



## Theme of homosexuality and politics in Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*

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### Abstract

The objective of this paper is to discuss about the homosexual relationship between King *Edward II* and his dearest friend Gaveston and political rivalry between the King and the Barons. They established a spiritual affinity between them. Another important word from king is 'share'. Marlowe suggests that parliament is spending time on trivial arguments. The idea of 'Machiavelli' is also reflected in Mortimer. But through these 'homosexual' and 'political' aspects Marlowe has created a masterpiece.

**Keywords:** homosexuality, politics, Christopher, *Edward II*

### Introduction

Christopher Marlowe is the leading dramatists of his era. His chief exponent lays in his dramas like *Dr Faustus*, *Edward II*, *Tamburlaine*, and *The Jews of Malta*. The play *Edward II* is one of the masterpieces of Marlowe. The full title of *Edward II* is troublesome reign and lamentable death of Edward the second, King of England with the tragical fall of proud Mortimer. The chief source of the play is Holinshed's *chronicles*. Marlowe has presented the plot without focusing a particular character. The play presented the political conflict and political power play. It is a theme of rise and fall. Hence instead of character Marlowe built a plot with motives of power. Consequently common men find no place in the plot. Marlowe has modified the historic facts only to produce diversified emotion the pity for the king's changes with time. Similarly Mortimer uses the heroic status at the end. Marlowe thus presents a play showing inconstant emotion for major character.

The play opens when Gaveston reads a letter from his dear friend *Edward II*. The letter contains a message from his dearest friend "My father is deceased. Come Gaveston, and share the kingdom with the dearest friend". This shows the reciprocal relation between them:

"What greater bliss can hap to Gaveston?  
 Than live and be the favorite a king!  
 Sweet prince, I come! There, these thy amorous lines  
 Might have enforced me to have swum from France,  
 And, like Lender, gasped upon the sand,  
 So thou wouldst smile, and take me in thine arms"  
 (Marlowe, *Edward II*)

Gaveston's opening lines present the kingdom of Edwards dream. It is never the real England with its factions, its realities of governing. The country becomes a huge playground for king and his minion. They established a spiritual affinity between them. The letter conveys a sense of joy and relief for the king invites Gaveston only because his father is dead. Another important word from king is 'share'. Marlowe implies that the king wants to share his power which is impossible. The King is only weakening royal power. The second line also implies the impending power of Gaveston is a subject and he will share the kingdom with the dearest friend *Edward II*. The king forgets

that royal power is a national power. It is not a personal power that can be shared. In fact the king's private morality stands as contrast to his public irresponsibility. It is to be noted that Mortimer's strong public morality is contrasted with his private immorality.

Gaveston wants to lead a life like a pleasure dome with 'Wanton poets'. These poets' poems are sensual and not intellectual. He also wants 'pleasant wit' that refers to those people whose will relate pleasant and casual stories having no deeper significance. This speech shows sensuality and a paradise with homosexuality. The motto of Gaveston's speech is clear.

"By which is ment. That those whoe do pursue  
 Their fancies fond, and things unlawfull craue,  
 Like brutish beastes appeare unto the view  
 And shall at lengthe, Actaeons guerdon haue;  
 And as his houndes, soe their affections base,  
 Shall then deuore, and all their deeds deface" (Whitney,  
 Geoffrey)

Marlowe here presented two different themes in his drama *Edward II*. One is The King's love with his friend Gaveston. This love is not a simple friendly love but instead of showing any interest to his queen Isabella he always thinks about Gaveston. This is symbol of Homosexuality. Another important theme is Politics. Mortimer shows the tricks and plays a role like a politician. Some scholar gives their opinion that we can trace origin of Homosexuality by discussing the historical perspective of the play. J. Cady says:

"The reign of Edward the second, the king of England (1307 to 1327) has been considered to be one of the gloomiest period in British history. Historians refer to him as an unworthy son of Edward I. But historians also claims the lack of proper upbringing causes" (Cady, Masculine love)

To show the love relation between *Edward II* and Gaveston the dramatist implied a powerful dramatic irony, *Edward II* is compared with Actaeon and Gaveston may be called Diana. The Infatuation of *Edward II* for Gaveston has really transformed him to a stag. The Barons are hounds. In the play *Edward II* is hunted and killed by the Barons. *Edward II* gives

