Rebels with a Cause: How Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare Subversively Challenge the Monarchy’s Source of Power and Other Societal Norms of Early Modern England

Maggie E. Roussell

University of New Orleans, mrousse2@uno.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.uno.edu/td

Part of the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

Recommended Citation
http://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/2356

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at ScholarWorks@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. The author is solely responsible for ensuring compliance with copyright. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.
Rebels with a Cause: How Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare Subversively Challenge the Monarchy’s Source of Power and Other Societal Norms of Early Modern England

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English

By Maggie Roussell

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2014

May, 2017
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table of Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract ................................................................. iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1 ................................................................. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited ............................................................... 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita ................................................................. 55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

This thesis examines the ways that Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare use their history plays to subvert the ideals of early modern England. Writing plays about historical events gave the playwrights freedom to depict certain things on stage that would have otherwise been unacceptable, and because they had history as their source, they could show events that were parallel to the current happenings in England and make commentary on those events.
On November 3, 1579, John Stubbs stood before an English crowd and had his right hand cut off. Stubbs’ crime was writing a pamphlet titled *The Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf* which spoke of his disapproval of the possible marriage between Queen Elizabeth I and the French prince Henry, Duke of Anjou. Natalie Mears explains that Stubbs’ pamphlet displeased the queen, and she ordered that he “have his right hand struck off with a cleaver” (629). During a time when a punishment was supposed to fit the crime, it is clear why Elizabeth would have chosen to chop off the dominant hand of a writer who was publishing things she did not agree with. This also shows the perilous times writers and publishers were living in. If something they wrote or published was deemed dangerous and undesirable by the queen, they could face a fate similar to Stubbs.

Considering this incident makes the work of Christopher Marlowe even more impressive. Born a son to a poor shoemaker in Canterbury around 1564, Marlowe’s beginnings were unimpressive. Marlowe excelled at school and earned enough scholarships that he was able to finish his MA, despite the fact that, as David Riggs states, “Tradesman’s sons usually left school at the age of eight” (26). While finishing his degree, rumors begin to circulate that Marlowe had spent time or was planning to go to the English seminary at Rheims, a destination for Catholic scholars. In what appears to be an attempt to quell the rumors, “On 29 June, the queen’s Privy Council informed university officials that Marlowe ‘had done her Majesty good service…in matters touching the benefit of the country’…their letter leaves the impression that Marlowe had carried out secret missions on the Council’s behalf’” (29). Marlowe’s work with the government, however, was not always as clear as this letter makes it seem.

While there is nothing to prove Marlowe’s true allegiance one way or another, there is a possibility that Marlowe was a double agent. Some of his contemporaries would proclaim him an
atheist, counterfeiter, and sodomite. This along with his murky alliance led the crown to see him as a threat to the order of the realm, and Marlowe was murdered at an inn under the pretense of a fight over the reckoning of the bill. It is not clear whether Marlowe was involved in treasonous plots or not, but “Queen Elizabeth paid Marlowe the fatal compliment of taking him seriously, as a political agent to be reckoned with” (38). With this, Marlowe’s talent and future were snuffed out, and any potential accomplishments left unrealized. Instead, as Charles Nicholl states, “He is remembered not just as a writer, but as an atheist and blasphemer, a dissolute homosexual, an Elizabethan ‘roaring boy’ who lived fast and died young” (4).

The poems and plays Marlowe left behind are full of dangerous themes and subversive messages; from his racy translations of Ovid’s *Amores* to the class jumping hero of *Tamburlaine* to the various depictions of homosexuality in most of his works, Marlowe was not one to shy away from taboo subjects. His plays contain feminized males and same sex relationships, along with the questioning of God and His morality. These issues concerning patriarchal institutions are examined in small or large chunks throughout his poetry and plays, as is the question of whether it was those most capable or those with the right bloodline who had the right to rule.

As Marlowe wrote most of his history plays, the country was preoccupied with one thought: who will be the sovereign once Elizabeth dies? Elizabeth had no heir and, considering her age and lack of a husband, was never going to produce one. There were a few logical candidates Elizabeth could have considered to designate as her heir, and it was the uncertainty of who that person might be and what potential effect his or her rule would have on the country that weighed heavily on the country’s mind. During the same time, William Shakespeare was writing his history plays; these show his audience what can happen when there is no apparent heir to the throne or when the heir is horribly unfit to rule. Marlowe also shows this to his audiences
through his own historical plays. It is certainly not a coincidence that Shakespeare and Marlowe were writing plays that examined these possibilities while England’s future remained unsure.

In all of these plays, the transfer of power, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, is symbolized by the material symbol of monarchy, the crown. Whoever possesses the crown possesses the power. This seems to suggest to Shakespeare and Marlowe’s audiences that the monarchy, whose power is supposed to be divinely appointed, is really just dependent on whose head holds the crown; there is no real divine right. The two playwrights take this suggestion one step further by challenging their audience to consider the fact that if ruling by divine right is not true, then why is the ruler of the country supposedly chosen by blood and not ability?

A monarch’s power was supposed to be unchallengeable, but there are various instances throughout Marlowe’s plays where the king challenges the idea of divine right. Glenn Burgess examines James I’s speech where the king explains the divine right of monarchs by asserting that “The State of Monarchie is the supremest thing upon earth: For Kings are not onely Gods Lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon Gods throne, but even by God himself they are called Gods” (837). Though James would give this speech more than ten years after Marlowe’s death, the ideas of a monarch’s power were similar during Queen Elizabeth I’s reign. Instances where Marlowe challenges these ideas will be discussed throughout the essay, but it is important to keep in mind how dangerous this topic was for him to discuss—especially during a time when his current sovereign had no obvious heir—yet he does so several times.

In a time when censures and punishments for writing about taboo subjects were rampant, Marlowe and Shakespeare were able to depict the problems and downfalls of many patriarchal institutions of early modern England at the time. Marlowe is certainly more risqué in his choice of subjects, but evidence of the same nature can also be found in Shakespeare’s history plays as
well. These men had obviously spent a lot of time thinking about their society and the way it worked, and they found it severely lacking.

This essay will first discuss effeminate males in the works of Marlowe and, briefly, Shakespeare, focusing mostly on the playwrights’ history plays. Then, I will discuss how Marlowe and Shakespeare show that it is not their protagonists’ effeminate nature that makes them ineffectual rulers; the playwrights see the kings’ inability to rule as a disastrous effect of the “divine right to rule” theory. Finally, I will show how the symbol of the crown is important in all of the history plays and proves further that the playwrights were concerned with and questioning the process through which people were chosen to rule.

**Homosexual Relationships and Effeminate Males**

*Edward the Second* has at its center a homosexual relationship during a time when acts of sodomy were forbidden by law. Bruce Smith explains that sodomy became a felony under King Henry VIII, and “deprived the convicted felon not only of his life but of his ‘goods, chattels, debts, lands, tenements, and hereditaments, as felons beene accustomed to doo according to the order of the common laws of this realme’—in effect, taking away the social status and economic means of the convicted man’s entire family and all of his heirs” (45). Sodomy was now a felony, so sodomites would face the same fate as other felons, “death was to be inflicted by hanging” (Smith 45). Sodomy was not only seen as a religious offense; it was now a political offense.

Despite this fact, Christopher Marlowe wrote a play with a homosexual relationship. What allowed Marlowe to examine this taboo subject so closely and brazenly without attracting the wrath of the censors was the historical background; Edward II of England was known to have shown favors to his male subjects and was eventually overthrown by his wife Isabella and her
lover, Roger Mortimer. This historical context allowed Marlowe to write a play that would have otherwise been impossible. Had the story been fiction, the erotic homosexual relationship shown in the play between the king and his subject Gaveston would have certainly been omitted by the censors, but Holinshed’s historical account of their relationship gave Marlowe the freedom to write about it. Holinshed records that Edward

received him [Gaveston] into most high favor….he [Gaveston] had sworn to make the king to forget himself, and the state to which he was called, furnished his court with companies of jesters, ruffians, flattering parasites, musicians, and other vile and naughty ribaldry, that the king might spend both days and nights in jesting, playing, blanketing, and in such other filthy and dishonorable exercises. (547)

Though Holinshed never explicitly calls Edward and Gaveston sodomites, the implication is certainly there. This is all Marlowe needs to write a play about a homosexual relationship.

Though Edward and Gaveston’s love for one another is certainly different than the heterosexual love stories usually told on stage, this was not Marlowe’s first time examining homoerotic relationships. His first surviving play, *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, opens with Jupiter and his servant Ganymede. Ganymede is perched on Jupiter’s knee while Jupiter promises Ganymede all the goods his heart can desire. For these material possessions, Ganymede responds with the promise that “I’ll hug with you a hundred times” (1.1.48). It is almost comical that, with a lover as powerful as Jupiter, all Ganymede can think to ask for is “a jewell for mine eare/ And a fine brouch to put in my hand” (1.1.46-7). It would seem that Marlowe is choosing to depict Ganymede as the stereotypical sodomite. He is frivolous and silly and preoccupied with showy
and materialistic things. This makes it clear that Jupiter does not love Ganymede because they are intellectual and mindful equals; this is a sexual relationship built heavily upon looks and lust.

This dynamic of Jupiter and Ganymede’s relationship is further proved by Marlowe’s poem Hero and Leander. As Leander swims to try to reach his love Hero, Neptune mistakes him for Ganymede. It is the physical beauty of Leander that causes Neptune to mistake him for Ganymede, further proving that Ganymede is meant to be the stereotypical beautiful younger man. Unlike Ganymede, Leander is not eager to use the love of a god to better his life. He tells Neptune “You are deceived! I am no woman, I” (676). Leander is ignorant of male-male relationships and believes that Neptune has mistaken him for a woman. While Neptune has mistaken him, it is not for a woman; it is for the beautiful young man, Ganymede. Neptune believes that Ganymede has come to Neptune in the sea because Jupiter has angered the boy, who “displeased/ Had left the heavens” (641-2). Like Jupiter, Edward, and Marlowe, Neptune is also fond of beautiful young men. The fact that Neptune believes that Ganymede has fled from one powerful lover to the next speaks something of the character of Ganymede; he is obviously enticed by men with power. Because Gaveston is modeled on Ganymede, it is important to keep this image of Ganymede in mind.

