

Edward II

Edward the Second by Christopher Marlowe

History, Tragedy, and Truth in Christopher Marlowe Edward II

Edward Second by Christopher Marlowe is a period drama retelling the life and struggles of King Edward II during his twenty-year reign as the ruler of England. It was written in the year 1593 and is based on the works of English Chronicler Raphael Holinshed's Chronicle on Edward II.

Edward II can be easily nominated as one of the best creations of Marlowe, is most well-versed and researched historical play that he has ever written.

Marlowe's Edward II is not only aesthetically pleasing and delightful to read but it successfully portrays the series of events that took place during that time and the historical change thereafter.

Marlowe's interpretation of Edward the Second is based on his understanding of the political and social norms of 13th century England.

In many ways, Edward II by Christopher Marlowe is far more sophisticated and interesting than the carefully written historical facts of Holinshed's 'Chronicle'. The dramatic illustration of the events in the play helps us to relate to the tragic life of Edward II and also the events appear livelier and more coherent with the actual facts.

Edward the Second by Christopher Marlowe was written in the context of the monarchy and troubled life of King Edward II and his controversial relationship with an English noble Piers Gaveston who is considered by many historians as his lover and how their relationship will change the course of the political history of England.

In Act I Scene I, we see Gaveston who was exiled by the king's father Edward I reading out a letter he received from Edward II. Gaveston was exiled on account of his extreme closeness to young prince Edward and to such an extent that the prince ignored his royal duties and lavished Gaveston with unprecedented gifts and favours.

The letter stated that upon the death of Edward I, Edward II is now the new King and he revokes the banishment of Gaveston and invites him to join him in the court. Gaveston is overjoyed by the thought of reuniting with Edward II and more so because he anticipates how much power and wealth, he can actually earn due to the communion.

Meanwhile, rumours began to surface about the probable love relationship and closeness between Edward II and Gaveston and it has infuriated the nobles who consider that Gaveston is only using the King to flourish his own vested interests.

As Gaveston arrives in England he watches a group of nobles arguing with Edward II from a place of hiding. The king tries to reconcile with the nobles who think that Gaveston is self-indulgent and a threat to the king himself and should be banished from court immediately. Gaveston then arrives and the two meet and exchange pleasantries and Edward II happily creates Gaveston the Earl of Cornwall with authority to withdraw funds from the treasury.

The happy reunion is hindered by the arrival of Bishop of Coventry who opposes Gaveston's return to the court and Gaveston imprisons the Bishop with the support of Edward II.

The imprisonment of the Bishop of Coventry further ignites the flame of resentment among the nobles. The nobles particularly the Earl of Warwick and Lancaster, Earl of Pembroke, and the Mortimers along with the Archbishop of Coventry issued an order to banish Gaveston. The order was supported by Queen Isabella of France,

Edward's much-neglected wife who never supported her husband's reluctance towards his duties.

Edward in fear of a possible rebellion signs the order but makes an arrangement with the nobles. He makes Gaveston the Governor of Ireland and accompanies him to Ireland. Isabella is lonely and recalls for his husband and Gaveston to return to England only to hatch out a plan to murder Gaveston.

In Act II of the play, Gaveston returns to England to get married to Edward's niece Lady Margaret de Clare. The marriage is just a formality to make Gaveston part of the royal family. Edward has also failed to pay a ransom for Mortimer's father who was a prisoner of the Scots and this infuriated the nobles as they thought that Edward is completely unfit for the crown and ignorant of diplomatic matters. They also despise the new king for his treatment of the Queen and this was one of the reasons they planned to assault and murder Gaveston.

In Act III, the nobles ambush and kill Gaveston and deny his wish to see the King for one last time. They carry the body of Gaveston to the king and he is enraged and decides to seek revenge. Edward's army defeats the army of rebels and kills Warwick and Lancaster, but Mortimer succeeds to escape.

In Act IV, Mortimer escapes to France and joins Isabella of France and her son Prince Edward. Isabella's loyalty to the king has faded by now and she has grown a closeness to the Mortimer. Isabella and Mortimer allies with a French King who will help them defeat King Edward II. By this time, Edward has fled to Ireland and sought refuge in a monastery where he is found and taken in by the nobles.

