Asynchronous Edward: Comparing online responses to gender in Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* and Elizabeth Cary's *The History of the Most Unfortunate Prince Edward II*

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Introduction

This essay examines how students in an online undergraduate English literature survey course (in 2023) reacted to and wrote responses in forum posts to a comparative reading of Christopher Marlowe's sixteenth century play *Edward II* and Elizabeth Cary's seventeenth century prose account of the same monarch. The students used the online Marlowe text hosted by Tufts University while they read Cary's *History* in the database *Early Modern Books Online*.[1] The essay seeks to answer two gaps in scholarship. First, there is a distinct lack of critical studies on online teaching of early modern literature. When scholarly discourse appears in this literary period, it tends to emphasize Shakespeare rather than any other writers. This essay will address this issue in three ways: by discussing two of those other authors, by focusing on a comparative analysis rather than a single author, and by achieving a gender balance; second, such work tends to emphasize technology rather than pedagogy. Consequently, "technology then can dictate the pedagogy rather than an instructor's pedagogical goals determine the most useful technology" (Giese 2021, 158). This could be rectified by creating student communities, promoting student engagement, providing opportunities for collaborative learning experience, and allowing students to create their own interpretations and resources. My contribution to this pedagogical focus will be to examine how students interact with texts via discussion boards.

Background

Indiana University of Pennsylvania is located in the western part of the state, approximately 65 miles from Pittsburgh. It is part of the Pennsylvania System of Higher

[1] Christopher Marlowe, *Edward II*, ed. Hilary J. Binda, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.03.0007; Elizabeth Cary [attributed to Henry, Viscount Falkland], *The History of the Most Unfortunate Prince King Edward II* (London: 1680), Wing / F414, https://liverpool.idm.oclc.org/login?url?url=https://www.proquest.com/eebo/books/history-most-unfortunate-prince-king-edward-ii/docview/2240876633/sem-2?accountid=12117. All quotations from these texts refer to these editions.

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Education (PASSHE) which serves the entire commonwealth. It typically attracts first-generation college students whose age is in the 18–22-year-old range although there are also typically non-traditional students outside that range. The content of this paper is based on a portion of a course for English majors, designated as an introductory level British Literature survey class (*Beowulf* to 1660) within an array of courses that range from introductory classes on literary analysis to upper-level classes. The class is taken by both those in the BA English track and those in the English secondary education track. This class was delivered in an asynchronous online format, meaning that the students worked independently and would receive feedback from me in terms of posted announcements and video clips that consisted of both educative content such as mini lectures and observations about student responses.

2023 was the first time I had taught this particular course in this modality, but online teaching has become, particularly during the Covid pandemic and in the post-pandemic era, an observable trend in Higher Education, where colleges and universities have realized the necessity of becoming as flexible as possible in offering students multiple ways to access courses and to complete their studies. In response to declining enrolments, and a lack of state support for public universities in Pennsylvania, PASSHE decided to implement several momentous changes in operations during the pandemic in order to survive. One of the reports they published in 2020 had as its second strategic goal a desire to ensure that 53,000 students (Fall 2022 numbers of students enrolled across the state system stands at approximately 85,000) could take classes online. It also emphasized the flexible benefit of online classes for adult learners (14).[2] In another report from PASSHE in the summer of 2021, three surveys of current students indicate the popularity of the online class: 91.5% were willing to take some courses online, 92.5% would do so to make sure the price they paid for their education was the lowest it could be, while 90.5% agreed to do so if they could finish their degree more quickly.[3] All of these strategic moves are part of a national trend as Kristine Blair recognizes when she comments about how "more and more programmes go virtual to remain competitive in an era of 24/7 learning."[4] This momentum towards more online classes has become feasible because of the

[2] "Strategic Plan: Rising to the Challenge" 2020. Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education. PDF. 9.
[3] "PASSHE Quantitative Research Report." 2021. Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education. PDF. 18-20
[4] Kristine L. Blair. "Delivering Literary Studies in the Twenty-first Century: The Relevance of Online Pedagogies," in *Teaching Literature at a Distance: Open, Online and Blended Learning*, ed. Takis Kayalis and Anastasia Natsina (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 68.

investment universities have made in online modalities together with faculty experience of teaching online during the pandemic which has moved many of them from the status of "digital immigrants" to "digital natives," or to the assigned role of "delivery people" to use Stanley Fish's dehumanized term.[5]

My university uses D2L (Desire to Learn) as its online platform which has an array of functions to facilitate student learning such as the ability to build quizzes and assignments, make announcements, the space for both detailed description of lessons and the uploading of files and multimedia videos and video recordings by faculty explaining class pedagogy. In the class I will describe below, that took place in the Spring semester of 2023, there were twenty-seven students, twenty female and 7 males. They had to complete quizzes, write two 5–7 page essays that covered the two topics of the course—gender and religion—and complete discussion threads of approximately 250 words for which I provided prompts in each case.

The possibilities of an online delivery of an early modern literature class

I have taught many online courses, but they have focused on composition and research for undergraduate students. This was my first experience of teaching a literature class online. In my experience, the benefits of software modalities are as follows: they give a voice to the more introverted student through the use of discussion threads;[6] enable teachers to provide detailed descriptions of activities/ assessments; possess the ability to upload all of class materials without the worry that students would misplace them; download video mini-lectures to supplement discussions or troubleshoot following the reading of written online assignments; and maintain a permanent record of materials which is useful as an organizational tool and in cases where grades are disputed. The downsides are those typically associated with online communication between teacher and student, specifically the replacement of in-class and in-depth explications of assignments and objectives with a verbal account in a digital medium such as D2L that, limited to a word count requirement, can lead to a lack of written detail and consequent ambiguity. While my class consisted of several pedagogical assessments—quizzes and two essays—it is the discussion board that is the focus here, a platform which Marshall and Slocombe argue we need to push more to

[5] Blair, "Delivering Literary Studies," 70.

