

Ambiguous devices: the use of dramatic emblems in Marlowe's *Edward II* (1592)

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ABSTRACT

The extensive use of symbolic images in *Edward II* has often been critically addressed; in this paper I would like to focus upon the use of emblems as a source of dramatic ambiguity. We must keep in mind that both the author and his audiences were deeply trained in the mechanics of symbolic languages whereas our approach to these elements tends to narrow the focus of interpretation and force into them a coherent univocal reading which satisfies our need for rationality on the stage. The analysis of three specific emblematic references will help us to understand how Marlowe could create a set of internal references along the development of the plot, which confers an allegorical status to certain characters, objects and events.

The use of symbolic images in *Edward II* has been a common motif for critical discussion but little attention has been paid to the dramatic purpose of certain emblematic constructions in a tragedy cheered as a "naturalistic chronicle play" (Ryan 1998-99: 465).¹ Emblems were a very particular form of symbolic composition; they emerged as part of Humanist court literature in close connection with other texts dealing with the education of the Christian prince. Several collections of emblems were put together during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with a didactic purpose in mind: to present the ruler – or the ruler-to-be – with an ideal conduct code s/he could use to weigh his/her own achievements. Ambiguity was an essential element of the rhetorical decorum of the emblems as they attempted to grasp the deep meaning of political actions, their complexity and, consequently, their contradictions; also because the nature of the addressee invalidated any other form of admonition: the warnings against the

¹ M.T. Burnett asserts that "Edward II abounds in emblematic devices" (1998: 91) although he does not pursue the idea any further; Charles R. Forker's edition of the play searches in detail the textual tradition behind some of these references but he avoids their discussion in the specific context of emblematic Renaissance literature.

dangers of tyranny could only be suggested by asserting the ideals of good government.² Although some scholars have warned about the difficulties involved in citing the emblem books as direct source for dramatic texts, and the scarce examples of emblematic critical readings,³ I will argue that Marlowe's use of these elements in several passages of *Edward II* should not be read as univocal parallels to the actual historical characters and conflicts in the play; rather these visual references, rooted in classical culture, cast a shadow of ambiguity upon the central characters and their actions;⁴ and by doing so, they infuse the historical events with moral and political resonances that go beyond the mere plot narrative. This paper will focus on three passages from the first part of the play: Gaveston's evocation of the Actaeon myth, Edward and Isabella's apparent reconciliation and the public reception of the minion by the earls.⁵

The play opens with Gaveston expressing his willingness to return to England after the death of the old king by comparing himself to Leander, waiting to be received in the arms of his 'Edward/Hero' and, immediately before Edward and his train enter the stage, he imagines a Lylian type of entertainment to "draw the pliant king which way I please" (1.1, 52). Then he describes its theme:

Sometime a lovely boy in Dian's shape, ...
Shall bathe him in a spring; and there, hard by,
One like Actaeon, peeping through the grove,
Shall by the angry goddess be transformed,

² For a discussion of political didacticism and the emblem, see, for instance, P.M. Daly (1988) and S. López Pozas (2000).

³ The critical value of emblems books for Renaissance literature has been discussed by R. Freeman (1948: 90ff) and H.G. Rusche (1964: 261) among others. H. Green's "Introductory Dissertation" (1971: ix-lxxxviii) and "Essays Literary and Bibliographical" (1971: 233-312) to his edition of Whitney's *A Choice of Emblemes* are practical examples of this approach; also M. Praz (1939) or the works by P. M. Daly (1988a, 1988b, 1998), J. F. Leisher (1987) or J. Dundas (2001); R. Cockfrost's seminal study of Tamburlaine's chariot is probably the most complete analysis of emblematic imagery in Marlovian bibliography (1968).

⁴ The use of classical imagery in Marlowe's plays had been widely analyzed; see, for instance, H. Levin (1952); S. M. Deats (1980), or the collection of papers edited by A.B. Taylor (2000).

⁵ This note is part of a larger project to research the frequent use of emblems throughout the play. All references will follow Charles R. Forker's edition for *The Revels Plays*.

And, running in the likeness of an hart,
By yelping hounds pulled down, and seem to die. (1.1 60-69)

Christopher Wessmann has recently argued the full importance of the Actaeon myth in the development of Gaveston's tragedy (1999-2000: 1-33).⁶ Unfortunately he fails to consider the moral and visual revaluations of the Ovidian legend in the context of Renaissance emblematic literature. F. Laroque has argued that Marlowe and Shakespeare see the myth as a "mysterious icon ... which they use in an ambivalent way that slyly subverts generic orders and borders" (2000: 165). I would suggest that Marlowe's use of Actaeon in *Edward II* is reminiscent of diverse emblematic versions which frame among other aspects "the excess and destructiveness of self-indulgent desire" (Laroque 2000: 172). Alciatus includes the motif in the emblem *In receptatores sicariorum* – "Against those who harbour assassins" – with the following explanation: those who allow wicked men to live on them, end up being devoured by those they favoured (86-87).⁷ Whitney's rendering *Voluptas aerumnosa* – "Sorrowful pleasure" – shows a different thematic edge as it focuses upon consuming passions.⁸ He explains that

those whoe do pursue
Their fancies fonde, and things unlawful crave,
Like brutish beasts appeare unto the viewe,
And shall at length, Actaeon guerdon have:

⁶ The editors explain very little of this fantasy of Gaveston as royal entertainer to-be. Gill suggests, "Actaeon and his hounds are emblematic of Edward and the barons" (1967: 42); and Forker expands this correspondance (1994: 145, n.66). Wessmann's views in "Marlowe's *Edward II* as 'Actaeonesque History'" and several answers to it by F. Bonaparte and J. Stern (1999-2000: 223-27), A. DiMatteo (1999-2000: 228-40) and R. Bowers (1999-2000: 241-47) develop the topic in full except for the emblematic connections; S. M. Deats has considered Whitney's emblem in her analysis to argue that the hounds represent Edward's desire (1980: 311); for F. Laroque, Gaveston's Actaeon masque bears "affinities to emblematic literature, for instance to Geoffrey Whitney's treatment of the devoured hunter as a figure of *Voluptas aerumnosa*" (2000: 168); neither Deats nor Laroque pursue other relevant variations of the motif.

⁷ Solorzano also includes the Actaeon myth in his *Emblemas Regio-políticos* (1651) with the motto *In nimis deditos venationi*; the story is an example to "any man of state and authority who spends his time in hunting and other worldly pleasures" instead of using his time to fulfil the duties God had set upon him; his flatterers are the dogs who help him to his pleasures (1987: 163-64).

⁸ For a full discussion of this emblem sources, Whitney (1971: 321-323).

And as his houndes, soe their affections base,
Shall them devowre, and all their deeds deface. (1971: 15)

These versions may be aptly applied to the scene. At the plot level, Gaveston's courtly entertainment shows his project to control the king; but at a deeper level it foresees his tragic fate. On the one hand, the emblematic context hints at Edward's main weakness – an unnatural love that subverts the hierarchy of preference, hence the political structure of the kingdom itself; on the other, it reveals Gaveston's base moral nature and the deadly consequences of his company for the monarch. In a very economic way, Marlowe warns the audience about the selfishness of flatterers but also about the troublesome situation for the whole community when the head of the state is ruled by private passions.

The second scene I want to comment upon occurs once Edward seems to reach a momentary peace with the queen and his barons and they accept Gaveston's return; the way to show this agreement is through emblematic elements. First of all, Edward closes the conflict between Gaveston and the queen by means of a gift:

For thee, fair queen, if thou lov'st Gaveston,
I'll hang a golden tongue about thy neck,
Seeing thou hast pleaded with so good success. (1.4, 326-28)

Editors of the play have simply commented upon this item in its more realistic sense but what needs to be explained is whether the gift shows the king's sincere acknowledgement of the queen's dealings or whether it is an indirect criticism of those dealings.⁹ This question is closely related to the critical discussion about Marlowe's characterization of Isabella, and Marlowe's ability – or lack of it – to present her transition from patient wife to Machiavellian schemer. The emblematic use of the human tongue was built upon the ability of human speech to save and destroy, so it is an inherently ambiguous item, which can show both the

⁹ Merchant comments these lines by saying that "Symbolic ornament was frequent, on and off the stage" (1967: 31, n.327); and Wiggins and Lindsay simply gloss: "an item of jewellery" (1967: 34, n.329). Forker notices in his introductory study that Marlowe hints from the start "at Isabella's wilful and devious tendencies" (1994: 43) but his commentary on this passage misses the connection and he follows the previous interpretative line: "Some evidence suggests that metal images of tongues were used in jewellery of this period" (1994:176, n.327).

wisdom of its owner or its evil nature.¹⁰ Marlowe transforms the gift into a clue to evaluate the queen's role: although she speaks against the rebellion, her participation in the plot against Gaveston and the king shows her ambivalent moral nature at a moment when she appears as a victim of Edward's frenzy for his favourite. The promised gift is, in fact, a perfect complement to the previous scene in which the queen appears plotting secretly with Mortimer Gaveston's return as part of a wider scheme; both dramatic elements prepare the audience for Isabella's overturn of loyalties.¹¹

Afterwards, Edward orders the barons to solemnize Gaveston's return and his wedding with "a general tilt and tournament" (375). The staging of Gaveston's arrival and Edward's review of the emblematic displays prepared by his barons (probably large shields showing the picture described in the text) appear in 2.2, 11-46 (Forker 1994: 189, n.11):

