“Unborn and unbegot”: Richard III, Edward II, Richard II, and Queer History

by

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Abstract

In my thesis, I treat Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, Marlowe’s *Edward II*, and Shakespeare’s *Richard II* as a queer sequence of history plays, or a kind of co-authored triptych, by reading their influences on each other and focusing on the iterative elements of their writing of history. I describe in my thesis how the queer affects, desires, and pleasures in these plays are integral to a History – the shared knowledge and impressions of a British national past – from which they are and have been systematically excluded.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Evan Choate.
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Introduction: “A little scene / To monarchize”

For God’s sake let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings,
How some have been deposed, some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,
Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed—
All murdered. For within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps death his court, and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene
To monarchize, be feared and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life
Were brass impregnable, and humoured thus
Comes at the last and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall—and farewell king.
Cover your heads and mock not flesh and blood
With solemn reverence. Throw away respect,
Tradition, form and ceremonious duty.
For you have but mistook me all this while,
I live with bread like you, feel want,
Taste grief, need friends. Subjected thus,
How can you say to me I am a king? (3.2.155-77)

I have chosen to open my thesis, not with my own words, but with an extended quotation from Shakespeare’s Richard II because it exemplifies both the substantive content and the structural approach of my analysis. In this scene, Richard is preoccupied by the power of narratives of monarchy – the symbolic construction of power in history. He gazes backward, not at his predecessors themselves, but on the “sad stories” of their deaths, capitalizing on the affective pay-off, narratively, of the violation of the seemingly impregnable body of the king. Kingship here is neither biological, historical, nor divine. Instead, it is intertextual. The image of English kings deposed, slain in war, and haunted by the ghosts of their predecessors far more insistently and fully recalls Richard III, who lived a century after Richard II, than it does any of Richard II’s
predecessors. Specifically, it recalls the embellished Richard III, as he is invented by More and later Shakespeare, rather than the historical Richard III, who probably never met any ghosts.

More importantly, it is certainly not historically accurate to state that every English monarch was murdered, although it is, perhaps, figuratively true of their lives on the Elizabethan stage. The imagery which dominates the speech, of a death that taunts and toys with a king before he “at the last and with a little pin / Bores through his castle wall” recalls, in its dramatic rather than historic details, Lightborn’s torture and vicious mutilation of Marlowe’s Edward II. Personified death here mimics the process of seduction – flattering, comforting, and humouring, before eventually penetrating, its target. The commonplace links between death and orgasm reinforce the erotic registers of this exchange. The pay-off of these stories – the very fact that they all end the same way – is what causes Richard to reject the “solemn reverence” that he is offered by his subjects. In examining the telos of narratives of power which compulsively destroy the bodies of the kings, we can see that power itself is reduced to an erotic game played between a sadistic murderer – the playwright, historian, or the King’s successor (Mortimer, Henry IV, Richard III, Henry VII) – and their unwitting victim, the king who reads the signs of his power as real, permanent, and immutable. By recognizing the erotics of historical narrative, how power itself is constructed through the fantasy of its dissolution and the intertextual network of significance that buries this dissolution in the discourse of power itself, Richard II confronts the hopeless reality of his own place within history, and his own status as monarch. He also frames the queer reading of Shakespeare’s and Marlowe’s history plays that I present in this thesis.

In my thesis, I, like Richard II, occupy the intersection between a number of dramatic narratives of history as a means of interrogating the ways that their erotic investments shape the
representation and reality of power. I treat Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, Marlowe’s *Edward II*, and Shakespeare’s *Richard II* as a queer sequence of history plays, or a kind of co-authored triptych. By reading their influences on each other and focusing on the iterative elements of their writing of history, I describe in my thesis how the queer affects, desires, and pleasures in these plays are integral to a History – the shared knowledge and impressions of a British national past – from which they are and have been systematically excluded.

In this introduction, I will frame the largely literary analysis that I perform in my chapters within a theoretical tradition that I take to be part of, not distinct from, literature itself. In my chapters I develop the contentions that I present here through concrete literary analysis that I take to be not just an application of theory, but also theory in and of itself. In this introduction I examine the ways in which notions of history condition modes of sexual subjectivity and vice versa without definitionally ruling out our own involvement in the histories that we examine. More specifically, I look to provide a cogent account of how a history – not the people in it and not the people writing it – can be queer. With an interest in the queer and erotic registers of anachronism, nostalgia, nonlinearity, memory, revision, reinterpretation, reappropriation, and reenacting, I rehearse and explore in this introduction the dictum that “the project of queering the Renaissance insists on queering historicism” itself (Goldberg and Menon, 1610). As such, I look to expand on the last twenty years of queer historicism while being attentive to the ways that this critical heritage not only makes possible but is, in many ways, the object of my own criticism. In summarizing and synthesizing these theoretical interventions, I stage my own examination of the relationship between history, representation, and political power as queer erotics. I aim to demonstrate how heterohistorical regimes that privilege chronoteleological difference necessarily contain a homohistory that always doubles back on itself. This buried erotics of chronological
sameness ultimately subverts and reverses the productive teleologies at which regimes of heterohistory aim. As such, I propose that the emergence of homohistory is, in fact, a condition of the relationship between political power and literary text and that the process by which historical narrative produces History is, insistently and necessarily, a queer one.

“Ever froward”

Both the history of queers and the queers of history have been hot topics in academia since Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* designated the nineteenth century as the point at which the homosexual became a ‘species,’ a coherent, legible identity capable of having and engaging a history, politics, and culture, in opposition to the incoherent, illegible sodomite of the pre-modern past (43). Important works, such as Alan Bray’s *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (1982), Gregory Bredbeck’s *Sodomy and Interpretation* (1991), and Jonathan Goldberg’s *Sodometries* (1994), to name a few, have advanced the project of understanding and engaging, rather than simply dismissing, the valences of pre-modern queer subjectivities (subjectivities and identities that did exist as such, if in terms not immediately recognizable to Foucault’s more dogmatic readers). At the same time, these works tend to be only minimally concerned with the investments of the historicist project itself – the variously queer and normative positions that we occupy when looking backward and engaging with the past. In many cases, queer history in the academy has meant a history of queer figures, subjects that we salvage and claim from the alien past. In opposition to this trend, this thesis stakes its claims on the possibility of doing for history what Leo Bersani proposed doing for art, that is, provide an account of history “to which homosexual desire is essential, but which, precisely and paradoxically because of this, can dispense with the concept of homosexual identity” (31).
Accounts which take seriously the queer aspects of history and historiography itself are not an innovation of this thesis. There is, indeed, a growing body of work that takes up these issues as a central concern. Some examples include: Carla Freccero’s *Queer/Early/Modern*, which “queers historicist imperatives … by means of an implicit critique of historicism itself” (3); Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward*, which sets out to “trace a tradition of queer backwardness” that takes seriously the ways in which affective engagements with history are fundamental and productive elements of queer experience (8); and Nishant Shahani’s *Queer Retrosexualities*, which argues that modern queer adulthood “necessitate(s) a retrospective looking back and a rethinking of signs, actions, behaviors, speech acts and attachments” in order to formulate identity in the present (1). These accounts, usefully, outline the ways that histories affect and are affected by queer subjects that experience them, live them, and (re)produce them. What these accounts lack, and what is vital to my own, is a focus on the ways in which queer desire and queer erotics, specifically, are fundamental to producing, understanding, and encountering history. A recent example of a project that is attentive to these concerns is Vin Nardizzi, Stephen Guy-Bray, and Will Stockton’s collection *Queer Renaissance Historiography: Backward Gaze*, which aims to “free queer scholarship from the tyranny of historicism” by focusing on the queer erotics of the “backward gaze that demonstrates the connection of past literature to the present” (6). Nardizzi, Guy-Bray, and Stockton’s project, however, (deliberately) never gets as far as theorizing history broadly, instead presenting a variety of accounts which controvert or subvert traditional historicism and its attendant assumptions about epistemology and use. This thesis, as an expansion on the projects outlined here, will actively theorize the queer and erotic registers of history.
In the tradition of queer history in the academy that I have traced, the account that I have benefited the most from is Madhavi Menon’s *Unhistorical Shakespeare*. In it, she outlines a broad theoretical framework she calls homohistory or, alternatively, unhistoricism. Menon’s theoretical framework is an expansion on an idea introduced in the essay “Queering History,” which she co-wrote with Jonathan Goldberg. Menon argues that historicism’s “embrace of difference as the template for relating past and present produces a compulsory heterotemporality in which chronology determines identity” (1). In so doing, it reifies absolute sexual identities based on the fantasy that desires can be ordered and made to signify according to a regime of “chrono-teleological difference” (4). In other words, historicizing sexuality reproduces the Foucauldian notion that historical difference provides the basis for the coherence of a modern sexual identity in opposition to the incoherence of a conceptually and temporally alien past sexuality. The past here teleologically produces a present made coherent by its very relation (as consequence) to a disorderly past. In contrast, Menon’s homohistory “posits a methodological resistance to sexuality as historical difference,” “disrupts frameworks within which desire and time are presumed to be coherent,” and “focuses on the textual, socioeconomic, political, and biological ‘incoherence’ that attends desire” as a means of disrupting the teleological forces of heterohistoricism (2, 4). The strengths of Menon’s argument are its recognition of the ways that “desires always exceed identitarian categories and resist being corralled into hetero-temporal camps,” and its move to incorporate this recognition into the way we talk about histories of desire, which are, indeed, always queer histories (1).

Menon’s framework is particularly useful because it exposes the unsexy, hetero assumptions on which a lot of self-proclaimed progressive, or even self-proclaimed queer, accounts are based. In so doing, she opens the door for specifically queer ways of engaging the
past. While Menon’s history creates a space for the incoherence of desire and time, it does not elaborate on the ways in which desire might be complicit in the production of all sorts of history or essential to the very act of narrativizing and politicizing the past. That is to say, there is still a counterintuitive hetero gap between homo and hetero history in Menon’s theory; heterohistory itself is a discipline, an entire category of experience, which the homo does not access. While Menon’s theory theoretically leaves space for a desire that takes history as its object, she more frequently characterizes desire as a force that is incompatible with historicism as it is currently conceived: historicism is simply “inadequate to housing the study of desire” (3).

My intervention is staked on the theorizing of history as constructed by desire and as a desired object, a valence that is absent (as objects of desire always are) from Menon’s account. In writing this thesis I have begun to refer to this intervention as ‘froward erotics.’ I have pilfered the (fantastic) word ‘froward’ from Thomas More’s *History of King Richard The Third*, which I examine in the first chapter. More writes that Richard was “malicious, wrathful, envious, and, from afore his birth ever froward” (10). The *OED* defines “froward” as “disposed to go counter to what is demanded or what is reasonable; perverse, difficult to deal with, hard to please; refractory, ungovernable; also, in a wider sense, bad, evilly-disposed, ‘naughty’. (The opposite of toward.)” “Froward” is a word that comes with a ready-made set of obviously queer meanings – ‘perverse,’ ‘refractory,’ and ‘naughty’ all stand out. “Froward” is also an anagram of forward and, while mimicking the form – visual, aural – of forward, it reverses its priorities, making it perverse rather than providential. In this way the word is, simultaneously, both backward and forward, an incoherence which typifies Menon’s homohistory. It places a formal emphasis on the forward posture of heterohistory while placing a semantic emphasis on the fact that history is a
backward discipline, and that, most importantly, this backwardness is perverse, refractory, and naughty.

Froward erotics depend upon a pseudo-Freudian understanding of the ways in which desire reacts to the attempts to control or contain it. In *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman reminds us that “in Freud, ‘binding’ is a way to manage excess; yet this very binding also produces a kind of rebound effect, in which whatever it takes to organize energy also triggers a release of energy that surpasses the original stimulus” (xvi). For Freeman, like Love and Shahani, queer subjectivity and identity are produced as the excess of the historical process of ‘binding,’ the process by which history is used as a form of temporal mastery, justifying and exemplifying the privileged “now.” At the same time, the power of history is in the necessity that we ‘buy in’ to the story it tells: to invest affectively in the outcome of history means to invest affectively in its narrative moments as well. Normative histories always come with both the expectation that representation will engender affective response, and the consequent risk that this response will be in excess, or will fail, like Freud’s inverts, to eventually fixate on a proper endpoint.

