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## Subscription and proscription in Marlowe's *Edward II*

Yan Brailowsky

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- 1 As remarked by Marjorie Garber, *Edward II* begins much like *Doctor Faustus*—with characters reading onstage.<sup>1</sup> But whereas Faustus is seen reading and interpreting Latin works such as Justinian's *Institutes* or Jerome's translation of the Bible, *Edward II* opens with Gaveston reading and commenting two lines from a private letter sent to him by the newly-crowned king:

'My father is deceased; come Gaveston,  
And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend.' (1.1.1–2)<sup>2</sup>

- 2 This candid, or rather callous, letter sent by a king to his lover at the beginning of act 1 contrasts with the devilishly ambiguous letter sent by a king's captor to his confederates towards the end of act 5. Mortimer's letter to Edward's gaolers is craftily left "unpointed" and both intimates them to save and kill the king:

This letter written by a friend of ours  
Contains his death yet bids them save his life.  
'Edwardum occidere nolite timere bonum est':  
'Fear not to kill the king, 'tis good he die.'  
But read it thus, and that's another sense:  
'Edwardum occidere nolite timere bonum est':  
'Kill not the king, 'tis good to fear the worst'.  
Unpointed as it is, thus shall it go (5.4.6–13)

- 3 A closer reading of the two letters elicits other peculiar parallelisms. Although Edward's letter to Gaveston expresses his wish for his minion to return from his exile, one quickly realizes that the terms used by the king with his plan to "share the kingdom" are ominous, as they pave the way for the kind of rebellious division of the body politic which is also at the heart of plays such as *King Lear*. In other words, the deadly duplicity of Mortimer's device is the natural outcome of Edward's ill-advised plan to "share the kingdom", and the king's letter is programmatic of the civil strife which will engulf England. Despite their apparent differences in tone and structure, the first and last letters

of the play both deal with the life and death of the king. These acts of writing prove to be powerful, or disastrous, instruments of public and private policy.

- 4 If these letters represent for critics emblematic acts of writing in *Edward II*, the play is in fact littered with letters and decrees being written, received, exchanged, read, or torn on stage.<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I will first show how the various references to (acts of) writing in *Edward II* are the fruit of material peculiarities found in Marlowe's narrative sources which lend the play a semblance of historical verisimilitude. Letters, however, also serve a host of specifically *dramatic* purposes, contributing to underline key structural elements in the play and serving as props capable of inflicting physical wounds. If one can study these letters as if they had a life of their own, producing meaning or provoking pain, they are also the result of an *act* of writing. Studying the letters' agency, I shall try to argue, helps reflect the shifting allegiances both in and outside of the play, illustrating Marlowe's struggle between the public and private "hand", between policy and passion, belonging and exile, subscription and proscription.

## Transcription or Marlovian *effet de réel*?

- 5 The omnipresence of letters in Marlowe's play stems directly from his known narrative sources, notably Raphael Holinshed's second edition of his *Chronicles* (1587), John Stow's *Annals* (1580) and John Foxe's second edition of his *Acts and Monuments* (1570).<sup>4</sup> While Holinshed remains Marlowe's more recent and influential source, mentioning letters with the greatest frequency and wealth of detail, each source emphasized different aspects of the story of Edward's ill-fated reign.<sup>5</sup> Comparing *Edward II* with these narrative sources reveals at least three letters which appear clearly in both play and source, either because they are mentioned with insistence or because they are rather faithfully transcribed: the decree ordering Gaveston's exile (1.4); the letter from France by Levune giving news of the queen (4.3.28–38); and the letter ordering the king's murder (5.4.6–13, quoted above). Were these transcriptions from Marlowe's sources necessary or did they serve to produce what one could call a Marlovian "*effet de réel*", using *historical* documents to lend an 'edited' and partly fictional version of events greater *poetic* potency?<sup>6</sup> I would like to argue that it is the peculiar *materiality* of these letters as found in the narrative sources which first influenced Marlowe's writing process, rather than any poetic or structural considerations.
- 6 The first example is perhaps emblematic of the playwright's procedure. In Holinshed's *Chronicles*, the order exiling Gaveston to Ireland on the second year of Edward's reign is reproduced in full, as a separate paragraph in roman type, introduced with a subtitle in bold announcing: "The tenour of the kings letters patents".<sup>7</sup> The transcription clearly stands out from the page, as it is not in blackletter script. Interestingly, however, Holinshed's lengthy transcription of the decree in Latin is of little narrative use, as the content of the letter says nothing that he had not already said in the preceding lines. If anything, the transcription of the king's "letters patent" allows the chronicler to insist on the clarity of, and the publicity made to, the order exiling Gaveston. He adds that "These letters were read, heard, and allowed in the presence of all the Noble men of this land", and Gaveston's exile is confirmed by the archbishop of Canterbury, who was ready to "pronounce the said Peers accursed, if he taried within the realme longer than the appointed time".<sup>8</sup> Marlowe does *not* reproduce the Latin text in his play—in fact, we do not know exactly what the "form of Gaveston's exile" (1.4.1) contains. Presumably, the

said form was self-explanatory, too well-known to need to be repeated. As if to compensate for the absence of the original, Marlowe provides instead a dramatic equivalent by making the lords assembled onstage repeatedly insist that they should all “subscribe their name” to the banishment order, thereby calling attention to the document’s materiality. In *Edward II*, as in Holinshed, the archbishop also seems to play a decisive role in enforcing the injunction, and the order is eventually “published in the streets” (1.4.89), as when Holinshed said it was read and heard throughout the realm.

