

THE QUEER HISTORIES OF EDWARD II AND RICHARD II OF ENGLAND

by

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Abstract

Beginning during their reigns, kings Edward II and Richard II of England developed “queer” reputations that have been perpetuated and renegotiated through the present day. Scholars continue to debate how best to understand these elements of Edward and Richard’s legacies, sometimes focusing on possibilities of gender transgression and intimacy between men, and sometimes dismissing such lines of inquiry as stemming from the unfounded allegations of politically-motivated chroniclers. This debate overlaps with a broader conversation about how scholars should reckon with the empiricist, historicist approach that has heretofore been dominant in work dealing with issues of gender and sexuality in history. Drawing on Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon’s notion of queer unhistoricism, as well as Carla Freccero’s work on queer spectrality, this thesis uses an expansive definition of queerness to move past “were-they-or-weren’t-they” disputes about Edward and Richard, and engage more fruitfully with the presence of queerness in both medieval and modern texts about these kings.

Two late medieval poems written in praise of the currently-reigning king, *Adam Davy’s Five Dreams about Edward II* (c. 1308) and Richard Maidstone’s *Concordia facta inter regem et cives Londonie* (c. 1392), are similar in their creation of a textual intimacy between the king and the author—a socially-imbalanced intimacy that mirrors the highly-criticized relationships between the kings and their male favorites. I examine these poems in relation to fourteenth- and fifteenth-century chronicles that disparage Edward, Richard, and their relationships with their favorites, linking bad kingship with the feminization of men and excessive intimacy between men. Expanding on Claire Sponsler’s reading of Froissart’s chronicles, I look at a modern British

docudrama's depiction of Edward II and Hugh Despenser's deaths, suggesting that the series follows Froissart in presenting the queer man as a figure to be denounced in order to suppress the possibility of improper intimacy between men. Finally, I take Richard's attempt to canonize his great-grandfather Edward as an opportunity to look at how Edward II and Richard II's legacies as queer kings intersect and reflect each other.

Lay Summary

King Edward II (1284-1327) and King Richard II (1367-1400) of England have long had “queer” reputations. Medieval chronicles often criticized these kings’ intimate relationships with male favorites and implied that they were feminine, leading modern scholars to debate how we should talk about Edward and Richard’s gender and sexuality. This thesis uses medieval poetry and chronicles, as well as modern pop culture depictions of Edward and Richard’s lives, to explore how these kings’ queer legacies developed. I argue that rethinking our understandings of gender and sexuality in relation to Edward II and Richard II is important both for medieval scholarship and for the modern LGBTQ+ movement.

Preface

This thesis is original and independent work by the author, Allen Fulghum.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Lay Summary.....	v
Preface.....	vi
Table of Contents.....	vii
Acknowledgments.....	viii
Chapter One. Introduction: “A nightmare from which I am trying to awake”.....	1
Chapter Two: Edward II.....	9
2.1 And I Fell Out of Bed Twice: <i>Adam Davy’s Five Dreams About Edward II</i>	9
2.2 This Boy is a Bottom: Myths about Edward II.....	22
Chapter Three: Richard II.....	30
3.1 Which Is the Rooster, Which Is the Hen?: Queer Transgression in Maidstone’s <i>Concordia</i>	30
3.2 This Charming King: The Queerness of Richard II.....	44
Chapter Four: The Shared Legacies of Edward II and Richard II.....	51
Bibliography.....	62

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Chapter One: Introduction: “A nightmare from which I am trying to awake”

The first thing I have to do in order to talk about what I want to talk about here is to define “it”—my subject, my object of interest. Beginning is easy enough: “Here I will undertake a study of late medieval poems and chronicles dealing with the reign and downfall of Edward II and Richard II of England in order to examine the literary representation and/or construction of their—” What to say next?

Homosexuality? Scholars have been attempting to move past the debates between “acts vs identities” and “essentialism vs social constructivism” that originated with Foucault, or with misreadings of Foucault (Grassi 201-202). Despite the turn away from such dichotomies, the prevalence of the notion that there were no sexual identities *per se* in the Middle Ages has led to a general apprehension of referring to historical or literary figures from this period as homosexual, or as participating in or identifying with homosexuality. In his introduction to *Sexuality and its Queer Discontents in Middle English Literature*, Tison Pugh emphasizes that “heterosexuality, homosexuality, and heteronormativity did not exist in the Middle Ages as we know them today,” suggesting that “scholars should use such terms as queer, homosexual, heterosexual, and heteronormative in referring to medieval sexualities with care and should contextualize them for the sociocultural environs of the Middle Ages” (10). If the term “homosexuality” is used, it tends to be qualified or adapted to avoid charges of failing to attend to the varying understandings of gender and sexuality across time.

This avoidance of “homosexuality” appears often in contemporary scholarship on Edward II and Richard II. In the second essay of *The Reign of Edward II: New Perspectives*, “The Sexualities of Edward II,” W.M. Ormrod begins by stating that “this study does not set out

to cast Edward II as a medieval representative of any one modern category of sexual orientation, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, whatever” (22). The third essay in the same collection, Ian Mortimer’s “Sermons of Sodomy: A Reconsideration of Edward II’s Sodomitical Reputation,” begins with sharp criticism of “those who presume Edward II may be taken as a gay icon” and “those who objectively classify the king as a homosexual in order to understand fourteenth-century homosexual identities” (48). Discussing Richard II, Sylvia Federico invokes “the idea of royal queerness (including but not limited to references to homosexuality or to homosexual acts),” qualifying her use of “homosexuality” by incorporating it into “queerness” (26). “Queer” is different from “homosexual” because it is fluid and indeterminate, and as such has been relied upon to account for the fluidity and indeterminacy of past sexualities, or anyway our inevitably flawed understanding of them. (I might emphasize that it would be impossible to arrive at a complete understanding of present sexualities, either: I’ve been witness to, and participant in, many debates about how to define and discuss queerness, straightness, masculinity, femininity, sex, gender, sexual identity, and so on, in what to me is the here and now, and I would hope future scholars would not feel the need to try to uncover how twenty-first-century sexuality “really was.”)

What about “queerness,” then—am I dealing with Edward II and Richard II’s queerness here? While I agree with Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon’s argument that “to produce queerness as an object for our scrutiny would mean the end of queering itself,” the definition of queerness that I return to most often was proposed by Eve Sedgwick in the landmark *Tendencies*: “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made

(or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically” (Goldberg and Menon 1608; Sedgwick 7). One of queer theory’s uses is its ability to encompass within the term “queer” any number of transgressive or nonnormative things, whether people, acts, identities, texts, or materials. Queer frees us from the impossible task of attempting to either discover the truth of, or retroactively impose our own beliefs on, historical understandings of gender and sexuality. Calling for scholars to resist both historicist approaches that take past sexualities as wholly other and presentist approaches that force past sexualities into modern frameworks, Goldberg and Menon propose a strategy of “reading unhistorically” that “should not sacrifice sameness at the altar of difference nor collapse difference into sameness or all-but-sameness” (1616). If I were to make one approach to historical literary study preeminent in my own work, it would be Goldberg and Menon’s “homohistory,” which “suggests the impossibility of the final difference between, say, sodomy and homosexuality, even as it gestures toward the impossibility of final definition that both concepts share” (1609).

The apparent limitlessness of that “open mesh of possibilities” poses problems of its own. Defending what she terms “queer historicism,” Valerie Traub writes in “The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies” that “to fail to specify the terms of queer’s historicity is to ignore desire’s emergence from distinct cultural and material arrangements of space and time...It is to celebrate the instability of queer by means of a false universalization of the normal” (33). Traub suggests that unhistoricism “bespeaks an antipathy to empirical inquiry that, viewed as the primary tool of the historian, is posed as antithetical to acts of queering—as if queerness could not live in the details of empirical history” (34). My intent in taking up the call to read unhistorically is not to refuse to look at “the details of empirical history” or “distinct cultural and material arrangements

of space and time”; there is much to be gained from writing about, and formulating ideas based on, observable elements of the past. But there is freedom in being “open to the possibility of anachronism,” as Goldberg and Menon suggest (1616). This freedom is especially important because the very nonnormativity of sexuality and gender that I study here has been—and in many ways still is—denied and limited by the empiricist approaches that have been dominant in Anglophone academia in the twentieth century. Responding to the debate between Traub and Menon, Ari Friedlander states that “historicism is not inevitably a form of heteronormativity, much less homophobia” (7). It is true that historicism is not *inevitably* a form of heteronormativity or homophobia, but it often is. In much historical and literary scholarship centered on subjects other than gender and sexuality, historicist methods are used to heteronormative and homophobic effect, as discussions of gender and sexuality are forbidden due to a lack of positive evidence that queerness, in whatever form, might be present in history. One need only look at the treatment of Edward II and Richard II to prove this.

In much of the work that makes mention of Edward and Richard’s gender and sexuality, the central question in regards to these issues, regardless of the specific language used, seems to be essentially binaristic: “Was he or wasn’t he?” (gay, homosexual, queer, a sodomite), “Did he or didn’t he?” (commit sodomy, have sex with men, love men in a way that could be considered unnatural or abnormal, whether to the twentieth- or the fourteenth-century eye). Though many of these scholars do discuss gender and sexuality with nuance, they more often than not place themselves on one side or the other: writing in the 1980s, the author of *Piers Gaveston: Earl of Cornwall* concludes that “there is no question that the king and his favorite were lovers,” while Richard II’s biographer Nigel Saul writes that although there were “allegations of

homosexuality” between Richard and Robert de Vere, “almost certainly these allegations were baseless” (Hamilton 16; Saul 121). The conclusion that Edward or Richard “was not” (gay, etc) or “did not” (commit sodomy, etc) often seems to serve as an excuse *not* to explore their gender and sexuality, despite how significant these issues have been to their legacies. A footnote to the 2011 Oxford World’s Classics edition of William Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, for instance, states that:

The suggestion here of homosexual interest between Richard and some of his followers ... is a feature frequently exploited in modern productions, though it is not in fact borne out by the rest of the play. Holinshed says that the King’s indulgence in ‘the filthy sin of lechery and fornication’ led God to ‘shred him off from the sceptre of his kingdom’ (p. 508), but he does not accuse Richard of sodomy. (3.1.11-15n)

Obviously this is primarily a commentary on Shakespeare’s Richard rather than the historical figure proper, but it serves as a significant example of how a lack of positive evidence of non-normative sexuality in the historical record is used to simply shut down queer lines of inquiry, rather than to help clarify or strengthen them. Such an approach may hew closer to the historical record than J.S. Hamilton’s claim that there is “no question” Edward and Gaveston were lovers, but is it a more fruitful mode of scholarship, literary or historical? What does this footnote tell us about Shakespeare’s play, or about the historical Richard II, or about Holinshed’s account of Richard’s reign, or about sodomy or homosexuality, except that the possibilities we might see in the text should not be entertained because they do not actually exist?

Similar logic appears throughout the existing scholarship on Edward II and Richard II. The discussion of “the question of Edward’s sexual orientation” in Roy Martin Haines’ definitive scholarly biography of Edward II consists of the restatement and carefully-worded denial of the accusations of sodomy in contemporary chronicles; the presentation of Edward’s children as evidence that “the king was clearly capable of sustained heterosexual relationships”; and the statement that “the medieval connotation of ‘sodomite’ need not concern us here, nor is it necessary to contend that the times could and did overlook homosexuality in the highest echelons of lay society,” which is followed by a summarization of Pierre Chaplais’ “no homo” argument that Edward and Piers Gaveston’s bond was one of adoptive brotherhood (42-43). Haines’ conservative empiricist methodology, in its effort not to claim anything that cannot be definitively proven, yields very little insight into Edward’s sexuality, and in the end turns away from the questions of culture and discourse that might prove more worthwhile to a biographer of Edward. If we can claim anything as truth, it is that we just don’t know enough about these kings’ lives to make a definitive statement about their actions or identities. That doesn’t mean they *didn’t* have sex with men, or that they *didn’t* act or desire or exist in ways that were considered unnatural—or that we should treat them as if they didn’t. Moreover, it doesn’t mean that there is no reason to use these kings and their histories as a way to explore the complexities of gender, sex, desire, and intimacy, whether in the Middle Ages or in the present.