Froward erotics refer to the specifically sexual responses – desire, arousal, pleasure – to backward oriented encounters with history, encounters which dally in historical detail itself rather than focusing on the designated telos of normative histories. This pleasure arises, in part, specifically because we are facing the wrong way. As Lee Edelman has compellingly argued, “far from partaking of this narrative movement toward a viable political future, far from perpetuating the fantasy of meaning’s eventual realization, the queer comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form” (4). History is, by definition, always a backward gaze. It is an inherently queer obstacle that must be overcome in order to teleologically (re)produce the present and future – both a
necessary condition of and threat to hetero-semantics. History is also, as opposed to memory, a narrative in which the literal self is absent, non-specific, or dispersed; we don’t ‘remember’ history, we read it and we imagine it, it is always mediated. Similarly, the past is itself the queer byproduct of the normativity of the present, the detritus, what’s left behind by reproduction: the thing that is reproduced. In order to normatively privilege the present, the past must be discarded, made other, foreign, and incoherent. Froward erotics take pleasure in history as backwardness and as narrative, elements of heterohistory that are meant as means to its teleologically useful end: the fantasy of the reproductively determined future. The encounter with history as subjectless and history as what’s left behind enacts the “radical disintegration and humiliation of the self” that Bersani sees as the radical outcome of queer sexuality and “the jouissance, the corrosive enjoyment” that Edelman sees as “intrinsic to queer non-identity” (24; 30). To take pleasure in the performance of history, textual or dramatic, is to dwell on its fissures, gaps and dissonances, its failures, the way it elicits illicit pleasure and refuses to move on or comply with a productive vision of the future. Froward erotics recognizes the ways that history is always a potentially disruptively queer encounter and encounters it as such.

“I am Richard III know ye not that?”

On the night before his failed coup d’état against Elizabeth I in 1601, the Earl of Essex reportedly ordered a private performance of Richard II. On hearing about this performance, Elizabeth is reputed to have coolly remarked to her aides, “I am Richard II know ye not that?” (Dawson and Yachnin 4). The question is, in a way characteristic of so much of what is attributed to the queen, cleverly multi-layered and bitingly self-aware. Here, Elizabeth is recognizing the ways in which she has been troped as one in a long line of weak and effeminate kings, of a piece with Edward II and Richard II. Further, she is recognizing how Essex has
attempted to use this backward gaze to recreate this history by literally having the history acted out as a means of trying to securely fix its template, so to speak, on the present. More importantly, however, she is calling attention to the ways in which the template does not fit. She has, most importantly, not been successfully deposed precisely because Essex has confused the priority of the figurative and the literal. Richard II is only figuratively effeminate: he is literally male. Elizabeth, on the other hand, is literally female, but figuratively male, as she famously declared in her speech at Tilbury in 1588. Elizabeth was, indeed, ruthless and politically clever, nothing like the weak king Shakespeare dramatizes (Elizabeth and Essex are both, of course, referring to the dramatic Richard II rather than the actual person). By calling attention to the froward erotics of Essex’s theatre, the way it uncomfortably dallies in the confusion of present with past, Elizabeth uses the same technique against him, also relying on the exposure of her incompatibility with this narrative template to produce her own incompatibility with weakness and deposition, further painting Essex as yet another overreaching favourite that, as Bolingbroke says of Bushy and Green, caused people to “misinterpret” her (3.1.18). While there is scant historical evidence to suggest that this incident actually occurred, the fact that this story is often reproduced speaks to the ways that Renaissance drama uses literary intertext to engage history, wherein the past becomes not a providential pathway to the present, but a template for encounters with history that erotically reproduce and re-bind its subjects.

When Richard II asks, in the quotation that opens this section, “how can you say to me I am a King?” (3.2.177), he is implicitly asking “I am Richard III know ye not that?” There are moments throughout the play, like this one, where intertextuality manifests as an uncanny reencounter with things we’ve seen before; where it seems like the characters themselves have read Elizabethan plays. In this thesis, I treat characters as though they are exactly these sorts of
intertextual agents, and examine the ways that narratives of history erotically ‘feed back’ into other narratives of history through this uncanny preoccupation with narrative itself. I examine the emergence and significance of froward erotics in a historical tradition that existed, more specifically and more deliberately than most, in order to providentially justify the Tudor monarchy. Moving through and between early chronicle histories and Shakespeare’s and Marlowe’s plays, I examine how these texts engage the threat to historical orthodoxy posed by the spectre of queer historical dalliance, the taking of queer pleasure from and in the very structures intended to police it. Plays on a stage, and the dramatic situations within the plays that I read, present us with bodies that simultaneously are and aren’t real, and historical scenes that we do and don’t witness. As these plays perform history, they also disorder it. As they dwell in historical moments they become part of how these moments are read and witnessed, and they shape the ways that politics is able to look backward. Ultimately, in Richard II, we see the homohistory that the plays can’t help but perform collapse into the providentialist heterohistory of Henry IV’s ascension to the throne, blurring the hetero division between the performance of reproductive power and the incoherence of queer desires, hollowing out the crown to create a space for cross-temporal dalliance.
Chapter One: “From forth the kennel of thy womb”

Writing in 1491, John Rous, an early Tudor chronicler, described Richard III as “the unnatural product of two years in his mother’s womb” who had “emerg[ed] with teeth and hair to his shoulders.” He further noted that the baby Richard “like a scorpion combined a smooth front and a stinging tail” (qtd. in Dockray xxi). This heavy-handedly symbolic description of Richard locates the specific impetus for Tudor intervention in Richard’s incompatibility with heterosexual orthodoxy. Here, Richard is the product of gestation gone wrong: his “smooth front” conspicuously lacks any reproductive organs, and, like most people worth knowing, he is hiding a dangerous phallic surprise in his rear. He is cast as a mistake of heterosexual order; his “unnatural” gestation denies his status as the legitimate outcome of genealogical productivity, while his “smooth front” denies the possibility that he, himself, might reproduce. Richard is also a direct product of hetero-reproduction and, as a result, his disqualification from the “natural” patrilineal order, which serves to preserve the integrity of that order, is dependent on the capacity for the stability, security, and naturalness of that order to fail. This paradoxical relationship between power structures and the individuals disqualified from them characterizes much of the Tudor accounts of Richard.

In order to stake a claim to their own monarch’s authority, Tudor propagandists had to invalidate Richard III’s claims to the throne – Henry VII’s usurpation was only legitimate if Richard wasn’t. Broadly, Richard III has always been a sort of allegorical figure: he ruled for only two years, and the most historically important thing he did was serve as a pincushion for Tudor halberds. Indeed, as the last Plantagenet king, the Tudor regime found it necessary to stuff more than just their sundry bladed weapons in Richard; they impregnated him with an entire
counter-genealogical political ideology, a symbolic denaturing of the heterosexual integrity of patrilineal political power capable of justifying their own circumvention of the reproductive designation of monarchical authority. In this chapter, I will examine Richard’s role in the articulation and fortification of Tudor power. I will argue that in *Richard III*, Shakespeare reflects on Thomas More’s figuring of Richard as an act that, far from stabilizing the Tudor regime within a sanitized framework of heterosexual order, reduces heterosexuality to a theatrical pretense. The Tudors, More, and Shakespeare all participate in a politics in which power itself comes to rely on a non-reproductive seduction, a conscious location of royalty within the semantic and erotic slippages of storytelling and narrative rather than the factual bedrock expressed by biological reproduction. In articulating royalty as a seductive transaction between monarch and subject which depends on the exploitation of a queer pleasures and queer desires, the perceived sanitary, heterosexual order of English power comes to rest on a foundation that understands politics and power in a way that is potentially scary, non-reproductively sexy, and very queer.

“Some convenient pretext”

Shakespeare’s *Richard III* is conventionally considered to be the pinnacle of Tudor representations of Richard III. Historian Keith Dockray describes it as “the magnificent dramatic climax of almost a century of growing denigration” (xxv). George Logan credits it as being the work that “sealed Richard’s reputation as a monstrous tyrant” (xlviii). The play is generally believed to owe its greatest debt to Thomas More’s *History of Richard the Third* (c. 1513), which is the most canonical of the early-Tudor depictions of Richard, despite owing a great deal to the histories that preceded it. Shakespeare is likely to have encountered More through Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577), which plagiarized its chapter
on Richard III from Edward Hall’s *Union of the Two Noble Families of Lancaster and York* (1548), which reproduces More’s text more or less verbatim while explicitly proclaiming its political bias in the title.

The most important piece of Tudor historiography that preceded More was written by Polydore Vergil, a friend of More famous for inaugurating the so called “Tudor myth,” in which the Wars of the Roses were cast as the punishment for, and Henry VII the correction of, Henry IV’s usurpation of the throne in 1399 (Logan, G. xxx). It was originally commissioned by Henry VII and completed between 1507 and 1521. Although Vergil’s account is briefer and less dramatic than More’s, it nonetheless contains a number of themes familiar to modern readers. Vergil explains that Richard “began to be kyndlyd with an ardent desyre of soveraigntie” upon his brother’s death and proceeded with his plan “not myndyng … thutter subvertion of his howse” (173-74). Here, Richard’s relationship to power is specifically figured as an anti-genealogical lust that undoes and subverts the authority and integrity of heterosexual structures, such as family. Vergil depicts Richard as “determynyd to assay his purposy by subtyltie and sleight” and “covering and cloking certane days his desire, under the colour and pretence of common welthe” (174, 179). This notion of Richard as motivated by impure but concealed desires would later be of vital importance for both Shakespeare and More, and echoes the hidden threat of the scorpion’s tail in Rous. Most importantly, in Vergil, more so than in either More or Shakespeare, the political utility of Richard’s queer subversion of family becomes clear, as it is located in a grand narrative of Tudor legitimacy that ultimately locates Richard’s fault in Henry IV’s crimes against genealogy.

More is likely to have read Vergil’s *Historia* in manuscript in 1513, around the time that he is reputed to have begun writing his *History of Richard the Third* (Logan, G. xxx-xxxii). In
relation to the Tudor historical orthodoxy that preceded it, there are no real surprises in More’s
text; it presents basically the same account of events that we find in other early Tudor historians,
such as Henry VII’s poet laureate and official historiographer Bernard André’s *Life of Henry VII*
(1502), Rous and Vergil. While similar in its general outlines, the queerness of More’s Richard
is, in many ways, more explicit than in More’s predecessors. In addition to embellishing and
emphasizing Richard’s standard moral failings (“malicious, wrathful, envious”) and physical
deformity (“little of stature, ill-featured of limbs, crook-backed, hard-favored of visage”), More
goes to great lengths to establish that Richard was, “from afore his birth, ever froward.” For
More, Richard’s perversion is not just an aberration of reproduction; he thwarts teleology
altogether by being, in this narrative, inherently and necessarily backward. More emphasizes this
point when he adds to Rous’s mythos of Richard’s unnatural birth: More insists that, in addition
to being born “not untoothed,” “that [Richard] came into the world with the feet forward (as men
be borne outward).” In other words, More’s Richard is quite literally born backwards; he enters
as most men exit or die, and so his parturition conflates and corrupts reproduction with death and
reverses the stable trajectory of the heteroproductive life. Just in case we might have missed the
point of these details, More further explains that “nature changed her course in his beginning
which in the course of his life many things unnaturally committed” (10).

Such prurient details take on added ideological significance because More is also careful
to demonstrate the necessity of genealogy as a method for justifying monarchical authority.
Unlike the other accounts before him, More’s history devotes considerable energy to the bastardy
of Edward IV’s heirs, the princes Edward and Richard. Richard soon discovers that it is not
enough to convince the people that he would be a good king, and so he needs “some convenient
pretext” for making himself king. Of the “divers things” that Richard and his co-conspirators
devise, the “chief thing and the weighty of all that invention rested in … that they should allege bastardy, either in King Edward himself, or in his children, or both” (69). Here, we see that Richard is able to become king only by manipulating the genealogical bedrock of royal authority. This point carefully contains his usurpation within the language of reproductive futurity and historical truth: even Richard must contend with the dependence of monarchical authority on socially legitimated heterosexual reproduction. At the same time, Richard accesses and modifies the past by virtue of his froward posture, which typifies the irony of Tudor historicism; only a perverse dwelling on narratives of the past can underwrite the productivity of the future.

