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Gender, Power and the Politics of Access in the Fourteenth Century

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Audrey Covert', with a stylized, cursive script.

Audrey Covert

Summary

The central thesis of this study is the analytical interrogation of the relationship between gender, power and the politics of access in the fourteenth century. It will pursue this through a series of case studies which compare aspects of these concepts, in order to further tease out the nuances of these debates. It will conclude that, though there were undeniably gendered expectations and norms in fourteenth century English socio-politics, the methods through which individuals transgressed these norms, and the punishments for doing so, were not exclusively gendered, but rather determined by other factors.

The introduction will provide a background to the sources used in this project, focusing on the chronicles which form the greatest share of the primary material. As these case studies intersect across the same time period, they often share sources, and so I have decided it is prudent to address the sources individually first, and then expand on the relevant nuances as necessary. The introduction will also introduce the theoretical background to this study and discuss the terminology used for clarity.

The first part of the project is entitled ‘Gender and Rulership’ and will examine the dynamics between these two concepts, exploring the expectations of rulership within the context of gendered norms, using the case studies of Edward II, Roger Mortimer and Isabella of France.

Chapter I will examine concepts of masculinity through a comparison of the careers of Edward II and Roger Mortimer, and by locating these careers in between the reigns of the (much more lauded) Edwards I and III. In particular, it will interrogate the relationship of what it meant to be a good or bad ‘man’ and a good or bad ruler, within the context of medieval conceptions of masculinity and power. In contrast to Edward II, whose potential sexual relationship may have been a part of his downfall, Roger Mortimer was able to harness the influence he gained from his relationship with Isabella into institutional power and rewards for his supporters, though this power was short-lived.

Having examined the careers of Edward II and Mortimer on their own, Chapter II will introduce the woman they had in common, Isabella of France, and will examine how gender and femininity affected her career and rule. While Isabella was undoubtedly a large presence throughout her time as Queen, regent and queen mother in England, the power dynamics of the period are not due to her alone, but rather to her relationships with those men around her; specifically, with Edward II and Roger Mortimer. An analysis of the power struggle between

Edward II and Isabella and Mortimer will explore the nuances of each of their relationship to gendered power during the events of 1325-6.

The second part of this project examines some of the so-called ‘royal favorites’ of the fourteenth century and comparatively examines the trajectory of their careers: Alice Perrers, favorite and sexual partner of Edward III; Katherine Swynford, favorite, sexual partner and third wife to John of Gaunt; Piers Gaveston, close confidant and possible sexual partner to Edward II; and Robert de Vere, close confidant of Richard II. It will examine these careers through the lenses of gender, marital and sexual status, and economic status by isolating, as much as is possible, and then examining these different factors.

Chapter III primarily compares Alice Perrers and Katherine Swynford, using their statuses as women as the commonality to examine their financial and social careers. It will examine each woman’s marital status, and how Katherine, uniquely in the realm of medieval extramarital sexual partners, was able to make the shift to wife. It will discuss how the later years of each’s career trajectories were distinctly different due to this difference in marital status. It will also discuss how Alice Perrers’ treatment in both contemporary political records and chronicle sources is particularly vitriolic, and how this vitriol is related to her crossing of normative gendered boundaries.

Chapter IV introduces Piers Gaveston and Robert de Vere. Firstly, it will compare the careers of Alice Perrers and Gaveston, using a degendered examination of their careers to interrogate the many commonalities. It will then compare Piers and de Vere, again using gender as the point of commonality to compare socio-political careers. This chapter will also examine the effect of Gaveston’s ‘foreigner’ status and de Vere’s nobility by birth before proceeding to compile a comparison of all four favorites in order to draw some conclusions from this case study.

Finally, the conclusion will use a thematic structure to find the threads which tie together all four chapters. In doing so, it will present some broader conclusions for the study of gender, power and access in the fourteenth century.

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Abbreviations and Conventions

<i>Anonimalle</i>	<i>The Anonimalle Chronicle 1307-1334: From the Brotherton Collection MS 29</i> (eds.) Wendy R. Childs and John Taylor (Cambridge, 2 nd ed. 2013).
<i>Chronica Maiora</i>	<i>The Chronica Maiora of Thomas Walsingham, 1376-1422</i> (ed.) David Preest (Suffolk, 2005).
<i>Gesta Edwardi</i>	<i>Gesta Edwardi de Carnavan</i> (ed.) William Stubbs (London, 1882-1883).
<i>Knighton</i>	<i>Knighton's Chronicle 1337-1398</i> (ed.) G.H. Martin (Oxford, 1995).
<i>Lanercost</i>	<i>The Chronicle of Lanercost 1272-1346</i> (ed.) Herbert Maxwell (Glasgow, 1913).
<i>Londoniensis</i>	<i>Annales Londoniensis</i> (ed.) William Stubbs (London, 1882-1883).
<i>Ordinances</i>	<i>The New Ordinances, 1311</i> (ed.) Harry Rothwell, Vol III, 1189-1327 (1975) (http://www.englishhistoricaldocuments.com/document/view/html?id=710)
<i>Paulini</i>	<i>Annales Paulini</i> (ed.) William Stubbs (London, 1882-1883).
PROME	Given-Wilson, Chris, <i>Parliament Rolls of Medieval England</i> (2005) (https://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/parliament-rolls-medieval)
<i>St Albans</i>	<i>The St Albans Chronicle: The Chronicle Maiora of Thomas Walsingham: 1376-1394</i> (eds.) John Taylor, Wendy R. Childs and Leslie Watkiss, 2 Vols (Oxford, 2003)
Stubbs	<i>Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and Edward II</i> (ed.) William Stubbs (London, 1882-1883).
<i>Usk</i>	Usk, Adam of, <i>The Chronicle of Adam of Usk, 1377-1421</i> (ed.) Chris Given-Wilson (Oxford, 1997).

<i>Vita</i>	<i>Vita Edwardi Secundi: Life of Edward II</i> (eds.) Wendy R. Childs and N. Denholm Young (Oxford, 2005).
<i>Vita et Mors</i>	<i>Vita et Mors Edwardi Secundi Regis Angliae</i> (ed.) William Stubbs (London, 1882-1883).

A note on translations:

When translations have been used from published editions, only the English translation of texts is included in the body of the work, with citations to the editions in the footnotes. When the original language is included in the footnotes, the English translation in the text is my own.

INTRODUCTION

In January 1327, Edward III acceded to the throne of England. Unlike kings before him, his father, Edward II, was still alive, imprisoned since his arrest and deposition the year before and he would remain so until his death later that year. The twenty-year reign of Edward II was, by most accounts, a failure of monarchical and personal authority, and of contextualized norms of masculinity. This is especially evident when placed in context between the reigns of Edward I and Edward III, both kings who are overall described as successful, though this conclusion has been, and should continue to be, debated.

The events of 1326-7 did not occur in a vacuum, nor can they be tied only to Edward II himself; in studies of the early decades of the fourteenth century a broad cast of characters emerges whose actions and relationships eventually intertwine to lead to Edward II's dramatic downfall. These characters include his close personal favorites: Piers Gaveston and the Hugh Despencers; his wife, the princess Isabella of France; her eventual ally, Roger Mortimer; Edward and Isabella's son, the Prince Edward; and Prince Edward's eventual in-laws, the noble family of Hainault, as well as a larger group of English and continental magnates and nobles.

Using curated comparative case studies, this study will examine the intersection of three of the key forces – gender, power, and the politics of access – exerted on and by a diverse cast such as those listed above, to bring about significant moments of socio-political shift in the fourteenth century, such as the accession of Edward III. It will conclude that, though there were undeniably gendered expectations and norms in fourteenth century English socio-politics, the methods through which individuals transgressed these norms, and the punishments for doing so, were not, overall, gendered, but rather determined by other factors.

This project will not, however, be confined to Edward II's reign or the events that ended it. Instead, it will trace patterns throughout the fourteenth century to identify and develop the wider themes of these forces, and examine how they shaped the lives, careers and lasting reputations of these historical figures. Beyond the careers of Edward II, Isabella, Piers Gaveston and Roger Mortimer, this project will also examine the careers of Alice Perrers, favorite of Edward III; Katherine Swynford, favorite and eventual third wife of John of Gaunt; and Robert de Vere, close confidant of Richard II.

These case studies will be examined using a comparative framework which focuses on those three forces listed above – gender, power, and the politics of access – to interrogate assumptions about these forces and how they functioned in late medieval England.

Recent decades have seen a proliferation of material on medieval gender and sexuality; there is no shortage of material exploring medieval power; and there have been several studies of medieval gendered power as well. Conceptions of power in the medieval world have also grown as an area of study in recent years. However, there has, up until this point, been very little written which explores the intersection of all three of these areas of study, and it is this gap which this study will hope to bridge, particularly by examining the intersection of medieval gendered social norms and power structures.

Sources

The primary source material for this project is principally chronicles, supported by record and literary sources. The focus on chronicle material is due to the importance of contemporary perception of the reputations of each of the various case studies to understanding the broader gender and sexual norms of the period and the potential social and political danger of transgressing these norms. Chronicles provide contemporary or later medieval accounts of the characters and their reputations, their actions - including those they may have been accused of, whether or not they were proven - and the fallout from these actions. The chronicles can assist in the analysis of the impact of disregarding gendered and power norms on political and social agency and career trajectory by detailing particular case studies, which can then be combined and extrapolated into broader conclusions. In particular cases where legal action was pursued, the fallout of these negative accusations can be explored in a concrete manner, such as the accusations leveled against Alice Perrers, which can be found both in the parliament rolls of the so-called ‘Good Parliament’ of 1376, and in the *Anonimale Chronicle*.

This first section will consider a selection of the most important sources analyzed, in order to contextualize their usage in the following analysis. These sources were not written in a vacuum, and have to be considered as a product of the time in which they were written, accounting for their own sourcing, as well as recognizing the different ways in which sources have been used in the time since their publication, and thus the variability of each source. In short, these sources are not static, but are living documents, existing relationally with their sources, authors, and readers. As will quickly become evident, these chronicles are also by no

means neutral texts – as far as identification of authorship is possible, they are exclusively white men, all of whom were educated enough to read and write in Latin, suggesting the likelihood, though not the inevitability, of a higher socio-economic background. Most are clerical men, though a few of the London city chronicles have secular authors. This religious background is particularly important when using the chronicles to discuss women, gender and sexuality, as these are topics which are likely to draw particularly vehement and negative reactions from religious men. While some authors, such as Walsingham and Froissart, are clearly working from some first- and second-hand reports of events, most of the authors are compiling their information from multiple, diverse and dispersed sources, making it hard to track accuracy. Lastly, most chronicles are written or edited with the benefit of hindsight, which may shift the viewpoints of the author, and requires further contextualization: not only does the time in which the events occurred need to be contextualized, but the time and events since need to be, as does the time of writing and editing. This many-layered contextualization helps to separate, where possible, events from analysis and authorial opinion.

There has been significant work by professional historians to examine and analyze medieval sources, particularly chronicles. In particular, Antonia Gransden's *Historical Writing in England* and Chris Given-Wilson's *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England* have provided methodological background to the studies of these documents.¹ For the particular periods relevant to this study, John Taylor's *English Historical Literature of the Fourteenth Century* and the two-part study which includes Alison McHardy's *The Reign of Richard II: From minority to tyranny, 1377-97* and Given-Wilson's *Chronicles of the Revolution, 1397-1400: The Reign of Richard II* are all valuable studies for sources and context.²

Of particular relevance here is a brief discussion of the shifts in the writing, production and dissemination of chronicles which occurred over the thirteenth-fifteenth centuries. These shifts parallel and reflect those which occurred in the socio-political structures of English court and society, and thus effect how these events are understood from a distance of many centuries. The end of Edward I's reign in the first decade of the fourteenth century saw most of the

¹ Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, 2 Vols (Ithaca, 1974 and 1982); Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England* (London, 2004).

² John Taylor, *English Historical Literature of the Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1987); Alison McHardy, *The Reign of Richard II: From minority to tyranny, 1377-97* (Manchester, 2012); Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution, 1397-1400: The reign of Richard II* (Manchester, 1993).

ongoing chronicles come to an end, and the transition of the crown seems to have inadvertently caused a shift in the production of these sources.³ Most critically, while early and high medieval chronicles were predominantly produced within monasteries, one or more steps removed from daily life, beginning in the fourteenth-century it was secular clerics within royal and noble courts (and, to a lesser extent, local governments) producing many of the contemporary accounts.⁴ The early chronicles of Edward II's reign were authored in the monastic setting, while those which were started later in the reign, or after Edward II's death as retrospective histories, began to shift towards secular authorship.⁵ This shift placed chronicle authors in closer proximity to the events they were depicting, which seems to have acted as an impetus for the production of more – and more detailed – histories; however, this shift also placed the authors themselves closer to the power and patronage about which and for whom they may have been writing, convoluting the passage and depiction of information. While monastic chroniclers, due in large part to their enclosed lifestyles, preferred written documents as their information sources, the secular clerics writing in the fourteenth century shifted towards the use of oral and eyewitness testimony in their accounts – often bolstered by their own participation in or presence at key events – supported by written sources and woven together to create the intended narrative.⁶ First- and second-hand contemporary accounts in the chronicles mean a multiplicity of viewpoints and independent voices can be found, and allow for the author to shape their narrative, while simultaneously lending the veil of expertise to these accounts. Even monastic chroniclers of the fourteenth century seemingly preferred first-hand accounts of events to written sources when they were able to access them, and clearly cite them when they do.⁷ The shift from monastic to secular authorship may also be partially explained by the military triumphs of Edward III's early reign: these were stories which were best described by those there, either soldiers themselves or, more often, by clerks who travelled with the armies. Gransden notes that many of the chronicles of this era end with military victory, suggesting that historical commemoration was the intention of these compositions. This is bolstered by the fact that as these military campaigns became less popular, with fewer victories, the composition of chronicles slowed significantly, and did not pick up again until the reign of Richard II.⁸ The 1380s, during the height of Richard II's reign, did see a brief

³ Gransden, *Historical* (Ithaca, Vol II: 1982), p. xi.

⁴ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles*, p. xx.

⁵ Gransden, *Historical*, p. 2.

⁶ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles*, p. 16.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁸ Gransden, *Historical*, p. 60.

revival of monastic historiography, and Richard's reign was particularly productive when it came to the writing of chronicles. The traumatic events of the last years of Edward III's reign followed by Richard's reign, particularly the Peasant's Revolt and Richard's deposition, created understandable triggers for this revival of historical writing in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and fueled new interest in social histories after the military focus of the preceding decades.⁹

In addition to the broad shift from monastic to secular clerical authorship, the fourteenth and fifteenth century saw an increase in cases of chronicle authors identifying themselves in their work, either explicitly or through clues which would lead the reader to be able to identify them. These works were also increasingly written in vernacular languages, suggesting production for a much wider, even 'public', audience, when compared to the 'in-house' monastic chronicles of earlier centuries. Altogether, this suggests that the chronicle authors of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw themselves as more engaged with the events and societies they were recording, rather than as outside observers, and that they were considering their audiences and the potential future uses of their works.¹⁰ However, Given-Wilson rightly notes that the timeline and distribution scale of medieval chronicles means that most of these accounts were unlikely to be written with a modern concept of 'propaganda' in mind: they simply could not spread fast or wide enough to have much of an effect on a contemporary audience. Instead, they can be viewed as written in a manner which might have some future goal or effect in mind, and thus written with more a view towards influencing posterity. Interest in a more efficient and contemporarily effective method of communicating ideas and information led to the development of shorter documents, such as political tracts and manifestoes.¹¹ Many of these have, in turn, been preserved in the chronicles written in the following decades, neatly demonstrating the different usages of these styles of documentation.

From the early twelfth-century, English historical chronicles had traditionally been written thematically, using the regnal cycle as a natural division and reporting on events with reference to the life cycle of each king.¹² The later fourteenth-century saw this thematic focus shift: from a king- and regnal-centered approach to chronological division to a parliamentary

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-3.

¹⁰ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles*, pp. 149-52.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 203-5.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 164; pp. 158-9: earlier medieval histories often used the conversion of England as the focal point, and followed Bede in dividing historical periods by those peoples ruling the territory.

one. Interest in parliamentary politics, and especially in the role of the commons, received an upsurge following the ‘Good Parliament’ of 1376 and political reporting in the histories shifted to a relatively annual cycle, following the parliamentary schedule.¹³ Gransden does note that while location and language of composition shifted, in general, the annalistic form of the major chronicles continued to thrive into the fifteenth century.¹⁴

Chronicles of the Revolution makes limited reference to the lack of gender diversity present within the chronicle sources; not just a lack of female authors, but also a lack of identifiably female witnesses or informants. Given-Wilson notes that “this was not simple clerical misogyny...women rarely acted as witnesses in courts of law, and if they were not generally regarded as law-worthy, to what extent...could they be regarded as credit-worthy?”¹⁵ What is perhaps implied, but not stated explicitly enough, is that medieval misogyny – in general, but in this case in regards to the perceived trustworthiness of women – was not a problem of clerics, or even of chroniclers, but rather one which spanned society. Given-Wilson further notes that, while uncredited, women inevitably formed parts of the information networks which preserved and disseminated the information eventually preserved within chronicles and other official documents. Additionally, beyond their possible presence in the sources as authors or witnesses, women certainly played roles as patrons of new works, and in shaping the cultural parameters and preferences of the court, as can be seen in the cultural shifts that occurred after 1330 at the court of Edward III and Philippa of Hainault. Courts, both royal and noble, seem to have clearly understood the importance of chronicles in developing both contemporary and historical reputations, and made efforts to ensure that the ‘correct’ narratives made it to the written page, though they were clearly not always successful in these endeavors.¹⁶

As many of these documents will appear as sources in more than one chapter and in discussion of more than one case study, I will begin by addressing the general context and necessary framing of each source, and then address more specific points as they become salient in later sections.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 174-7.

¹⁴ Gransden, *Historical*, p. xi-ii.

¹⁵ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles*, p. 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 73, 108-9.

The first chronicle considered is the *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, written contemporarily during the reign of Edward II. No medieval copies of the chronicle are known to exist; the chronicle is known to modern historians through a transcript from 1729 by Thomas Hearn. Hearn's process, including the loss of the manuscript, is described in his own papers, as well as in the later edition by Bishop William Stubbs.¹⁷ This 18th-century manuscript contains an independent chronicle detailing the life and reign of King Edward II of England. Scholarly analysis dates the completion of the chronicle to between December 1325, when the narrative ends, and September 1326, when Queen Isabella invades England, an event presumably important enough to warrant inclusion had it yet occurred.¹⁸ This dating makes the *Vita* one of the earliest chronicle sources used in this project; most are written after the events of 1327: the deposition of Edward II and the accession of Edward III. Understandably, this timeframe shifts the representations of most major characters. This project will primarily rely on the translation and edition from Wendy R. Childs, whose work on chronicles will appear elsewhere in this project, and has been invaluable. Childs herself is building on the earlier works of Hearn, Stubbs and of N. Denholm Young.¹⁹ Earlier scholars have suggested that the chronicle was likely written as a single piece of work in the months before it concludes, but Childs convincingly challenges this view, noting several instances where it is clear that the author of the chronicle did not have knowledge of later events, and instead suggests that the chronicle may have been compiled contemporarily over the course of a long career.²⁰ As to when the author began to write the chronicle, Childs suggests sometime between 1310-3, and notes that the decision "was no doubt prompted by the drama of the exile or the murder of Gaveston. Certainly the events of the first three or four years seem telescoped in time and are written with almost exclusive attention to Gaveston."²¹

Unlike many of the other chronicles referenced in this project, the *Vita* appears to be a unique and independent chronicle, not using any other medieval chronicles, and also not appearing as a source in later chronicles. Childs notes that the author's lack of sources is

¹⁷ *Vita*, p. xv: other chronicles from the collection by Stubbs will be examined later in this section.

¹⁸ *Vita*, p. xix.

¹⁹ Thomas Hearn, *Monachi cujusdam Malmesbriensis, Vita Edwardi Secundi, e codice MS. penes Jacobum Westum, armigerum* in [ed.] Thomas Hearn, *Johannis de Trokelowe annales Eduardi II. Henrici de Blanforde chronica et Eduardi II vita a monacho quodam Malmesburiensi fuse eneratta* (Oxford, 1729/30); William Stubbs, *Monachi cujusdam Malmesberienis, Vita Edwardi Secundi* in Stubbs (London, 1883); N. Denholm-Young [ed.], *Vita Edwardi Secundi, Monachi cuiusdam Malmesberienis*, Nelson's Medieval Texts (London, 1957).

²⁰ *Vita*, pp. xxi-ii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

unsurprising given that it is one of the earliest written discussing this time period, and therefore would have few options to draw on. It is clear from the chronicle that the author had access to documentary sources, including the ‘Ordinances of 1311’ and some ecclesiastical sources.

There is no clear authorship for the *Vita*. Childs compiles a likely description of the author from the text itself, concluding that he would have been a Englishman in his late forties or early fifties, conventionally well educated, located in the west country and relatively close to political centers of power.²² Whether coming from a religious or secular background, the author of the *Vita*, like many of his contemporaries and successors, displays strong opinions and imposes a sense of social justice and morality into his narrative. Given this fairly extensive portrait, it becomes clear as to why the *Vita* is such an essential source for this period, especially because it is not influenced though hindsight by the events of 1327. As Childs notes

In charting how the political community had debated ways of constraining a king for years before 1327, the author provides historians with illuminating background to the final deposition...his narrative of these arguments and threats...reveals contemporary opinion untainted by hindsight.²³

As will become clear, this truly contemporaneous account and lack of editing in hindsight is the uniquely valuable feature of the *Vita*. Relatedly, the combination of contemporary access and knowledge with demonstrable accuracy makes it invaluable as a central source for the period, especially for comparison with other sources. Additionally, the chronicle provides not just narrative and details, but also sophisticated commentary which sheds light on those things and people which engaged the author’s interest and concerns. In particular, Childs notes that it

provides a running commentary of high quality on the great political figures, their shifting alliances, and their motives... Such a commentary provides not only insights into the concerns of the great, but also gives us one of our clearest insights into the reactions of those around them

and that “the value of the text lies overwhelmingly in its commentary on central politics”²⁴

Beyond the general value of the source, its value to this project in particular is in its attention to detail during the Gaveston years and during the events leading up to its completion. These details, uncolored by the invasion and the events that followed, offer a different lens through which to view, in particular, Piers Gaveston, Edward II and Isabella. This is especially

²² *Ibid.*, pp. xxv-xxxii.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. lvii.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xxxvii.

true as many of the later chronicles were authored during the reign of Edward and Isabella's son, which likely would have influenced the framing of those narratives. The author of the *Vita*, discussing the relationship between Edward II and Gaveston, sees the impropriety of the relationship in the supplanting of the king's standard advisors, and Gaveston's unusual rise to power, but makes no mention of a sexual relationship, or even rumors of one.²⁵ That said, the author seems to build on other contemporary accounts of the two men as quick-witted and well spoken, seemingly suggesting that their relationship may have been one of intellectual partners.²⁶ This description is not one that appears often in later sources, possibly due to the shift in the reputation of Edward II after the events of 1327; later portrayals of him overwhelmingly associate him with agrarian pursuits rather than academic or noble ones, and his companions are often suggested to be too low born to be well educated. The suggestion that the relationship between Edward and Gaveston was platonic is in alignment with other earlier chronicles, as noted by Kit Heyam in his monograph, *The Reputation of Edward II*; further analysis of this phenomenon will be explored later.²⁷ In particular, Childs notes that in the *Vita*,

Gaveston is viewed with unusual compassion, especially in the report of Piers's repentance after his death. Reasons for his unpopularity are rehearsed... Nonetheless, the author, in one of his best known asides, states that he strongly believes that Piers might still be safe if only he had been careful in his attitude towards the earls. Moreover, it was not just Piers's attitude that was the trouble, but that of the king himself. It was commonplace for great men to have close friends, which normally caused no trouble, but Edward went too far and ignored everyone else if Piers was in his presence.²⁸

These last two points – that it was Edward, as much as Piers who was the cause of the problems, and that it was a problem of degree, rather than the actions themselves – will both emerge as themes throughout this study, suggesting that concerns over so-called 'favorites' and over social and political norms and constructs in regards to gender and status are far more nuanced and complex than they sometimes appear in the sources and analysis, both medieval and modern. This phenomenon was explicitly explored by Henric Bagerius and Christine Ekholm in the 2017 article 'Kings and Favourites: politics and sexuality in late medieval Europe', which features Edward II as one of five medieval rulers whose particularly close relationships with their personal favorites led to social and political disasters; Richard II was also included

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xl.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. li.

²⁷ Kit Heyam, *The Reputation of Edward II, 1305-1697: A Literary Transformation of History* (Amsterdam, 2020), p. 104.

²⁸ *Vita*, pp. xlviii-xlvix.

in Bagerius and Ekholst's study, as he will be in this one.²⁹ Additionally, the suggestion that those in power would put all focus on their favorite, to the complete detriment of everyone else, will also appear as a reoccurring issue throughout this thesis. The question of whether or not Piers could have evaded his eventual fate if his actions towards his peers had been a bit more circumspect will also reappear in later chapters, and this question will be expanded to apply to Robert de Vere as well, noting some of the parallels in Gaveston's and de Vere's careers.

Like the *Vita*, the chronicle *Johannis de Trokelowe Annales*, covering the years 1307-1323, was originally edited by Hearne in 1729. The edition used in this project is from a compilation of manuscripts, *Chronicles and Memorials of Great Britain and Ireland during the Middle Ages*, edited by Henry Thomas Riley in 1866.³⁰ According to Riley, there is nothing known of the author beyond the name printed in the manuscript. Though the chronicle covers only the years of Edward II's reign, unlike the *Vita*, Riley concludes that it "was evidently compiled after the death of that sovereign, and at a date at least as late in the reign of Edward III as the year 1330."³¹ Riley further notes that, beyond occasional chronological inaccuracy, the chronicle is of considerable value to the period, and serves as a source text for later chronicles. For this project, *Trokelowe* serves primarily as an additional confirmation of chronological detail, and as a relatively contemporary account and analysis of the events of Edward II's reign.

"The most important historical narrative written in the north of England, the *Anonimalle Chronicle*...was composed in French, was almost certainly written with no outside audience in mind, and appears to have been virtually unknown outside of St Mary's [Abbey, York] itself."³² As this comment from the introduction by Childs and John Taylor makes clear, the *Anonimalle Chronicle* is a key source for fourteenth century English events. They further suggest that "because of the existence of the *Anonimalle Chronicle* St. Mary's must be regarded as the premier centre of chronicle writing in Yorkshire during the second half of the fourteenth century."³³ The contemporary and lasting import of this chronicle is demonstrated

²⁹ Henric Bagerius and Christine Ekholst, 'Kings and favourites: politics and sexuality in late medieval Europe' *Journal of Medieval History*, 43, 3, pp. 298-319.

³⁰ Henry Thomas Riley, *Chronicles and Memorials of Great Britain and Ireland during the Middle Ages* (London, 1866).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

³² *Anonimalle*, p. 11.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

in its use as a source for later chronicles: the center section of the chronicle contains a short continuation of the French prose *Brut* chronicle, and this continuation has been suggested as a source for the *Gesta Edwardi de Carnarvan*, the histories of Henry Knighton and Thomas Burton, and most significantly, the *Chroniques of London*, one of the few London chronicles to survive from the first half of the fourteenth century.³⁴ The value of the chronicle as a historical source comes in its clear contemporary knowledge and accurate account. Childs and Taylor note that it is a “sober and factual chronicle...Where it can be checked it is generally very good on names, places and documents cited. Its chronology of events is good, apart from three short sections in 1318, 1332-3, and 1333-4.”³⁵ It is particularly valuable for understanding the events which occurred after Isabella’s forces landed in England in the invasion of 1326; in combination with the *Annales Paulini* and the *Chroniques de London* “a powerful picture of a divided, uncertain, and violent city [London]” appears. It is also the most complete picture of Isabella’s negotiations and political maneuvers during the invasion, and the only account to cite her second letter to the city.³⁶ While the chronicle does not contain more detail on the deposition of Edward II than other sources, it does contain one interesting discrepancy. As Childs and Taylor note, “most texts of the short continuation, except this one, note that Edward II, when he was forced to resign his throne, gave his son his blessing.”³⁷ There is no evident explanation for this discrepancy, though it could perhaps be accounted for by the chronicle’s Lancastrian leanings, though even these are muted in comparison to some contemporaries.³⁸ As the duke of Lancaster spent much of Edward II’s reign at odds with the king, it is understandable that a chronicler intending to demonstrate support for the Lancastrian faction would choose to eliminate this incident, which seemingly depicts Edward as a reasonable and peaceful man and supportive father, if not a strong king or leader. Current editions of the *Anonimale Chronicle* come from the Brotherton Collection MS 29, written in the second half of the fourteenth century at St Marys. The edition primarily used for this project covers only the above-mentioned short continuation of the *Brut*, encompassing the years 1307-1334, essentially the reign of Edward II and the fallout after his deposition. An earlier edition of the chronicle edited by V.H. Galbraith covers the later years, 1333-1381.³⁹

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-8: for more on the use of the short continuation as a contemporary source, see *ibid.*, Appendix 1, pp. 62-6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18, 35, 37.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12; V.H. Galbraith, *The Anonimale Chronicle, 1333-1381* (Manchester, 1927, reprinted 1970).

The background for the *Polychronicon* of Ranulph Higden is not well attested to. According to the editor of the nineteenth-century edition, “A single sentence may tell all that we can say about him with certainty. He was a Benedictine monk at St. Werburg’s abbey in Chester, who died at an advanced age in the latter half of the fourteenth century, having compiled a *Polychronicon or Universal History*.”⁴⁰ Unlike many of the other chronicles used in this study, the *Polychronicon* is not a history of the any particular reign or series of events, but rather a general history, reflecting a different, and generally earlier, kind of chronicle tradition; it is only the seventh and final volume of the chronicle which carries the history of England from the Norman conquest through to the reign of Edward III.⁴¹ That said, it is the coverage of the reigns of Edward II and III which are of interest to this project, and in this his accounts are comparable to his contemporaries.

Many of the chronicles of the thirteenth and fourteenth century have been compiled into two edited volumes, entitled *Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and II* by William Stubbs, published in 1882 and 1883. Stubbs describes in his introduction his goal to create “a collection of the most important of the small chronicles.”⁴² In particular, this project has used the *Annales Londoniensis* and *Annales Paulini* from Volume 1, and the *Gesta Edwardi de Carnavan* and *Vita et Mors Edward II* from Volume 2.

The *Annales Londoniensis* is an incomplete section of the remnants of Cottonian MS Otho B. 3. Stubbs notes the work of Maude Thompson in preserving those pages which survived an eighteenth-century fire.⁴³ The surviving portions of the text begin in 1194, and Stubbs further notes that there are several distinct sections of the work. The relevant sections for this project begin in the early fourteenth century, where Stubbs, following Thompson, notes the likelihood of a new hand in the manuscript in 1307, and further suggests that “from the year 1301 to the year 1316...the annals contain a revelation, which is simply invaluable, of the closing events of the one reign and of the early troubles of the next.”⁴⁴ These are the years which certainly form the framework for the rest of Edward II’s reign, including his marriage, the birth of the future Edward III, and the rise and fall of Piers Gaveston. Stubbs suggests, on the evidence of the sources present in the chronicle – particularly those of with a civic focus -

⁴⁰ *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden, Monachi Cestrensis; Together with the English Translation of John Trevisa and of an Unknown Writer of the Fifteenth*, (ed.) Churchill Babbington Vol. 1, (London, 1865). p. ix.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. xiii-iv.

⁴² Stubbs, Vol. 1, p. x.

⁴³ *Londoniensis*, pp. xi-ii.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. xviii-xix.

that the authorship of the *Annales Londoniensis* must be a citizen of London.⁴⁵ This is particularly interesting given that the city of London is often said to have supported Isabella and Mortimer, rather than Edward, during the events of 1326-7.

The *Annales Paulini* is a continuation of the earlier *Flores Historiarum*, adding material from 1306-1341.⁴⁶ As to the authorship of the chronicle, Stubbs examines several possibilities put forth by previous scholars, and only concludes that the author was likely a member of the clergy located at St. Paul's in London.⁴⁷ Like the *Annales Londoniensis*, *Paulini* provides a focused history from London, containing many details of the goings on in the city. Again, the importance of the chronicle to this project is the details it contains regarding the unpopularity of Edward II and his followers in the city in the 1320s.

The *Gesta Edwardi de Carnavan* is a short chronicle of the reign of Edward II, written by a canon of the priory of Bridlington in Yorkshire, and preserved in one, incomplete fourteenth-century manuscript and two seventeenth-century copies.⁴⁸ Stubbs notes that the *Gesta* can be split into two parts, the first covering the life of Edward II, and the second a continuation into the early years of Edward III.⁴⁹ The chronicle contains some unique sources for the conflicts between Edward II and Lancaster, including a letter from Lancaster to Edward in 1317, and discussions of the support for Lancaster in Yorkshire beginning in the early 1320s.⁵⁰ Like the unique perspectives of the city of London found in the *Londoniensis* and *Paulini*, this perspective of Yorkshire, and its own dislike for Edward II's reign, forms another piece of the depiction of Edward and his kingship for this project.

Lastly from this collection is the *Vita et Mors Edwardi Secundi Regis Angliae*, the authorship of which is ascribed to a Sir Thomas de la More. However, Stubbs argues it is an abridged version of the work of Geoffrey le Baker, possibly written at the request of de la More in 1347.⁵¹ Le Baker's work itself was composed in Oxfordshire beginning in 1341 and covered the years 1303-1356, using contemporary material as sourcing for the early years.⁵² Stubbs notes that his edition of the *Vita et Mors* is a compilation of three manuscripts, all Elizabethan

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

⁴⁶ *Paulini*, p. xlii.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. lxvii-lxxiv.

⁴⁸ *Gesta Edwardi*, pp. xviii-xxi.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. xxvi-ii.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. xxix-xxx.

⁵¹ *Vita et Mors*, pp. lvii-lxv.

⁵² Gransden, *Historical*, pp. 3-4.

copies of a medieval original; the reputation of Edward II began to shift significantly in the Elizabethan period, particularly with the production of Christopher Marlowe's play *Edward II*.⁵³ While usage of chronicles written during the reign of Edward III have to take into account the relationship between the two kings and the recent history of instability, Elizabethan texts instead need to account for hindsight, two centuries of inter-family conflict, and shifting conceptions of morality and masculinity. Even so, Stubbs concludes that the chronicle, though filtered through several versions, is mainly trustworthy as a source on the life of Edward II.⁵⁴ For this thesis, these four chronicles, alongside the many others referenced, collectively serve to present both the historical details and the depictions necessary to better understand these individuals and their lasting legacies.

The *Chronicles* of Jean Froissart is probably the most widely known of the medieval chronicles, and has been accessibly translated several times. Unlike most of the other chroniclers included here – who, where identifiable, are English – Froissart was born in Valenciennes, in Hainault, and travelled to England around 1361, according to his own statement, to serve in the household of Philippa of Hainault, wife of Edward III. He remained in England until Philippa's death in 1369, after which he returned to the Netherlands and began his chronicles. Froissart was one of several foreign authors who wrote about events in England in the years surrounding the death of Edward III and accension of Richard II, as part of a broader revival of historical writing in this period. Further French interest in English events after Richard's marriage in 1396 to Isabella, daughter of King Charles VI of France, spurred more continental chronicles beginning around the turn of the fifteenth century.⁵⁵

Froissart was one of many Hainaulters who made this move to England during the years of Philippa's reign, including Katherine Swynford, featured as one of the case studies in this thesis, and her sister, also a Philippa, who would marry Froissart's contemporary Geoffrey Chaucer.⁵⁶ This is not an unusual social phenomenon with the introduction of a new, foreign queen, and reflected how royal marriages occurred not just between two individuals or even two families, but between two cultural groups.

⁵³ *Vita et Mors*, pp. lxvi-lxxi: for more on this shift, see Heyam, *Reputation*.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. lxvi-lxxi.

⁵⁵ Gransden, *Historical*, pp. 161-2.

⁵⁶ Brereton, *Chronicles*, (London, 1978: electronic edition), pp. 6-7.

According to his first Prologue, Froissart initially dedicated his chronicles to Robert of Namur, of the house of Flanders, one of three principal patrons of his career. Later in his career, his primary patrons would shift to Wenceslas of Bohemia, Duke of Luxembourg and Brabant, and Guy de Châtillon, Count of Blois. Brereton notes that this shift in patronage is also reflected in Froissart's framing of events in later, revised versions of Book 1, and of the subsequent three books: while Robert of Namur was pro-English in the conflicts of the fourteenth century, having married a sister of Queen Philippa, both Wenceslas of Bohemia and Guy de Châtillon were pro-French.⁵⁷ However, Brereton also cautions that

it is possible to make too much of Froissart's supposed swing from pro-English to pro-Frenchness...Froissart was always striving to be impartial...The main effect of his French connexions was that they changed and widened his horizon. He was able to travel more freely in French territory and to mingle with French personalities, so that his account of the affairs of Western Europe became fuller and more balanced.⁵⁸

Even if the effect of Froissart's shift in patrons is not as evident or important as it may first seem, Froissart's work is unusual in the detailed knowledge scholars have access to when it comes to both the biography of Froissart himself and his patrons. This clarity makes contextualizing his work much easier in some ways, removing much of the usual guesswork. However, as Brereton cautions, it also allows for the oversimplification of context, without allowing for other factors.

In order to provide adequate background for the history, Froissart relied on the work of Jean le Bel, a knight and soldier in the entourage of John of Hainault. Froissart directly copies large parts of le Bel's work into his own Book 1, acknowledging this sourcing in his prologue. Le Bel's work ends in 1361, after which the work is Froissart's own, and continues up until 1400. Froissart's unique work is based on his own first- and second-hand accounts.⁵⁹

As to the value of Froissart in this thesis, he is useful as a source for the events of the reign of Edward III and Philippa, particularly in the 1360s, when his own narrative begins. Brereton notes that "in outline, he is generally trustworthy. It is his detailed narrative...which is often questionable."⁶⁰ Froissart's methodologies make it incredibly difficult to source his information after 1361, and it is sometimes impossible to separate his accuracies from

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

inaccuracies. However, his documented presence at the court of Edward III certainly makes him a valuable source for understanding the social and political complexities of the 1360s. In this project, he is especially useful for understanding the attitudes around the rise of Alice Perrers, Edward III's favorite and sexual partner after the death of Philippa. However, analysis of his depictions must take into account his position in Philippa's household and loyalty to her family through Hainault and Robert of Namur in his early years. This project utilizes two editions: primarily, when possible, the selected translation of Geoffrey Brereton, reprinted in 1978. For sections which are not included in this edition, it will instead turn to the sixteenth-century translation by John Bouchier, Lord Berners, edited in 1904 by G.C. Macaulay.⁶¹

The *Chronicle of Lanercost* can only be dated to the late fourteenth-early fifteenth century by dating the hand used in the complete manuscript. The authorship, which remains anonymous, is examined in an essay by Reverend James Wilson in the introduction to the 1913 edition of the chronicle, edited by Sir Herbert Maxwell.⁶² Following Stubbs, Wilson notes that events into the twelfth-century which are covered by the chronicle are based on the earlier chronicle of Roger of Hoveden.⁶³ Later years do not have the same clear source, but are a compilation of various sources, which Wilson suggests were compiled over time.⁶⁴ Though the chronicle is traditionally associated with priory of Lanercost, Wilson argues that this is not as clear as is suggested, though he presents a series of evidence which does make it the most likely location for authorship, ultimately concluding that "if it is admitted that the Chronicle bears evidence of continuous production as the work of more than one author, the presumptions in favour of Lanercost are difficult to set aside." The tone of the chronicle, especially in reference to the issues in Scottish-English relations in this period, does make clear that it stems from an English religious house, close to the Scottish border.⁶⁵ Based on the conclusions that can be made regarding the timing and location for authorship of the chronicle, for the purposes of this thesis, the *Lanercost* serves as a relatively contemporaneous account for the reigns of Edward II and the early decades of Edward III, when corroborated with other sources. In particular, given how poorly represented Edward II's handling of Scotland and the borders is in most sources, the border origination of the chronicle makes it a valuable source for those events.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*; Froissart, *Chronicles*, [trans.] John Bouchier, [ed.] G.C. Macaulay (London, 1904).

⁶² Rev. James Wilson, 'Authorship of the Chronicle of Lanercost' in [trans.] Sir Herbert Maxwell, *The Chronicle of Lanercost, 1272-1346* (Glasgow, 1913), p. x.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xix-xxxi.

It is simply not possible to discuss the reigns of Edward III or Richard II without incorporating the works of Thomas Walsingham, a prolific writer who authored, among other works, two chronicles which examine this period: the *Gesta Abbatum* and the *Chronica Maiora*, also referred to as the St Albans Chronicle. Walsingham led a monastic career covering at least six decades at the monastery of St Albans in Hertfordshire, a third of which he presided over the chancery and scriptorium.⁶⁶ St Albans, just twenty miles north west of London on a main road, was ideally located to collect and report on important events in London, especially as governmental processes shifted from the royal court to the halls of Westminster over the course of this period. The proximity likely explains why Walsingham was able to write so successfully during a period when the majority of chronicles were emerging from secular, rather than monastic, authors. The *Gesta Abbatum* is a history of St Albans and is considered a continuation of his predecessor Matthew Paris' own *Gesta Abbatum*. Significantly more relevant to this project is the St Albans Chronicle, which is a general history covering the years 1376-1422 and was likely also supposed to be a continuation of Matthew Paris' work, in this case his *Chronica Maiora*, compiled a century earlier. Viewing Walsingham's work as a continuation of the previously discussed Higden's *Polychronicon* has also been suggested, less compellingly.⁶⁷ Walsingham's multiple works were written for different purposes, and inconsistencies between the works possibly denote the author's recognition of these purposes: the *Gesta Abbatum* was an "in-house production" written for small, closed monastic audience at the St Albans; whereas the *Chronica Maiora* was abridged, written for a wider, 'popular' audience and intended to be disseminated widely, and likely to be used as a reference source in the future. Given-Wilson suggests that this may have been an intentional choice made by Walsingham, based on an understanding of the role of chronicles in social and legal matters, and a recognition of Walsingham's personal responsibility as an author over the potential future use of his works.⁶⁸

Walsingham's chronicle provides a completely independent narrative, including first-hand accounts, often from high-profile sources, and not borrowing from other chronicles. James Clark notes that he uses documentary sources sparingly but effectively, and in some cases has preserved some uniquely in the text.⁶⁹ It also contains unique events and descriptions,

⁶⁶ James Clark, 'Introduction' in David Preest (ed.), *The Chronica Maiora of Thomas Walsingham, 1376-1422*, (Suffolk, 2005), p. 7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶⁸ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles*, p. 77.

⁶⁹ Clark, 'Introduction', p. 1.

including for the Peasant's Revolt, Appellant Crisis and conquest of Normandy, as well as depictions of the elderly Edward III, Richard II and the young Henry V. In addition to his work on English events, Walsingham is the only of the English chroniclers to include significant reference to events on the continent. Walsingham is unapologetic in his description of contemporary characters; he is particularly vicious towards Alice Perrers, as will be explored in Chapter III, and John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster and fourth son of Edward III, though later revisions of the text by Walsingham himself in the years around 1390 do soften somewhat towards Gaunt. There is some repetition of events in the text, especially in the earlier years, which suggests that Walsingham was writing continuously throughout the period, making this chronicle particularly useful as a historical source as this methodology preserves contemporary opinions and insights, in the same way that some of the value of the *Vita* stems from its contemporaneity. The later years of the chronicle display both more evidence of editing, and of hindsight.⁷⁰ Beyond his clear opinions, Walsingham is also prone to moralizing throughout the text, and clearly displays a great concern about the influences surrounding those in power, both worldly and otherwise. In the introduction to their 2003 edition, Taylor, Childs and Leslie Watkiss note that Walsingham displays evident interest in miracles, belief in the power of astronomical bodies, and a consciousness and concern over the power of magic.⁷¹

The value of Walsingham's work is clear from its prominence as a source since it was first written. It is present as a source text in later chronicles, and has been edited and reprinted numerous times, beginning in the early modern period.⁷² The first scholarly edition of the text is the 1863 *Historia Anglicana* by Riley, followed shortly by the 1874 *Chronica Angliae* by Thompson, and then the 1937 edition by Galbraith. This project will rely on two editions which build on the editions of Riley, Thompson and Galbraith: the 2003 *St Albans Chronicle* edited and translated by Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss; and the 2005 *Chronica Maiora*, translated by David Preest with introduction and notes by Clark.⁷³ All that said, Walsingham's knowledge is not infallible, and Mark Ormrod has noted, for instance, that Walsingham's dating of Alice

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-2.

⁷¹ *St Albans*, pp. cviii-ix: further discussion of the accusations of use of magic made by Walsingham and others against Alice Perrers can be found in Chapter III.

⁷² Clark, 'Introduction', pp. 1, 21: these include the 1574 edition printed under Matthew Parker, archbishop of Canterbury; a late C15th century translation by John Snow and other scholars; and a portion of the text included in a 1603 collection by William Camden.

⁷³ *St Albans.*; Preest, *Chronica*.

Perrer's second marriage to William Windsor cannot be accurate, which changes the narrative surrounding her legal status in her battles over land ownership after the death of Edward III.⁷⁴

Walsingham was one of only two monastic chroniclers who did not choose to keep their work anonymous; the other was an Augustinian canon at the abbey of St Mary of the Meadows at Leicester named Henry Knighton. Knighton's chronicle extended far beyond his own years, beginning in the tenth century and ending in 1395, with a gap from 1366 to 1377. Gransden suggests that he began his work around 1390 with those years he had personally experienced - from 1377 on - before going back to fill in the past centuries, taking as his source material the *Polychronicon* and a now lost chronicle of Leicester which covered the years up to 1326.⁷⁵

The chronicles discussed up to this point have been those which are essential to the research for this project - those which either cover multiple periods and case studies, or are central to singular ones. There are, of course, other chronicles which have been only referenced once or twice; thus, their influence on the project as a whole is much less significant, and necessary commentary will appear as needed. However, there is one exception which bears comment. The *Chronicle of Adam of Usk* covers the period of 1377-1421, the first half of which is the reign of Richard II (1377-1399).⁷⁶ Usk, a clerk attached to the court of the archbishop of Canterbury, composed his work during the reign of Henry V (1413-1422), but based it partially on his own earlier memories.⁷⁷ As will become evident in the chapter on Robert de Vere, the close favorite of Richard, one would assume that Usk would discuss de Vere regularly, much as Piers Gaveston and Hugh Despenser are discussed in sources for the reign of Edward II. This, however, proves not to be the case; de Vere is mentioned only one time in Usk's chronicle, in reference to the Battle of Radcot Bridge.⁷⁸ No clarity is given for this near omission. In discussion with James Ross, a leading scholar on de Vere and whose biography of him is in process, two possibilities arose: through his work, Ross has noted that de Vere's physical presence around Richard II may be over-stated in the sources, and thus over-estimated by scholars. If he was indeed less present, that may explain why he is also less present in Usk's chronicle. However, this then begs the question why Usk would be more accurate in this instance than other contemporaries? A second possibility, suggested by Ross, is that Usk is

⁷⁴ Mark Ormrod, 'The Trials of Alice Perrers' *Speculum*, lxxxiii, no. 2 (2008), p. 373.

⁷⁵ Gransden, *Historical*, pp. 159-60.

⁷⁶ *Usk*.

⁷⁷ Gransden, *Historical*, p. 160.

⁷⁸ *Usk*, pp. 10-1.

writing later than other chroniclers of the period, likely starting his chronicle around 1399, and thus de Vere may be of less concern for him: after his defeat at Radcot Bridge in 1387, de Vere escaped to the continent, before dying in Louvain in 1392. The excitement of the final years of Richard's reign, and his eventual deposition in 1399, may have caused Usk to overlook de Vere's relevance to the earlier events.⁷⁹

As has become evident, the nineteenth century was somewhat of a hotspot for translation and editions of medieval chronicles – as with the earlier noted Elizabethan editions, this cannot be ignored in the scholarly process, as these processes require decisions on the part of the editor which impact the final product. These concerns were summed up well by Galbraith in 1945:

Clearly a balanced judgement upon the medieval kings must allow for a double distortion – that of contemporaries and that of the Victorians. In the medieval judgments there is, after all, much that is true and permanent...As repeated and glossed in the nineteenth century, these too-moral judgements are altogether less convincing; for the Victorians seem to have felt that at all costs they must teach a moral lesson and edify their public.⁸⁰

While the opinions and moralizing of Walsingham may be easily recognized in his work, those of his editors and translators are harder to identify, but necessary to consider when working with modern translations.