In the final act, Edward is deposed off as the King and the crown passes to his son Edward. Edward II is devastated to learn that he is deceived by his own wife and he gives the throne along with his handkerchief wet with his tears to Isabella. Isabella

and Mortimer both want Edward dead but the Earl of Kent, Edward's brother intervenes but to no success.

Edward is taken to Berkeley Castle and kept under filthy conditions. Mortimer hires a killer named Lightborne. In the final scene, Edward dies a horrible death in the hands of Lightborne. Young King Edward vows for revenge against his mother Isabella and Mortimer and arrives with his army of men. Mortimer is to be executed and Isabella will be prisoned and the young prince takes over the throne of England.

Edward 2 by Christopher Marlowe Analysis

Marlowe's Edward II is a classic example of blank verse free from the traditional rhyming lines of poetry as a result of which, the dialogues seem much more unrehearsed and natural.

Edward II falls under the genre of 'historical play' and envisions the rise and fall of the core characters of the play. All the main characters of the play King Edward II, Isabella of France, Gaveston, and Mortimer are responsible for their own downfall brought about by infinite pursuit of revenge, power and wealth.

Edward II as portrayed in history is a weak and fragile character who in spite being a king and his father's rightful heir fails to meet up his responsibilities and uses his power to only bestow his favourite Gaveston with undue privileges totally unaware of the dangers he is lurking in.

Edward and Gaveston's love relationship form the backdrop of the play and that is a major flaw in his character that will bring about his tragic downfall in the end. In many instances, Edward has failed to keep his personal relationship separate from the political matters of the state. His irony of kingship is visible when he is abandoned by his wife Isabella, his brother Kent and his nobles who turn hostile against him.

Edward II is a story of power struggle. Even Gaveston a commoner uses King's favour for his own interests.

The play is set in a time when the Church's authority was considered to be supreme much in contrast with the 16th century when the play was staged. So, when Gaveston questioned the authority of the Archbishop of Coventry, the audience was not taken by surprise.

Edward II Characters

Edward II

Edward II, the title character of the play is highly unmindful of his surroundings, cheerful and takes interest in music and merriment, a homosexual, whimsical, and self-destructive, and is undoubtedly the weakest monarchs of his time.

His character is less compelling than that of his enemies Isabella, Mortimer or even his lover Gaveston. He has little or no interest in warfare or matters of his state and his only interest seems to be Gaveston whom he deeply admires.

He is confused and seems to be seen divulging in self-pity or vouches for revenge in several instances. Edward tragically seems to be a man born in the wrong time totally unfit to be a king. Perhaps he is a man of simple desires who is willing to give away power and wealth for the man he loves. His devotion to Gaveston is noteworthy but he fails to fulfil his duties as a rightful king.

Piers Gaveston

Piers de Gaveston is an interesting character in comparison to Edward and is ambitious and hungry for power. Gaveston the Earl of Cornwall is witty and clever and indulges Edward in poetry and theatre to keep him away from performing his duties. Throughout the play, Gaveston has used Edward for his personal interests

but at the very end when he is about to die, he wishes to see Edward for last time thus proving that his love for the king was genuine and true.

Queen Isabella

Queen Isabella in Edward II by Christopher Marlowe is a French princess and wife of Edward II. She plays an important role and is responsible for the dethroning Edward II as well as his murder and the crowning of her son Edward III of England.

Isabella is a devoted wife and unlike her husband is confident and ambitious. She, in the beginning, was sympathetic towards her husband but his persistent favouritism towards Gaveston and accusations of adultery towards her made her go against the King. Isabella in the end rebels against her husband taking Mortimer by her side as a lover and turns into a treacherous and scheming character desperate to take revenge against the king.

Roger Mortimer

Roger Mortimer or Mortimer Junior, the co-conspirator and lover of Isabella is vindictive, proud and arrogant due to his position and title. He resents Gaveston and King Edward and doesn't think he is fit to rule his kingdom. He wants to take revenge against the king for not paying a ransom to free his father from the hands of the Scots.

He ultimately plans and kills both Gaveston and Edward. As he rises to power, he grows more impatient and ruthless and tries to influence and manipulate young Prince Edward III.

