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A Critical Study of Modernity in Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*

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Abstract

This paper shows that *Edward II* is an unconventional tragedy in which Marlowe explores the problem of moral conflict implicit in the established society. Unlike the megalomaniac seekers of power, Edward II was born into the inheritance of kingship but he proudly spurns in favour of another mastery, which is of homosexual love —– totally unacceptable to the world where he is obliged to live and move. Edward II is seen as a king without command; a lover denied fulfillment, a lion changed into a lamb encompassed by wolves and a man ultimately hurled by his antagonists to the depth of human misery and humiliation.

Keywords: Dramatised, Religion, Morality, Holinshed, Renaissance, Coronation, Homosexual

In *Edward II* Marlowe gathered his materials from the national history of his own country and dramatized Edward II's tragical career. Plays based on the national history of England had, for some years before Marlowe, been written. Such plays had gained a significant place on the stage. The plays in which the national history of England is dramatized, dated from 1580s. Common Englishmen took interest in the history of their country, which facilitated the growth of national feeling. The historical records show that the sense of nationality had steadily grown in England since the reign of King Henry VII. It was only after Elizabeth had become the Queen of the country that the national feeling grew to a degree which intensified the people's desire to know the past history of their country. John Stow, Robert Fabyan and Ralph Holinshed wrote chronicles about the country's past between 1516 and 1577. Thereafter the dramatists attempted to present the past history of the country on the stage and wrote chronicle plays. The earliest chronicle play in England was *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, written partly in prose and partly in blank verse. The other chronicle plays were *The Life and Death of Jack*

Straw, *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, *Edward I*, *The Contention Betwixt the Two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster*, and *The True Tragedy of Richard III*. Marlowe's *Edward II* was written later in 1590 and it was a great improvement upon previous plays in which there were no attempt on the part of the playwrights to select the incidents and shape them into a plot or to link them with characters. Marlowe's *Edward II* transformed the chronicle narrative into a regular play. In this play Marlowe did not use the older method of just panoramic presentation. Here the historical connections of the scenes are altered to make the story appropriate to a design. So in *Edward II* history is well presented and well dramatized. In English Literature it is the first historical play with a well-knit structure. Marlowe performed a difficult job of presenting the long period of twenty years on the stage by employing the method of compression. Again, historically there was nothing in the character of Edward II to invite pity. But Marlowe has produced pity in the treatment of the last days of the King. Charles Lamb remarks that the death-scene of King Edward II had moved him to pity and terror. Marlowe's dramatic portrayal of King Edward II in the last Act gives the impression of his force, passion and tragic power, the constituent elements of poetry, religion and drama. It is to be remembered that the feeling part of any action forms the basis of poetry and religion. Here the drama is theaction of sounds of words spoken by the hero.

To Marlowe dramatic poetry is to experience as wine is to the grape. This is true both of the conception and of the speech which is the bodily vehicle of the conception. Unlike prose which is unintoxicating utterance of life's common experience, poetry is the fermented utterance, i.e., the utterance fermented into metre and heady imagery. All this is evident in the King's character, his artistic and musical tastes. Gaveston ponders to such tastes and provides him with congenial entertainment. The King's artistic temperament serves as the pure vintage which intoxicates the King very handsomely. The royal character of Edward II embodies avowedly poetic drama appealing to the patronage of Dionysus. Here we have the freest and fullest exercise in poetic drama which makes the politics and economics of everyday affairs meaningless. Edward II's character as well as the stuff of the drama is emotional imitation and so very disturbing, though fundamentally enjoyable. Religion and poetry are hardly distinguishable. Edward II is shown naturally proving false to his duties as a ruler and a husband. Gaveston, the King's favourite, has many features in common with each other. His defiant gaiety is a poetic feature as well as his religion. It is expressed in the following words of Gaveston:

"I thank you all, my lords: then I perceive,

That heading is one, and hanging is the other,

And death is all." (Marlowe 30-32)

In presenting the national history in *Edward II*, Marlowe has excluded the spirit of patriotism so necessary to a work of this kind. Perhaps the reason is that Marlowe was a rebel against the religion and morality of his countrymen. He displays his lyrical exaltation in painting the King's love for Piers Gaveston.

