

The Employment of Touch in Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*

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Michaël Popelard's 2024 essay, "Knowledge, Love and Epistemic Uncertainty in Marlowe's *Edward the Second*," reminds us that Christopher "Marlowe's characters fumble and grope their way around" their dramatic environments.¹ As Popelard continues, he points out that "opacity is the rule, not the exception" for the playwright's characters.² This opacity comes into plain sight when examining queerness in Marlowe's plays. While many critics shine a light on desire in Marlowe's *Edward II* through queer, historical, and political critical lenses, it seems timely to now re-direct this focus to investigate how Edward and his favourite, Gaveston, literally "fumble and grope" their way through the play. As a result, this article will re-visit queer desire through intimate touch by exploring how Marlowe employs the sense to communicate male-male erotic intimacy.

Marlowe's *Edward II* demonstrates the power embodied in the sense of touch as it breaks down and reveals the transitory nature of socially constructed boundaries such as formal behaviour, contemporary terms of sexuality, and social class. While Marlowe employs metaphor to convey the sense, his engagement remains strikingly literal. He details moments of male-male affective intimacy between Edward and Gaveston through physical contact which breaks with formality and which merges the men together into a composite body or a complete "self." Touch between the king and his favourite vies with and even surpasses intimacy between the king and queen. It further extends beyond desire to manifest as a display of power. Towards the end of the play, Marlowe utilises persuasive, deceptive, and violent forms of touch prior to the king's death. In these moments, he toys with sexual touch as Edward pleads for his life with his assassin.³ I argue that Marlowe understands touch not as a base sense that is simply habitual, intermittent or fleeting but as a complex, primal and powerful force that lies in the hands of those who use and misuse it. In *Edward II*, the touch of the king's hands holds the power to invoke pleasure, sexual intimacy and fulfilment, and

¹ Michaël Popelard, "Knowledge, Love and Epistemic Uncertainty in Marlowe's *Edward the Second*," *Journal of Marlowe Studies* 4 (2024): 117.

² Popelard, "Knowledge, Love and Epistemic Uncertainty," 117.

³ While I touch on violence here in the introduction, brutal and sadistic touch inflicted by Lightborne at the end of the play requires a separate article to offer a comprehensive and detailed analysis.

status elevation; conversely, his assassin's employment of the sense summons violence, subjugation, immense suffering, and ultimately a violent death.

Touching Base: A Brief Overview and Criticism

The circumstances employed, the type and nature of intimacies expressed and interacted with, and the narrative framework that tells the tale all influence our interpretation and understanding of touch. The interaction between animate bodies and animate/inanimate bodies and the conscious and unconscious linguistic interactions recorded on textual surfaces can offer further insight into early modern sexual expression. Physical contact can incorporate a plethora of forms, offer a multitude of meanings, and impart information on varying levels of relationships; for example, holding hands might take the shape of a handshake that means a formal greeting, a pact, an agreement or a parting. It might indicate intimacy between lovers or the grappling of arm wrestlers in a show of strength to onlookers. Kissing might alternate between formality in the shape of a greeting and informality in the form of affection between parents and children or friends. It might also expose erotic consensual and non-consensual moments of intimacy. Other factors such as the duration of hand-holding, the power of the grip, and the care taken in instigating, persisting with, and ending physical contact also influence interpretations of behaviour and the level and stage of relationship between the parties involved. The varying degrees to which early moderns record their interactions with others can communicate desired, imagined, observed, suggested, and physical intimacies and present evidence of where their emotional and physical desires lie. While degrees of desire, types of erotic acts and practices, and levels of expression and interactions can vary widely between individuals and over time, the continuous repetition of those interactions can contribute to the creation and communication of an individual identity which includes, but extends beyond, a sexual identity. Such elements may partially overlap between individuals and between wider time periods.⁴ Indeed, this overlapping of desires figuratively and literally intertwines the king and his favourite.