More interesting than Richard’s need to tarnish the legitimacy of the princes is the way that More rebukes his accusations. More embarks on a long and ponderous diatribe about Edward IV’s courtship with Elizabeth Woodville, in which he explains that Edward declined a number of more politically advantageous marriages because he “refused to be wived against his appetite” and believed that marriage is a “spiritual thing” “made for the respect of God, where his grace inclineth the parties to love together” (73). Having established that Edward and Elizabeth were really, truly in love, More explains that “I have rehearsed this business about this marriage somewhat the more at length because it might thereby appear upon how slipper a ground the protector … pretended King Edward’s children to be bastards” (76). This is an interesting refutation given that Richard’s claim is a legal one (that Edward was previously married) while More chooses to focus his refutation on the affective circumstances in which the children were conceived. The effect of this historiographical strategy is to locate legitimacy and monarchical power in loving heterosexual, rather than legal, structures, making even more explicit the link between Richard’s queerness, his disinterest in falling in love and having babies, and his disqualification from the throne.
While More’s text is famously dramatic for a historical chronicle, consisting of a number of clearly invented set speeches (there’s no way More could have known what Richard said to his advisors in private), it also features a significant amount of editorializing from its narrator. In More’s *History*, the narrator serves, primarily, to tell us what to think about Richard and to offer opinions on the efficacy of Richard’s various schemes (as above with his deconstruction of Richard’s claims about the princes’ legitimacy). The effect of this style of writing history is to distance the reader from Richard and to locate affective response to the episodes firmly within a univocal Tudor perspective in which Richard is an aberration outside of, rather than within, the mechanisms of power. To the extent that More’s Richard is a queer figure who successfully seduces people, he is one from whom we are kept apart; he is never allowed to seduce us. Indeed, More is careful always to specify that Richard’s schemes are transparent and ineffective. For example, in the famous scene where Buckingham implores Richard to accept the crown, More explains that, although “the matter was on both parts made so strange, as though neither had ever communed with the other thereof before … there was no man so dull that heard them but he perceived well enough that all the matter was made between them” (94). In More’s telling, Richard’s acting (and he does, famously, liken it to “a stage play” [95]), is a lame pantomime, and people do not resist his attempt to gain power because, at this point, Richard has killed or imprisoned most of the powerful people who might oppose him.

The moves to distance both the audience and lineal mechanisms of power from Richard’s schemes are necessary for More. Unlike Vergil, whose narrative of Richard III was simply the final step in the ascension of the Tudors following the deposition of Richard II, More’s Richard III was written as a stand-alone parable, and it therefore lacked the teleological force of Vergil’s *Anglica Historia*. More’s history, left unfinished, barely mentions the Tudors; the good king that
contrasts Richard’s bad king is, in fact, Edward IV who, despite being (maternal) grandfather to Henry VIII, was also part of the line of kings deposed by Henry VII. As such, More needs to portray Richard’s usurpation without losing the providential force of the Tudor claim to the throne, and the only way to do that is to refuse the claim that Richard’s approach to politics is functional – More has to deny genealogy in this instance without denying genealogy altogether, a difficult negotiation, to be sure, and one which Shakespeare troubles in his stage adaptation of More’s history. At the same time, the use of the editorializing narrator to locate legitimacy in the past requires that the reader buy in to the very sort of counter-genealogical politics that Richard stands for, at least partially.

“Who’s so gross that cannot see this palpable device”

Despite the seeming pervasiveness and influence of Tudor accounts during the period, Shakespeare’s portrayal of Richard is unlikely to be a passive or ignorant recapitulation of Tudor dogma, as by the end of the sixteenth century there were already a number of prominent published works which questioned the dominant narrative of Richard’s life. For example, in his Annales (1580), John Stow questions the evidence that Richard killed his nephews and denies entirely the claims that Richard was physically deformed. More extremely, in his Britannia (1586), William Camden specifically writes that Richard was a “good prince” and “was, and is the true and undoubted King of England, &c. and that the inheritance of these Kingdoms rightfully belongs to the heirs of his body lawfully begotten” (771). Far from being the only Richard available to him, the Richard of Shakespeare’s play is a conscious embellishment on a tradition of representation that originated under the rule of Henry VII and, perhaps because of Shakespeare’s intervention, remains current today.
The recent critical tradition surrounding Shakespeare’s *Richard III* tends to agree on a number of fundamental notions about the play that bring into focus the ways that Shakespeare’s treatment differed from More’s. These differences, I think, suggest the ways in which *Richard III* is a specific instantiation of a frowardly erotic political philosophy and praxis embedded, but not explicitly articulated, in More’s chronicle. The biggest of these differences is the magnetism and appeal of Shakespeare’s Richard in relation to More’s. For example, George Logan has observed that “Shakespeare took the wit and caustic irony of More’s narrator and transferred them to Richard – who is not, in the *History*, a witty person” (xlviii). Intentionalist fossils Charles and Elaine Hallett observe something similar in their recent book on the artistic links between the two Richards, claiming that Shakespeare’s Richard is “Richard as such a Richard might present himself were he to write his own autobiography” (29). They note that Shakespeare does not present More’s “blundering Richard,” but rather a Richard with an “extraordinary ability” to “organize events … the way a dramatist invents his own world” (21). While these and gobs of other scholars tend to use these observations as part of a grand narrative in which *Richard III* is a turning point in Shakespeare’s development of dramatic interiority, it is worth taking seriously the effect of Shakespeare’s collapse of the two most distinct voices in More’s narrative, the moralizing narrator and the villain. As noted previously, the separation of the persuasive force of political rhetoric (More’s narrator) from the successful but unpersuasive Richard establishes a certain moral distance from the action that More represents; the audience can never sympathize with Richard or be implicated in his worldview. Further, this separation establishes a distance between the Tudor rhetoric of legitimacy and the illegitimate rhetoric of the last Plantagenet. When the narrator is removed this distance collapses. In my reading of Shakespeare’s play, I demonstrate how the seductive “interiority” that Shakespeare develops by internalizing the witty
and incisive commentary of More’s narrative into the character of Richard III capitalizes on the ironies of Tudor historiography, the way historiographers discredit genealogy even as they try to defend it, in order to enact a queerly affective engagement with the machinery of power. In other words, Richard III develops a froward erotics of power.

The idea that Shakespeare’s Richard is “witty” and “clever” has been elaborated by a number of critics, who seek to explain what More cannot, which is how Richard is able to “trick” people even without them ever believing the conceit. This emerging tradition, which tends to focus on the ways in which Richard is attractive, both to other characters and to audiences, is bluntly summarized by Robert McRuer, who observes that Richard is “kind of hot” (297). In articulating this point, however, critics have taken a variety of different approaches, all of which are useful in framing my own point about the ways that the construction of history acts as a queer engagement with authority.

For most critics who theorize the appeal of Richard III, his “hotness” is tied up in the very violations of heteronormative social and political structures that mark him as a villain. Writing as early as 1961, A.P. Rossiter claimed that the play “offers the false as more attractive than the true” (143), creating a deep “paradoxical ironic structure” that constitutes “Richard’s demonic appeal” (144). S.P. Ceresano’s claim in 1985 that Richard’s “magnetism relies on a combination of language and gesture so deadly and eccentric that it cannot be got used to, or predicted, or repelled” articulates Rossiter’s observation in ways that have an even more unequivocal affinity with what would later come to be recognized (or, more accurately, fail to be recognized) as queer. In recent years, the euphemistic “magnetism” and “demonic appeal” of Richard has been articulated in more explicit terms. Joel Slotkin, for instance, explained that “the play treats its evil and horrible elements as aesthetic objects capable of arousing erotic desire”
(7). Arguing against the critical tradition that assumes that Richard is able to seduce Anne successfully because he somehow fools her with rhetorical prowess, Slotkin observes that “Richard refers to his crimes so frequently that the poetry of his seduction could not be assigned to a virtuous character” (16). Instead, Slotkin argues that, “for Anne, erotic attraction is generated by the sinister – in this case, by the dark, ironic beauty of Richard’s carefully constructed self-presentation as a creature of deceptive malevolence” (17).

While all of the above accounts access something fundamental about the links between Richard’s asocial, destructive energies and his erotic appeal, none of them manages to comprehensively articulate the links between Richard’s “monstrousness” and his queerness. Robert McRuer does just this in his essay “Fuck the Disabled: The Prequel,” where he draws a positive link between Richard’s body and the queer ways in which he seduces. McRuer says of Richard’s opening soliloquy that “if, even for an orgasmic moment, he can expose the ways in which the marriage of compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness has no future, it is hard not to find him kind of hot” (297). What McRuer articulates on behalf of the scholarly tradition I’ve been sketching is an element that was embedded in More’s text all along; in his positioning as a queer threat to heteronormativity and reproductive models of power, Richard must necessarily also redirect, distort, transmute, and amplify the desires and pleasures that these modes of power are meant to contain. The froward erotics necessary for Richard’s disqualification from the normative order posits the appeal of its violation. In Shakespeare, we are allowed to see this paradox explicitly: how it is the very effect of threatening heteronormativity that allows Richard to threaten it in the first place, as both are contingent on an embodiment of non-hetero desire. In other words, the threat to hetero-orthodoxy was always internal to that orthodoxy, and, in this way, Shakespeare’s villain’s appeal (pernicious faggotry)
is already present in the political dogma of More’s Tudor narrator, as both depend on constructing a power whose very legitimacy depends on the attractiveness of undermining it, our willingness to position ourselves forward.

As if to raise the stakes, Shakespeare inscribes the queer affective aesthetics of Richard’s monstrosity in a functional system of political practice. While McRuer and others tend to focus on Richard as a destructive or dangerous force, whose various domestic and political seductions serve to undo a stable political system, it is worth remembering that Richard also successfully integrates himself into that system (if only temporarily). In her book *Shakespeare’s Ghost Writers*, Marjorie Garber argues that bodies, especially Richard’s, were forcibly read and made legible as expressions of various political doctrines and power structures – a claim which resonates with McRuer’s account of the dangerous potential of the body of the crip. This idea is expanded in the work of Linda Charnes, who articulates the link between Richard’s monstrous aesthetics and political ideology. For Charnes, Richard’s body is an over-determined signifier, recognized as such by other characters and audiences of the play. Richard’s goal, then, becomes to replace his own flawed body, signifying moral corruption, with the perfect body of the king, in which the same body signifies a transcendent access to divine power. For Charnes, this move is significant in that it “sublates” the political for non-political desires – the desire to transcend his own monstrous status (37). It is this sublation and substitution, which, for Charnes, characterizes Richard’s political machinations throughout the play.

Charnes sees Richard’s seduction of Anne in 1.2 as the exemplar of this substitutive technique. She is particularly interested in the way the scene is framed around the corpse of Henry VI, a potent symbol of the homosocial violence that characterizes political power. Throughout the scene, Richard rhetorically positions acts of political violence as acts of erotic
courtship. He famously explains to Anne that “Your beauty was the cause of that effect … To undertake the death of all the world / So I might rest one hour in your sweet bosom” (1.2.119-22). In this moment “Henry’s wounds… [that] bleed afresh” cease to signify politically and begin to signify erotically (1.2.53-53). As Charnes explains it, “rhetorically recoding Henry’s dead body and its wounds as the ‘effect’ (penetration) of ‘that cause’ (sexual desire), Richard transforms political wounds into sexual ones, simulacra of the deflowered maidenhead. Accordingly, Henry’s death is translated from a political-theological sacrifice into a sexual one” (45). This inversion causes the escalation of political antagonism to signal an escalation of erotic affect. This escalation is inescapable for Anne once Richard gives her his sword to “hide in [his] true bosom,” thereby potentially substituting Richard’s body for the erotically signifying Henry’s, and Anne’s body for Richard’s (1.2.161). The end result of this encounter is that any action proves a capitulation to the terms Richard has created for erotic action.

In this scene, we see Richard producing a history, much like More’s Tudor history, that frames an ascension to power in a way that is fundamentally desirable. Of course, while More’s history is based on the penetration of living bodies to produce children, Richard’s fantasy of power is founded on the penetration of dead flesh to produce eroticism. For Charnes, the interesting part of this exchange is the “preposterous revisionism” that Richard engages in, one that is effective because of the rhetorical terms of revision, rather than the content of the lie. (The effect here mirrors the process of writing history more generally.) Ultimately, Charnes argues that “Richard’s determination of himself as villain is the literal realization of (and unwitting collusion in) the play’s determination of Richard” (62). This moment, when Richard realizes that he has actually constructed his monstrosity by trying to escape it, is where Charnes sees the ending as providential or conventional, one which heralds the inevitability of Tudor order. At the
same time, Richard’s transparent construction of history ending in the construction of Tudor dogma demonstrates the ways in which Tudor dogma is produced through a similar logic of substitution and seductive misdirection. As Charnes puts it, “the extent to which the play reveals legend as an apparatus that justifies particular regimes and versions of history means that we must also see everyone else in the play as a kind of monster” (64). Once again, the historiographical format which discredits Richard through his froward historical dalliance also introduces that forwardness to discourses of power more generally.