[6] As Timothy A. Turner has pointed out: "face-to-face courses can inherently privilege the most outgoing students which can be a problem…after all the most talkative students are not always the most insightful." See "Shakespeare Online: Contextually and Collaboratively," *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 34 (2021), 182.

students since "the value of the discussion board to their own learning has not been made clear to them."[7] This in spite of the fact that some scholars fear the lack of quality in such forums.[8]

Another motivation here was my awareness of the striking lack of scholarly articles on online teaching in the early modern period of writers other than Shakespeare. In observing how "few resources exist on teaching Shakespeare asynchronously,"[9] Loreen Giese assumes that our concern is only with Shakespeare. She does not mention other authors, a hardly surprising omission given that research trends have focused exclusively on online Shakespeare. The only complaint Giese makes is that such discourse has focused on digital humanities rather than pedagogy. While these critical positions on Shakespeare do contain practical tips in online teaching such as structuring courses so they emphasize digital readings, mini-lectures, and forums, the content is always Shakespeare. Giese acknowledges this in an endnote, remarking on the "abundantly and rapidly growing" field dedicated to "Shakespeare and the digital humanities."[10] The essays collected by Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan that describe digital scholarship, research and pedagogy exclusively in terms of Shakespeare testify to the stark critical absence of considering how other writers of the period might be taught in an online environment. The recourse at present then in testing the validity of the argument of these critical studies is to mindfully replace the name of Shakespeare with the author/s of our choice and see if the same argument resonates. Thus, when Giese argues that "directed discussions for pedagogy in teaching Shakespeare asynchronously are urgently needed," we need to be saying that about all writers in the early modern period.[11]

Comparative readings

The value of the comparative reading

[7] Louise Marshall and Will Slocombe, "From Passive to Active Voices: Technology, Community and Literary Studies," in *Teaching Literature at a Distance*, ed. Kayalis and Natsina, 104.
[8] Erin Sullivan, for example, worries whether the format of forums can "achieve the same sustained depth as a face-to-face discussion." See "Internal and External Shakespeare: Constructing the Twenty-First Century Classroom," in *Shakespeare and the Digital World. Redefining Scholarship and Practice*, ed. Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 70.
[9] Loreen L. Giese, "Teaching Shakespeare Online: Challenges, Advantages and Strategies," *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 34 (2021) 158.
[10] Giese, "Teaching Shakespeare Online," 162n3.
[11] Giese, "Teaching Shakespeare Online," 159.

In my classes I often create paired readings in order to give space to marginalized voices. Hence in my Shakespeare and adaptation course for English majors, I pair Shakespeare's *The Tempest* with Aime Cesaire's postcolonial *A Tempest* and Philip Osment's queer reading, *This Island's Mine*. In my graduate class on adaptation itself, I supplement theory through paired readings such as *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Robinson Crusoe* and Coetzee's *Foe*. Such pairings require a comparative reading, a relatively difficult pedagogical task which I often solve by asking students to create a tabular form, noting differences as they read the adaptation. Since these particular students were at the beginning of the English Major's program and therefore relatively inexperienced in comparative readings, I provided them with a series of bullet points which I have developed into prose below.

There were a series of conceptual points that motivated the comparative analysis. First, the need for canonical balance. I am very conscious of how Cary's presence in my course, as a female writer whose work was once assumed to be that of her husband, signifies an attempt to achieve greater parity in terms of gender representation in the field of Renaissance literature. I have taught female writers of the period before such as Amelia Lanyer, Isabella Whitney and Margaret Cavendish, and Cary as well in the form of her play *The Tragedy of Mariam*. However, these have been partial works in anthologies. This was an opportunity for my students to engage in reading and discussing the substantive work of a female writer.

Second, I was interested to see whether students noticed if Cary reads history in a different way than Marlowe. Although hers is a prose account rather than a play, which in itself could be an interesting study in genre differentiation, I wanted to see whether students noticed what motivates Cary's historiographical reading of Edward II's reign. I was hoping that they might notice the extent to which Cary's critiques are based on class and status rather than merely issues of homosexuality.[12] Lastly, given that Marlowe's play is deeply invested in domestic intrigue, specifically the triangulations of desire that motivate political decision making, I was interested to see where Cary's sympathies resided: does she identify with Isabel, does she condemn Edward for his homosexual

[12] The issue of homosexuality alone in *Edward II* has preoccupied critics for generations to the exclusion of other topics. See as brief examples in a burgeoning field: Jonathan Crewe, "Disorderly Love: Sodomy Revisited in Marlowe's *Edward II*," *Criticism* 53, no. 1 (2009): 385–99; David Stymeist, "Status, Sodomy, and the Theater in Marlowe's *Edward II*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 44, no. 2 (2004): 233–53; Michael G. Cornelius, *Edward II and a Literature of Same-Sex Love: The Gay King in Fiction, 1590–1640* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016).

relationships, does she have stronger opinions about Gaveston or Spencer than Marlowe? My analysis revealed that while students were nonchalant about the homosexuality in either version, they were very focused on the triangulation of desire in the two men/one woman nexus, Edward with either Gaveston or Spencer, specifically as it affected Queen Isabel. Moreover, students' preference of Cary's version of Isabel indicated their perception that she was a much better writer of female character than Marlowe, notably in terms of her representation of Isabel's push back against an essentialist identity and of her political nous in fighting for her own survival and that of her son, the future Edward III.

General Observations about Comparing the Two Edwards

These are important questions because Cary's version of *Edward II* is quite different from Marlowe's play. Some of this information is relatively trivial—Cary's Gaveston is exiled three times to Marlowe's twice—but other descriptions are more revealing. For example, often Cary's reading of history is astutely political whereas Marlowe's interpretation of events panders to a cultural prejudice such as the anti-Catholic sentiment of the audience. For example, when Cary's Edward agrees that Gaveston should be exiled once more out of pure political necessity, it is because he sees that he cannot counter the danger the barons pose. In contrast, in Act 1, scene 4 of Marlowe's play, Edward sends Gaveston into exile because the Archbishop of Canterbury tells him he must do so out of his allegiance to the Pope which Edward recognizes, "The legate of the Pope will be obayd." While this admission acknowledges the unequal power relations between a Medieval English king and the head of the Catholic Church, when he subscribes to the exile, Edward immediately threatens to burn down the Vatican "For these thy superstitious taperlights," a sentiment that would appeal to a Protestant audience in the Elizabethan theatre. This is a relatively insubstantial point perhaps, but I suggested to my students in posted class notes that comparative reading is not always about the big picture: sometimes, nuanced differences in narratives reveal significant cultural moments of antagonism and hatred. Although I will refer to some of these differences in the detailed discussion of student responses to both texts that follow, it is worth detailing here the more general substantive differences in terms of genre and in terms of the representations of character and events that impacted how students interpreted each text.

