

*The Literary Figuration and the Constellation of Power in the Play "The Life of Edward II of England"*

Jan Demcisak, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius Trnava, Slovakia

The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2015  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

Believing in the necessary and close connection between aesthetics and politics runs like a golden thread through the whole work of the German playwright Bertolt Brecht. The paper look into the nexus of power and politics which Brecht addresses in his play "The Life of Edward II of England". It not only makes recourse to the destiny and the fall of this British monarch, but it also makes one to understand how power influences truth. Following Brecht's work and Foucault's genealogy of power, the political power will be analyzed in its multidimensionality: as power of state within its creative and changeable historical perspective; as precarious balance of power which on the one side influences the life of the whole nation and the individual private life on the other; as invisible mechanism which is hardly to uncover. The goal of the paper is also to think over the use of the gesture by Brecht. According to Carrie Asman, who suggests the gesture to be understood as the back going shift from the Semiotic to the Mimetic, to the paper aims to analyse the literary figured bodies as special interfaces of the aesthetic and political discourse. Based on Close Reading we also try to demonstrate how a politically representative figure and its power can be destroyed and created at the same time.

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## Introduction

The play “The Life of Edward II of England” by Bertolt Brecht was first published in *Neuer Merkur* in 1924. After that it has been edited for the Kiepenheuer Verlag one more time in the same year. This second version, which is according to Knopf (1980) the regular base for serious interpreting of the play (p. 41), is also a part of the most complex, commented edition of Brecht’s oeuvre titled *Große Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe* (Brecht, 1988). This text version forms the primary base for the following critical analysis.

Even though the play is an adaptation of the tragedy by Chrisoph Marlowe, Volker Canaris showed as early as in 1973 that the play by Brecht is unique and original, because it strongly differs from Marlowe’s text. On the other hand, Brecht wrote *Edward II* together with Lion Feuchtwanger as co-author, who called Brecht’s attention to this historical play. It is not relevant whether Marta Feuchtwanger witnesses an intense cooperation between her husband and Brecht or if Carl Zuckmayer gives the only credit for the work to Brecht. What is important is that the scholars have recognized in this writing process one of the first examples for collective writing, which became one of Brecht’s main working principals (Knopf, 1980, p. 41). The play is also a milestone in the development of the so-called alienation or estrangement effect and of the creation of the gestic language; it demonstrates the immense and maybe sometimes unpredictable impact of the discourse, the language and the speech as well.

## The performative discourse

Already at the beginning of the play, the royal brother Kent, facing the first quarrels between King Edward and the aristocracy, gives the following comment to the situation:

“There will be heads, brother, to stick on poles  
Because the tongues in them are far too long.” (Brecht, 1966, p. 6)

Speaking with Austin’s speech act theory Kent’s utterance makes obvious that some speech acts are performative and are able to change the social reality. They can also be linked in causal relationships to other acts and affect them. Edward’s words “I will have Gaveston.” (p. 6) and his stubbornness get the story line rolling and lead to the final consequences expressed through the sentence “I stand or fall with Gaveston.” (p. 6). The word of the king is able to perform and to create a new reality. This specific power is manifested in the majestic plural (the royal we) “Gaveston, this very moment we will make you/Lord Chamberlain, Chancellor, Earl of Cornwall/And Peer of the Isle of Man” (p. 6) and in the name of the king: “Give orders in our name just as you please”. (p. 7) All utterances of the king are performatives and acts of power at the same time. As Butler observes, power and discourse are linked in a specific way: “The power of discourse to produce that which it names is thus essentially linked with the question of performativity. The performance is thus one domain in which power acts as discourse.” (Butler, 1993, p. 17) Brecht reflects this interesting unity between power and discourse in his Edward-play too. Intended or not, he unmasks the machinery of the discursive power. The power of the king’s speech can not only be seen in the declaration of war and in the act of releasing Gaveston from prison, there

is also present an obvious metaphorization of the power and Edward himself is in numerous cases more or less directly compared to God.

