

## Edward II, "Actaeonesque History," Espionage, and Performance\*

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Christopher Wessman relates the Actaeon story from classical myth to the concerns of Marlowe's *Edward II* in terms of metaphor, history, tragedy, and politics. Richly textured and informative, his argument along mythological lines reveals much about the compelling power of this play, and of Marlowe's dramatic effects generally, placing him in good critical company. In 1952 Marlowe studies received a critical boost with Harry Levin's *The Overreacher* which argued powerfully for the centrality of the Icarus myth to Marlowe's aspiring heroes. More recently Fred Tromly, in *Playing With Desire: Christopher Marlowe and the Art of Tantalization* (1998), argues the centrality of the Tantalus myth to Marlowe's effects of frustration on characters and audience. Wessman's essay on "Actaeonesque History," especially in relation to *Edward II*, reflects greater dramatic sensitivity than Tromly and fuller political possibility than Levin. Complex, versatile, powerfully suggestive and multivalent—the Actaeon myth involves sexualized power struggle, terrible personal recognition, and a paradoxical transformation of the hunter hunted within a political culture of punishment. Wessman convincingly argues "Actaeonesque History" as unstable, amoral, and transformative.

I would like to respond by suggesting a wider context in terms of power dynamics. In *Edward II*, as in the paradigmatic Actaeon myth, power relations combine and transform themselves through punishments that can be seen in Foucauldian terms of political allegiances,

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\*Reference: Christopher Wessman, "Marlowe's *Edward II* as 'Actaeonesque History'" *Connotations* 9.1 (1999/2000): 1-33.

inversions, and ironies. As source of power and site of contention, Edward's body is especially invested with extreme and paradoxical meanings. At once private man and public symbol, at once beloved king and tormented other, Edward II enacts and partakes of the contradiction described by Foucault: "In the darkest region of the political field the condemned man represents the symmetrical, inverted figure of the king" (29). In what follows, I will debate Wessman's sense of "spying" in *Edward II* by relating it to issues of self realization, personal punishment, and performative retribution, as informed, in historical and cultural terms by Foucault, Girard, and Kantorowicz and in performative terms by the profoundly doubled interactions of Edward and Gaveston within the drama.

Gaveston's action within the play does not so much involve espionage as it does *performance*. Nothing about him or his language is covert. If it were, the nobles and the Queen might understand it. He does "stand aside" (I.i.72) at the outset of the play, but does so for purposes of exposition as he eavesdrops and comments on the King and assorted nobles. These comments, variously snide and joyful, effectively characterize both Gaveston's contradictions and the others' hypocrisies. He does not need to spy on these characters because, as his comments show, he knows them all already. His Actaeonesque spying is more a matter of infiltration, invasion, and performance—"Actaeonesque intruding" as Wessman observes (9). Disgruntled, Mortimer condemns Gaveston as inappropriately "pert," protean, a "dapper jack" (I.iv.403, 411), before indulging in a fantasy of inverted hierarchy and shame:

Whiles other walk below, the king and he  
From out a window laugh at such as we,  
And flout our train and jest at our attire. (I.iv.415-17)

Feeling personally and politically upstaged, Mortimer excoriates Gaveston's showy behavior. Openly insouciant, Gaveston conveys disrespect from an elevated position (literally and figuratively), a position of comfort combined with jocular, even complacent, *élan*.