Beyond chronicle sources, this project also uses a variety of record sources where relevant, in order to better understand events, interrogate and examine inaccuracies in the chronicles, and contextualize these changes. In particular, the rolls of parliament are often used to connect the events and depictions of individuals in the chronicles to the socio-political fallout of these events and actions.⁸¹ Unfortunately for this project, the parliament rolls for the reign of Edward II are incomplete. However, there are still other record sources available for this period including, for example, the 1311 'Ordinances' which sought to restrain Edward's monarchical authority.⁸²

⁷⁹ James Ross, email to author [8 December 2023].

⁸⁰ V.H. Galbraith, 'Good Kings and Bad Kings in Medieval English History,' *History* (1945), 30, 112, pp. 131-2.

⁸¹ PROME: Unless noted, all references to the parliament rolls are cited as PROME, and refer to the online database of these records. My unending thanks to Chris Given-Wilson and colleagues for their work establishing this database, which is an invaluable resource.

⁸² Harry Rothwell, *The New Ordinances, 1311* Volume III, 1189-1327 (1975) (<http://www.englishhistoricaldocuments.com/document/view.html?id=710>).

Theoretical Background

In 1976, Natalie Davis stated, in reference to the then early developments of the study of ‘gender history’ that

Our goal is to understand the significance of the *sexes*, of gender groups in the historical past. Our goal is to discover the range in sex roles and in sexual symbolism in different societies and periods, to find out what meaning they had and how they functioned to maintain the social order or to promote change.⁸³

While the nuances of the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ have become far more clarified in the decades since Davis was writing – with the first denoting a biological description and the second denoting a social positioning – the sentiment expressed here remains. As Katherine Lewis notes convincingly, the very fact that there were discussions of proper gendered action in medieval sources means that there was an understanding – though not necessarily explicitly theorized as such – that gender was not an innate characteristic, but rather something that could be learned, honed and performed.⁸⁴ Beyond this, the texts that discuss gender are an active part of this process: not just descriptive of it, but also proscriptive and reactive.⁸⁵ In order to fully understand either ‘men’s history’ or ‘women’s history’, and certainly to understand the history of those outside this binary, the full range of possible roles and norms needs to be explored, and needs to be done so in a comparative method in order to tease out the details of how this range of positionings affected historical trajectories. As Joan Scott noted ten years later, “the way in which this new history would both include and account for women’s experience rested on the extent to which gender could be developed as a category of analysis.”⁸⁶

Gender is a complex concept, rooted and defined within the cultural context of each society.⁸⁷ In a study of the medieval world both the biological capabilities of female and male bodies and the socio-cultural expectations of women and men are relevant to understanding the

⁸³ Natalie Zemon Davis, “‘Women’s History’ in Transition: The European Case”, *Feminist Studies*, 3 (1976), p. 90.

⁸⁴ There are, of course, disagreements with this conclusion, which would argue that the pre-modern world was inherently essentialist in the context of gender politics. See, for instance: Michelle Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture*, p. 4-7. As will be explored repeatedly throughout this study, I would argue, like Lewis, that the existence of discussion and argument surrounding a topic strongly suggests that nuances far exceed this essentialism.

⁸⁵ Katherine J. Lewis, *Kingship and Masculinity in Late Medieval England* (London, 2013), pp. 6-7.

⁸⁶ Joan Scott, ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis’, *The American Historical Review*, 91, 5 (1986), p. 1054.

⁸⁷ As far as I am aware, there have been no studies done which question the gender identity of any of the case studies chosen for this project, nor is there any suggestion in the source material which would make it a necessary question to pursue. For the purposes of this study, the gender of each of the subjects will be assumed to match with their gender presentation as portrayed in the sources.

trajectories of individual careers, particularly in the secular context. Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex* argues that the classical Galenic model he terms 'one-sex,' in which the female body is seen as an incomplete or faulty version of the male body, was the predominant understanding of biological sex throughout the Middle Ages and into the early modern period.⁸⁸ This understanding has been repeatedly challenged, including by Katherine Park: in *Secrets of Women*, Park argues that the Galenic text which posited the homogeneity of male and female genitalia which formed the basis of this argument was in fact not widely circulated until the late fifteenth century, and therefore could not have been the basis of teachings throughout the middle ages.⁸⁹ Others have criticized Laqueur as well, calling for more nuanced analyses of medieval understandings of biological sex, as well as of cultural understandings of gender, and of the intersection of these concepts.⁹⁰ Scott's enduringly fundamental 1986 article 'Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis' has been essential in framing gender in history in the decades since publication, and continues to be a key piece of scholarship on the subject, examining not just the construction of gender throughout historical societies, but, in particular, the relationship of gender to power and the construction of power hierarchies.⁹¹

The development and study of masculinities and 'men's history' as a field has a complex relationship with the related fields of 'women's history' and 'gender history'. In the introduction to the 1994 edited collection *Medieval Masculinities*, Clare Lees describes the collection as a "timely intervention in gender studies and medieval studies."⁹² The preface to the collection expands on the position of the work, noting that "although subjects of traditional historical discourse were for the most part men, that discourse was still not precisely 'about men'."⁹³ This statement recognizes that, while, yes, men are usually the default subjects around which historical studies have been written, the subject is not any man, nor every man, but primarily those men of high social, political and economic statuses, leaving the majority of men just as silent in the sources and historical record as women and other silenced groups. *Medieval Masculinities* is presented as an early attempt to begin to fill some of these particular gaps in the historical record. Furthermore, Fenster notes that by associating 'men' with the

⁸⁸ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: body and gender from the Greeks to Freud*, (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 25-62.

⁸⁹ Katharine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection*, (New York, 2006), p. 186: the importance of recognizing that the existence of a text and its circulation were two very different properties will be addressed again in the following discussion of sources.

⁹⁰ See: Helen King, *The One-Sex Body on Trial: The Classical and Early Modern Evidence*, (New York, 2013).

⁹¹ Scott, 'Gender', p. 1073.

⁹² Clare A. Lees, 'Introduction' in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (ed.) Clare Lees (Minneapolis, 1994), p. xxiv.

⁹³ Thelma Fenster, 'Preface: Why Men?' in *Medieval Masculinities*, p. x.

default, it not only suppresses the feminine, but also effectively neuters the masculine, silencing the specifics of masculinities.⁹⁴ By assigning ‘man’ as the default gender and actively gendering ‘woman’, ‘man’ simultaneously loses its gendering. Furthermore, it is not just the differentiation of masculinities and femininities which can then be defined within these contexts, but also internal hierarchies of class and power. Amanda McVitty explores a corollary of these conclusions in her study of treason in medieval England, noting that while treason is, in theory, a gender neutral legal concept, “it was constructed upon historically specific understandings of masculinity that figured the traitor as the inverse of the medieval ideal of the ‘true man’.”⁹⁵ This is not to suggest that women were not capable of being traitors, but rather that gender normative adherence, defined relative to contextually proper masculinity, was one metric in defining treason and traitors.⁹⁶

Ten years after the *Medieval Masculinities*, Ruth Karras’ *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* continued to examine the particularities of the study of masculinities, echoing and building on the importance of studying men not as a default, but as a defined gender.⁹⁷ This study attempted to better delve into the nuances, making clear that medieval masculinity – and masculinity in general – was not a singular existence, but rather that there were a multitude of masculinities dependent on context. In particular, Karras focused on the formation of masculinities – the social and institutional methods by which different forms of masculinity were developed, learned and reproduced.⁹⁸

Shifting towards recognizing the importance of specifying both subject and context does not mean that there is not still space for the study of ruling men and ruling masculinities, and this project will engage primarily with subjects, men and women, of the ruling classes. The masculinity of kingship, in particular, is relevant to the following case studies of Edward II, his close favorite Piers Gaveston, and Robert de Vere, favorite of Richard II. The relationship between medieval conceptions of kingly masculinity and the health and strength of the body politic is of particular importance – this is mentioned in early studies such as those in *Medieval*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*.

⁹⁵ Amanda McVitty, *Treason and Masculinity in Medieval England*, p. 4.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 405: “...shifting legal and political definitions of treason could reinforce both also destabilise dominant cultural norms of masculinity. This meant that treason trials had a significant role to play in transforming wider notions of gendered political subjecthood.”

⁹⁷ Ruth Karras, *From Boys to Men*, p. 19x: “...this project grows out of the recognition that we cannot understand women’s lives without understanding men as men (as opposed to men as the normative humans, the traditional focus of historical study).”

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

Masculinities, and engaged with on a much deeper level in more recent studies such as McVitty's *Treason and Masculinity in Medieval England*.⁹⁹ While McVitty convincingly considers this conceived partnering of the masculinity of the king and the health of the body politic as integral to understanding the development of conceptualizations of treason in the fifteenth century, its importance extends far beyond discussions of treason. Christopher Fletcher's 2012 article built outward from his work on Richard II, which will be addressed later, to construct a more general understanding of the relationship of manhood and kingship in late medieval England. One salient point made by Fletcher, which will reappear several times throughout this study, is the expansion of the commons and the broadening of public political activity in the fourteenth century brought an increased awareness and concern over the masculinity of the kings of this period, and the ability to control 'public opinion' became a necessary skill to ruling.¹⁰⁰ As will be discussed in Chapter III, Edward II's perceived lack of proper masculinity – in some cases flaws that were perceived 'femininities' and in others, were traits inappropriate for his social class – was at the core of discussions, both contemporary and later, surrounding his failure of kingship and the defense of his deposition. As Fletcher states, "if Edward did not behave like a king, then perhaps he was not really king at all."¹⁰¹ Edward's masculinity was inherently wrapped up in his kingship: if he was not a proper king, then he also was not, in context, a proper man. Lewis' work has specified the ideological link made between masculinity and kingship as self-mastery, considered essential to both identities.¹⁰² If a king (or, for that matter, anyone with public authority) could not perform one correctly, how could they be expected to perform the other? This theorization of the embodiment of the body politic, reliant on the masculinity of the king, is quite literal, depicting the king as the head and other ruling men as the limbs of the body.¹⁰³ This conceptualization explains the importance of the king maintaining proper masculinity: without the head working as it should, the rest of the body cannot possibly hope to. One conclusion several scholars have come to regarding medieval masculinities is that conceptions of masculinity were not made in relation or reference to women, but in relation to other men: that the key relationships were homosocial.¹⁰⁴ This close relationship between the king and the ruling men, and its importance to the health

⁹⁹ Fenster, 'Why Men?', p. x.; McVitty, *Treason*.

¹⁰⁰ Christopher Fletcher, 'Manhood, kingship and the public in late medieval England', *Edad Media* (2012), 13, pp. 126, 127.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 139; 142.

¹⁰² Lewis, *Kingship*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰³ McVitty, *Treason*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁴ Karras, *Boys*, p. 10; Lewis, *Kingship*, pp. 234-5: following R.W. Connell on 'hegemonic masculinity': "...it rests on the subordination both of women, and of other men whose masculinity is instead defined as subordinate, complicit, or marginalized" and Simon Yarrow on 'iconic masculinity'.

of society, is at the core of many discussions of medieval homosociality, and the rather blurry but important lines between appropriate and inappropriate relationships which will form the core of this study. This metaphor also reinforces the essential interdependence between the king and leading subjects, the balance of which was at the center of many of the political discussions and debates of the period.¹⁰⁵

Lewis also notes that ‘the masculinity of kings...has remained largely invisible, emerging as an issue only in the case of kings who ‘do it wrong’; whose derivation from the norms of manhood forms part of the explanation for their status as ‘bad’ kings.’¹⁰⁶ However, one could argue that while perhaps the failure of masculinity and kingship is discussed much more explicitly than the successes, the lack of these critiques could be taken as implicit approval. Lewis, in the company of many other scholars, lists Edward II, Richard II and Henry VI as the ‘failures’ or ‘bad’ kings of the late medieval world. It is not, I would argue, a coincidence that the so-called successes were also the successors to these kings: Edward I, Edward III and Henry V: while there are arguably circumstantial reasons why the reigns of these kings may have been more ‘successful’, there are also discernable cycles – both within reigns and between reigns – of dissatisfaction, so-called ‘rebellion’, and somewhat peaceful recovery.¹⁰⁷ Lewis comments on these ‘successful’ kings as well, suggesting that they are “presented as innately manly individuals who appear to have no palpable gender identity at all.”¹⁰⁸ That said, certainly in the case of Edward III, there are nuances to his ‘success,’ some of the details of which revolve around Alice Perrers and will be discussed in-depth in Chapter IV. Possibly, it is easier in the scholarship – both medieval and modern – to nitpick the ‘successes’ for problems than the ‘failures’ for successes. Extending slightly beyond kingship and, for the most part, beyond the scope of this project, the individual case studies of John of Gaunt and the so-called Black Prince are both interesting in this vein, as their particular depictions of masculinity also interact with concepts of rulership and leadership.¹⁰⁹ Following Joanna Layesmith, Lewis also notes that the interaction of kingship and masculinity did not exist in a vacuum; though medieval masculinity did define itself within a homosocial

¹⁰⁵ Lewis, *Kingship*, pp. 25-6.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁷ More on this cyclical phenomena will appear in the discussion of Edward II in chapter II and that of Alice Perrers in chapter IV; though outside the scope of this study, there are discernable cycles to the reign of Richard II as well, beyond the life and career of de Vere.

¹⁰⁸ Lewis, *Kingship*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁹ John of Gaunt will appear in the discussions in Chapter II, but as the husband of Katherine Swynford. While his own masculinity will be discussed, it will not be a focus in this study.

environment, kingship in particular also existed in a relational dynamic to queenship and the associated femininity.¹¹⁰ This becomes particularly clear in the case of Isabella of France, who, in one reading of her career, was unable to properly perform her queenship due to her husband's failure to perform his own role – as king, and perhaps as her husband as well.¹¹¹

Conceptions of gendered power have centered around two key questions. The first is one of vocabulary and definition: which word to use - power (soft or hard), agency, influence, autonomy; and how to define the chosen word within context. The second question is one of measurement - how to quantify, or even qualify access to any of the concepts and the results of this access. Discussions of women's access to power often begin with the 1973 article 'The Power of Women through the Family in Medieval Europe' by Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple which argued that from the eleventh century on, the access of elite women to power declined in the face of social and political shifts in Europe.¹¹² This argument gave rise to the idea of the 'exceptional woman,' one who, in the face of all the obstacles presented in the later Middle Ages, was still able to exercise power. The decades following the publication of this article have been filled with counter arguments from historians and other scholars, presenting numerous studies of women who seem to qualify as 'exceptional' under this theory and leading to the question - with this many examples, at what point does 'exceptional' become the norm?¹¹³ In 2003, Jo Ann McNamara published a rebuttal to these critiques entitled 'Women and Power through the Family Revisited.' While she acceded to some small claims of the critiques, acknowledging that women were 'significant actors,' she did not recant the conclusions made in 1973.¹¹⁴ The most recent work to take on the McNamara-Wemple thesis is the 2019 volume edited by Heather Tanner entitled *Medieval Elite Women and the Exercise of Power, 1100-1400: Moving beyond the Exceptionalist Debate*. This volume developed out of a series of conference events, culminating in the 'Beyond Exceptionalism' conference in 2015. The introduction to the volume calls for

¹¹⁰ Lewis, *Kingship*, p. 10 & n. 64, 29; Joanna Laynesmith, *The Last Medieval Queens: English Queenship 1445-1503* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 72-130.

¹¹¹ This topic will be explored in depth in Chapter III.

¹¹² Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple, 'The Power of Women through the Family in Medieval Europe: 500-1100', *Feminist Studies*, 1, 3/4 (1973), pp. 137-8.

¹¹³ See: Constance Bouchard, 'The Origins of the French Nobility: A Reassessment' *The American Historical Review*, 86, 3 (1981); David Crouch, *The Birth of the Nobility: Constructing Aristocracy in England and France 500-1300* (London, 2014), esp. pp. 122-3; Jennifer Carpenter and Sally-Beth MacLean (eds.), *Power of the Weak: Studies on Medieval Women* (Illinois, 2014).

¹¹⁴ Jo Ann McNamara, 'Women and Power through the Family Revisited', in Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (eds.), *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 2003), p. 21.

...a new paradigm for discussing the power, authority, and agency of medieval elite women...[which] starts from the premise that elite women in positions of authority in the central medieval period were expected, accepted, and routine. The routine nature of a woman exercising power does not mean that every woman was successful, or that a particular woman might not face challenges to her authority.¹¹⁵

Since the publication of this volume, a second event, ‘Beyond Exceptionalism II’ was held in 2022, suggesting that there is still plenty of work to be done in this realm, especially outside of Western European contexts.

While there are many arguments made in the chapters of the first volume, the one this project will utilize most is the final chapter by Theresa Earenfight titled ‘A Lifetime of Power: Beyond Binaries of Gender’ which expands on Foucaudian concepts of power. Rather than examining whether or not an individual had power, Earenfight instead examines how power can manifest differently in different periods of life, and attempts to de-gender power and associated concepts to better understand the relational nature of power and how it could be exercised by women.¹¹⁶ Though her examples are necessarily female focused due to the context of the volume, her conclusions and analysis apply outside of female power, extending to analysis of all power, and the usefulness of developing de-gendered concepts for analysis. Earenfight discusses the gendered nature of medieval power, stating that

Monarchy, the paramount secular political institution of the Middle Ages, was predicated on patriarchal kin groups, but both medieval authors and modern commentators considered only kings and marked power as masculine. Locating kings at the center and pinnacle of power means that male power was considered normative...¹¹⁷

This view that defines male power as normative creates a hierarchy in which ‘female power’ – generally understood to be ‘soft power’ or ‘influence’ – is a lesser form of power, though this conclusion will be interrogated shortly. Earenfight continues by reimagining discussions of power as not something that one has or does not have, but rather something one can harness to varying degrees in different situations:

To sort out the interplay of gender and power, I propose not that we toss out all considerations of gender, but that we...focus on the job descriptions: the sources of power and what people are actually doing. We need to shift our attention from power

¹¹⁵ Tanner, Heather, Laura L. Gathagan and Lois L. Huneycutt, ‘Introduction’ in *Medieval Elite Women and the Exercise of Power, 1100-1400: Moving Beyond the Exceptionalist Debate* (London, 2019), p. 2.

¹¹⁶ Theresa Earenfight, ‘A Lifetime of Power: Beyond Binaries of Gender’ in *Medieval* (ed.) Tanner, pp. 271-293.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 272.

as big categories of action or inaction and focus more on circumstances that shape the degree to which one can exercise power - a lot, a little, sometimes a lot, mostly a little...Furthermore, power is more than simply doing something, like issuing a command. It is also a latent and potential force, inherent but not always realized (like a threat), and always there even when not visible from our vantage point. Power is a shape-shifter and what often passes for powerless is not necessarily powerlessness. Rather, the resistance to power is an articulation of considerable power that reveals that power is more than acquired, seized, or shared.¹¹⁸

This conceptualization of power allows for important nuance and allows for the possibility of multiple actors of power – of any gender – present in any given situation. In particular, this conceptualization allows the scholar to perceive power outside of that which is explicitly noted: in particular, this thesis will return to ideas of inherent or latent power, and how this can often be found by looking at punishment or restrictions of rights.

Much to the frustration of patriarchies throughout history, females are required for societal and biological reproduction. The requirement of females to provide heirs for the dynasties of Europe was both their greatest use to these dynasties and the greatest threat. The threat was twofold: firstly, the relationships which developed between lovers, spouses, and parents or grandparents and children created avenues through which many women were able to build influence and wealth, often to the exclusion or detriment of other lords or nobles. Secondly, the power of royal (and noble) dynasties was in the ability to pass the crown and titles from one generation to the next, in an unbroken line of blood relatives, usually male. The fear of female infidelity, therefore, was not just fear of being labeled a cuckold, but of the possibility of illegitimate children being raised and inheriting the crown or title and thus ending the bloodline. For this reason, practices of sexual morality were carefully taught and regulated, and transgressions of women were punished severely. Several of the case studies throughout this project will demonstrate the continued importance of regulating female sexuality and the fear of those women who strayed outside these established boundaries.

While concerns over female sexual morality were primarily based on concerns of the reputation of her husband and legitimacy of her children, concerns over male sexual morality were of a different type. While not technically allowed in Christian Europe, male sexual affairs were expected and accepted, particularly within the upper classes of society, as long as the other partner was a woman, and her status did not make the relationship problematic. However, if the extra-marital partner was another male, society was far less forgiving. When discovered,

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

these transgressive acts were punished harshly, and the vast majority of these cases involved multiple men, as the phallocentric understanding of sex did not often recognize the potential sexual nature of a relationship between multiple women. Significant work has been done on how to address pre-modern sexualities. The central questions remains how to find a balance between the importance of self-identity to queer and other minority communities with the importance of a history for these communities.¹¹⁹ Beyond the transgressive nature of the acts themselves, societal issues with same-sex sexual relationships stemmed from pervasive concerns over gender-norms, particularly masculinity and the intersection of masculinity and power.¹²⁰

While the specifics, or rumored specifics, of the acts themselves caused concerns over morality and norms, concerns over undue intimacy were not limited to sexual acts or partners. One of the key themes developed over the course of this project is the question of access, and the socio-politics which surround this question. In this case, these questions are generally regarding access to rulers, and this access can be physical, emotional, and social. The English courts of the fourteenth century display a great deal of negotiation regarding who could and should be intimates of the king, queen and immediate royal family. Issues arose regarding both the type of person who should be allowed this intimacy and the allowable or acceptable degree of intensity within these relationships. Excessive deviation in either or both of these categories led repeatedly to social and political issues between court factions.

Many of the concepts explored in this thesis have multiple or nebulous meanings, creating a lack of mutual understanding, which undermines the scholarly debate on this subject. These misunderstandings can exist both between contemporary scholars and across scholarly generations. One clear solution to these concerns is specificity in terminology and definition; for this project, the key terms will shortly be addressed and defined to support this goal. However, even when terminology is well defined and agreed upon, context can still create areas of uncertainty or misunderstanding. This is particularly true for a project such as this one, which examines not just what happened, but also the perception of historical figures and events. Kit Heyam's 2020 study *The Reputation of Edward II* takes on pieces of this issue, noting that

¹¹⁹ See more: Judith Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms", *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, 1/2 (2000), pp. 1-24; Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken and James A. Schultz (eds.) *Constructing Medieval Sexuality* (Minneapolis, 2007); Anna Livia and Kira Hall (eds.) *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality* (New York, 1997); Bruce Smith, 'Premodern Sexualities', in *PMLA*, cxv, no. 3 (2000), pp. 318-329.

¹²⁰ Karras, *Boys*, pp. 82; 147-8.

the career of Edward II is valuable to scholars of history and sexuality not just of his reign, but of the succeeding decades and centuries. The prevalence of his story in literature (and theater) provides case studies for understanding the ongoing development of narratives of sexuality, sexual discourse, and sexual deviance. The parallel careers and reigns of Edward II and Richard II also provide a fascinating case study for the processes by which political and historical exemplum and memorialization was developed, and, in this particular case, the effect of historical processes on conceptualization of masculinity, sexuality and kingship, in all forms of source material.¹²¹ As will be discussed in later chapters, scholars will likely never know whether or not Edward II engaged in sexual acts with other men, and the facts of this are not necessarily important to discussing it. Scholars, both medieval and modern, have endless opinions about Edward's actions and how to interpret them: in the most relevant example, two of the leading scholars on the relationship between Edward and Piers Gaveston, J.S. Hamilton and Pierre Chaplais, fall on either side of this debate.¹²² Heyam's work calls for a recognition that, beyond the facts, ongoing reframing and new understandings of Edward's career shift how these examples are interpreted, and the circular relationship between sources and scholars continues to develop. This framework for understanding reputation will be extended to other case studies throughout this project to attempt to bridge multiple understandings and account for nuance.

Terminology

The terminology of this project has been a consideration throughout. There are some terms that will be contextualized and defined as needed, but there are a couple worth addressing initially.

The first of these is 'power', with the related 'hard power' and 'soft power', as well as 'agency' and 'influence'. For the purposes of this project, the semantic difference between these terms is far less consequential than the context within which they are used. The relationship between 'hard' and 'soft' power is a well fairly established one, with 'hard' generally referring to institutionalized, tangible power and 'soft' power used for situations where the source of power is harder to define, but not necessarily less effective. 'Influence' will usually be considered to be a form of 'soft' power, referring to situations where the source

¹²¹ Heyam, *Reputation*, p. 10.

¹²² Pierre Chaplais, *Piers Gaveston: Edward II's Adoptive Brother* (Oxford, 1994); J.S. Hamilton, *Piers Gaveston, Earl of Cornwall, 1307-1312: politics and patronage in the reign of Edward II* (London, 1988).

of this power is personal relationships of some sort. ‘Agency’ will be used as an umbrella term, following Theresa Earenfight’s definition: “the ability to take action that has the potential to affect one’s own destiny.”¹²³ This project will attempt not to fall into the (often unintentional) pattern of using ‘power’ and ‘hard power’ to refer to traditional forms of male power and ‘soft power’ or ‘influence’ to refer to female sources of power, a trap which undermines the power of women, and often presupposes that male forces of power are stronger, or always easier to define.

As discussed earlier, ‘gender’ will always be used when the discussion is regarding cultural or social patterning and identity, and will be paired with the terms ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ and any related forms; ‘sex’ will only refer to discussions of biology and will be paired with the terms ‘male’ and ‘female’. Gender will be recognized relational, such that the construction, depiction and discussion of gender relies on oppositions and fluid, contextual boundaries.¹²⁴ Use of the terms ‘gender’ and ‘gender-norms’ or any related forms, will always account for the cultural context of the discussion and allow for variation of culture within the medieval world.

As mentioned above, this project will also engage in an analysis of ‘access’. This encompasses a wide range of ‘accesses’, including physical access, social and political access, and emotional access, and is certainly intertwined with concepts of intimacy.¹²⁵ In a medieval context, most access came down to physical presence, if only because that was the primary means of communication – even written communication relied on passage through those around the rulers – and control of physical access to the rulers will appear repeatedly throughout this project as an area of concern and disagreement between factions. Additionally, the difference between public and private access and intimacy will emerge as loci of discussion, as access to the private, inner world of an individual suggests a different level of intimacy, and possibly influence, than does public access.

Alice Perrers and Katherine Swynford are often referred to as ‘mistresses’, which is a term laden with misogynistic undertones, and undermines the significant social and financial position held by both women, particularly in the English context. The English kings of this period had considerably fewer public mistresses than their contemporaries in, for instance, France and Scotland, making Alice Perrers that much more of an anomaly in her position. Even acknowledging the more established prevalence of mistresses at the French court, the first

¹²³ Earenfight, ‘A Lifetime’, p. 276.

¹²⁴ Fenster, ‘Why Men?’, p. xii.

¹²⁵ Bagerius and Ekholst similarly discuss questions of access between kings and their male favorites: see ‘Kings’, pp. 308-311.

official mistress there did not appear until the early fifteenth century, several decades after Alice. In particular, Sywnford's later position as Gaunt's wife is often listed second to her earlier, and longer, extra-marital relationship. The lack of a gender-neutral or male-oriented term that mirrors the usage of 'mistress' displays the disregard for recognition of relationships of this type. While acknowledging that an official use for the term 'mistress' would later develop, and that it would become an established position in courts across Europe, its usage in reference to Alice Perrers and Katherine Swynford does not reflect this later usage. This uneven primacy of the [potential] sexual elements of the relationships for female favorites, and the primacy of platonic and political relationships for male favorites ignores important nuance and undermines any attempt to better understand gendered power in this period. By utilising the broader, gender-neutral 'favourites', alongside the term 'sexual partner' when necessary, this project advocates for a more nuanced examination of the sexual and social relationships surrounding those in power, and of the power structures surrounding these relationships. This is certainly not a novel choice of terminology.

As an overall term, this project will utilize 'royal favorites' to describe those individuals who were unusually close to members of the royal family, whether these relationships are sexual or platonic. This term encapsulates nicely the position of each of the four case studies discussed here, without reducing or minimizing the complex intricacies of their social, political and economic ties and positions.¹²⁶ 'Favorite' is not a new term to this area of research, and has been used to describe these, and other, similar, case studies, by scholars across recent historical scholarship.¹²⁷ However, this project is using 'favorite' to intentionally equalize discussions of partners in an attempt to de-gender these relationships and thus parse the resulting discussions of power and access for new conclusions.

This use of 'favorite' as an overarching term to describe the positioning of these case studies, while useful as a general term of categorization, can be reductionist as a term of translation. Amanda McVitty notes that in several cases, expressions used in the chronicles have been translated collectively as 'favorite' and lose important relevance and nuance in the process. For example, she notes that both the term *fautores*, which appears widely in ecclesiastical inquisitions to describe heretics, and *auriculares*, which 'created a viscerally

¹²⁶ It has been suggested to me that 'princely favorites' may be a better, broad term to include similar relationships outside of the royal family. Within the context of this project, the case studies are all senior members of the royal family, and thus I have chosen to continue with the term 'royal favorites,' but would welcome the expanded use of this term to other studies. My thanks to Prof. Serena Ferrente for an interesting discussion on this terminology and this suggestion.

¹²⁷ For instance, see Bagerius and Ekholst, 'Kings', pp. 298-319.

embodied image of men who were so close to the king they were literally “in his ear”, have been translated by modern scholars as ‘favorites,’ despite describing very different contexts.¹²⁸ For the purpose of this study, the term ‘favorite’ will be used as an academic descriptor to encompass the collection of relevant case studies, rather than as a term of translation from any one or more medieval terms.

The central thesis of this project is the analytical interrogation of the relationship between gender, power and the politics of access in the fourteenth century. It will do this through a series of case studies which compare various aspects of these concepts, in order to further identify the nuances of these debates. The project has been split into two large parts, and then further narrowed down within these parts to chapters which address the individual case studies.

The first part of the project, ‘Gender and Rulership’ will use the case studies of Edward II, Roger Mortimer and Isabella of France to examine this relationship between gender and the power of rulers by exploring the dynamics and expectations of rulership within the context of gendered norms, and the consequences of upending these established norms. The first chapter will examine conceptions of masculinity through a comparison of the careers of Edward II and Roger Mortimer, and by locating these careers in between the reigns of the (much more lauded) Edwards I and III. In particular, it will interrogate the relationship of what it meant to be a good or bad ‘man’ and a good or bad ruler, within the context of medieval conceptions of masculinity and power. The question of whether Edward II has been portrayed, both contemporaneously and by historians since, as a bad king because he was a bad ‘man’, or as a bad ‘man’ because he was a bad king is a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation. Medieval concepts of masculinity were strongly rooted in relationships with other men, and in the shared pursuit of dominance and physical prowess.¹²⁹ The reality is that he was and continues to be portrayed as both: a bad king due to the strong preferential treatment he showed his favorites, the oppressive nature of his later reign and the failures of his Scottish campaigns; and a ‘bad’ man due primarily to his relationship with Piers Gaveston and the rumors regarding the sexual nature of their relationship.¹³⁰ The combination of the two features - his policies and his personal nature -

¹²⁸ McVitty, *Treason*, p. 36.

¹²⁹ Karras, *Boys*, pp. 10-1.

¹³⁰ Malcolm Barber, *The Two Cities: Medieval Europe 1050-1320* (2nd ed., New York, 2004), p. 302-3; Michael Prestwich, ‘England and Scotland during the Wars of Independence’ in Michael Jones and Malcolm Vale (eds.), *England and her Neighbors, 1066-1451: Essays in Honor of Pierre Chaplais*, p. 186. For other

were weapons which Isabella and her supporters were able to wield in their campaign which eventually led to Edward II's abdication and the succession of their son, Edward III, with Isabella as regent. In contrast to Edward II, whose potential sexual relationship may have been a part of his downfall, Roger Mortimer was able to harness the influence he gained from his relationship with Isabella into institutional power and rewards for his supporters, though this power was short-lived. The construct of male (heterosexual) virility, and the need to display this virility, was another element of the construction of medieval masculinity, particularly as portrayed in literature from the period.¹³¹ Even before the death of Edward, the public nature of the relationship between Isabella and Mortimer may have been useful propaganda in continuing to undermine the reputation and powerbase of Edward - not only could he not maintain control over Scotland or his own nobility, as a king should be able to, but he could not even maintain control over his wife, as any man should be able to, by medieval standards.¹³²

Having examined the careers of Edward II and Mortimer on their own, the second chapter will introduce the woman they had in common, Isabella of France, and will examine how gender and femininity affected her career and rule. While Isabella was undoubtedly a large presence throughout her time as Queen, regent and queen mother in England, the power dynamics of the period are not due to her alone, but rather to her relationships with the men around her; specifically, with Edward II and Roger Mortimer. Without minimizing Isabella to the position of a pawn or possession, as her supporters and family in France were unquestionably a key force in the coup, her relationship with Mortimer likely served as a clear condemnation of Edward. An analysis of the power struggle between Edward II and Isabella and Mortimer provides an excellent case study of medieval constructions of masculinity, femininity and gendered power.

The second part of this project examines some of the so-called 'royal favorites' of the fourteenth century and comparatively examines the trajectory of their careers: Alice Perrers, favorite and sexual partner of Edward III; Katherine Swynford, favorite, sexual partner and third wife to John of Gaunt; Piers Gaveston, closest confidant and possible sexual partner to Edward II; and Robert de Vere, close confidant of Richard II. It will examine these careers

theories regarding the relationship of Edward and Gaveston include simply close friends or 'sworn brothers,' see: Chaplais, *Gaveston* and Hamilton, *Gaveston*.

¹³¹ Karras, *Boys*, pp. 50-1.

¹³² Tracy Adams, 'Between History and Fiction: Revisiting the Affaire de la Tour de Nesle' in *Viator*, xliii, no. 2 (2012), p. 170, following Geneviève Bührer-Thierry, "La Reine Adultère," *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale* 35 (1992) 299-312.

through the lenses of gender, marital and sexual status, and economic status by isolating, as much as is possible, and then examining these different factors.

The first chapter of this part, Chapter III, 'The Power of a Ring' primarily compares Alice Perrers and Katherine Swynford, using their statuses as women as the commonality to examine their financial and social careers. It will examine each woman's marital status, and how Katherine, uniquely in the realm of medieval extramarital sexual partners, was able to make the shift to wife. It will discuss how the later years of each's career trajectories were distinctly different due to this difference in marital status. It will also discuss how Alice Perrers' treatment in both contemporary political records and chronicle sources is particularly vitriolic, and how this vitriol is related to her crossing of normative gendered boundaries.

Chapter IX introduces Piers Gaveston and Robert de Vere. Firstly, it will compare the careers of Alice Perrers and Gaveston, using a degendered examination of their careers to interrogated the many commonalities. It will then compare Piers and de Vere, again using gender as the point of commonality to compare socio-political careers. This chapter will also examine the effect of Gaveston's 'foreigner' status and de Vere's nobility by birth before proceeding to compile a comparison of all four favorites in order to draw some conclusions from this case study.

If one ignores the gender of these four favorites, they occupy very similar places in society: close favorites of institutionally powerful men who benefited greatly from this power - in wealth, influence and position in society. Within this degendered framework put forth by Earenfight, the parallels between Gaveston, Perrers, Swynford and de Vere become even more striking - while Gaveston and de Vere, as noble males, undoubtedly had access to more 'hard power' than either of the women, both Perrers and Swynford were able to build up significant wealth and social networks, providing them with what Earenfight would categorize as charismatic and diplomatic power. The potential or latent power that all four held as possibly problematic or dangerous figures can be found in their exile from court - Gaveston repeatedly at the behest of both the French and the English nobles; de Vere after his military defeat at the Battle of Radcot Bridge; Swynford after Gaunt's second marriage; and Perrers after the death of Edward III. All four could be said to have had diplomatic power through their close relationships with royal men; Gaveston also had institutional power after his elevation to Earl by Edward II, and de Vere through elevation to Duke of Ireland in 1386. Both Perrers and

Swynford had dynastic power access as the mother to their children; this is particularly true of Katherine Swynford as her children were not just recognized but also legitimated.

The later medieval period is ideal for the study of these dynamics, as the civil conflicts of the period were wide-ranging in terms of both time and space. Civil conflicts, with their associated disruption of normal political and social order, often allowed for unlikely people to rise to power. This could be said to particularly true for the fourteenth century as the conflicts in England were – for the most part – bouts of political and social unrest, rather than full scale armed conflict, or trans-national conflict, as would erupt in the following century. While some women were still able to emerge with unusual power during the fifteenth century, the internal power structures in England seem to have been more fluid and flexible during the periods of unrest in the fourteenth century. Women in particular seem to have seized these opportunities, and used these periods of disruption to their advantage, gaining increased agency and influence. However, even when these opportunities were seized through means recognized as legitimate - particularly through regencies either as Queens or as Queen Mothers - women perceived as usurping the social and political roles of men often faced significant backlash. Whilst significantly more women were penalized for contravening their gender norms, men were also expected to maintain gender norms, and those accused of failing to do so also faced charges of sexual immorality and denial of agency and power in various forms.

PART I: GENDER AND RULERSHIP

Chapter I: Comparative Masculinities

...in the early fourteenth century kings already needed to be men as well as kings, to gain the approval of a public whose opinion was of increasing importance for political success or failure. Yet at the same time, we need to bear in mind that the means to establish or deny the manhood of kings varied not only with time but also with the multitude of possible strategies provided by the multiple concepts of manhood which were available in late medieval England¹

While neither Edward II nor Roger Mortimer have fared well in the tomes of medieval literature or modern historiography, Roger Mortimer's masculinity has not come under fire in the same types of attacks as has that of Edward II. The relationships and political grievances made during the reign of Edward II and the 'reign' of Isabella and Mortimer have many parallels, but the two men occupied opposite positions – Edward as a failed ruler, and Mortimer as a (temporarily) thriving favorite. While Mortimer was disliked, presented as greedy, power-hungry, and a poor leader, he was presented in the contemporary sources as a bad person, but not as a bad 'man'.² In some cases, he is depicted as encouraging Isabella's betrayal of her husband, but whether he is depicted as leading Isabella or as a member of her retinue, his masculinity is never questioned, and her position does not seem to affect his masculinity in the same way it does Edward's. Interestingly, Mortimer's depiction in the various sources often appears to be in service of the author's intended portrayal of Isabella – was he leading her astray, or was she the instigator? Similar questions will continue to arise throughout this project as to where the fault for various actions lies, and when it may have been necessary to protect individuals by passing off the leadership of these acts. In contrast to depictions of Mortimer, Edward was perceived as weak-willed and susceptible to outside – and inappropriate – influence, and as having acted outside both gender and class norms. He was a bad 'man', and also a bad king. The relationship each man had with Queen Isabella was both the cause and a symptom of this narrative of masculinity: Edward was unable to fulfill his role as a husband and control his wife and children, whereas Mortimer was acting immorally by taking another man's wife, and, in doing so, displayed his perceived superior masculinity.

¹ Fletcher, 'Manhood, kingship', p. 142.

² Galbraith, 'Good Kings', pp. 119-132: I am aware of the article by V.H. Galbraith which uses similar terminology to that being used here. While the article makes interesting points regarding the downfalls of classifying rulers as 'good' or 'bad', and of viewing dynasties as cycling between these two, this chapter is not intended to either build on or endorse this particular article or usage of these terms. Instead, I use the phrasing "bad 'man'" to mean man acting not in accordance with societal gender norms (as in, bad at being a man in this socio-political context). This is in contrast to 'bad person' which reflects a moral judgement, or 'bad king' which reflects a judgment of leadership and ability in that role.

In his 2005 article on Richard II and manhood, Christopher Fletcher urges caution on the conflation of both terminology and concepts in this area of study, in particular cautioning against the conflation of the terms ‘manhood’ and ‘masculinity,’ and against defining either of these terms as simply a form of ‘maleness’.³ In part, this returns to the earlier discussion regarding the default, and therefore neuter, status of ‘man’ as sometimes denoting ‘human’; while ‘masculinity’ is a clearly gendered term, ‘man’ or even ‘manhood’ can at times be ambiguous. Beyond this, if one can determine with specificity the intended usage of a term, there remains contextual ambiguity. Ruth Karras notes that “no single form of masculinity... characterized the Middle Ages, even the later Middle Ages in Christian western Europe. Concepts of what it meant to be a man not only changed over time, they also coexisted and competed within any given medieval culture or even subculture.”⁴ Similarly, Gabrielle Storey comments that “multiple masculinities could exist in society at one time, and not all men could carry out all aspects of each type of masculinity.”⁵ Thus, in the following discussion of Edward and Mortimer, what will become evident is that they displayed different kinds of masculinity. Edward, however, did not always – or even often, depending on the source – display the correct kind of masculinity for his social station. It will become evident, especially in the case of Edward, that gendered norms are not singular, but depend on a series of other qualities, including social status. Even more complexly, these intersecting norms are relational; thus, what is acceptable in some situations, or with some social partners, is not acceptable in others: some of Edward’s actions are not inappropriate simply on their own, but also because of his chosen partners.

In general, the medieval sources are not particularly kind to either Edward II or Mortimer. For Edward, they range from neutral in tone to disgust with his choices of companions and perceived lack of leadership ability; in reference to Mortimer, they range from barely noting his presence to hatred of his power-hungry tactics. The majority of these sources were written and/or edited during the years of Edward III’s reign, or are based on those sources that were, and therefore reflect a specific contemporary consensus about both men. Heyam’s *The Reputation of Edward II* encourages a recognition of the relationships which develop among these texts, and how over time this cyclical process of authorship and readership creates,

³ Christopher Fletcher, ‘Manhood and Politics in the Reign of Richard II’, *Past and Present* (2005), pp. 12-3.

⁴ Karras, *Boys*, p. 3: as mentioned above, Karras’ study delves into both the multiplicity and formation of masculinities in late medieval Europe.

⁵ Gabrielle Storey, ‘Questioning Terminologies: Homosocial and “Homosexual” Bonds in the Royal Bedchamber and Kingship in Medieval England and France,’ *Royal Studies Journal* (2022), 9, 1, p. 38.

defines and undermines reputations and legacies. This is particularly true in the case of Edward II.⁶

Opinions emerging during Edward III's reign and the late medieval period on Mortimer are clear: while his family later managed to work their way back into the good graces of Edward III, Mortimer himself was executed as a traitor, and was likely responsible for the death of Edward's father and certainly undermined Edward III's position as king, possibly even planning a coup of his own. Edward III's later opinions about his own father are harder to discern: the sources are unclear as to how much active participation Edward played in the coup and deposition of his father. He (seemingly willingly) traveled to France and stayed with his mother, even when recalled, and he doesn't appear to have fought against the invasion, capture and imprisonment, or deposition of his father. That said, he was only thirteen or fourteen during these events, and was following the will of Isabella. When charges were levied against Mortimer after his capture in 1330, one of these charges was for the murder of the king; it's unclear in the records whether this was due to a desire for revenge on the part of Edward III or a politically expedient move to ensure Mortimer's execution.⁷ Edward III later visited his father's tomb in Gloucester in 1348, suggesting at minimum a degree of familial loyalty remained.⁸ Certainly, not all the sources were written specifically for the eyes, or tastes, of Edward III; as noted in the introduction they reflected a range of knowledge and opinions of both the authors themselves and, in some cases, their patrons. Edward III's personal feelings about either his father or Mortimer aside, the collective evidence was that feelings toward both Edward II and Roger Mortimer remained broadly negative throughout the fourteenth century. One exception to this is the chronicle of Geoffrey le Baker, which presents Edward II in a much less negative light than others. However, even this portrayal is still not flattering, instead taking a pitying tone when, for instance, he spends almost ten pages describing Edward's capture, manner of imprisonment, and murder.⁹

⁶ Heyam, esp. pp. 26, 28-9, 241-76.

⁷ PROME, Edward III, 1354 April, p. 255, n. 9.

⁸ Ian Mortimer, *The Greatest Traitor: The Life of Roger Mortimer, 1st Earl of March, Ruler of England, 1327-1330* (London, 2003), p. 134.

⁹ *Chronicon Galfridi le Baker de Swynebroke* (ed.) Edward Maunde Thompson, (Oxford, 1889), pp. 25-33: Le Baker also describes the murder in particular in minute detail, far beyond that of any other source, and beyond any probable knowledge he could have had. Antonia Gransden notes that though le Baker was "the most important of the later authorities for Edward II's reign...it is questionable how far he is a reliable sources. Certainly his dramatic representation of Edward II's end seems to belong to literature rather than historiography": *Historical*, p. 4. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Le Baker is also one of the most hostile sources towards Isabella of France. For more on Isabella's portrayal in the chronicles – and particularly the shifts in portrayal after the events of 1325, see Michael Evans, 'Isabella of France and Roger Mortimer: lovers or allies?' in Gabrielle Storey and Zita Eva Rohr (eds.), *Premodern Ruling Sexualities: Representation, Identity and Power*

Masculinity, Leadership and Power

Edward II, born in 1284 as Edward of Caernarvon, was the youngest of the fourteen (or more) children of Edward I and his first wife, Eleanor of Castile. At least seven of his elder siblings died before his birth, and the third and final remaining elder brother, Alfonso, died shortly after Edward's birth, leaving Edward the sole surviving son and heir to the throne.¹⁰

Unsurprisingly, Edward II has fascinated scholars for centuries: the tumult of his reign, his deposition, death (or murder), and his relationship with Piers Gaveston have all attracted focus over the years, and lots of scholarship has been produced. As a core reference, Seymour Phillip's 2010 tome, *Edward II*, is unmatched. Other key scholarship on Edward includes work from Elizabeth Brown on his marriage to Isabella; Pierre Chaplais and J.S. Hamilton on his relationship with Piers Gaveston; Christopher Fletcher on Edward and masculinity; and Michael Prestwich, Mark Ormrod and Anthony Goodman on the period more broadly.¹¹

In 1297, the leading clergy and magnates swore fealty to Edward as his father's successor and in 1299, Edward's betrothal to Isabella, daughter of Philip IV of France, was provided for as part of the Treaty of Montreuil (the betrothal itself did not occur until 1303). This was the final of several betrothals proposed over his childhood as the shifting politics in Europe also shifted political alliances. In 1301, Edward was created Prince of Wales and earl of Chester. This was the first use of the title 'Prince of Wales' to refer to the heir to the English throne, and likely reflects both Edward's status and achievements in advance of his upcoming marriage, as well as the concern over the loyalty and stability of the political climate in Wales after several conflicts across the preceding decades.

Edward and Isabella were married in 1308, and the marriage produced four children: Edward, later Edward III (b. 1312); John (b. 1316); Eleanor (b. 1318); and Joan (b. 1321). On 25 February of the same year, a month after the marriage, Edward was crowned king at Westminster. In his oath he swore in a newly added clause to uphold 'the laws and rightful customs which the community of the realm shall have chosen'.¹² The terminology of this clause

(Manchester, 2024), pp. 89-104: My thanks to Michael Evans for providing me with a pre-published version of this article for this project.

¹⁰ Seymour Phillips, *Edward II* (London, 2010), pp. 39-40.

¹¹ Phillips, *Edward II*; Elizabeth A. R. Brown, 'The Political Repercussions of Family Ties in the Early Fourteenth Century: The Marriage of Edward II of England and Isabella of France' in *Speculum*, lxxiii, no. 3 (1988), pp 573-595; Elizabeth Brown, 'The Marriage of Edward II of England and Isabelle of France: A Postscript' in *Speculum*, lxxiv, no. 2 (1989), pp 373-379; Chaplais, *Gaveston*; J.S. Hamilton, *Gaveston*; Fletcher, 'Manhood, kingship'; Michael Prestwich, *The Three Edwards: War and State in England, 1272-1377* (London, 2nd ed. 2003); Mark Ormrod, 'England: Edward II and Edward III' in *The New Cambridge Medieval History* (Cambridge, 2000), vi, 273-296; Anthony Goodman, *A History of England from Edward II to James I* (New York, 1977).

