

HISTORICAL TRAGEDY

EDWARD II

Edward II was one of the major plays of Marlowe. The date of the composition of *Edward II* is not still with certainty. However, it is believed by scholars, on the basis of available evidence, that it must have been written during the 1592 in winter (December). Before he died at the age of twenty nine, Marlowe was able to produce *Edward II* which is the best of the tragedies on English national history written before the work of Shakespeare. This play has qualities which are properly dramatic and are not to be found in any

of Marlowe's other plays. The subject of this play was the tragedy of a king who was dominated by his favourite.

Marlowe's Sources: Marlowe could have obtained the materials for the play *Edward II* from a good many sources such as:

1. The Brut or Chronicles of England.
2. Chronicles of England by J. Capgrane.
3. Chronicles of Reigns of Edward I and II.
4. New Chronicles of England and France by R. Fabyan.
5. Polychronicon by R. Higden.
6. Chronicles by R. Holinshed.
7. The Mirror of Magistrates.
8. A Summary of the Chronicles of England by John Stow.
9. The Chronicles of England-unto this Present Year 1580 by John Stow.
10. The Annales of England by John Stow.
11. Historia Anglicana by T. Walshingham.¹

But there is no evidence that Marlowe made use of any other sources than Holinshed's "Chronicles" and John Stow's and based his play on the history of the reign of Edward II as he found it there. He mainly depended upon Holinshed's 'Chronicles' for material for *Edward II* but some incidents were taken from other sources.

Therefore, the dramatization of such materials was bound to be clumsily episodic in structure and the only unity that it possesses is the personality of the king.

Historical Context: When Marlowe composed *Edward II* can be seen from a number of different perspectives and over the centuries of performance and critical commentary. It has been interpreted as a story about the conflict between the personal and the political; as a story of the legitimacy of revolt against an inadequate and ineffectual monarch; as a homosexual love story; and as a story of an 'Overreacher'-Mortimer. The reign of Edward II was marked by a continuous conflict between the king and the barons. The barons had been effectively curbed by Edward I who was a powerful

king but Edward II was young and inexperienced and lacked the dominating personality of his father. The feudal lords knowing this, tried to regain their authority and get back their privileges as soon as Edward II ascended the throne.

The legacy of Edward II was not enviable. His father, who had ruled for thirty five years, was continuously at war. When he died, there were many troublesome problems that awaited solution. Edward II was faced with a heavy debt incurred by his father in costly wars and in castle-building. The people groaned under heavy taxation and the foreign creditors exercised undue influence on England which the people did not like. He inherited an aggressive foreign policy which was bound to create trouble whether it was continued or allowed to lapse.

The reign of Edward the second, the king of England (1307 to 1327) has been considered to be one of the gloomiest periods in British history. There are no unhappier pages in English history than those which record the “Pitiful tragedies of this King’s time”.

He was born with certain inherent character traits that dominate his life and actions throughout his life. He had the misfortune to be the son of a dominating father who was also an autocratic king. The young Edward had the misfortune to lose his mother when he was quite young and was thus deprived of the love and care of his mother which too stunted his growth. He lacked both maternal and paternal love and this made him seek for love elsewhere. Hence, his infatuation for Gaveston was the only person who loved him.

Historians refer to him as an unworthy son of Edward I. As a youngman, he had caused much distress to his father by his neglect of such manly recreations as hunting and participating in tournaments. He had been spending most of his time as a young man in gambling, idle luxury, and frivolous sports with bad companions. Even on becoming the king, he showed no sense of the responsibilities of his position. He immediately cancelled the campaign against the Scots and he replaced his late father's experienced and trustworthy ministers by his own boon companions. The Chief of these boon companions was a dissipated and conceited

young Gascom – a native Gascony in France named Peirs Gaveston. This man had been banished by King Edward I because his influence upon the young Prince Edward had been pernicious to him. However, Edward II, on ascending the throne, immediately sent for Gaveston from exile in France.

Conflict: Edward's inordinate affection for Gaveston turned his head against the question of Mortimer 'why should you love him whom the world hates so much? Besides fifty thousand pounds of Langton's property (Bishop of Coventry) was given to Gaveston and also £100,000 from the late king's treasury. He was made Earl of Cornwall on August 6, 1307, and all the belongings of the late Earl of Cornwall were passed on to him. So Gaveston was proud, greedy, ambitious, ostentatious and imprudent and his meteoric rise and his offensive behaviour antagonized the barons. And also, he was betrothed to the niece of Edward II. Margaret was one of the heiresses of Earl of Gloucester. Gaveston obtained large possession in various parts of England, and his pride and vanity increased accordingly. So, here comes a cause of conflict between Barons and the King.