The reality that prejudice continues to exist, and to shape historical and literary scholarship, makes it especially important to consider the ramifications of an expansive, universalizing approach to queerness—even if one does, as I do, use “queer” for the sake of its breadth and inclusivity. Will Stockton thoughtfully critiques this approach in his review of

Shakesqueer, an essay collection edited by Madhavi Menon. Responding to Menon's description of temporal, causal, and epistemological confusions as queer, Stockton writes that Menon seems to be suggesting "no particular desire—for chronological order, proof, or another person—has more potential than any other to be queer. This symmetry elides the fact that gay people often get bullied and sometimes killed for being queer, while someone who mixes up cause and effect might just get points deducted on an exam" (231). Expansive approaches to queerness allow us to examine how we think and write about sexuality and gender; how understandings of these issues are constructed within culture; how boundaries, definitions, and beliefs shift over time, or are consciously altered for political purposes. They allow us to move beyond the limitations placed on us by historically- and/or culturally-defined notions of sexuality as genital configuration or sex act; of gender as assigned sex or sex role. But this work should be done with care, with an attentiveness to the fact that these scholarly efforts are always intertwined with the forces of oppression and the continual struggle for material political liberation. I argue that enabling scholars who work on or with queerness—especially those scholars who are themselves queer—to work creatively, freed from the limitations set by the empiricist expectation that they should strive to do scholarship "correctly," is in itself an effort of liberation.

Having said that, I will define my project here more precisely. I bring together two different forms of late medieval texts, poetry and chronicle, in order to examine how Edward II and Richard II are simultaneously queer creations and creators of queerness. In the first chapter, I demonstrate how the early fourteenth-century poem *Adam Davy's Five Dreams of Edward II* forges an intimacy between its author and Edward II that mirrors the politically dangerous intimacy between king and favorite while also reaching towards a queer utopia of reciprocated

desire between king and subject. I then place medieval chronicles' spurious accounts of Edward II's murder by hot poker and Hugh Despenser's castration alongside a 2014 docuseries, *Britain's Bloodiest Dynasty*, that stages the particular narratives found in these chronicles. I argue that in both cases, mythic narratives about Edward and Despenser are used as a means of social regulation, presenting the queer man as a figure to be denounced in order to suppress the possibility of improper intimacy between men. In the second chapter, I read Richard Maidstone's late fourteenth-century praise poem *Concordia facta inter regem et cives Londonie* as a demonstration of how Richard II acts as a locus of queer desire, creating the possibility not only of sex between men but of a shifting of gender. Following that, I confront the ambiguous depictions of Richard's queerness in late medieval texts, including the chronicles of Thomas Walsingham and Adam of Usk, as well as John Gower's *Vox Clamantis*; I put these texts in relation to modern scholarship on Richard, showing that what they have in common is the propensity to suggest queerness—whether homosexuality, sodomy, femininity, or something else—in the process of denying it. The third and final chapter takes Richard's attempt to canonize his great-grandfather Edward as an opportunity to look at how their legacies as queer kings intersect and reflect each other. I end by using Carla Freccero's work on queer spectrality to argue for the worth of a continued effort to acknowledge and engage with Edward and Richard's queerness.

Chapter Two: Edward II

2.1 And I Fell Out of Bed Twice: *Adam Davy's Five Dreams About Edward II*

The early fourteenth-century poem known as *Adam Davy's Five Dreams About Edward II* is an obscure and rarely-studied text that has not thus far been argued to have any great literary or historical significance. The *Five Dreams* may not be a technically accomplished poem or an important account of Edward II's kingship, but it is a fascinatingly queer text: identifying himself as one whom God has tasked with attracting the king's attention, the author uses the poem as a means of becoming intimate with his sovereign. Though the *Five Dreams* is a praise poem, the textual relationship between poet and subject, subject and king, becomes politically transgressive in its replication of the unusual intimacy between Edward II and his male favorites.

While not much is known about the author or the precise date of composition, the poem identifies itself as being written by Adam Davy, marshal of Stratford-atte-Bow, and the five dreams can be dated as having occurred between 1307 and 1308, in the first years of Edward's reign (Haines 29-30). The only known copy exists in Laud Misc. 622, a composite manuscript dating to the late fourteenth century that had likely once been part of a larger volume (Clifton 31). Excluding *Five Dreams*, the texts deal with the history of the Middle East; "King Alexander" and "Siege of Jerusalem," both of which are extant in other manuscripts, are Middle English versions of Latin histories (30). It is unclear why the *Five Dreams* are included alongside these others.

The few scholars who have discussed the poem have written about it as an entry into the genre of political prophecy and as "a conventional panegyric ... that looked forward to great

deeds but without much sense of realism” (Scattergood 51; Haines 30-31). The scholarship emphasizes the unknowable, uninterpretable elements of the poems as much as the knowable, interpretable elements. Roy Martin Haines states that “it would be difficult or impossible to establish the precise purpose of the ‘Five Dreams’” (30). John Scattergood opens his chapter on the poem with a declaration that “a good deal of uncertainty surrounds the Middle English *Dreams* of Adam Davy” (50). The fact that the poem doesn’t lend itself easily to academic interpretation is precisely what makes it a good subject for a queer reading. To return to the definition of “queer” according to which I work, *Five Dreams* is a poem that can’t be made to signify monolithically. Even a scholar like Scattergood who works in a historicist mode, aiming to “determine a little more precisely in what political circumstances the Dreams were written, and to isolate a little more precisely Davy’s intentions,” arrives at an admission of unintelligibility: “the significance of the dream is obscure.... Even more obscure is the statement that: ‘Tweye poynts there ben that ben vnshewed’ (143) of which, other than this, nothing is said” (53). In the absence of a clear historical interpretation, an unhistoricist reading is perhaps the only way we can make sense of this poem.

What I want to bring into focus here is the presence of desire in the *Five Dreams*. The central conceit of the poem is that what Davy dreams is better than what he knows in reality. After describing the first dream, in which Edward stands before the shrine of Edward the Confessor and proves himself impervious to the attacks of two knights, Davy writes, “God me graunte so heven bliss, / As me mette this sweuene as it is” [God grant me such heavenly bliss as I saw in this dream] (39-40).¹ These lines tell us something important about Davy’s perspective

¹ All translations from Middle English and Middle French are my own.

as the narrator of this poem: what he dreams is “heaven bliss,” a divinely-granted pleasure that he has seen and now wants to experience for himself. Davy wants Edward to fulfill the prophecy not only because it would be proper kingship, but because it would be blissful to him personally. He makes this plea not for the sake of the realm, or for the people over whom Edward is sovereign, but for his own sake, so that he might have “heaven bliss.” Davy betrays a desire that is not one-dimensionally political but personal, intimate and corporeal. He wants Edward to rule well, but he also simply *wants* Edward: he wants Edward to reciprocate his attention, he wants to be intimate with Edward, he wants to be known to Edward in the same way that Edward is known to him.

Davy’s desire for Edward is underscored by his insistence that he was bidden by God to communicate his dreams to the king: Davy’s representation of God’s will is a reflection of his own wishes. Of his fourth dream, he writes:

On Wedenysday in clene leinte
 A voice me bede I ne shulde nough feinte;
 Of the sweuenes that her ben write,
 I shulde swithe don my lorde kyng to wite.

[On a Wednesday during Lent,
 A voice told me not to faint:
 Of the dreams I’ve written here,
 I should make haste to tell my lord the king.] (117-120)

Davy makes it clear that these dreams are being recorded for the express purpose of being conveyed to the king. There is no evidence that Davy and Edward had a preexisting relationship, such as that of minstrel and patron, that would enable Davy to easily bring his work to Edward's notice (Scattergood 51-52). Neither is there any evidence that Edward actually read this poem (though certainly he might have done—as in the case of Edward having sex with men, we don't know he *didn't*). In this sense, the poem carries the intense yet deeply imbalanced affective charge of celebrity fanmail. Davy is in Stratford-atte-Bowe dreaming about how sexy Edward looks in his crown—"a Coroune of gold bicom hym wel," Davy says—and Edward probably doesn't even know Davy exists (10).

Part of the function of this poem is to create an intimacy between Davy and Edward. Whether or not Davy succeeded in drawing the king's attention is unknown, but the text achieves a form of that desired intimacy in and of itself. Like the teenager who writes their own name alongside their beloved's in a bathroom stall, Davy inscribes his name alongside Edward's. Just as he introduces the subject of his poem by writing that "His name is ihote sir Edward the king, Prince of Wales, Engelonde the fair thing" [He is called Sir Edward the king, / Prince of Wales, England's fair thing], Davy introduces himself, writing, "Adam, the marchal, of stretford-atte-bowe— / Wel swithe wide his name is yknowe,— / He hym-self mette this metyng—" [Adam, the marshal of Stratford-atte-Bowe, whose name is known far and wide, dreamed these dreams] (5-6, 113-15). Despite the obvious imbalance between them, their identities are made equally explicit. This is not just a poem about the king in isolation, but a poem about Adam the marshal of Stratford-atte-Bowe's relationship with and feelings for the king.

The insistence that Davy was called upon by God to share his dreams seems to function simultaneously as a disavowal of his desire for intimacy with the king and an attempt to legitimize that desire. Continuing his description of the fourth dream, Davy writes of his hesitancy to do as the voice told him:

Ich ansuerde, 'that I ne mighth for derk gon.'

The vois me bad goo, for lighth ne shuld ich faile non,

And that I ne shulde lette for nothing,

That ich shulde shewe the kyng my metyng.

[I answered that I couldn't, because it had already gotten dark.

The voice bade me go, I couldn't give up just because there was no light,

And I shouldn't stop for anything

Until I showed the king my dreams.] (121-24)

Davy is claiming that not only did he not think to address a poem to Edward before God told him to, he didn't even want to do it when it was demanded of him. He frames the creation of the poem as an act of physical submission to God, ending the fourth dream with a prayer that reads: "Lorde, my body ich yelde thee to, / What youre wille is with me to do" [Lord, I yield my body to you, so that you can do what you will with me] (129-130). This prayer's emphasis on the body implies that even in putting pen to paper Davy is doing what God wants, not what he wants. One of the other means by which Davy attempts to mitigate this issue of social imbalance between

himself and Edward is to insist on his own fame and importance: he claims that “wel swithe wide his name is yknowe” [his name is known far and wide], and that “in stretforde-bowe he is yknowe, & ouere al” [he is known in Stratford-atte-Bowe, and all over] (114, 164). Surely, then, if there were any subject who deserved to draw the king’s notice, it would be Adam Davy of Stratford-atte-Bowe, who’s so well-known and well-liked. But Davy’s appeal to divine authority is his most powerful strategy of self-justification. After all, only God is higher in the hierarchy than the king. If God is the one who wants Adam Davy to tell his dreams to the king, then both Davy and the king are cleared of responsibility for any corruption of the social order that might result from their unusual intimacy.

With the fifth dream, Davy goes a step further in insisting that the poem was coerced, not something he created of his own free will. He writes, “The Aungel com to me, Adam Daui, & sede, “Bot thou, Adam, shewe this, thee worthe wel yuel mede!” [The angel came to me, Adam Davy, and said, ‘If you don’t write about this, great evil will come to you!’] (150-51). If we are to believe him, this is a poem that was created under threat of punishment. Why is Davy taking such great pains to convince us—or perhaps to convince Edward—that this isn’t something he *wants* to do, it’s something he *has* to do?

