

Maritime Anxiety and Political Instability in Marlowe's *Edward II*

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Abstract

Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* employs maritime imagery to interrogate Elizabethan anxieties over permeable borders and fragile sovereignty. The sea, intrinsically tied to Gaveston and Isabella, functions as both a destabilizing force and a geopolitical metaphor. Gaveston's disruptive presence—ostracized as a foreign interloper—mirrors England's vulnerability to external threats. And Isabella's navigation of turbulent political waters reflects attempts to mediate monarchical and aristocratic tensions, yet her eventual alliance with Mortimer underscores the precariousness of regal power. The nobles' conflict with Edward II, framed through territorial language, exposes the era's crisis of authority: land-based hierarchies clash with the fluid, uncontrollable nature of maritime forces, emblematic of England's struggle to reconcile centralized rule with aristocratic autonomy. Marlowe's oceanic metaphors thus conflate personal and political dissolution, linking Gaveston's transgressive influence and Isabella's shifting loyalties to broader anxieties about porous national boundaries and unstable governance. The play's exploration of these tensions—where the sea simultaneously threatens invasion and embodies internal disorder—captures Elizabethan England's dual fears: the permeability of its island defenses and the fragility of a monarchy besieged by domestic factionalism and foreign pressures.

Keywords

Edward II, Christopher Marlowe, Maritime Boundaries, Geopolitical Anxiety, Insularity

1. Introduction

In the opening scene of *Edward II*, Marlowe strategically deploys maritime imagery as a geopolitical metaphor when the embattled monarch declares to his con-

troversial favorite Gaveston: “And sooner shall the sea orewhelme my land, Then beare the ship that shall transport thee hence” (1.152-153) (Marlowe, 1994). These lines transcend mere emotional expression, constituting a cartographic metaphor for England’s unstable position in an era of emerging thalassocracy rivalries. When confronted by nobles demanding Gaveston’s exile, Edward II’s subsequent vow—“This Ile shall fleete upon the Ocean, /And wander to the unfrequented Inde” (4.49-50)—converts the island kingdom into a ship drifting in a hostile political sea. Through such nautical rhetoric, Marlowe dramatizes the sixteenth-century anxiety that England’s insular security could disintegrate into maritime vulnerability, with its territorial sovereignty threatened not only by domestic discord but also by the capricious neighbor in oceanic geopolitics.

Scholarship has traditionally framed Edward II’s tragedy through affective paradigms, interpreting his doomed relationship with Gaveston as a monarch’s self-destructive passion overriding statecraft (Greenblatt, 2005; Cheney, 2004). Yet this emotional lens risks obscuring the play’s geopolitical subtext. As Laurence Publicover observes, Marlowe’s maritime metaphors prefigure Shakespeare’s use of oceanic imagery to articulate anxieties about political hierarchies and territorial instability (Publicover, 2014). However, as recent scholars have pointed out, an excessive emphasis on corporeal desire runs the risk of obscuring other interpretive approaches (Atwood, 2013). For England, which was committed to the sea during this period, the sea should not be confined to emotional expression metaphor. As a traumatic metaphor of geopolitics, the image of the sea pervades the core scene of the power shift, revealing the security anxiety brought by the sea to England throughout the entire sixteenth century. The sea in *Edward II* functions not merely as an emotional metaphor but as a traumatic geopolitical signifier—a liminal space where royal authority is contested, national boundaries are made permeable, and England’s emerging identity as a maritime power paradoxically exposes its vulnerabilities.

This geopolitical reading gains urgency when contextualized within Marlowe’s historiographic project. Composed circa 1592 amidst England’s escalating naval conflicts with Spain and debates over Irish colonial ventures, *Edward II* belongs to what Helgerson terms the “generation’s contribution to writing of England” (Helgerson, 1992)—a nationalist historiography grappling with territorial integrity. It is also recognized as one of the “the new genre of the national history play” (Helgerson, 1992) adapted from Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles* (1587). The play’s 42 invocations of “England” resonate against late Elizabethan anxieties. *Edward II* was published four times within merely thirty years (1594, 1598, 1612, 1622), highlighting its profound significance for England in the late 16th and early 17th centuries (Thornton, 1998), particularly coinciding with England’s transformation from an embattled island to a nascent empire, making Marlowe’s maritime metaphors insightful.