Mortimer, very similar to Tamburlaine is the embodiment of worst type of ambition, and of violence:

"The prince I rule, the queen do I command," (Marlowe 48)

He lives as he wishes like Tamburlaine in the same spirit. When the young prince orders his father's murderer for immediate execution, the latter shows haughty indifference. Mortimer is the scorner of the world, ever longing to satisfy all desires and getting baffled ultimately. He loses all glory, all excellence because he is a sleeping soul, hell-bent on committing crimes to ensure his security. Both the King and Mortimer exemplify the lesson that the primrose path of desire and dalliance leads to the portals of sin. The issue once again is of religion. The expression is poetic and dramatic. Marlowe proves himself a great dramatist. We see in the last scene the King's all sins blotted out in his agony. He is brutally done to death.

Marlowe has lifted this drama into the level of high literature because he is a great poet whose religion is faith in himself. Though conventionally an atheist, he is precursor of Milton and a little of him is Byron and is Shelley. He produced intensity on the English stage. The characters are full of animation and living. The drama gives rise to the conviction that to move is to live. The drama shares sublimity with the ancient dramas. This sublimity is the distinctive feature of poetry, religion and drama. Thus Marlowe gives his audience the impression of greatness and sublimity. In the similar way Tamburlaine treats all ordinary kingships and lordships of the earth with contempt. Faustus also disdainfully treats the whole deposits of man's learning, so he aspires for infinite knowledge. Like his protagonists, Marlowe values expansion, and there is no room for contraction in Marlowe's thinking as contraction is death, not life. In this sphere poetry, religion and drama co-exist in full accord and one catches a glimpse of the infinite.

In *Edward II* Marlowe accomplishes the political purposes of the Elizabethan historian. The King's downfall emphasizes the point that a King must have certain qualities to rule effectively in the absolutist state. About his short comings Holinshed states:

> "… he wanted judgment and prudent discretion to make choice of sage and discreet counsellors receiving those into his favour, that abused the same to their private game and advantage, not respecting the advancement of the common-wealth." (67 qtd. in Anderson)

The greed and immoderate ambitions of the King's favourites alienated the nobles and made them rise in rebellion against their King. Here Marlowe sounds a warning to the effect that a king has got to be prudent in choosing his counsellors. He is necessarily to possess a strong character, able to control his nobles, eliminate those opposed to him, which Edward visibly cannot do. As the nobles really defend the royal owner, a successful King does not marginalize them. After Edward's short reconciliation with the Barons, Queen Isabella directs an important bit of didacticism to her audience ironically:

"Now is the King of England rich and strong,

Having the Love of his renowned peers" (Marlowe 368-9).

The King's relation to the noble is the main political theme of *Edward II*. But the King, as absolute ruler, thinks that his Kingdom is his personal property and he is free to distribute to his parasite Gaveston. The King is found having no desire to rule as he prefers personal pleasures to the public interests of the government. It is obvious that England will be reduced to chaos because of the King's homosexual attachment to his dearest Gaveston and his frolic with him. The King has not the elementary knowledge that the nobles and commonalty form the real political group of importance. The Renaissance political ethics require the absolute ruler to rule justly, but the King himself has been found guilty of transgressing this fundamental principle of justice as accepted during Renaissance.

Now the thematic analysis is given here to reinforce what has been stated above. Act I, Scene I is about Gaveston in London, who has just come out of France in response to a letter of the new King, which he reads. Three poor men are there to enter his service, but he dismisses them from his presence in the rude manner. He remembers that "it is no pain to speak men fair" (Marlowe 41). Then he makes promises which he does not mean to keep. The character of the favourite is revealed in a soliloquy.

