

Early Modern Homophobia in *Edward II* and *The Life and Death of John Atherton*

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Abstract

Same-sex relationships, especially among males, have always been a controversial issue throughout history. The intolerance, fear, hatred of, or prejudice against homosexuality is called 'homophobia', which has long existed side by side with homosexuality. People who do not follow conventional gender norms usually experience discrimination and harassment by homophobic people. In England, towards the Early Modern Era, the intolerance of homosexual behaviour grew particularly among the aristocracy and the clergy for they were expected to set a good example to the society. Marlowe's *Edward II* and *The Life and Death of John Atherton*, the anonymous pamphlet about Lord Bishop of Waterford and Lismore are two literary works, which deal with male homosexuality and homophobia in Early Modern England. This article examines the specific homophobic behaviour towards male homosexuality with its real motives and outcomes in Early Modern England with a deeper look into these two works. It is seen that homophobia could even lead to violence, and those who were accused of sodomy and buggery, the terms that were used to refer same-sex relationships, were removed from power, imprisoned, and eventually sent to the gallows, as well.

Keywords: Homophobia, Sodomy, Early Modern England, Edward II, John Atherton

Edward II ve The Life and Death of John Atherton'da Erken Modern Dönem Homofobi

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Öz

Tarih boyunca, özellikle erkekler arasında yaşanan aynı cinsiyetten ilişkiler her zaman tartışmalı bir konu olmuştur. Nitekim eşcinselliğe karşı hoşgörüsüzlük, korku, nefret veya önyargı, 'homofobi' olarak adlandırılır. Geleneksel cinsiyet normlarına uymayan kişiler genellikle homofobik kişiler tarafından ayrımcılığa ve tacize uğrar. İngiltere'de, Erken Modern Çağ'a doğru, eşcinsel davranışa karşı olan hoşgörüsüzlük özellikle soylular ve din adamları arasında topluma iyi birer örnek olmaları beklendiğinden ötürü büyüdü. Marlowe'un *Edward II* adlı oyunu ile Waterford ve Lismore Piskoposu John Atherton'ın ölümünden sonra yazılmış olan *The Life and Death of John Atherton* adlı anonim risale, Erken Modern Dönem İngiltere'sinde erkek eşcinselliği ve homofobiyi ele alır. Bu çalışma, Erken Modern Dönem İngiltere'sinde özellikle erkek eşcinselliğini hedef alan homofobiyi, altında yatan nedenlerin ve doğurduğu sonuçların tespit edilebilmesi amacıyla bahsi geçen bu iki eseri detaylı bir biçimde incelemektedir. Sonuç olarak görülmektedir ki homofobi şiddete de yol açabilmiş ve eşcinsellikle suçlananlar tahtından indirilmiş, hapsedilmiş ve nihayetinde darağacına bile gönderilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Homofobi, Oğlancılık, Erken Modern İngiltere, Edward II, John Atherton

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INTRODUCTION

Homosexuality has always been a controversial issue and it has been accompanied by homophobia both as a response and a reaction to it. The intolerance, fear, hatred of, or prejudice against homosexuality is called homophobia, and although the term 'homophobia' is believed to be coined in the 1960s, homosexuality and homophobia have long existed side by side. Even today, people who do not follow conventional gender norms usually experience discrimination and harassment by homophobic people, which could sometimes lead to violence, as well.

The aversion to same sex relationship can be dated back to the appearance of homosexuality itself, but "the intolerance toward homosexual behaviour grew particularly in the Middle Ages, especially among the adherents of Christianity and Islam" (Andersen: E. T. 04.01.2021). Religious authorities and doctrines were strictly against same sex relationships, either between females or between males. Women were usually labelled as witches and burnt at the stakes, whereas men were accused of several other crimes such as treason and blasphemy before they were eventually executed. Furthermore, homophobia grew larger as the social status of homosexual people became higher. Especially the aristocracy and the clergy suffered from the greatest disapproval within societies in which the Church held power and authority during the Medieval and Early Modern Eras.

As it is known, the Church of England was a powerful and a privileged authority during the Early Modern Era, and there was a significant amount of intolerance of male homosexuality within the society. Homophobia in the Early Modern English society could be analysed with the help of literary works. To be more specific, examples of homophobic attitudes toward male homosexuality among upper class people, and the outcomes of these attitudes could be found in Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* (1594), and *The Life and Death of John Atherton* (1641), the anonymous pamphlet about Lord Bishop of Waterford and Lismore in the Church of Ireland. Both Edward II and John Atherton were imprisoned and executed due to their involvement notably in homosexuality, and several other crimes against nature which were laid on them.