When Edward II likens Gaveston’s exile to national submersion (“sea orewhelme my land”), he unconsciously predicts the geopolitical reality that Eng-

land's future security, and eventual global dominance, would rely not on resisting the sea, but on mastering its commercial and military potential. The tragic irony lies in Edward II's anachronistic perception of the ocean as a destructive force rather than an imperial channel, a cognitive dissonance mirroring Elizabethan England's own troubled relationship with maritime expansion. From this perspective, the power struggles within the play transform into microcosms of the national growing pains—the violent birth throes of an island kingdom learning to navigate, the geopolitical currents of the oceanic age. This paper commences on interpreting the metaphorical role of the “sea” and its destructive power in relation to the geopolitical anxieties of England during that period. It also explores the implications these historical narratives possess for the evolution of an English collective identity, with the aim of offering a more profound understanding of the complex interaction between the play, historical context, and national identity formation.

2. The Narrow Sea: Complexities of the English Channel

Marlowe's *Edward II* constructs a profoundly dialectical geopolitical imaginary in its opening movement, spatializing the early modern England liminal anxieties through this sea threshold. Gaveston, having crossed the ocean to England, commences the play with delivering an extended soliloquy elucidating his motivations. Having received Edward II's summons following the death of the old king—an invitation to “share the kingdom” (1.2)—this French courtier aspires to become the monarch's “favorite” (1.5). His eagerness is manifested through hyperbolic aquatic imagery: he claims that he would have “swum from France” (1.7) and emerged “like Leander gasping on the sand” (1.8). Scholars applying affect-theory frameworks have noted Marlowe's intertextual reference to his own translation of Ovid's *Hero and Leander* in 1598, interpreting this classical allusion as eroticizing the maritime space (Bray, 2003). While this perspective valuably examines the sea as a metaphor for desire, it overlooks the political ambitions underlying Gaveston's rhetoric. Even as he ostensibly quotes Edward II's letter, the foreigner's true objective surfaces in his aspiration for shared sovereignty.

Moreover, Gaveston demonstrates an acute awareness of his precarious position as a continental outsider in England. Though envisioning London as a welcoming “harbor” (1.13) for his royal intimacy, he acknowledges existing in a state of perpetual enmity with the English court (1.15). His proposed survival strategy involves employing continental cultural capital—specifically “Italian masques”—to consolidate exclusive influence over the monarch. These lines ultimately reveal the English Channel's dual symbolic function: despite its physically narrow, this liminal maritime space serves both as a conduit for transgressive desires and as a permeable border that permits the infiltration of foreign political ambitions and decadent continental practices into England's insular realm. The Channel's geographical constriction ironically facilitates the unimpeded flow of subversive elements across political and cultural boundaries.

Anjali Arondekar's examination of the "geopolitical" dimensions within eroticized maritime spaces warrants critical attention (Arondekar, 2007). While asserting that the language of geopolitics remains crucial to articulating the terms of gender and its significations, she acknowledges that from the vantage of sexuality studies, this heightened attention to the geopolitical has served more as a cautionary tale (Arondekar, 2007). This observation reveals how sexualized interpretations have persistently permeated geographical analyses of straits, particularly concerning the cultural and historical significances embedded in maritime symbolism. In Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, the Hellespont—the aquatic divide separating Abydos and Sestos, and by extension symbolizing East/West binaries, Ottoman/classical tensions, and the Hero/Leander dyad, assumes central narrative significance (Marlowe, 1987). For early modern English writers, this strait represented a palimpsestic space where geographical boundaries intersected with historical memory, notably as the legendary site of the Trojan War. When Gaveston aligns himself with Leander's beach arrival, he implicitly activates the Channel's symbolic parallels to the Hellespont, both functioning as precarious liminal zones.

