

***Edward II*, directed by Daniel Raggett for the RSC, Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 12
March 2025 (front stalls, centre).**

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The mightiest kings have had their minions:
Great Alexander loved Hephestion;
The conquering Hercules for Hylas wept;
And for Patroclus stern Achilles drooped (1.4.390–93).¹

Mortimer Senior’s list of homoerotic precedents suggests that the beef against Gaveston’s regal favouritism is not his sexuality but rather his shocking behaviour as a parvenu. Mortimer Junior is outraged that “one so basely born / Should [...] riot it with the treasure of the realm” (402–404) and Gaveston’s costly garments—“He wears a lord’s revenue on his back” (406)—must have been appalling to an Elizabethan sensibility, accustomed to the rigours of sumptuary law. But the profligate absurdities of the contemporary catwalk mean that costume no longer defines social status, and the development of queer criticism has shifted our focus on *Edward II*. It is no longer a play about fashion and social class, but about homosexuality. This should not surprise us. For all President Trump’s anti-“woke” rhetoric and his current attacks on Diversity, Equality and Inclusivity, in the UK, at least, since the legalisation of gay marriage, the DEI agenda is here to stay and the appropriation of the most canonical texts—Marlowe’s *Edward II* or Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*—puts non-heteronormative readings firmly on the map, a development neither surprising nor unwelcome. The consequence is that modern productions of this play read it as a persecution of gay love rather than, as the Elizabethans might have done, a condemnation of social mobility.

This explains why the RSC’s current version has no interest in the play’s social range. With the exception of Gaveston, Lightborn and a couple of companions, anyone who existed outside the court (Spencer Senior, Gurney, Matrevis, Hainault, Levune, James and so on) was omitted. Warwick and Lancaster assisted Lightborn in Edward’s execution rather than Gurney and Matrevis. Several effects arose from this: the sex scandal was a matter for the court, not the wider country (I suspect Prince Andrew would approve), the focus on the political machinations was thus tightened and the play was greatly streamlined, running at just 100 minutes without interval. But the negative consequence was that the sex scandal upon which the production focused felt confined to a group of people about whom we couldn’t care less (Prince Andrew again). There was no sense of the cynical (s)exploitation of the lower classes by the aristocracy; indeed, there was no exploitation at all. This was confected disgrace among consenting adults and these adults, overly privileged and dripping with

¹ Christopher Marlowe, *Edward II*, The Revels Plays, ed. Charles R. Forker (Manchester University Press, 1994). All quotations from the play refer to this edition.

gold braid, were vain, thin-skinned and utterly insulated from real social concerns. Ruta Gedmintas's slim, tall and graceful Isabella was a version of Kate Middleton in pencil-cut coats and killer heels. But some would agree with Hilary Mantel's view that Middleton is a "shop-window mannequin" with perfect plastic features and void of personality.² This was no Epstein-island orgy with press-ganged and vulnerable victims but a petty feud between back-stabbing Machiavels about whom one couldn't get too concerned.

This was personified in Daniel Evans's protagonist. Clearly the brutality meted out to the play's tragic hero is out of all proportion to his homoerotic affairs and, if any of these characters were to arouse our sympathy, it would be the king. But even here, the pathos Marlowe has written for Edward was battered by an intransigent temper. As Edward signed Gaveston's banishment his "Instead of ink, I'll write it with my tears" (1.4.86) was not spoken with any kind of torment but with a defiant rage. Thirty-odd lines later, his "I from myself am banished" (118) was again delivered at top volume, insolent and public rather than solipsistic or even disheartened. This was the tone adopted right up to the incarceration in the dungeon. Even the script's most pensive and reflective pronouncements—"what are kings when regiment is gone / But perfect shadows in a sunshine day?" (5.1.26–27)—were bludgeoned by a vocal irascibility. Though lacking any sense of anguish, Evans's strident Edward was beautifully spoken, clear and imposing. This made his humiliation all the more devastating and following his brutally staged anal penetration, his corpse was picked up and carried, *pietà*-like upstage. Eventually, here, pathos was evoked but it seemed a bit like an afterthought.

Much of this production (designed by Leslie Travers) relied upon visual quotations. The stage floor was a replica of the Cosmati pavement of Westminster Abbey, exactly the same as that used in the Globe's 2019 production in the Wanamaker—surely not a coincidence but the point of the allusion was lost on me. When Gaveston was suspended from a butcher's hook and killed (in the play he is executed offstage after his exit at 2.6.15), one was reminded of the still-life pictures of decaying fruit by Juan Sánchez Cotán and, as Mortimer and Isabella formulated their plots, they did so at a long banquet table with two wax-dripping candelabra and plenty of dining detritus, reminiscent of Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989)—a powerful signifier of luxury and decadence.

The production opened with courtiers standing in state, wearing full dress uniform, around the catafalque of the deceased king (again exactly as in the Globe's production). Gaveston's opening soliloquy was spoken from above as he frolicked in the steam of a gay bath house clad only in a waist-wrapped towel. His encounter with a Freddie Mercury look-alike resulted in his tugging at the latter's towel and his "Let me see" (1.1.30) was a flirtatious request to inspect more closely the genitals he was about to enjoy. Everything was fully consensual ... nothing to see here.

² Hilary Mantel, "Royal Bodies," *The London Review of Books* 35, no. 4 (2013), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v35/n04/hilary-mantel/royal-bodies>.

Towards the end of the production, the stage floor was trucked upstage to reveal a cratered earth floor in the middle of which a large puddle had formed. The deposition scene took place between Lancaster (Evan Milton), Warwick (Geoffrey Lumb) and an Edward who irritated and frustrated them. At “Here, receive my crown” (5.1.97) Edward proffered it, suddenly thought better of it and hid it, child-like, behind his back: Lancaster and Warwick puffed with impatience. As Edward signed his abdication, he pressed the biro to his stomach wounding himself and crossly pronounced, “He of you all that most desires my blood / [...] Take it” (100–102).

Lightborn entered to the king and the two of them knelt nose to nose as the lighting turned a Satanic scarlet (lighting by Tim Lutkin); perhaps such a scene doesn’t require subtlety. In a gesture of intimacy, Lightborn lifted Edward’s vest off, maternally “skinning the rabbit,” and further inveigled himself, muttering sweetly, “Lie down and rest” (5.5.91). Lightborn lay down next to the king, cuddling him and resting his head on Edward’s arm. The execution followed rapidly and viciously, Edward’s head being dunked in the water while his pants were torn off, his legs held aloft and his anus offered towards Lightborn’s glowing skewer.

Marlowe’s script is perfunctory from here on comprising, in rapid succession, the revelation of Mortimer’s and Isabella’s plot and their comeuppance, but here there were a couple of nice closing touches. As he was arrested Mortimer made an ill-aimed stab at the new king who, almost immediately, slashed Mortimer across the throat. There was no way in which the preceding brutality had been extirpated by Edward’s death. Finally, in an abrupt change of tone, the corpses of Gaveston and Edward were brought in and gently placed next to each other beneath a Richard the Lionheart flag (red with three gold lions) while an image of them kissing was projected onto the backdrop. Was this a new reign that had realised (too late) the errors of its previous homophobic ways? Probably not because in a gesture which implied futile circularity, Edward III quoted Gaveston’s reading of Edward’s letter, the words with which the whole cycle of violence had been precipitated: “My father is deceased, come Gaveston...” (1.1.1)... black-out.

Bibliography

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