



'Edward II' as a Chronicle Play

Like 'The massacre at Paris', 'Edward II' is a chronicle play based on contemporary European history. The plot of 'The Massacre at Paris' could not attract Shakespeare. Marlowe's gifts were really dramatic. If we read Holinshed's account of the reign of Edward II we see, with what art of selection, condensation and adaptation, Marlowe has shaped out the chronicle history of a disagreeable reign, a historical tragedy. The title suggests a chronicle. Although history, especially in Acts II and III, is not assimilated into drama, the running title 'The Tragedy of Edward the Second' represents the play better. Marlowe is a playwright, and not a historian. So he throws aside material unsuitable to his purpose.

The balance of one character or motive with another is essential because the purpose of the dramatist is to illuminate weakness, not strength. Weakness does not act but is acted upon. Therefore Marlowe is forced by the nature of his theme to distribute the interest over a variety of characters. The stage is set for the conflict to follow in the four movements of the first scene. Gaveston returns from banishment. He is eager to



meet the king and to derive the sensuous pleasures which delight them both. The second movement concerns the king's quarrel with the lords bitterly jealous of the upstart Gaveston. This is the movement in which we meet the king's chief enemies — Lancaster, both Mortimer and Warwick. The third movement concerns the reunion of Edward and Gaveston. In a brief fourth movement Edward and Gaveston abuse the Bishop of Coventry and add to the hostility of lords. All characters except Queen Isabel appear in this scene of these characters Gaveston is murdered at the beginning of the third act. Lancaster is captured at the battle of Borough-bridge. Mortimer and Isabel alone are important in the last act as in the first. As the play proceeds, their share in the personal tragedy of the king becomes increasingly important.

Though of subsidiary importance the king's brother Edmund, Earl of Kent, fulfills an important function. Kent throws in his lot now with the ^{now with the} king's enemies in a vain attempt to trim the ship of state. His concern for the king is wholly untouched by jealousy, hatred, lust or self-aggrandisement.

The similarity between the theme of 'Edward II' and that of 'Richard II' is obvious. But the similarities are superficial. It is an altogether grimmer world into which Marlowe