

Study Materials on *Edward II* by Christopher Marlowe

Course – English Hons. Paper – CC IV, Sem 2

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Brief Biography of Christopher Marlowe

The son of a shoemaker, Christopher Marlowe nevertheless earned a scholarship to study at Cambridge, where he completed a bachelor's degree. The school also awarded him a master's degree, apparently on the recommendation of the government, which had praised Marlowe for services to his country—possibly a reference to a role as a secret agent. Marlowe likely began writing plays while still at Cambridge, but the exact date of most of his work is uncertain. What is clear is that after graduating, Marlowe moved to London to pursue a career as a playwright, but was frequently sidetracked by problems with the authorities (among other things, Marlowe was suspected of blasphemy and atheism). He died in a tavern fight shortly after a warrant had been issued for his arrest, and most of his plays were published posthumously. Marlowe was enormously popular as a playwright, however, and his style (including his use of blank verse and his experimentation with historical drama) influenced Shakespeare, whose own career as a playwright overlapped with Marlowe's, significantly.

Historical Context of *Edward II*

Marlowe's play (based largely on the work of a chronicler of English monarchy named Raphael Holinshed) is broadly historically accurate in its treatment of Edward II's reign. It does, however, significantly compress the timeline, since the real Edward II ruled for nearly 20 years (1307–1326). The rising tensions in the play over Edward's military defeats and personal favoritism are also true to life, though it's difficult to say with certainty that the historical relationship between Edward and Gaveston was sexual. Marlowe's only major departure from historical fact concerns Edward's murder, though his depiction is, again, based on Holinshed's. The real Edward II was almost certainly not murdered in the karmic way Marlowe and Holinshed describe—i.e. rectally impaled on a heated spit. In fact, Edward might not have been murdered at all. It's possible that he instead died of natural causes, and even at a much later date; a letter sent by an Italian priest to Edward III, for instance, claimed that the king had escaped and fled the country.

Other Books Related to *Edward II*

Marlowe's most famous play by far is *Doctor Faustus*. His *Edward II*, however, arguably has more in common with William Shakespeare's work than with much of Marlowe's—commonalities are particularly strong between Edward II and Shakespeare's *Richard II* and

Henry VI Part 1, *Henry VI Part 2*, and *Henry VI Part 3*. Like *Edward II*, these plays all center on the rule of a "weak" king and the domestic turmoil and bloodshed that results. The parallels with *Richard II* in particular are striking, since both works also raise questions about the nature of monarchy and the legitimacy of rebellion. In fact, it is highly likely that *Edward II* influenced Shakespeare's play.

Key Facts about *Edward II*

- **Full Title:** The Troublesome Reign and Lamentable Death of Edward the Second, King of England: with the Tragical Fall of Proud Mortimer
- **When Written:** Early 1590s
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1593
- **Literary Period:** Elizabethan/Renaissance
- **Genre:** Drama, Historical Play
- **Setting:** 14th-century England and France
- **Climax:** Lightborne murders Edward II.
- **Antagonist:** Mortimer Junior and Isabella are the play's primary antagonists in the sense that they act in opposition to the main character, Edward II. It's worth noting, however, that both Mortimer and Isabella are somewhat sympathetic characters, particularly in the first half of the play. Neither, in other words, is a villain per se.

Extra Credit for *Edward II*

A Woman Scorned. Edward II might not have been a popular king, but the role his wife played in deposing him earned her an infamous place in English history and a terrifying nickname: "the she-wolf of France."

Elvis Sightings, Renaissance Style. Marlowe died at just 29 years old—or did he? Basically all historians and literary critics say yes, but that hasn't stopped people from speculating that Marlowe not only faked his own death, but also went on to write all of William Shakespeare's works. It's a silly idea, but fun to think about.

Summary

Piers Gaveston, in exile from England in his native France, receives a letter from his friend and probable lover, Edward II. Upon the death of his father, Edward II has been newly crowned King of England, and in his letter he reveals that he has revoked Gaveston's banishment and wants his

favorite to come share in his own wealth and power. Gaveston eagerly complies, delighted at the prospect of seeing Edward but also hopeful that he can use the King's affection to his own advantage.