Edmund Kent

The Earl of Kent is the brother of Edward II and resents his brother's apathy towards his duties as a king and his self-indulging behaviour. He is torn between his love for his brother and his loyalty towards the crown and it is this duty that compels him to

support the nobles and go against his brother. In the end, Kent tries to take the side of his brother but is killed by Mortimer and Isabella.

Prince Edward III

He plays a rather short but significant role in the play. He is the son of Edward II and Isabella and the rightful heir to the throne. In the beginning, when his father is dethroned, he is a young boy and a puppet in the hands of Mortimer who plays and manipulates him.

But in the end, it is he who will turn the wheels of fortune by executing Mortimer and imprisoning his mother for the death of his father Edward II. He thereby proves as a rightful heir to the throne, dutiful and taking matters into his own hand. He rises as a true monarch who even does not spare his own mother.

Earl of Lancaster and Earl of Warwick

The Earl of Lancaster and Warwick are supporting characters and play a crucial role in the banishment and execution of Gaveston. They want to join forces to overthrow and kill king Edward II. Both Lancaster and Warwick later die in the hands of Edward II.

Mortimer Senior

Mortimer Senior is the uncle of Roger Mortimer and is a powerful noble who has been captured by the Scots and held for ransom.

Bishop of Coventry

Bishop of Coventry is an important church official and helped Edward I to banish Gaveston from the court.

Lightborne

He is an assassin hired by Roger Mortimer to kill Edward II. He kills Edward mercilessly and later is killed by Gurney to cover up the traces of the crime.

Lady Margaret de Claire

Lady Margaret is the niece of Edward II and daughter of the Earl of Gloucester. She is engaged to Gaveston.

Edward II Christopher Marlowe Themes

Homoeroticism

Homosexuality forms the backdrop of the historical play of Edward II. Edward is remarkably in love with Gaveston and even Queen Isabella is jealous of his husband's behaviour.

The duo is so much in love that they are completely oblivious of their surroundings and focuses on enjoying each other's companionship. Edward is completely blinded by his affection for Gaveston so much so that in the end he loses his life and throne.

The concept of homosexuality was quite a taboo in the 16th century but the way Marlowe produces it will evoke a sense of pity among the audience for Edward in the end. Also, the relationship between the two men in the play gives a broader spectrum of life much beyond social status, class, and position.

Fight for Power

Throughout the entire play, all the characters are fighting for power and recognition. Isabella and Mortimer are hungry for power and the throne so much so that Isabella decides to kill her husband whom she once loved for the throne of England.

Gaveston who undoubtedly possesses a genuine love for Edward being a commoner cannot deny his lust for position and power and uses his relationship to achieve superior positions in the court.

Edward II: Failure as a king

There is a point when the audience may have pitied with Edward for being cornered, manipulated and killed by his own men. But is he not responsible for his own downfall?

Though it might seem that Isabella, Mortimer, and Gaveston has used him and schemed against him but it was long due. Edward as a king is a failure and he has misused his position as a king and even his relationships.

He has mistreated and ignored his wife Isabella so much so that she despises her husband and wants to seek revenge. Even his own brother Kent and his loyal nobles are against him and do not support his flamboyant and overindulging behavior. His obsession with Gaveston and his misuse of power will bring about his untimely death in the end.

Revenge

In the play, everybody is seeking revenge against one or the other. The death of Gaveston has devastated Edward and he wants to avenge the death of his lover and kills the nobles responsible for his death.

Isabella who was once a devoted wife, resents his husband's mistreatment towards her and decides to seek revenge and kill Edward.

The nobles loyal to the throne are completely unhappy with the relationship of Gaveston and Edward and join hands and Mortimer who thinks Edward is completely unfit for the throne decides to kill him. In other words, the entire drama seems to be a revenge play much like Marlowe's earlier revenge dramas.

Fate takes its course

There is no escape from the wheel of fortune. Edward is a weak king and has never bothered about his kingship or his subjects and meets his end due to his ignorance and indifference towards his nation.

Similarly, Isabella and Mortimer who are cunning and fits into the role of villains quite well do not escape their fate. In the end, Mortimer who tries to subdue and influence young prince Edward, son of Edward II gets executed by the young prince. Even Isabella is not spared and she is imprisoned for conspiring against the king.