- 7 The second letter which stands out in the sources and which finds its dramatic equivalent in *Edward II* is the letter by Levune in act 4. Marlowe again provides a translated version of the original rather than a transcription, as his sources do *not* quote the letter by Edward’s envoy to France. Instead, they quote a letter sent by the queen to the city of London, in which she justified her invasion from Belgium and called for the arrest of the Spencers. This document is mentioned by Holinshed and Stow, but it appears in full only in Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments*, after having been introduced by a subtitle in roman type: “The copie of a letter that the Queene sent vnto the Maior and Citizens of London”.<sup>9</sup> The letter is followed by a blank line, making it stand out in the page. Much like Holinshed’s transcription of the order in Latin exiling Gaveston, one could argue that Levune’s letter in *Edward II* does not tell the audience anything that it did not already know. But the change wrought by Marlowe works by *displacement* and serves several purposes. Firstly, rather than reading a letter *from* the queen, the dramatist has the queen appear *in person* in the scene that follows, giving us a long-winded “passionate speech” (4.4.1–14) interrupted by Mortimer. The bombastic style of the speech, and Mortimer’s interruption, convey the tone of her letter in the sources. Secondly, by having a letter read by Edward’s envoy, Marlowe provides the audience with a moment of dramatic and ironic reversal of fortune, as Levune’s letter announcing Isabel’s invasion and Mortimer’s escape from the Tower comes moments after Spencer had read the names of all the nobles executed for having rebelled against the king (4.3.11–12), in other words, after news in Edward’s *favor*, which allowed the king to gloat over the demise of his foes.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Marlowe’s displacement from queen to envoy can be explained as a way to underline Edward’s frustration and to lend greater presence to the character of the queen. As it is a dramatic artifice, it should come as no surprise that the letter should come from Levune, a fictional character nowhere to be found in the sources.<sup>11</sup>
- 8 The last letter I would like to quote is the opposite of these two examples. If the letters exiling Gaveston or giving news from France are translated and adapted versions of letters printed conspicuously in the sources, the letter ordering the king’s murder is transcribed from the sources almost *verbatim*. In this case, it is Stow’s account which provides the most complete explanation of the “sophism” employed by Edward’s murderers. Marlowe’s only significant change to the letter is that he has Mortimer rather than the Bishop of Hereford, Adam de Orletor (or Tarleton), devise the unpointed letter. Stow argues that the Bishop acted partly in response to Isabel’s premonitory dreams that Edward might be reinstated and pursue a vigorous revenge against her and her allies. As almost the entirety of the passage finds its way in *Edward II*, it is worth quoting in full:

there is a privy motion made unto them, but yet in such sort, as it might seeme halfe done, that the death of Edward would not be misliking unto them, whether it were naturall or violent. And in this point, the great deceit of Sophisters stood in force, set downe by the Bishop who wrote thus.

Eduardum occidere nolite timere bonum est,  
Kill Edward doe not fear is a good thing:

Or thus:

To seeke to shead King Edwards blood  
Refuse to feare I count it good.

Which sophisticall saying is to be resolved into two propositions, whereof the first consisting of three words, to wit, *Eduardum occidere nolite*, do not kill Edward, and the second of other three [sic], that is, *timere bonum est*, feare is a good thing, doe seem to perswade subtilly from murthering of the King: but the receiuers of these letters, not ignorant of the writing, changed the meaning thereof to this sence, *Eduardum occidere nolite timere* to kill Edward do not feare: and afterwards these words, *bonum est*, it is good, so that they being guilty, turned a good saying into euill.

The Bishopp being thus determinately purposed touching the death of Edward, and warily prouiding for him selfe, if by any chance hee should bee accused thereof, carftily [sic] worketh that the authoritie which hee gaue by writing, might seeme to bee taken expressly contrary to his meaning, by reason of accenting and poynting of the same.<sup>12</sup>

- 9 Moments later, the murderers produced a series of letters to justify their act:

[they] shewed the Letters of Isabel, the Bishoppe, and other conspiratours, being confirmed with their owne handes and seales, which the Bishop refused not, but confessed to be his and others, but construed them to another sence, accusing them to be false interpreters of this Letters, & of his own authority threatened them, untill he forced them to runne away. Thus much touching the Letters.<sup>13</sup>

- 10 These examples reveal not only Marlowe's indebtedness to his sources, but also the influence of the materiality of the books used: the letters which are foregrounded in the play are those which "stand out" in the sources because of the way in which they were typeset. Arguably, Marlowe's writing process made a self-conscious use of the chronicle histories. This is further suggested by Mortimer's claim that one should "in the chronicle, enroll [the] name [of the would-be murderer of Gaveston] / For purging of the realm of such a plague." (1.4.269–270), and again when Mortimer and Lancaster quote at length, if not always in full, "triumphs, masques, lascivious shows" (2.2.157), "ballads and rhymes" (178), or a Scottish "jig" (189) which speak ill of Edward and his reign, as if the characters had been compiling data to write a chronicle history.<sup>14</sup>

## Early (post-)modern circumscriptions

- 11 In addition to lending the narration a semblance of historical veracity, the succession of letters in *Edward II* also serves a dramatic intent and are usually thought to "set the audience's expectations [...] for the climactic 'unpointed' letter sent by Mortimer in the fifth act."<sup>15</sup> Without underestimating the aptness of this teleological interpretation, I would like to argue that a more systematic analysis of these letters reveals them to be dramatic devices in their own right. In drama, letters can be regarded as the early modern equivalent of phone calls in films and television, which have been used as an editing tool since the silent movies of D.W. Griffith, allowing to dissociate sound and image, time and space.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, letters can serve several key purposes such as: provide new information and introduce a turn of events; underline structural parallelisms; and serve as props.
- 12 Letters are most commonly used to provide new information to the characters onstage, artificially introducing a turn of events, suddenly changing the rhythm or course of the plot, and constituting a debased form of *peripeteia*—I speak of a "debased form" since

Aristotle, whom Edward mentions in one of his speeches (4.6.19), frowned on reversals of fortune which were not brought on by structural, plot-related means.<sup>17</sup> There are numerous examples of letters of this type in *Edward II*, usually characterized by the arrival of a messenger (stage directions read: "Enter Post"), followed by a character providing a summary of the contents of the letter.

