gaveston that estrangement becomes a clear geographical impossibility. In his case, certainty takes the form of territorial rootedness: "Ere my sweet Gaveston shall part from me, / This isle shall fleet upon the ocean / And wander to the unfrequented Inde" (1.4.48–50). It is true that when the King utters these lines, Gaveston has just been arrested and taken off stage. Although it is possible, of course, to read Edward's comment as a desperate piece of wishful thinking, the King's geographical trope also serves to emphasize how much the language of love is one in which certainty takes pride of place.

True love, therefore, is never really open to doubt in the play. Not unlike Archimedes' point, it provides the characters with one "true and indisputable thing," a sure principle they can go by. The aim, here, is not so much to move the earth, as in Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*, as to secure "some nook or corner" (1.4.72) where love can be enjoyed and certainty achieved. Gaveston's love for Edward, or Edward's love for Gaveston, is never really in doubt and the same goes for Mortimer and Isabella. Love is either indisputably

present or painfully absent:[21] it is an all-or-nothing emotional state. Conversely, when love is absent, it cannot be rekindled. True, at the end of the play, Edward bitterly reminisces that he once was a young king jousting for Isabella's sake: "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" (5.5.67–69). But was he ever really in love with Isabella? It is no accident that he claims that he "ran at tilt" for Isabella's "sake" (as opposed to "her love"): not once in the entire play does Edward use the verb "love" with reference to Isabella. The Queen is quite right to exclaim, as she does: "In vain I look for love at Edward's hand, / Whose eyes are fix'd on none but Gaveston" (2.4.61–62). Because this chivalric episode is entirely confined to the character's pre-dramatic past, it is already ancient history by the time the play begins. Edward's certainty stems from his love for Gaveston, rather than his marital relationship with the Queen.

"Can this be true?": from Emotional Certainty to Doubt and Death in *Edward the Second*.

If love affords the characters the certainty they crave for, politics tends to produce the opposite effect. It is a force which tears the characters apart and dislocates the strongest relationships, including, of course, the Edward-Gaveston relationship. In so doing, the oppositional logic inherent in the definition of politics gradually substitutes doubt for certainty. Love is both the main cause and the first casualty of the political fight between the King and the barons. As a result, even the strongest certainties fail to survive the conflict which is rending the kingdom. A case in point is Edward's confidence that he will never be parted from Gaveston. What looked like an absurd prediction, however, turns out to be a frightening fact. Edward and Gaveston will be separated. The rest of the play may not be a wandering "to the unfrequented Inde" but it is not unlike a journey to and across the continent of uncertainty. The shift from Edward's initial confidence to his subsequent doubts is made increasingly manifest by lines such as the following ones:

> 'Tis true, sweet Gaveston. O were it false!
> The legate of the Pope will have it so,
> And thou must hence, or I shall be deposed
> But I will reign to be revenged of them,
> And therefore, sweet friend, take it patiently (1.4.108–112)

[21] Obviously, this statement does not apply to the weaker and broader uses of the term "love," which is frequently employed either ironically or in the sense of "friendship" or "loyalty" in the play, as in the passage where the King tells Lancaster and the other nobles that he "will requite [their] love" (1.4.382).

Today's truth is tomorrow's falsehood (or vice versa), or so Edward hopes, as he muses that his unfavourable situation can be reversed.

As noted by Martin Wiggins, "the play's overall unity lies in its political action; but it also requires its audience to shift focus from private to public and back."[22] This is true, of course, but I would like to contend that part of the play's unity also stems from the way it concerns itself with epistemic issues affecting both the characters' private and public lives.[23] That this is so can be seen from the repeated occurrences of words pertaining to the lexical field of truth and knowledge, as well as from the many comments introducing a philosophical note into the play. Regarding the former, the verb "know" and its cognates are used forty-three times in the play, which is only a few times fewer than "love." Whereas the adjective "false" is often taken in the moral sense of "untrustworthy" rather than in the epistemic sense of "incorrect," this is not the case of its antonym "true" whose sixteen occurrences testify to the importance of the epistemic theme in *Edward the Second*. (As a rather telling point of comparison, there are only sixteen occurrences of "know" and six of "true" in *Doctor Faustus*, a play that is much more overtly concerned with the quest for knowledge.) The characters' many philosophical comments also tend to reinforce the impression created by the frequent repetition of knowledge-related terms. Railing against Mortimer's sudden change of heart regarding Gaveston's banishment, Lancaster makes a very Aristotelian comment: "Fie Mortimer, dishonour not thyself! / Can this be true, 'twas good to banish him? / And is this true, to call him home again?" (1.4.244–46), before concluding, both tersely and philosophically: "In no respect can contraries be true" (1.4.249). Despite his uncle's command that he "does not play the sophister," younger Mortimer carries the day by arguing that an absent Gaveston cannot be murdered. Truth is not absolute but relative. It is time-sensitive because it fluctuates according to circumstances.