Then the conversation of the King and Barons is indicative of future quarrels. After the retirement of the barons Gaveston came into the presence of the King. When the Bishop of Coventry enters, he is insulted and maltreated by the King and his favourite. Act I Scene II introduces the barons in London, enraged at the King and Gaveston. They are supported by the Archbishop of Canterbury because of the King's ill treatment of the Bishop of Canterbury, and by Queen Isabella who was made sad by the King and his infatuation with Gaveston. They agree to banish the King. In the third scene of Act I, Lancaster is scoffed at.

In Act I Scene IV, the barons and the Archbishop in council at the New Temple pass the banishment order. When the King enters with Gaveston, he finds himself compelled to yield to

the mandate of the joint council and bids Gaveston and makes him governor of Ireland. In a bit of anger he accuses Isabella of her fondness for Mortimer and does not want to see her until Gaveston is repealed. Then Isabella obtains Gaveston‟s repeal, taking the help of the younger Mortimer. At the end of Act I, a general reconciliation is brought about. But Mortimer's angry utterance that foretells the coming storm is as follows:

"But whiles I have a sword, a hand, a heart,

I will not yield to any such upstart." (Marlowe 425-426)

In Act II, Scene I, the younger Spencer and Baldock– servants of the late Earl of Gloucester – resolve to stand by the side of Gaveston who has the royal favour. KingEdward's niece now goes to meet Gaveston. In Act II, Scene II the King, the Queen and the barons at Tynmouth wait for Gaveston. As he enters, Gaveston is contemptuously addressed by the barons. Gaveston also scoffs at them. After the bitter exchange, the barons go to their castles to start armed rebellion in the not-too-distant future. In Act II Scene III, Spencer and Baldock join the King's side. In Act II Scene IV, Kent goes over to the barons. In Act II Scene V, Gaveston escapes to Scarborough. The Queen bitterly hates the King and falls under the influence of Mortimer. In Act II Scene VI, Gaveston is imprisoned. But his seeing the King as allowed now is to be stopped ultimately.

In Act III Scene I, Warwick carries off Gaveston. In scene II, the Queen and their son are sent to France to confer with the King of France. When Gaveston's death is reported, the King swears vengeance. In Act III Scene III, the barons are captives, ordered for execution. The King's power is restored. In Act IV Scene I, Kent meets Mortimer when he has escaped from the Tower. They leave for France. They form a group to invade England. In Act IV scene IV, the Queen and her comrades have landed, and are marching forward to assert the Prince's right. Act IV Scene V shows the Queen victorious and the King fleeing, Kent repenting of his connection with the associates. Mortimer is eager to arrest the King, Baldock, Spencer and their associates. Act IV Scene VI is about their capture in the Abbey ofNeath.

Act V Scene I shows the forced abdication of the King. He is made to move from the custody of Leicester to the charge of Berkeley. In Act V Scene II, the Queen and Mortimer are conferring about how to kill the King. Then they decide to send him to Matrevis and Gurney, hoping that the King will die when he is tortured. In Act V Scene III, Kent's attempt to rescue the King comes to nothing. In Act V Scene IV, Mortimer says that either the King must die or Mortimer goes down. Then he hires a murderer and works for the coronation of the Prince with himself acting as his protector. Then he orders the execution of the King. In Act V Scene VI, the young King, accompanied by the peers, meets Mortimer face to face and

orders instant execution of Mortimer because he is a traitor. This is done before his father's funeral.

Marlowe probably supports the barons‟ hatred for Piers Gaveston, but he has no scorn for Gaveston for his lowly birth as Mortimer has. Marlowe has sympathy in Edward's defence of the lowly born against the oppressive barons. His message is that Kingship and nobility bear no relation to birth. This religion is based on the Renaissance ideal of humanism.