¹² Prestwich, *The Three*, p. 74, Phillips, *Edward II*, pp. 140-3.

encourages recognition that the relationship between the king and nobility was already shifting before Edward took his throne – the strife of his reign did not emerge from nowhere, and as king, Edward was faced with developing and maintaining a shifting relationship with his nobility, without the benefit of previously established practices.

Throughout his reign, Edward encountered a nobility increasingly chafing under the broad royal power of earlier reigns. This was not a new phenomenon – demands for reform of monarchical rights and power had emerged during the later years of Edward I's reign. However, the favoritism of Edward II and the rise of Piers Gaveston brought these issues to a head during Edward II's reign, culminating in the Ordinances of 1311. The Ordinances themselves mostly addressed concerns that had been expressed, and even provoked, during the reign of Edward I – with the clear and important exception of the clause which called for the exile of Gaveston.¹³ Gaveston's presence may have been the final straw that pushed the barons to demand reform, but that it happened during the reign of Edward II – rather than his father – certainly fits the narrative that Edward II was weak-willed and unable to assert his royal authority in the way he should have.¹⁴

After the death of Piers Gaveston, there rose a new group of favorites under Edward, the most significant of whom were the Hugh Despensers the elder and younger, but also included Roger Damory, Hugh Audley and William Montagu. Beyond the exceptional and well known cases of Gaveston and the Despensers, there were a series of less prominent favorites and favored members of the household and court whose careers demonstrate the pattern of Edward over-favoring those close to him, and many of whose later shifting allegiances suggest that even beyond the problems created by his favoritism, Edward had a problem retaining the loyalty of those who received his patronage.¹⁵ Phillips discusses the differences between Gaveston and the younger Despenser, noting that Gaveston's "influence seems to have been over the person of the king rather than in the day-to-day business of government" like Despenser, and that "although [Despenser's] official title was never more than that of chamberlain of the royal household, or Hugh Despenser of Glamorgan, there is no doubting the power and influence he exercised."¹⁶ The difference denoted here, in the separation of the person of Edward II from the business of government, coincides very clearly

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 178-9.

¹⁴ The career of Piers Gaveston, and his relationship with Edward, will be discussed in depth in Chapter IV.

¹⁵ Prestwich, *The Three*, pp. 72-6.

¹⁶ Phillips, *Edward II*, p. 442. For more on the Despensers, who are not a significant focus of this work, see Martyn John Lawrence's PhD Thesis: 'Power, Ambition and Political Rehabilitation: The Despensers, c. 1281-1400', (unpublished PhD Thesis, York, 2005), esp. pp. 20-53.

with the concerns present in the *Ordinances* and elsewhere, that government and the actual rule of the country needed, to an extent, to be spread out beyond the king.

The Despensers, in particular, were long-time opponents of Edward's cousin, Thomas, duke of Lancaster, who continued to lead the baronial opposition to Edward's reign even after the passage of the *Ordinances*.¹⁷ Like Gaveston before him, the promotion of the younger Despenser alienated him even from the other favorites around him, particularly Damory and Audley with whom he shared claim to the Gloucester inheritance through their marriages to the three sister de Clare heiresses.¹⁸ Despenser was even more politically dangerous than Gaveston had been, both because his status as an English lord meant he started with far more resources of his own than Gaveston had, and because Despenser demonstrated far higher ambitions and ability than Gaveston possessed. In particular, Despenser's ambitions became more obvious, and his tactics more unscrupulous, after the rebellion in 1321-2 and Lancaster's execution.¹⁹

In 1320, Edward and Isabella crossed the Channel to perform homage for Aquitaine and to renew the alliance of perpetual friendship confirmed between Edward I and Philip IV in 1303. Philip V had been putting increasing pressure on Edward to renew this homage since late 1316, and while Edward had formally recognized that he owed homage in 1319, he had continued putting off a state visit, citing political instability in England and Scotland. Philips notes that "there was also of course an element of deliberate delay, since no king of England liked doing homage to the king of France."²⁰ While in France, Edward performed the necessary homage and met with Philip to discuss the status of the county of Ponthieu, which was of concern to Isabella, and Edward was allowed to remedy the situation there. Among others, both Despensers and Damory accompanied the royal couple to France, and were present in Amiens for the performance of homage.²¹

The *Anonimale Chronicle* describes the parliament of August 1321, at which the baronial opposition – naming specifically Hereford, the Mortimers, Mowbray and Clifford – gathered to insist on the removal of 'evil counsellors such as Sir Hugh Despenser, both the father and the son'. This parliament resulted in the banishment of the Despensers as traitors. In retribution, the king besieged Leeds Castle to force the barons into open opposition.²² This in

¹⁷ Phillips, *Edward II*, p. 363-9.

¹⁸ Lawrence, 'Power', pp. 26-7.

¹⁹ Prestwich, *The Three*, pp. 72, 83-4.

²⁰ Phillips, *Edward II*, p. 354 n. 168.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 354-7.

²² *Anonimale*, pp. 100-1.

turn resulted in over a year of civil strife before Edward declared victory in 1322. Lancaster was executed, Audley and the Mortimers were imprisoned, each along with many others, and the remaining opposition was fined or suffered forfeiture of land and titles. At the conclusion of this conflict, in the Statute of York, Edward declared void the 1311 Ordinances under which the baronial opposition of that time had tried to rein in his royal power, though he reissued and confirmed some of the ‘good’ clauses as a show of support for certain types of reform. These events, following those of 1311-2 where Edward mostly relented to the baronial demands, display the back-and-forth nature of the politics of this period as earlier traditions of monarchical rule began to give way to some forms of magnate rule. Though these shifts were likely inevitable eventually, the issues of Edward II’s reign and ruling personality created the necessary pressures for them to then. It is clearly impossible to know whether they would have still occurred if Edward II had a different king, but that they did occur during his reign means that they are part of his historical legacy.

Edward, the historical person – particularly his personality and his achievements – has long been shrouded by his reputation and legacy. He is almost universally reviled by the contemporary chroniclers (with the above-noted exception of le Baker), and until recently the historiography has followed this trend. Recent scholarship has recognized, at minimum, that Edward II was left a very difficult hand to play at his father’s death – particularly in Scotland – and that he, for the most part, did the best with what he had. As mentioned above, Heyam’s monograph examines how – independent from the need to reexamine and reinterpret the causes and events of Edward’s reign – interpretations of Edward’s life, reign, personhood and career have been developed and shaped over time, and the need for more discerning and nuanced scholarship to understand these processes.²³ Over the course of his reign, Edward II did display many of the necessary qualities of kingship – he was attractive; well educated, likely more so than usually thought; well spoken and decisive when needed, as was displayed in France in 1320; athletic, a strong horseman, and seemingly reasonably skilled in battle; generous, if not equitable; and likely quite devout.²⁴ Raphael Holinshed, in his later sixteenth-century chronicles, describes Edward in a eulogy of sorts, after recounting his death. Holinshed focuses on his physical strength and health, and ascribes his failures to poor companions in his youth, noting that: “if his eville conncellors had beene removed, that he might have shewed it in honorable exploits, which being kept backe by them he could not do. So that thereby it

²³ Heyam, *Reputation*.

²⁴ Prestwich, *The Three*, p. 71; Phillips, *Edward II*: Phillips discusses characteristics of Edward’s personality throughout, particularly in Chapter 2: ‘The Nature of a King’, pp. 33-76.

appeareth of what importance it is to be trained up in youth with good and honest companie.” Holinshed also focuses on Edward’s education, and his focus on learning, displayed through the foundation of Oriel College, Oxford.²⁵ These many positive qualities are overshadowed in the literature by his problematic ones: his lack of governing experience prior to ascending to the throne (not necessarily his fault, but rather a seeming lack of foresight by Edward I), his pursuit of ‘unseemly’ activities – including water sports and ‘rustic crafts’; and, most glaringly, his tendency towards favoritism. As late as 1910, Francis Bickley was still recounting these descriptions of Edward, including his preference for music, theater, ‘animal pursuits’, drinking, and athletics, but not soldiering. He was a “handsome, swaggering, dissolute youth” and his household “separated from an early date from the king’s was a disorderly affair.”²⁶ Beyond clearly undervaluing Edward’s education, Bickley here makes a couple of interesting points. Firstly, he is clear about separating Edward II’s household from that of his father Edward I. While in this context he seems to be trying to absolve the elder Edward of association with the failings of his son, he also – perhaps unintentionally – aids an analysis more popular in recent scholarship: that Edward II was critically underprepared by his father for his eventual role as king, and that his failings are in part due to this failure of parenting and teaching. Bickley’s notes about the Edwards’ companions are interesting as well, given that they come just after his description of Gaveston: “that undoubted cleverness, that *esprit*, which was later to so irritate the barons, that refinement of vice, which was to earn their contempt.”²⁷ While not, perhaps, entirely a compliment, this description certainly suggests that Gaveston is not included in the “ditchers, watermen and the like.” However, it would be quite unusual to include Gaveston in the “few kindred spirits of more adequate parentage” either, as Gaveston’s Gascon background has normally been one of the most negatively commented on parts of his background. Fletcher notes that many of these activities “would have been perfectly manly for most of his subjects.” This clearly demonstrates that masculinity was not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ concept; proper, appropriate masculinity had to contextually match other social markers.²⁸ While Edward’s activities would have been appropriate displays of masculinity for those of other social statues, they were not proper displays of the kingly masculinity which was expected of him.

²⁵ Raphaell Holinshed, *The Chronicles of England, from William the Conqueror* (1585), p. 342.

²⁶ Francis Bickley, *King’s Favourites* (New York, 1910), p. 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Fletcher, ‘Manhood, Kingship’, p. 136-7; Prestwich, *The Three*, p. 72.

Fletcher further comments that “there is evidence by the mid 1310s public talk was beginning to suggest that if Edward did not behave like a king, then perhaps he was not really a king at all.”²⁹ The chronicles report widespread rumors regarding Edward II’s parentage – that, perhaps, he was not in fact the son of Edward I. From *Lanercost*:

...there arrived in Oxford a certain unknown and ignoble individual who...made claim to the kingdom of England...He declared that my lord Edward, who at the time possessed the kingdom, was not of the blood royal, nor had any right to the realm...the said lord Edward resembled the elder lord Edward in none of his virtues. For it was commonly reported that he [Edward II] had devoted himself privately from his youth to...vanities and frivolities wherein it doth not become a king’s son to busy himself.³⁰

The implication that Edward II does not resemble his father is made not in reference to physical looks, but rather to temperament. The implication made, then, is that ‘kingliness’ – ie. the proper interests and pursuits of kingship – is something inherent to a king, passed on through the divinely marked, royal bloodline. Edward’s lack of these qualities, it is then implied, stems not from his upbringing or personal nature, but rather from bastardy. Interestingly, what is not included in these reports is that, if true, Edward I – usually presented as a beacon of proper kingship and kingly masculinity – was cuckolded by his wife, and, seemingly unknowingly, brought up a bastard as his heir.

In 1325, Queen Isabella was sent to Paris to negotiate with her brother, King Charles IV, after violence had erupted in English-held Gascony in 1323. As part of the negotiations, Isabella sent for her son with Edward II, the future Edward III, to travel to France and perform homage to his uncle, after being gifted the French lands by his father. After completing his homage, Prince Edward and his mother remained in France, despite calls to return to England by the King, and by November, Isabella was openly refusing to return to England while Despenser remained at court.³¹ Isabella’s conflict with Edward’s chosen favorites is a clear pattern throughout this period; she and her natal family in France had also been at the center of the calls to exile Gaveston. As will be explored in more detail in later chapters, this reflects an ongoing pattern throughout this period in which queens and their natal families are at significant odds with these emerging favorites, suggesting perhaps a ‘zero-sum’ understanding of power and influence within the royal courts.³² These conflicts also reflect the dual failures of Edward II within contemporary gendered standards: both his penchant for inappropriate

²⁹ Fletcher, ‘Manhood, Kingship’, p. 139.

³⁰ *Lanercost*, pp. 221-2.

³¹ *Vita*, pp. 228-9.

³² This will be explored further, particularly in Chapter II on Isabella of France.

favoritism and his inability to control Isabella. That the two were at odds, resulting in fracturing within court and society – and later open military conflict – only further reinforces Edward's inability to control the spaces he was meant to rule: his family and his court. In a related discussion of the shortcomings of kings to rule, Fletcher records an interesting account regarding Henry VI in the 1440s, noting that:

for the critics of Henry VI, lack of vigour – the essential quality of manhood – lay at the root of his failures as a king... allegedly said that, whenever the kyng *wold ha[ue]* [h]ys *dysporte wyth our souerayn lady the Quene*, the bishop and others around the king *conselyd hym that he schuld not come nye her*. It was because of this that the land lacked a prince. Thus the king's lack of will meant not only that he did not rule the country, but that he did not even have the will to disport himself with the queen, and so furnish the kingdom with an heir.³³

In this case of Henry VI, the concern is around not fulfilling his familial duties in a different manner than Edward II, but the parallels between failures of the family and failures of kingship and dynasty remain. This also returns to the conceptualization of the body politic with the king at the head, and of the nation as paralleling a family structure – without a strong, healthy head, the body will fail, and without healthy leadership producing future generations, the future of the nation is not secure. While Edward's 'vigour' in reference to producing children is never questioned, this quality is questioned in other ways. Earlier in the same article, Fletcher notes the semantic relationship between the use of 'manly' and 'manhood' in late medieval English texts and the use of the Latin terms *viriliter* and *virtus*. "*manly* action is above all vigorous, steadfast action in a fighting situation. This vigour is often called for in circumstances of defence, especially against the odds."³⁴ Edward's lack of reputation as a military leader, fairly earned or not, paired with his penchant for unsuitable hobbies, certainly lends credence to a perceived lack of vigor, and thus a contextual lack of masculinity.

In response to the open defiance from his wife, Edward confiscated Isabella's lands, which may have been passed on to Eleanor de Clare, Edward's niece and Hugh Despenser's wife. Reportedly, Eleanor was treated as queen in Isabella's absence, and one Hainault chronicler even suggested she may have been Edward's sexual partner in this period. If true, this calls to mind Laura Tompkins' conception of the 'uncrowned queen' in reference to Alice Perrers during the last decades of Edward III's reign, in which Alice, as Edward's favorite, took on many of the social and political roles of a queen, but did so without the constraints or

³³ Fletcher, 'Manhood, Kingship', p. 134.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 129, p. 136

propriety of marriage and queenship.³⁵ While Eleanor de Clare's position, if the Hainault chronicler was correct, was certainly never as influential as Alice's would later be, this framing of a replacement English queen at the English court may have served to parallel the development of the beginning of Isabella and Mortimers 'reign' in France, and potentially provides Edward II with an English partner in this fight as tensions with the French – tensions which, by design, were lessened by his marriage to Isabella – reignite. Isabella's place in this conflict is an interesting one: while this particular series of events is set off by her failure to do Edward's bidding or, alternatively, Edward's refusal to act as a proper husband, there is also on-going tensions with Isabella's natal family in France. As Edward and Isabella's marriage was intrinsically tied to peace from the start, she was always destined to have her loyalties pulled in two directions, especially in a conflict as long-running and complex as the now-termed 'Hundred Years War'. Given the unlikelihood of permanent peace between England and France in this period, there is a question as to whether or not Isabella was doomed to fail in her role as mediator or in the center of this conflict. While far less politically advantageous, the possibility of an English partner for Edward could have, at least in theory, had fewer concerns regarding split loyalties.

Ian Mortimer's work accepts Eleanor de Clare's position at this time, and suggests that Isabella was aware she was being spied on by Eleanor before Isabella's journey to France. Whether or not she was a spy for Edward, Caroline Dunn's recent work examining Isabella's personal networks concludes that Eleanor was one of Isabella's close companions, alongside her sister Elizabeth, and the ladies Joan of Bar and Marie de St Pol. This is an interesting group as it is not clearly an English or French faction, but instead contains a mix of backgrounds.³⁶

It has alternatively been suggested that Edward may have been involved romantically or sexually with Despenser during this period, though there is certainly no strong evidence to support this conclusion. More likely, the many parallels in the relationships of Edward with Despenser and Gaveston, and the animosity displayed by Isabella toward both men, has resulted in an extrapolation of the, far more credible, rumors regarding Gaveston's relationship with Edward to be extended to include Despenser and further harm Edward's reputation.³⁷

³⁵ Laura Tompkins, 'The Uncrowned Queen: Alice Perrers, Edward III and Political Crisis in Fourteenth-Century England, 1360-1377' (unpublished thesis, St. Andrews, 2013), pp. 70, 217-8: my thanks to Laura Tompkins for providing me with a copy of this thesis while under embargo for this project; see Chapter III for more on Alice's status at the court of Edward III.

³⁶ Caroline Dunn, 'Elite Service and Noblewomen's Friendship Networks in Late Medieval England' (Leeds, 2023).

³⁷ Mortimer, *The Greatest Traitor*, p. 79.

While in France, Isabella began a political relationship with Roger Mortimer of Wigmore. Most accounts of this relationship suggest that the two were involved in a sexual affair as well, though recent scholarship is beginning to question this conclusion, or, at the very least, the inevitability of it in the historiography.³⁸ Previous scholarship has noted the lack of contemporary accusations against Isabella, but have attributed this lack of rumor to social politics, rather than a lack of adultery.³⁹ Michael Evans, in particular, notes the importance of recognizing the pattern of criticizing queens through accusations of adultery, and whether this might be a standard trope employed against Isabella in the literature post-1325.⁴⁰ The alternate, possibly more convincing, conclusion – that they were not, in fact involved sexually, but rather were social and political allies united by a common enmity towards Edward's favorites and his dedication to them – has been unsurprisingly left out of most analysis until recently, when scholarship has begun to explore these assumptions. As will be discussed again in later chapters, this contrasts significantly with the accounts of Edward and Gaveston, where the language in the sources is far more explicit in some cases, but the secondary analysis continues to waffle about the sexual elements of their relationship. Commenting on this phenomenon, Kathryn Warner notes that

[e]very piece of evidence that Edward II might have loved Piers Gaveston and Hugh Despenser romantically and/or sexually [...] is placed under a microscope, examined in isolation, and nipped out of existence. By contrast, the notion that Roger Mortimer was Queen Isabella's 'lover' and that she was a 'certain adulteress' is treated with unquestioning reverence that some people accord to Holy Writ.⁴¹

Following Warner, Evans suggests that "this double standard may reflect heteronormative prejudices (a heterosexual adultery is assumed to be true by default, but a homosexual one is not), or it may represent a tradition of criticism of adulterous queens."⁴² In this particular case, it is likely the intersection of these two traditions which have solidified the (unproven) assumptions regarding Isabella and Mortimer without proper academic study. The reality in each case will likely never be known and is neither particularly important nor the point, but the

³⁸ For more on the alternate ways of interpreting Isabella's relationship with Roger Mortimer, see: Evans 'Isabella', pp. 89-104; Kathryn Warner, "The Relationship of Queen Isabella and Roger Mortimer (2)," February 20, 2021, *Edward II*. <http://edwardthesecond.blogspot.com/2021/02/the-relationship-of-queen-isabella-and.html>.

³⁹ Laynesmith, Joanna, 'Telling Tales of Adulterous Queens in Medieval England: From Olympias of Macedonia to Elizabeth Woodville,' in *Every Inch a King: Comparative Studies on Kings and Kingship in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, ed. Lynette Mitchell and Charles Melville (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 195-214.

⁴⁰ Evans, 'Isabella', pp. 89-104; For more on this topic, see Laynesmith, 'Telling Tales', pp. 196-9.

⁴¹ Warner, 'The Relationship'.

⁴² Evans, 'Isabella', p. 90; Heyam, *Reputation*, pp. 18-9: further analysis of Isabella's reputation as an adulteress can be found in the following section.

underlying assumptions regarding gendered power and relationships requires confrontation and disruption in order to better understand each figure and the complexities and nuance of this period.⁴³

Roger Mortimer was born in 1287 to Margaret de Fiennes, the wife of Edmund de Mortimer, lord of Wigmore. The Wigmores had been landholders since the eleventh century and had pushed westward into Wales in the thirteenth. By the late thirteenth century, through marriages and the support of Edward I, the Mortimers had become one of the prominent baronial families, especially in the Welsh marches. Interestingly, given Mortimer's later relationship with Edward II, after Mortimer's father's death in 1304, his wardship was given to Piers Gaveston, the future king's favorite, before Mortimer was granted his lands, underage, in 1306 and knighted alongside Edward II, and many other young magnates, later in that year.⁴⁴

Given his importance to the events of the late 1320s, there has still been fairly little work on Roger Mortimer on his own, though he naturally features in most of that work which covers Isabella, Edward and the period. Ian Mortimer's 2003 monograph *The Greatest Traitor* remains the only scholarly biography of Roger Mortimer, while Paul Dryburgh's PhD thesis on the career of Mortimer, though unpublished, is also a key source.⁴⁵

During his father's lifetime, Roger was betrothed to Joan de Geneville, the sole heiress of the large Geneville inheritance held by her grandfather. In 1307, the Geneville lands were transferred to Roger and Joan when her grandfather retired to a Dominican house. Joan had two sisters, both of whom entered the priory of Aconbury in Hertfordshire, leaving Joan as sole heiress. This choice, intentionally made by her parents in order to avoid the splitting of the inheritance, is an interesting counterpoint to the de Clare family, and the issues the younger Despenser encounters with his brothers-in-law during this same period.⁴⁶ For Mortimer, these lands consolidated his holdings in western England and Wales, but most significantly, expanded his holdings in Ireland. Much of Mortimer's career from 1308-20 was spent in Ireland, including in conflict there with Edward Bruce in 1315-8. After an initial defeat in 1315 and retreat to England, he returned in early 1317 and was broadly successful in 1317-8, when Bruce was killed in battle. The *Vita Edwardi Secundi* places Mortimer at the siege of Bristol in July 1316, along with several other barons, under the leadership of Bartholomew Badlesmere. Mortimer was appointed justiciar in Ireland in 1316 and again in 1319, before

⁴³ More on this will be discussed in the Chapter IV discussion on the career of Piers Gaveston.

⁴⁴ *Vita*, p. 185 n. 377.

⁴⁵ Mortimer, *The Greatest Traitor*; Paul Richard Dryburgh, 'The career of Roger Mortimer, the first earl of March (c. 1287-1330)' (unpublished PhD thesis, Bristol, 2002).

⁴⁶ Mortimer, *The Greatest Traitor*, p. 23.

returning his focus back to his lands in England and Wales in 1320. The *Vita*, in its mention of the conflict with Bruce, interestingly does not mention Mortimer, but rather only references his lieutenant, Edmund Butler, who served as sole Justiciar before 1316, and then under Mortimer after his appointment.⁴⁷

In this early period of his political career, Mortimer was politically neutral, serving, for instance, on the delegation which facilitated negotiations between Edward and Lancaster in 1318. This perceived neutrality, along with his rising socio-political status, is reflected in his inclusion on several of the councils and commissions created as part of and following the treaty between Edward and Lancaster, including one designated to reform the royal household. The parliament rolls list Mortimer's name as one of the negotiators of the 'Treaty' of Leake, having been sent by the king to negotiate with Lancaster and his men, and included in the oversight council put in place afterwards. This positioning suggests that at this point Mortimer was held in esteem and trust by both the King and Lancaster.⁴⁸

This neutrality shifted after the rise to power of the Despensers. In particular, the landholding ambitions of the younger Despenser were targeted at the southern Welsh marches – as a major landholder in Wales, Mortimer had reason to be wary of the Despensers and to object to their promotions. This concern was roused into open defiance by several of the marcher lords in 1320 when Edward seized the lordship of Gower, which Mortimer and others claimed as their own, and gave it to Hugh Despenser the younger.⁴⁹ The *Vita* records the chief barons involved in the complaint as “John Mowbray, the earl of Hereford, Hugh Audley, and Roger Clifford, Roger Amory, and amongst others Roger Mortimer, the uncle and the nephew. These came with many others; and they had the support of the earl of Lancaster.”⁵⁰ The *Vita* continues, stating the complaints of each of the barons: “The two Roger Mortimers were hostile to Hugh Despenser because he proposed to rob the one, and promised to avenge the death of his grandfather upon each of them.”⁵¹

By early 1321, Mortimer had been stripped of his appointment as Justiciar of Ireland, and he – along with his uncle, also Roger Mortimer, and the other marcher lords – joined forces with Lancaster against Edward and the Despensers. The marcher dissidents achieved a short-lived victory in April, after a campaign across the Despenser lands in Wales, which resulted in the exile of the Despensers and pardons for the marcher lords. Hostilities resumed shortly

⁴⁷ *Vita*, pp. 106-7, n. 206.

⁴⁸ PROME Edward II 1318.

⁴⁹ *Vita*, pp. 182-7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 186-7.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 186-7.

when, in October, Bartholomew Badlesmere refused entry for Queen Isabella to Leeds Castle, giving Edward cause to lay siege. Though contemporary accounts suggest that the dissidents still had fighting options, by January both Rogers Mortimer surrendered to the king after negotiations made through the king's brothers, and were sent to the Tower.⁵² These negotiations are described in the *Anonimale Chronicle*: "...by the conspiracy of messengers, his [Edward II's] brothers and others, who came back and forth between the king and the two Mortimers like false brokers, and did so much by their cunning and conspiring that the Mortimers came to the king as in peace and to treat of accord between the two parties."⁵³ Their trials were held in March, after the defeat of Lancaster, and both were initially condemned to death; their sentences were later commuted to life imprisonment.⁵⁴

In August, 1323, Mortimer (the younger) escaped from the Tower and successfully fled to France, despite attempts to recapture him, where he was welcomed by Charles IV, at the time at odds with Edward. Mortimer's escape from the Tower was aided by several allies, one of whom was suspected to be the bishop of Hereford, Adam of Orleton. The account in the *Anonimale Chronicle* gives a list of possible methods by which Mortimer may have escaped, and includes the accusations against Hereford, as well as additional accusations against the bishops of Norwich and Dublin, reinforcing that there were significant members of the English court and clergy who were at odds with Edward as well.⁵⁵ It was in France that Mortimer's relationship with Queen Isabella, whatever it may have included, began, when she arrived in 1325 on the diplomatic mission for her husband. Ian Mortimer suggests that Isabella and Mortimer already had some kind of understanding or plan developing as early as 1323, before he escaped the Tower, and that Isabella was involved in his escape, but this conclusion is not supported by other sources.⁵⁶ When the *Gesta Edwardi de Carnarvan* re-introduces Roger Mortimer into the narrative in France in 1325, he is already labeled as 'reginae dominus' in reference to his relationship with Isabella, though this could easily be a label applied in hindsight, and does not necessarily suggest a pre-existing relationship before 1325. It also identifies him as 'the nephew' (in reference to his uncle, also Roger Mortimer) and references his capture and escape from the Tower.⁵⁷

⁵² *Gesta Edwardi*, p. 74; *Vita et Mors*, pp. 302-3.

⁵³ *Anonimale*, p. 107.

⁵⁴ *Paulini*, p. 301; *Anonimale*, p. 110.

⁵⁵ *Paulini*, pp. 305-6; *Vita*, p. 232 n. 485; *Anonimale*, pp. 116-8; Johannis de Trokelowe, *Johannis de Trokelowe et Henrici de Blaneford, Chronica Monasterii S. Albani* (ed.) Henry Thomas Riley (London, 1886), p. 145.

⁵⁶ *Polychronicon*, pp. 317-9; Mortimer, *The Greatest Traitor*, p. 76.

⁵⁷ *Gesta Edwardi*, pp. 85-6: "Adhaesit ibidem reginae dominus Rogerus de Mortuomari nepos, qui de Turri Londoniae procarcere sibi deputata latenter exit et evasit."

Whatever the exact nature of their personal relationship, this political alliance was successful enough to lead to the invasion of England in September 1326, bringing Prince Edward with them. Mortimer and John of Hainault led the invasion with troops and funds from the low countries, arranged along with the betrothal of the Prince Edward to Philippa of Hainault.⁵⁸ Within weeks of landing, the forces of Isabella and Mortimer were triumphant. There are varying ways in which the leadership of these forces is referenced in the sources. The *Polychronicon* does not name John of Hainault, but rather lists them as “the qwene of Ynglonde, with Edward her sonne and Roger Mortymare.” In contrast, interestingly, the *Brut* describes the invasion as being led by ‘the quene Isabell and Sir Edward hir sone, Duc of Gyene, Sir Edmund of Wodestok, Erl of Kent, and Sir John the Erles brother of Henaud.’⁵⁹ While the secondary list may differ, both accounts listed here are clear that the leadership of the invasion rested with Isabella and Prince Edward. This clarity was vital to legitimizing the actions of the invasion forces, and also makes sense for those sources authored during the reign of Edward III.

Edward II and Despensers fled west, and were captured by the invading forces. The older and younger Despensers were both executed, on 27 October and 24 November, 1326, respectively.⁶⁰ The *Annales Paulini* report the arrival of Mortimer into the city of London, where he was welcomed.⁶¹ They state that he “submitted himself to the citizens of the London, promising to defend against the grievances of the lady Isabella and maintain the liberties of the said city.”⁶² The status of London in this conflict is interesting, as it is consistently and overwhelmingly depicted as pro-Isabella and anti-Edward II. This is clear in the sources produced in London as well, as was discussed above.

Edward II had allegedly been threatened with deposition twice before, in 1310 and 1321, but the events of 1326 proved to be more than a threat.⁶³ Prince Edward was named protector of the realm on 26 October. In January, Parliament was called, and drew up a series of articles which outlined Edward II’s failures as a king, and which presented the incompetence as a king and leader that has haunted his reputation ever since. It was demanded that Edward

⁵⁸ *Vita et Mors*, p. 308; *Lanercost*, p. 251; Ormrod, ‘Philippa of Hainault: Dignity, Duty, and Display,’ in Aidan Norrie et al. (eds.) *Later Plantagenets and the Wars of the Roses Consorts: Power, Influence, and Dynasty* (Switzerland, 2023), pp. 50-1.

⁵⁹ *Annales*, p. 319; *Polychronicon*, pp. 318-21; *The Brut or The Chronicles of England*, (ed.) Friedrich W.D. Brie (London, 1906), p. 236.

⁶⁰ *Paulini* 1, pp. 317, 319; *Monachi Cujusdam Malmesberiensis Vita Edwardi II*, (ed.) Stubbs p. 289.

⁶¹ *Anonimale*, p. 33.

⁶² *Paulini*, p. 322: ‘dominus Rogerus de Mortuomari venit cum magna comitiva ad Gihaldam, et ibi submisit se civibus Londoniensibus. Promittens se defendere querelam dominae Isabellae refinae, et libertates dictae civitatis manutenere.’

⁶³ Phillips, *Edward II*, p. 522.

give up the throne in favor of his son, which he did under great pressure on 20 January, 1327.⁶⁴ Michael Prestwich notes that these events are not actually a clear case, but rather a confusing mixture of deposition and abdication, and that “such problems as how parliament could act in the absence of the king, who was an essential element in any parliament, were slurred over and not fully resolved.”⁶⁵ Edward III succeeded as king on 25 January and was crowned on 1 February.

The former king was placed in custody, eventually being held in Berkeley Castle. There were several plots to free him, but none were successful. It was announced in Parliament that Edward had died on 21 September, 1327, and his body was displayed before being buried in St Peter’s Abbey in Gloucester in December. His cause of death has never been conclusively proven, but rumors that he was murdered are present in both contemporary material and historical scholarship.⁶⁶ Some suggestions that he had not died, but rather escaped, persisted – so much so that his half-brother, Edmund, earl of Kent, was executed in 1330 for plotting to restore the former king to the throne.⁶⁷

In the years immediately after the deposition of Edward II and ascension of Edward III, Mortimer, alongside Queen Isabella, was the dominant political figure in England.⁶⁸ *Lanercost* accuses Edward of “acting on the pestilent advice of his mother and Sir Roger de Mortimer (they being the chief controllers of the king, who was barely fifteen years of age)”.⁶⁹ *Anonimalle* similarly reports that “the queen, mother of the new king, and sir Roger Mortimer usurped royal power and the treasure of the realm and they held the king under their subjection.”⁷⁰ The terminology used here promotes the image of Isabella and Mortimer as the center of control, despite the existence of the ruling council, and as enforcing their will on the king. Mortimer presided over the executions of the former king’s inner circle, including the two Despensers.⁷¹ This returns to Tompkins’ suggestion of an uncrowned monarch, taking on the power and influence without the established boundaries which accompanied the royal

⁶⁴ Paulini, p. 322.

⁶⁵ Prestwich, *The Three*, p. 87; For further analysis of the complexity of the politics surrounding the deposition/abdication of Edward II, see Claire Valente, ‘The Deposition and Abdication of Edward II’ *The English Historical Review*, 113, n. 453 (September, 1998), pp. 852-881; Phillips, *Edward II*, pp. 536-9.

⁶⁶ *Lanercost*, p. 259; For more on the discussions of Edward II’s cause of death, and how it intersects with his legacy and reputation, see Heyam, *Reputation*, pp. 241-76.

⁶⁷ For more on the possibility of Edward II having escaped custody and survived, see Mortimer, *The Greatest* chapters 12 and 12 (revisited) and Ian Mortimer, ‘The Death of Edward II in Berkeley Castle’ *The English Historical Review*, 120, n. 489 (December, 2005), pp. 1175-1214.

⁶⁸ Ormrod, ‘Philippa’, p. 52.

⁶⁹ *Lanercost*, p. 259.

⁷⁰ *Anonimalle*, p. 141.

⁷¹ Paulini, pp. 317, 319.

position. In this case, Mortimer seems to occupy a role as an ‘uncrowned king’, partner to Isabella’s maintained status as queen, despite her technical role as dowager after her son’s ascension and marriage – and despite neither of them technically ruling over the minority of Edward III, which was left to a ruling council in the hands of Henry of Lancaster. As will be discussed in more depth shortly, the evidence certainly suggests that Isabella was unwilling to shift in position from Queen to Queen Mother, and so while placing her son on the throne was her best method of taking power, the generational shift it implied did not immediately emerge. Three of Mortimer’s sons were knighted during the ceremonies of the coronation of Edward III, and the imprisoned Edward II was transferred from the custody of Lancaster to that of Thomas Berkeley, Mortimer’s son-in-law, before the former king’s death (often attributed in one way or another to Mortimer and the Queen, though never proven); events which both ceremonially and practically symbolized Mortimer’s climb to power.

Mortimer did not hold any official position of governance, but rather maintained his power and position through his association and relationships with the king and queen-mother. He was referred to as the ‘king’s kinsman’ and treated as a member of the royal family. Mortimer established himself as the most powerful landowner in the Welsh Marches, beyond even that which the younger Despenser had been able to aggregate. Contemporary accusations of the usurpation of power stemmed from accusations that Mortimer prevented anyone from speaking with the king without his permission, and that he bypassed the will and authority of the council set up to rule during Edward’s minority. These accusations directly mirror those made against Gaveston when he was present around Edward II, and also later made regarding Robert de Vere in regards to his position during the reign of Richard II.⁷² That this was a common accusation reinforces the importance of physical access to the king, and the power of those who could control and restrict this access. As mentioned above, James Ross’ work suggests that de Vere was not as present as he is made out to be in the sources, suggesting that perhaps the accusations of this type against him may have been unfounded, or, at least, overstated. This may suggest that these were rote accusations of control and denial of access to the king, intended to encompass a range of possible wrongdoings, much as accusations of adultery against queens seem to be used to denote other failings as well. If true, this does not undermine the importance of this issue, but rather should be read to reinforce its importance, just as accusations of adultery only reinforce the importance of control of female sexuality.

⁷² Robert de Vere, and his relationship with Richard II, will be one of the case studies featured in Chapter IV.

By 1328, there was growing dissatisfaction with Mortimer and his position, in particular in relation to the English relationship with Scotland, which had deteriorated with Scottish raids into Ireland and northern England, and eventually led to a peace very much in favor of the Scots in 1328. While the political events in Scotland and France – often suggested to be the personal fault of Mortimer and Isabella – certainly did not make Mortimer friends at the court – or, rather, the ruling council – of Edward III, like the favorites of Edward II before him, it was Mortimer’s lust for power and land which eventually precipitated his downfall. Henry, earl of Lancaster, was effectively the leader of the minority council, and, like his brother before him, felt that his influence and position were being usurped by the undeserving favorite of a royal.⁷³ As described in *Anonimalle*: “sir Henry, earl of Lancaster, who by common assent of the realm at the king’s coronation was made his chief guardian, could not come near to him to advise him or protect him.”⁷⁴ As has been mentioned earlier, one of the key threads of commonality throughout this project is the importance of access, and of control of access. Here, though Lancaster has been granted the official power of guardianship of the young King Edward III, his inability to actually access the king limits his ability to exercise this power. Even without holding official positions of power, Isabella and Mortimer are able to maintain their power by controlling physical access to the king. Lancaster attempted to stir opinion against Mortimer, and refused to attend the 1328 parliament which saw Mortimer elevated to Earl of March. The *Annales Paulini* describe this particular parliament, noting that the archbishops, bishops and ‘almost all others’ refused to attend, ‘in magna discordia’ but that ‘nevertheless, by the lord king and his council,’ Mortimer was elevated.⁷⁵ Mortimer outmaneuvered Lancaster, resulting in a humiliating surrender by Lancaster and his allies. The execution of the king’s uncle, the earl of Kent, elucidates the power held by Isabella’s faction, and the incredible influence perceived to be held by Mortimer at this juncture. It serves as a key event in turning the tide of opinion against Mortimer, according to the chronicles. *Lanercost* again suggests Mortimer’s outsized influence in this decision: “it was said that his death was procured chiefly through the agency of Sir Roger de Mortimer, Earl of March, who at that time was more than king in the kingdom, forasmuch as the queen-mother and he ruled the whole realm.”⁷⁶ This phrasing is particularly important as it displays the view that Mortimer

⁷³ Henry was the younger brother of Thomas, who had been executed under Edward II. Henry had not participated in opposition to Edward II and petitioned to receive the title and estates after the death of Thomas.

⁷⁴ *Anonimalle*, p. 141.

⁷⁵ *Paulini*, p. 342: “sed in magna discordia archiepiscopi et episcopi et fere omnes alii inde recesserunt. Tamen per dominum regem et consilium suum...dominus Rogerus de Mortuomari comes de Marchia.”

⁷⁶ *Lanercost*, p. 265.

had usurped the crown itself, unlike those favorites before him. While the favorites of Edward II were accused of accumulating undue power and wealth, they were never accused of attempting to take the throne itself, even when Gaveston had been left in England as Edward II's regent. Mortimer himself seems to have recognized the danger that accompanied allegations such as these, arranging for continuous body guards for himself and Isabella at court.

Given that Isabella and the barons' primary complaints during the primacy of Gaveston and the Despensers were based on their personal greed and ability to translate favoritism into wealth and power, the hypocrisy of the (short) 'reign' of Mortimer cannot be overstated. He significantly expanded his own holdings, including securing the former lands of many of Edward II's favorites themselves, and received the wardships and marriage rights of several marcher estates. He continued to expand, in particular into Wales and Ireland, entrenching his personal sphere of influence. The parliament rolls from November 1330 – after Mortimer's arrest and around the time of his execution – relate this perceived greed, and the means by which he pursued it, accusing him of imprisoning a woman until he was granted use of her lands "as if for the use of our lord the king."⁷⁷ The inclusion here of this phrase is striking as one of the charges levied against Mortimer, in addition to greed and covetousness, was usurping royal power. These accusations do appear in the parliament rolls for the 1330 parliament of Edward III, shortly after Edward III took back personal control of the government and the execution of Mortimer without defense. At this juncture, it served Edward III and his supporters to demonize Mortimer, justifying their actions and attempting to bring the various factions which had been at odds for a decade back together through a common enemy.

Mortimer's creation as the earl of March was a surprise to contemporaries, as it was the first comital title not linked to a county – instead, it reflected the importance of the marches to his territorial power. Dryburgh notes that the choice of title, made by Mortimer himself, recognized both the consolidation of his power in this area, and simultaneously elevated Mortimer above the other marcher lords, cementing their fears and opposition to his regime.⁷⁸ Most unusually, he appropriated the lands of his uncle - who had not escaped the Tower with him, but died there in 1326 – despite his uncle having a legitimate son over the age of majority who should have inherited. These actions suggest that Mortimer was confident that, if his

⁷⁷ PROME Edward III, November 1330, p. 58, n.187.

⁷⁸ Mortimer, *The Greatest*, p. 179; Chris Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages* (New York, 2nd ed., 2003), p. 33; Dryburgh, 'The Career', p. 127-8.

cousin had tried to pursue his claims to the lands, Mortimer would be able to maintain them though his political influence.

In addition to territorial expansion, Mortimer persisted in displaying his gained wealth and power, hosting banquets, round tables, and a 1328 tournament where Edward III and Isabella were the principal guests. As part of the ceremonies, he betrothed two of his daughters to the sons of comital families, suggesting his desire and anxiety to further entrench his family into the noble families of England, and possibly also recognizing the precariousness of his position. The combination of Mortimer's territorial expansion, personal power and influence, breaches in protocol and lack of respect towards the king, the flaunting of the supposed relationship with Isabella, and Mortimer's own arrogance all combined to result in contemporary reports that Mortimer was intending to usurp the kingship itself.

The case of the earl of Kent attempting to reinstate Edward II to the throne, believing rumors that he was still alive, is an interesting one as Kent was an early supporter of Isabella and Mortimer against the Despensers. Kent's 'treason' displays how far Isabella and Mortimer's 'reign' had fallen in the eyes of the nobles and their inability to maintain support for their regime. The execution of Kent and failure of Lancaster suggest that any plot against Mortimer required the support of the crown itself, support which Edward III, now seventeen years old in 1330, was only too happy to provide.⁷⁹ In October, 1330, Mortimer was arrested by a group of Edward III's associates at a parliament Mortimer himself had called, after which Edward announced he was taking personal control of government. The *Annales Paulini* record this event, identifying him as 'Roger Mortimer, who is called earl of March, the greatest of all the men of the realm', and that he was found 'in the chamber of Queen Isabella' at Nottingham Castle.⁸⁰ The phrasing found in the *Annales Paulini* does not necessarily imply anything sexual or even inappropriate about this location, and lists others present at the time of his capture, including the Bishop of Lincoln.⁸¹ Fourteen charges were brought against him at a parliament the following month, reflecting the complaints against him, and he was declared guilty by the peers on the basis of the notoriety of his crimes, without the opportunity for defense. The *Annales Paulini* record the reason for his execution as responsibility for the death of the former

⁷⁹ C.G. Crump, 'The Arrest of Roger Mortimer and Queen Isabel' *The English Historical Review*, 26, n. 102 (April, 1911), pp. 331-2.

⁸⁰ *Paulini*, p. 352: "dominus Rogerus de Mortemer, qui vocabatur comes de la Marche, maximus inter omnes proceres regni, captus fuit apud Nottingham in castello in camera Isabellae reginae"; *Malmesbriensi*, p. 291: refers to Mortimer as "tunc comes Marchiae vocatus"; *Polychronicon*, pp. 326-7.

⁸¹ Evans, 'Isabella', p. 91.

king.⁸² *Lanercost* lists the death of the former king, death of Kent, losses in Scotland, and reputed relationship with Isabella.⁸³ He was executed at Tyburn on 29 November. The charges against him were still being repeated in the parliament rolls as late as the April 1354 parliament, where Mortimer's grandson, also Roger Mortimer, petitioned for the return of some of the titles lost after the execution of his grandfather for treason. The record of this petition includes the full list of charges brought against the elder Mortimer in 1330, for which the titles and properties had been lost.⁸⁴

The *Gesta Edwardi* locates these events in the sentence following the birth of King Edward's first child, a son also named Edward and known later as the Black Prince. While chronologically this is accurate – the Prince was born in June, 1330 and Mortimer's arrest was in October, just four months later – this also could serve to intentionally link the two events. Edward III was still only 17 at the time of his son's birth, and may have felt the birth of an heir, and accompanying dynastic security, brought him the political support he needed to overthrow Mortimer and his supporters, and reign as king in his own right. Philippa's coronation, delayed since the time of their marriage, finally took place in February 1330, shortly after news of her first pregnancy emerged at court, suggesting that impending parenthood elevated her status, as well as Edward's.⁸⁵ In the months and years following Edward III taking back his personal rule, he stripped Isabella of much of the land and wealth she had accumulated during the Mortimer years. Some of this wealth was given to Edward's young wife, Philippa of Hainault, who had not received the customary dowry at the time of her marriage. Katia Wright notes that it was not uncommon for queens to have to wait years for their dower, often dependent on the availability of property, and that this can sometimes, though not always, be linked to a living dowager. Isabella herself did not receive her full dower until 1318, 10 years after her marriage to Edward II.⁸⁶ Even so, Isabella was still alive in 1330, and these actions suggest a changing of the guard of sorts – if not one done voluntarily by the older generation – and an assertion of

⁸² *Paulini*, p. 352: "in quo parliament dictus dominus Rogerus de Moretemer fuit morti adjudicatus pro morte regis Edwardi de Carnervan."

⁸³ *Lanercost*, pp. 266-7; Mortimer, *The Greatest*, p. 202: Isabella was never accused of adultery with Mortimer, nor was she accused of any involvement in the Berkely plot.

⁸⁴ PROME Edward III, April 1354, p. 255, n. 9; PROME Edward III, November 1355, p. 267, n. 29: Roger Mortimer the elder's son, Edmund, was restored to the family estates at Wigmore after his father's death, but died in December 1331 (just one year after his father), before he could re-acquire any other lands or titles. His son, this Roger Mortimer the younger, inherited his father's small lands and wealth at three years old, and slowly re-acquired much of the lost titles and land over his lifetime.

⁸⁵ Ormrod, 'Philippa', p. 52.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-2; Katia Wright, 'A Dower for Life: Understanding the Dowers of England's Medieval Queens,' in Aidan Norrie et. al. (eds.) *Later Plantagenets and the Wars of the Roses Consorts: Power, Influence, and Dynasty* (Switzerland, 2023), pp. 147-8.

the rights of Edward and Philippa as monarchs, the catalyst for which seems to have been the birth of their son.

Masculinities and Legacies

Modern scholarship has certainly not become more sympathetic to Edward. Even after describing Edward's more favorable qualities – and noting that many of those considered unfavorable in the fourteenth-century are not necessarily hallmarks of either a poor leader or a bad person – Michael Prestwich states, in a passage which is at odds even with examples brought earlier in the same chapter:

Edward II was lazy and incompetent, liable to outbursts of temper over unimportant issues, yet indecisive when it came to major issues. He was held in little respect by his people, and it is hardly surprising that there were rumours that he was a changeling and not the real son of Edward I...the fact that Edward had ambition as a king made his weakness all the more dangerous.⁸⁷

He later describes Edward after his capture, when it was demanded he give up the throne: “Edward displayed the full weakness of his character, fainting with grief and begging for mercy.”⁸⁸ In addition to inheriting a heavy debt and the war with Scotland, Edward II also inherited an aristocracy distrustful of the monarchy and of the promise of reform – a distrust reflected in the Ordinances of 1311 and reinforced by Edward's repeal of them. Edward's legacy and reputation were cemented during the reign of his great-grandson Richard II, first in Richard's attempt to canonize Edward, and later, in the parallels made – especially in regard to both kings' penchants for favorites – during and after Richard's own experiences with deposition.⁸⁹ As Ian Mortimer notes, “Edward II might not have lost his throne if he had not been so intense in his friendships with men who had equally intense enemies.”⁹⁰ Fletcher recounts similar contemporary feelings recorded in the account of Ranulph Higden and the *Vita Edwardi Secundi*:

Higden states that the king *was fair of body and great of strength (corpore elegans, viribus praestans)*, but goes on to say that in his mores he was very inconstant - *moribus...plurimum inconstans*. Had Edward not wasted his time, gifts and honour on ribald associates, the lower classes and Piers Gaveston, all would have been well.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Prestwich, *The Three*, p. 73.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p. 87.

⁸⁹ Nigel Saul, ‘The Despensers and the Downfall of Edward II’, *The English Historical Review*, 99, n. 390 (January, 1984), p. 2. The favoritism of both Edward II and Richard II, and the parallels of their reigns, will be explored in more depth in Chapter IV.

⁹⁰ Mortimer, *The Greatest*, p. 14.