Much criticism written on Marlowe's *Edward II* centres on homoeroticism. As David Clark observes, "[m]ost critical attention...has focused on Marlowe's homoerotics and their function and significance in the context of early modernists' debates about homosexuality,

⁴ I expand on this concept in much greater detail in my forthcoming book, *Exploring Early Modern Sexualities. The Desires of King James VI & I, Queen Anna and his Favourites* (Bloomsbury, 2025).

sodomy, friendship, and their intersections.”⁵ For Alan Bray, Marlowe alludes to sodomy between Edward and Gaveston, but he states that their relationship draws on “the daily conventions of friendship without being [a sign] of a sodomitical relationship.”⁶ David Stymeist notes that critics prior to the emergence of new historicism often depicted the sodomitical murder of *Edward II* as an indication of Marlowe’s inclination toward sadism and brutality.⁷ While contemporary critics focus on the political aspects of sodomy, he continues, they develop two divergent viewpoints.⁸ Some queer critics contend that Marlowe’s play challenges the representation of the sodomite while others contest this, arguing that early modern concepts of sexual deviation restrict interpretations of sodomy.

Simon Shepherd proposes that Marlowe specifically centres on sodomy while Jonathan Goldberg suggests that Marlowe “is defending sodomy, not an idealised friendship or some spiritual relationship or some self-integrated principle of identity.”⁹ Gregory Bredbeck asserts that Gaveston politically employs homoeroticism with liberating effects.¹⁰ For Curtis Perry, the early modern patronage system which encompasses homoerotic desire and political disorder can also invite allegations of sodomy.¹¹ Perry also notes that the sovereign encapsulates the antipathy towards a king to whom access remains restricted. Stephen Greenblatt states that theatrical works penalise those who challenge the early modern hierarchical structure such as the sodomite, which suggests a symbiotic relationship between the theatre and governing.¹² Sara Munson Deats reasons that Marlowe remains restricted by the early modern governing structures and consequently the sodomite must adhere to societal constraints.¹³ For Greenblatt and Munson Deats, Marlowe’s work underpins this framework rather than contests it. Yet a plurality of varied and changing acts and identities can exist alongside each other despite their varying degrees of domination. Those oppressed for acts or identities can also work within or against the societal framework imposed upon them.

⁵ David Clark, “Marlowe and Queer Theory,” In *Christopher Marlowe in Context*, ed. Emily C. Bartels and Emma Smith (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 233.

⁶ Alan Bray, “Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England,” *History Workshop* 29 (1990): 9.

⁷ David Stymeist, “Status, Sodomy, and the Theater in Marlowe's *Edward II*,” *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 44, no. 2 (2004): 236.

⁸ Stymeist, “Status, Sodomy, and the Theater,” 236.

⁹ Simon Shepherd, *Marlowe and the Politics of Elizabethan Theatre* (Harvester Press, 1986), 204; Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodomities: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford University Press, 1992), 124.

¹⁰ Gregory W. Bredbeck, *Sodomy and Interpretation: Marlowe to Milton* (Cornell University Press, 1991), 63.

¹¹ Curtis Perry, “The Politics of Access and Representations of the Sodomite King in Early Modern England,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (2000): 1054.

¹² Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 201.

¹³ Sara Munson Deats, *Sex, Gender, and Desire in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (University of Delaware Press, 1997), 186.

This article aims to explore Marlowe's employment of some of the literal instances of intimate touch in *Edward II*. Those who create and engage in moments of touch in the play alongside those who observe and interpret them help to shape their interpretations. While private moments of intimacy between men remain unproblematic, tension arises as desires of the body natural influence the body politic. The elite in Marlowe's *Edward II* perceive the ambition of the lower-class favourite rather than his desire as the driving influence behind sexual touch and the fear of the elite lies in the wider implications of a redistribution of power and in the contamination of the social classes. Touching and being touched between the king and his favourite then becomes political as it extends beyond desire into a demonstration of power. Marlowe's play simultaneously demonstrates how negotiations are made, accepted, and rejected through corporeal contact and how public displays of affection define and signal markers of social status and the movement of wealth, status, and power.

“Kiss not my hand; / Embrace me, Gaveston, as I do thee!”: Literal Touch between Edward and Gaveston in *Edward II*

I argue that private and public moments of love and desire expressed through physical intimacy demonstrate that the power that lies in intimate contact of the body natural challenges the body politic and, by extension, the social structure in Edward's court. Martin Wiggins notes that the play “requires its audience to shift focus from private to public and back,” while Popelard proposes 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.”¹⁴ Popelard also draws attention to “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.”¹⁵ This sense of inseparability becomes evident in private moments of physical touch between Edward and Gaveston, as the king and his favourite forge a composite body.

