

## Violence and Murder in *Edward II*

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### Abstract

The play of *Edward II* composed by British dramatist Christopher Marlowe is characterized by the depiction of violent scenes. Marlowe describes three symbolic scenes of murder in order to prove the violence mechanism in political issues. This paper indicates the reasons for the political disaster and the effective methods for restoring a new political order.

**Key words:** Violence; Murder; Political Order

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### INTRODUCTION

In *Edward II*, English dramatist Christopher Marlowe shows his readers a story about the natural law and cosmic order. "The weak king, the untended kingdom, the parasite, the discontented peers, are essential ingredients of the Elizabethan play of disorder" (Steane, 1964, p.223). The king Edward the second is a weak and inefficient king, many ambitious nobles around. It is the king's obsession with his kingship and crown that causes the violence and murder in England. In the beginning and ending part of the play, there is a scene of a king's death and the emergence of a new king. The replacing of the crown displays the circulation mechanism of violence and portrays an astonishing moment of "erasing the king". The features of violence enforcement are exhibited in this play. Based on the analysis of the three symbolic deaths in

the play (the death of Gavaston, the king's minion, of the king, and of the nobleman Mortimer), this paper indicates why violent behaviors fail to bring new order and how effective violence behaviors can be employed in the restoration of political order.

### 1. THE DEATH OF GAVASTON

In real history, Edward the second was betrayed by his nobleman because of his overindulged affection to his minion, Gavaston. Those lines at the beginning part of Christopher Marlowe's play *Edward II*: "My father is deceased; come, Gavaston/And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend" (Marlowe, 2003, p.401), reveals the tangled and complicated social and political relationship in the late era of 16<sup>th</sup> century in England Gavaston, the minion and lover of the king, is hard to hide his ecstasy when received the letter from the king Edward the second:

What greater bliss can hap to Gavaston,  
Than live and be the favourite of a king?

...

Farewell, base stooping to the lordly peers;

My knee shall bow to none but to the king (Marlowe, 2003,

p.401).

Those lines bear some pathetic relationship to another figure created by Christopher Marlowe, the Scourge of God, Tamburlaine. The two are the typical images of ordinary man and they have little chance to get crowns, but both of them could get advancement by some crafty means. In *Edward II*, Gavaston can get a share of a kingdom as being a companion of the king.

Except for his overt ambition of being a king's dearest, Gavaston objects to the well-known church dogma that the greatest happiness of a man lies in contemplating his god. He thinks that his supreme joy is being the lover and minion of Edward the second. His humbleness and humility is only limited to the king. Gavaston does not hide his earthly vanity to a higher position and the

heavenly bliss is not his pursuit. His moral value is totally different from the Christian values and his ambition is limited and sycophantic.

Edward's homosexual relationship with Gaveston and later Spencer would have been regarded as an unnatural affection contradicted to the Church value and system. But the fact that Edward is a homosexual is not the most crucial part and the big concern in this play; it is the disability and irresponsibility of the king that ruins the reign. Mortimer Senior believes that the king's affection for Gaveston will diminish:

The mightiest kings have had their minions:  
Great Alexander loved Hephæstion,  
The conquering Hercules for Hylas wept,  
And for Patroclus stern Achilles drooped.  
And not kings only, but the wisest men:  
The Roman Tully loved Octavius,  
Grave Socrates, wild Alcibiades.  
Then let his grace, whose youth is flexible,  
And promiseth as much as we can wish,  
Freely enjoy that vain, light-headed earl,  
For riper years will wean him from such toys (Marlowe,

2003, pp.427-428).

The young Mortimer thinks that the king's "wanton humor" (Marlowe, 2003, p.428) does not annoy him; but Edward's indulgent affection to his minor and Gaveston's pretensions do. Gaveston's influence on Edward's political issues is indeed enormous (Kirschbaum, 1962, p.80). The play focus on the responsibility and duty of a king in his reign, but Edward the second lacks such ability.

At the same time, this play reveals the concerns of England people about the martial status of their "virgin queen", Elizabeth I. She "belonging to no single man" (Fiedler, 1960, p.28), but the queen can exert great influence on the dissemination of power and property. All state affairs are evoked by Elizabeth I will arouse the social mobility. Leonard Tennenhouse gives a depiction about the England people's reaction to the queen's near marriage to Alencon. People at that time are fearful of the transferring of the England to the French, "for such a fantasy embodies certain elements of the English kinship system and plays them out in the form of a contradiction: a patrilineal system which privileges sex (the first son) and a bilateral system which distributes power through the female (the daughter of the king)" (Tennenhouse, 1986, p.23). Stone analyses the latter as one reason of the female heirs "dismember property" (Stone, 1965, p.170). In the period of early modern, many western countries would face the great problems of land transferral with the exchange of women (Reiter, 1975, pp.157-210). Because of the lacking of loyalty, women become the preys of some wooers in order to empower themselves. So, a king or a queen's personal inclination in love will have a marked impact on the political affairs of a country. Edward the second, in this play, like an unfaithful

daughter or wife, seduced by Frenchman Gaveston, threatens to dismember an estate.

