Christopher Marlowe's Lightborne and the Chester Mystery Cycle

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In his 2016 piece on Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*, Robert A. Logan called on scholars "to return to a close reading of the text" and to pair such a reading with consideration of the "encompassing theater culture that Marlowe was working with and within."[1] Yet, while the play's treatment of gender, queer desire, and even French history has received substantial critical attention in recent years, relatively few scholars have considered how Marlowe's dramas were shaped by the medieval stage. It is time to look again at Marlowe's reliance on the language and symbols operating in late sixteenth century England. In particular, the significance of one specific character in *Edward II* has received scant attention other than as a figure of homoerotic violence and Machiavellian designs. I refer to Lightborne, the assassin of Edward II, a character not found in the historical records that inform much of the text, but instead based upon a fallen angel and agent of divine providence in the Chester Mystery Cycle Plays.

While the Chester Lightborne serves as a model for Marlowe's character and parallels exist between the two, including their portrayals as over-reachers with a sadistic delight in torture, Marlowe's rendering of Edward II's death problematizes a strict providential reading of the monarch's assassination. Instead of depicting his Lightborne as a tool of God who deposes a corrupt king, Marlowe deviates from the *de casibus* tradition and contemporary understandings of divine providence by undermining Lightborne's murder of Edward. I argue that Marlowe's probable allusions to the Chester Mystery Play's Lightborne purposely frame the king's murder as conventionally providential only to ultimately destabilize such a reading.

Beginning with Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium* (c. 1358), European writers explored the falls of great historical personages so that readers could learn from the misfortunes of nobles. The resulting *de casibus* tradition, which was popularized in England

[1] Robert A. Logan, "*Edward II*," in *Christopher Marlowe at 450*, ed. Sara Munson Deats and Robert A. Logan (London: Routledge, 2016), 128.

by John Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* (c.1431–1439) and the sixteenth century multi-authored *Mirror for Magistrates*, offered a teleological view of history by depicting the downfall of princes as caused by misplaced trust in Fortune and enacted via the judgment of God.[2] These stories stressed that not only was it unwise to trust in worldly accomplishments and power, which could be taken away any moment, but also that misgovernance and human sin could lead to divine retribution. King Edward's fall, for instance, was usually depicted as divine punishment for his "foule" acts. Lydgate, in his addition to the Fall of Princes, attributes the king's horrific assassination to Edward's reliance on advisors who polluted his behavior: "But so governed was he nowe vnderstonde / By suche as caused foule his vndoyng."[3] Lydgate interprets Edward's horrific end as brought about by the king's own moral failings, thus perpetuating the *de casibus* tradition. This narrative tradition of telling stories of noble people who rose and fell dramatically proved popular in medieval and early modern histories, and similar themes operate in the medieval plays, particularly the mystery plays. According to Francesca Aran Murphy, the Corpus Christi plays "present one fall story after another," showcasing the dangers of pride and rebellion against God and the moral punishments meted out to those who dare to defy the divine.[4]

The Mystery Cycle Plays, sometimes referred to as the Corpus Christi plays, began as part of a feast day celebrating the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and were traditionally held on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday. Although the feast was instituted in the fourteenth century and celebrations were held in large cities throughout England, scholars remain unsure when the addition of plays began in Chester. R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, though, do note the 1422 performance of a Corpus Christi play in Chester, which involved various local guilds enacting scenes from biblical history.[5] By the early sixteenth century the Chester

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[2] For more on the *de casibus* tradition, see Paul Budra, *A Mirror for Magistrates and the de casibus Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Andrew Duxfield, "De casibus Tragedy: Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*," in *The Genres of Renaissance Tragedy*, ed. Daniel Cadman, Andrew Duxfield, and Lisa Hopkins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 11–28; and Jessica Winston, "Rethinking Absolutism: English de casibus tragedy in the 1560s," in *A Mirror for Magistrates in Context: Literature, History and Politics before the Age of Shakespeare*, ed. Harriet Archer and Andrew Hadfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 199–215.

[3] John Lydgate, "Of the Sodein Fal of Princes in Oure Dayes," in *John Lydgate: The Minor Poems, Vol. II: Secular Poems*, Early English Text Society, Original Series, 192, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), 660. Michael G. Cornelius notes that in Lydgate's three different renditions of Edward's fall he omits to name the sodomitic proclivities of the king and even in some versions "shamelessly rewrites history" to control the national memory of the king. See Cornelius, *Edward II and a Literature of Same-Sex Love: The Gay King in Fiction, 1590–1640* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 68–74, especially 73.

[4] Francesa Aran Murphy, "Providence in 1 Samuel," in *The Providence of God: Deus Habet Consilium*, ed. Francesa Aran Murphy and Philip G. Ziegler (London: T. & T. Clark, 2009), 64.