We can gain some insight into the play of power and desire here by reading these passages of *Five Dreams* alongside the Ricardian recension of the prologue to Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*. Gower, of course, was writing the *Confessio Amantis* in the 1380s, about seventy years after Davy’s dreams are thought to have taken place. I don’t intend to argue that these texts are directly connected, or that *Five Dreams* had any impact on the writing of the

Confessio Amantis; rather, this is an instance in which reading backwards in time, against the grain of linear history, encourages us to look at a text with a new perspective.

Gower, in describing his poem's origins, uses similar rhetoric to Davy in that he takes care to emphasize his own unwillingness to write it. Declaring the *Confessio Amantis* "a book for King Richardes sake," Gower tells us how he was rowing on the Thames when the king approached in his barge and invited Gower into it. Richard then charges Gower with the creation of "som newe thing I scholde booke, / That he himself it mighte looke / After the forme of my writyng" [some new thing I should write, so that he himself could read it] (*51-*53). Like Davy, Gower reiterates his unwillingness multiple times, mentioning that he has long been ill (*79-*80). But as Gower pointedly notes, you can't just say no to a king: "For that thing may nought be refused / Which that a king himselve byt" [nothing a king has ordered can be refused] (*74-*75). What is implicit in Gower's prologue is stated explicitly in *Five Dreams*, as Davy relates his claim that "great evil" would befall him should he not write down and share his dreams: the poet risks punishment by higher powers, royal or divine, if he does not do as he is told (150-51).

While the punishment that might have befallen Davy remains vague in *Five Dreams*, Gower alludes to the salient social and political pitfalls of writing a poem that will be circulated widely:

And thus upon his comaundyng

Myn hert is wel the more glad

To write so as he me bad;

And eek my fere is wel the lasse

That non envye schal compasse
 Without a resonable wite
 To feyne and blame that I write.

[And thus upon his command
 My heart is all the more glad
 To write as he bade me;
 And also my fear is lessened
 That no envious person shall try
 Without a good reason
 To misconstrue and criticize what I write.] (*57-*60)

A poet always risks the possibility of being censured based on a misunderstanding or perversion of their work. Gower relies on his royal patronage to protect him; knowing that it is the king for whom he writes, his fear of being misconstrued is lessened. This passage functions essentially as a disclaimer that whatever other people think he's saying, he only means to "preyseth that is to be preised" [praise what's worthy of being praised], as a good poet should (*63). Indeed, this disclaimer works to protect him both from the public and from the king, should he dislike the poem he commissioned. Gower is absolving himself of responsibility, firstly by making it clear that he's only writing this because the king wanted him to, and secondly by preemptively denying that he really meant any unpopular or politically dangerous things he might say. Returning to *Five Dreams*, we can see that in claiming to write according to God's will, Davy

absolves himself of responsibility in a similar way to Gower. While the position of the poet in relation to the king differs between these two cases—if we are to believe his narrative, Gower was commissioned by Richard II to write *Confessio Amantis*, while Davy seems to have had no connection at all to Edward II—publishing a poem for and about the king necessarily puts the author in a precarious position. Any political transgression on the part of the author, whether intentional or not, might cause him trouble, so he takes pains to preemptively protect himself.

Unlike *Confessio Amantis*, Davy's *Five Dreams* has not been examined for its potential political transgressivity, perhaps with the exception of speculations that the poem might be warning Edward against misrule or attempting to course-correct his reign (Scattergood 50).² Indeed, the dominant interpretation of *Five Dreams*, as discussed earlier, is that the poem praises Edward in a conventional manner. So again we are returned to the question of what it means that Davy is absolving himself of responsibility for what the poem says. I argue that what is potentially dangerous about *Five Dreams* is that the force of Davy's desire for Edward threatens the stability of their hierarchy-bound relationship as king and common subject.

It may be conventional for a subject like Davy to admire the king, but is it appropriate for him to *desire* the king, to wish for an intimacy with him, if to achieve that intimacy would be to raise him so far above his station? Although, as far as we know, Davy's desire was never reciprocated, his eagerness to become close to the king is even more threatening to the hierarchy when we take into consideration which king, specifically, we're talking about here. Edward's reputation as a bad king who lavished undue attention on his favorites while disregarding or bungling important matters of state was only cemented through the chronicles written after his

² For a thorough analysis of moral and political transgression in Gower, see Diane Watt, *Amoral Gower: Language, Sex, and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

deposition, but these flaws were already beginning to make themselves known at the beginning of his reign, in the period in which Davy was supposedly dreaming his five dreams.

Piers Gaveston, a Gascon squire who had been part of Edward's household in the years leading up to his father's death and his accession, was exiled from England in the spring of 1307, months before Davy's first dream, which is said to have occurred "the wedenysday bfore the decollacioun of seint Ion" [the Wednesday before the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist] on August 29th (Haines 21-22; Davy 37). Chroniclers' accounts, and scholarly interpretations of those accounts, differ on the issue of why Gaveston was exiled. The Guisborough chronicle claims that the exile resulted from Edward I's anger at his son's request to give Gaveston land, perhaps prefiguring the lavish gifts of lands and titles that Edward II showered upon Gaveston once he was on the throne (Haines 21-22). Upon Edward I's death in July 1307, his son almost immediately recalled Gaveston, and in the nobility's opposition to Gaveston's return we see how the intimacy between Edward II and Gaveston disrupted the hierarchy of the realm: the "homage et serment" declaration of 1308 casts Gaveston as one who, in using the king to raise himself, weakens the Crown (Haines 60). If Edward *had* read *Five Dreams* and, in response to Davy's praise, bestowed on him some favors or special attention, it might have been seen as part of the same pernicious pattern evident in Edward's relationship with Gaveston (and, later, Hugh Despenser the younger). For Edward, intimacy with his inferiors was risky; and as his inferior favorites like Gaveston and Despenser would discover, intimacy with the king was risky for them as well, despite the opportunity for great rewards.

The *Vita Edwardi Secundi* claims that, following his return from exile, Gaveston was infamous: not only did the nobility hate him, "almost all the country hated him too, both the

elder and younger men and the old, and foretold ill of him, so that his name was reviled far and wide” (*Vita* 5). Did Adam Davy know about Gaveston’s relationship with Edward, and his exile? In 1308, as his dreams continued, did he hear reports of the barons and earls’ anger at Gaveston’s return? Did he perceive any likeness between Gaveston, the knight of obscure origin who was made Duke of Cornwall because of his closeness with the young king, and himself, who was unknown to the king but wrote this poem for the sake of drawing his attention? Or do Davy’s repeated claims of being known far and wide suggest that he thinks of himself as worthy of the king’s favors in a way that the hated Gaveston was not?

These are questions that are impossible to answer historically, but contemplating them adds interest and complexity to a poem that heretofore has not been considered to have much worth beyond what it can tell us about Edward II’s reign. Placing the relationship between the praise poet and the sovereign object of his praise alongside the relationship between the king and his favorite illuminates them both: we see that the praise poet resembles the favorite in his flattery of the king and his hopes of receiving favor, and that the threat to the social order that the favorite poses is posed by the praise poet too. The text that at first seems to be locking the hierarchy into place through adoration of the sovereign by his subject reveals that it carries the same potential to collapse that hierarchy as the dangerous intimacy of Edward and Gaveston.

But for Davy (here I am writing of Davy as the narrator of the poem, a textual figure), the creation of an intimacy with the king, even within the bounds of the poem, has as much potential to be constructive as to be destructive: he takes care to clarify that his connection with the king is willed by God, that it is right and proper for him to tell the king of his dreams, because his fantasy-intimacy is too good to let go. In this sense, *Five Dreams* can be read as the kind of queer

utopian project that José Muñoz calls for in *Cruising Utopia*, which states that “queerness is not yet here; thus, we must always be future bound in our desires and designs” (185). The medieval prophecy as a genre is future-bound in its design, in its form and in its cultural function; Adam Davy’s *Five Dreams* is future-bound in its desires, in its hope that Edward II might become “Emperour in cristianete”—and the possibility that Davy might succeed in his aim of showing Edward his dreams (82).

Citing song lyrics that repeat the call, simultaneously playful and profound, to “take ecstasy with me,” Muñoz writes of queerness as an ecstatic future towards which we must always progress: “Taking ecstasy with one another, in as many ways as possible, can perhaps be our best way of enacting a queer time that is not yet here but nonetheless always potentially dawning” (187). Where Muñoz says “ecstasy,” Davy says “heaven bliss,” but the meaning is similar: in writing *Five Dreams* Davy is taking the ecstasy of his dreams with him, into the text of the poem, into the future that perhaps might be disappointing to him but that carries, nonetheless, the ever-renewing opportunity for the intimacy that he desires. It is no coincidence that a poem reaching towards a utopian future is grounded by references to specific events that even we in the twenty-first century can track according to the calendar: *Five Dreams* reaches from the here-and-now, in which Davy’s desire for the king remains unreciprocated, to the queer time that did not exist for Davy and that still does not exist for us.

To conclude this reading, I return to the passage containing the line about the “tweye poynts” that Scattergood pronounced “obscure,” hoping that I can make a queer sort of sense of it. After describing his last dream, in which Edward appears with an angel before the high altar at Canterbury, his clothes red like blood, Davy writes:

Tweye poyntz there ben that ben unshewed,
 ffor me ne worthe to clerk ne lewed;
 Bot to sir Edward oure kyng,
 hym wil ich shewe thilk metyng.

[Two points there have been that have been hidden,
 Since it's not right for me to show them, to a learned man or a layman;
 But to Sir Edward our king,
 Him I will show this dream.] (143-146)

It seems only right that a twentieth-century scholar should find it difficult to explicate the first line, since Davy himself says that he won't reveal his meaning to anyone but the king, however learned his readers or interlocutors might be. The private intimacy between these "two points" is sanctioned by God, who in giving Davy these dreams has brought him and Edward together, and established a space in which further intimacies might flourish secretly, beyond the audience's vision. God has played matchmaker for Davy and Edward, and now he's giving them room to be alone together. Knowing that any reading advanced here can never represent a final or true understanding of the text, I propose that we take these "two points" as the two men whose intimacy the poem establishes, whose precise positions we do not know and will never know, but whose relations nonetheless grant both the writer and the audience pleasure, even if the pleasure is that of the perpetually-unfulfilled prophecy.

2.2 This Boy is a Bottom: Myths about Edward II

The queerest thing about Edward II is that every “fact” about him that seems to prove his homosexuality has turned out not to be a fact at all. The received narrative about Edward II is essentially a vague, distorted summary of Marlowe’s *Edward II*: Edward was so gay for Gaveston that he ruined his own reign for Gaveston’s sake, after which he was deposed, imprisoned, and murdered with a hot poker inserted into his rectum, because he was gay. Scholars have made a great effort to explore and document these myths *as* myths: the hot poker story seems to have originated with mid-fourteenth-century French chroniclers Jean le Bel and Jean Froissart, while the accusations of sodomy between Edward and his favorites are also unverifiable claims made by chroniclers writing at some distance from their subjects (Sponsler 146; Mortimer 53-55). A quick search on Twitter, however, reveals that these narratives about Edward II, whose origins are in the doubtful accounts of fourteenth-century chronicles, are still alive and well. In 2017, the popular historian Tom Holland jokingly rephrased a BBC headline about British Prime Minister Theresa May as “Am told Edward II will face a poker up his arse unless he sacks Piers Gaveston & the Despencers...” (@holland_tom, 10 June, 2017). In 2015, comedian and author Guy Branum tweeted, “Edward II had a hot poker shoved up his ass for loving Piers Gaveston in 1327” (@guybranum, 4 February, 2015). These narratives have such staying power because they work with such potent social forces: prejudice, spectacle, justice and injustice, schadenfreude. They allow us to make sense of history, to feel that we understand exactly how and why Edward was deposed and murdered. When we study Edward’s life and death closely, peeling away the embellishment and distortion of longstanding myth, we discover uncertainty and educated speculation, which can make us feel at a loss.

