‘In No Respect Can Contraries be True’: Passion and Reason in Marlowe’s Edward II

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Abstract: In Christopher Marlowe’s Edward II the relationship between passion and reason becomes powerfully relevant to the factional strife between the king and his barons. As the conflict escalates, one character exclaims that ‘in no respect can contraries be true’ (I. 4. 249), yet the play as a whole seems to refute this claim. While Edward has the right to claim the loyalty that his kingship entails and put down the revolt of his barons, the barons express a similar duty to remove the king’s favourite, Gaveston, for the benefit of the state. Both positions are true, and this presents a problem for the audience who seek to comprehend which faction they should support. In Marlowe’s view, contrariety is not so much a theory as an experience: and the audience is led to experience doubt. The play highlights the monstrous excesses of extreme passion and extreme reason as problematic attempts to make sense of the confusion of the play. In this paper, I will argue that Marlowe structures his play to first evoke and then actively question traditional representations of the relationship between passion and reason.

While the struggle between passion and reason was subject to intense debate in Renaissance thought, moral depictions of an ideal balance were far from uncommon. William Marshall’s frontispiece for the Earl of Monmouth’s work, The Use of Passions (1649), depicts an idealised representation of the conflict. In the image passion and reason are ordered hierarchically, with the passions — including joy, hope, and love...
— literally enchained by Reason. Above this hierarchy Marshall places the figure of Divine Grace, whose guidance provides reason with the authority, and presumably wisdom, to enchain the passions. The lines underneath the image acknowledge to some degree the idealised nature of the depiction: ‘But this, (yowll say)’s but in Effigie!’. However, the writer remains confident that if we ‘Peruse this Booke [...] Thereof will finde this truth so prov’d’.¹ The image was published after Marlowe’s time, but it expresses a contemporary concern for grasping the proper relationship between passion and reason in a balanced human being. In Edward II (published posthumously in 1594), Marlowe brings this relationship to the stage in order to reinvigorate rather than resolve the debate. Through the clashes between the king and his barons, passion is portrayed both as an emotional weakness that creates monarchical instability, and later, through compassion, as a measure of humanity. As the conflict between the king and his barons escalates, one character exclaims, ‘in no respect can contraries be true’ (I. 4. 249).² Yet through the play’s concern for irreconcilable positions, the truth in contraries becomes the dominant theme of the play, especially as it pertains to the relationship between passion and reason. Attention into the play’s ability to evoke and then actively question traditional representations of this relationship reveals the intricacy of its affective structure. The play that emerges defies idealistic resolution in order to frame an instructive experience of doubt for the audience.

Marshall’s frontispiece is of course only one perspective on the debate, but the perspective is a common one. The hierarchical representation is very close to that expressed by St. Augustine of Hippo, whose fifth-century writings continued to influence Renaissance thinkers across myriad disciplines. While Augustine vindicates certain kinds of emotions, such as anger when it is used as an agent to reform a sinner, he envisages a similar ideal to Marshall:
The point is that scripture subordinates the higher mind itself to God [...] and puts the passions into keeping of the mind, to be so regulated and restrained as to be converted into servants of righteousness.³

For both Marshall and Augustine, the authority of reason (or the mind) comes from God, and is therefore unquestionable. However, not all theorists were so confident that human reason reflected a divine ideal. Gail Kern Paster, in her work on the representation of the passions in Renaissance culture, suggests that early modern moralists ‘strongly doubted the force of reason as an encompassing or even an adequate rationale for behaviour’.⁴ Furthermore, Richard Strier identifies ideas in the works of Petrarch, Salutati, Erasmus, Luther, and others that ‘against the rule of reason’, seek to defend the ‘validity and even the desirability of ordinary human emotions and passion’.⁵ Marlowe’s contemporary, Michel de Montaigne, emphasises the limits of human reason as an adequate guide to realising the divine ideal in his essay, ‘An Apology for Raymond Sebond’ (first published 1580): ‘Human reason goes astray everywhere, but especially when she concerns herself with matters divine’.⁶ Where the limitations of reason and the importance of passion were occasionally explored, however, hierarchical representations continued. Stephen Gaukroger suggests that through the moral depiction of the seven deadly sins, of which all are recognisable passions, a conceptual link was often made between the passions and sin.⁷ In practice, therefore, literary representations of immorality more commonly portrayed excessive passion as the culprit, rather than indicting the limitations of human reason.