The English Channel's geopolitical vulnerability becomes particularly pronounced post-1558, following the loss of Calais, England's final continental foothold. This twenty-mile aqueous border between Dover and Calais crystallized territorial anxieties, its supposed role as protective barrier undermined by historical realities. As a dividing line between nations, it did not seem so safe in the age of Great navigation. John Stubbes' polemical tract "*The discoverie of a gaping gulf vwhereinto England is like to be swallowved by another French mariage, if the Lord forbid not the banes, by letting her Maiestie see the sin and punishment thereof*" (1579) encapsulates this paradox through oxymoronic cartography as a little river to divide England and Franch—"who haue one bounds of the sea, and but a small brooke that partes vs" (Stubbes, 1579). Gaveston's aquatic metaphors thus operate as subversive geopolitical discourse. His traversal of the Channel metaphorizes the permeability of England's defenses, transforming the sea into an unsettling conduit through which foreign political degeneration and continental decadence infiltrate the island realm. The Channel's geographical constriction belies its dangerous efficiency as a vector for destabilizing forces, positioning England in perpetual vulnerability to external influences that erode both monarchical authority and national sovereignty.

Gaveston's French identity and the negative influence associated with continental Europe are one of the reasons why he is regarded as a source of national danger, yet more than one person crossed the English Channel. In the play, upon seeing Gaveston, the Bishop of Coventrie immediately rebuked him, insisting that he should return to France (1.185). Similarly, Mortimer also expressed his intention to exile this treacherous and harmful "slie inveigling Frenchman" (2.57). Coincidentally, Edward II's queen, Isabella, was also of French origin. After Gaveston was banished to Ireland by the nobles, Edward II blamed her for the situation. In

her sorrow, Isabella expressed a macabre desire: she hoped that upon leaving France and arriving in England—“when I left sweet France and was imbarkt”—the “That charming Circes walking on the waves” made her cup filled with venom on her wedding day (4.171-174). Although Isabella initially voices her feelings of being wronged, it is ultimately this French princess who assists Mortimer in his resurgence by bringing the French forces under the command of Sir John to England. Also in the play, Isabella delivers a letter to Edward II in which her brother states that “That lord Valoyes our brother, king of Fraunce, /Because your highnesse hath beene slack in homage, /Hath seized Nomandie into his hands” (11.62-65). The danger of Normandy is a recurring theme in the text, with Mortimer himself emphasizing this geographical vulnerability when describing England’s precarious position—England is surrounded by enemies on all sides of the sea.

It seems that, throughout England, the threat posed by France through the sea progressively intensifies in the narrative, largely through the characters of Gascon and Isabella. This accumulation implies that France, as a neighboring nation and its associated maritime security anxieties, represents an enduring tendency for England—one that views its natural boundaries not as defensive barriers but as pathways for access and egress (Mckeown, 2018). The sea reconfigures this perceived vulnerability into a critical point of territorial insecurity. As early as 1539-1540, Henry VIII ordered a comprehensive survey of England’s coastal defenses. These accessible river mouths and coastlines, which could penetrate deep into the English interior, became the nation’s Achilles’ heel. Edward Hall, in his work “The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York” (1548), commented on the situation, highlighting the growing awareness of vulnerability—“all the Portes and daungers on the coastes where any meete or conuenient landyng place myght be supposed, aswell on the borders of Englande...And in all soche doubtfull places his hyghnes caused dyuers & many Bulwarkes & fortifications to be made” (Mckeown, 2018).

This national-security anxiety about the sea intensified in Elizabethan times with the geopolitics of the English Channel. During Elizabeth I’s reign, France represented England’s greatest security threat for several reasons. First, France’s population was three to four times that of England. Second, after capturing Calais, France fully controlled the windward coast of the English Channel. Additionally, France and Scotland were traditional allies, with the Catholic Guise family ruling France and attempting to support Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, in her bid for the English throne. Similarly, in 1567, Duke of Alba led Spanish forces to the Netherlands, stating that if the Low Countries fell under Spanish domination, they would elevate Mary’s claim to the English throne (Black, 1959). Early in Elizabeth’s reign, Armigail Waad assessed the geopolitical landscape: “The French king bestriding the realm, having one foot in Calais and the other in Scotland. Steadfast enmity but no steadfast friendship abroad.” (Hurstfied & Smith, 1978) Recent scholars have often invoked Shakespeare’s *Richard II* (circa 1595) and its reference to “the sceptered isle” to argue that England was seen as an exalted and impregnable

empire. In reality, the precarious kingship depicted in Marlowe's *Edward II* reflects a broader perception during the 16th century: England and the British Isles were vulnerable—an island realm strangely susceptible to foreign invasion and conquest. This image contrasts sharply with the idealized notion of an imperial power, revealing deep-seated anxieties about national security and sovereignty.

