

The Aristocracy in *Edward II**

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Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* is a highly-condensed account of the events of the reign of the historical Edward II who ruled England from 1307 to 1327. Marlowe's principal source was Holinshed's *Chronicles*, and he found a few incidents in Stow's *Annals of England*. Critics generally admire his compression of events and selection of details. One of his omissions is interesting from my point of view: a claimant to the throne appeared who asserted that he was the rightful king of England and Edward the son of a carter. Marlowe does not mention the existence of a pretender, although a reference to this claim would have been consistent with the characterization of Edward as entirely unsuited to ruling. Edward's friends as well as the critical barons are disappointed that he does not live up to his heritage. One of them says to him:

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Were I King Edward, England's sovereign,
 Son to the lovely Eleanor of Spain,
 Great Edward Longshanks' issue—would I bear
 These braves, this rage, and suffer uncontrol'd
 These barons to beard me in my land,
 In mine own realm? My lord, pardon my speech.
 Did you retain your father's magnanimity,
 Did you regard the honour of your name,
 You would not suffer thus your majesty
 Be counterbuff'd of your nobility.¹⁾ (3.2.10-19)

Edward's weakness is the subject of the play, but Marlowe neither impugns his right to the throne nor offers any explanation for his appearance in a line of strong and efficient kings. His father had commanded the respect of the barons; his brother is the spokesman for royal dignity and responsibility; his son, in spite of constant association with his adulterous mother and her lover, has a sure instinct for kingship that can only derive from inherent nobility. Edward is an anomaly.

The play begins immediately after the death of Edward I. The young king summons back to England his boyhood friend, Piers Gaveston, who had been banished by his father because he was a bad influence on the prince. The barons resent Gaveston's recall; they are angered by his elevation to the positions of Lord High Chamberlain, Chief Secretary, Earl of Cornwall, and King and Lord of the Isle of Man. When Edward and Gaveston manhandle the Bishop of Coventry, confiscate his estates, and imprison him, they intercept him when he is on his way to Westminster to make the arrangements for the funeral of Edward I -- the Archbishop of Canterbury joins the opposition to Gaveston.

1) All quotations are from *Christopher Marlowe: Complete Plays and Poems*, eds E. D. Pendarv and J. C. Maxwell (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1976).

The combination of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the barons force Edward to banish Gaveston once more, but he harshly charges his wife Isabella to persuade the barons to relent:

. . . till my Gaveston be repeal'd,
Assure thyself, thou com'st not in my sight. (1.4.168-9)

Isabella appeals to the young Mortimer, who, evidently pitying her, convinces the other barons that Gaveston is less of a menace at home than abroad. They permit the king to send for him. At the end of Act I, an uneasy reconciliation is effected: Edward recklessly distributes offices among the barons in his gratitude, but he also tactlessly announces that he will marry his niece to Gaveston, and he urges the nobles to prepare a triumphant welcome for him, "a general tilt and tournament," for which they are to spare no expense.

Act II begins with the introduction of young Spencer and Baldock, attendants in the household of the king's niece. They are both seeking to improve their fortunes. Spencer is represented as a low-born servant of the lady Margaret's father; Baldock, as her tutor. Spencer relies on Gaveston's affection for him to raise his status:

Baldock: What, mean you then to be his follower?
Spencer: No, his companion, for he loves me well,
And would have once preferr'd me to the king. (2.1.12-14)

Baldock's social standing is more interesting. Edward asks him:

Edward: Tell me, where wast thou born? What is thine arms?
Baldock: My name is Baldock, and my gentry
I fetch from Oxford, not from heraldry. (2.2.241-43)

Baldock represents a kind of Elizabethan gentleman.²⁾ Although he has achieved the condition of gentleman, his position before the king's patronage is not lofty. A conversation between Spencer and Baldock depicts the usual scholar as a servile dependent of a minor nobleman. Spencer distinguishes between a scholar and a gentleman:

Then, Baldock, you must cast the scholar off,
 And learn to court it like a gentleman.
 'Tis not a black coat and a little band,
 A velvet-cap'd cloak, fac'd before with serge,
 And smelling to a nosegay all the day,
 Or holding of a napkin in your hand,
 Or saying of a long grace at a table's end,
 Or making low legs to a nobleman,
 Or looking downward with your eyelids close,
 And saying 'truly, an't may please your honour',
 Can get you any favour with great men. (2.1.31-41)

Charlton and Waller point out that this unflattering account of the gentlemen-scholars is confirmed by lines in Joseph Hall's *Virgidemiarum* and by some of the portraits in Overbury's *Characters* and *New Characters* and in Earle's *Microcosmographie* (35).