This infatuation becomes the dominating passion in his life; so much so that he antagonizes his nobles, would rather lose his crown and kingdom than giving Gaveston up. The following lines, a letter from King Edward to Gaveston in Act I, Scene I, will show this truth:

GAVESTON (*reading on a letter*) *My father is deceased; come*

Gaveston,

*And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend!*²

This is what I would show his inordinate affection for Gaveston. It appears to us that such passion is dangerous and ruinous and we find it difficult to understand Edward's conduct. For instance, he appears stupid, blind and extremely self-centered because he jeopardizes his own kingdom and the interest of his country and people.

In one sense, the affectionate relationship rather the infatuation that subsists between the two is an unnatural passion called homosexual. When they meet in Act I, Scene I, the exchanges

between the two are unrestrained. The following dialogue is an apt example for this relationship:

EDWARD *What Gaveston, welcome! Kiss not my hand*

Embrace me, Gaveston, as I do thee! [They embrace.]

Why shouldst thou kneel? Knowest thou not who I am?

Thy friend, thy self, another Gaveston!

Not Hylas was more mourned of Hercules

Than thou hast been of me since thy exile.

GAVESTON *And since I went from hence, no soul in hell*

Hath felt more torment than poor Gaveston

EDWARD *I know it- Brother, welcome home my friend.*

Now let the treacherous Mortimers conspire,

And that high – minded Earl of Lancaster;

I have my wish, in that I joy thy sight;

And sooner shall the sea O'erwhelm my land,

Than bear the ship that shall transport thee hence.

I here create thee lord High Chamberlain,

Chief Secretary to the state and me,

*Earl of Cornwall, King and Lord of Man.*³

And therefore, the elation of Gaveston on hearing all that the king has said finds expressing in inflated rhetoric: “It shall suffice me to enjoy your love, which whiles I have, I think myself as great as Caesar riding in the Roman street with captive kings at his triumphant car.”⁴ The result of this unbounded joy at meeting after a long time is the commission of foolish and arbitrary act, imprisonment of the Bishop of Coventry and bestowing of his wealth and property on Gaveston. No doubt both of them behave extremely beyond the interest of the people of England. This is a part of the temptation of Edward II.

Apart from that, Edward gave even his Queen Isabella’s presents from her father to Gaveston and ignored her for the sake of his favourite. He is mainly interested in Gaveston rather than any

matter of the country. Instead of winning the support and co-operation of the barons for good and welfare of the kingdom, he will have Gaveston even if it means armed conflict with the barons.

In this connection, it is a fact that Queen Isabella was unable to bear to see the excessive interest of the king in the love Gaveston and expresses the statement in sorrowful discontentment:

For now my lord the King regards me not,

But dotes upon the love of Gaveston.

He claps his cheeks and hangs about his neck,

Smiles in his face and whispers in his ears,

And when I come he frowns, as who should say,

'Go wither thou wilt, seeing I have Gaveston' ⁵

Edward's Temptation: Edward II behaves in a most haughty and arrogant manner towards the barons when they appose him for his desire to keep Gaveston with him and allow Gaveston to spend as much money as he places. For example, if a man suffers from any

personal weakness of character, his attitude towards others generally becomes apologetic but kind Edward II, instead of placating the barons and keeping them in good manner offends them still further by his arrogance. His autocratic and dictatorial power aggravates the situation between him and the barons. This is an image of Renaissance man.

In dealing with the barons, Edward II shows no qualities of statesmanship, no spirit of gentlemanliness, no insight into human character, no foresight; it is a vividness of Renaissance man's character. Even in taking his revenge upon the barons he shows a lack of judgment when he orders Warwick and Lancaster to be executed and sends the leader of the rebellious barons merely to prison by his power. For instance, In Act I, scene I he says:

EDWARD *Well, Mortimer thee, I'll make thee rue these words.*

Beseems it thee to contradict thy king?

Frown'st thou threat, aspiring Lancaster?

The sword shall plane the furrows of thy brows

And hew these knees that now are grown so stiff.

I will have Gaveston, and you shall know

What danger 'tis to stand against your king.⁶

It manifests that that's why Edward browbeats to the barons by using these words. It is nothing but a symbol of haughtiness. Actually he did not care about his future and what might happen. He believed that the king's word should be obeyed either willingly or unwillingly. If they do disobey they should be punished severely because king is so powerful and a sovereign can effectively curb the power of his barons.