Further analysis of how Gaveston and Isabella interpret their cross-sea behavior in the play reveals alternative representations and connotations of the geographic space of the English Channel. When Gaveston compares himself to Leander, it is important to note that Leander's residence at Abydos lies in Asia, while Hero resides at Sestos in Europe. Similarly, when Isabella accepts Sir John's assistance and ultimately agrees to join him, she declares, "Ah sweete sir John, even to the utmost verge Of Europe, or the shore of Tanaise," emphasizing her willingness to go anywhere with him (13.28-30). The "Tanaise" is the ancient Greek name for the Danau River and was often understood as the boundary between Europe and Asia. Interestingly, both Gaveston and Isabella—individuals who originate from France and significantly influence England's political landscape—are depicted as emanating from a region described as "uncivilized". In John's tract titled "The Discouerie of a Gaping Gulf" (1579), England is portrayed as a poor Isle compassed about with the sea that is perpetually vulnerable to being swallowed up by the rolling waves (Stubbes, 1579). These swallowing waves are explicitly linked to France, which is described as a nation infected by degeneration—both physical ("Italian diseases" such as syphilis) and spiritual ("Machiavellianism," associated with the Catholic Church and other destructive belief systems that erode moral and political integrity (John, 1548). This tract also equates France to Italy, associating both with a culture of cunning and duplicity. In *Edward II*, Gaveston's rejection of soldiers who had previously fought in Scotland suggests his preference for courtly diversion over military duty. Instead, he fantasizes about hosting an Italian masque—a spectacle favored by the king (1.52-54). While scholars have emphasized the sodomitical relationship between Gaveston and Edward II, Gaveston's claim to resemble "As Caesar riding in the Romaine streete, /With captive kings at his triumphant Carre" (1.173-74). His desire for power is no different from that of Isabella, who wins the war with the help of French troops in the play, and both are cunning "Machiavelli". Both characters personify the threat posed by Continental Europe—specifically France—to England's territorial sovereignty.

Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* employs a dramatic spatial reconfiguration of the English Channel, portraying it as a permeable boundary. Marlowe not only reflects the dilemmas surrounding maritime borders in sixteenth-century England's insular geopolitical imagination but also constructs an insecure English Channel and France as a threatening neighbor. The ocean, as a penetrable passage, simultaneously defines England's insular identity and persistently threatens its territorial security. Both Gaveston, the "French villain," and Queen Isabella, sister of the French king, embody threats originating from continental Europe, particularly France. In the play, Marlowe uses their dialogues to emphasize their trans-

marine origins, invokes maritime traditions and allusions to underscore their menace, and reinforces the concept of monarchical crisis alongside territorial anxieties stemming from the crossable nature of the sea, ultimately shaping a community permeated with border anxieties. However, throughout the play, the territorial anxieties inflicted upon *Edward II* by the sea extend beyond France. At the edge of the English Channel, England appears to be encircled by adversaries on all sides.