First, by writing an historical narrative instead of drama, Cary can provide more historical details than is possible within the structure of a five-act play that is heavily reliant on dialogue and rapidly moving events punctuated by frequent acts of violence both

on and off stage. One of the most important of these details is her representation of Edward's father, Edward I, that begins her narrative. The praise of his father acts as a moral countermeasure and offers the probity of an ideal masculine behavioral model. Edward I has done everything a father can do to prepare the son for a monarchical life: given him practical experience as a soldier and leader in the Scottish wars, and instruction in the arts of discipline and realpolitik. But Cary also indicates that his son's incipient immoral behavior, defined as a "corruption in nature," (2) has threatened Edward I's solicitous care. This is not to say that Edward I escapes criticism. Cary relates how Edward I's paternal feelings for his son blinded him into thinking that the twin aspects of maturation and the responsibilities of leading the kingdom would lessen his affections for Gaveston, "the *Ganimede* of his affections" (3). Nonetheless, Edward I is always trying to secure his son's and kingdom's future, and before he dies, he gets his barons to take an oath to promise to never let Gaveston return from exile. This is only casually referred to by young Mortimer in the first scene of the play, and there is only a brief acknowledgment of Edward I at all when Gaveston mentions Edward II's letter to him, noting "My father is deceast" (1.1).

The expansive nature of her narrative also means that Cary can provide a larger, unflattering picture of Edward's incompetence that extends beyond his inability to rule because of his infatuation with Gaveston. Marlowe provides only brief details of a wider geopolitical sphere through which Edward's reign can be evaluated. It is true that the audience is conscious of the geo-politics of Anglo-French relations in the shuttle diplomacy of Spenser and Isabella respectfully. And the barons inform him that no foreign power respects him and that the Irish and Scots invade while his military "marcht like players" in Scotland, treating war as a stage performance. But these geo-political details are compressed. There is a greater sense in Marlowe's account of the constriction of regal movement. The fighting between the king and the barons takes place around Tynemouth castle, on the North-East coast of England, after which the king flees south to Scarborough while the barons capture Gaveston. This narrow vision of geographic space is replaced by Cary's expansive account of the wars in Scotland and the diplomacy in France undertaken by Isabel. The consequences are a further belittling of Edward. Cary presents Edward's incursions into Scotland as a distraction from his domestic conflict with the barons. His fight with Robert the Bruce makes Edward adjourn "his private spleen" (14). But the fight turns into an embarrassing loss, followed by the ignominy of discovering that two of the Pope's intercessionists for peace between the two countries are robbed on the way to

Scotland. Cary views further robberies as illustrative of a general lawlessness throughout the kingdom, blamed on a discontent towards the king in the people who had objected to his "untemperate and undiscreet actions" (16). Such deliberate acts of criminal behavior are seen "to tast the Peoples inclinations" (16) for more general mayhem. This is followed by plague, famine and invasion by the Scots as a sign of divine displeasure. When Edward goes to war with Scotland again it is, once more, a disaster. The result for the reader is to obtain a much more damaging picture of Edward's incompetence as a monarch.

Second, one of the most interesting characteristics of Cary's narrative is her authorial commentary. For instance, she bestows the reader with an immediate first impression of Edward through authorial candor that indicates her moral disapprobation of a monarch who was "in Conversation light, in Will violent, in Condition wayward, and in Passion irreconcilable" (2). Similarly, when Cary describes how Edward ignores the birth of his son because he misses Gaveston so much we are told that "his distracted brains take new and desperate resolutions" (9). She then interjects the following authorial moral commentary: "Kings that once falsifie their Faiths, more by their proper Will than a necessary Impulsion, grow…fearful or suspected to their own peculiar Subjects" (10). This demonstrates her canny understanding of the origins of popular unrest towards the monarch.

This authorial voice also enables a critique of the story's most prominent female character. The most significant example of Cary's authorial intrusion is her inclusion of material that is not covered in Marlowe: Isabel's treatment of Spenser. It is here that Cary critiques Isabel for the way she treats Spenser who she takes in triumph with her: "she gives her incensed passion preheminence, revenge must precede her desire and strong ambition" (58). She sends her husband to Berkeley castle and delivers Spenser up to the military. Cary disapproves of how Isabel takes Spenser with her to Hereford "with a kind of insultant triumphing tyranny, far unworthy the Nobility of her Sex and Virtue, she makes her poor condemned adversary in a strange disguise attend her Progress." (59) He is forced to ride a jade, an inferior horse, and forced to wear a tabard, a piece of clothing typically worn by peasants and is then proclaimed by trumpet on route, together with "all the spightful disgraces and affronts that they could devise to cast upon him" (59). Yes, according to Cary he was a vicious tyrant, but she suggests that at least he could have been given a jury trial by his peers. Instead, her treatment of him indicates to Cary both a lack of class, a behavior that betrays her royal condition as the daughter of a French king, and a reaction based on passions that Cary always rates below reason:

> a wondrous base condition, to insult or to tyrannize over those poor Ruins which Fortune has thrown into our power…To satisfie our passions with the bitterest extremity of our power, may justly be stiled rather a salvage and barbarous Cruelty, than true and perfect Justice." (59)

Isabel gets her justice when the subjects demand it. But when all the passion has gone out of her decision making, Cary indicates that it remains a blemish on Isabel's character.