Tensions begin to surface, however, even before Gaveston makes his return to England known. As Gaveston watches from a place of hiding, Edward II argues with a group of nobles who regard Gaveston as a manipulative social climber and support his continued exile. Although the King's brother, the Earl of Kent, warns Mortimer Junior and the other nobles that they are dangerously close to committing treason, they stand firm in their opposition and leave for their homes threatening war. Gaveston then reveals himself to Edward, and the two share a joyful reunion during which Edward makes Gaveston Earl of Cornwall and gives him the authority to issue commands and draw money from the treasury in the King's name. The joyful reunion, though, is marred by the arrival of the Bishop of Coventry, who makes it clear that he also opposes Gaveston's return. With Edward's encouragement, Gaveston assaults and imprisons the Bishop and then confiscates his property.

The attack on Coventry further cements the nobility's low opinion of Gaveston, as does Edward's ongoing neglect of his wife Isabella, the sister of the King of France. Along with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the nobles Mortimer Junior, Mortimer Senior, the Earl of Warwick, the Earl of Lancaster, and the Earl of Pembroke together issue an order for Gaveston's exile. However, despite their insistence that Edward has obligations to both the Church and the English nobility, Edward at first refuses to sign the order. In response, the nobles forcibly arrest Gaveston and threaten rebellion, causing the King to reluctantly agree to his favorite's banishment. A sorrowful parting follows, during which Edward promises to send money to Gaveston in Ireland.

Shortly after Gaveston departs, however, Isabella begins trying to persuade the nobles to allow him to return: Edward, who suspects her of having an affair with Mortimer Junior, holds her responsible for Gaveston's exile and refuses to even speak to her while Gaveston is away. The nobles agree, reasoning that recalling Gaveston will at least provide them with an opportunity to murder him. Naturally, the nobles do not share this plan with Edward, and their apparent willingness to compromise brings them back into the King's good graces: Edward even entrusts Mortimer Senior with leading his army in Scotland. Meanwhile, Edward prepares for Gaveston's return by calling Gaveston's fiancée, Lady Margaret de Clare, back to court so that the two can be married (Lady Margaret is Edward's niece, so marriage to her will formally tie Gaveston to the royal family). Lady Margaret brings with her tutor Baldock and a family retainer named Spencer Junior—two men who hope to find employment with Gaveston and eventually become favorites of the King.

Virtually as soon as Gaveston has arrived back at court, however, another quarrel breaks out between him and the nobility. Matters only worsen when Mortimer Junior learns that his uncle, Mortimer Senior, has been captured and is being held for ransom by the Scots. Edward is unwilling to pay for Mortimer Senior's release himself, which prompts the nobles to list all the

ways in which they feel the King has behaved irresponsibly—by spending money on art rather than the military, by jeopardizing diplomatic ties through his treatment of the Queen, by flouting the nobles' own opinions, and so on. Edward ignores all of this, decisively alienating not only the nobility but also his own brother, who goes to join Mortimer Junior, Lancaster, and the other earls in planning an assault on the court at Tynemouth to capture Gaveston.

The attack on the castle forces Edward and Gaveston to split up, fleeing in different directions. The nobles choose to pursue Gaveston, eventually overtaking him. Initially, they agree to allow Gaveston to see Edward one last time before he is executed. Warwick, however, is unhappy with the compromise and ambushes and kills Gaveston as he is being escorted to the King. When Edward learns of this, he swears revenge and prepares to go to war with the nobles, who are now demanding that Edward cease with his favoritism of Spencer Junior as well.

Edward's forces succeed in defeating the nobles in the initial battle, and Warwick, Lancaster, and Mortimer Junior are all arrested. The first two are eventually executed, but Mortimer Junior succeeds in escaping to France with Kent. There, they join forces with Isabella, whom Edward had initially sent with their son, Prince Edward, to negotiate with France regarding England's claims to the region of Normandy. Isabella's loyalty to her husband has finally worn thin, however, and she is now trying to find allies who will help her install her son as king instead (something the Prince himself does not want).

Edward believes that he can successfully curb the threat the Queen poses by buying off the French nobility, but Isabella and Mortimer—who now in fact *are* lovers—eventually manage to find a supporter in a nobleman named Sir John of Hainault. Together with Kent, they return to England and fight the King's forces in a battle at Bristol. This time, it is Edward who is defeated, although Baldock, Spencer Junior, and the king himself succeed in escaping to a monastery where an Abbot offers to hide them. A man who works as a mower, however, betrays their whereabouts and all three are arrested: Spencer Junior and Baldock are taken off to be executed while Edward is imprisoned in Kenilworth under the guard of the Earl of Leicester.