The passage continues with Spencer's recommendation of Machiavellian ruthlessness to Baldock, who says that he is quite capable of it. He assures Spencer that he is neither sincerely humble nor pedantic, but "apt for any kind of villainy" (2.1.51). The whole passage is clearly satiric. It is impossible not to associate the sentiments with Marlowe, the son of a shoemaker, who became

2) Edward II was the first king to establish colleges in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge: Cambridge's King's Hall in 1317 and Oxford's Oriel College in 1326.

a gentleman by graduating from Cambridge. The great men who, according to Spencer, are "proud, bold, pleasant, resolute, / And now and then stab, as occasion serves" (2.1.42-43), sound more like the Walsinghams, Raleigh, and Marlowe's other highly-placed friends than they do like Edward or anyone at his court.

In the play Edward receives the applications of Spencer and Baldock cordially. When after more quarreling with the barons, Gaveston is hunted down and killed, and Edward transfers his affection to Spencer and Baldock, the barons immediately demand their dismissal. At their urging, Edward finally goes to war; with their help, he defeats the barons, executes several of them, and imprisons Mortimer. At the end of Act III, Edward is at the height of his power, but he has already made the error in judgment that leads to his death in sending Isabella and his son to restore good relations with her brother, the king of France. Isabella's mission becomes an appeal in her own right for assistance against Edward; Spencer and Baldock forestall her efforts in France by bribing the French king, but Sir John of Hainault offers her refuge in the Netherlands, and in Act IV she is joined there by Mortimer, who escapes from the Tower with the help of Edward's brother, Edmund, Duke of Kent. Gaveston hinted early in the play that the Queen and Mortimer were lovers. His hints were perhaps malicious falsehoods, but during their stay in Hainault they do become lovers. They invade England, defeat and capture the king, execute Baldock and Spencer, and in the first scene of Act V force Edward to abdicate in favor of his son, whom they act for. Mortimer and Isabella do not feel safe as long as the king is alive; they arrange for him to be moved from prison to prison, treated harshly, and finally horribly murdered. They are betrayed by one of Edward's guards to the young prince. He takes the evidence against Mortimer, an ambiguously-punctuated letter, to the council and procures his

condemnation. Mortimer is beheaded, Isabella committed to the Tower, and young Edward offers the head of Mortimer to his father's ghost as he joins the funeral procession.

The play deals with many matters bearing on Elizabethan concepts of the aristocracy. The source of the chief conflict--the barons's resentment of Gaveston--is based on their aristocratic pride. The barons are, in both senses of the word, Edward's peers: Mortimer calls him "cousin"; the Mortimers trace their name to a crusader:

Mortimer Jr.: This tottered ensign of my ancestors
 Which swept the desert shore of that dead sea
 Whereof we got the name of Mortimer
 Will I advance upon this castle walls. (2.3.21-24)

The etymology is false, but, as Charlton and Waller point out, it was common in the sixteenth century.

Another of the barons, Lancaster, possesses five earldoms; he is the cousin of Edward and the uncle of Isabella. All of the barons object to Gaveston, first, because he had been banished by Edward I to whose memory they are loyal; and second, because Gaveston is French, although, as W. D. Briggs points out, this objection is more typical of the sixteenth than of the fourteenth century, for the barons themselves would have been close to their Norman origins (132); and third, because he encourages the king in extravagance. These objections are minor, however; the chief complaint of the barons is that the king constantly associates with one substantially his inferior in birth. Gaveston is a knight; Mortimer says, "Thou . . . hardly art a gentleman by birth" (1.4.28-29). Mortimer's justice in these lines is unusual. Gaveston's low birth is greatly

exaggerated in such epithets as "base and obscure," "base minion," "that villain," "the slave," "base peasant," "a lown," "a night-grown mushrump," and "a base groom." The barons are at first unable to account for Edward's affection for him. Mortimer junior believes that the king is deranged: "Come, uncle, let us leave the brain-sick king" (1.1.125); Mortimer senior finds a supernatural explanation: "Is it not strange, that he is thus bewitch'd?" (1.2.55). The barons are bewildered by Edward's affection for Gaveston because of the difference in their ranks:

Warwick: You that are princely born should shake him off.