3. The Perilous Sea: England's Insular Anguish

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes early modern drama as a critical medium for spatial epistemology (Sanders, 2011). Marlowe's depiction of maritime space in *Edward II* reflects sixteenth-century Tudor England's geopolitical consciousness of its insularity—an embattled island-nation grappling with territorial anxiety. As the plot unfolds, Gaveston's political disruptions allegorize the transformation of oceanic and liminal spaces into zones of existential crisis. Marcie Bianco argues that Gaveston's role as “as governor of Ireland, comes to embody the dangerousness that Ireland poses to the sanctity of the English nation and to the purity of English national identity” (Bianco, 2007), symbolizing both the permeability of England's insular geography and *Edward II*'s corporeal vulnerability. Gaveston thus emerges as a nexus of Irish alterity and homoerotic subversion. A close reading reveals that the nobility's fears extend beyond the Irish Sea and the Anglo-French English Channel to encompass a geopolitical panorama of encroaching threats—Scotland, the Netherlands, and Wales all loom as destabilizing forces. Fundamentally, Marlowe's maritime imaginary is shaped by the maritime politics of Elizabethan England and the broader Age of Exploration, its ideological contours emerging as both a product of immediate historical circumstances and the *longue durée* of England's fraught relationship with the sea.

The fourth act's marine metaphors crystallize these anxieties. Mortimer's denunciation of Gaveston as “vile Torpedo” haunting “the Irish seas” (4.223-24) biologizes colonial anxieties through ichthyological symbolism—the torpedo fish's numbing electric discharge mirroring Gaveston's paralyzing influence on royal governance. Edward II's contentious appointment of Gaveston as Lord of Mann (strategically positioned between England and Ireland) and subsequent delegation as “governour of Ireland” (4.125) inverts conventional center-periphery dynamics. Mortimer's alarm at Gaveston's capacity to “purchase friends in Ireland” with Edward II's royal gold (4.258-62) exposes the crown's paradoxical reliance on colonial administration to counter aristocratic opposition, while simultaneously fearing its destabilizing potential. The lexical shift from “for the realms” (4.243) to “do our countries good” (4.257) in Mortimer's rhetoric signals an emerging nationalist discourse that subsumes feudal loyalties under imagined communal interests.

By Act 6, as Gaveston is reinstated amid escalating crises, coastal confrontation amplifies this geopolitical anxiety. Lancaster's litany of crises—French garrison

expulsions, O'Neill's cross-channel raids, Scottish sieges at York (6.162-66)—reveals Marlowe's deliberate anachronism, superimposing Elizabethan colonial anxieties onto fourteenth-century narratives. Crucially, aristocratic concerns center not on Irish territorial integrity but on its blowback threatening metropolitan aristocratic interests. The nobility's evolving hostility toward Gaveston—from resentment of his courtly influence to outright condemnation as a national peril—exposes the fragility of monarchical-aristocratic relations, wherein both factions ostensibly subordinate self-interest to the “commonwealth”. Crucially, Gaveston's liminal identity—bridging Ireland via the Irish Sea—transforms him into a metonym for England's porous borders. While critics often frame Gaveston as a locus of Edward's personal negligence, his Irish connections transcend mere affective transgression. Marlowe strategically positions him as an ideological cipher, conflating Ireland's geopolitical volatility with the sovereign's failure to safeguard territorial integrity, thereby crystallizing the play's central tension between corporeal desire and cartographic sovereignty.

If the French problem, across the English Channel, represents a marker of early modern England's territorial anxieties regarding Continental invasion, then the Irish Sea and Ireland, as traversed by Gaveston, exemplify the typical internal Irish territorial anxieties within the British archipelago. During the Tudor period, although only one-third of Ireland's territory was under direct control of the English Crown, Henry VIII in 1541 still proclaimed himself “King of Ireland” through the *Act of Kingship* in 1541 (Maxwell, 1923). Nevertheless, Irish affairs consistently occupied secondary priority in English governance, primarily due to logistical challenges imposed by the Irish Sea. The Tudor-controlled territories in Ireland proved insufficient to sustain required garrisons with adequate provisions, horses, armaments, and funding. Prior to the mid-1590s, English military presence in Ireland never exceeded 1500 - 2000 troops, with reinforcements during conflicts being rapidly withdrawn to minimize expenditures (Hammer, 2003). For Elizabeth I's financially strained government, military engagements in Ireland dangerously drained domestic political, military, and economic resources, rendering England vulnerable to recurrent fiscal-military crises and consequently fostering cautious interventionist policies (Altman, 1991). This conservative stance persisted even during the final two decades of the sixteenth century when threats of combined Irish-Spanish assaults intensified. Following the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, the growing alliance between Ireland and Spain further heightened the territorial threat to England. Though Irish rebel leaders repeatedly sought Spanish assistance throughout the 1590s, substantive military support materialized only in 1601 with the deployment of 3,400 Spanish troops (Ellis, 1998).

