

Edward - II : A Tragedy

Edward II is one of the finest plays written by Marlowe before he died at the age of twenty nine. The play deals with a king who is dominated by his favourite, Gaveston, a Frenchman, who is held in unusual affection by the king. This becomes the cause of all trouble. Edward neglects his wife, Isabel, and is always attached to Gaveston. In this way he proves false to his duties as a ruler and a husband. The nobles meanwhile have formed a feeling of hatred for this royal favourite. With Young Mortimer as their head, they manage to banish Gaveston for a time, but he is speedily recalled and shows the same insolent attitude towards the clergyman and the barons. He taunts them; bidding the 'base, leaden ears' go home and eat their tenants' beef. They answer the taunt by rising in rebellion. They at last succeed in getting hold of Gaveston and execute him. The King is furious at this and decides to march against his rebellious barons. He manages to imprison some of the barons. But Mortimer soon escapes to France, where Queen Isabel is staying with her son, Mortimer, with the help of the other barons, Warwick, Lancaster and Pembroke, comes back to England and defeats the king. The king is compelled to surrender his crown to Mortimer. The king is then shut up in Kenilworth Castle. Mortimer, meanwhile, comes to an understanding with the Queen, who becomes his mistress. They both plan to do away with the king, and their agents murder Edward in a gruesome manner. But Mortimer realizes that his end is coming soon. He tries his best to banish the Earl of Kent, brother to the old king. The king's son, now Edward the Third, however, foils his attempts. He kills Mortimer and imprisons his treacherous mother.

Edward II is most remarkable for its two famous scenes: the Deposition scene and the Murder scene. In writing of the Deposition scene in Edward II, Charles Lamb commented, "The reluctant pangs of ~~abdication~~ abdicating Royalty in Edward furnished hints which Shakespeare scarce improved in his Richard II". Of the murder scene, he said that it "moves pity and terror beyond any scene ancient or modern, with which I am acquainted".

But not withstanding its technical excellences and intensely pathetic scenes, Edward II does not appeal as Shakespeare's tragedies do. A great tragedy issues from the greatness of the hero's soul. Shakespeare's tragic heroes are great men not only in the sense that they are kings and generals, but also because they possess a great character. They possess goodness and greatness in them. Hamlet is a man of lofty ideals, Macbeth and Othello are men of outstanding qualities; Lear has the nobility of soul. Accordingly, Shakespeare's tragic heroes evoke feelings of pity and fear. Marlowe's Edward II is a king of different nature. He is not only a fool but a coward. He is neither a soldier nor a statesman. No doubt, he sometimes exhibits nobility of human soul. Its essence does not lie in the spectacle of suffering that it offers to our view, but the nobility and greatness of the soul that is revealed to us through the process of suffering. There must be a spiritual greatness in the hero if his fall is to inspire awe as well as pity. Edward II does not have this. Until the fifth act, it is the King's inefficiency, his wrong-headedness, his pettiness that is apparent. This downgraded pettiness is apparent in almost all the major characters.

The great tragedies of Shakespeare involve a moral conception, a conflict between good and evil from which good ultimately emerges triumphant. The basis of a great tragedy is this moral concept. In Edward II, apparently there is no such high moral concept. We

are not made to decide whether the King deserved his fate or not ;  
nor are we led to be sorry for the queen or repelled by her  
treachery and cruelty. It can be said that a moral pattern is  
wanting in Tamburlaine and Faustus also. But Edward II is a play  
of normal human characters and involves a conflict of human motives

If we judge the merits and demerits of the  
individual plays of Chaucer, we would perhaps regard Faustus and  
not Edward II as his greatest dramatic achievement

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