AMBIGUITY IN *EDWARD II*

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This paper examines the ambiguity of characterization in Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*, probably written in 1591. Marlowe's characters belong to the History of England in the fourteenth century and are portrayed as vividly interesting, contradicting, unpredictable human beings who sometimes surprise us, even astonish us with their sudden change of attitude and mind. The appraisal that follows is meant to demonstrate how these features are both a result of the appropriation of History and of its dramaturgical transformation.

The historical Edward II

The historical Edward was son to the famous Edward Longshanks, the first of his name to rule England, a great king as well as a great conqueror who overcame the Welsh. Edward I took great pains in preventing the future king from acquiring the habits of extravagance and frivolity, which he retained all through his life. The old king attributed his son's defects to the bad influence of his friend, the Gascon knight Piers Gaveston thus driving the favorite into exile.

Soon after Edward I's death, his son, now king of England, was to recall Gaveston granting the favorite lands, titles, power... The young

king's next act was to abandon the Scots campaign, which his father had set his heart on. Edward II was a very fine looking man who cared for nothing but his own hedonistic pleasures. He was wanting in all serious interests and was always in the hands of a favorite with a stronger will than his own. Gaveston was his minion in the early years of his reign and acted as regent when Edward went to France to marry Isabella, daughter of Philip the Fair. Gaveston then received the earldom of Cornwall and married Margaret of Gloucester, the king's niece.

The barons insisted on his banishment from England as they watched Gaveston's growing influence. Twice Gaveston was exiled and twice recalled back. The earl of Lancaster, the King's cousin, went to war against Edward and his favorite, and in 1312 treacherously put Gaveston to death. Edward lost his power to the barons. But Robert Bruce was steadily conquering Scotland occupying all the fortresses save Stirling in 1314. The barons then joined forces with Edward, marching against Bruce but were completely defeated at Bannockburn. Edward's defeat made him even more dependent on his barons. Edward 'elected' another favorite, Hugh Despenser, the Younger, making the barons infuriated against both. In 1321, they procured the banishment of the Despensers but Edward's reply was to wage war against his own barons. The leader, his cousin Lancaster was executed at Pontefract.

The Despensers 'ruled' for a while making the queen, Isabella of France indignant at their power. In 1325 she went to France to visit her brother, the new French king Charles IV. When the time came for her return she declined to go back to her husband as long as the Despensers held power. Isabella associated herself with Roger Mortimer of Wigmore, first Earl of March, and a year later she landed in England with her son openly against her husband, the king. Edward's followers deserted him; he fled from London to the west but was captured after a while. He was then sent prisoner to Kenilworth Castle his son chosen to be King as Edward III. He was made to resign his crown and renounce his office too, before a committee of the estates.

Isabella and Mortimer did so badly in their government that they feared Edward's existence. Edward was secretly removed to Berkeley

Castle in Gloucestershire where two attendants of Mortimer, Matrevis and Gourney inflicted every indignity upon him. With this, they hoped Edward would become ill and die but their plotting was in vain. Then, he was cruelly put to death on September 21, 1327. It was announced Edward II had died a natural death... Three years later, Edward III had Mortimer tried for corruption and executed.

Marlowe's dramaturgy

Marlowe made some alterations in the historical events and characterization as he appropriated History in order to attain his dramatic purposes. His historical accuracy is deficient but the effect achieved is magnificent. The death of Gaveston, for example, which really occurs in 1312, is made to happen at the same time of the trouble in France with the seizure of Normandy. Mortimer's execution runs almost parallel to Edward's murder; the choice of the second favorite, Younger Spenser, is made immediately after Gaveston's death when in truth, it took years for Edward to take another favorite.

These changes appear to have been made for theatrical impact, so as to build up tension. They all cohere in Marlowe's swift presentation of Edward II's tragic life. The King, Mortimer, Isabella, Gaveston, and Kent are given special emphasis while the role of the Despensers and the Earl of Lancaster, who are historically more important to the development of events under Edward II's rule become second in importance in the play. Careful examination of the main characters' behavior and speeches shall reveal the full implications of these dramaturgical choices.

Edward II: from pride to misery

King Edward II shows his assertive personality since the beginning of the action by going against his peers and having Gaveston back at court (I, i, 78). Edward defies whoever contradicts him or remains

opposing his plans: 'Beseems it thee to contradict thy King? / Frown'st thou thereat, aspiring Lancaster?' (I, i, 78).