For Marlowe’s contemporaries, many of the dangerous aspects of passion were also considered to be the vices of playmaking. Critics of playhouses were nervous that, given a playwright’s ability to incite the passions of the audience, plays would inspire morally corrupt thoughts. Thomas Nashe defended these charges by arguing that artists portrayed the punishment of evildoers, and thereby sought to
confirm moral beliefs in the audience.\textsuperscript{8} Despite this, Thomas Cartelli argues that critics of the theatre, such as Stephen Gosson and Anthony Munday, in their fear of what drama was capable of, provide better justification for drama’s ability to move its audience than writers such as Nashe.\textsuperscript{9} Cartelli writes, ‘the very process a playwright activates is [...] a matter of resonances and suggestions that continue to ramify in a playgoer’s mind long after play’s end’.\textsuperscript{10} While critics such as Gosson and Munday feared the power of plays to stir up immoral passions, Edward Smith identifies a competing trend in Neoplatonic philosophy that saw passion as the basis from which a philosopher pursued knowledge. He writes, ‘the passion leads; knowledge follows — it would almost be correct to say mimics — the passion’.\textsuperscript{11} In his \textit{Defence of Poesy}, Sir Philip Sidney argues that poetry is particularly effective in stirring productive passions that ‘teacheth and moveth to virtue’.\textsuperscript{12} As he states, ‘who will be taught, if he be not moved with desire to be taught’.\textsuperscript{13} Nevertheless, Sidney condemns much of contemporary drama — not for its dramatic form so much as for the unclassical (or ‘faulty’) depiction of place and time,\textsuperscript{14} and use of ‘mongrel tragi-comedy’.\textsuperscript{15} Sidney’s apology is therefore consciously exclusive, and as \textit{Edward II} contains such ‘faults’ as elapsed time and movement between spaces, Marlowe’s play is excluded from Sidney’s eloquent defence of poetry’s ability to incite positive passions. Further, it is unclear whether the play ‘moveth to virtue’ or even whether Nashe’s evildoers are satisfactorily punished. Sidney’s insistence on the positive aspects of poetry is therefore contingent upon specific circumstances that help him to legitimise certain kinds of poetic works, while apparently leaving others to the criticism of writers such as Gosson and Munday. In my opinion, the play operates outside a purely positive depiction of passions in order to interrogate orderly categories. The play structures a destabilising experience by first creating a passionate investment in the story, and then by reversing this premise, promoting questioning and rational reflection of the play.
Of all Marlowe’s plays, *Edward II* is the most highly structured. Despite its categorisation as a history play, Marlowe extensively revises the historical account into a coherent and concise narrative of factional strife centred on the king’s favourites. Indeed, his rather inaccurate history play — which includes presenting events that actually occurred over the space of twenty years as factors directly influencing one another in a short period of time — suggests that he is less interested in providing a historical narrative than creating a structured experience for the audience. A number of critics have noted that where the play appears to initially condemn Edward, in the second half it reverses its focus to reveal the ambitious cruelty of Mortimer and the plight of the tortured king. Sara Munson Deats investigates the extent of this structuring, and notes that the play begins and ends with the funeral of one King Edward and the accession of another. For Deats, almost the entire play, when split at the middle, can be seen as a series of mirrored scenes that create ‘a symmetrical arrangement of parallels and antitheses’. She writes, ‘the drama thus brilliantly comes full circle, like the turning wheel of fortune, like the rising and setting sun, like the shining golden round’. For all of the brilliance and intricacy of the structure, the experience of the play can be very unpleasant with its constrictive and unrelenting symmetry. It has been described as ‘a grim, disquieting, even disagreeable work’, where ‘emotions are rawly exposed’, and the action ‘tears at our nerves’. To my mind, the tight structure of the play allows Marlowe to create an uncomfortable vision of reason and passion. Beginning with the premise of a distracted and wasteful king, who disregards social hierarchies by advancing his low-born lover, the play moves on to interrogate the intentions of the barons, the effectiveness of Kent’s isolating morality, and finally to consider the repercussions of either denying or endorsing compassion for an ineffectual king.

To a powerful degree, the play structures an experience for the audience that promotes questioning and further introspection. Philosopher Tzachi Zamir theorises
that works of literature can function as vehicles for philosophical thought through the experience that they provide for the audience. Zamir’s work is distinct in that it provides a framework to consider literary texts that do not reference philosophers or investigate specific doctrines as philosophical on some level. For Zamir ‘works of literature are structures of experience’,\textsuperscript{21} and therefore make the work of moral philosophy more accessible to the audience. He writes, ‘People who do not have a firm experiential grip on the beliefs they entertain lack understanding, not merely moral motivation’,\textsuperscript{22} and he suggests that drama can provide this understanding. 