When Edward hides away from the rebellious nobles in the monastery with his favourite, Spencer Junior, and the scholar, Baldock, the king asks them to:

Make trial now of that philosophy
That in our famous nurseries of arts
Thou sucked'st from Plato and from Aristotle.¹⁶

¹⁴ Christopher Marlowe, *Edward the Second*, eds. Martin Wiggins and Robert Lindsey (1997; repr., London: Methuen, 2009), xxx; Popelard, “Knowledge, Love and Epistemic Uncertainty,” 124.

¹⁵ Popelard, “Knowledge, Love and Epistemic Uncertainty,” 122.

¹⁶ Christopher Marlowe, *Edward II*, New Mermaids, ed. Martin Wiggins and Robert Lindsey (1967; repr., Bloomsbury, 2018), 19.17–19. All subsequent quotations from the play refer to this edition.

Many of the classical moral philosophers argued that touch was the most inferior of the senses. Joseph Moshenska proposes a “venerable tradition” of moral philosophers extending from Aristotle to Ficino who associate touch with baseness and beastliness.¹⁷ In addition to ranking the senses in order from the highest (sight) to the lowest (touch) in *De Anima*, Mark Paterson registers how Aristotle “reserves contempt for the ‘bestial’ pleasures of taste but especially erotic touch in his *Ethics* (1118a24–25).”¹⁸ Pablo Maurette also acknowledges the inferiority of tactility in ancient times and records that this viewpoint “would continue through late antiquity into the middle ages and the Renaissance.”¹⁹ However, while Edward invites debate on the philosophers who dismiss touch, he challenges their viewpoints on the sense as he demonstrates the power in physical contact through the king and favourite.

Marlowe employs touch to reveal intimacy between men in *Edward II*, but these moments remain fraught with tension as they illustrate how intimacy conflicts with the public role of king. He explores this through the double-bodied role of the monarch which consists of the private body or the body natural, and the public role of the sovereign or the body politic. The Elizabethan lawyer, Edmund Plowden, details how the monarch’s body natural remains distinct from their body politic. Plowden proposes in his *Commentaries, Or Reports* (1571) that the monarch “has a Body natural, adorned and invested with the Estate and Dignity royal; and he has not a Body natural distinct and divided by itself from the Office and Dignity royal, but a Body natural and a Body politic together indivisible, and these two Bodies are incorporated in one Person, and make one Body.”²⁰ Plowden proposes that “what the King does in his Body politic, cannot be invalidated or frustrated by any Disability in his natural Body.”²¹ Henry S. Turner also reports on “the corporation sole, or that species of corporation that had only one member, and the corporation aggregate, or the corporation formed out of many different individuals who seek to pursue a collective project.”²² The king’s body politic represents an example of the corporation sole who can “stand not as a

¹⁷ Joseph Moshenska, *Feeling Pleasures: The Sense of Touch in Renaissance England* (2014; repr., Oxford University Press, 2017), 248.

¹⁸ Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch Haptics, Affects and Technologies* (Routledge, 2007), 1.

¹⁹ Pablo Maurette, “Touch, Hands, Kiss, Skin: Tactility in Early Modern Europe,” (PhD thesis, University of North Carolina, 2013), 10.

²⁰ Edmund Plowden, *The Commentaries, or Reports of Edmund Plowden* (London, 1761), 213.

²¹ Plowden, *The Commentaries*, 213.

²² Henry S. Turner, “Corporate Persons, between Law and Literature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of English Law and Literature, 1500-1700*, ed. Lorna Hutson (Oxford University Press, 2017), 468.

mortal person but as an immortal corporation-of-one in the interest of undertaking legal actions pertaining to property and feudal obligation.”²³

The English lawyer Edward Coke also records how “English common law sought to define the limits and capacities of corporate entities, approaching them at once as quasi-mystical bodies with metaphysical properties and as purely artificial, legal institutions created to suit a variety of specific purposes.”²⁴ He employs the theory in *Calvin’s Case* (1608) as he investigates the status of Scots after King James VI & I succeeds Queen Elizabeth I in 1603. He eventually concludes that while the English and Scots body politic remain separate, the king’s body natural can unite the two Crowns as he has both English and Scots lineage.²⁵ Curtis Perry registers that “while the practice of monarchy was (as always) simultaneously and inextricably personal and public, the meaning of the personal aspects of monarchy became increasingly fraught.”²⁶ This becomes evident through instances of tactility in *Edward II* which display the tension between the body natural and the body politic.

