

The Death Scene of the King Edward II: Evocation of Pity and Fear

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‘The death scene of Marlowe’s King moves pity and terror beyond any scene, ancient or modern with which I am acquainted.’ The death scene (5; V) of Edward in Marlowe’s *Edward II* (1594) not only moves a sensitive soul like Charles Lamb thus, but also any other with its grotesque, gruesome and, of course, obscene cruelty. More intense in terror and more difficult to act than the putting out of Gloucester’s eyes in *King Lear*, the death scene is not only historically true, but also dramatically purposeful. Clifford Leech in *Christopher Marlowe: Poet for the Stage* suggests that ‘The mood of killing may have been one of the reasons why Marlowe chose this story for dramatization.’ There is unanimity among the historians regarding the method of killing, though differences are there regarding the instruments used. Marlowe did not give also any stage direction, but the murderer Lightborn’s actions accord well with history. However, even if it were not justified in history, the death of the King is the culmination of his suffering.

The King, hitherto headstrong in his love for Gaveston, begins to earn pity as early as when he takes shelter in the Abbey of Neath. The weary and despondent King, who yearns for ease in the Abbey (‘Good father, on thy lap/ Lay I this head, laden with mickle care’), in the gloomy dungeon and just before the murder is more studied in his suffering, he realises

the fruitlessness of his life's tale amidst the filth of the prison. The scene of the King deceived by Lightborn's crocodile tears and living in hope of sympathy is truly a pitiful spectacle. 'List awhile to me, / And then thy heart...will melt ere I have done my tale', he requests Lightborn. The King who spit fire onto his barons now suddenly finds his head ugly without the crown: "Where is my crown? / Gone, gone; and do I remain alive?" Fear of deception shakes him up from his trance. The death of the King is therefore the last comfort against these mental torments.

The death scene is presented with the swan song of Edward's royal career. The King rises to kingship only when he loses the crown. For a moment in Lightborn's presence, he becomes a king again. He remembers his prowess in combats with which he impressed Queen Isabella, unhorsing the Duke of Cleremont. With any almost habitual grace, he bestows the last jewel he is left with to Lightborn: "Know that I am a king." Even Matrevis and Gurney are surprised that 'He (Edward) hath a body able to endure/ More than we can inflict.' The filth, stench and moistness of the dungeon, nothing can subdue his royal blood, which has now begun to run more eagerly than ever. He develops courage enough to say, "let me see the stroke before it comes, / That even then when I shall lose my life/ My mind may be more steadfast of my God." The rare eloquence of these short final speeches contrasts with the empty rhetoric of the past.

Marlowe has not given stage direction for the killing of Edward. Yet, the gruelling aspect of the process sends a chill down the spine. Lightborn hints at the beginning: "never was there any/ So finely handled as this king shall be." He tells Matrevis and Gurney prepare a spit red-hot on fire, and, as most chronicles and contemporary playwrights agree to it, they close the king's wearied body between two beds, uncover his most secret part and without pity or remorse thrust the hot spit to the heart. Marlowe mentions no such bed, and instead,

makes use of a table. Holinshed speaks that Edward's cry did move so many within the castle and the town of Berkley to compassion that they began praying to God to receive his soul when they understood what the cry meant. It is in these circumstances that the assassins decide leaving Berkley in the play.

The creation of the character 'Lightborn' for the purpose of murder is very significant. He is a sub-human, a machine for murder. His heartless and deceptive tears emphasise more than ever the King's muddled and suffering humanity. He is unique in his ways of killing. Yet, his character has many other ramifications. His name plays on 'The Son of Morning,' Lucifer, and his torturing the King echoes and surpasses the tortures meted out to damned sinners in hell. However, Lightborn is a product of a well-established tradition. 'The view that suffering and death should be proportionate to the sins committed is a recognised tenet of medieval thought', says William Moelwy Merchant in his edition of the play.

Marlowe makes Edward's death, quite significantly, as William Empson was the first to suggest in a review in *The Nation*, CLXIII, 1946, a parody of the King's homosexual act with Gaveston. Empson also links Edward with Faustus not only in the agony of death but also in the dilemma of life. Both are blind to virtue in their thirst for pleasure, but, according to medieval tradition of morality, commit themselves to God on ultimate realisation of their sinful diversion.