⁹¹ Fletcher, ‘Manhood, Kingship’, p. 137.

and

The king was, at his accension, *a young man and strong of might, in about his twenty-third year*. Yet, after six years of his reign, the *Vita* asserts, he had achieved nothing – which is to say no great military deed. God had endowed him *with gifts of every virtue* – which is to say every strength or capacity – which made him equal to or even excel other kings. But he was misled by bad counsel – especially the counsel of Piers Gaveston.⁹²

These accounts are interesting in that both suggest that Edward had all the necessary characteristics of a good king, and had been led astray only by his associates. This is in clear contrast to the earlier commentary which suggested that he may not have been Edward I's true son, and that therefore it was his birth, rather than his upbringing, that led to his failures as king.

In the context of Edward II's reign, the violence that erupted between the factions around the king and his favorites and the baronial opposition certainly had political and economic motivations, but the gendered and classed coding of the rhetoric discussing Edward and those around him reflects this consciousness of idealized and proper contextual maleness, which forms the basis for an understanding of contemporary masculinity. That Edward did not maintain these concepts of masculinity, while simultaneously failing in his leadership, serves to link these two seemingly distinct concepts, and in doing so circularly sustains them both.

The violence of the reign of Edward II – particularly the executions for treason – had its roots in the reign of his father. While Edward I's focus was on foreign traitors in Wales and Scotland, rather than English ones, the precedents established during his reign can be found utilized in the civil strife of Edward II's, and were maintained into the early years of Edward III's.⁹³ In the introduction to the *Anonimale Chronicle*, Childs and Taylor note that many of the characteristics of Edward II's reign were maintained in the years 1326-1330, during the 'reign' of Isabella and Mortimer. Prestwich notes that "In many ways the three years of Isabella and Mortimer's rule form a postscript to the reign of the unfortunate Edward II, rather than a prelude to the successes of Edward III."⁹⁴ In particular, many of the problems that had haunted Edward II remained: especially concerns about the state of relations with Scotland and the politics and dynamics at court. It was not until after the removal of Mortimer and ascendancy

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 138; *Vita*, p. 69.

⁹³ Prestwich, *The Three*, pp. 97-8.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

of Edward III that the focus of the chronicles shifts from court politics, suggesting stability of leadership and support.⁹⁵

Problems stem from opposite sides of the same coin – Mortimer is effectively occupying the same role as Edward’s favorites did: the accusations against him mirror those levied against Gaveston. The accusations against Mortimer are more troubling to contemporaries because the royals involved are a woman and a minor. Edward’s former post is occupied primarily by Isabella, if technically also by the young Edward III. Despite their greedy and, in the case of the Despensers, power-hungry reputations, none of Edward II’s favorites were ever accused of reaching for the crown themselves. Ian Mortimer notes that “Gaveston’s relationship with the king was no more remarkable than Mortimer’s with the queen. One was probably homosexual in nature, the other adulterous: both were outrageous aspects of royal behaviour in the early fourteenth century.”⁹⁶ A comparison of these two relationships invites several potential comparisons for better understandings of gender and power within medieval conceptions of infidelity: not only can we compare royal infidelity through a gendered lens, comparing the discussions of Edward and Isabella, but also, as has been pursued here, a discussion of male infidelity through a gendered lens in regards to the partner, and the repercussions of these relationships. This comparison is, of course, not perfect – Mortimer’s relationship with Isabella, if sexual, is unique in that her status as queen makes his position more concerning to those around than if she had been of a different social position. Isabella’s positions and relationships will be explored further in the next section.

Edward II’s masculinity is questioned as a way to understand his failure of leadership – he is a bad king, and therefore must be a bad ‘man’. Mortimer’s overreaching of power makes him a bad person, but not a bad ‘man’. On the contrary, the existence, or at least supposed existence, of his relationship with Isabella solidifies his masculinity while enforcing Edward’s lack thereof. Edward II is clearly presented in both medieval and modern writing as not conforming to his particular subcultural conception of masculinity – as a bad ‘man’. Fletcher notes that “according to his critics, Edward’s manhood and kingship were both compromised by his failure to do due honour to the ordering of the social hierarchy. The threat posed by Piers Gaveston...is above all a threat of shame brought on by a failure to respect hierarchy.”⁹⁷ The focus on his ‘inappropriate’ hobbies and pursuits label him as not only un-masculine but also as un-noble – there is a particular focus on highlighting his penchant for ‘lowly’ activities. This

⁹⁵ *Anonimale*, p. 33-4.

⁹⁶ Mortimer, *The Greatest*, p. 14.

⁹⁷ Fletcher, ‘Manhood, Kingship’, pp. 140-1.

intersection of gendered- and class-norms are utilized to explain his failed reign. The implications, and occasional accusations, of homosexuality play into a specific understanding of masculinity as well. As Phillips notes, in reference to a 1326 sermon by Adam Orelton, the bishop of Hereford, which “allegedly accused Edward of being both a tyrant and a sodomite...Accusations or suggestion of sodomy, which was considered tantamount to heresy, were a familiar method of blackening the character of one’s enemies.”⁹⁸ As has been noted in reference to the allegations of adultery against Isabella found in the sources, and possibly the accusations of favorites who controlled and denied access to their kings, these allegations fall within a discernable pattern of undermining power and support through dismantling specific gendered elements of character and reputation.

In the hierarchical world of the medieval court, status was determined by relational power – simplistically, the ability to control others or cause events favorable to oneself. Karras examines the gendered elements of this relationality, noting that the importance of heterosexual desire to conceptions of knighthood were not related to concerns of homosexual behavior, but rather that the affection of women became a currency in which knights could display their superiority.⁹⁹ Fletcher further comments on the tendency to relate modern concepts of sexuality to medieval conversations of gender, power and masculinity, noting that while sexual activity had its place in conceptions of manhood and masculinity, this concern is not necessarily linked to anything modern scholars would recognize as sexuality.¹⁰⁰ In this sense, Edward II was a failure of his birth status – he was controlled, or, at least, manipulated, by those whom he was supposed to control, and unable to assert this necessary superiority over the men around him. Gabrielle Storey examines this conceptualization of power and masculinity, following William Aird, noting that “[kings] were also able to fully exert their masculinity by subordinating other men and women. The exercise of power was an essential characteristic of the gender identity of medieval adult men...alongside the production of a son to ensure dynastic continuance.”¹⁰¹

Edward’s relationships with his favorites, sexual or not, undermine his masculinity by undermining his power status. Most egregious is his inability to control his wife and child, and furthermore, that they end up under the control of another man. Mortimer, then, achieved more than organizing a successful coup; relationally, he usurped Edward’s positions, both within his

⁹⁸ Phillips, *Edward II*, p. 523.

⁹⁹ Karras, *Boys*, p. 51.

¹⁰⁰ Fletcher, ‘Manhood, Kingship’, pp. 130-1.

¹⁰¹ Storey, ‘Questioning Terminologies’, p. 37.

family and within court politics, and thus stripped Edward's masculine and ruling statuses as he built his own.

Relationships with Isabella

Isabella and Mortimer may have been engaged in a sexual relationship – later sources certainly collectively and repeatedly imply so. However, if we understand Isabella to be the de facto ruler – both of the forces which invade England and later, during the early years of Edward III's reign – then her personal spaces become public, political sites and the presence of noble advisors in these sites should not, in itself, be cause for accusations of sexual impropriety. That said, the singling out in the sources of Mortimer's presence there suggests that his presence was somehow unique compared with the other magnates, as further suggested by his being identified as Isabella's "dominus". Most of these sources are critical of Edward II – and of his masculinity – and the implication that his wife was engaged in a public affair certainly is damaging to his reputation, especially when combined with the rumors about Edward's own relationships.

There is little, if any, direct evidence as to the nature of the relationship between Isabella and Mortimer. Even Ian Mortimer, who presents the relationship as "one of the great romances of the Middle Ages," notes that "we have only one fact illustrating the nature of Roger and Isabella's relationship at this time." This "one fact" is an argument witnessed between the pair in 1326 when she threatened to return to her husband, and Mortimer responded by threatening to kill her. Ian Mortimer suggests that "[Roger's] emotions got the better of him, and his feelings for Isabella were stronger than his self-control."¹⁰² However, this anecdote does not necessarily suggest a sexual or romantic relationship, or that it was Mortimer's emotional attachment to Isabella that motivated the outburst. At this point, the pair were in the middle of developing a complex and dangerous act of treason, and Mortimer's future wealth, position and life all depended on Isabella's support for the plot. This said, with few exceptions modern sources are almost unified in their assumption that the relationship was sexual in nature, though this does not necessarily reflect the medieval sources.¹⁰³

It is important to note that all of Isabella's known children were fathered by Edward: the couple had four children (Edward also had at least one illegitimate child, born before his marriage to Isabella), so their relationship certainly was sexual for a decade or more. Mortimer and his wife Joan had at least ten or eleven children who survived to adulthood. Ian Mortimer

¹⁰² Mortimer, *The Greatest*, pp. 84-5.

¹⁰³ See above; Evans, 'Isabella', pp. 89-104.

notes that Roger and Joan had at least two children in their first three years of marriage, and at least ten more in the following years, which suggests that they generally lived in close proximity to each other, and that Joan likely travelled with Mortimer when possible, including to Ireland in 1310. While by no means certain, this does suggest a positive companionship existed between the couple.¹⁰⁴ Despite both Isabella and Mortimer clearly having the ability to bear children, there has never been any widespread indication or rumor that a child was produced from their relationship: only Froissart, following Jean le Bel, states that Isabella was rumored to be pregnant in 1330. Ian Mortimer makes a compelling, but entirely circumstantial, argument for Isabella being pregnant in 1329-30, following Froissart's rumor.¹⁰⁵

Edward and Isabella's relationship is generally framed as antagonistic – particularly in regards to her hatred of his chosen favorites which comes to a head with the confrontation over the Despensers and Edward's capture – but despite this, they seem to have a functioning working relationship at the very least. Michael Evans calls for “a more sober assessment of Isabella's reign” and notes that, before 1325, Isabella mostly fulfilled her traditional duties as a medieval queen.¹⁰⁶ Edward II chose, rather foolishly as it turns out, to send Isabella as his proxy to negotiate with her family in France in 1325, suggesting that he believed she would serve the best interests of England and his reign while there, even in confrontation with her own brother. The *Vita* reports his response to hearing of her refusal to return to England:

the queen crossed to France to make peace, and she had instructions to return at once when her mission was accomplished. And she promised this with a good will. And on her departure she did not seem to anyone to be offended...[now] she says that Hugh Despenser is her adversary and enemy...when she left, towards no one was she more agreeable [than Despenser], myself excepted.¹⁰⁷

Whether he was blind to Isabella's hatred of Despenser or, more likely, he underestimated the lengths she was willing to go to eliminate him, Edward clearly saw Isabella as a trustworthy political actor. Beyond just a political partnership, there is some evidence of a positive emotional relationship as well: after Edward's death, Isabella was given his embalmed heart; this heart was buried beneath Isabella after her own death in 1358.

¹⁰⁴ Mortimer, *The Greatest*: Joan was implicated in Roger's treason, despite being at Ludlow Castle, the Geneville family seat inherited by Mortimer and Joan after their marriage. She was pardoned in 1336, and her title of Dowager was reinstated in 1354 when her grandson successfully petitioned to have Roger's sentence overturned.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 121-2.

¹⁰⁶ Evans, 'Isabella', p. 90.

¹⁰⁷ *Vita*, pp. 242-5.

The relationships between Isabella and both Edward and Mortimer are central to the dynamics of both the politics and events of this period, and to the lasting reputations of both men. In addition, Isabella's personal grievances, ambitions and political maneuvering certainly play a large role, which will be explored further below.¹⁰⁸ Beyond her personally, her statuses – as a princess of France; the wife of the king; the mother of the crown prince and, later, king; the probable lover of Mortimer – are all also important to the political dynamics of this period. Neither Edward nor Mortimer can be understood without the context of Isabella's presence, and their conflicting relationships with her underlie understandings of both men's masculinity.

Ian Mortimer notes that “if we know anything of the period we know that its politics were intensely personal.”¹⁰⁹ Though framed in terms of constitutional reform and attempts to limit monarchical authority, the disputes of 1320-1330 are primarily due to personal hatreds and jealousies, rather than ideological differences. Though there was a considerable amount of development in governance structure and power dynamics at all levels, and this provided the context for which antagonisms emerged, personalities – whether loved or hated – rather than policy, seem to have been the cause of most of the shifts and violence of the period and the personalities of both Edward and Mortimer are at the center of these shifts. The masculinities of both men can be understood only in relation to one another, and within the context of their relationship with Isabella. Both men have lasting reputations as poor leaders, but while Mortimer is seen as a bad person, he is never presented as a bad ‘man’; in contrast, Edward is presented as weak-willed and a failure at conforming to both gender and class norms, leaving him a lasting reputation as a bad king

¹⁰⁸ The next chapter, as a piece of this part on ‘Gender and Rulership’ will explore Isabella's career.

¹⁰⁹ Mortimer, *The Greatest*, p. 14.

Chapter II: Isabella of France

“‘She-wolf of France.’ Probably Isabella of France, queen of Edward II, is better known to posterity by that name than any other.” Hilda Johnstone’s 1936 article uses as its title and opening line the nickname first given to Isabella by Thomas Grey’s 1757 poem ‘The Curse upon Edward II’. Johnstone continues, “Isabella, then, has lived in historical memory mainly as the agent of a brief and brutal revolution. Yet she had been already queen for twenty years when it occurred, and she lived another thirty-one after it.”¹ Johnstone’s point still stands today, nearly a century after her article was published: Isabella’s career – and personal legacy – continue to be defined by her 1326 invasion of England, and the three years during which she ‘reigned’ on behalf of her son, Edward III. To some extent, this is not entirely unfair; Edward II was the first of the short list of English monarchs to be deposed, and that it was the actions of his wife which directly led to this deposition still fascinate scholars to this day. However, Isabella’s long and active career across the first half of the fourteenth century provides illumination of her various social and political roles, including those which were in active support of her husband’s reign.²

This chapter will trace her career and examine her engagement and agency in several of the major events of her life. It will examine her participation in family and dynastic networks, including both her natal and marital families; noble networks, including those at the French and English courts, as well as larger regional networks; and external networks, including those she developed with Roger Mortimer while on the continent in 1325-7, particularly in Hainault. It will examine this development and utilization of networks as a case study of the expression of her personal agency and influence. It will examine these relationships through gendered and de-gendered lenses in order to better understand how Isabella’s womanhood and socio-political statuses – princess, noble, Queen, daughter, sister, wife, mother, foreigner – influenced her ability to assert agency.

Despite being a well-known figure, and central to the events which led to the outbreak of the Hundred Years War, until recent decades little of the historical research on the period centered Isabella in the narrative frame. Paul Doherty’s 1977 PhD Thesis, entitled ‘Isabella, Queen of England, 1296-1330’ was, unfortunately, never pursued to publication, and no

¹ Hilda Johnstone, ‘Isabella: The She-Wolf of France’, *History*, 21, 83 (1936), p. 208: Grey in turn had borrowed the title from Shakespeare, who had applied it not to Isabella, but to Margaret of Anjou in the Henry VI plays.

² Michael Evans, ‘Isabella of France: She-Wolf and Rebel Queen?’ in *Later Plantagenets and the Wars of the Roses Consorts: Power, Influence, and Dynasty* (ed.) Aidan Norrie et. al. (Switzerland, 2023), p. 28.

academic monograph exists.³ Sophia Menache's 1984 article 'Isabelle of France, queen of England, a reconsideration' was the first modern revisionist assessment of Isabella as an independent historical figure.⁴ Menache's work centers Isabella in the events of the early fourteenth century, and begins the process of analyzing her presence and agency, particularly during the 1320s. The article provides a good overview of the various contemporary discussions, but accepts without question some conclusions which have since been problematized. Menache's 2012 article, subtitled 'A Postscript' revisits the topic three decades later.⁵ While it certainly engages with the significant amount of scholarship which emerged in the intervening years, it generally reiterates many of the points made in the first article, and, indeed, concludes by quoting the earlier article. Also in 2012, Lisa Benz St. John released a monograph based on her doctoral research, which took as its central thesis the examination of queenship in the fourteenth century and took as its case study the uninterrupted period of queenship which occurred from the marriage of Margaret of France in 1299 until the death of Philippa of Hainault in 1369, with the reign of Isabella sitting in between the two.⁶ Benz's thematic study results in a particularly valuable and interesting interrogation of queenship and female power and agency, especially as she actively frames it in between similar studies previously conducted for the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁷ In just the last few years, several pieces of scholarship have emerged which have called into question previously made assumptions about Isabella. Laura Slater's 2021 article examines the mechanisms by which Isabella and her allies may have deliberately attempted to influence public opinion through an analysis of both written and visual sources, some private and many more public.⁸ Finally, Michael Evans has two recent book chapters in which he problematizes and reassesses previous conclusions of Isabella and her career, first examining her long-standing reputation as the 'she-wolf,' building on the work of Menache and others; and then, critically and compellingly,

³ Paul Charles Doherty, 'Isabella, Queen of England, 1296-1330', (unpublished PhD thesis, Oxford, 1977); Alison Weir's 2005 popular history 'Isabella, She-Wolf of France, Queen of England' promotes itself as the 'first full-length biography of a much maligned – but astonishingly colorful – Queen of England'.

⁴ Sophia Menache, 'Isabelle of France, queen of England – a reconsideration,' *Journal of Medieval History* (1984), 10, pp. 107-124.

⁵ Sophia Menache, 'Isabella of France, Queen of England. A Postscript,' *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* (2012), 90, 2, pp. 493-512.

⁶ Lisa Benz St. John, *Three Medieval Queens: Queenship and the Crown in Fourteenth Century England* (New York, 2012).

⁷ For the thirteenth century, see Margaret Howell, *Eleanor of Provence: Queenship in Thirteenth Century England* (Oxford, 1998); and the work of John Carmi Parsons, especially *Eleanor of Castile: Queen and Society in Thirteenth Century England* (New York, 1998); *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John Carmi Parsons (New York, 1998), pp. 1-12, 63-78; for the fifteenth, see Helen Maurer, *Margaret of Anjou: Queenship and Power in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2003); and Laynsmith, *The Last*.

⁸ Laura Slater, 'Rumour and reputation management in fourteenth-century England: Isabella of France in text and image,' *Journal of Medieval History* (2021), 47, 2, pp. 257-292.

calling into question the assumption the sexual nature of her relationship with Roger Mortimer.⁹ The various depictions of Isabella in the chronicles will be examined in more depth throughout this chapter, but overall, while she is often present in the chronicles, there is rarely detail beyond this presence.

Like most royal marriages, the 1308 marriage of Isabella, princess of France and Edward II of England was designed to unite two dynasties and create peace between two warring factions. In particular, Isabella's position in this transaction – and, more broadly, the position of many women in exogamous marriages, which ties together two (or more) separate networks through marital union – was to serve as the fulcrum in newly cemented socio-political networks – both official and unofficial.

Born in late 1295, Isabella was the only surviving daughter of Philippe IV of France. She had three surviving older brothers, who reigned in succession after the death of their father as Louis X, Philippe V and Charles IV. Her marriage to Edward, then prince of Wales, was first discussed in 1298 as part of a treaty negotiation over the duchy of Aquitaine, but was eventually finalized in 1307, followed by their marriage in 1308 in France and her coronation in England. Despite their marriage, tensions remained over the territory of Aquitaine.¹⁰ The *Chronicle of Lanercost* explicitly ties their marriage to politics, and to the Church's role in these negotiations: "...peace was proclaimed between the said kings by the Archbishop of York, and [it was announced] that the King of England's son was to marry the King of France's daughter, accordingly as had been previously decreed by my lord Pope Boniface."¹¹

From the beginning, their marriage was haunted by the relationships of Edward and his 'favorites', beginning with Piers Gaveston, and deteriorating even further after Gaveston's death in 1312 when the Hugh Despensers, elder and younger, entered the picture.¹² The issues with Gaveston can be epitomized by the indignation of Isabella's uncles to his presence at their arrival for the wedding in 1308. As will be explored further in the next part on 'Royal Favorites', the sources suggest that the presence of Gaveston and others had negative impact on Isabella's time and access to her husband, as well as her financial resources in England. That said, Evans argues that reports that Isabella herself was unhappy enough with the situation to complain to her father in fact stems from Walsingham's narrative a century later, and that

⁹ Michael Evans, 'She-Wolf?', pp. 27-47; 'lovers or allies?', pp. 89-104.

¹⁰ *Trokelowe*, p. 65; *Londoniensis*, p. 152; *Paulini*, p. 258, *Gesta Edwardi*, p. 32, *Vita et Mors*, p. 297, *Vita*, pp. 8-9.

¹¹ *Lanercost*, p.181, 186.

¹² The Despensers, discussed briefly in the previous section, do not make up a major case study of this project. Piers Gaveston will be examined in much further depth in the second half of this thesis, as part of the sections on 'Royal Favorites.'

this in fact was a misinterpretation of discussion of the opposition between Gaveston and Queen Margaret, widow of Edward I and Isabella's paternal aunt.¹³ Evans suggests that, if anything, it was Isabella's age, not Gaveston's presence, which limited her political agency in the early years of her marriage, as it did her childbearing.¹⁴

As Edward's wife and queen, traditionally one of Isabella's primary methods of influence would be through her access to her husband, particularly via private time and influence, out of the eye of the court. It was disruption to this time, in particular, which is noted in the chronicles, stating "that the king frequented Piers's couch more than the queen's."¹⁵ At least, this implies the minimization of Isabella's role in her marriage and court and, at most, could be suggesting a concern over the future production of heirs. Gabriella Scarlatta notes that "without heirs, a queen not only was unable to fulfill her most important role, but she also had to relinquish her queenship."¹⁶ While this view is a simplification of the diversity of agency available to Isabella as queen, it is true that her active role in court, especially as a mediator, emerges primarily after the birth of her first child in 1312. Benz, following Earenflight, comments on this phenomenon as well: "...when the queen gave birth, especially to a son, her symbolic power rose in the eyes of her contemporaries, which in turn enlarged her symbolic capital."¹⁷ Similarly, as will be discussed later, Isabella's ability to maintain her role as the most influential woman at court seems to have dissipated around the same time as the birth of her first grandchild, in 1330.¹⁸ However, the complexity of English politics in both 1312 and 1330 mean that perceivable changes to Isabella's influence cannot be linked solely to her status as mother or grandmother. Even so, recognizing the importance of Isabella's ability to bear children to her role as queen, it is understandable that reports that Edward's relationship with Piers Gaveston was getting in way of this was concerning to her family. Rumors of the lack of attention from her husband was not limited to Isabella's family in France: the medieval chronicle of Trokelowe reports the duke of Lancaster expressing pity over Isabella's circumstances in 1312.¹⁹

¹³ Benz, *Three*, p. 120.

¹⁴ Evans, 'She-Wolf', p. 30.

¹⁵ Brown, 'The Political', p. 583; *Paulini*, p. 262: "Karolus et Lodowicus patrum reginae, cernentes quod rex plus exerceret Petri triclinium quam reginae, cum indignatione ad Franciam remigarunt."

¹⁶ Gabriella Scarlatta, 'Marguerite de Navarre and Renée de France: Power and Sexuality in Brantôme's *Illustrious Women*' *Royal Studies Journal*, 6, 2, 2019, p. 70.

¹⁷ Benz, *Three*, pp. 98, 104: It should be noted that the proximity of Gaveston's death to the birth of Isabella's first child, both in 1312, complicates a simple analysis of the shift in her political activity around the same time.

¹⁸ Benz, *Three*, p. 106.

¹⁹ *Trokelowe*, p. 75: "Thomas autem, Lancastrie Comes, Reginae languoribus praeter ceteris condolens, quia suus avunculus erat, secretos nuncios sibi destinavit, ipsam consolando, fideliterque promittendo, quod non cesseret,

That said, Isabella was not completely boxed out of politics at the English court. Throughout the 1310s, Isabella regularly served as a regulatory force between her husband and the barons with whom he often quarreled, including alongside Gilbert de Clare in 1312; alongside Humphrey de Bohun in 1316 between Edward and Thomas of Lancaster; and at the so-called ‘treaty’ of Leake in 1318.²⁰ Childs notes in the introduction to the *Vita Edwardi Secundi* that 1318 is one of the earliest instances in which this particular author records Isabella acting as a mediator, in this case between Edward and Lancaster: “And so at the request of the lady queen, the earl of Hereford, and other nobles whom the earl of Lancaster accounted faithful to him, this was achieved.”²¹ Isabella is included as a mediator at the 1321 Parliament in the *Annales Paulini*, but not depicted as present at this event in the *Vita*.²²

There is no reason to think that both things might be true: Isabella’s position, especially within her personal and private relationships to Edward, may have been usurped to a degree by Gaveston and his other favorites, and she still may have had a public position which she filled at court, especially given the number of courtiers whose dislike for Gaveston was well known. However, that these instances in which she played a public, political role as mediator increased in occurrence beginning in 1312 is relevant. Gaveston was executed by the Earl of Warwick in June, 1312 and Edward III was born in November of that year. The death of Gaveston may have provided an opening in Edward’s inner circle which Isabella was able to take advantage of, and additionally, as noted above, a pregnancy – Isabella’s first – likely provided Isabella with increased import and influence to her husband. Some scholarship has commented on the lack of children born to the royal couple in the first almost five years of their marriage, suggesting, perhaps, that Edward was spending his time in Gaveston’s bed instead of Isabella’s, however this is not necessarily the reason. The lack of children born in the early years is likely due to Isabella’s age – she was just twelve when she was married, and she eventually birthed four children beginning around the age of 16-17: Prince Edward, the future Edward III in 1312; John of Eltham in 1316; Eleanor of Woodstock in 1318, and Joan of the Tower, later queen of Scotland, in 1321.²³ Even in the early years, Edward regularly granted pardons, and bestowed financial and political favors at Isabella’s request. Walsingham describes her interest and

antequam ipsum Petrum a Domini Regis consortio totaliter amoveret; ad ipsam tamen personaliter accedere noluit, ne forte indignationem Regis causa ipsius incurreret.”

²⁰ Menache, ‘Reconsideration’, p. 108; Menache, ‘Postscript’, p. 498.

²¹ Childs, *Vita*, p. xlv; *Vita*, pp. 150-3.

²² *Vita*, p. 191 n. 395; *Paulini*, pp. 294-7.

²³ *Trokelowe*, p. 79, 95, 102; curiously, Joan is not mentioned in *Trokelowe*; *Londoniensis*, p. 219-20; *Paulini*, p. 273, *Gesta Edwardi*, p. 45; *Vita et Mors*, p. 299; *Vita*, pp. 64-7.

intercessions in church politics, restoring lands to the Priory of Bynham.²⁴ Interestingly, while the primary participant whose actions she is undoing is unsurprisingly listed as Hugh Despenser (also suggesting that her motives in these events were not likely unconditional or altruistic support for the church), one of the others listed is Roger Mortimer, her later partner, suggesting that, at least at this early point, they were not yet involved in any way. Her importance to the royal family is evident in attempts to use her as political bait against her husband. In 1319, James Douglas attempted her abduction to Scotland. Recording this event, the author of the *Vita* noted: “Indeed if the queen had at that time been captured, I believe that Scotland would have bought peace for herself.”²⁵ Later, in 1321, she was refused entry to Leeds Castle by the wife of Bartholomew Badlesmere, a member of the baronial opposition to Edward. This was an insult which Edward had no intention of ignoring; indeed, while earlier scholarship has blamed Isabella personally for igniting tensions with the barons, more recent sources have argued that Edward, Isabella and their allies may have engineered the altercation themselves with the intention that it would end with her husband laying siege to the castle.²⁶

Beyond her new court in England, Isabella maintained engagement with her natal family in France, and court politics there. This is evident in the discussions regarding her involvement in the discovery of the so-called ‘Tour de Nesle Affair’ of 1314. While a detailed analysis of the affair – and Isabella’s potential involvement – is beyond the scope of this project, it will be examined briefly.²⁷ In short, the affair surrounds Isabella’s three brothers, Louis, Phillippe and Charles, and their marriages to Marguerite, daughter of the duke of

²⁴ *Gesta Abatum*, ed. Riley, p. 141: Walsingham’s associated text reads “Igitur non post multum tempus exactum, ad instantiam Dominæ Isabellæ Reginæ, et aliorum quorum precibus non erat tutum non adquiescere, quia quasi ‘Nudato supplicat ense poten,’ Willelmus præfatus est a vinculis liberatus, et Prioratui de Bynham restitutus; quanquam Abbas aliter faciendum cum eodem firmiter statuisset.”

²⁵ *Vita*, pp. 162-5.

²⁶ *Vita*, pp. 197-200, esp. n. 404; Evans, ‘She-Wolf’, p. 32.

²⁷ For more on the affair, see the work of Elizabeth A.R Brown, especially ‘Philip the Fair and His Family’, *Medieval Prosopography*, 32 (2017), pp. 125-185; ‘Philip the Fair and His Family’s Disgrace: The Adultery Scandal of 1314 Revealed, Recounted, Reimagined and Redacted’ *Mediaevistik*, 32 (2019), pp. 71-104; “‘Laver de ses pechiés une pecheresse royale’: Psalm Collects in an Early Fourteenth-Century Devotional Book’ in (ed.) Eglal Doss-Quinby, *Cultural performances in Medieval France: Essays in honor of Nancy Freeman Regalado* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 163-80; ‘The King’s Conundrum: Endowing Queens and Loyal Servants, Ensuring Salvation, and Protecting the Patrimony in Fourteenth-Century England’ in (eds.) John Anthony Burrow and Ian P. Wei, *Medieval Futures: Attitudes to the future in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 115-165; ‘Diplomacy, Adultery, and Domestic Politics at the Court of Philip the Fair: Queen Isabelle’s Mission to France in 1314’ (1989); ‘The Political Repercussions’; ‘Postscript’; ‘Royal Marriage, royal property, and the patrimony of the crown: inalienability and the prerogative in fourteenth-century France’, *Division of the Humanities and Social Sciences: Humanities working paper 70* (Pasadena, 1982); and Adams ‘Between History’; Emily Lalande, ‘The Tour de Nesle Affair: Succession and Sexuality in fourteenth-century France’ in Gabrielle Storey and Zita Eva Rohr (eds.), *Premodern Ruling Sexualities: Representation, Identity and Power* (Manchester, 2024), pp. 194-213: my thanks to Emily Lalande for providing me with the unpublished proofs of this chapter for this project.

Burgundy, and her two cousins, the sisters Jeanne and Blanche, daughters of the count of Burgundy, respectively – marriages made by Philip IV to strengthen the relationships between Burgundy and France. In 1314, the women were arrested and imprisoned – Marguerite and Blanche for alleged adultery with two brothers – the knights Philippe and Gautier d'Aunay, who were executed – and Jeanne for helping her sister and cousin conduct their affairs.

Isabella's natal family and potential involvement are not the only relevance the affair has to this project. Emily Lalande's chapter 'The Tour de Nesle Affair: Succession and sexuality in fourteenth-century France' compellingly argues why the affair can be used as a case study for understanding the perception of, in her terms, "disordered sexualities": a term which also can potentially apply to most, if not all of the case studies in this project. Lalande presents

a new perspective on how female sexuality was intertwined with the inability of female claimants to succeed to the French throne following the Tour de Nesle affair...*A queen's, or prospective queen's, alleged adultery could have dire effects not only for herself, but for her issue...*a royal woman's sexual impropriety not only resulted in shame and punishment for herself, but also had far-reaching effects capable of harming her issue – and a ruling dynasty's ability to maintain its sovereignty.²⁸

These comments apply outside of the affair, and outside France as well: sexualities – defined here in the broadest of terms, to describe all the various pieces of an individual's sexual life – had sweeping affects on society and politics and on, of course, succession. The potential dangers of these rumors have been explored already in the questions surrounding Edward II's parentage, and will emerge again later.

Isabella's potential involvement in the affair comes in the suggestions, by both some medieval chroniclers and contemporary historians, that it was Isabella who uncovered the affairs – or, alternately, invented them – and reported them to her father. These accusations are generally accompanied by recognition of the hypocrisy of Isabella's apparent concern over marital loyalty, given her later, alleged, relationship with Roger Mortimer. The suggestions of her involvement begin with the fact of her presence in France on a diplomatic mission in 1314.²⁹ Ultimately, Elizabeth Brown, who has written extensively on the affair over the past several decades, concludes that there is no conclusive evidence to link Isabella to either inventing or revealing the affairs, but there is circumstantial evidence to suggest her involvement may have been possible. Brown notes that only one chronicle, the *Normanniae nova chronica*, is possibly contemporaneous to the reported events, but that other, later medieval chronicles also include the account, including Sir Thomas Grey's highly erroneous

²⁸ Lalande, p. 195-7 [my emphasis].

²⁹ *Vita*, pp. 66-9.

account in his *Scalacronica* and Jean des Preis's *Myreur des histores*, whose account introduces the coin purses supposedly gifted from Isabella to her sisters-in-law, which she later saw in the possession of the d'Aunay brothers, sparking her suspicions.³⁰ One depiction of her involvement suggests that she may have hoped that the imprisonment of her sisters-in-law, none of whom had yet produced a son in 1314, may ultimately pave the way for her own son to inherit the throne. However, as is clear from Louis' eventual remarriage in 1315 after Marguerite's death in prison, this is a substantial leap of logic, especially in a royal line which had ruled without interruption since the tenth century. Isabella would have no reason to anticipate the crisis of inheritance that would befall the Capetian dynasty, eventually ending the senior line in 1328 and allowing her son, Edward III, to make a claim to the French throne, though unsuccessfully. The combination of these two episodes - the allegations of the Tour de Nesle and the Capetian succession crisis - demonstrate the essential importance of women in maintaining dynastic power as well as the vulnerability created by this importance and the very real consequences of it being undermined, especially by rumors of these "disordered sexualities".

However, even the rumors of her involvement in these events suggest a 'zero-sum' conceptualization of power and access in which Isabella viewed those around the king and royal family as rivals. The rumors of her involvement in the affair also suggest that she maintained the necessary levels of communication and influence in the French court to interfere in the relationships and careers of her brothers and their wives – one of the reasons several medieval chroniclers suggest that she was involved in reporting her sisters-in-law's activities was her presence in Paris at the time the news broke, serving as an intermediary between her father and husband. Her career suggests a seemingly never-ending desire for greater access and power, a determination to pursue these ends, and, perhaps, the cunning to perceive and utilize the opportunities and networks when they arose. Interestingly, there is a suggestion made in *Trokelowe* that Prince Edward was originally going to be named after the king of France, his maternal uncle, but that the English nobles would not allow this.³¹ If true, this suggests both lasting emotional ties between Isabella and her natal family as well as potential dislike or even fear at the English court over the influence of French ties. The *Anonimale Chronicle* notes that, regarding the events leading up to Isabella's 1325 embassy to Paris after the outbreak of

³⁰ Brown, 'Diplomacy', pp. 74-7.

³¹ Trokelowe, p. 79: "Et licet Dominus Lodowicus, ejusdem Reginæ frater, cæterique domini et dominæ de Francia, tunc ibidem existentes, nomen Regibus Franciæ conveniens puero voluissent aptasse, magnates Angliæ, hoc non permittentes, ipsum nomine patris sue 'Edwardum' vocari fecerunt."

the War of St Sardos, Edward II “in defiance of the king of France took into his hand all the lands that the queen, his consort, possessed in England and he removed all the French knights and esquires, ladies and pages who were with the said queen and this was [done] by the advice of Hugh Despenser.”³² This passage makes evident that even seventeen years after her marriage to Edward, Isabella was still very much perceived as an in-between, and as French. However, Michael Evans notes that there is little contemporary reference or hostility to her ‘French-ness’, suggesting that these connections may have reemerged in the sources in the decades following these events, as hostilities with the French reignited.³³ While the removal of her lands to be given to Despenser can be attributed to Edward’s poor policies of over-gifting to his favorites, the specificity here is that the *French* knights and others were removed from her service. While this suggest a clear anti-French policy – at least socially and at court, Isabella’s French-ness is also displayed as a perceived asset, though for use in ‘evil schemes’, by those who send her to France. Here, the union between Edward and Isabella – and between England and France – is a living, dynamic process, rather than a single event, even though the 1308 marriage was part of a single treaty. This suggests that Isabella’s loyalties – both natal and marital, continued to be, at times, pulled at both ends. The marriage, and Isabella’s role in it, continue to evolve and be utilized when necessary, but this also made it at times manipulable from both sides, and by Isabella herself.

Isabella’s own ability to manipulate the marriage is perhaps most clear in 1325, as she is tasked by her husband to serve as an ambassador at her brother’s court. Froissart’s depiction of the event is telling in the ways the events of 1325 have be reframed to suit various biases:

And when [the earl of Kent] perceived the displeasure of the queen, by his subtle wit he set great discord between the king and the queen, so that the king would not see the queen nor come in her company, the which discord endured a long space. Then was it shewed to the queen secretly and to the earl of Kent, that without they took heed to themselves, they were likely to be destroyed, for sir Hugh Spencer was about to purchase much trouble to them. Then the queen did purvey to go into France, and took her way as on pilgrimage to Saint Thomas of Canterbury, and so to Winchelsea, and in the night went into a ship that was ready for her, and her young son Edward with her, and the earl of Kent and sir Roger Mortimer...and had wind at will, and the next morning they arrived in the haven of Boulogne.³⁴

The historical evidence makes clear that this is an extremely fictionalized account: in 1325 Isabella was sent on official business to France, and had no need to sneak away as if on pilgrimage; Prince Edward did not initially travel with her, but rather came later; and Mortimer

³² *Anonimale*, pp. 118-9.

³³ Michael Evans, ‘The Frenchness’.

³⁴ Froissart, ed Macaulay, p. 5

was likely already in France, and as a traitor to the crown on the run, certainly was not in her entourage. However, this later account, dedicated to the Queen Philippa during Edward III's reign, reframes these events as if Isabella and Prince Edward were fleeing England and the influence of the Despensers, making the events of 1326-7 seem necessary and noble, rather than the rebellious plotting of traitors to the crown, as Isabella and Mortimer's actions often are.³⁵

There is no consensus in the sources as to the origin of the idea to send Isabella to France as negotiator in 1325 – a role she had taken on before – and thus get herself, and, eventually, her son, out of England and away from the reach of King Edward and the Despensers.³⁶ The likelihood is that it was not the first step in some grand scheme to eliminate Edward, but rather that Isabella was well positioned to be the intermediary in this situation, and that developments after her arrival in France would be to blame for the later invasion. The *Vita* records the events that pre-empted the Prince Edward's travel as a negotiation between both sides, without any clear animosity present.³⁷ Seen in these terms, which are reflected in most other medieval sources, Isabella's 1325 embassy is certainly presented as a mission of peace, and her initial intentions are not questioned. As the sources generally do not hesitate to discuss her intentions later, during and after the invasion of England, it can be assumed that there would be indications in the sources if her intentions had been understood as less than in good faith.

At what point these intentions changed is also unclear. Evans suggests that one possible explanation is Edward's seizure of Isabella's estates in England in 1324, at the outset of the War of St. Sards.³⁸ Menache argues that while the reignition of hostilities with the French served as the excuse to seize Isabella's lands alongside other measures, it also made her the most politically valuable, to those on both sides of the conflict.³⁹ Certainly, she seems to have been aware of her influence and networks at the French court. Reports of her complaints regarding Despenser, which mirror those reported regarding Gaveston at her marriage two decades earlier, suggest that she believed herself able to foster the necessary support. Again, Froissart, depicting Isabella discussing Despenser with her brother: "When the noble king Charles of France had heard his sister's lamentation, who weepingly had shewed him all her

³⁵ For more on the different portrayals of Isabella in the chronicles, especially differences between French and English accounts, see: Menache, 'Reconsideration', pp. 114-120.

³⁶ For more on Isabella's previous diplomatic activity in France, see: Evans, 'She-Wolf', p. 33;

³⁷ *Vita*, pp. 240-1.

³⁸ Evans, 'She-Wolf', p. 38; Menache, 'Postscript', p. 500.

³⁹ Menache, 'Reconsideration', p. 110; 'Postscript', p. 501.

need and business, he said to her: 'Fair sister, appease yourself, for by the faith I owe to God and to Saint Denis I shall right well purvey for you some remedy.'"⁴⁰ While, as seen above, the details of Froissart's narrative regarding this period are certainly questionable, the narrative further suggests the intricacies of Isabella's position as an intermediary and the complexities of the interconnecting loyalties at two courts.⁴¹

The description of events in *Lanercost* again provides significant contrast between the machinations of Isabella and the peaceful naivete of Edward II:

the King of England sent his consort the queen to her brother, the King of France, hoping that, by God's help, peace might be established between himself and the King of France through her, according to her promise. But the queen had a secret motive for desiring to cross over to France.⁴²

The full passage creates a contradiction, beginning with this presentation of Edward as peaceful and trusting of his wife and of the queen as conniving, but continuing by listing the numerous financial and personal freedoms which had been restricted for her, including the restriction of those around her and of her correspondence, as noted above in *Anonimalle*, again naming Despenser as the instigator of these insults.⁴³ The passage opens by stating that she had a secret motive for going abroad and again reflecting the absolute importance of controlling physical and mental access to those in power. This section concludes with describing Isabella as "...equally indignant and distressed, and therefore wished to visit her brother in France to seek for a remedy."⁴⁴ Continuing through the treaty with Hainault and the invasion of England, the passage is full of contradictions of character, but ultimately appears to settle uncomfortably on an understanding of Isabella's motives, as can also be seen in this description of her portrayal by the English people in *Lanercost*: "But there were contradictory rumours in England about the queen, some declaring that she was the betrayer of the king and kingdom, others that she was acting for peace and the common welfare of the kingdom, and for the removal of evil counsellors from the king." Interestingly, this particular section does not mention Roger Mortimer, but rather states that Hugh Despenser was at this time at Avignon, pursuing a divorce for Edward from the Pope, and that Isabella's goals were to stop this.⁴⁵ These passages clearly reflect the struggle the medieval chroniclers had to reconcile their reactions to the actions of

⁴⁰ Froissart, ed Macauley, p. 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Lanercost*, p. 249.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 249-50.

Edward II in England and Isabella in France, neither of which reflected idealized social and gender norms.

Isabella's position, as a go-between for the marital and natal family, is an active interpretation of the goal of exogamous marriage. However, while her position may be a central locus for these networks, she was not passive or even only acting in defense. *Lanercost* and other sources clearly depict Isabella as on the offensive, acting in the interest of herself, her son and her allies when necessary. Isabella's career is one of active participation in the networking needed to create and maintain ties for herself and both her families. Isabella's networks and contacts were not limited to France, and her diplomatic career was not limited to her immediate family: in 1314, in addition to serving as the intermediary between her father and husband, she helped negotiate the release of Edward's nephew Count Edouard of Bar, who was being held prisoner by the duke of Lorraine. Isabella, like many queens, also developed a female social network around her, one that could be utilized in many forms when needed. As noted above, central figures in this network include Eleanor de Clare, who attended Isabella as a lady-in-waiting from at least 1311 and was married to Hugh Despenser (either of whom may have been involved in a sexual affair with Edward, depending on the source); and Eleanor's cousin, Joan of Bar, who never formally served Isabella, but did travel with her to France in 1325, among others.⁴⁶ Isabella's choice to remain in France in 1325 – to intentionally ignore the demands of her husband and king – relied on the relationships and networks she maintained in England, France and the wider continent. It also cemented new relationships and networks as she became the face of the opposition to Edward and his close favorites.⁴⁷

Following the deposition of Edward II, Isabella continued to serve as a mediator during her and Mortimer's 'reign' from 1327-30, ruling in the name of Edward III.⁴⁸ In one example, in 1328 she negotiated a treaty with the Scots in an attempt to end the seemingly endless wars fought across the border.⁴⁹ Isabella was present at the marriage of her daughter Joan to David II of Scotland, agreed upon as part of these 1328 peace negotiations. She attended in place of Edward III, demonstrating her central position as a mediator for the dynasty. As noted in *Lanercost*, in regards to this peace negotiation and marriage, "All this was arranged by the king's mother the Queen [dowager] of England, who at the time governed the whole realm."⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Dunn, 'Elite Service'.

⁴⁷ Menache, 'Postscript', p. 503.

⁴⁸ Evans, 'She-Wolf', p. 28; Benz, *Three*, p. 4.

⁴⁹ Childs and Taylor, *Anonimale*, p. 28.

⁵⁰ *Lanercost*, p. 260.

There is clear evidence that Isabella, despite being a French princess, was well-liked by the people of England, particularly in comparison to her husband. Her initial landing during the invasion in 1326 with her armies garnered support in the Eastern counties, as well as in London after Edward and the Despensers had fled west, and they continued to find enough support to see the coup through to its end.⁵¹ In their introduction to the *Anonimale Chronicle*, Wendy Childs and John Taylor note that central to this support was likely the inclusion of the Prince Edward, a legitimate heir nearly of age.⁵² Prince Edward's presence is important for two reasons: firstly, as the heir to the throne, he legitimated both the invasion and presented the opportunity for an alternate ruler and a relatively stable transfer of power. Additionally, however, similarly to Isabella's influence and activity increasing around the time of Edward's birth, his presence legitimated Isabella's – as a mother, her influence and power in England stemmed partially from her position relative to his, and especially her access to and influence over him. *Anonimale* reports on a letter sent from Isabella and Edward to the people of London and surrounding areas, which lists Isabella first in its greeting, suggesting her leadership and prominence, and that it was believed she could garner the necessary support: “for be sure that we and all those who have come with us to this land do not intend to do, and please God, will not do, anything which will not be for the common profit of the land, save to destroy sir Hugh Despenser, our enemy and all the realm's, as you well know.”⁵³ The letter clearly sets up Isabella and prince Edward as an alternative to Despenser and other ‘enemies’. Later, *Anonimale* continues to present the support of the people of London for Isabella's cause and the incoming reign of Edward III, depicting the people of London calling out for the prince to reign while simultaneously depicting Edward II as choosing to step aside for his son in accordance with the will of the people.⁵⁴

There is a clear attempt in *Anonimale* to balance its depiction of both Isabella and Edward II: to maintain the image of proper wifeliness and queenship for Isabella, alongside maintaining an element of innocence for Edward II, if innocence via naivete and weak will. “The king in the company of his enemies fled from the queen's company; she pursued him in order to have him removed from his enemies and in order to rejoin her lord if she could. But the king would

⁵¹ Menache, ‘Postscript’, p. 503.

⁵² Childs and Taylor, *Anonimale*, pp. 32-3.

⁵³ *Anonimale*, pp. 124-7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-3: “The queen and sir Edward her son came to London together with a good company of people...at Westminster the archbishop of Canterbury read out before the people several articles against the king. Because of this the people agreed and cried out that he should no longer reign, but that his son the duke of Guyenne should be king...[Edward II] agreed for he could do not otherwise.”

not leave the company of his enemies.”⁵⁵ There are several interesting elements to this passage. Even in the description of Isabella’s motives, her first goal is to remove Edward’s false counsellors, and secondary is to rejoin him as his wife. Isabella is presented here as the ruler who perceives correctly enemy from friend, and whose motives are correct, which in turn presents Edward as both lacking wisdom and as passive, being pursued by the active Isabella who will then remove other men from his circle. This is in comparison to the depiction of her as a woman and wife intending to return to her ‘lord,’ which carries implicitly a return to his position as ruling over her. There is tension in this passage in how to portray Isabella both as the primary force and actor behind these events – again, interesting given that Mortimer, John of Hainault, and Prince Edward are all present and could each be portrayed as the leader – without undermining her femininity or proper gender role. The depictions of both Edward II and Isabella in this passage – and the lack of Mortimer’s presence – presumably reflects the authorship under Edward III’s reign. In this same vein, *Anonimalle* returns Mortimer to the narrative after Edward III is crowned, when Mortimer and Isabella take political control for themselves:

At this time the queen, mother of the new king, and sir Roger Mortimer usurped the royal power and the treasure of the realm and they held the king under their subjection to such an extent that sir Henry, earl of Lancaster, who by common assent of the realm at the king’s coronation was made his chief guardian, could not come near to him to advise him or protect him.”⁵⁶

Isabella is certainly not denied any agency here; she is still listed first and is not presented as being under Mortimer’s power or acting against her own wishes – his presence appears to serve as a delineation in these passages from times when she is acting properly and those when she is not. The independent ‘Isabella the queen’ and ‘Isabella the mother’ are separated in their actions from those of the paired ‘Isabella and Mortimer’. Additionally, this passage once again emphasizes one of the key moves made by the pair – to separate the young king from his appointed council, and to control – physically and socially – those who could access him, thereby asserting themselves as the only path to the royal power.