So the myths persist, even when we should know better. The 2014 Channel 5 documentary series *Britain's Bloodiest Dynasty*, hosted by popular historian Dan Jones, presents a reenactment of Edward's death via hot poker in grisly, visceral detail: we're shown the poker being heated in a fire, then a painfully long sequence of Edward screaming and struggling as he's held in position to be penetrated (42:47-43:14). In one shot, the tip of the poker hovers before Edward's terrified face, inviting us either to sympathize or to glory in his pain and fear (42:50). But just before the act itself is rendered, we return to Jones walking through Kenilworth Castle, where Edward was in fact held captive, asking the camera, "Even after everything Edward had done, how could a king be tortured and killed in such a horrific fashion? The answer, of course: he wasn't" (43:18-43:24). Jones explains that the poker myth persists because "the idea of a humiliated, emasculated, possibly homosexual king being buggered to death is too good a story to be troubled by the truth," after which there's a cut back to the reenactment: we're shown Edward's executioner ramming the poker into his body, then Edward writhing and screaming (43:40-44:08). Despite the admittance that the narrative being presented is almost certainly not true, the episode ends on a shot of Edward's screaming face, establishing that image, above all others, as an encapsulation of his life and his reign—because the idea of an emasculated homosexual man being killed by an act that mimics sodomy is not only better than what the historical record actually proves, but better than any other fiction about Edward II. The series renders Hugh Despenser's execution similarly: the reenactment depicts Despenser's genitals being cut off at the behest of Queen Isabella, as reported by Froissart, though no other chronicle contains a similar account (39:50-40:15; Sponsler 153). In the case of Despenser, there is no

acknowledgment that what is being depicted onscreen is, like the hot poker myth, unlikely to be true.

The decision by the creators of *Britain's Bloodiest Dynasty* to televise these chronicles' spurious accounts of the deaths of Hugh Despenser the Younger and Edward II shares broad ideological strokes with the chronicles themselves. In both the medieval and modern examples, the deaths function as theater that, in decrying certain behaviors—sodomy, treason, and misrule for the chroniclers, homosexuality and bad decision-making for the documentary-makers—reassert social control. Claire Sponsler, in “The King’s Boyfriend,” lucidly demonstrates how Froissart’s narrative of Despenser’s execution renders the event as a public performance in which Isabella’s punishment of Despenser establishes Edward’s failings as a king and justifies his removal from power (144). Froissart relies on what Sponsler calls heteronormative discourses but which I would call simply normative discourses; the method of Despenser’s execution champions Isabella as wife, queen, and mother while underscoring the sodomitical nature of the Edward-Despenser relationship by emphasizing how different Despenser was from that feminine ideal (144).

Describing Despenser’s emasculation, Froissart follows Jean le Bel, as he often does: “Once he was bound, his penis and testicles were cut off, because he was a heretic and a sodomite, even, it was said, with the king” [quant il fu ainssi loiet on li coppa tout premiers le vit es les couilles par tant qu’il estoit heritez et sedomittes ensi qu’on disoit et meysmement dou roy meysme] (34). Afterwards, his heart was removed and thrown onto the fire along with his genitals, “because it was a false and traitorous heart” [par tant qu’il estoit faux de coer et traytrez] (34). Despenser’s political transgressions—treason, heresy, sodomy—are violently and

permanently inscribed into his body, retroactively creating visible evidence of his misdeeds for the spectators of the execution to observe (Sponsler 153). A self-justifying logic is established: Despenser is having his genitals and heart removed—the corporeal representations of his treason, heresy, and sodomy—in order that his mutilated body might serve as evidence that he has committed treason, heresy, and sodomy.

Sponsler explores how this version of Despenser's execution stands apart from traditions of punishment in the late Middle Ages, which differed according to the crime and the sex of the offender: male traitors were usually punished by drawing and quartering or, for an offender of high status, beheading, while female traitors were burned (155). Sodomy, which was often linked with heresy, was usually punished by castration and burning (156). The ambiguity about exactly which crimes Despenser was being punished for, along with the lack of clarity about which acts were meant to be punishments for which crimes, makes Despenser and his execution a site of transgression in terms of both gender and sexuality. The burning of his various excised body parts echoes both the burning of female traitors and the burning of male sodomites: castrated, then burned as a woman might be, Despenser is feminized by multiple means, symbolic and corporeal. Ironically, this feminization is a way for Queen Isabella to remove Despenser as a competitor for Edward's attention and as a dominant influence on the king: Despenser is less of a threat to Isabella as a feminine presence than as a sodomitical, treasonous man. Despenser's lack of penis and testicles, along with his torn-out bowels, remind the spectators that Isabella still bears the reproductive system that allows her to fulfill the role expected of her as Edward's wife and the mother of his legitimate heir, to whom Edward would later surrender the crown.

This reading of Froissart also sheds light on the hot poker myth, which shares with Hugh Despenser's castration the capacity for social control via the symbolic, theatrical punishment of specific transgressions. Investigating the various accounts of Edward's death, Ian Mortimer concludes that the hot poker narrative was first recorded sometime after 1333 in the French lay chronicle known as the *Brut*, and was probably only widely circulated with the popularization of two texts, a continuation of the *Brut* and the second redaction of Higden's *Polychronicon*, in the following decades (53-56). This narrative therefore stands at a significant distance from Edward's death in 1327, just as Froissart stood at a distance from Despenser's death; these later, embellished accounts serve more to dramatize moral lessons than to accurately document past events. Examining the logic of treason in late-fourteenth-century chronicles, Paul Strohm describes how written accounts of gossip and scandal, in particular those that represented treason, unify their audience in an understanding of what is proper or improper (134). The accounts of Edward and Despenser's deaths discussed here work as a form of social regulation, making it clear that certain behaviors are wrong and liable to be punished, and inviting the audience to pass judgment on the denigrated subjects. The audience of Froissart's chronicles occupies the same position as the audience of Despenser's execution in Froissart's account.

While Mortimer emphasizes the political nature of the accusations of sodomy lodged against Edward, arguing that the hot poker narrative is more likely political propaganda than evidence of Edward's actual practices, the sexualized nature of the myth warrants continued exploration of its sexual and gendered dimensions. W.M. Ormrod connects the hot poker myth with Froissart and le Bel's accounts of Despenser's castration, suggesting that these posthumous narratives "began to construct the political relationship of king and favourite in the sexualised

imagery of a meeting between Hugh's genitals and Edward's anus" ("Sexualities" 39). Taken together, these narratives create a politicized representation of the physical realities of sex between men. The bad king is imagined as the sodomized partner, and the nefarious favorite as the sodomizer. Both parties are, in different ways, feminized—Edward by the anal penetration, and Despenser by the castration. Despenser may not have penetrated Edward; the two may not have had anal sex, or they may not have had sex at all; but certainly some of their contemporaries did do these things, and in the falsification of these death narratives, those men's experiences are brought into contact with Edward and Despenser's relationship as it existed, however it existed.

This connection also works in the opposite direction: surely there must have been men who had anal sex with other men and recognized the intimations of that act in the narratives of Despenser's castration and Edward's death by hot poker. The social mores that these narratives enforce—the privileging of the idealized woman over the emasculated, feminized man, the condemnation of anal sex, the warnings against imbalanced relationships between men of different social status—must have shaped the lives not just of kings and courtiers in similar positions to Edward and Despenser, but of men who had sex with men. It's not surprising that this can't be proved with historical evidence: the presence of such social regulation in the late Middle Ages is one reason why there is an excess of evidence proving the idea of sex between men was used as a rhetorical device to render political criticism, but a relative paucity of evidence about the lives, experiences, and perspectives of those men who did have sex with each other.

Despite its unspeakability, male-male sexuality was still part of, not distinct from, the web of connections between men that constituted royal and noble social structures in late medieval England. Sponsler concludes that Froissart's narrative of Hugh Despenser's death "attests to at least partial acceptance of homosocial and homoerotic behavior among men at court, implicitly recognizing that male affectional and associational structures did not just lurk hidden within the government but in fact constituted it and were necessary for the operation of courtly culture" (161). The regulatory function of the chronicle was so crucial because intimacy between men could not be done away with entirely: if social problems like royal favoritism, improper allocation of the crown's resources, and unnatural sex acts were going to be prevented, it had to be done by a reshaping of connections between men, not a total severance of them. But that meant that there would continue to be relationships that pushed against the boundaries of what was natural or proper, which necessitated that constant attention be given to how desire and intimacy flowed between men, and how those personal relationships influenced social and political exchanges.

At about 700 years' distance, *Britain's Bloodiest Dynasty* adopts a similar strategy of social regulation in their reproduction of these chronicles' accounts. Edward and Despenser's deaths are presented in violent detail in order to demonstrate that these are figures to be reviled: the intimacies between Edward, Gaveston, and Despenser are decried as the root cause of the political turbulence that occurred during Edward's reign. Curiously, the central difference between the chronicles' version of events and that of the TV series is that the TV series denies the possibility that Edward may very well have been sexually involved with Gaveston and Despenser. When Gaveston is introduced, he is labeled as Edward's "brother" and "best friend,"

simultaneously anticipating and rebutting the suggestion that their relationship may have been a sexual one (3:11-3:32). When Despenser's genitals are cut off, the narrator explains that "Isabella wants everyone to know that Despenser has come between her and her husband"; the sexual dimensions of the act, however, go without explication (39:51-40:06). This approach, in which the queerness of the subject is suppressed but the false narrative of the homosexual king and his favorites getting their just deserts is perpetuated, is a strange hybrid of empiricist historicism and what I might venture to call "straight unhistoricism," to differentiate it from Goldberg and Menon's queer unhistoricism. Although the series acknowledges the unreliability of the hot poker narrative, making a show out of correcting an oft-repeated myth, it nonetheless relies on debatable accounts of Edward and Despenser's deaths to achieve its effects.

The claim that the hot poker myth is "too good a story to be troubled by the truth" suggests that the series is relying on these accounts to provide entertainment (43:50-44:02). But they are considered entertaining because they provide a convenient means by which male-male sexuality can be discursively regulated. While the chroniclers discussed here are concerned with demonstrating the evils of sodomy, heresy, and treason, *Britain's Bloodiest Dynasty* is inflected with homophobia as it exists today. Edward II is described as "possibly homosexual," without any qualification of the term, in order to locate a modern understanding of *homosexuality*, specifically, as the object of regulation. Yet the logic of twenty-first-century homophobia, unlike the forms of prejudice evidenced in the chronicles, dictates that homosexuality be denied and made invisible at the same time it is produced for scrutiny, so that Edward and Gaveston are portrayed as "best friends" in the same narrative that indulges in the spectacle of the homosexual king being buggered to death.

Chapter Three: Richard II

3.1 Which Is the Rooster, Which Is the Hen?: Queer Transgression in Maidstone's

Concordia

Concordia facta inter regem et cives Londonie, written by the Carmelite friar Richard Maidstone between 1392 and his death in 1396, is like *Adam Davy's Five Dreams of Edward II* in being a poem in praise of the currently-reigning king. One key difference is that while Adam Davy remains obscure, Maidstone's life and literary work are relatively well-documented. There is evidence that Maidstone was confessor to John of Gaunt, suggesting that, while he was not exactly *in* the elite circles surrounding the king, he had greater access and a higher standing than Davy (Carlson 8). Another key difference is that while in *Five Dreams* the king's deeds are entirely imaginary, the *Concordia* is a contemporary rendering of an actual event: in 1392, following a conflict with the oligarchic merchants of London sparked by their refusal to give him a loan, Richard symbolically reasserted his absolute sovereignty over the people of London by staging a pageantic progression through the city. *Five Dreams* is a prophecy, future-bound; the *Concordia* positions itself as documentation of recent history.