Reactions to reading Marlowe's *Edward II*

Once students had read the condensed bulleted points comparing the two texts, I asked them to spend a week reading Marlowe's play and answering some questions about the play's actions and interactions between characters to test their comprehension. The following week, students had to write a discussion thread. The prompt was as follows:

> This is an unusual play for its time because it shows an openly gay monarch who struggles to control his kingdom because of his dedication to a series of male lovers. The play also shows a number of power struggles between various characters such as between Edward and his wife Isabel, who is trying to assert her own identity both as a Queen but also as a wife competing with male rivals for her husband's affections. Meanwhile, those who hold a lot of power in the kingdom, the barons, are a rival power who insist that Edward maintains his regal dignity in order to rule the kingdom rather than succumb to the influence of his "minions," the French word for favorites. These include first Gaveston and then Spencer who they regard as social upstarts. What I would like to do is to consider issues of gender and power in this play by picking on some scenes or episodes that you think best illustrate the struggles that are taking place. You might want to consider some of those characters I have mentioned above or you can include any other characters/situations that you think explain issues of gender and power in the play.

There are several key directives here. Students were guided by the phrase "power struggles" as a general concept while their thought processes were further funneled into considering several relationships, foremost of which was the relationship between Isabel and Edward. My own choice of phrasing predetermined certain assumptions that I wanted the students to consider: a) *political*. Isabel is trying to establish what her title of Queen means in terms of who she is as a political person; b) *interpersonal*. What is her status within her marriage? I also included the relationship between the barons and the king, while leaving open the possibility that they might want to consider any other relationships such as Edward and his lovers, Gaveston and Spencer, Isabel and Mortimer, Isabel and her father, Isabel and her son, and Mortimer and his father.

When I clustered my students' answers, I noticed immediately that the majority of responses focused on the triangulation of desire that involved Marlowe's Edward,

Gaveston and Isabel. Despite the bulk of criticism focusing on the same-sex relationship of Edward and Gaveston, my students showed little interest in it per se—and only where it was interpreted to impact upon the feelings of Isabel.[13] In fact, some students played down the sexual nature of the relationship between Edward and Gaveston perhaps because same-sex relations to this cohort of college students did not seem shocking. They also pointed out that it did not seem to be that much of a concern to the barons either who were more disturbed by Gaveston's social status than his sexual orientation. These two responses typified this observation: "(1) it seems that the nobles are more concerned with Gaveston's status more so than their homosexuality…(2) the nobles are more preoccupied by being replaced by a commoner." One student cited the following passage in Marlowe's play in which Mortimer makes the following contemptuous remark: "Thou villaine, wherfore talkes thou of a king, / That hardly art a gentleman by birth?" (1.4) as a comment on how the nobles believed Edward's actions demonstrated that he didn't uphold the best interests of them and his country.

Isabel's Relationship with Edward

Many students saw Isabella's character as changing in the course of Marlowe's play from a loving wife to a woman full of contempt for her husband because of the pressures of a politically prominent marriage. Some students focused on how Edward's issues with his wife centered on his need to control Isabel by forcing her to accept Gaveston because of his status as king. After being submissive for so long and being constantly dismissed and wronged, they saw her frustration leading to a complete change in her attitude that left her hungry for power. One student argued that Isabel cared less about the fact that her husband's lovers were male than that she enjoyed less of a central role in his life: "Throughout the story, Isabella complains about coming second to the male favorites of her husband. Although there is not much that she can do about it, it is clear that this bothers her." Furthermore, this student argued that "It seems to be the main (or, perhaps, only) reason for her conspiracy against her husband." She suggested that Isabel would likely not have behaved in the same manner had her husband not been involved in affairs

[13] The weight it carries can be indicated by Michael Cornelius's observation that "no work is more indispensable in the study of male-male erotic desire prior to the twentieth century—than Marlowe's *Edward II*." *Edward II and a Literature of Same-Sex Love*, 99. Other critics regard it at essential to the plots of the main characters. For example, Gerson Peres da Silva argues that "homophobia motivates the plot of usurpation." See "Homophobia in Marlowe's *Edward II*," *Ilha Do Desterro* 34 (1998), 105.

outside of their marriage. Other students saw it as a sign of masculine manipulation, believing that Edward was trading affection for Isabel's concession of leaving him alone with Gaveston: "King Edward also has a lot of power when it comes to Isabella as well. He basically controls her, and he threatens her to give him what he wants, or he will continue to not show her any affection." In this respect, they viewed Edward as arrogant and selfish.

Reversed Gender Roles

Most fascinating were the responses of those students who saw gendered role reversals. By the time many of my students get to this play, they have already read *Beowulf*, *Gawain and the Green Knight*, and a variety of Renaissance poetry that demonstrates a systemic gender issue concerning male characters as voyeurs of women (Spenser's *Fairie Queene*), hunters of women (Thomas Wyatt's poetry), and objectifying the female body (Donne, Nashe, and Marvell). These readings prepare them to explore the essentialist profiling of gender in Marlowe's play.

One student saw this immediately in how Isabel is depicted by Marlowe as either wringing her hands or beating her breast. In a response to that student, I commented on how the Earl of Pembroke sees her as a saint—"Hard is the heart, that injures such a saint" (1.4.297)—hereby setting up expectations for her behavior. However, when they encounter Marlowe's *Edward II*, they are more fascinated by the reversal of essentialist portrayals:

> Masculinity and femininity are both presented as elastic gender categories that certain characters seeking power use to their aid. Women were typically perceived as acting irrationally, responding more to emotion, through desire and passion. Edward II instead makes decisions based on his heart, and what will keep him around Gaveston, whom he loves the most. Isabella picks up for the slack, getting the nobles on board and bringing Gaveston back for the country's sake. In this specific scene, she takes up the role of enforcer, traditionally masculine, and makes orders from her point of power.