For shame subscribe, and let the lown depart. (1.4.81-82)

They even condemn as ignoble all those who accept Gaveston's sudden eminence:

Mortimer senior: Doth no man take exceptions at the slave?

Lancaster: All stomach him, but none dare speak a word.

Mortimer junior: Ah, that bewrays their baseness, Lancaster. (1.2.25-27)

Seeing Gaveston seated next to the king, Mortimer senior exclaims, "What man of noble birth can brook this sight?" (1.4.12), and Pembroke asks, "Can kingly lions fawn on creeping ants?" (1.4.15). It is clear that the nobility in their minds is a closed system. It is the violation of the hierarchical arrangement of the persons surrounding the king that disturbs them. Gaveston sneers at their self-importance:

Edmund, the mighty prince of Lancaster,

That hath more earldoms than an ass can bear, (1.3.1-2)

and

Base leaden earls that glory in your birth,
 Go sit at home and eat your tenants' beef;
 And come not here to scoff at Gaveston,
 Whose mounting thoughts did never creep so low
 As to bestow a look on such as you. (2.2.74-78)

Gaveston asserts his superiority on the basis of his loftier intelligence, "mounting thoughts." Edward, on the other hand, claims that it is within his power to bestow nobility. Of Gaveston he says, "Were he a peasant, being my minion, / I'll make the proudest of you stoop to him" (1.4.30-31); he tells Spencer and Baldock, "He that I list to favour shall be great" (2.3.259). Edward regards as worthy of ennoblement anyone who displays affection for him. His difficulties with his barons make him rather democratic: when Baldock admits that he has no claim to hereditary nobility, he says, "The fitter art thou, Baldock, for my turn" (2.2.243). He also appeals once to the barons's charity:

Ah, none but rude and savage-minded men
 Would seek the ruin of my Gaveston;
 You that be noble born should pity him. (1.4.78-80)

In one passage, however, Edward indicates that when he is not defending one of his favorites, he makes the same assumptions about heritage that the barons do. When Spencer senior arrives with four hundred men to defend Edward against the barons, Edward is very grateful:

Welcome ten thousand times, old man, again.

Spencer, this love, this kindness to thy king,
 Argues thy noble mind and disposition;
 Spencer, I here create thee Earl of Wiltshire, (3.2.46-49)

The lines parallel the attitude of the nobles, but there is a significant difference, for "the noble mind and disposition" which Edward here claims can be inherited consists simply in loyalty to him.

The character of Edward bears on this study: he is a deplorable king, not merely indifferent to the welfare of England, but inclined to think in terms of its destruction:

And sooner shall the sea o'erwhelm my land
 Than bear the ship that shall transport thee hence. (1.1.151-52)

Under his rule England's enemies flourish; his military adventure against the Scots is such a fiasco that it becomes the subject of a ballad. Mortimer describes Edward's martial exploit:

When wert thou in the field with banner spread?
 But once; and then thy soldiers marched like players,
 With garish robes, not armour; and thyself,
 Bedaub'd with gold, rode laughing at the rest,
 Nodding and shaking of thy spangled crest,
 Where women's favours hung like labels down. (2.2.181-86)

Part of Edward's characterization as wickedly pleasure-loving is his contempt for all family relationships. He disregards his father's wishes; he neglects his wife for Gaveston and abuses her: "Fawn not on me, French strumpet, get thee gone" (1.4.145). He shows only a perfunctory interest in the young prince:

. . . Madam, in this matter
 We will employ you and your little son;
 You shall go parley with the King of France.
 Boy, see you bear you bravely to the king,
 And do your message with a majesty. (3.2.69-73)

Edward addresses Gaveston, Spencer, and Baldock as "thou," the young prince as "you"; in the same way, he addresses Gaveston as "brother," and banishes his real brother. Two things suggest that Edward's lack of interest in his family is more than incidental to his characterization as a weak and irresponsible king. Edmund, who expresses and informs moral judgment in the play, and young Edgar, who is the ideal prince, are both dedicated to their family. The contrasts make a responsibility for family relationships an important virtue in the play.

