



# **VIVEKANANDA COLLEGE**

**THAKURPUKUR  
KOLKATA -700063**

**NAAC ACCREDITED 'A' GRADE**

**Topic : Edward II**

**Course title : British Drama**

**Paper : cc4**

**Semester : 2**



**Teacher : Subhendu Pukait**

**Department : English**

## Edward II

Edward II is by far the greatest of Marlowe's plays so far as the plot - construction is concerned . His earlier plays were the plays in which the sense of structure is not prominent. The construction is rather loose. Edward II is unique in the sense that here his skill in construction is best demonstrated.

Edward II is a history play. It is based on the separate chronicles of Fabyan , of Stowe and of Holinshed. It is to be noted that Marlowe draws primarily on the account of King Edward 's reign (1307 - 30) given by Holinshed, the famous historian. His debt to the others is marginal.

In Edward II we have a more or less faithful picture of the troublesome reign of Edward II i e from the accession of King Edward to the throne of England to the death of the Baron, younger Mortimer. We must remember that Marlowe was a playwright and not a historian. It is, therefore quite natural that he has freely condensed, altered and omitted many historical events in order to suit his dramatic purposes. He has taken liberties with the chronicles for dramatic purposes. He has portrayed an essentially true picture of the hostility between King Edward and his Barons, his worthlessness , his helplessness and his dreadful fate.

In the first half of the play the king is represented as a perversely self-willed person who brooks no opposition. He is shown to be a highly irresponsible person. He never minds state affairs. He is utterly despicable in his treatment of the Queen and in his behaviour to the barons.

Right from the very beginning of the play we find that king Edward is not alive to his regal responsibilities. He subordinates his kingly duties to his private desires. He lavishes gifts on his favourite, Gaveston. He plays duck and drakes with the public exchequer in order that he may live happily with Gaveston.

Queen Isabella, who is represented as a very devoted and loving wife at the outset of the play, is neglected and abused by king Edward. She dotes on her husband but her husband dotes on Gaveston. She tries desperately to win him away from Gaveston, but to no effect. So deep is the King's infatuation for Gaveston that he clings to him like a leech. He would not be separated from him even for a second. The barons insist on the banishment of Gaveston. But the King recklessly goes on frolicking with this upstart minion continually. Thus he antagonizes the barons by his infatuation with Gaveston.

King Edward is indeed a voluptuary, a sensualist for whom pleasure outweighs everything else on earth. He is ready to give up his Kingdom so that he may abandon himself completely to an unbridled indulgence in pleasurable sensations.

Make Several Kingdoms of this monarchy  
And share it equally amongst you all  
So I may have some nook or Corner left  
To frolic with my dearest Gaveston.

What makes Edward still more ignoble is the depravity of his desire. His passion for his favourite is perverse. It is because of his infatuation for Gaveston that he not merely neglects his kingly duties but also insult and forsakes his wife. He is churlish in his treatment of the Queen. He calls her a 'French Strumpet'. Thus in the first half of the play we have the impression that King Edward is a contemptible figure in spite of all the external trappings of power and authority with which he is invested as England's King.

King Edward, however, appears in a more favourable light when he is defeated and disgraced. While taking shelter in the Abbey of Neath he lays bare a fineness of soul. He asks his companions to take refuge in Plato and Aristotle and wishes that he might live a quiet life in preference to a career of action. Thus in his hour of distress he regains the sympathy that he forfeited in his hour of glory. Marlowe focuses on his intense anguish.

In the Abdication scene the king lays bare his soul lacerated with grief. He is driven by an intense desire to cling to the emblem of his power which he knows he will have to part with. Thus the Abdication scene, marks an important stage in the process of the King's humiliation. This scene in its turn, lead on to and prepares us for the death scene which is undoubtedly the most moving and terrible scene in the play.

In the scene of his murder, we see King Edward so tormented by fears that he cannot have a few moments of peaceful sleep. The utter helplessness of his situation, his intense physical Suffering , his sense of doom, his fears that if he sleeps in sheer weariness he will never wake up – all these help to evoke the image of suffering humanity. We cannot help feeling deeply for the king in his distress. Our awareness of his earlier moral depravity is submerged altogether in the swelling tide of the pity that is aroused in us. Edward is further redeemed when he, despairing of life turns to God, revealing a fineness of temper, hitherto unknown to us :

Assist me, sweet God, and receive my Soul.

The depth of Edward's misery may move us deeply . But his suffering does not evoke any feeling of admiration. His character lacks the elemental grandeur with which tragic protagonists face their adversities and accept their misfortunes in a mood of humility. Nor does Edward Grow in self-awareness. It never occurs to him that he is wholly responsible for the doom that overtakes him. Edward II as a play, therefore, fails to attain true tragic heights.