Alan Bray notes that the term 'homosexual' did not exist until 1600s, and the equivalents to define the people involved in same sex relationships were sodomite and bugger (Bray, 1995: 13). Instead of the terms 'homosexual' and 'homosexuality', 'sodomy', and 'buggery' were the common words used to define same sex relationships in the Elizabethan England. The words 'sodomite' and 'sodomy' are derived from 'Sodom' referring to the Biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the two cities which were destroyed by God because of the people's depravity. The word 'buggery' was first used in the Buggery Act of 1533 under the reign of Henry VIII, in which same sex relationships were defined as felony. The Buggery Act was succeeded by the Sodomy Law in 1534. Buggery was a serious crime and the punishment was execution by hanging. Death penalty remained as the punishment of buggery in England and Wales until the enactment of the Offences against the Person Act in 1861. Yet, it remained to be a crime that was punished with imprisonment till the second half 20th Century.

Buggery was also considered to be a sin against nature, and therefore heresy. For instance, Hugh Despenser was executed because he was accused of being both a sodomite and a heretic. His genitals were cut off and burned in front of his eyes. England was Catholic during the reign of Edward II, and the religious views of the Era about homosexuality were not any different from the past or the following decades. Martti Nissinen notes that the Christian tradition has always condemned homosexuality, but it has also condemned heterosexuality because any kind of sensual temptation is forbidden in Christianity (Nissinen, 1998: 125). He argues that homosexuality itself is neither a moral nor an amoral condition. Because morality is a relative concept as it can differ

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from one culture to another culture; or even from one person to another person within the same society like naturality. He also states that gender identity is thought to be either male or female in most cultures including the modern Western culture (Nissinen, 1998: 12). Similarly, Bray notes that God created an order for the nature and human beings are expected to behave in accordance with this order (Bray, 1995: 23). Since men and women were created for each other, not for their own gender, they were supposed to act according to the reason of their creation and mate each other as a rule of nature. Therefore, the ones that did not comply with this custom were not welcomed and accepted by the society.

Linkinen states that the condemnatory approaches toward same-sex sexual acts and desire as sodomy, sin against nature, were always contextualised in relation to sin and unnaturality (Linkinen, 2015: 33). Both Judaism, Christianity, and Islam oppose and ban same sex relationships, and this proves that their existence has always been known. However, Nissinen notes that 'homosexuality' has gained a new attention and interest after it became a defined and classified category of human sexuality, especially after the Second World War (Nissinen, 1998: 1). The increasing number of public discussions about this matter proves this claim as homosexuality used to be considered a shameful sin which should be kept a secret; and as a consequence, people did not dare to talk about it. In England, the repeal of the sodomy law was a remarkable progress for the attitude towards same sex relationships. It is not easy to say that the attitude towards homosexuality today is quite different from the early stages because people still cannot express their sexual orientations frankly in public, but at least, homosexuality is not a crime anymore in most countries. It seems that people are not ready to accept a 'third gender' which is regarded 'queer' or 'unnatural'. But, then, it is impossible to define the term 'natural' precisely and the meaning of 'natural' may differ from one person to another which makes it impossible to judge 'naturality'.

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Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues the concept of "homosocial desire" between men and states that the word 'homosocial' is a new form of 'homosexual' that describes the social bond between people of the same gender (Sedgwick, 1985: 1). She uses 'desire' on purpose indicating that the relationship has an erotic potential, as well. However, the close relationship between them do not always have to be necessarily a sexual one, it can be a close friendship, too. Nissinen also talks about other more neutral terms such as 'homophilia', i.e. same-sex love, and 'homotropia', i.e. same-sex orientation (Nissinen, 1998: 16). But, these ones have never gained common use. The mythological story of Ganymede is also a reference for homosexual desires between men. According to the story, Ganymede is the most handsome men in Troy and Zeus falls in love with him. An eagle takes Ganymede to Mount Olympus by force and Zeus makes him his lover and the cupbearer to the gods. The name 'Ganymede' became a term which is used to symbolise the male homosexual love in literature. It is usually pejorative and refers to a male prostitute or a servant kept for sexual purposes as Bray has noted. Bray also argues that 'ganymede' was not as threatening as 'sodomite' or 'bugger' because it did not arouse heretical and sinful associations as the others did (Bray, 1995: 65). It is true that 'ganymede' remained an insulting word only, while the other two were used in the 'Buggery Act of 1533' to define a person who takes part in a same sex relationship. 'Sodomy' is still used to name the laws against homosexuality around the world. The term 'ganymede' was also used as a synonym for 'catamite' which means a boy who is the sexual partner of a man (Bray, 1994: 49). DiGangi has noted that it can also be interpreted as the royal favourite. In addition to meaning an erotically subservient male, a 'ganymede' could refer to a favourite servant of a king, which is most proximate to its mythological source (DiGangi, 1997: 106).

