

Marlowe's 'Edward II' as a chronicle or historical play .

As we proceed to evaluate Marlowe's Edward II as a chronicle or historical play, there are certain important aspects which we are required to take into account. These aspects closely relate to the structural and thematic requirements the play: the extent to which the playwright follows the timeline of history in selecting and reshaping events associated with the life of Edward II as a historical figure; second, the formal requirements of a tragic play; and third and final one, the spirit of the Renaissance age.

It is true that Edward II dramatizes the weaknesses and failure of a king who also happens to be a historical figure. However, historical accuracy in a play or in any work of art does not become important as much as its human concerns. In fact, the playwright has shortened the time duration of 23 years of the reign of Edward II in something like 12 months. Thus, in the play the banishment and return of Gaveston from the exile occur in one and the same scene. As a matter of historical fact, there was a gap of almost one year between the two events. In the same way, the delineation of the king as a voluptuous figure who ill-treats the queen is not historically correct. But these changes and digressions are there to make history well dramatised. These alterations in the facts of history have been necessitated by the requirements of a well-knit dramatic presentation. In Edward II, Marlowe finds in the historical character of Edward II a true symbol of a tragic protagonist as per the prevailing spirit of the Renaissance age. He finds the character of the king quite suitable for delineation as a tragic figure. The king, on account of his weaknesses and lust, is ultimately deposed and murdered. But at the same time, he also gains in dignity as the catastrophe comes nearer.

In the play, the king is shown as a weak, vacillating and self-indulgent person who knows nothing of the nature of the powers that make a king feared one. He asserts his strength in a state of fury and passion but only to expose his weaknesses all the more. He prefers to remain indulgent in his infatuation which renders him vulnerable. It is quite obvious when he longs to be freed from the burden of his legal responsibilities and to enjoy a private life in peace with Gaveston. Such an attitude to abdicate the responsibilities of a king for some frivolous desire, eventually estranges him from his queen and also invites rivalry of the lords and hostility of the church. This precisely constitutes his tragic flaw which makes him responsible for his suffering. Thus, from the dramatic point of view, the character of the king satisfies the requirement of a tragic protagonist. When Edward II is overpowered, he seems to have realised

his 'self'. He longs for his death as he is totally shattered to see his kinship "gone to dust". He also realises the vanity of being a king-

"But what kings, when regiment is gone,
But perfect shadows in a sunshine day."

It is significant to note that the final speeches of the king consist of images of sorrow personified and of the destructive fury. These images indicate the passive nature of the king's suffering. It is not that kind of suffering that expresses itself in rage or even in terms of stoic strength. Herein lies the irony in the predicament of a king who, by his own frailty and weaknesses, is forced to look upon himself as a helpless victim. However, it is quite evident that his excessive doting on, and infatuation for, his 'minion' Gavestone is unworthy of his legal statue.

During the last period of his life, the king behaves most nobly which befits his stature. When asked to surrender his crown, he behaves almost like a philosopher. He begins to hate all pomp and show within Court- " make me despise this transitory pomp." He also realises that he has been a weak king, though his weakness, as he feels, has been of a different nature. Thus, the pleasure-loving king exhibits a kind of pathetic dignity which is, of course, tragic in nature while accepting the inevitable consequences of his tragic flaw. This aspect of his character is a redeeming feature which saves the play from mere representation of history on the stage and transforms it into a tragic play with human significance.

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