The Crown of a king and his responsibility to his country is inseparable. The Crown is the symbol of divine properties and capabilities of the king and the inalienable right of the kingdom. But Edward's self-willed behaviors throw his people into the fear that he will abuse the rights of the Crown and the land. Edward the second disrupt the indivisible ties among the king, peoples and the realm.

In order to restore the political order of the country, the noblemen decide to remove Gaveston and they think they can do it by right because they deserve their power just from their blood, not from flattering the king. The Earl of Lancaster admits that he could sell the source of his right to oppose Edward and Gaveston: his power is in his property. The noblemen's patrimony is their legitimacy, the symbol that they have inherited from their fathers and have remained loyal to it. Their names are their property. But Gaveston does not share the same right with them. All the property and rights Gaveston endowed are not from his father but through the structurally female the king Edward. So Gaveston cannot really claim to have a head. Edward's homosexual relationship with Gaveston threatens to change or close the traditional channels of power which is a strong connection between the king and his noblemen.

In scene 3 of *Edward II*, the noblemen capture Gaveston and kill him. This is the turning point of the whole story because the death of Gaveston is beyond Edward's expectation. The action of removal is the king's dearest impresses the king and rebuilds the authority and rights of the noblemen. In the game playing of political issues, the noblemen guarantee their own might.

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## 2. THE DEATH OF THE KING

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The removal of Gaveston does not solve the problem of political disorder because the king is lacking the sense of responsibility and ambition. So the noblemen should guard their own rights with great efforts. Upon seeing Edward and Gaveston together, Pembroke says, "Can kingly lions fawn on creeping ants?" (Marlowe, 2003, p.413). But Edward curses the country, "This isle shall fleet upon the ocean, and wander to the unfrequented Inde" (Marlowe, 2003, p.414). Those lines suggest that the country of England is in the status of social disaster. Edward in his metaphor compares the country a ship, breaking loose from its moorings and drifting aimless out to the unknown world. The king himself is the captain of this abdicating ship. Wilson argues that all those images appeared in the lines is the "symbol of chaos, an inversion of nature, which is a token of evil in human nature; now the image is from Edward himself and marks the absence of all sense of kingly duty and moral scruple..."(Wilson, 1969, p.63).

Edward gives out of his kingdom to his minions and deprives himself of all his power. Leo Kirschbaum notices that it “is as though it is impossible for Edward to rule himself” (Kirschbaum, 1962, p.78). In the second round of distributing his powers, Edward goes to the extreme and he says:

Make several kingdoms of this monarchy  
And share it equally amongst you all,  
So I may have some nook or corner left  
To frolic with my dearest Gaveston (Marlowe, 2003,  
p.415).

In the eyes of Edward the second, this county is just “a poor thing: let it float away, be divided up, and let the nobles have the treasury: One nook in which to play with Gaveston would be worth more” (Steane, 1964, p.226). In the Great Chain of natural order, the transgressor would be punished by their ascending, but at the same time, the great ones would receive a more severe penalty because of their descending. Any seemingly trivial and very personal action will cause the changes in nature. So Gaveston is not the main disturbance to the reign and the demerits of the king are the crucial reasons for the disaster of the country. After hearing the news of Gaveston’s expelling, Edward’s anger at Canterbury and his noblemen strengthens his will, and he vows to “reign to be revenge’s of them” (Marlowe, 2003, p.417).

The king’s over-absorbed affection makes him completely incapable of dealing his political affairs as a king. He asks for more than contributes to his country, and he wants to be free of his duty. The reason that he clings to his power is to retain the authority to punish those protesters. When he gets the news of Gaveston’s death, he says:

By earth, the common mother of us all,  
By heaven, and all the moving orbs thereof,  
By this right hand, and by my father’s sword,  
And all the honours’ longing to my crown,  
I will have heads and lives for him, as many  
As I have manors, castles, towns, and towers (Marlowe,  
2003, p.457).

