

The Character of Edward II

With Edward II Marlowe seems to have left away the non-English legends and myths with tragic potentialities and melodrama in favour of the native historical themes that have some sort of socio-political relevance for the time without the melodrama. Marlowe drew upon the accounts of Stowe and Holinshed and presented the much debated personality of Edward II in perfect balance with the dynamics of tragedy and the psychology of the audience whose maturity he must have invested his faith in. It may be pointed out here that Marlowe might have been influenced by the Renaissance notion of history as a teacher, a notion reinforced in England by the vogue of the "courtesy books" like the Mirror of the Magistrates. In other words, the tragedy of Edward II was expected to illustrate the ways of life a king should avoid and the kind of the ways the subjects should not take resort to in order to advance personal gains or whims. Again, it must be emphasised here that Marlowe must have been fascinated with the 'queer' and 'unnatural' personality of the king, which we now plainly categorise as homosexual. But it is not the sole trait which brings about his downfall; in fact, a number of tragic flaws can be marked in his character in the process of the drama.

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.

With representative appearance of the Three Poor Men on the stage the audience once again can well understand the economic instability of the country created by the former king's maintenance of a huge army in England, France, Scotland and Ireland. Edward II does not show any intention of addressing those serious problems his subjects face. Instead he throws himself into the vicious hands of Gaveston and aggravates the situation by trying to avenging the exile of Gaveston. Here the king violates the norms of the traditional hierarchy by encouraging Gaveston to insult and assault the Bishop of Coventry and by confiscating his property and installing his minion in the bishop's place. At this both the noble class and the clergy become apprehensive of their property, position and power. Edward's case gets further worsened with the queen Isabella's openly complaining of his ill-treatment. The king, according to her, "regards me not...dotes upon the love of Gaveston". It seems that Marlowe used the myths in order to convey what could not be expressed in plain terms on the stage, that is, his homosexual affiliation. The most expressive of all, however, is the one the queen employs:

"For never doted Jove on Ganymede

As he on cursed Gaveston."

The king shows utter inefficiency as he cannot resist the collective manoeuvre of the nobles and the clergymen, who force him to subscribe to Gaveston's second banishment. In fact, the king and Gaveston are to blame themselves more for the latter's banishment.

The king, however, makes a correct estimate of the noble class and the papal authority when he bursts out in ineffectual anger:

"They would not stir, were it to do me good."

The situation demands that he act as a shrewd politician, but he turns out to be anything other than that. He commits another grave mistake of using his own wife as a political agent by black-mailing and pushing her further to lean on to Mortimer, who as a Machiavellian—in the narrow sense of the term—makes most of the situation.

The king goes on committing mistakes until he loses Gaveston. But instantly he installs another fortune seeker in the form of Younger Spenser. One may note here that the adoption of Spenser

becomes a psychological necessity for him as he cannot live without Gaveston. It is only after the death of Gaveston and the exposure of the barons and earls as power-hungry hypocrites that the sway of sympathy turns in favour of Edward II.

However, the king shows enough grit and determination to defeat the earls and barons in the battlefield, but after that commits the gravest mistake of sending Mortimer to Tower, of not executing him straight. Again, perhaps he chooses the conflict as an opportunity to get rid of the queen, whom he does not recall even after his victory. This creates an opportunity for Mortimer and the queen to regroup, raise an army and invade England defeat him.

The play Edward II reaches its emotional climax in scene i, Act V. It is in this scene that the king's image as an irresponsible and weak person undergoes a total transformation, and he emerges before the audience as a tragic figure in his understanding of the worthlessness of a king stripped of power just like the King in King Lear. Now falls under the control of death-instinct. As Berkley tries to console him, he resolutely affirms:

“...of this am I assured

That death ends all, and I can die but once.”

But nobody perhaps, unless one is familiar with the historical account, can anticipate the gruesome, inhuman and shocking death Edward dies. The spectacle of his suffering on the stage even goes beyond the Aristotelian limit; the audience do undergo the emotional experience of “pity and fear”, but at last shudder at and get shocked.