- 13 More interestingly, letters can help highlight structurally symbolic traits. In addition to the example of Levune's letter mentioned earlier which provided a contrast with the reading of the list of execution by Spenser, one can quote Edward's letter to Gaveston, and Gaveston's love letter to Lady Margaret, the Earl of Gloucester's daughter, which appear at the beginning of acts 1 and 2, respectively. The parallelism in the content and structural position of these letters (opening the *first* two acts) suggest Gaveston is an upstart. Margaret's comments in act 2 resemble Gaveston's reaction to the king's letter in the first scene:

Gaveston. [...] Ah words that make me surfeit with delight;  
 What greater bliss can hap to Gaveston  
 Than live and be the favourite of a king?  
 Sweet prince I come; these, these thy amorous lines [...] (1.1.3–6)  
 Margaret. The grief for his exile was not so much,  
 As is the joy of his returning home.  
 This letter came from my sweet Gaveston [...]  
 'I will not long be from thee though I die':  
 This argues the entire love of my lord,  
 'When I forsake thee, death seize on my heart,'  
 But rest thee here where Gaveston shall sleep. (2.1.57–65)

- 14 Put thus forth together at the beginning of each act, these letters symbolically set the stage for the dysfunctional love triangles which occupy the first half of the play, as Isabel and Margaret compete for the loves of Edward and Gaveston.
- 15 In addition to underlining thematic issues, letters may also be used as props, becoming meaningful objects every time characters call attention to their materiality. Thus, Edward claims that he is physically pained when he subscribes to "the form of Gaveston's exile" (1.4.1): "Instead of ink I'll write it with my tears" (86), "'Tis done, and now accursed hand fall off" (88). What matters is less the message inscribed on the paper than the fact that paper is capable of inflicting such wounds (and paper cuts are notoriously painful).<sup>18</sup> After having used the device in the *first* act of the play, Edward uses it again in the *last* act. Only this time, rather than allowing a letter to harm him, the king tears it apart as if to dismember the letter's author, Mortimer:

Well may I rent his name that rends my heart. [*Tears the paper*]  
 This poor revenge hath something eased my mind,  
 So may his limbs be torn as is this paper;  
 Hear me, immortal Jove, and grant it too. (5.1.140–3)<sup>19</sup>

- 16 Thus, letters "circulate" in the play as envoys, orders, requests, warnings, threats, entreaties... embodying a variety of meanings and uses, from practical harbingers of news and simple means of communication, to actual weapons of torture or execution.<sup>20</sup> This said, the issue of agency and intentionality remains undetermined: if we can see what letters and orders can *do* in the play, or where they come from, what do the *acts of writing* them signify?
- 17 For Garber, acts of writing in Marlowe's dramatic works serve to develop "the trope of writing and unwriting", as characters unsuccessfully compete with the dramatist's

“hand”.<sup>21</sup> Her analysis of *Edward II*, partly influenced by deconstructionism, centers on the amphibolic and self-condemning nature of Mortimer’s letter which comes back to betray and condemn its author. Garber argues that Mortimer and nearly all of Marlowe’s main characters, such as Faustus and Tamburlaine,

are ultimately cancelled or slain by their own hands: by their handwriting, by their signatures, by their seals, by writing against the hand of the playwright, against the hand of history, fable, legend, Scripture, inscription.<sup>22</sup>

- 18 In her view, the characters’ acts of writing express their self-defeating destinies and the fundamental indeterminacy of language. I would contend again that this interpretation is perhaps overly teleological, ascribing to the playwright or history too much control over the play’s meaning and symbolism than what early modern literary history warrants. It obfuscates in particular the fact that for Marlowe—let alone his characters—, writing for/ in the theater in the early 1590s was a potentially divisive experiment. After all, one could easily argue *Edward II* accumulated characteristics which could be severely criticized from different quarters, for different reasons: although the play was based on a well-documented segment of national history, it dwelt on its most scandalous details; to perform this licentious play, Marlowe went to a liminal, marginal space (the Rose in Bankside), associated with bankruptcy and prostitution and hated by the City Fathers who had no jurisdiction over this area; literary purists, on their end, could rue the fact that the play pertained to an ill-defined dramatic genre, “histories”, still in the making in the early 1590s; lastly, perhaps most damningly, the play flouted the latent homoeroticism made possible by single-sex acting companies by portraying the scandalous relationship of two *male characters*. These characteristics explain why drama was vehemently criticized by anti-theatrical pamphleteers in the 1580s and 1590s.<sup>23</sup>

## Pierce pressure: “Subscribe your name”

- 19 If one considers the play to be a daring experiment by Marlowe in order to provoke his critics, one can perhaps understand why his characters constantly fight efforts to be circumscribed by others, as shown in the manner in which they subscribe only reluctantly to peer pressure and recant whenever possible. This motif appears as early as act 1, when Edward is arm-twisted by the barons into agreeing to his minion’s banishment. The peers’ pressure to rid the court of Pierce Gaveston is unrelenting. They start by forcing each other’s hand, as suggested by Lancaster’s haste (“Quick, quick”):

*Lancaster*. Here is the form of Gaveston’s exile;

May it please our lordship to subscribe your name.

*Bishop of Canterbury*. Give me the paper.

*Lancaster*. Quick, quick, my lord, I long to write my name. [...] (1.4.1–4)

- 20 When the document is submitted to the king, he is pressured with a series of threats (excommunication, shame, deposition...) by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the other lords to add his signature:

*Bishop*. You know that I am legate to the Pope;

On your allegiance to the see of Rome,

Subscribe as we have done to his exile. [...]

Or I will presently discharge these lords

Of duty and allegiance due to thee.

*Lancaster*. Come, come, subscribe. [...]

*Warwick*. For shame, subscribe and let the lown depart.

*Mortimer Senior.* Urge him my lord.

*Bishop.* Are you content to banish him the realm?

*Edward.* I see I must and therefore am content [...]

*Lancaster.* Give it me. I'll have it published in the streets. (1.4.51–3, 61–2, 75, 82–5, 89)

21 Revealingly, this act of writing is rendered null only moments later when Isabel tries to convince the lords to repeal their late injunction, urging them to “subscribe to [Gaveston’s] *repeal*” (1.4.227, emphasis added) with the same energy as the lords before her. Surprising observers with her persuasive energy (Warwick exclaims: “mark how earnestly she pleads”, 234), she eventually manages to brow-beat even the most recalcitrant opponent, Mortimer, who then enjoins the others to “plead for [Gaveston’s] *repeal*” (241)—peer pressure in action once again. The repeal obtained, the queen then promptly and proudly announces to the king: “Gaveston, my lord, shall be repealed” (321), just as Lancaster had eagerly published the news of Gaveston’s banishment after Edward had agreed to it.