In certain circumstances, the barons believed that they had the right to disobey, rebel and depose the king. This concept makes it clear that the powers of the king hedged in by limitations and if the king fails to govern well, he could be deposed. This fact is shown in Act I, scene II by the following lines:

Then will you join with us, that be his peers

*To banish or behead that Gaveston?*⁷

In spite of the barons having many powers against the king to banish his favourite, Edward had absolute power to face them very easily without fear. He is compelled by circumstances to face the barons, the church and the people of his country who rebel against him as three powerful forces.

The king is always thinking only of Gaveston while the peers pour out their venom against Gaveston. He conferred on him almost any title or honour which comes to his mind. He creates Gaveston the Lord High Chamberlain, the Chief Secretary to the State, the Earl of Cornwall. Then, they were physically seizing the Bishop of Coventry and ordering him to prison and bestowing the bishopric income on Gaveston. At that time, the king's brother, Earl of Kent, though stands wholly on the king's side, protest against the conferment of so many title upon Gaveston, saying that even the least important of these titles could well suffice for a man of greater birth than Gaveston. In spite of being protected by the Earl of Kent, here, king said to Bishop of Coventry with disdain:

EDWARD *Throw off his golden mitre, rend his stole,
And in the channel Christen him anew.*

KENT *Ah, Brother, lay not violent hands on him,
For he'll complain unto the sec by Rome.*⁸

Act II scene II ends with declaration of revolt against the king by the peers. From this point onwards the civil war with the peers began to happen, first for the removal of Gaveston and then for the removal of the young Spenser from the king's favour. At this moment Edward II said so:

*Nay, all of them conspire to cross me thus;
But if I live, I'll tread upon their heads
That think with high looks thus to tread me down.
Come, Edmund, let's away and levy men;
'Tis war that must abate these barons' pride.*⁹

On every occasion, he gives evidence of his spirit of defiance. Nowhere does he surrender to the barons. Instead of fear, he displays throughout in dealing with the barons his power, but also against the authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The king shows his disregard even of the authority of the pope. It shows that all those who are hostile against him must be ruined. This is the willingness of Edward II. Here come these lines as support:

Yet, shall the crowing of these cockerals

Affright a lion? Edward, unfold thy paws

*And let their lives' blood slake thy fury's hunger.*¹⁰

In this connection, we may cite from Act III, scene III (at the time the captured barons are taken away King Edward) what king himself said:

Sound drums and trumpets!

March with me, my friends;

*Edward this day hath crowned him king a new.*¹¹

Isabella's Illicit Relationship with Mortimer: It is interesting to note that the scene i.e., Act II, Scene IV, contains both Isabella's most moving expression of love for Edward, spoken in soliloquy and the seeds of her betrayal. Though urged by Mortimer to share with him and the barons in the pursuit of Edward whom they have defeated in battle, she declines, lest her 'honour be called in question. As they leave, she is left alone for another brief soliloquy:

So well hast thou deserved, Sweet Mortimer,

As Isabel could live with thee for ever

In vain I look for love at Edward's hand,

*Whose eyes are fixed on non but Gaveston.*¹²

It is an intriguing speech, switching as it does from recognition of Mortimer's kindness to her assessment of her failed relationship with Edward. The development of her relationship with Mortimer is open to wide interpretation both in study. However, it is seen that by the second half of act IV, Isabella has been transformed

into a deceitful adulteress, conspiring with Mortimer against the throne. Edward hints at hypocrisy: “And yet she bears a face of love, forsooth. Fie on that love that hatcheth death and hate”.¹³

The reason why a change has now taken place in the Earl of Kent’s attitude towards the Younger Mortimer with whom he had earlier become very intimate is that the Earl of Kent has come to know that the Younger Mortimer has developed an illicit love-affair with the Queen Isabella. To justify this fact what the Earl of Kent said in Act IV, Scene V may be cited:

Dissemble, or thou diest; for Mortimer

And Isabel do kiss, while they conspire:

*And yet she bears a face of love, forsooth.*¹⁴

As a matter of fact, Queen Isabella is genuinely in love with her husband and also really devoted to him. But, due to the King’s fondness of Gaveston’s company she is rejected by her husband. So, she always remained a pathetic figure because of her husband’s ill-treatment of her. Queen wants to retaliate against her husband and

so tells the Young Mortimer that her husband, the king, does not care for her but “dotes upon the love of Gaveston”. Henceforth, she really becomes Mortimer’s lover.