Together with the Bishop of Winchester, Leicester manages to persuade Edward to surrender his crown. Nevertheless, Mortimer Junior quickly dismisses Leicester for being too sympathetic to Edward's plight, replacing him with Berkeley, whom he then *also* dismisses. Mortimer finally settles on Gourney and Maltravers as guards, instructing them both to torment Edward as much as possible and to move him back and forth from Kenilworth to Berkeley in order to frustrate any escape attempts: Mortimer has learned that Kent now regrets the role he played in his brother's overthrow and is plotting to free him. Gourney and Maltravers comply with these instructions, mocking Edward and apprehending Kent when he tries to make contact with his brother.

Meanwhile, Mortimer Junior has made plans for Prince Edward's coronation. Since the new king is still a boy, Mortimer himself will wield de facto power as the Lord Protector, as well as the lover of the Queen Mother. Nevertheless, he feels his position will not truly be secure until

Edward II is dead, and therefore arranges for an assassin—Lightborne—to murder him. Having sent Lightborne on his way, Mortimer quickly asserts his authority over Prince Edward (now Edward III) by ordering Kent's execution against the new king's wishes.

Lightborne arrives at Berkeley and explains his mission to Gourney and Maltravers, who—unbeknownst to him—have orders to murder Lightborne as soon as Edward is dead. Initially pretending to sympathize with Edward, Lightborne urges the deposed king to lie down on a feather bed, where he then kills him with a hot poker. Gourney then stabs Lightborne and flees, while Maltravers reports the crime to Mortimer Junior. As he does so, however, Isabella enters in a frenzy, reporting that Edward III has learned of his father's death and suspects both her and Mortimer of murder. Edward III then enters himself, accompanied by members of the nobility and bearing the written order Mortimer had issued for Edward II's death. Realizing the jig is up, Mortimer bids farewell to Isabella and stoically accepts his impending execution. Isabella herself continues to plead with her son but is ultimately unsuccessful: Edward III orders her imprisonment until he can learn whether and how she was involved in his father's murder. Finally, he orders a hearse to be prepared for Edward II, on which he places the severed head of Mortimer.

Sex, Lineage, and the Natural Order *Theme Analysis*

For its time, *Edward II* is remarkably open about the kind of relationship that exists between the king and his favorite, Gaveston. As Marlowe depicts them, the two men are almost certainly lovers. While the concept of homosexuality as it is understood today may not have existed until the 19th century, homosexual behavior and relationships obviously *did* exist, and in the times when the play was set and was written were extremely taboo. It is therefore not surprising that Edward's relationship with Gaveston is a point of contention in the play. What is surprising, however, is that the play's characters are more concerned with Gaveston's status as a commoner than his sexual behavior. In fact, *Edward II* does not ultimately seem to condemn homosexuality at all, but instead uses the two men's relationship to make a broader point about the role of sexuality in a society based on class, rank, and birthright.

Initially, the objections of the nobility to Gaveston seem quite clearly rooted in sexual prejudice in light of his presumed romantic relationship with the king. Mortimer Senior, for instance, remarks that it is "strange" that Edward is "bewitched" by Gaveston. Edward's sexual preferences, however, are ultimately of less concern to the nobility than his willingness to follow the advice of Gaveston, a commoner, rather than their own. It is this, at least as much as Gaveston's gender, that Mortimer Junior suggests has disrupted the rightful order of things, sparking discontent among the common people and robbing the nobility of their legitimate position at court. "Thy court is naked," Mortimer Junior says, "being bereft of those / That makes a king seem glorious to the world— / I mean the peers whom thou shouldst dearly love." In other words, Mortimer Junior asserts that the authority of the court depends on its members

being of high social rank. That being the case, Mortimer argues, Edward should love those of his own class, which further implies that he should *not* love the commoners.

To the extent that Edward's relationship with Gaveston is a problem, then, it is a problem not so much because it is homosexual, but because it ignores the categories according to which society is organized. In Edward II's world (and Marlowe's), ties of blood were far more important than ties of romance, because an individual's rank hinged entirely on whom he was biologically related to. By prioritizing a sexual relationship over the inherited claims of the nobility, Edward is in effect undermining the entire system by which power was allocated, making it possible for a "peasant" like Gaveston to enjoy more political power than the nobility. Isabella's eventual affair with Mortimer Junior creates a similar problem, because Mortimer—though a noble—is not in the direct line of succession for the throne. By choosing to pursue a relationship with him, however, Isabella opens up both herself and her newly crowned son to Mortimer's manipulation. This culminates in a scene where Mortimer orders Kent's executions over Edward III's protests before dragging the King bodily from the room. This flagrant disrespect for the wishes of a king—even a young king—is clearly problematic in a monarchical society.