Edward II does not enact moral philosophy, but Zamir’s concept of a structured experience is useful in considering the play’s ambivalent engagement with passion and reason. In addition to her work on the symmetry of Edward II, Deats has noted the wider trend within Marlowe’s works toward interrogative drama, in which plays argue on both sides of a given question. In the case of Edward II she identifies this tension between ‘personal fulfilment (love, passion, pleasure) and public responsibility (duty, honor)’.\textsuperscript{23} However, in her discussion of ‘pro-duty’ and ‘[p]ro-Edward’\textsuperscript{24}, she does not consider the experience of the play beyond its polarised critical reception. The careful structuring of the play does not only create a double perspective, but forces the audience to constantly revise their previous thinking, and reinterpret the drama. I would suggest that the play structures an experience of doubt, in which learning is not about identifying which faction is correct but in recognising that sometimes it is impossible to do so.

From the opening scene of Edward II, it is evident that Marlowe is weighing into debates about the role of passion, and more specifically, the dangers it can present when combined with power. After reading the ‘amorous lines’ (I. 1. 6) from the king, Gaveston quickly plans how he will enthrall him:

\begin{quote}
I must have wanton poets, pleasant wits, 
Musicians that with touching of a string 
May draw the pliant king which way I please (I. 1. 50–53)
\end{quote}
Critics agree that Gaveston’s passion is undoubtedly homoerotic, and such avowals were likely to have been considered immoral. Yet there is still significant division in determining whether the threat Gaveston poses to the barons is largely one of sex, politics, or of both intermingled. Nevertheless, it seems likely that the underlying threat of Gaveston’s perhaps unconvincing love is his power over this ‘pliant’ monarch. The descriptions of employing ‘wanton poets, pleasant wits’ (I. 1. 50) and holding ‘Italian masques by night’ (I. 1. 54) indicates exorbitant spending of state funds, and signals Gaveston’s desire to distract Edward from political responsibility. Edward later affirms Gaveston’s professed power when he lavishes gifts and authority upon him, naming him Lord High Chamberlain, Chief Secretary to the State, and Earl of Cornwall (I. 1. 153–55). For Edward, though, even this is not enough, so he gifts his heart as well as more worldly benefits:

Fear’st thou thy person? Thou shalt have a guard
Wants thou gold? Go to my treasury.
Wouldst thou be loved and feared? Receive my seal,
Save or condemn, and in our name command
Whatso thy mind affects or fancy liked (I. 1. 165–69)

Edward’s promise of his seal, with the authority to save or condemn, echoes another of Marlowe’s plays, *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (published posthumously in 1594), where Jupiter cedes to Ganymede the power to ‘Controule proud fate and cut the thread of time. / Why are not all the gods at thy command, / And heaven and earth the bounds of thy delight’.25 In both texts Marlowe depicts the extraordinary circumstance of monarchical authority ceded to a sexual minion, and therefore signals Marlowe’s awareness and attention to the danger of figures in authority who are swayed by passion. Yet, where *Dido* deals in a mythic landscape in which Jupiter’s philanderings impact only indirectly upon the main story of Dido and Aeneas, *Edward II*’s historical narrative would have appeared disturbingly real to
contemporary audiences. Here, excess passion is not just an explanatory narrative for the changeability of fate, but a direct factor in the historical weakening of a nation.\(^6\) In *Edward II*, Marlowe explores in increasing depth the problematic relationship between excessive passion and figures in authority.