22 This lengthy scene reveals the characters’ unease and shifting allegiances, all the while foregrounding the double-edged role of the Church. Indeed, the comminatory terms used by the Archbishop of Canterbury in *Edward II* resemble those found in the bull issued by Pope Pius V which excommunicated Elizabeth I in 1570. In *Regnans in Excelsis*, Article 5 declared “the nobles, subjects and people of [England] and all others who have in any way sworn oaths to her, to be forever absolved from such an oath and from any duty arising from lordship, fealty and obedience.” The bull would have been topical in the early 1590s, as it was reissued by Pope Sixtus V in 1588, only a few years before *Edward II* was first performed, in reprisal for the execution of Mary Stuart in 1587. In addition to his supposed role as former spy in Catholic circles for the Crown, Marlowe would have been keenly aware of anti-Catholic sentiment prevalent in London after the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. This is perhaps expressed in his decision to show Edward remonstrate against Papal interference (speaking of “Rome” rather than “Canterbury”) in a brief, yet aggressive monologue:

Why should a king be subject to a priest?

Proud Rome, that hatchest such imperial grooms,

For these thy superstitious taperlights,

Wherewith thy antichristian churches blaze

I'll fire thy crazed buildings [...]

With slaughtered priests may Tiber's channel swell (1.4.96–100, 102)

23 Typically for Edward, however, this Protestant outburst is followed by a bout of resignation and self-victimization:

'Tis true sweet Gaveston; oh, were it false!

The Legate of the Pope will have it so,

And thou must hence or I shall be deposed (108–110)

24 Is this to say that the most effective letters in the play are those issued by Church authorities? Probably not, as suggested by an earlier scene in which Edward is quick to strike a bishop and strip him of his goods, adding a paronomastic pun on “rent”: “rend his stole” (1.1.186), “receive his rents” (193).<sup>24</sup> And yet, despite the ambivalence of Edward’s reactions when faced with peer pressure, the play generally successfully conveys a sustained feeling that, long before the Spanish threatened the island with invasion in 1588, England was surrounded by potential enemies, be it with the Scots in



the North, the French in the South, the Irish in the West and the Danes in the East. One passage in the play specifically mentions all of these threats:

*Lancaster.* Look for rebellion, look to be deposed.  
Thy garrisons are beaten out of France  
And, lame and poor lie groaning at the gates;  
The wild O'Neil, with swarms of Irish kerns,  
Lives uncontrolled within the English pale;  
Unto the walls of York the Scots make road,  
And, unresisted, drave away rich spoils.

*Mortimer.* The haughty Dane commands the narrow seas [...] (2.2.162–8).

- 25 In the narratives of the reigns of the Edward Plantagenets, much space was devoted to the wars with the Scots, especially against Robert the Bruce first fought by Edward's illustrious father, Edward I (also nicknamed *Malleus Scottorum* or "Hammer of Scots"). Why do these wars appear to be only a secondary issue in Marlowe's *Edward II*? They are practically mentioned only in passing when Warwick is sent to fight against the Scots, and when a letter arrives "from Scotland" to announce that he has been taken prisoner and must be ransomed (2.2.112ff.), or again when Edward learns that "Lord Bruce doth sell his land" (3.2.53) in Wales.

## Prescription and proscription

- 26 In addition to the dramatic reasons<sup>25</sup> commonly put forward by scholars to explain Marlowe's decision to minimize references to the wars with Scotland, one can suggest other explanations which highlight the role played by writing, or the lack thereof (i.e. censorship). To begin with, the Scottish threat may have been sufficiently present in the minds of the audience for Marlowe only needing to *hint* at it. Or perhaps Marlowe may have been reticent to speak of Scotland to avoid reminding audiences of the controversial execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, still fresh in their collective memory—a form of political censorship. In both cases, the ever-present Scottish threat stresses the English barons' need to settle their disputes with the king by pen and paper (signing banishment orders, for example), rather than by the sword, so as to avoid costly internecine wars which were notoriously detrimental to their efforts to fend off the Scottish enemy. By concentrating on England, Marlowe also recalls other elements characteristic of English political history, contrasting the lords' insistence on legal precedent and the rule of Parliament with Edward's absolutist tendencies.
- 27 The nobles' insistence on precedent appears through their repeated references to the late king's "will" that Gaveston be exiled, and their chivalrous claims that they are bound by their oaths to perform this wish. Against such claims, Edward opposes his own "will":
- Edward.* Will you not grant me this? [*Aside*] in spite of them  
I'll have my will [...]
- Mortimer.* Mine uncle here, this Earl, and I myself,  
Were sworn to your father at his death  
That he should ne'er return into the realm;  
And know my lord, ere I will break my oath, [...]  
And underneath thy banners march who will,  
For Mortimer will hang his armour up. (1.1.76–88, emphasis added)<sup>26</sup>
- 28 In the sources, such as Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, the lords actually mention founding constitutional texts which they inherited from the barons who forced King John to

subscribe to the *Magna Carta* in 1215, precisely one century before the events depicted in *Edward II*:

[...] at length the parliament appointed came an. 1310. whiche was the fourth of this kings reigne. The articles were drawn by the nobles to be exhibited to the kyng, which articles were the same conteyned in *magna charta*, and *de foresta* [*Carta De Foresta*, 6 Nov. 1217] about specified: with such other articles as hys father had charged hym with before: to witte, that he should remoue from him and hys court, all alienes and peruerse counselours. And that all the matters of the common wealth should be debated by common counsaile of the Lordes both temporall and spirituall [...]<sup>27</sup>

- 29 Edward does not wish to recognize the barons' inherited parliamentary rights or medieval chivalrous ideals in which one's *word* is linked with one's *sword*, as expressed by the numerous speeches linking "hand, heart, sword"—the hand being a metonymy for one's word (the hand which subscribes to something). Instead, Edward lives in the present, attempting to exercise his royal prerogative through performative speech, freely bestowing titles and lands unto Gaveston, the Spencers or other lords following his whims or circumstances (1.1.153ff.; 1.4.65ff. and 344ff.; 3.2.49ff.).<sup>28</sup> As with monetary policy, however, by abusing his ability to grant gifts and make promises, Edward debases their value until his word becomes worthless. This is illustrated in the scene in which Arundel, the king's messenger, unsuccessfully asks the rebel lords *in the king's name* to entrust him with Gaveston:

*Arundel.* And in the honour of a king he swears,  
He will but talk with him and send him back.  
*Warwick.* When? can you tell? Arundel no; we wot  
He that the care of realm remits  
And drives his nobles to these exigents  
For Gaveston, will, if he sees him once,  
Violate any promise to possess him. (2.5.59–65)

- 30 The same wariness with regards to Edward's word is reported by Holinshed:

[...] manie good ordinances and statutes were deuised and established, to oppresse the riots, misgouernance, and other mischeefes which as then were vsed: and to keepe those ordinances, the king first, and after his lords receiued a solemne oth, that in no wise neither he nor they should breake them. By this means was the state of the realme newlie restored, and new counsellours placed about the king. But he neither regarding what he had sworne, neither weieng the force of an oth, obserued afterwards none of those things, which by his oth he had bound himselfe to obserue.<sup>29</sup>

- 31 Does the worthlessness of the king's word explain the need to turn to writing? Given that honor and oaths no longer carried weight, the barons' insistence on the king to "subscribe" to Gaveston's exile may have expressed their hope that this could fixate or somehow "inscribe" his promise on a more secure basis, following the adage *verba volant, scripta manent*. Garber argues, however, that writing is not immune to the same form of debasement which affects speech in *Edward II*. Moments after sending his murderous letter, Mortimer smugly exclaims: "I seal, I cancel, I do what I will" (5.4.50), which, as Garber points out, ironically undermines his own purpose, since "to cancel is to obliterate writing by drawing lines across it, to deface, to cross out, and thus to render deeds and documents invalid."<sup>30</sup> In fact, Mortimer will later attempt to renege on his own "hand" in Edward's murder by pretending that the letter is not his, or that it was not written with malicious intent:

King. Yes, if this be the hand of Mortimer. [*Shows letter*] [...]

Mortimer. 'Tis my hand; what gather you by this? (5.6.44, 47)

- 32 Despite Mortimer's reluctance in recognizing his "hand" in Edward's murder, the audience knows him to be a man obsessed with leaving his mark in history, to see *his* "name" "enroll[ed]" "in the chronicle" (1.4.269). Throughout the play, this is suggested not only by his boisterousness, but also by his eagerness to "subscribe his name" to a host of orders and letters, notably the order exiling Gaveston (1.4.6); a letter by Gurney to which he "will subscribe our name" (5.2.50) and which commands Berkeley to hand over the captive king; or the Lord Protectorship to which "For our behoof [...] a king's name shall be under-writ" (5.2.13-4). Arguably, Mortimer's craving for attention is also most infamously expressed through the agency of Lightborn, who "writes" Mortimer's name onto Edward's body with a weapon left as "pointed" as Mortimer's sword, as suggested by an earlier speech addressed to Gaveston which eerily announces the manner of Edward's demise: "Upon *my weapon's point* here shouldst thou fall / And *welter in thy gore*." (2.5.13-4, emphasis added). This is compounded by the fact that Edward was first left to die "in a vault up to the knees in water" (5.5.2), a literalization of Mortimer's name, which he claims signifies the Dead Sea (2.3.22-3). Through Mortimer's constant desire to leave his "imprint", or *imprimatur*, on key documents of Edward's reign and even on the king's body, one can also see how Marlowe attempts, and perhaps succeeds, to make *his* mark on his country's history.
- 33 In the narrative sources, Mortimer plays a role in Edward's life only in the later years of the king's reign. In *Edward II*, as intimated by the title-page, the story is from the outset as much about Edward and Gaveston than about "the tragicall fall of proud Mortimer".<sup>31</sup> Marlowe's "re-creation" of Mortimer as a foil for Edward suggests the playwright wished to portray the struggle between the public and private "hands", policy and passion, exile and belonging. The "private" hand is the hand of passion and exile, the hand which, like with Edward and Gaveston, writes love letters and which is treated with contempt by the landed aristocracy. It is opposed to the serious "public" hand of the masculine warrior lord, such as Mortimer, who defends the public interest and community by punishing any scandalous *affaire d'État* with an iron rod—or in this case a red-hot spit (5.5.30).
- 34 This reading suggests that Lightborn is an extension of Mortimer's hand, inscribing the latter's red-hot "will" into Edward's body.<sup>32</sup> It boots little that some critics such as Stephen Orgel have argued that the text as we have it does not say that Lightborn actually uses the spit he requested should be prepared for him (5.5.29-30).<sup>33</sup> Marlowe's sources provided all the painful details, and the scene on stage would have been graphic enough and the anecdote sufficiently well-known for Marlowe or his posthumous publisher to feel no need to spell out the details. Like the letters which literally "stood out" in the narrative sources, the details of Edward's ignominious murder can "stand out" in the play not only during its performance—in the guise of an incandescent spit and Edward's deafening cry of agony—, as well as in the collective minds of the audience, without any need for further verbal or textual commentary. One can even posit that, with *Edward II*, the infamous anecdote of the manner in which Edward died manages to overshadow the other details of his 22-year reign in collective memories. In this sense, the play's "anecdotal" ending represents the epitome of the unsavory tragedy which delighted Elizabethan audiences in the 1580s and early 1590s, in which private, courtly vices were exposed as public scandals.<sup>34</sup>

- 35 But perhaps Marlowe's agency in refashioning history is best intimated by Mortimer's speech to the audience when he presents the device of the "unpointed" letter. Paradoxically, the unpointed letter may be construed as the dramatist's way to "point" out what it is to write (and read) ambiguously or, perhaps, ambidextrously. The fact that characters seem to be reading as much as writing during the play shows that *Edward II* is "a play about rhetoric and its effect on audiences", in other words, a play aware of rhetoric, of what it means to read and write, and calling our attention to it.<sup>35</sup> This may explain why, in the opening lines of the play, Marlowe has Gaveston speak with the gusto of an Ovidian lover, "like Leander" (1.1.8), developing a meta-literary description of men after his own taste (Gaveston's as well as Marlowe's):

I must have wanton poets, pleasant wits,  
Musicians, that with touching of a string  
May draw the pliant king which way I please;  
Music and poetry is his delight,  
Therefore I'll have Italian masques by night,  
Sweet speeches, comedies and pleasing shows [...] (1.1.50-5)