Tragic Flaw: Now, we cannot deny that king Edward’s suffering is due directly to his own misdeeds and his misconceived policies. He destroys himself. He causes his downfall. In fact, Edward II is lacking in some greatness e.g., spiritual greatness until the beginning of Act V. It is fairly clear that the character of Edward II is the motion of the absolute power of the monarchy. It is an adequate character of Renaissance’s man. A remarkable feature of Marlowe’s tragedy is its high seriousness. There is a complete lack of humour in his plays. Seriousness is rather inevitable in Marlowe’s plays because his heroes are all brave human souls battling against forces that ultimately prove to be powerful for them and consequently bringing about their tragic doom.

In the last scene of this play King Edward requests water to cool his thirst and to clear his body of foul excrements. His warders offer him channel water and proceed to shear off his beard, to

prevent recognition and rescue. The emphasis of this short scene is principally on the humiliation and indignity of the operation:

Traitors, away! What, will you murder me,

*Or choke your sovereign with puddle water?*¹⁵

The chief effect generated is one of a generalized pathos attendant on the control between Edward's status and the treatment he receives. Under the Younger Mortimer's order the king is treated in a most callous, nay brutal manner. The barbarity of the scenes, in which the king is shown as undergoing ill-treatment, is very painful to us.

Indeed, the situation of king's suffering is in Act V of the play. Only savage beasts are as cruel as Matrevis, Gurney and Lightborn, all professional murders show themselves to be in their treatment of the king. King Edward II is being kept as prisoner by the power of Mortimer and Queen Isabella. Speaking to Lightborn, the king, as prisoner in dungeon of Barkely Castle where he is kept, says that the hearts of Matrevis and Gurney have been "hewn from

the cancasus". But the king soon finds after a while, that Lightborn in an over greater devil than those two men. And, of course, the king Edward II was murdered by Lightborn but it was the diabolical hands of the Younger Mortimer and Queen Isabella doing it. Here, the following lines said by Queen Isabella to her lover Mortimer show the truth of this plot:

Sweet Mortimer, the life of Isabel,

Be thou persuaded that I love thee well;

And therefore, so the prince, my son, be safe,

Whom I esteem as dear as these mine eyes,

Conclude against his father what thou wilt

*And I myself will willingly subscribe.*¹⁶

It discloses that she does not mind how the Younger Mortimer deals with her husband King Edward as long as he ensures the safety of the Prince. Isabella is certainly a good mother of her son, Edward III but she is undoubtedly a treacherous wife though at the same time we cannot deny that the king had never shown any kindness or

loyalty to her. In fact, *Edward II*, the play of Christopher Marlowe is quite historical tragedy.

Theme: Marlowe's play *Edward II* is the one according to which power and suffering constitutes the leading theme of the play. The assertion of power and authority and the exercise of power and authority are a recurrent theme in this play. Suffering results directly from the exercise of power and authority, though the resultant suffering may take sometime to manifest itself. In this play, suffering comes as a climate to a course, while the power and authority and the resultant suffering pertain to the political sphere only.

In fact, the theme of this play is the reign of King Edward II with particular reference to his conflicts with the barons and with his own Queen, leading to his downfall and death. This play is mere history. Taking a cue from this, *Edward II* dramatizes with reference (i) to the king's friendship, first with Gaveston and then with the two Spenser's, and (ii) to his conflict first with a large group of the barons and then with his own Queen helped by the only surviving

members of that group. There is no vagueness about the theme. The theme is clear as daylight. The theme is the downfall and death of a king who is unable to govern his country because of certain weakness in his character. The central figure in this play is King Edward II; and Marlowe wrote this play to expose the inefficiency and inadequacy of this king to rule the country and to deal effectively with the barons. An intelligent king would have given his favourite his due, and he would at the same time have managed to keep the barons in good humour by allowing them their due share in the governance of the country. This king is devoid of any qualities of statesmanship. He shows himself to be utterly selfish, self-centered, despotic, and arrogant. And he, therefore, incurs the wrath of the barons. Not only that; the king alienates the church too by his foolish behaviour and his haughtiness.