The King will have Gaveston no matter opinion or act against it. Edward dotes on him, giving him dignities boldly facing his barons, the Church, and social conventions. Gaveston is made Lord Chamberlain, Lord of Man, Earl of Cornwall. Gaveston is placed by his throne because 'it is our pleasure; we will have it so' (IV, 4, 9). Edward offers dignities to his peers to leave him alone with his minion just to frolic with him. But Edward subscribes Gaveston's banishment from the realm though saying he writes it 'with his tears'. Soon after doing it, he tells Gaveston he cannot leave him. Edward repels his Queen but has her back promising a 'new honeymoon' because she will 'give' him Gaveston. Edward forgives his peers in readiness just because they have changed their minds concerning Gaveston's exile. He grants them honors without stopping to meditate on how fast his peers have changed their minds concerning younger Mortimer's decision to call the favorite back.

In Act II, scene ii, Edward realizes that his barons are really against Piers Gaveston. In scene two, lines ninety-six and seven, Edward defies them all: 'If I live, I'll tread upon their heads / that think with high looks thus to tread me down'. Edward fears none, ready to face Warwick, Lancaster, Mortimer, hoping to abate his baron's pride as 'they shall not frighten a lion', he says. His attitude towards his brother Kent is that of an adversary when Edmund tries to reason with him concerning the avoidance of a dispute between Edward and the barons; 'Out of my sight, and trouble me no more!'

Again the King defies his subjects' antagonism by marrying his niece, the sole heiress to the earldom of Gloucester to Piers Gaveston, much aware that they shall take arms against this resolution. Now, at long last, Edward does not trust his peers any longer. Edward loves Gaveston to distraction, yet when he understands that Gaveston is going to be murdered by the earls, he proclaims his new favorite, Younger Spenser, earl of Wiltshire. When he sees that the King of France, his

brother-in-law, has seized Normandy into his hands Edward demands that Isabella, his despised, humbled wife negotiate the land back to him. When Edward learns about Gaveston's murder and swears revenge against the rebellious barons, he begs the Lord of Heaven to defend his sovereign right to be King of England and goes on warring his earls, swearing to pour his wrath with his sword as only their beheaded corpses shall appease his lust for revenge.

Edward achieves his goal but leaves the main and most dangerous plotter, Roger Mortimer, alive. Mortimer is only taken to the Tower of London to be imprisoned there while the other peers die. Edward wishes the Earl of March 'safe bestowed'... In Act IV, scene iii, we watch the King deserted by all; yet, he braves his misfortune, ready to meet his traitors in open field. In scene six, Edward takes refuge in the Abbey of Neath, Glamorganshire. Defeated, he becomes a different individual, pathetic in his meditation on the nature of royal power. Edward calls the monks gentle, humbly begging them not to betray him. He, exactly the one who had deprived the Bishop of Coventry of his rents by giving the profits to Gaveston as a revenge against the clergyman as he had influenced Parliament to decree the favorite's exile; Edward wished to humble the Church by enforcing the papal thieves to kiss the lowly ground and 'with slaughter'd priests make Tiber's channel swell'.

Edward is aware of his loss and foresees the need to resign the crown in order to protect his son. Edward offers his crown submissively because 'two kings in England cannot reign at once', as he himself declares. He wishes to forget himself offering crown and handkerchief wet with his tears; he is ready to face death as he can die but once. Tortured, given ditch water to drink and to wash, having beard and hair shaven, a ritual of humiliation, Edward still braves his fate. When Kent comes to his aid, he calls him 'gentle'. If one calls to mind the way Edward dealt with Edmund a few scenes before one cannot recognize this Edward as the same arrogant willful man who did not want to listen to Kent's plea not to fight against his peers. Edward has suffered a sea change, i.e., he is almost a stranger to us. His last scene in the play

shows a mind distempered and a numb body in his tattered robes. But still his credulity wins and Edward believes in everything that his murderer tells him about the Queen's worrying for his sake. Edward offers his last remaining jewel to Lightborn trying to buy him to his side and thus tragic irony comes into play in the ex-King's last speech.

Mortimer's changing loyalty

Roger of Mortimer is absolutely loyal to the King in the beginning: 'This sword of mine, that should offend your foes,/Shall sleep within the scabbard at thy need', he tells Edward. Mortimer is bold, a trustworthy subject who tries to deter Gaveston's influence over the King. He is determined to have his will or lose his life combating what he thinks is the pernicious influence of Gaveston over Edward. But Mortimer changes his mind in Act I, scene iv, when he claims to agree that Gaveston be called back to England after hearing the Queen's plea for the favorite. His attitude is so unexpected that the earl of Lancaster tells Mortimer not to dishonor himself, that his reasons would 'make white black, and dark night day', so controversial they seem to be. Mortimer then reveals his real purpose, which is to betray Gaveston with a false loyalty in order that they, the English barons may lay hands on Edward's minion.

