

MARLOWE'S EDWARD II: A CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

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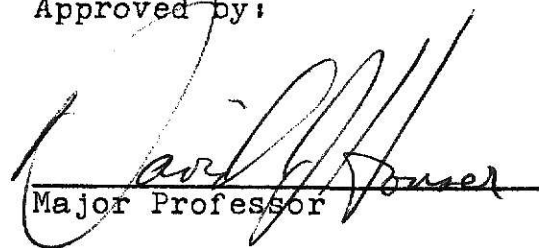
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This paper will analyze Christopher Marlowe's Edward II as the history of a conflict between interests that are totally self-serving and ones that are ultimately self-denying. First, early indications of the motives of Mortimer Junior, Queen Isabella, and King Edward will be examined to show that despite common critical opinion to the contrary, these early motives are consistent with the actions of the characters throughout the play. Then, the later actions of the king and those of his opponents will be considered, and it will be shown how Marlowe makes the motives for these actions contrast sharply with each other. Finally, we shall see by its outcome that the play illustrates the ultimate weakness of self-seeking interests such as Mortimer's and Isabella's--the inability of selfish impulses to withstand the influence on others of such unselfishness as Edward's.

The most common view of Mortimer and Isabella sees a marked and unprepared for shift in their characterization mid-play, an alteration that endows them with a newly emphasized Machiavellianism that later leads them to engineer Edward's defeat and murder.¹ The work of certain critics of Edward II has gone a long way toward correcting these interpretations which in fact are in error. For example, Claude J. Summers accurately sees in the Isabella who early schemes to have

Gaveston murdered "qualities worthy of the Machiavellian accomplice she later becomes."² Taken together, these critics contribute to our understanding of the overall consistency of motive in King Edward, Mortimer, and Isabella by making us examine again the signs that many of the king's actions throughout the play are determined by a uniformly self-sacrificing love and that from the outset Mortimer's and Isabella's actions arise regularly from self-seeking interests. A fresh and comprehensive analysis of the overall consistency and nature of the main characters' central qualities is sorely needed as a means to a complete understanding of the play, for Marlowe has made his main characters so dominated by their opposing qualities that their political conflict becomes a contest between the kinds of motives these characters reveal. The eventual downfall of the Machiavellians is made to imply the defeat of their selfishness.

The play's main characters each exhibit early in the play a puzzling combination of interests that may well cause an audience's sympathies to fluctuate, for their complexity apparently has caused the critical confusion about these characters. For example, while King Edward's need for affection may be granted to be legitimate, his efforts to get it lead to outrageous abuses of his royal prerogatives. Similarly, the barons' interest in eliminating corrupting influences from the court is sullied by the class pride they exhibit in their fiercely jealous contempt for the royal favorites. Mortimer's ready

opposition to corrupting influences is potentially admirable. But his rash manner betrays a menacing pride that is frequently directed at the king himself--actions which adumbrate Mortimer's later cruelty. Isabella's devotion to Edward is, to all appearances, unimpeachable. Yet even it is based on a kind of self-interest that rationalizes her behavior throughout the play: in her early manipulation and subtle scheming can be seen the seeds of her later Machiavellianism.

Of all the varieties of self-interest exhibited early in the play, Edward's is easily the most reprehensible in terms of its immediate consequences.³ But it is the play's chief irony that we later see emerging out of Edward's need for affection a disinterested love that evokes sincere devotion in others --an influence felt ultimately beyond the circle of his court favorites. Edward's love eventually exerts the most powerful influence of the play: it is directly responsible for his son's assertion of authority over Mortimer and Isabella and thus is the key to Mortimer's defeat.

Admittedly, many of Edward's early actions arouse for him little audience sympathy. As the play opens, we have a hint from the king's letter as Gaveston quotes it of the kind of behavior that can be expected from Edward:

My father is deceased. Come Gaveston,

And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend.

(I,1,1-2)⁴

The words "And share the kingdom" jar, because they are a clue

that Edward is not a ruler who fully appreciates the weight of a monarch's responsibility. Possibly, the promise could be construed as a harmlessly exaggerated expression of Edward's affection. But Gaveston's subsequent remarks about Edward's inclination to indulge his tastes without discretion and Edward's choice of such a schemer for a friend imply that Edward could easily make the offer with thoughtless sincerity. After having professed his personal affection for Edward, Gaveston disqualifies himself as a beneficial influence on the king by displaying his own pretensions in his presumptuous disdain of the nobility (I,1,18-19), in his disregard for Edward's subjects (I,1,20-23), and in his casual manipulation of the three poor men who enter and entreat him to use his influence at court to help them (I,1,25-50). Obviously, Edward has, at best, been unwise in his choice of a minion; his friend is an opportunist who will use his relationship with the king to indulge his personal ambition. At worst, as we learn from Gaveston (I,1,50-71), Edward is self-indulgent to an extreme; his love of court entertainment provides his favorite a means for influencing the king:

I must have wanton poets, pleasant wits,
Musicians, that with touching of a string
May draw the pliant king which way I please.

(I,1,51-53)

Because "Music and poetry is his delight" (I,1,54), Gaveston plans to preoccupy the willing king with

Italian masks by night,
Sweet speeches, comedies, and pleasing shows.

(I,1,55-56)

Gaveston also imagines the sensual pageants he will arrange for Edward's daytime entertainment (I,1,57-70). He makes clear that these things "best please his majesty" (I,1,71) and that Edward would willingly preoccupy himself with them day and night. If it is clear that Gaveston wishes to manipulate Edward, it is clear also that he would not be able to do so if Edward had any idea of the importance of his role or had any taste for his duties as king. Given the degree of the king's preoccupation, offering literally to share the kingdom with Gaveston would involve few second thoughts.

Furthermore, homosexuality is a feature of Edward and Gaveston's relationship, and Gaveston's ability to pander to the king's homoeroticism encourages Edward's irresponsibility. Gaveston refers to his letter from the king as "these thy amorous lines" (I,1,6) and declares his desire for Edward's tender embrace (I,1,6-9). Moreover, we are given to understand that Edward's love of court entertainment is based upon a fascination with erotic spectacle: in his plans for sensual court pageants, one of which is to feature a "lovely boy in Dian's shape" (I,1,61) who bears in his hands

an olive tree,

To hide those parts which men delight to see,

(I,1,64-65)

Gaveston claims a thorough knowledge of the king's pleasures (I,1,71). And Gaveston's contemplation here of the boy's delicate loveliness (I,1,62-63) implies that the pageant is designed mainly to appeal to Edward's homoerotic tendencies. Thus, the king's homosexuality is presented in this scene as a corrupting element that helps to render him susceptible to his minion's flattery and to explain the king's lack of concern for duties which would draw his attention away from the pleasures created for him at court.

Together with Edward's basic lack of interest in his kingdom's affairs, his infatuation with Gaveston results in a neglect that has serious consequences for the members of his court and for the life of his kingdom. Insisting upon Gaveston's repeal, Edward becomes embroiled in a dangerously bitter dispute with a group of his most powerful lords (I,1,74ff.). Since they are Gaveston's enemies, the king's demand has the effect of alienating a substantial segment of his military and political support. Not only does Mortimer threaten to abandon Edward in time of need (I,1,82-89), but Lancaster, in a thinly veiled threat, announces that he will sell four of his earldoms in order to secure wages for his soldiers rather than allow Gaveston to remain in the realm (I,1,102-06). Thus, the king alienates those whose loyalty it is his duty to cultivate. And Edward displays a total lack of concern for his kingdom's political and civil stability as he risks civil war to satisfy his desire:

Brother, display my ensigns in the field;
I'll bandy with the barons and the earls,
And either die or live with Gaveston.