By affirming Gaveston’s power with titles and gifts, Edward reorders the power structure of the court according to his passions. Consequently, the first representation of passion in the play is not only vicelike, but dangerous to the nation. Lawrence Normand writes, ‘For Marlowe’s barons the offence that Gaveston represents is not self-evidently sexual […] for the barons Gaveston is objectionable because his access to favour means their exclusion, and their anger is expressed in political terms’.\(^7\) While I agree with Normand that the barons’ anger is largely political, they express this anger in (intriguingly) passionate language that is similar to Gaveston and Edward. They complain that they would ‘love and honour’ (I. 1. 99) the king if he would banish Gaveston again: ‘If you love us, my lord, hate Gaveston’ (I. 1. 79). Curtis Perry argues that the play is ‘distinguishing between two kinds of love’ — the impersonal love of the barons and the intimate and transgressive love of Gaveston.\(^8\) Yet for all that there is a perceivable difference between these avowals of love, Perry suggests that the barons’ language indicates that ‘they do conceive of monarchy as personal and of royal favour as intimate’.\(^9\) The barons though, legitimate their passionate language through claims of loyalty to ‘your father’ (I. 1. 82), being Edward I, and the ‘oath[es]’ (I. 1. 85) that they made. By combining their passionate language with seemingly patriotic motives, their passions appear to be rational in nature, as Marshall’s image advised. Consequently, when both the king and the barons threaten vengeance — the terms escalating from refusing aid (I. 1. 84–88) to drowning the king’s throne in blood (I. 1. 129–32) — the king’s refusal to give up his favourite at the cost of his country’s stability means that the weight of audience disapproval would likely have fallen upon Edward’s head. Further, in their opposition the barons are able to position themselves as rational and patriotic

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against the dangerous passions of the king. From this opening scene, Marlowe seems to reinforce a hierarchical understanding of passion and reason, as might be expected from contemporary moral texts. This is, however, only the first scene.

As the play progresses, the early ethical divide between the king and his barons is eroded. Indeed, approval of the barons is contingent on the belief that while Edward is undone by passion, the barons behave rationally and patriotically for their country. However, it soon becomes clear that the barons are defending their own interests above those of the state. Mortimer claims that Gaveston’s ‘ambitious pride, / Will be the ruin of the realm and us’ (I. 2. 31–32), and therefore reveals that his patriotism is mingled with self-interest. Soon after, Mortimer’s desire for justice escalates to revenge: ‘The king shall lose his crown, for we have power, / And courage too, to be revenged at full’ (I. 2. 59–60). The Archbishop’s quick reply, ‘But yet lift not your swords against the king’ (I. 2. 61), reveals that even among his supporters, Mortimer has gone beyond rational patriotism. In these scenes the barons’ claims to rationality are dismantled by the ambition that will later be revealed in Mortimer, an ambition that is not unlike Gaveston’s own subjective goals: ‘Mine enemies will I plague, my friends advance’ (V. 4. 65). It is clear that Marlowe is structuring an experience for the audience that, as Zamir suggested, is capable of provoking deeper understanding. Conversely, where Zamir emphasises that a play can enable ‘a firm experiential grip on the beliefs they entertain’, I find that the experience of Edward II is directed towards unsettling and questioning belief systems. Indeed, disapproval of the king is designed to elicit approval of the barons; the audience’s consequent disillusionment with the barons results in the loss of a moral framework from which to view the action. There is a sense that no ethical binary is complicated or complete enough to encompass the conflict. Whichever set of binaries are used to differentiate the factions — whether passion and reason, vice and virtue, or private and public politics — each displays facets of each. They make
truth claims that cannot be denied: Edward has a responsibility to his realm which
he does not fulfil, just as the barons have a duty to their king which they too readily
redirect to their own desire for power. Left with a violent opposition between two
competing factions, the meaning of the conflict becomes indiscernible. It is this lack
of meaningful but all-consuming conflict that constitutes the carefully constructed
experience of the play.

The play employs a range of mirroring patterns to characterise the
irreconcilable nature of the conflict. In addition to Deats’ description of the
patterning of mirrored scenes, John McElroy notes the repetitive patterning of
language, plot points, and characters, whilst Lisa Hopkins argues that the play is
‘haunted’ by a series of doubles. This kind of mirroring is especially evident in the
series of exchanges in characters directly mimicking each other while expressing
opposing positions. Marlowe uses this device at various times in the play and the
effect is to emphasise the irresolvable nature of the conflict. The device appears most
regularly (four times) in the fourth scene (I. 4. 20–21, 76–77, 80–81, 160–61). The first
instance connects repetition directly to the central conflict in the play:

EDWARD: Lay hands on that traitor Mortimer!
MORTIMER SNR: Lay hands on that traitor Gaveston! (I. 4. 20–21)