In the introduction to the most recent edition of the *Concordia*, David R. Carlson describes the *Concordia* as "propaganda" that "engrosses royal power, apologizing for and promoting a peculiarly Ricardian notion of 'peace,' in the form of submission to royal authority, however willful or arbitrary it might show itself to be. This is the sense made by the poem of the key term in its title, concordia: blank authoritarianism" (Carlson 18). If the effect of Richard's "reconciliation" with London was to display his power and his subjects' submission to him, the *Concordia* continues that work. While Lynn Staley argues that Maidstone's references to

classical figures such as Troilus and Absalom suggest he “most likely intended to instruct as well as to praise his prince, implicitly urging him to maintain control by maintaining a wisdom those earlier figures did not possess,” her reading aligns with Carlson’s in its description of the *Concordia* as an affirmation of Richard’s sovereignty (170). The *Concordia*, Staley writes, “offers Richard a portrait of himself as triumphing over both the powers of time and of rebellion ... in a way that is emphatically ceremonial, formal and hieratic” (170). In documenting Richard’s reconciliation with London, Maidstone clearly recognizes the power of spectacle to affirm Richard’s sovereignty, and transforms the multi-sensory spectacle of the reconciliation into a textual reproduction that, despite the difference in medium, accomplishes the same thing.

In the *Concordia*, as in *Five Dreams*, we see the textual creation of an intimacy between the poet and the king. While Davy states his intent outright, the desire and intimacy we see in the *Concordia* comes slantwise, establishing a connection between the poet and the king by moving from point to point. Before Maidstone even begins to speak about Richard II, he speaks of two other Richards—himself and the friend [*socius*] to whom the poem is dedicated. Following a quotation of Cicero “in praise of friends,” Maidstone addresses the *socius* Richard:

Hinc tibi, Ricarde, duplante iugo michi iuncte

(Nomen et omen habes: sic socius meus es),

Gaudia visa michi Trenovantum nuper in urbe

Actus amicitia glisco referre modo;

Et licet incultum carmen tibi condere curem,

Parce, precor, cure: parcere debet amor.

[So, Richard, who are joined to me by double yoke
 (You share my name and symbol: we're companions),
 To you I'm drawn by friendship, and I long to tell
 The joys I saw just recently at Trinovant;
 I hesitate to offer you a clumsy song:
 Have pity on my fear, I beg, as love demands.] (9-14)

Carlson suggests an identification of the *socius* Richard as the Carmelite Richard Lavenham, confessor to Richard II (32). He writes in a footnote that the fact that Maidstone, the *socius*, and the king all share the name of Richard “engender[s] the notion that the *socius* addressed here was the king himself,” but takes care to correct this notion: “That a person of Maidstone’s situation would have addressed a monarch in the terms used in 1-14, especially a monarch possessed of the kind of extraordinary and frightened self-regard that characterizes Richard II ... is very difficult to conceive, the more so inasmuch as the rest of the poem’s point is to elevate to all but divine stature the person ostensibly addressed so familiarly” (32n91). Anachronistic twentieth-/twenty-first-century readings such as those pointed out by Carlson prove powerful, if unintentional, queerings of the text. A misinterpretation of Maidstone’s *socius* as Richard II creates a version of the Concordia in which those social boundaries *are* breached, and the subject achieves a transgressive familiarity with his king. Richard II might very well have been horrified at being addressed with the familiarity with which Maidstone addresses his friend, but luckily he

is not currently in a position to object to a reading in which he is identified with Maidstone's *socius*.

One of these scholarly texts that Carlson corrects, Charles R. Smith's 1973 doctoral dissertation on the *Concordia*, seems to happen accidentally into the sexual—indeed, homosexual—valences of a reading of Richard II as Maidstone's *socius*. At first suggesting that the quotation of Cicero on friendship “allows Maidstone to dedicate the *Concordia* to Richard II with wit, grace, and compliment”—presumably maintaining the hierarchical relations appropriate to king and subject—Smith changes his tack and argues that Maidstone “prostitutes his own honor and the dignity of the poem to flatter the king,” that he “plays the servile courtier, flattering the king with fulsome praises” (130). Smith's misinterpretation of the *Concordia* creates a connection between transgressive male-male sex, praise poetry, and the kind of courtier-king relationships that, to the late thirteenth/early fourteenth-century eye, were so easily corrupted and made dangerous by flattery—criticism of which often coexists with accusations of sodomy between kings and their male favorites. Once again, we see how the roles of the praise poet and the favorite overlap, despite the poet remaining at a remove from the king.

While I don't intend to advocate for a reading such as Smith's that claims a definitive identification of Richard II as Maidstone's *socius*, I argue that the implications of such a reading still exist even if we recognize Maidstone as addressing someone of similar position like Richard Lavenham. Simply by calling attention to the fact that he and his friend share the name “Richard,” Maidstone is implicitly drawing Richard II into this bond of companionship, making it a triple yoke rather than a double. The shared name superimposes Richard II's image over both that of the *socius* Richard and that of the poet. In her discussion of the poem *De quadripartita*

regis specie, part of a volume compiled for the king, Staley writes that it “suggests that those who trafficked in the king’s image sought Richard as an audience; the wares they held out were versions of his own face from which they urged him to choose” (123-24). While we don’t know for certain, Carlson assumes that the original audience of the *Concordia* was royal or patronal, meaning that it’s very possible Richard could have read it, even if it wasn’t addressed to him (32). As his well-documented patronage of the arts proves, Richard was an avid participant in the artistic creation of his own kingly image; in commissioning poetry, in patronizing poets, in encouraging the representation of his own sovereignty through poetry, Richard took on the role of a creator, redirecting his sovereign gaze onto itself by viewing himself through the eyes of a poet. That is to say that, in the *Concordia*’s introduction, Richard II’s presence exists as much within the poet Richard as the *socius* Richard. The king is simultaneously the one who offers admiration and the one who is in the position of rejecting or accepting it. That the same name should be shared between these three disparate figures is unsurprising—how many medieval men at any given point must have shared their name with the king, whether he be a Richard, an Edward, or a Henry? Yet this connection between the three Richards, this ambiguity created by the shared name, allows Richard II’s identity to move from king to poet to dedicatee.

The relations between the *socius*, poet, and king—as well as between the king and the favorite, which as we have seen overlap with the relations between the king and poet—are fraught with social and political tensions. None of them are free, simply by virtue of their position, from the possibility of disrupting the social order. Favorites are often accused of diminishing the king’s power; the ordinance that exiled Gaveston from England in 1311, recorded in the *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, accuses Gaveston of “lording it [the king’s treasure] over

the state of the king and of the crown to the ruin of the king and kingdom,” and of acting “to the great disgrace and damage of the kingdom, the disinheritance of the crown, and the destruction of the people” (35-37). This would seem to make the favorite dissimilar to the praise poet, who dedicates himself to the maintenance of the king’s power—but in fact the favorite relies even more than the poet on the king keeping his power, since as soon as the king is out, the favorites are too. Poets of the Ricardian era like Gower and Chaucer, who during Richard’s rule were willing to affirm his power through literary praise, proved more than capable of adapting to the change of leadership that came with Richard’s deposition. Meanwhile, royal favorites such as John Bushy and William le Scrope, who used their own political power to consolidate Richard’s, lost their heads during Bolingbroke’s rebellion. As Carson points out, it would have been dangerous for the poet to address the king familiarly, casting him as his *socius*; but it was also dangerous for the king to be overly familiar with his inferiors. Walsingham accuses Richard and his close companion Robert de Vere, whom Richard created as duke of Ireland, of having an “obscene familiarity” [*familiaritatis obscene*] (1: 799). While scholars have not considered this to be convincing evidence of a sexual relationship between Richard and de Vere, the charge of an “obscene familiarity” does suggest that to the medieval commentator, an improper or excessive familiarity between king and subject, in whatever form, was a mark against the king.

Examining the precariousness of each of the positions set out in the *Concordia*’s introduction, we see that in the Ricardian era, just as in the time of Edward II, proper relations between men were always intertwined with, and threatening to give way to, improper relations. The significance of male social connections is apparent in the *Concordia*’s introduction: in telling his *socius* that “to you I’m drawn by friendship, and I long to tell / The joys I saw just

recently at Trinovant,” Maidstone justifies his praise of the king as a means of strengthening the intimacy between the poet and his *socius*. Conversely, the invocation of friendship between social equals at the outset of the poem qualifies the praise of the king that follows, establishing the poem as a work whose message adheres to the late-medieval social hierarchy that places the king above all others, a hierarchy in which everyone knows their place. But if the ambiguity of the Christian name is enough to destabilize that hierarchy by suggesting the existence of improper relations between men, the hierarchy may already be profoundly unstable.

Up to this point, I’ve limited myself to issues of male-male relationships depicted as such—that is to say, there has been no question that Richard II, Maidstone, and the *socius* are men being examined in their relation to each other. However, another element of the Concordia that warrants further analysis is the ambiguity of gender implicit in Maidstone’s rendering of the citizens of London as Richard’s spouse, and of Richard’s queen as an avatar of the citizens of London. Following the introduction, Maidstone begins the poem proper with an extended figuration of this spousal relationship:

For now you get your king again, your spouse, your lord,
 Whom Wicked Tongue had taken from you by deceit.
 Its grudging troop had roused the king to wrath at you,
 So that the groom gave up and left his marriage bed;
 But since your love is whole—your lover’s face more fair
 Than even that of Paris—he can’t hate for long. (21-26)

The political conflict between Richard and the people of London is represented as a personal conflict between husband and wife, casting Richard as husband/lord and the people of London as wife/vassal; the superiority of husband over wife is taken for granted here, the subordinate wife used as an implicit ideal for the Londoners to emulate. There is already a sense of transgression in the representation of London as a collective “wife” to Richard, especially considering that those who were convicted and fined for their refusal to comply with Richard’s demands were mayors, sheriffs, and aldermen, which is to say men (Carlson 4-5). But Maidstone pushes the envelope further by representing Richard’s punishment of these men as a husband leaving his marriage bed [*thalamus*].

Hollie Morgan interprets Maidstone’s emphasis on the chamber and the marriage bed as a representation of the the city’s wish to enter into a privileged political relationship with the crown, the marriage-bed being a space in which husband and wife communicate openly and honestly (105). But in order to go directly to an interpretation of Maidstone’s marriage bed as a metaphorical political space, one must bypass acknowledgment that one of the most important activities that take place in a marriage bed is sex. Without discounting the political dimensions of the term, I’d like to return to this point and linger for a moment. In the lines quoted above, the disruption of the political relationship between the king and his subjects is depicted as a disruption of conjugal relations. Maidstone goes on to describe the king as “yearning to approach his marriage bed as spouse,” suggesting that a proper relationship between king and subject corresponds to a healthy sex life between a married couple, and that furthermore the king himself desires such a connection (42). Again, as in the introduction, the possibility of sex between men emerges, haunting Maidstone’s earnest attempts to chastise the citizens of London for failing to

be properly subservient to the king. Whereas in the introduction the implication of male-male sex stems from improper social relations between men, it appears here through a confusion of gender.

