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Chronicles and Politics in the Reign of Edward II

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Historians have tended to give more weight to sources such as governmental and legal records than to chronicles, not least because so many survive. They open up areas of history impossible to access through chronicles alone, and they also provide a much more precise and detailed political narrative. But chronicles have their own value. They record events that made little impact on central records, reveal attitudes and comment on personalities.¹ Moreover, as Tout said, to read records and chronicles side by side is to see how accurate the chronicles were.² This reflects chroniclers' views of the importance of history as much as their sources of information. Some wrote polemics and eulogies, but, for most, contemporary history was a serious business. Their inherited classical ideas, reinforced by Christian views that events on earth manifested God's purpose, meant that history must be accurately recorded if posterity was to learn from it. They therefore sought good information; the best of them sifted it carefully; and when it was doubtful, they said so.

¹ The sixteen chronicles used for this paper and their approximate dates of composition are as follows: *Adae Murimuth continuatio chronicarum*, ed. by E. Maunde Thompson, Rolls Series, 93 (1889), written before 1346; *Annales Londonienses*, ed. by W. A. Stubbs, in *Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and Edward II*, Rolls Series, 76, 2 vols (1882–83), I, 151–241, written before 1316; *Annales Paulini*, *ibid.*, 257–338, written in stages at c. 1308, c. 1321, before 1340s; *The Anonimale Chronicle 1307–1334. From Brotherton Collection MS 29*, ed. by Wendy R. Childs and John Taylor, Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series, 147 (Leeds: Yorkshire Archaeological Society, 1991), written c. 1334; *The Brut*, ed. by F. W. D. Brie, EETS o.s. 131 (1906), written by 1333; 'A Chronicle of the Civil Wars of Edward II' [London, British Library, MS Cotton Cleopatra D IX], ed. by C. Haskins, *Speculum*, 14 (1939), 73–81, written c. 1327; *The Chronicle of Walter of Guisborough, Previously Edited as the Chronicle of Hemingford or Hemingburgh*, ed. by H. Rothwell, Camden Society, 3rd series, 89 (1957), written c. 1312; *Chronicon de Lanercost, 1201–1346*, ed. by J. Stevenson, Maitland Club, 46 (Edinburgh: Maitland Club, 1839) through the translation by Sir Herbert Maxwell, *The Chronicle of Lanercost 1272–1346* (Glasgow: Maclehose, 1913), written by 1346; *Chronicon Galfridi le Baker de Swynbroke*, ed. by E. Maunde Thompson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), written before c. 1358; *Flores Historiarum*, ed. by H. R. Luard, Rolls Series, 95, 3 vols (1890), III, written before 1330; *Gesta Edwardi de Carnarvan auctore canonico Bridlingtoniensi*, ed. by W. A. Stubbs, in *Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and Edward II*, Rolls Series, 76, 2 vols (1882–83), II, 27–97, written by c. 1339; revised 1370s; *Johannis de Trokelowe et Henrici de Blaneфорde chronica et annals*, ed. by H. T. Riley, Rolls Series, 28 (1866), written by 1324; *Nicolai Trivetii annalium continuatio*, ed. by A. Hall (Oxford: e Theatro Sheldoniano, 1722), pp. 1–29, written before 1318; *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden monachi Cestrensis*, ed. by J. R. Lumby, Rolls Series, 41, 9 vols (1865–86), VIII, written by c. 1352; *Sir Thomas Gray. Scalacronica 1272–1363*, ed. by A. King, Surtees Society, 209 (2005) started in 1355; *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, ed. by W. R. Childs (Oxford: Oxford Medieval Texts, 2005), written by 1326.

² T. F. Tout, *The Place of the Reign of Edward II in English History*, 2nd edn by Hilda Johnstone (Manchester:

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For the reign of Edward II chronicles offer numerous insights. Take the incident of John of Powderham, who claimed in 1318 to be the rightful king of England. This apparently minor incident offers a vivid glimpse of court politics. While the king joked and suggested making Powderham court jester, the queen and barons saw him as a serious threat during a period of tense political negotiations with Lancaster and successfully demanded his execution. The only clear record reference to this event is an order to deliver John of Exeter from the gaol in Northampton, where he was imprisoned for saying he was the king's brother.³ Otherwise, we are entirely dependent on chronicles. Far more important in the political narrative, and somewhat unexpected, is the chronicles' value for Edward's deposition. There is plenty of information in official records *that* it happened, but not for *how* it happened. Since there was no court of record that had the authority to depose a king, there were no procedures, no recording clerks, no formal rolls. The chronicles both provide a probable chronology and offer vivid pictures of the meetings, including one at which Thomas Wake waved his arms like a conductor to bring in the acclamation of the people at the appropriate time.⁴ With their comments on character chronicles also play a part in the discussion of *why* the deposition took place. It may be partly explained by the events in the reign steadily ratcheting up tensions and hatred, but these alone are not sufficient explanation, as the formal accusations against Edward show.⁵ To justify the deposition, his opponents attacked not only his failed policies but also his personal failings. Records show how contentious the charges of failed policies were. For instance, the claim that Edward II lost Scotland 'which his father had left him in peace' was utterly false.⁶ Edward I was still campaigning when he died in 1307. Again, the claim that Edward oppressed his baronage refers to the executions after the battle at Boroughbridge in 1322, but execution was a justifiable punishment of traitors (although mercy might have been more becoming in a king). Edward's failures were thus not as clear-cut as the accusations allege, and it is possible to find areas of success, ignored by the accusations. By 1326 the treasury had been refilled, Edward had overcome internal dissension, the Scottish border was stable under truce, and the Gascon crisis (which can be seen as just another skirmish in a long-running problem) had a sensible solution in making the prince of Wales duke of Aquitaine.⁷ Why then, in the face of Isabella's coup, could Edward not rally support? His personal failings were clearly as important as his actions. The list of failings in the accusations included incompetence, over reliance on others, greed and cruelty, but were they as contentious as the accusations over policy? For an assessment of character, chronicles again come into their own.