(I,1,136-38)

Edward further displays his mediocre talent for statecraft when he enthusiastically hands over to Gaveston as gifts a number of political offices which will easily make his minion the second most powerful man in the kingdom. Gaveston is made simultaneously Lord High Chamberlain, Chief Secretary to the State and to the king, Earl of Cornwall, and King and Lord of Man (I,1,154-56). Such an action, which would effectively exclude the lords from important avenues of prestige and power, would hardly win them to the king or to his minion. Furthermore, Edward alienates the Church, which has the power to absolve the lords of their allegiance to the king, when he seizes the Bishop of Coventry's wealth and makes Gaveston the new bishop. For the sake of his friendship, Edward carelessly arouses political unrest in his kingdom, risks the pain and suffering that civil strife would cause for his subjects, and seriously weakens the legitimate bases of his power--the confidence of his nobles and the sanction of the Church.

Because of his single-minded devotion to Gaveston, Edward also disregards the responsibilities of an important personal commitment. He totally neglects Queen Isabella; as she laments to Mortimer, Gaveston and the king are close and constant companions, and Edward resents the queen's efforts to attract his

attention because he regards them as intrusions (I,ii,49-54). In withholding the affection that is due his queen, Edward not only cruelly rejects her love but also risks destroying the royal marriage, the result of which perhaps could disrupt the orderly succession of Edward's line to the throne. When Edward is forced by the combined efforts of his lords and the Archbishop of Canterbury to exile Gaveston again, he vents his unhappiness on the queen--"Fawn not on me, French strumpet; get thee gone" (I,iv,145)--and accuses her, at Gaveston's unjustifiable suggestion, of engineering the banishment:

Thou art too familiar with that Mortimer,
And by thy means is Gaveston exiled.

(I,iv,154-55)

Edward not only rejects her plea for love but also accuses of infidelity and deceit someone who, at least up until this point in the play, has shown a more unimpeachable devotion to her lord than has any other character.

Lancaster and Mortimer's angry confrontation with the king just before the barons revolt (II,ii,155ff.) reviews effects of Edward's personal indulgence and his neglect of the affairs of state. The lavish court entertainment has exhausted the king's treasury, the king's forces have been beaten in France, the English settlement in Ireland cannot be defended against Irish raiders, the Scots are making inroads into England from the north, the English navy is useless, foreign relations are poor, and, because of the king's preoccupation with

Gaveston, he both neglects the queen and excludes the peers from participation in the government. The results of Edward's abuses are alarming: they consume the country's wealth, reduce its power, render ineffective its domestic security, and weaken its influence abroad.

Given the seriousness of Edward's abuses and the problems he creates for his opponents, their various protests against the king's irresponsibility and efforts to remove Gaveston seem to be commendable acts performed by figures concerned with re-establishing the dignity of the monarchy, the harmony of the court, the peace of the royal marriage, the close-knit relation between the king and his lords, the peace and welfare of the kingdom, and the strength of English military power at home and abroad. Mortimer's implacability, Warwick's and Lancaster's resistance, and Queen Isabella's decision to work for Gaveston's death all provide ready solutions to the problems at hand. As a result of their problems and their efforts to solve them, Mortimer, the barons, and Isabella win an early sympathy that Edward and Gaveston do not.

Sympathy need not carry full approval with it, and certainly Marlowe does much to qualify our response here. But, nevertheless, this sympathy has led to some oversimple critical admiration of Edward's opponents as they exhibit themselves early in the play. For example, William Dinsmore Briggs calls the Mortimer of the early acts "frank, sincere, audacious, high-tempered, reminding us much of Hotspur."⁵ Moelwyn Merchant says

that Mortimer, in his support of the barons and their "stand for order and good government" is "at first engaging in his plain-spoken candour."⁶ Such remarks overlook an aspect of Mortimer's behavior which should check the sympathy he elicits. In the quarrel in the first scene of the play, Mortimer is inexcusably recalcitrant in his aggressive opposition to the king; his manner is unjustified in spite of the king's outrageousness. His lack of respect for the royal person is compounded by the threat to withhold his armed forces from support of the king, an act that would violate his allegiance (I,1,82-89); as he leaves, Mortimer adds a new threat:

Come, uncle, let us leave the brainsick king
And henceforth parley with our naked swords.

(I,1,125-26)

Although the armed resistance would be directed at removing Gaveston and not the king, it would nevertheless amount to treason since it would oppose the king's commands. The scene reveals that Mortimer, along with the barons, would pursue his apparently public-spirited aims with an assertiveness and implacability that would risk serious social disorder. Later in this paper I will consider the pride that Mortimer exhibits here and subsequently and that provides the key to our understanding of his later actions. At this point, it is sufficient to note that his early portrayal is not as wholly sympathetic as argued by some critics.

The injuries done to Isabella early in the play create

for her a sympathy that encourages an oversimple response to her early characterization as well. For example, it is Briggs who says of her that, to begin with, "She is in love with the king, and his happiness is her sole concern."⁷ He supports his claim by citing her original request to the barons that they not oppose the king:

for rather than my lord
Shall be oppressed by civil mutinies,
I will endure a melancholy life,
And let him frolic with his minion.

(I,ii,64-67)

Felix E. Schelling makes a similar observation: "Isabella is at first weak and affectionate, content to endure her loveless life in quiet and uncomplaining suffering."⁸ Yet she soon becomes embroiled in a competition with Gaveston for the king's attention, a competition that reveals that she is more intent on securing her own desire than allowing the king his. After Edward cruelly rejects her, accusing her of infidelity and demanding that she be instrumental in repealing Gaveston's second banishment, she is concerned in her soliloquy primarily with her own misery (I,iv,170-81). And it is significant that she considers scheming her only alternative:

I must entreat him, I must speak him fair,
And be a means to call home Gaveston.

(I,iv,183-84)

Here she declares her willingness to manipulate events and

people in order to regain for herself the king's attention. Later in the scene, her suggestion to Mortimer and the other barons that Gaveston be recalled again so that he may be murdered conveniently shows her less concerned with Edward's happiness than with removing any obstacle in her path to his attention. Isabella's affection for Edward is based on a kind of self-interest which does not agree entirely with the selfless motives ascribed to her by some critics. Of course, it is not difficult to sympathize with Isabella for her predicament and to understand her desire to dispose of Gaveston. In these early scenes she is still devoted to her husband. But the self-interest she displays and her manner of protecting it are not inconsistent with her later Machiavellianism.

There is no question, then, that Edward treats his opponents shabbily. But it would be a mistake to sympathize so much with Edward's opponents as victims of his outrages that we divert our attention from aspects of their portrayal early in the play that could provide us with an understanding of their portrayal later. A number of critics have committed this very error and see little connection between their early impressions of Mortimer and Isabella and the cruel monsters these characters develop into. They are unconvinced, for example, of the dramatic credibility of Mortimer's apparent transformation from a ready opponent of corrupting influences to a ruthless Machiavellian. To Briggs, the early portrait of "frank, sincere, audacious, high-tempered" Mortimer contradicts Marlowe's later portrayal

of him. After Gaveston's death, Mortimer becomes "the queen's lover, a traitor to the king, a crafty dissimulator, a cruel and treacherous murderer."⁹ In this case, as in others, a critic has observed what he considers a radical change in the dramatic portrait of Mortimer: "Here is a problem in the degeneration of character that Marlowe appears hardly to have solved with dramatic success" (p. cvii). In the introduction to their edition of the play Charlton and Waller voice a similar concern: we see the later Mortimer, "But we remember the rebellious Hotspur-like figure at the beginning of the play . . . and his chivalrous attention to the neglected Queen; and we wonder whether this egregious villain can be the same man. Within the apparent time-limits of the play he obviously cannot be. . . ."¹⁰ Charlton and Waller explain that Marlowe has compressed Mortimer's "degeneration of twenty-three years" (p. 56), as described in Marlowe's chronicle source, into too brief a span for the change to appear dramatically credible. But since the "change" does seem to have some historical basis in fact, Charlton and Waller are willing to concede it as a "melancholy possibility" (p. 57). This observation may provide interesting historical commentary, but it does not offer a satisfying consolation for a development that--for them, at least--does not seem to work effectively on stage. F. P. Wilson makes no attempt to reconcile his conflicting impressions of Mortimer, nor does he regard them as evidence of a flaw in the playwright's craft. Considering both Mortimer and Isabella, Wilson remarks that "There is

change, certainly, rather than development, but which dramatist of this date attempted to show development . . . ? We must not ask of an Elizabethan play what we ask of a naturalistic play."¹¹ According to Wilson, the "change" suits Marlowe's purpose in directing more pity and sympathy toward Edward once Mortimer has defeated him (p. 95). However differently these critics approach this "change" in the portrayal of Mortimer, each takes for granted that the dramatic portrait of Mortimer displays marked discontinuity.

