"De-emplotting" History: Genre, Violence and Subversion in Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*

Rebeca Gualberto Velverde[1]

Abstract. Taking into consideration Hayden White's seminal argument about historical emplotment, and relating such notion to traditional explanations about the ritualistic structure of Tudor historiography, this article reassesses Chistopher Marlowe's *Edward II* (ca. 1592) from the perspective of genre in order to expose how the play counter-effects the dominant ideology of the Tudor regime concerning royal authority. The encodation of historical events into the icon of romance, and the dramatic superimposition of tragic conventions upon such an iconic structure arguably confront two opposing modes of representing violence onstage, which determines a theatrical interplay of power discourses that arguably dramatizes the desacralization of kingship through the immanent representation of its sacredness. As this article argues, these dialectics articulates the political anxieties of Renaissance England from within generic categories, and it effectively subverts the well-established strategies of legitimization that idealized (and rewrote) violence, history and monarchy in Tudor England.
Key words: Christopher Marlowe, *Edward II*, History Plays, genre, tragedy.

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1. Introduction

Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* (ca. 1592) has traditionally been considered as the play through which "the Elizabethan history play attains maturity and some degree of aesthetic greatness" (Ribner 1955: 244). It condenses thirty years of a highly conflictive period of English history into one single year of dramatic action (Ribner 1955: 245), transforming the episodic account in the chronicles of King Edward II's reign into "a well-integrated tragedy" (345). Much has been written about the tragic nature of the play; as Ribner already noted in the 1950s, "critics have generally recognized [the play's] superiority as a work of art to any of the

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[1]   Departamento de Educación, Comportamiento y Procesos Sociales, Universidad Europea de Madrid (Spain)
        E-mail: rebeca.gualberto@universidadeuropea.es

history plays which proceeded it, but they have tended to consider it apart from the main stream of historical drama" (244). Indeed, as it is well known, Harry Levin argued in his now classic study of Marlowe's drama, *The Overrreacher*, that in composing *Edward II*, Marlowe "[was] not concerned with the state but, as always, with the individual; and in this case, it is a poignant irony that the individual happens to be the head of a state" (1974: 110).

Other critics have disagreed with this notion over the decades, however, having noted that even if the play presents "a conscious and deliberate moulding of chronicle matter into the shape of tragedy […] the identity of a history play is in no way destroyed" (Ribner 1955: 244). Taking both arguments into consideration, this article aims to reassess Marlowe's play from our present-day generic perspective so as to expose how the drama arguably subverts the ideologically-charged emplotting devices of Tudor historiography, following Hayden White's celebrated notion of historical "emplotment" (White 1978: 83). Such emplotment, succinctly defined as "the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures" (White 1978: 83), determines what we today perceive as a coalescence of genres in *Edward II* and, as it will be explained, such coalescence might indeed be read as confronting two opposing modes of representing violence: the legitimizing mode of romance and historiography, and the subversive mode of early-modern tragedy. It is arguably this dialectics that dramatizes a process of "royal desecration" (Forker 1994: 91) in the play, articulating the political anxieties of Renaissance England; for as this critical study aims to suggest, the dramatic interplay of conflicting discourses on royal authority in the text is developed from within generic categories, and it is through a process of what we may interpret as generic hybridization that the play brings about a contesting codification of the rhetoric of violence, history, monarchy and political ideology in the Tudor regime.

2. The Intersections of History and Tragedy

Along the scholarly tradition, reputed critics such as Tillyard have considered that in his dramatic portrayal of King Edward II, "Marlowe shows no sense of national responsibility: he merely attaches two current political orthodoxies[2] to a play concerned nominally but not essentially with historical matter" (1969: 115).[3] From the opposite viewpoint, however, Ribner argued that despite the fact that *Edward II* can be regarded as "a mature tragedy of character in which a potentially good man comes to destruction because of inherent weaknesses which make him incapable of coping with a crisis which he himself has helped to create" (1955: 244), it is no less true that, even if interpreting the figure of King Edward II as a tragic hero,

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[2]　Tillyard refers to the doctrines of loyalty and kingship which, in his view, find no defiance in Marlowe's play, since the text "never confuses the legitimate cutting off of princely parasites with the illegitimate lifting of the hands against the Lord's Annointed" (1969: 114).

[3]　On his lengthy introduction to the play, Forker comments extensively on the tragedy vs. history controversy, explaining that, "following Tylliard, most commentators in the 1950s, 19600s, and 1970s emphasized the private as opposed to the public side of the play" (1994: 86). The list of critics mentioned by Forker includes Leech (1960), Steane (1965), Sanders (1968), Wickham, Clemen, and Bradbrook (Forker 1994: 86-87, 130 note 118).

"the sins of the hero are sins of government; the crisis he faces is a political one, and his disaster is also ruin to his kingdom in the form of civil war" (1955: 245). Yet through his claim that *Edward II* should then be taken into account as a Tudor history play—insofar the play digs out from the chronicles an earlier political situation that mirrors the possibility of a civil war, which the Elizabethan audience feared might happen again if Elizabeth I disregarded the political lessons implicit in the monarchies of the past (Ribner 1955: 244-245)—Ribner eloquently identifies the figure of King Edward II with an archetypal figure: "like the traditional *tragic hero*," he writes, Edward "is a king, and his downfall is thus intimately involved with the life of the state" (1955: 244, my italics). The statement seems contradictory, as it raises the question of how King Edward can be identified simultaneously with a historical figure and also with an archetypal *tragic hero*. The answer to that question, this article hypothesizes, might be found in the elucidation of how history, following White's well-known argument about historical narratives, is "emplotted" (1978: 83) in Marlowe's sources, but perhaps effectively 'de-emplotted', so to speak, in Marlowe's tragic play.