Chronicles have, of course, to be used with caution; some chroniclers were better placed than others for information and, as time passed, in an effort to explain the deposition, Edward's misdeeds grew in the telling. The abbot of Meaux went so far in the 1390s as to say that Edward 'in vitio sodomitico nimium delectabat',⁸ and by the sixteenth century Holinshed

Manchester University Press, 1936), pp. 4–5.

³ *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1317–21*, p. 273. For full details see W. R. Childs, '“Welcome, My Brother”: Edward II, John of Powderham and the Chronicles, 1318', in *Church and Chronicle in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to John Taylor*, ed. by Ian Wood and G. A. Loud (London: The Hambledon Press, 1991), pp. 149–63.

⁴ For the most recent analysis see C. Valente, 'The Deposition and Abdication of Edward II', *English Historical Review*, 113 (1998), 852–81.

⁵ These were not recorded until 1334, when the bishop of Hereford produced them as part of the material in his defence of his role in 1327.

⁶ Valente, 'The Deposition and Abdication of Edward II', p. 880.

⁷ Seymour Phillips, *Edward II* (Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 469, 476, 478–79.

⁸ *Chronica monasterii de Melsa*, ed. E. A. Bond, Rolls Series 43, 3 vols (1866–68), II, 355.

emphasized Edward's lightness, lewdness, heinous vices, wantonness, love of voluptuous pleasure, riotous excess, and filthy and dishonourable exercises (although he blamed Gaveston for corrupting the king in this way).⁹ Nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship, returning to early fourteenth-century sources, became kinder. Bishop Stubbs saw Edward as a 'trifler, an amateur farmer', with a 'skilful hand rather than [a] thoughtful head'; his loyalty to Gaveston was 'the one redeeming strong feature of his shallow but sensitive nature'. He also remarked that it was 'reserved for a later generation to discover an element of vice in what his contemporaries viewed with pitying indignation as a stupid but faithful infatuation'.¹⁰ Tout, in his 1913 Ford lectures, broadly echoed Stubbs: Edward was a man who did not like war, politics, or business; he and his two favourites 'have been on the whole rather too severely judged at the bar of history. Yet the most friendly eye can see little to praise.'¹¹ In the later twentieth century N. Denholm-Young, J. R. Maddicott, M. Prestwich, and J. S. Hamilton have emphasized the difficulties of government in the early fourteenth century, but remain critical of Edward's inadequacies as king,¹² P. Chaplais showed more sympathy and saw Edward as perhaps 'not so much an incompetent king as a reluctant one'.¹³ Twenty-first century historians continue to show compassion. R. M. Haines found a bit of a 'sensitive side',¹⁴ but wrote 'As an individual Edward could be brave and decisive [...]; as a king and as a military commander he was deficient.'¹⁵ J. R. S. Phillips is more sympathetic pointing to Edward as a literate man with a sense of humour, a powerful speaker, a man (perhaps) of more than conventional piety, and concludes: 'As a king, he was too able to be ignored but with too many weaknesses of character and behaviour to be a success.'¹⁶ None now sees Edward as vicious; most see his intermittent interest in government as his real incapacity. The most recent reassessments make Edward's problems and abilities more understandable, but a re-reading of the chronicles can still add sudden sharp glimpses into his life.

Edward's reign provides numerous chronicles, monastic and secular, moderate and extreme, carefully documented and racy, compassionate and sour. The most extensive and revealing comments are in the *Vita*, written before Edward's deposition and by someone very close to the court. Its author was a moralist, but a compassionate realist. He sympathized with the baronial cause, but remained a critical royalist, who never advocated violence, because 'civil war never yet had an acceptable end.'¹⁷ A small group of London and St

⁹ Raphaell Holinshed, *The laste volume of the Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande* (London: Iohn Harison, 1577), p. 847. John Stow, although he disapproved of the deposition by that 'fierce and cruel' woman, Isabella, also described Edward as disposed to lightness, the company of vile persons and given wholly to the pleasure of the body: John Stow, *The Annales of England* (London: Raiffe Newbery, 1600), pp. 327, 347, 349.

