

## Edward II : As a Historical Play

Marlowe was not the first Elizabethan to write a historical play. In his own life-time such plays as *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, partly in prose and partly in blank verse and *The Troublesome Raigne of King Johan* were in existence. Peele's *Famous Chronicle of Edward I Surnamed Edward Longshanks*, with his returne from the Holy land, had already been acted. There are some other plays of doubtful authorship.

Marlowe was well acquainted with all the available accounts of the reign of Edward II. There were several poems dealing with the life and tragic death of the King. Besides, the account of his reign and his final defeat and death is given in the *Chronicles of Fabyan*, of *Stowe* and of *Holinshed*. The principal source of Marlowe's plot is *Holinshed's chronicle* which was first published in 1577. Some of the incidents in the play *Edward II* are not found in *Holinshed*, but are mentioned in the *Chronicles of Fabyan* and *Stowe*. The most notable of them is the scene where *Matrevis* and *Gurney* was the king in puddle water and shave his beard away. Marlowe must have found this episode in *Stowe's Annals of England* published in 1580.

The charm of *Edward II* lies in the skilful dramatic representation of the history. Though the play has been criticized on account of the nature of achievement and material, yet the job of Marlowe certainly involved skilful construction. Twenty three years of history are compressed so that the events seem to pass credibly in something like twelve months. Marlowe often makes necessary changes in history for the sake of dramatic effect and still more, for the sake of a close knit plot. The actual history as represented by *Holinshed*, is a dull and uninteresting enumeration of disjointed events, which are confused. Marlowe, therefore, had not only to select the salient

events, but also to reshape them according to his requirements. In fact, here it may be noted that a historical play is not a piece of history. It is history altered for the sake of dramatic effect.

As has already been noted that Marlowe considerably shortens the time-duration of the reign of Edward II. The incidents of the play actually occurred in about twenty-seven years, from 1307 to 1330. But their development in the play is much more rapid. It appears as if all the events from the beginning of the play to the end, occur in one year.

Marlowe's characters are also not the exact versions of the figures of history. In actual life, King Edward II was not so great a voluptuary figure as he is presented in the play. Nor did he so ill-treat the queen as he has been shown to do. Perhaps Gaveston, too, was not such a deliberate mis-leader of the king as Marlowe has presented him to be. He was attached to the king as his friend from childhood and sincerely loved and admired him.

Edward II of Marlowe shows several other historical digressions and inaccuracies. Marlowe has exercised great freedom in the treatment of Spencers. They were neither needy adventurers nor were they low-born. They were introduced to the king six years after the execution of Gaveston. But in the play their story forms just an extension of the Gaveston theme. Again the king had to fight two successive battles to defeat his barons, but in the play only one is presented. The Mortimer had actually submitted to the king before the battle, but in the play, Mortimer Jr is imprisoned in the Tower after the battle of Boroughbridge. Warwick has actually died before the battle, but is kept alive to aid Lancaster and share his fate. Likewise, the prominence given to Mortimer in the play is historically incorrect. Marlowe has presented him as Edward's bitterest enemy from

the very beginning of the play. But in reality he was the queen's associate in her rebellion against the king. It was after her return from France with the rebel army that he came in to prominence.

Edward II is a typical English historical play. In it, history has been well presented and well dramatized. Though there are digressions and changes made in the historical events, yet the characters are essentially historical. They speak for themselves. The audience may very well mark Edward's weaknesses, his coldness to his wife, his dotage to Gaveston, his haughtiness to his barons and carelessness about the interests of England and English people. They may also mark the insolence and haughtiness of the barons, the selfish and unpatriotic spirit of Mortimer and faithlessness and hypocrisy of the queen.

The play may lack the vigour and vitality of Shakespeare's Richard II. But as Charles Lamb says, "the death scene of Marlowe's king moves pity and terror beyond any scene, ancient or modern with which I am acquainted. And a comparison of the King Edward II of Marlowe with the King Richard II of Shakespeare can not fail to leave a strong impression of the force, passion and tragic power of Marlowe."