To begin elaborating on this argument, and before exploring in depth the mechanisms of historical emplotment, it bears recalling that, in the English vernacular tradition, the genre of tragedy is best understood through a critical reading of Chaucer's *The Monk's Tale*, which advances an understanding of tragedy as a literary mode that exceeds the rather restrictive notion of 'fortune tragedy'. As Bruda notes (2000: 44-47), by including in his tale tragedies in which Fortune plays no part, tragedies that present a cause-effect relationship between evil actions and personal destruction, and tragedies that recount the death of good men and offer no moral whatsoever, Chaucer effectively defines tragedy simply by its storyline: "Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie, / As olde bookes maken memorie, / Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee, / And is yfallen ou of heigh deree / Into myserie, and endeth wrechedly" (Chaucer 2008: VII 1973-1977). Also, he introduces the notion that tragedy is meant to cause sorrow for the audience, who will empathize with the calamities of the protagonist: "I wol biwaille in manere of tragedie / The harm of hem that stoode in heigh degree / And fillen so that ther nas no remedie / To brynge hem out of hir adversitee" (2008: 1991-1994).[4] In the tradition established by Chaucer, then, English tragedy is characterized by two main features: a fall-from-grace narrative pattern, and the evocation of sympathy in the audience.

Easily, both defining traits are traceable in *Edward II*, a circumstance that may allow for the identification of King Edward with a traditional, archetypal tragic hero; a literary trope rather than a plausible recreation of a historical figure. Joan Parks has cleverly noticed that the dramatic representation of medieval history in Marlowe's play—arguably insofar as it is enacted in the form of a tragedy—is a fictive artefact that she identifies with "the self-centred and nonhistorical perspective of the tragic king" (1999: 288). The tragic king is, in this argument, a non-historical, timeless figure that exists in a sort of mythic time, "in a cyclical model of history [in which] all events are perceived as archetypal" (Bruda 2000: 15). Indeed, for Tudor Historians, History was thought to occur in the form of

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4   As Bruda notes, "Bewail in Chaucer means to express great sorrow for, to lament loudly, to mourn" (2000: 47).

recurrent historical patterns in a way that made it possible to learn from events in the past and apply such knowledge to contemporary politics; but, crucially, this seemingly medieval remnant—since "medieval men lacked a sense of the past being different in quality from the present" (Burke 1969: 1) and thus medieval history lacked "an interest in causation" (13)—functioned primarily from a purely theoretical perspective. Budra explains:

> History was viewed as repetitive, or cyclical, and therefore major patterns of events could be counted on to recur […] But, for most people, the notion of cyclical time would have occurred only in the contemplation of natural, liturgical, and metaphorical patterns of recurrence, none of which would have superseded the orthodox Christian perception of history as a finite progression of events from the Creation to the Apocalypse. Time, for the Christian, is linear and progressive; a gradual revelation of God's purpose in specific events. (2000: 14)

That is to say, historical events might be *interpreted* as archetypal within a cyclical understanding of history but, in Renaissance England, history is considered cyclical only when its repetitive patterns are regarded *metaphorically*. Thus, history is not really believed to be repetitive and cyclical—as the time of Christianity must be linear and continuous—but *represented*, that is, *written* as repetitive and cyclical. The pursued effect is, of course, the transformation of historical matter into a metaphor that emblematizes the concerns of Tudor England and functions to advance a propagandistic agenda. The result is the contemporary, timeless recreation of historical events that, inasmuch as they are construed in the chronicles through the representation of historical time as recurrent and circular, become a sort of mythical narrative that repeats a set of archetypes in a series of constantly-present mythical moments. And yet, such metaphorical eternal recurrence that, as it will be explained, is cognate with a process of historical emplotment, is in fact paradoxically pessimistic: as Kamps explains, the coalescence of Christian linear time and a recurrent understanding of History resulted in a new shape of time, "that of a spiral, endlessly repeating the drama of rise and fall, of sin, repentance, and mercy and punishment, and ever coming nearer the apocalypse" (2003: 12). Such an apocalyptic notion, which became prominent as the collision of pagan and Christian conceptions of time "climbed to uneasy heights just as Shakespeare's histories reached the stage, when the approaching 'millennium' revived the old [Greek] myths of decline with fresh apocalyptic fears" (Goy-Blanquet 2002: 59), is key to understanding how *Edward II* truly challenges the ideological stance of Tudor historiography—and, as it will be explained, of medieval romance—that the restoration of political order in society can and will bring about, in tandem, the natural and spiritual regeneration of its people.