Charnes account articulates the ways in which the play can both provide a conventional and a subversive reading of Tudor history simultaneously. Further, I think it also identifies a number of the paradoxical energies that Shakespeare’s Richard contains through his revisionist attempts to write history. But where her account is insufficient, I think, is in failing to recognize the ways in which the sexuality that Richard manipulates in 1.2 is not just a convenient narrative tool, but an aspect of power itself. Where Richard’s queerness emerges as an answer to and condition of his homosocial positioning as the violent product of political ambition, she sees his sexual appeal as a condition for understanding his monstrousness and as a means to maneuver politically, but never connects it to the sexuality of politics itself.

Scholars have tended to make much of Richard’s apparent surprise at his successful seduction of Anne (e.g. Slotkin, Garber). There is more than just irony in Richard’s claim that “I’ll be at charges for a looking-glass, / And entertain some score or two of tailors / To study fashions to adorn my body” (1.2.240-42). This scene is, explicitly, a political revelation as well as a sexual one: having seduced Anne through a conflation of desire and politics, Richard realizes that all politics are just such an erotic transaction. As many scholars are also quick to point out, Richard’s body is itself a political text, an ideological history that can be traced
through events like More’s reassignment of Richard hump from his right to his left shoulder. What Richard realizes in this moment is that, to the extent that his body is a sign of political history, one whose significations differ and can be manipulated, we see that the cultivation of attraction to that body becomes a cultivation of queer attraction to politics itself. To the extent that there is irony in Richard’s wry calls for a “glass,” it is in that political power is just such a glass, one which reflects an ideological framework that not only idealizes, but also sexualizes, the bodies it reflects.

Throughout the play we see repeated references to a history that we are forced to understand through the actions of Richard. Every major edifice and event in the play is framed by historical invention. For example, in a prescient discussion of his own death, prince Edward discusses Julius Caesar’s role in building the Tower of London. In response to a thinly veiled death threat from Richard, the prince explains “That Julius Caesar was a famous man. / With what his valour did enrich his wit, / His wit set down, to make his valour live” (3.1.84-86). At this moment, the prince recognizes the way that the tower itself, and his imminent confinement within it, is a story that is being told, not to create power, but explicitly to create history (Julius Caesar was not powerful, but “famous”). That Richard’s body is just such a text, and one which can be written and rewritten, is more or less explicit throughout the remainder of the play, and it is important to remember, as Richard does, that our engagement with politics is also an engagement with the body of the king and that body’s queer production of history rather than babies.

The textual history, so to speak, of Richard’s body is explicitly manipulated by Richard throughout the play. Shakespeare locates Richard’s claims to the bastardy of Edward IV and the princes in his “lineaments” and the extent to which they resemble his father’s, a patent and
confusing lie, given that Richard looked nothing like his father, while his brother did (3.5.89).

Even more famously, Richard reverses the representational logic of his own body with his claim that his arm is “like a blasted sapling withered up” by the “hellish charms” that have “prevailed upon” his “body” (3.4.67, 74). Here, while his body is still a symbol of disqualification from the nimble “capers” in a “lady’s chamber” that his brother enjoyed (1.1.12), it signifies the unnatural threats to reproduction posed by others, “witches” who have made him impotent and his political rivals, rather than a threat to reproduction posed by his body itself. Like most effective displays of one’s body, this one successfully gets him some head, Hastings’ to be specific.

The climax of these concerns is, of course, the famous scene where Buckingham implores Richard to accept the crown, a scene that has its precedent in the well-known history of Julius Caesar. In it, we see the various histories that Richard has written congealed into a narrative that justifies his seizure of power. As Buckingham implores Richard to accept the throne, his language is more explicitly genealogical than anything we’ve heard in the play thus far. While deliberately directing attention to the spectacle of Richard’s body (“see where he stands” [3.7.90]) which is “aloft” on a scaffold or stage, Buckingham recites the claim that the crown is “successively from blood to blood / Your right of birth” (3.7.128-29). Like his seduction of Anne, the success of this appeal is predicated on a sort of narrative exchange, with Buckingham and the Mayor speaking from the position of the citizens, figuratively and literally redirecting their desires. The extent to which the logic of inversion mimics the seduction of Anne, and the physical positioning of bodies in the scene, which echoes courtship traditions (a set-up that Shakespeare would famously use in Romeo and Juliet), deliberately frame Richard’s ascension as analogous to a sexual seduction. Later, when Buckingham threatens to “plant some other in the throne, / To the disgrace and downfall of your house,” Richard’s narrative seduction
is reframed in terms of reproductive futurity (3.7.198-99). In this moment, reproduction itself, wherein the production of an heir is normally conceived in terms of the future, is reframed as a backward gaze, as a way of discovering what the spectators desire in the past, with the seduction protecting the descendants of Richard’s family precisely by erasing their claims to power. Richard’s genealogy is a self-conscious fantasy, and one that we are transparently forced to share, not because anyone is convinced by the spectacle, but because of the rhetorical and erotic appeal of dallying in the spectacle itself. Immediately before the scene begins, a Scrivener reminds us of this fact by almost directly quoting More: “who’s so gross / That cannot see this palpable device?” (3.6.10-11).

Shakespeare’s play is not entirely subversive. It ends with the victorious Richmond, whose deliberate forward gaze and desire to marry Elizabeth to produce “the true succeeders of each royal house” (5.7.30) confirm his proper orientation forward and his correct location of royal authority within broad kinship networks. There is a sense in which, despite the fact that it lacks the providential force of Vergil’s long narrative or the binaristic tidiness of More’s (it is positioned at the end of the first tetralogy; Richard is simply one in a rapid succession of inept and effeminate kings: Henry VI and Edward IV), Richmond’s legitimacy is confirmed by the internal logic of his thinking about the crown and Richard’s recognition of his own guilt during his confrontation with the ghosts of his victims. At the same time, the play’s conscious engagement with, and Richard’s appropriation of the logic of, the Tudor histories that were produced by Richmond, reveal a queer logic lurking behind authority that is difficult to dispel. Richard, as he exists in More, is just such an attempt to affectively negotiate power by manipulating the ways that people feel about past events. Richard reaches a point at which power is located, not in the God given-legitimacy of birth, but in the fascination with the narrative of
history. Through his adaptation of More into a dramatic form, forcing Richard to stand onstage and perform his device, Shakespeare makes palpable not only Richard’s devices, but also More’s. The performance of heterosexuality and the reproductively exciting future that Richmond promises is darkened by the potential to be just the sort of playacting, the palpable froward dalliance in historical narrative, that More excoriates in his history. After all, *Richard III* is a play.
Chapter Two: “Inhuman creatures nursed with tiger’s milk”

Richard III opens with a long soliloquy depicting the debauched peace-time court of Edward IV.

In some of Shakespeare’s most famous lines, Richard explains:

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York,
And all the clouds that loured upon our house
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried. (1.1.1-4)

The ascension of the new king is marked by distinctive celestial imagery that links it simultaneously to a markedly natural system of primogeniture (the son/sun pun). Richard continues,

Grim-visaged war hath smoothed his wrinkled front,
And now, instead of mounting barbéd steeds
To fright the souls of fearful adversaries,
He capers nimbly in a lady’s chamber
To the lascivious pleasing of a lute. (1.1.9-13)

Within fifteen lines the new genealogical stability of Edward’s court has been sublimated into a lascivious world in which politics and power are expressed through participation in a kind of directionless erotic dalliance – war itself is aesthetically reimagined and relocated within a lady’s chamber, as a participant in the “nimble capers” which are almost certainly oriented toward “lascivious pleasing” rather than making new sons. Richard places his own corrupt queerness at the center of the courtly spectacle, proclaiming “[I] have no delight to pass away the time, / Unless to spy my shadow in the sun / And descant on mine own deformity” (1.1.25-27). Here Richard’s own villainy is specifically dependent on the erotic excesses, the aforementioned “sun” of the Yorkist court. The word “descant,” glossed in the Oxford edition as to “play an improvisatory accompaniment above the simple and repeated bass theme of” (149, n. 27), itself suggests a deliberate expansion on, rather than an opposition to, the “lascivious pleasing,”
presumably aural, of the lute. As such, from the beginning of the play, the excesses of the peace-
time court project the queer shadow that will become Richard III, while, at the same time, these 
“nimble capers” create the aperture that his political enlargement penetrates.

Marlowe’s Edward II opens on a strikingly similar note. Gaveston, like Richard, is a 
queer outsider who suddenly finds himself at the center of political power and court life after the 
ascension of a new king. He too imagines his experience of the new court at the play’s start. As 
with Richard, the celestial primogenital “sun” of the king marks an asocial erotics of power, as 
Gaveston proclaims that he will “with the world be still at enmity. / What need the arctic people 
love starlight, / To whom the sun shines both day and night?” (1.14-16). Marlowe’s punning use 
of “sun,” as well as the explicit use of Gaveston’s illumination by Edward II’s sun as a 
motivation for his queer political ambitions, clearly recalls the way that Edward IV’s sun enables 
Richard to “descant on his deformity.” Gaveston goes on to expand on his vision of court life, 
proclaiming “I must have wanton poets, pleasant wits, / Musicians that with touching of a string / 
May draw the pliant king which way I please” (1.49-51). While these lines recall the “pleasing of 
a lute” in Richard III, they bear a distinct difference, in that Gaveston’s introduction of the erotic 
scene is a deliberate attempt to access power, whereas Richard merely capitalizes on a scenario 
that is produced by the court. Later, Gaveston reimagines the Yorkist “brows bound with 
victorious wreaths” and “bruised arms hung up for monuments” (1.1.5, 6) as “a lovely boy in 
Dian’s shape” with “crownets of pearl about his naked arms, / And in his sportful hands an olive 
tree / To hide those parts which men delight to see” (1.59, 61-63). While imagining a similarly 
erotically preoccupied court, Gaveston has reversed its priorities. Rather than a court where the 
political motivates the erotic, the “victorious wreaths” logically entailing the “nimble capers,” 
Gaveston’s court is one in which the political symbols that predominated in Richard’s are
themselves explicitly conflated with erotic spectacle, the branches of the tree constituting a pederastic striptease rather than martial triumph, the arms a decadent spectacle rather than monuments. Gaveston’s vision of the court, in its differences from Richard’s, signals the way that the queerness of Shakespeare’s play has mutated in Marlowe. Political symbols themselves have ceased to signify politically, the link between power and non-reproductive erotics collapses into identity, and the “theater” which serves as an operative metaphor for Richard’s political machinations is deliberately literalized – rather than just behave theatrically, Gaveston literally wants to bring the theater into Edward’s court.

The inversion of the political and historical priority of Richard III is one which will characterize much of Marlowe’s engagement with Shakespeare’s play, wherein the court of Edward II descants on the shadow cast by Shakespeare’s queer usurper, refracting and amplifying him across the entire political landscape. Throughout Edward II, the representational logic of Shakespeare’s play is used to undermine the stability of political signification itself rather than simply the hetero-fidelity of political processes. In this chapter, I will rehearse the ways that Edward II responds to Richard III, with a focus on how this intertext is used as shorthand for an erotics of political ambition and a denaturing of the reproductive futurity on which a stable monarchical politic depends. The historical priority that Marlowe establishes serves to both explain and react to the violence of Shakespeare’s play. By exploiting the political and erotic logic of Shakespeare’s play, Marlowe engages in a kind of reductio ad absurdum of political power in general, in which the slipperiness of the symbolic order produces a simultaneous queer chaos of symbols and an actual queer violence against bodies.
“Critical homophobia”

Critical analysis of Shakespearean intertext in *Edward II* tends to focus on the ways in which *Richard II* responds to it rather than the ways in which Marlowe’s play might be a response to Shakespeare’s *Richard III* (Charney, “Marlowe’s”; Skura; Logan, R.; Stanivukovic). Analysis of the Marlovian intertext in *Richard III* treats Marlowe as similarly prior to Shakespeare, as it frequently discusses Richard III as a figure that imitates Marlowe’s Tamburlaine and Barabas (Bradbrook; Charney, “Voice”; Spivack). The general tendency to view Marlowe as prior to Shakespeare in the development of English drama has functioned to shut down discussions of the way that Marlowe responds to Shakespeare. Even the few notable exceptions I’ve encountered, which note the structural similarities between *Edward II* and 2 and 3 *Henry VI*, generally remains focused on Marlowe’s response to Shakespeare as a regressive or reactionary obstacle to Shakespeare’s perfection of the English history play in the second tetralogy (Charlton and Waller; Shapiro; Forker, *Edward II*). For example, in summarizing the relationship between *Edward II* and the early Shakespeare, Jean Bauso writes that “While *Henry VI* seems to have had a simplifying effect upon Marlowe’s vision, *Edward II* had the opposite effect of Shakespeare” (180). I have not encountered any discussions of the relationship between *Edward II* and *Richard III*. This is likely a result of the difficulty of establishing a firm chronology for the plays. On this point I follow numerous critics (Dawson and Yachnin 1; Holden 95; Hopkins 40; Jowett 3; Martin 34; McEvoy 227) in asserting that *Richard III* (c. 1591-92) probably preceded *Edward II* (c. 1592-93), but, ultimately this firm chronology is relatively immaterial. My goal is not to establish or adhere to strict timelines; I have proposed the priority that I have as a conceit intended to open up interpretative possibilities and make sense of these plays’ relationships to
one another in terms of their theoretical engagements with queerness, power, and history. This specific intertextual configuration does not have a strong critical precedent.