At the same time, this king is an utter failure as a husband. He does not know to treat his wife who is herself a princess by birth. An intelligent king would have managed to keep his wife contented and even happy while continuing his relationship with Gaveston, whatever the nature of that relationship was. But this king incurs the

hostility of his wife also by his sheer stupidity and lack of tactfulness. On the other hand, at last the king is deposed, and then murdered. Here the play could have ended. But Marlowe goes a little further in pursuing his theme and depicts the two evil-doers namely the Younger Mortimer and Queen Isabella being overtaken by Nemesis. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Marlowe's *Edward II* is the fact that, although it has the very appearance of being a play on a national and political theme, a play about kingship, it is yet an intensely personal play in which the public issues hardly arise. It's true that there is a fair deal of talk about our country's good.

Technique: The structure of *Edward II* has highly been praised. Indeed, it is the best of all Marlowe's plays so far as its construction is concerned. Marlowe has shown himself as a true craftsman. The play has a compact and well-knit structure. One of the most beautiful techniques is that the various historical events and episodes are closely inter-connected; and they all point in one direction. All the events and episodes are intended to reveal the character of the king, and to show how he deals first with the

rebellious barons and subsequently with the combined strength of his own Queen and the only surviving members of a large group of the rebellious barons who had fought against him.

Such being the technique of this play, indeed, it is marvelous to see Marlow's artistic sense fully exhibited in this play. In order to impart unity to the historical events chosen by him, he has even deviated from history and gone to the extent of falsifying history in some cases. To attain the necessary unity, he has freely omitted, condensed, and re-grouped the facts which he found in Holinshed's chronicles.

In other words, historical truth has been sacrificed by Marlowe to attain dramatic effect; for example, in the case of the Earl of Lancaster and also in the case of the Earl of Warwick. Actually, Marlowe has been able to build a skillfully knit tragic plot. It is by virtue of this skill that Marlowe wrote a play which can justly be regarded as the first artistic masterpiece by using his dramatic technique.

In certain other ways also, Marlowe moulds history to serve his dramatic requirements. The result of this selection and alteration of the events of King Edward's twenty years of reign is a most skillfully-knit tragic plot. It is because of his such selection, omission, and condensation of facts that *Edward II* has been raised to the stature of the first artistic masterpiece in dramatic structure.

This is in fact, the function of the exposition in a play: to prevent the initial situation from which the action of the play is to develop; to introduce the main characters whose relationship is to be worked out in the course of the play, and finally to highlight the theme at least provisionally needs Marlowe has been able to achieve successfully all these objection of the exposition.

In the first Act, he finds places for depicting the infatuation of Edward for Gaveston and in the last Act, succeeds in delineating the pathetic plight of Edward. No other emotion or passion is worked out at all in the play though there are many opportunities in the play to do so. Very often, particularly Acts II and IV are just series of episodes or scenes following each other so rapidly. Here, Marlowe

is unable to manage the passage of time properly. Even then, they show a good deal of technical and dramatic skill which was rare things when Marlowe wrote his *Edward II*.

And also, a new dramatic technique is employed in these and certain other motive forces in the play. It is unable to apprehend all these episodes with great vividness as real actions carried out by the characters for and against one another. Thus, Marlowe's new dramatic technique conveyed too little of what the set speech had earlier given us too much. He had not yet found for himself a language which, like that of Shakespearian tragedy, was capable of representing every kind of incident concretely, and which was at one and the same time succinct, emotionally satisfying and forceful in expression. Even in *Edward II* he was still hovering uncertainly between two different levels of style; he could not reconcile his poet's command of language with his capabilities as a dramatist.¹⁷

The following chapter will depict a summary of the whole thesis with its possibly convincing judgments of the entire

investigation along with Marlowe's achievement and contribution to English Renaissance drama.

Reference

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4. A.K. Khullar. *Christopher Marlowe's Edward the Second*, p. 103.
5. Ibid., p. 117.
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7. Ibid., p. 107.
8. Ibid., p. 106.
9. Ibid., p. 116.
10. Ibid., p. 117.
11. Ramji Lall. *Christopher Marlowe: Edward the Second* (New Delhi: Rama Brothers India Pvt. Ltd., 2005), p. 112.

12. Stevie Simkin. *Marlowe* (Delhi: Pearson Education Pvt. Ltd., 2003), p. 193.
13. Op. cit., p. 193.
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16. Hazelton Spencer. *Elizabethan Plays*, p. 134.
17. Wolfgang Clemen. *English Tragedy before Shakespeare: The Development of Dramatic Speech* (London : Methuen & Co Ltd., 1961), p. 156.