It is important to note that Neptune is not the only one besotted with Leander. It would appear that the poem’s persona is infatuated with Leander as well. While the persona spends time describing the clothes of the female Hero, he then delves into a long description of the physical beauty of Leander. He praises, “A pleasant smiling cheeke, a speaking eye/ A brow for Love to banquet roiallye/ And such as knew he was a man would say/ Leander, thou art made for amorous play” (83-86). It is worth noting that the “narrator is content merely to look at Hero, but
Leander he tastes and touches‖ (Smith 132). Even Marlowe’s narrator of *Hero and Leander* seems to have a preoccupation with young and beautiful males.

Christopher Marlowe was not hesitant to evoke the image of Ganymede as a beautiful boy using his wiles to secure the love of a god and the benefits that come with that love. More so in *Dido* than *Hero and Leander*, it is clear that Ganymede knows the power he holds over Jupiter and is anxious to use his sexual power to gain what he wants. This is much the same position Gaveston takes in *Edward the Second*, when he tells the audience that he will use his knowledge of how to work the king to his advantage. He says that he “must have wanton poets, pleasant wits/ Musicians, that with touching of a string/ May draw the pliant king which way I please” (1.1.51-3). Both Ganymede and Gaveston are using the infatuation of their powerful rulers to better their lives. Ganymede and Jupiter are on stage for only the very first scene of *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, but the similar relationship of Edward and Gaveston is explored throughout the play *Edward the Second*. It is possible that the audience had already compared the relationship between Edward and Gaveston with the relationship between Jupiter and Ganymede, yet Marlowe insures that his audience remembers the mythological relationship in *Edward the Second* when Queen Isabella, in the role of Juno, moans that “For never doted Jove on Ganymede/ So much as he on cursed Gaveston” (1.4.180-1). Edward is the powerful and besotted Jupiter being used by his beautiful and conniving lover.

Ganymede and Jupiter would have been well known by Marlowe’s audience as lovers. Bruce Smith argues that the myth of Ganymede and Jove was widely known throughout Renaissance England because “More explicitly than any other myth, it articulated the social and political dynamics that complicated male-male desire” (192). Jove is the all-mighty god; Ganymede is his lowly servant. According to class laws of the time, the powerful ruler and the
lower-class servant should have never crossed class lines to love one another. This strict social order, imposed by the patriarchy to insure that those in power, stayed in power completely forbid such a relationship. Politically and socially, Jove should hold all the power; however, this is not the case. Ganymede, much like Gaveston, manipulates his powerful lover to better his station. For Ganymede, that comes in the form of material objects such as Juno’s wedding jewels.

Gaveston, however, is playing for something much more dangerous: a place within the nobility. It would appear that Marlowe is arguing that it is this desire, and not his sodomy, that Gaveston is punished for.

After the nobles have agreed to allow Gaveston to return to the kingdom, Mortimer Senior reminds Roger Mortimer that, “The mightiest kings have had their minions/ Great Alexander loved Haphaestion/ The conquering Hercules for Hylas wept/ And for Patroclus stern Achilles drooped” (1.4.390-3). Though all of these examples are classical, by reminding his audience of them, Marlowe is showing that sodomy has been around for centuries, and some of the most respected and admired military leaders were sodomites. Unlike the stereotypical feminized Gaveston, these were masculine military leaders who loved other men. If Marlowe’s intention while writing this play was to condemn sodomy to his audience, the inclusion of these examples does not make any sense. Marlowe’s use of these classical relationships must have been to remind the audience of admirable men who were also the lovers of other men.

Mortimer Senior goes on to recommend that Mortimer allow Edward to “freely enjoy that vain, light-headed earl / For riper years will wean him from such toys” (1.4.399-400). The implication here is that this is simply a phase that Edward will outgrow, and then Gaveston will be dismissed. Mortimer Senior’s confidence that the situation will rectify itself seems to imply that Edward and Gaveston’s relationship was not the first of its kind. Mortimer Senior is an older
noble who would certainly have had a stake in the structure of the kingdom. Had Gaveston posed a real threat, it is obvious that Mortimer Senior would have wanted to intervene.

The response Mortimer gives his uncle proves that it wasn’t the homosexual nature of Gaveston and Edward’s relationship that was bothering the nobles. Mortimer explains to his uncle that “his wanton humour grieves not me/ But this I scorn, that one so basely born/ Should by his sovereign’s favour grow so pert” (1.4.401-3). It is Gaveston’s ability to elevate himself through the favor of his lover that annoys and threatens the nobles. Earlier in the scene, when Edward is awarding offices to Lancaster, Warwick, and the Mortimers, no one argues over whether the nobles are worthy. When Edward extends the same favor to Gaveston, however, the nobles react. It is the low station Gaveston was born into that angers the nobles. They believe that their blood gives them the right to rule and be part of the hierarchy; those born outside of the system are not supposed to be able to enter. By using Edward’s love to gain titles for himself, Gaveston is violating a major social norm and setting a dangerous precedent. This is the crime for which he is punished and murdered.

Along with the homosexual nature of their relationship, Edward and Gaveston, like Ganymede, are considered effeminate. Gary Spear accumulates the multiple meanings of effeminate from the *Oxford English Dictionary* and states its meaning: as “an adjective it designates a man as ‘womanish, unmanly, enervated, or feeble’ (1.a.); ‘delicate’ (1.b.); ‘gentle, tender, compassionate…without implying reproach’ (1.c.); or through a pseudo-etymology, ‘self-indulgent’ or ‘voluptuous’ (3). As a noun it designates a man who possessed any or all of the above qualities (a ‘wanton, young effeminate’) or a sexually passive sodomite” (410-411). Certainly it could be said that most of these meanings apply to Edward, Gaveston, and Ganymede. In a time when men were expected to be incredibly “masculine”—tough, merciless
warriors with few displays of emotions—these three men, like Richard II from Shakespeare’s tragic history play, stand in stark contrast to that.

Edward loves all things lavish and ornate, a fact that Gaveston has told the audience and has used to his advantage. While magnificent displays of wealth were considered a Renaissance virtue, this preoccupation with clothes, poetry, and music is not what was expected of a king at this time. Even when Edward attempts to lead his army into battle, it is made into an elaborate show. Mortimer chastises Edward that, “When wert thou in the field with banner spread?/ But once, and then thy soldiers marched like players/ With garish robes, not armour; and thyself/ Bedaubed with gold, rode laughing at the rest” (1.6.181-4). Edward cannot even effectively lead his army into battle, a role that was expected of kings at this time. He makes it into another lavish entertainment even though war is a serious business that places men’s lives on the line.

Gaveston and Ganymede’s roles as mistresses also put them into an effeminate role. They are willingly taking on the role of lover, a role that is meant to be played by females. However, they hold and exercise more power than a female mistress could because, as males, they can rise up in their own right. Their ambition would certainly have been looked down upon in early modern England, as would their willingness to abandon their masculinity and happily play the feminine role in the power dynamics of their relationships.

Gaveston, Edward, and Ganymede are not Marlowe’s only feminized males. There are similar characters in both Tamburlaine, the Great Part One and Tamburlaine, the Great Part Two. Tamburlaine the Great, Part One opens with the King of Persia, Mycetes who tells the audience that “I find myself aggrieved/ Yet insufficient to express the same/ For it requires a great and thund’ring speech” (1.1.1-3). Mycetes is the King of Persia, but he does not have the intelligence to accurately explain why he is upset. Here Marlowe is showing a ruler, much like
Edward, who has inherited the right to rule, but who does not seem to be worthy of such a title. Especially when his speech is contrasted with the great and thunderous speeches of Tamburlaine, a mere shepherd who would take over most of the eastern hemisphere, Mycetes’ inability to rule becomes clear. Mark Thornton Burnett argues that, “The speech of Mycetes is marked by impoverished witticisms and limp line endings, which throw into stark relief Tamburlaine’s sonorous and resounding pronouncements” (128). Tamburlaine’s speeches are a relief to the audience’s ears much like his capable leadership was probably a relief to the people of Persia. Mycetes’ brother Cosroe, laments that the gods “denied/ to shed their influence in his fickle brain” (1.1.14-5). Soon after, Cosroe abandons his brother for Tamburlaine’s cause because he believes he will be the king once Tamburlaine overthrows Mycetes, so obviously neither brother is particularly intelligent.

After being defeated by Tamburlaine, Mycetes comes on stage attempting to hide his crown. His belief that wearing a costume—a crown—is what gives him his power shows that he is gravely out of touch with what political power actually is. It also shows his preoccupation with the costuming that comes with being king; this is similar to Edward and his love of the pageantry. Edward, too, plays around with handing over his crown once he is captured as if holding onto his crown would mean that he still had power even though he is now a prisoner. This frivolous preoccupation with the material aspect of being king is similar to Ganymede and his desire for the jewels of Juno.

In Tamburlaine the Great, Part Two, Tamburlaine’s own son plays the role of the feminized and ineffectual male. Early in the play it is clear that Calphyas is not the mighty military man that his father is. When Tamburlaine tries to inspire his sons to join him in a battle, Calphyas responds, “But while my brothers follow armes, my lord/ Let me accompany my
gratious mother” (1.3.63-4). Calphyas has no desire to follow in his father’s footsteps; he is much more interested in staying with his mother. This eldest son of Tamburlaine is not a manly warrior. He is a feminine boy. His hesitation to join his father initially appears to come from fear. When Tamburlaine attempts to teach his sons about battle, Calphyas is horrified, saying, “My Lord, but this is dangerous to be done/ We may be slaine or wounded ere we learne” (3.2.93-94). Fear of battle, though certainly not admired as a masculine trait, could be understandable depending on Calphyas’ age which we never really learn. Whatever his son’s age, Tamburlaine does not hide his disappointment in his son, and once Zenocrate is dead, Calphyas has no one to hide behind. When Calphyas decides to stay behind while his father and brothers go to battle, his brothers are horrified. Calphyas tells them, “Take you the honour, I will take my ease” (4.1.49). Calphyas decides to play cards with his servant Perdicas while the others fight. This silly preoccupation is similar to those pursued by Ganymede, Gaveston, Edward, and Mycetes. Calphyas as the eldest son of a great king has a duty to his country. His inability and lack of interest in fulfilling that duty puts his country at risk. Because of this, Calphyas comes across as silly as the Ganymede he is modeled after, yet as a potential ruler he is infinitely more dangerous.

