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Literary Visions of Edward II and Isabella of France

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ABSTRACT

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The historical Edward II and Isabella of France do not always resemble the literary Edward and Isabella. Chronicles written after their deaths produced romances about their lives that to this day have colored historical scholarship. Other literature in the form of plays and novels have also been responsible for nurturing legends about Edward and Isabella. This thesis examines first the contemporary chronicles and government records in order to establish some facts about the ill-fated king and queen; then it analyzes the romances and the media that produced them, in an effort to test their reliability. Although some of the legends cannot be refuted because important information is missing, others obviously belong to the realm of literature, not history.

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CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORICAL EDWARD AND ISABELLA

How much of what we know about medieval royalty is legend and how much is fact? How is history distorted by authors' imaginations? Everyone enjoys medieval epics about chivalrous Richard the Lion-Hearted, bad King John, heroic Henry V, and tyrannical Richard III, yet serious historians realize that although such stereotypes may have some basis in fact, they are too simple and incomplete. Scholarship reveals a Richard the Lion-Hearted who was also cold and cruel; a King John, who, for all his faults, did show interest in governing; a Henry V who may have been more lucky than militarily brilliant; and a Richard III who was a victim of circumstance.

The character of Edward II of England (1307-1327) poses similar questions of fact and fantasy. Historians, at one time uninterested in his reign, have in the last hundred years paid much attention to his career, but much remains controversial even now. The popular story, told by chroniclers and popular writers alike, is well-known; how much of this is embellishment is unclear, and yet it continues to find its way into works of even the highest scholarship.

Nor is Edward II alone. Another person stands out during Edward's reign as a fascinating character in her own right. She is Isabella of France, Edward's queen and the so-called "she-wolf of France." She, like her husband, had an unusual nature and lived a controversial life, and she, like Edward II, has also been the subject of serious research in recent years. Accounts of her life, to an even greater degree than is true for Edward--as women were largely ignored by contemporary historians unless they were somehow remarkable, or in Isabella's case, notorious--cross the line between fact and fantasy with ease.

The lives of Edward and Isabella were fatefully, and fatally, intertwined. Between the two of them we find all the ingredients of a modern television mini-series: homosexuality, adultery, deceit, controversy, power, ambition, and murder. In fact, the general consensus is that Edward was an incompetent homosexual king who rose to prominence only via his tragic murder. Similarly, the historical portrait of Isabella is that of the deceitful, ambitious wife, an adulteress who betrayed her husband. But is it not possible that there is more, or less, to their traditional characters? Where does truth end and fantasy begin?

The search for answers to such questions forms the basis for this thesis. Any historian must understand the pitfalls into which he may plunge if he takes too literally the popular legends; conversely he cannot totally disregard

the stories of contemporary historians. Edward II and Isabella form suitable subjects for inquiry because their lives were, literally, the stuff of which legends are made. Yet sufficient contemporary documentation exists to reveal glimpses of the truth. Since various aspects of the lives and careers of both Edward and Isabella are currently the subjects of serious historical research, it is an appropriate moment to compare their actual lives to their legends.

The available documentary sources include government records such as various calendars and one published household book. They are useful for verifying the bare facts. Chronicle accounts then become necessary not only for their narration, but also as a means to the establishment of the social, political, and economic atmosphere of the period.

The most reliable chronicle is the anonymous Vita Edwardi Secundi, attributed wrongly to a monk of Malmesbury. Bishop Stubbs, in introducing the biography in his edition of the chronicle, states that the author probably began to write his account around the year 1325, when his narrative ends.[1] Another chronicle, the Annales Londonienses, is important mainly for the years between 1289 and 1316; it concludes on 28 July 1330.[2] The Annales Paulini and Adam

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[1]Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and Edward II, Rolls Series, ed. William Stubbs, vol. 2 (Kraus Reprint Ltd., 1965), xliv.

[2]Ibid., vol. 1, xx.

Murimuth's chronicle appear to have been written by participants in the events they describe and therefore are also valuable as contemporary accounts.[3] All other chronicles of the period were written after 1330 and are more accurately assigned to the category of literature rather than history.

First we shall consider Edward of Caernarvon, the fourth son of Edward I and Eleanor of Castile, born on 25 April 1284. One older brother, Alfonso, was still alive at the time of Edward's birth. Later that same year, however, Alfonso died at the age of twelve, and before he was one year old Edward of Caernarvon was first in line to the throne.

There is little in Edward's early life that would explain the way his character would develop. Before he ascended the throne, his father allowed him to gain some experience in two important elements of medieval kingship: governing and fighting. In 1297, for example, Edward I went to Gascony on business, leaving his son in England as regent.[4] When he was old enough to battle, the young Edward

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[3]See Chronicles of the Reigns, vol. 1, xlii-xcix for the value of the two works; and see also Adam Murimuth, Continuatio Chronicarum, Rolls Series, ed. Edward M. Thompson (Kraus Reprint Ltd., 1965), ix-xvi, for further discussion of Murimuth's work.

[4]"Whereas the king wills that Edward, his son, supplying his place in England, shall have speech and treaty with the bishop concerning certain arduous and urgent affairs. . ." ([C]alendar of [C]lose [R]olls 1296-1302, 128).

went to Scotland with his father on campaign.[5] Apparently the prince acquitted himself well in both roles.

The first indication of trouble appeared in 1305. In June of that year, according to the Annales Londonienses, Bishop Walter Langton complained to Edward I that the prince had broken into his forest. The angry king then banished his son from court.[6] Hints of the king's displeasure toward his son are shown in an entry in the Calendar of Close Rolls, dated 22 July 1305:

> Although the king has lately caused certain ordinances to be made for the direction of the estate of his son Edward, which he wills shall be observed during his pleasure so that his son shall not contravene them in any way, and he ordered the mayor and sheriffs to inhibit all men of that city on his behalf from making any subsidy to his son by way of loan or otherwise until he should cause it to be otherwise ordained, he, willing nevertheless, at the request of Queen Margaret, his consort, that the inhibition shall cease and shall be annulled from this date. . . .[7]

Though the king appeared to relent at this point, he was not truly reconciled with his son until 13 October 1305, when the two presided over a feast at Westminster.[8] Although at the time this incident may have been put off to boyish high spirits and recklessness, this episode foreshadows the future Edward II's disregard for the dignity

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[5]Prince Edward, for example, was in Scotland in October 1301, to judge by Edward I's order of the fourteenth. See C. C. R. 1296-1302, 470.

[6]Annales Londonienses, in Chronicles of the Reigns, vol. 1, 138.

[7]C. C. R. 1302-1307, 342.

[8]Annales Londonienses, 143.

of high officials which became in later years a chief cause of his downfall.

The problem of the relationship between Piers Gaveston and the prince also manifested itself before the old king died. Edward I had brought the Gascon into his son's household in 1300 when the prince was a teen-ager and they became fast friends.[9] In 1305, Gaveston was in trouble along with Gilbert de Clare because of the Langton affair and Edward I temporarily banished both men from his son's retinue. A year later Gaveston angered the king even more and was exiled. The story that he was banished because the prince had tried to bestow the county of Ponthieu upon him has recently been refuted; it appears instead that the king may have exiled Gaveston for deserting a Scottish campaign.[10] Since all the other deserters were quickly pardoned, it is evident that Edward I was worried over his son's infatuation with Gaveston. The Annales Paulini in fact state that the king banished the Gascon because the prince loved him excessively.[11] He had good reason to be concerned, for by this time Prince Edward was betrothed to Isabella of France, daughter of Philip IV. Any rumor of degeneracy might cause the shrewd Philip to withhold his

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[9]J. S. Hamilton, Piers Gaveston Earl of Cornwall 1307-1312 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 29-30.

[10]See Hamilton, 33-4.

[11]Annales Paulini, in Chronicles of the Reigns, vol. 1, 255.

daughter, thereby shattering the fragile truce between England and France.

Edward II had no such qualms. On 8 July 1307, upon the death of his father, Edward of Caernarvon became king. One of his first actions was to recall Gaveston to court. As gifts, the new king gave him the earldom of Cornwall and his niece Margaret of Gloucester as wife. These were unwise moves, but worse was yet to come. For as the Vita claims, "Piers Gaveston led the king astray, threw the country into confusion, consumed its treasure, was exiled thrice, and then returning lost his head."[12]

Through this relationship Edward showed several qualities, both good and bad. Edward proved here, as he was to elsewhere, that he was obsessively loyal to his friends. He showered Gaveston with titles, honors, and material wealth. One of the greatest honors Gaveston received was the designation of regent when Edward went to France to marry Isabella in 1308. It was, the author of the Vita exclaims, "an astonishing thing, that he who had lately been an exile and outcast from England should now be made ruler and guardian of the realm."[13] In addition, Gaveston received all of Edward's wedding presents, according to the St. Paul annalist.[14]

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[12]Vita Edwardi Secundi, ed. N. Denholm-Young (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1957), 40.

[13]Ibid., 3. [14]Annales Paulini, 258.

By doing so, Edward revealed a bad trait: an overwhelming lack of judgment. Gaveston, with no political acumen, was the last person who should have been named regent. Had he given that honor to a baron, Edward might have gone a long way toward mollifying the magnates, who "looked down upon Piers because, as a foreigner and formerly a mere man-at-arms raised to such distinction and eminence, he was unmindful of his former rank."[15]

Nor did Piers conduct himself graciously. The opinion of the Vita chronicler is that if Piers had behaved modestly toward the barons, he would never have had a problem with them.[16] The fact that Edward preferred the company of the arrogant upstart to that of the barons never pleased them and set the unpleasant tone that permeated the whole reign.

Edward's obsession with his favorite brings up another matter. Was Edward's relationship with Gaveston homosexual? There is no easy answer. The Vita skirts the issue, though it does leave some tantalizing hints. First it says that the king's affections could not be alienated from his favorite: "the greater grew his love and tenderness toward Piers."[17] Later the author continues:

> I do not remember to have heard that one man so loved another. Jonathan cherished David, Achilles loved Patroclus. But we do not read that they were immoderate. Our king, however, was incapable of moderate favour.[18]

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[15]Vita, 3. [16]Ibid., 15. [17]Ibid., 1-2.

[18]Ibid., 15.

Finally, the chronicler uses the same symbolism in describing Edward's reaction to Gaveston's murder:

> For the greater the love, the greater the sorrow. In the lament of David upon Jonathan, love is depicted which is said to have surpassed the love of women. Our king also spoke thus; and further he planned to avenge the death of Piers.[19]

Clearly, this biographer believed that Edward loved Gaveston in an extraordinary fashion.

Yet, in other passages the Vita implies that this unusual affection was like nothing more than the love between two brothers. The chronicler writes that:

> the king, knowing that Piers had returned [from exile in Ireland], came to meet him at Chester, and there rejoicing at his return he very thankfully received him with honour as his brother. Indeed he had always called him his brother.[20]

Later the chronicler explains the enormous risk that the earls took in beheading Gaveston:

> For they put to death a great earl whom the king had adopted as brother, whom the king cherished as a son, whom the king regarded as friend and ally.[21]

Of course, it is unlikely that a contemporary chronicler would dare expose the reigning monarch as a homosexual. Instead, he throws out insinuations. On the other hand, aside from these statements the monk compares the friendship to the relationship between close kin; only Edward's unwise behavior made it unacceptable.

Other contemporary chroniclers also fall short of declaring Edward homosexual. As stated above, the Annales Paulini declares that Edward loved Gaveston immoderately,

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[19]Vita, 30. [20]Ibid., 7. [21]Ibid., 28.

much the same way that the Vita does.[22] Later, the annalist remarks that the new queen's uncles, Charles de Valois and Louis d'Evreux, were outraged during the coronation ceremonies that Edward preferred Gaveston's couch to her own.[23] This chronicler also compares Edward's affection for Gaveston to that of a brother, but he spoils the comment in the next line by noting the people's discontent over Gaveston's favored status.[24] He does not dare accuse the king openly, but he hints strongly that his affections for Gaveston are unusually strong.

On the surface, to be sure, the evidence is damning. Later chroniclers are less hesitant in declaring Edward's homosexuality. It also appears that Edward's contemporaries were suspicious of the nature of their friendship.

For example, Isabella and her relatives looked gravely upon Edward's friendship with Gaveston. The English barons' similar dissatisfaction can easily be dismissed as jealousy and hatred, because the king took the favorite's counsel over theirs. Isabella's concern, however, was personal and she relayed such misgivings to her father, according to an anonymous letter written from Westminster

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[22]Annales Paulini, 255.

[23]Ibid., 262. This can be misinterpreted, however. The annalist uses the noun "triclinium" which can be defined as a dining-couch. Cassell's New Latin Dictionary, 1959 ed., S.V. "triclinium." Perhaps Edward chose to dine with Gaveston instead of with Isabella, a slight that her uncles and everybody else could scarcely fail to miss.

[24]Ibid., 259.

Abbey in April 1308. This letter states that Isabella was continuing to protest about Gaveston to her father in the hopes that he would send her help.[25]

Philip IV was indeed very concerned over the state of his daughter's marriage.[26] The St. Paul's annalist tells of the French king's wish that her marriage-bed be fruitful; for nearly four years, nevertheless, there were no children because of Gaveston's interference.[27] Support arrived in the persons of several French envoys led by the abbot of St-Germain-des-Pres in May 1308. It was their duty to abet the English barons who were also anxious to rid Edward of Gaveston. Philip in addition sent wine and money to the earls of Pembroke and Lincoln as tokens of his support.[28] This type of interference in his son-in-law's affairs abated when Isabella became pregnant and the problem died completely with Gaveston's murder. Yet the French king had been worried; the natural conclusion is that he believed Edward to be homosexual.

The only judgment we can make from these hints and speculations is that Edward had an unusually close

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[25]J. S. Hamilton, Dry Run for Deposition: Queen Isabella and the Death of Piers Gaveston, Paper presented at the Seventh Medieval Forum, Plymouth State University, April 1986, 4.

[26]See Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "The Prince is Father of the King: The Character and Childhood of Philip the Fair of France," Mediaeval Studies 49 (1987): 306-7.

[27]Annales Paulini, 258.

[28]Hamilton, Dry Run for Deposition, 5-6.

friendship with Piers Gaveston. No concrete proof can be offered that demonstrates unequivocably that Edward and Gaveston were homosexual lovers. It is fact, however, that both men were capable of intimacy with women. F. D. Blackley has shown that Edward fathered a bastard son, Adam.[29] While Gaveston was still alive, Edward and Isabella conceived the future Edward III, and they were to have three more children in later years. For his part, Gaveston and his wife Margaret had one daughter, born in 1312. The fact that both men produced children proves little, but it can be said that their relationship prevented neither from normal physical relations with women.

In any case, their friendship ended abruptly with Gaveston's decapitation on Blacklow Hill in June 1312. The first stage of Edward's career came to a close. The author of the Vita also remarks upon this turning point, voicing an opinion that was no doubt shared by others:

> For our King Edward has now reigned six full years and has till now achieved nothing praiseworthy or memorable, except that by a royal marriage he has raised up for himself a handsome son and heir to the throne.[30]

It is now time to consider the mother of this fine boy.

Sometime in the 1290s Isabella of France was born, the daughter of Philip IV and his wife, Jeanne of Navarre. Her exact birth date is not known, which leads to some

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[29]See F. D. Blackley, "Adam, the Bastard Son of Edward II," Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research 37 (May 1964): 76-7.

[30]Vita, 39.

interesting speculation on the nature of her early relationship with Edward II. A contemporary French chronicler of the period, Guillaume de Nangis, states that she was twelve when she married; the year of her birth would have been 1296.[31] Some modern historians agree.[32] Paul C. Doherty, in an article on the subject, concludes from a papal dispensation that she was indeed born in 1296, though he lists other documentation that suggests otherwise.[33]

Edward II can perhaps be forgiven if he preferred the company of an old friend to that of a young girl of twelve, no matter how beautiful. His behavior is less acceptable, however, if she were older at the time of her wedding, as some people believe. A genealogical table published in France in 1985 lists 1292 as Isabella's birth year.[34] Some twentieth-century historians agree that she was born in the

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[31]Guillaume de Nangis, Chronique, in Collection des mémoires relatifs à l'histoire de France, ed., M. Guizot, vol. 13 (Paris: J. L. J. Briere, 1825; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1969), 269.

[32]Hamilton, Piers Gaveston, 47; May McKisack, The Fourteenth Century 1307-1399 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 4; and Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "The Political Repercussions of Family Ties in the Early Fourteenth Century: The Marriage of Edward II of England and Isabelle of France," Speculum 63 (July 1988), 583.

[33]See P. C. Doherty, "The Date of the Birth of Isabella Queen of England 1308-1358," Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research 48 (1975): 246-8.

[34]Tableau Généalogique de Rois de France (Paris: Editions de la Tourelle, 1985), 3.

early 1290s.[35] For Edward not to have been attracted to a lovely young woman of fifteen or sixteen, if such was the case, could lend support to the theory that he was otherwise occupied with Gaveston.

Not much is known about Isabella's early years, which is not surprising as she did not become important until her betrothal was announced. She first appeared in English sources in 1299 as an involuntary participant in the Treaty of Montreuil, whereby she was engaged to Edward of Caernarvon. It is likely that she was blessed in these early years with a happy home life. Her father loved her devotedly, to judge by the extravagant wedding gifts he gave her, by his anxiety over Edward's infatuation with Gaveston, and by the fact that he sent her his personal physician to attend her first confinement.[36]

Isabella returned his devotion. She kept in close touch with him, as her household book for July 1311 through July 1312 indicates. In the period between November 1311 and April 1312, she paid messengers at least three times to carry letters to her father.[37] On several occasions she

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[35]Hilda Johnstone, "Isabella, the She-Wolf of France," History 21 (Sept. 1936): 208; Michael Packe, King Edward III (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 8; and Sophia Menache, "Isabelle of France, Queen of England--a Reconsideration," Journal of Medieval History 10 (June 1984): 113.

[36]Brown, "The Prince is Father of the King," 306-7.

[37]F. D. Blackley and G. Hermansen, eds., The Household Book of Queen Isabella of England (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1971), 137, 211, 221.

returned to France to visit him, once in 1313 to witness the knighting of her brothers and again in 1314 to act as emissary from her husband.[38] She may have felt confident of her father's support and this may have contributed to her aggressive behavior during the Gaveston crisis.

The young queen was not one to take Edward's neglect meekly. In addition to complaining to France about Gaveston, Isabella allied herself with those English earls who were working to unseat the favorite. According to Nangis, she was gracious and amiable toward the barons.[39] Her household book records numerous occasions on which she sent letters or tokens to them, though whether she was actually conspiring with them remains unclear.[40] She also commissioned a copy of the Ordinances of 1311, an effort which suggests she assisted the barons against Edward.[41] As later events were to prove, she was certainly capable of such action.

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[38]For the trip in 1313, see Vita, 39; for her mission in 1314, see documents in Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "Diplomacy, Adultery, and Domestic Politics at the Court of Philip the Fair: Queen Isabelle's Mission to France in 1314," in Documenting the Past: Essays in Medieval History Presented to G. P. Cuttino, ed. J. S. Hamilton and P. J. Bradley (Woodbridge, England, 1989), 32-41.

[39]Nangis, 278.

[40]See Household Book for the following:
19 October 1311, letters to the earl of Warenne, 209.
18 January 1312, boar meat to the earl of Hereford, 215.
January 1312, boar meat to the earl of Lancaster, 137.
March-April 1312, letters to the earls of Gloucester, Hereford, Lancaster, Warenne, and Pembroke, 139.

