

RSC

2024/25 SEASON

EDWARD II

BY CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE





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The extraordinary (supposed) life of Christopher Marlowe – and what drew him to the scandalous King Edward II

BASED ON A TRUE STORY

By Goran Stanivukovic



MARLOWE WAS A WRITER WHO PLAYED with radical ideas. Early in *Edward II*, the character Gaveston, Edward's lover, describes entertainment for the king with these erotic lines:

*Sometime a lovely boy in Dian's shape,
With hair that gilds the water as it glides,
Crownets of pearl about his naked arms,
And in his sportful hands an olive tree
To hide those parts which men delight
to see.*

After Gaveston's seductive words, it doesn't take long for the king to abandon public duties and declare, 'He loves me more than all the world.' Marlowe boldly thrusts upon his audience the prophetic hope that homosexuality is a subject worthy of the stage.

But how did Marlowe come to write this radical play about one man's – one king's – wilful choice of another man as a lover?

ANNO DNI AETATIS SVÆ 21

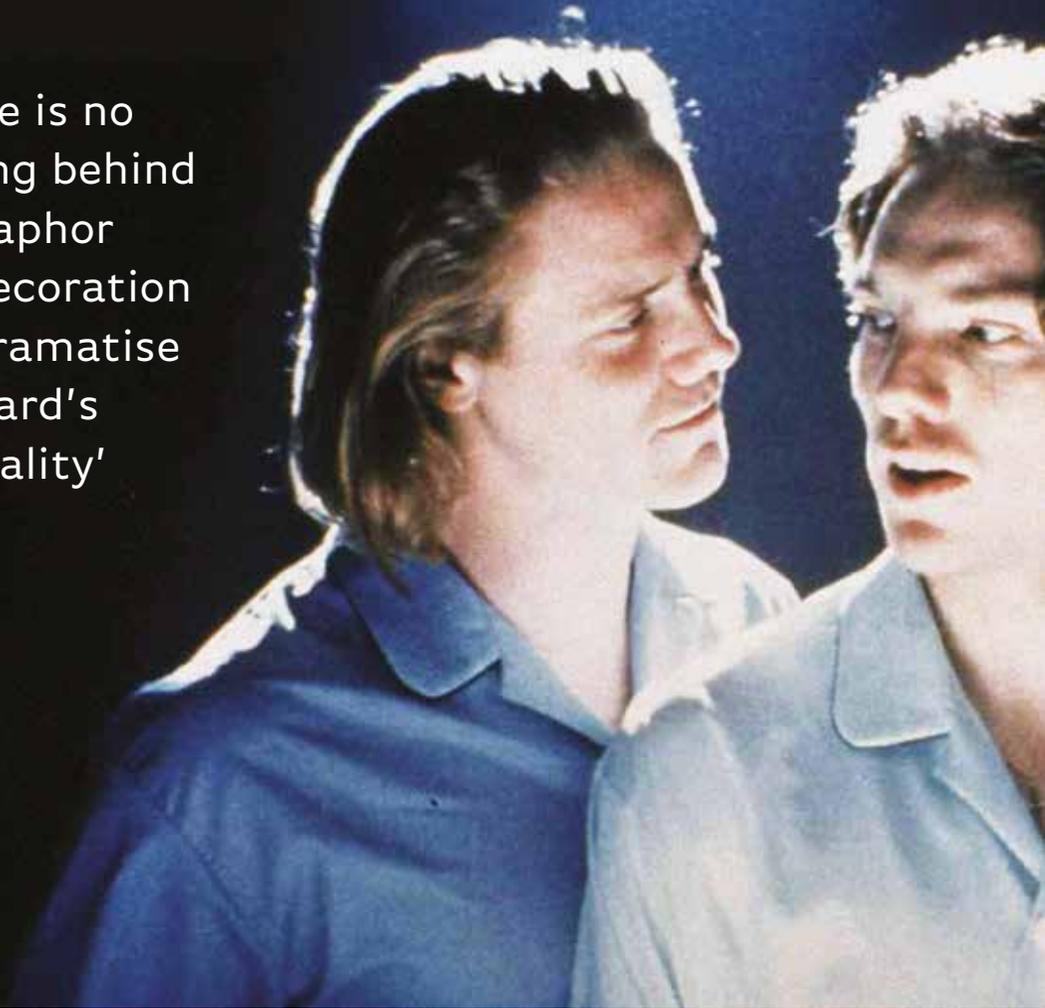
1585

QVOD ME NVTRIT
ME DESTRVIT



*A portrait that could be
of Christopher Marlowe,
bearing the words
Quod me nutrit me destruit
(‘That which nourishes me
destroys me’) in the corner*

'There is no hiding behind metaphor or decoration to dramatise Edward's sexuality'



LIBELS, SCANDALS & HERESIES

Born in Canterbury in 1564, Marlowe lived a life shrouded in mystery and died before he turned 30. There are numerous myths about him. When Cambridge University attempted to withhold Marlowe's MA degree due to frequent absences, the Privy Council intervened on his behalf, stating that he 'had done Her Majesty good service'. Was Marlowe a spy, as biographers have speculated?

In 1592, he was arrested in Flushing, Holland, on charges related to counterfeiting, along with the informer Richard Baines. Baines accused Marlowe of atheism – a claim that could have led to torture, imprisonment, hanging, and even burning at the stake – and most infamously counselled that

Marlowe's mouth be 'stopped'. While evidence for the atheism charge was being gathered, Marlowe wrote *Edward II*, probably also in 1592.