As with Mortimer, some critical impressions of the Isabella of the early acts are at odds with later impressions. Briggs compares the Isabella who loves the king with the cruel Machiavellian: "If we turn to the latter part of the play, we find a total change, and Isabel has become Mortimer's paramour and his furtive accomplice in the deed of blood" (p. cviii). Charlton and Waller find that "So much devotion and so cruel a desertion, so much gentleness at the beginning and such callous hypocrisy at the end, go badly together . . ." (p. 47), and they suggest that at least part of the problem is the effect of the same time-compression that may have created problems in Marlowe's handling of Mortimer (p. 47). As in the case of Mortimer, these critics base their remarks on the belief that Marlowe's portrayal of Isabella is uneven and displays a noticeable lack of continuity.

It is possible to have these contradictory impressions of Mortimer and Isabella if one is not alert to consistently

portrayed aspects of their behavior that provide a better understanding of their actions throughout the play. By looking closely at the Mortimer and Isabella of the first scenes, we can begin to trace in both a steady development of traits that, given the dramatic circumstances, ripen perceptibly, with imminently plausible continuity, into the ruthless and furtive duplicity we witness toward the end of the play. Having once established that the Mortimer and Isabella of the early scenes are indeed consistent with the Machiavellians who arrange the king's murder, we will be in a better position to understand the play's ultimate judgment of the kinds of self-interest they indulge. It will become more and more obvious that, while Edward remains faulty, his indulgences are less aggressively vicious than the pursuits of Mortimer and Isabella. The play directs our attention away from the homosexual aspect of Edward's liaison with Gaveston and toward the fact that the relationship fulfills the king's sincere need for affection. This need generates a selfless devotion to his intimates that sets him off conspicuously from Mortimer and Isabella. Marlowe juxtaposes from the beginning of the play one kind of personal interest with another, and by observing the ultimate effects of both, we will be better able to understand the play's comment on the value of a selfishness that is ultimately not able to hold its own against Edward's ability to inspire love and devotion in others--an ability that is finally the key to Mortimer and Isabella's downfall.

That Mortimer's rash manner in the early scenes stems from pride is remarked by Clifford Leech, who notices that Mortimer is incensed at Gaveston not so much out of concern for the kingdom's welfare as he is from a pride that causes him to resent a commoner who aspires to the prestige of rank.¹² Charles G. Masinton makes much the same observation about Mortimer and believes that it is his pride that is the primary impetus for his rebellion against the king.¹³ As can be seen in his several confrontations with the king in the early scenes, Mortimer directs his irreverent protests directly at the king with a vehemence that reveals a personal anger stemming largely from the pride observed by Leech and Masinton. We have seen already that Mortimer angrily threatens the king in the first scene. In the following scene, when Warwick, Lancaster, and the two Mortimers are reacting with dismay to news that the king has heaped upon Gaveston a number of political offices, Mortimer is easily the most angry. He is the first to suggest direct action--gathering an army to commence a rebellion (I,ii, 16). A little later, as he tries to console the rejected queen, he makes clear again that he is not unwilling to depose the king for the sake of getting rid of Gaveston: before the lords fail, he vows,

The king shall lose his crown, for we have power,
And courage too, to be revenged at full.

(I,ii,59-60)

At this, he and the others are checked by the Archbishop of

Canterbury (I,ii,61). And even Lancaster, who moments earlier had vowed to kill both the king and his minion if necessary (I,ii,5-6), is dissuaded from the direct action against the king that he knows would amount to treason. But Mortimer is still inclined to fight, as can be seen as he leaps at what he considers a justification for rebellion: given the occasion that Edward rejects his counselors' confirmation of Gaveston's second banishment, "Then we may lawfully revolt from him" (I,ii,73).

Of course, all the lords in this group are spoiling for a fight if nonviolent means fail, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that Mortimer is simply the most outspoken of the group--the youngest and possibly, therefore, the most impulsive. But his actions in the scene in which the lords force Edward to sign the order of banishment again gives us the impression that Mortimer's impulsiveness is mingled with a menacing pride. Before the king arrives, Mortimer subscribes to the order; we can imagine the vigorous strokes with which he signs it:

The name of Mortimer shall fright the king,

Unless he be declined from that base peasant.

(I,iv,6-7)

Offended, along with the other lords, that Edward allows Gaveston to be seated at the king's side in a position more appropriately the queen's, Mortimer immediately calls for a rebellion in words that suggest more that his pride has been offended than that he is concerned, for the queen's sake, about a flagrant

violation of her right;

Their downfall is at hand, their forces down.

We will not thus be faced and over-peered.

(I,iv,18-19)

That Mortimer is more energetic in his protests than the other lords is certainly a mark of his youth, but that he is more consistently vengeful and menacing indicates a deeply held resentment, both for the commoner who would "over-peer" him and for the king who would elevate such a commoner.

As with Mortimer, our early sympathy for Isabella is qualified by our knowledge of her selfishness, and, again, these are things that we comprehend immediately, not in hindsight. We are not immune to her unhappiness; yet we see signs in her efforts to draw the king's attention from Gaveston not only that her love is self-centered but also that accompanying her self-concern is a talent for deception and manipulation. In the scene where Edward demands that she bring about Gaveston's repeal, she is left alone to express her bitterness and misery in soliloquy:

Would, when I left sweet France and was embarked,
That charming Circes, walking on the waves,
Had changed my shape, or at the marriage-day
The cup of Hymen had been full of poison,
Or with those arms that twined about my neck
I had been stifled, and not lived to see
The king my lord thus to abandon me.

(I,iv,171-77)

This is altogether unlike the affectionate submissiveness we observe in Act 1, scene 2. At this moment she is preoccupied with her own pain:

I will fill the earth
With ghastly murmur of my sighs and cries.

(I,iv,178-79)

Edward's heartless rejection understandably grieves her, but when compared to her previous meekness, the forcible impatience of this outburst is startling. We realize that this is the first time in the play that Isabella is alone onstage; previously we have seen her only as she attempts to exert an influence on others. In Act 1, scene 2, for example, she gently begs the lords not to engage in open rebellion, and just before her soliloquy, she appeals meekly to Edward for sympathy and love:

Witness the tears that Isabella sheds,
Witness this heart, that sighing for thee breaks,
How dear my lord is to poor Isabel.

(I,iv,164-66)

That she decides so quickly in her soliloquy that she must entreat Edward, "speak him fair" (I,iv,183), and somehow engineer Gaveston's repeal before she can hope to influence the king--a scheming that follows immediately an expression of bitter frustration--indicates possibly that our earlier impressions of Isabella result from a familiar practice. There is a hint that speaking gently and fairly is her characteristic way of

exerting influence, that she can easily conceal her resentment and appear more modest and restrained when it suits her purposes --the better to draw sympathy and, when necessary, assistance from those who can relieve her predicament. This soliloquy gives us our first clue that Isabella's devotion to the king is mingled with a degree of selfishness that conditions her methods for influencing him and others and that her selfishness breeds a personal resentment whenever her methods fail, as they do with Edward.

Isabella confirms our suspicions almost immediately when, having realized that she cannot sway Edward, she next goes to work on Mortimer. The lords enter, discover the cause for the queen's mourning, but steadfastly refuse to grant her request that Gaveston be repealed. We have seen in their previous meeting (I,ii,47ff.) that Isabella can use her influence to draw sympathy from "gentle" Mortimer and a vow that Gaveston will be exiled. Now she hopes to persuade Mortimer to influence the lords to recall Gaveston:

And therefore, as thou lovest and tender'st me,
Be thou my advocate unto these peers.