¹⁰ Stubbs, *Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and Edward II*, II, pp. xlviiii–l.

¹¹ Tout, *Edward II*, pp. 9–15. On the matter of homosexuality, he concluded that there was no proof, and pointed to the use of accusations of homosexuality, blasphemy, and witchcraft to blacken individuals and groups at that time.

¹² *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, ed. by N. Denholm-Young (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1957), p. ix; J. R. Maddicott, *Thomas of Lancaster 1307–1322: A Study in the Reign of Edward II*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 88–89; M. Prestwich, *Edward I* (London: Methuen, 1988), pp. 554–55, 565–66; J. S. Hamilton, *Piers Gaveston, Earl of Cornwall 1307–1312: Politics and Patronage in the Reign of Edward II* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), p. 14.

¹³ P. Chaplais, *Piers Gaveston: Edward II's Adoptive Brother* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 3.

¹⁴ R. M. Haines, *King Edward II: Edward of Caernarfon: His Life, His Reign, and Its Aftermath, 1284–1330* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), p. 23.

¹⁵ Haines, *Edward II*, p. 47.

¹⁶ J. R. S. Phillips, 'The Place of the Reign of Edward II', in *The Reign of Edward II. New Perspectives*, ed. by G. Dodd and A. Mussen (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer for York Medieval Press, 2006), pp. 220–33.

¹⁷ *Vita*, pp. 32–33.

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Albans chronicles, written wholly or partially within the reign tend to be neutral or moderately critical.¹⁸ All of these were in favourable geographical positions to obtain good information about central politics. Chronicles written in the twenty years after Edward's downfall, sometimes some distance from court, still have value as records by politically aware writers who had lived through his reign.¹⁹ They too remain moderately critical. Only two chronicles written in this early period were unrelentingly critical. The racy Long Continuation of the *Brut* shows a strong pro-Lancastrian stance through constant reference to the 'gentle' or 'noble' earl, but even that rarely denigrates Edward directly.²⁰ Quite different is the extreme vituperation of the Westminster continuation of the *Flores Historiarum*.²¹ Relations between Edward and Westminster were unfriendly, but the hostility of the chronicle is unusually bitter, perhaps because it was written or revised after the reign to justify Isabella's action.²² Even this chronicle says little directly about Edward in the early years, except to note his 'silliness' and love for Gaveston; but its criticism becomes overt from c. 1316 and virulent from 1320. Its language is so extreme with repeated comments on tyranny, cruelty, hatred, rage, and sin, that it loses credibility as a serious commentary on Edward himself, although it remains a serious indicator of the savage response released by his vengeful actions in the 1320s. After this period, the further away from the reign the chronicles were written, the worse Edward's character appears.

An analysis of all the chroniclers' comments on Edward would make too long a paper, so here I select aspects which seem to me still to have points within them which are insufficiently emphasized: Edward's relationship with favourites, his rustic pursuits, his alleged incompetence, and his anger and cruelty.

The problem of Edward's reliance on favourites is at the core of all contemporary and modern criticism, and has been much worked over. Yet something not always fully appreciated is that having favourites was not necessarily itself the problem. It was expected that great men would have confidants, and the clearest statement of this is in the *Vita*. The author declares that someone asking why the barons so hated Piers might be surprised, 'since it happens in almost all noble houses today that someone of the lord's household enjoys a prerogative of affection.' That was acceptable. What was not acceptable was the flaunting of the position by the favourite or 'immoderate love' by the lord.²³ The same desire for discretion on the part of a favourite was expressed years later in Richard II's reign by Thomas Walsingham: if only Robert de Vere had kept their friendship to himself and not vaunted it, he would have been safe.²⁴ Lancaster was as flawed as Edward II in this way. Higden reported that he too had one favoured 'secretarius' on whom he relied exclusively and again this was criticized: 'agenda sua ad nutum unius hominis, secretarii sui, passim committere'.²⁵ The clear implication is that a

¹⁸ *Annales Londonienses* and *Trokelowe* were written wholly within the reign; *Annales Paulini* and *Murimuth* partly within the reign.

¹⁹ *Anonimalle*; *Bridlington*; *Le Baker*; *Lanercost*; *Polychronicon*.

²⁰ *Brut*, pp. 205–47, 252–53.

²¹ *Flores*, pp. 137–235.

²² A. Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, 2 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974–82), II, 17–19.

²³ *Vita*, pp. 26–29.

²⁴ *The St Albans Chronicle, Volume II, 1394–1422*, ed. by J. Taylor, W. R. Childs and L. Watkiss (Oxford: Oxford Medieval Texts, 2011), pp. 30–31.

²⁵ Translated by Trevisa as 'Also he wolde commytte all his doynge to oon of his secretaries to doo with as he wolde': *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden monachi Cestrensis*, ed. by J. R. Lumby, Rolls Series, 41, 9 vols (1865–86), VIII, 314–15. The 'secretary' was probably Robert Holland. The *Brut* (p. 216) says that Lancaster loved Holland who could do what he liked in Lancaster's court.

discreet confidant and helper is fine but that policies and actions must always be those of the king or baron himself.