   For indeed, as it has been argued, history only becomes cyclical and repetitive once it operates as a metaphor; that is, once it becomes a *representation* of past events. Following White's celebrated argument about historical narratives, then, historical events need to be transformed into *stories* so that they can be explanatory through the already-mentioned process of emplotment, which White explains as follows:

> Historical narratives are not only models of past events and processes, but also metaphorical statements which suggest a relation of similitude between such events and processes and the story types we conventionally use to endow the events of our lives with culturally sanctioned meanings. Viewed in a purely formal way, a historical narrative is not only a reproduction of the events reported in it, but also a complex of symbols which gives us directions for finding an icon of the structure of those events in our literary tradition. (1978: 88)

In the case of Tudor historiography the "icon of the structure" to be found "in our literary tradition" that articulates the events of medieval English history is the "culturally provided categor[y]" (1978: 83) of medieval romance, which determines that the historical narrative enacted in *Edward II*—and moulded against the themes and the pattern of tragedy—is structurally mythical. Thus, the figure of King Edward might be regarded as a literary trope, that is, a kind of tragic hero who may indeed by rooted in Britain's past history. As the mythical Maimed-King of Arthurian legend, and as Oedipus Rex in classical tragedy, the archetypically weak king in Marlowe's play is mystically portrayed as unfit to govern his kingdom, and thus presented as responsible (but, perhaps, guiltless) for the plight that plagues his realm.

3. The Icon of Romance

Analyzing the structure of the Tudor chronicles, Alvin Kernan famously noted:

> History was discovered by Tudor historians to have the sameness of ritual: a weak or saintly king makes political mistakes and is overthrown by rebellious and arrogant subjects; the kingdom becomes a wasteland and society a chaos in which every man's hand is set against his fellows; after a period of great suffering, reaction against the forces of evil occurs, and a strong and good king restores order. (1975: 264)

Meaningfully, the ritual structure described by Kernan corresponds squarely with the plot structure of *Edward II*, as it can be clearly observed, incidentally, in the title of the 1594 printing: *The Troublesome Reign and Lamentable Death of Edward the Second, King of England: with the Tragicall Fall of Proud Mortimer*. In Marlowe's play, indeed, a weak king makes political mistakes, which result in England's successive defeats against its foreign enemies and in the suffering and impoverishment of the English people. In order to overthrow the inept monarch, the barons rise up in arms and civil conflict erupts. Foreign and domestic wars conflate, exacerbating an escalation of violence and the propagation of social chaos until the installation of the young, strong, legitimate heir, Edward III, who punishes the self-servicing usurpers and restores order so that the kingdom can be prosper again. Evidently, such ritualistic structure is cyclical and thus constitutes a metaphorical representation of historical time that, as explained by Kernan, is cognate with the structure of medieval romance and indubitably imbued with

romance ideology, insofar as it presupposes the eternal recurrence of socio-political regeneration.[5]

Specifically, the medieval myth of the Fisher King eloquently articulates such a power discourse. In Arthurian mythology, the Fisher King is the wounded king of the Waste Land, a character who appears for the first time in the earliest extant version of the Grail myth; that is, in Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval*, an unfinished courtly romance composed probably between 1175 and 1190 (Loomis 1992: 28). The Fisher King has been wounded between the thighs and rendered sterile, and, as a consequence, his infertility has resulted in the wasting of his kingdom. The tale overtly gives shape to a providential notion of kingship that presupposes a mystical and inextricable relationship that bounds the fates of the king and of his kingdom,[6] and thus it establishes that, in order for the land to be restored to its former prosperity, the king's wound must be relieved. Such task of deliverance falls upon the hands of the Grail Knight, who must find the Grail—or alternatively the meaning behind the Grail—in order to heal the Fisher King and consequently restore the Waste Land. However, it must be taken into consideration that, by the time this myth is recreated in late fifteen-century England in the romances of Thomas Malory (first published in 1485 by William Caxton), the earliest, twelfth-century version of the tale found in de Troyes's *Perceval* is no longer retold as a fixed narrative about a king wounded in battle who governs over a land laid waste. Per contra, the figure of the now called "Maimed King" and his inextricable connection to the mythical Waste Land have become a leitmotif that recurs here and there in Malory's comprehensive account of the Arthurian cycle, a circumstance that seems to reinforce a medieval *mystical* conception of kingship. For in all cases—there are three main Maimed-King figures in Malory's romances—the king is believed to be sympathetically connected to the land so that if the king dies unjustly or is maimed, the land is laid waste as the result of a curse, a plague, or a war.[7]

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[5]   Moreover, this ritualistic structure fits the Elizabethan master-narrative named by critics as the "Tudor myth," that is, "[the] story the Tudor government wished to have told about its own rise to power and continuing dominance" (Holderness 1992: 33). This is a concept drawn from Tillyard's classic study of Shakespeare's history plays (1944) and corresponds with a mythical tale allegedly dramatized in the Histories that idealizes Henry VII's ascension to the throne and mythically construes the union of the houses of York and Lancaster through Henry VII's marriage to the York heiress as "the providential and happy ending of an organic piece of history" (Tillyard 1969: 36). Habib summarizes how this overtly romance-like story rearranged—that is, emplotted—historical events so as to fit a very specific and ideologically charged narrative that fits squarely the ritualistic structure detected by Kernan in the chronicles: "Richard of Bordeaux's deposition by Henry Bolingbroke [was] a grievous sin for which the English nation was punished by the protracted and bloody Yorkist-Lancastrian civil war and the murderous reign of Richard III. England's suffering was seen to end only when Richard of Gloucester's defeat and death at the hands of Henry Richmond at the battle of Bosworth. Descended from the fabulous Arthur and Cadwallader on the one hand and the Lancastrian line of Gaunt on the other, Richmond, or Henry VII as he subsequently came to be known, was the first of a long and illustrious line of Tudors who were to restore England to its former prosperity and greatness" (1993: 73).