- 36 Arguably, one should read this tirade with the same self-mocking, critical distance displayed in act 4 by the Welshman, Rice Ap Howell, when he downplays Edward, Spencer and Baldock's rhetorical flourishes. His captives' overwrought lines, brimming with conceits built on repetition and parallelism (diacopes, epistrophes, isocolons, etc.), culminate with an emblematic rhyming couplet: "To die, sweet Spencer, therefore live we all, / Spencer, all live to die, and rise to fall" (4.6.110-1). The bathos of these lines contrasts with Rice's anti-climactic and literally *prosaic* interruption: "Come, come, keep these preachments till you come to the place appointed; You, and such as you are, have made wise work in England" (112-4). The break in tone is compounded by a brief, yet humorous, exchange with the Mower highlighting the rural informer's self-serving nature and recalling, by extension, Spencer and Baldock's reigns as court parasites: "Your worship I trust will remember me?" "Remember thee, fellow? what else? Follow me to the town." (115-6). When read in parallel, Gaveston's Ovidian lyricism and the Welshman's frankness suggest Marlowe wanted to insist in *Edward II* on dramatic, rather than lyrical writing.

## Conclusion

- 37 Gaveston's tongue-in-cheek reference to "wanton poets" in act 1 and the comic episode with the Welshman and the Mower at the end of act 4 both contrast with the reading and writing of private and public letters elsewhere in Marlowe's play. As shown above, acts of writing can be divided between those destined for personal use (private correspondence, love letters), and those which, through ceremonies of collective subscription, seek to define public policy. The struggle between the two lies in the fact that subscriptions are coercive, attempting to fit otherwise independent-minded characters into a single (national) narrative.
- 38 This struggle between public and private "hand" may account for the difference between Marlowe's play and his narrative sources, which discuss at length England's troubled relationship with Scotland, its negotiations to uphold its possessions and claims in France, the influence of Rome, or the colonization of Ireland. The play insists on something else. Marlowe not only pares down the story, he allows his characters to be

self-aware of their own theatricality, as shown most clearly when Edward lucidly says to Lightborn: “I see my tragedy written in thy brows” (5.5.73).

- 39 Despite this occasional meta-theatrical lucidity, agency remains difficult to determine in *Edward II*, partly because the text that has come down to us is not backed by accounts of the play's original performance history. Thus, one may wonder whether Spencer actually reads the list of nobles being executed (4.3.11), as the list is absent from the script. To compensate for this lack, most performances quote Holinshed as a source, perhaps reinforcing the influence of the chronicler in our collective memories.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the text of *Edward II* does not spell out the details of Edward's murder, and performances typically follow—again—Holinshed's harrowing account.
- 40 The play's ambiguities or “ambidextrous” writing might explain the reason critics have been traditionally divided about it: some subscribe to it, some proscribe it, deeming it unworthy of Marlowe's other works, or wanting when compared with Shakespeare's tetralogies.<sup>37</sup> I would like to think that the play leaves us willingly dangling in the dark, somewhat like Edward, moved from one place to another in the dead of night, in perpetual dread of falling asleep, lest he (we?) should be smothered in his (our?) sleep. We must, like the pitiful monarch, continue to “fret the more” (5.2.62). Even his son's parting words, “let these tears distilling from mine eyes / Be witness of my grief and innocency” (5.6.101-2), although meant to express grief with decorum, sound strangely reminiscent of his father's speeches when the late king said he would subscribe to Gaveston's exile with tears, rather than ink. The change in tone is marked by Edward III's gruesome desire to begin writing the chronicle of his own reign using his father's hearse and Mortimer's head and blood as if they were pen, ink and paper which all spelled out “monstrous treachery” (97).

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## NOTES

1. Marjorie Garber, “ ‘Here's Nothing Writ': Scribe, Script, and Circumscription in Marlowe's Plays”, *Theatre Journal*, 36 (3), 1984, p. 301-320.
2. All references to the play are taken from Christopher Marlowe, *Edward the Second*, W. Moelwyn Merchant (ed.), New Mermaids, London, A & C Black, W.W. Norton, 1990 [1967].
3. Garber provides a partial list of the different letters, decrees or other pieces of writing in the play, notably: “ ‘the form of Gaveston's exile' [...]; heraldic ‘devices' that greet Gaveston's arrival [...]; a note of execution; and a spate of letters: a letter from Gaveston to Lady Margaret, his intended wife; a letter from the Frenchman Levune, concerning Mortimer; a letter from Mortimer to Leicester and Berkeley [...]; a letter from Edward, resigning the crown”, Marjorie Garber, *op. cit.*, p. 319.
4. Raphael Holinshed, *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, London, Printed by Henry Denham, 2nd ed., 1587; John Stow [and Edmund Howes], *Annales, or a general Chronicle of England*, London, Printed by Richardi Mieghen, [1580] 1631; John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, Aldersgate in London, Printed by John Day, 1570, RSTC 11223, 1570. There are additional secondary sources, such as Fabyan's *Chronicle* (1533). For more on Marlowe's sources, see Vivien

Thomas and William Tydeman (eds.), *Christopher Marlowe: The Plays and Their Sources*, London, Routledge, 1994.

5. One notable example of the number of letters mentioned by Holinshed occurs when he quotes a flurry of letters dealing with the wars in Scotland: "There were letters intercepted about the same time, which a messenger brought forth of Scotland, three closed and three open, for there were six in all. The king sent them to the archbishop of Canturburie, who by his commandement published them in open audience at London. The first was closed with the seale of the lord Thomas Randulfe [...] which contained a safe conduct for sir Thomas Copeliue [...]. The second was sealed with the seale of sir James Dowglas for a like safe conduct [...] The sixt had no direction, but the tenour thereof was this as followeth. [§ title] The tenor of the said sixt letter lacking a direction [...]" etc., Raphael Holinshed, *op. cit.*, p. 329, available online: [http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/texts.php?text1=1587\\_3862](http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/texts.php?text1=1587_3862).

6. Roland Barthes, "L'Effet de réel", *Communications*, 11, 1968, p. 84–89. I am here implicitly comparing Barthes' concept with Sidney's (Aristotelian) contention that drama should rearrange the facts of history, beginning *in medias res* and concentrating events, in order to produce greater dramatic effect. See Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apologie for Poetrie*, Edward Arber (ed.), New York, AMS Press, English reprints, v. 1, n. 4, [1595] 1966. On the significance of Sidney's treatise, see Laetitia Coussement-Boillot, "The Defence of Poesy de Sir Philip Sidney (1595): réticence de la polémique", *Études Épistémè*, 12, 2007, p. 1–10.