Marlowe's *Edward II*

King Edward II was probably the most notorious English king who was accused of having a same sex relationship and was executed for that. Edward was born in 1284, and his father was Edward I, i.e. the Hammer of the Scots, who brought Piers Gaveston, a knight from Gascony, to instruct and accompany his son. Gaveston was recorded to be one year older than young Edward, and they were first thought to be brothers to each other. Their friendship started to annoy his father which resulted in exiling Gaveston from the court. But when his father died, Edward called Gaveston back to the court to live with him. Edward became the King in 1307 and he married the 12-year-old Isabella of France in 1308 by whom he had two sons and two daughters. However, Queen Isabella was never happy with her husband's close friendship with Piers Gaveston for the King used to show more affection to his friend than his wife. Gaveston, eventually, was killed in 1312, but the King found another favourite, Hugh Despenser, who was also executed in 1326 immediately after Queen Isabella invaded England. Edward II was imprisoned and killed in 1327 leaving the throne to his 14-year-old son, Edward III.

The full title of Marlowe's play is *The Troublesome Reign and Lamentable Death of Edward the Second, King of England, with the Tragical Fall of Proud Mortimer*, which Mario DiGangi identifies as 'the tragedy of homosexuality' (DiGangi, 1997: 133). The play tells the story of King Edward II beginning from the death of Edward I and ending with Edward III's avenging his father's murder. The play was staged in 1593, five weeks after Marlowe's death, and although it tells about the events that took place in 1300s, it should be considered together with the Elizabethan concerns of same sex relationships.

Marlowe's play opens with Gaveston's speech upon reading Edward's letter. Edward invites him to 'share the kingdom' with his 'dearest friend' (Act I, Sc. I, 2) as his father is dead and the obstacle in front of their friendship has disappeared. Although Edward calls him a 'friend', Gaveston does not use the same word, instead he considers himself 'the favourite of a king' (Act I, Sc. I, 5). He calls Edward 'sweet prince', and likens himself to Leander² insomuch as he could swim from France to England in order for the king to take him in his arms and let him lie in his bosom. When he arrives at the court Edward welcomes him passionately and embraces Gaveston asking him to do the same:

K. Edw. What, *Gaveston!* Welcome! - kiss not my hand-
Embrace me, *Gaveston*, as I do thee.
Why should'st thou kneel? Know'st thou not who I am?
Thy friend, thy self, another *Gaveston!*

(Act I, Sc. I, 140-143)

It is seen that the king puts Gaveston on an equality with himself, so as to consider him his soul mate, and does not abstain from embracing his friend publicly. The physical intimacy of the king with a male in front of the other courtiers could be regarded as one of the incitives of the unrest among the courtiers.

Although the play takes place in the early 1300s, it was actually written for the Elizabethan audience, and as Alan Sinfield noted sodomy, and anything that threatens the court and the religious establishment, might be followed by torture and death during the reign of Elizabeth I. (Sinfield, 1998: 36). Because the sodomy law was re-enacted in 1563 after being repealed by Queen Mary, and gained more power. Sinfield also says that capital punishment should be

² The mythological character who swims every night to meet his lover Hero from one side of a channel to the other side until he drowns in the stormy sea.

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considered as another notable issue. He questions why death is made the measure of everything and why it became so desirable in Edward's case. (Sinfield, 1998: 37). Because Edward was the king and the king was supposed to be an ideal for the society. He had to leave the throne as his personal life was not private enough after Queen Isabella started to gain support in and out of England.

Bray argues that the Elizabethan 'sodomy' was different from today's idea of 'homosexuality' as it referred to an idea of debauchery³ rather than same sex relationships. In addition to being a sex crime, it was also a political and a religious crime (Bray, 1994: 41). Buggery was seen as a rebellion against the Church and the State. That is the reason why it received so much hatred and resulted in execution. Simon Shepherd states that Marlowe's texts can be seen as giving their own definitions, and perhaps questioning the values of sodomy (Shepherd, 1986: 199). Marlowe questions the attitude towards sodomy in his play, and he reveals this by means of the Elder Mortimer's speech to his nephew:

E. Mor. Thou seest by nature he is mild and calm,
And, seeing his mind so dotes on Gaveston,
Let him without controulment have his will.
The mightiest kings have had their minions:
Great Alexander loved Hephestion;
The conquering Hercules for Hylas wept;
And for Patroclus stern Achilles drooped
And not kings only, but the wisest men:
The Roman Tully loved Octavius;
Grave Socrates wild Alcibiades.
Then let his grace, whose youth is flexible,
And promiseth as much as we can wish,
Freely enjoy that vain light-headed earl;
For riper years will wean him from such toys.

(Act I, Sc. IV, 391-404)

The Elder Mortimer's speech actually shows that same sex relationships between men have existed throughout history and even the greatest kings were said to have had male lovers of their own. It can be argued that Marlowe himself was not against same sex relationships as he put this speech into his play. Perhaps he tried to justify Edward and Gaveston's relationship by referring to the legendary characters such as Great Alexander and Achilles. However, even if the same sex relationship could be accepted, the way Edward behaves and spends the money of the state could not be accepted at all.

According to DiGangi, the kings had their lovers not because they wanted to gratify their sensual desires, but because they always needed political allies (DiGangi, 1997: 109). Piers

³Archaic meaning: seduction from morality, virtue, or duty / Modern meaning: indulging too much in bodily pleasures.