Of the king's favourites Gaveston drew most comment. Despite sneers at his lower class and foreign origins, there was not much wrong with Gaveston. His Gascon family was respectable; his father had served Edward I well; he was no more foreign than some of the earls; he was militarily and administratively competent. And, although the baronage had forced his exile in 1308, they were not always united in the intensity of their dislike. They were prepared to bring him back in 1309 on condition purveyance practices were reformed. At this time, clearly, they saw royal finances as more important than keeping Gaveston from the king. Edward at this stage had also proved competent at manipulating them. The *Vita* both describes and laments these complex and changing relationships: 'See how often and abruptly great men change! [...] The love of great men is as a game of dice, and the desires of the rich like feathers.'²⁶

After Gaveston's death in 1312 there was no single favourite for some years, although in 1317, a group of three, Hugh Audley, Hugh Amory, and William Montacute, provoked the continuator of the *Flores* to write that they were worse than Gaveston with their ludicrous ostentation, criticism which seems to be reflected in the papal exhortation to Edward at this time to spend less on clothes, feasting, and presents.²⁷ These men were all from respectable families, and Audley and Amory, like the younger Despenser (and Gaveston before them), were close to the king by being married to his nieces, the heiresses of the earl of Gloucester. The next single favourite was the younger Hugh Despenser, again of respectable family and specifically recommended by the earls to be king's chamberlain in 1318.²⁸ He was entrenched as favourite by 1320. Like Gaveston, he turned out to be good administrator, someone on whom the king could rely, but because of his overt greed he was, in the eyes of some, worse than Gaveston.

Although Gaveston drew most comment, it is clear that friendship with all the favourites included deep love and affection. 'Amor', 'affectio', and 'dilectus', 'familiarissimus', 'specialis' were words frequently used of both Gaveston and Despenser; and Amory at his death was also said to have been 'amicus specialis'.²⁹ The extreme love is also expressed in London, British Library, MS Cotton Cleopatra D IX in terms of a pact, an indissoluble bond, a flame of love.³⁰

A loving friendship between men was not itself criticized. As well as commenting on the normality of special friendships, the *Vita*'s author recalls the love of David and Jonathon, and of Achilles and Patroclus. Such love was to him within the acceptable spectrum because 'we do not read that they went beyond what was usual' ('modum excessisse').³¹ What all the chroniclers decried was the 'immoderate love' shown by Edward. By this they did not necessarily mean a sexual relationship, although the chronicles clearly record a physical side to the emotional involvement between Edward and Gaveston. At each exile Edward accompanied him as far as he could, and when Gaveston returned in 1308 Trokelowe speaks of 'kisses and

²⁶ *Vita*, pp. 10–17.

²⁷ *Flores*, p. 178; *Calendar of Papal Letters 1305–42* (London: HMSO, 1895), p. 434. For a discussion of these men as part of Edward's 'court party' at this time, see Maddicott, *Lancaster*, pp. 190–95.

²⁸ Besides being from a family well established in royal service, Hugh was well connected: a nephew of the earl of Warwick and brother-in-law to the earl of Lancaster's brother, Henry.

²⁹ *Vita*, pp. 100–01, 194–95, 208–09.

³⁰ Haskins, 'A Chronicle of the Civil Wars of Edward II', p. 75.

³¹ *Vita*, pp. 28–29, 52–53.

repeated embraces'.³² Without doubt there was a physical 'touchy-feely' relationship, but this need not be more than modern locker-room camaraderie. Whether there was a full homosexual relationship has been discussed for centuries and is difficult to prove one way or the other. Of the contemporary chronicles only the *Flores* explicitly mentions illicit liaisons ('concupitus illicitos'), and the later *Scalacronica* alludes to Edward's love of the 'delights of the flesh', but such words could refer to both sexes. Otherwise, before the late fourteenth century, there is only the rumour that Bishop Orleton had spoken in 1326 of 'unnameable vice' in relation to either Despenser or the king — a rumour that he denied.³³ Such allegations must be taken with a pinch of salt, given the *Flores*'s excesses and the tendency in this period to hurl extreme accusations of heresy, blasphemy, sorcery, and sodomy at any who were to be denigrated (including the Templars and Bishop Walter Langton). In any case Edward's sexuality does not seem to be the main concern of the chroniclers in their criticism of his kingship. The *Vita*'s mention of David and Jonathon, and Achilles and Patroclus is interesting.³⁴ The exact nature of these relationships is still debated, and it is not clear what stance the *Vita*'s author is taking. Their apparent acceptability to him may indicate that they were not then seen as homosexual relationships, in which case Edward and Gaveston's friendship was seen in the same non-sexual way. If they were understood to be homosexual, then it would seem that we are being told that a homosexual relationship was within the acceptable (or understandable) spectrum. Only when it disrupted other relationships did it become unacceptable. Of the more recent writers, Chaplais thought a homosexual relationship less likely, Haines thought it possible, and Hamilton accepted it.³⁵ If there was such a relationship, it was not exclusive. Edward had four children by Isabella, in 1312, 1316, 1318, and 1321; Gaveston's daughter was born in 1312; and Edward's illegitimate son must have been born between about 1307 and 1310.³⁶