Evidently both parties identify political dissent as treachery, yet in this exchange it is
unclear to the audience which of these acts of dissent is traitorous. Edward’s
accusation defines treachery as disloyalty to his kingship, and indeed, his command
is a response to Mortimer’s declaration that he and his allies, ‘will not thus be faced
and overpeered’ (I. 4. 19). These threats had already been made explicit when in the
first scene Lancaster warned the king, ‘look to see the throne where you sit / To float
in blood’ (I. 1. 130–31). For the audience, the barons’ open opposition to Edward’s
authority is treacherous. Yet from an alternative perspective there is also truth to
Mortimer Senior’s claim that Gaveston is the traitor. The barons define their ‘duties’
(I. 4. 23) as to the state, which they claim overrides their duty to a ‘brainsick king’ (I.
1. 124). Mortimer Senior openly refuses the role as traitor: ‘We are no traitors; therefore threaten not’ (I. 4. 26). In this short interchange treachery takes on two irreconcilable meanings. Ernst H. Kantorowicz’s study *The King’s Two Bodies* explores the tension between the king’s immortal body politic and mortal body natural. This doubling may inform our understanding of this conflict: there is treachery to the person of the king, and treachery to the office of the king. Consequently both factions are guilty of treachery, and both are right to recognise it in the other. It may be tempting to surmise that the contrariety of this mimicry cancels itself out, and, as Judith Haber suggests, sinks the dispute into ‘indefinition’. However, the care Marlowe takes to acquaint the audience with the validity of each side’s perspective speaks otherwise. There are multiple traitors and multiple truths in this play, and passion and reason resist easy identification with either faction.

This doubt-ridden treatment of the qualities of passion and reason indicates a significant departure from the treatment of reason in Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles*. Joan Parks describes the inclusive, or indiscriminate nature of the detail they contain, yet argues that they retain ‘general ethical principles calling for reason and deliberation in all things’. Amongst this turbulent period of history, Parks suggests that the *Chronicles* maintain their standards of rational and moral behaviour by focussing upon the realm rather than the king as an individual. As she suggests, ‘the chronicle’s form and content actually worked to address the concerns and convey the values of the citizen and artisan Londoners who were its principal readers and producers’. Indeed, Holinshed frequently places emphasis upon the responses of common people to political events: ‘iudged of the common people’; ‘the English nation began to grow in contempt’; ‘stir the people to some rebellion’; ‘run into the hatred of all his people’. The *Chronicles’ interest in common people increases the sense that all parties in this history are accountable, and will be judged according to their adherence to the shared principles of the people, and especially reason. The
emphasis in the *Chronicles* upon public rather than private individuals, where the populace is treated almost as an undivided whole and individual motives are often hard to discern, allows categories such as reason to remain idealised.

For Marlowe’s source material, Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, the place of reason in this ‘unfortunat’ reign remains intact for being abstract, and is unaffected by individuals’ adherence or resistance to the principles of the land. Following this framework, the *Chronicles* condemn Edward’s overwhelming passion as an abuse of monarchical power, and later also condemn the barons for their ambition:

All these mischeefes and manie more happened not onlie to him [Edward], but also to the whole state of the realme, in that he wanted iudgement and prudent discretion to make choise of sage and discreet councellors, receiving those into his fauour, that abused the same to their priuate gaine and aduantage, not respecting the aduancement of the commonwealth [...] the hearts of the common people & nobilitie were quite estranged from the dutifull loue and obedience which they ought to have shewed to their souereigne.

As Holinshed suggests, Edward is criticised for lacking ‘judgement and prudent discretion’ in choosing counsellors, who neglect the ‘aduancement of the commonwealth’ for ‘priuate gaine’; meanwhile the ‘common people & nobilitie’ are shown to be ‘estranged’ from their ‘dutifull loue’. Interestingly, Holinshed does not therefore condemn kingship or defend the revolt, but affirms the place of the king:

[...] for God who hath placed princes in the thrones of royaltie, to this end hath vouchsafed them a superlatiue degree of dignitie, that they might be obeyed, neither will his justice permit impunitie to the disloiall enterprises and complots of malefactors, common peace-disturbers, hautue-harted Nemrods; ambitious Hamans, or any lewd malcontent.