(I,iv,211-12)

In his recent article,¹⁴ Claude J. Summers has recognized the importance of understanding Isabella's plea as it relates to the Machiavellian she becomes later. Summers argues persuasively that it is Isabella's idea that recalling Gaveston will provide the lords with an easy opportunity to have him murdered. Seeing

that the other barons are adamant, Isabella draws Mortimer aside, taking advantage of her power over him (I,iv,225). After their conversation, Mortimer is completely converted, ready to persuade the others with the plan. Considering the degree of Mortimer's opposition moments before, it is likely that the idea would not have occurred to him had not the queen introduced it. Summers is convinced that "Isabella, the patient, mistreated wife who mouths pious clichés, is the authoress of this cruel and ruthless scheme . . ." (p. 309). Surely this treachery is at odds with the long-suffering meekness displayed earlier. Faced with the lords' determination, Isabella contrives a scheme that she knows will please them all; realizing the extent of their hatred for Gaveston, she manipulates it until they grant her wish, becoming, as it were, her instruments. Summers has identified accurately the importance of this scene: "her ruthlessness and subtlety here adumbrate her later attitude toward Edward: 'I would hee were killed, so it were not by my meanes' (2188) V,11,457" (p. 310). The scene also gives us our first full look at her talent for manipulation, hinted at earlier. "Her action here," says Summers, "indicates that Isabella is never the complete innocent she is commonly reputed to be in the beginning of the play" (p. 310). Most important, the scene reveals in her a selfishness that is capable of great cruelty, and it is by exposing her methods in this scene that "Marlowe early prepares us for Isabella's ultimate Machiavellianism" (p. 310).

Other interpretations, which have largely overlooked the

significance of this scene, have been kinder to Isabella. They regard Edward as bearing most of the blame for the queen's eventual complicity with Mortimer and see her mainly as the pathetic victim of Edward's repeated cruelty, a likely candidate for conversion to the cause of one who shows for her a greater regard. J. B. Steane sees no real incongruity between what he believes to be a portrait of the king's selflessly devoted wife in the beginning scenes and the fact that she becomes his opponent later in the play: "One sees the process whereby the queen's fidelity is worn down, strained beyond endurance. . . . She is a poor, sad woman, having just about as much loyalty and feeling as most people have, yet required to bear more than a non-heroic nature can endure."¹⁵ Clifford Leech believes that Isabella possesses an unselfish affection for Edward, but that it steadily diminishes until the moment when she takes her first direct action against him. Leech considers her actions in Act 2, scene 4, where Edward and Gaveston prepare to make their separate escapes after the barons' successful attack upon Tynemouth castle. Before departing, the king once again cruelly rejects Isabella (II,iv,13-14). Later, Isabella betrays Gaveston's escape route to the pursuing barons. Although they are in pursuit of Gaveston and not the king, Isabella's disclosure amounts to a betrayal of Edward. Moments later, Isabella expresses in soliloquy her growing regard for Mortimer:

So well hast thou deserved, sweet Mortimer,

As Isabel could live with thee forever.

(II,iv,59-60)

At the same time resolving once more to "importune" (II,iv, 63) Edward, "she hesitates," says Leech, "between a new loyalty and an old hope to regain Edward's love . . ." (p. 190).

According to Leech, this is the moment in which the real shift in her loyalty occurs: "This is the turning-point for her, though she does not know it yet. It is psychologically right that the moment of crisis should come without her realising it" (p. 191). For Leech, the change is so convincing that it is "one of the most perceptive things in Marlowe's writing" (p. 191).

Thus Steane and Leech deal with those who argue that Marlowe does not convincingly portray a change from an innocent Isabella to Edward's cruel persecutor. But in dealing with them, Steane and Leech pay too little attention to the scene in which Isabella and the barons scheme to have Gaveston murdered. In that scene and repeatedly thereafter she is no innocent. Marlowe makes her not a hapless victim who is driven finally to accept affection from someone else but a conscious manipulator. And there is in her scheming a self-interest that grows finally to outweigh her allegiance to Edward.

Now that we have taken a closer look at the kinds of self-interest which motivate Mortimer and Isabella, we are in a better position to understand which aspects of Edward's behavior are to be distinguished from those of his opponents. The

source of Edward's early errors is, of course, his love relationship with Gaveston; the king's irresponsibility on this score seldom fails to elicit censure from critics of the play. But a number of critics have noted that Edward is not vicious or malevolent in his outrages;¹⁶ for the most part, his errors are not premeditated but are more the result of a careless neglect. That he has little relish for his kingly duties does indeed demand a stern disapproval, but that there can be found in his personal relations with Gaveston--and later, with Baldock and Spencer--an unselfish devotion which grows strong and unshakable also demands that he be understood not exclusively in his role as king. Although his ineptitude is early exposed whenever his public responsibilities make demands upon him, it is not as a public figure that he exerts his influence in the play. As we shall see later, Edward not only offers a solidly loyal personal affection to his friends; he has the ability to convert them from self-aggrandizing flatterers to faithful companions who die rather than abandon him. And it is this ability to command affection and devotion from individuals that exerts the strongest influence of the play; it is ultimately greater than the cold political machinations of Mortimer and Isabella, because it inspires those who finally depose the Machiavellians. A consideration of the kind of devotion he offers his minions will prepare us for a better understanding of the force of its influence on others.

In his first meeting with Gaveston in the play, Edward

abuses his royal prerogatives so outrageously that considering his actions with even the slightest degree of tolerance becomes a risky business. The freedom with which he hands over offices to Gaveston (I,i,154-56,194) reveals one of the weaknesses of his reign: he dispenses power as carelessly as he wields it. But after we have censured him for his irresponsibility, it is not impossible to discover in the scene signs--albeit obscured by his boyishness and immaturity--of his sincere and unselfish devotion to Gaveston.

We notice that Edward commits his errors naively; his idea is not deliberately to cause mischief in the kingdom but to honor his friend. As David M. Bevington observes, Edward "is never regarded as vicious, but only misguided, inexperienced, and pleasure-seeking."¹⁷ It is possible to regard Edward's gift of rank and prestige to Gaveston as simply an overenthusiastic extension of his initial action upon meeting his long-exiled friend; as Gaveston greets Edward, the king generously dispenses with formalities in an effort at once to put Gaveston more at ease and to remove the personal barriers that differences in rank can create between them:

Kiss not my hand;

Embrace me, Gaveston, as I do thee.

Why shouldst thou kneel? Knowest thou not who I am?

Thy friend, thyself, another Gaveston!

(I,i,140-43)

Considering the enthusiasm with which Edward grants Gaveston

free access to his own affections, the move to elevate his favorite's rank can be regarded as a similar attempt to remove barriers by using the hierarchy of political power to place Gaveston in greater personal proximity. Thus, an act which reveals explicitly Edward's inexperience and lack of responsibility as a king stems at the same time from a basically generous and unselfish impulse, even granting the pleasure he derives from Gaveston's presence.

Edward commits further errors by lavishing upon Gaveston more honor, power, and wealth. Granted, the king's lack of caution and discretion here makes us uneasy, especially when we consider that earlier Gaveston describes his plans to "draw the pliant king which way I please" (I,1,53). Edward unwittingly plays into his flatterer's hands, but from a naivety that is an outstanding mark of his love for Gaveston. Edward's gifts, the misguided and hasty results of his boyish enthusiasm for Gaveston's return, are open signs of his own happiness and never bear the mark of any ulterior motive:

If for these dignities thou be envied,
 I'll give thee more; for but to honor thee,
 Is Edward pleased with kingly regiment.
 Fearst thou thy person? Thou shalt have a guard.
 Wantest thou gold? Go to my treasury.
 Wouldst thou be loved and feared? Receive my seal;
 Save or condemn, and in our name command
 Whatso thy mind affects or fancy likes.