From start to finish, then, *Edward II* depicts sexuality as a force that potentially threatens the entire social order. This is particularly clear in the repeated use of the word "unnatural"—a term often applied to sexual transgressions—to describe a variety of broken social ties. Kent, for instance, claims that only an "unnatural king" would "slaughter noblemen / And cherish flatterers," while Edward III says he has difficulty believing his mother "unnatural" enough to conspire in her husband's murder.

The ascension of Edward III to the throne at the end of the play seems to mark a return to the social norm, since the new king explicitly invokes his father (that is, his bloodline) when imprisoning his mother and executing her lover. Presumably, he will also defer to the nobility when appropriate, thus preserving social order on a broader scale as well. However, readers may find it difficult not to sympathize with Edward II's love for Gaveston, or even with the frustration that drives Isabella to her affair with Mortimer. In other words, while Marlowe depicts these relationships as a *threat* to the status quo, he does not entirely condemn them, leaving open the possibility that he does not entirely support the return to normalcy in the play's final lines.

Fear of the Other and Internal Discord *Theme Analysis*

At the time *Edward II* was written, the casual xenophobia of its characters would not have seemed out of the ordinary in English society. War was common, both in Marlowe's day and in Edward's, and tensions with the French, Scottish, and Irish ran correspondingly high. With that said, the mistrust of foreigners and the pervasive threat of war in the play also points to a broader suspicion of "otherness," whether based on ethnicity, sexuality, or even class. Ultimately,

however, these fears prove to be misguided, as the most serious threats faced by characters in the play are internal.

The character who most clearly fulfills the role of outsider in *Edward II* is Gaveston. In fact, Marlowe underscores Gaveston's otherness by making him low-born—something that was not true of the historical Gaveston, but which clearly unnerves the nobles, who have inherited their position in the court. Gaveston's sexual behavior is also more obviously at odds with societal norms than Edward's. This is partly because Isabella and the nobles view Gaveston as the corrupter of an otherwise innocent (though weak) king, but it is also because Gaveston is quite open about where his sexual preferences lie. He talks, for instance, about arranging homoerotic “masques” with “men like satyrs grazing on the lawns” and “a lovely boy in Dian's shape, / ...in his sportful hands an olive tree / To hide those parts which men delight to see.” Finally, Gaveston is a foreigner both by birth (he is French) and by habits and appearance; in a speech that links Gaveston's class, sexuality, and foreignness, Mortimer Junior complains that Gaveston “wears a short Italian hooded cloak” and goes around “with base outlandish cullions at his heels.” Since “cullions”—an insult comparable to the modern “low-life”—*also* was sometimes used as slang to refer to testicles, the term captures much of what marks Gaveston as different, and much of what other characters malign him for.

What is ultimately threatening to the nobles about Gaveston, however, is not his threefold status as an outsider (homosexual, low-born, and foreign), but rather his status as an *insider*—specifically, the fact that Edward views his favorite as an extension of himself. Edward not only gives Gaveston permission to issue commands in his own name, but repeatedly describes the two of them as being one and the same person: Edward responds to Gaveston's exile, for example, by claiming, “I from my self am banished.” To some extent, then, Gaveston's influence over the king (and all the ill effects that follow) are simply a reflection of Edward's own “brainsickness”—a problem that is internal to both England and Edward himself. What exactly this sickness consists of is never entirely clear, but Edward's remarks about being separated from himself suggest that his sense of identity is unstable or divided. In this way, Edward's inner state mirrors the political divisions that eventually erupt into civil war. In fact, when fighting eventually *does* break out between Edward and the nobility, Isabella's remarks underscore the idea that the violence is an outward manifestation of the king's own state of mind; her description of “kin and countrymen / Slaughter[ing] themselves in others” recalls Edward's comments about his relationship with Gaveston, and she concludes by attributing these problems to “misgoverned kings.”

In the end, then, it is not the foreigner—the “wild O'Neill” or the “haughty Dane”—that poses the real danger to England, but rather internal discord, which manifests not only in the rebellion of the nobility against the king, but also in the psychology of the king himself. In fact, as the political situation deteriorates further under Mortimer's rule, Edward descends so far into inner turmoil that he becomes a complete stranger to himself: he says, for instance, that he cannot tell

whether he has “limbs” or not. By the end of the play, Marlowe suggests that the true “other” is not an external enemy but rather something that comes from within.