A growing antagonism between Edward and Mortimer starts to emerge in Act II, scene ii. The latter presses the King to pay his uncle's ransom to the Scots as he had gone to fight battle against England's enemies. The Mortimers are proud and do not beg for favors; the nephew demands that Edward pay for his uncle's liberation. Mortimer accuses the King of overlooking the danger of both Scottish and Irish rebellious advance against England. In Act II, scene five, Mortimer holds Gaveston prisoner wishing to do away with him all for the welfare of his beloved country, so he says. In Act IV, scene iv, Mortimer states that he is coming back to England in arms against the King's flatterers. Again, he is exemplary in his loyalty to the King, but, in the following

scene (IV, v) Mortimer tells Kent that the King will be disposed of, if necessary.

In Act V, scene ii, Mortimer wishes to become the young prince's protector. Edward, already powerless is much easier to handle, and Mortimer will act with him demanding that he be given 'neither king word nor good look'. The earl plans that the captive has his mind broken by mental torturing in watched captivity. Mortimer becomes a dissenter who pretends to care for Edward's welfare in the presence of Prince Edward and Kent. The latter is then disposed of in due time not to interfere between the prince and himself. It is Mortimer who sends the letter authorizing Edward's murder with a deliberately ambiguous message written with a double meaning either being not to kill the King because it would be good that he died or, not to kill because it would be a fearful thing to do. With this stratagem Mortimer wanted to exempt himself from any blame, should the message be discovered. Mortimer's change of attitude and character achieves its climax when he selects Lightborn, a paid assassin to put an end to Edward's life without leaving any bruise; a horrible, cruel death leaving no marks as ordered. Mortimer plots the further elimination of this assassin by Guerney, one of Edward's wardens who, together with Matrevis had turned Edward's last days into hell. All tremble at the sound of his name – almighty Mortimer now fears no one. The final irony is that the boy King accuses him of murder and powerful Mortimer, once a patriot, now a despot, ends in disgrace, his head an 'adornment' for King Edward II's coffin.

Queen Isabella: from loyalty to rejection

Queen Isabella of France stands out as a model of fidelity in the beginning of the action, when she prefers to see her husband frolic with Gaveston than to have him face civil dissention. Isabella begs Roger Mortimer not to flight from Edward. In Act I, scene iv, Isabella shows her adoration for her husband. She sheds tears for him saying

that he is dear to her poor heart; she does not wish to exist without her lord. Isabella even devises a plan to bring Gaveston back from exile. Why? For the sake of having her husband's good will towards her. The Earl of Pembroke calls her 'saintly'. She prefers to die a thousand deaths than be drawn apart from her beloved Edward. Again, in scene iv, the Queen loves her King more than he can Gaveston, and sighs because he does not love her half as much as she does. Isabella begs her husband's affection for her after having succeeded in convincing the noblemen that Gaveston must be brought back to England; 'how a kiss revives poor Isabel', she says.

In Act II, scene ii, though Edward suspects she is plotting with the barons she is a true candor. In scene iv, when Edward bids farewell to his niece and Gaveston, now husband and wife, safely conveyed to Scarborough away from his peers' rebellion, Isabella resents the King's indifference. She would like 'to mollify his stony heart with her tears'. She complains, when Mortimer arrives at Tynemouth Castle that everything she has done to conquer Edward has been in vain; he always prefers Gaveston. The Queen is apprehensive and has to be calmed down because she suspects the barons are gathering forces against the King. But soon after that, she gives them the information of how Edward planned to weaken his earls by dividing their forces: 'That this your army going several ways,/Might be of lesser force'.

Isabella still longs to remain with Edward but, at the same time, she confesses she could live with Mortimer forever as she did not find love in the King. She also decides to depart to France with her son feeling Piers Gaveston had definitely robbed her of Edward's love. When she comes back to England, she starts war against the English King alleging he misgoverns the realm. She takes Mortimer's side to protect her son's interests. When Edward is finally imprisoned, humiliated, deprived of his crown, Isabella pities him but feels unsafe and longs for his death. To the end, Isabella plays false with Edward; she sends a message telling him she labors in vain to ease his grief and works on his liberty, when she does just the opposite. While she sends

the ex-king her ring as a love-token, she is Mortimer's paramour letting the latter become the Crown Prince's Lord Protector. Mortimer becomes tremendously influential to the boy, the irony being that, in the end, the boy realizes all – Isabella and the Lord Protector were accomplices of his father's murder.

Gravestone's contradictory nature

Edward II's favorite, Piers Gaveston, shows ambiguity in character from the start. Gaveston warmly welcomes three men, a soldier, a traveler, and a horseman who came to him to offer their services and continues his deception by saying that they will possibly be of use to him. Soon after, Marlowe depicts the Knight soliloquizing on dismissing the poor men as he, Piers, prefers the company of cultivated sophisticated people, 'poets and pleasant wits', not ordinary folks. He wants his pages to be clad like 'sylvan nymphs', sometimes a lovely boy 'in Diana's shape' are the erotic fantasies Gaveston delights in imagining. To the young man, life must be a sequence of delightful moments; there is no place for endurance and reality, the solution of practical matters is to be avoided. The world of make believe is much easier for Gaveston. All of this luxurious world of exquisite pleasure is made available to him by the King, his lover and the one who had called him back in spite of the risks involved in this decision.