The king has the power over life and death even in his absence, because he's always present due to his name as semiotic sign. At the time when a letter from Edward arrives and his friend Gaveston is saved from the execution, Gaveston calls out: "Edward. The name revives me." (Brecht, 1966, p. 27) This sentence shows the effect of the semiotic sign (Edward's name) and the link between power and discourse. Not Edward himself is the one who saves the life of Gaveston; it is the power which is rather coupled to the name of the king than to his person. The unity between power and discourse can also be observed in the following paronomasia:

"GAVESTON:

You have the promise of our good King Edward

And that with word and seal:

He'll only see me and then send me back.

[...]

LANCASTER:

When?

*Laughter.*

For his Danny's sake, if he catches a glimpse of him,

He'll break the seal and God's very nose." (p. 27)

The word "seal" used iteratively by Lancaster could be replaced with the term "word". The possibility of this replacement turns the one word to the metaphor of the other. The seal of the king as the sign of his power correlates to the word as a sign participating in a discourse. The power-discourse or power-word relation is apparent in the whole play. To achieve the abdication and to make the king to give up his power, the bishop tries to force to the monarch to say specific words, but he does not succeed. Both, the intrigue and the attempt to seize the word of the king mean taking possession of the power and breaking the power. In the same sense Mortimer wants to usurp the political power and compares the struggle between him and Edward to a verbal fight: „You fight well. /As one who knows good orators" (p. 84). This discursive battle reaches its climax at the moment when Mortimer makes use of violence and hires two soldiers to force the king to change his words: "Bring him to the point where he says yes/To every question. Burn it into him." (p. 79); but without success. Even after the physical elimination of the person, after killing the king, Mortimer cannot overcome the power, which he is trying to defeat. The ruling power continues in the person of Edward's son.

The old discourse proceeds and it is symbolically resurrected by the name of the father – the young Edward invokes the inner voice of his father: „My father's voice in me" (p. 90). A voice that is not present has to function as a witness; this situation demonstrates also how the process of signification works. The signifier denotes an object even if this object is not present. The signification is at the same time performative, it creates a meaning and legitimates the power of pronouncing Mortimer guilty and sentencing him to death. There are invoked some other "witnesses", who should function as symbolical signs and witness the situation without being present: "Those who're not here shall be my witnesses." (p. 90) The witnessing is realised in the name of the father and it is based on male representation

only. It corresponds with Lacan's theory, which claims that women are excluded from the symbolic order. Lacan understands phallus as signifier of all meaningful significations, which structure the symbolic order as a socio-linguistic and socio-cultural system of signs. (Osinski, 1998, p. 140) Indeed the exclusion of the woman from the symbolic order and the impossibility of participation in the male connoted discourse of power could be demonstrated by the character of Queen Anne. As a woman she has not the power to influence the occurrences, she also cannot function as a symbolical sign, she is not allowed to play a role of the witness and after all she is aware of that, than she says: "Ask nothing of me, child. I may not speak." (Brecht, 1966, p. 77) Already her name Anne could be understood as a *nomen genericum* for the woman, she is excluded on the one hand from the relationship between Edward and Gaveston and on the other hand from the male dominated discourse as well. She is permanently manipulated and has to fight for her place within the men's world.

### **The power of the language as political power**

The subject of the language is related not only to the reflexion and portraying of the performative power of the discourse, but also to the phenomenon of misinterpreting and misunderstanding within the interpersonal communication, which depends on the correct linguistic signification and the proper meaning. One of the examples could be found in the scene, where Gaveston deals with a kind of defamation. His reaction to the defaming song is in Latin and states that continuous defaming causes something sticks in the mind of people. Spencer adds to this statement his own comment: "You are saying the gallows are too good for him." (p. 10)

The perlocutionary effect of Gaveston's utterance could be at worst the death of the singer, because Spencer is interpreting and emphasizing the speech act on his way. Finally the scene results in a comical effect. The exposure of the king and his fellows to ridicule is apprehended as dishonour, it is interesting, that affected feel especially those persons, who are not really involved and who are not the very target of the verbal attack. The bishop remarks: "London is laughing at us." (p. 10) He as much as Queen Anne demonstrates the internalization of the defaming discourse; this internalized consternation interrelates in this case with homophobia. The affected characters act triggered by their fear or paranoia and try to approve their heterosexuality and moral integrity. The homosexuality functions like the photographic negative, it is a necessary part of the binary logic and it should affirm the right, normal, morally intact, heterosexual subject. The church and the aristocracy use it as pretence of fighting against the monarch. The struggle has not to do with Gaveston as lover of the king, but the royal power is the matter of the fact. Also Mortimer's speech regarding the Trojan War shows how every struggle starts with making use of pretence:

"Till in an alehouse by the dockside  
A man socks another man, gives him a bloody nose,  
His pretext being it was for Helen's sake." (p. 18)

It is interesting, that in Mortimer's version of the story Paris or Menelaus did not initiate the war, but it were two anonymous men, who attacked each other in an alehouse. The war begins from the bottom up, the two individuals infected with an ideology start to struggle in the name of an idea they believe in. The ideology

becomes viral and the struggles spread like an uncontrolled, fast expanding fire. Suddenly the mass of the people behaves insanely, the madness overcomes many and many are involved in the fight now:

“Quite unexpectedly on the following days  
The hands of many reached for many throats.  
From the beat-up ships they harpooned the drowning  
Like tuna fish. As the moon waxed,  
Many were missing from the tents, and in the houses  
Many were found, headless.” (p. 18)

The war is avalanche-like and the same is true of the discourse, especially if we think about slander and its discursive power and its ability to change the reality of the language into the ontic reality. The difference between the performative constructed being and the “real” being could be illustrated by the dialog between Gaveston and the soldier James:

“GAVESTON: The battle’s moving over toward Bristol. When the wind blows, you can hear the Welshmen’s horses. Have you read about the Trojan War? My mother’s son: for him, too, much blood was shed. Eddie may be asking quite often where his friend is.

JAMES: I doubt it. Everyone in Killingsworth will tell him he needn’t wait for you any more. Dig, dear sir. The rumor’s around, you see, that your honorable Irish corpse has been seen in the Killingsworth carrion pit. If rumour is ever to be believed, you have no head now, sir.” (p. 40)

What is remarkable is that the text changes from verses into prose. Not the lyricism and poetic, but the more down to earth prosaic narration brings the rumour into the world and keeps it alive. Jameson is reproducing this rumour and the absurdity of the scene is, that the iterated quote becomes reality, because Gaveston is digging his own grave. The directive to dig the grave is embedded in the explanation. The words “you see” (in the German text originally as adverb “nämlich”) in “The rumour’s around, you see” are linked to the explanation why Edward isn’t waiting for Gaveston. The cause (rumour) of the effect (Edward doesn’t inquire after Gaveston anymore) is named. In addition to it the words “you see” respectively the German word “nämlich” as correlate refers to the previous sentence “Dig, dear sir.” This means the rumour is also the cause of Gaveston's death, to which points the digging of the grave itself. This causal nexus is much more complicated, than Edward’ believing in the rumour and in the death of his friend is part of it.

In the analysed scene Gaveston speaking of the Trojan War compares himself indirectly to Helen and recognizes himself as the cause of the actual war in which Edward is involved. The myth of the Trojan War may be also a hint for the further contextualization and interpretation. Before asking the question, if James has ever read the epic by Homer, Gaveston had guessed to hear the horses (“Welshmen’s horses”). This reference makes possible to compare the rumour of Gaveston’s death to a Trojan horse that helped to win and to end the war. For Mortimer, who is planning the intrigue, Gaveston is the signifier for the beginning and the end of the political struggle too: “He’s the alpha of the war, this butcher’s son, /Its omega too” (p. 28)

His order to James “Take this man and when they ask you: where/Are you taking this man? /Say: to the carrion pit.” (p. 28) initiates the rumour with the aim to defeat Edward. Like the warriors hidden inside of the wooden horse Mortimer uses symbolically Gaveston’s skin: “I wrap myself in the skin of another man:/This butcher’s son.” (p. 29) But the one lie follows the other, because Edward confronted with the message takes revenge for his friend like Achilles grieving over Patroclus. Mortimer has to go on with his intrigues and his weapon is the power of words and of the discourse. At first he wants to convince the people, that Edward II abdicated. Because he must hide the truth especially from Edward’s brother Kent and the young Edward III, the king has to be kept dead quiet. It happens symbolically at the country road, when Kent meets his brother escorted by the soldiers, Edward’s mouth has to be gagged and finally by the end of the play Edward has to be killed to be silenced. Mortimer’s tactic escalates and he admits: “Because he’s stubborn and won’t talk one must/Out-lie the lies with lies.” (p. 68) As the culmination point can be seen Mortimer’s philological trick:

“A strip of paper, carefully prepared,  
 Odourless, proving nothing, will set up this  
 Contretemps.  
 If he knows neither Yes or Not to my question  
 I shall know how to answer him in kind.  
 »Eduradum occidere nolite timere bonum est«  
 That’s with no comma. They can read it:  
 »Kill Edward you must not, fear it!«  
 Or according to the state of their innocence,  
 And whether they’ve been eating or fasting:  
 »Kill Edward, you must not fear it. «  
 »Kill Edward you must not fear it. «  
 Without any punctuation, thus.” (p. 85)

Fully aware of the possibilities of the language, Mortimer uses the polyvalent or vague meaning of words. The play also thematizes the problem of interpretation; the ambivalent message is only a one example for the imperfection of the understanding through the language. The soldiers who are delivering the letter say it very clear: “What’s this? I don’t get it.” (p. 87) Depending on the interpretation or misinterpretation (if one can talk about a misinterpretation in case of polyvalence) Edward loses his life. Volker Canaris has proven that a misunderstanding or a false interpretation causes the death of Gaveston. According to him Edward would misunderstand the message he received: “Forget Gaveston/Who is not in the quarrel any more—” (p. 36) as the death of Gaveston, what would make him not to hear to the lords, who were trying to tell him something what maybe could have saved Gaveston’s life. (Canaris, 1973, p. 40) Canaris proves his interpretation with Mortimer’s words commenting the execution of the peers:

“And when my friends began to talk, had you  
 Not drowned their words out with your drums  
 Had not, that is, too little confidence  
 And too much passion, too swift anger  
 Troubled your eye, your favourite Gaveston  
 Would be still alive.” (Brecht, 1966, p. 43)

It has to be added that Edward's opinion is impacted by the information from Queen Anne about Gaveston being executed.

The interpretation or misinterpretation of messages corresponds to the self-referentiality of Brecht's texts, with the thematizing of literature in literature. The doubt and scepticism about the meaning of written words are expressed in the play many times. Edward claims not to read books, Mortimer's soldiers say, they haven't read a chronicle yet and Mortimer himself reckons: "Since I quit books and knowledge/I sleep much sounder and digest my food." (p. 73) Mortimer's nickname "eel" could be applied to him because he's an intriguer, but also because he's a writer

### **The effects of misunderstanding**

Besides the "textual" understanding respectively the understanding through the language the play deals with interpersonal communication and apprehension per se. It also could be the war, which we could see as an effect of the misunderstanding. In his speech about Trojan War Mortimer describes this causality with the following words:

"If then the human, inhuman ear of reason  
Had not for the most part been stopped up  
–No matter whether Helen was a whore  
Or had a score of healthy grandchildren–  
Troy, four times larger this London,  
Would still be standing" (p. 19)

Both Helen in the myth and Gaveston in the play are only seemingly the cause of the war. The words "whore" and "score of healthy grandchildren" could also be an allusion to Gaveston/Edward's homosexual behaviour. It doesn't matter if this behaviour is a natural or morally reprehensible one, more important is the fact that it's not accepted. Besides this aspect the interpersonal communication seems to be inhuman, it doesn't only mean, that people are not able to listen to each other, but also that they treat each other more affectively than rationally. They don't communicate as humans anymore and change into animals. For Brecht this metamorphosis is linked to the language:

"Toward eleven forgetting their native speech  
The Trojan sees Troy, the Greek sees Greece, no more:  
They see instead the metamorphosis  
Of human lips into the fangs of tigers." (p. 19)