There is a similar process in the depiction of Isabella and her actions in the *Vita*, where the narrative appears to be attempting to protect both the sanctity of the marital relationship between Isabella and Edward and simultaneously protect the royal family:

Amongst other things, when the king sent his son to France, he ordered his wife to return to England without delay...the queen replied, 'I feel', she said, 'that marriage is

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 140-1.

a union of a man and a woman, holding fast to the practice of a life together, and that someone has come between my husband and myself and is trying to break this bond; I declare that I will not return until this intruder is removed, but, discarding my marriage garment, shall put on the robes of widowhood and mourning until I am avenged of this Pharisee.’⁵⁷

The passage continues, reporting that King Charles did not want to be seen as detaining his sister, and tells the English messenger that the choice is Isabella’s. This section both reinforces Isabella’s family ties in France and suggests her autonomy and agency in her actions of this period; she will not be controlled by the wishes of either her husband or brother. This passage also emphasizes a level of impropriety in the relationship between Edward II and Despenser, seemingly suggesting that once again Isabella’s position is being usurped by the king’s favorites. While the earlier depictions of Gaveston seemingly imply that he may have taken Isabella’s position in Edward’s bed – and certainly suggest that he was intruding on the physical and emotional spaces of their relationship, this passage directly positions Despenser within their marriage, suggesting a spousal relationship as compared to Gaveston’s more unofficial ‘mistress’-like description. The disruption to marital dynamics is portrayed with more drama and gravitas here than in reference to Gaveston, reflected in the drama of Isabella’s reported speech.⁵⁸ The *Vita* reports Edward II’s response to Isabella’s choice to remain in France, and once again appears to be attempting to protect Edward’s reputation. In this case, it appears the author believed the lesser of evils was to portray Edward as naïve, uncaring, or perhaps just blind, to his wife’s hatred of Despenser, rather than suggesting that Edward’s choices were the result of deliberately bad kingship and leadership. He is presented as displaying confusion at his perception of Isabella’s shift in opinion towards Despenser, but also as continuing to protect her, suggesting that she has been manipulated, rather than believing the betrayal came from her.⁵⁹ In response to her actions, the *Vita* includes a letter written from Edward and the people of England back to Isabella, which once again attempts to portray both in the best possible light.⁶⁰ The defense of Despenser alleviates any fault of Edward’s – if there is no threat from the favorite, then there is no reason for Isabella to fear return. The letter reiterates that Edward believes the plot cannot have been initiated by the Queen, seemingly suggesting that for her to have been fooled into disloyalty is preferable to her being the root of the disloyalty. The letter also plays on traditional depictions of

⁵⁷ *Vita*, pp. 240-1.

⁵⁸ As will be explored further in the next chapter, when de-gendered, this is suggestive of Laura Tompkins’ conception of the ‘uncrowned queen’, and also possibly of the ‘feminization’ of Edward II in his relationships.

⁵⁹ *Vita*, pp. 242-5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 244-7.

womanhood, motherhood and queenship in suggesting that Isabella alone can prevent bloodshed and can care for and protect the people of England, her children. There is an interesting counterpoint to this argument at the end, when the letter uses the trope of the stepmother as the counter position to that of the protective mother, playing on the fear of the stepmother as disrupting the ideal family structure as well as peaceful inheritance patterns. Paired with the anti-French sentiment throughout, the letter appears to be suggesting that Isabella must choose her loyalty – as an English mother and protector, or as a false French stepmother.

The *Vita*, likely composed almost contemporarily to the events, records the chief barons involved in the dispute and their individual complaints.⁶¹ In the context of the already divided, factional court of Edward II, Isabella's relationship with Mortimer – and clear hatred of the Despensers – opened up a political alternative to the widely disliked Edward and his favorites. As noted above, the presence of the young Prince Edward with his mother provided further legitimacy and authority to their cause.

When the later 14th-century chronicle, the *Gesta Edwardi de Carnarvan*, re-introduces Roger Mortimer into the narrative in France in 1325, he is already labeled as 'reginae dominus' in reference to his relationship with Isabella.⁶² As noted before, this terminology, titling him as 'the queen's lord' seems to set him apart from her other advisors, perhaps suggesting a level of subservience to him or denoting their personal relationship, though it is not explicitly detailing their relationship. If their relationship was indeed sexual, that Isabella would embark on her own high-profile affair after witnessing the aftermath of the alleged affairs of her sisters-in-law a decade before suggests either a callous disregard for the danger to both herself and Mortimer, or that there was a significant enough shift in the power dynamics of the royal couple which allowed Isabella to believe her own infidelity might be overlooked. As noted earlier by Lalande, the fallout of the events of 1314 in France were not minor – ultimately, it led to the codification of male only inheritance to the French throne. Though the ultimate succession crisis in France did not occur until 1328, the immediate aftermath would presumably have been enough for Isabella to think twice about risking her own safety. While there is the possibility that Isabella felt herself immune to the fallout – there was certainly a shift in the dynamics of the English court, and in 1325 Isabella may not have planned to return to England in peace, it seems that her insistence that Despenser was the problem would hinge

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 186-7.

⁶² *Gesta Edwardi*, pp. 85-6: "Adhaesit ibidem reginae dominus Rogerus de Mortuomari nepos, qui de Turri Londoniae procarcere sibi deputata latenter exit et evasit."

on presenting herself as the ‘victim’, and thus require good behavior on her part. A high-profile, public affair was unlikely to help her gain and maintain the support she needed.

Regardless of their personal relationship, the political relationship between Isabella and Mortimer served a similar function as a marriage: uniting networks and forming a stronger force to pursue their own goals. The growing dissent in England against Edward, and particularly the hatred of his band of favorites, provided Isabella and Mortimer with necessary allies that may not have otherwise aided them – in particular, this included John of Brittany, earl of Richmond, whose lifelong loyalty to the king faltered over the rise of the Despensers; and Edward’s half-brother, Edmund of Woodstock, who arrived in Paris in 1326.⁶³

This political alliance between Isabella and Mortimer was successful enough to lead to the invasion of England in September, 1326, bringing Prince Edward with them. Mortimer and John of Hainault led the invasion with troops and funds from the low countries, arranged alongside the betrothal of the Prince Edward to Philippa of Hainault.⁶⁴ While the court of Hainault was not on the best of terms with Edward’s court going into the events of 1325-6, the betrothal between the Prince Edward and the daughter of Count William gave them a vested interest in the rebellion. This betrothal also served as a necessary link between Isabella and the Valois dynasty in France through Philippa’s mother, Joan of Valois. Military support from the continent was essential in both the endeavor to supplant Edward II and in the establishment of the new reign of Edward III. The *Polychronicon* describes this support without naming John of Hainault, but rather listing “the qwene of Ynglonde, with Edwarde her sonne and Roger Mortymare.” In contrast, interestingly, the *Brut* describes the invasion as being led by ‘the quene Isabell and Sir Edward hir sone, Duc of Gyene, Sir Edmund of Wodestok, Erl of Kent, and Sir John the Erles brother of Henaud.’⁶⁵

In the years immediately after the deposition of Edward II and ascension of Edward III, Isabella, along with Mortimer, was the dominant political figure in England. The *Lanercost Chronicle* accuses Edward III of “acting on the pestilent advice of his mother and Sir Roger de Mortimer (they being the chief controllers of the king, who was barely fifteen years of age)”.⁶⁶ The *Anonimalle Chronicle* similarly reports that “the queen, mother of the new king, and sir Roger Mortimer usurped royal power and the treasure of the realm and they held the king under their subjection.”⁶⁷ Several studies convincingly argue that Isabella’s ‘reign’ as de-facto regent

⁶³ Kathryn Warner, *Isabella of France: The Rebel Queen* (Gloucestershire, 2017), pp. 187-8.

⁶⁴ *Vita et Mors*, p. 308; *Lanercost*, p. 251.

⁶⁵ *Paulini*, p. 319; *Polychronicon*, pp. 318-2. *The Brut*, p. 236.

⁶⁶ *Lanercost*, p. 259.

⁶⁷ *Anonimalle*, p. 141.

of Edward III was relatively accepted for a time, and that it was likely the outcome of the 1328 Treaty of Northampton which secured peace with the Scots which may have ultimately proved to be their downfall.⁶⁸ As both Benz and Evans note, there is no evidence that the Treaty was initially unpopular, but the fallout resulted in the loss of lands in Scotland for several English lords, and several of those disinherited were part of the coalition that ultimately formed against Isabella and Mortimer.⁶⁹ During this period, Isabella was able to extend her economic wealth to nearly three times her dower wealth, making her the richest landholder after the King. However, Evans notes that, if her position as regent, and thus *de facto* ruler, is accepted, then this income is not as outlandish as it first seems.⁷⁰ While Isabella may have been astronomically wealthy if perceived as the dowager queen, as the reigning regent, her income was arguably appropriate. Benz suggests that her ability to accumulate this amount of wealth was due in part to an initial wave of gratitude from the magnates after the invasion of 1326.⁷¹

Slater makes no comment on Isabella's motives in 1325, or when she decided to act against her husband, but suggests that Isabella's actions at the French court in the autumn of 1325 can be perceived as marking "the beginning of a concerted public relations campaign by the queen to drum up sympathy and support."⁷² Isabella's history as a successful mediator and intercessor between her husband and his opponents – in France, England and abroad – may have assisted this cause, as she was able to build on this reputation as a supportive wife and queen, and place the blame for problems on Edward's circle, an oft-repeated claim.⁷³ This argument suggests that Isabella was very aware of the importance of maintaining this image in order to drum up support for her actions in 1325. This is a convincing argument for the years 1325-7, and even 1328, which only highlights the shift that occurs in the years 1328-30.

Given that Isabella and the barons' complaints during the primacy of Gaveston and the Despencers were primarily based on their personal greed and ability to translate favoritism into wealth and power, the hypocrisy of the (short) 'reign' of Isabella and Mortimer cannot be overstated. Menache's work discusses the shift in support and perception of Isabella in the years 1327-1330, arguing that "the sympathy awarded to the abandoned wife was withdrawn from the woman who lived openly with Mortimer, her lover." Interestingly, Menache seems to immediately contradict herself when she notes that the nature of Isabella's private life had not

⁶⁸ For an detailed analysis of Isabella's role as de-facto ruler from 1337-30, see Benz, *Three*, pp. 133-163.

⁶⁹ Evans, 'She-Wolf', p. 42; Benz, *Three*, p. 155.

⁷⁰ Evans, 'She-Wolf', p. 42.

⁷¹ Benz, *Three*, p. 151.

⁷² Slater, 'Rumour', p. 5.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

perceptibly changed between 1327 and 1330: Mortimer was present during the invasion and deposition, as he was when Edward III seized his reign.⁷⁴ Therefore, it is not Mortimer's presence – or, at least, not only Mortimer's presence – which can account for the shift in support of Isabella across their years in power. As has already been discussed in this chapter, the assumption that Mortimer was Isabella's lover should not be accepted without question, as Menache seems to do here. However, even without making assumptions as to the nature of their relationship, some of Menache's later point stands: when the Despensers and other of Edward's favorites were present, Isabella's actions could convincingly be presented as saving the Edward and England from such 'evil counsellors'. After the deposition and death of Edward and execution of his favorites, Isabella and her circle could no longer place the blame for actions elsewhere, and instead became the focus for discontent. Edward's death, whether at the hands of Isabella's camp or not, did not necessarily improve her public image. As Menache notes, "Edward dead was a more dangerous opponent than Edward alive."⁷⁵ Coupled with their own growth in wealth and prominence, Edward III's age and the execution of the Earl of Kent, it is unsurprising that they were unable to hold onto their power in 1330. What is surprising, however, is how quickly it seems Isabella's control over her own reputation fell apart. While the events of 1325-7/8 suggests a socio-political savviness, the following years seem to suggest a corresponding level of deafness to the politics of the court, ultimately leading to Mortimer's death and Isabella's downfall. It may be that Isabella's positioning was tenuous enough that her fall from power was inevitable, and that in another context her actions would have been depicted differently in the contemporary sources. Benz, following Ormrod, argues that Isabella's actions during Edward III's minority disrupted gender norms, and that Edward III's actions in 1330 and the years following were necessary to reestablish gender normative balance. Benz adds, however, that Isabella's actions were only perceived as disruptive of gender normativity when her policies became unpopular.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Menache, 'Postscript', p. 493, 506; 'Reconsideration', pp. 112, 115; p. 120: Menache also seems to accept without question that Edward's relationships with his favorites were sexual, and suggests that this should have been – but was not – included in contemporary accounts to her favor: "The fact that Edward II was a homosexual was not always mentioned...nor was it adduced as a balancing factor in judging his wife's promiscuity, leaving her a pathetic figure with all her negative fears." Aside from the fact that we cannot know for certain, that these were sexual relationships, as has been discussed in chapter I, and will be addressed again in chapter IV, generally it is no longer an accepted feature to ascribed modern terms of sexuality to medieval figures. 'Postscript', p. 495, 497: The 2012 'Postscript' reflects some of these shifts in scholarly practice, though still seems to assume the sexual nature of the relationship, as it does Isabella and Mortimer's.

⁷⁵ Menache, 'Reconsideration', p. 117.

⁷⁶ Benz, *Three*, p. 156; W. Mark Ormrod, 'Monarchy, Martyrdom and Masculinity: England in the Later Middle Ages' in *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages* (eds.) Patricia Cullum and Katherine Lewis (Cardiff, 2004), pp. 175-187.

While periods of conflict create power vacuums and opportunities, the eventual end of conflict results in a similar end of these opportunities. When Edward III came of age and seized the throne for himself in 1330, Isabella's fall from wealth and power was swift – she was unable to maintain her networks and position once the socio-politics of the court stabilized and the relationship between king and nobility was (somewhat) healed. Unlike Mortimer, who was swiftly arrested and executed without trial, Isabella survived the transition of power from the minority into Edward's personal rule. Though the coronation of Edward III in 1327 was essential to establish the role of Isabella as regent, the coronation of Philippa was prevented for two years after their marriage, in order for Isabella to maintain her role as queen. It was only in 1330, while five months pregnant, that Philippa was finally crowned, and Isabella's role as queen dowager cemented. Benz notes that this delay was unusual, and likely at Isabella's instigation, citing several studies which link queenly status with coronation, rather than marriage. However, this same status also could be linked to the legitimacy of children, as “an uncrowned consort could not give birth to a rightful heir.”⁷⁷ In order to protect the legitimacy of Edward III's future children, Philippa's coronation was essential. That Isabella not only survived the shift of power to her son, but ultimately regained much of her expected role is never used to suggest that Isabella was innocent of the events of 1326-7. Undoubtedly, the lack of severe punishment for her involvement was due to her personal relationship with her son; the events of 1325 certainly suggest that Edward III, then Prince Edward, trusted and supported his mother. Though not infallible, the particular power of motherhood may have saved Isabella from a traitor's fate such as befell Mortimer.⁷⁸ She was briefly kept under guard after the arrest and execution of Mortimer, but later lived out her life with the respect and resources due a dowager queen.⁷⁹ As was mentioned above, several of the chronicles from later in the fourteenth-century show evidence of trying to obscure or explain Isabella's involvement, likely reflecting her return to court and her position in Edward III's esteem. In the months and years following Edward III taking back his personal rule, he did strip Isabella of much of the land and wealth she had accumulated during the Mortimer years, but, in 1337, restored to her some of the wealth she had enjoyed as a consort, before the death of her husband. Some of this wealth was given to Edward's young wife, Philippa of Hainault, who had not received the customary dowry at the time of her marriage. Walsingham's *Gesta Abbatum* records that in

⁷⁷ Benz, *Three*, p. 106.

⁷⁸ For more on the intersection of motherhood and queenship in the fourteenth-century, see: Benz, *Three*, 105-131.

⁷⁹ Lanercost, p. 267; Froissart ed. MacCaulay, p. 31.

1334, Richard, Abbot of St Albans, was able to recover from Isabella a rent of 20 shillings for a mill “wrongfully alienated from the Abbey.”⁸⁰ The more recent studies of Isabella all agree that older scholarship has underrepresented Isabella’s political and social activity after 1330. Edward III’s claim to the French throne, which ignited the ‘Hundred Years War,’ was made on the basis of Isabella’s bloodline, suggesting that it was in his interest to maintain her presence in his political circles. Indeed, there is evidence of Isabella’s continued role as intercessor and mediator into the mid-1350s, shortly before her death.⁸¹

From the age of three, Isabella was destined for a life as an intermediary – a peacemaker located centrally between the volatile, dueling dynasties on either side of the channel. Rather than submit to the whims of kings from either side, her career suggests a desire to carve for herself as many benefits as she could from both sides. The socio-political instability of this period was rife with opportunities for her to do so, and Isabella was bold in pursuing these opportunities as they came. While she began life as a typical princess, betrothed for political gain, and ended as a relatively typical dowager queen, with her son on the throne and her daughter by her side, her career in between was not the path that those around her would have encouraged.

The destabilizing nature of civil conflict is such that traditional power structures are often upended for a time, creating the opportunity for an assertion of power by those traditionally left out of institutional power structures. Over the course of his reign, the decisions of Isabella’s husband, Edward II, led to several instances of open rebellion, creating political instability within the court and country. Through strategic partnerships – both in England and abroad – Isabella was able to utilize this instability and maneuver herself into an opportunity to lead an armed rebellion against her husband, placing her son on the throne and effectively ruling alongside Mortimer, for the three remaining years of Edward III’s minority.

The relationships between Isabella and the men in her life – her father and brothers in France, Edward II, Mortimer, Edward III and even Gaveston and Despenser – are central to the dynamics of both the politics and events of this period, and to the lasting reputations of all involved, including and especially Isabella herself. In addition, Isabella’s personal grievances, ambitions and political maneuvering certainly play a large role. Beyond her personally, her statuses – as a princess of France; the wife of the king; the mother of the crown prince and,

⁸⁰ *Gesta Abbatum*, ed. Riley, pp. 266-7: “Circa idem tempus idem abbas recuperavit versus Isabellam Reginam, tenentem manerium de Langleye ex dono Regis, redditum viginti solidorum de molendino Radulphi Chendut in Langley, per billam in pleno Parlamento, et breve, concessum, ut patet per processum subsequentem”; pp. 268, 275

⁸¹ Evans, ‘She-Wolf’, p. 44; Benz, *Three*, pp. 4, 116.

later, king; the probable lover of Mortimer; a queen dowager; a foreigner in England – are all also central to the political dynamics of this period.

PART II: ROYAL FAVORITES ¹

Alice Perrers, Katherine Swynford, Piers Gaveston and Robert de Vere occupy very similar places in society: close favorites of institutionally powerful men who benefited greatly from this power - in wealth, influence and position in society. The trajectories of their careers arise from four important differences: gender; social position – Robert de Vere was the son and heir to the eighth earl of Oxford, Piers Gaveston and Katherine Swynford were both children of knights, and Alice Perrers was likely the daughter of a goldsmith; and marital and sexual status - Katherine Swynford eventually became the third wife of John of Gaunt while Gaveston and Perrers remained attached only informally, but likely with sexual relationships and de Vere was probably only ever attached platonically to Richard II, though there were some rumors regarding the nature of this relationship as well. Even accounting for these differences, the issues society had with each remains remarkably similar: each was able to leverage their relationship for huge amounts of wealth and influence, upsetting those who were passed over in favor of them: the depictions of Alice Perrers in the contemporary *St Albans Chronicle* of Thomas Walsingham maintain an image of a greedy villain, particularly in the deathbed scene of Edward III, where she is described as removing the rings from the king's fingers as he lay dying.² However, when it came to the perception that they were transgressing gender boundaries and norms, the societal concern with the women was that they were holding too much power and influence for their gender, whereas the concern regarding Gaveston and de Vere was that they were elevated above their deserved social status, and that their relationships with Edward II and Richard II undermined the masculinity and prestige of the kings by surrendering too much power to the favorites.

Working within a degendered framework to understand power, the parallels between the four become even more striking - while Gaveston and de Vere, as noble males, undoubtedly had access to more 'hard power' than either of the women, both Perrers and Swynford were able to build up significant wealth and social or patronage networks, providing them with what Theresa Earenflight would categorize as charismatic and diplomatic power.³ The potential or latent power that all four held as potentially problematic or dangerous figures can be found in

¹ Portions of this part have been published as; Audrey Covert, "*Sine commune favore*: the intersection of power, perception and sexual morality in the careers of Piers Gaveston and the 'royal favorites' of fourteenth-century England" in Gabrielle Storey and Zita Eva Rohr (eds.) *Premodern Ruling Sexualities* (Manchester, 2024), pp. 232-251. My thanks to Gabby and Zita for all their work in assembling this volume.

² Ormrod, 'The Trials', p. 367; *St Albans*, p. 118.

³ Earenflight, 'A Lifetime', pp. 271-293.

their exile from court - Gaveston repeatedly at the behest of both the French and the English nobles; de Vere after a military defeat at the hands of those opposed to Richard's reign; Swynford after Gaunt's second marriage; and Perrers after the death of Edward III. All four had diplomatic power through their close relationships with royal men; Gaveston also had institutional power after his elevation to earl by Edward II and de Vere through his birth and inheritance, and later through his elevations to marquis and duke by Richard II. Both Perrers and Swynford had dynastic power as mother of their children; this is particularly true of Katherine Swynford as her children were not just recognized but also legitimated. Of the four, three of their stories end relatively poorly: Gaveston is executed; De Vere dies in exile; and Perrers loses most of the status and wealth she gained during Edward III's life. Katherine Swynford is the exception to this rule, likely for one – or both – of two reasons: firstly, of the four, only her 'royal' was not a king, perhaps allowing her to stay just under the radar enough to survive the relationship; secondly, she is the only of the four whose relationship ends up legalized, with her later marriage, giving her both the protection of this marriage, and later, the protection of her legitimized children.

Systematic comparison of the lives and careers of these four royal favorites creates a space for the nuanced exploration of the intersection of gender, power and sexual morality by isolating, as much as is possible, and then examining the different factors which may have affected the trajectories of their careers.

Chapter III: The Power of a Ring

Alice Perrers

She was a shameless, impudent harlot, and of low birth...elevated by fortune. She was not attractive or beautiful, but knew how to compensate for these defects by her seductive voice. Blind fortune elevated this woman to such heights and promoted her to a greater intimacy with the king than was proper. Even while the queen was still alive, the king loved this woman more than he loved the queen.¹

There is little known conclusively about Alice Perrers' life before she entered into the service of Queen Philippa of England, wife of Edward III, likely sometime in the early 1360s. It is not even known exactly where she acquired the name 'Perrers,' though most recent scholars now suggest that Perrers was the name of her first husband. Given her exponential rise to wealth and power in the late 1360s and 1370s, and her subsequent fall, trials and court cases, it is not surprising that a significant amount of academic work has been dedicated to attempting to trace her origins and early years. F. George Kay's *Lady of the Sun* (1966) was the definitive biography until recent years, when she has come of interest again to a new generation of scholars. In particular, W. Mark Ormrod and Laura Tompkins have each written a series of papers and chapters in recent decades which examine various pieces of her career and previous theories of her origins to create a convincing, if still uncertain, picture of her personal history.² Alice herself was silent on the particularities of her natal family, mentioning only her children with Edward III in her will.³

There were several traditions of Alice's origins provided by late medieval historians. Thomas Walsingham, in the *St Albans Chronicle*, who was, to put it kindly, not a fan of Alice, describes her as "a shameless, impudent harlot, and of low birth, for she was the daughter of a thatcher in the town of Henney, elevated by fortune."⁴ Most scholars assume that Walsingham was letting his clear dislike for Alice color his description of her, and that his analysis should therefore be taken with a grain of salt. This dislike stems from two sources and, as will become evident throughout this chapter, is not limited just to Alice: firstly, Walsingham generally displays a clear sense of rigid morality, and is quite prolific in his moralizing, even beyond

¹ *St Albans*, pp. 42-3.

² W. M. Ormrod, 'Who Was Alice Perrers?', pp. 219-229; 'The Trials', pp. 366-396; 'Alice Perrers and John Salisbury', pp. 379-393; Laura Tompkins' 2013 PhD thesis 'The Uncrowned Queen' is the most recent full-length analysis of the life and career of Alice Perrers. My thanks to Laura for providing me with access to her work for this research while it was still under embargo.

³ Laura Tompkins, 'Alice Perrers and the Goldsmiths' Mystery: New Evidence Concerning the Identity of the Mistress of Edward III', *English Historical Review*, 130, 547 (2015), pp. 1361-2.

⁴ *St Albans*, pp. 42-3.

what might be expected from a medieval monastic chronicler, and Alice's position as Edward III's favorite was specifically one he clearly abhorred. In addition, Alice spent much of her adult life in conflict with the Abbot of St Albans, where Walsingham resided and to whom Walsingham served as a clerk. Walsingham's biases, reflecting those of the Abbot, are clear in other cases as well. In particular, the Abbot's close relationship with Edward III is reflected in a far more positive portrayal of the king, as is his intense dislike of the king's son, John of Gaunt.⁵ Despite these clear biases – or perhaps because of them – Walsingham's *St Albans Chronicle* is filled with references to Alice, and therefore remains an invaluable source on her activities, even if his descriptions of her person and character require skepticism. One school of thought from the nineteenth century regarding her origins suggested that she was a niece of William Wykham, Bishop of Winchester and Chancellor of England under Edward III and Richard II, possibly due to stories of Wykham's own modest birth.⁶ Another tradition names Alice as the daughter of a Devon weaver. Comparatively, several other traditions give Alice a more highborn background, including the suggestion that she was the illegitimate daughter of the Earl of Warrene, suggesting that a woman of low birth would not have been able to end up in the Queen's service.⁷ In the twentieth century, Haldeen Braddy published a pair of articles which suggested that Alice was the second wife of William Champaigne of London, but which have been convincingly countered by Martha Powell Harley.⁸ Chris Given-Wilson's original biography of Alice in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB) suggested that Alice was the daughter of a Sir Richard Perrers of Hertfordshire; however, more recent versions of the biography no longer make this conclusion.⁹ One point of contention in the scholarship is whether Perrers was Alice's maiden name, or whether she may have been married by the time she was at court – early arguments suggested that while Alice's role at

⁵ George Kay, *Lady of the Sun: the life and times of Alice Perrers*, (London, 1966), p. 95.

⁶ *Dictionary of National Biography*, (ed.) Sir Leslie Stephens and Sidney Lee, 63 vols, (London, 1885-1900). Vol 15, p. 898. For more on the relationship, though not familial, between Alice and Wykham, see Laura Tompkins, '“Said the Mistress to the Bishop”: Alice Perrers, William Wykeham and Court Networks in Fourteenth-Century England' in Rémy Ambühl, James Bothwell and Laura Tompkins (eds.), *Ruling Fourteenth-Century England: Essays in Honour of Christopher Given-Wilson* (Suffolk, 2019), pp. 205-226, esp. p. 209 regarding the rumored familial relationship.

⁷ W. Mark Ormrod, 'Who Was Alice Perrers?', *The Chaucer Review*, 40, 3 (2006), p. 220.

⁸ Haldeen Braddy, 'Chaucer and Dame Alice Perrers', 21, 2 (1946) pp. 222-228; Haldeen Braddy, 'Chaucer, Alice Perrers and Cicely Champaigne', 52, 4 (1977), pp. 906-11; Martha Powell Harley, 'Chaucer, Alice Perrers and Cicely Champaigne: A Closer Look', 28, (1993), pp. 78-82.

⁹ Chris Given-Wilson, 'Alice Perrers', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: Several of these suggestions were made as early as 1910 by Frances Bickley in his *King's Favorites*.

court could have been filled by a married woman, there was no evidence to suggest that she was married, and therefore assumed that she was born a Perrers.¹⁰

Taking these several traditions as to Alice's origins as convincingly debunked and therefore assuming that Alice Perrers is, in fact, not related to Wykham, or a weaver in Devon, or the Earl of Warenne, then we return to the original question facing scholars for several centuries – who was Alice Perrers before she was Edward III's favorite? Ormrod and Tompkins' conclusions on this subject rely on several critical discoveries: the first is a petition found in the 'Ancient Petitions' collection in the National Archives which refers specifically to a Janyn Perrers, husband of Alice, who owed debts accumulated sometime in 1360-1. As noted by Ormrod, this is the first definitive proof that Alice was married before her relationship with Edward III and her later marriage to William Windsor, and that Perrers was therefore her married name and not her maiden name. This not only definitively ends any possible connection to Richard Perrers, it also makes a possible marriage to Chaumpaigne impossible as the only document potentially linking the two is dated to this same year.¹¹ The second critical document appears for the first time in Ormrod's 2008 article 'Alice Perrers and John Salisbury'. It discusses another petition from this same collection, in which a John Cobham is seeking recovery of various debts from Alice and is dated sometime between the first two parliaments of Richard II's reign, between November 1377 and October 1378.¹² The third count of the petition specifically describes a grant effected through the Exchequer of Receipts to her brother, John Salisbury. This is, again, the first instance of a named relative of Alice Perrers and the first account which suggests a maiden name for her. John Salisbury is certainly not a unique name for medieval England. Ormrod notes in reference to a John Salisbury who was a trader in Southampton being mistaken for one who was a disgraced courtier, "misidentification of John Salisburys was as much as a hazard then as it is now".¹³ Ormrod then proceeds to attempt to identify who this particular Salisbury might be, working outwards from the circles in which he knew Alice existed: specifically the court, the city of London and rural Berkshire, building off of Walsingham's suggestion that Alice originated in a town called "Henneye", which Ormrod, following Douglas Richardson, argues refers to East and West

¹⁰ Ormrod 'Who Was', p. 221; *DNB* 15, pp. 898-900.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

¹² W. Mark Ormrod, 'Alice Perrers and John Salisbury', *The English Historical Review*, 123, 501 (2008), p. 380.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 385: the name identified in the original document is 'Salesbury', which has modernized as 'Salisbury'.

Hanney in Berkshire.¹⁴ While Ormrod is unable to definitively identify this brother of Alice, he comes to the tentative conclusion it might be referring to one “John Southbury who created a trust for Alice on his East Hanney manor in 1382.”¹⁵ Ormrod also notes that Alice’s illegitimate son by Edward III is given the name Southeray, which could be yet another variation of the names of Salisbury/Southbury, rather than the previously suggested variant on “Surrey”.¹⁶

As mentioned above, Alice entered into the service of Queen Philippa of Hainault, wife of Edward, as a *damoiselle* sometime in the early 1360s and likely attracted the attention of Edward quite quickly, becoming his sexual partner shortly thereafter. Her service to Philippa is first noted in 1366 when she was granted two tuns of Gascon wine for ‘long service to Queen Philippa’, she is then not included in lists of ladies who received Christmas robes in 1366 or 1368, suggesting she may have left Philippa’s service by this time.¹⁷ Alice’s fortunes truly began to shift after the death of Queen Philippa in 1369.¹⁸

Katherine Swynford

In comparison to Alice Perrers, there is relatively little scholarly work on her contemporary, Katherine Swynford. The one exception of this is the work of Jeannette Lucraft, who published a popular history monograph on Katherine in 2006.¹⁹ Most references to her can be found in larger works discussing her second husband, John of Gaunt. There are several reasons for why this might be, the most likely of which is that, up until her marriage to John of Gaunt, there was not a lot to distinguish Katherine from any other female favorite of the period. While she was not noble born, she was also not from a family of craftsmen like Alice, and her presence at court is certainly not surprising. Similarly, during her time as a favorite and sexual partner, she did not make the same waves or problems that Alice did, and her presence did not have nearly the same level of socio-political or economic ramifications. This is due in part, of course, to the fact that John of Gaunt was not king, and therefore any influence or power

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 388: previous attempts to locate “Henney” have identified it as Great and Little Henney in Essex.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 391; Chris Given-Wilson and Alice Curteis, *Royal Bastards of Medieval England*, (London, 1984), pp. 138-142.

¹⁷ *St Albans*, p. 42; *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, Vol 13, p. 321; Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, 1992) p. 90; Laura Tompkins, “Edward III’s Gold-Digging Mistress”: Alice Perrers, Gender and Financial Power at the English Royal Court, 1360-1377’, in Cathleen Sarti, *Women and Economic Power in Premodern Courts*, (York, 2020), p. 60.

¹⁸ Tompkins, ‘Edward III’s’, p. 60.

¹⁹ Jeannette Lucraft, *Katherine Swynford: The History of a Medieval Mistress* (Gloucestershire, 2006): This monograph is the expansion of her undergraduate dissertation, which she does not appear to have pursued into postgraduate work.

Katherine had over him was not nearly as concerning to those around him as Alice's power over Edward would have been. Had Katherine never married Gaunt, it is likely that she would never have been known to history, except perhaps for a passing mention in a biography of John of Gaunt or Geoffrey Chaucer – and, even then, it would be in reference to her relationships through others: as a mother to Gaunt's illegitimate children or as sister to Chaucer's wife. What makes Katherine Swynford so remarkable and of more than passing interest from a historical point of view was her ability to make the transition from favorite and sexual partner to wife.

Katherine was likely born c. 1350 and was the daughter of Payn de Roet, a knight from Hainault. Anthony Goodman, in his pamphlet length biography of her, notes that de Roet was part of a migration of Hainaulters to England during the reign of Edward III, seeking the favor of his wife, Philippa of Hainault.²⁰ Katherine had one sister, also a Philippa, and they both succeeded in securing positions and beneficial marriages in England: Philippa married Geoffrey Chaucer, at the time an esquire in the king's service and later, of course, one of the most famous writers in medieval England, and was a damsel of the queen's chamber.²¹ Katherine married Hugh Swynford, a Lincolnshire knight and became a lady-in-waiting to Blanche of Lancaster, wife of John of Gaunt, third son of Edward III. It is usually suggested that it was through her service to Blanche that Katherine would have first met John; however, Goodman suggests an alternative, though not necessarily more likely possibility. Until 1372, Gaunt held the earldom of Richmond, which included some of the land granted to the Swynford family in Lincolnshire and it is highly likely that Hugh served much of his career under Gaunt, and unsurprising that his wife would also serve the same family.²² Whether Katherine's position came through the influence of her father and Philippa of Hainault or through her marriage, by January, 1365, she was granted privileges by Bishop Buckingham of Lincoln as the duchess' *ancille*, a female servant. Dunn notes that despite the female dominated space of the queen's court, "ladies-in-waiting still operated within male-dominated familial networks."²³ Tompkins also discusses the fluidity between the two courts, noting that

the similar set ups of both institutions meant that they could come together and separate with ease as and when it was required. Most of the queen's officers, administrators and domestic servants had been trained in the king's household and her ladies were often the wives of the king's men.²⁴

²⁰ Anthony Goodman, *Katherine Swynford* (Lincoln 1994), p. 1.

²¹ *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, Vol 13, p. 311; Caroline Dunn, 'All the Queen's Ladies? Philippa of Hainault's Female Attendants' *Medieval Prosopography*, 31 (2016), p. 190.

²² Goodman, *Katherine Swynford*, p. 24

²³ Dunn, 'All the Queen's Ladies', p. 178; Goodman, *Katherine Swynford*, p. 10.

²⁴ Tompkins, 'The Uncrowned Queen', p. 214. For more on the structure and politics of the queen's household, see *ibid.*, 202-217, esp. 214-217.

While John of Gaunt's household was not the royal household, there would have been many parallels in their structures and Hugh and Katherine simultaneously serving in the two halves of the court is not surprising.

Hugh and Katherine had at least two children together, both of whom survived to adulthood. Their son, Thomas, was born in 1367 or 1368. John of Gaunt stood as godfather to their daughter Blanche, presumably named for the duchess, who Goodman suggests also likely stood as godmother and therefore would have been born first, as Blanche of Lancaster died in 1368.²⁵ Chris Given-Wilson and Alice Curteis disagree, stating that Thomas was born in 1368 and Blanche in 1370.²⁶ It seems equally as possible that Blanche Swynford was born second and named in memory of the late duchess. Hugh Swynford died overseas in 1371, likely in the service of Gaunt in south-west France. Now a young widow, Katherine was given a new, and important, post in the duke's household: as governess to the duke's daughters, Philippa and Elizabeth. She held this post until 1381 and was rewarded for her service, according to the records, with a wardship in 1376.²⁷

Exactly when the affair between Katherine and Gaunt began is unclear – Goodman suggests dating the beginning of the affair to 1372, which corroborates the statements later made that they were not involved before the deaths of either Blanche of Lancaster or Hugh Swynford. Froissart states that the affair began before the death of Hugh Swynford. He also erroneously states that the couple only had three children, “deux fils et une fille”.²⁸ Interestingly, Katherine did not serve as a governess to Gaunt's younger daughter, Catherine, by his second wife, Constance – though there is no indication as the reason for this. It may be that the age difference between the young Catherine and her older half-sisters was too significant for them to reasonably share a governess, or it may be that Constance's knowledge of Gaunt and Katherine's affair – which was anything but discreet – meant that Katherine was not considered a proper choice for the young Catherine's governess.²⁹ Dating the beginning of the affair is both an impossible task and incredibly important to Katherine's later reputation and the possible legitimacy of her oldest son: while unmarried sexual partner was never a respectable role for a woman to hold, it is tacitly far more acceptable for a widow than for a

²⁵ Goodman, *Katherine Swynford*, p. 11.

²⁶ Given-Wilson and Curteis, *Royal Bastards*, p. 148.

²⁷ Goodman, *Katherine Swynford*, p. 11.

²⁸ Froissart, *Oeuvres de Froissart*, (ed.) Kervyn de Lettenhove, (Brussels 1892-1896), p. 239: “Le chevalier vivant et mort, tousjours le duc Jehan de Lancastre avoit amé et tenu celle Katherine de Roet.”

²⁹ Anthony Goodman, *John of Gaunt: The Exercise of Princely Power in Fourteenth-Century Europe* (2nd ed.: New York, 2013), p. 321, 357.

married woman. Due to John of Gaunt's gender and position, his taking a sexual partner even while married is not particularly problematic. He did have a negative reputation himself, but cuckolding another man would have been viewed much more negatively. Additionally, there were at least some questions as to the possible paternity of Thomas Swynford, Katherine's oldest son. Had the affair been taking place during her first marriage, it would be potentially possible that he was in fact John of Gaunt's son, rather than Hugh Swynford's. This is not a narrative ever pushed by either Katherine or Thomas, and Katherine and Gaunt maintained their assertions that Katherine was a widow when they became involved. Froissart, in his *Chronicles*, lists only "thre children, two sonnes and a doughter, *the eldest called Johan*."³⁰ While Froissart is clearly lacking knowledge of one of the four children and therefore not the strongest witness, he is also not including Thomas, who would have been the oldest if he had been Gaunt's child. Gaunt's twentieth century biographer, Sydney Armitage-Smith, dates the births of their children, later given the dynastic name of Beaufort, to circa 1373, 1375, 1377 and 1379, all of which aligns with an affair beginning in 1372. The name Beaufort came from a former French possession of Gaunt's in Anjou, which he lost to the French in 1369. While tradition has claimed that the Beaufort children were born there, this has proved untrue, and the title was likely chosen because it did not interfere with the possessions or inheritance of any of Gaunt's legitimate children.³¹ After she left her post as governess to the duke's daughters, Katherine and the Beaufort children went to live in the household of Mary of Bohun, wife of Henry Bolingbroke, for the remaining years while Gaunt was abroad. He returned to England in 1389, at which point he and Katherine lived together openly until the death of his second wife, Constance of Castile, in 1394 and their marriage in 1395.³²

Marital Status

There are many clear parallels between the relationship of Alice Perrers and Edward III and that of Katherine Swynford and John of Gaunt. F. George Kay states that "it was said openly that Katherine was a second Alice Perrers, with none of her charm and far more influence."³³ While these specifics can certainly be debated, the parallels of their relationships and careers cannot be denied. Both were clearly scandalous, though the existence of sexual partners to powerful men was certainly not unusual, and both women were incredibly

³⁰ Froissart, trans. Bouchier, p. 190.

³¹ Sydney Armitage-Smith, *John of Gaunt* (1904), p. 389, 462-3; Given-Wilson and Curteis, *Royal Bastards*, pp.148-9.

³² Given-Wilson and Curteis, *Royal Bastards*, p. 149.

³³ Kay, *Lady of the Sun*, p. 193.

successful in leveraging their relationships for wealth and influence. However, there is one clear difference between them: Katherine Swynford was able to achieve the transition that Alice, and indeed, most other female sexual partners throughout history, was never able – the transition to wife.

Each woman was married twice – Alice first to Janyn Perrers and later to William Windsor and Katherine to Sir Hugh Swynford and then to John of Gaunt. Each first marriage is relatively unrelated to the later careers of the women, other than the occasional question as to the dates of death of their husbands relative to the beginning of relationships as sexual partners and, as noted above, in Katherine's case, a single accusation that her oldest son with John of Gaunt may have been born before Sir Hugh's death, possibly bringing his paternity into question, although this accusation does not appear to have ever been pursued.³⁴ Goodman suggests that these accusations, which were raised in Hainault in 1411, may have stemmed from Froissart, who also suggested the affair may have begun while Hugh Swynford was still alive.

It is the second marriage of each woman, then, which is far more interesting in reference to their status, careers and reputations. The exact dating of Alice's marriage to William Windsor is unclear, but was attested to at the Good Parliament, in which he claimed that they had already been married for some time. Walsingham follows a statement by Windsor that they had been married "for a long time," leading some scholars to suggest that the marriage may have taken place in the early 1370s or even late 1360s.³⁵ F. George Kay suggests that Alice and Windsor may have met as early as the mid-1360s, when Windsor traveled with the returning Lionel of Clarence from Ireland during the time Alice was in service to Philippa.³⁶ Ormrod notes that Alice was formally acknowledged as having independent widow status in 1374 and 1375, and suggests that the marriage most likely could not have occurred before the Good Parliament, as Windsor claimed in 1378, but took place after and Windsor chose to claim an earlier date for the economic benefit of attempting to reclaim the lands lost to Alice.³⁷ The first formal mention of the marriage appears to be in December 1377, by the sheriffs of London returning the writs which made a valuation of Alice's property prior to its confiscation. The mention of Windsor as Alice's husband in these writs is the legal basis for the claim of errors

³⁴ Goodman, *Katherine*, p. 11, n. 13; *Froissart*, p. 239.

³⁵ W. Mark Ormrod, 'The Trials of Alice Perrers', *Speculum*, 83, 2 (2008), pp. 371-2.

³⁶ Kay, *Lady of the Sun*, pp. 64-5.

³⁷ Ormrod, 'The Trials', pp. 371-2.

made a year later.³⁸ She was later able to use this assertion of her marriage to her advantage after Edward's death and it enabled her, and her husband, to reclaim some of the land taken previously taken from her.³⁹ However, after the death of Windsor, much of this reclaimed land was once again taken away. This marriage seems to have been manifested by those who wanted to limit her economic power and influence as it made her more palatable and controllable, but it also offered a level of safety which she had not been afforded in her previous status. Earenflight discusses the power, rather than powerlessness, inherent in resistance and captivity.⁴⁰ While Alice was never held in physical captivity, the decisions of parliament held her in a form of economic and political captivity, effectively cutting off her access to power at its source – her independence and her access to the king - and thus tacitly admitting to the power she held. If Alice did not have the influence and power through her relationship with the king and her presence in his court, then that access would not need to be regulated and removed. Walsingham reflects on the danger of Alice's presence:

...they knew that the king's love for this harlot was, as we have said, more than was right or proper, they tolerated it until she brought almost universal dishonour upon the king's reputation, unjustly disinherited some of the most powerful of Englishmen, and defiled virtually the whole kingdom of England with her disgraceful insolence... They were well aware that whatever charge or judgement they endeavored to make against Alice, though they would be doing this for the good of the king and not to his disadvantage, he would be reluctant to accept it.⁴¹

Tompkins refers to Alice as the 'Uncrowned Queen', referencing specifically the influence and power Alice held after the death of Philippa. One particular example of this is an October, 1371 incident in which Pope Gregory VI appeals to Alice to intercede and obtain the release of his brother, Roger Beaufort, who was being held captive by an ally of the English. Tompkins specifically notes that this was an unusual request to be made of someone in Alice's position, and that "under normal circumstances the only women the Papacy would approach to intercede with the king would be the queen or close female relatives, such as his mother."⁴² This incident suggests that Alice's prominence and importance at Edward's court was both significant and public, and news and knowledge of it had traveled as far as the papal curia.

³⁸ *Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous Preserved in the Public Office, Henry III-Henry V, 7 Vols, Vol 4* (1377-1388), n. 17.

³⁹ Kay, *Lady of the Sun* p. 173

⁴⁰ Earenflight, 'A Lifetime', pp. 283, 286.

⁴¹ *St Albans*, 44-5.

⁴² Tompkins, 'Uncrowned Queen', pp. 217-8; see also, *ibid.*, p. 70.

However, Tompkins also notes that “while ‘good’ queenship has been shown to be vital in supporting, complementing and even completing a king’s sovereignty, Alice’s ‘quasi-queenship’ reversed that effect, weakening the last years of Edward III’s kingship in ideological as well as practical terms.”⁴³ In these years, Alice was filling a socio-political vacuum within Edward’s court, but doing so without the proper context and constraints of marriage made her associated rise in power and influence dangerous, rather than useful. Though Alice was not the only ‘favorite’ to rise around Edward III in his final years, she was at the very center of this so called ‘covyne’. Like Gaveston before her, and de Vere after her, leading members of the king’s household were relied upon as well, to the detriment of other leading nobles, but Tompkins argues that Alice is the ‘linchpin’ around which this group functioned, putting her in a highly influential position.⁴⁴ The centrality of Alice’s position is visually expressed most clearly, in the mid 1370s, when she rode through London and appeared at a tournament dressed as the ‘Lady of the Sun’.⁴⁵

The secret nature of Alice’s marriage to Windsor makes it manipulable: Was the king aware of the marriage, making him complicit in her adultery? Were they or were they not married before the Good Parliament, allowing her to be tried as a *femme sole*, or should Windsor have been present? Tompkins suggests that recognizing Alice’s married status actually improved her legal claims and strengthened her and Windsor’s ability to reclaim her lands as compared to her status as a single woman, which is reflected in the limited success of their legal claims after their marriage was made public.⁴⁶ Tompkins’ argument is made in counter to Ormrod’s earlier arguments, which suggest the marriage was as strategy “of a conspiracy between Gaunt and Windsor to cover and silence her.”⁴⁷ Walsingham is very clear that Edward was unaware of any marriage during his relationship with her, noting that he was informed after “in the course of a careful inquiry carried out by the commons it was discovered that Alice had been married.” The king’s reaction to hearing of her marriage is described as well: “hearing this the king became very frightened, swearing by his Holy Lady Mary (this was his oath) that he did not know she was married, and that if he had known she had a husband,

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 195: for more on a comparison of the benefits of the legal statuses of ‘*femme sole*’ and ‘*femme couvert*’ during this period, see Marjorie K. McIntosh, ‘The Benefits and Drawbacks of *Femme Sole* Status in England, 1300-1630’, *Journal of British Studies*, 44, 3 (2005), pp. 410-38.