[6]   The providential theory of kingship might be understood as "the concept of the monarch ruling as the chosen vice-regent of God, independent of the consent of the commons, unfettered by ecclesiastical authority, outside of and prior to the laws of the kingdom—all summed up in the term, 'divine right'" (Carroll 2003: 127).

[7]   After the knight Balin wounds King Pellam, one of the Maimed-King figures in Malory's romances, the knight is told to have "rode forth through the fair countries and cities, and found the people dead, slain on every side. And all that were alive cried, 'O Balin, thou hast caused great damage in these countries; for the dolorous stroke though gavest unto King Pellam, three countries are destroyed'" (Malory I 1969: 84). Later, the reader finds out that King Pellam is the son of King Labor, another Maimed-King figure, whose death in battle was followed by a terrible plague that desolated his kingdom, "for sithen increased neither corn, ne

But of all Maimed Kings in Malory's romances, perhaps the most relevant figure for this study is King Pelles, who is explicitly stated to suffer from a sexual wound. He was wounded after drawing a mysterious sword, as "therewith entered a spear wherewith he was smit him through both the thighs, and never sith might he be healed" (1969: 337). The injury is consistent with the affliction of the Maimed King *ab origine*: as Loomis translates from De Troyes, "[the Fisher King] was wounded and maimed in a battle, so that he cannot move himself, for a javelin wounded him through the two thighs" (1992: 36). Such coherence is undoubtedly significant for, as it has been recurrently argued by Arthurian scholars, the Fisher King myth reproduces "the ancient, heathen theme of the sterilization of the king and the consequent desolation of his realm" (Loomis 1992: 248). It is highly meaningful, then, that in Marlowe's reutilization of the themes and structures of such romance mythology, epitomized by the Fisher King myth and echoing in the ritualistic structure of the chronicles, King Edward's wound—so to speak—is in fact denoted as sexual, for indeed the faults of his body natural[8]—he is a "lovesick" king (Marlowe 1994: I. IV. 87)—are articulated through the subversive discourse of sodomy, as it will be further on explained.

But before exploring in depth how the rhetoric of the play in fact discloses the relevance of the romance themes and patterns underlying Marlowe's historical tragedy, it is crucial to address the structural functionality of romance in *Edward II*, as determined by the emplotting of history into the shape of romance in Marlowe's sources, as detected by Kernan. In order to do that, one must note that in the medieval sources that are translated and rewritten in Malory's romances, the myth of the Maimed King concludes with the Waste Land being restored after the King dies and the spirit of his body politic is transferred onto his more vigorous successor. The narrative of magical healing that appears in the earlier versions of the myth is displaced thus in later texts into a narrative of royal succession, and as such it is depicted in Malory and as such it vertebrates the ritualistic structure of the chronicles as explained by Kernan.[9] Hence, Marlowe's *Edward II* in fact reproduces this mythical narrative of royal succession, as it dramatizes how England is seemingly restored after the ascension of Edward III to the throne. Yet, despite this upshot of political restoration, the play actually raises inevitable questions about the regenerative power of violence which undermine the ideology contained in the ritual and mythical structure that arguably sustains the dramatization of King Edward II's death. For, as it will be explained, the structure of tragedy is superimposed on the structure of romance, and the explicit depiction of violence on the stage undercuts the rhetoric of romance that attempts to

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grass, nor well-nigh no fruit, ne in the water was no fish: wherefore men callen it […] the Waste Land" (1969: 334).

[8]   Sixteenth-century jurist Edmund Plowden explained as follows the Tudor political theory of the king's two bodies, which constitutes the providential theory of kingship that was dominant in Renaissance England: "to [the King's] natural Body is conjoined his Body politic, which contains his royal Estate and Dignity; and the Body politic includes the Body natural, but the Body natural is the lesser […] and he has not a Body natural distinct and divided by itself from the Office and Dignity royal, but a Body natural and a Body politic together indivisible; and these two Bodies are incorporated in one Person, and make one Body" (qt. in Kantorowicz 1997: 9).

[9]   Myth-critic Northrop Frye explains this phenomenon by hypothesizing that, in truth, "the replacement of an aged and impotent king by a youthful successor is really a displacement of the theme of renewing the old king's youth" (1976: 121).

legitimize the barons' rebellion as a mystically-justified endeavour pursued for the good of the realm.