[5] R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle: Essays and Documents* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 168–70.

celebrations had expanded and consisted of twenty-six separate play pageants that began with "The Creation and Fall of Lucifer," included segments on Old Testament patriarchs, the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ, Pentecost, and the Harrowing of Hell, and ended with "Judgment Day."[6] The performances of these biblical stories not only allowed the citizens of Chester to learn about their faith, but also drew large crowds who spent money and improved the city's financial situation. The Chester mystery plays, due to their popularity, continued to be performed until 1575, after which the Protestant authorities, alarmed by the Catholic theological aims of the plays, banned their staging.[7] Yet, as Rowland Wymer notes, "the Corpus Christi plays continued to be performed in the northwest of the country until the early seventeenth century" and in Ireland until at least 1637.[8] Additionally, although no longer performed in London, memories of these plays remained in the minds of the public and, as many scholars have noted, significantly shaped the staging and themes of early modern tragedies.[9]

Although it is impossible to know if—and highly improbable that—Christopher Marlowe ever saw the performance of a medieval mystery play, scholarship has traced the influence of these works on his plays and posited that the medieval mystery plays remained influential in early modern England despite their suppression following the English Reformations.[10] Indeed, as Michael O'Connell notes, Shakespeare and his contemporaries made frequent references to biblical narratives in their works and often these references depended upon familiarity with the mystery cycle tradition. While O'Connell admits that theatregoers and playwrights in Shakespeare's England may not have attended performances of medieval dramas due to the cessation of the majority of the plays by the 1570s, he contends that "certainly everyone knew what they were." What is more, this cultural memory of the mystery cycles remained present during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth

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[6] Lumiansky and Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle: Essays and Documents*, 174–75.

[7] While the final performance of the cycle occurred in 1575, Heather Mitchell-Buck states that the plays remained important to Chester's citizens, as evidenced by the performance of similar plays in Chester during the late 1570s as well as the existence of "five complete texts of the cycle, dating from 1591–1607." See Mitchell-Buck, "Maintaining the Realm: City, Commonwealth, and Crown in Chester's Midsummer Plays," in *The Chester Cycle in Context, 1555–1575: Religion, Drama and the Impact of Change*, ed. Jessica Dell, David Klausner, and Helen Ostovich (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 191–92.

[8] Rowland Wymer, "Shakespeare and the Mystery Cycles," *English Literary Renaissance* 34, no. 3 (2004): 270.

[9] For information on the indebtedness of early modern drama to the medieval mystery cycles, see Beatrice Groves, "Early Modern tragedy and the Mystery Plays: New Material Evidence," in *The Transformations of Tragedy: Christian Influences from Early Modern to Modern*, ed. Fionnuala O'Neill Tonning, Erik Tonning, and Jolyon Mitchell (Boston: Brill, 2019), 23–43; Glynne Wickham, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Heritage: Collected Studies in Mediaeval, Tudor and Shakespearean Drama* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969); and Kurt A. Schreyer, *Shakespeare's Medieval Craft: Remnants of the Mysteries on the London Stage* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

[10] See Wymer, "Shakespeare and the Mystery Cycles," 265–85.

centuries as a "vital cultural practice" that informed the composition and staging of secular dramas and enhanced the audience's understanding of key moments.[11] Moreover, David M. Bevington's seminal study, *From Mankind to Marlowe*, explores how medieval morality plays, especially in their staging and casting, influenced Marlowe's later work.[12] More recently, John Parker argues that Marlovian drama replicates the ambiguous relationship between the Antichrist and Christ found in the medieval mystery plays.[13] Other scholars have posited a direct relationship between particular plays and the medieval tradition. Catherine Willits, for instance, contends that Marlowe's treatment and staging of Calymath's entry into Malta in *The Jew of Malta* echoes and subverts Christ's entry into Jerusalem in the mystery plays, among them the Chester Cycle.[14] Richard F. Hardin also draws parallels between Marlowe's use of ceremony and spectacle in the *Tamburlaine* plays and the Chester mystery plays' treatment of the Antichrist.[15] And most notably, Patrick Ryan convincingly demonstrates the parallels between the Chester Cycle's depiction of Isaiah's vision of the bloody Christ in the Ascension play and the extreme cruelty enacted upon Edward II's body in Marlowe's drama.[16] Thus, while Marlowe may not have seen or read a mystery play, he most likely knew about the cycles and thought about their staging, characters, and themes.[17]

While scholars have noted the influence of the medieval mystery cycles on the plays of Christopher Marlowe for some time, few have explored *Edward II*'s fictional assassin Lightborne in relation to the Chester Mystery Cycle.[18] As it is likely that the Chester Cycle's

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[11] See Michael O'Connell, "Vital Cultural Practices: Shakespeare and the Mysteries," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 149–68, especially 164.

[12] David M. Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Dramas of Tudor England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

[13] John Parker, *The Aesthetics of Antichrist: From Christian Drama to Christopher Marlowe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

[14] Catherine Willits, "The Dynamics and Staging of Community in Medieval 'Entry into Jerusalem' Plays: Dramatic Resources Influencing Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*," *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 27 (2014): 78–109.

[15] Richard F. Hardin, "Apocalypse Then: *Tamburlaine* and the Pleasures of Religious Fear," *Baylor Journal of Theatre and Performance* 3, no. 2 (2006): 35.

[16] Patrick Ryan, "Marlowe's *Edward II* and the Medieval Passion Play," *Comparative Drama* 32, no. 4 (Winter 1998–1999): 465–95.