Potentially dangerous effeminate males can also be seen in Shakespeare’s history play The Tragedy of King Richard the Second. Richard is an effeminate male ruling as King of England much like Marlowe’s Edward. While speaking to his son, Hal, in Henry IV, Part I, Bolingbroke, Richard’s usurper, accuses Richard of ignoring royal duty:

   The skipping king, he ambled up and down
   With shallow jesters and rash bavin wits,
   Soon kindled and soon burnt; carded his state,
Mingled his royalty with cap’ring fools;
         Had his great name profaned with their scorns,
To laugh at gibing boys. (3.2.60-5)

Here Bolingbroke tells of a king very similar to Edward. Richard loves jesters and wits and fools who are able to entertain him. His leisure is to laugh at ‘gibing boys’ even if it means he is despised by his people. His preoccupation with his favorites is taking him from his duties. Admittedly, when he is about to be murdered, he does show military strength in his ability to kill some of his pursuers. Until this time, Richard seems very similar to Edward in that he is a silly and materialistic sovereign more interested in the lavishness of the throne and his favorites than in running the country. The last-minute display of kingliness makes the situation even more tragic because it demonstrates that Richard, like Edward, could have been a good king; his bad behavior is by choice, not nature.

Bruce Smith argues that, “Unlike Tamburlaine, which inspired dozens of rant-and-battle plays, Edward II did not inspire a series of plays with sodomite heroes, unless one accepts Richard II as a sodomite hero” (308). The argument can certainly be made that, much like Edward, Richard is a sympathetic homosexual who is overthrown, and, much like Marlowe with Edward, Shakespeare seems to be trying to show that this overthrowing was not exactly justified and to make Richard into a sympathetic character.

While the homosexual relationship between Richard and his male favorites is not as blatantly homoerotic as Edward and Gaveston’s, there is evidence that Shakespeare, and his audience, was aware of the rumors regarding the king’s sexuality. When Bolingbroke accuses Bushy and Green of leading Richard astray from his duties to the kingdom, he says, “You have in manner with your sinful hours/ Made a divorce betwixt his queen and him/ Broke the
possession of a royal bed/ And stain’d the beauty of a fair queen’s cheeks” (3.1.11-14). While Richard has supposedly been overthrown because of his inability to effectively run the government, Bolingbroke focuses on how his transgressions with Bushy and Green have affected his relationship with his wife. The image of sinful hours passed in a bed must certainly be alluding to an erotic relationship between the men; in fact, “hours” works as a pun on the pronounciation of “whores,” subtly making this accusation sexual and transgressive. The imagery that Bolingbroke uses to describe the relationship between Bushy and Green and the Queen—divorce, possession, beds, tears, stains—feels much more similar to the relationship between a wife and her husband’s mistress than a wife and her husband’s friends.

As will be discussed later, the way in which Richard is deposed makes the audience truly sympathetic to him and his cause. It does not feel as if justice has been done; in fact, it feels very much the opposite. Had Shakespeare wanted to condemn Richard and his homosexuality, certainly he would not have made his audience feel sympathy for the king. Much like Edward, the audience is left to feel that a wrong has been committed against the king. Though Richard and his favorites’ relationship is not as developed as Edward and Gaveston’s relationship while reading the plays, there are opportunities for the actors to create the impression of a sexual history between them. Shakespeare and Marlowe have both succeeded in making sodomites sympathetic; it does not at all feel as if a just punishment for their behavior has been carried out. It feels as if they have both been horribly wronged.

**The Dangers of Masculinity**

Marlowe and Shakespeare manage to show the dangers of having effeminate kings while still eliciting sympathy for their protagonists. This proves that it is not the kings’ effeminacy for
which they are punished; it is their inability to effectually rule their kingdoms. To prove this further, it is clear that Marlowe is certainly not suggesting that the alternative is better, for his plays have many examples of how the early modern England ideal for masculinity was harmful to men and those around them as well.

As discussed earlier, Tamburlaine, the great warrior, is saddled with an eldest son who is much more like Ganymede than he is like the illustrious Tamburlaine. Despite these faults, however, Marlowe does not seem to be condemning Calphyas. When his father returns from battle and realizes Calphyas has stayed behind, Tamburlaine commits the horrific act of murdering his own child. Though the audience has seen Tamburlaine commit atrocious acts throughout parts one and two of his story, this act is one of the most shocking and disturbing. Bruce Smith argues that “Calphyas’s murder marks, in fact, the beginning of the end for Tamburlaine…He begins to lose his grasp politically; more disastrously, he begins to lose his hold on the sympathies of his audience” (209). It is true that it is not long after this murder that Tamburlaine begins to fall ill and eventually dies; it is also around this time that his antics begin to grate the audience. Despite his numerous earlier acts of violence, Tamburlaine’s ability to murder a child he made with his great love Zenocrate seems to prove that there is something defective in his moral and emotional make-up. Had Marlowe meant Calphyas to act as a model for what men should not be, he would never have made his death so shocking and disturbing to the audience. The negative reaction that comes with Calphyas’ death seems to suggest that Marlowe wants the audience to sympathize with Calphyas despite his feminized and frivolous character.

This is not the only way that Marlowe challenges his culture’s idea of what makes a man perfectly masculine. Tamburlaine, the mighty shepherd who fights his way into becoming king
of a vast empire, never seems to be content and happy with what he has. He is constantly at war defending his empire. When Zenocrate asks him when they can finally be at peace, he responds, “When heaven shall cease to move on both the poles/ And when the ground whereon my soldiers march/ Shall rise aloft and touch the horned moon/ And not before” (1.3.12-5). He never has any time to enjoy his empire. He is also not free to express his love to Zenocrate as he wants to. In a soliloquy, Tamburlaine expresses his love for Zenocrate and his awe at her beauty. The poetry describing his love for her is beautiful, but as soon as he says it, he sadly acknowledges, “But how unseemly is it for my sex/ My discipline of arms and chivalry/ My nature, and the terror of my name/ To harbor thoughts effeminate and faint” (5.1.174-7). Though he loves Zenocrate and wants to dote on her, he knows he is not allowed to do so because his military duties prevent this, and his desire outweighed by his need to conquer new lands. He is also given three sons who are obviously not fit to follow in his footsteps. The first words he speaks of his sons are disappointed words as he says, “But yet methinks their looks are amorous/ Not martial as the sons of Tamburlaine” (1.3.41-2). His inability to have a son who is like him martially must weigh heavily on his mind as he ponders what will happen to his empire once he has died. Tamburlaine is the embodiment of everything early modern English culture expected a man should be. This ultimately does not make him any happier than any of Marlowe’s other protagonists.

Marlowe also shows how these patriarchal restrictions which are imposed by men also hurt men who don’t meet the standards of masculinity. Dr. Faustus is a very learned man in a time when physical might and prowess were respected as the height of masculine achievement. Because of this, his brain does not help him break down any social barriers. His knowledge is not respected enough to make him worthy of a position anywhere other than the college where he already resides. Kate Chedgzoy explains that Faustus “shares [Tamburlaine’s] desire for power,
but he sees knowledge, not military conquest, as the key to achieving it” (249). Jew of Malta’s Barabas, much like Faustus, has a keen mind and an obsession with material things that keeps him from being respected as a “true” man, and this is probably why the representatives of the Catholic church did not hesitate to rob him of his estate.

The only exception to this is Tamburlaine. Though Tamburlaine is certainly the full realization of the physical and mighty man ideal, he is also one of Marlowe’s least sympathetic protagonists, and much of the play is spent waiting for Tamburlaine’s retribution to finally come, though it never does. Edward—who is obsessed with fashion, pageantry, and, of course, another man—also does not meet the cultural expectations of masculinity, especially of kings, of this time. Because he is not what they expected, the nobles are constantly trying to get Edward to conform to what their ideas of a good king should be. Not only is this detrimental to Edward’s psyche, but it keeps the king’s attention drawn away from the issues which is obviously not helpful to the kingdom. Marlowe’s focus is often not the female struggle against the oppressions of the patriarchy; he is much more interested in the struggle of the male against the restrictions of the patriarchy. Through his various ways of showing how the patriarchy can be stifling to men that are seen throughout his plays, it becomes clear that this was an issue that weighed heavily on Marlowe’s mind.

Another negative aspect of this idea of masculinity that Marlowe explores throughout his plays is loneliness. Barabas and Faustus spend much of their time on stage alone. Though Barabas has Ithamore, the slave serves mostly as a tool to help realize Barabas’ evil desires. Barabas plots alone and is ultimately only concerned with his own property and wishes. He does not hide this fact, saying, “Ego mihimet sum semper proximus [I am always nearest to myself]” (1.1.189). Barabas’s Jewishness is why he is largely able to act outside of the spheres of society.
Chedgzoy argues, “Barabas’s Jewishness inflects his masculinity in ways that make him irredeemably disorderly within the Christian world-view of the play, and cut him off from any sense of a stake in the social or membership of the commonwealth” (253). This selfishness allows him to commit the atrocious acts he does throughout the play, and it is ultimately responsible for his downfall. Barabas has no supporters or friends willing to help him, so he is ultimately able to be destroyed by Christian plots and treachery. Similarly, Faustus has no friends or family available to persuade him to not sell his soul to Lucifer. Had he a close friend or confidant, his life might have turned out differently. As the comments of the younger scholars show, they try to help, but he pushes them away. Faustus is so preoccupied with gaining knowledge, the only way he can advance in this patriarchal society, that he pursues it even at the cost of human relationships. The very first thing he asks Mephistopheles for is a wife, showing his deep desire for a companion. Unfortunately, Mephistopheles is able to fool Faustus into believing that he is there to help Faustus, and when Faustus begins to doubt, Mephistopheles is able to distract Faustus with the beautiful succubus of Helen of Troy. Had either of these men not been distanced from the rest of their societies, they might not have taken up such disastrous and horrible pursuits.

Though Marlowe tackles this subject in both The Jew of Malta and Doctor Faustus, he brings the theme back in Edward the Second. Like Barabas and Faustus, Edward is also horribly alone. Though he is surrounded by his nobles and, of course, has Gaveston, none of these people are really trying to help Edward. They are using Edward and his power in an attempt to better their lives and pursue their own selfish interests; they are certainly not trying to “save England.”

