

Examine critically how in Edward II Marlowe has transformed the chronicle play into a great personal tragedy./ Edward II as a chronicle play/combination of tragedy and history in Edward II

Edward II by Marlowe is history remade. This is for the simple reason that Marlowe was not writing the history of the reign of Edward II but was writing a tragedy out of the material that history provided. The play was written in 1590, acted soon after, and set an example of the type of English historical play which Shakespeare closely followed. The tradition came to stay even long after. Havelock Ellis wrote: "Here Marlowe reached the summit of his art. It was not until ten years later that Shakespeare came near to this severe reticence, these deep and tragic tones." Marlowe's **Edward II**, on the contrary is an English historical play in which 'history, in the main, well presented, history well dramatized.' The poet does not moralise or teach a lesson. He lets his characters speak for themselves, and the audience would have a re-look at the King's weakness, his neglect of the queen, his carelessness about the French dominions and about the honour of England. They may also witness the haughtiness of the barons, the patriotic yet arrogant attitude of Younger Mortimer, the sycophancy of Gaveston and later by the Spencers, the resultant shift of loyalty and hypocrisy of the Queen, and they may form their own judgments.

According to history, Tancock says, King Edward II was the son of King Edward I and Eleanor of Castile. He was born at Carnarvon in April 1284; succeeded his father in July 1307; was forced to resign crown, and was deposed in January 1327. He was murdered at Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire in September 1327. The playwright has drawn the character of the King in accordance with the views of the historians of the time, and shows him thoughtless, unwise, vindictive, and undignified. So far so good, but the dramatist at the same time discovers in the man the potentiality of a tragic hero, parallel to, if not greater than, Shakespeare's 'Richard II'. The play starts at a crucial juncture of English history: it is a transition from the supposedly stable reign of Edward I to the uncertain one of his son. The situation demands at one level an abler king than the former, but unfortunately for both the king and his subjects he turns out to be anything but a king. At the very opening of the play when Gaveston is seen on the stage reading aloud the lines of the letter sent by Edward II,

"My father is deceased! Come, Gaveston,
And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend."

The contemporary audiences could well anticipate the extent to which the new king was going to be irresponsible as he forgot that a kingdom was to be ruled better, not something to be shared and enjoyed with a person who had been banished from the kingdom by the former king for some serious charges, which the chroniclers could not clearly put in black and white out of decency or taboo. As the audience watch and hear Gaveston, they learn from him the new king's adherence to pleasure principle.

"Music and poetry is his delight,
Therefore I will have wanton poets and wits..."

Here Gaveston is all set to play the role played by Mephistopheles in 'Doctor Faustus' as an agent of destruction.

But nobody perhaps, unless one is familiar with the historical account, can anticipate the gruesome, inhuman and shocking death Edward dies. When Edward is killed in the most undignified manner, 'our heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains' (Keats: Ode to a Nightingale) our human sensibility. *Here the King acquires the status of a tragic hero, though by default.* The king draws our admiration for his patient suffering and rouses in us the emotion of terror. It may be verging on horror, but terror it is. Thus when Prince Edward who suddenly matures into an assertive king like the boy in Gunter Grass's 'Tindrum' orders the execution of Younger Mortimer, the *catharsis takes place. His end is no less tragic, rather more tragic than that of Edward II, but that accomplishes the poetic justice.* Perhaps for the least little love that she reserves for her husband, Isabella is not beheaded but sent to the Tower for a future trial. Edward II departs from the world an unworthy king, fallen owing to his own fault, but leaves behind, as we feel for the time being, a worthy king to rule England. His blessings upon his son that he might rule better than he readily come true.

Thus Marlowe has made use of his historical sources in '**Edward II**' like a master tragedian. He has manipulated the historical incidents and characters in such a way that the play has been a great success of the genre. He has abridged the period, transposed the events and shed focus on the areas of the characters and incidents that served his purpose of unities. Most particularly, his greatest stress has been upon the role of the evil, corrupting Gaveston and over-indulgence to whom constitutes the *hamartia* of the King's character. If the King earned our antipathy in the earlier part of the play, he **exhaustively** draws our sympathy in the abdication scene and in the murder scene. Not that the king is totally bereft of admiration altogether. In fact, he aspirates our admiration partly by default and partly for his basically innocent and good nature which has been corrupted by Gaveston. That is why Charles Lamb showers high praise upon the play as a tragedy, and Professor Ward says: "The drama of Marlowe's which seems to me entitled to the highest and least qualified tribute of praise is his historical tragedy of **Edward the Second**"; "and none of his plays, except Edward the Second ... is to be regarded as the unadulterated expression of Marlowe's art."