Chaplais has suggested an alternative explanation for the close relationship with Gaveston in formal adoptive brotherhood or brotherhood in arms, and in his holding the office of king's chamberlain. As Edward's 'brother', Gaveston would deserve the earldom of Cornwall and a royal bride; as chamberlain, he would have the power to do many of the things that the chroniclers and baronage disliked.³⁷ The chronicles certainly frequently mention the close relationship of brotherhood, especially the *Vita* and the *Annales Paulini* but also the *Brut* and the Lanercost chronicle.³⁸ Other reports that Edward cherished Gaveston like a son and grieved for him as a father for a son similarly signal the closeness of a 'family' relationship, making Gaveston worthy of royal status.³⁹

Whatever the nature of the relationship, it was the disruption of power and patronage at the centre of government which upset contemporaries. The raising of Gaveston to royal status was no doubt provoking, but as the *Vita* records, had this remained a private rather than a flaunted public matter Gaveston might have lived.⁴⁰ Gaveston does not seem to have sought wealth and power as openly as did Despenser. He is usually seen as greedy for status

³² *Trokelow*, p. 65.

³³ *Flores*, p. 229; *Scalacronica*, pp. 90–91; for Orleton's *Responsiones* see Roger Twysden, *Historiae Anglicanae Scriptorum X* (London: Cornelius Bee, 1652), col. 2765.

³⁴ *Vita*, pp. 28–29.

³⁵ See Chaplais, *Gaveston*, pp. 6–13, 113–14; Hamilton, *Gaveston*, pp. 16–17; Haines, *Edward II*, pp. 42–43.

³⁶ F. Blackley, 'Adam the Bastard Son of Edward II', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 37 (1964), 76–77.

³⁷ Chaplais, *Gaveston*, *passim*.

³⁸ *Vita*, pp. 14–15, 32–33, 50–51, 178–79; *Annales Paulini*, pp. 259, 263, 273; *Brut*, p. 205; *Lanercost*, p. 184.

³⁹ *Vita*, pp. 50–53.

⁴⁰ *Vita*, pp. 28–29.

not power. The problem was that with the status came power. All the chronicles agree that when Gaveston was present Edward preferred him to all others; he looked at and spoke to no one else; he ignored his nobles and traditional advisors; there was no access except through Gaveston.⁴¹ The same was said of Despenser. Whether this was because of personal preference or because Gaveston and Despenser, as chamberlains, naturally controlled access to the king, the extreme language of the criticism shows how bitterly Edward's abdication of responsibility and the disruption of the proper hierarchy and balance of power was resented. The *Annales Paulini* called Gaveston the king's idol, whom he feared to displease as a father or a superior.⁴² Both Gaveston and Despenser were called the king's governor ('rector'),⁴³ and Despenser was seen 'as his right eye'.⁴⁴ Even worse, some wrote, there were now two kings in England (of Gaveston) or even three (of the two Despensers).⁴⁵ Because of their apparent hold over Edward, idioms of sorcery, enchantment, seduction, and bewitchment were used, especially of Gaveston but also of Despenser.⁴⁶ Critics said not only that the king delegated too much authority to Gaveston, but that his need to defend Gaveston also took his attention away from government and warfare. The *Vita*'s author commented in 1311 that Edward could not do two things at once: he could not effectively fight Bruce while he worried about defending Gaveston. The Bridlington chronicler also wrote that Edward 'paid little attention to ruling the realm' in 1312 when all his attention was focussed on Gaveston's return and safety.⁴⁷ Moreover, it was rumoured that Edward even considered giving up Scotland to Bruce and Gascony to the king of France and the pope to keep Gaveston safe.⁴⁸ That was certainly forgetting his position and going too far.

Edward's willingness to delegate so much to his favourites argues for a lack of interest in government. Comments which suggest a fun loving, quick-witted, out-door person, perhaps confirm this. Edward's sense of humour is expressed in his letter while prince to Louis of Evreux, promising him bandy-legged harriers from Wales and lazy running dogs.⁴⁹ It may also be seen in 1318 when he laughed and proposed to make John of Powderham court jester for claiming to be his brother.⁵⁰ Both he and Gaveston were easy talkers. Edward is known for strong and robust public speeches when necessary;⁵¹ Higden's succinct character sketch records Edward as 'ready in speech'; the Lanercost chronicler described him as a rational speaker.⁵² Chronicle reports suggest intimate conversation was one of the delights of the friendship between Edward and Gaveston. Clearly they were 'on the same wavelength' intellectually (at whatever level that was). The *Vita* recorded them at Langley in 1309 'talking daily and fully making up for the former absence by their long-desired closeness and

⁴¹ *Vita*, pp. 4–5, 28–29; *Annales Paulini*, p. 259; *Annales Londonienses*, p. 151; *Trokelowe*, pp. 64, 67; *Bridlington*, p. 32; *Le Baker*, p. 11; *Brut*, pp. 211, 224; *Lanercost*, p. 184.