This loneliness is also caused by the patriarchy. Men were expected to be stoical, and this lack of emotions resulted in male rulers being alone most of the time. They were not supposed to
need a shoulder to cry on; they were not expected to cry. Had Edward had a true friend or wise
counselor available to discuss what Edward should do without worrying about his own
advancement, Edward might have been able to be persuaded to do what is best for the kingdom;
however, Edward knows the nobles do not have his or the kingdom’s best interests at heart, so he
is not inclined to listen to them. What is most tragic about Edward’s lack of friends is his
desperate desire for one. He is devoted to Gaveston because he believes that Gaveston truly loves
him. When Mortimer asks Edward why he cannot let Gaveston go, Edward replies by saying,
“Because he loves me more than all the world” (1.4.77). Once Gaveston is dead, Edward tries to
recreate this bond with Spencer, who is a cheap version of Gaveston, but Spencer has already
shown the audience that he is an opportunistic user, explaining that “a factious lord/ Shall hardly
do himself good, much less us/ But he that hath the favour of a king/ May with one word
advance us while we live” (1.5.6-9). Once Edward begins to favor Spencer, the audience knows
he has once again chosen unwisely. Edward is desperate for affection and love; he obviously
never received much of either from his father, he believes his wife is unfaithful, and he knows
his nobles are simply trying to use him to promote their own agendas. It is this feeling of utter
isolation that leads him to rely so heavily on Gaveston and then Spencer.

**Sympathy as a Tool of Subversion and the Legitimacy of Divine Right to Rule**

The way Marlowe portrays Edward and Gaveston’s relationship is also important when
trying to understand what message Marlowe wanted the audience to leave the play with. Did he
want to reaffirm their beliefs that sodomy was a horrible sin, or was he trying to show that
sodomites are also people worthy of love, respect, and acceptance, and that persecutors of
sodomites are horrible hypocrites? The treatment of Edward, Gaveston, and Spenser—the
favorite of Edward after Gaveston’s death—would seem to point to the latter. Though Edward, Spenser, and Gaveston are all executed before the play is over, their deaths are not the justified executions of sinners that one would expect. Particularly in the case of Edward, who is left to starve in the castle sewer for days before being murdered by having a hot spit thrust in his anus, the audience is left horrified and obviously sympathetic to the “heretic.” Gaveston is kidnapped by Warwick and beheaded quickly without a fair trial. This murder is also not the justified execution of a heretic. It happens off stage and is tainted by the unfairness of his trial and execution. The news of Spencer’s death comes from Mortimer who tells Queen Isabella that “The proud corrupters of the light-brained king/ Have done their homage to the lofty gallows” (1.22.2-3). Historically, Spencer was hanged, drawn, and quartered which involved a castration. Marlowe’s audience who had read Holinshed would have been aware of how Spencer was executed. Though this was the typical death of traitors and heretics, the fact that Marlowe chooses to omit the description of a castration of a suspected homosexual is meaningful. According to the Renaissance belief that the punishment should fit the crime, what could be a more fitting punishment for a sodomite than losing the appendage that allows him to sin? By not putting this information in his play, it would appear that Marlowe is trying to keep the audience’s attention away from the nature of Spencer’s death. This could be so that Edward’s murder later on in the play has a greater effect as the one horrific sexualized murder, but it could also be because Marlowe did not want the audience to read Spencer’s death as a justifiable punishment.

Whatever the audience thinks of the character of Gaveston and Edward, they know that Edward’s love for Gaveston is true. Though Gaveston’s first scene on stage has him alluding to the gains he will receive through his knowledge of how to manipulate the king, Edward makes no such remarks. He has nothing to gain from loving Gaveston, but he does have everything to
lose. Whether it is morally right or wrong, Marlowe shows that Edward’s love is pure. This is important because it makes Edward’s persecution for his love horrific and not triumphant. Edward’s murderer is not respected or admired for his role in Edward’s death. He is a horrible man who says and does horrible things, and the audience is definitely not meant to align themselves with him. Isabella and Mortimer are also obviously not supposed to have the respect and love of the audience, for it is a triumphant moment when the young Edward III overthrows Mortimer and banishes his mother. This seems to suggest that Marlowe wants the audience to align themselves with Edward and not his murderers.

This is not the first time that Marlowe creates a character whom the audience should hate but instead sympathizes with. In *The Jew of Malta*, Barabas has the audience’s sympathy despite the horrendous acts he commits because it is apparent that he is simply acting in retaliation for the injustices he is saddled with. Likewise, though Faustus sells his soul to the devil and denounces God, the audience still holds out hope until the end that he will repent and be saved. His death at the end is not a celebration; it is a tragic ending. Even Isabella, who will eventually be instrumental in the brutal murder of her husband, is made sympathetic through Edward’s cruel treatment of her earlier in the play. What keeps these characters all worthy of the audience’s sympathy despite their horrendous actions is the knowledge that each of these characters is simply reacting against the power of the patriarchy. Barabas has everything that he has worked for and earned taken away by the Catholic church, a corrupt patriarchal religious institution with enormous power. Faustus has accomplished all that is offered to a man of his social standing, and so his alliance with the devil is the desperate act of a highly capable individual who has exhausted all of his worldly options of betterment because of the strict rules set up by the patriarchy intent on protecting its assets by maintaining a strict class structure. Isabella is forced
to marry a man who obviously has no interest in her because it is her duty, and though she initially tries to be a dutiful wife, his harsh treatment of her eventually makes her join forces with Edward’s enemies. These institutions—traditional marriage, the church, and the monarchy—are all institutions formed by the patriarchy to keep the male sex in power, by giving them control of money, land, and institutions. In all three of these plays, Marlowe subversively shows how harmful these institutions are to the majority of the world who are not the upper-class males who benefit from these systems by having the audience feel sympathy for these characters who, by societal standards, do not deserve sympathy.

Marlowe’s depiction of traditional heterosexual marriage as less than ideal can be seen in *Dido, Queen of Carthage*. While Isabella and Edward are the most obvious instance of a marriage that harms both parties, this can also be seen with Dido and Aeneas. Though Dido and Aeneas are never actually married, they do make a promise to each other in the cave that is very much like the promise made during a traditional marriage ceremony. While they are initially happy, this “marriage” keeps Aeneas from fulfilling his destiny of founding Rome. Even though he is stepping into a role expected of man—faithful husband—it is this role that is keeping him from achieving his other manly goals: founding an empire. It is only when he breaks his vow and Dido’s heart that he is free to pursue his fate. Dido’s desire to stay with Aeneas is at odds with the will of the gods, and so she will never win this battle. The play ends with Aeneas sailing off and Dido committing suicide. This traditional relationship that should be bringing them both contentment and happiness is hurting both of them. If they stayed together, Aeneas is negatively affected; when they part, Dido is negatively affected. No matter what they do, someone is going to lose, and the patriarchy determines that the loser is Dido. This hopeless depiction of a
heterosexual relationship is a good precursor to the even more tragic marriage of Edward II and Isabella.

Just as the Catholic church plays a harmful role in *The Jew of Malta*, it is also problematic in *Edward the Second*. The Catholic church officials align themselves with the nobles who are just as guilty for the horrible state of the country as Gaveston and Edward. Instead of trying to mediate between the two factions, the Catholic church makes matters worse by working with the nobles to overthrow the king. In the beginning of the play, the Bishop of Coventry is described as being “the only cause of his [Gaveston’s] exile” (1.1.178). This shows that the bishop is heavily involved in the government under Edward’s father. This is not very exceptional; bishops and cardinals reported back to Rome which oversaw the political and theological events in Europe. Later on, however, after Kent has warned Gaveston and Edward to not lay hands on the bishop because he will report back to Rome, Edward orders that they “seize upon his goods/ Be thou lord bishop, and receive his rents” (1.1.192-3). These two lines show the hypocrisy of the church. Members of the church were supposed to live in poverty; however, they were very rich. They had goods that nobility thought were worth seizing which suggests that it was valuable property and goods. In these two brief lines, Marlowe is showing the hypocrisy of the Catholic church that his audience was well aware of because, under Henry VIII, similar seizures marked the arrival of the Protestant Reformation. It also proves that the patriarchal institution of the church actively works to keep the men it deems acceptable in power. By banishing Gaveston, the Bishop of Coventry was attempting to keep Edward’s family in power by taking away Edward’s preoccupation even though this devastated the heir to the throne. Monarchs in England argued that they had the divine right to rule; their power came from God.
Dissatisfaction with the church, whether Protestant or Catholic, would have certainly not been alien to Marlowe, Shakespeare, or their contemporaries. The switch back and forth of the national religion from Catholic to Protestant and back again left many common people disillusioned with religion altogether. Even before Henry VIII’s break from Rome left English citizens yo-yoing between religions, many people were frustrated with the corruption found in the Catholic church that is mirrored in Marlowe’s plays. Kenneth Muir argues that the best evidence of this can be found in Thomas More’s *Utopia* where, “a community of people, who without being Christian, had managed to establish a just society. Early Tudor England, by contrast…with its inequalities, injustice and war, was nominally Christian but, in fact, barbarous and corrupt, and so preserved by the law and the constitution” (27). Seeing as the laws of the land were intertwined with the laws of the church, it is easy to see why this aggravation with the church would have also manifested into a frustration with the laws of the kingdom.

Marlowe shows another situation that could leave the audience questioning God’s role in the power of the monarchy in his first Tamburlaine play. The play opens with the whining of Mycetes, who is obviously not fit to be the ruler of a kingdom. He is soon deposed by a shepherd named Tamburlaine who would go on and conquer many other countries throughout the world. Tamburlaine has no nobility in his blood; he was born a commoner. The fact that he is able to overcome various monarchs who claim the right to rule through their blood demonstrates that ability trumps heredity. Most monarchs claim that their power was ordained by the divine—although history shows they first became kings by conquest—yet no divine spirit ever interferes with Tamburlaine’s conquests. If kings ruled and passed on their title to their sons because God wants them to, then certainly God would interfere if someone was threatening the rule of the chosen bloodline. The fact that Tamburlaine never faces any challenges in overtaking other
countries implies that there is no divine right to rule given to a monarch by God. C.K. Preedy argues that “Tammburlaine’s unsuccessful opponents regularly invoke the principle of divine right, so that their downfall implicitly calls into question the force possessed by and advisability of depending upon such appeals” (264). God is obviously not very interested in which bloodline is ruling the country.