7. "Notum vobis facimus per praesentes, quòd amodò vsque ad diem dominus Petrus de Gaueston regnum nostrum est abiuraturus & exiturus, videlicet in crastino natiuitatis S. Iohannis Baptistae proximo sequenti: nos in quantum nobis est nihil faciemus, nec aliquid fieri permittemus, per quod exilium dicti domini Petri in aliquo poterit impediri, vel protelari, quin secundum formam à praelatis, comitibus, & baronibus regni nostri, ordinatam, & per nos libero consensu confirmatam, plenarie perficiatur. In cuius rei testimonium has literas nostras fieri fecimus patentes. Datum apud Westm. 18 die May. Anno regni nostri primo." Raphael Holinshed, *op. cit.*, p. 319, available online: [http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/texts.php?text1=1587\\_3794](http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/texts.php?text1=1587_3794).

8. *Ibid.*

9. "JSabell by the grace of God, quene of Englande, ladye of Irelande, and Countesse of Pountyf. And we Edward the fyrst sonne of the kyng of Englande, Duke of Gyan, Earle of Chester, of Pountyf and of Mountstrel, to the Maior and all the comminaltie of London sendeth greeting. For asmuch as we haue before this tyme sent to you by our letters, and how we come into this land in good array and good maner, for the profit of holy church and of our right deare Lord and king, and all the realme wyth all our myght and strength, to keepe the maintain the realme as all good people ought for to do. Vpon that we pray you and desire you that ye would be helpyng to vs for the health & profit of the realme, and we haue had none aunswere of you, nor knowe not your wyll in that partye. Wherefore we send to you agayne and pray you, and charge you, that ye beare you so agaynst vs, that ye haue nor make no cause vs to greue, but that ye be to vs helping in all the wayes that you may. And wete ye wel in certaine that we and also all those that commeth with vs into this realme, nothyng for to done, but that shalbe pleasyng to God, and common profyt to all the realme. Not els, but for to destroy the Spencers, enemies to the realme as ye well know. Wherefore we pray and charge you, in that fayth that ye owe to our Lord the king to the crowne and to vs, and vpon all that ye may forfeite, that if Hugh Spencer both the father and the sonne our enemies come within your power, that ye do them hastely to be take, and safly kept, till we haue ordeyned for them our wyll. And as ye desyre profit and honour of vs, and of the realme. Vnderstandyng well if it be so that ye doo our desire and prayer, we shall the more be beholden to you. And also we shall do you profyt and worship if that ye send vs hastely word agayne of our wyll. Geuen at Baldocke the vi. day of October." John Foxe, *op. cit.*, p. 465, available online: <http://www.johnfoxe.org/index.php?realm=text&gototype=modern&edition=1570&pageid=486>.

10. Although Spenser is said to read a list of names, the list does not appear in the printed version of the play. Most productions read (an extract from) the list provided by Holinshed.
11. The link with Isabel's letter in the narrative sources may also subtly appear if one considers that it was Isabel who had introduced Levune to us earlier in the play (3.3.60–5).
12. John Stow, *op. cit.*, p. 226.
13. *Ibid.* In Holinshed, it is Isabel and the Bishop of Hereford who send the letter ordering her husband's death: "[...] the bishop of Hereford under a sophisticall forme of words signified to them by his letters, that they should dispatch him out of the waie, the tenor whereof wrapped in obscuritie ran thus: *Edwardum occidere nolite timere bonum est*: To kill Edward will not to feare it is good. Which riddle or doubtfull kind of speech, as it might be taken in two contrarie senses, onlie by placing the point in orthographie called Comma, they construed in the worse sense, putting the Comma after Timere, and so presuming of this commandement as they tooke it from the bishop, they lodged the miserable prisoner in a chamber ouer a foule filthie dungeon [...]", *op. cit.*, p. 341. The "amphibologicall epistle" is mentioned again elsewhere, *ibid.*, p. 1229. On amphibology in drama, see my paper entitled "Amphibologie et parole jésuitique à la Renaissance: entre poétique et politique", *Bulletin de la Société de Stylistique Anglaise*, 27, 2006, p. 11–26. In Foxe, there is no mention of the amphibolic device, only that "by the meanes of syr Roger Mortymer, he [Edward] was miserablye slaine, with a spyt (as is sayd) being thrust vp into his body", *op. cit.*, p. 465. In fact, the martyrologist makes no precise reference to laws, edicts, letters patent or otherwise, but he does make regular references to the role of Isabel, virtually absent from Holinshed in the first half of his account of Edward's reign.
14. For Joan Parks, the manner in which *Edward II* transforms its source material proves it to be a major contribution to the genre of the history play, as opposed to the narrative chronicles on which it is based: "*Edward II* helps bring about, through the infusion of literary form, the type of unified interpretation—with beginning, middle, and end—that we have come to think of as 'history,' and its author explores the significance of such history writing through his meditation on the nature of power." Joan Parks, "History, Tragedy, and Truth in Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 39(2), April 1999, p. 275–290, p. 289. The Scottish jig entitled 'Maidens of England' is mentioned by Fabyan, see the introductory notes to the play in the New Mermaids edition, *op. cit.*, p. xiii.
15. Marjorie Garber, *op. cit.*, p. 319.
16. I am here taking up the introductory remarks included in notes to a course on "The telephone in cinema" by Michel Chion, January 31, 2009, available online: [http://www.michelchion.com/cours/telephone\\_aucinema.pdf](http://www.michelchion.com/cours/telephone_aucinema.pdf).
17. Aristotle, *Poetics*, Samuel Henry Butcher (ed. and trans.), London, Macmillan, 1902, chapters X–XI. Letters are as artificial as the *deus ex machina*, they are not a necessary, natural part of the plot, but an accident.
18. According to scientists, paper cuts are more painful than (equally benign) wounds caused by razors because paper leaves tiny particles in the wound, causing a very unpleasant stinging sensation.
19. Edward's comment after tearing the letter apart reveals, however, his persistent weakness ("This poor revenge hath *something* eased my mind").
20. When speaking of "circulation", I am thinking of Stephen Greenblatt only insofar as the letters point to the numerous, well-known narrative accounts of Edward's reign which predate Marlowe's play and which constitute a cultural backdrop for the dramatist's *œuvre*. See Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning. From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago & London, Chicago University Press, 1980.
21. Marjorie Garber, *op. cit.*, p. 301.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 320.