Apart from King Edward, there are a host of other important characters in the play Edward II. Among them, younger Mortimer stands out as the most important figure. It would not be wrong to say that younger Mortimer is the most Marlovian character that appears in Edward II. He is proud, daring, and a man of over-reaching ambition. But it appears that there is no consistency in the development of his character.

In the earlier scenes of the play we find that younger Mortimer is the spearhead of the baronial opposition to the King. He seems to be prompted by patriotic motives. He stands up to the king and hurls abuses at times. He appears to be a very noble-minded, high-spirited rebellious baron. But in the later scenes of the play we find that from a daring, noble-minded patriotic person he degenerates into the level of a cunning, foxy person who has an illicit relationship with the queen. He is shown to be a very unscrupulous person. He is relentless in his search for power. He is capable of the worst type of cruelty. This sudden change in younger Mortimer's character seems to be highly improbable.

Mortimer's degeneration begins after he has escaped from the Tower and joined with Queen Isabella to bring about the fall of King Edward. After Edward is deposed and put into prison, he makes himself protector and becomes virtually the ruler of England. He relishes to his heart's content this newly found power. However, Prince Edward, the legitimate ruler of England, orders the immediate execution of younger Mortimer on the charge of sedition and regicide.

Younger Mortimer faces death bravely and there is something admirable in this farewell speech addressed to the Queen Isabella :

Weep no more for Mortimer  
That scorns the world, and as a traveller  
Goes to discover Countries yet unknown.

Another character, Gaveston plays a pivotal role in the play, Edward II. He is largely responsible for King Edward's misfortunes. Marlowe represents Gaveston as a Machiavellian schemer and a deeply loving friend of the King. He is at the same time a self-seeker who corrupts the king . It is primarily due to his power over Edward that England is brought to the verge of ruin.

Gaveston is an upstart who wins his way into Edward's heart in order to secure advantages for himself. he is cunning enough to know how he may manipulate the pliant King to his own advantage. He decides to minister to the artistic tastes of the monarch and provides him with Congenial entertainments so that he may strengthen his hold on the King's affection :-

I must have wanton poets, pleasant wits,  
Musicians, that with touching of a string  
May draw the pliant King which way I please,

It is quite natural that Gaveston with his disregard of England's Interests should provoke the patriotic barons. His insolence embitters them further against him. He forgets his own place and insults them all.

Even his temporary exile does not chasten him. After his recall he remains as defiant of them as ever. He breaks into an unbridled fury when he says:

Base, leaden earls, that glory in your birth  
Go sit at home and eat your tenants' beef;  
and come not here to scoff at Gaveston

There is no doubt that Gaveston abuses the King's affection. His love for the King Can hardly be doubted. His sincerity cannot be questioned when he says:

What greater bliss can hap to Gaveston .

Than give and be It is because the favourite of a king !  
It is because of his boundless love for the monarch that the king bestows on him favours and makes him Lord Bishop, Lord high Chamberlain, Chief Secretary to the State and to the King , Earl of Cornwall etc.

But nothing can redeem Gaveston. He proves to be a hateful creature. He is cursed by common men while the rebellious barons seize him and put him to death. He pays heavily for his recklessness, his extravagance and his insolence

Now with regard to Marlowe's treatment of history in the play Edward II , it can safely be pointed out that he does not follow the sequence of historical events as he has to fit heterogeneous materials into a dramatic mode. He omits, invents and rearranges events so that he may succeed as a playwright.

A close reading of the play Edward II makes it clear that Marlowe throws aside many a detail not relevant to his purpose. He omits Gaveston's second banishment to Flanders in 1311 and his recall in 1312. He passes over the demand of the barons for the banishment of the Spencers in 1321. He leaves out the king's voyage to France and his marriage to Isabella. Many other less significant details are similarly left out so that Marlowe may mould history to his dramatic needs.

Marlowe invents a few details here and there. In Holinshed, there is but a passing reference to the Queen's grief. Caused by younger Mortimer's Execution. She has no significant role in history. But Marlowe gives prominence to her. She is represented in the first half of the play as a loving faithful wife much neglected and abused by a cruel husband whose well-being is always uppermost in her mind. In the latter half of the play, Queen Isabella is transformed into a monster of Cruelty and hypocrisy besides being involved in an immoral relationship with Mortimer,

Thus, the details concerning Isabella that Marlowe invents help to alienate our sympathy from the King in the first half of the play and assist in the swing from detestation and contempt of Edward to pity for him when he is deposed and disgraced in the second half of the play.