The most obvious example of Marlowe conveying this idea to his audience occurs in the prologue to *The Jew of Malta* when Machiavelli opens the play with a speech. In the speech, Machiavelli tells his audience that, “Might first made kings, and laws were then most sure/When, like the Draco’s, they were writ in blood” (Prologue 20-1). Machiavelli is explicitly telling the audience that kings first derive their power from being the most physically might, not by being the one chosen by God. This is the baldest statement Marlowe will make on the subject, and he can do so because it is spoken by Machiavelli who an England audience would have seen as an Italian villain. Despite the likeability of the person speaking the lines, Marlowe was still able to have a character speak these dangerous words questioning the validity of diving right on stage.

Tammburlaine is himself a picture of what could happen when “divine right” is taken out of the equation and the most capable man is allowed to rule. Tammburlaine takes power for himself, and once in power, he bestows favors, in the form of kingdoms, based on accomplishments. While bestowing titles and land to his generals he says, “Deserve these titles I endow you with/ By valour and by magnanimity/ Your births shall be no blemish to your fame/ For virtue is the fount when honour springs” (4.4.130-3). Tammburlaine has taken God completely out of the equation here. He has taken power for himself, and he never once thanks a god for
helping him along his journey. He takes full credit for his success. Not only does he take all the credit, but he starts making kings which is supposed to be God’s job. Had Marlowe been trying to make an argument against men like Tamburlaine, one would expect Tamburlaine to experience some tragedy. He never does, however. He lives a long life until he dies of a natural sickness. While some may argue his sickness was a divine intervention of the gods, it does not seem that divine retribution would come as a peaceful death in a bed in old age. Marlowe seems to be suggesting to his audience that might is what is needed to make great kings, not a stellar bloodline. He gets away with this potentially traitorous message because Tamburlaine is a historical figure, so Marlowe can always argue that this was how these events really unfolded.

This argument of ability over blood can also be seen in Edward the Second. As the play progresses, we see that although Edward has inherited the throne from his father, he is not suited to be king. He is not a strong leader. Gaveston himself acknowledges this when he says, “I must have wanton poets, pleasant wits/ Musicians that with touching of a sting/ May draw the pliant king which way I please” (1.1.50-3). Edward is like a child distracted by something shiny; whoever is keeping him pleased is able to steer him in any direction. He is too easily manipulated and distracted. He does not care about the threat from France or the threat of civil war levied by his nobles. After Mortimer and Lancaster corner him, they explain to him that “the idle triumphs, masques, lascivious shows/ And prodigal gifts bestowed on Gaveston/ Have drawn thy treasure dry and made thee weak” (1.6.156-8), and he should “look to be deposed/ Thy garrisons are beaten out of France” (1.6.160-1). Though they are responsible for keeping Edward preoccupied by constantly threatening his beloved, they make valid points that Edward is not ruling his country effectively. Edward does not see this, however, and instead rages that his nobles would dare to point out his faults. He continuously puts his kingdom in jeopardy while
pursuing his desires. This patriarchal system of primogeniture fails the kingdom and makes everyone miserable by forcing power upon someone who is not fit to rule.

Marlowe also explores this theme in *Tamburlaine Part II*. As shown earlier, Tamburlaine has an eldest son, Calphyas who is not interested in war or power. When Tamburlaine goes out to conquer countries, the eldest son would rather stay behind and away from the violence. Tamburlaine’s anger with his child eventually builds until he murders his own child in a fearful scene. The unnaturalness of the act reinforces the unnaturalness of the laws that caused it. Though none of Tamburlaine’s sons seem fit to follow in his footsteps, he has other sons who are certainly more willing to take over his empire. Had Tamburlaine been able to pass his empire to one of his other sons without side-stepping any laws, this unfortunate and horrific act might have been avoided.

Likewise, the Duke of Kent, Edward’s brother is much more realistic and level-headed than his brother. Though Kent initially tries to support his brother and not try to exile Gaveston, when the country begins to fall apart, Kent realizes that Gaveston will always stand in the way of Edward effectively ruling. He warns, “My lord, I see your love to Gaveston/ Will be the ruin of the realm and you” (1.6.207-8). Kent reluctantly leaves his brother and joins forces with the nobles. Once he realizes that Mortimer and Isabella are not the moral characters he believes them to be, he flees to try to save his brother. He explains, “Hence will I haste to Killingworth Castle/ And rescue aged Edward from his foes/ To be revenged on Mortimer and thee” (1.22.118-120). Kent appears to be the one who realizes what is natural and good and what is unnatural and bad. When he is appalled by Edward’s favoring of Gaveston, and Spencer, he calls Edward an “Unnatural king, to slaughter noble men/ and cherish flatterers!” (1.14.8-9). Once he has seen the truth of Mortimer and Isabella’s relationship and their evilness, he calls their cause “this
unnatural revolt” (1.19.9). In a play full of characters looking out for their own self-interests, Kent seems to be the only character who is trying to do what is best for his country while Edward is the argument for what could go wrong when there is an incompetent ruler with absolute power. Edward is showing what Constance Jordan argues, “was widely held to be the truth of absolute rule: insulated from the will of subjects, it easily degenerates into despotism, incites popular rebellion, and creates political chaos” (2.) In contrast to Edward, Smith suggests that Kent is “the one impeachable moral spokesman in the play” (218). This is what is needed of a good king, but the laws of inheritance make the oldest, Edward, the king and not Kent, the most worthy.

Marlowe examines the father’s aspect of this situation in the Tamburlaine plays, but in Edward the Second, he shows us what will happen when an ineffectual son takes the throne. Marlowe’s return to this theme suggests that it was an issue he was greatly concerned with. As Queen Elizabeth’s reign came to an end and it became obvious that she would not have an heir, the issue of succession was on many English minds. It was certainly on Marlowe’s. As he thought about the succession, he pondered whether ability or blood should determine the ruler. His plays consistently demonstrate that he thought ability was far superior than hereditary right. The fact that Tamburlaine and Edward are both figures in the historical record allows him to write about these characters and insert his subversive political messages without encountering the wrath of the government censors.

Had Edward and Kent’s father been able to choose his successor, he might have spared his country a lot of despair and warfare by choosing Kent over Edward. However, the rules of primogeniture enforced by the patriarchy binds even male hands, and it keeps them from being able to make the decision that is best for everyone involved. By making Edward king, his
father’s death wish is not honored because parts of his kingdom are lost to France, a civil war breaks out, civilians die in both the war against France and the civil war, and the king is overthrown and murdered. This is all a direct result of the oppression of the patriarchy and its determination to produce an unbroken line of male rulers.

Much as Calphyas is unable to follow in his father’s footsteps, so is Edward unable to follow in his father’s. The play starts with the death of Edward’s father who we learn has banished Gaveston from the kingdom. This is the first instance in the play where there is evidence of the tensions between what is expected of men versus what a man might want. Fathers, especially kings, are supposed to raise their sons—especially their eldest sons—to be strong and capable of being the head of their households. One day this son will inherit their land and wealth, and the father needs to insure that the son is capable of handling such a responsibility. This weight put on the eldest son is a direct result of the patriarchal rule of primogeniture that says that property and inheritance must pass from the father to the eldest son.

The Role of the Crown in Marlowe and Shakespeare’s History Plays

In England, the crown, much like the throne or the scepter, is a symbol of the monarchy. The ceremony has a long history dating back to the middle ages, and it still exists today, despite Earl Fitzwilliam’s declaration in 1838 that “coronations were fit only for barbarous, or semi-barbarous ages; for when crowns were won and lost by unruly violence and ferocious contests” (Sturdy 243-4). Whether a barbarous time or not, Henry VII definitely needed the ceremony of the coronation to legitimize his kingship, won on the battlefield against Richard III. Alice Hunt states that “Henry VII needed the reality of the sacred to make itself visible and present at his coronation to prove that his claim to the English throne was legitimate” (17). Henry VII came to
the throne as a conqueror, not as an inheritor, yet his descendants would follow this exact
coronation ceremony to emphasis their right to rule as inheritors.

While there are many symbols and objects that are an important part of the coronation
ceremony, one of the most precious objects is St. Edward’s crown. The crown was believed “to
have belonged to Edward the Confessor, it was carried aloft from Westminster Hall to the Abbey
by the lord high steward of the coronation. In the ceremony, it was blessed and consecrated and
worn, briefly by all newly anointed English monarchs before it was replaced” (Hunt 52).

Following the crowning with St. Edward’s crown, the sovereign would then be crowned with
“the imperial state crown and then a personal imperial crown” (Hunt 52). In all, the Tudor
monarchs would be crowned with three different crowns during their coronation ceremonies to
show their rule over England and its empire.

It is important to note that throughout this section when speaking of crowns, there is no
distinction made in the plays whether the crowns talked about are the imperial state crowns or
the personal imperial crowns. Because St. Edward’s crown is so sacred and kept separately, it is
unlikely that a copy of this crown is shown on stage. While it would seem that the state crowning
would be more important than the personal crown, there is a historical instance of a usurper
wanting her predecessor’s crown.

When Anne Boleyn supplanted Katherine of Aragon as Henry VIII’s queen, she
requested Katherine’s personal crown for her coronation. This was unprecedented, as was the
entire situation, but it seems that Anne—much like the successors we will see throughout the
discussion of the history plays—does not consider her supplanting of Katherine complete until
she has control of her predecessor’s crown. To Anne and Henry, “Anne’s legitimacy as queen
was bound up with her coronation and its symbols. To wear Katherine’s crown, which may well
have referred to the queen’s state crown…would complete Katherine’s demotion, stripping her of her queenship and transferring it to Anne” (Hunt 53). Hunt’s argument is similar to the argument made here: the successors do not feel that they have succeeded to the throne until they are wearing the crown. Hunt’s argument also shows that the two crowns are interchangeable in the surviving records; while Hunt assumes Anne wears Katherine’s personal crown, she admits that it may have been the state crown. This suggests references to the crowns were rarely specific, so a crown that is discussed in the record is not obviously personal or imperial. This failure to specify which crown is used on stage does not indicate a lack of importance of the crown.