They note that desire and passion, which they have seen exhibited by female characters in previous texts, are now identified with Edward. Male characteristics such as toughness with no signs of weakness or what were deemed in the period female characteristics such as devotion and the encouragement towards a partner are reversed as they read Isabel as an enforcer, corralling the nobles to do what is in the best interests of the country. She sublimates her personal feelings in the name of patriotism. Instead of a masculine king, we

have an emotional lover, and instead of an emotional woman, we have a Queen who is the truer monarch of her country: "Edward rules with his heart, working to put Gaveston above his own country and showing where his true loyalties lie. This may have been seen as weak and cowardly at his time but reveals a great deal on the type of person he was and who he could have been had he not been King. Isabella, similarly, works against her husband, showing she cares more for the country and wanting to rule it than Edward II ever did." One student also saw this in terms of her relationship with Mortimer. By pleading to her French family and operating from within France against her husband, she is promoting love of her country. One student quoted the following passage as an example of how Isabel abdicates her own personal happiness for the health of the nation:

> Then let him stay, for rather then my lord
> Shall be opprest by civill mutinies,
> I wil endure a melancholie life,
> And let him frollick with his minion (1.2)

I commented to this student that this could be equally borne out at the end of the play when she says, "I rue my lords ill fortune, but alas, / Care of my countrie cald me to this warre" (4.6).

Processing Same-Sex Relations in Literary Characters

What also occurs in these readings is an awareness of the extent to which students are processing their first exposure to same-sex relations in the literature of this time period. One student undertook a comparative analysis of the treatment of both Edward II and Isabel's affairs in Marlowe's play:

> One of the details of *Edward II* that I found most interesting is the treatment of both Edward II's and Isabella's affairs. Both affairs are seen as "unnatural," but neither is deemed particularly worse than the other. The way Edward II's favorites are treated feels equal to the way they would be treated if they were female. In fact, I almost wonder if the reaction would've been *worse*. Even Isabella doesn't seem to find the fact that Edward II's lovers are male that jarring, except to be somewhat offended that she has to compete with men.

The student argues that while both affairs are seen as "unnatural," neither is deemed particularly worse than the other. One of the most fascinating parts of this analysis is that I can see how this student is processing the universality of feelings regardless of the gendered identity within the relationship. In other words, how they saw that the way Edward II's favorites are treated feels equal to the way they would be treated if they were

female. The student thus rightfully normalized Edward and Gaveston's relationship and erased a differential reading bias towards heterosexual relationships. The student also noted that Isabel doesn't seem to object to the fact that Edward II's lovers are male; it is just galling that she has to compete with them.

This student reading can be supported by further textual evidence. She is constantly in a sea of conflicting emotions in her marriage not because her husband loves another man but because she is the third wheel. When Isabel tells Edward that Gaveston can be recalled from exile, we are aware just how emotionally needy she is: "I love him more / Then he can Gaveston, would he lov'd me /But halfe so much" (1.4). Even though Edward promises her a "second mariage" in response to this news, her old insecurities return when Gaveston returns from exile and she observes Edward with him, commenting to Lancaster "Look ... how passionate he is, / And still his minde runs on his minion" (2.2). Minion is perhaps a pejorative reference to a male favorite, but it is her jealousy about his depth of feelings for another person that matters here, regardless of his sexual orientation. Students did note the irony of Edward's own jealousy when the shoe is on the other foot. In Act 5, scene 1, Edward views Mortimer and Isabel's relationship in terms of how it makes her "unnatural" and "unconstant" in his eyes. While Isabel does not point out Edward's same sex relationship, he certainly notices her heterosexual infidelity with another man.

Isabel's Lack of Political Power

Above all, students notice how little negotiable power Isabella possesses both within the marriage and with other power brokers in the kingdom: "Every bit of power that she does have is stripped away by the men around her, leaving her powerless and at their mercy." Some students thought this exemplified that even the Queen has little power in a time period where women are consistently denied a say in national or domestic matters. While Isabel was constantly in close proximity with people of power, students argue that she did not have much power herself despite her attempts of asserting her identity as Queen and wife to King Edward. When Gaveston comes back from exile, Isabel is pushed into the background as Queen and as wife. Another student saw Isabel as doing whatever is necessary to maintain the title of Queen but noted that this was just to hold ground rather than make any moves that would consolidate her power. One student saw her relationship with Mortimer less as one of lovers than a conspiracy partnership designed to rebel against the king in an attempt to reclaim her power. But even in conspiring with Mortimer she

does not have much power or voice. The student cited the following lines when Mortimer cuts Isabel off as she makes a political speech: "Nay, madam, if you be a warriar, / Ye must not grow so passionate in speeches" (4.4). Mortimer's reprimand suggests that he believes she can't control her emotions, and this is viewed as a weakness in her desire to find a political identity. Although she specifically tells Mortimer "Forbeare to levie arms against the king" (1.2), I noted to the students that she has to instruct another male politician to enact this request. It is a command but she knows she cannot carry it out herself. Similarly, upon hearing Edward tell her that unless she can get Gaveston repealed he will not reconcile with her, she acknowledges "It lies not in my power" (1.4) to reconcile him to the barons. Even after her husband and Gaveston die, students commented that she never gains power because it continues to reside in the male figures with whom she has relationships:

> Isabella was constantly in close proximity with people of power yet did not have much power herself despite her attempts of asserting her identity as Queen and wife to King Edward. When Gaveston comes back from exile, Isabella is pushed on the backburner as Queen and as wife. But even conspiring with Mortimer she did not have much power or voice…Then once Mortimer is taken, Isabella is imprisoned by Edward III, newly appointed king, her own son because he deems her guilty and untrustworthy.