Monarchy, Legitimacy, and Loyalty *Theme Analysis*

Like many works of English Renaissance drama, *Edward II* deals extensively with the nature and limits of monarchical rule. Although the English kings and queens of the time certainly wielded more power than they would in later years, they were not absolute monarchs in the way that many rulers in continental Europe were. Instead, England had a tradition of semi-constitutional monarchy dating back to the rule of King John and the signing of the Magna Carta—a document that gave the nobility some checks on the king’s power. This tug-of-war between the monarchy and the nobility continued for the next several centuries, and forms the backdrop for *Edward II*, in which the nobility eventually overthrows Edward in favor of his son, whom Mortimer intends to use as a puppet ruler. However, Marlowe’s take on history also incorporates questions of personal loyalty and patriotism which—although anachronistic to the era in which the play is set—add further nuance to the conflict between Edward and the nobility.

Perhaps more than anything else, Edward’s repeated complaints about being “overruled” by the nobility reveal his shortcomings as a king. For one, the remarks betray his lack of awareness, since Gaveston is in fact “overruling” Edward’s decisions on a continual basis through his influence. Even more to the point, however, Edward’s preoccupation with the indignity of his treatment by the nobles suggests that he has difficulty viewing the broader political implications of events beyond whatever personal meaning they hold for him. This is to some extent understandable, particularly given that Edward at times expresses a desire to be free of the burdens of kingship (at one point telling the nobility to “Make several kingdoms of this monarchy, / And share it equally amongst you all, / So I may have some nook or corner yet / To frolic with my Gaveston”). For as long as he *is* king, however, Edward has a responsibility to abide by the norms and responsibilities of the position, which includes paying attention to the concerns of the nobility. As Warwick puts it, “We know our duties [to the king]; let [the king] know his peers.” Ultimately, the nobles decide the king has failed to live up to his duties, and they rise up in revolt to depose him.

Whether Edward’s flouting of his kingly responsibilities does justify deposing him is a complicated question. Early in the play, even those characters who are most frustrated with the king are wary of actually taking action against him because they believe the role of the king demands loyalty, regardless of the fitness of the individual who has the role. The Bishop of Canterbury, for instance, cautions Mortimer Junior to “lift not [his] swords against the King.” The exception, as this exchange demonstrates, is Mortimer, who repeatedly argues that the king’s actions have broken the implicit contract that *makes* him king in the first place, and that it is therefore “lawful” to rise up against him. His argument is based not only on the idea that Edward’s actions have wronged his nobles, but also that they have “wronged [the] country.” Warwick and even Kent—Edward’s own brother—eventually come to share in this view, citing

their duty to England as a reason to support the coup that deposes the king. This line of reasoning, if accepted, transforms the nobles' rebellion (which would normally be an act of treason) into an act of patriotism. In addition, this logic also redefines treason as a matter of undermining the country's welfare, rather than rebelling against any particular leader. The nobles, for instance, repeatedly describe Gaveston as a "traitor" despite his loyalty to the king.

This idea of civic or patriotic loyalty—loyalty not to a person but to a country—however, is tarnished by Mortimer's own ambition, and his behavior after his own ascent to power. His pleasure at seeing the "proudest lords salute [him]" does not make him seem like someone who places the interests of his country before his own. Perhaps, then, the best way to understand Marlowe's treatment of loyalty and royal legitimacy is to view it in the context of the time in which the play was written (not the time in which it was set). Renaissance England was moving away from the medieval feudal system, where individuals owed allegiance to a particular lord or monarch, and was beginning to embrace something like modern nationalism, where individuals owe allegiance to a nation-state that exists independently of any particular ruler. The transition was incomplete at the time Marlowe was writing, however, and in fact England at the time was strongly united under Elizabeth I, though tensions over succession marked both the times before and after her reign (and in fact, about 40 years after the publication of the play England would erupt in a civil war that would end with the execution of its king). This may explain why *Edward II* views Mortimer's patriotism with some suspicion, while painting Gaveston and Edward's personal devotion to one another in a relatively sympathetic light.