Independent of the Shakespearean intertext, *Edward II* has been a lightning rod for critics interested in queerness in Renaissance drama. In a review of pre-queer theory readings of *Edward II*, Stephen Guy-Bray argues that, after the acknowledgement of the homo overtones in the play in the mid-twentieth century, criticism tended to understand the brutalization of Edward as a product of “Edward’s and Marlowe’s neuroses,” coopting the play into a discourse that attempted to moralize the queer pleasures in the text in what Guy-Bray terms “critical homophobia” (125-26). For Guy-Bray and some critics writing since his corrective in 1991 (Deats; Skura), the play is not a moral parable but, in fact, an analysis of “the way that society controls sexuality” that speaks to the ways queerness is policed when framed as a threat to institutionalized heterosexuality (126).

Criticism of *Edward II* in general, and especially the queer criticism of the past twenty-five years, focuses on Edward as a central figure. Despite Guy-Bray’s cogent arguments against such practices, vaguely (if not outright) homophobic analyses of Edward’s psyche and confused, anachronistically literal Freudian readings remain the norm in criticism focused on the queer elements of the play. Typical of the continued currency of this tradition is Jon Surgal’s recent essay, which argues that Edward is “fixed from start to finish” at the “anal sadistic phase of childhood,” a claim he sets out to prove with reference to his “willfulness, to his excess, to his egocentricity, and to the literally anal nature (as well as the literally anal consequences) of his sexual behavior” (165). Even texts predicated on a less offensively medicalized discourse of sexual deviancy still tend to focus on individuals and interiority. A representative example is Sara Munson Deats’ insightful chapter, “Masquerade and Metamorphosis,” which sets out to
“examine the construction of gendered subjectivity” in the play (165). In these instances, a focus on trying to get “inside of” the gendered and sexual subjectivities obfuscates the political and social machinations that the play foregrounds. The political and social world of the play, perhaps, has the potential to offer more insight into the queer pleasures and desires of both the play and history then speculating about which characters Edward has sexual relations with and why.

While I have no intention of denying that Edward is “gay”, for my purposes he (like Richard II) is a bit of a critical red herring. I follow Guy-Bray in seeing the way that queerness is manifested and addressed culturally and socially as the salient issue of the play. I diverge from Guy-Bray in contesting the fact that the political and social dynamics of the play can be productively understood simply as homophobic power structures policing queer bodies. Instead, I see the institutions of English political power themselves as experiencing a queer crisis of representation. This crisis exists not simply in terms of what Viviana Comensoli sees as a society where “the structures of patriarchy (an orderly body politic, compulsory heterosexuality, and strict allegiance to the law) are no longer tenable” (180). Rather, it emerges from a pronounced queering of the structures of power themselves that originates in Richard III and is, eventually, disturbingly and destructively literalized in the form of Edward’s execution: the spit that has preoccupied so many critics. While Guy-Bray is right to contend that the execution is an act of profound homophobia, he is also right when, while excoriating a reading by Purvis E. Boyette that links the execution with orgasm, he asserts that “it is clear from the context that Boyette did not mean that Lightborn reaches orgasm, although this would seem to me to be far more likely” (128). Indeed, it is not just Lightborn who stands to get off on this counter-reproductive act of violence, but Mortimer and, even more generally, everyone who aspires to power in the play.
The froward erotics of monarchical power explored by Richard III contain the seeds of how Mortimer, Gaveston, and others manifest violently counter-reproductive eroticized engagements with systems of power. These engagements depend, in part, on the queerly backward gaze of seeing history as the desired object in the theatrical erotics of the monarchy (as opposed to the future-oriented hetero-erotics of reproduction). Indeed, as in the last chapter, these froward erotics characterize both providentialist Tudor historiography and history in general.

It is worth briefly noting that this preoccupation with historical erotics also diverges from recent scholarship that attempts to read the play as a historical document which chronicles Renaissance attitudes toward sodomy (Stymeist; Burnett; Crewe). While such readings very well might be true, I am interested in the implication of discourses of power in the construction of history as a more general issue rather than as a temporally specific one. The historical erotics that Marlowe enacts in this play are a reflection of the dynamics of reading and writing history in the medieval period, in the Renaissance, and today.

“Suscepi that provinciam, as they term it”

There are many parallels between Richard III and Edward II. Indeed, it often seems as though Edward II is intentionally reenacting Richard III through parallels in imagery (for instance, celestial imagery, specifically the sun; shadows; maimed and disfigured bodies; twisted metaphors of reproduction; intense focus on the crown as a physical object; conflated opposites – light and dark, sin and virtue) as well as parallel scenes and characters (for instance, the precocious would-be child king; the female and feminized victims who act as a pseudo-chorus; the pattern of ironically reflexive curses; the death-bed conversations between victim and executioner; the illegitimate nobility of Queen Elizabeth’s and King Edward’s respective favourites; a repeated focus on unreliable narrative). While it would be impossible to address all
of these parallels in the detail that they deserve, at the center of both *Richard III* and *Edward II* is a certain logic about what it means to attain and maintain power. Nowhere is this logic clearer than in the paralleled scenes where various characters are offered and denied positions of power.

Before the iconic scene in which Richard accepts the crown from Buckingham and the Lord Mayor of London, Buckingham rehearses their plan. He instructs Richard to

> Be not spoke with but by might suit;  
> And look you get a prayer book in your hand,  
> And stand betwixt two churchmen, good my lord,  
> For on that ground I’ll build a holy descant.  
> Be not easily won to our request.  
> Play the maid’s part: say ‘no’, but take it. (3.7.40-46)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the scene develops a political dynamic built around a theatrical aping of courtly seduction. The “descant” of the priests recalls the fact that the scene as a whole is part of Richard’s larger scheme to “descant” on his deformity, which incorporates his symbolic deployment of religious authority into the queer relationship he has with power and representation. Further, the injunction that Richard “play the maid’s part” calls to mind the “parts” that maids play and play with, and the consequent imperative to “take it” reinforces the sexual logic of the scene. Richard validates this interpretation when he replies to Buckingham “If thou canst plead as well for them / As I can say ‘nay’ to thee for myself, / No doubt we’ll bring it to a happy issue” (3.7.47-49). Most obviously, referring to the product of Richard’s piece of theatre as an “issue” frames his rise to kingship as an imitation of reproduction and develops the sexual connotations of the scene. On a deeper level, the syntactic and semantic complexity of his rephrasing of their plot is mind boggling, relying on our understanding that both characters’ desires run counter to the ostensive meanings of the political-reproductive act that they perform. Buckingham pleads ambiguously either for the people, the priests or both while trying to transform their desires rather than vocalize them. Richard does, indeed, “say nay” for himself,
but it is only meaningful and effective because Buckingham and the audience know that he doesn’t mean it. Buckingham and Richard reproduce in their backward semantics the perverse desires and pleasurable outcomes that the linguistic act is meant to produce.

A similar, if abridged, version of this scene occurs near the beginning of Edward II. When Edward and Gaveston are first reunited, Edward grants Gaveston a number of titles. Gaveston’s response, “My lord, these titles far exceed my worth” (1.155), recalls Richard’s reply to Buckingham that “my desert, / Unmeritable, shuns your high request” (3.7.137-38). As with Richard, we are privy to Gaveston’s plan to use theater to manipulate the king: his “pages” clad “like sylvan nymphs” functionally double Richard himself as male characters playing maids’ parts (1.56). The resonances of the exchange with courtship are further reinforced by Edward’s reply that “Thy worth, sweet friend, is far above my gifts; / Therefore to equal it receive my heart” (1.159-60). At this point, the aspirational logic is the same as with Richard, but its context and orientation have been slightly altered. Whereas Richard, himself hoping to become king, doubly figures the king as both the object of the desire and the agent engineering the desire, penetrator and penetrated (he plays the maid but is the man), Gaveston here seduces Edward. Rather than having the crown preside over a semantically empty, reflexively simulated courtship, the power of the crown is accessed by an external agent (Gaveston) through courtship. Even as Gaveston’s doubling of the reluctant maid and the active provocateur of the exchange recalls Richard’s scene of theatre, the seduction that occurs is not abstract. Similarly, while the sex acts Richard that gestures toward are figurative or imagined, Edward II gives us ample reason to suspect that, after the courtship ritual, Edward and Gaveston engage is some decidedly literal fucking. The scene substitutes the figurative for the literal in other ways as well. Rather than having the performance grounded on a “holy descant,” Gaveston instead assaults a bishop less
than twenty lines after accepting his new titles from Edward. Where Richard III subverts the power of the church by appropriating their symbolic authority, Gaveston physically beats a member of the clergy and literally seizes his wealth and titles. Although the logic of seduction seems the same, the queer desires that subtend it transcend the frame of the theatrical, penetrating and infiltrating the body of the king itself and rendering irrelevant the “props of virtue for a Christian prince” on which Richard relies (3.7.91).

Later in the play, Mortimer’s soliloquy, in which he gloats about his usurpation of power, recalls the same scene in Richard III once again through its structure of mock reluctance and theatrical persuasion. In lines that are often skipped over by critics interpreting the passage, Mortimer describes his assumption of the Protectorship in words which distinctively resemble Richard III:

They thrust upon me the Protectorship
And sue to me for that that I desire,
While at the council table, grave enough,
And not unlike a bashful Puritan,
First I complain of imbecility,
Saying it is onus quam gravissimum,
Till, being interrupted by my friends,
Suscepi that provinciam, as they term it.
And to conclude, I am Protector now. (23.54-62)

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of this exchange, aside from its clear parallels to Richard III, is its generation of ambiguity through Mortimer’s unnecessary slip into Latin. For those of us who don’t speak Latin (which is a sizeable portion of the audience in any public theater since they play was written) it is entirely unclear what, exactly, happens between Mortimer being interrupted by his friends and becoming Protector. The clear parallel to the corresponding scene in Richard III, however, might suggest that he, like Richard and like Gaveston, was playing the

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1 Mathew Martin translates onus quam gravissimum as “most weighty burden,” suscepi as “I undertake,” and provinciam as “office” (Marlowe 158, n. 5, 6, 7).
maid’s part. No doubt, an actor could turn the Latin “suscepi that provinciam” into a pretty explicit sexual innuendo by capitalizing on the fact that many members of the audience do not understand the words, perhaps playing off the conspicuous presence of Mortimer’s adulterous lover Isabella in the lines that immediately follow. Indeed, as an audience, we have watched Mortimer employ just such a strategy of bashful inversion and backward semantics to seduce Isabella, and, as with Edward and Gaveston, we have ample reason to suspect that Mortimer has been advancing his “tattered ensign” on more than just “castle’s walls” (7.21-24). Later in the play, Mortimer’s schemes, like Richard’s, will even be figured in terms of reproduction, when Edward III describes him as having “hatched this monstrous treachery” (25.97), and indeed, Mortimer has risen to power, like Gaveston, specifically through a sexual relationship. More significant than whose provinciam Mortimer may or may not have been susceping, however, is the fact that, because it is difficult to figure out exactly what he is doing, his ascension is reduced to a performance without a clear referent. It is not clear, for example, who the “friends” are who interrupt him, or whether or not they are in on the plan, or, for that matter, whether or not the plan was even necessary; the last time the issue was discussed, the contention was whether or not Isabella or Kent should be the Protector, at which point Mortimer forcibly carried the Prince off stage (21.112). In short, there are important logistical elements that are simply glossed over with a signal toward Richard III – Mortimer gains power in the past tense and offstage, in part, I would argue, because we have seen this scene before.

