Curtis Perry’s new book defines and explores a discourse of corrupt favoritism through a broad range of early modern English writing, from anonymous libels to court masques. Perry contends that the figure of the royal favorite permits writers to raise theoretical questions about constitutional monarchy, the limits of prerogative, and the nature of the public sphere. Tracing an uneven but discernible shift in the way favoritism is perceived, Perry reads texts from the late 1580s, when writers labor to “dissociate the queen from the guilt of her favorite,” to the Caroline period, when depictions of favoritism are more overtly critical of Stuart use of instrumental favorites to effect a general “erosion of liberty and law” (31, 265). While urging us to recognize the vital cultural work done by discursive conventions of the favorite as “comparative frameworks,” Perry also warns that continuity is not inevitability—that there is “no direct or inevitable path from the ideological dissonance of the late Elizabethan state to the outbreak of civil war” (284). A similarly responsible approach guides his inclusion of a generous amount of under-examined texts; this book makes a considerable contribution to current efforts to expand the scope of literary studies. By focusing on the way these texts attempt to negotiate the contradictions intrinsic to their core ideologies, Perry reveals a surprising level of sophistication in work hitherto marginalized if not dismissed outright.

Of special interest to Marlowe studies are chapters 3, 5 and 6 of this 7-chapter book. Together they locate Marlowe’s Edward II as an early but far-from-lone statement in two overlapping, politically-charged conversations of the day: one concerning royal erotic incontinence figured as “sodimitical favoritism,” the other about the “political fable” of England’s Edward II (145, 185). This fresh approach renders Marlowe’s play, if no less disturbing, then more stringently and topically political than some recent readings suggest. That these chapters also feature some of the study’s most lively writing is a bonus; in the rare moment when Perry’s prose is less engaging, it is forgivable and eminently preferable to what the “proto-Republican sentiments” of some of the works he covers might have elicited from a less sober scholar (43).

Chapter three is the necessary entry point for the final section of the book since it establishes an intellectual history of virtuous favoritism against which Perry’s striking readings gain coherence. At stake is the question of the nature and limits of monarchy within a traditionally balanced English constitution—a structural tension pushed to a crisis with late Elizabethan and early Stuart innovations in the crown’s patronage, from an increase in royal monopolies, licensing, and manufacturing, to the sale of offices. Suspicion of court corruption, articulated through the trope of poison (chapter 4), is outstripped by an even more “ubiquitous” deployment of tropes of erotic favoritism as the “unofficial language of corruption” in the political fictions of chapter 5 (135).
More surprising is Perry’s finding that sodomy is “the predominant figuration for corrupt erotic favoritism” (138). Perry traces this trope from the anonymous 1592 A Knack to Know a Knavel e, which stages the “effeminate” affections of king Edgar in order to articulate deep cultural concerns about royal favoritism, to the 1627 play, *The Cruel Brother*, into which an unexpectedly radical, pre-laureate Davenant slips a “structural critique” of personal monarchy (141-5, 172). These plays often conclude in a manner that avoids “having to grapple with complex questions concerning the political validity of royal affection,” but Perry maintains that the very discourse of sodomitical affection tends to undermine royalist pieties about bad counsel by moving blame from the ambitious favorite to the monarch incapable of governing his own passions (153). Reading Marlowe’s *Edward II* against *Leicester’s Commonwealth* (an earlier libel) and Jesuit Robert Parson’s treatise *A Conference About the Next Succession to the Crown of England*, Perry shows how Marlowe dramatizes the politic pieties of a disgruntled Catholic aristocracy who ostensibly crave a return to natural, “impersonal modes of government” which would, in effect, “reduce the king to a puppet or a cipher” (197-9). In context with other fictional treatments of Edward, Perry identifies Marlowe’s innovation in his “force[ing] the audience into an uneasy recognition” of the symmetry between tyrannical passion and unruly rebellion (202, 207).

Perry astutely finds this move not evasively apolitical, but quintessentially Marlovian in its aggressive demystification, capped by a slick, problematic ending (201). Yet, Marlowe’s political fiction is not the most radical in Perry’s history. Through compelling, carefully supported analysis, Elizabeth Cary’s *History of the Life, Reign and Death of Edward II* (1627) emerges as the most overtly topical reading of Edward II: the most hostile toward monarchy itself.

Acknowledging with Perry that currently obscure texts are potentially “deeply topical without being slavishly or reductively allegorical” allows us to envision Marlowe participating in a discursive community that is perhaps larger than commonly imagined (87). Perry’s solid, historicist approach permits a graceful juxtaposition of texts like Cary’s *History* with Jonson’s tragedy, *Sejanus*, on one hand, and a pamphlet like *The Second Part of Crafty Crumwell* (1648) on the other. He is perhaps less comfortable with the “literary-critical methodologies” touted in the book’s catalogue entry. Perry’s arguments demonstrate theoretical sophistication throughout, yet the direct engagement with Habermas or Williams feels somewhat compulsory, relegated as it is to short prefatory and concluding remarks. At one point, this results in Perry wrapping up a rather suggestive reading of favoritism in *Paradise Lost* by questioning a new historicist subversion/containment model no longer espoused by its best known American proponent (for Stephen Greenblatt’s significant modification see “Culture,” *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, University of Chicago Press, 1995). Perry’s book is extremely impressive as a “cultural history of the Elizabethan and early Stuart discourse of favoritism” and it is on those terms that it adds significantly to the field (21).

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