(I,1,163-70)

The rapidity with which Edward grants these privileges reveals the hasty over-generosity of his enthusiasm; and, again, the gifts are designed to create a greater intimacy between the king and his minion by putting them on a more equal footing. Edward is entirely open in his regard for Gaveston, and he has made clear that his gifts are honest signs of a genuine affection:

Thy worth, sweet friend, is far above my gifts;
Therefore, to equal it, receive my heart.

(I,i,161-62)

Similarly, in Edward's awarding of the Bishop of Coventry's office and wealth to Gaveston we see that the king's desire for revenge upon those who would interfere with his love relationship is more willfully petty than it is malevolent. Gaveston seizes the bishop and moves to kill him, but Edward intervenes:

No, spare his life, but seize upon his goods.
Be thou lord bishop and receive his rents,
And make him serve thee as thy chaplain.

(I,i,193-95)

The king's suggestion shows that he is more intent on humiliating the bishop than he is on taking savage revenge by having him killed; at the same time, this act is yet another of Edward's efforts to accord Gaveston honor, wealth, and power that will put their relationship on a more even footing. Marlowe makes Edward's lack of ultimate malice apparent by setting it by

Gaveston's determination to do away with the bishop; despite Edward's desire simply to humiliate Coventry, Gaveston is determined to use this gift of power to carry out a grim retaliation: "He shall to prison and there die in bolts" (I, 1,197).

In this scene, Edward is so much the ebullient juvenile that his errors can illustrate his immaturity without really obscuring the fact that he does everything solely for the benefit of his friend. To the extent, then, that he wishes to honor Gaveston, he acts upon a basically generous impulse. Edward's immaturity in this scene helps explain some of his other actions--his constant wrangling with the barons is an expression of willful impatience with those who would interfere with his friendship; even his rejection of Isabella is less the result of deliberate cruelty than it is his impatience with one who presents yet another obstacle to his relationship with Gaveston. Since Isabella times her appeals for the very moments in which efforts to separate Gaveston and Edward appear likely to succeed (Act 1, scene 4, ll. 144ff. and Act 2, scene 4, ll. 13ff.), it is understandable, given the degree of Edward's immaturity, that he should make such impatient remarks and that he should recklessly thrash about, under the pressure of the moment, to place more blame for his predicament on the queen than she deserves; for example, as Gaveston and Edward prepare their escapes from Tynemouth, Edward makes his farewell:

King Edward. Farewell, sweet Gaveston, and farewell,
niece.

Queen Isabella. No farewell to poor Isabel thy queen?

King Edward. Yes, yes, for Mortimer, your lover's sake.

(II,iv,12-14)

For all his careless willfulness and its results, Edward's dedication to his friendship with Gaveston is measured at this point by the extent to which he grants Gaveston free access to his affections and by his ready resistance to all attempts to have his friend removed. Edward displays similar dedication later as he resists attempts to oust Baldock and Spencer. L. J. Mills has accurately identified the most significant aspect of Edward's affection for his favorites. Although Edward is "wilful, and unwisely determined to cherish his friends (who do not merit it),"¹⁸ Mills understands that "His chief virtue is his loyalty to those whom he has chosen as friends; it is a genuine, absorbing loyalty and love, and it actuates his behavior on all occasions" (p. 27).¹⁹ And we see that Edward is able to sustain this loyalty later, even in his most difficult moments; after he has been deposed and subjected to terrible physical and emotional suffering, he reaffirms a commitment to his friends, even after their deaths, that reveals a calmer, more mature understanding of the depth of his own devotion:

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.
 The Spencers' ghosts, wherever they remain,
 Wish well to mine; then tush, for them I'll die.

(V,iii,41-45)

We see that the boyish recklessness of his earlier generosity has grown into a mature willingness to accept for the sake of his friends the loss of things much more precious to him than his gifts of wealth and influence, namely the loss of his crown, and, with it, his life. Discussing Marlowe's treatment of Edward's love for his favorites and the king's "pathetic attempt to base a life on love rather than policy,"²⁰ Leonora Leet Brodwin writes of Edward's new understanding: "But though he has no desire for life after the loss of his precious sovereignty, he is yet able to accept this greatest loss because it has been the price of a dedication to love which he still affirms as the highest value of his existence . . ." (p. 154). Thus, Edward displays early in the play a basic generosity that matures into a completely selfless devotion to his friends.

It is necessary at this point to consider some criticisms that find little or nothing in the play to redeem Edward for his carelessness and irresponsibility. A prime example of this is Charlton and Waller's heavy castigation.²¹ These editors' contention that there is not much to admire in Edward suggests that they are a little too sternly disinclined to grant even a modicum of respect to Edward for his loyalty to his friends. Other critics discuss Edward's downfall and horrifying murder

as punishment for his errors; according to them, the play proceeds roughly along the lines of medieval de casibus tragedy. Douglas Cole, for example, sees Edward's suffering at the hands of Mortimer and Isabella as retribution for his offenses:

"The suffering of Edward from the time of his capture is the suffering of a lost soul, a soul condemned to a kind of material damnation which deprives it of all dignity, power and stature it was once intended to enjoy."²² And the dramatization, says Cole, of Edward's emotional suffering over his indignities and his lost crown--his "extreme self-pity and pathetic lamentations [e.g., V,v,67-69]" (p. 174)--marks an advance in Marlowe's art; Cole claims that the king's outbursts represent "The De Casibus contrast between past glory and present misery" (pp. 173-74) and that Marlowe thus infuses in Edward's actions elements of the de casibus formula without resorting entirely to its conventions.²³ And Edward is all the more blameworthy, says Cole, for not admitting his role in his own downfall (p. 178): shortly after surrendering his crown, Edward complains,

Yet how have I transgressed,

Unless it be with too much clemency?

(V,1,122-23)

Charles G. Masinton understands Edward's suffering, particularly in the manner of his execution, as symbolic punishment for his damning homosexuality.²⁴

But to regard Edward's suffering solely as punishment or divine retribution for evil deeds is either to misinterpret

or overlook entirely the fact that Edward's suffering and death are the work of Mortimer and Isabella, who have clear interests of their own in doing away with the king. Hearing that Kent is plotting to free Edward, Isabella shows fear for the safety of Mortimer, herself, and the young prince (whom, incidentally, Edward loves dearly):

But, Mortimer, as long as he survives,
What safety rest for us or for my son?

(V,ii,42-43)

Shortly before he commissions Lightborn to kill Edward, Mortimer considers his alternatives:

The king must die, or Mortimer goes down;
The commons now begin to pity him.

(V,iv,1-2)

Edward's murder is clearly not an act of punishment; it is rather a calculated move on the part of Mortimer to protect his and the queen's interests. And it is unlikely that Marlowe conceives of Mortimer as an unwitting instrument for God's punishment of Edward. Nowhere is this idea developed; rather, attention is focused primarily on the characters' motives for dealing with one another. Edward himself denies emphatically the notion that his suffering is a form of divine retribution; given the poignancy of the moment in which he makes his remarks--he is bidding farewell to his beloved favorites, from whom he is being forcibly separated--we are moved to concede the justice of his observation:

King Edward. Spencer, ah, sweet Spencer; thus then
must we part.

Spencer Junior. We must, my lord, so will the angry
heavens.

King Edward. Nay, so will hell and cruel Mortimer;
The gentle heavens have not to do in this.

(IV,vi,72-75)

In discussing the connection between power and suffering in Edward II, Clifford Leech considers the characters and the pressures that they exert on one another the primary interest in the play (p. 182). Leech's approach focuses on characters' actions and motives and is right to do so since Marlowe provides us with much of this kind of evidence that must be taken into account. By measuring these motives one against another, the play's judgment of individual characters and the kinds of interests they represent becomes clear.