Hence while she does assert her political nous in telling the barons where Gaveston has fled so they can pursue him and bring him to justice, and orders the arrest of Spenser and Baldock, respondents found that Mortimer's words "The prince I rule, the queene do I command" (5.4) demonstrated a depressing narrative in which he, like other powerful male politicians before him, was in charge. Similarly in Act 5, scene 2, she goes along with whatever Mortimer decides: "Conclude against his father what thou wilt/ And I my selfe will willinglie subscribe." And slightly earlier than this scene, when Kent asks what Isabel and Mortimer plan to do with Edward after his deposition, Mortimer tells him it is not in the queen's control, only the male parliament's. So, although Isabel does carry out some executive orders, she has very little power. I did point out to them in an online comment that she is canny enough to know that with Edward still alive, her safety and sons cannot be assured. I quoted her observation when Mortimer proposes that Edward is killed that "I would hee were, so it ere not by my meanes" (5.2). However, this moment of cold, calculating policy is offset by similar instances of male power in the actions of her son that serve to neutralize her threat. Quoting the lines of Edward III to his mother—"If you be guiltie, though I be your sonne, / Thinke not to finde me slack or pitifull" (5.6)—one

student saw his willingness to throw her to the wolves and imprison her as a sign that patriarchal power has only briefly been interrupted. This leads one student to depressingly conclude: "This whole play has Isabella in a catch 22 situation, since no matter what she did she would have been screwed. In the end she loses any power and her life to men." Her abandonment by her son at the end of the play was viewed as demonstrating the fragility of her power and a sign that the enjoyment of power was simply a façade for her and other women in her position.[14]

After spending a week on reading Marlowe's play, in which they had been tested on their comprehension through a series of quizzes and through their analysis in the discussion threads, I introduced them to Cary's text by providing them with some online notes that provided biographical information about her troubling marriage and her conversion to Catholicism. I also did some forecasting of the text by providing them with some bullet points about the nature of historiographical writing during the period (captured above through my comment about her authorial commentary on character and their actions). I then set up the discussion response to Cary as follows.

Reactions to Reading Cary

The prompt for this discussion thread was as follows:

> What I would like you to do is to examine this text from a woman writer's perspective and ask yourself how it differs from Marlowe's version? You might focus on a certain character or a certain relationship or additional material that Cary provides, but it must focus on issues of gender.

I deliberately left the prompt vague first because of their familiarity with the plot and the characters through reading Marlowe, and second because I was interested in whether my students would choose any other relationship apart from Edward and Isabel—which they had done almost exclusively in response to their reading of Marlowe's play. What occurred was an unprompted decision by a majority of students to offer a comparative analysis between the two texts in which Isabel became their first interest, not only in terms of arguing that a female writer could understand female characters better than a male

[14] It is worth noting that Marlowe seems to have amended historical accounts of Isabel's fate in order to reserve something far more ominous for her. Allison Machlis Meyer notes that "Edward III's pronouncement is a notable revision that gestures towards a harsh punishment, perhaps even execution, not found in the play's sources." See *Telltale Women: Chronicling Gender in Early Modern Historiography* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 121–22. Meyer adds that Marlowe alone "hints that Isabel faces deserved death at the hands of her own son" (122), and suggests that Marlowe is implying that her political influence is "deserving of the disciplinary measures he invents for her" (123).

writer but that she produced a much stronger female character. The end result was a ready identification with Cary's text by female students in particular who were alert to how they felt they had to defend their argumentative position in the discussion threads from accusations of emotion rather than reason. And like Isabel's relation with Mortimer, they felt that often their opinions were not taken seriously or they were interrupted by male speech in the classroom.[15]

Cary's Understanding of Character

Students criticized Marlowe for the weaknesses of all his characters in comparison to Cary's representations, and many students believed that Cary's gender made her a more empathetic writer of character's feelings. The majority of students harshly critiqued Marlowe's representation of Isabel. Words like "underplayed" "downplay" "underdeveloped" "underestimated" "an afterthought" 'devalued" "a weak link" "clingy" suggested that students believed that Marlowe did not understand women enough to see that they were capable of wielding power and vengeance. Two students thought that Marlowe treated her as a joke, who is make fun of, dismissed, a "shove-off" character, one who is told to get lost, presumably by Edward. In contrast, in practically the only response written about the relationship between Edward and Gaveston, one student wrote that Cary delved far more into their relationship than Marlowe. The student noted that when Cary wrote about how "their affections go hand in hand, and the apparent injustice of the one never found contradiction with the other," (5) it showed they had a more meaningful, deeper relationship than in Marlowe's play. One student hated Cary's Gaveston more than Marlowe's version. Rather than the immature party boy she sees in the first few scenes of Marlowe's play, she saw him as an evil, manipulative person in Cary's version, which she exemplified by quoting Cary's observation that Gaveston "had so true a knowledge of his master's weakness, that he made him solely his" (8).

The Complex Emotional Range of Cary's Isabel

[15] My students' personal reaction gels with Cary's own identification with her text. Janet Starner Wright and Susan Fitzmaurice have pointed out that "Cary's historical composition is rooted in her own cultural, historical and personal moment; it is shaped by her station in life, her cultural environment, her gender, her personality, and her decision to convert to Catholicism" (81).

The subtext of some readers' arguments suggested an acknowledgement that the different genres redirected the story in Isabel's favor:

> The character of Queen Isabella was pushed to the back in Marlowe's account of this tale, whereas Cary gives us a better sense of the story through Isabella's eyes. This gives the reader a better sense of who this woman was and the struggles she endured during this tale. In Marlowe's version, Isabella is portrayed more as a villain who conspired against her king and husband, but Cary shows us a deeper side of this. She shows the reader how tragic of a tale this was for Isabella.

Another analysis praised how Cary could offer depth in character:

> In Marlowe's version of the story, she was not taken so seriously, and the readers could only assume what she was feeling/experiencing mostly through just her dialogue. In this version though there is so much description for what's going on in her head and she is being shown in a new light where she is not just the "complaining wife."

In other words, the descriptive prose account provided a more cognitively aware Isabel than was possible through the dialogue form of the play. Students viewed Marlowe's version as downplaying the role Isabella played, providing his reader with only glimpses of connections, jealousy, and a twisted love story. Therefore while Marlowe made Isabella's role less important by only showing one dimension of her emotional range—her jealousy from the love triangle she was in with Edward and Gaveston—"In Cary's version, Isabella was able to express and share with others about her feelings towards her husband's relationship with Gaveston."