In *Richard II*, the first history play in historical chronology, England is ruled by Richard, an effeminate man who seems unbothered by matters of state and more interested in bestowing land and money on his favorites. Before long, the nobles and their followers have grown tired of allowing Richard to rule England, and they begin to champion a usurper, Henry Bolingbroke. Bolingbroke has many reasons to detest Richard: Richard banished him, Richard confiscated his dead father’s lands, and Richard is an inept king. As Bolingbroke discusses Richard’s transgressions in the Act 3, Muir states that it is not just Richard’s acts that annoy Bolingbroke. Muir argues, “In Bolingbroke’s view Richard II had debased and corrupted his inherited crown… The divinity which doth hedge a crown was an illusion, and the illusion was now threadbare” (24). Because the king is supposed to be God’s anointed, having Richard II act so sinfully calls this theory into question. As someone who was about to usurp the throne, Bolingbroke is clearly disturbed by Richard’s inability to rule as God’s representative.

When Richard knows his cause is lost, he decides to surrender to Henry and hand the country over to him. Though Richard has already agreed to give the kingdom to Henry, Henry
insists on a public concession, accompanied by a ceremonial handing over of the crown. Richard has already agreed to Henry’s terms, so Henry’s insistence on a public uncrowning suggests that there is a certain power belonging to the holder of the crown that treaties and promises cannot overcome. Henry is not officially the king until he possesses that material object.

Percy Ernest Schramm quotes Archbishop Cranmer explaining to King Edward VI that kings are, “God’s anointed, not in respect of the oil which the bishop useth, but in consideration of their power, which is ordained, of their sword, which is authorized, of their persons, which are elected by God, and indued with the gifts of his Spirit for the better ruling and guiding of this people” (139). This exchange between Richard and Henry seems to prove otherwise. The sign of the monarchy, the crown, which Cranmer argues is not needed due to the power invested in the king by God, is obviously needed to be taken seriously as a monarch. In fact, the word “coronation” means “crowning.” Needing the coronation to be considered legitimate implies that the crown is needed to be legitimate as well. While the theory about divine right certainly helps to reinforce that power, it appears that one must possess the crown before one can seriously possess any real power.

As Bolingbroke attempts to take the throne, the Bishop of Carlisle attempts to stop him by asking

And shall the figure of God’s majesty,
His captain, steward, deputy, elect,
Anointed, crowned, planted many years,
Be judg’d by subject and inferior breath,
And he himself not present? (4.1.125-9)
Bolingbroke has Carlisle arrested for treason, but the moment jars the new king enough that he decides to call for Richard, telling Northumberland, “Fetch hither, Richard, that in common view/ He may surrender; so we shall proceed/ Without suspicion” (4.1.155-7). Bolingbroke realizes that he needs to possess the crown and have people see Richard handing it over publically to be acknowledged as the monarch. The exchange between the two men is not exactly the satisfying conclusion Bolingbroke had hoped for.

As Richard recites beautiful flowery words lamenting his loss of the kingship, Bolingbroke has to keep reminding him, “I thought you had been willing to resign” (4.1.189). Richard repeatedly responds that yes, he is willing to resign, but then he falls back on bemoaning his loss, crying while looking at himself in a mirror, “How soon my sorrow hath destory’d my face” (4.1.291). Earlier in the exchange, Richard seems to be almost taunting Bolingbroke with the crown by holding it just out of his reach while saying, “Here, cousin, seize the crown/ Here, cousin” (4.1.181-3). Richard obviously does not completely want to give up the crown; that is apparent. If he were truly God’s anointed, surely his desires would be the same as God’s, and together they should certainly be able to stop a usurper like Bolingbroke. The fact that Bolingbroke is able to upset the order of who is line to inherit and is able to take the throne from a living king in spite of that king—who is supposed to be God’s figure on Earth—seems to suggest that the holy spirit is not as involved in the reign of the monarchy as suggested. The monarchy is seized by power, and the crown is a symbol of that power.

The exchange between Richard and Henry is also very similar to the exchange between Edward II and Mortimer in Edward II. While some have made comparisons between Richard II and Elizabeth I, theatrically Richard seems much more aligned with his great grandfather, Edward II. Like Edward II, Richard was rumored to have homosexual relationships with his
favorites, and has disappointed and angered the nobles by bestowing numerous honors and gifts of money, land, and goods to these favorites. Both men were also forced to give up their throne after their rule was challenged by a usurper. Both men also have unhappy wives. Also, though agreeing to hand over the crown, they both toy with their usurpers by promising the crown, but then they keep it just out of the usurper’s reach.

When asked for his crown, Edward acts as if he will hand it to his captors only to place it back on his own head. Like Richard, he is pained over giving up the kingship against his will. He struggles with this dilemma, telling his captors, “Here, receive my crown/ Receive it? No, these innocent hands of mine/ Shall not be guilty of so foul a crime” (1.21.97-9). Like Richard, Edward toys with the idea of holding onto power by keeping hold of the crown. Also like Richard, Edward ultimately admits defeat to fruitlessly try to save his life.

Until the king hands the crown over, their usurpers are still just that; they cannot be king until they hold that circle of metal. Though Richard and Edward’s words are legally enough to justify handing over the power, their physical actions betray their desire to hold onto it, and because they are the ones in possession of the crown, the threat that they might decide to change their mind and hold onto the power is real and shown through their grip on the crown. Indeed it is this threat that ultimately leads to the murder of both Richard and Edward. Because the shift of power can happen very quickly and simply by the exchange of a crown, it is clear why the new kings would want the former kings dead. The threat of them returning and taking over possession of the crown is a constant and very real threat; this is why Henry asks of his court regarding Richard, “Have I no friend will rid me of this living fear?” (5.4.2). It is also why Mortimer observes in Edward II, “The king must die, or Mortimer goes down” (1.24.1). Much as the court grew tired of Richard and Edward and championed their usurpers, the court could soon tire of the
new rulers and decide to put Richard and Edward back on the throne. This is exactly what happens in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV Part I* as the northern rebels fight Henry and plan to put Mortimer, who Richard II named as his heir, on England’s throne. All of this seems to suggest that the monarchy’s power is really not divinely ordained. If royal authority can be passed over by men whenever they desire through the transferring of a crown, then the power cannot possibly be as special and cemented as the monarch claims. If power is ordained by God, then certainly He would not want it to switch back and forth as readily as kings and nobility fear. What these plays actually suggest is that God has very little to do with who rules the kingdom.

Christopher Marlowe also explored this idea in his play *Tamburlaine*. The play opens with Mycetes who is obviously not fit to be the ruler of a kingdom. He is soon taken over by a shepherd named Tamburlaine who would go on and conquer many other countries throughout the world. When Mycetes knows his cause has been lost, he attempts to hide his crown. As he looks for a place to hide it he says

> For kings are clouts that every man shoots at,
> Our crown the pin that thousands seek to cleave.
> Therefore in policy I think it good
> To hide it close—a goodly stratagem,
> And far from any man that is a fool.
> So shall not I be known, or if I be,
> They cannot take away my crown from me. (2.4.8-14)

Mycetes’ words are important because they explain what the actions of Shakespeare’s characters only suggest. The crown is the real vessel of power that men are fighting for, and there is no mention of the power of God to decide or stop the crown from falling into anybody’s hands.
Mycetes’ attempt to hide the crown also shows a last, but futile attempt to keep power for himself. Tamburlaine finds him and allows him to keep the crown, saying, “I lend it thee/ Till I may see thee hemmed with armed men/ Then shalt thou see me pull it from thy head” (2.4.36-8). Tamburlaine is the most powerful man alive during his time, and even he needs to make a symbolic show out of taking the power from a reigning monarch in order to convince an audience. The similar way that the kings and their usurpers handle the transfer of power in both Shakespeare and Marlowe’s plays cannot be a coincidence. It seems that both playwrights were disillusioned with the idea of kings ruling through divine right and were trying to show their audience the foolishness of such an idea by emphasizing the power invested in a physical object that could be recreated in a play, the crown.

Shakespeare is also trying to show his audience how the major players in these history plays also know this idea of kingship coming from a divine right to be untrue. Richard II, who appears to believe in God’s ability to reveal who is guilty or not guilty in a trial by combat—which is why he changes his mind to keep Mowbray’s and his own guilt from being revealed—must believe that his ability to rule is supposedly from God. He is there to rule over the people as God’s anointed figure on Earth. Despite his knowledge of this task, Richard behaves by stealing land from his nobles, taxing his citizens outrageously, losing in Ireland, and seeming not to care for the overall wellbeing of his country. As Catherine Belsey argues, “Richard-as-England has consumed England’s material wealth in riot, misusing his sovereignty to mortgage the land, devouring in the name of his title his own entitlement” (35). Richard’s earlier actions prove that he believes in God’s ability to intervene, yet he is secure in his ability lazily and inefficiently to rule the kingdom which suggests that he knows his power to rule is not necessarily dependent on the divine. Harry Berger explains, “He [Richard] knows, in short, that he has abused and
slandered the office as well as the idea of kingship; if he accepts the dogma that the king is God’s deputy, he knows very well that God did not choose—or lacked power—to prevent him from using his divine office to commit murders, treasons, and detested sins” (72). Richard’s earlier actions prove that he believes in God’s power, so he must know God remains removed from the decision about who shall be king or how he shall rule.

The argument could be made that Richard’s eventual overthrow was God’s way of replacing a lackluster anointed king with a more capable one; however, this is not exactly a perfect scenario. As shown above, both Richard and Bolingbroke behave as if Richard’s act of handing over the crown is the official way of making Bolingbroke the new king. Both sides believe that if Richard should decide to hold onto the crown, Henry cannot take over as king, hence Richard’s offer to make Henry his heir. Leaving the final decision to Richard seems to be Shakespeare’s way of suggesting that Richard’s loss was not divine retribution but instead just the effect of being the less powerful of the two forces. Henry also does not triumph at Richard’s death; in fact, he is haunted by the guilt of his decision throughout the next two plays. The audience is definitely not meant to read Richard’s fate as divine retribution, and this would seem to disprove the theory that his usurpation was something that God wanted to happen.