The social alienation is also an estrangement of the languages and vice versa. There is an animal fight instead of understatement. Queen Anne associates being strange with the struggle. She's begging: "For my sake do not raise your swords against/The king" (p. 15) In the German text she says: *Erhebt doch nicht das Schwert gegen euern König. /Sehr fremd ist uns Eduard.*" (Brecht, 1988, p. 19), which means, "Edward is strange to us", but she cannot explain the cause of Edward's strangeness. Edward's strangeness could be interpreted as intentional, as a desire to escape from politics and hypocritical society and to find refuge in the privacy outside of any norms (such as marriage or compulsory heterosexuality). This allows us to understand, why Edward insists on his relationship with Gaveston, it seems to be an alternative option for him:

“Oh, Spencer, since words are rough,  
And only part us heart from heart  
And understanding is not granted to us,  
Amid the deafness nothing remains except  
Bodily contact between men. And even  
This is little. All is vanity” (Brecht, 1966, p. 55)

Canaris interprets the situation as a manifestation of an elementary structure within human relationships, as a manifestation of the loneliness of the individual in the middle of manifold interlacing. He claims, that only the elementary relationship reduced to the physical saves Brecht's Edward from the loneliness and from the isolation of the individual in the crowd. (Canaris, 1973, p. 39)

The close reading of the text showed us, that Edward doesn't complain about his loneliness at all. And in the first place it is the mutual misunderstanding, which isolates the individual in the middle of the crowd. Already in the scene in London 1307-1312, when the Queen Anne tries to run away in the woods and when complot against Edward II begins, Mortimer describes the queen as a widow: “You're widowed by a butcher's son, my lady.” (Brecht, 1966, p. 14) It means Edward is pronounced for dead, what is actually not true at this time. Mortimer's words could be interpreted as a social death caused by Edwards sympathy for Gaveston. It is the relationship with Gaveston, which leads the king into isolation. Edward's fight has to be seen as a fight for the right to individual happiness, which is refused to him by the milieu or the circumstances. His desire for Gaveston is not an escape from the isolation and it is already given at the beginning of the play.

On the contrary when one tries to keep the friend away from him, Edward starts to fight, although he was never interested in fighting before. The death of his lover causes incredible change in his behaviour. The king becomes an animal too: “Tell every man before you strangle him in the undergrowth/That England's king turned tiger” (Brecht, 1966, p. 39). With the animal state comes also the deafness, what is similar to Mortimer's lecture about the Trojan War. This proves, that the interpretation by Volker Canaris, who means that the friendship between Edward and Gaveston is marked by the “low of the deafness” (Canaris, 1973, p. 40), is not correct.

It is also obvious that Canaris understands the homosexuality in the play as an asocial aspect, what certainly determines his interpretation of Edward's stepping back to the “bodily contact”. According to him the people are able to cohabit (to understand each other), if they step back into their physical nature, the social drive to “understanding” causes the step back into anti-sociality, into a-sociality (which corresponds with the homosexual relationship) (p. 40). If we follow this conclusion, it must be the love, which is an asocial phenomenon for Canaris. The “bodily contact” namely, which Edward is speaking about, has to overcome the situation of being apart “hart from hart”. Also his words addressed to Baldock: “Make a test now of the philosophy/You've sucked from breasts of celebrated wisdom/In the works of Plato and of Aristotle.” (p. 55) postulate the idea of the platonic love. And finally the last sentence “This is little. All is vanity” (p. 55) demonstrates Edward's opinion, that love can only be an illusionary support in our life. Thinking of vanity corresponds with the historical costume of the play and shows the ephemeral and short-lived character of love, which cannot be almighty at all. This point of view matches to the dis-



romanticized concept of love in Brecht's work. The love between two men follows the same mechanism as the love between man and woman. In the scene, when Gaveston and Edward say good bay to each other, the king confesses to his lover: „Like the triangle/ Formed by that flock of storks in the sky, /Which seems to stand, though flying, /So stands your image in our heart/Undimmed by time.” (Brecht, 1966, p. 23) The storks in the sky are also a figure in one well-known poem by Bertolt Brecht. It describes the relationship between a stork and a cloud and shows the illusionary and ephemerality of love, because even if the stork and the cloud seem to stay forever together, they have to fall apart.

