

Comment on Marlowe's mastery of plot construction as revealed in the play Edward II

The blazing Renaissance passion in Marlowe does not allow the steady crystallization of a plot. His Dr. Faustus begins brilliantly and ends brilliantly leaving the middle thin and weak. Not only Dr. Faustus but also Tamburlaine the Great and The Jew of Malta are one-man plays swelled with the exorbitant lust for knowledge, power and wealth respectively. In them, the heart and brain are overactive, but their morality skeleton remains inadequately fleshed. But in a successful mixture play, characters, situations and actions are buttressed against one another to impress upon the audience a neat fabric of totality. All the parts contribute to the whole and the plot is achieved. This plot effects an amplitude, contributes to the intensity of the cathartic-gain of the mind and turns out to be the 'soul of a tragedy'. It is in Edward II that Marlowe develops a plot and we should not underestimate his achievement by simply commenting that the historical details hold the playwright's frame of facts. Marlowe consults Fabyan, Holinshed and Stow and goes on selecting the best for his dramatic design.

History, unable to deviate from reality, is likely to rule over the imaginative vision of the dramatist. Therefore, like Shakespeare, Marlowe also takes liberty to subordinate history to the dramatic necessity. In order to bring the materials into a concentrated size, Marlowe omits the King's voyage to France and his marriage, the second banishment of Gaveston to Flanders and the banishment and recall of the Queen. The Battle of Bannockburn took place in the seventh year of Edward II's reign. But Marlowe has brought it to the fifth year within the life-time of Gaveston.

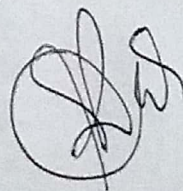
(B.A. Part II, Paper III)

to make the dramatic motive clear, that the King is brought to disaster from his association with Gaveston. With dramatic insight, the Spensers have been deftly associated with Gaveston by making the younger Spenser a page on a mission to the Earl of Gloucester's daughter, betrothed to Gaveston. The elder Spenser is kept a stranger, as he is not introduced to the King by the younger Spenser. In history, the attack of the barons on the Spensers occurred in the twelfth year of the King's reign. But Marlowe draws it to the fifth to tie it up with Gaveston's death. The surrender of the two Montimers to the King's grace near Shrewsbury, operations against Thomas of Lancaster and the Earl of Hereford and the defeat of the nobles at Boroughbridge have been dramatically taken together as the King's single victory over the combined opposing forces. In history, the death of Warwick took place earlier but in the play, Warwick is beheaded after the battle of Boroughbridge for killing Gaveston. The long usurpation of Mortimer has been condensed and Mortimer and the Queen have been summarily punished. Mortimer is executed by the order of the young Edward before the body of the murdered King is buried. The aesthetic vision takes the upper hand in Marlowe's treatment of history. In history, Edmund was a boy of six when Edward was in peril. But in the play, he is made to represent a facet of self-conflict within the King's family.

The King's weakness for the proud and hedonistic courtier Gaveston intensifies the complication. The King insults the Duke of Clarence that engages the Archbishop of Canterbury. Under the spell of the dotage upon the love of Gaveston, the queen is neglected. The council order of Gaveston's exile is repealed by the request of the Queen and the interference of young Mortimer. The betrothal of the Earl of Gloucester's daughter and niece of Edward II to Gaveston joins

together the Spensers and Baldoek with the king. Warwick's wit and policy prevail and the freed Gaveston loses his head. The infuriated king with the help of the Spensers recovers his power defeating and executing most of the barons. Being helpless in France, the Queen falls back upon young Mortimer to uphold the authority of the boy Edward. The king yields and gets arrested and young Mortimer does his worst to aggravate the persecution of the king. The king's death turns the boy Edward desperate and from the tragic source he gains strength for Mortimer and imprisonment for mother. With the progress of action, the king goes through undeserved suffering and the wheel of justice is set back upon the intriguing Queen and the paramour Mortimer. Thus the plot becomes not only a chain of happenings, but morally justifies the ruin of the self-forgetting nobility including the king himself. Finally, Prince Edward shines as the English spirit which is both brave and human.

The concatenate nation of the partly-flawed partly right personal events, voices up an impersonal moral order and there lies the success of the plot.



15.05.20