Significantly, while Marlowe's *Edward II* makes no explicit reference to Spanish aggression, its portrayal of besieged England under simultaneous Irish and Scottish attacks mirrors contemporary anxieties about persistent Spanish invasion threats. Gaveston's role as a governor of Ireland—a position invested with authority and wealth—functioned less as a stabilizing force and more as a catalyst for

English anxieties. Despite England's historic victory over the Spanish Armada, the public remained deeply convinced that another Spanish invasion was imminent. For an island nation surrounded by seas, this perpetual sense of being "besieged" from all sides became an inescapable source of territorial insecurity. As Willy Maley has noted, Ireland in Shakespeare's plays is often depicted as a "backdoor" for potential invasions (whether from France or Spain), adhering to the "domino theory" (the idea that if Ireland fell, so too would Wales and Scotland, followed by Kent and Cornwall), and also as a staging ground for English traitors. These three perspectives often overlap in Shakespeare's works (Maley, 2003). Notably, the Irish Sea, as a critical connecting corridor, was seen as a "potential conduit of papal subversion" (Neill, 1994) offering an easier route for foreign invasions to English territory. Gaveston's Irish connections epitomize how Irish affairs impacted English territorial security, extending beyond colonial possessions to influence metropolitan safety through overseas garrisons and foreign alliances. His role, coupled with his perceived wealth from Edward II, starkly highlighted England's "spatial anxieties" about the Irish Sea region and the spaces it encompassed.

The concerns about the ocean and Spain's control over it were not limited to Ireland and France. Before Mortimer and the nobles raised their rebellion, they enumerates military crises across France, Ireland, and Scotland, then pointed to Danish threat in the Narrow Sea—"The hautie Danie commands the narrow seas, /While in the harbor ride thy ships unrigd" (6.168-69). This anachronistic reference to thirteenth-century Edward II's reign actually reflects late sixteenth-century anxieties. While this description does not align with the historical context of Edward II in the 13th century, it reflects the potential crisis facing England in the 16th century. Unlike other crises mentioned in *The Chronicle*, which were at least partially documented, "The hautie Danie" represented a completely new threat to England in the late 16th century, unrelated to the reign of Edward II. Sir Walter Raleigh's 1593 parliamentary address warned that Spain controls all the rich and fruitful regions of the world and had surrounded England through through alliances with Denmark, the Low Countries, Norway, France, and Scotland (Neale, 1957). In Marlow's play, the term "Narrow Sea" does not specifically refer to the English Channel but rather to the Sound (Oresund), the sole passage to the Baltic Sea. By the mid-15th century, Denmark had gained control of this strategic waterway. At its narrowest point near Elsinore (Elsinore Castle), the channel was only four miles wide. Any vessel passing through was forced to lower its sails and pay the traditional Sound Dues under the watch of Frederick II's Kronborg Castle (built in 1574). For Elizabethan England, this choke-point not only incurred transit fees but also frequent ship detentions, while Danish dominance adversely affected fishing interests in the North Sea and disrupted the northern trade routes of the Muscovy Company (Cheyney, 1929).

In *Edward II*, the nobles who despised Gaveston repeatedly persistently remind the monarch of England's insular vulnerability. Marlowe's strategic incorporation of chronicle material and contemporary realities—particularly through Mortimer

and Lancaster's impassioned rhetoric—reconstructs England's maritime-induced territorial crises. The dramatization of seas as perilous geopolitical spaces mirrors post-1588 anxieties about recurrent Spanish invasions. Though the Channel winds aided England's naval victory, the maritime medium that enabled Spanish Armada also perpetuated fears of omnipresent threats from Spain and its European allies. This maritime paradox—simultaneously protective barrier and vulnerable conduit—fundamentally shaped early modern England's territorial consciousness.