We have seen that all three main characters indulge their personal interests early in the play--Mortimer his pride, Isabella her selfishness, and Edward, with careless generosity, his feeling for Gaveston. As the action proceeds, we become increasingly aware of ever sharper contrasts between Edward's qualities and those of his opponents. We discover that Mortimer's class pride is the mark of a selfish ambition that grows more and more ruthless and cruel. Isabella continues to exercise her talent for deception, growing more pitiless in the process. Edward, however, offers his favorites an unselfish love that

converts them from knavery to unswerving loyalty.

As the play progresses, Mortimer gives more indications that his rebelliousness in the early scenes results from an offended pride. When he schemes with the nobles to murder Gaveston, he considers rebellion as an alternative for overcoming the favorite; in such a plan, says Mortimer, the barons can count upon the support of the commons, because the people

cannot brook a night-grown mushrump,
Such a one as my lord of Cornwall is,
Should bear us down of the nobility.

(I,iv,284-86)

At the end of the first act, we hear Mortimer himself explain to his uncle that he resents above all the elevation of a commoner; he is less disturbed by Gaveston's personal behavior or by the fact that such a concentration of power in one person --even a true-born nobleman--is unwise:

But this I scorn, that one so basely born
Should by his sovereign's favor grow so pert
And riot it with the treasure of the realm.

(I,iv,402-04)

His uncle counsels him, since the king and the barons are enjoying for the moment a rare peace, to serve Edward loyally and humor his caprice; Mortimer consents yet vows never to allow himself to be controlled by Gaveston:

But whiles I have a sword, a hand, a heart,
I will not yield to any such upstart.

(I,iv,421-22)²⁵

Later, after the barons' attack upon Tynemouth, Gaveston is captured, and here Mortimer displays the kind of cruelty and heartlessness that his pride generates. Gaveston understands that his death is imminent, yet he is given hope that he might have a last meeting with Edward before he is executed. Arundel, sent by Edward to request the meeting, volunteers to serve as the barons' hostage until Gaveston's return, but Mortimer at first callously denies Gaveston's pathetic hope by refusing the request:

Mortimer Junior. It is honorable in thee to offer
this,

But for we know thou art a noble gentleman,
We will not wrong thee so, to make away
A true man for a thief.

Gaveston. How mean'st thou, Mortimer? That is over-
base.

Mortimer Junior. Away, base groom, robber of king's
renown.

Question with thy companions and thy mates.

(II,v,67-73)

Mortimer makes clear that his injured class pride will permit no sympathy for one he considers exceedingly inferior in rank. He agrees to the request only after Pembroke has succeeded in persuading Lancaster and Warwick.

After Mortimer's own capture, we learn that his pride extends well beyond his self-esteem and regard for his preemi-

nence as a noble; it is the mark of a man of considerable ambition. As Edward commits him to the Tower, Mortimer declares

What, Mortimer, can ragged stony walls

Immure thy virtue that aspires to heaven?

No, Edward, England's scourge, it may not be;

Mortimer's hope surmounts his fortune far.

(III,iii,72-75)

As he defies Edward and the restriction the king has placed upon his freedom, we realize that Mortimer's earlier menacing threats, his scorn of Gaveston, his cruelty toward and lack of sympathy for a beaten opponent are all symptoms of an ambition that will admit no constrictions. Even after the original objects of his indignation have been removed--Gaveston, Spencer, and Baldock--Mortimer persists in resisting Edward, bent on seizing the king's power for himself.

In his subsequent actions, Mortimer gives further signs of the ruthlessness of his ambition. Although he leads his and the queen's forces against Edward's armies ostensibly to restore Queen Isabella's privileges and to rid the court of Baldock and Spencer, we see soon after Edward's capture and his favorites' executions that the king is being forced to give up his crown (V,1,36ff.). In the next scene, Mortimer manipulates the queen by persuading her to have the prince crowned king and himself named protector so that their power will be more secure. We see more and more that Mortimer is in control, maneuvering himself into a position of absolute

power through manipulation, cruelty, and deceit. Hearing that Kent may be plotting to free Edward, Mortimer charges Matrevis and Gurney to move the king from place to place so that only Mortimer and the queen should know his whereabouts. And, in an act of gratuitous cruelty, Mortimer directs Matrevis and Gurney to abuse the king:

And by the way, to make him fret the more,
 Speak curstly to him; and in any case
 Let no man comfort him if he chance to weep,
 But amplify his grief with bitter words.

(V,ii,62-65)

Once he has executed Kent for attempting Edward's rescue and commissioned the sinister Lightborn to murder the king by such sly means that Mortimer himself will not be implicated, he is satisfied that his aspiration to absolute power has been fulfilled:

The prince I rule, the queen do I command,
 And with a lowly congé to the ground,
 The proudest lords salute me as I pass;
 I seal, I cancel, I do what I will.
 Feared am I more than loved; let me be feared,
 And when I frown, make all the court look pale.
 I view the prince with Aristarchus' eyes,
 Whose looks were as a breeching to a boy.
 They thrust upon me the protectorship
 And sue to me for that that I desire.

.

Now all is sure; the queen and Mortimer
 Shall rule the realm, the king, and none rule us.
 Mine enemies will I plague, my friends advance,
 And what I list command who dare control?

(V,iv,48-57,65-68)

Mortimer continually acts from a selfish pride that will not tolerate restrictions on his personal ambition. When his power as a noble is threatened by the elevation of a commoner, he rebels; when he is completely stripped of his power and privileges by King Edward, he engineers, through ruthless cruelty and manipulation, the king's downfall and murder and his own ascent to absolute power. The menacing pride he displays in the early scenes is entirely consistent with his pitiless Machiavellianism in the later scenes.

Isabella's appeal to the barons in Act 1, scene 4 for Gaveston's return has shown us how willing she is to scheme to get her own way. And we learn as the play proceeds that the heartless duplicity she displays in that scene is for her a familiar technique; she employs it first against Gaveston and then directly against Edward. Her initially pathetic appeals for affection look progressively like a self-seeking desire for attention; ultimately, this consideration outweighs whatever loyalty she may have had for Edward, and she transfers her affection to Mortimer. When this happens, she employs against Edward--now her opponent--her familiar methods with

increasing ruthlessness and cruelty.

Early in the play, Isabella repeatedly protests her innocence, and, up until the moment that she proposes her plan for Gaveston's murder to Mortimer and the barons, we are more or less impressed with her sincerity. Thereafter, her protests, we know, are hollow, designed to conceal from the king that she is actively engaged in efforts to remove Gaveston. This is evident in the scene in which she denies to Edward that she has conspired with the barons, even after she has proposed to them the plan for Gaveston's murder; Isabella enters with others moments after the angry barons--now determined to fight the king--have departed to prepare their armies:

Queen Isabella. My lord, 'tis thought the earls are
up in arms.

King Edward. Ay, and 'tis likewise thought you favor
'em.

Queen Isabella. Thus do you still suspect me without
cause?

(II,11,223-25)

When we consider her conspiracy with the barons to recall Gaveston from Ireland, we know that the denial is designed to conceal from Edward her sympathy for the barons' activities. Although she is still concerned at this point primarily with Gaveston's removal, that she disguises her sympathy prepares us for her later complicity in Edward's defeat. Later, we understand from Levune that Isabella's efforts in France to

gain support for her plans to remove Edward from power are the results of a well-concealed conspiracy:

That's it these barons and the subtle queen
Long leveled at.

(III,iii,88-89)

Once Mortimer and Isabella return from France and defeat Edward, we learn from Kent that whatever pity she may display for the fallen king is pretense:

Mortimer

And Isabel do kiss while they conspire;
And yet she bears a face of love forsooth.

(IV,v,21-23)

She is in league with Mortimer in his struggle for absolute power, but she conceals their purpose by claiming to act unselfishly:

I rue my lord's ill-fortune; but alas,
Care of my country called me to this war.