Despite this tension, Edward places a striking importance on the sense of touch. Before Gaveston’s initial encounter with Edward, he listens in on the king who defends him to the rebellious nobles as they petition to remove Gaveston from the realm. Once they leave, Gaveston is unable to control himself and emerges from his hiding place:

GAVESTON: I can no longer keep me from lord. [He steps forward]
EDWARD: What Gaveston! Welcome! Kiss not my hand;
Embrace me, Gaveston, as I do thee!
Why shouldst thou kneel; knowest thou not who I am?
Thy friend, thy self, another Gaveston!
Not Hylas was more mourned of Hercules
Than thou hast been of me since thy exile. (1.138–44)

The repetition of Gaveston’s name three times over four lines adds to the familiarity between the king and his favourite and communicates Edward’s excitement and disbelief. The desire between the two men then becomes evident from the outset and can only be expressed through informal touch. Gaveston complies with social greetings which appear to befit the position of a subject towards the king in Edward’s court as he kisses Edward’s hand. This token gesture executed through subservient contact details his submission to his king. However, Edward’s response reveals an intimacy beyond king and subject which removes

²³ Turner, “Corporate Persons,” 468.

²⁴ Turner, “Corporate Persons,” 468.

²⁵ Turner, “Corporate Persons,” 569.

²⁶ Curtis Perry, “The Politics of Access and Representations of the Sodomite King in Early Modern England,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (2000): 1057–58.

Gaveston from such gestural formalities. In another move which confuses Edward and suggests that the king is unaccustomed to his favourite's formal behaviour, Gaveston falls down on his knees, presumably prior to kissing his king's hand. Edward continues to criticise Gaveston's commitment to formal gestures as he asks, "[w]hy shouldst thou kneel; knowest thou not who I am?" This initial encounter between the king and his favourite establishes Gaveston's willingness to comply with official royal protocol on greeting the monarch and Edward's dismissal of it; however, Edward's body natural and personal desires reign over his body politic or public position as monarch. While Gaveston offers different forms of subservient physical contact to Edward, formal contact is not acceptable nor tactile enough to convey the intimacy between the two men.

Edward demands informal and intimate touch from Gaveston as he commands him in iambic pentameter to "[e]mbrace me, Gaveston, as I do thee!" (1.140). The rhyming between "me" and "thee" produces the effect of balancing the two men within the structure of the line and additionally in their actions as Edward expresses his desire and approval of Gaveston to mirror him to form the embrace. The perplexed king wonders if Gaveston no longer recognises him as Edward must remind him that he is "[t]hy friend, thy self, another Gaveston!" (1.142). As Popelard notes, "[l]ove is either indisputably present or painfully absent: it is an all-or-nothing emotional state" in Marlowe's *Edward II*.²⁷ For Edward, two separate bodies compose the "self" and consequently the king orders this intimate form of touch which physically fuses the two men into one composite body as they fasten their arms around each other. In this moment, the embrace shifts the relationship between the king and his favourite beyond the body politic, the structure of courtly conduct, and the boundaries of friendship and social class. It moves them into a relationship of somatic and affective equals and into one amalgamated "self" as their bodies mirror each other and join together in the embrace.

These moments of contact which fuse two bodies resonate with Aristophanes' account of the beginnings of human love in Plato's *Symposium*. As Maurette notes, according to Aristophanes, humans were once "spherical portly creatures with four legs and four arms, and there used to be three, not two, genders: masculine, feminine, and androgynous."²⁸ However, Zeus punishes these creatures for defying the gods by splitting them in two and he curses them to spend their lives searching for "their other half. This explains heterosexuality, and

²⁷ Popelard, "Knowledge, Love and Epistemic Uncertainty," 122–23.