Thus Mortimer's change of heart encapsulates the very essence of the political game that plays such an important part in *Edward the Second*. If love stands for certainty, as I have tried to show, politics, on the contrary, is the realm of deception, half-truths and false appearances. In such a world, there is no place for certainty. It is striking that Lancaster should use an image akin to Edward's ocean drifting island. But as the image is transferred

[22] Christopher Marlowe, *Edward the Second*, ed. Martin Wiggins and Robert Lindsey (1997; repr., London: Methuen, 2009), xxx.
[23] Besides, as noted by Joan Parks, in *Edward the Second*, public and private spaces tend to become more and more inseparable as the play unfolds: "the adulterous and exclusive relationship between queen and baron furthers Marlowe's thesis that the public, political world is constituted and determined by private forces." Joan Parks, "History, Tragedy, and Truth in Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 39, no. 2 (1999): 283.

from the domain of love to the public sphere of politics, it also acquires a more sinister connotation. As has already been pointed out, Edward was adamant that he would never be parted from Gaveston: the nonsensical image of the drifting island was therefore conjured up in order to present permanence and stability as two essential attributes of his love for Gaveston. On the contrary, Lancaster's horrifying image of a throne floating in blood suggests the opposite of stability. His is an image of a solitary, tottering king sitting in a throne that is tossed about in a sea of blood, thus denoting the very opposite of stability:

> Adieu, my lord, and either change your mind,
> Or look to see the throne where you should sit
> To float in blood, and at thy wanton head
> The glozing head of thy base minion thrown (1.1.129–132)

In the second half of the play, the sense that certainty can be achieved through love is gradually being replaced by the hypocrisy and ambiguity which are so characteristic of the play's political world. Far from being "entire" and "unwavering" (two adjectives associated with true love in the play), love suddenly becomes doubtful and hypocritical. To Kent who claims that he comes to join the barons out "of love to this our native land" (2.3.1), Lancaster answers: "I fear me you are sent of policy / To undermine us with a show of love" (2.3.5–6). Much as kings are said to be "perfect shadows in a sunshine day" (5.1.27), so love, here, is a mere "show," nothing substantial. The same point is taken up by Kent later on in the play with regard to Isabella's attitude: "for Mortimer / And Isabel do kiss while they conspire; / And yet she bears a face of love, forsooth" (4.6.12–14). Nowhere perhaps is the epistemic tension between truth and falsehood more plainly visible than in the episode of the shields. The barons' words are at odds with the emblematic paintings on their shields. Whereas they profess to love the King and be reconciled with Gaveston, their shields argue otherwise, which prompts the King to rail against their hypocrisy:

> Proud Mortimer! Ungentle Lancaster!
> Is this the love you bear your sovereign?
> Is this the fruit your reconcilement bears?
> Can you in words make show of amity
> And in your shields display your rancorous minds? (2.2.29–33)

The heraldic emblems painted on Mortimer's and Lancaster's shields stand in marked contrast with their apparent protestations of love and devotion, thus creating a hermeneutic dynamic whereby meaning becomes intrinsically elusive, problematic and uncertain.