4. The Political Metaphor of Ocean and Land in *Edward II*

Returning to the opening line concerning the maritime-terrestrial dialectic, Edward II's declaration to the newly returned Gaveston, "And sooner shall the sea orewhelme my land, Then beare the ship that shall transport thee hence" (1.152-153)—we observe how the play's political tensions are spatially encoded. Though Gaveston initially gains temporary ascendancy through royal favor, the oppositional nobility's political prowess in confronting the monarch remains undeniable. Lancaster's rebuttal to Edward II's accusations foregrounds territorial power as military capital: "Foure Earldomes have I besides Lancaster, /Darbe, Salsbure, Lincolne, Lesceter, /These will I sell to give my souldiers paye" (1.102-104). Similarly, Mortimer Senior's Wiltshire estates (1.127) and Warwick's Warwickshire holdings (1.127) exemplify the baronial power rooted in landed wealth. By Act IV, when compelled to sign Gaveston's expulsion under combined aristocratic and ecclesiastical pressure, Edward II's desperate metaphor—"This Ile shall fleete upon the Ocean, /And wander to the unfrequented Inde" (4.49-50)—reveals monarchical impotence against terrestrial authority. The king's sovereignty appears reducible to mutually destructive resistance through maritime imagery, his political agency metaphorically adrift. Moving beyond psychosexual interpretations of Edward II's attachment, we might adopt Stephen Greenblatt's analytical lens to interrogate what societal structures Edward's private relationship with Gaveston, articulated through oceanic metaphors of fluidity and dissolution—fundamentally challenges. The maritime becomes not merely topographical reality but a discursive counterpoint to rigid feudal hierarchies, with Edward's transgressive desires symbolizing resistance against the landed aristocracy's patriarchal order. This aqueous imagery destabilizes the play's geopolitical certainties, rendering royal authority as precarious as England's insular geography, perpetually threatened by both terrestrial rebellion and imagined marine dissolution.

Therefore, when Edward II laments "the sea orewhelme my land", his grievance extends beyond the geographical reality of Britain's insularity amidst hostile European neighbors to encompass the metaphorical "disorderly" sea. The former perpetuates England's self-conception as an island besieged by perilous waters, while the latter has conventionally been interpreted through the prism of Edward II's transgressive relationship with Gaveston. Scholars frequently attribute Edward II's political disorder to his socially condemned personal affections, arguing

that the blurring of boundaries between sovereign duty and private desire plunges both monarch and nation into chaos (Crewe, 2009). Yet as Mortimer remarks before departing for the Scottish campaign—"The mightiest kings have had their minions" (4.391)—the nobles' vehement opposition demands critical interrogation: beyond Gaveston's status as an outsider, what fundamental sociopolitical transgressions render this royal favorite so intolerable? What symbolic weight does Edward II's maritime rhetoric carry within the play's geopolitical imaginary? The monarch's invocation of the sea transcends mere topographical anxiety, crystallizing the epistemological crisis of a feudal order destabilized by desires that breach the "natural" boundaries of land-based hierarchies. While Gaveston's foreign origins provide convenient justification for baronial hostility, the deeper threat lies in his embodiment of fluid loyalties and non-territorial influence, forces as formless and erosive as the ocean itself. Edward's metaphorical seas thus represent both the destabilizing flux of unregulated affections and the political dissolution wrought by a sovereignty adrift from its feudal moorings.

Gaveston, like the "flying fish" emblazoned on Lancaster's heraldic emblem, embodies a force irreducible to existing political taxonomies. This chimeric symbol—a creature transgressing elemental boundaries between sea and air—mirrors Gaveston's destabilizing position as a royal favorite who defies feudal hierarchies. His liminality threatens not merely through foreign origins or excessive influence, but through his very existence as a category crisis: neither fully integrated into the aristocratic order nor reducible to conventional courtly roles. Edward's oceanic metaphors thus articulate a dual anxiety—the geopolitical vulnerability of England's porous borders paralleling the monarch's inability to contain desires that breach the "natural" order of land-based sovereignty. The "disorderly sea" becomes the discursive arena where personal transgression and political dissolution converge, exposing the fragility of Tudor England's self-fashioned identity as both insular fortress and ordered hierarchy.