²⁸ Maurette, "Touch, Hands, Kiss, Skin," 167n517.

both male and female homosexuality.”²⁹ The term “another” (1.142) suggests a replication of the same and in this moment Edward defines himself as a duplicate of Gaveston rather than Gaveston as a reproduction of Edward. The king recognises himself as separate from the court and body politic and, like Gaveston, different to the nobles who banish him. Despite the fact that some critics may consider it anachronistic to describe medieval/early modern relationships in modern terms, Edward demonstrates the desire to engage in intense forms of male-male physical intimacy where the physical and emotional fusion of two male bodies create a consolidated and complete “self.” While early moderns may not have organised their identities around their sexual desires, Edward’s desires for Gaveston greatly contribute to towards his overall identity.

Marlowe employs another mythical narrative in this scene to further enforce the intimacy between Edward and Gaveston. Edward empathises with the loss, anxiety, and yearning Gaveston feels in his separation from his lord through the tale of Hylas and Hercules (1.143–44). This tale records how “Hylas accompanie[s] Hercules on the journey of the Argonauts. When they anchored at Mysia, Hylas was carried away by water-nymphs. In his grief, Hercules remained behind, searching for the lost boy while the Argonauts continued their journey.”³⁰ The alliteration which resonates in the “h” of Hylas and the “h” of Hercules binds the two men together just as Edward declares that he duplicates Gaveston. Indeed, Edward’s interpretation that he is “another Gaveston” indicates that he similarly suffers this loss for Gaveston due to his prolonged absence (1.142). Edward cannot be satisfied by Gaveston’s employment of ritual touch; for him, only the comforting and intimate embrace of his favourite can ease the grief brought on by loss. His sadness parallels the sorrow felt by Greek and Roman gods and nothing can ease that torment until he re-joins his favourite to his “self.”

Ironically, Edward’s hands, which contribute to satisfying his cravings through intimate moments of contact such as the embrace, become instrumental in Gaveston’s banishment as one of them authorises his second exile. After Edward signs the document with his “tears” which banish Gaveston, Mortimer Junior notes how the overwhelmed “[k]ing is love-sick for his minion” (4.86–87).³¹ Edward responds, “[t]is done, and now accursed hand fall off” (4.88). The king’s hand becomes the sole part of his body which commits this

²⁹ Maurette, “Touch, Hands, Kiss, Skin,” 167n517.

³⁰ Marlowe, *Edward II*, ed. Wiggins and Lindsay, 11n143.

³¹ Interestingly, Popelard points out that Edward never employs the verb “love” with reference to Isabella. Popelard, “Knowledge, Love and Epistemic Uncertainty”, 123.

act as he writes his signature and as it betrays his desire for Gaveston which permeates the rest of his body. As Katherine Rowe points out, “[f]or early modern writers, following Aristotle by way of Galen, the location of agency in relation to the body is the chief intellectual tenor of representations of the hand.”³² However, for Marlowe in this instance, the actions of the hand represent the body politic as it legally authorises Gaveston’s banishment by holding the pen to the parchment to sign his exile papers. This action conflicts with the desire flowing through Edward’s body natural. As a result, the king disassociates with his hand for betraying the will of the rest of his body which yearns for Gaveston to stay. While the hand that touches can bring pleasure, it becomes the part of the king’s body that removes Edward’s access to Gaveston by signing his banishment from the realm.

Only touch can express the complex language of intimacy for Edward as he meets Gaveston before his favourite’s second banishment. This private moment where the two men hold one another in each other’s arms and console each other prior to their separation presents the visceral emotion between them and reconnects their composite body. Courteous words and reciprocal sentiments only heighten the suffering between the king and his favourite as Edward remarks that “Kind words and mutual talk makes our grief greater. / Therefore, with dumb embracement, let us part” (4.133–34). The “dumb” embrace which conveys both silence and baseness of the body rather than the intellect, offers a fundamental reassurance to Edward and Gaveston where words cannot. The soothing embrace stimulates Edward’s emotions which drive his response as he declares, “[s]tay, Gaveston, I cannot leave thee thus” (4.135). Language for Edward proves futile in this moment of anguish and he can only communicate his response after intimate physical contact which enables him to fuse with his “self” as he touches and is touched.

