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Plot of Edward II

The date of Edward II is uncertain, though it must precede Marlowe's death on 30 May 1593. The earliest surviving text of the play was printed in 1594. He is one of the best dramatists in the world because he has given us unbeatable text to go beyond imagination with literary taste.

Edward II's representation of what many modern critics have seen as an identifiably homosexual king makes this play seem pressingly modern. The brutal degradation and murder of Edward in a manner that seems to mock his homosexuality therefore makes the play even more topical and disturbing.

Edward II depicts an amoral and ruthless political world in which each player single-mindedly pursues their own pleasures and ambitions with dire consequences. Christopher Marlowe's play is more sympathetic to Edward than is his major source for the story, the history Holinshed's Chronicles (1577; 1587), which denounces the King's weakness and infatuation with Gaveston. In Edward II, the motivations of the other characters are also suspect and unpredictable.

Edward's amorous attachment to Gaveston pits the King against almost all his lords. The lords force Gaveston into exile until Edward rather insensitively persuades his wife, Queen Isabella, to plead his case with the lords. They reluctantly agree to Gaveston's return, if only to 'greet his lordship with a poniard' [a small, slim dagger] – that is, to murder him. When Gaveston returns, the ambitious Mortimer wounds him, and Edward declares war on his nobles. Gaveston is captured and executed. However, losing the war, Mortimer and the other rebellious lords flee to France, and Mortimer and Isabella become lovers. Later, Edward's army is defeated by the rebels and he flees, but is quickly found, imprisoned and forced to abdicate in favour of his young son, with Mortimer and Isabella as co-regents. On Mortimer's orders, Edward is degradingly treated, and then murdered by a hired assassin. There is little detail in the playtext's stage-directions, but Holinshed's Chronicles gruesomely records that the murderers 'put into his fundament [anus] an horne, and through the same they thrust up into his bodie an hot spit ... the which passing up into his intrailles ... burnt [them]'. Compressing historical time, in the play Edward's murder is immediately revealed and his son Edward III, now the new king, takes revenge upon Mortimer and Isabella. Some of his contemporaries say that this is the revenge tragedy but fact is not that.