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2 This term recalls The Duchess of York’s lines in Richard III: “O my accursèd womb, the bed of death, / A cockatrice hast thou hatched to the world” (4.1.49-50), and the Earl of Kent’s “Mortimer / And Isabel do kiss while they conspire. / And yet she bears a face of love, forsooth— / Fie on that love that hatcheth death and hate!” (18.22-24). The word “hatch,” used in the sense of figuratively reproducing, first appears in Shakespeare in Richard III. Marlowe uses it in both of his late plays, Edward II and The Massacre at Paris, but it does not appear in any of his earlier works. It is a paradigmatic example of the twisted sexual-reproductive vocabulary that the plays develop together, as Marlowe extends Shakespeare’s more reproductively literal use into a more abstract term.
The fact that Mortimer refers to himself, not as a maid but, anachronistically, as a puritan, compounds the oddity of his vague recapitulation of the maid-playing scene. The change in analogue might signal, first of all, that the scene should be read anachronistically, especially with reference to Richard III’s own dishonest use of religiosity as “props of virtue.” Unlike Richard III, however, Mortimer does not actually need to deploy the symbolic framework of religion in order for his scheme to succeed. Instead, shows of religiosity themselves are simply a shorthand for the kind of deceit he engages in, a sign of the debt that these tactics owe to the religious posturing of Richard. While the hypocrisy of puritans was a staple critique in the Renaissance (n. 23.57), the anachronistic (looking forward only to go back) presence of the reference in a passage already highly suggestive of another text links Mortimer’s scheme to the representational and symbolic backwardness of Richard III. As such, it reinforces the ways that the symbols and rituals of power have been hollowed out by the froward erotics of power that are consuming the realm.

Mortimer’s suscepi speech is preceded by two other scenes that echo the maid-playing scene in slightly different registers while reinforcing the queer confusion of signs, power, and desire that Richard III’s pantomime inaugurated. The first of these scenes is Edward’s abdication. Structurally, the scene inverts the maid-playing scenes we’ve examined thus far, with Edward repeatedly refusing to give up the crown before finally acquiescing. At the climax of the scene, the Bishop of Winchester leaves, supposedly to tell Mortimer that Edward is unwilling to abdicate. At this point Leicester entreats Edward to “Call them again, my lord, and speak them fair, / For if they go, the prince shall lose his right” (20.91-92). The line closely parallels Catesby’s line “Call them again, my lord, and accept their suit” after Buckingham exits, having similarly threatened Richard by saying “We will plant some other in the throne, / To the disgrace
and downfall of your house” (3.7.203, 198-99). The parallels continue, when Edward replies, “Call thou them back, I have no power to speak” and later, “heavens and earth conspire / To make me miserable. Here, receive my crown. / Receive it? No, these innocent hands of mine / Shall not be guilty of so foul a crime” (20.93, 96-99). Richard’s acceptance of the crown touches on identical themes, as he proclaims,

Would you enforce me to a world of care?
Well, call them again. I am not made of stones,
But penetrable to your kind entreats,
Albeit against my conscience and against my soul. (3.7.205-08)

Both Richard and Edward frame their submission as an immoral act which they are forced to commit at the cost of much personal pain.

While the textual parallels draw attention to the ways that the scenes are similar, they also highlight the obvious ways in which the scenes are different. First of all, Richard is being offered a crown while Edward is having his taken away. Richard enters ‘aloft’, on top of a stage within a stage, controlling the scene. Edward is in a dungeon; in the 1969 RSC production of the play it was actually below the stage. Richard is self-consciously, deliberately, and rather obviously acting. Edward is not. At the same time, there is an ironic dimension to Edward’s histrionics. For example, he speaks the line “I have no power to speak” aloud. Kingship here remains a performance, and in both instances the characters are aware of it. The difference is that once again the priorities of the scenes have been reversed. For Richard, his theatrical reluctance is a vehicle for real events, whereas for Edward, real events are forced to express themselves as theatre. When Edward plays the maid’s part and says “no,” he actually means it. Unfortunately for him, the inexorable logic of Richard’s theatrical seduction, once again, has literal consequences. Edward will be horrifically executed.
In the next scene, which further tracks the progress of the newly resigned crown, Prince Edward gestures toward the now familiar mock reluctance to accept power. In a bizarre twist of such logic, Edward asks “Mother, persuade me not to wear the crown. / Let him be king; I am too young to reign” (21.91-92). This is an odd request because the issue of whether or not the Prince will be king has already been settled: Edward II has abdicated, and Mortimer and Isabella have been busy planning the prince’s coronation. The belated denial is especially fascinating because the prince never says that he does not want to be king. Instead, he asks for his mother, whose mock allegiance to Edward II isn’t fooling anyone at this point, to persuade him not to be king. Rather than actually recapitulating the persuasion scene again, Prince Edward merely expresses a desire for such a scene, but it is denied to him. Isabella assures him to “be content, seeing it is his highness’s pleasure” (21.93). Here, the theatrics of the previous scene forestall the theatrics of this one. Given that Edward II has abdicated, Edward III’s assumption of the vacant throne is determined by primogeniture. His confusion, then, speaks to the extent that the logic of inheritance, reproduction, and genealogy has been supplanted by the froward erotics of Richard III.

The near obsessive repetition of Shakespeare, here and throughout the play, underwrites the instability and dissolution of monarchical authority in Marlowe’s queer dramatic universe. English royalty is coerced into playing out a theatricality that has actually replaced the primogenital authority that, in Shakespeare, this theatricality subverts but ultimately depends on. In Marlowe, the theatrical conceits that Shakespeare uses to motivate his political erotics are not conceits at all, but actual events which render politics and royal authority themselves as conceits, empty signifiers subtended by real people desiring each other and engaging in real acts.
“Perfect shadows in a sunshine day”

Although Edward III is traditionally understood as a character who resolves the conflicts of the play and restores stability to the realm, there is a body of work that challenges the assumptions on which this claim is made. For example, Marie Rutkoski examines how the characters in the play engage the prince on the same terms as Gaveston and Spencer. She argues that “sexual, political subversion and instability never truly can be laid to rest, despite the apparent buttressing of the normative expressed by the play’s end” (296). For Rutkoski, Edward III is incapable of resolving the problems of the realm because his rule has been constructed according to their deep perverse logic.

Expanding on this work, I argue that the ascension of Edward III makes use of the Shakespearean intertext in order to signal the continued incoherence of the royal authority he inherits and, in the final moments of the play, wields. Edward III takes power only through a truly perverse spectacle, his slaughtered and imprisoned family. As Isabella begs him “As thou receivéd’st thy life from me, / Spill not the blood of gentle Mortimer,” she invokes the sort of genealogical allegiances on which royal authority is theoretically based, and recalls the multiple tableaus of unified families and, eventually, intergenerational mourning and solidarity, which litter Shakespeare’s first tetralogy (25.68-69). When Edward executes Mortimer, the tableau he creates – the head of the dead protector on top of the dead father as the mother is dragged off to the dungeon – specifically rejects the possibility of this fantasy of genealogical coherence. While presiding over this grisly stack of corpses, Edward says,

Sweet father, here unto thy murdered ghost
I offer up this wicked traitor’s head.
And let these tears distilling from mine eyes
Be witness to my grief and innocency. (25.99-102)
The ghost of his father could recall the ghosts that taunt Richard before he loses the battle of Bosworth Field. Here, however, the ghost is not real – there are no providential spirits guarding the monarchy – and Edward’s invocation of one only calls attention to its conspicuous absence. Further, Edward III calls attention to his grief as a theatrical sign which needs to be forcefully interpreted, and we are, once again, reminded of Richard’s own obsession with bearing witness. Richard’s injunction after accepting the crown to “Attend the sequel of your imposition, / Your mere enforcement shall aquittance me / From all the impure blots and stains thereof” (3.7.214-16), and his proclamation “Be your eyes witness of this ill” (3.4.72) when using his withered arm as a pretense to attack Hastings, both express a voyeuristic logic that Edward employs in this final scene. The monarchy remains theater, with Edward’s tears for his father fulfilling the same role as Henry VI’s corpse, “the bleeding witness of [Anne’s] hatred” (1.2.219).

The affinities between Edward III’s speech and the queer representational logic of Richard III are even more pronounced when Edward’s final lines are contrasted with Richmond’s final speech in Richard III. In it, Richmond proclaims,

O now let Richmond and Elizabeth,
The true succeeders of each royal house,
By God’ fair ordinance conjoin together,
And let their heirs, God, if thy will be so,
Enrich the time to come with smooth-faced peace. (5.7.29-33)

In this speech, Richmond focuses not only on genealogy and heterosexual coupling, but also specifically on the children that that coupling will produce as the source of the peace and stability that his victory will provide. Edward makes no such gestures towards dynastic succession, and instead, bases his claim to kingship on the perverse spectacle of corpses as they express the froward erotics from which the chaos that characterized Edward II’s reign emerged.
When Edward II, minutes away from abdication, ponders the mutability of his inherited status as king, he asks “what are kings when regiment is gone / But perfect shadows in a sunshine day?” (20.26-27). In this moment, he recalls Richard’s early declaration that he has “no delight” but to “spy my shadow in the sun / And descant on mine own deformity” (1.1.25-27). The perfect shadows that Edward observes are the fruits of Richard’s ambition, the queer shadows which have come to occupy the space of royal authority itself. Ultimately, there is a very real confusion about the status of the king and kingship (“What Edward do you mean?” “Where is the court but here?” [18.41; 22.59]) that is only resolved by Edward III’s ascension insofar as everyone involved in the conflict of the play is either dead or imprisoned. The queer logic that produced that confusion remains intact. The queer disturbances of the hetero which define Richard become an essential element of power and a fundamental part of the discourse of the realm in Edward II, with the effect of amplifying Shakespeare’s eroticizing of More backward through time and deeply embedding its brand of queerness in a historicized system of political thought. When Edward II asks, finally, “Inhuman creatures nursed with tiger’s milk, / Why gape you for your sovereign’s overthrow?” there is a strong sense in which the “tiger’s milk” on which they were nursed is the “old odd ends” (with all of this phrase’s queer connotations) with which Richard “clothe[d]” his “naked villainy” (20.71-72; 1.3.336-37), and they “gape” for Edward’s overthrow because the descant of royal authority itself has become the erotic spectacle of the rise and fall of kings. Ultimately, Edward II presents an incoherent chaos materialized from the erotic appeal of Richard’s shadow.
Chapter Three: “These two beget a generation of still-breeding thoughts”

In *Henry IV, Part One*, King Henry attempts to correct prince Hal’s ostensive “inordinate and low desires” by linking the production of political success, power, and nobility to a counterintuitive strategy of deliberate inscrutability and invisibility (3.2.12). He explains that

By being seldom seen, I could not stir
But like a comet I was wondered at,
...
and so my state,
Seldom, but sumptuous, showed like a feast
And won by rareness such solemnity. (3.2.46-59)

Henry’s success is not just based on the fact that he made his presence into a special treat, but that this invisibility interrupts his ability, as a political figure and as an individual, to signify. He alleges that “men would tell their children, ‘This is he!’” while “Others would say, ‘Where, which is Bolingbroke?’” (3.2.48-49). As in *Richard III* and *Edward II*, Henry associates royalty with the sun, but here, the royal sun is a product of the “extraordinary gaze, / Such as is bent on sun-like majesty / When it shines seldom in admiring eyes” (3.2.78-80). The “extraordinary” gaze directed toward Bolingbroke is opposed to the “vile participation” of both Hal and Richard, which cause them to be “rendered such aspect / As cloudy men use to their adversaries” (3.2.82-83). Henry here articulates an ironic inversion of symbolic significance, as royal illumination is associated with obscurity rather than clarity, invisibility rather than visibility. This speech, at the center of a play which both realizes the political chaos that Richard II prophesies and repeats in the new generation the challenges to his authority, serves as the first clear statement of a political strategy and political philosophy that we see Bolingbroke apply in *Richard II* but, appropriately, never articulate.
In this chapter, I discuss how *Richard II* confronts the ideological and discursive queerness that Marlowe posits in *Edward II*. Modifying the extensive scholarship that addresses the connections between these two plays, I will focus on the ways that Shakespeare specifically responds to Marlowe’s response to him. I argue that *Richard II* uses this intertextual web as a means of interrogating the ostensive stability of *Richard III*’s conclusion in light of the queerness that *Edward II* thrusts, literally, into the fundament of English political power. *Richard II* presents us with a queer *realpolitik* in which the queer language that was so destructive in *Edward II* becomes the basis of stability itself; the failure of the symbolic order undergirding primogenital authority becomes a condition for successful political maneuvering and effective rule, rather than a threat to it. Bolingbroke is able to create himself as the invisible signifier around which queer identification orbits by recognizing queerness as an inherent part of the machine of political power. Ultimately, Bolingbroke recognizes that the queer disruption of history and political authority that has been discursively transmitted among the plays precludes the possibility of ever excising queerness from within. The political world that Bolingbroke inhabits has been fundamentally altered by the dramatic narrativization of the histories of previous monarchs. As queerness itself is read backwards into antecedent plays, it becomes an essential part of the process of forming new history – a history that eschews the glow of heterotemporal futurity in favour of the reflexive circularity of still-breeding homohistory.