4. Rhetoric and Subversion

From his ascension to power in 1307, King Edward II governed a country in perpetual war against Scotland, Ireland and France (Forker 1994: 46), a set of foreign conflicts that are most famously and best summarized in Lancaster's accusatory speech to the king in Act II. He warns King Edward, threatening with revolt:

> Look for rebellion, look to be deposed.
> Thy garrisons are beaten out of France,
> And, lame and poor, lie groaning at the gates.
> The wild O'Neill, with swarms of Irish kerns,
> Lives uncontrolled within the English pale;
> Unto the walls of York the Scots made road,
> And unresisted drave away rich spoils. (1994: II. II. 161-166)

As Forker notes in his footnote to these lines, the disasters listed by Lancaster are "too unspecific and unchronological to be based on any single passage or group of passages in Holinshed" (1994: 198).[10] Thus, rather than a condensed account of the various catastrophic foreign conflicts that England was immersed in at the time, and of the king's nefarious role in such calamities, Lancaster's speech stands in for a personal accusation against the King, continued in a litany of England's domestic troubles at court and in the streets:

> *Mortimer Junior*. Thy court is naked, being bereft of those
> That makes a king seem glorious to the world—
> I mean the peers whom thou shouldst dearly love;
> Libels are cast against thee in the street,
> Ballads and rhymes made of thy overthrow.
> *Lancaster*. The northern borderers, seeing their houses burnt,
> Their wives and children slain, run up and down
> Cursing the name of thee and Gaveston. (1994: II. II. 173-180)

Conspicuously, only two of the famous battles of the English against the Scots are included in the play: Bannockburn and Boroughbridge (Forker 1994: 46). In the quoted lines above, the reference is Bannockburn, a disaster for which, judging by the barons' accusations, both Edward and his minion Gaveston are to blame.

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[10] However, Forker also explains, following Charlton-Waller, that there is a passage in the chronicles describing how in 1322 the Scots and the French took military advantage of England's weakened position after the eruption of civil war when the barons rose up against the King (1994: 198). Far from illustrating the effectiveness of the barons' revolt as a solution against the frail position of England in the conflict against its foreign enemies, the chronicles seem to demonstrate that such an argument is a purely rhetorical device employed by the rebels to justify their violent actions as, in effect, the civil war evidently only aggravated the delicate position of England in its foreign wars.

England's martial failure is then, in the rebels' rhetoric, inextricable from the king's obsessive sexual involvement with Gaveston, a circumstance that seems to corroborate that, in fact, in early-modern texts, sodomy "at once describes the sexual act and presents a metaphor that indicates subversion" (Rutkoski 2006: 283). For sodomy arguably stands in as a metaphorical construct that signifies political disorder, as, according to Crewe's eloquent argument, following Alan Bray's influential *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (1982), the term sodomy, which could refer to, among others, heterosexual adultery, "designated a perceived threat to sexual, *hence political*, order rather than same-sex relations exclusively" (2009: 388, my italics). Bearing such notion in mind, sodomy then arguably constitutes one of the two nodal points, along with the nation-state, that sustain the network of conflicting power discourses in Marlowe's *Edward II* (Bianco 2007: par. 8) and that articulate the doctrine of the king's two bodies in the play. That is to say, In *Edward II*, the king's body natural is dramatically configured along the rhetoric of sodomy not purely on sexual terms but as a socially-disruptive counter-discourse that counterpoints the dominant discourse of the nation-state, which in turn articulates the dramatization of King Edward's body politic.[11]

But the situation staged in the play presents the king's body politic as being clearly overpowered by the desires and frustrations of his body natural. This causes a profound imbalance in the two-fold mystical identity of the king and consequently renders the monarch effectively powerless. He recognizes it himself: "My nobles rule, I bear the name of king / I wear the crown but am controlled by them" (Marlowe 1994: V.I. 28-9).[12] In rhetorical terms, the counter-discourse of sodomy overcomes and ultimately dismantles the dominant discourse of the nation-state. Sodomy, because discursively represents a situation of class conflict and political unrest, absorbs, metaphorically, the king's political insufficiency. In other words, the king's natural body is made responsible for the political chaos displayed upon the stage, and thus the rhetoric of romance becomes functional in the play. As Stephen Orgel has notoriously argued, "translating the whole range of power politics into sodomy […] was probably safer […] than it would have been to lay it, so to speak, straight" (2011: 425). In his view, *Edward II* is then the only Renaissance play in which homoeroticism, exacerbated by the jarring class difference between the King and his lover, is truly and explicitly presented "in the terms in which the culture formally conceived it—as antisocial, seditious, [and] ultimately disastrous" (Orgel 2011: 423).

Edward II is not an impotent or castrated king, like the medieval Fisher King; his sexual practices are not incestuous, as Oedipus's, the prototypical tragic king. But the social syntax that should derive from the imitation of the natural order, that

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[11]   In fact, as will be further on taken into consideration, the social significance of sodomy as the nodal point of the play's political counter-discourse is made explicit by the constant reminders on the barons' accusations about Gaveston's unfit social-status.