Gaveston and the Spencers act as Edward's political supporters and they give advices to him. DiGangi also states that 'sodomy' could be understood as a politically transgressive relation between men besides a sexual act, and it takes place most damagingly between Edward and the peers, not between Edward and Gaveston (DiGangi, 1997: 108).

It was not only Edward's close relationship with Gaveston that aroused the oppositions against them. The peers begin to rebel against Gaveston, and thus Edward, only after Gaveston himself starts to gain more political power and the opportunity to control the king as he wants to. DiGangi questions what distinguishes a friend from a parasite as the favourites could become harmful to the sovereign's safety and status in time (DiGangi, 1997: 111). Gaveston becomes a rival in power even if it is not against the King but the other nobles are certainly disturbed by being rivalled by a person who is not of noble birth.

Edward wants Gaveston to marry his niece most probably to keep him near and to provide Gaveston a wife in order to stop the rumours about him and the King. Of course, this is not acceptable for the peers due to Gaveston's social status. Yet, the niece herself seems to be in love with Gaveston as she calls him 'my sweet Gaveston' (Act II, Sc. I, 59) when she receives a letter from him. Edward sees this marriage as a sign of his love, thus his power over Gaveston, and announces their wedding with this speech:

K. Edw. Cousin, this day shall be your marriage feast.
And, Gaveston, think that I love thee well,
To wed thee to our niece, the only heir
Unto the Earl of Gloucester late deceased.

(Act II, Sc. II, 253-256)

It is seen that the word 'love' is repeated throughout the play and the relationship between Edward and his favourites is usually identified as love. Simon Shepherd states that love is usually mentioned with treasure or reward and argues that Edward replaces Gaveston's role with Spencer and continues to practice his love and power relationship with him (Shepherd, 1986: 119-121). He provides Spencer with money and land in order to show his love towards him as can be seen in these lines:

K. Edw. Spencer, this love, this kindness to thy king,
Argues thy noble mind and disposition.
Spencer, I here create thee Earl of Wiltshire,
And daily will enrich thee with our favour,
That, as the sunshine, shall reflect o'er thee.
Beside, the more to manifest our love,
Because we hear Lord Bruce doth sell his land,
And that the Mortimers are in hand withal,
Thou shalt have crowns of us t'outbid the barons:
And, Spencer, spare them not, lay it on.
Soldiers, a largess, and thrice welcome all!

(Act III, Sc. II, 48-58)

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Young Mortimer asks Edward why he should love Gaveston so much when the rest of the world hates him. Edward's answer is quite remarkable as he says that he loves him because Gaveston loves him 'more than all the world' (Act I, Sc. IV, 77). It seems that Edward considers Gaveston the only sincere person around him while all the others might be plotting against him. When they are parting, Edward says that his love will never decline till the next time they meet, and that he will continue sending him enough gold. Then, they exchange each other's pictures as a sign of their love.

Edward's beloved ones gain more power depending on how much the king loves them. Spencer gains a lot of power when Edward gives him Gaveston's titles by saying "And merely of our love we do create thee / Earl of Gloucester, and Lord Chamberlain, / despite of times, despite of enemies" (Act III, Sc. II, 148-150). This eventually leads the peers to rebel against the king for he is actually wasting the money of the nation. Especially, Queen Isabella is annoyed by this situation and goes to France to gain support against the Spencers. She is, indeed, sent to France to forward a message about Normandy to the King of France as she is his sister. However, she comes back only after she finds enough support to invade England and as soon as she seizes the control she gets Young Spencer executed.

Although the play does not explicitly show a sexual relationship between Gaveston and Edward, it implicitly reveals the possibility of it. They are so close to each other that Gaveston addresses the king with an abbreviation of his name: "Well done, Ned!" (Act I, Sc. I, 98). Lancaster points out that Gaveston marches arm in arm with the king as if they were equals, and Warwick says "Thus leaning on the shoulder of the king / He nods and scorns and smiles at those that pass" (Act I, Sc. II, 23-24). It is quite clear that the peers do not approve of this situation at all. Queen Isabella says:

Q. Isab. For now my lord the king regards me not,
But dotes upon the love of Gaveston:
He claps his cheeks, and hangs about his neck,
Smiles in his face, and whispers in his ears;
And, when I come, he frowns, as who should say,
"Go whither thou wilt, seeing I have Gaveston."

(Act I, Sc. II, 49-54)

The queen points out the intimacy between Edward and Gaveston which disturbs her so much. It is understood that the king prefers the companionship of Gaveston rather than his queen. In addition, the way how Edward and Gaveston are told to behave towards each other by the queen stands for another proof of a probable sexual relationship between them.

