

Edward II as a Tragedy/ King Edward as Tragic Hero

[BA (Hons.), Part-2]

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‘His reign is a tragedy, but on that lacks in its true form the element of pity; for there is nothing in Edward. Miserable as his fate is, that invites or deserves sympathy.’ This is what William Stubbs’ *Constitutional History* (ii.314.) says of the appeal of *Edward II* (1594) as a tragedy. This view of a historian might have been propelled by the lack of considerable greatness in the character of King Edward II, the tragic hero himself. The title of the play uses the phrases ‘troublesome reign’, and this is based on the frustration and moral weakness that king Edward was a victim of. The king is no aspiring superhero. Yet, Marlowe’s force, passion and tragic power leave a strong impression of a tragedy when compared to another historical play *King Richard II* of Shakespeare. The play glorifies a suffering soul trying to outstrip all its consequences. This suffering is here the object of pity and fear. The result is obvious, as espoused by Charles Lamb: ‘...the death scene of Marlowe’s king moves pity and terror beyond any scene, ancient or modern, with which I am acquainted’ (*Rosamund Gray, Essays, &c*, 35).

The *hubris* that characterises a tragic hero has many manifestations in King Edward II. The greatest of these is his doting upon his ‘mighty favourite’ (as the title indicates) Gaveston. His homosexual leaning toward his friend, a fact which led Edward’s father to banish Gaveston from England, is indicated from the very beginning when Gaveston reads

Eddard's 'amorous lines' and urges him, 'take me in thy arms.' This friend does nothing but encourages and feeds the king's hunger for a licentious life, indulging the latter in music, poetry and masques involving 'a lovely boy in dian's shape.' Edward also vows to 'either die or live with Gaveston', bestows upon him posts of import and empties the state coffer upon him, not only this, weakness is part of the King's being, so that time and again he is guided and misguided by the cunning and ambitious barons.

This *Hubris* leads Edward to commit some errors of judgement (*hamartia*), thus making permanent and irreparable *hiatus* in his relationship with the barons and queen. National importance for him goes in the background, and entertaining the 'mighty favourite' becomes the prime importance, so that the barons' words are unheeded. He behaves not only indifferently, but also rudely with the queen, and accuses her of an adulterous relationship with the Younger Mortimer, even though she is completely faithful to him. He also blasphemously treats the bishop of Coventry, and asks Gaveston to usurp all his posts and privileges. Not only so, he further exposes his characteristic weakness by letting the younger Spenser influence his judgements after the death of Gaveston.

But Edward is less a sinner than sinned against, and soon Marlowe succeeds in generating sympathy for this otherwise degenerate king. The first feeling of sympathy for the king is generated when he makes a moving speech at the Abbey of Neath. He laments the loss of his happiness and praises the happy and heavenly life, which abbots lead. Just at this time, the agents of the Queen take him into custody, thereby adding to the pity of his plight. He now feels that even the stars are frowning at him and wishes that Pluto's hell should be the ideal place for him to keep him in peace away from the barons and also the faithless Queen, who now 'spots (his) nuptial bed with infamy.' His plight is further intensified in his speeches

in the Abdication Scene (V; I) where he wants time to come to a halt so that he can permanently hold his crown.

The suffering reaches its acme in the scenes of the prison. Edward is confined in an airless dungeon where he is put to starving and sighing. He is shaved by Matrevis and Gurney with puddle-water, is compelled to stand on mire and filth for ten long days, disallowed to sleep and fed on mere bread and water. It is in the prison that Lightborn murders him brutally with the help of a red-hot rod. Marlowe here deserves credit for introducing the murder on stage to intensify and move to a climax-the feeling of pity and terror, since historically, nothing of how Edward was killed in the prison was known except the sudden shrieks of death from his dungeon.

Thus, although not a tragedy on a grand scale like the other tragedies of Marlowe, *Edward II* succeeds in creating the stature needed for Edward to be a tragic hero.