⁴⁷ Ormrod, ‘Trials’, 394; 366-396.

he would in no way have entertained this sinful liaison.”⁴⁸ The danger of Alice is further expanded then, by her dishonesty, and by dragging the king further into sin without his knowledge. In the end, it seems the easiest way to remove the problem of Alice Perrers, *femme sole*, and the social independence, though somewhat politically ineffectual, that came with this position, was to accept the assertion that she had been married, secretly, before the Good Parliament and allow her and her husband to regain most of her wealth and land, while maintaining the king’s reputation through lack of complicity.⁴⁹

Katherine’s second marriage, to John of Gaunt, is certainly the most significant of the four in terms of its occurrence. As noted above, the transition from favorite to wife was quite rare, and why and how this marriage occurred is certainly an important question. While marriage may have made the relationship between Katherine and John more societally palatable, it certainly was not without comment. The most important result of the marriage was that it created the opportunity for their four children to become legitimate, as was done by papal bull in September 1396. The marriage itself also required papal dispensation since they had committed adultery and because Gaunt stood as godfather to Katherine’s son, Thomas Swynford.⁵⁰ However, this marriage probably had more effect on the lasting status of her children and family than it did on Katherine’s own social status during her lifetime – even as a Duchess, no one was likely to forget that she had been the duke’s sexual partner for several decades. Froissart reports the shock of other royal women at the time and compares the relatively humble birth of Katherine to that of her predecessors, Duchesses Blanche and Constance.⁵¹ After the death of Gaunt in 1399, Katherine retired from court and lived the remaining years until her death in 1403 in relative quiet.⁵²

It is likely that Edward III never considered marrying Alice – the only real reason to do so would be to legitimate their children. Any mention of the possibility of a marriage between Edward and Alice, or of the legitimation of their children, would undoubtedly have been met with uproar and likely violence. The root of this conclusion stems from two points: firstly, that it was unnecessary, and secondly, that no candidate would ever have been agreed upon. Edward and Philippa of Hainault had many children, including five adult sons when he began his relationship with Alice, and his oldest son and heir, Edward, known as the Black Prince, had a

⁴⁸ *St Albans*, pp. 46-7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁵⁰ Given-Wilson and Curteis, *Royal Bastards*, p. 150.

⁵¹ *Froissart*, p. 239-40.

⁵² As noted above, this is still a very comfortable ending in comparison to the other case studies featured in this section.

son of his own, the future King Richard II, in 1367. Marrying Alice and making their children legitimate was entirely unnecessary, and in fact would likely have created more problems by adding potential claimants to the throne, as well as the complications of a secondary line born in illegitimacy. The second argument is simply that the only candidate who Alice would have accepted as a second wife to Edward would presumably have been herself, and all evidence suggests that Edward himself would not have agreed to a marriage without her support. She was, clearly, not an acceptable candidate to much of his court or clergy, and thus any push for the king to remarry would have created a political stalemate between the two factions. Tompkins also suggests that a third possible reason for Edward not to remarry was in order to remain loyal to Philippa after her death.⁵³ However, were that the goal, presumably Edward would not have encouraged so public a presence for Alice within his court. No matter the reasons, without the necessity of additional heirs, it was clearly prudent to not provoke this particular issue, and thus Edward III was one of only a few late medieval kings to end his reign without a consort. Tompkins argues that the combination of Alice's prominent status at court and the lack of an official consort to Edward in the final eight years of his life, left Alice to fill the socio-political vacuum at court, acting as 'uncrowned queen' for these years, noting that the death of Philippa in 1369 served as the instigation for a shift from Alice as a private sexual partner to a public figure and favorite.⁵⁴ And this, perhaps, is what makes Alice such a unique and infamous figure: while Katherine Swynford's unique status stems from making the most unlikely of shifts from sexual partner to wife, Alice's notoriety stems from her unofficial, but hugely influential, position at Edward's court in his final years, an influence which only expanded and lasted due to Philippa's death. While the concept of a royal female favorite as an 'uncrowned queen' is not unique to Alice Perrers, or unheard of to a medieval audience, it was fairly uncommon for fourteenth century England. This practice was far more common in Scotland and France, and even there still just beginning to emerge in the 1360s when Alice was ascendent, really peaking in the fifteenth century at the courts of Charles VI and Charles VII.⁵⁵ It is important to recognize the nuance present between the title of 'queen' and position and duties of 'queenship': the idea of 'uncrowned queen' then becomes one who holds the duties – and presumably also the power and influence – without the title. Tompkins notes that

Alice was able to access the practical functions of the office of queenship in this manner because only a small part of queenship was fully exclusive to the person of the queen.

⁵³ Tompkins, 'Uncrowned Queen', 69.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 68-70, 197: For more on the development of this theory, a breakdown of Alice's career, and the specific power structure around Alice, see *Ibid.*, Chapter 6: 'The Uncrowned Queen', pp. 197-245.

⁵⁵ See *Ibid.*, 197-202.

Her beauty, her virtues and her ability to bear children were expected of all women, not just queens...upon Philippa's death (and to a lesser extent before) Alice could access the power of those aspects of the office of queenship familiar and associated with all women and which did not need the authority of a queen...a queen's ability to exert power, apart from her role as an independent landowner, was ultimately reliant on her influence over the king. A queen could enhance her position by both adhering to and manipulating the agency afforded to her as a mother, intercessor, and landowner, but without real influence over the king these legitimate methods of wielding power were little more than useless ornaments.⁵⁶

In comparison to Alice's position, John of Gaunt only had one surviving son by the time his relationship with Katherine Swynford began – Henry Bolingbroke, the future Henry IV. It was certainly within his interest to produce more male heirs and the three sons – John, Henry and Thomas - which Katherine had by him were all in their twenties by the time they were legitimated, along with their sister, Joan, by Richard II.⁵⁷ Henry IV reissued the act of legitimization in 1407 with an added clause which prevented any of the Beauforts from inheriting the throne – this was later revoked by Edward VI.⁵⁸ In this instance, Katherine's power came from her ability to provide Gaunt heirs, and in doing so she was able to utilize this power to her own benefit. While Katherine's relationship with Gaunt was certainly worthy of social commentary, and of the disdain of the clerics, neither it nor Katherine defies social norms in the same way as Alice did. While Katherine may have reached beyond her 'natural' station or status with her marriage to Gaunt, she did not transgress gendered norms. Her relationship with Gaunt was ultimately more understandable and palatable, and far less dangerous to the magnates of the realm, and this is likely why her retirement after the death of Gaunt lacked the volatility of Alice's.

Alice, in comparison to Katherine, spent her many remaining years after the death of Edward trying to reclaim the wealth and property she had amassed during her time as Edward's favorite. Had the relationship ever been legitimized through marriage or her children recognized, this process may have proceeded much more in her favor, though this is not certain. There are many historical examples of widows who also struggled to maintain their wealth.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁵⁷ Given-Wilson and Curteis, *Royal Bastards*, p. 49.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18, 151: The House of Tudor, of which Edward VI was the third reigning monarch, traced its claim to the throne through the Beauforts: John Beaufort's granddaughter Margaret Beaufort married Edmund Tudor in 1455. Their son, Henry Tudor, was the first of the Tudor kings, reigning as Henry VII. Given-Wilson and Curteis note that the qualification in Henry's confirmation may have simply been restating a commonly held opinion that the Beauforts should not have access to the line of succession, nor were they needed – at the time, the Lancaster line stood strong. It was not for a several more generations that the line would begin to die out and the Beaufort claim become relevant.

History has generally looked far more kindly on Katherine than on Alice, mostly because while Katherine is usually a footnote in the larger story of John of Gaunt's life and career, Alice is often her own chapter. The sheer scope of the vitriol found both in contemporary accounts of Alice and written history into the modern era is astounding for a woman with such a modest background. While Katherine was also looked upon quite unfavorably during her lifetime, this judgement seems to have been left behind for the most part, and she has become just one in a long list of the wives of important men, though perhaps with an asterisk by her name. If she had never married John of Gaunt, would she still just be part of a long list, this one of female favorites and sexual partners? Or, facing similar attacks to her reputation and her wealth, would she have joined Alice on a much shorter list, that of the known women of history? While Alice was seen as the seducer of the pious Edward III, John of Gaunt was well known for his extra-marital relationship and his illegitimate children – one chronicler described him as a *magnus fornicator* – and so Katherine can more easily be depicted as the seduced, rather than as a seductress.⁵⁹ That said, John's reputation and standing did transfer to Katherine's status as well, such as during the Peasant's Revolt of 1381 when she had to go into hiding while he was exiled. Though her relationship with John, and the children it produced, were all products of sexual immorality, history has been able to blur these events to make them appear more acceptable, while Alice's relationship, and person, have been highlighted as a bastion of improper behavior.

Economics of Femininity

The careers of Alice Perrers and Katherine Swynford followed similar trajectories: both served as *demoiselles* to Philippa of Hainault and Katherine served as governess to the children of John of Gaunt and Blanche of Lancaster.⁶⁰ Though they wound up in similar circumstances, their births were significantly different. Assuming Tompkins and Ormrod are correct, Alice was born to a (likely wealthy) goldsmith family in London, while Katherine was born to a Hainault knight. Froissart attributed Katherine's later success as a duchess to her birth, suggesting she was raised to fit in with nobility.⁶¹ Alice's family and education aided her

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁶⁰ Dunn, 'All the Queen's Ladies', p. 179, 187: Dunn's study examines the women who served Queen Philippa in her decades of marriage to Edward III; she notes four sub-categories which she labels as ladies (*dominae*), damsels (*domicellae*) – the category under which the Roet sisters appear to fall, under-damsels (*subdominae*), and night-watchers (*veillereses*). She also notes that despite the association of the term 'damsel' with virgins, the differentiation between these terms has no clear link to marital status, but is rather one of hierarchy; Tompkins, 'Edward III's', p. 60.

⁶¹ Froissart, p. 240; Tompkins 'Alice Perrers', p. 1369.

financial savvy, which she was able to use to her advantage while she was in favor, supplementing the lands and wealth given to her by Edward with additional land and property she purchased herself. However, this added to her reputation as greedy and these lands were taken from her along with those gifted by Edward after his death. In comparison, though Katherine also had a negative reputation, she was able to live out the remainder of her life on the land provided to her, though this is also due to her status as John's widow. Both women were able to leverage their wealth for power and influence, including by serving as lenders to the crown and nobility. Alice in particular used her wealth to build influence, but doing so gained her more enemies and further hurt her reputation: *The St Albans Chronicle* states how she "began to act unjustly in all matters...and, if opposition was planned anywhere against her, she would go immediately to the king and...she would achieve what she desired."⁶² In general, reports of Alice include reference to her many un-ladylike pursuits, the accumulation of wealth and money lending among them.⁶³ Francis Bickley includes one reference from St. Albans where, during an ownership dispute between the monastery and a Thomas FitzJohn, sale of the property to Alice was arranged as it was apparently assumed that Alice's claim would not be denied, even if FitzJohn's may have been.⁶⁴ Tompkins notes that Alice's financial ventures in this period include both those more typical of members of the court – in particular referencing the land gifts and wardships she received through the patronage of Edward – and commercial dealings which were decidedly inappropriate and feature in many of the complaints against her. Despite her centrality to Edward's court, and her increased physical presence there, Alice continued to amass property in London, including building a large London townhouse, later known as Coldharbour.⁶⁵

There is a very interesting parallel between negative depictions of Alice and Edward II. Degendering these discussions, the two are decried for the same general actions: that is, undertaking activities which are inappropriate for their social stations. Edward is viewed as undertaking actions which are below his station, and not having the proper interest in noble pursuits. Alice's transgressions depend on the context in which she is viewed: either, she is seen as reaching far above her proper station through her relationship with Edward III and her presence in his court; or, her commercial and financial activities are seen as below her station

⁶² *St Albans* p. 44: "Que postquam semel regi cepisset illudere, et percepisset eundem mente captum cepit omnia iniuste exercere, causas falsas manutenere, ubique possessions illicite ad suos usus adquirere et, si alicubi sibi resistentia parab[atur], regem adire, cuius mox siue iuste siue iniustet adiuta patrocinio est uoti compos effecta."

⁶³ Goodman, *Katherine*, p. 15.

⁶⁴ Francis Bickley, *King's Favourites*, (New York, 1910), p. 44.

⁶⁵ Tompkins, 'Uncrowned Queen', 82, 72-97.

as a member of that court. Either way, she is not acting within her prescribed social rank. Reintegrating gender into these discussions, Alice is acting outside of proper female positioning through her pursuit of power – both political and financial. Edward II's gendered analysis is a bit more complicated: while he is not pursuing female coded activities, he is also not pursuing the activities of a proper male noble, and the negative qualities associated with him in depictions can be, if not feminized, at least de-masculinized. These examples also reinforce the importance of social class to gender norms; some activities are appropriate only within a particular intersection of class and gender.

With the death of Edward III, Alice lost not only her link to increased wealth and power, but her protection as well. This had been foreshadowed by the 'Good Parliament' the year before, in April 1376, which saw the commons assert their power in Parliament with a long list of grievances, including many against Alice herself. Alice was held to account not just for her financial dealings, but for her political involvement as well. In addition, she was accused of keeping a Dominican friar in her household who practiced magic on her behalf, specifically spells to bind Edward to her.⁶⁶ Walsingham also accused her directly, stating that he was "enthralled" by her and that

not only had she captivated and ensnared him by her charms, but had so enticed him into an illicit love affair with her by using magic [*magicis artibus*], it is alleged, that she sapped his elderly body of all its strength, its natural vitality being drained by sexual activity. Hence, she had caused him a double loss: she had made him a reproach in all the neighboring countries, and had robbed him of almost all his strength.⁶⁷

Accusations of witchcraft are common throughout history in reference to women who overstep their gendered bounds, and often serve, if not as a punishment, then as a warning to behave.⁶⁸ As with the punishments levied against her, it is the existence of these accusations which suggest the power Alice had and wielded at the time – she clearly had enough socio-political and economic capital to concern a room full of institutionally powerful men into trying anything they could to be rid of her.

The favor which had been shown to Alice over the preceding decade came to a head in 1376 at the so-called 'Good Parliament', where a number of leading government officials were sentenced to various punishments due to concern and anger over Edward III's mishandling of financial and military affairs.⁶⁹ The accusations of the Good Parliament mirror those of the

⁶⁶ Bickley, *King's Favourites*, pp. 49-50; *St Albans* p. 46-8.

⁶⁷ *St Albans*, p. 45, 46.

⁶⁸ See, for instance: Eleanor Cobham, Duchess of Gloucester; Jacquetta of Luxembourg, Duchess of Bedford and Countess Rivers; and Elizabeth Woodville, Queen of England.

⁶⁹ Goodman, *A History*, p. 163-4; Tompkins, 'Uncrowned Queen', pp. 96-7.

Ordinances decades before and of those from the ‘Merciless Parliament’ a decade later, particularly in reference to the overspending of the crown, which had demanded subsidies at every parliament since returning to war in 1369. According to Walsingham, the Good Parliament accused the crown of being in the hands of ‘untrustworthy individuals’ who were not governing ‘sensibly and honestly’, specifically naming William, Baron Latimer, and John of Gaunt, third son of Edward. Walsingham goes on to note that ‘...at the request of the commons it was decreed that certain bishops and earls, and other lords of good reputation should in future govern the king and the kingdom, *since the king was becoming senile and lacked good advisors of this sort*’ and that “a lecherous youth sins, but a lecherous old man is insane.”⁷⁰ It is not just Walsingham and the medieval authors who portray Edward as senile and Alice as taking advantage: this depiction has been prominent in modern historical work as well.⁷¹ Recently, Laura Tompkins’ work has confronted these depictions, noting that there is no strong evidence for Edward III’s senility in the last decade of his life, but rather only basic aging and illness.⁷² Walsingham in particular emphasizes Edward’s senility and loss of mental acuity and connects it directly to the king’s relationship with Alice. He further emphasizes the link between senility and aging, seemingly suggesting that Alice’s presence in the king’s life and their relationship literally drained and aged the king, in addition to the accusations that she drained the royal coffers. Walsingham finishes his chapter on the death of the king with a note regarding Alice:

Yet that whore, Alice Perrers, so it is said, most shamelessly enticing him did not refrain from acts of licentiousness and lascivious touching of his flesh, even in this time of his senility; *for this reason, it is thought, he ended his life more quickly, because of the immodest life of that woman.*⁷³

This portrayal of Edward depicts him as a victim, not just of Alice’s charms (either personal or magical) and of her sexual drive, but of her actions as well, almost suggesting, to the modern eye, assault. Like earlier portrayals of Edward II, it seems that Walsingham prefers to depict the king as aging and incompetent, as opposed to an older man displaying the lust of a much younger one. It is worth recognizing that the death of Edward’s oldest son – known as the ‘Black Prince’ – in July 1376 after a decade of ill health, happened while Parliament was in

⁷⁰ *St Albans*, pp. 974-5, pp. 46 [my emphasis].

⁷¹ See, for instance: Given-Wilson and Curteis, *Royal Bastards*, p. 10-1: “Edward, growing senile by now, was infatuated with her, and was prepared to do almost anything to please her. She was the only royal mistress in medieval England who really became a national scandal...It was only when a royal mistress achieved the sort of influence over her lover which allowed her to sway political decisions that court gossip turned to genuine disapproval. Only Alice Perrers falls into this category.”

⁷² Laura Tompkins, ‘Dotage and Senility: The Illness and Reputation of Edward III in the 1370s’ (Leeds, 2022).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 990-1; *Chronica Maiora*, (ed.) Preest, p. 33 [my emphasis].

session. This death left the nine year old son of the Prince, the future Richard II, as heir to the throne. The combination of the aging king and the young heir would naturally have been recognized as an opportunity for potential advancement of those able to access an inner circle.

Walsingham devotes an entire paragraph to describing the faults of Alice, focusing in particular on how her behavior was not fit for a woman:

Indeed, so great had her insolence grown in harming others, and so abundant was the patience and humility of the English, that this woman felt no embarrassment in taking her place on the bench of judges at Westminster; and she was not afraid to speak there, either on her own behalf or on that of her friends, or even on behalf of the king as though she were promoting his business; nor to ask in public for authoritative judgement from the judges there about her own lawsuits.⁷⁴

The language in this passage has nuanced gendering in its criticism: Alice is described as ‘insolent,’ a term often associated with young, immature men or youths and presented in contrast to the ‘patience’ and ‘humility’ of the English people, traits associated with proper young ladies. Walsingham is accusing Alice of a multitude of sins at once, including transgressing class and gendered lines. However, in the same passage, and far more explicitly in the following chapter, he accuses her of the most female of crimes, seduction through the use of magic.⁷⁵

Earlier in the same passage, she is described as having “gained such a hold on him that he allowed important and weighty affairs of the realm to be decided on her advice.”⁷⁶ Beyond the implication that Alice had unparalleled influence over the king, she also had physical access to him beyond that of even his closest advisors – through her space in his bed. Laura Tompkins discusses this phenomenon as ‘bedroom politics’ or politics ‘inside the curtain.’⁷⁷ Evidence from her trial makes it clear that not only did Alice’s position in Edward’s bedchamber give her influence and the ability to intercede with the king, she was also able to influence whom else was allowed into this semi-private space – who was allowed ‘inside the curtain’.⁷⁸ Following Ormrod, Tompkins suggests that while the queen’s bedchamber was associated with childbearing and motherhood, “the king’s state bed was an item closely associated with sovereignty” and that Alice’s presence in Edward’s bed upends the traditional balance of gendered politics of the royal couple.⁷⁹ Traditional queenly intercessory powers, such as those

⁷⁴ *St Albans*, pp. 44-5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-51.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-5.

⁷⁷ Tompkins, ‘Uncrowned Queen’, p. 227.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 227-8.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

famously displayed by Philippa on behalf of the burghers of Calais during the Siege there in 1347, were conducted with openness and a purity displayed through this transparency.⁸⁰ In comparison, Alice's intercession is private and sexualized by its positioning in Edward's bedchamber and her unofficial role in the court.⁸¹ These concerns over appropriate access and intervention evoke the same concerns that will later be discussed regarding Piers Gaveston and Robert de Vere – these favorites are taking up more space and influence than they should in a proper social order, and doing so in inappropriate spaces. Alice's refusal to conform to cultural gender norms only exacerbates these issues. Following these accusations, Alice was exiled from court and a new ordinance was written which stated that:

Because a complaint was made to the king that some women have pursued various business and disputes in the king's courts by way of maintenance, bribing and influencing the parties, which thing displeases the king; the king should *forbid any woman to do it, and especially Alice Perrers*, on penalty of whatever the said Alice can forfeit and of being banished from the realm⁸²

While this ordinance names Alice and is clearly directed at her, it is interesting that it includes a broader 'some women' and goes further to forbid 'any woman' from pursuing their business in the courts. This conclusion displays not just fear of Alice personally, but a broader fear of women overstepping their gendered bounds and entering into male spaces by reinforcing these boundaries. Ormrod does note that, interestingly, Alice is not actually put on trial at the Good Parliament, nor is she sentenced to any punishments immediately – the listed punishments only go into effect if she continues to practice maintenance, which she did. Ormrod suggests that the reason for this may be that, despite a general dislike of Alice and her practices, there were no charges to be brought against her that could actually be proven, and that the goal of the parliament was to undermine her influence and access to wealth, which was most easily achieved by removing her from court and preventing her from continuing her practices.⁸³ Laura Tompkins also suggests that, though it was likely many of the members of the Commons would have liked to pursue charges against Alice, actually doing so would tread too closely to accusing the king himself of wrongdoing, as ultimately the decisions which supported her rise were his. She further argues that "Lancaster and the others were willing to investigate her and accept that she was guilty, as is clearly demonstrated in the ordinance, but they were not going to have the behaviour of the king questioned in open parliament."⁸⁴ This in itself further

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁸² PROME, Edward III, Vol II, 1376 April, p. 329, n. 45 [my emphasis].

⁸³ Ormrod, 'The Trials', p. 371.

⁸⁴ Tompkins, 'Uncrowned Queen', p. 127, 129.

supports the power Alice held at the time, that there was enough concern that it needed to be expressed, but that Parliament was also aware that her relationship with Edward prevented them from taking immediate action against her, presumably for fear of his response and that formal charges against Alice would necessarily involve the questioning of royal prerogative, and would come to close to questioning the king himself.⁸⁵ Unlike with Gaveston and de Vere later, Alice could not be made a legal scapegoat without involving the king as well. In these years, Alice is a clear case study of Earenflight's concept of potential power.⁸⁶

An interesting aside to this is that the Good Parliament was presided over by the king's son, John of Gaunt, who was at this time already deeply involved with his own favorite, Katherine Swynford, giving the proceedings an air of hypocrisy that did not go unnoticed or un-noted by contemporaries, in particular Thomas Walsingham.⁸⁷ Goodman suggests that Gaunt's active participation in this event was an attempt to separate himself from the unpopular events of the final years of Edward's reign, and to demonstrate his dedication to Richard's young reign.⁸⁸ Several chronicles suggest that, despite Gaunt's relationship with Katherine, he was both aware and discomforted by his own reputation. Walsingham seemingly believes this to be performative, rather than real, noting "the duke was more concerned about his father's notoriety as an adulterer, it is believed, than about his own ill-repute, for although he was licentious himself he wanted it to be thought that he detested this vice."⁸⁹ Goodman notes that there is a similar dismissal of John of Gaunt's actions in the fifteenth-century historiography, suggesting that, despite the rise of his son as Henry IV, Gaunt's reputation still struggled to recover from his adultery and hypocrisy.⁹⁰ Katherine Swynford's legacy also had long-lasting damage. As issues between Alice and Gaunt come to a head at the Good Parliament, Walsingham is presented with an interesting issue, as each are characters whose actions he loathes. Knighton's account suggests a more sincere fear from Gaunt of the repercussions of his reputation during the later upheaval of 1381: "his reputation was greatly tarnished in all parts of the realm...that he had paid no attention to what was said to him because he was blinded by desire, fearing neither God, nor shame amongst men."⁹¹ Versions of Walsingham's *Chronica Maiora* from earlier in his career are far more critical of Gaunt's actions than can be

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 126-7.

⁸⁶ Earenflight, 'A Lifetime', p. 275.

⁸⁷ *St Albans*, p. 168, 566.

⁸⁸ Goodman, *John of Gaunt*, p. 72.

⁸⁹ *St Albans*, pp. 50-1.

⁹⁰ Goodman, *John of Gaunt*, pp. 15-6.

⁹¹ *Knighton*, pp. 236-7.

seen in the final versions, perhaps reflecting Gaunt's changing political status during the reigns of Richard II and Henry IV, Gaunt's son. The later, kinder versions continue to comment on Gaunt and his dealings, but the descriptions are neutral, or even leaning favorable, while Walsingham's ire shifts to Richard II and his favorites.⁹² Like accusations pointed to the favorites, Walsingham notes that Gaunt "was allowed to do whatever he liked in the last days of his father the king."⁹³ However, unlike Alice, this statement serves less as a negative reflection on Gaunt, who was well within his own prescribed social rights, and more as a negative reflection of Edward III, reinforcing the image of a weakened, old man, serving at the whims of those around him.

In the short term, the punishment of the Good Parliament was not altogether effective, as Edward was still alive and just a few months later Alice returned to his side, at least as powerful as ever.⁹⁴ Walsingham states that, according to William of Wykeham, bishop of Winchester, at this time: "Alice Perrers, the king's mistress, had the power to do anything she wished, and nobody, even if he could, was willing to frustrate her will."⁹⁵ He goes on to describe her, in this period, as a "wolf" and those who should have been punishing her for breaking the dictates as "dumb dogs unable to bark...not shepherds, but robbers and hirelings, and so deserted the sheep from fear of the wolf."⁹⁶

Walsingham is the only chronicler to record Alice's presence at Edward's deathbed, and he does so in ruthless terms:

It is shameful to record that at his bedside during the whole period of his illness was that unspeakable whore, Alice Perrers, who in his middle age had always satisfied all his desires of the flesh. She did absolutely nothing for the salvation of his soul, *nor did she allow others to do anything*, but kept continually promising him that he would recover, until she recognised in the closure of his voice the unmistakable signs of death. Then, unbelievably, when she saw that he had lost his powers of speech, that his eyesight was growing dim and that his bodily heat was leaving his extremities, *the shameless hussy at once snatched the rings from his fingers and left.*⁹⁷

There are several important points in this passage. Firstly, is the veracity of the statement that 'she did not allow others to do anything.' One of the complaints regularly voiced about these

⁹² *Chronica*, p. 11, 71, 105, 215; Goodman, *John of Gaunt*, pp. 260-1.

⁹³ *Chronica*, p. 104.

⁹⁴ *CPR Edward III (1374-1377)*, Vol. 16, pp. 364-5; *St Albans* p. 56: "Quod expost uerum fuisse patuit, quia eandem Aliciam, contra statutum predictum et sacramentum quod eadem in parliament fecerat, ad familiaritatem pristinam reuocauit."

⁹⁵ *St Albans* p. 108.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56: "Archiepiscopus uero et eius suffraganei, qui contra eam, si contra decretum parlamentale uenire contingeret, sententias debuerant facti sunt ut canes muti non ualentes latrare. Quippe qui, ut uerum dicam, non pastores set depastores errant et mercenarii, et ideo lupi timore ouium desertores."

⁹⁷ *Chronica*, p. 32 [my emphasis].

favorites is the control they exercised over physical access to the monarchs, and thus over access to influence and power. In this particular case, this is manifesting less in regards to secular access and influence, as governing was presumably ongoing in a different location than the king's death bed, but rather in regards to spiritual access and influence. This passage suggests the physicality of the necessary actions – not only are they not allowed to *say* anything, they are not allowed to *do* anything either. As his sexual partner, Alice's position could always be considered a danger to the king's immortal soul, but by restricting access to him while he is dying, Walsingham is elevating that danger through its immediacy. Secondly, the depiction of Alice stripping the rings from the hands of the dying king is one that, despite having no contemporary corroboration, has had a strong, lasting effect on her reputation. In this case, it is less likely that the event actually occurred as depicted by Walsingham, and far more likely that it reflects the broader opinions of Alice's greed and overreaching, that she was effectively stealing from the crown through her access and influence over the king. Alice's presence and position also upset the familial peace that Edward and Philippa had fostered over their marriage and reign – she was thus undermining both the political and maternal parts of queenship.⁹⁸ In reference to the real and lasting problems Alice's presence caused for Edward and his reputation, Laura Tompkins notes that

marriage was a moral act and therefore played an important role in publicly communicating that the king had put his indiscretions behind him, and had overcome the temptations of youth to embark on strong, decisive and moral adult kingship...Edward's relationship with Alice had the opposite effect. Their lustful affair had all the connotations of a youthful dalliance...More than anything, the lapse in Edward's moral strength of character to conquer his passions for Alice meant that he was perceived as lacking the strength of character to perform wise, consistent, just and manly kingship needed to rule effectively... Moreover, this was much worse in an older man because while a youth could grow into a man, for a man to change into a youth went against the natural order of life.⁹⁹

This 'reverse aging' may have been particularly damaging for Edward III, given the precedence of his parents' rumored relationships and the importance of his marriage to Philippa to the establishment of his reign. This personal history may also have been in the minds of the magnates who feared Alice's rise, who likely had not forgotten the disasters of the previous generation.

⁹⁸ Tompkins, 'Uncrowned Queen', p. 230.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 238-9.

Lastly, Walsingham suggests that Alice refuses to accept Edward's impending death until the evidence in front of her was overwhelming. While he links this to her further endangering Edward's soul by refusing access to religious support, it could also reflect a recognition on her part of the precarity of her situation once Edward died – a refusal to acknowledge her own impending danger. Framed this way, the act of taking the rings from his fingers (or, more importantly, the documented actions which Alice takes to attempt to secure her financial and legal future after the death of Edward) can be viewed as one of desperation for safety, rather than of greed. In this more favorable interpretation, there is also the symbolism of the wedding rings, and Alice removing the rings could represent her recognizing the end of the relationship and choosing to take a memento of it with her as she leaves. There is one other interesting parallel in the depiction of rings, specifically. Earlier, Walsingham notes that the magician Alice had allegedly hired “had also devised rings that caused forgetfulness or remembrance, just as Moses had once done, so that as long as the king wore them he would never forget this harlot.”¹⁰⁰ In this context, there are several possibilities for her stripping the rings: if she had, in fact, engaged in some form of witchcraft to control Edward, then removing the rings would be removing the evidence and thus protecting herself from those charges. More symbolically, Walsingham could be portraying the removal of the rings as her loss of influence at Edward's death, physically removing the tools by which her control was cemented.

There is every indication that she was anticipating the attacks against her which would come after Edward's death, given the sentiments expressed against her during the Good Parliament. In June 1376, the pardon she had received the previous October was issued verbatim to cover any offences she may have committed in the intervening months.¹⁰¹

After Edward's death in 1377, Alice was quickly put on trial in the first parliament of Richard II's reign and was found guilty of breaking the terms of the earlier ordinance, for which she was sentenced to forfeit her lands and goods and was banished from England.¹⁰² Two specific complaints are noted in the parliament records: the first concerns a Sir Nicholas Dagworth who asserts that he lost an appointment to travel to Ireland on royal business due to Alice's intervention via Edward III ('grandfather of our lord the present king'), causing damage to Edward and the realm; and the second regarding a Richard Lyons who had been imprisoned and his property claimed and reappropriated to other nobles. After a pardon, Alice is accused

¹⁰⁰ *St Albans*, pp. 48-9.

¹⁰¹ Tompkins, 'Uncrowned Queen', p. 140-1.

¹⁰² Tompkins 'Edward III's', n. 14; *PROME Richard II*, Vol III, 1377 October, pp.12-14, n. 41-3.

of pressuring Edward to return all of the lands and property. Alice is asked for her response, to which she pleads not guilty and produces several witnesses on her own behalf, including a steward of Edward's, a controller of his household, and the keeper of the privy seal, among others. Walsingham also reflects on Alice's downfall:

Present at this parliament...were almost all the knights who, in that parliament rightly called 'the Good', had so nobly stood firm for the advancement of the land and the welfare of the kingdom. *And so they took up their demands in the very place in which they had formerly put them down and insisted on the banishment of Alice Perrers*, since she, in contempt of the statute of parliament and the oath she had taken, had been bold enough to go to the king's court to urge him to grant her whatever it was she happened to want. Although she had bribed several of the lords and all the lawyers of England, who defended her publicly as well as in private, she was convicted out of her own mouth...and sent into exile, with all her property, moveable and immoveable, being assigned to the royal treasury.¹⁰³

Walsingham is here explicit in noting that the concerns of those who prosecuted Alice in the Good Parliament had not dampened since, but that they had recognized that they would not be able to pursue meaningful punishment while the king was still alive. It is also made clear in the parliament records that her punishment is not to be seen as establishing a precedent, given that it is unusually aggressive in reach, but rather is meant to be specifically used in this case due to the particularly terrible nature of her crimes.¹⁰⁴

The following year, in October 1378, Alice and her husband, Sir William Windsor are found petitioning for a reversal of the earlier judgements against her on the grounds that "various errors are to be found" and requesting that the king "identify the errors contained in the said record, and thereupon to do for them what is right and reasonable, as the law suggests."¹⁰⁵ The primary error on which this petition is based is that Alice was tried as a single woman, not as a married woman. As Windsor's wife, her fortunes improved somewhat: in 1379 she was pardoned for having failed to leave the country and in 1380 her husband received the restoration of many of the former Perrers estates.¹⁰⁶ She can be found again in the parliament rolls in November 1384, this time as Windsor's widow, arguing for her rights to her former lands, left in trust by William to his nephew, John. The decision at that time was to repeal the judgements against her from that point forward, but not to return all the forfeited property.¹⁰⁷ Doing so may have been simply expedient – Alice's legal status for the previous

¹⁰³ *Chronica*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁴ PROME, Richard II, Vol III, 1377 October, n. 43.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 1378 October, Vol III, p. 40, nos. 36-7.

¹⁰⁶ Ormrod, 'The Trials', p. 366.

¹⁰⁷ PROME Richard II, Vol III, 1377 October, p. 186, n. 13.

decade had been somewhat precarious and repealing the earlier judgements clarified her status as she entered her second widowhood. A similar request is found again in November 1397, with the only answer provided that the king should examine the earlier judgements and make a decision, but this final decision is not provided.¹⁰⁸ Presumably, these requests were made in an effort to reclaim her land, this time from John Windsor, but she was never successful at reassembling her previous estates.

Recent historiography has shown that Alice was not the greedy woman stripping the rings off of Edward's dying body, as she was portrayed by Walsingham, nor the 'gold-digging mistress' she was accused of being by K.B. MacFarlane in 1965, but rather a savvy businesswoman who was able to translate her influence and Edward's favor into wealth which multiplied through investment and business acumen.¹⁰⁹ It is not possible to trace all of the wealth acquired by Alice in her lifetime. The best-preserved records are that of her landownership. According to Tompkins, between 1365 and 1377, she acquired at least sixty-eight manors and seventy other properties across twenty-eight counties and London, likely valued at close to 2000 pounds per annum.¹¹⁰ Much of this land was either granted directly by Edward, or in the form of valuable wardships, but the majority of it she was able to acquire herself. She regularly employed the method of *enfeoffment-to-use*, by which a group of men owned and managed the land on her behalf, returning the profits to her. In theory, this was designed to protect her landholdings after the death of Edward III, when she knew she would be vulnerable to attacks against her similar to those lodged at the Good Parliament. However, in an unprecedented move, the terms of the forfeiture against her after Edward's death specifically included those properties held in this form, terms which would establish a new standard – once again, this is a display of the fear of the potential for Alice's future actions if allowed to maintain her present state of wealth.¹¹¹ Alice's wealth was not limited to land. She was also given gifts, particularly clothing and jewelry, from Edward. In 1373, Edward granted her all the jewels from Queen Philippa which had been held by a Euphemia de Heselarton since Philippa's death in 1369, a gift that no doubt caused outrage as a physical representation of Alice's overreaching her rightful social and economic status and representing her status as the 'uncrowned queen'.¹¹² Tompkins notes that the few examples of Edward's gifts to Alice likely

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 368, n. 68.

¹⁰⁹ *St Albans* p. 986; Tompkins, 'Edward III's', p. 64

¹¹⁰ Tompkins, 'Edward III's', p. 65.

¹¹¹ PROME Richard II, Vol III, 1377 October, pp.12-14, n. 41-3; Tompkins, 'Edward III's', p. 66; Tompkins 'Alice Perrers', p. 1371.

¹¹² Kay, *Lady of the Sun*, p. 93.

represent only a very small number of those given, as no records of the expenditures of the king's chamber exist from this period.¹¹³ As with land, not all of Alice's material wealth came directly from the king; much of it was garnered through the use of her reputation and influence as the king's favorite. Tompkins suggests that her material wealth included 20,000 pounds worth of jewels.¹¹⁴ Petitions submitted to parliament in advance of the charges brought against Alice depict ruthless, and sometimes not entirely legal, business acumen which was utilized with precision. They also suggest that Alice was able to act without fear of legal retribution due to her status. Just as Froissart would later suggest that Katherine Swynford's birth and upbringing made her ideal for the role of governess and step-mother to the children of John of Gaunt, Alice's upbringing as the daughter of a goldsmith surrounded by business and trade gave her the skills necessary to utilize the gifts and influence from her status as Edward's favorite to become one of the wealthiest women in England. However, the enemies she gained in this same rise to power were able to specifically target her methods of maintaining wealth and to remove it once she no longer had the protection of Edward. As Tompkins notes, her rise brought with it both visibility nationally as Edward's favorite and locally as a landowner; her loss of influence at Edward's death did not bring with it invisibility. Instead, she had all the visibility and enemies with none of the access.

Ormrod notes that

Alice had brought no family baggage with her to her position as a royal mistress, and, in the period between the death of Janyn Perrers and the publication of her marriage to William Windsor, she played very consciously the role of *femme sole*, undertaking extensive property and financial dealings in her own name and right.¹¹⁵

Alice never formally acknowledged any family other than her children with Edward – her intent was to be the king's favorite and only the king's favorite, as shown through the difficulty historians have had in identifying both her natal family and the identity of her first husband. In particular, much of her efforts were put towards the advancement of her and Edward's only son, John de Southeray, whom she married to the heiress Mary Percy in January 1377. In that same year, Southeray was knighted at Windsor alongside the future Richard II and Henry IV.¹¹⁶ Southeray predeceased his mother, and Alice's will lists her two daughters by Edward, Joan

¹¹³ Tompkins 'Edward III's', p. 68.

¹¹⁴ Tompkins, 'Alice Perrers', p. 1361.

¹¹⁵ Ormrod 'The Trials', p. 369

¹¹⁶ Tompkins, 'Uncrowned Queen', p. 138.

and Jane, as the primary beneficiaries when she dies in the winter of 1401-2.¹¹⁷ Tompkins notes that “had Mary Percy not demanded a divorce and Southeray not died, Alice’s ability to promote her son through her influence over Edward III may well have secured her long-term future, even more so than her own marriage...Although she was not successful, therefore, Alice clearly used her children, in particular her son, to try and secure her future after the king’s death and enhance her own status in the same manner as a queen consort.”¹¹⁸ That Mary Percy did successfully demand a divorce reinforces the difference between Alice and Katherine’s positions later in life, and as mothers. Without legitimacy, Alice was not able to protect her children in the same way the Beaufort name did for Katherine’s.

For a time, these efforts to singularly link herself to the king and their children clearly worked as she was able to amass incredible amounts of land and wealth and wield tangible social power through her influence and patronage. The veracity of the attacks against her during the Good Parliament stemmed from the anxieties of a patriarchal system needing to reassert control over a woman who had stepped too far outside her prescribed social position. While this lack of ‘family baggage’ may have been one of the reasons Alice was so successful at amassing the wealth and property she did, it is also likely the reason she struggled so much to hold onto it. Her societal position was quite precarious – as shown by the ease with which the parliament was able to strip her of this land and wealth – and she had no powerful family backing to support her in maintaining or regaining it. Even remarriage did not solve this problem entirely – while her marriage to Windsor enabled the couple to regain much of the lost property, Alice was unable to claim it for herself after his death. Alice’s status was solitary – lacking family support or a network to call on once she lost the position and influence of the King’s support.

This is in stark comparison to Katherine Swynford who, while not quite reaching the same level of wealth and influence Alice did at her peak, had her family and social networks to provide cushion and support for her when she was briefly set aside – Katherine never had to rely on a singular point of access in the same way Alice did. That said, Katherine’s access, even at its peak once she was married to John of Gaunt, never reached the height Alice did in the late 1360s. Katherine also never faced the legal or economic ramifications of a downfall. The economic favor shown to Katherine by John of Gaunt was significantly more than would

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 184-5.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

have been common or appropriate for either the widow of a knight who died in his service or the governess of his children. The first of these grants was in May 1372 in which she received a life annuity of 50 marks, more than doubling her annuities for service to Blanche. The date of this grant reinforces the likely beginning date for their affair, after the death of their respective spouses.¹¹⁹ She received household and building supplies from him while he was on campaign in 1373 and an extravagant silver chafing-pan in the early 1380s.¹²⁰ Goodman notes the most unusual expense on Katherine's behalf was not to her, but to a widow named Agnes Bonsergeant, who had served as a wet-nurse to Katherine, suggesting that their relationship was more than a mutually beneficial financial arrangement, but that he cared enough for her to take care of those she cared for as well.¹²¹ During the Peasant's Revolt of 1381, Gaunt was a primary target, requiring both his wife and Katherine and his children to hide for safety and Gaunt to be temporarily exiled to Scotland. Walsingham notes that the rebels "[stopped] all pilgrims...[and] compelled them to swear an oath: [that they would] accept no king who was called 'John' (this was owing to their dislike of John, duke of Lancaster)" and, later records the death of a Franciscan at the hands of the rebels 'because of the ill will and anger the rebels bore to John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, of whom the Franciscan had been a friend.'¹²² After this, Katherine was temporarily set aside in favor of Gaunt returning to his wife and appearing to mend his former ways.¹²³ Knighton's Chronicle describes this separation, describing Katherine as 'a certain foreign lady' in Gaunt's wife's household.¹²⁴ This alienation of Katherine is similar to negative descriptions of Gaveston, perhaps suggesting a moral superiority of the English, or a immoral 'infection' that came with foreigners.

As part of this separation, Katherine was granted a life annuity of 200 marks and referred to shortly after as the 'duke's daughter's former governess'. During this period, Gaunt and Constance of Castile attempted to reclaim her lands in Castile, which had been seized by her uncle after the murder of her father, Pedro I of Castile, and claimed the crown of Castile in her right. These ambitions faded after their summer campaign in 1387 ended disastrously, after which Gaunt returned to England.¹²⁵ It was also during this time that Gaunt ordered the partial repayment of a loan of 100 pounds that Katherine had provided to him, suggesting that not

¹¹⁹ Goodman, *Katherine*, p. 11; *John of Gaunt's Register* (JGR) 1372-6 n. 409.

¹²⁰ Goodman, *Katherine*, p. 12; JGR 1372-6, nn. 1356-7; 1379-82, p. 183.

¹²¹ JGR 1372-6, n. 718.

¹²² *Chronica*, p. 121, 127.

¹²³ *St Albans*, p. 566: "...tunc primo dux ipse, conuersus ad religionem, cepit accusare uitam suam pristinam non solum priuatis sed puplicis confessionibus...tunc illius Katerine Swunford consortium abhorrere."

¹²⁴ *Knighton*, pp. 236-7.

¹²⁵ JGR 1379-82, nn. 984, 1157.

only were the couple still in contact at this point, but also solidifying the power Katherine's growing economic status afforded her. Both Alice and Katherine's careers make it clear that, in addition to the socio-political influence they held through their relationships with these powerful men, they were able to use this influence and their own growing wealth to assert semi-independent financial influence. By 1389, Katherine had returned to his household, where she presumably remained until Constance's death in 1394 allowed them to marry. Walsingham notes that

[Gaunt] left court and hastened to Lincoln, where Katherine Swynford was staying at the time. Then, after the octave of Epiphany he married her, to the astonishment of all who witnessed this amazing event, since the circumstances of such a woman were quite inappropriate for marriage to a lord of such eminence.¹²⁶

Froissart echoes the reports of universal amazement over the marriage, though the relationship had certainly not been secret before.¹²⁷ Goodman suggests that during his marriage to Constance, the very public nature of the affair with Katherine made her a route of alternative access to the proper channel of his wife, much like Alice's 'uncrowned queen'-ship both fulfilled a necessary role and bastardized that role as properly understood. Goodman also notes that "the affair is a prime example of Gaunt's princely willfulness, sometimes pursued to the detriment of other objects."¹²⁸ While Gaunt likely could have made a more financially advantageous match had he chosen to, and though this transition from favorite to wife was uncommon, their marriage was still likely not particularly surprising to their contemporaries after a relationship spanning several decades. Froissart suggests, quite reasonably, that the marriage was driven by the desire to legitimate Gaunt's children with Katherine. Gaunt's only surviving son from his first two marriages was Henry Bolingbroke – future Henry IV – and legitimizing the Beauforts significantly expanded his dynasty. Goodman labels the marriage as 'eccentric' and notes that Richard was quite willing to humor Gaunt's ambitions for his newly legitimized children, as was their own half-brother later during his reign.¹²⁹ Walsingham's apparent surprise over the marriage can more likely be attributed to his taking the opportunity to criticize John of Gaunt than any true shock over the occasion. As Goodman notes,

though one monastic chronicler described Catherine Swynford as a she-devil, she seems to have been eminently suited to be a prince's paramour, unlike the tottering Edward's scratchy bedfellow Alice Perrers, who drove Thomas Walsingham,

¹²⁶ *St Albans*, pp. 38-9.

¹²⁷ Froissart, ed. Lettenhove, pp. 238-40.

¹²⁸ Goodman, *John of Gaunt*, p. 50, 362.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 156-7, 365.

apoplectic, to cast unmonastic aspersions on her deficiencies of complexion and figure.¹³⁰

Katherine's wealth was passed on through her children, including those from her first marriage, and both the Beauforts, her children by John of Gaunt, and Swynfords benefitted greatly from the ascension of their half- and step-brother Henry Bolingbroke as Henry IV in 1399.¹³¹ Thomas Swynford served both John of Gaunt and Henry IV: he was awarded 40 pounds annuity from Gaunt by 1383, who also granted him a wedding present of 100 marks annuity in the same year.¹³² In a bid to maintain Thomas' loyalty, Richard II maintained this grant even when he seized the Lancastrian inheritance after Gaunt's death, but Thomas chose Henry, serving as his retainer.

Following their legitimization in 1396, the Beauforts became one of the most significant families in England: as Goodman notes, "Gaunt and Richard proceeded to exalt them further than any English royal kinsfolk born in bastardy had been since the twelfth century."¹³³ The eldest, John, was elevated as the earl of Somerset in 1397, after having been given the title of marquis of Dorset by Richard in the early 1390s; he later became a close companion of Henry IV. Their second son, Henry, had a clerical career beginning with two prebends in Lincoln Cathedral when he was fifteen, then receiving the see of Lincoln from Pope Boniface IX in 1398, and later serving as bishop of Winchester, chancellor of England and a cardinal during the Lancastrian reigns. Walsingham records that this position was given by the pope to Henry "one of the sons of John the duke of Lancaster and Katherine Swynford, though but a boy, but he did it out of respect and love for the duke."¹³⁴ The third son, Thomas, duke of Exeter, was a soldier, beginning his career with his half-brother Henry, serving as a retainer to Richard II with an annuity of 100 marks in 1397, and then as a commander in France under his nephew, Henry V. He was also trusted with the upbringing of the infant Henry VI in 1422. The youngest child of Katherine and Gaunt was a daughter, Joan. She was married first to a Sir Robert Ferers and was widowed young, then married again in 1396 to Ralph, Lord Neville, head of a prominent northern family who received the title earl of Westmorland shortly after the marriage, and by whom she had thirteen children.¹³⁵

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 50: This is a reference to the author of the *Anonimale Chronicle*.

¹³¹ Given-Wilson and Curteis, *Royal Bastards*, p. 150.

¹³² *CPR* 1396-9, p. 493.

¹³³ Goodman, *Katherine*, p. 20.

¹³⁴ *St Albans*, pp. 110-1.

¹³⁵ Goodman, *Katherine*, pp. 21-2; Given-Wilson and Curteis, *Royal Bastards*, pp. 151-2.

Chapter IV: The Bounds of Acceptable Homosociality

Piers Gaveston

Much like Alice Perrers, neither the fourteenth-century contemporaries of Piers Gaveston nor historians since have been particularly kind to him, and he is often pointed to as a scapegoat for the political and social unrest of Edward II's reign. In the case of Piers Gaveston, contemporary accusations of sexual immorality were used as a tool to undermine his position and to frame understandings of the events of his life. Without a doubt, Gaveston's presence in England and at Edward's side caused lengthy debate and overt disdain from their contemporaries, but it is worth attempting to ascertain which pieces of Gaveston's biography, in particular, caused so much disdain.

Like Katherine Swynford, Piers Gaveston was not born in England: his father, Arnaud de Gabaston, was a Gascon knight in service to Edward I from the 1270s.¹ Edward twice used Arnaud as a hostage, the second time in France from 1294 until 1296, when he escaped to England. Piers likely first arrived in England in the late-1290s with his father and served Edward I as well, accompanying his forces to Flanders in 1297. In 1300, he was transferred to the household of the future Edward II, forming the relationship which would define his life and career.

