



*The Reputation of Edward II,
1305-1697: A Literary Transformation
of History*

Kit Heyam

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Reviewed by: Seymour Phillips



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It is only fair to begin this review by noting that I have a particular interest in the subject of the book, since my own work and the book under review cover much of the same ground: problems of interpretation such as Edward II's sexuality and the manner of his death, for example, are common to both. Kit Heyam does not intend "to 'claim' Edward II for any modern category of sexuality, or even to claim (in the non-possessive sense) that he engaged in any particular sexual acts" (18). While Heyam and I are in agreement that Adam Orleton's possible description of Edward II in 1326 as a sodomite needs to be treated with extreme caution, since such charges were often used as a means of blackening the reputation of a political opponent (Heyam, 43–44; Phillips, *Edward II*, 1–4, 523–524), it is certainly true that a sexual interpretation of Edward II's relations with his favourites was developed after his death: in the fourteenth century by Thomas Burton, the author of the chronicle of Meaux Abbey in Yorkshire (who appears to have had a personal interest in the subject—Burton also mentions an incident in 1320 at the papal curia—and who was avowedly writing to deny Edward II any claim to sanctity); and especially by Holinshed and Marlowe in the sixteenth century. This does not, however, prove that such a conclusion already existed explicitly in Edward II's own lifetime, nor indeed does Heyam argue that it did.

After a thirty-three page introduction the book is divided into seven long chapters, each dealing with a particular section of Edward II's life and career and utilising the available chronicle and literary sources for that topic down to the end of the seventeenth century. In addition to the general bibliography at the end of the book each chapter ends with several pages listing the primary and secondary sources used in that chapter. This is an unusual arrangement but adds to the clarity of the argument presented. The book ends with a very useful forty-six page Appendix: "Accounts of and allusions to Edward II's reign, composed 1305-1697." One item that might be added is *The History of Edward III* by Joshua Barnes, published in 1688, in which he argued that Edward II was, at the last, truly repentant of "all his former vanities" and noted the worthy things which he had done in his lifetime, such as the foundation of Oxford colleges and religious houses, "and might have done more, had he not been so miserably interrupted."

The book is well written and well argued and is a very thorough exploration of Edward II's reputation, but it does not add anything significant to our knowledge of the reign, with one interesting exception which I had missed in my own research. This is a short poem entitled "Against the Queen," evidently written close to the events, in which Isabella is castigated for the deposition and imprisonment of her husband, whom the unknown author clearly regards as still the legitimate king. The poem, which was edited and published in 1999 by Ruth Dean and Maureen Boulton in vol. 3 of the Anglo-Norman Text Society's occasional publications, is one of a number of miscellaneous items in the early folios of Leeds

University, Brotherton Collection, Ms. 29, which are then followed by the text of the *Anonimale Chronicle*.

However, the literary scholar and the historian are really pursuing different objectives. While a literary scholar, drawing principally on narrative sources, is perfectly entitled to emphasise Edward's later reputation, the historian has to attempt to achieve a balance between evidence and interpretation, using the full range of both chronicle sources and the multitude of surviving administrative records. There is also of course an extensive, and often highly controversial, body of scholarship on the reign to be taken into account, on such political and constitutional issues as the Coronation Oath, the Ordinances, Edward's deposition, and possible 'afterlife' as a wandering hermit, as well as relations with France, Scotland, and the papacy, all of which take the subject far beyond that simply of reputation.

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