[17] See also the work of Chris Chism, who notes that while Marlowe may not have seen the performance of mystery cycle plays, the playwright "takes medieval spectacles of intimate power and distances them in order to grip audiences through the power of spectacle itself." See Chism, "Marlowe's Medievalism," in *Christopher Marlowe in Context*, ed. Emily C. Bartels and Emma Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 93.

[18] Many scholars, beginning with Harry Levin, pointed out, mistakenly, that Lightborne was an anglicized version of Lucifer. The mistake is understandable considering that Lucifer stems from the Latin *lux*, meaning light, and *fer*, meaning bearing. Yet, rather than bringing light as the name Lucifer implies, Lightborne is "carried or transported by or across" light, according to the contemporary understanding of the term 'borne'. Therefore, Lightborne differs from his counterpart in significant ways. Lucifer carries and causes light; Lightborne is carried by the light, making him always inferior and subordinate to Lucifer. F. N. Lees corrected Levin's assumption regarding the demon's name in 1955, noting that Lightborne was actually "the chief

Lightborne, who is transformed from an angel to the Secundus Demon in the first drama and reappears in several of the later dramas as a demonic character, inspired Marlowe's murderer, a more complex understanding of Lightborne is required than the short analyses provided by previous scholars. The depiction of Marlowe's fictitious murderer echoes the Cycle's demon Lightborne in two particular ways—both characters function as "over-reachers" and both invoke the role of the devil and his minions as agents of divine punishment. Looking at the ties between the medieval angel turned demon and the cunning Italian killer allows for a greater understanding Marlowe's *Edward II*. The play both uses and subverts a providentialist structure while simultaneously restaging the fall of a demon with an inflated sense of self-worth. While past scholars argued that Marlowe used Lightborne as an agent of providence whose murder of Edward carried out God's will by punishing a sinful king and returning England to a state of order, such readings have been challenged by most modern critics.[19] Indeed, Marlowe problematizes a simple providential reading of the death of Edward

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supporter" of Lucifer in the Chester Mystery Cycle plays and that the red-hot spit Marlowe's character carries further associates him with devils. Yet, despite this correction, many scholars continue to equate Lightborne with Lucifer and to focus on the homoeroticism of the murder scene rather than the religious and allegorical implications of Marlowe's use of a fallen angel from the medieval mystery plays. See Harry Levin, *The Overreacher: A Study of Christopher Marlowe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 101; See *OED* Online, "Lucifer, n." and "borne, adj.1" http://www.oed.com; Christopher Marlowe, *Edward II*, ed. H. B. Charlton and R. D. Waller, rev. F. N. Lees (London: Methuen, 1955), 221–222; David H. Thurn, "Sovereignty, Disorder, and Fetishism in Marlowe's *Edward II*," *Renaissance Drama*, 21 (1990): 136; Emily C. Bartels, *Spectacles of Strangeness: Imperialism, Alienation and Marlowe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 158; and Charles R. Forker, "Marlowe's *Edward II* and its Shakespearean Relatives: The Emergence of a Genre," in *Shakespeare's English Histories: A Quest for Form and Genre*, ed. John W. Velz (Binghamton, NT: Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1996), 88. Two notable exceptions to this trend exist. One is the observation made by Sara Munson Deats that Lightborne's name "proclaims his lineage from the medieval mystery play." She contends further that Lightborne's "delight in the mechanics of wickedness, his finely dissembled compassion for the king, and the relish with which he shares his 'brave' stratagems with the audience, immediately revealing himself as an agent of evil, further identify his progenitor as the medieval morality Vice." See Deats, "Marlowe's Fearful Symmetry in *Edward II*" in *"A Poet and a filthy Play-maker": New Essays on Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Kenneth Friedenreich, Roma Gill and Constance Kuriyama (New York: AMS, 1988), 248. The second important exception is Glynne Wickham, who notes that Lightborne may "be compared with another Lightborn in another and an earlier English play, the Chester Cycle." According to Wickham, the typical tools for the angel turned Secundus Demon "would naturally include a sharp-pronged fork and a red-hot spit." See Wickham, *Early English Stages: 1300–1660*, vol. 2, part 1 (London: Routlege, 2002), 30. Nathan A. Cervo also notes that "the greater echoes of Lightborn's murder of Edward come from the grotesque cantos of Dante's *Inferno* and from the infernal grotesque genre painting of several Italian artists." See Cervo, "Marlowe's *Edward II*," *The Explicator* 58, no. 3 (2000): 123.