Bruce R. Smith states that Edward and Gaveston play out the roles of 'master and minion' in the eyes of the lords and even in their own eyes (Smith, 1991: 211). Both the lords in the court and the queen calls Gaveston a minion⁴. Edward himself calls him minion once in the play when he talks to Young Mortimer: "Were he a peasant, being my minion, I'll make the proudest of you stoop to him" (Act I, Sc. IV, 30-31). The power relationship between the master and his minion stands for both 'man over boy' and 'king over commoner'. It is true for Edward and Gaveston as Edward is the king and Gaveston does not belong to a noble family, which is another reason for

⁴ A slave-like dependent person with a lower status - derived from the French word 'mignon' which means 'darling'.

his being despised and disparaged by the nobles in the court. They scorn him by calling ‘base’ to him. “Unless he be declined from that base peasant” (Act I, Sc. IV, 7) says Young Mortimer to the lords. Lancaster says “But for that base and obscure Gaveston?” (Act I, Sc. I, 100) when he questions the reason why Edward incenses his peers. Moreover, Lancaster is the first person in the play to call Gaveston a minion: “The glozing head of thy base minion thrown” (Act I, Sc. I, 132) which is a foreshadowing of Gaveston’s execution.

The peers hate Gaveston so much that Lancaster, Warwick, Pembroke, the Elder Mortimer, Young Mortimer, and the Archbishop of Canterbury subscribe their names on the form of Gaveston’s exile. However, Edward addresses them as “proud overbearing peers” and says that he will not exile his “sweet Gaveston” (Act I, Sc. IV, 47-48). Edward also prefers Gaveston to Queen Isabella and dispels her when she argues with Gaveston:

K. Edw. Away, then! touch me not.--Come, Gaveston.

Q. Isab. Villain! 'tis thou that robb'st me of my lord.

Gav. Madam, 'tis you that rob me of my lord.

K. Edw. Speak not unto her; let her droop and pine.

(Act I, Sc. IV, 160-163)

It is seen that they both accuse each other of robbing Edward from one another. Soon after that Queen Isabella likens herself, Edward, and Gaveston to mythological characters after she is expelled by the King. Juno becomes jealous when her husband Jove chooses Ganymede to be his cup-bearer due to his beauty according to the myth. The Queen says;

Like frantic Juno, will I fill the earth

With ghastly murmur of my sighs and cries;

For never doted Jove on Ganymede

So much as he on cursèd Gaveston:

(Act I, Sc.IV, 180-181)

According to the queen, Edward’s love for Gaveston is far more passionate than Jove’s affection to Ganymede. Only after Queen Isabella tells that Gaveston shall be repealed, Edward addresses her as “fair queen” and lets her hold his hand. He makes peace with the peers, as well. “Now is the King of England rich and strong / Having the love of his renowned peers” (Act I, Sc. IV, 367-368) says the Queen. But his attitude changes immediately after Young Mortimer wounds Gaveston with his sword. Later on, Edward’s continuing ignorance to his wife makes her realize that she does “look for love at Edward’s hand” (Act II, Sc. IV, 62) in vain, and she even says that she could live with Young Mortimer forever. Therefore, the Queen thinks of going to France with her son and complaining to her brother how Gaveston has robbed Edward’s love from her.

Apart from sharing a physical and emotional intimacy with his lovers, which extremely annoys the queen, Edward allows his favourites to control him. For instance, Gaveston has the right to tell the king what to do such as advising him to send Young Mortimer to the Tower:

K. Edw. The younger Mortimer is grown so brave,

That to my face he threatens civil wars.

Gav. Why do you not commit him to the Tower?

K. Edw. I dare not, for the people love him well.

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Gav. Why, then, we'll have him privily made away.

(Act II, Sc. II, 224-227)

It is understood that Edward refrains from the public reaction even when he is about to make a decision about someone who threatens his kingly self. However, Gaveston is bold enough to advise the king to get rid of him privately. Therefore, Smith argues that Marlowe's Edward committed sodomy in political terms, not in physical terms, and chose to play the 'boy' (Smith, 1991: 2201-221). As mentioned before, minions stand for 'boys' as well. In addition, according to Gregory Woods, Marlowe's boys dress up in order to draw attention to their bodies. He notes that the way they dress is not to hide their nakedness (Woods, 1992: 70). Boys like Piers Gaveston dress up to attract the eye, and use expensive jewels. At the very beginning of the play, Gaveston talks about wearing Italian masks by night and crownets⁵ of pearl to please Edward when he goes back to the court (Act I, Sc.I, 55-63). Edward shows his love to him not only by jewels but also with titles and money. He makes Gaveston Lord High Chamberlain, King and Lord of Man, Chief Secretary, and Earl of Cornwall (Act I, Sc. I, 154-156). The peers say that he has a lot of gold enough for him to 'purchase friends' in Ireland (Act I, Sc. IV, 259). Young Spencer is also gifted with titles and money as Edward gives Gaveston's titles to him after Gaveston's death.

Young Mortimer is quite annoyed by the king's ignorance about his duties as a king because of his addiction to Gaveston, and while they are waiting for Gaveston's return from exile he says to Edward:

Nothing but Gaveston! what means your grace?