As a counterpart to the unsatisfactory marriage between Richard and his subjects, Maidstone provides his audience with an image of the ideal marriage in his representation of Richard and Anne. Both of them are described individually in turn as beautiful and well-appointed objects of desire: Richard, “so fair, like Troilus or Absolon, / Makes captive all the hearts of those that see him there,” while Anne is covered with gems “from head to toe; there’s nothing visible but gems!” (112-13, 125). They are not beautiful simply because they happen to be beautiful; rather, their beauty is evidence that they sit at the top of the hierarchy, that they deserve to wield the power they do. Richard and Anne’s dress constituted an important element of their political pageantry, and Maidstone extends and elaborates on this pageantry through the text of the poem: not only does he render the costuming in its full glory, he emphasizes their personal physical beauty, describing Anne’s “very pretty limbs” and Richard’s “beauty” (111, 116). Notably, there is little distinction between masculine and feminine forms of beauty in these descriptions of Richard and Anne. Though much more attention is given to Anne’s dress than to Richard’s, their good looks are described in similar terms and with equal emphasis. Maidstone makes an effort to distinguish Richard and Anne in terms of their roles as husband and wife only when it comes to the crux of the poem—the king’s decision to restore the rights and liberties of the Londoners.

London’s chief representative within the text is “the knight appointed by the king as London’s ward,” later referred to simply as “the warden” [*custos*], who leads the train of

aldermen, nobles, and craftsmen through the city (45, 71-95). The warden speaks to the Londoners, telling them to prepare for the king's appearance, and on the Londoners' behalf, announcing to Richard that "with keys and sword the city gives up willingly" (45-54, 140). Again Maidstone makes use of the spousal metaphor, this time through the figure of the warden rather than in narration, as the warden tells Richard:

[“]Suffused with tears within, it [London] earnestly entreats

The king to enter in his room in gentleness.

.....

Let not the bridegroom hate the room he's always loved;

No cause remains by which his love should be reduced.”

[["]Hoc rogat assidue, lacrimis madefacta deintus,

Mitis ut in cameram rex velit ire suam.

.....

Non oderit thalamum sponsus quem semper amavit;

Nulla subest causa cur minuatur amor.”] (142-47)

The warden uses the term *camera* in line 143, but *thalamus* makes its second appearance in line 146. The notion of the marriage bed or the bridal chamber takes on a different meaning when it appears in dialogue between the warden and Richard himself, rather than as part of Maidstone's summary of the conflict between the crown and the city. When the warden, as the leader of the

train of Londoners, tells Richard, appearing in his role of ruler, that the city would like the king to come into their marriage bed, it also reads simply as the warden entreating Richard to come to bed with him. In rendering a single man representative of London, the marriage bed metaphor takes on a corporeality that underlines its inherent eroticism: the entire city of London couldn't actually go to bed with Richard, but the warden certainly could. Thus the idealized image of the husband and wife enjoying Church-approved sex and egalitarian political intercourse is overlaid with what to Maidstone would be a more disturbing image—a king in bed with a male inferior.

Anne functions, then, not only as a mediator between the city and the crown but a conduit through which dangerous desire is rerouted. As the king and queen parade through Southwark, the warden once more addresses Richard on behalf of the Londoners, saying that the citizens are “ecstatic, for this day has brought great joy for them, / Since you now deign to come back to your marriage room” (206-7). But after Richard accepts the citizens' offerings and declares peace in the city, the warden appeals to Anne by focusing on her role as queen, wife, and woman: “The queen is able to deflect the king's firm rule, / So he will show a gentle face to his own folk. / A woman soothes a man by love: God gave him her” (227-29). Because Anne is a woman, and Richard's queen, she can accomplish things that the warden cannot: she can calm Richard's anger, persuade him to continue repairing the crown's relationship with London, and she can have sex with Richard. She can make full use, politically and interpersonally and sexually, of the marriage bed that she shares with the king.

Acting on behalf of the warden, and therefore on behalf of the Londoners, Anne “falls, bowed down, prostrate, before the royal feet” and pleads for Richard to “restore the city to its ancient rights / And give it back at last its former liberties” (464, 491-92). As Carlson has

suggested, submission to Richard is crucial to the restoration of peace (18). Anne mirrors the Londoners' reestablished subservience to the king by taking a physical pose of submission, literally laying herself at Richard's feet. She also relies on the rhetoric of love to effect political action, calling him *dulcis*, *dulcis amor*, and *mi dulcis amor* before begging him "by that love that you have / For me, if I do anything to earn your love," to do as she asks (467-68, 477, 487-88). Not only does she invoke her love for him, she refers to his love for her, modelling the reciprocated love that Maidstone wishes there to be between Richard and London. Adopting his wife's affectionate language, Richard addresses Anne as *dulcissima* and agrees to do what she has asked (493-95). The crucial moment of total reconciliation between Richard and London, the restoration of the status quo, is represented in the Concordia as a loving, if pageantic, exchange between husband and wife. Yet the fact that Anne has played her part at the direct request of the warden suggests a reading of the scene in which the warden is acting through Anne, in essence becoming Anne. But this transformation of the warden—a man, a knight so low-ranking that he could not hope to enjoy familiarity with the king—into Anne—a woman, Richard's wife, an appropriate match for the king—does not entirely banish the suggestion of sex between Richard and his male subjects. It further muddles same-sex sexuality and the crossing of genders.

It is not only the warden who skirts perhaps too close to impropriety in moving towards womanhood: Richard does, too. In the article "Queer Times," which argues that "the idea of royal queerness" existed in the literature of the Ricardian era well before Bolingbroke's rebellion and the rise of Lancastrian propaganda, Sylvia Federico draws our attention to Maidstone's use of Venus in relation to Richard (26). Describing Richard's beauty, Maidstone writes, "If lavish Nature had increased his beauty more, / Then jealous Venus might have locked him in her

room!” [Larga decoris ei si plus natura dedisset, / Clauderet hunc thalamis invida forte Venus!”] (116-17). Once again, Maidstone’s use of the term *thalamus* invokes the idea of sexual desire for Richard in a way that exceeds the poet’s laudatory intentions. Federico writes that despite Maidstone’s insistence on praising the king, “the text nevertheless contributes to the interpretation of Richard’s striking—even unnatural—good looks as a sign of sexual misconduct” (38-39). In this passage Richard is rendered as a figure whose desirability may interfere with his kingship; Maidstone reveals an underlying anxiety that Richard might be found in Venus’ marriage-bed rather than the one he is meant to be sharing with London. What makes this possibility even more worrying is that Venus’ appearance suggests the transgression of gender, the feminization of men.

Following the figure of Venus from one Ricardian text to another, Federico links the Concordia’s “risqué political image” of Venus locking Richard in her nuptial chamber to the oft-quoted passage in the St Albans chronicle about Richard’s “knights of Venus” (38). According to Walsingham, these knights, who enjoyed favor with the king, showed “more prowess in the bedroom than on the field of battle, defending themselves more with their tongue than with their lance, being alert with their tongues, but asleep when martial deeds were required” [plus ualentes in thalamo quam in campo, plus lingua quam lancea premuniti, ad dicendum uigiles, ad faciendum acta marcia somnolenti] (1: 814-15). If Richard narrowly escaped being captive in Venus’ *thalamus*, then these knights seem to have gone willingly, albeit to their own detriment. In the article “Knights of Venus,” W.M. Ormrod gathers textual evidence from multiple medieval sources in order to argue that to Walsingham, Venus may have appeared as “a kind of nemesis to masculinity” (294). In several texts from the twelfth to the fourteenth century, including Alain de

Lille's *The Complaint of Nature* and the anonymous anti-French poem "A dispute between an Englishman and a Frenchman," Venus is an agent of gender transformation, feminizing men's physicalities and mannerisms, even castrating them ("Knights of Venus" 294). Though Venus is shown to be the agent of change, she is not necessarily the originator of it: these texts imply that the transformation occurs because of the man's own indulgence in vice (294). Ormrod writes that "to position them [Richard's knights] in this context was therefore to imply not merely that they over-indulged themselves in the pursuit of love, but also that they made themselves somewhat less than 'real' men" (295). A woman, of course, is what you get when a man becomes less than a real man: in *The Complaint of Nature*, the "unmanning" of men [*devirat arte viros*] is equated with the conversion of "hes" into "shes" [*illos facit illas*] (qtd. in Ormrod 294). Emasculation and feminization occur concurrently.

Ormrod cautions against assuming that such accusations of femininity necessarily imply male-male sexuality, though both feminized men and men who had sex with men were described as "against kind" or "against nature" (295). In fact, Ormrod points out, there was a medieval belief that too much sex between men and women could effect such feminization (295). But to read Richard in the *Concordia* as one who is at risk of being turned into a woman makes the seemingly safe diversion of desire from the warden to Anne transgressive in its own right. If Richard were to become feminized to such a point that he is understood as less than a real man—that is to say, if he were to become a woman—then his marriage with Anne would no longer constitute the ideal king-queen relationship in which Maidstone is so invested. In attempting to offer more or less unequivocal praise, Maidstone has in fact created a rendition of Richard who is performing a tightrope act of sexuality and gender. Step too far in one direction and he might risk

becoming a participant in male-male sexuality; step too far in another direction and he might risk becoming feminized, thereby corrupting his marriage.

The marriage-bed of the Concordia, which in certain ways can be seen as a space of peace-making and the restoration of kingly authority, is also the locus of the desires, intimacies, and transformations that threaten to render Richard deviant, and therefore weaken the very sovereignty that Maidstone means to champion. Just as the ambiguity of the beginning address to the *socius* Richard destabilizes the hierarchy that King Richard is meant to maintain, the allusions to sexual desire in Maidstone's account of the king's pageantry destabilize the structures of power that that pageantry—and Maidstone's representation of it—is meant to reestablish. Although the Concordia is chiefly known as a panegyric praise poem that uses Richard's own strategies of spectacle and submission to affirm his kingship and advance his political causes, this reading reveals its potential to work against its stated goal, establishing Richard and those around him as wellsprings of queer transgressivity.

3.2 This Charming King: The Queerness of Richard II

The hot poker myth has made it so that the queer legacy of Edward II centers on the act of anal sex between king and favorite, and the notion of the king as the penetrated, feminized man. There is no narrative about Richard that corresponds to the hot poker myth in its ability to draw together the strands of sex, politics, desire, hierarchy, and sovereignty and present them in one image. Many of the same issues are at play in medieval commentary on Richard II, but Richard's queerness is diffuse, difficult to locate and difficult to describe.

We can begin by looking at the obvious overlaps between Edward and Richard. The two kings were massively unpopular, during their own reigns and in later medieval history, which is unsurprising given that they were both deposed. Like Edward, Richard had favorites who were disliked by contemporaries and criticized in chronicles; like Edward, Richard was accused of sodomy, though not with nearly the same frequency or clarity. The chronicler Adam of Usk, a harsh critic of Richard, played a part in Bolingbroke's rebellion, taking part in the legal effort to depose Richard and replace him with Bolingbroke (xviii, 63). Usk recorded that Richard was deposed for "perjuries, sacrileges, sodomitical acts, dispossession of his subjects, the reduction of his people to servitude, lack of reason, and incapacity to rule, to all of which King Richard was notoriously prone" [periuria, sacrilegia, sodomidica, subditorum exinnantio, populi in seruitutem redactio, uecordia, et ad regendum inutilitas, quibus rex Ricardus notorie fuit infectus] (63). By the late fourteenth century, the term "sodomy" encompassed any act against nature: as Michael Hanrahan writes, "Sodomy threatens to mean nothing because it potentially embraces all unnatural acts and practices, which, in turn, are readily substituted for it" (425). *Sodomidica* could mean anal sex between two men, or it could mean other kinds of sex between men, or it could mean improper sex between men and women; and the very ambiguity of the term is what made it so effective as a means to criticize Richard's kingship, since its circumpsection allowed for a perpetual shifting of meaning (427).