Edward. But tell me, Mortimer, what's thy device
Against the stately triumph we decreed? ...
Mortimer. ... A lofty cedar tree fair flourishing,
On whose top branches kingly eagles perch,
And by the bark a canker creeps me up,
And gets unto the highest bough of all,
The motto: *Æque tandem.*
Edward. And what is yours, my lord of Lancaster?
Lancaster. My lord, mine's more obscure than Mortimer's,
Pliny reports there is a flying fish
Which all the other fishes deadly hate,
And therefore, being pursued, it takes the air;
No sooner is it up, but there's a fowl,
That seizeth it: this fish, my lord, I bear;
The motto this: *Vndique mors est.*
Edward. Proud Mortimer! Ungentle Lancaster!
Is this the love you bear your sovereign?
Is this the fruit your reconciliation bears?
Can you in words make show of amity
And in your shields display your rancorous minds?
What call you this but private libelling,
Against the Earl of Cornwall and my brother? ...

¹⁰ We can observe this double-sided value in Hernando de Soto's *Mors & vita lingua* – "The tongue is life and death" (1983: 22) – and also in Sebastián Covarrubias (*Emblemas morales* 1610) *Tu seruare potes, tu perdere* – "You are able to save and to destroy" (Bernat 1999: 1619).

¹¹ For a discussion of 1.4, 187-303, see C. J. Summers (1973).

I am that cedar (shake me not too much!)
 And you the eagles; soar ye ne'er so high,
 I have the jesses that will pull you down,
 And *Æque tandem* shall that canker cry,
 Unto the proudest peer of Britainy:
 Though thou comparest him to a flying fish,
 And threat'nest death whether he rise or fall,
 'Tis not the hugest monster of the sea,
 Nor foulest harpy that shall swallow him.

This moment marks the outbreak of hostilities between the monarch and his council and it opens the path to civil war and the king's deposition and death. The barons had to fulfil the official requirements of the show – to welcome Gaveston –, instead, their devices are interpreted by the king as an open declaration of their discontent. Edward reads Mortimer's ensign as follows: he is the tallest bough of the cedar tree reached by the canker; the eagles perching on the branches represent the barons. The king has no problem in deciphering Lancaster's device either: it is a death threat to Gaveston. We may wonder if the barons had really displayed such a daring public affront to the king or rather if the passionate Edward is unable to cope with the inherent ambiguity of these devices, which had already been recorded in books of moral emblems. Since their main function, according to Borja, was "to present the most heroic and true aspects of moral and political virtues with the brevity required by the many occupations of princes and other noble persons,"¹² these admonitory images were an adequate vehicle to address the powerful without being offensive, presenting them as friendly pieces of advice not to be forgotten in the undertaking of an important mission. If we agree with R. Knowles that "[Edward II is] a direct reflection on the most seditious political issues of the day – deposition and election of the monarch – which conflicted absolutely with Tudor orthodoxy" (2001: 105), it is not surprising Marlowe's use of emblematic images as a dramatic subtext to build up during the first part of the play – which legitimizes the deposition of the tyrant – the road back to political orthodoxy and the postulation of the providential nature of kings. Edward III visualizes this theory as he redeems both his father's tyranny and Mortimer's Machiavelism (Knowles 2001: 116).

¹² In Francisco de Borja's prefatory letter to Juan de Borja's *Empresas morales* (1981: without page number).

The editors of the play have normally reduced the image presented by Mortimer to its most superficial content as they miss the emblematic background of the composition.¹³ So Wiggins and Lindsay gloss “canker” as “worm, which consumes plants” (1965: 43, n.18) and so does Forker (1994: 190, n.18). This explanation may seem clear to modern readers, but lacks emblematic coherence. However other meanings of the word offer a more feasible picture of what was shown in Mortimer’s device. A canker is also “an inferior kind of trailing rose” (OED.5), a sense Shakespeare uses in *1 Henry IV* to describe Richard II and Bolingbroke: “To put down Richard, that sweet lovely rose, / And plant this thorn, this canker Bolingbroke” (1.3, 173-174); and in *Much Ado About Nothing* as Don John states: “I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace, and it better fits my blood to be disdained of all, than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any” (1.3, 25-28).