[12]   The many nuances of the king's speeches, which grow in depth and complexity as the play realizes the deconsecration of the character's sovereignty—effectively humanizing Edward—in fact reveal the demystification of kingship that results when historical matter is disengaged from historical emplotment. As King Edward is made aware of his powerlessness against the revolt, he wonders in very eloquent and significant words: "But what are kings when regiment is gone / But perfect shadows in a sunshine day?" (V.I. 26-7).

is, the assumed as natural, generative sexuality of men, is invalidated by the king's sexual conduct, as it disrupts the 'natural' order that defines male subjectivity in terms of reproductive sexual agency. The root of chaos and ruin for King Edward's kingdom is then debatably sexual—it is, as explained, articulated through the discourse of sodomy as a significant of social disorder—and thus configures a scenario in which, as it happened to the Maimed King in fifteen-century vernacular Arthuriana, King Edward must be killed so that a strong and vigorous successor can inherit the body politic, effectively restoring the land to its prosperity. And so the barons plot to kill the king, expecting to be praised for their "brave attempt" (1994: I. IV. 268) and hoping to have their names enrolled in the chronicles (I. IV. 269). Expressively, the faults of the king are codified in terms of sickness. King Edward is accused of being "wicked" (I. II. 4) and "bewitched" (I. II. 55), but most of all, he is considered by the barons to be "light-brained" (V. II. 2), "brainsick" (I. I. 124) and "lovesick" (I. IV. 87). His obsessive infatuation with Gaveston and his consequent negligence towards his duties are regarded and expressed as a malady. Mortimer laments, after he is taken prisoner in the course of Edward's only (and fleeting) victory: "England, unkind to thy nobility, / Groan for this grief; behold how *you are maimed*" (III. II. 66-67, my italics). The barons, after all, allegedly revolt to restore the land, literally "to *mend* the king and do our country good" (I. IV. 257, my italics). Even the Earl of Kent, the king's brother, decides to join the rebels' cause out "of love to this our native land" (II. III. 1) and in "the realm's behoof" (II. III. 3). In an intersection of the dialectics of romance and historiography, Edward has become "England's scourge" (III. II. 74) and his incapable government a "plague"; the historical wars against Scotland, Ireland and France merge together in the rebels' personal accusations against the King, and are thus codified rhetorically as a spread-out affliction that has been transferred from the "brainsick" Maimed King to the "plagued" Waste Land that he governs. The romance-like, ritualistic structure of the chronicle materials detected by Kernan is thus reinforced by the overt rhetoric of romance that articulates the plot of Marlowe's play. The apparent emplotment of historical matter seems complete.

But of course, the analogy that identifies King Edward with the Fisher King and the barons with the noble knights of Arthurian mythology—supported by the ritual-like structure of the play and by the baron's self-elevating rhetoric—does not hold for long. However chivalric the barons' purpose may be, and even if Mortimer believes that the murder of Gaveston should earn him praise and glory, "for *purging* of the realm of such a *plague*" (I. IV. 270, my italics) and that he should "[f]ear not to kill the king, 'tis good he die" (V. IV. 9), their heroic intention of healing/killing the king to restore the land is actually synchronized with extremely violent outbursts, such as Lancaster's horrific threat to the king: "either change your mind, / Or look to see the throne where you should sit / To float in blood, and at thy wanton head / The glozing head of thy based minion thrown" (I.I. 129-132). Inevitably, such gruesome language destabilizes the rhetoric of the commonwealth exercised by the barons to legitimize their rebellion, and hence exposes the latent violence that will erupt at the end of the play, thwarting the audience's expectations about a rightful, ordered deposition of an unlawful king

that might have been rooted in proto-constitutional justifications.[13] The barons' seemingly self-mythologizing rhetoric is thus revealed as a transitory, contradictory, and feeble legitimizing strategy to justify their violent, "unnatural revolt" (IV. VI. 9). The structure and rhetoric of medieval mythology are represented as immanent and biased, and thus the ideology of romance—as a legitimization of the violence intrinsic to history—is presented at the point of collapse. The mythical echoes of the barons' revolt exonerate the king from any blame in his faults of government, insofar as they characterize him as sick; simultaneously, those echoes also prevent the rebels' from taking responsibility of the violence they perpetrate under the guise of heroic restitution. The result is an escalation of verbal and physical violence that leads to the terrible final act of the play, in which the pathos of tragedy finalizes the process of subversion that in Marlowe's play counter-effects the alleged emplotting of historical violence into the shape (and meaning) of medieval romance.

5. The Violence of Tragedy

As it has been the object of so much critical attention over the decades, Marlowe conspicuously extends the chroniclers' account of King Edward's death in the fifth act of his play. Eloquently, Pearson explains how the extended and explicit regicide alters the emotional tone of the play:

> Prepared to see justice done and proper succession re-established, the audience instead witnesses a murder so affecting that it renovates even Edward's tarnished reputation […] Placing this creatively shocking scene directly before the anticipated conclusion of the play meddles with the audience's emotional barometer, causing a premature catharsis of sorts. The viewer desires their familiar history and a satisfactory succession to the renowned able king, Edward III. In a mild indictment of such lazy spectatorship, the play turns sharply away from justice toward criminality. (2009: 107)

As Pearson demonstrates by quoting several sources, "early modern chroniclers and historians and pamphleteers disagree on the manner of [Edward II's] death, but their protestations of ignorance appear squeamish rather than honest" (2009: 105). The chronicles hide and evade, or, in the case of Holinshed, they merely state succinctly the manner in which the king was assassinated. But what the chronicles hide, Marlowe drags into the light.[14] Rather than enacting the punishment of the

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[13] What Knowles defines in general terms as "resistance theory" (2002: 64) and Carroll, more specifically, as "contractual theory" (2003: 133) may be understood a set of varied reasons for deposition that already in the sixteenth century, in England and in the continent, "argued the limited nature of kingship and promoted the right of resistance to tyranny, even justifying the overthrow of rightfully enthroned kings if necessary" (Carroll 2003: 133).