[19] For an example of a providentialist reading of *Edward II* see Irving Ribner, "Marlowe's *Edward II* and the Tudor History Play," *ELH* 22, no. 4 (December 1955): 243–53. Nearly all recent critics argue against such interpretations. Raif Hertel, for instance, contends that in *Edward II*, "history is not the result of providence or divine will but the product of the sum of individual actions that reveal no overarching common purpose," while David Bevington argues that while Shakespeare "complicates the providential picture" of history, "Marlowe leaves providence out of the picture." See Hertel, *Staging England in the Elizabethan History Play: Performing National Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 220 and Bevington, "Christopher Marlowe: The Late Years," in *Placing the Plays of Christopher Marlowe: Fresh Cultural Contexts*, ed. Sara Munson Deats and Robert A. Logan (New York: Routledge, 2008), 221. Additionally, Ruth Lunney, who points out that "Marlowe draws upon the conventional uses of the exemplum" prior to Edward's murder, interprets the death scene and subsequent action as a challenge to the *de casibus* tradition. In particular, she identifies the individualized and

II; instead, the playwright destabilizes our understanding of Lightborne as a tool of the divine punishment by not only evoking audience sympathy for the murdered king, but also by suggesting that Lightborne's actions are performed for corrupt and treacherous humans rather than sanctioned by God.

To understand how Marlowe subverts his audience's understanding of providence, it is first important to explain how early modern English people conceived of God's involvement in the human world. As Alexandra Walsham has shown, not only radical Protestants, but also Anglicans and Catholics, subscribed to a belief that the divine frequently intervened in English history, on both the individual and national level.[20] According to this theological worldview, God provides for and oversees the course of events throughout time, supporting those who uphold the will of the divine, and punishing those who rebel against the Almighty. Monarchs, like commoners, were subject to the will of God; if they governed poorly and failed their subjects, God would either work to reform their actions, or would authorize their defeat and punishment by an outside agent.[21] Such punishments, while divinely sanctioned, were believed to sometimes be carried out by the devil or demons, who often showed up in medieval and early modern texts "as God's hang-man to tear sinners limb from limb or drag them screaming to hell."[22] Marlowe's Lightborne, while not technically a demon, evokes one of the central agents of punishment in the Chester Mystery Cycle, thereby signalling a providential understanding of the historical fall of kings. Likewise, Marlowe does, as Ruth Lunney notes, set up the narrative of Edward's reign in the manner of a *de casibus* tragedy by highlighting the king's reliance on inept counsellors and continually alluding to Edward's unfortunate fall.[23] Yet, as we shall see, Marlowe complicates a

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horrific nature of Edward's death by poker, which subverts a conventional reading of the assassination as poetically and spiritually justified. See Lunney, *Marlowe and the Popular Tradition: Innovation in the English Drama Before 1595* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 77–92, especially 78.

[20] Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 225.

[21] As Chloe Preedy points out, many early Elizabethan playwrights, even when working with classical sources, emphasized divine providence in their works. Punishments and rewards in plays by George Peele and Robert Greene, for example, are typically credited to the intervention of the gods. Yet, while Preedy insists that Marlowe placed "his politic characters within fictional universes devoid of providential significance," I contend that Marlowe actually stages many scenes, including the scene of Edward's assassination, within a world understood as gesturing towards providentialism. However, Marlowe's use of religious symbols associated with providence are often reframed as hollow. See Preedy, *Marlowe's Literary Scepticism: Politic Religion and Post-Reformation Polemic* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2012), 19–23, especially 23.

[22] Nathan Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 61. Marlowe uses a number of demonic or tyrannical characters as instruments of divine punishment. Tamburlaine, for instance, refers to himself as "the scourge and wrath of God," a theme explored by Roy Battenhouse. See Battenhouse, "Tamburlaine, the 'Scourge of God,'" *PMLA* 56, no. 2 (1941): 337–48 and Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great, Part One*, in *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays*, ed. Frank Romany and Robert Lindsey (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 3.5.44.

[23] Lunney, *Marlowe and the Popular Tradition*, 78–79.

simplistic reading of Edward's death as the result of divine displeasure; rather, by engaging with providential allusions from the medieval pageant cycle Marlowe forces his audience to sceptically confront and question God's intervention in human history.[24]

The Chester Cycle, which was performed at least six times between 1521 and 1575, is the only Corpus Christi cycle to include the character of Lightborne.[25] The angel turned demon appears as a prominent character in four of the cycle plays—"The Fall of Lucifer," "The Harrowing of Hell," "Antichrist," and "The Last Judgment."[26] Initially created by God as the second principal angel, Lightborne acts as Lucifer's tempter in the first play and eventually convinces the head angel to assume God's position and sit on the divine throne. When their rebellion is discovered, God condemns the two angels to hell, where they assume new identities as Primus Demon and Secundus Demon. In these roles, Lucifer and Lightborne function as punishers of those who disobey God and His commands. Thus, in the subsequent plays of the cycle, Lightborne, now styled Demon Secundus, welcomes an alewife to hell, drags the Antichrist to his damnation, and gleefully plans the eternal torture of the damned.[27] In this position, Lightborne serves not just as a sadistic torturer and tormented soul, but also as a tool of God's justice.