The end of the play takes the sense of epistemic tension one step further by making it a central aspect of the plot: the letter ordering that the king be killed is drafted in such a way

as to yield two mutually opposed interpretations. It is not just ambiguous, or unclear, it is ambivalent because it can be interpreted in two contrary ways:

> This letter, written by a friend of ours,
> Contains his death, yet bids them save his life.
> *(He reads)*
> '*Edwardum occidere nolite timere, bonum est;*
> Fear not to kill the king, 'tis good he die.'
> But read it thus, and that's another sense:
> '*Edwardum occidere nolite, timere bonum est;*
> Kill not the king, 'tis good to fear the worst.'
> Unpointed as it is, thus shall it go (5.4.6–13)

Younger Mortimer is right about the letter having more than one sense, of course, but the word "another" plays down the contrast between the two possible interpretations. They are not just different: they are contradictory. To quote Lancaster again, "in no respect can contraries be true." As Hansen explains: "the possible (and eventual) responses to Mortimer's unpointed (that is unpuctuated) letter betray not simply that the language, indeed all language, is unstable, but more concretely, that when, how and what we read or perceive is a matter of life and death."[24] Although Marlowe makes scant use of the letter's linguistic trick in the end—it plays next to no role in Mortimer's final downfall—the fact remains that this ambivalent message foregrounds the absence of certainty that gradually pervades the second half of the play, only to climax in the King's doubting that he has a body—a moment of hyperbolic self-questioning which strikingly foreshadows Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* of 1641:

> 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 (5.5.61–64)

True, Edward's bout of hyperbolic scepticism has been induced by accidental factors, including sleep deprivation and undernourishment. But his moving speech captures the final mood of a play in which all the characters see their initial certainties being shattered by the march of events, as Mortimer himself realises:

> Base Fortune, now I see, that in thy wheel
> There is a point to which, when men aspire,
> They tumble headlong down. That point I touched,
> And, seeing there was no place to mount up higher,

[24] Adam Hansen, "Marlowe and the Critics," in *Christopher Marlowe in Context*, ed. Emily C. Bartels and Emma Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 347.

> Why should I grieve at my declining fall?
> Farewell, fair queen; weep not for Mortimer,
> That scorns the world, and, as a traveller,
> Goes to discover countries yet unknown (5.6.58–65)

The wheel-of-fortune metaphor is all the more relevant to the current discussion as Mortimer explicitly links it to both downfall and death. Yet, perhaps because he has not been deserted by Isabella—and he will never be—Mortimer is still capable of intuiting a general truth about life ("now I see..."). In his situation, scepticism is not a dramatic option, or so it seems. Where there is love, there is also always a modicum of certainty left. In that regard, it will be noted that Mortimer's farewell to life, which is primarily a farewell to Isabella, is couched in clear epistemic terms ("goes to discover countries yet unknown"). Edward's situation is a far cry from Mortimer's. In his case, scepticism—defined as the character's impossibility to grasp a single, incontrovertible truth, except the certainty of his own mortality—is neither a methodological tool nor a preliminary stage in the discovery of truth, but rather a terminal condition. To the king, there are only two ways of remedying his life of misery and utter deprivation, namely death and oblivion, both implying the dissolution of the thinking subject. He welcomes death as an old friend who will gently close his eyes: "Come, death, and with thy fingers close my eyes, / Or, if I live, let me forget myself" (5.1.110–111). Edward repeatedly insists that death will come to him as a relief: "Farewell. I know the next news that they bring / Will be my death, and welcome shall it be; / To wretched men death is felicity" (5.1.125–127). In fact, from the moment the King is taken prisoner (and therefore separated from his friends), he is lost in a thick mist of epistemic uncertainty. At the end of his dramatic journey, the King reaches a position from "which the world is unknowable," to cite Cavell's own words. Of course, as a defeated king and a prisoner exposed to filth, stench and starvation, it is only natural that Edward should adopt a submissive and passive attitude. But he also speaks in a way that recalls Aeneas's bewilderment and confusion. Consider, for example, the following passage in which asking questions seems to be the only mode of expression still available to the King. Doubt has now replaced certainty:

> Friends, whither must unhappy Edward go?
> Will hateful Mortimer appoint no rest?
> Must I be vexed like the nightly bird
> Whose sight is loathsome to all winged fowls?
> When will the fury of his mind assuage?
> When will his heart be satisfied with blood?
> If mine will serve, unbowel straight this breast,
> And give my heart to Isabel and him;
> It is the chiefest mark they level at (5.3.4–12)

Death, not love, is the only certainty Edward can still cling to, and it is striking that this long string of questions should lead, quite naturally, to the evocation of his own demise. Even more striking is the fact that the same pattern tends to repeat itself in Edward's next speech. The only difference is that his question is now purely rhetorical, so that the certainty of his impending death becomes even more pressing and complete:

> This usage makes my misery increase.
> But can my air of life continue long
> When all my senses are annoyed with stench?
> Within a dungeon England's king is kept,
> Where I am starved for want of sustenance.
> My daily diet is heart-breaking sobs,
> That almost rent the closet of my heart.
> Thus lives old Edward, not relieved by any,
> And so must die, though pitied by many (5.3.16–24)

Last but not least, Edward's interaction with Lightborne provides a final illustration of the tragedy's epistemic subtext. The scene contains the passage in which Edward explains that "[his] mind's distempered and [his] body's numbed," so that he even comes to doubt his physical integrity ("And whether I have limbs or no, I know not," 5.5.63–64). Edward briefly remembers that he is a king, only to wonder, in the same breath, whether he is still alive: "Know that I am a king. O, at that name, / I feel a hell of grief. Where is my crown? / Gone, gone! And do I remain alive?" (5.5.88–90). Doubt, however, is not limited to Edward's incoherent statements. As befits a play in which uncertainty is gradually given pride of place, Lightborne engages in a cat-and-mouse game of dissimulation with the king. This is a cruel game whereby the barbarity of the impending torture is compounded by Lighborne's hypocritical mask of suavity. According to Charles R. Forker:

> [It is] an almost unendurable seduction of sorts in which the sadist toys quasi-sexually with his human object […]. The seducer uses a combination of techniques—feigned sympathy, soothing comfort, and transparent lies, beneath all of which menace is the motivating force. Delay heightens the terror both for the victim and for the audience. Edward, torn between physical exhaustion and paralyzing anxiety, between the desire for sleep (or oblivion) and the fear of violent death, wrestles with the contradiction between anticipated doom and a fantasy of hope."[25]

The atmosphere, though, is one of uncertain apprehension, rather than sheer terror. What dominates the few moments before the murder takes place is the sense that something is about to happen, but Edward is still sufficiently uncertain to let himself fall asleep. And it is

[25] Marlowe, *Edward the Second*, 1994, 79.

fitting that the last line he speaks before receiving confirmation that Lightborne is come to murder him should take the form of a final question, thus testifying to his still uncertain and puzzled state of mind: "And therefore tell me, wherefore art thou come?" (5.5.105).

Conclusion

Edward's dramatic journey is one that takes him from love and certainty to doubt, scepticism and death. Such a trajectory, it will perhaps be objected, is not entirely surprising in a tragedy. But what I have tried to show is how much certainty is predicated on love. When love disappears, the characters move to "a position from which," to borrow Cavell's phrase, "it is obvious (without argument) that the world is unknowable." In his essay "Of Friendship," Francis Bacon famously argues that "it is a mere and miserable solitude to want true friends; without which the world is but a wilderness."[26] Bacon goes on to explain that "the second fruit of friendship is healthful and sovereign for the understanding, as the first is for the affections."[27] In its own way, *Edward the Second* validates such a view by showing that "where there is no love" (as Bacon says), there is no meaning, no possibility to make sense of the world. This is why the play can perhaps be said to exemplify the brand of scepticism that Cavell identified in Shakespeare's plays as foreshadowing Descartes's *Meditations*. My contention is that *Edward the Second* is pervaded by a sense of uncertainty that creates epistemic tension at the heart of Marlowe's dramatic universe. The dramatic world Edward lives and dies in is a tottering, reeling, uncertain one. It is defined by its irretrieveable outsideness and its fundamental unknowability—an outsideness and unknowability that only love can contain for a while. To Edward, Gaveston, Isabella or even Mortimer love constitutes what Cavell calls "a return of the world" because it provides them with a form of dogmatic certainty which they express in words denoting the epistemic and emotional stability which they are craving for. Conversely, when the course of love is impeded, the world suddenly regains its uncertain quality. Unlike Prospero in *The Tempest* finally reconciling himself to his little life "being rounded with a sleep" and living on, after crushing Caliban's rebellion, to devote every third thought to the grave (which still leaves two-thirds of his intellectual activity for the contingencies of life), the protagonists of Marlowe's *Edward the Second* fail to survive a world that has become so cruelly lacking in epistemic solidity.

[26] Francis Bacon, "Of Friendship," in *Francis Bacon: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 391.
[27] Bacon, "Of Friendship," 393.

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