The instability of the medieval rhetoric of sodomy, even if it cannot be directly equated to modern homophobia, has been repurposed by modern scholars to deny the possibility of their subjects' queerness. In a note to his translation of Usk's chronicles, Chris Given-Wilson writes, referencing Walsingham's allegation of an "obscene familiarity" between Richard and Robert de

Vere, that “despite one aside by Walsingham (*Historia Anglicana*, ii. 148), there is no serious evidence that Richard was homosexual” (63n4). This statement acknowledges that certain medieval understandings of sodomy (e.g., as sex between men) overlap with the modern definition of homosexual (a man who has sex with men), but uses that modern definition as a way to deny the worth of an investigation into those resonances: the historical record cannot be used to define Richard as a homosexual in the modern sense, therefore we should not interpret Usk’s allegation of *sodomidica* or Walsingham’s allegation of *familiaritatis obscene* as suggestions that Richard may have been sexually involved with men. Usk’s inclusion of *sodomidica* along with a list of other misdeeds allows for the meaning of sodomy as sex between men to exist without being spoken; Given-Wilson’s use of the term “homosexual” allows for the range of possible meanings and implications in the allegation of *sodomidica* to be collapsed into one term and thereby dismissed wholesale. But as Hanrahan states, “Naming, writing or speaking Richard’s sodomy neither secures nor denies Richard’s legacy as homosexual” (433). As with Edward II, so with Richard II: even if we do not assign modern terms to these medieval figures or assert that the historical record proves without a doubt they had sex with men, we must encourage discussion of these references to sodomy that engages with their sexual dimensions.

As previously discussed, medieval narratives of Edward II and Hugh Despenser the Younger’s deaths establish feminization as the consequence of sodomy: Edward and Despenser were feminized via hot poker and castration because that was a punishment befitting the crime. Richard, however, possesses a reputation for femininity that, while not entirely independent of his reputation for sodomy, is at least not figured as the result of a post-deposition punishment. Christopher Fletcher, in his study of the discourses of youth and manhood in contemporary

accounts of Richard's reign, argues that an inaccurate understanding of Richard as unmanly and feminine has been perpetuated in twentieth century scholarship (7-12). While Fletcher's project is to move Ricardian scholarship away from the assumption of Richard as feminine in order to more fully examine how late medieval texts developed notions of masculinity in relation to Richard, he recognizes that this is difficult to accomplish when Richard's unmanly reputation does stem at least in part from historical evidence (13-14). The chronicler of Evesham Abbey, writing after Richard's death, describes the king as having "fair hair, a white, rounded and feminine face, occasionally corrupted with phlegmatic humour," revealing a characteristically medieval understanding of appearance by connecting the femininity of Richard's face with the effects of the humours on his body (qtd. in Fletcher 14). Certain contemporary criticisms of Richard conflated boys and women, suggesting that the young king might be like a woman in his inclination to vice (Goldberg et al., 5). Furthermore, the chronicler Thomas Walsingham used the belief that lechery might feminize men in order to criticize Richard's court (Hanrahan 431-32). Fletcher blames scholarly misrepresentations of such evidence for the perpetuation of Richard's reputation as unmanly (14). The larger issue seems to be that it is impossible to pin down what medieval people meant when they described a man as "feminine," as the Evesham chronicler did, or what medieval people thought when they saw an image of a king without a beard, as Richard was depicted in the Wilton Diptych, therefore making it impossible to know whether our understanding of Richard's femininity aligns with those found in medieval sources.

Often, a scholar's subjective, even subconscious understanding of gender fills the gaps in their understanding of gender in the late fourteenth century. Nigel Saul uses visual portrayals of Richard as evidence of his femininity: he describes the features of Richard's funeral effigy as

“slightly feminine,” and uses the same phrase to describe the Westminster portrait (450-451). But he does not explain what he means by “feminine,” or indeed “slightly feminine”—what is it about these depictions of Richard that are *slightly* but not *entirely* or *extremely* feminine? Is the degree of femininity meant to indicate also the degree of gender non-normativity? Saul leaves these questions unanswered. As Fletcher concludes, Saul’s analysis of these images proves nothing but that Richard appears feminine in Saul’s eyes (16). Fletcher’s response to the representation of Richard as feminine is to attempt to develop “a better knowledge of the variable meanings of manhood and youth available to his opponents, to his allies and to the king himself,” and while we can indeed develop our understandings of Richard’s late-medieval context, Fletcher’s use of the word *better* reveals the ultimate impossibility of arriving at the *best* knowledge (24). What Richard *was*, we’ll never know; but through the contestation of his gender—which spans from the alterations to his appearance during the restoration of the Westminster portrait, to Fletcher’s rebuttal, to Saul’s interpretation of that portrait—Richard has been able to slip from boy to woman, from masculine to (slightly?) feminine, from manly to unmanly and back again.

Another dimension of Richard’s queerness is his beauty. While the references to Richard as feminine and as sodomitical are found in texts that were written after his deposition and death, references to his beauty can be found throughout texts written during his reign. Federico’s “Queer Times” presents us with several such instances, including excerpts from Maidstone’s *Concordia* and Gower’s *Vox Clamantis*, which underwent multiple revisions before arriving at its final, anti-Ricardian form (38-39). The “mirrors for princes” section of *Vox Clamantis*, likely written before the end of Richard’s reign, contains striking and sustained literary representations

of Richard's beauty that are only emphasized by the corrective nature of the text. Addressing the king, Gower reminds him that "you have a noble body and comely limbs, so let the virtue of your spirit be all the greater" (1090). In a passage on the sin of gluttony, Gower tells Richard that "comeliness, breeding, honor, rank, grace, and power are yours" (850). Richard's physical beauty is one of his praiseworthy traits, but Gower makes clear that beauty is not enough, Richard is expected to be praiseworthy in his kingship as well; as a king, he is expected to be both beautiful and virtuous. Gower asks Richard, "What will your handsomeness or the noble name of your ancestor avail you, if you have become a slave to your own vices?" (630). Again, Gower reveals what he thinks is praiseworthy about Richard—his looks and his inherited nobility—in the process of warning Richard that in other regards he is failing to meet expectations. Similar to how the ambiguous category of sodomy makes room for both political and sexual valences, Gower's advice to Richard employs rhetoric that makes room for both straightforward lessons in kingship and a literary appreciation of the young king's beauty: queer desire is manifested through political rhetoric.

In Hanrahan's reading of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Gower's authorial persona is presented as a reformed sodomite using his experience of sin to advise the wayward Richard, who is implicitly identified as an unreformed sodomite presiding over a court of men who are feminine, or feminized, in their lechery (445). Despite his educational aim, however, Gower's role as an adviser opens him up to the same criticism he lodges against Richard's lustful, lecherous counsellors (443). The same can be said for *Vox Clamantis*: Gower's positioning of himself as adviser to Richard imbues his flattering descriptions of Richard's beauty with the same politically dangerous lust that he advises Richard against indulging. The presence of male-

male sexuality materializes most clearly in the passages that attempt to suppress it. Queerness is difficult to locate in contemporary texts on Richard II because it is always being denied at the same time that it is invoked: the ambiguity of language makes it so that any allegation of sodomy, any screed against the feminine licentiousness of Richard's court, can be interpreted in a way that excises any implication of male-male sexuality. But the reverse is also true: in every reference to sodomy, or to sin against nature, or to "obscene familiarity," the possibility of male-male sexuality exists permanently, unable ever to be entirely scrubbed out.

Chapter Four: The Shared Legacies of Edward II and Richard II

In 1385, eight years into his reign and fifteen years before his death, Richard II petitioned the pope to have Edward II, his great-grandfather, canonized. He would continue this effort, working to develop a book of Edward's supposed miracles, until his own deposition ("Lancastrian Inheritance," 568). As Chris Given-Wilson explains, there was a tradition in late medieval England of venerating recently-deceased figures for political purposes—in particular, figures of opposition like Thomas of Lancaster, a symbol of baronial resistance to Edward II (568-69). Richard's determination to canonize a deposed king, a king still known in the late fourteenth century as a bad ruler, did not fit in with that tradition. Given-Wilson sees the effort as part of a broader plan to deprive Thomas of Lancaster's descendants of their inheritance, annul the sentences given to Edward II and his supporters, restore Edward II's reputation, and thereby solidify the sovereign power of the English crown (570). As we can see from Richard's reconciliation with London in 1392, Richard found it important to take symbolic actions that justified and consolidated sovereignty—not only his own as an individual, but the divinely-granted sovereignty inherent to the English monarchy. But in trying to rehabilitate Edward's image, Richard reveals an identification with his great-grandfather that, precisely because of Edward's troublesome legacy, complicates those political goals. Richard Maidstone's *Concordia*, in attempting to valorize Richard as sovereign, ironically creates Richard, his queen, and his pageantic symbolism as sites of queerness. Similarly, Richard's desire to canonize Edward II turns out to strengthen the queer connections between Richard and Edward, however much it undermines his sovereignty.

Richard was crowned at the age of ten. Unlike Edward II, who developed his close relationship with Piers Gaveston before his accession, all of Richard's adult relationships—sexual, romantic, and otherwise, whether with men or with women—were shaped by his kingship. Beginning in 1384, Richard, who was in his late teens and already married to Anne of Bohemia, showered his favorite Robert de Vere, who was in his early twenties, with increasingly significant favors, culminating in the creation of de Vere as the Duke of Ireland in 1386 (Saul 182). As with Gaveston, de Vere's rise in the king's favor came at the expense of his reputation among the rest of the nobility, who considered him unworthy of the titles and lands that Richard had bestowed upon him (182-83). As with Gaveston, de Vere's favor with the king and unpopularity with the nobility led to his exile, though he fled after his disastrous defeat at the Battle of Radcot Bridge, rather than being forced out. However, de Vere was never reunited with his king: he died in exile in November 1392, only a few months after Richard's reconciliation with London, which took place in August.

Thomas Walsingham, who had previously documented the unrest caused by Richard's continuing promotion of de Vere, recorded the occasion on which Richard reburied de Vere's corpse in England:

The king held his [de Vere's] solemn funeral at the priory of Colne in Essex, appearing there himself in person, and he made the funeral service as magnificent as he could. He had the coffin of cypress wood, in which the embalmed body lay, open, so that he could gaze upon the earl's face and touch his fingers, which, men say, were adorned with

precious gold rings to be interred with his body. He showed his affection publicly for the dead man, as he had shown previously for him when he was alive. (2: 31)

Fletcher suggests that de Vere's reburial aligned with Richard's strategy of punishing of the nobles who had opposed him in the Merciless Parliament, and places it into the same pattern of self-dramatization that was in evidence at Anne's expensive and sumptuous funeral in 1394 (239-40, 240n97). It's worthwhile to note here that Fletcher's discussion of de Vere's reburial is relegated to a footnote in a passage on Anne's funeral, which he interprets as "the final stage in Richard II's efforts to assume his full authority as a man" (238). Though Fletcher takes Richard's effort to assume authority as a man and as a king as the primary connection between Anne's funeral and de Vere's reburial, most of the footnote is taken up with a detailing and then rebuttal of the evidence that Richard and de Vere may have had a sexually intimate and/or sodomitical relationship. Fletcher explains that both the description of Richard touching de Vere's fingers and the accusation that de Vere and Richard had an "obscene familiarity" are only found in later additions to the chronicle; interestingly, he follows Given-Wilson in noting that Adam of Usk's accusation of sodomy was adapted from the deposition of Frederick II, despite that no chronicle has mentioned sodomy *per se* in relation to Richard and de Vere (240n97). The logic at work here is strange: a depiction of ostensibly non-sexual intimacy between men is assumed to be potential evidence of a sexual relationship, similar in its implications to accusations of sodomy and "obscene familiarity" (which, of course, is not necessarily the same thing as sodomy). Rather than fully examine the parallels between Anne's funeral and de Vere's reburial, Fletcher uses the intimacy between Richard and de Vere displayed in Walsingham as an opportunity to foreclose

the possibility of a sexual relationship between the two men. Walsingham's passage on de Vere's reburial, despite its critical tone, and despite its having been altered and added to, is still a representation of intimacy between the king and his favorite. This holds true whether or not the relationship was sexual in nature. The reburial may indeed be interpreted as part of Richard's continued effort to consolidate his power, but Fletcher's discussion of Anne's funeral allows for an understanding that the event had both political and personal dimensions for Richard; there is no reason why the same should not be said of de Vere's reburial.