[41]Ibid., 115-7.

There is one story that writers have often used to further illustrate Isabella's unhappy relations with her husband. In May 1312, Edward, Gaveston, Isabella, and the court were in Newcastle. Upon hearing that the angry earl of Lancaster was on his way to capture Gaveston, Edward and his favorite fled to Tynemouth. This much can be documented.[42] Where the queen was, however, in the midst of this confusion, is less clear. According to the Annales Londonienses, she went with Edward and Gaveston to Tynemouth.[43] The authors of the Vita and the Annales Paulini do not mention her presence at all. An itinerary of the king's court shows that it remained at Newcastle three more days, but there is no mention of Isabella.[44] The later version of the episode is that Edward abandoned his pregnant queen in his haste, leaving her to deal with the irascible Lancaster. Serious historians repeat this tale, though contemporary evidence to support it is lacking.[45] The story of the young, abandoned, and pregnant Isabella makes for good reading, but like many of the legends surrounding her, proves difficult to document and therefore must be used with

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[42]On 2 May, Edward was at Newcastle. The next day, he was at Tynemouth. See Elizabeth Hallam, The Itinerary of Edward II and his Household, 1307-1328 (London: List and Index Society Publications, 1984), 85.

[43]Annales Londonienses, 204.

[44]Hallam, 85.

[45]See, for example, J. R. Maddicott, Thomas of Lancaster 1307-1322: a Study in the Reign of Edward II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 125.

caution.

Given all this contention, what can we say about Edward and Isabella's marriage in the early years? They had known for nine years that they were going to marry. It is nevertheless possible that Edward II was uninterested in the French marriage, preferring instead a Spanish bride.[46] This might account for some of Edward's indifference toward his new bride. He could not, however, so easily cast aside his betrothed without seriously offending Philip IV, so the marriage took place as planned. But Gaveston remained Edward's interest, not Isabella. This situation continued as long as Gaveston was alive, thus carving a rocky relationship between the newlyweds that would only worsen. The second stage of Edward's reign began on a happy note for the royal couple, however. On 13 November 1312, their son Edward was born in Windsor. The king was thrilled.[47] His son's birth, says the Vita, did much to alleviate the grief that Edward still felt over Gaveston's death which had occurred earlier in the year.[48] For the time being, the marriage was tranquil.

The ten years that encompass the second stage of Edward's reign were still unhappy ones for both the royal

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[46]Natalie Fryde, The Tyranny and Fall of Edward II: 1321-1326 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 18.

[47]In December 1312, the king granted 80l. per year to John and Joan Launge for bringing him the news of Edward's birth. [C]alendar of [P]atent [R]olls 1307-1312, 519.

[48]Vita, 36.

couple and for England. Edward continued to manifest his incompetence and to alienate his wife. These were years of baronial unrest, ignominious defeat at the hands of the Scots, and the rise of the Despensers.

During this time Edward persisted in his policy of snubbing the magnates who were constantly at his throat. Although Gaveston's murder split the opposition and garnered sympathy for the king's side, Edward did as he wished regardless of the possible consequences. For example, the earls did not want Edward to go to France in the spring of 1313. Robert Bruce was ravaging northern England and was threatening to march on London while the king was engaged in protracted negotiations with the barons. Edward and Isabella sailed anyway.[49]

Later, when Edward was in Scotland, he disregarded the earl of Gloucester's suggestion that he rest his weary troops before engaging in battle. The result, for that reason and others, was a shameful defeat at Bannockburn that "blemished the reputation of the English,"[50] a defeat that also damaged Edward's already tarnished image. The London annalist, for example, blames the defeat on enormous English sins such as pride, extravagance, and greediness, all of which could easily describe Edward's traits.[51]

Luckily for him, the barons were too divided in their

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[49]Vita, 39. [50]Ibid., 56.

[51]Annales Londonienses, 231.

own loyalties to unite against the king. On the one extreme there was Thomas of Lancaster, a sulky, vindictive, self-seeking, brutal individual who was probably a worse politician than the king and a poor leader for the opposition party.[52] On the other side was Aymer de Valence, the earl of Pembroke. He was a more stable man who remained on amicable terms with Edward until his death in 1324. The modern view is that Pembroke, too, was an indifferent politician and exercised no real influence over the wayward king.[53]

It says much for the ineffectiveness of the baronial opposition that the weak Edward eventually overcame his enemies. Edward's only military victory as king took place not against the Scots, but against his own subjects. Treachery was everywhere. The Vita claims that the earls of Lancaster and Hereford were conspiring with Robert Bruce.[54] Edward had no choice but to rid his kingdom of these insurgents and he succeeded. At the battle of Boroughbridge, 16 March 1322, the earl of Hereford was killed and the earl of Lancaster was captured, soon to be

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[52]T. F. Tout, The Place of the Reign of Edward II in English History (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1936; reprint, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1976), 16; and see also Maddicott for an important study on the earl's place in the history of Edward II's reign.

[53]See J. R. S. Phillips, Aymer de Valence: Earl of Pembroke 1307-1324 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) for the current accepted view of the earl of Pembroke.

[54]Vita, 123.

executed as a traitor. At the end of this stage in his reign, Edward had seemingly strengthened his position, defeated his enemies, and emerged fully in charge.

It was an illusion, however. Behind Edward stood the Despensers, father and son, who had been members of the king's retinue for many years. Before 1322, they were not overly powerful as members of the king's small circle of supporters. Since Gaveston's death, Edward had had no one particular favorite, but several. Like the Gascon, however, Edward's later favorites were men of inferior blood who nevertheless acquired influence over the king out of proportion to their rank.[55] Two of these men, Roger D'Amory and Hugh Audley, married Elizabeth and Margaret of Gloucester (widow of Gaveston) respectively in 1317. D'Amory and Audley were ambitious knights who were soon to declare war against Hugh Despenser the younger and thus to cause the split that made Despenser the king's sole favorite.

Hugh Despenser was also married to a Gloucester heiress, Eleanor. Edward II did not arrange this match; Hugh and Eleanor were married during Edward I's reign. The two men had always been friendly with one another, though for what motive on Hugh's part is questionable. The author of the Vita doubted Hugh's integrity very early in Edward's reign:

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[55]Phillips, 132.

> Hugh Despenser was also hateful to all the barons, because he had deserted them as they worked for the common good of the realm and, more from a desire to please and a lust for gain than for any creditable reason, had become an adherent of Piers.[56]

Thus Hugh Despenser the younger had never been a popular member of the king's court. Tensions reached the breaking point in 1321 after Hugh had unsuccessfully attempted to obtain Welsh lands held by Roger D'Amory, Hugh Audley, Roger Mortimer, and other Marcher barons. Hugh and his father were taken into custody and tried. The judgment rendered 19 August 1321, according to the Vita, was as follows:

> Each was found guilty, proscribed, and disinherited, as an evil and false counsellor of the lord king, as a seducer and conspirator or disinheritor of the crown and a destroyer of the people, and an enemy of the king and kingdom.[57]

As a result, both were exiled. Edward here shows that he still suffered from misjudgment as these were almost the exact same reasons for which Gaveston was twice banished. The king obviously did not learn from his mistakes, though no doubt it did not occur to him that he had made any. Unfortunately for Edward, this sentence proved itself no more permanent than those pronounced upon Gaveston. By January 1322, in the midst of baronial confusion, Edward recalled the Despensers to England. In March, the opposition was defeated, leaving Edward to rule happily with his "evil" counsellors.

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[56]Vita, 4. [57]Ibid., 114.

In the meantime, Queen Isabella remained largely in the background. Her relationship with Edward was at least cordial, for she bore her husband three more children after the future Edward III.[58] Edward showed his concern for her welfare and the children's by being present during most of her confinements.[59]

During the lull when no one favorite monopolized Edward's time, Isabella appeared to have some influence over her husband. She asked him to promote Louis de Beaumont, a clerk in her household, to the see of Durham in 1317; even though he had his own candidate, Edward agreed to Isabella's wishes.[60] Edward also recognized her worth as a diplomat; in 1314 she went to her father's court as a negotiator in Gascon matters, and in 1325 he once again sent her to France for similar reasons.[61]

Nevertheless, there are some hints of marital discord. Edward is strangely absent from the story of

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[58]John of Eltham, born in 1316; Eleanor of Woodstock, born in 1318; and Joan of the Tower, born in 1321.

[59]From 19 September 1312 until the end of the year the king was at Windsor, where Edward was born on 13 November; from mid-May 1318 to the end of June, Edward traveled between Westminster and Woodstock, where Eleanor was born on 18 June; and the entire month of July 1321 Edward spent in the London area, where Joan was born in the Tower on 5 July. Only for the birth of John of Eltham on 15 August 1316 was the king not present--he was in York. See Charles Hartshorne, "An Itinerary of Edward II," Collectanea Archaeologica 1 (1861): 123, 129, 132, 137.

[60]Kathleen Edwards, "The Political Importance of the English Bishops during the Reign of Edward II," English Historical Review 59 (1944): 341-3.

[61]Vita, 134-5.

Isabella's near capture by the Scots in 1319, as told by the author of the Vita. A spy, captured at York and questioned by the archbishop and the King's chancellor, revealed the plot devised by James Douglas to kidnap the queen who was staying near there. Armed with this warning and their weapons, the archbishop and the chancellor brought the queen into the city, from where they escorted her to Nottingham, thought to be safer ground.[62] During this time (mid-September 1319), the king was traveling between Berwick, Belford, and Newcastle-on-Tyne.[63] He did not bother to return to York until well after the queen was out of danger.[64] The St. Paul's annalist also does not mention the king in his account of the near kidnap.[65] Adam Murimuth notes that it was at this time that the king was besieging Berwick, so perhaps he did not know of the plot.[66] Yet, given the hostilities it seems strange that he would have allowed her to stay so close to the Scottish border.

On another occasion Edward may have shown himself indifferent to his wife's safety. This was in October 1321 at Leeds Castle. The Vita remarks only that Edward attacked the castle as the first in a series of assaults that he planned to undertake against his magnates.[67] The chronicle does not mention Isabella. Other chroniclers tell a

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[62]Vita, 95-6. [63]Hartshorne, 135.

[64]He was in York on 1 October. See Hartshorne, 135.

[65]Annales Paulini, 287. [66]Murimuth, 30.

[67]Vita, 116.

different story. Adam Murimuth writes that the queen went to Leeds Castle, held by Lord Badlesmere, on orders from the king. The castellans insulted her by refusing her hospitality. When the king found out, he immediately came and besieged the castle.[68] The St. Paul's annalist narrates in more detail that Isabella, on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, stopped at the castle to rest overnight but was refused. In the ensuing melee, six of her men were killed.[69]

This story has had numerous interpretations, some of which will be analyzed in later chapters. It has consistently provided material for those writers who seek to damage Isabella's reputation. Whether she instigated this conflict is controversial and remains obscure. The popular theory, however, is that she did, knowing that the Badlesmeres would prevent her entry to the castle, thereby condemning six of her men to death and initiating the baronial wars that would result in the deaths of the earls of Lancaster and Hereford, among others. Yet, her calculated involvement seems unlikely when we remember that Isabella had all along shown favor to the barons. It was Edward who knew that Lord Badlesmere was his enemy. Sending Isabella to Leeds Castle, if that is what he did, was looking for trouble. One historian believes that Edward planned the confrontation on purpose.[70] If so, he knowingly endangered his wife's life for his own ends.

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[68]Murimuth, 34. [69]Annales Paulini, 298-9.

[70]See Fryde, 50-1.

Perhaps Isabella sensed her husband's indifference to her welfare. This is only one suggestion as to why she changed so drastically from the dutiful wife to the adulterous traitor. Other indications are nonexistent, making it difficult for twentieth-century scholars to understand her motives as well as to refute the popular legends. She is not often mentioned in the Vita until her crisis begins in 1324; in documents she plays the expected role of medieval queens, asking for pardons, granting alms to charities, and other similar works.[71]

We do know a few things that might shed light on her character. She went to France in 1314 on a diplomatic mission for her husband. Even though the French king was her father and could be expected to look kindly on his daughter's requests, Isabella must still have been considered an intelligent and trustworthy woman to have been chosen for this assignment. Intelligent, she surely was; trustworthy, she would not be, as events will confirm. In hindsight, her loyalty to Edward should already have been suspect, as witnessed by her dealings with the rebellious barons over Gaveston.[72] That her husband trusted her as diplomat suggests that she was a shrewd dissembler as well.

One of Isabella's star performances is missing from contemporary evidence and therefore cannot be consulted in

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[71]See Household Book, 103-5, for examples of her charities.

[72]Edward II gave no indication that he distrusted Isabella at this time, however.

deciphering her character. It concerns her participation in the adultery scandal that rocked the French court at the time of her mission in 1314. Philip IV's daughters-in-law, Marguerite, wife of Louis, and Blanche, wife of Charles, were accused of and imprisoned for committing adultery with two knights.[73] The accuser, it has been said, was none other than Isabella. Elizabeth A. R. Brown discusses the lack of contemporary documentation in this matter, and ultimately rejects the notion that Isabella caused the downfall of her sisters-in-law.[74] Yet storytellers as well as historians repeat this legend as proof of Isabella's diabolical nature. It, along with the Leeds Castle incident, probably crosses the border into the land of fantasy.

Thus all we know of Isabella up to 1322 is that she was strong-willed, that she did her duty as queen by bearing heirs to the throne, that she was trusted enough to be assigned diplomatic responsibility, and that she was interested in baronial affairs. But none of this points to the traitorous direction in which she was about to turn. The only evidence available, as we shall see, is that she hated the Despensers' ascendance to power and influence over her husband. It is this, then, for lack of other motivation, that must explain her position.

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[73]See Nangis, 301-3, for a contemporary French version of the scandal.

[74]See Brown, "Diplomacy," 24-31.

With the siege of Leeds Castle and the ensuing battle of Boroughbridge, the second stage of Edward's reign ended. The third and last stage forms the basis for most of the legends that make the careers of Edward and Isabella so compelling.

The king had effectively slaughtered his opposition in 1322. Ruling in his name were the hated Hugh Despensers, father and son. Edward especially favored the younger Hugh. So much so that the younger Despenser was considered responsible for the "harshness of the king" that "has today increased so much that no one however great and wise dares to cross his will."[75] Clearly the king believed that he was invincible and that no one could stop him. The Despensers, no doubt, encouraged this foolish thinking.

The nature of Edward's relationship with Hugh is a mystery. The Vita hints at impropriety between Edward and Gaveston, but it does not do so where Despenser is concerned. The biographer recognizes the favorite's evil influence, but does not imply a sexual attraction. Neither do the other contemporary chroniclers. The idea that a sexual relationship existed between Edward and Despenser emerges in later chronicles, though it is possible that some contemporaries believed it anyway.[76] The younger Despenser,

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[75]Vita, 136.

[76]Isabella says: "I protest that I will not return until this intruder [Despenser] is removed, but, discarding my marriage garment, shall assume the robes of widowhood and mourning until I am avenged of this Pharisee." (Vita, 143).

when he was executed, suffered mutilation in a form that might suggest he was being punished for homosexuality, though his method of death, hanging, drawing, and quartering, was the accepted form of execution for treason.[77]

Whatever their relationship, the younger Despenser had a firm hold on Edward's loyalties. Edward, easily influenced as ever, allowed Despenser to deprive Isabella of her servants and income in 1324, thus alienating the queen to the danger level.[78] Despenser also persuaded the king not to cross to France to render homage to King Charles IV for Gascony when Isabella was there as a peace negotiator, sending instead the young prince right into his mother's hands. The inevitable outcome of such favoritism and tyranny soon resulted. In September 1326, after eighteen months abroad, Isabella and her son invaded England with a small force, successfully brought the barons under their banner, and ousted the Despensers from power. With their fall, Edward was ruined also.

What follows begins the romantic legend of Edward II. Some facts, however, are indisputable. In January 1327, the new government gave Edward the choice of resigning in favor of his son, or of being deposed and his son disinherited. The reasons for this action are outlined in the chronicle of Pipewell describing the Parliament of 13 January 1327:

There, by common assent of all, the archbishop of

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[77]Fryde, 192-3. [78]Vita, 135, 140-1.

> Canterbury declared how the good king Edward when he died had left to his son his lands of England, Ireland, Wales, Gascony, and Scotland in good peace; how Gascony and Scotland had been as good as lost by evil counsel and evil ward; how, further, by evil counsel the son had destroyed the greater part of the noble blood of the realm, to the dishonour and loss of himself, his realm, and all the people; and how he had done many other marvels. Therefore, it was agreed by all that he ought not to reign but that his eldest son, the duke of Guienne, should reign and wear the crown in his stead.[79]

Edward, depressed by the loss of Despenser, agreed to resign in favor of the duke.

After the documentation of the resignation, the facts become blurred and it is difficult to discover what really happened to Edward II. We know that in April 1327, Edward was transferred from the earl of Lancaster's custody at Kenilworth to the keeping of Lords Berkeley and Maltravers in Berkeley Castle.[80] After that, the policy of the government concerning Edward was silence. Only two contemporary documents have appeared that concern the king's fate, and neither of these supports the popular tale of his torment and murder.

The first document is a letter written by a clerk, John Walewyn, to the chancellor John de Hotham, bishop of Ely. The most interesting aspects of the letter, dated

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[79]M. V. Clarke, "Committees of Estates and the Deposition of Edward II," in Historical Essays in Honour of James Tait, ed. J. G. Edwards, V. H. Galbraith, and E. F. Jacob (Manchester, 1933), 35.

[80]On 15 May 1327 the following order was issued: "Order to pay to Thomas de Berkeleye, out of the king's money lately found in Kaerfilli Castle and in John's custody, 500l. towards the expenses of the late king." See C. C. R. 1327-1330, 86.

27 July 1327, are as follows:

> Sire, vous pleise sovenir que jeo vous certifiai nadgaeres par ma lettre des nouns d'ascunes gentz enditeez devant moi ou counte de Glou[cestre], de lor venir aforcement devers le chastel de Berkel', d'avoir ravi le pere nostre seignor le roi hors de nostre garde et le dit chastel robbe felenousement encountre la pees.[81]

Walewyn goes on to name Thomas and Stephen Dunheved, among others, as belonging to the conspiracy that released the king from his prison. Nowhere in the letter does Walewyn refer to the king's recapture.

The Dunheveds were well-known loyalists to the king, who were eventually tried by the government on other charges.[82] Perhaps, then, the king was soon recaptured. It could just as well mean, however, that Isabella's government had no intention of announcing to the world that the former king had escaped.

The other document, written after Edward's deposition (between 1336 and 1343) by Manuele de Fieschi, notary of the pope, to Edward III declares just that to be the case: Edward II escaped unharmed from England and settled quietly

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[81]"Sire, please note that I inform you by my letter of the names of several people indicted before me in the county of Gloucester, of having come before the castle of Berkeley, of having seized the father of our lord the king from our guard and of having taken him feloniously from the said castle." Frederic J. Tanquerey, "The Conspiracy of Thomas Dunheved, 1327," English Historical Review 31 (Jan. 1916): 119.