Even if this play is an attempt by Shakespeare to show a successful overthrow of an incompetent king, that would also be problematic for him and his society. As Michael Hattaway states, “any attack on the monarch could be construed, as the [Homily Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion] indicates, as an attack on the nation” (105). Kings during this time were thought to have derived their power from God and have two selves, a body natural and a body politic. Ernest Kantorowicz quotes Queen Elizabeth’s lawyers as making the argument that
The King has in him two Bodies, a Body natural, and a Body politic. His Body natural (if it be considered in itself) is a Body mortal, subject to all Infirmitities that come by Nature of Accident, to the Imbecility of Infancy or old Age, and to the like Defects that happen to the natural Bodies of other People. But his Body politic is a Body that cannot be seen or handled, consisting of Policy and Government, and constituted for the Direction of the People…what the King does in his Body politic, cannot be invalidated or frustrated by any Disability in his natural Body. (7)

Despite Richard’s faults, he has been consecrated with the sacred oil at his coronation, and he is supposed to possess the Body politic which gives him the right to rule despite any mental or physical deficiencies in his Body natural. By overthrowing his monarch Bolingbroke, and by extensions, Shakespeare, is calling the validity of this long held notion into question.

Kantorowicz argues that the entire play is centered around this idea of the King’s two bodies. He argues that Shakespeare, “has made it not only the symbol, but indeed the very substance and essence of one of his greatest plays: The Tragedy of King Richard II is the tragedy of the King’s Two Bodies” (26). This certainly explains why Richard II feels so conflicted after giving up the physical manifestation of his crown and why, Bolingbroke, after taking the crown, still feels as if he will never have peace until Richard is dead.

Indeed the deposition scene was seen as so dangerous to the idea of the King’s “Two Bodies” that the scene was not printed until 1608. Michael Hattaway agrees that is because, “the play seems to have appeared so threatening to the regime [because] Elizabeth on several occasions identified herself with Richard” (108). Elizabeth was not alone in comparing herself to Richard II; many of her contemporaries saw the similarity of them both being without a heir to
succeed them. This was something that weighed heavily on the conscience of the entire country, especially considering what happened after Richard II was removed from the throne. With the memories of the War of the Roses in the not so distant past, it is obvious why Elizabeth would not want written accounts of usurpers overthrowing a king who had no heir to succeed him.

Once Henry IV has his crown and Richard has been murdered, it still does not bring the king much peace. In the first play dedicated to his rule, he must face the rebellion lead by Hotspur and the fear that his own unruly son Hal will take over the kingdom once Henry dies. These two problems lead to interesting crown imagery in the play. The first is when Henry has multiple soldiers wear crowned helmet on the battlefield at Shrewsburys to confuse Hotspur as to who the real king is, and the second is when Hal and his friend Falstaff put on a performance of Hal talking to his father.

As Hal and Falstaff sit in a tavern imagining how Hal’s conversation with his father might go, they each take turns playing the part of the king. To symbolize their power, they each wear a crown made of a cushion. While obviously no one is under the illusion that this cushion crown gives them any real power, it is interesting that when pretending to be a king, they feel this sign of royalty is necessary. They are both in a tavern—hardly a castle—and dressed in common clothes—far from the rich robes of a king. These two inconsistencies between their lives and the lives of the king do not seem to bother the men. Location and clothes are not necessary for their fantasy; however, a crown is required. This suggests that the crown is something so synonymous with kingship that one cannot even pretend at one without the other. This further proves the great power bestowed on the crown as a symbol of a king’s power.

It also makes an interesting comparison between Falstaff and Bolingbroke. Falstaff, though obviously lacking the royal connections, truly has as much right to the throne as
Bolingbroke did. Bolingbroke was not the next heir when following the bloodline, and based on dynastic law, he should not have followed Richard to the throne. Falstaff’s mockery of kingship parallels the mockery that Bolingbroke made of the crown and the supposed divine right through which the monarch holds the right to rule. James Winny argues, “The usurper whose crimes have debased the dignity of his royal office enjoys as much right to crown and throne as Falstaff’s makeshift properties suggest” (106-7). Roy Battenhouse agrees that, “the regalia of royalty selected by Falstaff constitute, though Hal does not realize this, a Falstaffian parable of the pitiable baldness of Henry’s kingship” (39). The crown is important in two ways. The first way is as a way to show that the crown is the true vessel of power not God. The second is to highlight the ridiculousness of Henry’s claim to the throne. Through the props of this play within a play, Shakespeare reveals the hypocrisy behind the royals’ claim of ruling through divine right.

Later in the play while in battle, Henry has loyal followers wear helmets with crowns on them to confuse Hotspur and his soldiers. Douglas believes he has killed the king only to have Hotspur tell him that dead man is only a knight. Douglas asks the dead soldier, “A borrowed title hast thou bought too dear/ Why didst thou tell me that thou wert a king?” (5.2.23-4). By simply wearing the same battle armor as the king, the knight has “told” Douglas he was a king. The only thing that was needed to have Douglas believe he was fighting a king is a crown. The mere presence of this object caused him to believe the person under it held a certain power. This also shows that in practice the crown is actually the true source of perceived power and not the theory of divine right.

It also shows that common people can also acquire that power. The men wearing these crowns on the battlefield are not in line for the throne; in fact, because they are putting themselves in danger, they would be as far away from the succession to the throne as possible in
order not to jeopardize the future of England. Hal is not wearing a crown on the battlefield. With no royal blood, and therefore no chance at having a “divine right” to the throne, these men are still able to pass as a king. Shakespeare is showing his audience that a ruler does not need to have the right blood or upbringing to be thought of as a leader; all they need to have is a source of power, like a crown.

This idea that a king does not necessarily have to be someone with royal blood is a very revolutionary idea, but considering that the future of the country was unknown, it is not surprising that intelligent men like Shakespeare and Marlowe, who were kept from power because of their low birth, would wonder what made one man better than another simply because of their birth. Richard and Edward were both of noble blood, but they were dangerously incompetent rulers, and this led the country into war under both kings. The playwrights’ decision to show the failed rule of these two leaders and the turmoil that followed appears to be their attempt to warn their audiences of what could happen if the monarchy passed into less than capable hands due to a silly desire to keep the monarchy in the hands of those with the “right” blood.

In the next play in chronological order, Henry IV Part Two, we see another shift of power that is symbolized even though technically the power should not have shifted at all. Henry IV is sick and sleeping in his bed when Hal comes in to see his father. When Hal mistakenly believes his father has died, he takes the crown from his father’s pillow. If Henry had really died, the power would have passed to Hal regardless of whether he had taken the crown immediately or not. It is supposed to be the power of God who decides and appoints the rulers of the kingdom. Hal does not need to take the crown off of his father’s death bed. His decision to disturb what he
believes to be his father’s corpse proves that he believes it is of the utmost importance to take possession of the crown as soon as possible to ensure a smooth succession.

After Hal has taken the crown and left the room, Henry wakes up. When he sees that his crown is missing, he begins a tirade. Even though he is still alive, and obviously he is still the king, the fact that someone else is in possession of the crown upsets him so much that he becomes extremely emotional. This is further proof to Shakespeare’s audience that the power of the king is not given through a higher power but through the physical object of the crown. When Henry realizes Hal has taken the crown, he exclaims, “See, sons, what things you are!/ How quickly nature falls into revolt/When gold becomes her object!” (4.5.64-6). Though Hal and Henry have not had the best relationship, Henry is willing to accuse his son of treason because his son holds a crown which, while a sacred relic, is certainly not supposed to be the source of power for the kingdom that Henry seems to believe it is. Hal merely holding the crown represents a threat to Henry, and it is obvious why. Henry became the king by taking possession of the crown from his successor, so he knows how precarious the role of leader can be and how powerful having possession of the crown can be. Realizing what his father must think, Hal tells him, “There is your crown/And he that wears the crown immortally long guard it yours” (4.5.142-4). While Hal calls on God to protect his father’s crown, it is obvious that God is actually incapable of stopping anyone from taking the crown. Hal asks God to protect his father’s reign but only after he has given the crown back to Henry. Hal has proved that God is either incapable or uninterested in who holds the crown just as his father did in Richard II, so this call for God’s protection seems especially fruitless. This exchange further proves the theory that it is the crown that grants power, not God.
Arguably, if Hal were malicious and were trying to take the crown from his sickly and dying father, this moment suggests that all he would have to do to take his father’s power away is to take the crown. While one would believe that certainly someone would contest the action, proclaiming that this is not how the reign of the monarchy is supposed to be passed on, Shakespeare has shown in *Richard II* how people can remain quiet about what is right if the present situation suits their needs or desires. Looking at this situation more closely, it becomes apparent that Shakespeare is telling his audience something terrifically revolutionary. The power of the king—of any ruler perhaps—comes from the possession of the material symbol of that power; it does not come from divine action. In the 1590’s, when the future of the country was unclear and people were becoming less content with the monarchy, the representation of this idea on stage was certainly not an accident.

In *Henry VI, Part Three* when Margaret of Anjou captures the Duke of York who has been pursuing the kingdom, she taunts him before her supporters murder him by placing a crown made of paper on his head. As shown throughout Shakespeare’s earlier plays, the crown is a sacred religious symbol of the monarchy and may, in fact, be the very source of the monarch’s power as well. Much like Hal and Falstaff in *Henry IV, Part One*, Margaret seems to be unable to pretend York is a king unless he is wearing a crown. Simply calling him, “Your Highness” or, “Your Majesty” is not enough to ridicule him as a failed almost king. Once again, the crown is necessary in order to even pretend to be king. Margaret taunts York by saying

York cannot speak unless he wear a crown.

A crown for York! And, lords, bow low to him;

Hold you his hands whilst I do set it on.

Ay, marry, sir, now looks he like a king!
Ay, this is he that took King Henry’s chair,
And this is he was his adopted heir. (1.4.93-8)

York had Henry VI break the line of succession and appoint York and his sons to succeed to the throne in place of Henry’s own son. It is for this action that Margaret seeks revenge and, if the York family would not prove to ultimately conquer the Plantagenet family, then York’s death could be seen as God’s attempt to punish him for meddling in the line of succession. York’s sons will avenge his death and murder Henry and his son, however, so it seems much more obvious that God is not at all interested in the affairs of the state. Ultimately the victors are those who have disposed the “true” king even though the “true” king’s grandfather disposed the “true” king before him, and the result is the coronation of Richard III, England’s worst tyrant. All of this shows that the idea of a rightful king is honestly foolish because anyone can take the power of the crown away from those who are supposed to have it.