Language and Violence *Theme Analysis*

From start to finish, *Edward II* is an exceptionally violent play: Gaveston attacks a bishop in the very first scene, and the play ends with Edward brutally murdered and his son, Edward III, displaying the severed head of Mortimer Junior alongside his father's corpse. What is even more striking, however, is how much of the dialogue in the play centers on violence, often describing it as something that, like language itself, can convey meaning. In fact, Marlowe seems to suggest that words are of limited usefulness in the world of *Edward II*—a message given further nuance by the fact that the work is a play, and is therefore a medium that blends language and physical action.

The idea that violence might function as a substitute for language appears very early in *Edward II*. When the nobles first speak out against Edward's decision to recall Gaveston, Kent advises his brother, Edward, to "let these their heads / Preach upon poles for trespass of their tongues." Mortimer responds by threatening to "henceforth parley with our naked swords." Similar statements recur throughout the play, with the implication generally being that the spectacle of violence conveys a more powerful message about power and the consequences of treason than language alone ever could.

Initially, this is a view that Edward himself seems to share. Some of the most powerful speeches in the play are about the vengeance he intends to seek for the nobles' treatment of both Gaveston and himself. He threatens at one point, for instance, to "unfold [his] paws / And let their lives' blood slake [his] fury's hunger." But, at some point, all Edwards' talk of violence comes to feel more like bluster than true strength. And, over time, Edward's own language becomes more passive and uncertain. When Edward hears of Gaveston's death, for example, he responds by wondering aloud, "O, shall I speak, or shall I sigh and die?" Neither alternative seems particularly effective, as Spencer Junior points out when he advises the king to "refer [his] vengeance to the sword." Spencer, in other words, is advising Edward not to talk about violence, but to use actual violence to assert his power. Edward does so, and initially defeats his enemies. But battle creates inherent vulnerability; the cost of losing is much greater than the cost of losing an argument. Edward, does eventually lose, and the play's final scenes further underscore the idea that violent action has triumphed over language (this time to Edward's dismay), with Mortimer transforming language into a kind of weapon when he writes the note ordering the deposed king's murder.

With all that said, it is worth remembering that *Edward II* is a work of literature, and therefore a testament to the power of language in and of itself. This, in fact, is something that Marlowe draws attention to by repeatedly noting the king's fondness for poetry and theater. A performance of the play, of course, would also draw some of its power from its depiction of violence, but Marlowe at least raises the possibility that Edward's preference for language is vindicated after his death: his son, Edward III, claims that his "loving father speaks" through him, thereby quite literally giving Edward II the play's final word.

Fortune and Tragedy *Theme Analysis*

One recurring image in *Edward II* is the "Wheel of Fortune"—a symbol medieval writers used to warn against the dangers of striving for worldly power and success. The basic idea was that the same fortune that carried a man to a position of prominence would ultimately bring about his downfall. Perhaps because of the clear parallel to the genre of tragedy (traditionally concerned with the fall of a powerful individual), the image frequently appears in Renaissance theater. *Edward II*, however, is remarkable for the sheer *number* of downfalls it depicts—not just the title character's, but also Gaveston's, Mortimer's, and even secondary characters'. In the end, the play suggests that rank, morality, and individual agency matter very little in the face of an entirely impersonal fate.

This trend becomes particularly clear in the case of Mortimer Junior, who is perhaps the closest thing *Edward II* has to a tragic hero. In fact, the play is subtitled the "tragicall fall of proud Mortimer," which also gives some insight into exactly where Mortimer's failings lie. Mortimer is certainly "proud" once he assumes power, even to the point of hubris. He boasts, for instance, that no one and nothing can touch him, and claims to control fate itself. This arrogance, according to Mortimer himself, is what ultimately causes his downfall: there is a point on

Fortune's wheel, he says, "to which, when men aspire, / They tumble headlong down." Given this, and given the implied courage of someone who dares to challenge destiny itself, Mortimer would seem to stand out as an exceptional (though fatally flawed) character.

Within the context of the play as a whole, however, Mortimer's fall from grace is not unique at all. Instead, it is the last of a string of downfalls that overtake virtually every character who at any points holds a position of power: Gaveston, Edward himself, Isabella, and Spencer Junior. What's more, even relatively minor (and, to Mortimer's mind, ignoble) characters like Baldock cite the concept of Fortune's wheel to explain their fate: "All live to die, and rise to fall." This slew of characters rising and falling arguably dilutes the emotional impact of any single character's defeat, and instead more generally emphasizes the idea that downfall and death (in Baldock's words) are the shared experience of all humanity.

