

ISABELLA IN EDWARD THE SECOND

A general charge against Marlowe's dramatic artistry is that his women are not dramatically living. In fact his earlier plays are rather deprived of substantial feminine characters. But in his play Edward II, he has presented a female character as an important link in the whole action. This is Isabella, the queen, who is much instrumental to the tragic fall of the weak king. In this respect alone, Edward II can be safely deemed as superior to his plays.

Isabella, as presented by Marlowe, has a change in her character with the advancement of the play. She changes, in the course of time, into a hypocritical, vengeful, ambitious and even cruel woman. Isabella, in the earlier scenes of the play, is rather an object of pity. She is the queen but neither has she had the queen-like personality nor does she enjoy the honour of a queen. Her husband is rather cold cruel to her. He slights her and exploits her only to serve his base passion for his favourite Gaveston. The king's favourite proud Gaveston even insults her openly. She is, in fact, subjected to much torment and insult because of her unnatural husband. The queen, nevertheless, remains extremely submissive and loyal and is ready to do anything to get the favour of her husband. She prefers to bear her own sorrow silently to spare him from troubles and worries.

The queen is quite a different woman in the later scenes. Her husband's follies and frivolities drive her to desperation. She grows into a strong, determined, shrewd and corrupt woman. She comes forward with the French army to avenge the wrong, done to her by her husband. She conspires with Mortimer and other lords against her own husband. She becomes a party to Mortimer's cruel dealings with the king. She is in an adulterous relation with Mortimer, and does all that she can to foster her secret love for him. Gradually she turns into a power loving, unscrupulous and immoral woman from a timid, submissive woman of the earlier scenes.

Yet, a word of praise must be said in favour of Isabella. She loves her son sincerely and wishes him to be the safe king of England. Her words to younger Mortimer about her love for her son testify to her motherly love or affection—
"And therefore, so the prince my son be safe,
Whom I esteem as dear as these mine eyes."

The mother in her is true and strong, though wife in her is wicked and wrong. Isabella's punishment comes from the son for whom she has tried so much. Her punishment is the just retribution for the sin she has committed as a faithless wife and hypocritical queen. There is hardly any pity for her as she is thrown into the Tower of London as a prisoner. She must reap the bitter harvest for what evil she has sown.

The change in Isabella's character is neither sudden nor abrupt. Marlowe has delineated this change from a psychological standpoint. The role of Isabella is distinctive in the action of the play. She is simply a helpless weal woman, desperately seeking her husband's love. She has one important function which is to induce the barons to recall Gaveston. It is however this return of Gaveston that foments the civil war. In the rising of the lords against the king along with Mortimer, she plays a vital part in the final fall of Edward II. She gives the royal leadership that is so much needed for the defeat and capture of the king.

The character of Isabella also serves to heighten the tragic grandeur of Marlowe's hero. She lights up, in the earlier scenes, the king's failing as a husband. Again, in the later scenes, her conduct—her hypocrisy and conspiracy with Mortimer against the king—derives sympathy for the king and raises him to the dignity of a tragic hero. In short, Isabella's fury as a wronged woman is definitely terrible as evident in Medea of Euripides.

One Day I Wrote Her Name...

With *Amoretti* Spenser descended on the permanent paradox, namely the principle of change inherent in nature that causes merciless mutations to everything in this world. This is a paradox which baffled the European intellectuals historically since Ovid. The problem became acute with Renaissance thinkers as they were mainly concerned with the glorification of the self and were seeking to hold onto something that could give resistance to the effacement of the personality caused by time. The popularity of Neo-Platonism can be accounted for by the fact that it provided a clean way out of the clutches of time or the temporal. The urge to seek the resolution can be also found in the artistic scheme of the poets, deliberately making the structure symbolic of certain specific doctrine. This is no less evident in Spenser's *Amoretti*, which can be read as a symbolic structure in which the lover's attainment of his beloved is symbolic of the manifestation of divine beauty.

The sonnet no. 75 (*One Day I wrote Her Name...*) derives its singular belief from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, where he claimed to have found permanence in the monument created by art. Spenser begins the sonnet with a simple yet archetypal and obsessive and symbolic act on the part of a lover:

"One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
But came the waves and washed it away..."

Undeterred the poet tried for the second time; but in the same way his second attempt was futile. Seeing her name thus being repeatedly wiped out, the beloved reminded him that he was trying to immortalize a mortal thing as like her name she would also one day be wiped out from this world:

"Vain man", said she, "that dost in vain assay"
A mortal thing so to immortalize..."

Unusually for a Renaissance lady, the beloved has been given a voice here, and she seems to understand the symbolic and archetypal significance of the waves leveling the sand. The evidence of the destructive properties of time available in the natural world has been grafted on to the context of the human world by the beloved. Not only that, she does reproach the lover for this. This provides the poet with the intellectual necessity to answer her in the sestet.

In the sestet the lover hurries forth to silence the beloved and resolve the tensions created in the octave. Typical with a renaissance poet, the answer lies in the Neo-Platonic idealization of the beloved. The speaker starts with a belief of the renaissance alchemy that baser elements naturally perish in the dust. For Spenser, however, "baser things" symbolize the earthly things subject to decay and death. What he seeks to immortalize is not the physical beauty of the beloved, but those spiritual qualities which provide the beloved with spiritual beauty. The poet is hopeful that his verses will be able to eternize the memory of the beauty of the beloved and transfigure her into a heavenly being.

"...you shall live by fame
My verse your virtues write your glorious name."

Thus he thinks that he will be successful in preserving her name even after the world is destroyed in the Apocalypse.

The most important assertion, however, comes in the concluding line, in which the poet wants to use this kind of idealization as a way to preserving and immortalizing their love. He hopes further that this will help them to transcend their mundane existence and find a permanent place in the divine scheme of things:

"Where whenas death shall all the world subdue,
Our love shall live, and later life renew."