



Historicity And Characterization in Christopher Marlowe Edward II

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Abstract : This paper highlights dramatization of history, enacting the slanderous legend about his Spanish queen Elionor of castle. Edward II is the forerunner of Richard II of Shakespeare. He showed rare skill in construction and a whole admirable power of characterization. Marlowe's contributions to English drama are manifold and raised the subject matter of the drama to a higher level, provided big heroic subjects that appealed to the imagination. He gave life to characters, they were no longer puppets pulled by a string but living and breathing realities. His creation of blank verse paved the way for Shakespeare, followed three unities of drama. Plays before him had been formless, a succession of isolated scenes often with no proper connecting link. He was the first to realize the importance of the Romantic drama and in this he was different from the other university wits who advocated a servile imitation of the classical models. Thus we find that in a number of ways Marlowe led the way which Shakespeare was to follow. He was a man exceptionally brilliant and easily the greatest among the predecessors of Shakespeare.

Key Words: Historicity, English Drama, Characterization, Blank verse, University wits

I. Introduction

Little is known of the circumstances of Christopher Marlowe's tragically short life of less than thirty years. He was born at Canterbury in 1564. The period of Marlowe's work for the theatre was only about six years, from 1587 to 1593. In that time he wrote at least six plays and may have had a hand in almost as many others. Despite the brevity of this theatrical career, he left a reputation which in the annals of our drama stands second only to that of Shakespeare. The undoubted Marlowe plays are Tamburlaine the Great Part I and part II 1587, Dr. Faustus 1588, The Jew of Malta 1590.

The Elizabethan age crowned itself with the imperishable glory of many a triumphant culmination. It faced a world of vast horizons, new ideas, infinite aspirations, illimitable opportunities and rich rewards. From both the universities of Oxford and Cambridge there flocked to London many educated young men eager to cater to the theatrical demand. These were called by the general name the university wits, because they had their education at the universities.

Swinburn aptly observes that Marlowe "the father of the English tragedy and creator of English blank verse was therefore also the teacher and the guide of Shakespeare. Christopher Marlowe, the greatest of all the University Wits, he was the only man of Shakespeare's age who could have been a rival poet. He introduced blank verse to the Elizabethan stage. His second signal contribution is the infusion of pure poetry into drama. Marlowe absorbs his selected historical sources into beautiful and impressive dramatic art.



II. The University Wits

George Peele, Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe, Thomas Lodge, Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe were called university wits. These young men nearly all of whom are associated with Oxford and Cambridge, did much to found the Elizabethan school of Drama. There were all more or less acquainted with each other, and most of them led irregular and stormy lives. Their plays had several features in common.

- These plays are full of heroic theme, such as the lives of great figures like Mohammed and Tamburlaine.
- Variety, splendid descriptions, long swelling speeches, treatment of violent emotions and incidents. The qualities are excellent, but often led to loudness and disorder.
- Heroic style, magnificent epithets and powerful declamation. It led to abuse and to mere bombast, mouthing and in the worst cases to nonsense. In the best examples such as in Marlowe, the result is quite impressive. In this connection it is to be noted that the best medium for such expression was blank verse, which was elastic to bear the strong pressure of these expansive methods.
- The themes were usually tragic in nature, for the dramatists were as a rule too much in earnest to give heed to what was considered to be the lower species of comedy. The general lack of real humor in the early drama is one of its most prominent features. Humor, when it is brought in at all, is coarse and immature.

About the Dramatist and his works: -

Christopher Marlowe was the greatest of the Pre-Shakespearean dramatists. He was born at Canterbury and educated at Cambridge. He adopted literature as a profession and associated with Lord Admiral's players. His combination of inquiring mind and dissolute life charged with atheism, immorality and only his sudden death in a tavern brawl enabled him to avoid arrest. He composed all tragedies within five years (1587-92). He never touched comedy or comic parts in his plays, his plays are inferior. As a dramatist he limited to plot construction, simple characterization, and lacks the warm humanity of Shakespeare. All the plays except *Edward II*, revolve around one character portrayed in bold outlines. This character shows no complexity, is the embodiment of a single idea. Its plot is skillfully woven, and the material nearly derived from Holinshed's chronicles, depicts a sense of romantic requirements new in his plays and indeed in English historical drama. The play has less poetic fervor, a fine climax of deep pathos. In its multiplicity of living characters and lack of bombast it stands apart from the other plays. In *Tamburlaine* the great shepherd seeks the "sweet fruition of earthly crown", in *The Jew of Malta* Barabas seeks "infinite riches in a little room", while the quest of *Doctor Faustus* is for more than human knowledge. His verse is notable for its burning energy, splendor of diction, sensuous richness, variety of pace, full of bold primary colors, his poetry is crammed with imagery from the classics, from astronomy, and from geography, an imagery barbaric in its wealth and splendor.