[82]On 1 August 1327 Edward III issued orders to Thomas Berkeley that the Dunheveds were to be arrested for "coming with an armed force to Berkeley Castle to plunder it, and refusing to join the king in his expedition against the Scots." See C. P. R. 1327-1330, 156-7.

in Italy. According to this remarkable letter, a servant at Berkeley Castle warned Edward that some knights were coming to kill him and offered to help him escape. The former king, disguised in the servant's clothes, killed the sleeping porter, took the keys, and let himself out of the castle. The knights, discovering the king's escape and fearing the queen's wrath, sent the porter's heart to her as Edward's own, and buried the porter's body in the king's designated tomb at Gloucester. Edward went to Corfe Castle, where he remained for eighteen months. Then he went to Ireland for nine months. Afraid that he would be recognized there, Edward returned to England, and sailed from Sandwich to Sluys. His next stops were Normandy, Languedoc, Avignon (where he met with the pope), Paris, Brabant, Cologne, and Milan. Finally, he ended at the castle of Melazzo and the castle of Cecima in Lombardy, where he remained a recluse.[83]

If we consider only these two documents, we might assume that Edward did escape his death. In the Lincoln Parliament of 1327, however, Edward's death was announced as having occurred on 21 September 1327. He was given a December funeral and was buried at Gloucester Abbey.[84] The contemporary chronicles say little on the matter. The Annales Paulini simply state that on 20 September 1327 Edward II died in Berkeley Castle where he was being held.[85]

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[83]This letter, in translation, is printed in G. P. Cuttino and T. W. Lyman, "Where is Edward II?", Speculum 53 (1978): 526-7.

[84]Fryde, 201. [85]Annales Paulini, 337.

Adam Murimuth goes further and notes that Edward died in Berkeley Castle where he was imprisoned unwillingly and that several churchmen viewed his body.[86] The legend of Edward's torment and gruesome murder appears later in the fourteenth century and will merit further analysis.

There are also several references to the king's death in government documents. The new king issued an order on 15 May 1328 that Thomas Berkeley and John Maltravers were to be paid 100s. for every day that they had custody of Edward II's body.[87] Two years later, Roger Mortimer was accused of Edward's alleged murder as indicated by the official indictment:

> Whereas the father of our lord the king was at Kenilworth by the ordinance and assent of the peers of the land, to stay there at his ease and to be served as befitted such a lord, Roger, by the royal power which he had usurped, did not rest until he had got the king into his control, and ordered him to be sent to Berkeley Castle, where by means of himself and his tools the king was traitorously, feloniously and falsely murdered.[88]

It was clearly the government's position that Edward II was dead. Later, Edward III would try several other men, including John Maltravers, Thomas Gourney, and William Ockley for his father's murder, most of whom would flee England before their judgment.

The vast majority of historians reject the idea that Edward II escaped from death. Stubbs and Tout believe the de Fieschi letter to be a forgery, or at best inaccurate;

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[86]Murimuth, 53-4. [87]C. C. R. 1327-1330, 284.

[88]A. R. Myers, ed., English Historical Documents: 1327-1485 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 53.

many other scholars agree that Edward died in Berkeley Castle.[89] A few historians are more liberal in their analysis, thereby conceding the possibility that Edward did not die as the de Fieschi letter claims.[90]

The coverup that Isabella desired on all aspects of Edward's treatment was effective. Few knew exactly what happened to him, and those who did were not telling. Because he disappeared from view, like the two princes in the Tower one hundred and fifty years later, the practical explanation is that he died, either by murder or by natural causes. Of course, it is more interesting to believe that he was murdered, and later chroniclers devise an appropriately gruesome death for him. On the other hand, historians have not successfully refuted the authenticity of the two letters discussed above; they are questionable only in their lack of supporting evidence. Pending the examination of the royal tomb at Gloucester, it can only be said that Edward's fate is a mystery.

Any consideration of Edward's fate leads to the contemplation of his queen and her role in this final tragedy. As we have seen, even royalty must bear the human condition, and Isabella and Edward had their share of

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[89]Chronicles of the Reigns, vol. 2, cvi-cvii; McKisack, 94; Harold F. Hutchison, Edward II (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), 142; and T. F. Tout, "The Captivity and Death of Edward of Carnarvon," in The Collected Papers of Thomas Frederick Tout, ed. Hilda Johnstone, vol. 3 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1934), 179.

[90]See Fryde, 210-6; and Cuttino and Lyman, who analyze in detail the de Fieschi letter.

troubles and of happiness. The situation turned drastically for the worse, however, with the rise of Hugh Despenser as the king's favorite. When a young, inexperienced girl, Isabella had barely tolerated Gaveston; now she showed herself completely unwilling to endure her replacement in Edward's affections. She received her chance to escape her humiliation in the spring of 1325, when Edward decided to send her to France to negotiate with her brother King Charles IV over the problems in Gascony.

The author of the Vita insists that the queen went to France to flee the hated Despenser. He adds that:

> Small wonder if she does not like Hugh, through whom her uncle [Thomas of Lancaster] perished, by whom she was deprived of her servants and all her rents; consequently she will not (so many think) return until Hugh Despenser is wholly removed from the king's side.[91]

Edward was aware of Isabella's hatred of Despenser, though he claimed not to understand it. The king says in the Vita that "it is surprising that she has conceived this dislike of Hugh, for when she departed, towards no one was she more agreeable, myself excepted."[92] On 18 March 1326, he wrote to his son that "she feigns a reason to withdraw from the king by reason of his dear and faithful nephew H. le Despenser."[93]

Obviously Edward did not know his wife very well. She, as the author of the Vita writes in the last sentence of his biography, "refused to return to England."[94] Other

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[91] Vita, 135. [92] Ibid., 143.

[93] C. C. R. 1323-1327, 579. [94] Vita, 145.

matters, in addition to her hatred of Despenser, influenced her decision. She may have taken a lover, Roger Mortimer, and with him was planning to overthrow Edward.

There is no reason to believe that Isabella had previously been unfaithful, although as Charles Wood points out in an interesting paper, "the possibility always exists that she had earlier lovers."[95] Not a shred of evidence survives, however, that casts a doubtful light on the queen's morality before the 1320s. Interestingly enough, no contemporary evidence states that Isabella and Mortimer were lovers. The Vita does not mention Mortimer's name in connection with Isabella's; the author only has Edward saying that "the queen has been led into this error at the suggestion of someone, and he is in truth wicked and hostile whoever he may be."[96] Unfortunately, the monk ends his narrative in 1325, before the crisis had reached its climax, so it could be that no rumors had reached him yet.

Adam Murimuth states that there was undue contact between the queen and Mortimer, but he could have been referring to political matters rather than to intimate ones.[97] The St. Paul's annalist remarks that Mortimer was arrested in the queen's chamber, but it is unclear whether a

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[95]Charles T. Wood, "Queens, Queans, and Kingship: An Inquiry into Theories of Royal Legitimacy in Late Medieval England and France," in Order and Innovation in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of Joseph R. Strayer, ed. William C. Jordan, Bruce McNab, and Teofilo F. Ruiz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 387.

[96]Vita, 144. [97]Murimuth, 45-6.

bedchamber is meant.[98] Some kind of bond existed between the two, for the Annales Paulini mention Mortimer and Isabella together on several occasions.[99] But this chronicle and the others do not brand them as adulterers.

Edward in his letters mentions Roger Mortimer only in the role of traitor. On 19 June 1326 he wrote to the bishop of Beauvais that Isabella "adheres to Roger le Mortimer, the king's mortal enemy and notorious traitor."[100] By way of comparison, he also admonished his son on the same date for having "kept company with and adhered to Mortimer."[101] To the queen herself, he wrote nothing about Mortimer.[102] Edward either did not know or chose not to disclose his knowledge of Isabella's adultery, if such it was.

It is accepted that Isabella and Mortimer were openly living together, though official government documentation and contemporary chronicles omit such a suggestion. However, it is a fact that Isabella, Mortimer, and Edward of Windsor invaded England in September 1326, that they deposed Edward II and possibly had him murdered, and that together they ruled England until Mortimer's execution in 1330. Edward III hated Mortimer enough to have him arrested and suffer a traitor's death, but the main accusations were that he usurped the rightful king's power and that he

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[98]Annales Paulini, 352. [99]Ibid., 314, 322, 343.

[100]C. C. R. 1323-1327, 576. [101]Ibid.

[102]See the letter dated 1 December 1325, C. C. R. 1323-1327, 580.

assassinated his father. It is only mentioned briefly and in no detail that he had caused problems between Edward II and Isabella.[103]

There seems to have been as much of a coverup about Isabella's scandalous affair as there was about Edward's fate. After 1330, Edward III had his own good name to consider; he would not knowingly jeopardize the crown that came to him with so much trouble. Before 1330, few would dare criticize the two who were in power; those who did were conveniently murdered.[104] Edward II, if he knew about Isabella's infidelity, did not allow any official mention of it. All of this obscures the motives behind Isabella's actions and conceals the true nature of her liaison with Mortimer.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that Isabella and Mortimer were lovers. But, as in the death of Edward, lack of documentation must render this only as a possibility, no more. The lurid stories told about the queen and Mortimer belong to later generations of writers.

One other matter must be addressed. Although later writers brand Isabella a murderer as well as an adulteress, no contemporary account accuses her of that particular crime. Three reasons for this come to mind: she was innocent of the charge; Edward II did not die in Berkeley

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[103]Myers, 54.

[104]The most famous victim was Edmund, earl of Kent, Edward II's brother.

Castle, so there was no murder; out of respect for Edward III Isabella's complicity in the death was ignored. Her behavior after her downfall implies remorse for some great sin. Whether that transgression was adultery, murder, treason, or some combination of the three remains a mystery.

Upon Mortimer's death, Isabella was sent into seclusion at Castle Rising, in Norfolk. Her son saw to it that she was well-tended, but he also refused her any official public function. She later joined the lay penitents of the Poor Clares of the Franciscan Order, perhaps as a measure of her own penitence. Isabella showed remorse for her actions in other ways as well. Each year she commemorated the anniversary of her husband's death.[105] She ordered that Edward's heart be buried alongside her in her coffin, and that she be interred in her wedding dress.[106] She died at Castle Rising on 22 August 1358, having quietly spent the last twenty-eight years of her life.

Thus ends the official narrative of Edward II and Isabella. Mystery enshrouded much of their lives, thus laying the groundwork for the legends that soon arose. We have, on the one hand, a king who was not a king; a man, who, according to Tout, was weak-willed, frivolous, unschooled in the popular athletics of the day,

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[105]F. D. Blackley, "Isabella of France, Queen of England 1308-1358, and the Late Medieval Cult of the Dead," Canadian Journal of History 15 (Apr. 1980): 42.

[106]Fryde, 202.

unbusinesslike, and interested only in his own amusements.[107] He preferred male favorites, yet could function as a heterosexual. He despised his aristocracy, much to its consternation, and had to suffer the consequences many times. He did not learn from his mistakes. He gravely misjudged his wife, and for that offense, among others, he lost his crown. A weak king in an age when royal strength was needed and admired, Edward lacked the greatness that his father and son possessed. Coming between two such stalwarts, Edward II's character stands out like a beacon, waiting to be illuminated. Many answers have been offered since 1327 to solve the enigma.

Isabella is no less unusual. She was not content simply to sit on the sidelines and bear children as were Eleanor of Castile and Philippa of Hainault. She was a strong woman given a weak husband, who, for unclear reasons, decided to revolt against her fate in the worst possible way. Her overthrow of Edward's government, participation in his deposition and disappearance, and active liaison with Mortimer, whatever its nature, prove that she was a remarkable woman for her time. She, too, demands explanation, and has not been without her historians.

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[107]Tout, Place of the Reign, 9.

CHAPTER 2

THE BIRTH OF A ROMANCE

Edward II's ineffectiveness as king, Gaveston's ascendance, the baronial revolts, the Despensers' rise to power, and Isabella's coup d'etat are documented facts. Other matters, such as the nature of Edward's relationships with Gaveston, Despenser, and his wife, the manner of his death, Isabella's motivations (indeed, her character in general), remain mysteries about which chroniclers, historians, playwrights, and novelists have speculated since 1330. These conjectures often disguise themselves as serious historical scholarship and have been repeated for so long that their sources are forgotten. It is often impossible to prove that they have any basis in fact.

Edward II's reign had few contemporary historians. The Vita and the Annales Londonienses were probably written during his lifetime; the Annales Paulini and Adam Murimuth's chronicle appeared afterward, but as eyewitnesses to the events they record these chroniclers can be considered contemporary. During the reign of Edward III (1327-1377) the number of chronicles increased. This is not surprising, given his heroic nature and the many important battles that occurred during these years; circumstances such as these

attract historical writers. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were likewise littered with chroniclers who rewrote history to suit their own, and their sovereigns', prejudices. In addition, poems and dramas began to surface with themes and plots inspired by history. It is important to remember that these works are literature and not to regard them too seriously as historical fact. V. H. Galbraith, a pioneer in the study of chronicles as historiography, writes that "medieval history was always slowly turning into Romance, and on the whole we do wisely in suspecting any testimony that is not contemporary."[1]

Chroniclers, poets, and dramatists were responsible for turning the lives of Edward II and Isabella into romances after their downfalls. The chronicles written during Edward III's reign often begin with his father's story, perhaps as a means of establishing background or of glorifying Edward III's rise to greatness under inauspicious conditions. Edward II's importance as a cult figure may also have inspired literary creations.

The genesis of the "romance" of Edward II and Isabella of France dates to very soon after 1330 and its reverberations continue to this day. To trace the development of the romance it will be necessary to analyze the important chronicles and literature written after 1330. The first chronicle to consider is the one attributed to

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[1]V. H. Galbraith, Kings and Chroniclers: Essays in English History (London: Hambledon Press, 1982), 126.

Johannis de Trokelowe, a monk at St. Albans. There is some question as to his authorship; Antonia Gransden believes that he was only the scribe, not the creator.[2] It is also unknown exactly when the chronicle was written. The editor of the Rolls Series edition of Trokelowe's Annales declares that they were not compiled until at least 1330, although the narrative itself ends in 1323;[3] Gransden grants contemporary status to the chronicle.[4] In either case, Trokelowe's Annales are an appropriate place to begin the analysis. His account of Edward II's reign, though agreeing in many instances with the eyewitness versions of the Vita, the Annales Paulini, and Adam Murimuth's chronicle, has a more sensational tone.

Trokelowe tells the same story about Gaveston and Edward II that contemporary chronicles relate, but he furnishes some further insights. He implies ingeniously that the king and his favorite had an illicit relationship by claiming that he does not know why or in what fashion Edward loved Gaveston. More to the point he admits that Edward had a unique partiality for the Gascon.[5] Trokelowe

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[2]Antonia Gransden, Historical Writing in England: c. 1307 to the Early Sixteenth Century (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), 5.

[3]Chronica Monasterii S. Albani, Rolls Series, ed. Henry T. Riley, vol. 3 (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1866), xvi.

[4]Gransden, 5.

[5]Johannis de Trokelowe, Annales, in Chronica Monasterii S. Albani, vol. 3, 64-5.

does not go so far, however, as to brand either man or the relationship homosexual.

Trokelowe is one of the earliest chroniclers to promote sympathy for Isabella's plight. He relates that she writes to her father that she is living in poverty because of Gaveston's avarice. Philip IV responds by severely reproaching Edward for the shabby treatment of his daughter. Later, when Gaveston approaches France as a haven during one of his exiles, Philip threatens to pack him off to his daughter and the disgruntled barons if he steps one foot in that country.[6]

Isabella is also the focus of another story that appears to be original. In May 1312, Edward II and Gaveston flee Newcastle for the safety of Scarborough when they learn that the earl of Lancaster and his troops are coming to arrest the favorite. The pregnant queen, also at Newcastle, tearfully begs her husband not to leave her, but to no avail. When Lancaster arrives at the castle, he sees the queen in her sorrow, pities her, consoles her, and promises her that he will not cease fighting Gaveston until the Gascon is removed from the king's side.[7]

This moving, though unsubstantiated, story emphasizes Edward's mistreatment of Isabella. Edward is the villain, Isabella the pitiful victim who must remain to cope with the furious earl and his followers. The earl of Lancaster is the sympathetic character; he is the chivalrous knight that

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[6]Trokelowe, 68-9. [7]Ibid., 75-6.

Edward II should have been.

Some historians accept Trokelowe's account of the escape to Scarborough, though an earlier chronicler tells a different story.[8] The remaining Annales add little to the legend, painting a balanced and life-like portrait of both the king and queen. Trokelowe describes Edward's unpleasant traits of obsession, neglect, and failure, yet he reports that the king fought valiantly at Bannockburn. He praises Isabella's amicable relations with the barons and her reputation as peacemaker on several occasions,[9] but she also becomes the pathetic, clinging wife. His chronicle, though sentimental at times, is much more reliable than some that are to follow, because he for the most part corroborates the contemporary chroniclers.

The next chronicle also is faithful to contemporary documentation, with some notable exceptions which will add considerably to the legend. The Brut is an anonymous history written in French not long after 1333.[10] It was one of the most popular chronicles of the fourteenth century, appearing "from its contents to have been addressed to the widest possible medieval audience."[11] Yet this chronicle is

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[8]See, for example, Maddicott, 125; and McKisack, 25; for the differing contemporary view see Household Book, xxiii-xxvi; and Annales Londonienses, 204.

[9]Trokelowe, 80, 110.

[10]John Taylor, "The French 'Brut' and the Reign of Edward II," English Historical Review 72 (1957): 425.

[11]Ibid., 435; see also Gransden, 73, for the Brut's popularity.

one of the least utilized of all the near contemporary sources for Edward II's reign.[12] This is puzzling because the Brut is filled with interesting insights that will affect the writings of later historians.

Like most other chronicles, the Brut begins its version of Edward's reign with the recall of Piers Gaveston to England. Many times the chronicler comments on Edward's attachment to his favorite. At first he writes that the king "so miche louede him that he callede him his 'brother'," a statement that earlier chroniclers also made.[13] Later he claims more forcefully that "King Edward louede Piers of Gauaston so miche that he might nought forlete his company."[14] Gaveston was long considered a bad influence upon the king; Edward I commanded that the earl of Warwick keep Gaveston out of the country to avoid "bringing his son [Edward II] into riot."[15] The earl of Lancaster, so believes the author, was martyred as revenge for Gaveston's murder ten years before.[16] The chronicler stops short, however, of accusing either Edward or Gaveston of homosexuality.

The Brut also notes with disdain the rise of the Despensers. The chronicler comments that "Sir Hugh the Spenser, the sone, that was the Kynges chaumberlein, kepte

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[12]See Taylor, 424.

[13]The Brut or the Chronicles of England, Early English Text Society, ed. Friedrich Brie, vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 205.

[14]Ibid., 206. [15]Ibid. [16]Ibid., 207.

so the Kyngus chaumbre, that no man might speke with the Kyng."[17] The king listens to no one but the two Despensers, who counsel him, for example, to dispense with his wife's lands.[18] They believe themselves so powerful that they force Isabella and her son Edward out of France and secretly plan to have them killed.[19] No earlier chronicler dared to make that claim, but many afterward would repeat it.

In this chronicle, for the first time, we acquire a detailed explanation of Roger Mortimer's escape from the Tower. He breaks free with the help of Sir Stephen Seagrave, constable of London. The day before Mortimer is to die, he holds a feast wherein the guards drink so much alcohol that they sleep for two days and nights. With them out of the way, Mortimer flees by water to France. The king, understandably, is "sore annoied."[20] The queen is apparently uninvolved, though later chronicles will accuse her of complicity.