23. In other words, *Edward II* must be put in the context of anti-theatrical pamphlets by Gosson and others. As much as Marlowe may be aware of anti-Catholic sentiment in the manner in which he portrays the dubious conduct of the Church hierarchy in the play, he may also be writing against Puritans. On the relationship between anti-theatricalism and *Edward II*, see Debra Belt, "Anti-Theatricalism and Rhetoric in Marlowe's *Edward II*", *English Literary Renaissance*, 21 (2), 1991, p. 134–160.
24. The archbishop of Canterbury later recalls the event against the Bishop of Coventry, only he makes clear the distinction between tearing and confiscation: "his sacred garments rent and torn [...] and his goods asseized" (1.2.35–7). Based on his works, it is difficult to determine Marlowe's position with regards to ecclesiastical matters. If anything, I would argue that he was a rather "unorthodox" protestant. See John F. McElroy, "Repetition, Contrariety, and Individualization in *Edward II*", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 24 (2), 1984, p. 205–224, p. 207.
25. Critics point out that since the playwright chose to concentrate on two rival figures, Edward and Mortimer, he had to excise other characters and plot lines to fit 22 years of reign into one coherent story.
26. John McElroy contends that the repetition of "will" explains "the general tone of strident assertiveness" in the play, *op. cit.*, p. 216.
27. John Foxe, *op. cit.*, p. 459.
28. As noted by John McElroy, this structural trait of repetition also helps characterize the king: "Repetition [...] can highlight a single character's personal defects, as does the King's irresponsible yet increasingly desperate bestowal of titles of rank on four separate occasions", *op. cit.*, p. 209.
29. Raphael Holinshed, *op. cit.*, p. 321.
30. Marjorie Garber, *op. cit.*, p. 320.
31. The 1594 quarto does not even mention Gaveston on the title-page. His name appears only in the 1598 quarto. See *Edward the Second*, W. Moelwyn Merchant (ed), *op. cit.*, p. xii.
32. As noted by critics, Lightborn may also be interpreted as a *clin d'œil* to Marlowe's other play, *Doctor Faustus*, as the character's name is a translation of the Latin Lucifer, another fallen angel like Mephistopheles.
33. Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 46–49. For a more skeptical account, see Lukas Erne, "Biography, Mythography, and Criticism: The Life and Works of Christopher Marlowe", *Modern Philology*, 103 (1), 2005, p. 28–50, p. 44–49.
34. On the function of "anecdotes" in drama and their links with sexual scandal among members of the court on the early Elizabethan stage, see my paper entitled "Politique de l'anecdote, ou l'histoire secrète dans le théâtre élisabéthain", in François Lecercle, Sophie Marchand and Zoé Schweitzer (eds.), *Anecdotes dramatiques: De la Renaissance aux Lumières*, Paris, PU Paris-Sorbonne, 2012, p. 77–87.
35. Debra Belt, "Anti-Theatricalism and Rhetoric in Marlowe's *Edward II*", *English Literary Renaissance*, 21 (2), 1991, p. 134–160, p. 135.
36. In a 1970 television production directed by Richard Marquand and Toby Robertson (UK, 125 mn), starring Ian McKellen as Edward, McKellen holds a sheaf of papers, presumably reports of those fallen in battle, throwing a sheet to the floor in quick succession every time Spencer reads a name.
37. John McElroy, *op. cit.*, p. 205–207.



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## ABSTRACTS

The celebrated amphibolic letter in Christopher Marlowe's Edward II which, left "unpointed", both saves and kills the King is the last of a long list of pieces of writing in the play. This paper will bring into focus the manner in which the final coup de théâtre is prepared by earlier acts of writing, notably by repeated efforts by characters to convince others to "subscribe [their] names" to writs ordering the proscription of perceived enemies of the realm. It first shows how the various references to (acts of) writing in Edward II are the fruit of material peculiarities found in Marlowe's narrative sources (Holinshed, Foxe, Stow), lending the play a semblance of historical verisimilitude. Letters, however, also serve a host of specifically dramatic purposes, contributing to underline key structural elements in the play and serving as props capable of inflicting physical wounds. But if these letters may have a life of their own, producing meaning or provoking pain, they are also the result of an act of writing. Studying the letters' agency helps reflect the shifting allegiances both in and outside of the play, illustrating Marlowe's struggle between the public and private "hand", between policy and passion, belonging and exile, subscription and proscription.

La célèbre lettre amphibolique dans Edward II de Christopher Marlowe qui, laissée sans ponctuation (« unpointed »), sauve et condamne le roi à mort n'est que le dernier écrit d'une longue série dans la pièce. Cet article s'intéresse à la manière dont le coup de théâtre du cinquième acte est introduit les écrits qui précèdent, notamment au moyen des efforts réitérés de personnages pour convaincre les autres de "souscrire" aux décrets qui doivent proscrire les prétendus ennemis du royaume. En examinant les références à l'écrit dans Edward II, l'on constate le rôle joué par les particularités matérielles des sources narratives de Marlowe (Holinshed, Foxe, Stow), contribuant à donner à la pièce un semblant de vraisemblance historique. Mais les lettres servent aussi une fonction proprement dramatique, contribuant à souligner les principaux éléments structurels de la pièce, ou servant d'accessoires capables d'infliger des blessures corporelles. Si ces lettres ont une vie propre, signifiante, capable de blesser, elles sont aussi le résultat d'un acte d'écriture. On comprend alors mieux les jeux fluctuants d'alliances dans et en dehors de la pièce, et comment Marlowe luttait entre les « mains » publiques et privées, la politique et la passion, l'appartenance et l'exil, la souscription et la proscription.

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(Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010), avec Pascale Drouet, et *Language and Otherness in Renaissance Culture* (Presses Universitaires de Paris Ouest, 2008), avec Ann Lecercle.