If we accept this meaning, the device can be seen as part of an emblematic tradition that presented two related plants as examples of a profitable or a destructive friendship.¹⁴ The ‘canker’ or trailing rose creeping up to the highest bough of a cedar tree is included in Borja’s collection under the motto *Ingratitudine pereo* – “I die of ingratitude”. The emblem has a double message: on the one hand, the tree can justly complain of the ingratitude of the canker which has helped to dry it up, but on the other, it also shows the mindless generosity of the protector, as he was not able to choose worthy people as recipients for his generosity (1981: 158-159). Finally, the motto *Aequae tandem* – “Finally alike” – appears in one of the emblems of Joachim Camerarius’s collection *Symbolorum et Emblematum Centuriae Quator* (1595): a tortoise climbs to a nest where three swans rest. The message: everything can be achieved with patience (II, Nt. 92; Henkel 1976: 612). So far nothing in the emblem justifies the king’s reaction. Only the eagles seem to be Marlowe’s special addition to suit the dramatic situation: if they stand for the barons, those enabled to perch on the monarch as their rightful subjects, Mortimer is flouting the main symbolic reference of this bird as the eagle normally stands on its own as an image of

¹³ Forker notes an intended parallelism between the elements of the emblem and the characters – Gaveston/the canker, Edward/the cedar, eagles/the barons – and assumes that the emblem implies that “Gaveston will destroy ‘the lofty cedar’ ... on which the welfare of everyone depends” (1994: 190, n.20).

¹⁴ Some examples of these relations in Whitney’s *A Choice of Emblemes* (1971) are pine and gourd (34), elm and vine (62), olive tree and vine (133).

the king's supremacy.¹⁵ This visual alteration in the orthodox grammar of the emblem may explain the king's reaction: a warning to be generous with deserving men and not with flatterers has been turned into a direct attack unto the king, as the barons are presenting themselves as sharing the king's position. Marlowe once more, by means of this emblematic ambiguity, shows the intended target of the barons – Gaveston – but also their true and hidden target, the king itself.

Lancaster describes his device as "more obscure than Mortimer's," and it certainly is. He misquotes Pliny as his source and, more importantly, alters the conventional use of the image.¹⁶ The flying fish with the motto *Miseris nulla quies*, that is, "Those surrendered by dangers cannot expect a truce," appears in Borja's collection as a commentary on the topic "Afflictions without remedy" (1981: 42-43). Whitney's rendering, *Iniuris infirmitas subiecta* – "Weakness must bear injuries" –, is a commentary upon the weakness of the state when it is attacked both from within and without: "Betweene these two, the fric is still destroy'de, / Ah feeble state, on every side anoi'de" (1971: 52). In *Edward II* this general advice to great men about the need to weigh up one own forces with those of our foes is turned into a threat not only by Gaveston's inappropriateness as recipient of this homage, but also as a result of the change in the motto *Undique mors est*: "Death – neither dangers nor afflictions – is on all sides." Simultaneously Edward is the only suitable recipient for this threat as far as his figure can be equated to the state. Edward's reaction shows the king's obsession with the minion as he only considers Gaveston the barons' target and ignores the more obvious threats against himself. This political blindness will prove fatal in the subsequent actions.

Bacon's essay "Of Masques and Triumphs" offers a clue to understand Marlowe's dramatic use of these symbolic displays. Bacon does not discuss if these expensive practices were licit or illicit as "Princes will have such a thing" (175-76). So, placing out of focus his personal opinion, Bacon, the courtier, accepts public pageantry as part of the display of authority, assuming that emblems and other symbolic images were an apt theatrical device and part of a cultural tradition shared, in different degrees, by several social groups. His considerations only deal with the

¹⁵ See, for instance, Paradin's *Caelo imperium iouis extulit ales* (1591: 250).

¹⁶ For a discussion of the reference to Pliny see Forker (1994: 190, n.23).

decorum these spectacles should have in order to fulfil their only function: to make visible the power of the recipient of these performances. Bacon sustains the efficacy of these practices on two aspects: first of all, the choice of an adequate formal design and, secondly, on the recipient's worth to deserve this form of public eulogy. Marlowe seems to handle these two principles quite efficiently in order to create the sense of political and social unease that pervades the play: the formal elements of the public shows lack decorum – Actaeon's masque, the emblems with changed mottos –, and Gaveston's low profile renders him an impossible object for public praise. The dramatic tension created by Edward's straightforward interpretation of the devices turns upside down the supposedly neutral meaning of these symbols, but the barons' manipulation of the emblematic elements also visualizes their provocation, targeting in public the unnatural passion of the king for his minion. I think Marlowe's recollection of emblems in the passages discussed above hints towards possible meanings that have been overlooked in their critical discussion. Emblematic elements were rooted within the Neo-Platonist tradition and aimed to present an ideal canon of virtues for good government, or a warning against the dangers of tyranny and civil war.¹⁷ This moral philosophy – or rather its dialectical nature – pervades the play and challenges the audience's ability to ascertain its sympathies towards one character or another; the emblematic references seem to invite the spectators to detach themselves from the fictional plot and to evaluate the events as part of the complexities of state politics, including those which were a serious concern during the last decade of Elizabeth's reign.

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¹⁷ For Marlowe's exposure to Christian Humanist teachings and methods, see L. & E. Feasey (1951: 267).

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