While early modern followers of philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato may interpret touch as base and bestial, Marlowe demonstrates that the primal power that lies within the sense cannot be underestimated nor dismissed. Edward can only find contentment through physical tactility with the socially-inferior Gaveston and their intimate physical contact creates a complete “self” which is resonant of the creation of love and desire in Plato’s *Symposium*. The power of tactility becomes particularly evident in the conflict between the king’s body natural and the body politic. The king’s desires cannot be satisfied through officially sanctioned forms of physical interaction for the body politic such as the

³² Katherine Rowe, “God’s handy worke,” in *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*, ed. David Hillman and Carla Mazzio (Routledge, 1997), 285.

kiss of the hand. Words also prove futile and physical contact emerges as the only means by which Edward can truly express and satisfy his desire for Gaveston. Intimate touch for the king is comforting, fulfilling, and essential to his state of contentment and pleasure. However, both the monarch who should not be touched and the subject who should not touch the king gain full access to each other's bodies and subsequently create a sole body which elevates the favourite to a status equal to the sovereign. Marlowe then, I argue, draws attention to the complexity and power of touch by exploring how physical intimacy confuses the distinction between the King's Two Bodies and alters the social status of both king and favourite.

“He claps his cheeks and hangs about his neck”: Literal Touch between Edward and Gaveston and between Edward and Isabella

The capacity of touch to determine social position can be observed by interrogating moments of physical contact between Edward and Gaveston and between Edward and his long-suffering wife, Queen Isabella. Touch between the king and his favourite rivals Isabella's role as wife, challenges her position as queen, and surpasses her interactions with her husband. Isabella additionally employs tactility to attempt to restore and signal her status as queen. As the queen enters the play, she rushes by Mortimer Junior and the rebellious nobles who air their grievances about Gaveston to the Bishop of Canterbury. Gaveston asks her why she hurries so and she confides in him that she departs for the forest “[t]o live in grief and baleful discontent” as “my lord the King regards me not, / But dotes upon the love of Gaveston” (2.46–50). The verb “to dote upon” someone, suggests one who becomes blinded by the extremes of passion and love of another. While Mortimer Senior notes that Edward is still in his youth, “to dote” incites images of foolish acts or impairment brought on by old age (2.46–50; 4.402). Furthermore, Isabella registers the power that Gaveston holds over Edward and it outweighs her position as queen as the king refuses to consider or look upon her. The queen and the nobles clearly interpret Gaveston's significant grip on Edward as a threat to their positions.

As Isabella continues, she presents literal moments of touch and intimacies between Edward and Gaveston:

He claps his cheeks and hangs about his neck,
Smiles in his face and whispers in his ears,
And when I come he frowns, as who should say,
‘Go whither thou wilt, seeing I have Gaveston.’ (2.51–54)³³

³³ As Ann Jennalie Cook notes, Shakespeare employs the term “hanging about the neck” in *The Taming of the Shrew*, in sexual terms: “Petruccio blithely dismisses these objections as mere pretense, continuing to portray

Clapping hands can create sounds of approval and encouragement or conversely convey negative actions such as someone making another aware of their presence or someone attempting to frighten something away; however, the act generally sanctions acts of pleasure. The additional clauses in this sentence refer to and connect tender acts of touch which indicate that clapping cheeks emerges as a synonym for a form of intimacy. This playful form of tactility hints towards sexual undertones between the king and his favourite. Will Fisher notes the erotic nature of stroking the cheek in the early modern period.³⁴ This act of intimate contact forms as Edward hangs around the neck of his favourite and creates an image of the king suspended from the neck like the miniature or ring on a chain gifted from one lover to another. Unlike Gaveston's smile directed towards the nobles which scorns them (2.24–25), Edward's smile in the physical proximity of Gaveston's face illustrates an instance of desire and affection. Marlowe also literally and figuratively increases the distance between Edward and Isabella. He foregrounds how Isabella encroaches on Edward's space as he juxtaposes the smile which Gaveston rouses against the frown which Isabella incites as she notes how "when I [Edward] come he frowns" (2.51–53).