According to the Calendar of Close Rolls, Roger Mortimer poisoned many guards in the Tower which allowed him to escape at night on 6 August 1323. Sir Stephen Seagrave, far from helping Mortimer, became so seriously ill from the poison that he was unable to function as constable.[21] The king may have believed that Seagrave aided Mortimer, however, because a later entry in the Close Rolls dated 18

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[17] Brut, 212. [18] Ibid., 212, 224, 232.

[19] Ibid., 234. [20] Ibid., 231.

[21] C. C. R. 1323-1327, 13.

June 1324 freed Seagrave from the prison in which the king had placed him after Mortimer's departure.[22] Thus the Brut's report could very well be accurate.

By far the most interesting aspect of the Brut for the purposes of this paper concerns the last years of Edward's reign, his deposition, and his alleged murder. The Brut agrees with the Vita that Edward II sends Isabella to France to promote peace with her brother Charles IV. Unlike contemporary sources, however, the Brut reports that Charles remains angry that the English king will not come to France to render homage for Aquitaine, so the French monarch then bestows the duchy upon Prince Edward, unbeknownst to his father.[23] Prince Edward travels to France not upon his father's orders, but because he wishes to see his mother.[24]

Edward II soon orders Isabella and the prince back to England, but they refuse to return because they fear the Despensers. Edward then proclaims them enemies of the realm and declares them exiled.[25] When she discovers this, Isabella becomes afraid and seeks support from other English exiles in France: Roger Mortimer, William Trussell, John of

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[22]C. C. R. 1323-1327, 195. [23]Brut, 232-3.

[24]Ibid., 233.

[25]Though the king sends many letters to numerous people complaining of the misconduct of Isabella and Prince Edward, he never seems to have issued a proclamation declaring them traitors before their invasion. See Thomas D. Hardy, ed., Syllabus of the Documents Relating to England and Other Kingdoms Contained in the Collection Known as 'Rymer's Foedera,', vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1869), 231-7.

Cromwell, and others. She also bids for the duke of Hainault's help by betrothing Prince Edward to the duke's daughter Philippa. With his aid, and God's, she thinks, the prince can regain his heritage and oust the Despensers.[26]

At this point, the chronicler of the Brut elaborates upon Edward's troubles in an original manner. After his deposition and imprisonment, Edward II complains to his jailers that Isabella and his son will not visit him. They respond that the queen and Prince Edward will not come near Berkeley Castle for fear that the deposed king will strangle and kill them. Later Edward II is sent to Corfe Castle under the guard of Thomas Tourney (probably Gurney) and John Maltravers. In September 1327, Roger Mortimer sends a writ of execution to a Thomas and John Hade at Corfe. When the time arrives for the murder to occur, they cheer the king (who is ignorant of what is to come) and send him to bed.[27]

The author of the Brut does not hesitate to recount how the king died, unlike other chroniclers:

> And as the Kyng lay and slepte, the traitoures, false forsuorne ageins her' homage and her' feaute, come priueliche into the Kyngus chaumbre, and her' company with Ham, and Laiden an Huge table oppon his Wombe, and with men pressede and helde fast adoune the iiij corners of the table oppon his body: where with the gode man awoke, and was wonder' sore adrade to bene dede there, and slayn, and turnede his body opsadoun. The tok the false tiraunts and as wode traitoures, an horne, and put hit into his fundement as depe as thai might, and toke a spete of Copur' brennyng, and put the horne into his body, and oftetymes rollede therwith his bowailes; and so thai quellede here Lorde, that nothing was perceyuede; and after, he was enterede at Gloucestr'.[28]

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[26]Brut, 233-4. [27]Ibid., 253. [28]Ibid.

The Brut is the first history to describe Edward's death in this fashion. It is by no means the last. This basic version, with various enhancements added by later writers, survives as the accepted account of Edward's murder among authors and some historians to the present day. Yet where did the chronicler obtain his information? He does not divulge his sources. Later, he contradicts himself by stating that Edward died in Berkeley Castle instead of in Corfe Castle.[29] Knowing from where he derived such information would shed light on the mystery of Edward II's disappearance, but such knowledge is probably not forthcoming. John Taylor, for one, believes that "the whole narrative from 1307 to 1333 has the appearance of one written directly from events, rather than a popularization of a written source."[30] Indeed it is possible to verify that some of the reports are accurate. If Taylor is correct, then the Brut chronicler was an important man privy to secret information who was brave enough to disclose it, but not foolish enough to reveal his sources.

Because of this story, Queen Isabella's image suffers. She and Mortimer, writes the chronicler, take Edward away from Kenilworth Castle so that he can be imprisoned and murdered.[31] Thus the author comes very close to accusing Isabella of complicity in her husband's murder.

He also blames her for the earl of Kent's execution. According to the Brut, rumors arise that Edward II is still

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[29]Brut, 268. [30]Taylor, 435. [31]Brut, 259.

alive in Corfe Castle. Acting on this gossip, Edmund, earl of Kent (and Edward II's brother), informs the pope at Avignon that the deposed king has not died, and the pope offers him help to deliver Edward from prison. Isabella, furious upon hearing this, urges her son to arrest and behead Kent.[32]

Finally, the Brut also implies that the relationship between Isabella and Roger Mortimer is an illicit one. The chronicler states that "made he him [Mortimer] wonder' priuee with the Quene Isabell."[33] When the queen witnesses Mortimer's arrest, "she made miche sorwe in hert', and thise wordes unto ham [the arresters] saide: 'Now, fair sires, y you praye that ye done non harme vnto his body; a worthi knyght, our wel bilouede frende and our dere cosyn.'"[34] Still, the chronicler does not overtly accuse them of adultery nor does he moralize on their relationship.

It will soon be apparent that the Brut influenced many later chroniclers, though modern historians have largely ignored its usefulness as a near-contemporary source for the reign of Edward II. This is puzzling, for although the chronicler has a Lancastrian bias,[35] he succeeds in presenting a sober, balanced account of the years in question. The fact that he relates a unique version of Edward II's murder does not necessarily disqualify him from credibility: Geoffrey le Baker's later account, though

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[32]Brut, 263, 265. [33]Ibid., 268.

[34]Ibid., 271. [35]Taylor, 435.

similar, is much more melodramatic and unbelievable.

In fact, it is thought that Geoffrey le Baker knew and used the Brut as a source. Gransden comments that:

> there may be some literary connection between Baker's chronicle and the Brut. This possibility is suggested by the similarity in both works of the account of the death of Humphrey de Bohun at Boroughbridge and of the murder of Edward of Carnarvon.[36]

She also states that he knew Adam Murimuth's chronicle.[37] The French chronicle by Thomas de la More, no longer extant, likewise provided material for Baker's chronicle; some passages are merely translations into Latin from More's history.[38] Baker began his Chronicon, which spans the years 1303 to 1356, probably shortly after 1341.[39] This is still close enough in time to Edward's reign that we might hope to gain some new insight into its mysteries.

Instead, "it is questionable how far he [Baker] is a reliable source. Certainly his dramatic representation of Edward II's end seems to belong to literature rather than historiography."[40] Gransden adds that:

> Baker obviously embroidered his informants' words--and they themselves exaggerated the facts and in any case may not have remembered them correctly. He collected and synthesized his information twenty years after the events. At that time the cult of Edward II was flourishing and legend was eroding historical accuracy, but, on the other hand, men wanted to disassociate the ruling king, Edward III, from the savage murder of his

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[36]Gransden, 74. [37]Ibid., 38.

[38]Geoffrey le Baker, Chronicon Angliae, ed. J. A. Giles (Publication of the Caxton Society, 1847; reprint, New York: Burt Franklin, 1967), ix.

[39]Gransden, 38. [40]Ibid., 4.

> father for which his mother and her lover, both by then disgraced and the latter dead, were responsible. It is to be expected, therefore, that Baker would eulogize Edward II and denigrate Isabella and Mortimer and their supporters.[41]

Baker slants his account in favor of Edward from the very beginning. He writes early in the chronicle that Edward II is passionately in love with Isabella, a statement that is at best an exaggeration.[42] Edward gallantly besieges Leeds Castle to avenge the insult that the angry Isabella receives when the Badlesmeres refuse her entry.[43] The deposed king's only complaint during his imprisonment is that Isabella (whom he loves) will not visit him or allow his children to visit him. In this scenario, even after all his difficulties with his wife, he claims that from the first moment he saw Isabella he could not love any other woman.[44]

Baker evokes the most sympathy for Edward through his portrayal of the king's final days. The Brut's tersely worded account was not pitiful enough, to judge by Baker's long, melodramatic version of the pathetic king's plight. According to Baker, the poor prisoner is transported from Kenilworth to Corfe to Bristol to Berkeley, always in the dead of night so that he can be prevented from sleeping. He wears tattered clothes and eats rancid food. His guards are unfriendly, contradicting all his words and calling him a madman. They torment Edward by giving him cold water for

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[41]Gransden, 40. [42]Baker, 49.

[43]Ibid., 61-2. [44]Ibid., 88.

shaving and by forcing him to wear a crown of straw. They hope that these actions will erode the former king's health and cause his death, which Isabella desires. What they do not count on, however, is Edward's strong constitution which keeps him alive.[45]

Undaunted, Isabella invents a new scheme. She has the bishop of Hereford (one of her supporters whom Baker hated) send an ambiguous letter to Edward's jailers. It reads, "Edwardum occidere nolite timere bonum est." Depending upon the punctuation of the sentence, the message can mean either "Do not kill Edward, it is a good thing to fear" or alternatively, "Do not fear to kill Edward, it is a good thing." Of course, the jailers are meant to take the latter interpretation. They bring Edward to a safe room, where the stench tortures him for many days. On 22 September 1327, fifteen men enter the king's room and suffocate him with beds. They thrust a red-hot poker through his intestines so that there will be no scars upon the body. Not surprisingly, the king cries out so violently that all of Berkeley knows that he is dying.[46]

Baker knew that his readers might doubt his story. On one occasion he claims that he is revealing proven facts about which he could be more open if Edward II's enemies were not still alive.[47] Later he credits William Bishop, a servant of Edward's jailers, with the story about the cold

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[45]Baker, 89-95. [46]Ibid. [47]Ibid., 90.

shaving water.[48]

These contentions notwithstanding, aspects of Baker's account of Edward's death are doubtful indeed. Thomas Frederick Tout has effectively dispelled some of the assertions that Baker makes. For instance, Tout rejects the idea that the bishop of Hereford sent the ambiguous letter to Edward's jailers. "Even wicked bishops," he writes, "hesitate to send written orders to kill deposed kings, and to plead the accident of a wrong interpretation if their note miscarries."[49] In fact, according to Tout, the bishop was not even in England during this period. He was in Avignon, fighting for a promotion to the see of Worcester that Edward III and Queen Isabella had refused to grant him. Not only was he not present in England for the events in question, but he was not on good terms with the queen, either. As a final blow to the veracity of Baker's story, Tout mentions an earlier chronicler, Alberic of Trois Fontaines (writing before 1252), who attributes the same type of letter to John, archbishop of Gran when planning the murder of Queen Gertrude of Hungary.[50]

It is natural, therefore, to wonder if Baker wrote for literary purposes or for historical ones. His treatment

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[48]Baker, 91. It is interesting to note that no William Bishop appears in the calendar rolls under this designation.

[49]Tout, "Captivity and Death," 164.

[50]Ibid.; and see also Cuttino and Lyman, 522-5 for an analysis of the problems inherent in Baker's chronicle.

of Isabella is no less fantastic. He sympathizes with the queen briefly in her struggle against the Despensers, but primarily Baker characterizes her as completely evil.[51] According to Baker, Isabella plots with the bishop of Hereford who suggests that she travel to France to seek help against the Despensers. It is she, not Edward, who instigates the suggestion that she go to France as peacemaker. Once there, she remains. Baker, with some derision, writes that some say she was kept in France against her will. But the real reason, he reveals, is that she was having illicit intercourse with Roger Mortimer and other English fugitives. With the advice of her lovers, Isabella plans revenge on Edward and the Despensers.[52]

This "fierce lioness," as Baker calls her, orders Edward to Berkeley Castle under the keeping of Thomas Gurney and John Maltravers so that no friendly person can reach him. As has been stated, she conspires with the bishop of Hereford over Edward's murder, fearing that if he is released from prison, he will burn or imprison her. Her liaison with Mortimer continues, resulting in her pregnancy in 1330. Upon the arrest of her lover, she pitifully urges her son, "Beal fitz, Beal fitz, eiez pitie de gentil Mortimer," a plea that falls on deaf ears.[53]

Even though contemporary chroniclers avoid such

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[51]Baker, 70. [52]Ibid., 71-5.

[53]"Fair son, fair son, have pity on gentle Mortimer." For Isabella's nickname, plot, pregnancy, and despair, see Baker, 88-95, 111.

labels, the very closeness of Isabella and Mortimer in the three years they ruled suggests that they were lovers. But Baker is the first to brand them as such and he does not stop there, accusing Isabella of having other lovers as well, for which there is absolutely no proof. Probably she also knew of Edward's disappearance, but the extent of her involvement is unknown. Baker sets that blame squarely on her shoulders in any case and leaves the most likely culprit, Mortimer, out of the picture. Baker is the first to dub the queen with a negative sobriquet, antedating the "she-wolf" nickname by some two hundred years. Finally, no earlier evidence implies that Isabella was pregnant by Mortimer in 1330. But this is a curious remark for a chronicler to make about a woman whose son sat on the throne of England, a woman who, at the time of writing, was still alive. If Baker did have inside information on this subject, he remained quiet about his source.

Geoffrey le Baker's Chronicon, with its theatrical style and juicy details, greatly affected the shaping of the romance. It was to his version of the story that future chroniclers, poets, and playwrights often turned when Edward II and Isabella were to be their subjects. It is he that modern historians refute in order to allow the real Edward and Isabella to emerge.[54] It is in part thanks to Baker that Edward II has taken on the image of the tragic king and

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[54]See, for example, Tout, "Captivity and Death," 164; and Fryde, 201.

Isabella that of the evil queen. Authors will continue to weave this thread through their literature. But Baker is by no means the final authority on the subject.

An example of another view can be found in one of the most popular fourteenth century chronicles.[55] This is the Polychronicon by Ranulf Higden, a chronicle contemporaneous with Geoffrey le Baker's Chronicon.[56] Higden's Polychronicon is a sweeping history, beginning at creation and continuing to his own time. Gransden states that his "primary concern was with past, not contemporary, history," yet he paints an interesting picture of Edward II, a more complete portrait than Baker's one-dimensional figure.[57] Of Isabella, he has little to say.

Higden's description of the king is a classic one:

> This kynge Edwarde was a semely man of body, myghty in strengthe, but moche inconstant. For the seide kynge despisynge the cownsaile of the noble men of his realme, drawede to harlottes, syngers, carters, and to schippemen, giffynge hym to ryette, exaltynge over moche a man that he hade luffed. Whiche causede obprobry to the kynge, obloquy to that other person, sclawnder to the peple, and hurte to the realme. And mony thynges and grete treasures giffen to hym for to repelle the Scottes, were spende and wastede amonge harlottes and in excesse.[58]

Concerning Gaveston, Higden is equally as blunt. As soon as Edward II succeeds to the throne, he recalls his "luffe Petyr Gavaston to the realme ageyne."[59] Higden adds

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[55]Gransden, 73. [56]Ibid., 44-5. [57]Ibid., 44.

[58]Ranulf Higden, Polychronicon, Rolls Series, ed. Joseph R. Lumby, vol. 8 (Kraus Reprint Ltd., 1964), 299-301.

[59]Ibid., 297.

that because of Gaveston, Edward II "despisede his quene Isabell, and despisede also the noble men of the londe."[60] Thus two men, Baker and Higden, writing about the same king at approximately the same time, tell completely opposite stories. Baker alleges that the king was wildly in love with Isabella; Higden takes the more accepted position that Edward preferred Gaveston to his queen. Both, as near-contemporary sources, can be cited as documentation for whatever attitude a modern historian wishes to adopt.

Higden is not melodramatic like Baker, and his version of Edward II's reign and those people involved in it is sober and believable. The following excerpt about the Despensers is a good example:

> From that tyme [the death of Lancaster] unto the vjthe yere folowynge, the power of the Spensers began to encrease, and the powere of the qwene to decrease, untylle the kynge of Fraunce troublede the kynge of Ynglonde in that he did not homage for the cuntre of Gascoigne.[61]

Isabella then goes to France to seek peace, Edward II sends his son to France to render homage to King Charles, Isabella and the prince do not return to England for fear of the Despensers, Edward then exiles them and denounces them as traitors. Soon thereafter, Isabella, Mortimer, and Prince Edward invade England.[62]

Higden's version of Edward II's death resembles that of the Brut. He also refers to the cult that has arisen over the late king's memory. Higden is no fool, however; he

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[60]Higden, 301. [61]Ibid., 315. [62]Ibid., 319-20.

knows that a tragic death does not necessarily produce a martyr:

> Edward somme tyme kynge was broughte from Kenelworthe to the castelle of Berkeley, where he was sleyne with a hoote broche putte thro the secrete place posterialle. Wherefore mony peple say that he died a martir and did mony miracles; neverthelesse kepynge in prison, vilenes and obprobrious dethe cause not a martir, but if the holynesse of lyfe afore be correspondent: for hit is welle and if that vile dethe de awez synne in hym and diminische his peyns. But women luffynge to goe in pilgremage encrease moche the rumor of suche veneracion, untille that a feble edifienge falle downe.[63]

Higden's Edward is a man who is not worthy to be king and who deserves his fate. His view would inspire later medieval chroniclers such as Sir Thomas Gray and Henry Knighton[64], but his opinion of Edward's martyrdom (or lack thereof) would prove to be less influential than that of Geoffrey le Baker.

So far all the chronicles discussed have been English in origin. The Flemish also had their own perspective concerning Edward II's reign and while most of their histories contain inaccuracies, they are not without interest given the fact that the Flemish were important participants in Edward's overthrow. The first one to consider is an anonymous Flemish history, thought to be written in 1346. Important for its accounts of Philip the Fair's Flemish wars, it is utterly erroneous in its analysis of English history.[65] It is useful to study this chronicle,

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[63]Higden, 325-7. [64]Gransden, 57.

[65]Anciennes Chroniques de Flandres, in Recueil des Historiens des Gaules et de la France, ed. Mr. de Wailly and de Lisle, vol. 22 (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1865), 330.

however, as an exercise in how historians can grossly distort events only twenty years after they occur.

One such event is the arrest of Roger Mortimer in 1322. Edward, through the counsel of Hugh Despenser, suspects that Isabella is having an affair with Mortimer. The king therefore arrests the alleged lover and puts him in the Tower.[66] Mortimer was in fact imprisoned in the Tower of London for about eighteen months, but certainly not for suspicion of adultery. A letter in the close rolls states that Richard Lovell, constable of Bristol Castle, arrested and imprisoned Roger Mortimer, along with eighteen other men, for burning the king's towns and attacking the king's servants.[67] All of this stems from uprisings in the Marcher lands over Hugh Despenser's confiscation of some of the barons' lands. The queen apparently played no part in this drama.

Another misrepresentation of events concerns the queen's trip to France. After Mortimer's escape from prison, Edward angrily plans to imprison Isabella. When she discovers this plot, she takes her son and her jewels, and with the earl of Kent flees to Boulogne. This, according to the chronicler, occurs in August 1323.[68] Many mistakes riddle this report. First, even though Edward was no doubt

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[66]Anciennes Chroniques de Flandres, 415.