You have matters of more weight to think upon;

The King of France sets foot in Normandy.

(Act II, Sc. II, 7-9)

Lancaster tells that the Northern borderers curse the name of the King and Gaveston as their houses are burnt down and their families are killed, yet the King cares about nothing but Gaveston. Edward's brother, Earl of Kent, addresses Edward as an "unnatural king" (Act IV, Sc. I, 8) who slaughters noblemen and cherishes flatterers around him. He says that Edward's love for Gaveston will be "the ruin of the realm" (Act IV, Sc. VI, 55) and Edward himself. However, Edward, upon hearing these, thinks that nobody loves Gaveston and he has no friend but Edward. Gaveston's behaviour towards the peers is not positive either.

When the lords arrest Gaveston, they call him 'corrupter', 'flatterer', 'monster', and Lancaster refers to Helen of Troy by saying "the Greekish strumpet"⁶ (Act II, Sc. V, 15) to him. He likens Gaveston to Helen as Gaveston is the cause of the broils in the court like Helen was the cause of the Trojan War. Furthermore, referring to a female character indicates that Young Mortimer is also attacking Gaveston's sexual orientation.

Edward accepts that Gaveston was his favourite by saying "Good Pierce of Gaveston, my sweet favourite" (Act III, Sc. IV, 8) after his death. However, the king finds another favourite soon after Gaveston's death. When Edward starts to favour the Spencers, the peers do not approve of this, too. They call them 'flatterers', and say that the king pays "dearly for their company" (Act III, Sc.III, 14). According to Young Mortimer, these flatterers should be removed from the king for they "havoc England's wealth and treasury" (Act IV, Sc. IV, 28).

⁵ A coronet, i.e., a small crown decorated with gold or jewels

⁶ A female prostitute

Edward is arrested when Queen Isabella and Young Mortimer return from France and invade England. The king is now forced to resign and leave the throne to his son. He questions the meaning of being a king while he is kept in Kenilworth Castle⁷:

But when I call to mind I am a king,
Methinks I should revenge me of my wrongs,
That Mortimer and Isabel have done.
But what are kings, when regiment is gone,
But perfect shadows in a sunshine day?
My nobles rule, I bear the name of king;
I wear the crown, but am controlled by them,
By Mortimer, and my unconstant queen,
Who spots my nuptial bed with infamy;

(Act V, Sc. I, 23-31)

This speech summarizes the power conflict between the king and the peers. As a king, Edward seems to be controlled by others, especially by his favourites, all the time. He says his name will survive although he dies because his son, Edward, has the right to be the king after him. Besides, he is aware of his faults as a king. Therefore, he tells the Bishop of Winchester “Commend me to my son, and bid him rule better than I” (Act V, Sc. I, 121). Edward, upon resigning his crown, is kept in Kenilworth Castle in insanitary conditions where he is washed with puddle water until he is taken to Berkeley Castle. There he reminisces about his favourites and says:

O Gaveston, 'tis for thee that I am wronged,
For me, both thou and both the Spencers died!
And for your sakes a thousand wrongs I'll take.
The Spencers' ghosts, wherever they remain,
Wish well to mine; then, tush, for them I'll die.

(Act V, Sc. III, 41-45)

It is seen that the king is fully aware of his wrongdoings as a ruler, yet he is also aware of the mistakes that were made by others against him. He seems to regret only the fact that both Gaveston and the Spencers were murdered because of himself. Nevertheless, he would make the same mistakes over and over again for the sake of his favourites.

In Berkeley, Lightborn is the last person that Edward sees and talks with. He is afraid of dying and offers him his last jewel in exchange for his life. He is actually showing his love, which means ‘power’ in this sense, in the same way he did for Gaveston and Young Spencer. But it does not help this time, and even though Lightborn seems to be kind and affectionate to Edward he cannot hide the anxiety in his face due to his real duty. Edward notices this and says “These looks of thine can harbour naught but death / I see my tragedy written in thy brows” (Act V, Sc. V, 75-76).

⁷ The name of the castle is written ‘Killingworth’ in some texts.

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Edward is killed with a 'red hot spit' in a way that does not leave any external marks on his body. How he has been treated and humiliated in the dungeon before he is killed is noteworthy, and the way he is murdered seems to have a link with sodomy. It is closely related to homophobia of the Elizabethan times as well. Considering that sodomy was punished with hanging in the Elizabethan England, it can be said that the attitude towards same sex relationships did not change in about three hundred years. Edward shares the same fate with Gaveston and Spencer in the end. It is also remarkable that Edward is killed by a man called Lightborn whose name is a version of Lucifer⁸. It implies the idea that the biggest sin is punished by the devil himself. Gaveston has had the right to access the king's body as he is the king's favourite. The last person who has the access to the king's body is Lightborn who has been charged with killing Edward by Young Mortimer. Mortimer uses his political power to do this, who grows more and more ambitious as he gains the support of the queen and therefore France against Edward. DiGangi argues that from Edward's perspective, the sodomite is not Gaveston but Mortimer, and notes that Mortimer's access to the king's body is also punished with execution (DiGangi, 1997: 114-115). At the end of the play, Edward's son, King Edward III, sends her mother to the Tower as she is suspected of his father's death, and executes her lover and ally Young Mortimer to avenge his father's murder.