(IV,v,73-74)

Later, after she has agreed to Mortimer's plan for having himself named protector over young Prince Edward, whom they will force to accept the crown, a messenger enters with news of the imprisoned King Edward, and Isabella pretends a fine sympathy for her husband: "Alas, poor soul, would I could ease his grief" (V,ii,26). But her cruel deceit is exposed when she is again alone with Mortimer; when he suggests that Edward be killed, she replies "I would he were, so it were not by my

means" (V,ii,45). Moments later, still playing the unwilling conqueror, she charges Matrevis to

Commend me humbly to his majesty,
And tell him that I labor all in vain
To ease his grief and work his liberty,
And bear this [a ring] as witness of my love.

(V,ii,69-72)

Kent enters next, and because they suspect him of sympathizing with Edward, the queen advises Mortimer to pretend that all is well (V,ii,79). Kent, however, is able to discern their dissimulation (V,ii,86). The queen, still pretending sympathy for Edward, tries to persuade the young prince to accept the crown, and at the suggestion that Edward is dead, she pretends shock at the idea: "No, God forbid" (V,ii,99); this is clearly a dissimulation of the attitude she reveals moments before (l. 45).

Thus, not only are we warned of Isabella's cruel treachery, we are given repeated looks at her attempts to deceive and manipulate. She easily consents to Edward's murder, but almost immediately sends by Matrevis and Gurney a message to the king that might cruelly beget his hopes. She is interested solely in maintaining the power she shares with Mortimer. We understand that her earlier suggestion that Gaveston be recalled and murdered is our first substantial glimpse of a selfishness that reveals itself more clearly as we witness her growing capacity for deceit and cruelty.

Set against the selfishness of Mortimer and Isabella, Edward's loyalty to his friends stands in sharp contrast. We have considered that he offers them a wholly unselfish love and that he is faithful even in the most difficult circumstances. That Edward gives this kind of devotion to scheming flatterers could be construed as gross naivety--another sign of his incapacity and of his disregard of both the responsibilities and liabilities of kingship.²⁶ But his loyalty becomes more a mark of strength than weakness, because it has the power finally to turn Gaveston, Baldock, and Spencer from their flattery and to win from them an undivided loyalty. As we consider now the kind of love that Edward is capable of inspiring, we will understand more clearly later how this influence becomes more than a match for the ruthless stratagems of Mortimer and Isabella.

Although Gaveston, in his initial soliloquy explains how he intends to manipulate Edward (I,1,51-53), his purpose in obeying the king's summons is not wholly opportunistic, but based somewhat on an affectionate regard: he enjoys the sight of London again because, he says,

it harbors him I hold so dear,
The king, upon whose bosom let me die,
And with the world be still at enmity.

(I,1,13-15)

We detect already a level of commitment to Edward, which is nevertheless compromised at this point by a concern for personal

advantage. Despite evidence of sincere feeling for Edward, we often suspect that Gaveston's declarations of love are at least in part designed to convince the king of an affection free of ulterior motives. When Edward is forced to banish Gaveston, for example, the king's favorite speaks eloquently of his personal devotion:

To go from hence grieves not poor Gaveston,
But to forsake you, in whose gracious looks
The blessedness of Gaveston remains;
For nowhere else seeks he felicity.

(I,iv,119-22)

At these moments,²⁷ it is not easy to forgets Gaveston's soliloquy in the first scene and his designs for the "pliant king." And we understand later, from Mortimer's complaint that Gaveston is wanton with the king's treasury (I,iv,403-05), that Gaveston is taking full advantage of Edward's generosity. From the play's opening scene we have ample reason to suspect Gaveston's sincerity.

In the scene of his capture, however, Gaveston is nothing of the opportunist. He does not plead for his life, but expresses joy that before he is executed he will be granted a final interview with the king:

Sweet sovereign, yet I come
To see thee ere I die.

(II,v,94-95)

And later, when Warwick seizes Gaveston before the promised

interview can take place, Gaveston's last words show that he has no paramount interest in saving his own skin: "Treacherous earl, shall I not see the king?" (III,1,15). Says Takashi Kurokawa of this appeal, "This is not a plea for his life, but a simple expression of grief."²⁸ In these moments, Gaveston gives unmistakable signs of a deep personal commitment to Edward that overcomes whatever selfish motives he may have harbored before. We realize that his continued familiarity with Edward has wrought a change.

That Edward's influence is responsible for this conversion is confirmed when we witness in Baldock and Spencer the same pattern of change: before their arrival at court they are bent on using whatever influence they can exert to their personal advantage. After continued familiarity with the king, however, they display a loyalty and a devotion that not even Edward's defeat or the imminence of their own deaths can overcome.

As we see them for the first time, Baldock and Spencer establish themselves immediately as opportunists. They have outlived their lord, the Earl of Gloucester, and, hence, his ability to support them. They both plan to seek favor at court: Spencer hopes to become Gaveston's companion since he and the king's favorite, we learn, enjoyed the kind of intimacy that now exists between Edward and Gaveston (II,1,13-14); since Gloucester's daughter is betrothed to Gaveston, Baldock hopes

by her means to be preferred,

Having read unto her since she was a child.

(II,1,29-30)

And Spencer's advice to Baldock indicates the means by which they will exert their influence at court:

You must be proud, bold, pleasant, resolute,
And now and then stab, as occasion serves.

(II,1,42-43)

This scene functions, much like Gaveston's soliloquy in the play's opening scene, to establish characters as opportunists and manipulators.

After Gaveston's death, Spencer quickly replaces Gaveston as the king's favorite, and we see that he exercises through flattery an influence that reminds us of Gaveston. For example, he urges Edward to take revenge on the barons after the king has learned how Gaveston died:

My lord, refer your vengeance to the sword
Upon these barons; hearten up your men;
Let them not unrevenged murder your friends.
Advance your standard, Edward, in the field,
And march to fire them from their starting holes.

(III,11,123-27)

This is reminiscent of Gaveston's urging during one of the earlier quarrels between the king and the barons: "No, threaten not, my lord, but pay them home!" (I,iv,26). And all the time that he advises the king to oppose the barons, we are aware that Spencer, like Gaveston before him, is working to maintain

his power and prestige.

But, by the time that Edward is defeated at the hands of Mortimer and Isabella, Baldock and Spencer have undergone a conversion similar to Gaveston's. They do not abandon Edward; beaten and pursued, both flee with Edward and take refuge in the monastery where they all are captured and the king is taken into custody by Leicester. As Spencer and Baldock are arrested for treason, Edward again displays his unselfishness by offering to sacrifice himself for his friends:

Here, man, rip up this panting breast of mine,
And take my heart in rescue of my friends.

(IV,vi,66-67)

And we see moments later how such devotion has influenced his favorites. They lament Edward's departure with a simple grief, and like Gaveston's sorrow, there is no concern for their own safety, no appeal for their own lives:

Spencer Junior. O, is he gone? Is noble Edward gone,
Parted from hence, never to see us more?

.

Baldock. Spencer, I see our souls are fleeted hence;
We are deprived the sunshine of our life.

(IV,vi,99-100,104-05)

The pattern is repeated: initially disposed to manipulate the king, all three favorites emerge from intimate association with Edward changed men. While Una Ellis-Fermor regards Edward's intimacy with his favorites as a refuge from the

public world he cannot face,²⁹ she observes also that the change he works in flatterers indicates a personal strength.³⁰ Although Edward's need for affection has weakened whatever share of politic instinct he may have, it generates a love that can overcome the politic instinct in others. As we shall see later, this influence ultimately goes beyond the circle of his court favorites.

The cruel selfishness of Mortimer and Isabella and the unselfish loyalty of Edward are the outstanding qualities of these most prominent characters; the play illustrates these qualities repeatedly. Marlowe not only sets Edward off against Mortimer and Isabella by making them opponents in armed conflict, but he also distinguishes them by creating a conflict between their sharply contrasted qualities. We have seen already some of the effects on others of Edward's affectionate devotion, and we shall see that the ultimate effects of the qualities of both Edward and his opponents account directly for the play's outcome: while Mortimer and Isabella, once they are in thorough league with each other, steadily isolate themselves, Edward inspires sympathy and loyalty in those who, though they do not rally to his cause in time to prevent his death, finally overcome Mortimer and Isabella. The ultimate triumph of Edward's influence shows the power of the quality he comes to represent --a thoroughly unselfish love. In this way, Edward II illustrates the ultimate weakness of selfishness and its inability to withstand the power of an unselfish love and devotion.