Edward shows little concern about the danger of his county, but he pays too much attention to his homosexual friend. Mortimer once warns him that the French has invaded Normandy and he does not get any response from the king. Edward thinks that the invasion is “A trifle; we’ll expel him when we please” (Marlowe, 2003, p.432). There is not any evidence in this play to show the king’s interest in the welfare of his reign; neither does Edward show any ability to rule or to delegate power wisely. The noblemen do have their grounds for ousting the king from his throne. The noblemen also recite the terrible conditions of the state: the treasury is empty; foreign invaders like Irish and Scottish wander randomly within England’s boundaries, Danes controls the seas; diplomacy is no any further development; the noblemen have objected

the king’s court; the people sing songs about Edward the second’s overthrow and curse his misrule. Kent, the king’s brother, also criticizes Edward:

My lord, I see your love to Gaveston  
Will be the ruin of the realm and you,  
For now the wrathful nobles threaten wars,  
And therefore, brother, banish him for ever. (Marlowe,  
2003, p.440).

The wife of Edward, Isabella, even is faithful to her husband, argues as she leaves the country for the remedy of king’s disability, “Unnatural wars, where subjects brave their king...” (Marlowe, 2003, p.455). But the king at this moment ignores the critical moment of his country which is worsen by the noblemen’s conspiracy and ambition. At last, the king Edward is seized and trapped in the walls of a monastery. With the coming of king’s execution, Edward regrets:

O Gaveston, it is for thee that I am wronged;  
For me, both thou and both the Spencers died,  
And for your sakes a thousand wrongs I’ll take (Marlowe,  
2003, p.490).

Those lines do not let anyone see any sign that the king understands his duty. In fact, he acts only in his own interest and his self-concern is the ultimate symbol of the dissolution of law.

### 3. THE DEATH OF THE NOBLEMAN MORTIMER

In the whole process of fighting between the noblemen and the king, the Mortimers play an important role. There are few cues in the beginning part of this play showing the conspiracy of Mortimer. It seems that they worry about the state of the empire and the good of the country. Mortimer declares in scene 17:

Edward hath done to us, his queen, and land,  
We come in arms to wreck it with the sword,  
That England’s queen in peace may repossess  
Her dignities and honors, and withal  
We may remove these flatterers from the king  
That havocs England’s wealth and treasury (Marlowe, 2003,  
p.469).

Edward is gained of fighting against the noblemen and kills some of them. The queen leaves him and flees to France, and she unites with Mortimer and Kent. This new bind group decides to go back England and remove the king Edward. At this moment, Isabella’s behavior is the symbol of dismember property which is the action every female had the potential to do. She removes the father and the son, and at the same time she deprives the son of his right of succession. When Isabella claims her mother-right over the son, she threatens the whole patrilineal system, and her faithfulness to her husband is disrupted. Her connection with Mortimer also does the harm to the transfer of England crown. At the close part of the play,

Kent recognizes the conspiracy of the noblemen and he recants his allegiance to Mortimer. Kent thinks the noblemen are warring with a legitimate king:

Rain showers of vengeance on my cursed head,

Thou God, to whom in justice it belongs

To punish this unnatural revolt (Marlowe, 2003, p. 471).

But younger Mortimer has persuaded Isabella to the other side, and Isabella believes that their fight is legitimate:

Successful battles gives the God of kings

To them that fight in right and fear his wrath.

Since then successfully we have prevailed,

Thanks be heaven's great architect and you (Marlowe, 2003, p.471).

The queen's statement is as old as war: God will ensure the moral just and pious believers a military victory. Isabella chooses to ignore the wild ambition of Mortimer. Without any consultation of the realm and parliament, Mortimer seizes the king and put it into death. Mortimer reveals his characters as a Machiavellian. To commit the execution of the king, he has hired a professional murderer, Lightborn. The name of murderer here is the metaphor for the devil Lucifer. Mortimer has made a contract with the demon and sold his soul. There is no any evidence of his concerns to the state. It is important to note that Mortimer's power is formed in alliance with a woman, Isabella. He says: "the Queene and Mortimer/ Shall rule the realme, the king, and none rule us/Mine enemies will I plague, my friends advance/And what I list command who dare controwle?" (Marlowe, 2003, p.494). He has successfully wooed the queen.

It seems that Mortimer control the state in a short time, but Edward the third challenges him. With the help of his uncle and Parliament, the child king sentences Mortimer and other noblemen into death. The most symbolic act of Edward III is that he removes his mother. By doing this,

he separates himself from his mother and realigns with his father. He protects the system of patrimony.

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## CONCLUSION

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Christopher Marlowe portrays the king a miserable figure in *Edward II*, but the focus of the dramatist is to display the violence mechanism in the political world. With the description of three important scenes of death, Marlowe reveals the characters of violence mechanism. When the violent behavior lacks any ground for the state, the doomed failure is unavoidable. The violence is the essential part of a political society, but the restoration of political order relies on the implementation capacity of the political leaders.

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