

Death Scene in Edward II

Christopher Marlowe was the greatest of the University wits. His career as a playwright was short, stretching over some half a dozen years still he made no small contribution to the development of British drama. He was gifted with a dramatic genius which was inferior only to Shakespeare. Shakespeare is no doubt, the greatest poet and dramatist of all ages. He is the supreme and the most original of all the artists. Still in certain respects he is indebted to Marlowe, who paved the way for his great successor. He wrote romances which were in keeping with the spirit of the Elizabethan age. His plays are characterised by a freedom, breadth of imagination and intensity of emotion which are not to be found in the classical drama. Shakespeare follows this very romantic tradition. Marlowe's famous plays are - Tamburlaine the Great Part I and II; The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus (1588 or 1589); The Jew of Malta (1589); and Edward II (1593).

Edward II has been regarded by several critics as the finest play of Marlowe. It is most remarkable for its two famous scenes: the Deposition scene and the Murder scene or Death scene. The Death scene in Marlowe's Edward II is the most pathetic and emotionally appealing scene in the play. The last scenes, like the end of Faustus are saturated with deep pathos. But while pathos in Faustus arises from the spectacle of the downfall of great power, in Edward II, it originates from the misery and degradation of one who once was the ruler of a nation.

The pathos which begins to originate in the hearts of the readers and spectators reaches its height in the scene of murder. Our sympathy is at once alienated from Mortimer and Queen Isabella and goes to the King, who is subjected to abject humiliation and severest possible torture till at last death comes to make an end of his shame and suffering. As soon as Edward is captured, he foresees his death. He knows that his griefs, like the wounds of a lion are not going to heal up:

"
The griefs of private men are soon allayed,
But not of kings: the forest deer being struck
Runs to herb that closeth up the wounds;
But when the imperial lion's flesh is gored
He rends and tears it with his wrathful paw."

The Death-scene witnesses the greatest indignity to the King. Forcibly shaved, washed in puddle water, confined in darkness and filth, maddened by a beating drum, thrown his food like a dog, denied human contact except with the gaddess, who taunt and insult him - all this is most degrading to the King just before his death. He is constantly removed from one place to the other until every joint of his body begins to ache. No sleep, nor any rest is for poor Edward. The following passage shows the pain and misery of Edward which outdoes any other scene in pathos -

"
And there in mire and puddle water have I stood
This ten days space; and lest that I should sleep,
One plays continually upon a drum
They give me bread and water, being a King,
So that, for want of sleep and sustenance,
My mind's distempered, and my body's numb'd
And whether I have limbs or no I know not.
O, would my blood dropped out from every vein,
As doth this water from my tatter'd robes."

At the time of death, Edward becomes stoic in his thinking. He tries his best to take death patiently and happily: "To wretched men death is felicity." But he is so much tortured and tormented physically and mentally that he craves for peace and rest, or instant death:

" Friends, whither must unhappy Edward go?
Will hateful Mortimer appoint no rest?
Must I be vexed like the mighty bird
Whose sight is loathsome to all winged fowls?"

The present piteous condition of the king when contrasted with his past glory is rendered still more piteous. The death scene is difficult to match for stark unrelieved pathos. The king's attempt to awaken sympathy for him in his murdered, his account of horrid suffering he has borne, his longing for sleep from which he fears he will never awake - all make up a situation as poignant as any in the Elizabethan tragic drama. This Death-scene rightly made Charles Lamb remark,

"The death-scene of Marlowe's king moves pity and terror beyond any scene ancient or modern with which I am acquainted."

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