Students perceived that Cary seemed to introduce Isabel as a key player with more power, and many students see Isabella in Cary's version as one of the top masterminds behind the downfall of her husband. Several students liked her complexity, noting her outrage, the extent of her hurt feelings, her anger and her intellect. She was not seen as a supporting character, as in Marlowe's play, since her role in the plot was so central. Students appreciated the point of view of Cary's story since it gave more prominence to seeing the story as Isabel's narrative. It enabled them to empathize with her anger for her husband's actions and justify acting against him to seize the throne. It also provided an opportunity for them to see her as more than someone involved in a love triangle. Compared to Cary's representation of a complicated character, they argue that Marlowe saw her as weak and feeble. This is a significant feminist moment. While students argued that Marlowe did not recognize Isabel's strength, resilience and value, they saw Cary's Isabel as a signifier of female empowerment, operating within a man's world. This is

exemplified by her willingness to rise with each new challenge and to strategize each move she makes. With this emerges a confident persona, a nation builder who is empathetic to her people's suffering and determined to find solutions: "she tends to speak confidently for the entire nation of England. She shows much compassion and empathy to the suffering of her people and takes it upon herself to find a solution."

Cary's Isabel was also seen as a more three-dimensional character, someone deeply ingrained in matters of policy more than simply matters purely of domesticity which is how students perceived Marlowe's version where Isabel was viewed more as a damsel-in distress archetype, a puppet for Edward's selfish desires. It was this complexity that made her so identifiable: "In Cary's version, I find it much easier to relate and connect with Isabella's character… more of her motivations for her actions were clear. In fact, at one point, Cary even notes that she is motivated by a combination of jealousy and love." Revealing a female character acting from negative *and* positive emotions thus made it easier for students to identify and care about her character. Above all, Isabel is seen as displaying a range of emotions: "I feel as though Isabella goes through the 'stages of grief' in the sense that she becomes emotional and is angry, then upset, but overall comes out on top as the queen." Such insights into her complexity also convinced the reader that Cary cared more than Marlowe about constructing a believable female character:

> In Marlowe's version, Isabel is kind of taken as a joke. She's ridiculed and made fun of and dismissed, even by those who were on her side. Her reasonings were important and they weren't exactly underplayed, but she was not a focal point in Marlowe's version. However, from Cary's version, the reader is given a more authentic version of Isabel. Cary has really given us Isabel's emotions, her anger, her hurt, her intellect.

It was notable that on several occasions, students mentioned Isabel's realistic character. The desperate housewife in Marlowe's version is replaced by a woman "using her power to try to get herself and those around her in a better position." Cary's Isabel appears as "less of a cliché and more of a realistic portrayal of a woman who has been cheated on and neglected by her husband." Taken from her Marlovian background and turned into the focus of the story, Cary's Isabel becomes a genuine, believable character with whom my students could relate.

Understanding Power: Isabel's Astute Political Game

In contrast to Marlowe, students felt that Cary understood the key role that Isabella played in the history of this period. They appreciated how Cary assigns real power to Isabel. In contrast to Marlowe who domesticates her and "merely regarded her as an envious figure caught in a love triangle who wasn't really aware of what she was going through… Queen Isabella is a powerful lady, not just someone who complains about her love triangle." And this was a powerful feminist moment for this student who "appreciated Cary's work on the Queen since I detest how males often appear to believe that women are incapable of being powerful or in charge."

It did not escape my readers that Cary emphasized her role as a Queen rather than simply as a wife. One student noted that "In Marlowe's writing, Isabella only seemed to be important because she was the wife to the king and when the king was slipping away from her, she lost importance." In contrast, as another student noted, "The Cary version of the Queen allowed for her true power as Queen to show, instead of just being upset with her husband's actions and helping arrange his overthrow."

One student quoted the following passage as an indicator of Cary's more astute awareness of Isabel's intelligence and political nous: "The Queen seeing her self deluded, and this opportunity stoln from her, by those whom she before so mortally hated, sets her own brains a working, to invent a speedy remedy" (38). In fact, Cary's account spends a lot of narrative space on her political acumen when she discovers that Spenser perpetrates political interference to ensure that she will not be sent to France for the purposes of reproachment between England and France over a political slight. Isabel really comes into prominent focus in Cary's text when her brother, the French king, seizes Guyenne to add to the crown, which Isabel references as Normandy in Marlowe's play. Cary recalls this seizure as a failed ploy by Spenser who intended for Edward to be fearful of the action that the French king might take rather than the action should actually take place, causing him to have to react. They decide to send Isabel for the purposes of atonement with her brother (36ff). Her artful plan is to use her son—"the chief spring that must set all these wheels a going" (38)—to head to Canterbury on a pilgrimage to the tomb of Thomas a Becket as a proxy for heading to France. Edward sees this as a delightful plan since it will allow him to remain behind and enjoy "his stoln Pleasures, which were before so narrowly attended by the jealous eyes of his Queen, that in this kind had been so often wronged" (38) The Spensers are also delighted because they can see a scenario in which she is permanently absent which will mean that she is no longer a pain in their side. Her escape startles and

surprises the king and Spenser when they find that Isabel, together with Mortimer and her son, the future Edward III, have arrived in Boulogne. In weighing what to do next, they fixate on manipulating the French king based on their knowledge of the French temperament as being one "giddy, light, and covetous" (39). Isabel though gets to tell her royal brother her version of events and stays out in front of the story by painting a picture of her dejected greatness in an unhappy marriage: "My Royal Husband is far too seduced, his Ear is too open, his Will too violent, and his Heart too free, to those bewitching Syrens, that make his Errors their Profit and Glory" (41). She pleads for him to relieve a distressed and wronged sister. The king's promise of revenge makes Isabel believe she shall successfully obtain redress. The momentum seems to be with her since the Spenser faction are initially worried for the following reasons: they are hated in England, that the "vanity" of Isabel's passion will persuade the French and that Edward and Isabel's son is coming into favor. However, realizing they must act immediately, the Spensers dispatch their faction to the French court with the goal "to work and undermine the Queen's Proceedings" (43). They find that the French passion towards the Queen's cause has already cooled and so they more easily insinuate themselves into the presence of those who have the King's ear" "they give freely and promise more, till they have won a fair and firm assurance" (43). They also play on the essentialist conception of Isabel's gender, emphasizing to the French king her "intemperate Carriage" (44), and thereby arguing that a woman's passion is not enough reason to go to war. What this episode ends up demonstrating is the depressing narrative of the exercising of patriarchal power, a world where male politicians flex their authority.