Edward II loves private pleasure. Gaveston is the symbol of pleasure. Gaveston's extreme dress and his passionate response to the King's infatuation present the picture of Edward II‟s perverted sexual life that infuriates the barons. Everybody will dislike Edward II wanting to make him surfeit with delight: "Ah! Words that make me surfeit with delight!" (Marlowe 13). His Kingdom is a palace of pleasure. In this drama there is no spirit of patriotism. This is because Marlowe revolted against religion and morality of his time and vehemently disagreed with his fellow-countrymen in political matters. This rebellious disagreement is manifestly present in Edward II‟s unnatural love for Piers Gaveston. One notes Marlowe's lyrical exaltation in this unnatural love which is really the religion of the flesh. The King has the poet's sincerity. Again, the Younger Mortimer, the leader of the barons opposed the King's favourite and the King himself, has also affairs with Queen Isabella which also stand in opposition to conventional morality and ethics. But unlike the younger Mortimer's secret love, King Edward II‟s private relationship with Gaveston is homosexual. Drayton also wrote about King Edward II‟s homosexual friendship with the girl-boy called Wanton Gaveston.

The King's minion is woman-like in his behaviour and attire. The King's character is also lascivious and lustful. In a soliloquy Gaveston thinks of lascivious entertainments he would provide the King with. Homosexual relationships occasionally happened in the royal court in the past. James VI of Scotland who later became James I of England had homosexual relationship with Esme Stuart, and he was expelled by the barons. It is to be noted that Marlowe's portrayal of homosexual relationship did not shock the contemporary English Public. It is to be pointed out here that Marlowe has not clearly said about the homosexual relationship between the King and Gaveston. But some hints are there and from such hints any intelligent reader can draw inference about the King's homosexual relationship with the favourite as one sees the Queen behaving towards Gaveston contemptuously, and Gaveston's contemptuous behaviour to the Queen and even in the very presence of her husband, Isabella is neglected. In the long continuing neglect Queen Isabella gradually turns away from the King and draws towards the Younger Mortimer and has got alliance. The point to note here is that Isabella had been painted as the she-wolf of France in the contemporary chronicles.

Marlowe's credit lies in his power to evoke the readers‟ sympathy for the King. The King never neglects the low-born people whose representative is Gaveston. Here the Younger Mortimer is his exact opposite. But Queen Isabella and Mortimer as set against the homosexual love of the King and his favourite have won no applause at the end. Marlowe is, indeed, a great lyrical poet and he has unique conception of man and life. He has shown that there is poetry in the love that exists and side- marriage where men and women are treated like things. This practical thingism is the cause of Isabella's ruin along with Mortimer's downfall.

Since Marlowe was a rebel, he drew the readers‟ sympathy for Gaveston also. When Warwick instructs the soldiers not to hang Gaveston yet and tells Gaveston that they will show him the regard that they will not hang him from a tree and that they will have him executed. It is their courtesy because Gaveston has been the favourite of a King. Then Gaveston gives vent to his insolence and indifference admirably in the light-hearted manner thus –

"I thank you all, my lords. When I perceive

That heading's one and hanging is the other,

And death is all." (Marlowe 30-32)

What an admirable mixture of poetry and religion in the last utterance of Gaveston belonging to the lower class of people like Marlowe! Life-spirit of poetry is breathed into these lines. Very reasonably Marlowe may be called the Father of English Dramatic Poetry just as Defoe is called the Father of English Fiction and Chaucer is called the Father of English Narrative Poetry.

Piers Gaveston fully deserves his fate and so does the younger Mortimer. The earlier suffering of Queen Isabella is not deserved and then she draws the readers‟ sympathy but later she shows her cruel nature thus losing all sympathy. Readers, again have not much sympathy for the Earl of Warwick and Lancaster when the victorious King orders them to get executed. When Edward II has been seized, pity is aroused in the readers‟ mind. Pity is also aroused for Spencer and Baldock when they are kept in the Abbey of Neath. The king, talking about philosophy and religion, makes himself a pathetic figure. Later on he is subjected to harsh treatment. Then seeing this plight, everybody is moved. The Prison becomes "a cave of care" (Marlowe 32) where the King has the experience of great sorrow. Here the royal life of the King is nothing but the harrowing tale of misfortune. His tormentors are monstrous, "nursed with tiger's milk" (Marlowe 71). Only despairing thoughts assail the King. In his intense suffering he asks the Bishop of Winchester and the Earl of Leicester if they are affected by his wretched plight. He seeks God's help, and besought him to provide him with a seat on a heavenly throne. He complains that he is kept in a smelly cell. This is a horrible place