The similarities between the Chester plays' Lightborne and Marlowe's titular character involve their roles as punishers but begin with descriptions of their distinctiveness and seemingly marvelous initial appearances. In Marlowe's *Edward II*, Lightborne, summoned by the king's enemy Roger Mortimer to carry out the assassination of the English

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[24] Allyna F. Ward has recently pointed out the difficulties early modern writers experienced when attempting to show that both divine providence and Fortune caused people's falls. She notes that providential theology, which denied free will and highlighted God's control of history, and humanism, which allowed for human agency and thus called into question God's omnipotence were often in conflict. Indeed, Ward argues that "the idea of Fortune as an independent agent of God, in that people can accept or reject her gifts, questions the Calvinist idea of Predestination." Marlowe's work, I believe, shows this tension, allowing audiences to grapple with the two conflicting concepts while ultimately siding with the idea of Fortune rather than divine providence as the central cause of human downfalls. See Ward, "Fortune Laughs and Proudly Hovers: Fortune and Providence in the Tudor Tradition," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 39, no. 1/2, Literature and Religion (2009): 39–57, especially 40.

[25] Alexandra F. Johnston, "The York Cycle and the Chester Cycle: What Do the Records Tell Us?" in *The Chester Mystery Cycle: A Casebook*, ed. Kevin J. Harty (New York: Garland: 1993), 20; R. W. Hanning, "'You Have Begun a Parlous Pleye': The Nature and Limits of Dramatic Mimesis as a Theme in Four Middle English 'Fall of Lucifer' Cycle Plays," *Comparative Drama* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 35; R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, eds, *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, vol. 2, *Commentary and Glossary* (London: Oxford University Press, 1986), 9.

[26] Here I use the titles provided by R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills in their edited version of the cycle. The plays are also referred to by the names of the guilds performing the dramas and by the numbers. See Lumiansky and Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, vol. 1, *Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

[27] Lightborne may also be the demon who drags Herod to hell in Play X, "The Slaughter of the Innocents."

monarch, is called into being with the words: "Lightborne, come forth" (24.21).[28] Here, Lightborne functions as a theatrical creation, seemingly appearing from nowhere, similar to his appearance in the Chester Cycle's "Fall of Lucifer," wherein God brings forth the nine orders of angels and marks out Lucifer and Lightborne for special consideration as his "first operacion" (Chester 1.69).[29] Indeed, the Chester Lightborne rejoices in his exceptionality, commenting to Lucifer that "our creator / . . . us hase made gayer then goulde" (Chester 1.104–5). Lightborne's awareness of his distinctive beauty and brightness, as well as that of his fellow angel Lucifer, culminates in his demands that the other angels gaze upon them and confirm their claims of superiority: "All heaven shoulde doe us reverence / All orders maye assente to thee and me; / thou hast them torned by eloquence" (1.197–99). Lightborne here asserts that his exceptionalism stems from not only his beauty, but also from the abilities of the two rebellious angels to verbally and visually verify their elevated status.

Like the angelic figure of the medieval biblical play, Marlowe's Lightborne offers the audience an account of his uniqueness, boasting that he can accomplish Mortimer's murderous request artfully. At the same time as the Marlovian Lightborne details his skill as a killer, he also employs eloquent language to heighten the audience's appreciation of his rare ability to inflict death:

> You shall not need to give instructions;
> 'Tis not the first time I have killed a man.
> I learned in Naples how to poison flowers,
> To strangle with a lawn thrust through the throat,
> To pierce the windpipe with a needle's point,
> Or, whilst one is asleep, to take a quill
> And blow a little powder in his ears,
> Or open his mouth and pour quicksilver down;
> But yet I have a braver way than these. (24.28–36)

Lightborne here catalogues his talents as an assassin—talents that are both foreign and artistic. These skills set him apart as a killer. Notably, the methods of murder Lightborne describes are both intimate and undetectable, suggesting that his particular skill set involves thorough anatomical knowledge of the human body. Both Lightbornes, then, are initially provided with attributes beyond the normal range of angelic or human abilities. The angelic Lightborne occupies a special place within the hierarchy of heaven; the Marlovian

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[28] Christopher Marlowe, *Edward the Second*, In *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays*, ed. Frank Romany and Robert Lindsey (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 397-505. Quotations from *Edward II* are from this edition and will be provided in-text with references to scene and lines.

[29] Lumiansky and Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, Vol. 1. Quotations from the cycle are from this edition and will be provided in-text with references to play number and lines.

Lightborne is the most experienced and secret assassin Mortimer can find and does not require instructions to fulfill his duties.

The two Lightbornes, however, exhibit prideful attitudes that will eventually prove their downfalls. The Chester Lightborne, although warned by God "For crafte nor for cuninge, cast never comprehension; / exsalte you not to exelente into high exaltation," and reminded "touche not my throne by non assente" (1. 70–71, 91), incites Lucifer to disobedience and rebellion and eventually elevates himself above the deity as well. Suggesting that by sitting on the throne Lucifer will "be as wise withal / as God himself," and noting that Lucifer's body "is brighter then God a thousandfoulde," Lightborne instigates the angelic pair's insurrection (1.160–61, 165). After Lucifer sits upon the throne, Lightborne offers to "sit him bye," boasting that in their new exalted state "all heaven shoulde doe us reverence" (1.196–97). Lightborne's prideful boasting, though, leads not to a permanent state of bliss, but to banishment from heaven and a loss of ethereal beauty as both angels are transformed from creatures of light to "feeyndes blacke" (1.251).