The Earl of Pembroke's Men performed the play in London that same year, but it was not printed until 1594, a year after Marlowe's untimely death by stabbing in Deptford – another mysterious event attributed either to a dispute over a tavern bill or a politically motivated assassination.

THE BAINES 'NOTE'

After Marlowe's death, Baines delivered a libellous 'note' to the Privy Council, accusing Marlowe of saying that St John and Jesus were lovers, that Jesus was a bastard and Mary a whore, and that he had as much right to mint coins as the Queen.



Left: A still from Derek Jarman's 1991 film of Edward II

Below: Members OutRage! marching at the Lesbian and Gay Pride event, London, 19th June 1993



determined. The enigmatic motto – *Quod me nutrit me destruit* ('That which nourishes me destroys me') – could be a suggestion of an overbearing youth boxed in by an all-consuming passion which, in the end, destroys him.

A TRANSGRESSOR KING

Edward was the first English king to be deposed. Chronicles brim with accounts of his indulgences in the company of men beneath his social status. These sources also suggest that Gaveston 'corrupted' Edward, and some of his other favourites were likely his lovers. Marlowe – always keen to confront and challenge religious doctrine – was drawn to this story of personal and public misconduct, even though the capital offence of 'buggery' was at that point considered a crime against God. Marlowe expanded on Gaveston's grip on the King's emotions, amplifying Gaveston's contempt for the nobles and Edward's rage at his opponents. He also emphasised queerness. Marlowe, unique among his peers, treats sexuality directly, using plain language. There is no hiding behind metaphor or decoration to dramatise Edward's sexuality.

Most infamously, he accused Marlowe of saying that 'all they that love not tobacco and boys were fools'.

We can't verify Baines' posthumous libels, but the idea that Marlowe was an atheist has not gone away: in fact, these accusations haunted Marlowe's reputation until the end of the 17th century (although they didn't diminish his literary fame). And, since queer desire is a recurrent theme in his works – read *Hero and Leander* or *Dido, Queen of Carthage* – some have also supposed that Marlowe was gay.

Another veil of mystery surrounds Marlowe: a picture of a 21-year-old gentleman hanging in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, is believed to be him. His hair is unkempt and his gaze

That St Iohn the Evangelist was bedfellow to ^{him} and
and loathed always in his bosom, that he was ⁱⁿ ~~from~~
as the sinners of Sodom.

That all they that love not Tobacco & Birds were fools.

That all the apostles were fishermen and base followers
neither of wit nor worth, that Paul only had wit
but so was a timorous fellow in bidding men to be
subject to magistrates against his contentment.

That so had at good fight to come at the Queen of
England, and that so was acquainted with one poole
a prisoner in Newgate who had great skill in my
kind of matters and having learned some things of
him so went through the job of a running stamp
maker to some of our crowns pistole and Eng
lish shilling.

That if Christ would send instituted the sacrament
with more ceremonious observance it would send
our god in more admiration, that it would send
him much better being administered in a Tobacco pipe.

That the Angell Gabriell was sent to the holy
ghost because he brought the salutation to Mary.

That on his holy day ~~was~~ ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~city~~ ~~of~~ ~~London~~ ~~that~~ ~~he~~ ~~was~~ ~~persecuted~~
that so was persuaded by marlow to become an Atheist.

Those things with many other shall by good &
fondest words be agreed to be his opinions and
some Specters and that this marlow doth not
only send from himself but almost into every
company so doth he persuade men to Atheism
willing them not to be afraid of bugbears and
foes of the living, and utterly scorned both god and his
ministers as if Richard Bampf will justify &
approve both by mind of and his testimony
of many fondest men, and almost all men with
wisdom so fast comforted any time will
justify the same, and as if first all men in
Christianity ought to believe that the mouth of

Left: The informer Richard Baines' 1593 'note' of accusations against Christopher Marlowe

Below: Simon Russell Beale as the king in the RSC's 1990 production of *Edward II*

There is no record of the reception of *Edward II* in its own time. Given its radical treatment of sexuality and violence, it would probably have been regarded as disturbing. Evidence exists of a performance in London in the 1620s, as well as an epigram from the early 17th century about Lightborn, the King's murderer. Somewhere along the line, though, *Edward II* fell out favour, and it was not until the early 20th century that the play was revived in the theatre.

THE AFTERLIFE OF *EDWARD II*

Edward II has inspired modern reworkings in drama, film, and ballet, for example Bertolt Brecht's 1924 verse adaptation. Not long after the Conservative government introduced Section 28 in 1988, 'prohibiting local authorities from promoting homosexuality in... schools', Derek Jarman adapted the play for film. He blended Marlowe's story with the expression of contemporary gay activist groups like OutRage! (which responded to increasing incidents of gay bashing), and ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). A ballet version premiered in Stuttgart in 1995. In 2019, actor and writer Tim Stuart wrote *After Edward*, a new play exploring the psychological choices gay people make in a social environment hostile to their personal lives.

FACT OR LEGEND?

Marlowe lived dangerously, spoke impulsively, and often found himself at odds with the law, fuelling endless theories portraying him as a spy, a homosexual, an atheist, and a counterfeiter. The dramatist Thomas Kyd, who was once Marlowe's roommate in London, even implicated him in treason, claiming he sought to flee to the Scottish court of King James VI. It is impossible to distinguish fact from legend regarding Marlowe's life – and, given his body of work, perhaps it doesn't truly matter.

Today, we celebrate Marlowe's *Edward II* for both its thrilling pace and startling poetry, but also its enduring power to lend legitimacy, strength, and voice to the ongoing struggle of gay people in a still complex, and often hostile, environment. ■

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