[67]C. C. R. 1318-1323, 511-2.

[68]Anciennes Chroniques de Flandres, 416.

concerned about Mortimer's escape, there is no evidence that he accused Isabella of complicity. She did not travel to France until March 1325 (long after Mortimer arrived there) and then it was under the orders of her husband.[69] The prince did not follow until September 1325.[70]

Isabella is not the only one to suffer from the chronicler's mistakes. He is among the first to suggest publicly that an improper relationship existed between Edward II and Hugh Despenser, the son. He accomplishes this through his description of Despenser's execution: "le bourreau lui coupa tout premierement le vit et les genitoires pour tant que il estoit heretique et sodomitte, ainsi comme l'en disoit, et meismement aveuc le roy."[71] No English chronicler had charged Edward II and Despenser with this vice, but apparently the suspicion existed, at least in continental Europe. Englishmen and others hated Despenser for his tyranny and no doubt wished to think the worst of him. The method of his execution, hanging, drawing, and quartering, cannot itself serve as proof of Despenser's alleged homosexuality, for this was the common method of

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[69]"The King informs the pope that he has sent Q. Isabella into France to procure peace," letter dated 8 March 1325 (Hardy, 230).

[70]"Memorandum that Edward, the K.'s eldest son, embarked at Dover for France, to do homage to the K. of France," memorandum dated 12 September 1325 (Hardy, 232).

[71]"The executioner first cut the genitals because he was a heretic and a sodomite, as everyone says, even with the king." See Anciennes Chroniques de Flandres, 426.

executing traitors. But its barbarity could easily lead to such speculation of sexual sin if the suspicion already prevailed.

As to Edward's gruesome and sexually suggestive death, the Flemish chronicler says nothing. Instead, he writes that Edward was pushed off a high building to his death.[72] Where the chronicler came by this questionable information is impossible to determine and he gives no clues.

The anonymous Flemish chronicle might be valuable for its own national history, but its account of Edward II's reign teems with idle suppositions, inaccuracies, and probably pure invention. As a contrast, a London chronicle from about the same time (between 1343 and 1350) presents a trustworthy account of Edward II and Isabella. This is the anonymous French Chronicle of London, which takes as its source the Brut.[73] This chronicle is not so much a narrative as a yearly list of the high officials of London. In between the names, however, the chronicler relates the important events and thus gives an interesting insight into the characters of Edward II and Isabella.

The French chronicler tells that Edward made a great mistake by naming Gaveston the earl of Cornwall; the new earl's peers hated him because of his avarice and his

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[72]Anciennes Chroniques de Flandres, 426-7.

[73]D. C. Cox, "The French Chronicle of London," Medium Aevum 45 (1976): 201, 205.

arrogance.[74] The king continues to rely on unworthy counselors after Gaveston's death. Through the faulty advice of the Despensers, Edward seizes all the queen's lands and declines to go to France to render homage to Charles IV, sending instead his son, this after Isabella was already in France.[75]

This chronicle is more sympathetic to Isabella than to Edward. The author describes her as a widow in mourning for her lost husband during her sojourn in France and does not connect her to Mortimer or to anyone else. The common people love and support her, he writes, because she is popularly known as a peacemaker.[76] If he believed she was responsible for Edward's murder he does not say so, noting instead that "par abetement de ascunes sertein persones et l'assent de ses faus gardeinz, [Edward] treiterousment nutaundre estoit vilement murdriz."[77] Nor does the chronicler accuse Isabella and Mortimer of adultery even after 1327. According to him, Edward III arrests Mortimer in the earl's own bedchamber, not the queen's as other chroniclers sometimes assert.[78]

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[74]Croniques de London depuis l'an 44 Hen. III jusqu'à l'an 17 Edw. III, ed. George James Aungier (London: Camden Society Publication, 1844), 35-6.

[75]Croniques de London, 48. [76]Ibid.

[77]"With the help of certain people and the assent of his false jailers, [Edward] was traitorously and vilely murdered." See Croniques de London, 58.

[78]Ibid., 63.

The French Chronicle of London proves that even in the mid-fourteenth century Isabella still had her defenders. But they may have been a minority. Isabella was always well-liked in London and the Londoners were among the first to rally under the queen's banner when she invaded England.[79] Therefore it is not surprising that a London chronicler would portray Isabella favorably.

Foreign chronicles, nevertheless, continued to sympathize with Isabella during this period. One example is the chronicle of Jean le Bel, a cleric born in Lieges in 1290. He went to Scotland in 1327 as a member of Jean de Hainault's company, from whom he presumably heard first-hand accounts of Isabella's career. Jean le Bel later committed these stories to writing, the first part of his chronicle being written between 1352 and 1356.[80]

Although he may have received eyewitness information, Jean le Bel's chronicle is full of errors. He concentrates on Isabella and does not speculate much on Edward II's life or death. Like many chroniclers, he claims that the queen "estoit une des plus belles dames du monde."[81] But, according to le Bel, this most beautiful woman is not first in her husband's affections. Hugh Despenser is so forceful

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[79]Fryde, 174.

[80]Jean le Bel, Chronique de Jean le Bel, ed. Jules Viard and Eugene Deprez, vol. 1 (Paris: Librarie Renouard, 1904), i, iii, x.

[81]Isabella "was one of the most beautiful women in the world." See Jean le Bel, 6.

and causes so much trouble between Edward and Isabella that the king refuses to be in the same place as the queen. Isabella so fears for her life at the hands of Despenser that she flees to France, taking with her the earl of Kent, Roger Mortimer, and many other knights.[82]

Once she is in France, English barons send word to Isabella asking her to raise an army to invade England and to oust Despenser. She goes to her brother King Charles IV and begs for help. He agrees to provide men and money at first, but secret letters from Hugh Despenser persuade the French king to betray his sister. Someone warns Isabella, and fearing that Charles will send her back to England she escapes to Hainault with Prince Edward, Kent, and Mortimer.[83]

Jean le Bel provides the standard account of Isabella's invasion and her subsequent regency. He does note, however, the rumors that the queen and Mortimer were lovers. Because of this gossip and because Mortimer forced Edward III to execute the earl of Kent, the young king arrests and executes his mother's alleged lover.[84] The chronicler does not speculate on the veracity of the rumors.

The chronicle of Jean le Bel is important because it is the source for one of the most influential late fourteenth century histories, written by a famous Hainaulter named Jean Froissart.[85] He wrote under the patronage of

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[82]Jean le Bel, 10-1. [83]Ibid., 11-4.

[84]Ibid., 102-3. [85]Gransden, 89.

Queen Philippa, glorifying her husband, Edward III of England.[86] For the early fourteenth century, at least, he is an unreliable historian, because he writes "in the highly coloured chivalric style and undoubtedly presents a romanticized view of events."[87]

Froissart's narrative does read remarkably like an historical novel. He is a careless historian and his many mistakes erode his credibility as a chronicler, but the tale he tells is an influential one. His history of Edward and Isabella comes directly from Jean le Bel, but with more elaboration on the king. As an Hainaulter, he tends to be sympathetic to Isabella.

Froissart has a tenuous grip on English history before the deposition of Edward II. He seems to confuse Gaveston with Despenser, writing that "King Edward the Second . . . governed his kingdom very indifferently, by the advice of sir Hugh Spencer, who had been brought up with him from his youth."[88] He then almost exactly duplicates Jean le Bel's version of Despenser's interference between Edward and Isabella, her escape to France, her brother's betrayal, and her excursion to Hainault. He adds further that Despenser bribes the pope with gold, who then threatens King Charles with excommunication if he does not send Isabella

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[86]Ibid. [87]Gransden, 90.

[88]Jean Froissart, Chronicles of England, France, Spain, and the Adjoining Countries, ed. Thomas Johnes, vol. 1 (London: William Smith, 1839), 5.

home.[89]

Many chroniclers, including Froissart, assign Charles IV a large role in Isabella's drama. Some support for this can be found in several letters in the close rolls. On 1 December 1325, 18 March 1326, and 19 June 1326, Edward II wrote letters to Charles informing him of his displeasure and insisting that the French king send Isabella home.[90] Charles never answered to Edward's satisfaction, however, and on 10 September 1326 Edward ordered the arrest of all French people in his realm.[91] At this point Edward apparently expected an invasion from France rather than from Hainault, indicating that Charles never denied that he was aiding his sister.

It is not clear what Charles did during this crucial stage of Isabella's life. Certainly Edward assumed that the French king was on the queen's side. It is just as obvious that Isabella was not able to obtain much help from her brother, as she had to rely on the Hainaulters. Some historians claim that Charles made Isabella leave his country for various reasons, including suspicion of adultery;[92] others believe that the French king did not force the queen out of France, or they fail to state an opinion at all.[93] Judging from Edward's responses to Charles' letters, however, it seems likely that Charles had

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[89]Froissart, 6-8.

[90]C. C. R. 1323-1327, 577-81. [91]Hardy, 237.

[92]See, for example, McKisack, 83. [93]See Fryde, 181.

no intention of returning Isabella to her husband.

After the typical account of Isabella's invasion, Froissart then turns briefly to the fates of Despenser and Edward II. About Despenser's death, Froissart reports that:

> first his private parts were cut off, because he was deemed a heretic, and guilty of unnatural practices, even with the king, whose affections he had alienated from the queen by his wicked suggestions.[94]

This duplicates the description of Despenser's execution found in The Anciennes Chroniques de Flandres. By repeating it in his flamboyant history, however, Froissart assured the survival of a probably incorrect assumption: that Edward II and Despenser were homosexual lovers.

Froissart is more vague about the king's downfall. He writes that:

> The king was sent, by the advice of the barons and knights, to Berkeley castle, under a strong guard. Many attentions were paid to him, and proper people were placed near his person, to take every care of him, but on no account to suffer him to pass the bounds of his castle.[95]

Froissart does not mention Edward II again. As for Isabella, he remarks that:

> great infamy fell upon the queen mother--whether with just cause or not I am ignorant, but it was commonly said, that she was with child, and in this was the lord Mortimer inculpated.[96]

Froissart, who presents a favorable image of the queen, may have been reporting some court scuttlebutt. It is interesting to note that neither Baker, who also mentions the rumor, nor Froissart record what happened to the baby.

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[94]Froissart, 13. [95]Ibid. [96]Ibid., 31.

By the end of the fourteenth century, the basic shape of the romance had formed. All chronicles, whether favorable or unfavorable to Edward II, agreed that he doted too much on his favorites for the good of the country. He did not effectively rule England, as was his duty, and therefore he deserved to lose his crown--not necessarily his life, however; indeed, several chroniclers strove to create a martyr out of him. Isabella's treatment is more problematic. Many chronicles, mostly foreign, praise her beauty and commiserate with her troubles. Only a few concentrate on her crimes, but it is their view of Isabella that has survived the centuries.

It is not surprising, therefore, that strange tales begin to be told about this complicated woman. Sir Thomas Gray, in his Scalacronica, a Scottish chronicle written sometime before 1369, reports some heretofore ignored information. Writing about the adultery scandal that rocked Philip the Fair's court in 1314, he states that "il estoit dit de parol du comune qe cest esclaundre fust descouert au roy de France par sa feille Isabelle royne Dengleter, quoy estoit suppose de plusours qe nestoit pas uerite."[97]

Later in the fourteenth century, this faint allegation is transformed into a full-blown romantic story

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[97]"It was commonly said that the king of France discovered this scandal through his daughter Isabelle, queen of England, but many people did not believe this to be true." See Thomas Gray, Scalacronica: A Chronicle of England and Scotland (Edinburgh, 1834), 137.

by Jean des Preis d'Outremeuse, a member of the episcopal court in Lieges. Isabella, in France in 1313, gives two purses to her sisters-in-law Marguerite and Blanche. Upon her return to England, she notices the purses among the possessions of two knights of Philip the Fair's council who have accompanied the English queen home. Isabella secretly contacts her father and informs him of her suspicions. Philip then imprisons his daughters-in-law and executes their supposed lovers.[98]

No other English or French chronicle in the fourteenth century mentions Isabella's involvement in this scandal. Not even the Chroniques de Saint-Denis, those chronicles written for and commissioned by the kings of France,[99] link Isabella to it.[100] Later chroniclers, and indeed later historians, repeat the accusation as if it were fact. But as Elizabeth A. R. Brown notes, no contemporary evidence exists that Isabella discovered the adultery.[101]

This is just one example of how writers in the fourteenth century have begun to romanticize the lives of Edward II and Isabella. The romance spills over into the fifteenth century, when the passage of time further erodes

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[98]For this account, see Brown, "Diplomacy," 26-7.

[99]Antonia Gransden, "Propaganda in English Medieval Historiography," Journal of Medieval History 1 (1975): 375.

[100]See Chroniques de Saint-Denis depuis 1285 jusqu'en 1328, in Recueil des Historiens des Gaules et de la France, ed. F. Daunout and Mr. Naudet, vol. 20 (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1840), 692.

[101]Brown, "Diplomacy," 30.

those elements of truth still clinging to the legend. Chroniclers repeat what has already been recorded in the previous century; in some cases they add new information. One such chronicle is Thomas Walsingham's famous Historia Anglicana, written about the year 1430.[102] He relies heavily on Adam Murimuth, Johannis de Trokelowe, and Ranulf Higden for the years 1308 to 1343.[103] He also includes certain stories for which no source is apparent, most of which concern Queen Isabella.

For instance, Walsingham writes that Edward II has every intention of secretly murdering Isabella and his son Edward while they are in France. To carry out this endeavor, he contacts John of Brittany, the earl of Richmond. Someone uncovers the plot, however, and warns Isabella, who escapes unharmed into Hainault with her son.[104]

There is some evidence that this could be true. Isabella apparently believed that her husband wished her harm and told her brother so. Charles, in turn, must have repeated this to Edward, for the English king found it necessary specifically to deny that he planned to hurt his wife in the series of letters sent to France in late 1325

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[102]V. H. Galbraith, "Thomas Walsingham and the St. Albans Chronicle, 1272-1422," English Historical Review 47 (1932): 13.

[103]Gransden, Historical Writing, 124.

[104]Thomas Walsingham, Historia Anglicana, in Chronica Monasterii S. Albani, vol. 1, 179.

and early 1326.[105] It is also possible that Adam Orleton, the bishop of Hereford, reported to an unknown person that Edward II was attempting to have his wife murdered. A more detailed version of this account from the Chartulary of Winchester Cathedral says that Edward carried a knife in his hose with which to kill Isabella and that if he found himself with no other weapon he would crush her with his teeth.[106] The reference to the earl of Richmond as assassin is probably false, however, for in 1325 he had joined the rebel party in France.[107]

Walsingham continues his sympathetic portrayal of Isabella by claiming that far from desiring to overthrow her husband, she is upset by his deposition. Worried over his detention at Berkeley Castle, she often sends Edward presents, but does not visit him because the barons refuse their permission.[108] Walsingham does not accuse her of Edward's murder, and only repeats Murimuth's ambiguous remark that she was over-familiar with Mortimer.[109] Finally, unlike most chroniclers, he records her death.[110]

Walsingham's Historia Anglicana is the only important fifteenth-century chronicle for the development of the legend. The 1400s were turbulent years in England;

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[105] C. C. R. 1323-1327, 577-81.

[106] Menache, 116. [107] Fryde, 187.

[108] Walsingham, 186-8. [109] Ibid., 177, 189.

[110] Ibid., 284.

historians had enough of their own contemporary events to chronicle and little space was devoted to the past. In a general sense, however, the fifteenth century contributed to the shaping of the romance. As Charles Kingsford notes:

> At the beginning of the fifteenth century contemporary historians and chroniclers preserve, if in decay, the characteristics of the past. For the most part they are monastic, writing from a narrow point of view, in Latin, and for a limited circle of readers. At its close we are on the threshold of a new epoch in historical literature. Our historians are beginning to put on a modern dress; they write, if with prejudice, yet from a broader and more national standpoint, they use most commonly the language of the people and they appeal deliberately to a popular audience.[111]

This interest in a popular audience also stimulates the growth of literature based on historical events. Political poems appear praising or abusing the current monarch or faction in power. Balladeers write songs glorifying the Battle of Agincourt and the dynastic battles during the Wars of the Roses.[112] Eventually authors will look even further into the past for their characters and their plots. Pieces about Edward II, Gaveston, Isabella, and Roger Mortimer begin to appear in the sixteenth century.

The great chroniclers of the 1500s, such as John Stow and Raphael Holinshed, include in their histories detailed accounts of the careers of Edward and Isabella. Since these histories are little more than revisions of earlier chronicles, they are important only in the sense that they

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[111]Charles L. Kingsford, English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century (New York: Burt Franklin, 1913), 7.

[112]See Kingsford, 228-52.

inspire literary creations. The history of Edward II and Isabella attracted numerous writers during the sixteenth century. This was true for much the same reason that the lives of Richard II and Richard III were popular literary subjects: Edward's penchant for favorites, and his subsequent evil policies, paralleled similar characteristics in Queen Elizabeth's court.[113] Edward II, like Richard II, also provided by his fate the ultimate tragic character; "a potentially good man [who] comes to destruction because of inherent weaknesses which make him incapable of coping with a crisis which he himself has helped to create."[114]

As a major literary character, Edward II does not appear until the late sixteenth century. One early poem, from about 1559, contained in a series of historical verses called The Mirror for Magistrates, is devoted to Roger Mortimer, and by inference brings up certain points about Edward II and Isabella. Entitled "Howe the two Rogers, surnamed Mortimers, for theyr sundry vices ended theyr lyues vnfortunatelye," it tells of Roger Mortimer's rise to power during the minority of Edward III, his attainment of the earldom of March, and his ultimate downfall. The stanzas concerning Edward II and Isabella are as follows:

> For nowe alone he ruleth as him lust,
> Ne recketh for rede, save of kyng Edwardes mother:

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[113]Fryde, 7.

[114]Irving Ribner, The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 128.

Whiche forced envy foulder out the rust,
That in mens hartes before dyd lye and smother.
The Piers, the people, as well the one as the other,
Agaynst hym made so haynous a complaynt,
That for a traytour he was taken and attaynt.

Then all suche faultes as were forgot before,
The skower afresh, and sumwhat to them ad:
For curell envy hath eloquence in store,
Whan Fortune byds, to warsse thinges meanely bad.
Fyrst, that he causde the kyng to yelde the Skot,
To make a peace, townes that were from him got:

And therewithall the charter called Ragman.
That of the Skots he bribed pryuy gayne,
That through his meanes syr Edward of Carnaruan
In Barkley castell trayterously was slayne:
That with his princes mother he had layne.
And fynally with pollyng at his pleasure,
Had robde the kyng and commons of theyr treasure.[115]

Mortimer is the villain of this saga, as he will be in future works about this period. The minor characters are important also: Edward II gains sympathy as the victim of the villain; Isabella wins more notoriety as the queen who sleeps with her husband's murderer. Her actions prove to be of particular interest in an era when another queen, Mary of Scotland, commits the same crime. The number of works containing Isabella as a character increases sharply as the century progresses.

By the end of the century, Edward and Isabella become popular subjects for works of literature. For example, in the early 1590s (the exact date remains a matter of speculation) Christopher Marlowe wrote his classic version of the Edward and Isabella legend. Entitled The Troublesome Raigne and Lamentable Death of Edward the Second, King of

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[115]The Mirror for Magistrates (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1960), 83-4.