While the Marlovian Lightborne never attempts to usurp the English throne, like the Chester Lightborne, he does boast of his "crafte and cunning." Indeed, by describing what Thomas Anderson labels his "technologies of death," Lightborne elevates himself above the typical English assassin.[30] Lightborne describes his work as a delicate process, involving fragile items like needles, powders, and flowers, which are intimately and carefully inserted into bodily orifices. For Edward's murder, Lightborne plans to devise an even more extraordinary method, telling Mortimer that "I have a braver way than these," but "none shall know my tricks" (24.37–38). The killing of Edward, for Lightborne, and possibly for Marlowe, offers a novel approach to the fashioning of a violent spectacle.[31] By referring to the act of murder as something "bravely done," Lightborne highlights the artistry of his deed, for "bravely," in sixteenth century terms, meant not just courageously, but "[i]n a showy manner; gaily, splendidly, finely, handsomely."[32]

This "brave" approach to the murder of King Edward involves temptations similar to those used by the Chester Lightborne; rather than coaxing Edward to sit on a throne, though, Marlowe's assassin continually tells the king to "lie down on this bed and rest" (25.72).

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[30] Thomas P. Anderson, *Performing Early Modern Trauma from Shakespeare to Milton* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 94.

[31] As Douglas Cole observes, "Lightborn[e] implies . . . that his murder will be admirably stunning in its ingenuity and 'artistry'—something that will deserve not just a salary from Mortimer but a 'bravo' from an audience." See Cole, *Christopher Marlowe and the Renaissance of Tragedy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 118.

[32] See *OED* Online, "bravely, adj." http://www.oed.com.

Lightborne's purpose here is not only to get Edward to the bed, but also to induce his sleep and thus kill the king unawares. Edward, however, stresses his need to "see the stroke before it comes," believing that even then when I shall lose my life, / my mind may be more steadfast on my God" (25.76, 77–78). By tempting Edward towards sleep, Lightborne hopes not only to facilitate the murder, but to lessen the king's chance for a Christian end, for if Edward sleeps, he will not be able to repent or pray to God.[33] In this way, Lightborne functions as a symbol of the demons common in the medieval *ars moriendi* texts; like these demons, who besiege the dying and battle with heavenly forces for expiring souls by tempting them to turn away from the divine, Lightborne tries to bring his victim to despair and thus harm Edward's immortal soul, just as the Chester Cycle's Lightborne tempted Lucifer to rebellion and damnation.[34]

As well as the connections between Marlowe's Lightborne and the *ars moriendi* demons, the method of killing used by the assassin echoes the tortures used by Secundus Demon in the Chester Cycle's "Antichrist" play. After convincing the king to rest upon the feather bed, Lightborne calls for his assistants, who "bring in a table and a red-hot spit," and restrain their victim as ordered: "So, lay the table down, and stamp on it, / But not too hard, lest that you bruise his body" (25.111–12). Although stage directions are oddly missing, most critics believe that at this moment Lightborne drives the "red-hot spit" into Edward's bowels, echoing Raphael Holinshed's account of the murder.[35] Although many scholars have noted

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[33] Lightborne's attempt here to tempt Edward to sleep and succumb to death unawares mirrors the moment in *Doctor Faustus* when the protagonist pushes his skepticism aside to sleep on stage:

> What are thou, Faustus, but a man condemned to die?
> Thy fatal time doth draw to final end.
> Despair doth drive distrust unto my thoughts.
> Confound these passions with a quiet sleep.
> Tush! Christ did call the thief upon the cross;
> Then rest thee, Faustus, quiet in conceit. (11.29–34)

Importantly, though, Faustus uses sleep as a way to avoid thinking about his upcoming damnation, while Edward avoids sleep in order to contemplate the state of his soul. See Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, in *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays*, ed. Frank Romany and Robert Lindsey (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 341–95.

[34] For more on the use of demons in the popular *ars moriendi* texts, see Kristen Poole, *Supernatural Environments in Shakespeare's England: Spaces of Demonism, Divinity, and Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 58–94.

[35] Holinshed's account reads: "[T]hey came suddenlie one night into the chamber where he laie in bed fast asléepe, and with heauie featherbeds or a table (as some write) being cast vpon him, they kept him down and withall put into his fundament an horne, and through the same they thrust vp into his bodie an hot spit, or (as other haue) through the pipe of a trumpet a plumbers instrument of iron made verie hot, the which passing vp into his intrailes, and being rolled to and fro, burnt the same, but so as no appearance of any wound or hurt outwardlie might be once perceiued. His crie did mooue manie within the castell and towne of Berkley to compassion, plainelie hearing him vtter a wailefull noise, as the tormentors were about to murther him." See Holinshed, Raphael, *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*. Vol. 6. 2nd Ed. London, 1587. The Holinshed Project, http://www.cems.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/index.shtml, 134. Stephen Orgel famously decided that due to the curious absence of stage directions Marlowe's Edward was pressed to death rather than murdered by

the poker as a symbol of demons, its use as a tool of death seems here to allude to the role of Secundus Demon as the torturer of the Antichrist. In the Chester Cycle, after the Archangel Michael kills the Antichrist and gives his body and soul to Primus and Secundus Demon, the demon formerly known as Lightborne reveals his special job as punisher of the condemned. When speaking to Primus Demon of the tortures they hope to inflict on the Antichrist, Secundus Demon tells his fellow devil, "Thou take him by the toppe and I by the tayle" (Chester 23.693). These words suggest that Lightborne is in charge of tormenting the nether regions of his victims, just as Marlowe's Lightborne violates the backside of King Edward.[36]

