

## **B. A. English (Honours) Part-II**

### **Paper-III**

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### **Christopher Marlowe: *Edward II***

Christopher Marlowe is the greatest dramatist of pre-Shakespearean dramatic era. The glory of Elizabethan drama genuinely starts with him. He is the only dramatist to be compared with Shakespeare during the age. Some critics claim that Shakespeare followed the path that was prepared by Marlowe. Marlowe wrote only tragedies. All his plays except *Edward II* revolve around one central personality who is consumed by some sort of excessiveness which leads the hero to doom.

*Edward II*, the last play of Marlowe, was first performed in 1593. The play is a depiction of the tragic reign and demise of King Edward II. It deals with the tragic history of king's weakness rather than of his strength. Thus the hero of the play is not great enough to be tragic. *Edward II* is also remarkable for the treatment of the homosexual relationship between the king and Gaveston, his minion. Throughout the play the physical nature of their relationship is not openly mentioned, but the allusions to their romance are constant and subtle.

This play is less poetic in comparison of other plays by Marlowe. But so far as the dramatic style and innovation and the plot construction are concerned it is said to be the best of Marlowe's plays. *Edward II* is an acknowledged predecessor of Shakespearean historical drama. The play has multiple living characters and lacks the bombastic scenes of other plays and it makes it stand apart from other plays.

## Plot Summary

As **Act I** of the play opens Gaveston is heard to be returning to England after a long exile. Only the king is happy with this news. Several barons or powerful noblemen in the court—Mortimer Junior, Mortimer Senior, Warwick, Lancaster, and Pembroke—are outraged and they immediately began plotting Gaveston's next expulsion because they worry that the presence of Gaveston might gradually destroy the king's commitment to his kingdom. They also object to the amount of money Edward spends on Gaveston. Queen Isabella, Edward's wife, is angry that Edward has sexually rejected her. She begins an affair with Mortimer Junior. Only the Earl of Kent and Edward's brother supports the king. The barons and the Archbishop of Canterbury arrange for Gaveston to be exiled again. But soon afterward Mortimer Junior decides the barons should allow Gaveston to return, ensuring they'll keep the king's favor. Meanwhile they hope to discreetly arrange Gaveston's murder.

In **Act II** Gaveston is glad to return to the king though he continues to fight against the barons. Edward arranges a marriage between his niece and daughter of the Earl of Gloucester, Lady Margaret and Gaveston.

Mortimer Junior and Lancaster feel the king's devotion to "favorites" and "flatterers" is destroying the latter's ability to rule. They accuse Edward of ignoring foreign threats, abusing the country's funds, and losing the respect of his subjects. Their arguments convince Kent to withdraw his support from Edward. In the leadership of Mortimer Junior the barons prepare for civil war against the king. Kent fights on the barons' side. Soon the barons capture Gaveston in battle. They plan to execute him, but at the king's request, they agree to a final meeting between Gaveston and Edward. Warwick, however, murders Gaveston before he can see the king.

In **Act III** Edward becomes furious and vows to avenge Gaveston's death and massacre his opponents. The barons offer to stop the conflict if Edward will dismiss Spencer Junior, his new favorite, from court. Edward refuses and the war continues.

Soon Edward captures Warwick, Lancaster, and Mortimer Junior. Warwick and Lancaster are executed and Mortimer Junior is imprisoned. Meanwhile Spencer Junior arranges for the French government to deny aid to Isabella, who is seeking allies for Mortimer Junior in France.

In **Act IV** helped by Kent Mortimer Junior escapes from prison and both of them go to France together. There they meet Isabella and Prince Edward who were helped by Sir John of Hainault. They return to England and this time their forces are victorious.

After losing in battle, Edward escapes to Ireland with Spencer Junior and Baldock. But the fugitives are quickly discovered by English aristocrats acting on behalf of Mortimer Junior, who now controls the monarchy through his influence over Isabella. Their captors execute Baldock and Spencer Junior and imprison Edward at Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire, England.

In **Act V**, Edward is shown to be reluctant to give up his crown. He knows that even though the throne would pass to his son, Prince Edward, Mortimer would be the ruler. His son is too young and inexperienced, and also shows little passion for politics. But the king is deposed and imprisoned by Mortimer. Isabella, however, thinks that Edward must be killed to right the wrongs he has done to her and the country. Mortimer hires an assassin named Lightborn to kill Edward. As the play concludes, Prince Edward has unhappily become Edward III. He learns that Mortimer was behind his father's death and he gets him executed immediately. He imprisons his

mother, Isabella, for her role as an accomplice and then leaves to perform funeral rites for his father. And thus the play ends.

Thus *Edward II* is about the treacherous nature of power. It tells the story of the fall of the king and the betrayal of the queen. Ambition and lust make liars and fools out of nearly every character in the work. Marlowe, a critically acclaimed contemporary of Shakespeare, makes his *Edward II* a monumental success.

### **Sources:-**

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