England: with the Tragicall Fall of Proud Mortimer, this play was among the first of the Elizabethan historical dramas, written at a time when "the great age of the history play comes as perhaps the final distinctive manifestation of a new birth of historical writing in England."[116]

The Elizabethan dramatist's first objective was to create an entertaining play, but when he chose history as a subject, he became an historian as well.[117] To anyone familiar with the history of Edward II's reign it is obvious that Marlowe molded Edward and Isabella's story to suit his dramatic purposes. Yet his play projects authenticity as well; Natalie Fryde says that:

> Marlowe's play Edward II, written during this [Elizabethan] period, has captured the essential atmosphere of the regime perhaps better than any historian has since been able to do.[118]

Although his interest in Edward II's story apparently sprang from his knowledge of "The Two Mortimers" from The Mirror for Magistrates, Marlowe's main source for his play was Raphael Holinshed's Chronicles.[119] From these Chronicles he fashioned a drama wherein Edward II changes from weak king to tragic martyr, Isabella changes from devoted wife to traitor and adulteress, and Mortimer changes from disgruntled baron to ruthless villain. Marlowe invented very little of his plot, but he put into words and actions the very aspects of character that chroniclers had

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[116]Ribner, 4. [117]Ibid., 14.

[118]Fryde, 7. [119]Ribner, 128.

attributed to Edward and Isabella for centuries, thereby fleshing out real people with real personalities.

Marlowe is most concerned with his title character. About Edward the tragic persona Douglas Cole writes that:

> From the whirl of human pettiness and pretensions of internecine civil strife, of coarsening personalities and political degradations, the figure of a suffering king emerges, a king with neither the private nor the public virtues of kingship, a king governed by his minions and attacked by his barons, a king with nothing of the hero about him but with much of the petulant child, a king and no king.[120]

Edward's childishness, his obsession with Gaveston, and his problems with the barons dominate the first half of the play. Marlowe also strongly implies through the dialogue of Gaveston and Edward that their relationship is homosexual. Though Holinshed refrains from such brands, Marlowe, perhaps a homosexual himself, allows his characters to convict themselves.[121] For example, Gaveston, reading a letter from the king that revokes his exile, lovingly says:

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[120]Douglas Cole, Suffering and Evil in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 161.

[121]Holinshed says only that Gaveston "furnished his [Edward's] court with companies of iesters, ruffians, flattering parasites, musicians, and other vile and naughtie ribalds, that the king might spend both daies and nights in iesting, plaieing, blanketing, and in such other filthie and dishonorable exercises." (Raphael Holinshed, Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland, vol. 2 (New York: AMS Press Inc., 1965), 547); and about Marlowe's homosexuality, see Clifford Leech, Christopher Marlowe: Poet for the Stage (New York: AMS Press, 1986), 10. Marlowe was an outspoken man with bizarre opinions about religion and sex; this is perhaps why contemporaries and critics have speculated that he was homosexual.

> these, these thy amorous lines
> Might have enforc'd me to have swum from France,
> And, like Leander, gasp'd upon the sand,
> So thou wouldst smile, and take me in thy arms.[122]

Edward reveals his own proclivities when he sees Gaveston for the first time; "thy worth, sweet friend, is far above my gifts,/Therefore, to equal it, receive my heart."[123] He does not display his affection discreetly. Isabella notes sadly to Mortimer that "for now my lord the king regards me not,/But doats upon the love of Gaveston."[124] The king disgusts Mortimer, who admits to his fellow barons that "the king is love-sick for his minion."[125]

Edward depends upon Gaveston for his physical enjoyment; after the death of his favorite he immediately finds a new friend, not for sexual gratification, but for help in ruling his kingdom:

> Spencer, sweet Spencer, I adopt thee here:
> And merely of our love we do create thee
> Earl of Gloucester, and Lord Chamberlain,
> Despite of times, despite of enemies.[126]

The barons hated Gaveston and killed him, but they had little reason to dispose of Edward at that point, since the favorite was a personal plaything rather than a political power. This changes with the rise of the new minion, Spencer. Edward does not physically love Spencer

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[122]Edward II (London: Gordian Press, Inc., 1930; reprint 1966), 1.1.6-9 (all subsequent references are to this edition).

[123]Edward II 1.1.161-2. [124]Edward II 1.2.49-50.

[125]Edward II 1.4.87. [126]Edward II 3.2.144-7.

the way he loved Gaveston, but he allows Spencer to govern his realm. For this, the barons will not forgive their king or his favorite. The head of the rebellion, Isabella, weary of playing no part in her husband's life, sums up the antagonists' view nicely:

> Misgoverned kings are cause of all this wrack;
> And Edward, thou art one among them all,
> Whose looseness hath betrayed thy land to spoil,
> And made the channels overflow with blood
> Of thine own people.[127]

Up to now, Marlowe has characterized Edward as a weak king too obsessed with his favorites to rule his kingdom effectively. After he loses his crown, a punishment that he deserves, Edward must suffer in a way that no man merits, elevating him to a glorified position that he otherwise would never have attained. Isabella is the first to broach the subject of the king's murder. She asks her lover, "But, Mortimer, as long as he survives,/What safety rests for us or for my son?" Mortimer replies, "Speak, shall he presently be dispatch'd and die?" Answers the queen, "I would he were, so it were not by my means."[128]

The queen's involvement ceases; the villain in Mortimer takes over. Marlowe adapts the traditional story of Edward's torment and murder, originating in Geoffrey le Baker's chronicle and repeated in Holinshed, to astonishing effect.[129] First, Mortimer exhorts Matrevis and Gurney to

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[127]Edward II 4.4.9-13. [128]Edward II 5.2.42-5.

[129]See Holinshed, 586-7, for his report on Edward's murder.

drag the poor king from castle to castle and to speak bitterly to him at all times.[130] Then he sends the infamous letter, written by a "friend," urging "Edwardum occidere nolite timere bonum est."[131] Edward, meanwhile, imprisoned in a dark, stench-filled dungeon at Berkeley Castle, awaits his death. Speaking to Lightborn (the executioner that Marlowe invents), the pathetic king pleads:

> These looks of thine can harbour nought but death:
> I see my tragedy written in thy brows.
> Yet stay awhile; forbear thy bloody hand,
> And let me see the stroke before it comes,
> That even then when I shall lose my life,
> My mind may be more steadfast on my God.[132]

The audience is forced to wonder if even a weak, ineffective king deserves to suffer in this manner. What makes Edward's death tragic is a combination of several factors, powerfully evoked in Marlowe's play: one, that Edward is not an evil man, albeit sorely misguided; two, his heretofore faithful wife betrays him and desires his death; three, that Mortimer's characterization as the true villain overshadows Edward's negative representation; and finally, that Edward does not deserve his death at all, much less in such a gruesome fashion. Nobody can deny that Edward II was a bad king, but everyone pities him his fate. Marlowe's treatment of that tragedy contributes much to Edward's two-sided image.

Marlowe also establishes identities for the

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[130] Edward II 5.2.57-65. [131] Edward II 5.4.1-5.

[132] Edward II 5.5.72-7.

supporting characters that will not be easily shaken. Isabella, though at first seemingly devoted to her king, does not tolerate her lot in life and chooses to alter it. Marlowe characterizes her as a strong woman, in an era when strong women ruled countries all over Europe. Hers is not an entirely negative characterization, for there are several instances in the play when Edward is abusive toward her and the audiences's sympathy goes out to her. Her involvement with Mortimer, however, finally drags her down to his villainous level.

After reading this effective play, it is hard to imagine Edward or Isabella with any type of personality other than what Marlowe has given them. He presents the old chroniclers' stories so convincingly and so powerfully that we regard his drama as true history. In literature and in historiography, Christopher Marlowe left his mark on the development of the romance.

Another author also wrote of Edward II and Isabella at this same time. Michael Drayton, an Elizabethan poet, was a well-read man who knew the classics. His interest in history inspired him to write many epic poems, two of which are set in Edward II's time. Unlike Marlowe, Drayton relied heavily on Holinshed's sources instead of on Holinshed himself; his "Peirs Gaveston" and "Mortimeriados" are based upon the chronicles of Ranulf Higden and Jean Froissart.[133]

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[133]Bernard H. Newdigate, Michael Drayton and his Circle (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), 23.

About 1593, Drayton composed the long epic poem entitled "Peirs Gaveston." Gaveston himself narrates the poem. His opinion of Edward II barely differs from that of the king's enemies:

> With this fayre Bud of that same blessed Rose,
> Edward surnam'd Carnarvon by his birth,
> Who in his youth it seem'd that Nature chose
> To make the like, whose like was not on earth,
> Had not his lust and my lascivious will
> Made him and me the instruments of ill.[134]

For several stanzas thereafter, Gaveston describes the hedonistic pleasures that he has shared with Prince Edward.[135]

When Edward I bans Gaveston from court, Prince Edward damns the world in language that he should have reserved for the loss of something much more important (such as his kingdom):

> O damned world, I scorne thee and thy worth,
> The very source of all iniquitie:
> An ougly damme that brings such monsters forth,
> The maze of death, nurse of impietie,
> A filthie sinke, where lothsomnes doth dwell,
> A labyrinth, a jayle, a very hell.[136]

The rest of the poem describes Gaveston's many exiles, his troubles with the barons, and his murder at their hands, all told in the flowery language that characterizes Elizabethan poetry. About Isabella, the poet writes little, save that she was "daughter to Phillip then surnam'd the faire,/Who like to him in beauty did

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[134]Michael Drayton, The Works of Michael Drayton, ed. J. William Hebel, vol. 1 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott, Ltd., 1961), 164.

[135]Ibid., 164-8. [136]Ibid., 172.

excell."[137]

In a later Drayton poem, however, Isabella plays the central role. Entitled "Mortimeriados, The Lamentable Civil Wars of Edward the Second and the Barons," it is an epic poem that belittles Edward II while further establishing the queen's Amazon-like character. The first stanza sets the tone:

> The lowring heaven had mask'd her in a clowde,
> Dropping sad teares upon the sullen earth,
> Bemoning in her melancholly shrowde,
> The angry starres which raign'd at Edwards birth,
> With whose beginning ended all our mirth.
> Edward the second, but the first of shame,
> Scourge of the crowne, eclipse of Englands fame.[138]

Edward appears as a character later in the poem, in a long, tedious apostrophe to his tragic fate.[139] But the poem is really about Isabella and Mortimer. It quickly establishes that they are lovers before he is sent to the Tower in 1322. Isabella, in addition to being an adulteress, also must become a dissembler:

> Loe for her safetie this shee must desemble,
> A benefite which women have by kind,
> The neerest colour finely to resemble,
> Suppressing thus the greatness of her mind.[140]

But Drayton sympathizes with the queen's plight, even though she has been treacherous and deceitful. About her travails in France he writes:

> Nor can all these [problems] amaze this mighty Queene,
> Who with affliction, never was controld,
> Never such courage in her sex was seene,
> Nor was she cast in other womens mould,

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[137]Drayton, 180. [138]Ibid., 309. [139]Ibid., 355-68.

[140]Ibid., 313.

> But can endure warres, travell, want, and cold:
> Strugling with Fortune, nere with greefe opprest,
> Most cheerefull still, when she was most distrest.[141]

This strong woman crumbles under the stress at the end, however, and goes temporarily insane after Mortimer's execution.[142] This is a good, melodramatic end to a sentimental poem, but no evidence exists that suggests Isabella went mad after 1330. Drayton plants the seed, though, and other authors, even historians, will claim in later generations that after losing Mortimer, Isabella also lost her senses.

During the three centuries that have been considered in this chapter, numerous accounts of the history of Edward II and Isabella have appeared. Some of them, such as the chronicles written by Trokelowe, Higden, and Walsingham, are valuable historical works that may reflect prejudices and introduce unusual information, but are nonetheless reliable histories. These chroniclers are usually careful about their facts; under scrutiny they prove to be accurate where documentation exists. Where evidence is lacking, such as in Edward's disappearance, their versions bear consideration as serious theories and not mere speculation.

Where speculation breaks down and falls into the realm of "romance" is in historical writings by chroniclers such as Geoffrey le Baker, Jean le Bel, and Jean Froissart. These "historians" seem to be more interested in romanticizing the lives of Edward II and Isabella than in

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[141]Drayton, 344. [142]Ibid., 391.

objectively reporting the facts. They err in many crucial areas, thereby destroying their reliability. Their power, then, lies in the sensational details that they provide. At that time, as now, fantastic stories make better copy than dull news coverage. In this way history becomes distorted.

These "romantic" chroniclers have also influenced literary works. Although one can scarcely call Marlowe's grim tragedy a romance, he still effectively makes use of the legend set forth earlier by Baker and the others. By doing so, he also carves out images of Edward and Isabella for the general population that will not easily crumble. The extent to which these representations affect later generations of opinion on Edward and Isbella will be the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

MODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Up to the end of the sixteenth century, readers interested in the lives of Edward II and Isabella had to rely upon chronicles. Barely-documented romantic stories, exaggerated by chroniclers, found their way into poems and plays which further distorted the truth. As the centuries passed, historians and other writers began to examine Edward's reign with an eye to understanding not only what happened, but why and with what consequences for the subsequent history of England. Some, especially recently, have attempted to infuse the romance with elements of fact, yet most writers in the popular media still choose to exploit the romance. What develops is an ever-widening gulf between the historical and the legendary.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the romance still dominates in both fiction and history. Edward and Isabella are the subjects of several kinds of literature during this period. One example is an early play written by Ben Jonson, the Jacobean playwright. Entitled Mortimer His Fall, the surviving play consists of the "Arguments" and of about seventy lines spoken by Mortimer and Isabella. In the first scene, Mortimer brags about his rise to power (Edward

II is already dead) and about his influence over the queen. Isabella appears in the second scene, passionately exclaiming her love for the usurping Mortimer.[1] At this point, the play ends. An editorial note after the last scene explains that Jonson died before he could finish the play, but modern opinion contends that he started the play early in his career and for unknown reasons abandoned it.[2] It is unfortunate that Jonson never finished his tragedy, however, for judging by the "Arguments," he had some original ideas concerning this much-written-about period. For example, Jonson assigns a large role to John of Eltham, Edward III's brother and the earl of Cornwall. It is John who discovers how Edward II really dies and he who schemes with his brother to bring down Mortimer.[3] No one else, before or since, has given John of Eltham more than a perfunctory mention.

This fragmentary play, apparently forsaken in the late 1590s, marks the end of Edward II and Isabella as characters in drama for many years. Other forms of literature, however, often contained Edward II as a subject. There is at least one case in which Edward and his favorite, Gaveston, starred as the main characters in a political

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[1]Ben Jonson, Mortimer His Fall, in Ben Jonson, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson, vol. 7 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), 60-2.

[2]For the note see Jonson, 62; for a recent opinion see D. Heyward Brock, A Ben Jonson Companion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 190.

[3]Jonson, 58.

pamphlet. In the Histoire Remarquable de la Vie et Mort d'un Favory du Roy d'Angleterre, written anonymously in the mid-seventeenth century, Gaveston is compared with Cardinal Mazarin, a man with whom he had little in common except that the nobles in seventeenth-century France hated Mazarin for his influence over young Louis XIV's mother and regent, Anne of Austria, much as the barons of fourteenth-century England had despised Gaveston for exerting similar control over Edward II.[4] Here, the pamphleteer uses Edward not as an historical character or a tragic figure. Instead the king represents the dangers of a weak monarchy controlled by royal minions.

Poems about Edward II continued to be popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In 1628 one appeared written by a Sir F. Hubert. The poem, The deplorable Life and Death of Edward the Second, King of England Together with the Downfall of the two Unfortunate Favorits, Gavestone and Spencer, focuses on the relationship between Edward and Gaveston, likening them to a fourteenth-century Jove and Ganymede.[5] In the eighteenth century, another epic manipulates the already tarnished character of Isabella. In a long poem entitled "The Bard," Thomas Gray addresses the myth that Edward I hanged all the Welsh poets because they

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[4]For a discussion of French political pamphlets in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries featuring Edward II and Gaveston as subjects, see Aileen Ada Taylor, "The Career of Peter of Gavaston and his Place in History" (Master's thesis, University of London, 1939), 11.

[5]For a short analysis of the poem, see Taylor, 15.

encouraged their country to rebel against his restraints. The Bard, the narrator of the poem, regales Edward I about the bloody fate of his dynasty, including his own son, Edward II.

> Weave the warp and weave the woof, The winding-sheet of
> Edward's race. Give ample room and verge enough
> The characters of hell to trace.
> Mark the year and mark the night,
> When Severn shall re-echo with affright
> The shrieks of death, through Berkeley's roofs that ring,
> Shrieks of an agonizing King!
> She-wolf of France, with unrelenting fangs,
> That tear'st the bowels of thy mangled mate,
> From thee be born who o'er thy country hangs
> The scourge of heaven.[6]

It is due to this poem that Isabella ceases to be "the Fair," and becomes "the She-wolf of France." The sobriquet has since stuck with a stubborn adhesiveness. It is also an indication of Isabella's worsening image as the centuries pass. With only a few exceptions, writers before this time treated Isabella with consideration, if not kindness. It was becoming the fashion to regard her with contempt, a tendency that only today is beginning to change.

There are no serious studies about Isabella during this time, but Edward's reign is naturally included in all general histories of the the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A good example is that written by David Hume in the mid-1700s. As sources, Hume used extensively the chronicles of Thomas Walsingham, Adam Murimuth, and Thomas de la More. Hume was not interested in vilifying Edward;

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[6]Thomas Gray, The Complete English Poems of Thomas Gray, ed. James Reeves (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1973), 79.

in fact he defends the king on a number of occasions. He avoids discussing the intimate nature of the relationship between Edward and Gaveston, sufficing it to say that

> by all these accomplishments he [Gaveston] gained so entire an ascendant over young Edward, whose heart was strongly disposed to friendship and confidence, that the late king [Edward I], apprehensive of the consequences, had banished him his kingdom.[7]

About Edward's capacity as king, Hume writes that

> it is not easy to imagine a man more innocent and inoffensive than the unhappy king whose tragical death we have related; nor a prince less fitted for governing that fierce and turbulent people subjected to his authority.[8]

He grants that Isabella betrayed and cuckolded her husband, but he does not resort to the abuse that his contemporary Thomas Gray showered upon her. Hume gives the impression that Edward's reign was sad and ineffective and by no means important to the history of England.

In the nineteenth century, historians looked at Edward II's reign with renewed interest and new ideas, concluding that it had some influence upon English history apart from its value as a tragedy. One study by Bishop William Stubbs would become the standard work to consult for many years thereafter and would greatly influence the analysis of twentieth-century scholars.

But before considering the serious studies, it

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[7]David Hume, The History of England, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Peter Hill & Co., 1818), 328-9.

[8]Ibid., 360.

should be noted that the nineteenth century also spawned several other books that make interesting use of the Edward and Isabella romance. Probably the most famous, in Isabella's case at least, is the chapter devoted to her in Agnes Strickland's Lives of the Queens of England. Writing in the mid-1800s, Strickland leaves no doubt in the reader's mind that she considers Isabella of France the worst queen in England's history. The first sentence of Isabella's chapter sets this tone: "Since the days of the fair and false Elfrida, of Saxon celebrity, no queen of England has left so dark a stain on the annals of female royalty, as the consort of Edward II, Isabella of France."[9] At first glance it is difficult to fault Strickland's analysis, because she cites primary sources on a regular basis, including household records, ancient correspondence, and contemporary chroniclers. This does not prevent Strickland, however, from speculating upon the queen's evil nature whenever possible. For example, though she admits that Isabella "had been on the most amicable terms with the barons," Strickland blames the queen and her "haughty spirit" for pushing Edward II into attacking Leeds Castle.[10] The fact that the Badlesmeres did in fact insult the queen, and by association the king, by not allowing Isabella to lodge in her own castle goes unnoticed, as does the fact that Edward had

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[9]Agnes Strickland, Lives of the Queens of England, vol. 2 (London: Henry Colburn, Publisher, 1842), 205.