In addition to punishing the "tayle" of his victims, Secundus Demon also, at least in "The Harrowing of Hell," suggests that part of his role as God's hangman involves sexual violation. This pageant play, while focused on the escape of the patriarchs from hell, includes a dishonest alewife or mulier, who used "cardes, dyce, and cuppes smale," to sell her ale and caused many men to overindulge and be "brought to bedd / farre worse anye beaste" (17.334, 331–32). Due to her transgressions, the alewife is welcomed to hell by Satan, Secundus Demon, and Tertius Demon, with the former Lightborne promising to wed her, thereby implying that her punishment in hell will consist of sexual union with a demon. A similar implication is present in Marlowe's play, as scholars commonly interpret Lightborne's killing of Edward as a parody of anal sex and homoerotic desire.[37]

Lightborne's function as the torturer of damned souls is further described in the final Chester play, "The Judgement." In this segment, Secundus Demon claims the evil souls as his due, telling Christ that if the dead have not committed any good deeds, "deeme them to mee; / or ells thou art as false as wee" (224.570–71). Jesus, after listening to the demons' demands,

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a "red-hot spit." See Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 46–49. I, however, interpret the murder as involving a poker thrust up the bowels, due to Marlowe's obvious reliance on the Holinshed materials and the probable basis for Lightborne within the Chester Mystery Cycle. Additionally, Francis Hubert's poem on the reign and fall of Edward II, which was written a few years prior to Marlowe's play (although suppressed and not published until 1629), also notes that the king was murdered with a "Red hot spit," further suggesting that most contemporaries believed Edward died by a poker thrust rather than being crushed to death. See Hubert, *The Deplorable Life and Death of Edward the Second*, London: Nicholas Okes for Roger Michell, 1628.

[36] The term tail originated in the fourteenth century and according to the *OED*, meant "The lower and hinder part of the human body; the fundament, posteriors, buttocks, backside." See *OED* Online, "tail, n." http://www.oed.com Additionally, as Michael Camille notes, French medieval art often connected hell to anal violation, as shown through medieval images of devils anally penetrating individuals suffering in hell. See Camille, "Dr. Witkowski's Anus: French Doctors, German Homosexuals and the Obscene in Medieval Church Art," in *Medieval Obscenities*, ed. Nicola McDonald (Rochester, NY: York Medieval Press, 2006), 34.

[37] See, for instance, the following: Jonathan Crewe, "Disorderly Love: Sodomy Revisited in Marlowe's *Edward II*," *Criticism* 51, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 385–99; Viviana Comensoli, "Homophobia and the Regulation of Desire: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Marlowe's *Edward II*," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4, no. 2 (October 1993): 175–200; and David Stymeist, "Status, Sodomy, and the Theater in Marlowe's *Edward II*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 44, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 233–53.

concedes and tells the waiting souls they must "goe to the fyre in feere," for:

> Loe, you men that wycked have benne,
> what Sathan sayth you heren and seene.
> Rightuouse doome may you not fleene,
> for grace ys put awaye. (Chester 24.619, 605–8)

Thus, God sanctions the role of the demons as those in charge of the souls in hell, which involves not only demonic dominion, but also righteous punishment.

The Marlovian Lightborne, like his medieval counterpart, functions as a tool of punishment. The death of Edward, similar to the deaths of the Antichrist, the Alewife, and various other damned individuals featured in the Chester Cycle, can be interpreted as the result of human sin. Edward's suffering, according to contemporary understandings of providentialism, was linked to his queer relationship with Piers Gaveston, his disregard for his kingly duties, and his neglect of his queen. Lightborne's horrific murder of Edward could perhaps be interpreted as authorized by the divine in order to return the kingdom of England to order. Indeed, Holinshed's account upholds this view by asserting that God punished Edward for his offences against the divine.[38] Yet, unlike the demons of the Chester Cycle or Holinshed's chronicle, the Marlovian Lightborne's role is less clear, for not only is his task given to him by a corrupt human agent rather than God, but the final words of King Edward—"assist me, Sweet God, and receive my soul" (26.109)—suggest Lightborne's failure as divine punisher. Indeed, although Lightborne destroys the body of the monarch, Edward's soul, the play indicates, may ultimately be saved.[39] Thus, Marlowe, while maintaining the diabolic nature of the original Lightborne, offers audiences a more nuanced character in his Lightborne as a man who can punish the king's earthly body but has no control over Edward's spiritual punishment.

Furthermore, Marlowe's sympathetic treatment of the monarch during his final moments weakens a strictly providential understanding of Lightborne's role and destabilizes the *de casibus* elements of the play.[40] Edward, although earlier represented as a king unconcerned with governance who prioritized his relationships with favorites, becomes, in

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[38] Comensoli, "Homophobia and the Regulation of Desire," 179–80.