⁴² *Annales Paulini*, p. 259.

⁴³ *Murimuth*, p. 14; *Le Baker* p. 10.

⁴⁴ *Lanercost*, pp. 208, 229.

⁴⁵ *Vita*, pp. 4–5; *Annales Paulini*, p. 259; *Le Baker*, pp. 10–11, 17.

⁴⁶ *Vita*, pp. 28–29; *Annales Paulini*, pp. 262, 295; *Annales Londonienses*, p. 203; *Le Baker*, p. 10.

⁴⁷ *Vita*, pp. 26–27; *Bridlington*, p. 42.

⁴⁸ *Vita*, pp. 40–41, 42–43.

⁴⁹ Hilda Johnstone, *Edward of Caernarvon 1284–1307* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1946), p. 99; Phillips, 'Edward II', p. 221.

⁵⁰ *Anonimale*, pp. 94–95.

⁵¹ Phillips, 'Edward II', p. 226.

⁵² *Lanercost*, p. 193.

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conversation together'.⁵³ It is easy to picture them together, two quick witted friends with a similar sense of humour, joking, shutting out the other earls, perhaps running verbal rings round them, talking quickly, and laughing at the nicknames Gaveston made up. Again we are indebted to the chronicles alone for recording these. They were very personal and they hurt; both the *Flores* and the Lanercost chronicle picked up Warwick's bitter replies to his name: 'Black Dog of Arden'.⁵⁴

Alongside their mutual conversation came a love of finery (especially visible in Gaveston's purple and pearls at the coronation banquet),⁵⁵ courtly show and (perhaps) theatre. Love of courtly show was not unusual, but the *Vita's* sneer that Walter Reynolds became archbishop of Canterbury in 1313 only because of his ability to amuse Edward with theatricals, may indicate a noticeable and unusual taste for this.⁵⁶ Records do not confirm this, but histories and romances in Reynolds's library suggest that at least he had the wherewithal and interest to help entertain the king. However, as his biographer points out, he was no mere entertainer, but also a competent archbishop.⁵⁷ Edward's reputation for keeping a frivolous court was emphasized by the highly prejudiced *Flores*, which referred to dandies and buffoons at court, and was perpetuated by Higden.⁵⁸

Edward's rustic pursuits suggest a liking for physical exercise beyond hunting and riding, and are well known. They do not seem to have been shared by Gaveston, who was a tourneyer and a soldier, and it may be significant of Edward's grief that all the references to them come in the period after the death of Gaveston. The earliest mention of them appears to be in the *Vita* under the year 1313, soon after Gaveston's death,⁵⁹ and several references appear thereafter, not only in chronicles but also in records, as when Robert le Messager was prosecuted soon after Bannockburn for saying that no one could expect the king to win battles if he spent his time 'idling and applying himself to making ditches and digging and other improper occupations' instead of going to Mass.⁶⁰ Chronicles suggest water sports held particular appeal. According to the *Brut*, these brought derision from the Scots who mocked Edward's loss at Bannockburn by singing the sailor's chant of 'Hevalogh' and 'Romylogh'; and the writer of the *Flores* disparaged Edward's winter rowing on the Cambridgeshire fens before the Lincoln parliament in 1315.⁶¹

Love of theatre and outdoor pursuits do not necessarily preclude interest in government. Edward had a keen awareness of royal prerogatives and duties. The *Vita* reported how angered he was at being treated as an idiot, unable to manage his own household, in 1311,⁶² and at the offence to his prerogative when Gaveston was killed despite being in the king's peace.⁶³ N. Fryde and M. Buck suggest that he directly concerned himself with government in raising

⁵³ *Vita*, pp. 16–17.

⁵⁴ *Vita*, pp. 16–17, 44–45; *Annales Londonienses*, p. 151; *Flores*, p. 152; *Brut*, pp. 206–07; *Lanercost*, p. 194.

⁵⁵ *Annales Paulini*, p. 262.

⁵⁶ *Vita*, pp. 78–79.

⁵⁷ *Vita*, pp. 78–79; J. R. Wright, *The Church and the English Crown 1305–1334* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1980), pp. 242–74 (for his books see p. 255).

⁵⁸ *Flores*, pp. 191, 230; *Polychronicon*, VIII, 298–300. Higden's view was repeated at Bridlington and Meaux: *Bridlington*, p. 91; *Melsa*, p. 280.

⁵⁹ *Vita*, pp. 68–69.

⁶⁰ H. Johnstone, 'The Eccentricities of Edward II', *English Historical Review*, 48 (1933), 264–67.

⁶¹ *Brut*, p. 208; *Flores*, p. 173.

⁶² *Vita*, pp. 38–39.