The fact that the crown Margaret makes for the Duke of York is made of paper also speaks to the fact that anyone has the ability to make a crown. The crown on the Duke of York’s head is a crown of paper, and it is obviously not bringing him the power he craves, yet the shape and placement of the crown is strong enough that everyone immediately knows what the Duke of York is supposed to be even though the crown is made of paper. York’s torture and ridicule is, like Hal and Falstaff’s performance, supposed to be fun for the people creating the illusion, though it is certainly not fun for York. The crown is not supposed to be taken seriously as a real tool of power, but the implication is that a crown, made of any material, can indicate that anyone is a king, with or without power. Like the scene with Falstaff and the scene of the knights wearing the king’s battle armor in *Henry IV, Part Two*, none of these “kings” are in a position to petition for real power; however, the suggestion is that had they been in slightly different
circumstances with slightly better resources, all they would need to be seen as a king is to make a
crown of any material available to them. The fact that each faction does not have its own
crowned king proves that the nobles knew this to be true and were also aware of the potential
chaos it could cause in the long run if anyone could call themselves a king, so they all vie for
possession of the one crown.

In *Henry VI, Part Three*, as the crown shifts from Henry VI to Edward IV, the only way
to keep track of who is the king at the moment is by who is wearing the crown. This can be
attributed to an attempt to help the audience keep up with what faction is in charge, but what it
also shows is how powerful and sacred the crown truly is. Even those trying to dethrone the king
do not dare wear or make a crown of their own. They want the true crown, for if they fashion a
crown for themselves and start calling themselves king, they would begin a catastrophic trend in
which anyone with a desire to move to the highest office in the land could do the same—as the
rebel Jack Cole does.

Shakespeare is showing his audience how irrational and hypocritical the idea of a divine
right to authority truly is. If God truly decides whom He wants to rule the country and anoints
him with the power to govern his people, then it is truly appalling that mere mortals would
question God’s judgement by leading a rebellion. The only way one could truly lead a rebellion
with a clear conscience is to truly believe that the fight is for the greater good and is truly what
God wants. If that is the case, then certainly God would not care if his “anointed” rebel makes
himself a crown and wears it on his crusade to prove he is the rightful king. It seems that the
usurpers of the crown know that this is truly not the case—which would explain Henry IV’s
horrible battle with guilt and regret throughout his two plays—and they also know that if they
did that, anyone after them could create a crown and attempt to end their reign as well. To avoid
this, they have to keep the spiritual and ritualistic power of the crown alive even though by their actions they are also proving that this idea is completely false. Shakespeare, through these history plays, attempts to reveal this hypocrisy and show what horrible things can happen to the country when rich noble men are left to their own devices to squabble over power that honestly none of these protagonists—if one could call them that—really deserve.

In *Richard III*, the crown is used in much the same way as it is used in *Henry VI, Part Three*. Once Edward IV has dies and Richard has murdered the king’s heirs, Richard III walks on stage with a crown on his head to signal to the audience that he is the new king. This device works similarly to the way Shakespeare uses it throughout his other plays, by showing the audience the perceived power the crown has. It also shows the reader that Richard has gone through with his plan to murder his nephews to take power for himself. If God does indeed appoint the king through divine right, it is troubling that he would be so willing to hand power of his people over to a known child murderer. Even before this act, Richard shows that he is capable of murdering a child in *Henry VI Part III* when he is an accomplice in the murder of Rutland, another son who should have inherited the throne. Obviously, murdering innocent children is not in line with what God demands in the Bible, but, like Shakespeare shows on stage and the history record supports, Richard became king after he arranged for the murder of his nephews.

Shakespeare appears to be attempting to show his audience how unholy Richard is, but yet he still takes over the throne. Though he is eventually killed without giving a final speech—Shakespeare’s way of showing his disapproval for the character—he is still allowed to wear that holy crown for an extended period of time. Shakespeare is challenging his audience to question
the credibility of the idea that the king is God’s anointed. Would God really choose a man like Richard to be his mouthpiece on earth? It does not seem likely.

Preedy argues that “distinguishing between the physical body of the ruler and the eternal dignitas of kingship, this doctrine endowed the royal crown with a sacral character; the crown became the mystical talisman of the body politic, representing the transfer of dignitas from one monarch to the next” (261). This would explain the widespread use of the crown as an important tool on the Elizabethan stage by both Marlowe and Shakespeare. The people accepted the crown as a symbol of the king’s power given to them from God. It explains why the characters in the play put so much stock in the crown. It also lends even more gravity to the fact that God never does intervene to protect this sacred symbol from just falling into anybody’s hands. If the crown is truly the symbol of the power God has given to the monarch that everyone believed it was, then it would have been very shocking to the audience to watch the crown pass from hand to hand without seeing much intervention from God at all. The line of succession is unfairly changed, the thrones of kings are usurped, and monsters take over the crown. All of this happens without any significant hint of God’s involvement.

After proving that God is less than interested in the monarchy, the problem that Shakespeare and Marlowe leave their audiences with is why these inadequate leaders are allowed to rule in the first place. Those in power claim it is their blood that gives them the right to rule, but the usurpation that is included in so many of the history plays prove that having the right blood is not always enough to guarantee control of the throne; in fact, it sometimes is not helpful in getting or holding onto the throne at all. If the power does not truly come from the blood as the monarchs claim, then why must the subjects suffer through poor leaders?
Richard II is willing to take money from his subjects through taxes and seize land and wealth from his nobles just to benefit his favorites. Henry VI is crippled by guilt and remorse which affects his demeanor while ruling, and the rebellious way in which he gained the throne also opened the door to even more rebellion. Henry IV is extremely immature, and he is crippled by his power hungry uncles. This causes him to make decisions like disinheriting his son in favor of his uncle and cousins. Richard III is so evil and violent that he wreaks horrible havoc on the country. All of these rulers claim the throne through either an honest blood claim to the throne or a dishonest blood claim that is supported by their larger army. By showing that this “anointed” blood theory is used by men only when it is convenient and therefore less than probable, Shakespeare opens the door to doubting the idea of noble blood as superior to lowborn blood. Why should one be better than another, especially when there is so much evidence proving how horrible nobles can be at ruling the country?

At the end of Elizabeth’s reign, England was unsure of what their future held. As different groups of people argued for different heirs for Elizabeth, it became obvious that the, “Arguments that the royal crown was a changeless, mystical talisman were thus at odds with the idea of a crown that might be bequeathed in a monarch’s will, bestowed by Parliament, or even granted through popular election” (Preedy 262). People were willingly or unwillingly being forced to face the fact that what they had always been told about the source of power for the monarchy was possibly not true. Shakespeare and Marlowe both seize this opportunity to make a social commentary of their own while being protected by the theatricality of the play and the historical record.

However, all of these plays show the lack of belief even by the monarchs themselves that God will intervene or punish them for tampering with the line of succession, and the plays
themselves show that there are no true punishments for those who do so. While Henry IV may not have been the best king, he was certainly more capable than Richard II, and his son Henry V would prove to be one of the best kings England ever had. Though Henry IV usurped the throne from its “rightful” owner, the result is some of the best years that England had ever seen. However, after Henry V’s death, the throne is passed to his infant son, and this results in the horrific events of the Henry VI plays and Richard III. Shakespeare seems to be trying to show his audience that a line of government based on heredity is not the best system because it is honestly impossible to know what kind of ruler the next person in line may be, and putting an infant or child on the throne is a horrible idea. Shakespeare has a citizen express this belief on stage when news of Edward IV’s death reaches him in Richard III. One citizen tells the other, “Woe to the land that is governed by a child” (2.3.13).

Richard II, Edward II, Henry V, and Henry VI all inherit the throne after the death of their father, yet only one of them is a competent ruler. Letting the other nobles fight for the crown does not seem to work either, for then the country is saddled with leaders like Richard III or Isabella and Mortimer. Through their plays, Shakespeare and Marlowe seem to be trying to get their audience to realize there has to be a better system to choose a ruler. Considering a civil war broke out a little over fifty years after these plays were staged may prove that their audience was listening.

**Conclusion**

Throughout all of these works, Marlowe and Shakespeare show that they were deeply interested in the idea of who has the right to rule and where the power of the rulers came from. This is a topic that the English government would not have wanted their subjects thinking about.
Marlowe and Shakespeare showed plays that would have left the audience thinking about exactly these subject, however. How did they get away with it? The plays are rooted in historical fact, so this gave them the freedom to write about things they would ordinarily not be able to because they could argue that these events actually happened.

In plays like *Richard II* and *Edward II*, Marlowe and Shakespeare can argue that their characters receive a just punishment for their immoral behavior, and they are right. However, as shown earlier in the essay, both Richard and Edward retain the audience’s sympathy long after they are deserving of it. Does the death of a sympathetic character ever feel justified? No, it usually does not. Because of this, whether or not the playwrights are condemning these dangerous ideas is not exactly clear. Marlowe and Shakespeare were excellent writers, and they became experts in writing plays that show one thing but seemingly argue for the other. It can be argued that Richard and Edward receive the fate they deserve; however, the audience feels uncomfortable with the way they die, leaving them to question who is really wrong: the sodomites or the hypocritical killers? The answer is not easily found.

Likewise, Tamburlaine, who challenges the authority of the gods and thinks of himself as an all-powerful being, lives a long and victorious life before dying of a natural sickness. This would undoubtedly leave the audience questioning where his divine retribution was. If there is no punishment awaiting those who take what they have earned and deserved, then there is nothing to stop everyone from trying to advance themselves. This is what the nobility was afraid of, and this is what was being shown on Marlowe and Shakespeare’s stage. Preedy argues that, “Marlowe’s plays encourage readers and spectators to recognize and question the spiritual concepts of divine-right monarchy that underpin the realities of secular authority, without necessarily condemning their presence” (275). While it seems that Marlowe is definitely more
condemning of these concepts than Preedy acknowledges, his argument that Marlowe is encouraging his audience to question the foundations of their society is a good one. Marlowe and Shakespeare obviously spent a lot of time wondering why his society and cultural was constructed the way it was. Their attempt to work out the answers to these questions is shown all throughout their works, and they never gives a definitive answer. Maybe they never arrived at one. Whether one agrees or disagrees with their actions, one must acknowledge Marlowe and Shakespeare’s bravery in bringing these ideas to the stage during a time when doing so was certainly dangerous for them.
Works Cited


Belsey, Catherine. "Making Histories Then and Now: Shakespeare from Richard II to Henry V."


Vita

The author was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. She obtained her Bachelor’s degree in 2014 from the University of New Orleans where she double majored in English and History. She joined the University of New Orleans English graduate program to pursue an M.A. in English.