The homosexual love as it is showed in the play has a spiritual and a bodily aspect. As mentioned above Canaris reads the bodily contact as an attempt to break the isolation of the individual. The reading of Barth is compered to Canaris obviously homophobe and absurd. In Barth's opinion the homosexual seems to live monadic and not involved into communicative relations, in contrast to the heterosexual relationships, where the communication is expected (Barth, 1992, p. 185). For Barth is the homosexuality apriori non-communicative, for Canaris does step back into the asocial life cause the deafness as the sign for the non-communication, which is an aposteriori phenomenon. Both Canaris and Barth read the bodily contact as a rejection of the communication and understanding. In my view the bodily contact could be seen as an act of nonverbal communication that corresponds with the resignation from the understanding based on the negative connoted human language.

### **Is there a possibility to escape from the nexus of power?**

Regarding the aspect of the bodily contact, shown as nonverbal communication in Brecht's play it seems to be very helpful to reconsider the meaning of the gesture and the gestic by Brecht, as Carrie Asman already suggested. Asman referring to Walter Benjamin speaks about the necessary shift from the semiotic to the mimetic and from the sign to the body (Asman, 1993, p. 106), which means the gesture has not to be understand depended on the semiotic and the sign, but as retrospectively depended on the mimetic and the body. The gesture by Brecht is also not only a theatrical phenomenon, but it is also significant for the poetry. The play *The Life of Edward II of England* is known as the first play, where Brecht deliberately makes use of the gesture and works up the gestic. The double escape of Edward into the other modality of the sexuality and into the other modality of the language could be interpreted as try to get out of the nexus of power, words and violence. But this way seems not to be possible, because the mechanisms of power permeate the whole body. The link between the power and the materiality of the body is demonstrated in the scene, where the bishop is supposed to force the king to abdication and to take the crown off his head. Edward says: “I can't get it off, my hair comes with it, /The two have grown together! (Brecht, 1966, p. 61) and the bishop answers: “Tear it off! It's not your flesh!” (p. 61) On the other side Brecht shows that the embodiment of power is not quite natural. It can be demonstrated by the example of Edward III. In the last scene we are witnessing the entering of the young Edward into the patriarchal world. At the beginning of the scene he is only an innocent child, but he loses his innocence with the first use of the power. When he becomes king he orders the execution of Mortimer and sends his mother to the Tower. The violence act brings blood on his hands and the queen Anne comments his decision with the words: “Such a death's-head joke as that you did not/Suck up with mother's milk, third Edward. (Brecht, 1966, 93) She makes

clear, that the state, the young Edward had achieved, isn't a natural one, but determined by the society and the patriarchal order. The last words of the play, a prayer of the young Edward: "And grant us, God, that also/Our lineage may not perish in the womb." (p. 94) show us, that the idea of culture dominated by men and the male power may be the "natural" curse of our biological body.

## References

- Asman, C. (1993). Die Rückbindung des Zeichens an den Körper. Benjamins Begriff der Geste in der Vermittlung von Brecht und Kafka. (M. S. al., Ed.) *The other Brecht II = Der andere Brecht (The Brecht Yearbook, 18)* , 104-119.
- Barth, A. (1992). *Der frühe Bertolt Brecht: Textintentionen und Rezeption von Im Dickicht der Städte und Leben Eduards des Zweiten von England*. Beckingen: Verlag J. M. O. Barth.
- Brecht, B. (1966). *Edward II. A Chronical Play*. (E. V. Bently, Ed.) New York: Grove Press.
- Brecht, B. (1988). *Werke. Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe. Band 2. Stücke 2*. (W. Hecht, J. Knopf, W. Mittenzwei, & K.-D. Müller, Eds.) Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Butler, J. (1993). Critically Queer. *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* , 1 (1), 17-32.
- Canaris, V. (1973). *Leben Eduards des Zweiten von England als vormarxistisches Stück Bertolt Brechts*. Bonn: Nouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann.
- Knopf, J. (1990). *Brecht-Handbuch: Theater*. Stuttgart: Metzler.
- Contact email:** [jan.demcisak@ucm.sk](mailto:jan.demcisak@ucm.sk)