Infatuated with his ever-growing power, Gaveston mixes with the Church: he takes revenge on the Bishop of Coventry for having influenced Parliament towards the resolution of exiling him in France. He sends the old man to a life imprisonment. Gaveston's attachment to Edward raises another ambiguous issue: Does he really 'love' the King? When Gaveston learns he has to go back to exile, he reveals that he does not mind but for Edward's absence. When in Act II, scene ii, he arrives back to England, he again utters sweet words of love and friendship towards his King. Gaveston feels happy in beholding Edward even when in danger of losing his life in Mortimer's hands.

Yet, he uses Edward's infatuation to humble both the English nobility and the Church of England. He oppresses both, ridicules both, and uses the King's name and authority to do as he pleases. Gaveston knows that the barons will 'stomach' him because of his marrying Edward's niece. When they get hold of him, he says that Edward's name 'revives' him. Does he mean that he owes his life to the King's order of sending Arundel to stop his execution by the other peers? Does he 'love' Edward so deeply that even at the moment of his death he feels revived by Edward's remembrance of him? The playtext is simply ambiguous, so that one can never be sure what the truth is.

Kent's divided role

Kent, the King's brother, lives his role as Edward's loyal advisor, in the beginning. He tries to act as a buffer between the King and the Earls the moment they quarrel over Gaveston's privileges and influence at court. He stands beside Edward in the opening scene against the earls, defying them all by asking Edward to take revenge on their being so insolent. Kent tries to restrain Edward's blind favoring of Gaveston with titles as much as he tries to restrain his brother's ill-treatment of the Bishop of Coventry, quite right in supposing that this deed will create a friction with Rome. Kent is commonsensical in advising the exile for Gaveston as a means to pacify Church and State. But for this he is paid back with his own banishment decreed by Edward. Kent changes as much as joining the earls taking side against his brother, thus leaving him to his own resources. Kent's attitude in joining the earls is so dubious that Lancaster cannot believe in his intentions. Lancaster fears Kent is sent off with the policy to undermine them with a 'show of love' (II, iii). Warwick also doubts his revolt 'for England's good'.

In Act IV, scene i, Kent decides to join Isabella and young prince Edward in France. He turns against the King calling him unnatural. He becomes an accomplice to Mortimer too, helping the latter to escape

from the Tower; he also assists the Earl of March's escape to France after his defeat at Boroughbridge. It is only when civil war is renewed and Edward II is defeated that Kent ponders on his position. In Act V, scene v Kent calls Mortimer a proud traitor while considering the peers' revolt unnatural because it challenges the divine right of an anointed King. Kent despises both the Queen and Mortimer for their liaison, his heart full of grief for Edward, who flees to Ireland for safety. Kent tries to set his brother free from his captivity at Berkeley Castle but is inefficiently incapable to release Edward. Kent is full of sorrow for Edward II's death now that he understands Mortimer is to be feared and that Isabella really wished Edward's elimination. Mortimer does not allow Kent to approach the young Prince with the argument that he had joined the peers against Edward. Kent struggles to protect his nephew but fails; he is destroyed by the villainy of Black Mortimer, a victim of his own pusillanimity.

Conclusion

The playwright does not condemn or praise a society disturbed by power struggles and led by a very human but incompetent King. Marlowe's Edward II is both a King and the leading character of another chronicle play. Edward is singular and controversial; he fears none. When he has to suffer, he suffers with dignity. Yet, all his qualities are wasted in pursuing a wrong path of action and purpose. The fictional Edward II is a king full of greatness and meanness at the same time. The brave Earl of March, Mortimer of Wigmore, deteriorates morally as the play progresses. He is proud of his achievement but soon falls down losing at once position, fortune, all. One wonders whether the brutal Mortimer of Act V was ever the man he seemed to be – a loyal, dutiful subject to his King. After all, one feels as if there were two Mortimers in the play as well as two Isabellas, the dedicated wife and the 'French she-wolf' as she was called, the one who led an army against her husband. A study on power, how it corrupts man, the relativity of

what/who is good or what/who is evil is contained in this pageant of ambiguous characters depicted by Christopher Marlowe. The inefficient Edward, the liberal Kent, the hedonist Gaveston, are all alive in this profound analysis, even a cynical one, of human behavior. *Edward II* is a disturbing, somber work written by a master of words, a deep analyst of the human soul.

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