To some extent, then, the play's depiction of fortune and tragedy mirrors what is (for the time it was written) a relatively democratic worldview. Mortimer bitterly resents the social climbing of characters like Gaveston and Spencer Junior because they are low-born, but his own ambition leads him to precisely the same fate: his rise and fall, in other words, are not more "noble" by virtue of his own social standing. On the other hand, it is hard not to see the play's many downfalls as evidence of a dark and bleak worldview. *Edward II*'s characters seem trapped in an endlessly looping cycle of violence and death. In this world, individual action and morality hardly seem to matter, not simply in the sense that characters cannot ward off their fates, but also in the sense that no character can even attain the status of a full tragic hero: the audience's attention is split between a number of tragic figures (Gaveston, Mortimer, and Edward II) who ultimately share the same fate despite having very different failings as individuals. In this way, the play breaks the conventional association between a fatal flaw or mistake and a fall from grace. Although characters repeatedly claim that their successes—e.g. Edward's initial victory over the rebel nobles—stem from the virtuousness of their motives, these claims ring hollow: Mortimer and Isabella, for instance, seem very nearly as corrupt when they rise to power as they are when they fall from it. In other words, Marlowe depicts fortune as a largely arbitrary and impersonal force, rather than as one that punishes the bad and rewards the good.

Characters:

Edward II

Edward is, of course, the play's title character, and the plot more or less corresponds to the course of his actual historical reign (though the play significantly compresses the events of his reign), beginning with his ascension to the throne and ending shortly after his death. That said, Edward is often less compelling as a character than either his lover, Gaveston, or his enemy, Mortimer. This is telling, since one of the primary complaints the English nobility lodge against the king is that he is weak. It's certainly true that Edward has little interest in war, and that he tends to blindly comply with the advice and wishes of his favorites. He is also moodier than a

ruler probably ought to be, often swinging between hopeless self-pity and vows of violent revenge. To Edward's credit, however, he seems to know on some level that he is not especially suited to being king. At the very least, he occasionally expresses dissatisfaction with his position, saying he would happily give up his power if that meant he could be with Gaveston. Perhaps the best way of understanding Edward, then, is as a man who values personal happiness and relationships over public life. His devotion to Gaveston and his enjoyment of theater and pageantry are perfectly normal, although the play's events suggest these traits are not compatible with the strength and cunning required of a medieval ruler. In the end, Edward is overthrown and murdered by his wife Isabella and Mortimer, although his son—Edward III—avenges his death.

Mortimer Junior

Mortimer Junior is a powerful member of the English nobility and, eventually, the lead challenger to Edward II's rule. As Marlowe states outright in the play's full title, Mortimer is extremely “proud,” and he views the presence and influence of Gaveston—a commoner—as an affront to his own rightful position and dignity. Further exacerbating Mortimer's resentment is the fact that Gaveston encourages the king to spend money on pageants and plays rather than military matters. Besides being rather militant and hot-tempered himself, Mortimer feels (or at least expresses) a sense of obligation to the former soldiers now in need of pensions. Although Mortimer never makes any secret of his discontent, it is likely Edward's unwillingness to pay ransom for the return of Mortimer Junior's uncle, Mortimer Senior, that pushes him into open rebellion. While Mortimer's initial resistance to Edward II seems to be based on a degree of principle, he grows increasingly less sympathetic as he rises to a position of power. He has Edward murdered, despite Edward's willingness to abdicate the throne, and after becoming the lover of Edward's wife, Isabella, he uses his relationship with her to manipulate both her and her young son Edward III—the new king. The courage and resignation with which he faces his own execution at the end of the play, however, do restore a sense of dignity to him in the play's final moments.

Piers Gaveston

Gaveston is Edward II's companion and (almost certainly) lover. The two men have known each other for some time by the time the play opens, but had recently been separated by Edward's father, the former king, who disapproved of the relationship (this is a historically accurate detail, although Edward I had initially *chosen* the real Gaveston as a companion for his young son). The play begins with Gaveston receiving a letter from Edward II informing him of his father's death and his own ascension to the throne. Gaveston eagerly complies with the new king's summons to return, in large part because he hopes to use the situation to his own advantage. Ambitious and quick-witted, Gaveston encourages Edward to pursue his interests in poetry and theater—presumably to keep him in a state of happy compliance. Gaveston's tactics pay off in the short term, with Edward raising him from his low-born status and making him Earl of Cornwall, Lord High Chamberlain, and Chief Secretary. However, if Gaveston uses Edward's favor to his own

advantage, it is nevertheless true that he seems to genuinely love the king: alone on stage during his opening monologue, he speaks about "dying" on Edward's "bosom" even at the cost of the "world's" esteem. Gaveston's relationship with Edward also speaks to the broader complexities of his character. For instance, while Mortimer Junior describes Gaveston as being a somewhat foppish man, a description supported by Gaveston's expensive tastes in clothing and entertainment, it is nonetheless also true that Gaveston is unafraid to fight: he repeatedly gets into brawls and duels. If anything, Gaveston seems too *quick* to resort to physical violence.