“Rusty bills against thy seat”

In his ambitiously-titled *The Explanation for Everything*, Paul Morrison offers a counter-intuitive account of the relationship between heteronormativity and representation in which the security of sexual normativity is predicated precisely on its inscrutability and vulnerability to non-normative disturbances. Morrison attempts to account for the pervasiveness of Freud’s theory of ‘universal
bisexuality,’ where heterosexuality is neither discrete nor independent from homosexuality, in opposition to more intuitively regressive accounts of sexual deviance, such as the ‘third sex’ model. According to Morrison, the result of this conception of sexuality is that “homosexuality is an achievable identity; heterosexuality isn’t” (5). Heterosexuality need never, indeed, must never, be asserted: according to Morrison, “the claim ‘I’m straight’ is the psychosexual analogue of ‘The check is in the mail’: if you need to say it, your credit or credibility is already in doubt” (1). By contrast, homosexuality is an identity that both can be and must be declared, represented, and assumed. For Morrison, culture becomes a game of “find-that-faggot,” with a “uniquely privileged explanatory power” awarded to repressed homosexuality (8). As Morrison explains it, “the criminal or merely reprehensible behavior and filiations of the many can be explained as a latent or repressed form of the sexual perversions of the few. When no man is able to ascertain that he is not (that his bonds are not) homosexual, there is no atrocity that homosexuality cannot be made to explain (away)” (5). It is precisely through the chaos of the symbolic order that normativity is able to deploy the homo as the exculpatory savior of the hetero. Heterosexuality is privileged, invisible, assumed but never asserted, while homosexuality is everywhere the object of scrutiny, fascination, and repression: the proxy through which heterosexuality itself is policed.

When reading Morrison’s apt account, it is hard not to hear echoes of Henry IV’s fears in 1 Henry IV that Hal will lose his “princely privilege / With vile participation” (3.2.86-87). Indeed, in Richard II, Bolingbroke had confronted these fears by never explicitly intervening in the hetero logic of inheritance, but rather, his machinations framed Richard as an antithesis to genealogical authority, creating a gap in its logic that he, serendipitously, came to occupy. In Richard II, he repeatedly reminds us of the innocence of his intentions: in 2.3 he swears to his uncle that “his coming is / But for his own” (147), and in 3.2, he claims again, as he arrests the
king who has granted all of his demands, that “I come but for my own” (194). Later, even as Richard is called in front of the court to abdicate, he claims that his new position and the support he has received is “little looked for” (4.1.162). At no point in the play does Bolingbroke declare an intent to become king, or even to depose Richard; rather, he accepts it as a necessity as Richard recognizes his own failure to rule – that is to say, Bolingbroke directs attention toward the queerness of others, while signaling nothing in himself. At the same time, Bolingbroke never straight out calls Richard a queer. Further, the times that he comes close, such as when he accuses Bushy and Green of having “broke the possession of a royal bed / And stained the beauty of a fair queen’s cheeks / With tears drawn from her eyes by your foul wrongs,” the accusation doesn’t match what we’ve seen in the play (3.1.13-15). Bushy and Green are on good terms with the Queen; Richard and the Queen seem to have a devoted, appropriately intimate relationship, and it is, in fact, Bolingbroke who has made the Queen cry and who, eventually, separates her from the king. Given these perplexing absences, then, we are left to explain how Richard can be made to oversignify queerness without ever either directly or credibly signifying queerness.

Part of this explanation can be found in the scene where Scroop informs Richard, who has recently returned from England, that Bolingbroke has covered “your fearful land / With hard bright steel and hearts harder than steel” (3.2.110-11). In an effort to demonstrate just how fearsome the threat to Richard’s reign is, Scroop provides a list of these “hearts harder than steel” — “whitebeards,” “boys with women’s voices,” “beadsman,” and “distaff-women” (3.2.112, 113, 116, 118). Notably, all of these rebels seem singularly ill-fitted for battle, yet Richard and his companions react as though the threat is a particularly dangerous one. This perplexing gap between situation and response is one which characterizes much of the politics of
the play. It is, I think, partially explained by the statement that the “distaff-women manage rusty
bills / Against thy seat” (3.2.118-19). According to the *OED*, ‘bills’ might refer at the time to
either “a writing circulated reflecting upon any person” or “a kind of broadsword, a falchion.”
Seat, also, can be read in the sense of “throne” or as a vulgar reference to Richard’s ass. In
addition to the literal meaning that these women are using rusty pointed weaponry to rebel
against the king, the diction can also be interpreted as saying that the women aim to use old,
defamatory documents to slander or discredit the king; the women aim to use old, defamatory
documents to slander or discredit the king’s ass; or, most disturbingly, the women mean to use
rusty pointed weaponry to assault the king’s ass (an image which instantly recalls the execution
of Edward II). In all instances, the threat that Scroop details seems to be more textual rather than
martial. The distaff-women, indeed, threaten to make Richard an analogue of Edward II and, in
varyingly literal ways, inscribe that analogy on the king’s body. Here, as elsewhere, the real
conflict in the play appears to be in negotiating royal authority in light of the froward turn
seatward that has come to characterize the uses and abuses of historical narrative.

Critics of the play have been similarly keen to manage these rusty bills against Richard’s
seat, to the point where the critical tradition itself has come to function as a rusty bill, writing
over the incongruences, gaps, and dissonances in Richard’s fall in favour of a narrative which
emphasizes the political coherence of Bolingbroke’s deposition of yet another weak king. That
*Richard II* owes a significant debt to *Edward II* is well-worn critical ground, and their
similarities and differences have been thoroughly rehearsed in service of a variety of critical
aims. This critical tradition began with Charles Lamb’s *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets*
(1907), and has tended to focus on the parallels between the weak and effeminate kings, their
structurally similar deposition scenes, the similar treatment and emphasis on favourites
(Gaveston, Spencer, Baldock; Bushy, Bagot, Green), the grieving Queen Isabels, and the plays’ rhetorical similarities. This tradition (Forker, Garber, Bradbrook, Merrix and Levin) is helpfully summarized by Maurice Charney, who anatomizes the commonly cited parallels between the plays in his essay “Marlowe’s Edward II as a model for Shakespeare’s Richard II.” Recent critics writing on the plays tend to be dismissive toward the intertextual connections between them, which have become a critical cliché of a piece with psychoanalytic readings of Hamlet or the identification of Prospero with Shakespeare. Jonathan Bate’s assertion that “Richard II’s similarity to Edward II is so obvious that it is not very interesting” (113) is exemplary of this attitude. Those critics that do work on the plays usually either downplay the importance of this intertext to their argument as a whole, as in Goran Stanivukovic’s “Beyond Sodomy,” where his discussion of the plays is a brief sidebar to a discussion of the Sonnets, or provide unusually extensive justifications for their interventions, such as Robert Logan who, in his 2007 book on the subject of Marlovian influence on Shakespeare, spends almost half of his chapter on Richard II and Edward II trying to prove that “in spite of the strong tradition in criticism of ferreting out likenesses between [them], only to a limited extent has this approach proved worthwhile in studies on these two plays” (84) [emphasis added].

Perhaps the most interesting common thread within this body of work is the long-standing tradition of viewing Richard II as coherent in opposition to Edward II’s incoherence. Generally speaking, Edward II is identified as a chaotic side note in the telos of the English history play, an open question that Shakespeare answers with Richard II. A paradigmatic example of these assumptions comes from Meredith Skura, who writes,

> Even politically, the difference between Shakespeare’s and Marlowe’s plays has always seemed far more striking than the similarities. Where Marlowe reduces politics to personal appetite and a struggle for power, Shakespeare transcends the personal, contextualizing abdication in a universe that makes moral and political
sense. Where Marlowe’s play is full of sex and violence, Shakespeare’s is almost devoid of both. (41)

These statements are so basic to the critical assumptions about the relationship between the plays that Skura does not even feel the need to argue for them. In contrast to the carefully argued article that follows, they are, on closer inspection, fairly obviously false and fundamentally bizarre. First of all, it is difficult to identify a rubric by which *Edward II* is “full” of sex. While there are some circumspect allusions to sex, and, in some readings, sex is a major motivator for the politics of the play, it is pretty tame in comparison to other plays on stage in the 1590s: the pervasively rape-focused *Titus Andronicus*, the debauched underworld of *Henry IV*, especially *Part Two*, and the luxuriant dandling of Marlowe’s own *Dido* present themselves as examples which might, much more accurately, be described as “full” of sex. It is similarly odd to claim that Shakespeare’s play is “devoid” of the sex that apparently overwhelms Marlowe’s. Richard’s relationship with his favourites is understood on the same terms as Edward’s (they have “in manner of [their] sinful hours / made a divorce betwixt his queen and him” [3.1.11-12]), and the imagery of the play as a whole is famously seedy and womby. The claim that *Richard II* is devoid of violence is even stranger. Not only is Richard II murdered onstage, he is murdered after he kills two of his assailants, also onstage (5.5.105-13). Further, the final scene in *Richard II* presents the body of its eponymous king and a whopping seven decapitations. By contrast, *Edward II* seems almost restrained, as the presentation of the king’s body is accompanied by a meager single decapitated traitor. While the violence in *Richard II* is never as gruesome as the execution scene in *Edward II*, and the sex lives of the characters don’t seem quite as momentously important to a modern reader, it requires a certain whimsically selective approach to reading to argue that the play is “almost devoid of both.” As critics, we must contend with the
perplexing invisibility of sex and violence in Shakespeare’s play, and, similarly, the perplexing visibility of these elements in Marlowe.

The more significant claim that Skura makes, and one which is echoed across the body of criticism (notably, Logan and Shapiro), is that the world of Richard II makes “moral and political sense,” while Marlowe’s world consists in a chaos of appetites. As before, this is an interesting claim given that the political and moral world of Richard II, when pressed, fairly obviously doesn’t make sense. For example, there is famously a great deal of critical confusion over exactly why Richard starts offering to abdicate long before Bolingbroke has declared any interest in the crown, even leading some critics to speculate that there is a lost prequel that makes these scenes make sense (Merrix and Levin 4; Forker Critical 47-50). Indeed, at no point in the play does Bolingbroke declare an intention to become king; instead, he allows Richard’s own confusion about kingship to allow the crown to default to him. The scene where Richard returns to England involves him asking a variation of the question “Am I not king?” (3.2.83) seven times in the space of just over 100 lines: this is approximately once every ten lines that Richard speaks (3.2.83, 85, 88, 95, 150, 177, 206). The confusion over identity and royal authority is reinforced, rather than resolved, by the ending of the play. In the scene where Richard is murdered, he confronts the fractious state of royal identity which has allowed Bolingbroke to seize power when he proclaims, “play I in one person many people / And none contented” (5.5.31-32). Bolingbroke’s own response to Richard’s execution is built on contradictory impulses. He responds to Exton’s delivery of the news by claiming that “though I did wish him dead / I hate the murderer, love him murdered” (5.6.39-40). Here Bolingbroke characterizes his ascension to the throne – the act that allegedly “makes moral and political sense” – as consisting of ends and means with radically opposite moral values, expressing the ways in which his own authority is
built on paradox and incoherence. Kingship in the play is an open question, providing problems without resolutions. At the same time, if one were to read the criticism and not the play, you’d assume that audiences of Richard II walk away with a clear sense of what constitutes royal authority, what motivates political action and where, exactly, to draw a bright line between right and wrong. I am not going to argue that centuries of critics have misread the play (and indeed, critical opinion is not univocal, as many critics, such as Susan Wells and Madhavi Menon, capitalize on the political and textual incoherence of the play). Instead, I am interested in how to account for why the sex and violence in the play frequently seems invisible, and why the play so insistently seems to suggest that these loose ends are tied up, that the politics are coherent, and that its conclusion was inevitable.

As I stated in the beginning of this section, my answer to these questions lies in the way that the play positions itself intertextually, as it deliberately conflates historical and literary ways of knowing, arming its ironically unthreatening rebels with weapons that are simultaneously swords and documents. The intertext here functions as does Morrison’s universal bisexuality, as an exculpatory premise for the political and social ontology of the play. Bolingbroke exploits the exact kind of intertextual games of ‘fill in the blanks’ that have characterized the legacy of the play in the academy to make his incoherent political world function coherently. He occupies the gap between the providentialist genealogies of Henry Tudor (Richard III) and the froward erotics of Edward III (Edward II), both ideologically (in terms of his politics) and chronologically (he reigns after Edward and before Henry). In the remainder of this chapter, I examine how Bolingbroke exploits this gap to use the froward erotics of historical representation as a means of both expansively taking queer pleasure in historical construction and using that queerness as a means of bolstering a normative, centralized hold on power.
“Many years of sunshine days”: “Perfect shadows” Redux

As in Richard III and Edward II, much of the political currency in Richard II comes from negotiating the distinction between the figurative and literal ontologies that its politics deploys.