⁶³ *Vita*, pp. 58–59.

royal revenue in the 1320s.⁶⁴ And there is little evidence that he was battle shy, despite his military failures. Royal castles were part of royal prerogative, and Edward wept at their loss in 1313–14, and was angered by those who held them against him in 1321.⁶⁵ He was eager to fight his domestic opponents in 1312–13, 1316, and 1322, and to mount Scottish campaigns in 1314, 1319, and 1322. The *Vita*, while criticizing his leadership, acknowledged his eagerness to engage at Bannockburn. Trokelowe described him as a spirited soldier, fighting like a lion, and being pulled reluctantly from the battle by his men. The *Scalacronica* repeated the tradition of Edward as a brave soldier: beating Scots to the ground with his mace and having to change the horse injured beneath him.⁶⁶ Most reported his withdrawal from the field in neutral terms; after all no king could be allowed to be taken prisoner. Only the Lanercost chronicler, angered by years of Scottish border raids, openly criticized him. At Bannockburn, he said, the king and others fled ‘to their perpetual shame like miserable wretches’, and on the 1322 campaign he commented that Edward was ‘chickenhearted and ever luckless in war’.⁶⁷

Despite evidence for at least intermittent engagement with government, the accusations against Edward in 1327 called him ‘pas suffisaunt’. This can mean either negligence or ineffectiveness, and reflects the idea of ‘princeps inutilis’ in current theories of kingship. It sits a little uneasily with accusations of oppression but it was one of the two justifications for removing a ruler, and had been successfully used against Adolf of Nassau in 1298.⁶⁸ Although the words ‘insufficiens’ or ‘inutilis’ are not found in the chronicles, suggestions of negligence run through the criticisms of Edward’s use of his favourites shown above. There are also some hints of ineffectiveness through apathy and indecisiveness. Edward’s reputation for laziness is mainly based on two letters written in 1320 by Bishop Cobham, who reported that the king was behaving well at parliament, listening to prelates and nobles, and rising early in the morning,⁶⁹ but two chronicles also hint at laziness. The *Flores* recorded in 1320 that Edward was ‘paralyzed by the chains of sloth and idleness’ and becoming ‘useless’ (‘torpescens’),⁷⁰ but its target, in extravagantly purple prose, was usually the king’s rage, greed, atrocious cruelty, merciless revenge, and insane tyranny rather than his laziness. On the Scottish front, the *Scalacronica* also complained, looking back, that Edward did almost nothing against Scotland after Bannockburn and ‘lost as much by apathy’ as his father conquered.⁷¹ Rather than laziness, however, most chronicles picked up other weaknesses — notably delay and inconsistency.

The *Vita* deplored Edward’s delays,⁷² but acknowledged that in 1313 they were a tactic to wear out his opponents and in 1321 an attempt to save the Despensers.⁷³ Delays gave time to buy support and the *Vita* noted in 1308 that Edward did particularly well at this — a manifestation, it says, of the particularly English trait of using trickery and flattery

⁶⁴ N. Fryde, *The Tyranny and Fall of Edward II, 1321–1326* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 87–105; M. Buck, *Politics, Finance and the Church in the Reign of Edward II: Walter Stapledon, Treasurer of England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 163–96, esp. pp. 166–67, 174–75, 177.

⁶⁵ *Vita*, pp. 38–39, 86–87, 198–99.

⁶⁶ *Vita*, pp. 90–91; Trokelowe, p. 86; *Scalacronica*, pp. 76–77.

⁶⁷ *Flores*, pp. 158–59; *Lanercost*, pp. 209, 240.

⁶⁸ E. Peters, *The Shadow King: Rex Inutilis in Medieval Law and Literature, 751–1327* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 210–45.

⁶⁹ For a translation of part of the letter see Haines, *Edward II*, p. 45.

⁷⁰ *Flores*, pp. 192–93.

⁷¹ *Scalacronica*, pp. 78–79.

⁷² *Vita*, pp. 72–75.

⁷³ *Vita*, pp. 64–67, 192–93.

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when weak.⁷⁴ Postponing decisions in difficult circumstances can be wise, but in 1317 the *Vita*'s author saw lack of action as simply because the king did not know what to do.⁷⁵ Other chroniclers also picked up on Edward's indecisiveness. Looking back, Higden called Edward fickle ('inconstans') and changeable in actions ('opere varius').⁷⁶ The *Anonimalle* writer described him as a man who made a decision one day only to reverse it the next: 'si changeable de corage et de quoer, que ceo qil granta une jour pur commun profist de la terre il le voleit dedir une autre jour'.⁷⁷ This changeability was particularly associated with the 1320s. The *Annales Paulini* recorded for the 1321 parliament 'quicquid in una die per dominum regem fuerat concessum die sequente fuit adnichilatum'.⁷⁸ The *Flores* has similar comments for 1324 in relationship to French and papal negotiations.⁷⁹ Indecisiveness and delays may be understandable in the difficult circumstances Edward faced. He operated for much of his reign in the face of constant criticism and pressure, and some chroniclers speak of his fear and distress especially in the early years: the Tintern version of the *Flores* notes he pardoned Lancaster for Gaveston's death 'ductus timore' and made peace with Lancaster after Bannockburn 'non amore tamen timore'.⁸⁰ The *Vita* speaks of him being 'anxius et afflictus' over protecting Gaveston and of making moves to attack Lancaster at Pontefract in 1317 'perhaps because he was afraid where there was nothing to fear'.⁸¹