[10]Ibid., 230.

every right--indeed an obligation--to act as he did under the circumstances.

Strickland's animosity knows no bounds when she assesses the relationship between Mortimer and the queen. She writes that Mortimer grows interested in Isabella during his imprisonment in the Tower and causes the queen to fall in love with him. It is because of Mortimer that Edward begins to hate Isabella, and in order to show his hostility he seizes her lands and revenues in 1324.[11] Isabella then persuades her husband to send her to France as a peace negotiator. Strickland relates the well-known story about Isabella's sojourn in her native country, and taking Froissart's chronicle as gospel, argues that Charles expels Isabella at the pope's suggestion.[12] Relying upon the equally questionable veracity of de la More's chronicle, she repeats the tragic story of Edward's last days. Isabella, of course, is responsible for his death, and that of the earl of Kent as well.[13]

Strickland is never content to leave Isabella in peace. She reports the unsubstantiated legend that after Mortimer's downfall, the queen goes insane with grief. Furthermore, Isabella never forgets her lover, for when she herself is dying some thirty years later, she requests that she be buried at Grey Friars, which is also where Mortimer was interred.[14] What Strickland has produced as fact, however,

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[11]Strickland, 233-6. [12]Ibid., 250-4.

[13]Ibid., 274-81. [14]Ibid., 285-92.

is probably nothing more than legend. F. D. Blackley, for instance, states that even though the queen was indeed buried at Grey Friars, there is no evidence that Mortimer was also.[15] This is just another example of the length to which Agnes Strickland goes in order to blacken Isabella's reputation. Unfortunately for the queen's image, Strickland's portrait was an influential one. It would be a long time before anyone would attempt her defense.

Another book, similar in style to Lives of the Queens of England, appeared in 1860. This book, written by a Dr. Doran about the Princes of Wales, contains a standard biography on Edward II's life before he became king. Perhaps because of the sexual attitudes of the Victorian era, Dr. Doran is very careful not to attribute to Edward any abhorrent vices:

> Setting aside as totally untrue that he [Gaveston] led the latter [Prince Edward] into crimes abhorrent to nature itself, there was evil example enough to arouse the better counsellors of the Prince to strongly reprove the youth whom the King had given to his son for a companion.[16]

The rest of the chapter is just as sterile, though one important section stands out. It contains many letters, printed for the first time, that Edward wrote before he ascended the throne. These letters, exposing a vulnerable, witty, and human prince, enliven Edward's character in a

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[15]Blackley, "Isabella and the Late Medieval Cult of the Dead," 28.

[16]Dr. Doran, The Book of the Princes of Wales: Heirs to the Crown of England (London: Richard Bentley, 1860), 31.

way that Dr. Doran does not.

Nearly forty years later, the Edward-Gaveston relationship was the focus of another biography. As homosexuality was evidently not a proper topic for nineteenth-century authors, Walter Phelps Dodge also ignores the sexual tone of their friendship. The attraction existed between the two men because, according to Dodge, Gaveston was "educated, refined, and clever."[17] Concerning Isabella, Dodge also follows the inclination of the time. His summation of the queen's personality would have made Agnes Strickland proud:

> At this time, too, Edward began to realise something of the true character of the miserable woman he had married. Heartless, sensual, greedy, vain in the extreme, and heartily hating her husband, Isabella of France adds another blot to the darkened reign of Edward of Carnarvon.[18]

In the popular history of the nineteenth century, therefore, Edward II is portrayed as an inconsequential king, though not a homosexual one. Isabella possesses no good qualities whatsoever; she is depicted as a bad queen and a worse wife in an age when good Queen Victoria, a model wife and mother, reigned in England. Serious historians also began to study Edward's reign more intently, the result being a new interpretation of its importance. Record sources for the reign became more accessible. One article,

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[17]Walter Phelps Dodge, Piers Gaveston: a Chapter of Early Constitutional History (London, 1899; reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1971), 193.

[18]Ibid., 93.

for instance, used documentary evidence to establish Edward II's itinerary on a daily basis.[19] The most important work, however, came from Bishop Stubbs, who edited the chronicles of the reigns of Edward I and Edward II for the Rolls Series and wrote an influential study on the constitutional history of England.

The Constitutional History of England, published in 1897, established a new opinion of the significance of Edward II's reign. In earlier literature, Edward had been of interest primarily because of his notorious favorites, his scandalous wife, and his tragic death. His rule was deemed unimportant because, after all, he failed as king. But Stubbs shifted the focus away from the king himself, choosing instead to see Edward's government as a vital stepping stone on the path to constitutional monarchy:

> The constitutional result of the three reigns that fill the fourteenth century is the growth of the House of Commons into its full share of political power; the recognition of its full right as the representative of the mass and body of the nation, and the vindication of its claim to exercise the powers which in the preceding century had been possessed by the baronage only.[20]

Though Stubbs was among the first to recognize the importance of Edward II's reign, he was by no means deluded by the king's tragic image. His often-quoted judgment of the king, that Edward II was the first ruler since William the Conqueror not to have been a man of business, indicates

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[19]See Hartshorne, 113-44.

[20]William Stubbs, The Constitutional History of England, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897; reprint, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), 320.

that Stubbs had little patience for a king who did not do his duty.[21] Furthermore, he states that "his reign is a tragedy, but one that lacks in its true form the element of pity: for there is nothing in Edward, miserable as his fate is, that invites or deserves sympathy."[22]

Stubbs' seeming indifference to the tragedy of Edward's life does not allow him to linger on the king's fate or on Isabella's treachery, only stating that:

> Edward II survived his deposition for eight months; but his doom was sealed from the moment of his capture. So long as he lived none of his enemies could be safe; the nation was sure to awake to the fact that his faults, whatever they might have been, were no reason why they should submit to the rule of an adulterous Frenchwoman and her paramour. His death would rob the malcontents of a rallying point for revolt. He was murdered on the 21st of September, 1327.[23]

He does not go into the gory details of Edward's murder, sensationalism not being his purpose, but he is enough of a traditionalist to reject flatly the authenticity of the newly discovered Fieschi letter. This he accomplishes in his introduction to the second volume of the Rolls Series chronicles.[24] Stubbs' aim in studying Edward II's reign is to identify its role in the development of the constitutional government, not to enhance the Edward and Isabella romance. Yet he refuses to consider a new alternative to the old story, even though little evidence exists to support either side. Since Stubbs is concentrating on the politics of Edward's reign rather than

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[21]Stubbs, 328. [22]Ibid. [23]Ibid., 381.

[24]See Chronicles of the Reigns, vol. 2, ciii-cviii.

the tragedy, he can ignore the romance for the most part. But when he must address it, he supports the traditional story.

Stubbs' work opened up a whole new era of historiography about Edward II and Isabella. In the early twentieth century, three historians, T. F. Tout, J. Conway Davies, and Hilda Johnstone, produced extensive works on their careers. In the last twenty years, many more scholars have chosen them as subjects, with interesting results. In fictional literature as well, Edward and Isabella remain popular characters.

For example, in 1924 the young Bertolt Brecht wrote Edward II: a Chronicle Play. The only other play to feature Edward as the title character, Marlowe's Edward II, served as his source, but Brecht's play is more philosophical in tone than tragical. As Eric Bentley, the English translator of Brecht's version notes, "the point--as with his more famous transformations of later years--was to turn things completely around, to write a counter-play, to re-write Marlowe, to correct him, to stand him on his feet."[25]

Brecht copies Marlowe's play in several respects, concentrating, for instance, on the relationship between Edward II and Gaveston. He also, like Marlowe, manipulates the king's character so that Edward changes and grows into a heroic figure as he faces his terrible end. The differences

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[25]Bertolt Brecht, Edward II: a Chronicle Play, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1966), ix (all subsequent references are to this edition).

between the two plays, however, are more obvious than the similarities. There are only about twenty characters in Brecht's play, as opposed to forty in Marlowe's; Brecht's Edward II is a man who actively tries to avoid his fate, unlike Marlowe's, who allows his doom to envelop him like a shroud; the queen (for some reason called Anna) is a less shadowy figure than Marlowe's Isabella; Mortimer is a bookish man of reason rather than the ambitious villain of Marlowe's play, a man who hesitates to embroil himself in the baron's revolt, but who inevitably must because in Brecht's tragedy, reason is the villain. Bentley sums up the differences between the two plays in this fashion:

> One play is about a weak man who, under pressure, gives up his friend first and his crown later, and interests us only in his very human weakness and by virtue of the faint halo that is cast around it by all the grace and poeticizing. The other is a play about an infatuated man, made palatable to us in the beginning by no poetry or charm, but earning our admiration, gradually and with difficulty, by a surprising loyalty both to his friend and to his idea of himself as king.[26]

In Brecht, Edward and Gaveston are clearly lovers. Gaveston (whose first name is Danyell in Brecht's play), is the king's playmate first and foremost. When the barons remind the young King Edward II of his father's oath to banish Gaveston forever, the king replies resolutely, "I will have Gaveston."[27] This resolution never wavers. Gaveston, a butcher's son, never lacks favors from Edward, as indicated in this passage spoken by the king:

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[26]Edward II: a Chronicle Play, xiii.

[27]Edward II: a Chronicle Play, 5.

> Afraid? You shall have bodyguards.
> Need money? Go to my treasury.
> Want to be feared? Here are my ring and seal.
> Give orders in our name just as you please.[28]

In the 1920s, at least in Germany, the subject of homosexuality was no longer taboo. An erotic atmosphere permeates the early conversations between Edward II and Gaveston. Before the battle of Boroughbridge (at which, unhistorically, Gaveston lives to take part), Edward tells his neglected wife:

> I, Edward of England, mindful that maybe
> Only hours stand between me and my fall
> Can tell you this: I do not like you.
> In the hour of death: I still love Gaveston.[29]

Edward is stubborn to the end. Unlike Marlowe's pathetic Edward, who wavers back and forth but finally agrees to give up his crown, Brecht's Edward refuses to abdicate.[30] Mortimer, who has assured the uneasy barons and the new king that Edward had gladly abdicated, decides that the deposed king must be removed before the truth can emerge. So, encouraged by the notorious "Edwardum occidere nolite timere bonum est," Lightborn, one of Edward's jailers (and also a character in Marlowe's play) strangles the old king. But lest the straightforward manner of Edward's death not be gruesome enough for his martyrdom, Brecht closes Edward's life with a triumphant speech that gives the audience some second thoughts about the character of the

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[28]Edward II: a Chronicle Play, 7.

[29]Edward II: a Chronicle Play, 34.

[30]Edward II: a Chronicle Play, 58-64.

failed king:

> The hole they keep me in's the cesspool
> Upon my head has fallen for seven hours
> The offal of London.
> But such water hardens my limbs: which are now
> Like cedar wood.
> The stench of excrement gives me boundless greatness!
> And the good sound of the drum keeps me awake,
> Though weak, so death won't find me fainting but
> Waking.[31]

The courage of the king in his torment raises him to the level of tragic hero, much as his horrific death did in Marlowe's play. Brecht's Edward is less pathetic, however; one believes that he could have been an admirable king had he chosen to focus his energies upon kingship rather than upon Gaveston. That he did not comprises his tragic flaw.

As the twentieth century progresses, historical novels begin to appear about Edward II and Isabella. Historical novels are interesting phenomena in that the novelist's imagination fleshes out characters whose motives have been obscured through the passage of time. True, they are not scholarly efforts and often exploit the romances that serious historians are eager to discount, but they can stimulate a desire to probe into the historicity of the stories they tell.

One such novel is about Isabella, written by Margaret Campbell Barnes in 1957. In this book, Isabel the Fair, the complicated Isabella comes to life. She is vain, proud, and stubborn, but Barnes does not portray her as evil. Instead, the queen is a victim of unrequited love. She desperately

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[31]Edward II: a Chronicle Play, 87.

loves her husband at first, but runs a distant second in Edward's affections. Lonely and unfulfilled as a woman for many years, she becomes attracted to Mortimer while in the Tower awaiting the birth of her last daughter. His strength and resoluteness are too alluring for her to resist after coping with the weak Edward for so long. She is not interested in power so much as she desperately desires to oust the Despensers from Edward's life; it is Mortimer who has his eyes on the bigger prize, namely the crown. It is also he who contrives the murder of Edward; Isabella is appalled when she discovers the horrible truth. She never really hated Edward, who was fond of her in his way and was usually always kind to her. But in the end she chooses Mortimer. After his fall, she sadly but sanely moves to Castle Rising, determined to atone for her sins with good works.[32]

From a basically sympathetic portrayal of Isabella and Edward, we move to a novel that exploits the queen's "she-wolf" image and the king's weak, pouty one. Jean Plaidy, a prolific novelist who writes under several pseudonyms, has created a series of historical novels generally entitled The Plantagenet Saga. Two books of this series, The Follies of the King and The Vow on the Heron, tell the story of Edward II and Isabella. The first book focuses mainly on Edward. He is an ineffective king, an inadequate husband, and an

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[32]See Margaret Campbell Barnes, Isabel the Fair (Philadelphia: Macrae Smith Company, 1957).

indifferent father. His only concerns are Gaveston, and after that favorite's death, Despenser. His homosexual nature disgusts Isabella, who remembers it when she plans his murder by the red hot spit. He never quite realizes that he could have changed his fate by becoming a responsible king; his reaction is to blame anything but himself. His murder is a blot on those who commit it, but in this novel it seems a fitting end for a homosexual king who abused his power.

Isabella is also a prominent character in the first book. As in Barnes' novel, she is haughty and arrogant, but in Plaidy those are her good characteristics. She has no interest in her children, except in young Edward and then only for ulterior motives; she actively hates her husband from the moment she sees his weak and homosexual nature; and worst of all, she is a dissembler. For over fifteen years she plots her revenge against Edward, all the while bearing his children and submitting to his wishes. When Mortimer arrives on the scene, she immediately knows he is the one to help her in her revenge. Many times in this novel Plaidy refers to her as "the she-wolf," reducing Isabella to a one-dimensional, villainous stereotype. In Barnes' book, Isabella is a much more human character.

The other novel by Plaidy focuses upon Edward III and Philippa of Hainault. The author devotes the beginning, however, to Isabella and Mortimer, who are now in power after the death of Edward II. Having killed her

husband (although tormented by terrible nightmares about his sufferings), she and Mortimer happily rule the kingdom for a young man who grows increasingly uneasy about them. Isabella callously sends her five-year-old daughter Joan to Scotland to marry Robert Bruce's heir, an action which horrifies the people and disturbs the thoughtful young king. Such behavior Edward III does not tolerate for long. After Mortimer's execution, he sends his mother away to Castle Rising, where she lapses into mad spells. As she grows older, she mellows, goes insane less frequently, and leads a quiet life devoted to good works. But Plaidy still cannot resist mentioning the "she-wolf" from time to time.[33]

As evil as Isabella is in Plaidy's novels, an even more despicable queen appears in a recent novel, The Death of a King. This book is of particular interest because the author, P. C. Doherty, is a published historian who wrote his doctoral dissertation on Isabella for Oxford University. It is intriguing, therefore, to see how a scholar treats the subject of his serious study in a fictional setting. In this book, about a clerk's quest to discover the truth about Edward II's murder, Isabella is little more than a monster. Even in her seclusion at Castle Rising, she exudes wickedness, trying several times to have the clerk killed when he comes too close to the truth about Edward's fate. She is a minor character in this novel, but a memorable one.

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[33]See Jean Plaidy, The Follies of the King (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1980); idem, The Vow on the Heron (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1980).

At the very end, we discover that Isabella's treachery dated from long before 1326; her son, Edward III, is really Mortimer's offspring. This sensational disclosure is the climax of the novel, a blatant disregard for the surviving historical evidence.

As far as Edward is concerned, Doherty at least enters the realm of possibility. The deposed king does not die in Berkeley Castle; instead he escapes with the help of the Dunheveds to Italy. This theme Doherty takes from the de Fieschi letter, the first writer to address it in fiction since the letter was discovered in the nineteenth century. It proves to be as suspenseful as the old legend of Edward's horrific murder. Doherty adds a new twist when Edward III, knowing his true paternity and anxious to kill the rightful king before anyone else finds out, sends his knights to murder the old king at the abbey in which he has been residing as the gardener. So Edward does not really escape his murder; instead of being killed by his wife, he is murdered by his "son." Even though Doherty's book is an outrageous exploitation of the romance, and in some parts complete invention, it has refreshing variations that might inspire further writing on the theme of Edward's escape.[34]

As helpful as popular literature may be in fleshing out the one-dimensional characters populating medieval history, it cannot substitute for serious analysis. It is,

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[34]See P. C. Doherty, The Death of a King: a Medieval Mystery (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985).

after all, not the romances that are important, but the truth. If romance turns out to be truth, then so be it, but if not, then it must be rejected. Edward II and Isabella have now been frequent subjects for analysis since the turn of the century. Let us now turn to the books and articles written in the twentieth century, for their views on the Edward and Isabella myth.

Historians largely ignored Edward II's possible homosexuality during the nineteenth century. His relationship with Gaveston was nothing more than an intense friendship, an interpretation which might amuse the more jaded cynics of the twentieth century. If Richard I, the brave Lion Heart, can be branded a lover of men by twentieth-century historians, then how much easier it should be to label Edward a homosexual.

Nevertheless, some historians still hesitate to label Edward a homosexual in so many words, though most imply that it could be so. J. Conway Davies, writing about 1917, went to the contemporary chroniclers for his sources and concluded that Edward loved Gaveston the way he should have loved Isabella, and that the king's affection for his favorite was no passing fancy, but an enduring infatuation.[35] In 1936, T. F. Tout stated that "of the graver charges, which have taken classic shape in Marlowe's

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[35]J. Conway Davies, The Baronial Opposition to Edward II: Its Character and Policy (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1918; reprint, New York, Barnes and Noble, 1967), 84-5.

powerful but unhistorical tragedy, there is no more evidence than the gossip of several prejudiced chroniclers."[36] Michael Prestwich some forty years later, in an era when one could easily discuss the subject of homosexuality, addressed the difficulty found in accusing Edward II of this vice:

> Opinion as to whether the king's relationship with his favourites were homosexual has changed considerably in recent years, reflecting a change in modern attitudes rather than the discovery of fresh evidence.

He goes on to admit that "Edward had four children by Queen Isabella, and one bastard son, but it is hard to doubt a sexual element in his friendships with Gaveston and Despenser."[37] Charles Wood also discusses Edward's homosexuality in an essay about legitimacy in the fourteenth century, but leaves the question open to speculation. He writes that chroniclers' stories about Edward, Gaveston, and Despenser lead one to believe that the king did have a sexual relationship with these men, but Wood will only concede Edward's "apparent homosexuality" or the fact that he was "probably homosexual."[38]

Other historians take a firmer stand on this issue. J. R. Maddicott in his study on Thomas of Lancaster writes that:

> As the father of Edward's Queen, Isabella, Philip could hardly have taken a different attitude [toward

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[36]Tout, Place of the Reign, 13.