Tamburlaine the Great (1587) centered on one man in human, its theme is undramatic, no complexity in the plot construction. The play is episodic, lacks cohesion, contains best blank verse. *The Jew of Malta* (1589) has two fine, economically handled opening acts, but deteriorates later when the second villain, Ithamore enters. The play is also of interest as showing Marlowe's attention turning towards the conventional Machiavellian villain. *Doctor Faustus* (1592) has a good beginning and an ending, but the comic scenes in the middle are poor and may be another hand. The play contains some interesting survivals of the miracle plays in the conversations of the Good and Evil Angels. *The Tragedy of Dido Queen of Carthage* (1593) is an inferior one, and *The Massacre at Paris* is unfinished. In *Edward II*, Marlowe follows fairly closely the actual details of history. But he boldly



transfers their order for greater dramatic effect. He used British history for a theme. The first revolt of the barons, Lancaster, Warwick and Pembroke took place between 1307, the revolt of the queen and the younger Mortimer took place after 1324. Marlowe drastically altered history by grouping all the barons led by the younger Mortimer. The play moves on two simultaneous levels -the medieval and the Elizabethan, making the past interest the present.

III. Discussion

As an Historical Play :- It was in 1591 that Marlowe contributed Edward the Second to the series of 'chronicle plays' which were so popular in the decade after the defeat of the Spanish Armada. History is always difficult material for the literary artist, because in real life events seldom present clearly definable beginnings and endings. Accordingly the chronicle play is often little more than a mere series of interesting episodes which have little outward connection with each other. Marlowe, however, succeeded in turning the story of Edward II into a real tragedy. He shows how the king, by his fond doting on the worthless Gaveston, destroyed the love of his queen and the fidelity of his nobles; and then, when we feel how richly Edward deserved anything that could happen to him, our sympathies are cleverly turned towards the miserable king whose finer qualities are only revealed in the extremity of misfortune.

In Edward II Marlowe got his material from the English chronicle, but the Shakespeare he used the art of selection, condensation and adaptation. Marlowe pursued the foot steps of Shakespeare in the treatment of chronicle plays. Marlowe moulded the historical material to his dramatic purpose in Edward II. The real excellence of Marlowe's dramatic art in Edward II lies in the way in which he had delineated the character of Edward. The historical Edward II revealed all the characteristics most of them naturally unlovable of a degenerate. He was a man of great physical strength and arrested mental development, fond of low company and of mechanical occupations, given to outbursts of physical violence and ungovernable passion, devoid of intelligence, but possessed of low cunning, perverted and unmanageable of this picture, Marlowe has taken part, just as he has followed in part the record of events, but he has transformed the details of the character and their bearing upon each other so that the Edward did, is a different figure. It is characteristic of Marlowe to convert all he touches to beauty: the dull impassivity of Edward in captivity becomes in his hand fondness for favorites, bluntly set down by the historian as perversion, becomes a not unbeautiful love story against a dark background of storm and danger. Deliberately, and as if conscious of insight and sympathy which gave him the right to interpret it, Marlowe reveals a complete, consistent and truly pathetic figure, the victim of the misjudgement of circumstances. Edward is hardly strong enough to support a tragic fate, but he moves in pathos as his native atmosphere. He is too frail for the role which is thrust upon him, a role which he tries, nevertheless, to fulfil after his fashion, because while he lives he is the keystone of the state and can not be released from his position.

Marlowe has even sacrificed some of the practical ability with which history credits Edward; Hollinshed's King was successful in the field as a fighter, if not as a general, and his part in the battle of Bannockburn was valiant. But Marlowe presents his shorn of even this robustness and accentuates the triviality and helplessness of his behavior.

"When were thou in the field with banner spread.