Edward's whispers in Gaveston's ear present evidence of a private moment caught up in public which the king and his favourite secretly share at the exclusion of all others. The coordinating conjunction of "and" and the use of the present tense illustrate that these are not isolated incidents but recurring forms of touch and intimacies. The partial alliteration in "whispers in his ears" (2.52; emphasis added) denotes an intimate and private level of closeness as the phonetics of "ers" and "ears" resonate with each other and connect the verb and noun. Consequently, Isabella records the playfulness and lightness of movement between these actions and Edward's yearning as he flits between a plethora of intimate forms of expression which extend beyond friendship. While "his" refers to Gaveston as the owner of his own body parts, the demonstrative pronoun indicates possession and subsequently becomes ambiguous as it simultaneously implies that Gaveston is the king's property. The meaning of "his" becomes twofold as it denotes possession of Gaveston as the owner of his cheeks, neck, face, and ears and it invokes social closeness or social deixis as it indicates that

Kate other than she actually is. According to him, she has responded privately with ardent affection: 'She hung about my neck' and gave 'kiss on kiss' (304)—just what a lover hopes for." See Cook, *Making a Match: Courtship in Shakespeare and his Society* (Princeton University Press, 1991), 170.

³⁴ Will Fisher, "The Erotics of Chin Chucking in Seventeenth-Century England," in *Sex before Sex: Figuring the Act in Early Modern England*, ed. James M. Bromley and Will Stockton (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 148.

Gaveston's body parts additionally belong to the king. In doing so, it blends the body of the favourite and the king into one body and one "self."

The desire to touch and to be touched between the king and favourite draws Edward and Gaveston together, while the monarch's aversion to touch from his queen moves Edward away from Isabella. She registers how Edward rejects her: "And when I come, he frowns, as who should say, / Go whither thou wilt, seeing I have Gaveston" (2.53–54). Two oppositional verbs of motion, "come" and "go", mark Edward's lack of desire for Isabella in a command that physically directs her away from him. Edward not only orders her away from him, but he informs her that Gaveston replaces her. As Edward announces "I have Gaveston," the verb "to have" becomes literal in this instance as he hangs around Gaveston's neck and holds him close to his bosom (2.29; 51–54). However, like the previously noted demonstrative pronoun, "his," the verb "have" denotes Gaveston as a subject and possession of Edward. The imperative structure of a command to Isabella to go where she pleases replaces the declarative structure of statements which previously define how Edward behaves around Gaveston. Gaveston fulfils Edward's somatic and affective desires and as he completes Edward's self; no space remains for Isabella.

Physical touch between the king and his favourite translates as an act of personal intimacy and political solidarity prior to a confrontation with Isabella. As Edward leads Gaveston to his point of exile, he tells his favourite: "[b]ut come, sweet friend, I'll bear thee on thy way" (4.140). He employs a verb of movement, "to come," as they move together guided by the king, and the verb "bear," which metaphorically suggests that the king carries Gaveston as he leads him. Gaveston warns Edward that the "peers will frown," but the king informs his favourite that "I pass not for their anger" (4.141–42). Edward's act emerges as both a personal act of support and as a political statement against the rebellious nobles. The embrace which opens the first meeting between Edward and Gaveston moves full circle as it closes their final encounter before Gaveston's second exile (1.133–34; 139–40). While the king's official hand may have authorised the exile, the king's body leads and carries the favourite to his site of departure as conflict materialises between the hand as representative of the body politic and the rest of Edward's body natural.

Edward actively employs touch as a political statement from this moment which becomes evident as they encounter Queen Isabella. The king immediately repudiates Isabella as she asks where he goes: "Fawn not on me, French strumpet; get thee gone" (4.145). Gaveston, supported by the king, insolently accuses the queen of infidelity with her favourite, Mortimer Junior, for which she rebukes him and he apologises (4.147–53). Edward

subsequently aligns with Gaveston by charging the queen with improper behaviour with Mortimer Junior as he comments that she is “too familiar with that Mortimer” (4.154). Furthermore, Edward blames Isabella for Gaveston’s exile and when he warns her that if she does not “reconcile the lords,” Gaveston and Mortimer Junior, then Edward’s relationship with Isabella will suffer the consequences (4.156). When the queen claims that this lies beyond her control, he punishes her by withdrawing her power to touch him and by physically removing himself from her presence: “Away then, touch me not; come Gaveston” (4.156, 159). Edward converts touch into a political weapon by refuting her status as he denies her access to his kingly body.