Gaveston's intrusion registers itself with the King in terms of mutual personal endearment and political confidence. Who needs to spy when the King himself is Gaveston's political source? In a short scene that confirms his inside political information as well as his arrogant self-assurance, Gaveston drops names familiarly and sarcastically without fear of retribution:

Edmund, the mighty prince of Lancaster,  
That hath more earldoms than an ass can bear,  
And both the Mortimers, two goodly men,  
With Guy of Warwick, that redoubted knight,  
Are gone towards Lambeth. There let them remain. (I.iii.1-5)

Mortimer might well threaten, "We will not thus be faced and overpeered" (I.iv.19), his sense of injury reinforcing Warwick's acrimonious observation of Gaveston: "Ignoble vassal, that like Phaethon / Aspires unto the guidance of the sun" (I.iv.16-17). Gaveston's political aspirations are extreme and Phaethon-like replete with mythological associations of open challenge and personal disaster. He knows the political secrets of the King personally—all-too-personally. As Leonard Barkan observes in his study of the Actaeon myth within the Theban group of the *Metamorphoses*: "Each of the mortal figures in this group has an encounter with a mysterious emanation of divinity that is simultaneously beautiful and terrifying" (319). If Gaveston were more secret about his intelligence, he could easily and secretly be liquidated. But Gaveston's public intrusion at the highest level of political affairs ensures—as such an intrusion did for Actaeon (and will for Edward II himself)—terrible self-realization, physical torment, and destruction.

Classical myth conveys emotional, psychological, and political distress with compelling power. Marlowe stresses and sexualizes this multivalent power, with all of its attendant confusions, most especially within the Actaeon-Diana myth in relation to the controversy of Gaveston and Edward. Wessman links the myth to the medieval political theory of the "King's Two Bodies," as outlined by Ernst Kantorowicz, observing that "the Diana myth and the monarch's roles are opened up, profoundly

unsettled and destabilized by Marlowe" (10). But this destabilized situation occurs openly in terms of performance and posturing, political challenge and open disregard, not strictly in terms of clandestine stealth and covert deception. The standard interpretation of the myth cautions that the secrets of Princes are dangerous. But they are also intensely desirable, and once gained are to be indulged in and enjoyed despite their treacherously short and intense duration. Wessman cogently argues that the myth of Diana and Actaeon empowers the play of *Edward II*, but both the ancient myth and the political drama thrive on mimetically contrived performance of punishment.

Foucault and Kantorowicz, even Gaveston, and Edward and a whole host of medieval and renaissance political theorists—they all know that power is written on the body through the genetic information passed on to lineal inheritors of kings and nobles. But power is also inscribed through voice, presentation, celebration, finery, and show. Elizabethan sumptuary laws followed medieval precedent in regulating personal display to ensure recognized stratification of rank in society. A powerful person must "look" and "act" the part. This, Gaveston understands implicitly and performs publicly, eliciting Mortimer's antagonized condemnations above. Gaveston knows that his actions define him more thoroughly than preconceptions of class. And he does *act*—ironically, Mortimer's linking him to "Proteus, god of shapes" (I.iv.410) represented the acme of praise for Elizabethan performers. In emphasizing his external actions along with internal consciousness, Gaveston presents himself as dangerously self-aware. Edward too. As King, his every action is a public, political action. He necessarily *lives* the realization mirrored in Gaveston's experience. Barkan's observation is revealing: "As Actaeon faces his own dogs unable to prove his own identity, we begin to see that the secret he witnessed when he saw Diana bathing is the secret of self-consciousness" (322). Just as Edward, in Wessman's view, manifests simultaneous mythological power as Actaeon and Diana, so too does he mirror Gaveston in power and performance, affirming himself as "Thy friend, thy self, another Gaveston!" (I.i.142).

A king's body is always invested with sacred associations that have their genesis in the mists of mythological etiology and anthropological rite. Hence the suggestive power of Wessman's argument. René Girard, too, in *Violence and the Sacred* (1977) suggestively analyses kingship across cultures as generated by the unifying ritual of sacrificing a surrogate victim, a scapegoat. Here, the King/victim is target for a unifying violence in which all subjects participate as in the Actaeon myth. Just as the King's body politic never dies in the mythological formula "The King is Dead, Long Live the King" so too the King *ever* dies in the sacrificial personal body subject to age and change and assassination. This paradoxical violence relates to Kantorowicz's findings as well when he quotes Richard II's famous speech in Shakespeare's play beginning, "For God's sake let us sit upon the ground / And tell sad stories of the death of kings" (III.ii.155-56). The sad stories, all ending in deposition and death, are mere chapters of the Actaeon story of which Edward II's experience is exemplary. Kantorowicz's observation on the necessary expendability of Richard II is synonymous with that of Edward II: "The king that 'never dies' here has been replaced by the king that always dies and suffers death more cruelly than other mortals" (30).