But once, and then thy soldiers march like players," (Marlowe, Christopher 43)

And at the end of his life, immured in Berkley castle and waiting for death, he can contrast his condition with no more martial a scene than a tournament at the French Court:-

"Tell Isabel the queen, I lookt not thus,

When for her sake I ran at tilt in France." (Marlowe, Christopher. 57)

The emphasis, even at the end, is still thrown upon his frailness, and he wins our sympathy not by any sudden kingly vigour, but by the fitful charm of a slight and helpless character



falling a prey to forces at once more robust and helpless character falling a prey to forces at once more robust and uglier than itself. By contrast with the villainy by which he is benetted round. Edward becomes a beautiful and pathetic figure, full of courtesy and gentleness. We forget, under the charm that such natures cast in adversity, the insolence, the cruelty and the frivolity of his prosperous days. Thus, from records which are wearisome reading to all but a psychologist Marlowe has created a poem full of inevitable pathos, which, if not tragic, at least approaches that realm of art in which we realize a fresh that *mentem mortalia tangnut*.

From the historical point of view the dramatist is signally successful in making the men of the past live over again. His weak monarch is more intensely human than any mightier, more kingly rulers would probably have been in his hands. And the barons in their haughtiness and easy aptitude for revolt, are, to the life, the fierce men whose grandfathers and fathers in turn fought against their sovereigns and whose descendants fell in the fratricidal wars of the Roses. More over, the chronicle of the reign is followed with reasonable accuracy, if we make due allowances for dramatic requirements. It can hardly be said that the author's representation of Edward is impartial: a kindly veil is drawn over the lawlessness of his government and the disgrace brought upon English arms by his military incapacity. But the political intrigue, the friction between monarch and subjects, the helplessness of the king to enforce his wishes are brought back vividly.

Marlowe has never received due recognition for his skillful treatment of the Isabella-Mortimer story. He saw keenly that it gave him a chance to contrast two kinds of human affections, as well as to contrast growing affection with merely impulsive affection in Edward and his favourite of the moment. Nor did the play, at least for its own audience, lack climax. The hideous tortured death of Edward II is followed immediately by a scene of swift general retribution. Surely even now, this sequence when acted should mean good climax.

IV. Edward's Character Representing The Irony Of Kingship

The hero of Edward II is different from the heroes of Marlowe's former plays. A critic named Thronike points out "The protagonists, as in many tragedies before and since, are evil men intent on evil deeds. They appeal to our sympathy only in misfortune and disaster; in more fortunate circumstances they run counter to moral laws and excite a mixture of admiration, horror, and even contempt. Tamburlaine the atheist and Faust the dealer in magic invited a greater condemnation from every Christian then than now. Barbas is conceived, under the inspiration of Machiavelli and perhaps also of stage practice, as an intriguing villain with all the accompaniments ever since familiar in drama and fiction. He is the source of all evil and utterly without conscience; he vows villainy to the audience and he works by crafty intrigue with the aid of an equality and conscienceless accomplice. Edward II, on the other hand, is of the type of tyrants, weak, vacillating, and self indulgent, and he offers the difficult dramatic problem of a protagonist who is some times contemptible and must sometimes be heroic and pitiful.

The character of Edward thus represents the irony of kingship. In Tamburlaine, he made his hero declare, "a god is not so glorious as a king.", but in Edward II he sets out deliberately to destroy his earlier ideal of kingship. Edward's career seems an ironical retort to Tamburlaine's exultant cry, "Is it not brave to be a king" he is an essentially frivolous character, with sudden, shallow bursts of emotion -violent as they are changeable incapable of serious thought or feeling. He has no sense of responsibility, or of proportion, yet he is not incapable of inspiring affection, and his followers never desert him. In the first scene in which he appears, his ill-starred love for Gaveston and the deep-rooted hatred of the barons is instantly revealed. The nobles have decided to destroy his favourite, and their rough treatment of Edward shows that they have lost all respect for him. But Edward tries to



behave in an imperious manner, as if he has a superstitious faith in the sacredness of his kingship like a child using a talisman whose magic it does not understand:

“ Be seems is thee to contradict thy king? Frownst thou thereat, aspiring Lancaster?” (Marlowe, Christopher. 60) Though utterly weak, and incapable of holding his own against his antagonists, Edward never forgets that he is a king, and this pride of sovereignty is not lost even in defeat. Referring to Edward’s defiance of his nobles, not on the basis of any inherent strength in him, but simply on account of his foolish belief in the sacredness of kingship. It is an irresponsible, undeveloped mind, incapable of grasping the seriousness of any issue: “I’ll give thee more, for but to honor thee, Is Edward pleased with kingly regiment.” (Ziegler, Luke. 4) Yet his position is an obsession with him and he endeavors as far as he understands it to imitate the carriage of a king. He reminds himself continually that a king should be princely, stern, implacable when his privileges are invaded, and he tries to give impression of strength by fits of blustering rage. He obscures and confuses his own nature under the unreal picture of a king that he has taken for his model and sways inconsistently from one to the other: “Was ever king thus over rules as I Meet you for this, proud over daring peers? To frolic with my dearest Gaveston.” (Ziegler, Luke. 5)

