

Edward II as Historical Play/Marlowe's Derivations from the Facts of History and Their Significances

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The two hours of Marlowe's endeavours on the stage in the tragedy *Edward II* embraces twenty-three years of chronicle history. Yet, far from a strict adherence to the chronicler's facts, Marlowe perverts certain facts and scrambles certain dates to achieve an emotional authenticity far beyond the reach of the most detailed and accurate history. Marlowe borrows his materials partly from Robert Fabyan's *Chronicle* which supplies him with the jig or short ballad, quoted in the play (ii, 2) by one of the barons and which pertains to the battle of Bannockburn at which King Edward was defeated by Robert Bruce. Part of the history is also supplied by the chronicle of John Stow from which Marlowe borrows the story of the King being shaved with ditch-water. However, chiefly Marlowe is indebted to Holinshed whose chronicle excels Fabyan and Stow in detail and accuracy. Keeping the basic framework of the story more or less in conformity with Holinshed, Marlowe omits and condenses freely to make the action more continuous and dramatic.

Marlowe easily overcomes the difficulty of presenting such a long period of twenty-three years by careful compression and by skilful union of historically unrelated materials. Thus, he omits the King's voyage to France and his marriage, the second banishment of Gaveston to Flanders, and the banishment and recall of the Spencers, as recorded in

Holinshed. He transposes the battle of Bannockburn from the seventh year of Edward II's rule to the lifetime of Gaveston, not later than the fifth year of his reign, and thus presents it effectively as a disaster occasioned by the favourite's idle administration. The whole story of the Spensers with supreme skill and judgement is connected with that of Gaveston by making the Younger Spenser a page in attendance on the earl of Gloucester's daughter who is to marry Gaveston. The elder Spenser is also represented as a stranger, introduced to the King by his son.

The principal movements of the Baronial War have also been compressed for dramatic effect. Historically, the Baronial War consisted of a) the surrender of the two Mortimers to the King's grace at or near Shrewsbury; b) operations against Thomas of Lancaster and the Earl of Hereford about Burton-on-Trent and Pomfret; and c) the signal defeat of those noblemen at Boroughbridge. All these facts are naturally and easily related as a single victory gained by the King over their combined forces. Moreover, the result is that whereas Warwick in fact dies before the battle, he is introduced after the battle of Boroughbridge to meet the punishment due to his murder of Gaveston. A compressed **Act V** also shows the swift punishments to the sinners. Mortimers himself is executed before the body of the murdered king has been buried.

Not only does Marlowe reshape historical facts, he also reshapes historical characters and creates characters to fit his purpose. He creates the character of Edmund, Earl of Kent. The historical Kent was entirely unimportant person, who indeed was but six years old. Nevertheless, Marlowe introduces him as supporting the King in the council (I, 4). Feeble and yet repulsive, he is never 'in one stay'. Hurt and irritated by as his brother's infatuation for Gaveston, he joins the barons, but later repents what he has done. The playwright also

creates the character Lightborn. Literary meaning 'Lucifer', he in fact is the Devil who has learnt his murdering skill at Naples.

Holinshed describes Edward II's England as a country clawed by plundering Scots and a people weakened by the constant struggle for survival. Marlowe circumnavigates these details. In fact, the common man is Shakespeare's concern. The Scots are hinted by the barons only as useful of sketching the background, for adding weight to the baron's cause. These facts are removed to retain the suspense of the tragedy intact. In fact, *Edward II* is history well dramatized, not history well presented. Marlowe also does not mete out poetic justice with his own hands. The tragedy of the characters is the part of the history. His part is only to present history as dramatically as possible and let the audience form their own judgements of this tragedy of weakness, pride and ambition.