[39] Ryan points out that Edward's final prayer mimics that of Christ on the cross and contends that Marlowe's tragedy stages the trials and tribulations of Edward as further evidence of "Christological imagery." See Ryan, "Marlowe's *Edward II* and the Medieval Passion Play," 488–89. For a conflicting viewpoint, see Tom Pettitt's argument that Edward II was treated not as a Christ figure, but instead as a carnivalesque fool. See Pettitt, "Categorical Transgression in Marlovian Death and Damnation." *Orbis Litterarum* 65, no. 4 (2010): 292–317.

[40] As Meg Pearson notes, "prepared to see justice done . . . the audience instead witnesses a murder so affecting that it renovates even Edward's tarnished reputation." See Pearson, "'Die with Fame': Forgiving Infamy in Marlowe's *Edward II*," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 107.

his final moments, a figure of audience pity. Learning he will be kept in a dungeon, the king laments that he is "starved for want of sustenance," covered in "foul excrements," kept "in the sink/ Wherein the filth of all the castle falls," and kept awake by continual drumming (23.20, 26, 25.56–57, 60–61). These torments last for multiple scenes, culminating in Edward's murder, which is horrific in its brutality. The king's dying cries, which Lightborne's assistants believe "will raise the town" attest to the inhumanity of the act and the sounds of pain that extend from the monarch to the audience (25.114). Indeed, George Peele's 1593 poem, *The Honour of the Garter*, which Andrea Stevens argues is a probable recollection of Marlowe's play, includes lines which highlight contemporary reactions to the staging of the king's death: "Edward II, father to this King, / Whose tragicke cry even now me thinkes I heare, / When gracelesse wretches murthered him by night."[41]

Typically, in providential literature and *de casibus* tragedies, the death of the wrongdoer is sanctioned by God and a cause for wonder at the marvellous revelation of a divine plan. Responses to the death of the Marlovian Edward, though, from both audiences and the murdered king's son fail to conform to this ideology. Instead, the spectacle of Edward's death focuses not on the king as a moral exemplum, but as a victim who undergoes extreme mental and physical trauma.[42] Furthermore, Edward III, lamenting that his father was "murdered through [Mortimer's] treachery," takes revenge on his mother and Mortimer for their roles in Edward's assassination (26.28). Thus, the redemption of the kingdom involves not the removal of a corrupt king, but the reassertion of that monarch's power and a rehabilitation of his legacy.

The final treatment of Marlowe's Lightborne, while echoing the fall of the Chester Cycle's Lightborne, also fits uneasily with a strictly providential reading of the play. Following the death of Edward, Marlowe's assassin turns to his assistants, asking, "Tell me, sirs, was it not bravely done?" (25.116). Lightborne's question, of course, alludes to the skilfulness of the murder and his pride in the deed. Yet, rather than receiving praise or recognition, the Marlovian Lightborne is immediately killed and his corpse thrown "in the moat" (25.118). At first glance, the fate of Lightborne here seems reminiscent of the Chester Cycle's character, who, after the discovery of his rebellion against God, is cast into hell. Yet,

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[41] George Peele, *The Honour of the Garter: Displaied in a Poeme Gratulatorie* (London: John Busbie, 1593), lines 222–24; Andrea Stevens, "*Edward II*: A Stage History," in *Edward II: A Critical Reader*, ed. Kirk Melnikoff (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 43–72.
[42] Lunney argues that Marlowe disrupts a conventional reading of Edward's death as a cautionary tale by focusing on the king's emotional suffering and the quotidian details of his final days. See Lunney, *Marlowe and the Popular Tradition*, 82–86.

while the moat may signify banishment and perhaps symbolize hell, Marlowe's character never returns to act as a "scourge of God" like the Chester demon. Instead, he is cast off forever, his fall complete and unequivocal.

Ultimately, Marlowe's use of providential symbolism misdirects the audience by recalling a figure from a medieval mystery play and then challenging traditional understandings of demons and divine punishment. The Marlovian Lightborne, similar to his Chester Cycle precursor, can be termed an "over-reacher," for like Tamburlaine, Barabas, and Faustus, Lightborne falls due to his pride in his abilities and accomplishments. Likewise, the Marlovian Lightborne's characterization as a tool of punishment who focuses on the "tails" of his victims, is reminiscent of the medieval play's Lightborne. Yet, Marlowe's use of the medieval cycle's demon as a basis for his regicide does not offer audiences a straightforward account of God's providential work in human affairs. In *Edward II* Marlowe engages with religious understandings of divine punishments, but instead of portraying Lightborne as the Lord's executioner, Marlowe undermines traditional beliefs in demons (or demon-like characters) as instruments of God's chastisement. Additionally, the death of King Edward here functions not just as a cautionary tale, but instead suggests that history, at least for Marlowe, is more complex than the interpretations evoked by the *de casibus* tradition. In the end, the Marlovian Lightborne echoes the demonic figure from the Chester Mystery Cycle, but offers audiences not answers but questions, concerning the providential scope of English history and the role of divine punishment in human lives.

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