Gaveston a power which is not belongs to him. An allusion is taken here that Gaveston is like Icarus. When Icarus got the wings of wax he became ambitious and proud. He flew to words the sun but his waxen wings melted and he fell and died. Here Marlowe shows that the infatuation of *Edward II* to words him actually leads him to a dead-end. The play *Edward II* is based on the conflict between a hero and antihero *Edward II* and Mortimer. While *Edward II* shows a private morality Mortimer reveals a strong public morality. In every speech the king expresses his personal obligation for Gaveston. The king shares his power with Gaveston only to show that for him friendship and relation is more important than power. But the king also reveals his public failings. The king forgets that he is using public power to feed personal desire. He also forgets that he needs the Barons as much as Barons need him. This failure in the king is a tragic hamartia of the play. Another proof of homosexuality is the king wants to divide and share the Kingdome to all them for the sake of Gaveston. Both Church and the Barons force the king to banish Gaveston. But the king wants to retain him. He starts a bargain with the Barons. He tells them to divide the Kingdome. He has no need of a place where Gaveston is not with him. His proposal is direct and sincere. He only needs a nook to live with Gaveston. For him a greater kingdom is lesser in comparison with his dearest Gaveston. Actually Marlowe shows the lacks of nationalism. The king's intention of dividing his country proves lack of nationalism. For him Gaveston is more important than the unity of nation. His words proves that "Ere my sweet Gaveston shall part from me/ This isle shall fleet upon the ocean/ And wander to the unfrequented inde". The King is also ignorant about the queen also. The queen Isabella comments that "Like frantic Juno will I fill the earth/ With ghastly murmur of my sights and cries". She refers to the lamentable condition of Juno when Jupiter doted on the boy Ganymede. The implication is that as Jupiter felt attracted by the beauty of a man and overlooked feminine beauty of Juno, similarly *Edward II* is infatuated to Gaveston, ignoring Isabella. The soliloquy of Queen Isabella "O miserable and distressful Queen.... Ever miserable" proves her husband's love towards Gaveston. The soliloquy serves two purposes. Firstly, it acts as a flashback and describes *Edward II* as a lover of his Queen. The soliloquy also reveals her deserted present state. The Queen laments that she must have a different personality and different shape to allure her husband. Since the king dotes on Gaveston the queen thinks that her husband in general abhors feminine character. She is waiting to have a masculine shape to have her husband. These events show the homosexuality in the character of *Edward II* and Gaveston. Another important aspect of the drama is politics. Actually the Barons especially Mortimer plays the political role. The speech of Mortimer senior "If you love us my lord hates Gaveston" hints the theme of the play Gaveston is the personal life of the King. The Barons however are the public and political necessity. A man needs both public duty and private fulfillment. Mortimer's speech "Mine uncle....armor up" is a clear hint of arrogance and disloyalty of Baronial power towards King. Marlowe suggests that parliament is spending time on trivial arguments. Again Mortimer's speech proves that the Barons do not consider King a symbol of nationalism. As a result Mortimer threatens the king not to aid him in crisis. Marlowe suggests that in this England both King and Barons run after their personal desire, they never consider themselves as English people. The speech of Lanchester "Four earldoms

have I.... him straight" again proves the political tricks that the King does not symbolize nationalism. Lanchester will bribe the soldier to fight against king. The soldier will fight for money without any national sentiment. Dramatist implies that the political rivalry between king and Barons has moved backward the moral question – what the nation needs. The Baron symbolizes division. There is always conflict among Barons. The King unites the Barons and unites the nation. Edward I successfully did so, but *Edward II* fails to do so. Mortimer calls him 'Brainsick king' because he ignores the Barons. For the political benefit the King confers powerful title to Gaveston. He also refers to Gaveston as king because Gaveston was given the rule of 'Isle of Man'. The king politically empowers Gaveston so that he becomes superior to the Barons. In the way the king increases the security of Gaveston. Mortimer in his speech reflects his cunning political nature:

"For now we hold and old wolf by the ears  
That if he slip will seize upon us both,  
And gripe the sore being gripped himself" (Marlowe, *Edward II*)

Mortimer knows that political power is very slippery. So, he advises Queen not to ignore 'childish fear'. Mortimer implies the strength and loyalty of common men in support of king. The captive king is like a captured wolf. If Mortimer makes a slight mistake the wolf can take the advantage to attack its opponent. Mortimer knows that they must elect and erect a new king. Mortimer will himself be the protector of the king. In this way he will make the people feel that they are ruled by a king, although Mortimer will control the King. Mortimer is unique in his role as antagonist. His 'Machiavellian' is unique in his role as antagonist. His Machiavellian character is revealed here. His private immortality is shadowed by public morality. He is truly a contrast to *Edward II*. The soliloquy of Mortimer reveals his political cunning. He knows that common men naturally love the king. They will not tolerate their beloved king to be imprisoned. So, *Edward II* must be killed. Mortimer places the role of a sophist with a un pointed message. The message was written in Latin orders to kill the king and also to spare the king. His intention is to put the balance on these that will kill the king. More over the message of this post will carry a secret token which comments his death also. The cunning of Mortimer relate him to Roman politics where treacheries, betrayal, were ethics of politics. The idea of 'Machiavelli' is also reflected in Mortimer. In Elizabethan stage he is truly a unique character. The play is performing in front of Elizabethan audience when the England's people are heavily unified under the reign of Queen Elizabeth so this drama is a kind of shock because they can understand how their previous king was. But through these 'homosexual' and 'political' aspects Marlowe has created a masterpiece.

## References

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