

**Kirk Melnikoff, ed. 2017. *Edward II: A Critical Reader*.
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Veronika Schandl
Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Hungary

By the new millennium *Edward II* has become Marlowe's most popular play. While *Faustus* is still a more common item on school reading lists, directors and audiences more frequently turn to Gaveston's and Edward's love story and the turbulent backwaters of medieval English history than to the rise and fall of the famous scholar. Its topic and interpretation also qualify *Edward II* to feature in more diversified course schedules, which, in the long run, will probably provide a stable place for the play in university curricula as well. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Arden Early Modern Drama Guides included the Marlovian history play among its ranks in a volume of 2017, edited by Kirk Melnikoff.

The series is mainly designed to serve as a fairly comprehensive yet accessible guide to teachers and students alike, so each volume provides a summary of earlier scholarship while adding something new to contemplate. The *Edward II* volume follows the structure of the previous items in the series: after an introduction it outlines the critical backstory and the stage history of the play, provides a chapter on current critical debates and concludes with a thorough guide to secondary sources. Furthermore, it offers four essays that highlight new approaches to the play. This review will look into how it fulfils its double aim functioning both as a resource for teachers and a collection of essays for scholarly research.

Melnikoff's introduction (1–20) details the play's sources, its dating problems and early popularity, while placing *Edward II* in the Marlovian oeuvre. Where it ends, Darlene Farabee's essay continues, observing the play's critical fate from the sixteenth to the twentieth century (21–42), focusing on the generic problem of the play being both a tragedy and a history play and how this created various critical responses through the ages. While remaining succinct, the chapter manages to emphasize the most important issues raised in

each century thus providing a useful introduction into the play's critical backstory.

Andrea Stevens' chapter on the play's stage history (43–72) sees *Edward II* (following J. A. Downie's arguments) as the first evidence for Marlowe's success as a playwright. Although the play was probably absent from the stages in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, since its return in 1903 it has been readmitted into the Marlovian stage repertoire. The chapter gives an introduction to Brecht's rewriting of the play, and discusses the most important Anglo-American performances of this newly discovered "gay classic." Contextualizing them within British (sexual) politics, the chapter not only discusses Derek Jacobi's or Ian McKellen's performance, but also gives a detailed introduction to Derek Jarman's film version.

The final summary chapter by Judith Haber (73–96) examines state of the art criticism, with a slight variation to the normal routine of the series, starting not in the twenty-first century, but in the 1990s, a decade that rediscovered the play for scholarly discussions by considering the play's sexuality, often alongside its political context. After summarizing the main arguments of the most influential essays written on *Edward II* in the 1990s the essay concludes that the following decades just added slight variations to the themes these highlighted. The current disdain in scholarly work to focus solely on the play's sexual themes is shown not only in Hather's survey of recent work, but also in the following essays in the volume that all shun the discussion of gender and sexuality.

The volume closes with an excellent survey for teachers listing the most available resources for the play, assembled by Edward Gieskes.

At times one feels that the primary target of these summary chapters are not necessarily Marlovian scholars or early modernists, but even they can benefit from the thorough yet succinct overview they provide. If one critical remark can be allowed here, it is the somewhat painful lack of European and Asian material that is most conspicuous (especially in the "on stage" section), one feels, in these reviews.

The new perspectives part of the volume starts with Alan Stewart's excellent essay (97–118) that proposes a triangular reading of *Edward II*, a contemporary French pamphlet attacking King Henri III, entitled *Edouard et Gaveston*, and Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris*. What Stewart hopes from this reading is a realization that French politics did interest and influence Marlowe's writing of not only *The Massacre*, but also *Edward II*. Taking up Marlowe's use of the word "minion," previously associated with Henri III's favorites, the essay provides a convincing argument for further possible resonances between contemporary French politics and Marlowe's drama on medieval English history.

Roslyn L. Knutson attempts to place *Edward II* in the contemporary repertory (119–44). Since very little is known about the early modern performances of the play besides a title page reference that it was owned by the Lord Pembroke's Men, it requires a lot of conjecturing and guesswork to find answers to some of the questions repertory studies usually ask (who owned the play, when and how it was performed, what else was in the repertory, etc.). The essay is succinctly argued and immensely well researched, and one comes away with an appreciation of the difficulties in putting together the pieces of an early modern repertory.

Using Bourdieu's concept of conforming transgressions (familiar expressions with tiny variations that still violate accepting codes) James Siemon gives an exciting reading of the play's usage of ranks and titles. With insightful readings of how Gaveston, the peers and Isabella use or misuse these designations, the essay amply demonstrates Marlowe's uses of irony also as a commentary on contemporary political changes.

Another close reading of the play by Garrett A. Sullivan Jr. discusses different concepts of life and death evident in the play. It demonstrates how fragile clear-cut distinctions between the two are, while placing the terms in a wider historical framework.

Being both a compendium and a collection of scholarly essays, from the nature of the volume it is evident that the essays use rather different approaches and methodologies while also addressing different audiences. However, it is nice to observe how much the essays pay attention to each other, reflect on one another's arguments, try to avoid repetitions and so develop a scholarly

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discussion. Overall the volume provides a very strong line-up of contemporary criticism yet also offers an impressive coverage of diverse material, successfully fulfilling the double task it sets out to achieve.

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Author's contact: schandl.veronika@btk.ppke.hu

Postal address: Pázmány Péter Catholic University – Piliscsaba, Egyetem u. 1. 2087 – Hungary