The Life and Death of John Atherton

Next to Marlowe's dramatic work, *The Life and Death of John Atherton* can be analysed as a supporting text which shows that the ongoing hatred towards male homosexuality grew larger in time particularly among the clergy in the Early Modern England. John Atherton (1598-1640) was the Lord Bishop of Waterford and Lismore when he was executed for buggery in 1640. Soon after his death, an anonymous pamphlet titled *The Life and Death of John Atherton Bishop of Waterford and Lismore within the Kingdome of Ireland* was written, and printed in London in 1641, which Winnett calls "a sustained attack on Atherton's moral character" (Winnett, 1988: 9). The pamphlet includes the illustrations of both Atherton and Childe hanging on the gallows on a separate page titled *The Shamefull Ende, of Bishop Atherton, and His Proctor John Childe*. It consists of only 179 lines which begins with specific definitions of Atherton's title and his birthplace, and continues with describing his execution and his man, John Childe. According to the pamphlet, Atherton was hanged on the fifth of December on the Gallows Green at Dublin in 1640. His tithe proctor⁹, John Childe, was also hanged in the following March at Bandon Bridge.

Atherton is believed to have been born in Somersetshire in 1598 into a prosperous family; however, little is known of his personal life before he entered the service of the Church of England. Rictor Norton, in his informative introduction to the pamphlet, has noted that John Atherton was educated at the University of Oxford, and when he was appointed as the Lord Bishop of Waterford and Lismore in Ireland he was not welcomed by the Roman Catholic majority. It might be because he was a member of the Anglican Clergy. Atherton and John Childe, his steward and proctor, were accused of engaging in buggery and then hanged. Norton has also noted that they were not the first pair of men executed for sodomy in England, since Lord Audley, Earl of Castlehaven and his two male servants were also executed for the same crime in 1631. Yet, he was the first person to be hanged in Ireland who was accused and found guilty of an unnatural crime. 70 years after his execution, Atherton was thought to have been a victim of conspiracy. The real reason of his accusation might have been political oppositions, or his personal enmity of the Earl of Cork, or his disputes with a lawyer named Pierce Butler over the ownership of some land

⁸ Satan's name which means 'light-bearer' in Latin.

⁹ The Irish clergyman who takes care of the tax paid to the Church, which is one tenth of one's annual income, and the steward or manager of a bishop's household or estate.

near Waterford (Norton, E. T. 09.01.2021). Winnett, too, argues that “the unfortunate bishop has been regarded as the victim of a conspiracy on the part of those whose financial interests he threatened” (Winnett, 1988: 8). Because shortly after Atherton began his duty in Ireland, his activities were mainly directed against the Earl of Cork regarding the rents of some lands in Waterford and around.

Winnett states that there had already been a controversy about Atherton as there were several claims pointed to “some defect in Atherton's personal character, a defect which manifested itself in sexual irregularity” (Winnett, 1988: 6) when Atherton’s name was considered for the Bishopric of Waterford and Lismore in 1635. What really happened was that his wife’s sister had borne an illegitimate baby by one of Atherton’s parishioners and later on Atherton himself was accused of having a baby by one of his wife’s nieces. Nevertheless, he was appointed to the episcopacy of Waterford and Lismore, but within a few months his name began to be linked with some strange events such as his mother-in-law’s dealing with witchcraft and her spirit’s haunting Somerset after her death. Besides, there were rumours about him and his wife’s brother’s wife, Elizabeth Leakey, which were eventually backfired. However, as Winnett has noted “in 1640 a charge of serious immorality was brought against Atherton, namely, of sodomy with his steward John Child” (Winnett, 1988: 7). As a result, he was dismissed by the Lord Deputy and soon arrested, and then committed to Dublin Castle where he was kept until his execution.

John Atherton was not only accused of buggery, he was also accused of lust, incest, rape, and adultery, so it seems that buggery was related to other sex crimes as well. Indeed, Atherton was married to a woman called Joanne Leakey, and according to the pamphlet, he committed incest with his sister-in-law “for which he sued his pardon, and then fled / to Ireland, where a worse life he led” (25-26). Norton has noted that Atherton always denied the accusations about sodomy, but it was told that he confessed his guilt to the cleric who accompanied him in prison (Norton, E. T. 09.01.2021). His proctor, John Childe, was also accused of lust, avarice, extortion of fees, and using Cantharides¹⁰ to provoke lust. The anonymous writer of the pamphlet, who calls sodomy “a sinne so vilde” (165), warns the prospective clergymen to stay away from buggery and other crimes against nature with these lines:

If ye will Bishops be, be such as was
That Godly Timothy, make him your glasse,
Shun avarice, shun extortion, shun vaine pride,
Shun hate, dissimulation, let your Guide
Be godlinesse. Shun Lust, Shun Buggary,
Shun Incest, Rape, and shun Adultery.
Be practizers of every honest thing,
Be meeke like Christ your Bishop Lord and King,
So may you live belov'd, and dye to life,
Not by the Axe or by the hangmans knife,
A halter as this Bishop here hath done,
When being hangd your selves due scarce bemone:

¹⁰ A toxic preparation of the crushed, dried body of a green beetle that was used as an aphrodisiac.