Such substitution of meanings has special relevance for Wessman's approach when he relates the undignified shaving of the King as prefiguring Edward's later, literal ripping apart in torment. But the shaving incident suggests more than brutality. It also ritually and symbolically figures the King as prey. The Revels editor quotes Stowe's account which Marlowe no doubt knew: "diuising by all meanes to disfigure him that hee mighte not be knowen" (Appendix B, 360). But the rough treatment meted out to Edward within the play—"They wash him with puddle water, and shave his beard away" (V.iii.36, *sd*)—disfigures him in a way that he *can* be known. He is the sacred prey, the ultimate target, the surrogate victim, the condemned man, the shameful scapegoat, hounded forever and always by his own. In this regard, he certainly experiences Actaeon's confusion and distress as he too is tormented like an animal but still has voice to protest in nostalgic humanized pathos: "Tell Isabel, the queen, I looked not thus / When for her sake I ran at tilt

in France / And there unhorsed the Duke of Cleremont" (V.v.66-69). Ultimately though, like Actaeon, Edward cannot make himself understood to his tormentors.

Wessman conveys typically strong argument when he writes of "Edward's real transgression" as comprising both "the wrong kind of accessibility and the ways in which it exposes the body politic, the 'land'" (12). Edward's rending of the land is a decentralizing policy that prefigures Actaeon-like dismemberment in personal and political terms. After all, Edward's two bodies as King represent both his personal body and his body politic. Both will be pierced within the play, as suggested by Wessman in the punning chiasmic structure: "Piers peers; the peers pierce" (19). But Piers Gaveston pierces too as he punctures authority and twists terms from the very first, countering Isabella in mimicry—"Madam, 'tis you that rob me of my lord" (I.iv.161)—and publicly confuting the nobles with a pointed verbal stab: "Base leaden earls that glory in your birth, / Go sit at home and eat your tenants' beef" (II.ii.74-75). *They* are the kept men of the realm. Gaveston represents an autonomously wild force that savages their domestic corruption. Royal venison takes precedent over tenants' beef. At all points, Gaveston over-peers the peers in terms of brazen disregard for authority and innovative public performance. Rather than spy on them, he superciliously *overlooks* them because they are so predictable with their phony impresa, legal technicalities and blustering protests before the King. To them, public performance means heraldry; to Gaveston, it means unsentimental political action. To gain the King's love is to gain power at the court of Edward II. Gaveston does so, literally and publicly.

Profoundly resonant in terms of renaissance culture, politics and morality, the myth of Diana and Actaeon conveys and conflates differences between hunter and hunted, between external perception and internal consciousness, between forms of permission and insinuation. Wessman's connecting of the Actaeon myth to the violent political actions of Marlowe's *Edward II* returns us to the roots of discipline, punishment, and power. But power in *Edward II* is not so much equated with sight and spying as it is with insight and performance. Gaveston

literally and figuratively "looks down" on Mortimer and the nobles but does not attempt to do so in any clandestine manner. His constant on-upmanship is all-too-public. Wessman quotes Baldock and Spencer as literal spies within the play. But Spencer's inside information sounds more like administrative gossip than espionage. When he counsels Baldock on performance, however, he gets closer to the Actaeonesque proportions that Wessman argues: "You must be proud, bold, pleasant, resolute— / And now and then stab, as occasion serves" (II.i.42-43). Stunning in its moral indifference, such advice sums up the imperatives of power suggested in Marlowe's paradigmatic Cynthian mythology so well observed and argued by Christopher Wessman as "Actaeonesque History."

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