But Edward was not always dilatory and uncertain. If angered, he acted decisively. By threats he got his way against Lancaster in 1313 and 1318, and by force he won in 1322. As time went on it was his subjects rather than the king who felt fear. The picture of Edward as a man of anger and revenge emerges after Gaveston's death. In his youth there was no sign of the ungovernable temper of his father; indeed Hilda Johnstone found little to criticize in Edward as prince.⁸² But in 1312 the king was furious at the invasion of his prerogative and devastated by the personal loss of Gaveston. Unsurprisingly, references thereafter to his anger and vengefulness against Lancaster are constant.⁸³ After the executions in 1322 references to Edward's cruelty become more prominent. Edward was justified in executing traitors, but the scale of executions was savage, and possibly Edward later regretted his lack of mercy. The Tintern *Flores* (admittedly a lone voice) reported that God took his revenge on Edward's cruelty because he lay very ill for a month after the executions.⁸⁴ This is probably simply the writer's conventional response to atrocity, but it could hold an element of truth. There is nothing in Edward's early years to show that he was normally cruel, and it would be understandable if he showed signs of regret and stress once the heat of the moment had passed. The only other mention of possible illness in this otherwise strong and healthy man was also at

⁷⁴ *Vita*, pp. 14–15.

⁷⁵ *Vita*, pp. 140–41.

⁷⁶ *Polychronicon*, pp. 298–99. The Bridlington chronicler (p. 91) repeated this, using 'discrepans' for 'inconstans', perhaps drawing attention to the discrepancy between the promise of his kingly appearance and his weak actions.

⁷⁷ *Anonimalle*, pp. 80–81.

⁷⁸ *Annales Paulini*, p. 296.

⁷⁹ *Flores*, pp. 222 ('cuius erat consuetude serotinam pactionem in crastinam violare'), 228 ('hoc pro more ducens in consuetudinem, quod sero pepigerat mane violabatur'). See also p. 221.

⁸⁰ *Flores*, pp. 337, 339.

⁸¹ *Vita*, pp. 26–27, 140–41.

⁸² See Johnstone, *Edward of Caernarvon*. The author of the *Vita* (pp. 68–69) also saw Edward as an exemplary prince.

⁸³ *Vita*, pp. 52–53, 102–03; 130–31, 146–47, 176–77; *Anonimalle*, pp. 87–88; 102–03, 108–09; *Lanercost*, p. 234.

⁸⁴ *Flores*, p. 348.

a time of stress: the ‘feigned illness’ to delay negotiations with Lancaster in 1313.⁸⁵ Edward’s cruelty was emphasized in the *Flores*. Its language is extreme with torments, shackles, filthy prisons, and pavements flowing with blood. It goes so far as to call Edward a tyrant.⁸⁶ Its tone is quite out of line with others, but reference to cruelty and harshness appears even in the *Vita*. The author lamented Edward’s increasing harshness in 1325 (blamed on Despenser), and worried that now the king’s ‘will conquers reason’.⁸⁷ But he did not mention tyranny.

The juxtaposition of incompetence and oppression in the accusations at the deposition is an uneasy one, and the juxtaposition of apathy and laziness with tyranny and oppression in the chronicles is similarly uneasy. Edward’s failings are clearly not easy to categorize. But the chronicles provide some help towards understanding. First, we can see the sheer enjoyment of each other’s company that suffuses all the descriptions of Edward’s and Gaveston’s relationship, which with discretion need not have ended badly. The relationship with Despenser, the exclusivity of which is described in similar terms, lacks any similar verbal edge and is perhaps a more serious administrative partnership. Secondly, Edward’s characteristics seem to change. This is not surprising over a twenty-year reign and given the difficult circumstances. He started as a fun-loving, generous youth, but became harder in response to opposition. The *Vita* in particular draws attention to shifting attitudes, including those of the earls. The colours of the reign are far from black and white. Thirdly, the chronicles seem to support the more recent re-assessments by Chaplais and Phillips. They show a certain reluctance to rule personally (overall in the early years they offer more criticism of Edward’s failure to undertake expected government tasks than to his doing them badly, except in military leadership), but they also show signs of ability. In the later years complaints of oppression suggest effective government rather than incompetence. Moreover, they show Edward enjoying the perquisites of kingship — court life and banqueting provided a comfortable backcloth to his quick-talking, sociable life with close friends. He was fully aware of what was owed to his royal position; he did his duty in campaigning; he was most unwilling to abdicate except under threats. His withdrawal into rustic pursuits seems to be associated only with the empty years after Gaveston’s death. The chroniclers’ hints, especially the compassionate comments of the author of the *Vita*, suggest a more complex man than the traditional pictures portrayed. Together with the recent re-assessments by Chaplais and Phillips, they bring us closer to understanding Edward even if much about him still remains unclear.

⁸⁵ *Vita*, pp. 66–67.

⁸⁶ *Flores*, pp. 208, 214–15, 217–20, 227–29.

⁸⁷ *Vita*, pp. 230–31.