[14] Expressively, the dramatic presence of *Light-born*, bearing a torch as he enters the dungeon where the king is captive, becomes wholly significant in this view. 'Lightborn'—easily translatable as 'that who bears light'—is evidently the anglicized rendering of the Latin variant 'Lucifer', which charges the scene of Edward's killing with profound allegorical significance. As Roger Sales explains, the character is borrowed from the Chester Cycle of mystery plays (1991: 115), which fills the scene of Edward's death with morality conventions that "prop up an illusion of natural order" (1990: 126). The illusion immediately shatters,

"unnatural" rebels, or dwelling on the celebrated installation of Edward III, the ending of *Edward II* extends and portrays in detail the king's torture and horrific death. Such level of gruesome detail is exposed on the stage, eloquently, in the title character's increasingly-pathetic soliloquies. King Edward describes to Lightborn, his assassin:

> This dungeon where they keep me is the sink
> Wherein the filth of all the castle falls.
> […]
> And there in mire and puddle have I stood
> This ten days' space; and lest that I should sleep,
> One plays continually upon a drum.
> They give me bread and water, being a king;
> So that for want of sleep and sustenance
> My mind's distempered, and my body's numbed,
> And whether I have limbs or no I know not.
> O, would my blood dropped out from every vein,
> As doth this water from my tattered robes. (1994: V.v. 55-56, 58-66)

Only a few lines later, the scene concludes with the explicit staging of Edward's brutal killing:

> *Edward.* I am too weak and feeble to resist.
> Assist me, sweet God, and receive my soul.
> *Lightborn.* Run for the table.
> [*Exit* MATREVIS.]
> [*Re-enter* MATREVIS *with* GURNEY, *bringing the table, a featherbed, and a spit.*]
> *Edward.* O spare me! Or dispatch me in a trice!
> *Lightborn.* So, lay the table down, and stamp on it,
> But not too hard, lest that you bruise his body.
> [Using the table and featherbed to hold him down, they murder EDWARD, who screams as the spit penetrates him.]
> Matrevis. I fear me that this cry will raise the town,
> And therefore let us take horse and away. (1994: V.v. 107-114)

As Cartelli argues, the horror of King Edward's torture and death—"the stripped-down image Marlowe draws of the weak, enfeebled king, lying prone and submissive on his bed, while his murderers move purposefully about the room to execute a murder that is also a rape" (Cartelli 1999: 187)—is unmatched in most of Elizabethan drama, and actually enacts, dramatically, the 'deconsecration of sovereignty' that, in Moretti's classic argument, made of tragedy the "enabling medium of a 'real' king's eventual decapitation" (Cartelli 1999: 185-186). In Carletti's interpretation, the same long-term historical process described by Moretti as developing from English tragedy and culminating in the execution of Charles I

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   however. The horror of the extreme violence performed among the vain morality conventions in the scene reveals those conceptions as nothing but emptied-out tokens of medieval representation.

in 1649, "Marlowe presents in the concentrated span of five acts and in a manner even more threatening to the residual claims of absolute sovereignty" (1999: 186). But as Edwards notes, without a sense of the sacredness of kingship, such an act of sacrilegious violation would be meaningless (1983: 64). And both things, the *a priori* sacredness of kingship and the eventual desacralizing of royal majesty are made explicit in the climax of Edward's speech, which identifies the loss of his sovereignty with what remains after he is overthrown: the aches, fear and grief of his body natural:

> Still fear I, and I know now what's the cause,
> But every joint shakes as I give it thee.
> […]
> Know that I am king. O, at that name,
> I feel a hell of grief. Where is my crown?
> Gone, gone! And do I remain alive?
> […]
> But that grief keeps me waking, I should sleep;
> For not these ten days have these eyes' lids closed.
> Now as I speak they fall, and yet with fear
> Open again. (1994: V.v. 84-5, 88-90, 92-5)

Counter-discourses exist insofar as they oppose a main dominant discourse, in this case, the communal belief in divine sovereignty that Marlowe "drew in from the Tudor air about him" (Edwards 1983: 64). As explained, this dominant discourse— inherent to the romance genre—is functional in *Edward II*. It structures the plot and determines much of the rhetoric of the play, and of course it reveals the kind of emplotment that encodes historical events as represented in the Tudor chronicles that serve as Marlowe's sources. Such emplotment, that is, the emplotment of history into romance, determines that the plot of *Edward II* can only culminate in a 'killing-the-king' finale; but the notion that such an inevitable regicide can bring about a sense of collective regeneration—as it is the generic resolution of romance—is however challenged in Marlowe's play. Because arguably, on a plot level, *Edward II* presents a regenerative ending: the unfit king dies and a strong, legitimate successor inherits the throne, putting an end to the social and political chaos that had previously pervaded the dramatic action. Yet indubitably, on a deeper ideological level, the allegedly regenerative killing of the king is blatantly too brutal, too detailed, and too violent to bring about a sense of collective spiritual regeneration. The extreme violence committed against the king, as mentioned, is an irretractable act of desecration and therefore cannot be used to restore a preternatural, spiritual balance through the renewal of political order, for political order has been effectively desacralized.