In Time Binds, Elizabeth Freeman writes that

Desire is a form of belief in the referential object that the subject feels s/he lacks and that would make him or her whole (and insofar as this referential object is often posited in terms of a lost object, desire is ‘historiographical,’ a way of writing that object into the present). Erotics, on the other hand, traffics less in belief than in encounter, less in damaged wholes than in intersections of body parts, less in loss than in novel possibility…a productive disbelief in the referential object, a disbelief strong enough to produce some kind of pseudo-encounter with it that isn’t worried about the pseudo. (14)

The distinction she draws here between desire and erotics is, I think, useful for understanding the way that Bolingbroke negotiates the intertextual gaps between Richard III and Edward II.

Indeed, the distinction that Freeman draws here is one that I have also identified as the defining difference between Richard III and Edward II. Richard III’s theatrics develop desire as absence, his attempts at seduction are staked on figurative objects and figurative acts. In the court of Edward II, the historiographical erotics are centered on encounter, that is, a literalization and actualization of the figurative elements in Richard III. In Edward II the historical gaze becomes stuck, so to speak, backward, in actually realizing the hypothetical erotics of Richard III. The play’s politics therefore fails to reproduce the stable power structures that primogeniture is meant to undergird – as Freeman notes, its focus on specific encounter renders incoherent the actual objects themselves. Bolingbroke, then, must find a way to make a politics that looks backward in order to justify itself (primogeniture always requires the family tree whose branches move further into the past), and congeal it into something productive in the future. In order to do so, Bolingbroke hybridizes the approaches of the two plays we examined: he uses the encounters of Edward II as the lost objects themselves, thereby creating an erotics of absent encounters which
transcend history precisely by erasing its causal link to the present. Just as Paul Morrison recognizes concepts of queerness as fundamental to normativity, Bolingbroke uses the preoccupation of present meaning with past narrative as a way of producing futurity. As with Elizabeth I and Essex, the encounter between the past and the present can either reproduce the past or create an incoherence on which to stake a privileged form of difference. Like Elizabeth, Bolingbroke exploits the capacity for the present to erotically double the past in order to distinguish himself from that past.

The success of this technique, politically, is apparent in the ways in which characters in the play react to events as history before they have even happened. In the second act of the play, Isabel, in a conversation with Bushy, typifies this logic. In this scene, she grieves for no apparent reason at Richard’s departure for Ireland. Later in the scene, Green informs her that Bolingbroke has rebelled against the crown, but she begins to grieve before she ever learns that anything is wrong. As she explains,

Nothing hath begot my something grief,
Or something hath the nothing that I grieve:
'Tis in reversion that I do possess;
But what it is, that is not yet known; what
I cannot name, 'tis nameless woe I wot. (2.2.36-40)

Here Isabel grieves for something that has not happened yet. Bushy’s explanation, that she

Looking awry upon [her] lord’s departure,
Find[s] shapes of grief more than himself to wail
Which, looked on as it is, is nought but shadows
Of what is not. (2.2.21-24)

instantly recalls, first, Richard III’s descant on his shadow, and, second, Edward II’s description of kings as shadows on a sunshine day. Further supporting an intertextual reading, as Goran Stanivukovic points out, Isabel herself is “Shakespeare’s invention, and she does not appear in Holinshed’s Chronicles” (60). This intertextual web reverses the normal priorities of historical
affect. Here, the grief is prior to the historical moment. The “knowledge” of *Edward II* causes characters to react to the world in a way which is distinctly misaligned with what is actually happening. The theater that Isabel is experiencing is one which lays *Richard III* and *Edward II* over the present, creating what Gil Harris has described as a palimpsest (3-4). Indeed, Isabel herself ends up being something of a prop in Bolingbroke’s narrative, as he uses her mysterious grief to characterize Bushy and Green in the same terms as Edward’s favourites (3.1). The palimpsest that Bolingbroke creates here dallies in historical narrative in order to posit a series of encounters that never happen, a series of desires and desired figures from which Bolingbroke is notably absent.

The imagery of shadows, which is so intimately linked to both *Richard III* and *Edward II*, can be found once more in the play. In the abdication scene, Richard’s speech ends with the proclamation, “God save King Henry, unkinged Richard says, / And send him many years of sunshine days. / What more remains?” (4.1.220-22). What remains, of course, is for Richard to “confess his sins,” which are, incidentally, never specified by either Bolingbroke or his followers. For Richard, though, his primary sin is that he has given his “soul’s consent / T’undeck the pompous body of a king” (4.1.249-50): that is, his sin has been agreeing to abdicate, which seems to be his own idea. In the famous climax of the scene, Richard asks for a mirror, which he smashes. After destroying the mirror, Richard addresses Bolingbroke, telling him to “Mark, silent King, the moral of this sport: / How soon my sorrow hath destroyed my face” (4.1.290-91). Bolingbroke’s response, which is only his sixth line since Richard entered more than 200 lines previously, is that “the shadow of your sorrow hath destroyed / The shadow of your face” (4.1.292-93). The return to the imagery of shadows at this crucial moment forces us to recognize the ways that Richard’s deposition is predicated on the fixation of these
characters on the historical events of *Edward II* by casting them as aesthetically continuous. The simultaneous repetition of the phrase “sunshine day” reminds us that Richard has become a shadow *just like Edward*. Further, Bolingbroke distinctly recognizes and reinforces the ways that the strange causality Richard rearticulates – sorrow causing deposition rather than the other way around – is predicated on the shadows of the past that lurk offstage. He further emphasizes how he, like Richard III, has produced his sunshine days by descanting on a destructive shadow. However, unlike Richard III, he has made *someone else* into his shadow. He descants, not on his own deformity, but on the deformity of others, using shadows to imply the light of his kingship, rather than the other way around (as with both Richard III and Gaveston). In recognizing the ways in which previous histories have narratively overdetermined *Richard II*, Bolingbroke need only let these present absences, these shadows, do his work for him; he is present for the abdication, but he does not speak, as Richard’s own failure to name himself is politically and dramatically sufficient.

In the scene in which Richard is murdered, he contemplates his deposition in relation to theater and history. He understands himself, in his final moments, as hermaphroditically producing history through theater. He explains, “My brain I’ll prove the female to my soul, / My soul the father, and these two beget / A generation of still-breeding thoughts” (5.5.6-8). These thoughts then play out the kingdom in microcosm, before, inevitably, ending up in the same position as Richard. Eventually, Richard notes that people find a “kind of ease” by “bearing their own misfortunes on the back / Of such as have before endured the like” (5.5.29-30). The irony here is that the history that Richard takes comfort in is a poetic invention – created through metaphorical sex acts. Further, it is precisely the impulse to create analogies to the past that has reproduced the past – the very act of fetishizing the past’s relationship to the present both
produces and reproduces history in Richard’s formulation. As Richard concludes, “Thus play I in one person many people / And none contented” (5.5.31-32).

The ending of Richard III, while ostensibly stable and providential, creates a political opening for the chaos of Edward II precisely because Henry Tudor attempts to deny the erotic registers of historiography, to treat Richard III as an anomaly rather than recognizing the ways that queer shadows are a necessary product of the hetero sun. Bolingbroke, on the other hand, exploits the ambiguity of shadows, their interchangeability, their penchant for distortion to create a space for kingship to exist. At the beginning of the play, Richard II refuses to allow Mowbray and Bolingbroke to duel, taking the responsibility for justice upon himself, forcing himself to resolve the conflicts in the realm. Conversely, when Bagot and Aumerle fight in 4.1, Bolingbroke allows them to do so, recognizing the way in which the king frequently exists in order to give form to shadows; shadows are, in fact, a condition of light. Bolingbroke and kingly authority become invisible, while history signifies through the faults of others, becoming a queer buttress to normativity, a scapegoat into which its excesses and dissonances slip.
Conclusion: “All murdered”

The introduction to my thesis began with Richard II, where my chapters end. I begin my conclusion with Richard III, where my chapters began. This symmetry matches the temporal queerness, the regress and circularity, which interested me in the first place. Specifically, this conclusion looks at a recent case study as a way to return to my initial claim in the introduction that, while it may not be factually true that every medieval English monarch was murdered, the claim carries a figurative weight in terms of how narrative shapes authority, and how eroticism refocuses genealogy from the birth of the son to the death of the father: a preoccupation with the backward relation between the present and the past.

The focus of my case study is The Richard III Society, a group of amateur historians who dedicate the majority of their free time to refuting largely specious claims about the villainy of Richard III with equally specious claims about his heroism. In the mission statement on their website, members characterize themselves as “dedicated to reclaiming the reputation of a king of England who died over 500 years ago and who reigned for little more than two years.” This “mission” is, unsurprisingly, continually haunted by the spectre of Shakespeare’s Richard III. Indeed, for the society, Shakespeare appears to be the primary target of their corrective, as they write that “Richard’s infamy over the centuries has been due to the continuing popularity, and the belief in, the picture painted of Richard III by William Shakespeare in his play of that name” [incorrect emphasis in original], ironically confusing the play with the person yet again. In many ways the society lays claim not only to a certain version of history, but also to a certain way of encountering dramatic texts, one which opposes itself to the identification of theater and belief, representation and fact, historical narratives and History, capital ‘h.’ The website elaborates, spectacularly, on these historical commitments in the statement that
The Society is perhaps best summed up by its Patron, the present Richard, Duke of Gloucester: ‘… the purpose—and indeed the strength—of the Richard III Society derives from the belief that the truth is more powerful than lies; a faith that even after all these centuries the truth is important. It is proof of our sense of civilised values that something as esoteric and as fragile as reputation is worth campaigning for.’

The Richard III Society outlines an explicitly heterohistorical project while, at the same time, staking the value and authenticity of this project on a distinctly homo investment in the overlap between the past and the present. In the first instance, their emphasis on factual truth expresses a deeply traditional view of history, one which seeks to understand history as a branch of science, an object of enquiry in which it is possible to “strip away the spin, the unfair innuendo, Tudor artistic shaping and the lazy acquiescence of later ages.” At the same time, the society sets itself up as the chiastic double of the past, wearing its eerie patronage by Richard, Duke of Gloucester as a sort of certificate of authenticity. This is the attitude toward history that leads the society to “actively promote research into any aspect of the later fifteenth century which sheds light on issues such as ‘what was it like to be Richard III?’ ‘Was he, or would he have been (given longer on the throne), a good king?’” This history is speculative, romanticized. It bottoms out in obvious platitudes about the power of truth and our sense of civilized value. As the society locates our sense of value – indeed, the values themselves – in an internalized understanding of the past, the subject which desires to know the truth collapses into the historical subject whose desires constitute the truth that we desire to know: Richard, Duke of Gloucester stakes a claim on the “esoteric” and “fragile” reputation of the Richard, Duke of Gloucester who lives(/ed) that reputation. In the first view of history the present and the past become a closed circuit, one which doubles Leo Bersani’s “oval-like intimacy à deux” that characterizes hetero-erotics and hetero-aesthetics: the absorption into the “always futile efforts to penetrate the other’s secrets, that is, the other’s desires” (“Gay Art” 33). In the second view of history, this oval breaks down, there is
a blurring of historical priorities, the boundary between present and past values, truths, and priorities is smudged, moving toward the “massive and double negativity,” the collapse of self into other, which, for Bersani, constitutes the radical aesthetic and social potential of the ‘homo’ (“Gay Art” 34).

I have argued throughout this thesis that the second, homohistorical approach is a hidden premise of, and inherently present in, heterohistoricism – even in The Richard III Society’s project. This thesis has pulled this hidden premise out of the proverbial closet. It has staked its theoretical claims on the belief that history is performance, theater is desire, and pleasure is power. It has deconstructed the way history itself is predicated on the same narrative investments (desire, affect) as literature, and questions the distinction between these disciplines, deflating History’s claims to authority. Most importantly, my thesis is instructive. It teaches the dour people of The Richard III Society how to stop being obnoxious and start getting off. It is not just that looking backward is a queer way to engage society and power, but that the backward gaze itself queers the object it observes which, in turn, changes the way that we observe.
Works Cited