Essentially, therefore, the *Chronicles* uphold morality by identifying and criticising breaches of reason, but they do not consider any situation where reason itself may be confounded. In contrast to this focus on the realm, Marlowe focuses upon individuals, and therefore the ways in which abstract categories such as reason are embodied.
Among a cast of characters who are self-serving and deceitful, it is in a relatively minor character, Kent, that Marlowe offers the audience the most recognisably rational and moral character. With his sense of ‘duty’ (I. 4. 22) and ‘honour’ (II. 3. 9), critics have noted that Kent serves as a moral guide for the audience, to initially condemn and then later forgive the king as Kent does. Indeed, two critics have quite accurately likened him to a weathervane: following his conscience he first defends his brother the king, then defects to support the barons, and then returns allegiance again to his brother. As Vivien Thomas and William Tydeman suggest, Marlowe’s depiction of these shifts is drawn from his source material in the Chronicles, but according to the historical record these shifts were inexplicable. According to Holinshed, Kent loyally fights for the king on many occasions (‘The earle of Kent […] resisted the enemies verie manfullie’), until he is listed among those who return to England with the queen, apparently in support of her rebellion. No account is given as to why Kent changes his allegiance against the king, but a little more is given as to why he shifts back:

But as he [Edward] thus continued in prison, closelie kept, so that none of his frends might haue accesse vnto him, as in such cases it often happeneth, when men be in miserie, some will euer pitie their state, there were diuerse of the nobilitie (of whom the earle of Kent was cheefe) began to devise means by secret conference had together, how they might restore him to libertie.

While the description of ‘pitie’ provides some motive for Kent’s final change in allegiance, Holinshed’s use of the phrase ‘as in such cases’ suggests that he perceives this to be a general rather than particular emotion; further, while Kent may be ‘cheefe’ in this change, he is given no distinguishing narrative from the rest. This final change in the Chronicles indicates that even when it is possible to comprehend Kent’s motives in a broad sense, his character remains confusingly conflicted.
It is therefore significant that Marlowe explains Kent’s shifts in allegiance through rational, rather than inexplicable, decisions. Indeed, according to Marlowe the reasons underlying his actions are entirely honourable, yet his changeability renders him ineffectual in the drama. His advice to the king is disregarded (I. 1. 157–59), as are his subsequent denunciations of both the barons and the king (I. 1. 105–117; II. 2. 207–218); moreover, he undergoes imprisonment (I. 4. 34) and banishment (IV. 1. 5) by the factions at different times. Consequently, a conflict emerges between Kent’s appearance as either a transcendent rational voice that perceives injustice, or as the weak brother who is largely ignored. Further, there is an implication that in the kind of conflict that this play enacts, rational and moral responses necessarily must shift. By positioning Kent as the guide for the audience and then seeing him ignored and finally killed, Marlowe challenges the audience to consider that a moral approach to life may render a person ineffectual and lead to intense suffering. By contrast, the single–minded immorality of the king and the barons results in a greater ability to pursue their less ethical desires. Abstract concepts, such as the moral transcendance of reason, are therefore subjected to an uncomfortable reality in which they are distressingly impotent. Marlowe’s vision is deeply cynical, but I find that it does, in Zamir’s formulation, provide an experience that deepens and complicates our understanding of leading a rational life.

Kent’s final shift in allegiance sees him return to his brother the king, but what makes this action significant is that through his passionate language he begins to redeem the role of passion in the play. Up until this point, representations of passion have been limited to Gaveston, Edward, and Isabella. Gaveston’s extravagant passion has already been discussed, and Edward appears even less pitiable when he offers to cede his kingship in order to be left ‘some nook or corner […] / To frolic with my dearest Gaveston’ (I. 4. 72–73). By the end of the scene, Edward admits he would rather keep his kingship after all, and signs the banishment papers ‘with my tears’ (1.4.86). Once Gaveston is banished, Edward’s
passionate excesses continue, this time being ‘frantic for my Gaveston’ (I. 4. 314), to which Lancaster exclaims, ‘Diablo! What passions call you these?’ (I. 4. 318). Isabella’s passions are more complicated as they are marked by two distinct phases. When she is abandoned for her husband’s lover she vows to remain faithful to Edward:

[...] for rather than my lord
Shall be oppressed by civil mutinies,
I will endure a melancholy life,
And let him frolic with his minion (I. 2. 64–67)

It is evident that Isabella can see past her own abandonment to the political consequences of Edward’s liaison, and at this point in the play this renders her self-sacrificial passion more pitiable. The audience would likely have known Isabella’s reputation for eventually betraying her husband, but when Gaveston hints towards her infidelity she calls on God to defend her loyal love to Edward: ‘Heavens can witness I love none but you’ (II. 4. 15). By the time Isabella returns to France and begins plotting her husband’s deposition, her passion has metamorphosed into hate. Her words, ‘I rue my lord’s ill fortune, but, alas, / Care of my country called me to this war’ (IV. 6. 64–65), are revealed to be deceptions rather than true concerns. Interestingly, it is when she spurs on her army with descriptions of Edward’s political failings that her words sound convincing enough for Mortimer to quickly chide her: ‘if you be a warrior, / Ye must not grow so passionate in speeches’ (IV. 4. 14–15). In contrast to Kent’s virtuous shifts in allegiance, Isabella’s shifts reveal her deceptiveness to the degree where it is difficult to determine whether her initial affection for Edward was likewise feigned. Consequently, Isabella’s dangerous passions appear to outdo even Gaveston and Edward, as she disguises hate with the appearance of selfless love.