Once the king learns of Gaveston’s return to the realm, he restores her power by marking it through an act of physical contact as he announces: “[o]nce more receive my hand, and let this be / A second marriage ‘twixt thyself and me” (4.335–36). This political move is juxtaposed with Edward’s physical and emotional encounter with Gaveston when he begs his favourite to dispense with formalities and “[e]mbrace me, Gaveston, as I do thee!” (1.140). Although Edward offers Isabella his hand in return for Gaveston, she strategically requests a physical response which reflects her position of queen and wife: “a kiss revives poor Isabel” (4.334). However, Marlowe does not accede to her plea to restore her power; instead, the king declares that he will present her with a golden-tongued necklace should she “lov’st Gaveston” and also offers his hand to her in a “second marriage” since she “hast pleaded with so good success” (4.328–30, 36). Like the adjective “golden-tongued,” which refers to one who is “exceptionally eloquent or persuasive,” the necklace symbolises a gift in exchange for her powers of persuasion.³⁵ In a personal statement with political ramifications, Edward reduces the queen’s power by removing immediate access to his body politic through his body natural as a direct reaction to Gaveston’s exile. He only reinstates restricted touch for the queen to his body natural and, by extension, his body politic, when she negotiates Gaveston’s return.

Marlowe communicates the power of erotic touch and demonstrates its ability to mark favour and status. Isolated, private moments of playful and carnal touch offer Edward a sense of release from his oppressive environment and from his marital, social, and political responsibility. However, once these instances become public displays of affection, they act as markers of social status, cues for behaviour, and acts of resistance to authorised lines of power and sanctioned structures such as marriage. Marlowe details how tactility challenges

³⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, “golden-tongued (adj.),” March 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1028086986>.

the limits imposed by social status and how easily it disturbs these restrictions through the elevated positions of the favourite and the diminished rank of the queen. In addition to illuminating disparities and intensities between relationships and conveying desire and social cues, Marlowe weaponises physical intimacy between Edward, Gaveston, and Isabella as they seek to capitalise on it. They each recognise the importance of access and denial to touch and being touched by the king's body natural and its capacity to denote the distribution, removal, and reinstatement of power.

Conclusion: the Finishing Touches

Marlowe conveys the problems that arise as the king attempts to merge the body natural and the body politic. Physical contact is a fundamental form of communication for Edward which becomes evident in his private and public displays of intimacy as it strengthens bonds and comforts when words cannot. Indeed, the king navigates his personal and public space through touch and its denial. For Edward, men such as the favourites provide emotional and sexual release which breaks through the boundaries of formal touch. Intimate touch between Edward and Gaveston mirrors and replaces the religiously—and legally—sanctioned contact of the queen authorised by marriage. The play becomes fraught with the conflict which arises as the inferior class favourite secures this royal position of privileged touch of the royal body. Moments of tactility such as the embrace embody desire and reconciliation between the two men; however, they further extend beyond male-male intimacy into instances of alliance, defiance, and fusion between the social classes.

Marlowe demonstrates how the employment, the conveyance, and the interpretation of touch can differ between bodies. He communicates the complexities of male-male affective relationships which expand far beyond an act of sodomy and which find expression through physical affection and intimate touch. While philosophical teachings condemn unauthorised intimate contact as base, early modern monarchical rules separate the body natural and body politic and restrict first-hand interaction between different social classes to formal touch. However, Marlowe explores how his characters execute, manipulate, and interpret the touch of the body natural and its influence on the body politic as it impacts the ruling elite by shifting power, status, and wealth in unorthodox manners. For the rebellious nobles and the queen, visible displays of touch and affection become physical manifestations of Gaveston's techniques to lure the king into surrendering wealth, titles, and property; they threaten the existence of the rebellious nobles; and they shift their power to the inferior classes. Isabella also recognises the power of touch as she employs it in her attempts to

reinstate her status and position. Touch in Marlowe's *Edward II*, then, emerges as a weapon across the social classes as it strategically signals the allocation, denial, transference, and restoration of power and presents an opportunity to challenge manmade boundaries of desire and social structure.

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