The meaning of the final regicide is kept deliberately ambiguous. Mortimer entrusts Lightborn to execute the king in a clandestine manner so that "none shall know which way he died" (1994: V. IV. 24) and, consequently, the king is not put to death publically in a way that involves the subjects and thus reinforces the communal, ritualistic purpose of the allegedly regenerative killing. However, by means of Marlowe's dramatization of the secret murder, the effect of secrecy is reverted. Edward's clandestine death acquires the nature of a true ritual sacrifice by

virtue of being enacted in front of the audience. The purposes of the ritualistic and regenerative movement of romance are recovered. The audience is moved to terror and pity after witnessing the terrible violence onstage (Levin 1974: 125) so that such emotions can be purged. Through such a *katharsis* in the Aristotelian sense,[15] the dramatic enactment of King Edward's murder can be argued to have a restorative effect on the audience, and thus to result in a form of social regeneration. But paradoxically, as explained, these extra-textual restorative effects—which might be extrapolated to all *tragic* re-enactments of historical events insofar as the Aristotelian notion of *katharsis* is understood as a defining trait of the tragic genre—in truth bring about the ultimate desecration of kingship, that is to say, the subversion of the romance ideology that arguably inheres in the play's (and the sources') romance-like emplotment of historical events. The result is that such emplotment—necessary so that history can be understood and employed as an example to warrant social order in Tudor England—is in effect challenged and exposed as a mere ideological device aimed at legitimizing monarchical absolutism.

As this article has argued, such subversive dramatization of 'pre-emplotted' history is brought about in *Edward II* through the interplay of genre conventions. The matter of history is adapted to fit the *icon* (White 1978: 88) of romance through the filter of Tudor historiography, and the themes, rhetoric and structure of romance are shaped to adopt the form of tragedy, with the consequence that tragedy, as Moretti argued, "performs the degradation of the cultural image of the sovereign" (1992: 47). Tragedy, Moretti elaborates, "stages not the institutions of absolutism, but its culture, its values, its ideology" (1992: 47); arguably, by staging such ideology, tragedy inevitably portrays its immanence and therefore dismantles it.

6. Conclusion

In the tragedy of King Edward II as dramatized by Marlowe towards the end of the sixteenth century, the preternatural order of the world found in medieval romance—where chivalrous knights indeed go on to battle to mend the Maimed King and restore the Waste Land—is represented as a vain fiction, a rhetorical strategy that idealizes violence and power politics in a way that has no place in the world of Marlowe's theatre. As Frye explained, "chivalric romance rationalizes the social structure of the feudal system, in which few medieval barons resembled the knights of the Round Table" (1976: 177). *Edward II* arguably reverses that process, thus subverting the "emplotment" of history into the icon of romance. If, as White explains, "the historical narrative points [...] *toward* the events described in the narrative and *toward* the story type or mythos which the historian has chosen to serve as the icon of the structure of the events" (1978: 88), *Edward II*, denaturalizes such mythos. If the civil war is deemed unnatural by Isabella and

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[15]   As it is known, in the Aristotelian classical view, a tragedy is the imitation of a complete action of some magnitude, told in pleasant language and dramatic form, that arouses feelings of pity and terror in the audience so that those emotions can effectively be *relieved*, collectively (Aristotle 1987: 37).

Kent, for, again, "Tis treason to be up against the King" (1994: I. IV. 281), Edward's own violent determination, to, as Mortimer accuses him, "bathe [his] sword in subjects' blood" (III. II. 28), and in his own threatening words, to "make England's civil towns huge heaps of stones" (III. II. 31), make Warwick and even Kent regard the monarch as unnatural, too. As a consequence, "Marlowe's play renders any easy distinction between natural and unnatural impossible" (Archer 1999: 205), and there lies, arguably, the subversive force of the play. Political order is indeed restored in the figure of the legitimate successor, but all delusions of naturalness and preternatural order in the organization and maintenance of royal power are radically crushed. As Greenblatt notes, "in *Edward II* Marlow uses the emblematic method of admonitory drama, but uses it to such devastating effect that the audience recoils from it in disgust" (1980: 203). The subversive nature of dramatically representing an orthodox and dominant power strategy such as historical emplotting is thus undeniable, as it confirms Greenblatt's argument that "if the Elizabethan stage functions as one of the public uses of spectacle to impose normative ethical patterns on the urban masses, Marlowe enacts a relentless challenge to those patterns and undermines employment of rhetoric and violence in their service" (1980: 253).

Indeed, in *Edward II*, the legitimizing narrative pattern of medieval mythology that seems to validate the providential theory of kingship may structure the plot, but it does no longer contain the meaning, and, as a consequence, the play gives account, paradoxically, of what Thurn defined as "the failure of the fictions of sovereignty" (1990: 134). Ineluctably, then, Marlowe's play initiates the dramatic enactment of a 'mythical change' that marks the passage from the middle ages to the modern world (Kernan 1975: 270)—a change shaped through the dramatization of royal authority developed throughout the established modes of representation in Elizabethan England, and most eloquently exposed in Shakespeare's subsequent dramatization of English History. For historical Elizabethan drama—like Tudor historiography—relies on medieval myths of sovereignty to emplot, understand and ideologically exploit the historical events of the medieval past, but, as Moretti explains, "[tragedy], in its destruction of the medieval world picture, recognizes its importance, but destroys it nonetheless" (1992: 52).

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