Edmund is loyal to Edward until his banishment. Banished, he joins Isabella and Mortimer, but when he becomes aware of their adulterous relationship he repents his desertion of the king as a betrayal of both family and king:

Vile wretch, and why hast thou of all unkind,
 Borne arms against thy brother and thy king? (4.5.15-16)

Edmund dies as a result of trying to rescue his brother.

Even more than Edmund's return to the king, the characterization of young Edward illuminates the wrongness of Edward's rejection of his family. The prince enters the play at its exact center. His dominant trait is family loyalty. He is at first able to be loyal to both parents by blaming the Spencers, not his father, for the troubled state of England. When he and Isabella are rebuffed by the king of France, he childishly promises to solve her problems for her

when he grows up:

So pleaseth the queen my mother, me it likes;
 The King of England nor the court of France
 Shall have me from my gracious mother's side
 Till I be strong enough to break a staff;
 And then have at the proudest Spencer's head. (4.2.21-25)

When Mortimer joins Isabella and the invasion of England is planned, the prince asserts a confidence in his father that is more affectionate than realistic: "I think King Edward will outrun us all" (4.3.68). Young Edward vehemently protests the execution of Edmund, and Mortimer takes precautions against being connected with the murder of the king because he takes it for granted that the prince will avenge his father when he comes of age. Mortimer's precautions are insufficient, and he underestimates the prince. He thinks he can frighten him like a schoolboy:

I view the prince with Aristarchus' eyes,
 Whose looks were as a breeching to a boy. (5.4.54-55)

Young Edward is not intimidated. He acts where his father would only have quarreled and threatened. The stern young king of the last scene is unlike Edward II in many ways, but the key to their differences may be their different attitudes towards the family. Young Edward's family loyalty restores stability in England just as his father's indifference to the responsibilities of the position he was born to had destroyed it.

The infatuation of Edward II for Gaveston, which caused him to reject all family ties, has received much critical attention. There are extremely divergent

views about its nature. Briggs quotes Tzschasch's *Marlowe's Edward II und Seine Quellen* (1902) to the effect that the reason for Edward's affection is never apparent, and that therefore the play is unconvincing. Tzschaschel's criticism seems obtuse. Briggs counters it by interpreting Edward's affection for Gaveston as the result of "Edward's imperious craving for personal friendship" (104), and this interpretation is consistent with Edward's explanation:

Mortimer junior: Why should you love him whom the world hates so?
 King Edward: Because he loves me more than all the world. (1.4.76-77)

The barons accept this explanation. Mortimer's line, "The king is lovesick for his minion" (1.4.86), sounds like sudden enlightenment. When he understands the relationship, Mortimer senior is quite willing to tolerate it. He finds classical precedents:

The mightiest kings have had their minions:
 Great Alexander lov'd Hephaestion;
 The conquering Hercules for Hylas wept;
 And for Patroclus stern Achilles droop'd.
 And not kings only, but the wisest men.
 The Roman Tully lov'd Octavius;
 Grave Socrates, wild Alcibiades. (1.4.390-96)

Mortimer finishes the speech assuring his nephew that "riper years will wean him from such toys" (1.4.400).

This speech evidently clarifies the problem completely for the barons, but it has not done so for critics. L. J. Mills reads the play as a study of the conflict between friendship and love that is related to Lydgate's *Fabula Duorum*

Mercatorum, to the story of Titus and Gysippus in Elyot's *The Book Named the Governour*, and to Lyly's novels and plays. Mills finds four instances of Edward's acting as an ideal friend: he addresses Gaveston with terms of endearment; he bestows wealth and honors on him; he offers his own life in exchange for Gaveston; and he neglects his queen. Edward's error, in Mills's view, lies in his having taken as a friend a flatterer. He cites the essay "Of the Friend and the Flatterer" in Plutarch's *Moralia* and Chapter XXXV of Cicero's *Da Amicitia* as classical warnings against flattery. Chapter XX of *Da Amicitia* also seems significant to him in connection with *Edward II* because in it Cicero warns against allowing friendship to interfere with duty. To Mills, Gaveston appeals to the king's senses rather than to his sense of importance:

I must have wanton poets, pleasant wits,
Musicians, that with touching of a string
May draw the pliant king which way I please;
Music and poetry is his delight:
Therefore I'll have Italian masques by night,
Sweet speeches, comedies, and pleasing shows; (1.1.50-55)

There are many passages in the play which are evidence to modern commentators of homoeroticism. In Gaveston's opening soliloquy he says:

Sweet prince, I come; these, these thy amorous lines
Might have enforc'd me to have swum from France,
And like Leander gasp'd upon the sand,
So thou wouldst smile and take me in thy arms. (1.1.6-9)

Isabella complains:

For now my lord the king regards me not,
 But dotes upon the love of Gaveston.
 He claps his cheeks and hangs about his neck,
 Smiles in his face, and whispers in his ears; (1.2.49-52)

Leonora Leet Brodwin believes that Marlowe boldly treats homoeroticism as a noble passion after a preoccupation with narcissistic love that begins with *Dido, Queen of Carthage*. Although Harry Levin gives the theme less prominence, he also understands the play to deal with homosexuality rather than with the Renaissance friendship cult (93). Paul Kocher's reconstruction of the argument reported in the Baines note makes it apparent that Marlowe had given some thought to the subject of homosexuality. The Baines note contains an accusation of Marlowe as an atheist and a blasphemer based on the quotations from what was probably a talk with members of the Raleigh group. One of the remarks Baines attributes to Marlowe is "that all they that love not tobacco and boies were fooles" (Kocher 45). David Stymeist, pointing out that the play demystifies how sexual acts become criminalized, says that the play's apparent allegiance with legal, popular, and religious prejudice against sodomy functions to partially defuse antitheatrical charges that the theater was a bastion of sodomy and insurgency. Curtis Perry interprets the image of the sodomite king--in this play and in the gossip surrounding James I and his favorites--as a figurative response to resentments stemming from the regulation of access to the monarch.

What appears to be advocacy of homosexuality in this quotation is not confirmed by its treatment in *Edward II*, however. Leonora Brodwin acknowledges that the chronicles suggest an unnatural relationship between Edward and Gaveston, and that Marlowe was following what he believed to be reliable sources. An entirely different treatment of the play, not inconsistent

with either internal or external evidence, is Carroll Camden's "Marlowe and Elizabethan Psychology." Camden interprets the play as a psychological study which illustrates contemporary understanding of the emotions, as expressed, for example, in Pierre Charron's *De la Sagesse*:

All Passion, whatsoever, is moved by the appearance, either Real or Imaginary, of Good or Evil; . . . if the Object be Good . . . this is that Motion of the Soul which goes by the name of Love. (Camden 72)

Camden analyses Edward's metaphor, "My heart is as an anvil unto sorrow" (1.4.311) as an accurate statement of the belief that blood returned to the heart as a result of grief in contrast to its flow to the extremities in moments of anger.

In reading *Edward II* for matters related to the aristocratic family, I pursued one false lead. Lightborn, the murderer of Edward, is not named to indicate his lack of nobility: Levin points out that he is an Anglicized Lucifer who had appeared previously in one of the plays of the Chester cycle (101). He enters the dark hole where Edward is confined bearing a light, and perhaps one of his lines can be read as the ultimate judgment of Edward: "These hands were never stain'd with innocent blood" (5.5.80).

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Abstract

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Edward II's weakness is the subject of the play, but Marlowe neither impugns his right to the throne nor offers any explanation for his appearance in a line of strong and efficient kings. Marlowe even omits an interesting history about a claimant to the throne: he asserted that he was the rightful king of England and Edward the son of a carter.

This paper argues that the play deals with many matters bearing on Elizabethan concepts of the aristocratic family. The source of the chief conflict between the king and the barons is based on the barons's aristocratic pride; the chief complaint of the barons is that the king constantly associates with one substantially his inferior in birth. Edward's lack of interest in his family is more than incidental to his characterization as a weak and irresponsible king: for examples, Edward addresses Gaveston, Spencer, and Baldock as "thou," the young prince as "you"; in the same way, he addresses Gaveston as "brother," and banishes his real brother. However, young Edward, the ideal prince, is dedicated to his family. The contrasts make a responsibility for family relationships an important virtue in the play.

Key Words

Marlowe, *Edward II*, aristocracy, class-consciousness, Gaveston, homosexuality