To properly discuss Walsingham's representation of Richard and de Vere's relationship, it's necessary to draw a clear distinction between de Vere's reburial as a politicized gesture on Richard's part, and Walsingham's editorialization of the event for his own purposes. The reburial itself can be seen as both an expression of personal grief and a reassertion of power over the Appellates who had opposed de Vere. Walsingham, however, offers it up for criticism. Richard's touching of de Vere's fingers is an act of mourning; to Walsingham it is a chance to mention that de Vere's fingers are "adorned with precious gold rings," symbols of the wealth and favor Richard had granted him. The "magnificent" funeral service and the cypress wood coffin are presented similarly as signs both of Richard's affection for de Vere and his unnecessary expenditure. "He showed his affection publicly for the dead man, as he had shown previously for him when he was alive" seems at first to be a neutral statement of the king's continuing affection for de Vere, but read in relation to Walsingham's earlier passages on de Vere, it is a clear criticism of Richard's pattern of behavior. Walsingham presents Richard's affection itself as evidence of his poor kingship, because it was this affection that led to his preferential treatment of de Vere. But the political nature of Walsingham's complaint should not obscure the fact that he

is engaging with the king's feelings: he is observing and acknowledging the power of affective ties between men as a force that shapes Richard's sovereignty.

We see the same argument at work in chronicles that discuss Edward II and Piers Gaveston. The king's affection for his male favorites is always presented as excessive, as an emotion that has become negative not because of what it is in and of itself but because of its intensity. The *Vita Edwardi Secundi* states, in one of the passages most often quoted on Edward and Gaveston's relationship, that "Jonathan cherished David, Achilles loved Patroclus; but we do not read that they went beyond what was usual. Our king, however, was incapable of moderate affection, and on account of Piers was said to forget himself" [Jonathas dilexit Daud, Achilles Patroclum amavit; set illi modum excessisse non leguntur. Modum autem dileccionis rex noster habere non potuit, et propter eum sui oblitus esse diceretur] (29). Accusations of sodomy or of improper sexuality go hand-in-hand with accusations of excessive affection and criticism of favoritism; this is well-documented in the scholarship, as historians such as Fletcher and Saul characterize accusations of sodomy as a means of registering criticism against the king as a ruler (Fletcher 240n97, Saul 437-38). Without disagreeing, I would attempt to reorient our perspective by suggesting that male-male sexuality and politically disruptive favoritism are both figured in the chronicles as *symptoms* of the king's excessive affection for his favorites, with the unmastered intimacy being at the root of the king's misdeeds.

When chroniclers criticize these relationships between the king and his favorite, they often claim that if the couple had been moderate in their love, they could have avoided the political problems that stemmed from it. Writing of de Vere's death, Walsingham says that "de Vere would have been a fortunate man, had he decided to keep their friendship between

themselves, but he had suffered misfortune through vaunting it” (2: 31). The *Vita Edwardi Secundi* makes a similar point about Gaveston, chastising him for using his intimacy with Edward to challenge men above his station: “I therefore believe and firmly maintain that if Piers had behaved discreetly and humbly towards the great men of the land from the beginning, none of them would ever have opposed him” (29). These particular passages blame the favorites for not knowing their place, for accepting the king’s favors and allowing themselves to be exalted, but equal blame is placed on the king elsewhere in the texts. Describing John Bushy’s sycophancy, Walsingham writes that “the youthful king [Richard], being ambitious for honourable titles, and loving flattery, did not curb this adulation as it behoved him” (2: 81). Richard’s overweening desire for honor and adulation expresses itself through his desire for male sycophants like Bushy; Walsingham decries both forms of Richard’s desire. The *Vita* complains that Edward’s love for Gaveston was not only too intense but too exclusive: “If an earl or baron entered the king’s chamber to speak with the king, while Piers was there the king addressed no one, and showed a friendly countenance to no one except Piers alone” (29). In the early twenty-first century, the exclusivity of the lover’s gaze is cherished: we say, “I only have eyes for you,” “I can’t take my eyes off of you.” Writing as I am in 2019, I can imagine this anecdote from the *Vita* as part of a speech from the best man at Edward and Gaveston’s wedding, perhaps poking fun at the lovers’ preoccupation with each other, but using it ultimately as a demonstration of the strength of their intimacy. It appears here as worrying evidence that the king neglected his duty to offer his affection in moderation, according to the nobility’s consensus on who had earned it.

Like Froissart’s account of Hugh Despenser’s execution, these anecdotes and opinions were offered not just to register criticism of the king or to justify his deposition, but to instruct

the audience, who may be at risk of excessive affection as well. The writer of the *Vita* anticipates his readers' reactions, saying, "But if anyone asks how Piers had come to deserve such great baronial displeasure, what was the cause of the hatred, what was the seedbed of the anger and jealousy, perhaps he will be very surprised, since it happens in almost all noble houses today that some one of the lord's household enjoys a prerogative of affection" (27). He states that he is writing of these events "that the condemnation of one may instruct others, and the downfall of the one condemned become a lesson to others" (27). As Sponsler has pointed out, the social structures of late medieval England, especially among the nobility and royalty, depended on an economy of affections, intimacies, and desires between men that could never be entirely separated from sexuality. These chronicles reveal a fear that the male bonds that made the world go round would intensify until they gave way to sodomy, in both a political and sexual sense. In an attempt to prevent this from happening, the chroniclers present the lives of figures like Edward II, Richard II, Piers Gaveston and Robert de Vere as morality tales about the bad things that happen when men love other men too much. Again I emphasize that in these texts the affection itself, not its political consequences, is the primary object of criticism; intimacy between men, the desire of one man for another, is what is being regulated here.

The same is true for twentieth- and twenty-first-century accounts of the relationships between these kings and their favorites, in scholarship and in pop culture. I've discussed how narratives like those in Froissart and *Britain's Bloodiest Dynasty* function as social regulation, presenting the image of the feminized, violated queer man in an attempt to suppress improper intimacy between men. Now I will return to the tradition of narratives, discussed in the introduction, that deny the possibility of queerness: Nigel Saul's dismissal of the allegation that

Richard II and Robert de Vere had an “obscene familiarity” as “almost certainly ... baseless”; Anthony Dawson and Paul Yachnin’s denial of “homosexual interest” in Shakespeare’s *Richard II* due to the fact that Holinshed “does not accuse Richard of sodomy”; Roy Martin Haines’ swerve away from the issues of medieval understandings of “sodomite” and the conditional acceptance of male-male sexuality in medieval society in favor of Pierre Chaplais’ conclusion that Edward and Gaveston were just like brothers, the presence of which is not really sufficient as an excuse for Haines’ refusal to explore the subject of male-male sexuality beyond a few pages in a 600-page volume on a king who is chiefly known today for his queer reputation. If late medieval chronicles about Edward and Richard reveal a fear of excessive intimacy between men and an attempt to prevent such intimacy, these tactics of denial and avoidance reveal a fear of excessive queerness in the scholarship on these kings, and a concerted effort to prevent any expansion or elaboration of that queerness.

It’s important to note that these texts—an Oxford World Classics edition of a Shakespeare play, and two comprehensive scholarly biographies published by major university presses—occupy positions of authority on their subjects. They play a central role in shaping the twenty-first-century understanding of Edward II and Richard II, more so than pieces like Federico’s “Queer Times” and Sponsler’s “The King’s Boyfriend,” which engage much more deeply and more fruitfully with gender and sexuality but which have a more limited reach. Why should that be the case when Edward and Richard continue to be understood as queer (or as homosexual, or as gay, etc) in the popular imagination? Imagine a person going to see the 2016 Royal Shakespeare Company’s production of *Richard II*, in which a long-haired, nail polish-wearing Richard flirts with his male courtiers and kisses the Duke of Aumerle, and then reading Nigel

Saul's biography to learn more about the historical Richard's gender and sexuality. That person would come away thinking that Richard's queerness simply didn't exist, that what they saw on the stage was a modern fabrication whose only connection to history was through baseless "allegations of homosexuality," as Saul puts it. But what about the warden's desire to share Richard's marriage bed in Maidstone's *Concordia*? What about Richard's "knights of Venus," who in their licentiousness threaten to become women? What about Walsingham's account of Richard touching the fingers of Robert de Vere's exhumed body, showing the corpse the same affection he had shown the man when he was alive? Richard II's queerness exists; Edward II's queerness exists; and their queerness, however we come to understand it, however radically our understandings of it change as our discussions reshape themselves, is crucial to their legacies.

Carla Freccero proposes a way of doing queer history that responds to the ghostliness, the spectrality, of the past, which is at once gone and always returning, making itself known through "haunting" (69-70). This is not the same thing as the fearful, even hateful descriptions of the "specter of homosexuality" that is said to lurk, hidden, in literary texts or historical sources (77). Freccero suggests that to do queer history "involves an openness to the possibility of being haunted, even inhabited, by ghosts"—not just to try to understand the past, but to learn how to survive, how to live better, in the present and in the future (80). A feeling of kinship and identification with these ghosts of history allows one to experience the haunting as pleasurable, rewarding: as Freccero writes, "to be a ghost among ghosts is to 'see' the ghost not as a feared and fearful projection ... but perhaps as beautiful, though rarely laughing, for the specter is the form a certain unfinished mourning takes" (78). Though over 600 years have passed since their deaths, there is a sense that Edward II and Richard II—who died young and ignominiously, and

whose excessive love for other men has been understood as one of the root causes of their deaths—are haunting us still, demanding to be acknowledged and to be remembered, however imperfectly.

We can find this queer spectrality not only in modern scholarship but in the history we study: we can read Richard's effort to canonize his great-grandfather as a recognition of Edward's spectral presence, Edward's haunting of his own descendant. Reading Walsingham's account of Richard reburying Robert de Vere, we might imagine that Richard was haunted not only by the affection he had had for de Vere but by the affection that existed between Edward and his favorites, which was corrupted first by the violence of their murders and executions, and then by the discursive violence of myths whose function was to prevent intimacy between men from exceeding the social boundaries constructed around it. What narrative did Richard receive about his great-grandfather's life and death? The sections of Froissart's chronicles that dealt with Edward's deposition and Despenser the Younger's execution were in circulation by the late fourteenth century; so was the story about Edward dying by hot poker. Did Richard understand himself, even then, as a king whose vices and sins resembled Edward's? Did he suppose his affections, his love, his desire to resemble Edward's? By attempting to have Edward canonized, was he attempting to make acceptable, make laudable, the patterns of intimacy and of kingship that they shared? Though we can come to no definite conclusion through empiricist methods, the perpetual spectral presence of our queer past, indefinite and contradictory but nonetheless insistently *there*, asks all the same to be unburied, to be gazed upon and contemplated, to be looked at not just with a desire to *know* and to *prove* and to *assert*, but a desire for desire itself,

for the intimacy, affection, love, and pleasure which for so long the historical record has rendered invisible, unspeakable, and unworthy.

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