For the first few years, Gaveston's position in the prince's household was without trouble. In 1305, however, Gaveston's close proximity to the Prince began to prove detrimental when tensions arose between the Prince and his father, and Edward I dismissed a portion of the prince's household, including Gaveston. From almost the very beginning, then, there was controversy over Gaveston's access to Edward. By October, the rift between king and prince had been closed and Prince Edward had returned to court with his entire retinue. In May 1306, Prince Edward was knighted in preparation for leading the English forces in Scotland, as fighting there had resumed after the murder of John Comyn by Robert Bruce in February. During the ceremonies, Prince Edward knighted several of his companions, including Gaveston. In reference to the events of 1311, but an appropriate depiction of the events of 1306-7 as well, the *Vita Edwardi Secundi* states that Edward II had two priorities: the first, to

¹ *St Albans*, p. 120; *Vita*, p. 26.

defeat Robert Bruce in Scotland and the second, greater, priority, to keep Piers Gaveston at his side, against the wishes of the barons.²

The parliament rolls from 15 November 1306 list Gaveston among twenty-two men who were to have their land and wealth seized after leaving the king's service in Scotland to go overseas to compete in a tournament.³ In January 1307, all the deserters were pardoned, with a single exception – Piers Gaveston. The following month, Edward ordered Gaveston exiled to Gascony until recalled and both the prince and Gaveston were made to swear that they would not contravene these orders.⁴ This will be only one of several times Gaveston is removed from Edward's side, and the same pattern is later visible in attempts to separate Richard II from Robert de Vere, suggesting that exile, at least temporary, was a regular (if not entirely effective) form of social punishment for perceived over-access. J.S. Hamilton suggests that the choice to single out Gaveston was made due to concerns over the close relationship between Gaveston and the prince, but notes that these concerns likely stemmed from the excessive financial generosity the prince showed to Gaveston, rather than a concerning sexual relationship, though he does not rule out this possibility. In other words, the issue was not so much Gaveston's actions in Scotland – as is made clear by the pardons of the other deserters – but rather the prince's actions at home. The removal of Gaveston as punishment for Edward's misdeeds also suggests implicitly – and later is explicitly in many sources – that Gaveston's influence is to be held accountable for Edward decisions, reinforcing both the close and unbalanced relationship between the two.⁵ The prince's pleas for Gaveston's return during his first removal in 1305 had made clear how much he cared for Gaveston and his presence, and Gaveston's exile in 1307 can be viewed as a punishment for Prince Edward. In his *Historia Anglicana*, Thomas Walsingham reports that on his deathbed, Edward I cautioned his son not to recall Gaveston "without common support", recognising even then the potential danger of the anger of the barons.⁶

² 'Verum occupatus rex circa duo, unum circa expugnacionem Roberti de Brutz, in quo remissus agebat, pro eo quod maior pars baronum Anglie ad istud negocium non ferebat auxilium; aloiud erat circa retencionem Peteri de Gauestone, ad cuius expulsionem et exilium omnes fere barones Anglie unanimiter laborabant': *Vita*, 26.

³ PROME Edward I, Roll 16 column b.

⁴ *Polychronicon*, 295.

⁵ Heyam, *The Reputation*, p. 12.

⁶ *St Albans*, p. 115: "sine communi favore".

After the death of Edward I, Edward II recalled Gaveston back to England, gave him the earldom of Cornwall and married him to his niece, the daughter of Gilbert de Clare.⁷ This was done without the permission or support of the barons in England and marks the early beginnings of trouble between Edward and his nobility.⁸

This episode is commented on widely in the contemporary accounts and highlights the common thread of this part – a royal favourite who is seen to have been given status – socio-political, economic, or both – beyond what is considered proper. Two elements of Piers' status are emphasized in the complaints – his foreign birth and his low status. As noted above, the *Anonimale Chronicle* refers to Piers as the opposite of “the good people of [Edward's] land” and as England's enemy.⁹ Unlike Alice Perrers, whose anonymity allowed her to build a career without the baggage of family, Piers' continental origins only further aggravated his enemies at court and did not provide a similar safety net, as his father and brother had also travelled to England. Several chronicles refer to Gaveston as ‘alienigena’, in reference to his Gascon origins.¹⁰ Focusing on Gaveston's ‘foreignness’ is an interesting choice given that there were certainly others in Edward's court who had similar backgrounds. This accusation of foreignness is important because it applies to Gaveston alone, without implicating Edward as well, and therefore may have been chosen deliberately as a focus point by Gaveston's enemies as a way to demonize his presence at court. There are clear parallels between the treatment of Gaveston here and that of Katherine Swynford discussed in the previous chapter: her status as a ‘foreign lady’ was only brought into the narrative when her presence had a negative effect on an English lord. In the introduction to their edition of the *Anonimale Chronicle*, Childs and Taylor suggest that one of the reasons the later crisis over Edward's favouritism of Hugh Despenser, whom the *Vita* describes as “even less deserving than Piers”, was different from the response to Gaveston was Despenser's Englishness and familial nobility.¹¹

The choice to gift Gaveston with the earldom of Cornwall was particularly galling to their contemporaries. This was one of the first significant things done by Edward after succeeding the crown, recognising the importance of Gaveston's status in Edward's court, and its placement as the opening event in many of the contemporary chronicles recognises both

⁷ *Londonienses*, p.151; *Paulini* p. 257-8; *Polychronicon*, p. 297; *Gesta Edwardi*, pp. 2: 28; *Vita Et Mors*, pp. 2: 297; *Vita*, p. 4.

⁸ *Anonimale*, p. 82.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *St Albans*, p. 120: *Iste Petrus filius fuerat cujusdam generosi, sed alienigenae de Wasconia*; *Ibid.*, p. 4: ‘quia Petrus alienigena erat a Vaesconia oriundus’; *Gesta*, pp. 2, 32.

¹¹ *Anonimale*, p. 31; *Vita*, p. 52.

this chronology and importance. In the introduction to her translation of the *Vita*, Childs suggests that the author of the *Vita* began writing sometime between 1310 and 1313, that the writing of the *Vita* was “no doubt prompted by the drama of the exile or the murder of Gaveston,” and goes on to note that the first section of the text, which covers the years 1307-11, centers almost entirely on Gaveston.¹² Both the *Vita* and the *Gesta Edwardi de Carnavon* refer to this title having previously been held by Edmund, 2nd Earl of Cornwall, grandson of King John. More broadly, this title had been revived in the 1070s for the half-brother of William the Conqueror, in the 1140s for the illegitimate son of Henry I, and in the 1220s for Edmund’s father, Richard, second son of king John. For Edward II to add Sir Piers Gaveston to that list was an offence to the other English magnates. Once again, this mirrors Robert de Vere’s later elevation, and also, though less officially, the rise of Alice Perrers and the issues these elevations caused with the leading magnates. According to the *Vita*, Edward goes as far as to insist that Gaveston is addressed exclusively by his new title, rather than his name, due to his “unswerving love for him”.¹³ In addition to gifting Gaveston with the Earldom, Edward also married Gaveston to his niece Margaret de Clare, daughter of Edward’s sister Joan and her husband, Gilbert de Clare, earl of Gloucester. The *Vita* notes the marriage was designed to protect Gaveston in his new position.¹⁴ This effort clearly failed, creating more hostility towards Gaveston rather than protecting him from it.¹⁵

Following 1307, Gaveston was twice more exiled, both times in an attempt by Edward to stem the tide of increasing hatred toward Gaveston over his increasing social and financial status and political control. When Edward travelled to France for his wedding in late 1307, Gaveston was appointed regent in his place, to the utter disgust of several chroniclers.¹⁶ Edward’s return to England with his bride, the princess Isabella of France, did not diminish his relationship with Gaveston at all. The disgust of the chroniclers was echoed in reports of Edward’s coronation in February 1308, where Gaveston immediately preceded Edward in the procession, bearing the cross of St. Edward, the reaction to which is described in the *Annales Paulini* as “for which the people and the clergy were not undeservedly indignant.”¹⁷ This

¹² *Vita*, pp. xxii-iii, xxxix.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 4: ‘Rex autem continuum amorem erga eum habebat, in tantum ut exiret a curia regis preceptum publicum nbe quis eum nomine proprio uocaret, uidelicet dominum Petrum de Gauestone, set comitem Cornubie nominaret’.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6: : ‘sane hec copulacio matrimonialis partem eius non modicum uallebat; fauorem namque amicorum sibi uehementer augebat et odium baronem refrenabat.’

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 26: ‘Maior tamen pars baronum terre non consensit...propter inuidiam’.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8: ‘Regnum autem in manu Petri in custodia deputatur, Mira res, qui nuper ab Anglia exul erat et eiectus, eiusdem terre ian factus est gubernator et custus’.

¹⁷ *Paulini*, p. 261: ‘ex quo non immerito indignati sunt populus atque clerus.’

episode, in particular, serves to highlight not only Gaveston's socio-political rise, but also the physical proximity he maintained to Edward. Edward's actions during Gaveston's periods of exile display the intense desire of the King to always keep Gaveston physically close. The *Vita Edwardi Secundi* suggests that in Gaveston's presence, Edward would not speak to or address any other person, further insulting and angering the other nobles in Edward's court.¹⁸ Similarly, though not identically, it is later reported that Robert de Vere would refuse to recognize or speak to the other magnates with whom he disagreed. This suggests a pattern of insult via ignoring, and thus delegitimizing others' right to access both the space and person of the king. The *Annales Paulini* also report the indignation of Queen Isabella's uncles, who had travelled with her to England for the coronation, in "seeing that the king spent more time at [Piers'] couch than the queen's."¹⁹ The *Historia Anglicana* similarly reports the distress of Isabella over Edward's actions and relationship, her reports to her father, King Philip IV of France, and his complaints, in turn, to his contacts in England.²⁰ Again, a parallel can be suggested here with the later insults to Richard II's uncles during de Vere's divorce proceedings from his first wife, Philippa de Coucy, who was Richard's first cousin.

In April 1308, the barons, led by the earl of Lincoln, demanded Gaveston's exile and the confiscation of his estates. Edward held out, before consenting in May in order to prevent the outbreak of civil war. Edward appointed Gaveston his lieutenant in Ireland, turning the disgrace of exile into a political honour. The *Vita* suggests that it was Gaveston's arrogance, above all else, that was the root of the hatred of the barons, quoting a contemporary verse: "His arrogance was, then intolerable to the barons and the main cause of both the hatred and the rancour. For it is commonly said, 'You may be rich and wise and handsome,/But insolence could be your ruin.'"²¹ Before Gaveston even left for Ireland, Edward was working to find support among the barons to recall him. By the end of June 1309, Gaveston had returned to England and had been reinstated as the earl of Cornwall, with the support of a few key English magnates.

In 1311, Edward was presented with a list of forty-one regulations known as the Ordinances which had been drafted by the Ordainers, an elected body of twenty-one magnates whose goal was to eradicate abuses and reform the royal government. Gaveston's presence was

¹⁸ *Vita*, p. 28.

¹⁹ *Paulini*, p. 262: 'cerentes quod rex plus exerceret Petri triclinium quam reginae'; also, see *Vita et Mors*, p. 297.

²⁰ *St Albans*, p. 125: 'sed Regina tantum rebus necessariis artabatur, ut Regi Franciae, patri suo, lacrymabiliter, quereretur se honore debito destitutam. Ob quam causam, Rex Franciae cunctos Anglicos, sibi notos, pro talium abusionum tolerantia durius increpavit'.

²¹ *Vita*, p. 6-8, 28.

directly addressed in number twenty, which opens by stating “that Piers Gaveston had led the lord king astray, advised the lord king badly, and persuaded him deceitfully and in many ways to do wrong.”²² It was a personal attack on him and his position, and is also demonstrative of how he was seen as a symbol of the corruption of the system. The list of charges is long, and includes the return from his first exile, by Edward I, without ‘common assent’ and that those who did approve of his return did so on condition of good behaviour, which he has not followed. There is an interesting parallel in the conception of this punishment to that applied to Alice Perrers in the Good Parliament of 1376 – here, too, while the ordinance calls out Perrers’s abuses and orders her not to repeat them, the punishment of forfeiture and exile is not carried out unless and until she returns to her previous ways. Both are presented as warnings against future bad behaviour, rather than as immediate punishment for past behaviour.²³ That said, like Alice, Gaveston clearly had not changed his ways, and his punishment was determined to be permanent exile from England and all English possessions.²⁴

Edward fought against the implementation of the Ordinances from the outset, however Gaveston was briefly exiled again in October, possibly to Flanders, but returned to England by early January 1312 at the latest. Gaveston’s return, along with the other disagreements between the king and his barons, led to the outbreak of hostilities within England in early 1312. Gaveston was left at Scarborough to defend against a baronial siege in May. His forces were unable to hold against the siege, and he agreed to terms on 19 May, and was taken prisoner and held by the earl of Pembroke. While in Pembroke’s custody, Gaveston was seized by the earl of Warwick, who assembled a body of magnates to confer and condemn Gaveston, before executing him on 19 June, 1312.

Beyond the transgressive nature of the acts themselves, societal issues with same-sex sexual relationships stemmed from pervasive concerns over gender-norms, particularly masculinity. Much academic and popular attention has been paid to the debate surrounding the nature of the relationship between Edward II and Piers Gaveston, with convincing arguments both in support of and refuting a sexual element. As just one set of examples, in 1994 Pierre Chaplais argued for understanding the relationship as a ‘compact of brotherhood’ and compellingly listed all the reasons why the relationship could not have been sexual, where only three years earlier Childs and Taylor stated that “the relationship was no doubt homosexual”

²² Vita, pp. 34-5; Michael Prestwich (ed.), ‘A New Version of the Ordinances of 1311’, *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 57, 136, n. xxix.

²³ PROME, Edward III, 1376 April, ii.329.45.

²⁴ ‘Ordinances’, n. 20.

in the introduction to their edition of the *Anonimale Chronicle*.²⁵ Tison Pugh's 2010 study on sworn brotherhood within the Chaucerian corpus suggest that despite the prevalence of homosocial relationships of this kind, they were consistently viewed with suspicion:

Such pledges were known throughout the medieval era, but the cultural value of the resulting relationships is difficult to ascertain...Although scholars do not agree on the precise cultural meanings of these homosocial oaths, the extant records of their performance nonetheless document a form of homosocial union between men, even if such relationships were ideologically constructed as wholly asexual and normatively masculine.²⁶

Pugh continues,

James Schultz argues that the ambiguity of homosocial relationships stems from their cultural particularity and uniqueness, and that scholars need a new model for studying homosocial attachment, 'one that does not assimilate male couples of the Middle Ages to modern homosexuality but that also does not refuse them the possibility of erotic involvement.'²⁷

The relationships between Edward and Gaveston and between Richard II and de Vere – and, to a lesser extent, that between Edward and the younger Hugh Despenser – could certainly fall within this new model proposed by Schultz. Sexual or not, they were clearly more intense than was culturally expected or appropriate. While the question of the exact nature of these relationships continues to be a compelling area of research and discussion, it seems that this is, and will continue to be, one of the many frustrating questions we will never be able to completely resolve, and accepting them within a new model which accounts for, or even embraces, this ambiguity could open up new areas of study. The contemporary accounts which highlight Edward's 'excessive love' for Gaveston, and Edward's singlemindedness to ensure Gaveston remained at his side, despite it always being a poor political decision, leaves no doubt that the relationship was incredibly close and defining for both men.²⁸ This enduring love held by Edward is mirrored in the chronicles, which highlight his desire for revenge, and his joy, for instance, at the later execution of the earl of Lancaster, on whose land Gaveston had been executed, noting specifically that this execution of Lancaster was seen as retaliation for the

²⁵ For more on the two arguments to this debate, see Hamilton, *Gaveston*, pp. 15-7, 109-12 and Chaplais, *Gaveston*, pp. 109-14; *Anonimale*, p. 30.

²⁶ Tison Pugh, "'For to be sworne bretheren til deye': Satirizing Queer Brotherhood in the Chaucerian corpus," *The Chaucer Review*, 43: 3 (2009), pp. 282-310 at 282; 285.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 285; James A. Schultz, *Courtly Love, The Love of Courtliness, and The History of Sexuality* (Chicago, 2006), p. 95.

²⁸ Paulini, p. 259: 'Rex vocavit Petrum, prae amore nimio, fratrem suum'; *Anonimale*, pp. 80-2: 'Cesti roi aima chèrement de coer ascuns gentz qī son piere sovent foith li defendi la compaignie de eux, come une sire Peres de Gavastoun qī fust par le bone roi son pere exile, et par les bons pers de la terre.'

death of Gaveston, even a decade later.²⁹ While the contemporary chroniclers make no direct mention of a sexual relationship between the two men, the commentary certainly highlights the uniqueness, and impropriety, of their relationship. The *Vita* employs a classical reference to Achilles when discussing Edward's desire for revenge against those who executed Gaveston, and invokes the stories of Samson and Solomon when recounting the death of Lancaster.³⁰ Interestingly, there is one exception to this: Walsingham seemingly suggests that the birth of Edward's son, shortly after Gaveston's death, caused Edward's love for Gaveston and anger over his death to fade, and he was more agreeable to the barons: "from that day, by God's order, the love of his son grew, and the memory of [Piers] faded in his heart; the king yielded more easily to the will of his nobles than before."³¹ After Gaveston's death, the *Vita* returns to this comparison with David and Jonathan, saying that "love is depicted which is said to have surpassed the love of woman."³² At the later death of Lancaster in 1321, Walsingham attributes Edward's choice to single out Lancaster to his poor actions in the rebellion that preceded his capture, rather than to his anger of the execution of Gaveston as other chronicles do. No other chronicle makes this same suggestion, instead suggesting that Edward's anger and desire for revenge was unabated until the execution of Lancaster in 1321. While the contemporary chroniclers make no direct mention of a sexual relationship between the two men, the commentary certainly highlights the uniqueness, and impropriety, of their relationship. The *Vita* compares the relationship between Edward and Gaveston to that of the biblical Jonathan and David and, again to the classical Achilles and Patroclus - each of which have been at times analysed within the frameworks of platonic brotherhoods, homosociality, homoeroticism and homosexuality – but goes on to say that while these relationships stayed within the bounds of what is 'usual', the relationship between Edward and Gaveston crossed these bounds, and goes so far as to name Gaveston a 'maleficus', which Childs translates as "sorcerer," for bewitching Edward.³³ Accusing Gaveston of magical interference parallels those accusations levelled against Alice by Walsingham, as discussed in the previous chapter. This accusation is also interesting from a gender perspective, as use of magic was often a charge used against women, as it did not require physical size or strength, or access to the normal channels of power, in

²⁹ *Anonimale*, p. 108: 'et par my cel decapitacion sire Pieres de Gavastoun avant nome qi le roi milt [sic] ama.'

³⁰ *Vita*, pp. 178, 214.

³¹ *St Albans*, pp. 135, 164: 'Ab illo die, Deo disponente, crevit amor filii, et evanuit in ejus corde Petri memoria;...et Rex voluntati suorum procerum facilius solito condescendit'.

³² *Vita*, p. 52-3.

³³ *Vita*, p. 28: 'Modem autem dileccionis rex noster habere non potuit, et propter eum sui oblitus esse diceretur, et ob hoc Petrus malificus putaretur esse'. For more on the use of biblical and classical references in the *Vita*, see pp. xxiv-xxxi.

order to achieve its aims. Laying this accusation against Gaveston could be a method of feminizing his actions, especially in the midst of a discussion of his emotional relationship with Edward.

Late medieval chroniclers were openly disturbed by the close nature of the relationship between Edward and Gaveston: *Lanercost* describes their relationship as ‘on account of the undue intimacy which lord Edward the younger had adopted toward him [Gaveston]’.³⁴ The fascination with their relationship is mirrored in later depictions, such as Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II*, which places the relationship between Edward and Gaveston at the centre of the drama, rather than other socio-political explanations for the events of the period, reinforcing and reflecting the lasting negative reputations of these men.³⁵ These depictions are also mirrored in the modern scholarship, with recent re-examinations sparking debate between historians.³⁶ However, a closer examination of the chronicle sources suggests that the resounding hatred of Gaveston by his contemporaries was sparked by a combination of jealousy over his rise in wealth and power and, reportedly, disdain for his arrogance regarding his elevated status. The contemporary terms for the relationship between Piers Gaveston and Edward II vary, but all imply a significant closeness, to varying degrees, and relate both physical and emotional closeness. The *Annales Londonienses* describes Piers as “who was his partner in his youth” and Walsingham’s *Historia Anglicana* describes him as “whom the king embraced more specially and regarded more intimately.”³⁷

For the purpose of this analysis, this chapter will assume some form of deep emotional, and likely physical, relationship existed and that the lack of direct accusations possibly stems from the need to protect Edward as the king, and one still without an heir at the time of Piers’ death.

³⁴ *Lanercost*, p. 210: ‘propter hoc quamdam familiaritatem indebitam quam dominus Edwardus junior conceperat erga eum’.

³⁵ David Stymeist, ‘Status, Sodomy and the Theater in Marlowe’s *Edward II*’ *SEL*, 44, no. 2 (Spring 2004), pp. 236-8; Goran Stanivukovic and Adrian Goodwin, ‘Gaveston in Ireland: Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II* and the casting of queer brotherhood’ *Textual Practice*, 31, no 2. (2017), pp. 379-80; Alan Bray, ‘Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England’ in Johnathan Goldberg (ed.) *Queering the Renaissance* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 48-53; for later examples, see: Peter Horne, ‘The Besotted King and his Adonis: Representations of Edward II and Gaveston in Late Nineteenth-Century England’ *History Workshop Journal*, 47 (Spring 1997), pp. 30-48; Michael G. Cornelius, ‘Reconfiguring a Man’s “Place”: Space, Sexuality and Piers Gaveston in Henry Sewell Stokes’ *Restormel*’ *PLJ*, 2, no. 2, pp. 91-116; Sid Ray, ‘Hunks, History, Homophobia: Masculinity Politics in *Braveheart* and *Edward II*’ *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, 29: nos. 3 & 4: 22-31.

³⁶ Hamilton, *Piers Gaveston*, 16-7, 109; Chaplais, *Piers Gaveston*, 6-22.

³⁷ *Londonienses*, p. 151: ‘qui fuit consors ejus in adolescentia sua’; *St Albans*, p. 121: ‘quem mox Rex in amplexus specialius admittibat, et familiarius respiciebat.’

The Edwards' Favorites: Gendered Power and Social Bottoming

The divergent trajectories of the careers of Piers Gaveston and Alice Perrers result from two important differences: gender and social position. Even accounting for their differences, the issues society had with each remain remarkably similar: each was able to leverage their relationship for huge amounts of wealth and influence, upsetting those who were passed over in their favour. In the case of Alice Perrers, her career is an example of transgressing the traditional female gender norms of the period through her political and financial dealings. In contrast, the case of Piers Gaveston is not necessarily an example of Gaveston transgressing gendered norms, but rather of Edward doing so, by choosing a man as a favourite and a partner. However, Edward's status prevented direct accusations against him, leaving Gaveston the most convenient scapegoat for concerns over their relationship and his rise in status, as well as Edward's rulership and masculinity.

The parallels of the careers and commentary on Piers Gaveston and Alice Perrers in particular are striking given how different one might expect the situations of a man and woman in these circumstances to be. Using a de-gendered lens to examine Gaveston and Perrers' careers, the downfall of each comes from the excessive financial and socio-political power they derived from the relationships with their respective Edwards. Each was given a large amount of land and wealth, and was able to develop significant social power through patronage and, in the case of Gaveston, political position. The difference comes in the nature of their downfall – Alice was dispossessed of the majority of her wealth and land whereas Gaveston was captured and executed through unsanctioned military action. Each had potential power through their relationships and wealth, but Alice was only able to realize this power while she maintained these elements – once Edward III died, her power was no longer protected and she was unable to maintain it. In contrast, Gaveston's execution highlights the inability the magnates had to restrain the power he had attained, and likely concern that he would continue to utilize it further – particularly after having been named regent. The difference in attitude may stem from one of several sources. Most obviously, the death of Edward III left Alice unprotected in a way Piers was not in 1312. Edward II had shown he would not be prevented from keeping Gaveston close and from showering him with land and titles, and not even repeated exile had separated Gaveston or dampened his access to and influence over the king. Gaveston's death may have been seen as the only way to eliminate his power and influence. Had Edward III survived or Edward II predeceased Gaveston, the narrative around these favourites may have been very different. The other obvious difference is gender. In fourteenth-century England, Piers Gaveston likely seemed a more obvious threat to the status of others in high positions of power

than Alice Perrers would have, even if Alice Perrers was also able to realize power at a significant level.

Both Alice and Gaveston's relationships with their respective Edwards result in an inversion of perceived gender norms. To use a play on words, in both these relationships the respective Edwards could be perceived as 'social bottoms'. Alice inverted these by usurping power and asserting herself politically and financially, though this conclusion is complicated by viewing her career through the lens of queenship, as Laura Tompkins has done. Returning to the ideas of the differences between the beds of the king and queen, Tompkins notes

Alice's presence in the king's state bed of governance directly inverted the balance between the masculine and the feminine that the king and queen upheld. With Edward and Alice there was no sense of 'balance', and because their conjugal relations took place within the state bed, sex and politics were being constantly mixed.³⁸

Tompkins further notes, that just as Alice's methods of influence reflected an inversion of the ideals of queenship, politically, Alice acted like a man. In comparison, the commentary on Gaveston's access to Edward's bed and the anger of Isabella's family over her lack of access clearly demonstrates that Gaveston is usurping some of the traditional positions of the queen. Both relationships leave each Edward depicted as weak and manipulable, and of holding the subservient, 'feminine or 'bottom' position in their relationship.

The chronicles certainly suggest that Gaveston's personality – in particular, his arrogance – did not endear him to his contemporaries, but the true hatred over Gaveston stemmed from the titles, wealth, and power provided to him by his relationship with Edward. The enduring characterizations of Gaveston may stem not from contemporary depictions of him, but rather from his association with Edward, and from later depictions of Edward, particularly in the years between Gaveston's death and his own. The *Vita*, in an entry from 1313, laments the lost possibilities of Edward's reign up to that point, placing the blame on Gaveston's shoulders: "All hope vanished when he became King of England. Piers Gaveston led the king astray, threw the country into confusion, consumed its treasure, was exiled three times, and then, returning, lost his head." The *Gesta Edwardi de Carnarvan* similarly accuses Gaveston's presence of causing "the hearts of great men to be torn to pieces by their lord

³⁸ Tompkins, 'Uncrowned Queen', pp. 228.

king.”³⁹ Childs suggests that of all the figures of this period, the most significant reassessment of character by modern scholars has been for Piers Gaveston: increasingly, his military actions and successes have been noted, while the specifics of his relationship with Edward have been continually reinterpreted and the relevance of these specifics questioned.⁴⁰ Contemporary concerns about Gaveston himself stemmed primarily from his origins and his extreme rise to wealth and influence during the early years of Edward’s reign, and the perceived threat he posed to the power of the other magnates of England.

Laura Tompkins’ work examines Alice using degendered language to analyse her socio-political position, placing Alice as “one of the leading members of a small group of royal favourites... [who] in the first half of the 1370s contributed to a growing political crisis,” and who “controlled the person, policy, and patronage of the rapidly ageing and ineffectual king in the final years of his reign,” suggesting that her position in Edward’s court was more than just the recipient of excessively generous favouritism.⁴¹ While Alice might not be able to hold titles herself, she was certainly able to influence who else might receive them. In the case of Gaveston, while the choice of a male favourite was not novel, it remained a dangerous choice politically due to the direct competition it put Gaveston in with other magnates. Gaveston’s gender meant that he could be gifted titles and defined political power as compared to Alice’s less defined power, accessed primarily through patronage and influence with the king. While Alice had the opportunity to benefit or harm her male contemporaries at court, Gaveston’s rise in status and title was an insult and a tangible loss to his contemporaries. Edward II’s status prevented direct accusations against him, leaving Gaveston the most convenient scapegoat for concerns over their relationship and his rise in status, as well as Edward’s rulership and masculinity.

An important difference in the careers and discussions surrounding male and female favorites is who exactly they are perceived as replacing. Katherine, while without a doubt compared to her predecessors, did in fact hold the title of Duchess, whether or not she was perceived as deserving of it. Similarly, Gaveston, and later de Vere, both did hold positions within the courts of their respective kings, even if their rise in status was not recognized as proper. Only Alice, with her status as an ‘uncrowned queen’, did not technically hold any position which gave her the right to be where she was. This position also clearly put her in

³⁹ *Vita*, p. 68; *Gesta Edwardi*, p. 33: “Tota spes euanuit dum factus est rex Anglie. Petrus de Gauestone regem duxit in deuium, terram turbauit, consumpsit thesaurum, tribus uicibus exilium subiit, et postea rediens caput perdidit” (translated by author).

⁴⁰ *Vita*, xxxv: “a domino suo regge corda magnatum distrahebant” (translated by author).

⁴¹ Tompkins, ‘Edward III’s’, p. 60; ‘Alice Perrers’, p. 1361.

direct comparison with Philippa, which certainly only increased the attacks on her. Unlike Gaveston and de Vere, having Philippa – a traditional model of queenship and female power – as a direct, concrete comparison only enhanced Alice's failure to emulate and fulfil this role.

Both Alice and Gaveston were given a large amount of land and wealth, and each was able to develop significant social power through influence and patronage and, in the case of Gaveston, political position. With two particularly important exceptions – namely, the regency in 1308 and the Irish lieutenancy in 1308-09 – Gaveston never sought nor held significant political office, and his primary assertion of power was through influence and patronage, but the opportunity to wield so-called 'hard power' would have undoubtedly been available to him had he chosen to pursue it. Hamilton notes that this is in contrast to Edward's later favourite, Despenser, who did clearly pursue 'hard power' during his time at Edward's side; the actions and personalities of the two are at times conflated in the chronicles, complicating Gaveston's reputation.⁴² The significant difference between the two cases of Alice and Gaveston comes in the nature of their downfall – Alice was dispossessed of the majority of her wealth and land whereas Gaveston was captured and executed through unsanctioned military action. Each had potential power through their relationships and wealth, but Alice was only able to realise this power while she maintained these elements – she had influence over the king, and through both his and her own patronage networks, but did not hold official political power. This 'soft-power' enabled Alice to effectively gather and manage the resources she needed to support and sustain herself and her lack of official position may have even allowed her access to resources and networks that official structures could not access.⁴³ However, this method of power was also much harder to define and maintain; once Edward III died, her power was no longer protected and she was unable to sustain it.⁴⁴

By way of contrast, Gaveston's execution highlights the inability of magnates to restrain the power he had attained, and likely concern that he would continue to grow and utilize it further – particularly after having been named regent. In the introduction to his study of Piers Gaveston, Hamilton notes that "patronage is at the center not only of baronial

⁴² Hamilton, *Gaveston*, p. 111; Prestwich, *The Three*, p. 85.

⁴³ The 2018 collection edited by Susan Broomhall, *Women and Power at the French Court, 1483-1563* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press) examines the particulars of the different avenues of power available to women in early modern France – the observations and conclusions within are useful to this earlier period as well. In particular, see Susan Broomhall, 'In the Orbit of the King: Women, Power, and Authority at the French Court, 1483-1563', pp. 9-40; Aubrée David-Chapuy, 'The Political, Symbolic, and Courtly Power of Anne de France and Louise de Savoie: From the Genesis to the Glory of Female Regency', pp. 43-64; Johnathan A. Reid, 'Imagination and Influence: The Creative Powers of Marguerite de Navarre at Work at Court and in the World', pp. 263-286; and David Potter, 'The Life and After-Life of a Royal Mistress: Anne de Pisseleu, Duchess of Étampes', pp. 309-334.

⁴⁴ Broomhall, *Women*, pp. 24, 31.

animosity to Gaveston, it is at the center of – indeed, one might say it is the dynamic, driving force behind, the entire reign of Edward II.”⁴⁵ Arguably, the same might be said for the reign of Edward III, or at least for the final years of his reign.

Discussions of whether the relationship between Edward and Gaveston was sexual or not is an excellent example of the double standard of proof required to suggest a sexual element in same-gender relationships as compared to different-gender ones. While no definitive proof that Edward and Gaveston did have a sexual relationship has ever been found, there is also no definitive proof that they did not have one either. However, the default assumption for two men is generally to assume a platonic relationship, whereas a similar relationship between a man and woman would be assumed to be sexual. In this particular case, the relationship of Alice Perrers and Edward III produced acknowledged children, suggesting beyond (reasonable) doubt the existence of a sexual relationship. Relationships with female ‘favourites’ that do not produce any children are still assumed by default to have been sexual, while those with male ‘favourites’ are generally assumed not to have been. Beyond the case of Isabella and Mortimer, one clear example of this is the series of female partners of King David II of Scotland – Margaret Drummond, Agnes Dunbar, and Katherine Mortimer – none of whom had any children by him, but all of whom were treated as his sexual partners.⁴⁶

Robert de Vere

At first glance, Robert de Vere is the most contemporarily culturally appropriate of the ‘favorites’ discussed here, and yet his treatment in the sources is similar, if significantly diluted in comparison, to that of Piers Gaveston.

Robert de Vere was born in 1362 to Maud, wife of Thomas de Vere, 8th earl of Oxford. The de Vere family had held this title since its creation in the twelfth century by the Empress Matilda, but the title did not hold significant wealth by the time of Robert’s inheritance. Robert inherited the earldom at nine years old – making him the holder of the longest-standing noble title in fourteenth-century England – and his wardship remained with King Edward III.⁴⁷ In

⁴⁵ Hamilton, *Piers Gaveston*, p. 15.

⁴⁶ Bruce Webster, ‘David II’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, last modified 06 January 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/3726>: scholars generally assume David to have been infertile, as despite two marriages and several known favorites and sexual partners (several of whom had children from other relationships), he had no known issue, legitimate or not; Ormrod, ‘Who Was’, pp. 225, 229 n. 27; Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon*, D. E. R. Watt (ed.), (Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Press: 1987), pp. 7, 321: ‘Quam pre ceteris mulieribus [Katherine Mortimer] rex pretulit in amore; propter quam nimium reg[ina] fuit neglecta et complexa concubine’/ ‘How much the king preferred this other woman [Katherine Mortimer] in love; on account of which the queen was neglected and he was surrounded by the concubine’ (translated by author).

⁴⁷ Frank Wiswall, ‘English Royal Minorities and the Hundred Years War’ (Leeds, 2007), p. 16.

1376, he married Philippa de Coucy, daughter of Enguerrand de Coucy, earl of Bedford and his wife Isabella, daughter of Edward III, a marriage which brought with it increased status. Raised in the royal household, it is likely that de Vere was known to the future Richard II from a young age, and he was one of several knighted with the Prince in 1377, however his close relationship with Richard blossomed and he quickly became one of Richard's closest companions, particularly in the early-mid 1380s.

All this is to say, a friendship between Robert de Vere and Richard is not particularly surprising or worth commentary, at least early on: unlike Alice, Katherine or Piers before him, he was an English courtier from an old family, raised at court and married to a member of the royal family. And had he remained just one of several companions of Richard, and had Richard not lavishly displayed him as a favorite, then he would likely not have been included here. Like Piers, Robert de Vere's reputation and treatment at the hands of both his contemporaries and later scholars has as much or more to do with Richard's acts as it has to do with anything de Vere did himself.

The 'reigns' of Piers Gaveston and the Despensers – and, to a lesser extent, Alice Perrers – and other 'favorites' throughout the fourteenth century meant that by the time of Richard II's majority and de Vere's emergence as a court favorite, there was significantly more concern over royal favoritism and the consolidation of wealth, power and influence with one or two individuals, particularly when those individuals were outside of the established inner circle. This tension at court was exacerbated by socio political movements of the preceding decades, encapsulated by the 'Peasants Revolt' and the calls for a shift in social hierarchies and influence throughout England. These shifts included ongoing negotiations over the balance of power between the monarchy, court and parliament. In addition, there was also continuing factional conflict within the nobility during Richard's reign. As with Edward's reign before him, Richard's promotion of his own inner circle – whether deserving or not – exacerbated these factional conflicts, especially in a socio-political dynamic which invited broadening power and control, rather than narrowing it. Gillespie, following others, notes that while Richard did seem to have several emotional connections to women throughout his life, the primary political factors in his reign were the strength of his close friendships with, among others, de Vere.⁴⁸ Wiswall suggests Mortimer as a contemporary comparison for de Vere, rather than Gaveston, noting 'the advantage he took of the king's minority in order to secure lands and titles' and also notes that the relative poverty of de Vere, despite his family's long-

⁴⁸ James Gillespie, 'Richard II: Chivalry and Kingship', in *The Age of Richard II* (New York, 1997), p. 133.

standing nobility, made his rise in wealth and stature that much more unacceptable to their contemporaries.⁴⁹ Unlike Edward III, Richard II wields demonstrable power during his minority, especially in regards to patronage and favoritism, which could may be one reason why Richard, unlike Edward III, develops a clear circle of favorites.

In 1377, Robert and Philippa were granted a portion of the estate for their maintenance. In 1384, Robert was elected to the Order of the Garter. Gillespie notes that

Richard was clearly the moving force in the election of... his great favourite, Robert de Vere... These... knights were of impeccable lineage, but neither had the sort of martial reputation upon which the award of the Garter had been predicated... this must have galled the earl of Arundel, destined to be Richard's most obstinate foe, who remained outside this great company of chivalry in spite of his martial adventures at sea.⁵⁰

Continuing in the vein of Gaveston's earlier insults, and followed by de Vere's later divorce and remarriage, this slight – intentional or not – suggests a pattern stemming from all four men – Edward II, Piers Gaveston, Richard II and Robert de Vere – in which their personal ambition or entitlement seems to weigh out above necessary politicking or finesse when dealing with their contemporaries, and especially the 'old guard'.

In 1385, de Vere was granted the marquissate of Dublin and he was likely made a knight of the garter at the same time.⁵¹ While this is a promotion for de Vere, he is listed in Knighton as just one of several promotions, and not even the most significant in this instance. Even Knighton's description of the event is neutral, as compared to his later commentary on de Vere's career and relationship with Richard. Interestingly, this is the first instance of the use of the title of 'marquess' in England – though it had been previously known on the continent – and placed de Vere a step about the other earls in England, a rise which was seemingly exclusively due to favoritism from Richard. Michael Bennett suggests that this first creation of an English marquissate was influenced by his engagement with the Holy Roman Empire and other continental allies, particularly after his marriage to Anne of Bohemia, daughter of Charles IV, the Emperor, and reflected an aspiration on Richard's part to create an imperial England, and possibly to eventually rule as a future Holy Roman Emperor himself. Bennett maintains this thesis throughout his chapter, suggesting that while Richard was the first English king since the Conquest to be born to two English parents, he very much saw himself as one of the European princes as well as a "king among kings." It suggests that the choice to start by

⁴⁹ Wiswall, 'English Royal Minorities', p. 16; see above.

⁵⁰ Gillespie, 'Richard II', pp. 130-1.

⁵¹ Knighton, pp. 335-8.

asserting power in Ireland was an intentional one, stemming from “prophecies of an English king-emperor” and noting that Richard was known for his belief in astrology and prophecy.⁵²

Bennett further notes that after Richard’s 1382 marriage to Anne of Bohemia, there is discussion regarding the influx of foreigners that travelled with the queen, and of the activities and manners of the young court. As noted above, this is not an unusual pattern, and can be observed at the marriages of both Edward II to Isabella and Edward III to Philippa. However, the chronicles report the lavish spending of the inner court after the arrival of the Queen, including “[abuse] of the hospitality of the monasteries” the re-gifting the marriage gifts to those around them.⁵³ Despite being English, de Vere is certainly perceived as being a central figure in the royal court, and it seems reasonably possible that his Englishness was not enough to absolve him of his association with this influx of foreigners.

In 1386, the marquessate was revoked, and Richard instead created de Vere ‘duke of Ireland.’ This was done as part of the so-called ‘Wonderful Parliament’ in October, 1386, and may have been a reaction to demands from the magnates for the dismissal of the chancellor of England, Michael de la Pole, earl of Suffolk, and his replacement with Thomas of Arundel, bishop of Ely.⁵⁴ He was the first outside of the royal family to be made a duke, and the title placed him on level with the king’s royal uncles, which certainly created tension. Like Gaveston before him, this is clearly seen as an unnecessary and unworthy level of elevation for someone of de Vere’s status. However, there is a clear depiction of negotiation between parliament and the king and de Vere’s elevation. Far from being depicted as either a singular move by the king, or a coup reflecting his personal power, it is presented as a consolation prize in return for the more important and significant loss of de la Pole as chancellor.

In 1387, de Vere divorced Philippa in order to marry Agnes Lancecrona, a lady-in-waiting to Queen Anne:

but [Robert] grew to detest her, and sent the clerk John Ripon to the Roman curia to secure a divorce terminating the marriage – a task at which he worked to such effect that through perjured witnesses, hired for the purpose, he came away with the pronouncement of a sentence of divorce. These proceedings greatly displeased the lady’s uncles, the dukes of Lancaster, York, and Gloucester. When she had eventually been thus repudiated, this Robert de Vere, duke of Ireland, to his everlasting disgrace and reproach committed the iniquity of taking to wife a Bohemian chamber-woman of the queen’s, named Lancecron, and this in face of the queen’s unremitting protests.⁵⁵

⁵² Michael John Bennett, *Richard II and the Revolution of 1399* (Gloucestershire, 1997), pp. 266-7, 282.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 265-6.

⁵⁴ Louisa DeSaussure Duls, *Richard II in the Early Chronicles* (The Hague, 1975), pp. 31-2; *Knighton*, 352-5.

⁵⁵ *The Westminster Chronicle, 1381-1394* (eds.) L.C. Hector and Barbara F. Harvey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 186-91.

Given the general chronicle negativity towards Anne's entourage, it is interesting that the final line here seems designed to absolve Anne herself of wrongdoing in this particular set of events, though it is one of her own court, who presumably had traveled to England in order to serve her, who is the central figure. Goodman discusses the affair, noting that not only did de Vere's actions insult the king and royal family, since Philippa was a granddaughter of Edward III, but Richard's failure to properly punish de Vere tarnished his reputation as well. He further suggests that Richard's devotion to the memory of his grandfather, whose sainthood he pursued, may have meant that he failed to see the dangerous pattern that was repeating.⁵⁶ Fletcher further suggests that, in Walsingham's reckoning, all of Richard and de Vere's issues began with the divorce, triggering Gloucester's anger, de Vere's reaction and later involvement of Richard himself: "for Walsingham...the root of discord lay in the scandal raised by the duke of Ireland's sex life."⁵⁷ Given Walsingham's inclination toward moralizing, it is not at all surprising that he would see de Vere's liaisons as the root of all evil in this case.

After de Vere's remarriage, the hostility directed toward him increased, particularly from his former uncles-in-law, the king's uncles. Like Edward II's interactions with his own uncles-in-law after his marriage to Isabella, the alienation of powerful family by marriage presents another parallel between the events of the 1320s and those of the 1380s. This lack of respect for the more established members of the nobility is also reflected in Gaveston's notorious insults and, overall, these incidents seem to reflect a mentality of hubris from a younger generation which encapsulates the concerns and complaints which emerge more formally. Once again, if both Richard and de Vere had been a bit more circumspect in their choices and reactions, perhaps events would not have escalated to the degree they did.

These events coincided with an increase in trust and responsibility from the king, who appointed de Vere justice of Chester. In response, in mid-November 1387, de Vere was among five of the king's close associates accused of treason by the duke of Gloucester and the earls of Warwick and Arundel. The two sides met in battle on 20 December at Radcot Bridge where de Vere was defeated but escaped.⁵⁸ After the defeat, Richard was forced to submit to the will of the Lords Appellant at the so-called Merciless Parliament in February 1388.⁵⁹ Similarly to Gaveston, de Vere is a convenient scapegoat, easier to attack than then king himself. De Vere

⁵⁶ Goodman, 'A History', p. 25.

⁵⁷ Fletcher, Christopher, *Richard II: Manhood, Youth and Politics, 1377-99* (Oxford, 2008), p. 170.

⁵⁸ Goodman, *The Loyal Conspiracy*, pp. 129-30; Fletcher, *Richard II*, p. 233; See also, Simon Walker, *The Lancastrian Affinity 1361-1399* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 168-71.

⁵⁹ A. K. Gundy, *Richard II and the Rebel Earl* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 130.

was tried *in absentia* for treason and sentenced to death and forfeiture of his land and titles. As studied by McVitty, De Vere's trial and sentencing present an interesting case for shifting conceptions of treason: accepted definitions of treason included riding against the king's banner in battle and at Radcot Bridge, it was de Vere, not the Apellants who rode with the king's banner. By this logic, it was not de Vere, but the Apellants themselves who were the traitors. McVitty notes that in order to put de Vere on trial for treason in this context, they had to accuse him of accroaching royal power, a much less concrete accusation.⁶⁰ Knighton refers to the five favorites of Richard tried for treason at the Merciless Parliament (Michael de la Pole, Robert de Vere, Alexander Neville, Robert Tresilian, and Nicholas Brembre) as "the five nefarious seducers of the king."⁶¹ The chronicles continue to reflect a clear political preference in their narrations for these events: both Knighton and Walsingham favor the Lords Apellant over Richard and his inner circle. This is consistent with Walsingham's depictions of earlier events: he is particularly anti-de Vere, de la Pole and Burley, which parallels animosity towards Gaveston and Alice before them. Compared to Knighton's account, Walsingham places relatively more blame on Richard and less on his favorites for the failures of governance which led to these events.⁶²

De Vere escaped to the continent and traveled between Holland and France, finding little support or even a place to stay. Knighton describing how Richard could not be parted from de Vere, paralleling descriptions of Edward and Gaveston during his periods of exile, and labeling de Vere as "the brotherly and very special friend of the king."⁶³ De Vere eventually settled in Louvain, where he died sometime before early August 1392. Reportedly, Richard II was trying to obtain permission for de Vere to return to England at the time of his death.

The chroniclers tend to focus on de Vere as a major source of conflict, which may not reflect his actual physical presence at court or by Richard's side.⁶⁴ According to James Ross, the sources suggest that de Vere was actually not as frequently 'in the room' with Richard, or even present at court, as the Chronicles imply, but rather away on other business. However, the contemporary perceptions depicted in the chronicles certainly suggest his presence, whether physical or simply socio-political. However present he truly was, he is certainly depicted in the sources as not just present, but as a reoccurring obstacle between the king and those who opposed the king's favorites. This likely reflects the ongoing struggle over the

⁶⁰ McVitty, *Treason*, p. 29.

⁶¹ Duls, *Richard II*, pp. 35, 40.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 55

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 45; Knighton, p. 251.

⁶⁴ James Ross, personal communication [5 July 2023].

balance of royal and parliamentary power, as depicted in this scene, which squarely places de Vere and the other favorites as successfully defending Richard's right to absolute power:

the king went to Shrewsbury, and a number of the judges of the realm gathered there at the king's command. And they were asked by the aforesaid seducers of the king [*seductores regis*], namely Alexander, archbishop of York, Robert de Vere, duke of Ireland, Michael de la Pole, Robert Tresilian, and the rest of their associates, *whether it was consonant with the law of the realm that the king should oppose and resist the ordinances concerning the king and the kingdom which were made in the last parliament*, by the lords and commons of the realm with the assent of the king, he being, as they said, coerced thereto.