Edward II's invocation of "land" and "sea" implicitly articulates an idealized feudal contract between monarch and nobility, while the dramatized land-sea opposition spatializes their political conflicts. Under feudalism, nobles acquired territories through royal grants in exchange for service, forming a land-centric hierarchical symbiosis, which established institutional foundations for military, economic, and political power. A.N. McLaren notes that post-Elizabethan political theorists conceptualized mixed monarchy as a corporate body institutionalizing collective wisdom (through Privy Council and Parliament) to counterbalance potential female monarchical absolutism (McLaren, 1999). Edward II's recurring maritime rhetoric—drowning or displacing land through oceanic forces—metaphorically prefigures the chaos arising from monarch-noble discord. His apocalyptic visions of maritime destruction do not signify emotional prioritization over statecraft, but rather frustration at his inability to independently execute sovereign will. The persistent sea imagery symbolizes both Edward's emotional dissolution and his resistance against the inexorable power of aristocratic territorialism.

The social tensions embodied by Gaveston and Spencer's "rise of the gentry" versus Mortimer's "aristocratic crisis" reflect latent Tudor-era sociopolitical fractures. While fifteenth-century Wars of the Roses were attributed to noble factionalism, the Tudor regime cultivated governance through non-aristocratic professionals, marking a transition from lineage-based honor culture to centralized monarchical bureaucracy. This paradigm shift witnessed nobility's declining political influence through reduced Privy Council participation and diminished landholdings—parliamentary peers owned 71% fewer manors in 1602 than 1558 (Bernard, 2022). Nevertheless, Tudor aristocracy retained significant cultural hegemony. Elizabeth's revival of lord's lieutenantcy (predominantly noble-held regional military commands) during Spanish invasion threats, and rebellions like the 1569 Northern Rising led by Earls of Northumberland and Westmorland, demonstrated enduring baronial power. These uprisings, particularly the Northern Rebellion, paradoxically strengthened monarchy consolidation while exposing persistent aristocratic capacity to challenge central authority.

5. Conclusion

Marlowe's *Edward II* exposes England's maritime frontiers as vectors of political destabilization. The Channel becomes a conduit for foreign infiltration: Gaveston's French roots corrode court traditions, while Isabella's alliance with France weaponizes noble power for regime change. Marlowe's geo-poetic design thus exposes a brutal Elizabethan truth: England's island identity, far from being a protective moat, rendered it uniquely susceptible to multilayered maritime threats. Stephen Greenblatt conceptualizes Edward II as the "incarnation of land" within England's political imaginary, a figure whose inherent instability of selfhood reflects the nation's fractured territorial consciousness. This instability manifests not merely in personal identity crises but in the contested geographical boundaries of England as a communal entity—its imagined edges demarcated by the sea rather than the clear jurisdictional domains of landholding aristocracy. Unlike the protective "sea-wall'd garden" imagery in *Richard II*, Marlowe's maritime boundaries in *Edward II* function as permeable frontiers, enabling unfettered access for external adversaries. The play's oceanic geo-poetics articulate the dual pressures of mid-to-late Elizabethan state security: externally, the island's porous edges faced ideological and military incursions from Continental powers like France and Spain; internally, the volatile crown-aristocracy dynamic mirrored the sea's "disorderly" cultural symbolism—a disruptive force eroding traditional hierarchies amid rapid social transformation. This maritime-induced disorder operates dialectically: as the sea subverts established terrestrial order, it simultaneously generates new instabilities by transmuting existing equilibria into fresh asymmetries. Thus, even during the ostensible peace under Edward III, Marlowe's play perpetuates the metaphorical anxiety of insular vulnerability—the encircling seas are no longer symbols of natural defense but reminders of perpetual exposure. The ocean emerges as both geopolitical reality and ideological metaphor, embodying the par-

adox of early modern England's self-fashioning: an island nation whose imagined maritime fortifications could neither fully repel foreign threats nor contain the internal turbulence of sovereignty perpetually adrift between land's rigidity and sea's flux.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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