[37]Michael Prestwich, The Three Edwards: War and State in England 1272-1377 (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), 80.

[38]Wood, 388.

> Gaveston], and the homosexual relationship between Edward and Gaveston (and despite all that has been said in Gaveston's defence the chronicle evidence makes it very difficult to doubt that such a relationship did exist) must have shocked and outraged him and his court.[39]

Even Harold Hutchison, who tries to paint a favorable portrait of the king, admits that "it is more than likely that Edward of Carnarvon was a homosexual."[40] Even so, Hutchison hastens to remind the reader that a homosexual king is not necessarily an incompetent one.[41] A very recent opinion on this subject comes from J. S. Hamilton, in his biography on Piers Gaveston. He, too, comes to the conclusion that the relationship between Edward and Gaveston was no doubt homosexual, although he cautions against the anachronistic use of terms such as "homosexual" which were unknown and inapplicable in the fourteenth century.[42]

If historians differ as to whether Edward was unquestionably homosexual, they concur, with one exception, on his incompetence as king. Prestwich echoes the sentiment of many when he writes that "Edward II was one of the most unsuccessful kings ever to rule England."[43] The title of Natalie Fryde's book, The Tyranny and Fall of Edward II, succinctly reveals her opinion on the extent of Edward's abilities. Roy Martin Haines, in his book on the career of

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[39]Maddicott, 83. [40]Hutchison, 147.

[41]Ibid., 148.

[42]Hamilton, Piers Gaveston, 109-10.

[43]Prestwich, 79.

Adam Orleton, agrees with Fryde, declaring that the bishop of Hereford "had worked since the queen's return for the replacement of an impossibly tyrannical government."[44] May McKisack does not consider Edward a tyrant, but offers other explanations for his failure as king:

> Edward lived a life devoid of noble purpose or of laudable ambition. He lowered the reputation of his country abroad and at home he was the means of bringing the monarchy into the most serious crisis that had faced it since 1066. It was his own folly which delivered him into the hands of his cruel foes; and the consequences of his deposition reached far beyond his own generation.[45]

Davies sees Edward's reign much the way Stubbs did, in the light of administrative history. In his opinion, the system that Edward I had built could not be easily maintained by a weak man, such as Edward II; in this lay the root of the baronial opposition.[46] Tout, on the other hand, believes that Edward's follies had little effect on administrative development in the long run. Edward's reign is important because "it shows us how late medieval administration and late medieval society went on when left to themselves."[47] That Edward was incompetent is unquestionable; that he slowed down progress is a matter of controversy.

Only one writer strives to excuse Edward II's

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[44]Roy Martin Haines, The Church and Politics in Fourteenth-Century England: the Career of Adam Orleton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 177.

[45]McKisack, 96. [46]Davies, 75.

[47]Tout, Place of the Reign, 22-3.

weaknesses, attempting even to crown him with several kingly virtues. According to Hutchison, Edward appointed excellent ministers (both Despensers, Stapledon, Baldock, etc.); even though Edward had no support from the earl of Lancaster, he did inspire loyalty in the earls of Gloucester, Lincoln, and Pembroke; the king was a faithful friend; he had a sense of humor; though he engaged in "odd" pastimes, his hobbies showered him with "a warm touch of common humanity;" he was no coward and did his fair share of soldiering--if he did not defeat Bruce, then neither did Edward I.[48] There is more, but the above suffices to show that Hutchison's biography is little more than an apologia. Yet even he must admit in the end that "the sad and incontrovertible fact remains that he [Edward] was a failure. But in many ways he was a likeable failure."[49]

Though most historians agree that Edward failed both in his personal and his public lives, there is less assent over the controversies of his death. Tout wrote an article on the subject, "The Captivity and Death of Edward of Carnarvon." Though he is careful to reject the more outrageous elements of the traditional story (such as the infamous letter "Edwardum, etc."), he still on the whole accepts it. Manuel de Fieschi's letter he rejects as a fairy tale, the confessions of a madman, a trick by the French, or a blackmail scheme.[50] As the century passes,

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[48]See Hutchison, 145-54. [49]Ibid., 151.

[50]Tout, "Captivity and Death," 179.

however, the old legend begins to fray at the seams. McKisack, in 1959, wrote that "after his removal to Berkeley we find ourselves in a realm of mystery and surmise."[51] Hutchison, some ten years later, rejects the red-hot spit legend, emphasizing that the only fact which seems certain is that Edward II was murdered.[52]

By the late 1970s, it became the fashion, if not to completely reject the old legend, then at least to doubt it seriously. The most scholarly argument in favor of the de Fieschi letter comes from G. P. Cuttino and Thomas W. Lyman. In "Where is Edward II?" they seek to analyze the standard story and to expose its flaws. They believe that it is not Edward II's body which lies in the tomb at Gloucester Abbey. As evidence, they turn to the Italian cleric's letter and to the various comments by contemporary chroniclers indicating that, contrary to the propaganda at the time, the body was inspected in secret only by a few priests and then placed immediately in a casket, no public viewing being allowed. Since that time, nobody has opened that casket. Until that happens and more substantial evidence comes to light, Cuttino and Lyman's theory that Edward escaped his murder is as reasonable as any.[53]

Natalie Fryde agrees that Edward's fate is controversial. She rejects the legend of Edward's torment, and questions whether the king was murdered at all. She

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[51]McKisack, 94. [52]Hutchison, 142.

[53]See Cuttino and Lyman, 526-7.

prints the de Fieschi letter, and though she quotes Tout's objections to it, she leaves the impression that she tends toward the Cuttino view.[54] Prestwich, in The Three Edwards, also spends some time analyzing the letter. His conclusion, that "even if Edward did not die at Berkeley, he played no further part in the history of the country he had misgoverned," is another indication that the old legend of Edward's torment and murder is losing its impact.[55]

Certain aspects of Edward II's life remain enigmatic and controversial, even though general opinion still holds that he was an unsuccessful king. About Isabella, controversy still rules; everyone has his own ideas about her actions and motivations, and not often does one historian agree with another.

Much has been written about Isabella in the twentieth century. One of the first articles appeared in 1936, written by Hilda Johnstone. The article's title, "Isabella the She-Wolf of France," might indicate that this is just another vituperative account of her life, a la Agnes Strickland, but Johnstone fools us. The essay is not exactly an apologia; instead it seeks to concentrate on Isabella's life before and after her scandalous years with Mortimer. The theme is that:

> It is not easy, as we trace in the records the quiet domestic life, the charities and pious exercises, which distinguished Isabella's later days, to hold fast the like with earlier years, and to remember that this was

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[54]See Fryde, 200-6. [55]Prestwich, 99.

> the same woman who had then played so sinister a part. One object of the present study is to impress that fact upon the reader, and thus enable him to set in due proportion to the activities of a long life the brief notoriety of the revolution years.[56]

The result, unfortunately, is a rather boring analysis into her personal possessions found at the time of her death. Still, this article makes the good, and novel, point that Isabella's life deserves more balanced examination.

Another paper, published in 1984, is likewise a reexamination of Isabella's life. Entitled "Isabelle of France, Queen of England--a Reconsideration," the article "aims to create a fuller picture of the queen's position on the English political scene, at the same time examining her image in the eyes of her contemporaries."[57] The author, Sophia Menache, does not present an organized argument and therefore she does not fully resolve the mysteries surrounding Isabella's life. It is obvious, however, that Menache, too, believes that Isabella has not received a fair assessment by historians who have concentrated too much on her failures and not enough on her achievements.[58]

Consider, for example, some historians' views on Isabella's involvement in the French adultery scandal of 1314. Robert Fawtier states that "the wicked Isabella, their sister-in-law, who later had her own husband Edward II of England assassinated, has been suggested as their [Philip

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[56]Johnstone, 218. [57]Menache, 107.

[58]Ibid., 121-2.

the Fair's daughters-in-law] accuser."[59] Elizabeth Hallam, in her book on the Capetian monarchs, also mentions Isabella's possible involvement in the matter, though she acknowledges that the accusation is probably unjust.[60] The episode has been analyzed at length by Elizabeth A. R. Brown, who ultimately pronounces the tale a myth, because of the lack of contemporary documentation.[61] As this is the most recent opinion on the subject, it remains to be seen if historians will cease to use this episode as yet another indication of Isabella's bad character.

About the incident at Leeds Castle, most historians are careful to avoid blaming Isabella for Edward's subsequent vengeful actions. Both J. R. S. Phillips and Roy Haines cite a Trinity College manuscript of a Canterbury chronicle of the late fourteenth century stating that Edward himself asked Isabella to go to Leeds Castle, knowing that the Badlesmeres would refuse her entry.[62] Fryde also relates this version, though she does not reveal her sources or why she believes this.[63] Hutchison uses the standard chroniclers' story that Isabella was on pilgrimage to

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[59]Robert Fawtier, The Capetian Kings of France, trans. Lionel Butler and R. J. Adam (London: McMillan & Co., Ltd., 1960), 53-4.

[60]Elizabeth Hallam, Capetian France: 987-1328 (London: Longman, 1980), 282-3.

[61]See Brown, "Diplomacy."

[62]Haines, 131; and Phillips, 216.

[63]Fryde, 50.

Canterbury when the incident occurred and that it was at her bidding that Edward besieged the castle.[64] Menache probably comes closer to the truth when she writes that "a convincing explanation is yet to be found," but she does not agree that the queen's outrage over the insult was reprehensible or indicative of her evil nature.[65]

If most historians will forgive her the Leeds Castle incident and the subsequent baronial war, few if any will condone her most notorious behavior: her adultery with Mortimer, the deposition (and possible murder) of her husband, and the mismanaged regency. Only Menache, who herself does not excuse Isabella's conduct at this time, believes that her behavior should not affect her judgment by history.[66] Other historians are still fascinated by, and concentrate on, her unqueenlike behavior.

For example, the theme of an article written by F. D. Blackley in the late 1960s is the origin of her relationship with Roger Mortimer. Blackley concludes that although Isabella must have known the baron of Wigmore for many years, there is no evidence that she became his mistress until after she went to France.[67] Prestwich, likewise, writes that "he [Mortimer] probably only became Isabella's

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[64]Hutchison, 110. [65]Menache, 109.

[66]Ibid., 122.

[67]See F. D. Blackley, "Isabella and the Bishop of Exeter," in Essays in Medieval History Presented to Bertie Wilkinson, ed. T. A. Sandquist and M. R. Powicke (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969).

lover while in France."[68] Fryde also takes this view.[69] Wood, however, speculates that if Isabella cuckolded Edward in 1325, she could easily have done so earlier, and not necessarily with Mortimer.[70]

Historians agree that she was an adulteress, but was she a murderer as well? Fryde, whose book focuses on the end of Edward II's regime, does not mention Isabella in connection with either the king's murder or Kent's execution.[71] Both McKisack and Hutchison lay the blame on Mortimer.[72] Menache never states who she believes to be responsible for Edward's death, though she does allow that "the death of Edward II, indeed, freed Isabelle from the danger of immediate revolution and facilitated the beginning of her rule."[73] Perhaps this hesitance to accuse Isabella of Edward's death stems from the inconclusive evidence that he was murdered at all and the growing popularity of this view.

Even with the more balanced outlook that some historians take about Isabella's life, her negative image still prevails. According to Hutchison, she is a mischief-maker and an intriguer, even though she had been "very well treated." His final judgment on her character is that "the 'she-wolf of France' was baring her fangs."[74] In

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[68]Prestwich, 96. [69]Fryde, 180.

[70]Wood, 387. [71]See Fryde, 200-2, 224-5.

[72]McKisack, 94; and Hutchison, 141.

[73]Menache, 112. [74]Hutchison, 130, 127, 133.

McKisack's words, she made up one part of a "greedy and disreputable couple."[75] Fryde does not believe that Isabella was a competent regent, though she refrains from using the pejorative adjectives that other historians sometimes use to describe the queen.[76] Other historians let Isabella's adventures speak for themselves; infidelity, deception, and overweening ambition do not make up an attractive personality.[77]

Historians will probably never completely agree about the controversial lives of Edward II and Isabella, unless irrefutable documentation comes to light. Much has been written about them, but much more needs to be analyzed; full biographies of Edward and Isabella have yet to be published. Supporting characters in their lives, such as the Despensers and Roger Mortimer, also lack comprehensive biographies. No doubt these studies are forthcoming. With their appearance, perhaps many more questions about Edward II and Isabella of France will be answered.

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[75]McKisack, 96. [76]See Fryde, 207-27.

[77]See Haines, Maddicott, Phillips, and Prestwich, for objective narrations of Isabella's career.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

There are several conclusions to be drawn from the preceding study of Edward II and Isabella of France. The first is that it is often chroniclers, not the events about which they write, who control how the modern world views medieval history. We can almost liken them to modern-day reporters; then, as now, some were more interested in exploiting scandal than in reporting simple facts. The more disreputable chroniclers, such as Geoffrey le Baker and Jean Froissart, twist around events to suit their own prejudices. These are the instigators of the stories that have influenced many judgments on Edward II and Isabella of France. In a way it is not surprising that these romantic tales have persisted to this day. After all, what will historians in the year 2500 think of the twentieth century after examining The National Enquirer, Entertainment Tonight, and Geraldo Rivera?

This is not to say that all medieval chroniclers are ahistorical or even that those of questionable veracity are not worth studying. On the contrary, they give us some indication of what contemporaries likely believed to be true. But this does not mean that the romances have any

basis in reality. It was Baker who popularized the tragic story of Edward II's last days, but might not he have been taking advantage of Edward's contemporary cult status? Froissart leads us to believe that Despenser was Edward's lover, but was he not just heaping additional dirt upon a man who had never been loved by the people of England?

Because such chronicles set down juicy scandals as the truth, they inspire other writers to invent their own stories. Geoffrey le Baker, who was one of the first to slander the "fierce lioness" Isabella, influenced centuries of terrible legends about Edward's queen. Likewise, he also concocted Edward's tragedy from a similar, though less melodramatic, account in the Brut, a myth that has not been forgotten to this day and the reliability of which remains a controversial issue. For novelists and playwrights to accept such tales is expected, for the dirtier the scandal, the more compelling the plot. But using them in writing history is trickier and requires caution.

Fortunately for the historical Edward and Isabella, more sedate chronicles do survive that provide us with a more realistic picture of their careers. The New York Times and Washington Post of their day, these chronicles, such as the Vita Edwardi Secundi, furnish us with political editorializing, perhaps, but they also set down valuable detail that can often be documented. They do not have the scurrilous tone that the more fictional chronicles do; it is clear that their purpose is to record historical events in

the clearest way possible. It is unfortunate that chroniclers such as Adam Murimuth and the St. Paul's annalist chose to respect the cover-up that ensued following Edward's deposition, for we have no reliable narrative containing any details outside of the most sterile facts. That is one reason, no doubt, that Geoffrey le Baker's romance made the impact that it did, and why even today we must conclude that in Edward and Isabella's case, the gulf between fact and fantasy is wide indeed. It is possible to dispel many of the romances with some investigation, yet the legends live on. The historical novels, most recently The Death of King, continue to exploit the romance so that it cannot die. Historians, on the other hand, now consistently pick apart the stories to arrive at the truth. Thus writers have several times reconsidered Isabella's life in recent years and have pronounced her more complex than evil. In addition important personages in Edward's life, such as his father, Thomas Lancaster, and the earl of Pembroke, have also been studied with an eye to a greater understanding of English politics in the early fourteenth century. Only Edward himself lacks an erudite study (Hutchison's notwithstanding). J. R. S. Phillips, the author of the book on the earl of Pembroke, is now writing Edward's biography for the University of California series. Perhaps he will be able to shed light on Edward's enigmatic existence.

This leaves us with the more specific conclusions we can make about Edward and Isabella themselves. What is fact

and what is fantasy? To aid in answering that question, we must devise a third category, speculation or the educated guess. Too often the documentation does not exist to support a reasonable hypothesis.

The most basic and incontrovertible fact about Edward II is that he failed as king. He looked the part, but he could not act it. He alienated his wife, his aristocracy, and his subjects because of his excessive devotion to Gaveston and Despenser. His government fell apart because he would not take the time to rule it himself, leaving it instead to tyrannical friends who disgusted the ousted barons. It is a fact that Edward misjudged almost every crucial decision in his life. He misjudged the earls' intentions toward Gaveston; he misjudged Robert Bruce's military skills; he underestimated his wife's unhappiness and her ability to cause trouble. Most importantly, he misjudged his role as king, for he found that that designation was not a license to tyranny. For this more than anything else he lost his crown.

Those are facts. We can speculate that Edward was bisexual, for circumstantial evidence exists that points in that direction. But it indicates only Gaveston: any suggestion that Edward and Despenser were lovers is only a romantic continuation of the Gaveston story. About Edward's death, we can make two educated guesses. First, we can assume that someone did kill Edward after his deposition, because that is the official government position. We cannot

speculate upon the manner of his death, however, for all reliable contemporary chronicles omit those details. The red hot spit legend, unless some hidden proof comes to light, must be regarded as merely the product of a chronicler's imagination. Of course, it is now fashionable, and sound reasoning, to believe that Edward did not die at Berkeley Castle at all. Support for this theory comes from the Walewyn and de Fieschi letters, neither of which has been successfully refuted. Nevertheless, no one can be sure of Edward's fate until further evidence appears.

To decide what is fact and what is romance in Isabella's life is not so easy. What is true, however, is that she could not have been the monster that Baker, Strickland, and Doherty have made her out to be. There are many documents in the calendars and in her household accounts that attest to her generosity. It is fact that she was strong-willed and politically aware or she could never have succeeded with her coup-d'etat. She also was a pious woman, at least in the last half of her life which was spent in devotion and good works.

We can only speculate, however, about the nature of her relationships. Her marriage was not good, but it seemed serene enough until the end. Perhaps she reached the point where she had to do something to gain Edward's attention, and perhaps she also feared for her son's inheritance. It is a good guess that she turned to Mortimer for love, for they are often mentioned together after 1326, though not as

lovers. It is possible, once Edward was deposed, that she had some knowledge of his intended fate, or even suggested it herself. She and Mortimer would never have been safe as long as Edward was alive.

Yet the possibility that she may have instigated his murder does not preclude goodness of character. Many of the evil stories attributed to Isabella are clearly mere romance. For example, no contemporary chronicler, French or English, accuses her of maliciously sending her sisters-in-law to prison for adultery. Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that Isabella made a fuss at Leeds Castle because she was wicked or wanted to cause trouble between Edward and his barons. Those writers who blame Isabella solely for the Leeds Castle incident are exploiting her evil image unjustly. One legend, and a hard one to eliminate, is that Isabella was known as the "she-wolf of France." No writer, historian or otherwise, used those words to describe Isabella until Thomas Gray did so in the mid-eighteenth century. Outside of Geoffrey le Baker, who obviously did not care for Edward's wife, most chroniclers treated Isabella with kindness and even compassion. The attacks against her character started slowly and not even in her own time. The fact that little of this negative view of Queen Isabella can be traced to her own lifetime invalidates the legend of her permeating wickedness.

Thus Edward and Isabella have their historical lives and their romantic lives, sometimes overlapping, more often

not. The final conclusion is that both accounts have merit. As long as historical studies firmly pronounce the romance as romance, its existence harms no one. In fact, it is valuable as a literary tool, as shown in the plays of Marlowe and Brecht. The truth in historical works, however, should never be replaced by legend, no matter how much more fascinating the romance might be.

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