And the judges answered that the king could annul and change such ordinances at his pleasure, to improve them, because *he was not subject to those laws*.⁶⁵

Martin notes that this is the first time Knighton refers to the favorites as a singular group, which suggests that Knighton is working from another written source for these events. Later, similar accounts discuss the obstruction of these favorites, solidification of two oppositional groups, and growing animosity between them, eventually recognized as the appellants and the appellees:

while the king was planning to come to London, Thomas Woodstock, duke of Gloucester, Richard, earl of Arundel, and Thomas Beauchamp, earl of Warwick, seeing that *they could not continue with the governance of the king and the kingdom, according to the ordinance made in the previous parliament, being obstructed by the aforesaid favourites the archbishop of York, Michael de la Pole, Robert de Vere, duke of Ireland, Nicholas Brembre, and Robert Tresilian justice, who had withdrawn the king and estranged him from the counsel of the said lords, to the great damage of the king and the kingdom*, and had caused him to go whirling about the kingdom so that he should not be near the said lords, lest their counsel should take effect (and in truth no king had ever been known to travel the bounds of the kingdom in so short a time as had he, under the influence of their wicked counsel).⁶⁶

Beyond the insularity of the inner circles around both Edward II and Richard II, both Gaveston and de Vere seemed to have gone out of their way to antagonize their contemporaries. While de Vere primarily caused his problems by publicly and privately ignoring his contemporaries, Gaveston is rumored to have developed a series of insulting nicknames for those lords he didn't like. Fletcher recounts these rumors, noting that "Implicitly it was Gaveston's arrogance and Edward's excessive favour which disturbed a peace which would have otherwise remained untroubled... most historians agree that it was Gaveston's lack of respect, which particularly contributed to the hatred which he inspired amongst certain sections of the nobility."⁶⁷ In

⁶⁵ Knighton, pp. 392-3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 400-5 [my emphasis].

⁶⁷ Fletcher, 'Manhood, Kingship', p. 141.

general, Gaveston seems to be held more accountable for his issues than de Vere was, perhaps because he was older than Edward, and often depicted as a mentor or guide of sorts.⁶⁸

The language used to describe the relationship between de Vere and the other 'favorites' of Richard is interesting. The five favorites of Richard are repeatedly referred to by Knighton as '*seductores regis*,' and uses other language of clandestine romance: "they denounced the seducers of the king, traitors to the king and the kingdom, who had beguiled the king and were disturbing the whole realm, both rich and poor, and sowing discord and rancour between the king and his lords."⁶⁹ This portrays Richard as a weak leader, unable to see past the flattery and words of his favorites to their underlying treachery. McVitty notes that the sources, often link the actions of the favorites to the destruction of both king and kingdom: "this rhetoric...implicitly masculinised the body politic by connecting it directly to the gendered body of the king." In doing so, the weak leadership of Richard also results in a failure of both his and the kingdom's masculinity. This can be seen in Knighton's narrative, which continues, saying that the favorites were leading the king towards peace and friendship with France, including the surrender of areas which had been fought over for the previous century.⁷⁰ Knighton is certainly less neutral at this point in his story than at earlier points: he clearly believes that the Appellants were in the right, eliminating the dangerous influences of the favorites of the king. The suggestion that these favorites were pushing Richard to subject himself and England to the wishes of France would be particularly appalling to the English public, who had been at war over this and related issues for over half a century. This also reflects the importance of military might and leadership to English conceptions of kingship in the fourteenth century. The preceding generations had been filled with examples of those kings perceived and depicted as an excellent military leader in Edward I, a terrible one in Edward II, and one who started well and lost that reputation in Edward III. It is not incidental that the loss of military leadership capability of Edward III is linked to his relationship with Alice Perrers, and with her rise to power at court. Despite his imperial aspirations, in general, Richard does not appear to have had the same military drive as some of his predecessors, and Bennett suggests that he himself did not perceive this to be a problem for his reign: "Richard was comfortable with his image as a prince of peace. His interest in his predecessors focused on

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁶⁹ *Knighton*, p. 405.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 405.

Edward the Confessor and Edward II, whom he regarded as a royal martyr, not on the great warrior kings like Richard the Lionheart or his grandfather Edward III.”⁷¹

Only at this point in the narrative of the events does Knighton single out de Vere from the others, suggesting that he may have been viewed as a leader, or as the primary favorite of the king:

And it is said that Ralph, Lord Basset, said to the king, ‘My lord, you know that I have been, am, and ever shall be your faithful liegeman, and my body and all that I possess are and will be subject to your justice and truth, but I must tell you that if I have to go into battle, I wish unmistakably to be with the party that is true and seeks the truth, and that *I am not going to offer to have my head broken for the duke of Ireland.*’⁷²

In addition to clearly singling out de Vere, this passage also makes clear that there was still, at minimum, performative support for Richard, but, in Knighton’s estimation, de Vere did not command either the power or the respect for his contemporaries to worry about calling him out. McVitty notes that this passage shows “that for men directly involved in this conflict, matters of personal honour, true manhood and chivalric performance were as important as more abstract legal and constitutional concerns.”⁷³

As noted above, generally, scholars are in agreement that the relationship between Richard and de Vere was not sexual. However, interestingly Walsingham seems to imply a sexual relationship, recording that de Vere is accused of “obscene intimacy” with Richard, likely intending to imply an accusation of sodomy, known as the ‘unspeakable sin’.⁷⁴ Michael Hanrahan also notes that Usk seems to suggest more broadly regarding Richard :

Adam of Usk will later record a more overt reference to Richard’s sodomy, when he includes the king’s “sodomies” (“sodomica”) among the causes of Richard’s deposition. The charge of sodomy was never officially brought against Richard, but its occurrence in these Lancastrian chronicles betray[s] the political agenda behind the allegations, namely, Richard’s unfitness for rule.⁷⁵

The reference here to Usk is interesting since, as has been previously noted, Usk does not explicitly discuss de Vere after Radcot Bridge, and he certainly is not named during Richard’s deposition. If Usk was intent on defending a fairly unique accusation of sodomy against

⁷¹ Bennett, ‘Richard II’, p. 270.

⁷² Knighton, p. 405 [my emphasis].

⁷³ McVitty, *Treason*, p. 27.

⁷⁴ Duls, *Richard II*, 55; Michael Hanrahan, ‘Seduction and Betrayal: Treason in the prologue to the Legend of Good Women’, *Chaucer Review* 30 (1996), p. 235; *St Albans*, p. 148: ‘tabtum afficiebatur eidem tantum coluit et amavit eundem, non sine nota, prout fertur, *familiaritatis obscoenae*’.

⁷⁵ Hanrahan, ‘Seduction and Betrayal: Treason in the Prologue to the Legend of Good Women,’ *Chaucer Review*, 30 (1996), p. 235.

Richard and any believable rumors regarding his relationship with de Vere had existed at the time, likely he would have reported them at this point.

The concerns over de Vere, and the veracity of the eventual attacks against him, are far more likely to be a result of the culmination of an increasing awareness of the dangers of royal overreach and the actions of Richard, than a reaction to de Vere himself: the collective consciousness of the nobility had not forgotten the harms of the ‘reigns’ of Gaveston, the Despensers, and Alice Perrers, and there is an understandable fear of repetition displayed. After Radcot Bridge, the momentum of support for the Appellant’s movement meant that the Appellants had no choice but to move forward with the ‘extreme measures’ of the Merciless Parliament, or risk their own safety. In order to avoid deposing Richard, blame had to be shifted to those around him, making the choice to portray him as weak and manipulable. Furthermore, Gundy notes that the Gaveston and Despenser were not the only precedents which may have been on the minds of those in power in the 1380s: “the Appellants may have been aware of the historical precedents set by Simon de Montfort and Thomas of Lancaster, which demonstrated that noble rebels could not hope to succeed against the king unless they deposed him.”⁷⁶

After the death of de Vere, Richard II had his body returned to England and, supposedly, had the coffin reopened to view his friend once more:

...the reburial of Robert de Vere on the return of his corpse to England in September 1395. The St Albans chronicle alleges that many nobles stayed away from this event. It should be noted that the redactions of this chronicle which refer to Richard touching de Vere’s fingers at this point...as opposed to contemplating the rings on his fingers, are all later additions. The accusation, attached to the account of 1386, that de Vere had a ‘familiaritas obsoenae’ with the king is also a later addition.⁷⁷

Choosing to pursue the return of de Vere’s body takes to the extreme the emotional connection depicted in earlier instances, in which Richard could not stand to be physically separated from de Vere. It is also interesting that once again, there is an appearance of rings in the description, with all the possible implications of – on one hand – wealth and greed and – on the other – love, loyalty and fidelity, that they bring with them.

‘Sine Commune Favore’: Dangers of Access, Accusation and Parliamentary Reach

The case studies included in this project – in particular Gaveston, Perrers and de Vere – embody the potential of the royal favorites. On one hand, this is potential power – seemingly there were very few boundaries that they were unable to cross with the support of their

⁷⁶ Gundy, *Richard II*, p. 134.

⁷⁷ Fletcher, *Richard II*, p. 240.

monarchs. On the other hand, however, is the equally growing potential danger of the backlash to this crossing of boundaries. And, as was particularly clear in the case of Gaveston, this backlash was aimed directly at the favorites, even when the actions may have been those of the monarch.

As was with the case of Gaveston and the Ordanances of 1311 and with Perrers and the ‘Good Parliament,’ for Robert de Vere, one of the most obvious depictions of this potential for power and corresponding danger can be seen in the records of the so-called ‘Merciless Parliament’ of 1388. To some extent, de Vere’s case is less potential than the others – it comes after the battle of Radcot Bridge in which de Vere did lead an army against other lords of England. However, the potential for more actions against these lords is still very present, and the language of the parliament records – and the reports in the chronicles, which, barring some minor semantic changes, present an accurate reproduction of the records from parliament – make it clear that there is still a present and future danger from de Vere and his co-accused. However, unlike Gaveston and Perrers, the punishment language here is not in reference to potential future wrong-doing, but rather presents both past wrongs and potential future wrongs, and demands immediate punishment.

The parliament records of the appeal clearly center de Vere as a core bad-actor in the king’s inner circle. There are five men listed in the appeal as “traitors to and enemies of the king and kingdom” and accused of “high treasons committed by them against king and his kingdom”: “Alexander, archbishop of York, Robert de Vere, duke of Ireland, Michael de la Pole, earl of Suffolk, Robert Tresilian, false justice, and Nicholas Brembre, false knight of London.”⁷⁸ Of the thirty-nine articles listed in the appeal, 23 list all five accused, 17 of which list them in the order they are introduced – which is also the order presented in the title of the document – and presumably is either following a standard of social order, or designed to imply relative guilt. Deviations from this standard, then, present instances for intentionally singling out specific actors.

In addition to the 23 articles which list all five men, 10 more list just the first three, again using the default listing of York, followed by De Vere and then Suffolk, which is found in 6 of the 10. These three are clearly depicted as the leadership or backing of the group, with Tresilian and Brembre as a secondary tier of actors. Of the remaining articles, three depict the primary three as well as Brembre, excluding Tresilian from the article. Interestingly, two of these three, along with one article which does include Tresilian, list Brembre as the first of the

⁷⁸ PROME Richard II, 1388 Feb.

accused, perhaps implying his leadership in those particular cases. One additional article singles out Brembre by himself. All of the accusations which center Brembre are associated with London; as he is also labeled a “false knight of London,” this would suggest Brembre may have been the key actor located in London.

Nine of the thirty-nine articles present de Vere as the leading actor. Eight of these place him first in a list and one singles him out exclusively. This is clearly more than any other deviation, assuming that York’s prominence as the leading name is due to a social standardization rather than intentional placement, and suggests that the accusers perceived him as a central or leading figure within the opposition to their goals and preferred socio-political structure.

The articles which lead with or center de Vere begin with more abstract accusations and end with direct reference to the events around Radcot Bridge. They will be discussed here in reverse order and in thematic groupings to examine both questions of access and of the intersection of gender and power. They will be examined in comparison to and in context with the Ordinances of 1311 and the reference to Alice Perrers made in the records of the ‘Good Parliament’.

The final article, number 39, singles out de Vere and is in direct reference to the forces de Vere gathered against the lords, lead by Gloucester, at Radcot Bridge. While the article does, in the same formulaic manner as the rest of the appeal, accuse de Vere of acting against king and kingdom, interestingly it first lists by name the leading lords he was acting against:

with the intent treacherously to destroy with all his power the said lords Thomas, duke of Gloucester, constable of England, Henry, earl of Derby, Richard, earl of Arundel and Surrey, Thomas, earl of Warwick and Thomas, earl Marshal, and other loyal lieges of our lord the king, to the detriment and ruin of our said lord the king and all his kingdom.⁷⁹

This article, appearing at the end of the appeal, reads as retribution against de Vere personally by those lords who were most endangered by his position and power. Several articles in the appeal makes the accusation of “accroaching royal power,” an accusation which likely was intended to trigger collective memories of Gaveston, the Despencers and other leading magnates from previous reigns. However, this final article accuses de Vere of going further by leading an army under the royal banner, stating that “he caused the king's banner to be displayed in his company, contrary to the estate of the king and his crown.”⁸⁰

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

While the Ordinances of 1311 do not specifically address any one incident or battle, they do address the rights of the king to make war. Ordinance 9 states that “hereafter the king shall not go out of his kingdom or undertake against anyone the act of war with the common assent of his baronage, and that in parliament.” In a veiled, but clearly direct, reference to Gaveston’s regency while Edward was in France in 1308, it continues to state that “And if it happens that the king undertakes the act of war against anyone or goes out of the land with the assent of this baronage and needs to appoint a guardian in his kingdom, then he shall appoint him with the common assent of his baronage, and that in parliament.”⁸¹ This seems to reflect concerns both of poor leadership and of overreach or power grabbing by those left in charge, a concern which is later reflected in reference to de Vere’s perceived abuses of power in Ireland, and could also harken back to Gaveston’s appointment of regent in 1308.

Other articles also use the phrase “accroaching royal power.” Article 22 clearly centers de Vere, while also including the others:

...the said Robert de Vere, duke of Ireland, on the advice and prompting of the said malefactors and traitors, the aforesaid Alexander, archbishop of York [etc.]⁸²...accroaching to himself royal power, without commission of the king or other customary and sufficient warrant, made himself justice of Chester...and he also caused divers original and judicial writs to be made and sealed with the king’s great seal used in such parts.⁸³

Article 23 accuses all five of “accroaching to themselves royal power, caused to be freed John of Blois, heir of Brittany, who was a prisoner and the treasure of our said lord the king and his kingdom, without the assent of parliament and of the great council of the king.”⁸⁴ These articles accuse de Vere and his associates of commandeering a different element of royal power, in this case judicial power and the rendering of punishment. Article 23 also brings into discussion the second question of balance of power – not just where the accused were accroaching on royal power, but where they were coopting parliamentary power or the power of the other lords. In this sense, they are not just being accused of taking royal power, but also of committing monarchical overreach with that stolen royal power. In a similar manner to the way in which Article 23 discusses the relationship between England and Brittany, Article 8 addresses other shifts in diplomacy: “[the five] have arranged for various inadequate and unsuitable persons to have the keeping and governance of various lordships, castles and lands of war, in Guyenne

⁸¹ ‘Ordinances’, n. 9.

⁸² This format will be used in places where all five principles are included in the article.

⁸³ Article n. 22.

⁸⁴ Articles n. 23.

and elsewhere, on either side of the sea...as also in the marches of Scotland.”⁸⁵ After decades of warfare both on the continent and with Scotland, these accusations are clearly designed to suggest that de Vere and the other appellees are actively working against the good of the greater realm, and of the power of the king.

Similar concerns about loss of land and English power overseas can be found in the Ordinances of 1311 as well, in regard to the actions of Edward II. The introduction states that

through evil and deceptive counsel our lord the king and all his subjects are dishonoured in all lands and in addition the crown is in many respects reduced and dismembered, and his lands of Gascony, Ireland and Scotland on the point of being lost if God does not give improvement.⁸⁶

Ordinance 16 directly links this potential loss of land with the poor counsel around the king: “because the lands of Gascony, Ireland and Scotland are in danger of being lost for want of good officers, we ordain that good and sufficient officers to keep guard in the said lands be appointed in the way contained in the [other articles].”⁸⁷ Concerns of loss of land and military might were even more pressing during Edward II’s reign, particularly in comparison to his father’s reign. The legacy of the losses of Edward II’s reign likely were still felt during Richard II’s reign.

One interesting concern in the Ordinances which is not found in the articles of appeal is a concern over the origin of the king’s favorites and ministers: ordinance number 4 states that “it is ordained that the customs of the kingdom be kept and received by the people of the kingdom itself and *not by aliens*.”⁸⁸ The obvious reason for this inclusion in 1311 is Gaveston’s origins in Gascony, while de Vere and the other appellees were all of English birth. Though Gascony was held by England at the time, Piers’ Gascon origins created just enough ‘otherness’ to implicate Piers without also implicating Edward himself.

Article 11 is particularly incredible in its accusation of diplomatic overreach, in this case discussing de Vere’s appointment in Ireland: that de Vere, York and Suffolk

by the said accroachment have caused and advised our said lord the king, so far as he is able, to grant, assent and wholly agree that Robert de Vere, duke of Ireland, should be made king of the said land of Ireland...the aforesaid traitors have counselled and incited our lord the king to send his letters to our holy father the pope to grant, ratify and confirm their treacherous intent, without the knowledge or assent of his kingdom of England and the said land of Ireland, to the severance of the allegiance of the king from the said kingdom of England and the said land of Ireland, to the detriment of the honourable name of the king our aforesaid lord, and the open disinheritation of his

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ ‘Ordinances’.

⁸⁷ ‘Ordinances’, n. 16.

⁸⁸ ‘Ordinances,’ n. 4 [my emphasis].

crown of the kingdom of England, and the entire destruction of the loyal lieges of the king our said lord and of his said land of Ireland.⁸⁹

There are parallels here to the accusations made directly against Gaveston in Ordinance 20 which accuses him of “drawing to himself royal power and royal dignity, as in making alliances on oath with people to live and die with him against all men.”⁹⁰ Article 11, in particular, has been discussed by several scholars in various editions of the chronicles which relate the articles. G. H. Martin notes in his edition of *Knighton’s Chronicle* that “there is no evidence that Richard intended to cede suzerainty in Ireland to de Vere, but some that de Vere had planned to exercise authority there in person. The Anglo-Irish sought Richard’s own presence in 1385, and he probably regarded de Vere as an acceptable substitute.”⁹¹ Even accepting that it is possible some of the accusers may have truly been concerned that Richard was ceding some amount of his power in Ireland to de Vere, the implication that de Vere was looking for the title of king is surely meant to suggest the danger of his potential overreach and personal power. Combined with the accusations of the losses in the French possessions and Scotland, these articles are clearly painting the picture of a weakening English dominion under the leadership of de Vere and his associates.

A related but subtly different group of articles accuse the appellees of manipulating Richard II into various actions which benefit them over the wider kingdom. These include article 38, which relates to the outcome of Radcot Bridge, and states that they had

caused the king by his letters to notify the said duke of Ireland that he and others had been accused of treason...and it was also contained in the letters of the king that if the said duke had sufficient power he should not delay to set out with all his said power and come to the king.⁹²

This suggests that the loyalty of Richard was to de Vere and his associates over what is presented as just legal action, even though the king was seemingly cooperating with the accusers in putting their case before parliament. Article 5 states that the appellees “have ensured that our lord the king, *without the assent of the realm*, or their desert, has given them, *at their instigation*, various lordships, castles, towns and manors, both those annexed to his crown and others.”⁹³ There are two key pieces here – the first that the appellees are able to control the king’s actions, in one way or another, and the second that the realm – presumably

⁸⁹ Article n. 11.

⁹⁰ ‘Ordinances’, n. 20.

⁹¹ *Knighton*, p. 467 n. 2.; *Westminster*, p. 248 n. 1.

⁹² Article n. 38.

⁹³ Article n. 5 [my emphasis].

referring to parliament, or some part thereof – should have a say in the distribution of wealth. There is a striking similarity in this statement to the advice given by Edward I to his son, Edward II not to recall Gaveston *sin commune favore*; each presents a clear understanding, from Edward I at the beginning of the century and the Appellants at the end of it, that the ‘realm’ – in both of these cases presumably meaning the leading magnates – needs to assent to major decisions surrounding these royal favorites, and this understanding has not shifted by the end of the century. The ongoing tension regarding the balance of monarchical and magnate/parliamentary power appears as one thread of the accusations, and one of the methods by which the appellees are acting unjustly. Similarly, article 7 discusses gifts of money and other valuables

both from [the king’s] own goods and jewels and from the goods and treasures of the realm, as well as from tenths and fifteenths and other taxes granted in various parliaments for the defence and safeguard of the realm and otherwise...to the said Robert Vere, duke of Ireland, as various others. And further, they have hindered many good ordinances and plans made and ordained in parliament, both for the wars and the defence of the realm, to the great injury of the king and kingdom.⁹⁴

This article not only accuses the appellees of greed and manipulation of the king, but also of stealing from the realm, and of undermining its defense. While it is addressed to all the appellees except Tresilian, de Vere is intentionally singled out in relation to the excesses of monetary gifts. Excessive financial generosity and the depletion of the king’s estates were also a primary concern in the Ordinances, although they seem to reflect a more pressing concern that the financial abuses of the favorites and disregard by the king had progressed further, noting the current state of the king’s debt: Ordinance 3 states that “to pay off the king’s debts and restore his estate and the more honorably maintain it...no gift of land or rent or liberty or escheat or wardship or marriage or bailiwick be made to any of the said ordainers during their power.”⁹⁵ There is also clearly displayed here a recognition of the potential for similar abuses of power by the Ordainers, and a need to preemptively prevent further problems. The concerns over financial abuses and the situations abroad come together in Ordinance 7, which states “that all gifts, made to the king’s detriment and the diminution of the crown since we were given our commission...as well as in Gascony, Ireland, Wales and Scotland as in England, be revoked... [and that] they be not given back to the same people without common assent in parliament.”⁹⁶ Again, this reference to the consent from parliament speaks to the shift in

⁹⁴ Article n. 7.

⁹⁵ ‘Ordinances,’ n. 3.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, n. 7.

balance between monarchical and common power and (at least in theory, on paper) an attempt to prevent further abuse. These concerns are addressed in direct relation to Gaveston in Ordinance 20, which states that he had “[taken] possession of for himself all the king’s treasure and [sent] it out of the kingdom” and “[taken] the king’s lands, tenements and bailiwicks to himself and his heirs; and has caused the king to give lands and tenements of his crown to divers people to the great loss and diminution of the estate of the king and of his crown.”⁹⁷

The reference to Alice Perrers during the ‘Good Parliament’ reflects similar concerns as those related here, stating that “some women have pursued various business and disputes in the king’s courts by way of *maintenance, bribing and influencing the parties*.”⁹⁸ In the case of Alice Perrers, the ‘parties’ referred to here most likely refer to either the king himself, or those he had instructed to aid her. It is interesting to the discussion of gendered power that the concerns about Alice appear in this area of manipulating or controlling the king, which certainly reinforce conceptualization of female power as ‘soft-power’ or influence-driven power.

The perceived control of the king is not limited to excessive financial generosity, lands and titles, but also extends to positioning and access to the physical person of the king. Article 24 states that the appellees “caused the king newly to create a large retinue of divers men, and give them divers badges such as were not customarily used in ancient times by any of the kings his predecessors, to the end of giving them power to perform their false treason aforesaid.”⁹⁹ This article links concerns of a dilution or replacement of the power and authority of those magnates who traditionally were closest to the king with a new group of men, not tied to the same traditions. Ordinance 20 accuses Gaveston of similar actions: that he had

acted badly towards and has badly advised our lord the king and has incited him to do wrong in divers and deceptive ways...[and had estranged] the heart of the king from his lieges; in despising their counsels, not allowing good officers to carry out the law of the land; in removing good officers, appointing those of his own gang, as well aliens as others, who at his will and command offend against the right and the law of the land.¹⁰⁰

This accusation displays the power of physical access to the monarch in layered concerns: Gaveston’s personal control over access to the king, resulting in an impediment to the workings of the realm, and the promotion of foreigners to coveted roles within the royal administration.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, n. 20.

⁹⁸ PROME Edward III, 1376 April n. 46 [my emphasis].

⁹⁹ Article n. 24.

¹⁰⁰ ‘Ordinances’, n. 20.

These display an interesting struggle at the center of the socio-politics of this period: pushes for increased parliamentary power created fear and pushback from the traditional holders of this power – though de Vere was a member of the nobility, unlike Gaveston and the other favorites of this study – he and his allies were similarly caught in the middle, perceived on one hand as upstarts aiding in replacing the right to power, and on the other as taking advantage of the old system for themselves.

Concerns over potential uprisings or unrest as a result of abuses of power are explicit throughout the Ordinances, much more so that in the articles of appeal, where these concerns are woven more subtly through the articles. This is interesting as the decades preceding the ‘Merciless Parliament’ had displayed exactly how dangerous popular uprisings could be. The introduction to the Ordinances includes references to these concerns, stating that England is “on the point of rebelling because of oppressions, prises and molestations and these things being known and shown.”¹⁰¹ Ordinance 10 notes that “it is to be feared that the people of the land will rise on account of the prises and divers oppressions inflicted before this time.” In order to prevent these potential uprisings, the Ordinances suggest several times a return to “ancient customs and in accordance with what they used to do” and that “all prises shall cease from now on saving to the king and to others to whom they are due of right the ancient, rightful and due prises.”¹⁰²

It was not simply a matter of adding new members to the royal retinue that concerned the lords appellant, however. Article 3 states that the appellees “did not allow the great men of the realm, nor the good counsellors of the king, to speak with nor approach the king, properly to counsel him, nor the king to speak with them except in the presence and hearing of the said Robert de Vere, Michael de la Pole, earl of Suffolk, and Alexander archbishop of York.” While York and Suffolk are included, once again, de Vere is intentionally listed as first, suggesting he was the primary concern. The Ordinances also focus on the problem of bad counsellors around the king, noting that “we ordain that all the evil counsellors be ejected and dismissed altogether, so that neither they nor others like them shall be near him any more, or retained in the king’s service, and that other suitable people be put in their place.”¹⁰³ The next ordinance continues:

many evils have happened owing to such counsellors and such officers, we ordain that the king choose...with the counsel and the assent of his baronage, and that in parliament; and if it happens by any chance that any of the said officers must be

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, nn. 10, 11.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, n. 13.

appointed before there is a parliament, then the king appoint thereto with the good counsel that he has near him until the parliament.¹⁰⁴

The physical control of the king and access to him speaks not only to the perceived rigidity of authority and access within the court, but also, mirroring discussions of the relationship between Edward II and Gaveston, suggests a lack of authority on the part of Richard himself. This is further alluded to in the first two articles, which, rather than focusing on the specific wrongdoings of the appellees, establishes the state of king and court which allowed for their rise. Article 1 states that they

...perceiving the tender age of our said lord the king and the innocence of his royal person, so caused him to believe many falsities devised and plotted by them against loyalty and good faith, that they caused him to devote his affection, firm faith, and credence entirely to them, and to hate his loyal lords and lieges, by whom he ought rather to have been governed. And also, accroaching to themselves royal power, in disenfranchising our said lord the king of sovereignty, impairing and diminishing his royal prerogative and regality, *they caused him to obey them to such an extent that he was sworn to be governed, counselled, and led by them, by virtue of which oath they held him so long in obedience* to their false theories, schemes and deeds, that the troubles, inconveniences, misfortunes, and destruction contained in the following articles arose.¹⁰⁵

Article 2 doubles down on this accusation of an oath made by the king, stating that:

...whereas the king is bound not to swear an oath to any of his lieges except on the day of his coronation, or for the common profit of himself and his kingdom, the aforesaid...false traitors to and enemies of the king and kindom, made him swear and assure them that he would maintain and sustain them to live and die with them. And whereas the king ought to be freer than any other in the realm, *they have enslaved him instead, against his honor, estate, and regality, and contrary to their allegiance, as traitors to him.*¹⁰⁶

Once again, these articles seem placed to ensure that the blame for the following misdeeds fall squarely at the feet – or, on the necks – of the appellees, leaving the king blameless, if appearing weak-willed and a poor leader.

Amanda McVitty's work on treason and masculinity chooses the years 1386-8 as a case study for better understanding how the ongoing battles between the king and magnates over the balance of power intersected with perceptions of the king's masculinity.¹⁰⁷ It is evident the events of the 1320s were never far from the minds of those in the 1380s, and McVitty's study

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 14.

¹⁰⁵ Article n. 1 [my emphasis].

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, n. 2 [my emphasis].

¹⁰⁷ McVitty, *Treason*, pp. 21-50.

makes clear that one lesson learned from those events was the power of accusations of treason on both sides. Isabella and Edward III's coup had proven that the argument of 'bad counselors' and of protecting the king from those around him could be powerful and compelling. McVitty notes that there were "cultural understandings of treason as a violation of masculine bonds, and of the homosocial personal and political ties through which royal government functioned."¹⁰⁸ Critically, not all homosocial bonds functioned equally in this context: only those that were socially acceptable were included; inappropriate bonds could be labelled as treasonous. Again, McVitty: "homosocial affinity could become a threat if the noblemen who considered themselves the king's 'natural counsellors' found themselves excluded from political influence and the rewards of royal service."¹⁰⁹ Both the reigns of Edward and Richard II reflect the results of this threat. Both the Ordinances and the Articles frame their accusations within this "destruction of positive masculine bonds and the forging, through false and devious means, of destructive ones."¹¹⁰ Taking this differentiation of positive – or natural – and negative – or unnatural – homosocial bonds even one step further, the suggestion of sodomy is an easy accusation to make. While the relationship of Richard and de Vere is rarely suggested to have been sexual, the line between unnatural homosociality and a homosexual relationship seems a very thin, easily blurred one in the sources.

The concerns over the privileged roles, and therefore the power of their positions they held, of de Vere, Gaveston, and, to a lesser extent, Alice Perrers, are made eminently visible in the contemporary legislation of the time, which is designed to actively limit the authority of these favorites. Perhaps the concerns are best summed up by Ordinance 20, which stated that Gaveston "feloniously, falsely and traitorously has done the aforesaid things to the great dishonour and loss of the king and disinheriting of the crown and to the ruin of his people in many ways."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹¹¹ 'Ordinances', n. 20.

Conclusions: Cycles of Usurpation

This thesis has as its central study the examination of the intersection of gender, power and the politics of access in the fourteenth century. By combining historical sources and research with more recent discussions in social theory, it has developed more nuanced analyses of these topics, and concludes that while gender was certainly a key factor in the experiences of medieval individuals, many of the dangers and punishments for the transgression of the norms of gendered power were not solely gender dependent, but instead were the result of a complex and nuanced interplay of various factors. The social and political instability of the fourteenth century is an ideal time period for this study because this instability created the opportunity for shifts in power dynamics which may not have appeared in less fraught times.

This study has used a comparative methodology to isolate the different elements of the lives and careers of the case studies in order to more fully understand how each different element affected the trajectory of these careers and the structure of late-medieval court and society more broadly. In order to clarify patterns found across the two sections and form some broader conclusions, I will now use a thematic approach to bring together the various case studies from the previous chapters.

To begin with, I will address the themes which have formed the theoretical framework of this thesis, before examining some related themes which have hopefully emerged as connecting strands throughout the chapters. At the center of this analysis has been the discussion of gender generally, and more specifically, a contextualized analysis of masculinity, femininity, and gendered roles and norms in fourteenth-century England. Some of the case studies in this project, broadly speaking, conformed to contextual gender norms: these include Roger Mortimer, Edward III, Katherine Swynford and Robert de Vere. One caveat to the inclusion of Edward III in this list is the perception that during the final years of his life he was under the influence of Alice Perrers, which undermined both his masculinity and his kingship. However, I argue that these final years do not entirely invalidate his decades long reputation as a military leader and his successful marriage to Philippa, leaving intact his overall reputation. In comparison, Edward II, Isabella of France, Alice Perrers and Richard II all failed to conform to the normative expectations for their gender and social positions. Within these examples, several patterns emerge regarding the accusations commonly made about them in the sources. In the cases of Edward and Richard, both suffered from the interconnected failures of their masculinity and kingship, and both sets of failures stemmed from the relationships they maintained with their close favorites. They are each accused of a failure of leadership which is

tied to poor counsel. The accusations of inappropriately intense emotional relationships with other men extend beyond contextually appropriate understandings of homosociality and result in the implication of homosexuality. The combination of being controlled by poor councilors and possible homosexual relationships can be taken one step further to accuse each of taking passive, or 'female' roles in these relationships. It is possible that the implication of sodomy, particularly in the case of Richard where it is entirely unsubstantiated, is a narrative device used to highlight these failures of masculinity and leadership.

On the other side of this coin are Isabella and Alice Perrers, who are accused of transgressing their gender and taking on masculine roles. In doing so, not only do they harm their own femininity, but they also endanger the masculinity of their partners. It is unclear whether Isabella's relationship with Roger Mortimer was actually adulterous – it is certainly possible and the sources collectively imply so. However, it is equally possible that this accusation was once again a common narrative device used against transgressive women of many types. The accusations of witchcraft made against Alice are similarly female-coded. Magic in general was often associated with women as it was a form of power which did not come from physical strength or traditional power structures. Its very existence was transgressive, and so naturally it would be wielded by those whose power was similarly transgressive. That an accusation of 'bewitching' Edward II is also listed against Piers Gaveston is interesting in this gendered context. As noted above, most gendered analyses of this relationship place the older Gaveston in the traditionally 'masculine' role and accuse him of leading the younger Edward astray. Accusing Gaveston of a feminine-coded crime, then, does not fit this pattern. That said, it may be that Gaveston's foreignness and lower social status made an accusation of sorcery reasonable, as it would explain his ability to reach so far above his 'natural' place.

Beyond a study of medieval gender and gender norms, this thesis has also considered these case studies from a de-gendered perspective. In particular, I have used a de-gendered framework to explore medieval conceptions of power. Discussions of power often fall into a gendered-coded series of terminologies, with 'power' or 'hard power' often denoting masculinized forms of power, and 'soft power' or 'influence' denoting feminized forms of power. In addition, there are the concepts of autonomy and of agency, which has been defined here, following Earenflight, as the ability to take action which affects one's own destiny. By de-gendering this terminology, and including other terminology, this study has been able to tease apart the complex socio-political interplay of this period. On one hand, discussions of 'potential power' afford power to all four 'favorites' featured in part II during their periods of

exile, or when legal action is taken against them, by recognizing that the fear of future action implies in itself the possibility of undertaking that action. ‘Dynastic power’ similarly suggests the power of parenthood, especially motherhood, which is afforded to Katherine Swynford, particularly after the legitimization of her children, and to Isabella during the minority of Edward III. Alice Perrers, however, is an example of the potential limits of this form of power, as evidenced by the divorce of her son. In comparison, the depositions of Edward II and Richard II are evidence that so-called ‘hard power’ – of which monarchical power of the king would presumably be the most ‘hard’ – is not necessarily as secure as it would first appear to be. The push-and-pull between monarchical and parliamentary power bases in this period probes the limits of each form of power.

Of the titular frameworks for this thesis, the final one is the conception of the power and politics of access. In a medieval framework, this initially seems like an obvious discussion since the lack of technology in the pre-modern world meant that ‘access’ denotes physical access. And while this is primarily true, this thesis demonstrates that the complexities of this access are more nuanced than they first appear. The trajectory of the reigns of all three of the kings included in this study proves that access to the body and mind of the king was essential for social and economic growth at the highest level. Gaveston’s first exile during the reign of Edward I makes evident that there was already concern over his level of access to and influence over the then prince Edward. Whether or not Isabella herself complained to her father about her access to her husband, there was certainly discussion of it on both sides of the channel. In this case, these concerns stemmed not just from access to decision making or gifts, but from the necessity of physical access to the king in order to provide heirs to the dynasty. The violent hatred of Gaveston, Despenser and de Vere are all evidence of the perceived danger of those who were too close to the king, and the rumors that swirled around both Edward II and Richard II suggest that this was understood as a problem, and not one that could be overlooked. Isabella’s refusal to return to England in 1325 demonstrated that she held power by refusing access to herself and to her son and heir. Between 1337-1330, it was through the restriction of access to Edward III that Isabella and Mortimer were able to take de-facto rule of England, despite the existence of a ruling council. Several of these cases also demonstrate the differentiation between private and public access. The repeated references to beds and bedrooms in the discussions of Edward II and Gaveston, Isabella and Mortimer, and Edward III and Alice all suggest that maintaining access and proximity to the king was not enough; the ultimate access was to the private, intimate person of royalty. Each of Gaveston, Mortimer and

Alice's supposed access to the bed of a royal took politics out of the public sphere and into not just private, but transgressive, inappropriate private space.

An early outline for this project had the title 'The intersection of gender, power and sexual immorality'. The choice to replace 'sexual immorality' with 'politics of access' for the theoretical framework has meant that the analysis has been expanded to include a broader scope of relationships. In particular, the inclusion of the minority of Edward III is better framed by this shift as it was, uniquely in this study, a period where sexual transgression was not at the focus of the conflict, though even then it was still a factor. That said, conceptions of sexual morality and immorality remain an important feature of this analysis as they relate to all the case studies examined. Arguably, there are two main types of sexual immorality which feature throughout this study, sometimes in overlap: adultery and homosexual activity.

In this study, questions of adultery can be traced back to 1314 and the so-called 'Tour de Nesle' affair, as mentioned in chapter II. Even taking as credible the lack of evidence against Isabella for any involvement in the affair, inevitably the fates of her sisters-in-law – and the later collapse of the Capetian dynasty, which can convincingly be traced back to the affairs – would have made their mark on Isabella's mentality towards adultery. I continue to argue that this is a major argument against a sexual element in Isabella and Mortimer's relationship: she had seen the results of the adulterous actions of women who had married into a royal family and it is incredibly unlikely that she would not have perceived the parallels within her own situation. That most of the sources – contemporary and modern – continue to insist on a sexual element without hard evidence reinforces the idea that many scholars are unable to conceive of a platonic heterosexual relationship. It also reinforces the argument that adultery may have been a rote accusation made against women who were acting outside of their 'proper' gender roles. The boundaries of Edward III and Alice Perrers' relationship are somewhat unclear; however, for most of their relationship she was treated as an unmarried woman. This does not mean that their relationship was considered sexually moral – either way, they were not married to one another – but it is unclear whether or not she was married for any part of the affair. John of Gaunt's relationship with Katherine was clearly adulterous on his side; their relationship extended beyond his second marriage to Constance of Castile on both ends. Interestingly, the important question seems to be whether or not either was married when the affair began; much of this concern certainly relates to questions of parentage and legitimacy of Katherine's children, both with Hugh Swynford and Gaunt. As discussed in chapter III, Katherine's unusual transition to wife after Constance's death means that the discussion of this adultery is framed differently than other cases, serving as a precursor to a morally, if not socially, appropriate later

relationship. The final case of adultery relevant to this study is that of de Vere, when he divorced his first wife for his second. Here, the reaction was far less concerned with the possibility of de Vere's affair than it was with the insult to Philippa and the royal family. Presumably, had the relationship remained adulterous and de Vere remained married, the reaction would have been far more tempered. Tracing these [potentially] adulterous relationships across the century, a clear pattern emerges that, unsurprisingly, it was female sexual immorality which was concerning to most contemporary commentators. The reason for this is clear: it was the sexual morality of women which maintained the legitimacy of family bloodlines. Female adultery brought with it the possibility of questionable paternity, which undermined the patriarchal systems of descent. Additionally, the medieval conceptions of masculinity explored in the project are bound up in the ability to maintain control over those around an individual. Female adultery, especially of a wife, suggested a lack of control over one's family, undermining this particular conception of masculinity.

There is no unrefutable evidence of any of the homosexual relationships – or even homosexual activity – in this study. This is, in itself, evidence of one of the main difficulties of studies of queer history in the pre-modern world: without firsthand evidence, it is almost impossible to prove queer sexual activity, much less find 'queerness' or queer identities in those who would not have conceptualized their experiences in this way. As this study has shown, this is further complicated in a medieval context by the very thin, blurred line that can exist between acceptable homosociality, unacceptable homosociality and homosexuality. Without evidence of sexual activity, the difference between these three is a matter of degrees. It both is and is not coincidence that there is no discussion of possible female homosexuality in this study. It is coincidence in that none of the female case studies chosen had been accused of this particular form of sexual immorality. However, it is also not coincidence as there are far fewer instances of accusations – or even discussions – of female homosexuality in the medieval period in general.¹ This inevitably stems from a patriarchal understanding of sexual activity which is defined by penetration, and therefore cannot be performed between two women. While this is both an incredibly reductive and incorrect conception, it is not shocking that the primarily clerical authors of the fourteenth century did not often consider female sexuality.

As has been mentioned several times, in the end it does not matter to the analysis in this study whether or not the relationships featured here were actually homosexual in nature –

¹ For more on the topic of female homosexuality in this period, see: Ruth Karras, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages: Doing Unto Others* (3rd ed., London, 2017).

the importance here is that they were perceived and depicted as such. The relationship between Edward II and Gaveston and, to a much lesser extent, Richard II and de Vere were depicted as homosexual because they each combined a series of elements which were perceived as transgressive and undermining of the masculinity of each king and, in context, these elements read as homosexual. Both relationships featured an emotional attachment perceived as beyond that of even appropriate levels of homosociality, and which included a particularly intense desire for physical proximity and intimacy. In the case of Richard II, this desire did not abate even with the death of de Vere. In addition to the emotional and physical attachments was the perception that both kings were being led by the desires of their favorites. As was mentioned above, medieval conceptions of masculinity and kingship included clear understanding of the dynamics of control: proper men, and particularly proper kings, should be in control of those around them, not controlled by them. In both cases, but particularly in Richard's case, his failure to control those around him is most often depicted as weakness of character and kingship – as a failure of his masculinity. The combination of this failure of masculinity and the intensity of the emotional attachments led to the conclusion in some sources of the so-called 'unspeakable sin'. It is incredibly important to explicitly recognize that these depictions of homosexual relationship rest on a misogynistic and patriarchal conception of homosexuality and queerness resulting from a failure of proper masculinity. This is not to say that it is impossible for these relationships to have been homosexual in nature – to the contrary I would argue that there is a convincing argument that the relationship of Edward II and Gaveston, at least, was – but the medieval era accusations do not stem from the same understandings as modern queer scholarship.

Ultimately, each of these different strands can be reduced to questions of boundaries: physical, emotional or sociological. If these boundaries had been properly observed, they would have maintained the normative status of each of the case studies examined. Instead, each of these studies is an example of boundaries having been breached and, in most cases, usurped. In chapter II there was a discussion of the interpretation of power as 'zero sum'; that is, for one to gain power, someone else must lose it. It is this interpretation which caused the breach of boundaries to be understood as the usurpation of position. These cases can be tied together as follows: As early as 1305, Piers Gaveston was perceived to be crossing proper class (and potentially gender) boundaries, and usurping the positions of more deserving magnates in Edward II's inner circle; in 1308, he was once again crossing boundaries, this time emotional and physical, and perceived to be usurping Isabella's position, either physically in Edward's bed or as his closest physical and emotional companion. In 1325, Isabella's relationship with

Mortimer was regarded as usurping Edward's position, either as a sexual partner or as political one. The coup which followed physically and politically usurped Edward II and replaced him with Edward III; Isabella then politically usurped her son and/or his council during his regency. During this period, she was also perceived to be crossing gender boundaries by taking on the role of ruler, rather than consort. As noted above, up to this point, each of the case studies mentioned had usurped Edward II's roles in one form or another, leading to his reputation of both failed masculinity and kingship. By 1330, Edward III takes his position as king, technically usurping no one, but the necessity for a coup and the execution of Mortimer makes it clear that in taking back his power, he did usurp the positions of Isabella and Mortimer. Philippa's coronation – once again, taking her intended role – usurped Isabella's established and prolonged position as queen, relegating her to the position of queen mother. Even though Edward III and Philippa's reign from 1330 began with the usurpation of the former generation, rather than crossing boundaries, this reestablished proper social and political boundaries. From the perspective of boundaries, the reign of Edward III and Philippa was far more stable than Edward II's and it was not until the death of Philippa that these issues reemerged. As has been discussed above, Alice Perrers' relationship and position at the court of Edward III after the death of Philippa has been described as an 'uncrowned queen' which clearly references the crossing of these socio-political boundaries and the usurping of a position. While she was not directly usurping Philippa, in theory she was usurping the potential second wife of Edward III, and she was also usurping those magnates who may have been pushed out of Edward's inner circle due to her presence. Similarly, Katherine Swynford crossed moral and social boundaries, usurping the position of Constance of Castile during Constance's marriage to John of Gaunt, and then crossed class boundaries again during her own marriage, as well as potentially usurping a theoretical different third wife. Once again, Robert de Vere is the least obvious of the case studies analyzed here: he was not known to have crossed gender or class boundaries, and he was within his proscribed socio-political position. However, his relationship did cross acceptable emotional boundaries and, potentially, physical and sexual ones. His position usurped only other magnates. This may be the reason for the rumors that he was going to be given the kingship of Ireland: this was a clear crossing of acceptable political boundaries, and the usurpation of an unacceptable level of power. The nuance of de Vere's situation is likely why the accusations of treason against him were less clear than in other situations; the generalized 'accroaching royal power' was used to encompass these less clear accusations. Finally, de Vere's divorce and remarriage crossed class and moral boundaries, and Agnes' position usurped that of Philippa de Coucy, clearly offending her extended family.

Another boundary that has been briefly discussed in this thesis is that of foreignness. Conceptions of foreignness and belonging line up neatly with ideas of proper and improper access: who or what type of person should be allowed into spaces of power. One clear example of this that has been mentioned, but not been fully explored, in this thesis is the comparison of Piers Gaveston and Hugh Despenser. On one hand, Gaveston's rise was noted in the sources as being that much more galling due to his foreign status. However, during Despenser's later rise to power, he was perceived as even more dangerous to the other magnates because his Englishness meant that he had more of a right to be present. Similarly, de Vere's Englishness made it harder to eliminate him from the areas of power. This same accusation of foreignness was used against Katherine, even though Gaunt's second wife was also foreign. Indeed, exogamous marriage was particularly common within the royal family for the purpose of political diplomacy. In the case of Isabella, her other transgressions and ongoing tensions with France meant that her foreignness was both a useful tool and an accusation used against her. In the case of Philippa of Hainault, her foreignness was essential to the invasion of England, but even so, was held against her in some of the sources due to the influx of others from Hainault who travelled with her, and in the years following her marriage, including Katherine Swynford.

One final pattern which can be observed in this thesis is the cyclical nature of some of these issues. It has already been noted that, for instance, kingship cycled through periods of strength and weakness, either by reign or, in the case of Edward III's long reign, throughout his life. Certainly, it is evident in the sources that contemporary politicians and chroniclers were very aware of the events and mistakes of the generation before them and, for instance, the legacy of the 1320s can be seen in both the 1360s and the 1380s. These cycles also seem to contain an awareness of generational hypocrisy: if Isabella and Mortimer were indeed involved in a sexual relationship, the fates of her sisters-in-law in 1314 can never have been far from her mind. If, though seemingly unlikely, she was involved in their arrests and then went on to have her own affair, there would be blatant level of hypocrisy to her actions which would have had no clear explanation. To a lesser degree, several chronicles note the hypocrisy of John of Gaunt presiding over the proceedings against Alice Perrers while continuing with his own affair with Katherine Swynford. There are even indications in some of the chronicles that he was both aware and uncomfortable with this hypocrisy. Richard's actions and fate clearly parallel the reign of his grandfather, and Richard himself saw Edward as a martyr and pressed for his sainthood, so likely would have encouraged these parallels. These parallels are likely one of the reasons why Richard and de Vere's relationship resulted in rumors of a sexual

nature, even though there was much less evidence to support it than there was with Gaveston. While some of these cycles may be evident only in hindsight and to the scholar looking for patterns, it is clear that there were certain fears and conflicts which emerged generationally throughout the fourteenth century, as new political theory and structures emerged.

This thesis has used a comparative methodology to examine a series of case studies across the fourteenth century within the theoretical framework of the intersection of gender, power and the politics of access. The first section, 'Gender and Rulership', firstly examines medieval conceptions of masculinity and rulership through a comparison of Edward II and Roger Mortimer, and then integrates conceptions of femininity and queenship into this narrative through the inclusion of the woman they had in common, Isabella of France. The second section, 'Royal Favorites', then analyzes these theoretical strands by examining the phenomenon of contextually inappropriate 'favorites,' and the social and political fallout of their careers. These case studies include Piers Gaveston, favorite and possible sexual partner of Edward II; Alice Perrers, favorite and sexual partner of Edward III; Katherine Swynford, sexual partner and later wife of John of Gaunt; and Robert de Vere, likely platonic favorite of Richard II. Finally, this conclusion has used the titular thematic threads, plus the addition of the themes of sexual immorality, boundaries and the cyclical nature of power to tie together these two sections and elucidate some patterns evident across the century.

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