Kent’s final passionate response is characteristically of a different kind. He says:
Edward, alas, my heart relents for thee.
Proud traitor, Mortimer, why dost thou chase
Thy lawful king, thy sovereign, with thy sword
Vile wretch [himself], and why hast thou, of all unkind,
Borne arms against thy brother and thy king?
Rain showers of vengeance on my cursèd head,
Thou God, to whom in justice it belongs
To punish this unnatural revolt! (IV. 6. 2–9)

In this final shift, Kent prioritises his ‘heart’ above all else (IV. 6. 2). Where in an earlier scene he called his brother an ‘unnatural king’ (IV. 1. 8), here he considers his own lack of loyalty to his brother as an ‘unnatural revolt’ (IV. 6. 9). His emphasis upon brotherhood and kingship suggests that he is now prioritising relationships above his rational discernment of correct rulership. McElroy argues that this political change is ‘ironic because it rests on the assumption, absurd by now, that hereditary right and not Realpolitik is the decisive factor in the political arena’. In terms of politics, Kent’s passionate turn is poorly timed — indeed it leads to his death — but as the moral guide of the play, it allows the audience to witness a kind of passion that is selfless, and importantly, influences them to empathise with the king. It also reconfigures Kent’s moral approach as valuable, although not in a material way. Certainly, Kent’s passions make him no more effectual to the story than his rational attempts, but the change leads the story to consider whether passion is necessary to an ethical human being. To my mind, Kent’s passionate shift carefully scaffolds an important shift in the play itself towards reappraising passion.

The ethical dimension of the conflict between passion and reason is brought into sharp focus over the issue of compassion. Indeed, by using Kent to introduce a positive passion, Marlowe heightens the emphasis upon Mortimer’s repression of passion, and more specifically compassion. John Staines notes that the ability of rhetoric to elicit compassion was an ongoing anxiety for Renaissance thinkers, particularly when it interfered with political concerns. In his essay ‘De Clementia’,
Seneca describes the dangers of compassion: ‘there are women, senile or silly, so affected by the tears of the nastiest criminals that, if they could, they would break open the prison’. Following the stoic tradition, Seneca criticised this kind of compassion as impulsive and irrational. In place of compassion, Seneca advocated rationalised clemency. For Seneca, clemency is an entirely different category to compassion, as clemency is not a passionate response so much as a rational determination that considers mitigating factors that may enable someone to deserve such clemency. In the first half of the play Edward pleads for the barons to ‘pity’ Gaveston:

EDWARD: You that be noble born should pity him.

WARWICK: You that are princely born should shake him off. (I. 4. 80–81)

In Senecan fashion, the barons suggest that Gaveston does not deserve clemency. At this point it seems likely that the audience would mostly agree and remain unmoved by Edward’s plea, judging by Gaveston’s troubling influence over the king.

Later in the play, however, Mortimer not only fails to be moved by the plight of the king to compassion, but senses the capacity for his soldiers to pity Edward’s torture and orders them to resist such a feeling. Leicester and Berkeley both fail to resist pitying Edward (V. 2. 149–50; V. 2. 34–35), and Mortimer, far from being moved, employs Matrevis and Gurney, whom he instructs to weaken the king by giving him neither ‘kind word nor good look’ nor to ‘let no man comfort him if he chance to weep, / But amplify his grief with bitter words’ (V. 2. 54, 63–64). These extraordinary measures mark the point at which the denial of compassion begins to appear monstrous. Indeed, his position is contrasted by the compassion that is felt by the commoners (V. 4. 2) and even the series of guards who watch over Edward. While Matrevis and Gurney agree to these measures, when Matrevis reports back to Mortimer of Edward’s death, he too relents: ‘I wish it were undone’ (V. 6. 2). Edward
himself is given lines that both condemn his ‘unrelenting’ punishers and demonstrate a surprising understanding of the cause:

What, are you moved? Pity you me?
Then send for unrelenting Mortimer,
And Isabel, whose eyes, being turned to steel,
Will sooner sparkle fire than shed a tear. (V. 1. 102–05)

In these lines Edward draws his wife into condemnation with Mortimer. It is possible that the description of her steely eyes renders Mortimer’s own description as ‘unrelenting’ more than simply an emotional state, for instance one of steeliness or of stoniness. Critics of stoicism commonly described their adherents as stone men, and therefore it is not difficult to understand Edward’s words as an implicit criticism of stoicism. Where perhaps a majority of the audience would have disregarded Edward’s plea to pity Gaveston in scene four, the play has been carefully structured so that by this point it is more difficult to disregard calls for compassion.