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And Proctors be ye warnd by Iohn Childs fall,
Least that his fate betide unto you all.
Lust, Avarice, Extortion of Fees
Caus'd him at London bridge his life to lease.
Y'are alike guilty: let not the same thing
Draw you like him to Heaven in a string.

(79-96)

According to the writer of the pamphlet, the bishop candidates should stay away from capital vices such as greed, pride, and most importantly lust. The writer also notes that inappropriate sexual acts, i.e. incest, rape, adultery, and particularly sexual desire for one's own gender will be punished with hanging. Indeed, the overall message of the pamphlet is that the same punishment will be put on anyone who commits the crimes against nature like buggery. The last lines of the pamphlet show that buggery was considered a crime against Christianity, and the King of England, as well:

For the subverting of such Devillish plots,
From staining of our Kingdome with such blots,
For th' happy raigne of our most Sacred King,
And those that from that Royall Stocke doe spring,
For Parliament, and health of Martiall men,
All Loyall Subjects cry with me, *Amen*.

(174-179)

The ending word of the pamphlet implies that it was written by another clergyman in the form of a sermon. Written in verse, the pamphlet gives only a brief history of Atherton's life and particularly deals with the accusations on him and his execution. Since there are several warnings and condemnations throughout the pamphlet, it is understood that the writer of the pamphlet believes that Atherton was really guilty of all the crimes that were attributed to him. This homophobic attitude also shows that the writer is on the side of the accusers.

The discussions about Atherton and the accusations did not end even after his death as this pamphlet was written one year after his execution, and the case was reprinted by Nicholas Bernard, Dean of Ardagh, under the name *The Penitent Death of a Woefull Sinner, or, The Penitent Death of Jo. Atherton Late Bishop of Waterford in Ireland* in 1651. Bernard himself visited Atherton in prison and he left a detailed record of the last days of him and his execution. According to Bernard, Atherton confessed nothing else but "his neglect of public preaching and catechising in the church and private prayers in his family, for which sins of Omission he was given over to sins of omission, for the neglect of the commandments of the first table let fall into breach of the second" (Bernard, 1651: 26), which apparently denies the claim that he confessed his guilt to the cleric who accompanied him in prison. Bernard's *Penitent Death* was followed by *The Case of John Atherton, Bishop of Waterford in Ireland: Fairly Represented* which was published in 1710 by John King. King believes that Atherton's execution was the result of a conspiracy planned by certain people who were displeased by his efforts to recover the lands belonging to the Church (King, 1710: 9). Similarly, Winnett claims that "Atherton was the victim of what

nowadays would be called a ‘frame up’ on the part of those whose interests he had threatened in his efforts to recover the Church's patrimony” (Winnett: 1988: 14). It is not possible to say whether these claims are right or wrong since there is no extant record of Atherton’s trial. However, it could easily be said that homophobia within the clergy, whether he is really homosexual or not, led Atherton to his tragic end.

Conclusion

Edward II was executed in 1327, and John Atherton in 1640. The time gap between these two executions shows that the attitude towards same sex relationships in England did not change much in three centuries. Indeed, it took a long while to change until The Sexual Offences Act became law which decriminalised homosexual acts in private for adults over 21 in 1967.¹¹ The question, ‘Why is this person’s sexual orientation something other than purely heterosexual?’ may still be relevant as Nissinen states (Nissinen, 1998: 140). But it is more important to question the reason why somebody’s sexual choice is a matter for another person. He suggests that there should be love between people in order to accept the varieties. Only when people love one another, they can put an effort to approve of each other’s different lifestyles, or at least tolerate it. The reason of Edward II’s execution might be the lack of love among him and the peers. The same claim can be put forward for John Atherton as well because it is still argued whether he was a victim of slanders due to political and personal conflicts.

In conclusion, it can be said that no matter which motives were behind the intolerance toward male homosexuality in the cases of King Edward II and Bishop John Atherton, homophobia in the Early Modern England, especially among the clergy and the aristocracy, was so great that it could even lead to violence towards people who were accused of sodomy and/or buggery, and those people, according to their titles, were dethroned or dismissed, imprisoned, and eventually executed. The tragic end of Edward II and John Atherton together with their fellows those who were also condemned to death, whether they were maligned due to political reasons or not, shows that they were surely the victims of homophobia in the Early Modern England.

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