– giving him no sleep and no sustenance. People are deeply touched when Matrevis and Gurney shave off his beard with muddy water from a sewer. Later the King is heard telling Lightborn that he has been forced to stand in mud for ten days. Indeed the King's pitiable existence is unbearable. Words even fail to describe his suffering. It appears that suchsuffering will not be found in literature. But it is undeniable that the law of causation is here operating as fate or divine law that states that the King's suffering is due to his misdeeds and unjust policies. Here Marlowe's concept of religion can be inferred. The King deserves this downfall; still he is not to be tortured like this. This torture is not different from Hell tortures - hair-raising, heart-rending and brutal. When complaining to Lightborn about his torture in the hands of Matrevis and Gurney he soon discovers that Lightborn is a greater devil. But it is to be accepted that the Younger Mortimer and the Queen play diabolical roles in employing their agents to torture the King and cause his death — truly called murder. One thing is certain here — Edward II does not know the cause of his suffering and downfall. He isnot aware of his error as found in the morality tradition. But the link with the morality tradition is that the King has the experience or regeneration through suffering. This religious notion is thoroughly embedded in this drama.

In Marlowe's vision, suffering is the outcome of wrongful use of power and authority. The assertion of power and authority and the exercise of power and authority are the recurrent themes of Marlowe. He has explored the subject thoroughly. Power and authority are in the forefront of the series of events, and suffering comes when these events reach the climax. The King misuses his authority by asking Gaveston to throw away the cap of the Bishop of Coventry, to tear his garments and to throw him into the gutter. So retaliation will take place and King Edward II must suffer for his transgression of the law of God — the principle of causation.

The irony of Edward II's rank as the King is striking when he is treated brutally in the cell. Matrevis and Gurney function in the cell as tormentors of the King. As instructed by the Younger Mortimer, they torture the King physically and psychologically and shave off his beard with ditch-water, and give him no rest, no sustenance and no sleep. They also force the King to keep standing continuously in mud and filth for some days. Here the irony arises from the contrast between what the King thought of his past position and what he has now been reduced to. Having lost his lofty royal position he has become a prisoner undergoing torture, insult and humiliation. Under pressure he is now to abdicate his high office of the King and to give up the throne. The proposition is most distressing. He knows that the only choice open for him is to abdicate, but he tries to assert his power, but in vain. He says to Lightborn: "Know, that I am a king:" (Marlowe 90). Then he says that the very mention of Kingship makes him suffer a hell of grief. Then he continues to say:

"I feel a hell of grief; where is my crown?
Gone, gone; and do I remain?" (Marlowe 91-92)

In the course of time he is murdered in the most inhuman manner. The gap between the King's expectation and his present position is the cause of the King's tragedy. In his death Edward II has fallen from his absolute position of the King of the country. Here the irony has its retrospective value.

Edward II's tragedy arises from the fact that he tried to rule the country as an absolute monarch, but failed. Marlowe thinks that a King must have some qualities to govern the country successfully. Edward II has no judgment in choosing his counsellors. Most of his favourite persons aim at their private gains and have no consideration for the advancement. The favourites alienate the peers and the lords from the King and cause them to rise in rebellion against him. A successful King never alienates his peers who form the pillar of strength. He wishes to do just what pleases him, as his personal pleasures are valued more than the interests of the government. Besides, he has no regard for the rights of the baronsand the common people. But faith in his power and his assertions of authority prove hollow. So he meets with his tragic fate. It is his tragedy of fate.

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