Cary's Critique of Isabel

The positive responses about Isabel should not be taken to imply that students were completely uncritical about Cary's representation of Isabel. I pointed out in a comment that Cary still represented her as someone subject to fallible human feelings. When the Queen hates the Spensers, it is because she is spurred on by love and jealousy: "She saw the king a stranger to her Bed, and revelling in the embraces of his wanton Minions, without so much as a glance or look on her deserving Beauty" (37). Students had a sense that she used emotions to get her way rather than appear weak and feeble. A student cited as an example of her manipulative ability the passage when Isabel cries to the French king "with a silent rhetoric that invites a noble pity" (42) and whose "sad Complaint won a

general remorse, and her liquid Tears, a deep and strong compassion" (42). But students were also alert to the essentialist association of women as emotional individuals. It was noted that Cary wrote more negatively that "a Woman's Passion is believed too weak a Reason to engage two so Warlike Nations in a War" (44). And it was Cary's repeated negative connection between Isabel's passion and her judgement that drew most of their attention. One student noted that the moment where Cary writes "we may not properly expect Reason in Women's Actions, whose Passions are their principal guide and mover," (60) was re-enforcing the idea that women are driven by emotion, more than the students felt Marlowe did.[16] Another student chose a passage that alerted me to Cary's critique of Isabel's behavior. In the discussion thread in response to one student comment, I also referenced two similar passages, one that while not exonerating Spenser's vicious behavior towards Isabel, certainly chastised her for not allowing him to be tried by his peers. Cary presents Isabel's decision as determined by passion than impartiality: "To satisfie our passions with the bitterest extremity of our power, may justly be stiled rather a salvage and barbarous Cruelty, than true and perfect Justice" (59). My second example occurred with a post-punishment judgement on Isabel's character. While Cary is sure the people were sated with Spenser's death, she also notes that "when the heat of blood was past, and men had recollected their sences, it then appeared to be too great a blemish to a Queen, a Woman, and a Victor" (60).

Students were also alert to the fact that Cary does not shy away from identifying Isabel's weaker characteristics. In her version, Isabel does not like Mortimer's suggestion that they can quell discontent in the kingdom by having Edward killed: "She believed his sufferings were already greater than his faults, and was unwilling to stain the opinion of her worth and virtue, with so foul an Act of injustice" (71). One student acknowledged patriarchal judgement at work in how Mortimer identifies her reluctance to punish Edward as "female Weakness" which leads to her claiming that "I am a woman fitter to take advice than give it" while she throws herself at him. The student could not decide whether this was intentionally dramatic, but she did argue that it called attention to the way men

[16] Curtis Perry also focuses on this section in Cary's History to try to reconcile Cary's comments about Isabel's passions with other parts of the text where Isabel has been shown "acting quite rationally under extreme pressure." He concludes with the observation that Cary is commenting on the "vacuity of gendered language for passion," in a world dominated by rebellious individuals. So the text seems to raise the following question: "What does it mean…to treat Isabel's passion as typical for a woman if it is also seen as symptomatic of a world destabilized by the unruliness of men at the top?" See "'Royal Fever and the Giddy Commons': Cary's *History of the Life, Reign and Death of Edward II* and the Buckingham phenomenon," in *The Literary Career and Legacy of Elizabeth Cary*, ed. Heather Wolfe (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 86.

perceive women act. She concluded that Isabel is still trapped by her gender and "the stereotypical idea that women are driven by emotion and innately weaker than men, relying on them in times of indecision and difficulty." Other commentators in the discussion board concurred. As an example, one student noted that despite Isabel's general apprehension over the execution of Edward, "the act still ended up taking place because she didn't have the power over Mortimer…he has to be right and she obeys him…it also shows that she would not be capable of seeking revenge without the help of a man." I did point out to this student in a response on her discussion thread that she just does not want to be involved or know when and how it is going to take place and that she does agree to sign a warrant to replace his warders. In Marlowe's account, Isabel is more concerned with what it will mean for the safety of her and her son if her husband stays alive. In interesting ways, unlike Cary's version, Marlowe reveals Isabel's agency in decision-making. When he says: "Speake, shall he presently be dispatch'd and die?" (5.2) it is up to Isabel to decide only for her to respond, "I would he were, so 'twere not by my means!" However, in 5.2, gender deference occurs once more. Mortimer asks Isabel to be ruled by him and acts as her son's protector to which she replies "Conclude against his father what thou wilt, / And I my selfe will willinglie subscribe."

Conclusion

Overall, the students in my online undergraduate literature class determined that Cary's representations of Queen Isabel were more nuanced in terms of her character's relationships with her husband and more complex in terms of her interactions with Spenser than Marlowe's version. They valued Cary's promotion of Isabel's political life since it emphasized her determination to survive as a queen in a patriarchal world where male characters were trying to manipulate and neutralize her efficacy. In contrast, they assessed Marlowe as a writer who, while engaging in interesting acts of gendered reversals, presents a politically weaker queen who is subject to regressive passive gestures to ensure that she can be loved by a spouse who has very little interest in her. My intention in providing a comparative analysis is for students to critically examine gendered differences in representations of the same subject matter. The results suggest the students' capabilities to discern how authors chose to represent historical narrative reflects how gendered differences can be complicated by how gender intersects with competing cultural emphases such as class. For both Marlowe and Cary, class is as much an important

assessment of character as gender, but more so for Cary since the nature of historiographical writing provides her with a strong authorial voice that indicates how positive female representation can be undercut by the subject of class. The experience of teaching this class in an asynchronous mode suggests a more democratic impulse at work, one in which often silent or introverted students can use the discussion boards to make an equally compelling contribution to class discussion. My interactions with many of them in terms of posting comments does suggest the usefulness of what Marshall and Slocombe have called "teachnology" in which "communities of learning will reflect the pedagogic practice of the subject, valuing community production alongside individual achievement."[17] What is missing however is this community of learners in early modern literature online courses *apart from* Shakespeare and I hope that my "technology-enhanced learning" with Marlowe and Cary will suggest ways in which teachers can fill in this content gap.[18]

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