There is a sense that Mortimer’s inability to relent makes him too rational, and thereby less than human. Thomas Cartelli argues that Mortimer’s actions are governed by ‘dispassion’, a state whose ‘morally corrosive effects’ are a ‘fixed attitude dominated (as most authorities on the passions prescribe) by reason’. The play reconfigures the stoic ideal of rationality here as cruelty rather than restraint, a connection which undermines the stoic definition of reason as the beneficial eradication of the passions. After all, Mortimer’s reasons for resisting compassion are entirely rational: as the beginning of the play made abundantly clear, Edward’s reign was a threat to the realm, and of course Mortimer’s own power. Yet with Mortimer’s refusal to relent, there is a sense that his rationality renders him less than human, as if he were missing something inherent to all other characters, and indeed the audience. By depicting Mortimer’s lack of compassion, the play forces the audience to witness the monstrous excesses of extreme reason, to the same degree that extreme passion was depicted in the opening of the play. Mortimer’s cruelty towards
Edward makes the king more pitiable, and does something towards reforming his original negative representation. Ultimately, however, knowledge of Edward’s suffering is coupled with the understanding that it was brought about by his own negligence. It is this painful, contradictory information that characterises the heavily structured experience of the play.

*Edward II* is structured as an emotional journey for the audience. Marlowe begins with the foundation of Edward and Gaveston’s dangerous passion, which is contrasted with the patriotic reason of the barons. These easy distinctions are quickly broken down, however, and the two factions become confused in the audience’s mind, as both threaten to violently destroy each other. Finally, through Kent’s compassion for the king, the monstrosity of Mortimer’s lack of compassion is revealed, and the play effectively reverses its opening position. As Deats suggests, there is a logical order to the play’s progression: ‘In the play’s early acts [...] masculine duty is suffocated by excessive feminine passion; in the drama’s final acts, feminine compassion is throttled by excessive masculine ruthlessness’. Yet, this description cannot adequately account for the way in which Marlowe carefully frames expectations in the audience, only to undermine and threaten those ideas. Nor can it account for the sense of uncertainty this structured process brings. In this paper, I have argued that the purpose for this conscious doubling of perspective is to frame a journey for the audience that leads to an instructive experience of doubt, rather than resolution. Edward captures the experience of the play when he cries, ‘Rend not my heart with thy too-piercing words’ (I. 4. 117). For Edward, these words express the pain of a terrible choice: between losing the person he loves and failing in his duty as king. However, the words also pierce the audience. Marlowe challenges us to think on the limitations and the cost of singularly passionate and rational approaches to life, and to judge whether contraries can in fact be true.
Notes


2 Christopher Marlowe, Edward the Second, ed. by Charles R. Forker (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).


10 Cartelli, Marlowe, p. 28.


13 Sidney, Apology, p. 110.

14 Sidney, Apology, p. 110.

15 Sidney, Apology, p. 112.


17 Deats, ‘Marlowe’s Fearful Symmetry’, p. 257. For a table listing the mirrored scenes Deats refers to, see p. 242.


22 Zamir, *Double Vision*, p. 34.
23 Sara Munson Deats, ‘Marlowe’s Interrogative Drama: *Dido, Tamburlaine, Faustus, and Edward II’*, in *Marlowe’s Empery: Expanding His Critical Contexts*, ed. by Sara Munson Deats and Robert A. Logan (Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2002), p. 120.
35 Holinshed, *Chronicles*, p. 588.
36 Holinshed, *Chronicles*, p. 587.
37 Holinshed, *Chronicles*, pp. 572–73.
40 Holinshed, *Chronicles*, p. 576.
41 Holinshed, *Chronicles*, p. 580.
43 McElroy, ‘Repetition, Contrariety, and Individualisation’, 213.
47 Sara Munson Deats, *Sex, Gender, and Desire in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997), p. 188.