Isabella

Isabella is a daughter of the King of France, Edward II's wife, and mother to his son, Prince Edward. She is also one of the play's most ambiguous characters. The historical Isabella was a French princess who became infamous in England for the role she played in Edward's overthrow and (possibly) murder. In Marlowe's version of events, however, Isabella is quite sympathetic, at least initially. She first appears as a loving wife who is genuinely grieved and confused by her husband's preference for Gaveston—not least because Edward, under Gaveston's influence, treats her viciously at times. He repeatedly accuses her, for example, of having an affair with Mortimer Junior long before there is any evidence that she is doing so. Nevertheless, Isabella's willingness to conspire in Gaveston's recall and murder suggests she harbors an underlying ruthlessness. When her husband simply shifts his affections from Gaveston to Spencer Junior, Isabella decisively turns against Edward, taking Mortimer as her lover and supporting his rebellion against her husband. By the time Isabella colludes in Edward's murder and lies about it to her son, she has revealed herself to be a deeply treacherous character. It is never clear, however, whether she was untrustworthy and vengeful all along, or whether frustration with her husband's mistreatment of her is what drove her actions.

Symbols:

The Sun *Symbol Analysis*

In *Edward II*, as in much Renaissance literature, the sun functions as a symbol of the reigning monarch. This is likely at least in part the result of the prevailing cosmology of the day. Elizabethan England viewed the universe in terms of an orderly and hierarchical "Great Chain of Being," and analogies could be drawn between various relationships along the chain: the sun, for instance, naturally "ruled" the planets in much the same way a king naturally "ruled" his subjects. Not surprisingly, then, various characters in *Edward II* compare Edward himself to the sun, as when Warwick scolds Gaveston for trying "like Phaëthon" to control the sun/king.

Using this basic symbolism as a starting point, Marlowe also plays with sun imagery to develop the play's themes and plot. Edward's favorites, for instance, draw on the metaphor frequently, but often in personal rather than political ways. When Edward summons Gaveston to his side at the

beginning of the play, Gaveston questions, “What need the arctic people love starlight, / To whom the sun shines both by day and night?”. The lines, which immediately precede Gaveston's resolution to ignore the nobility entirely, underscore the extent to which Edward's personal relationship with Gaveston supersedes his responsibilities as king. It is therefore fitting that when Edward finally falls from power, he remarks that “kings, when regiment is gone, / [Are] but perfect shadows in a sunshine day”: far from being a sun himself, Edward now feels that his rule is, in effect, a trick of the light.

Trees and Vegetation Symbol Analysis

Elizabethan theater often used plant imagery to describe the health of a nation: gardens, for instance, play a major role in *Richard II*. Marlowe also draws on this symbolism in *Edward II*, often tying it to descriptions of Edward himself, as when the nobles describe Spencer Junior as a “putrefying branch / That deads the royal vine.” The rationale behind this and similar passages lies in Edward's *own* symbolic function as a monarch whose circumstances represent the circumstances of his entire country. Thus, in allowing social-climbing “flatterers” like Spencer and Gaveston access to himself, Edward is (according to the nobility) destabilizing the entire country.

The fact that it is a “mower” who, after Edward has lost the final battle and hidden himself in a monastery, reveals Edward's whereabouts to the nobles supports this idea: just as he literally prunes hedges, the mower symbolically “prunes” England back into shape. That said, Edward's arrest does not, in fact, end up putting an end to the country's problems, and it's worth noting that Mortimer Junior, who assumes power as Lord Protector after Edward's fall, at one point compares himself to “Jove's huge tree.” Since Mortimer would not be the lawful king even if Edward II were dead, his use of this imagery arguably hints at his own growing arrogance and corruption, and further implies that it is not until the rightful heir, Edward III, ousts Mortimer Junior that England again returns to natural health.

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