There is in this feeling for Gaveston, were not the claims of the highest responsibilities sacrificed to it, something magnanimous. But Edward has savage outbursts of cruelty, in which he dries the queen away and slaughters the conquered nobles. He outwears all men’s patience and respect, and even the loyalty of his brother Edmund fails before this final test. His frenzy is violent enough to do harm, but strong enough to produce any lasting effect and before the slow accumulation of hostility he collapses into sudden pathos and querulous self pity. It is the alteration of these two moods in the crisis of his fortune which completes his ruin. Such a character as this attracts more sympathy in adversity than in power, and Marlowe, once he had conceived it, had no need to call in stage devices to assist in rousing the affection of his audience for the defeated king. The violence and cruelty are submerged, the effort to be a king can at last be laid aside, not with the defiance of a peevish child, but with the grace of a man accepting the inevitable in pathetic dignity. The limitations and frivolity which made it impossible for him to face the responsibilities of kingship are lost to sight in captivity, where men tend to fill their time with gentle, irrelevant fancies. The irritated bewilderment of the king who was no king, becomes a profound, gentle despondency in which his inability to understand the causes of his suffering takes on some of the pathos of a hurt child... when his last retreat is discovered and Leicester comes to conduct him to a prison, a fatalistic, almost prophetic dignity comes upon him and fills the beholders with reverence... with one brief interval of passion, when he refuses to yield up the crown, this pale cast of thought subdues Edward’s mind until the end of the play. The king’s weakness is psychological. His pathetic longing for Gaveston evokes a sense of muted pity in us. Even the hurt queen pities him and pleads with the barons to spare Gaveston. The dramatist can not name the frenzied nature of King Edward’s fondness: “What passions call you those? The elder Mortimer is moved to sympathy for Edward’s flexible youth would change with riper years. It is psychopathy: for Edward needs some one to lean upon, if not Gaveston, Spencer. He is heart-broken when Gaveston is dead; and his resolute victory over the barons is a momentary flash of will that the dead man’s spirit has roused in him. When only sustenance for his soul. The inconsistency in the character of Queen Isabella is often pointed out as a critical puzzle. Marlowe seems to be never happy with his women characters: his feminine interests are slight. His zenocrate, Abigail and Helen are shadowy characters, if not simple shadows, With Isabella he seems at last to be more deliberate in the delineation of a feminine character, mention of any liaison between Isabella and Mortimer before Edward’s murder. Hence Isabella’s role is more or less an invention of the dramatist for the purpose of deepening the psychological interest in the king. In the first two acts of the play we hear much about the intrigue between the queen and Mortimer from Edward and Gaveston, and we suspect them to be inventing a motive for their unnatural alliance. Neither in word nor in deed does the queen suggest that she has anything at stake except her husband’s affection. She reveals herself in soliloquies that she



is frantic like Juno with jealousy and by Elizabethan convention a character tells the truth when most alone. She goes to the extent of persuading the barons to repeal Gaveston's banishment so that she might steal her way into her husband's perverted heart. Unless of course we interpret the stage direction her whispering to Mortimer aside, as her instructing him to dispose of Gaveston more deviously. What is said, as yet, openly does not warrant such guesswork. Only when the king is proved incorrigible does she break into a wish that she could live with Mortimer for ever. At any rate the queen's motives are not thrown into serious suspicion in the first part of the play. Her volte face is effected definitely only after her return from France with Mortimer, now in the role of a rebel. We see her two faces- the public face still softly sympathetic to her suffering husband and the private face hushing and blessing itself in the bosom of Mortimer. A critic named Kent states keeps us aware of the dissembler in Isabella. From now on she is the She- Machiavel. The suggestion of Edward's murder partly comes from this she- wolf of France. And then Marlowe hurries to fold up his inquiry into feminine villainy : she is sent off to the Tower.

V. Conclusion

Thus, with increased knowledge of the world and men. Marlowe grasped the main qualities of their natures clearly enough, even if he did not reveal them clearly. He used just which he needed for his main subject.

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