Once Mortimer and Isabella have defeated Edward's armies, the process of their isolation begins almost immediately. Having aided the two in order to rid the court of Edward's favorites, Kent relents as he realizes that Mortimer and Isabella are also aiming their efforts at the king himself:

Proud traitor, Mortimer, why dost thou chase
Thy lawful king, thy sovereign, with thy sword?

(IV,v,12-13)

Kent perceives that the queen and Mortimer are in league (IV, v,21-24), and to save his own life he counsels himself to conceal his distrust (IV,v,21). Kent, who a short time earlier was their ally, becomes their opponent and later attempts to free Edward; that he is converted so quickly suggests the kind of alienation that occurs as the result of a better understanding of Mortimer and Isabella's motives and stratagems.

We see signs of estrangement in other characters. Arriving at the monastery where Edward is hiding, Leicester feels uneasy about his commission to arrest the king, whom he pities:

The queen's commission, urged by Mortimer.

What cannot gallant Mortimer with the queen?

(IV,vi,49-50)

Here he expresses his doubt of the propriety of Mortimer and Isabella's partnership. Although Prince Edward is eager enough before the return from France to agree to his mother's wishes (IV,ii,21-25), he begins to question her plans after his father's defeat. He is unwilling to go along with arrangements

to have him made king (V,ii,92-93). His alienation from Mortimer is seen to be growing as he contradicts Mortimer's slander of Kent (V,ii,108); finally, the powerless prince refuses Mortimer's company and goes with him only by force (V,ii,111-12). When Mortimer, acting in his capacity as protector, dictatorily sentences Kent to be beheaded and disregards the youngster's protests, Prince Edward--now king--becomes fearful of Mortimer:

What safety may I look for at his hands,
If that my uncle shall be murdered thus?

(V,iv,108-09)

Thus, as Mortimer and Isabella advance their selfish designs, they estrange those whom they seek to manipulate; by the play's end they have isolated themselves so completely that they can influence no one.

Edward, on the other hand, inspires sympathy and devotion in those who figure finally in Mortimer and Isabella's overthrow. We observe that Edward obtains a sympathy from two of his lords--Leicester and Berkeley--that suggests a relation to support accorded young King Edward III by his lords in the final scene. And, most important, the bond between the elder Edward and his son remains strong, and young Edward's final assertion of authority and command over Mortimer and Isabella is inspired by his love for his father and a grief that ultimately overcomes both his fear of Mortimer and his response to his mother's affection.

When Edward is taken at the monastery, Leicester, pitying

the king for his predicament (IV,vi,51-54), nevertheless scolds himself: "But, Leicester, leave to grow so passionate" (IV,vi,55). Hereafter, he is largely businesslike in a scene in which he hears Edward's lament for his favorites' imminent execution:

For friends hath Edward none but these and these,
And these must die under a tyrant's sword.

(IV,vi,90-91)

Leicester also witnesses the touching farewell between Edward and his favorites (IV,vi,72-79,94-95). The effect on Leicester of these displays of affection can be observed in the next scene in the extent to which he has left to be dispassionate. His first action in this scene is an attempt to console Edward and ease his grief (V,1,1-4), for which Edward acknowledges Leicester's kindness: "For kind and loving hast thou always been" (V,1,7). And Leicester witnesses in this scene further evidence of Edward's affection--this time for his son, the prince; after an agonizing decision to give up the crown, Edward weakens, refuses to relinquish it (V,1,86-89), and sends away the Bishop of Winchester and Trussel, both of whom come from the parliament which is demanding Edward's decision; but Leicester appeals to Edward's concern for his son and for the prince's status as heir to the throne:

Call them again, my lord, and speak them fair,
For if they go, the prince shall lose his right.

(V,1,91-92)

It is only this consideration that finally convinces Edward to turn the crown over to the delegation from the parliament. The king's displays here and in the preceding scene of sincere affection and unselfish concern for others finally draws from Leicester a gesture of sympathy and devotion; as Edward departs with Berkeley, who is under command to take Edward into custody and relieve Leicester's charge, Leicester promises not to take leave of Edward abruptly: "Not yet, my lord; I'll bear you on your way" (V,1,155). When Gaveston is banished, we recall that Edward makes a similar gesture for his friend (I,iv,140). The similarity of these events suggests both the degree of Leicester's regard for Edward and Edward's ability to move him to an even greater expression of sympathy than Leicester offers in the preceding scene.

Berkeley, too, is not immune to Edward's influence. Edward expects, once he has given up the crown, to be killed at any time (V,1,125-27). Berkeley enters at this moment only to relieve Leicester, but Edward steels himself to meet what he believes will be an announcement of his execution:

Come, Berkeley, come,

And tell thy message to my naked breast.

(V,1,129-30)

Both Berkeley's denial of Edward's suspicion and his protestation of loyalty are marked by a deference and a sincere sympathy for his king:

My lord, think not a thought so villainous

Can harbor in a man of noble birth.
 To do your highness service and devoir
 And save you from your foes, Berkeley would die.

(V,1,131-34)

It is one of the functions of this scene to suggest a degree of sympathy and regard in genuine men "of noble birth" for their fallen king. This prepares us for the final scene of the play where young Edward III enters, in the company of his nobles, to condemn Mortimer. The event which spurs the young king to assert his authority is the murder of his father; there is a suggestion--a thin one--that the same event that provokes young Edward's determination has much to do with galvanizing the nobility--not representative of the rebellious barons--into giving unified support to their young king. So, when young Edward, as we learn from Isabella, has gone into the council chamber "To crave the aid and succor of his peers" (V,vi,21), we feel certain that the peers will rally to his cause, not only from their antipathy to Mortimer, but also from that sympathy for the fallen and murdered king which we glimpse earlier in Leicester and Berkeley.

The most decisive factor in Mortimer and Isabella's downfall is the unshakable bond of affectionate loyalty and devotion that exists between the younger Edward and his father. When Prince Edward speaks for the first time in the play, it is to his father; while King Edward is awaiting news of Gaveston, he deals carelessly with news of a military threat by command-

ing Queen Isabella and his son to depart for France to negotiate with the French king. The exchange at this moment between the king and the prince reveals a mutual regard, and, perhaps, the proud father's overestimation of his young son's abilities:

King Edward.

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Boy, see you bear you bravely to the king,
And do your message with a majesty.

Prince Edward. Commit not to my youth things of more
weight

Than fits a prince so young as I to bear,
And fear not, lord and father, heavens great beams
On Atlas' shoulder shall not lie more safe
Than shall your charge committed to my trust.

(III,ii,72-78)

The brief exchange in this scene establishes for us the bond of mutual esteem that exists between the father and the son. Here we witness not only the prince's humility but also his devotion to his father and his eagerness to carry out his king's commands. The prince never sees his father again until after the murder, but during their separation, each gives unmistakable signs of an unshakable love for the other. The prince never departs from the devotion to his father that we witness when they separate; the king is always deeply concerned for his son's safety and for his son's status as heir to the throne.

Continually Edward expresses a concern for the prince's safety. Once he learns that Isabella is collaborating with Mortimer in Flanders, the king demonstrates not only an eagerness to fight them and their armies but also a fear for the prince that he should be under their influence:

Ah, nothing grieves me but my little boy
Is thus misled to countenance their ills.

(IV,iii,48-49)

Beaten in battle and imprisoned, suspecting now that Mortimer and Isabella not only demand his abdication but also aim at killing him, Edward reveals a similar fear for the prince's safety:

For he's a lamb, encompassèd by wolves,
Which in a moment will abridge his life.

(V,i,41-42)

After having yielded to Leicester's advice and abdicated, Edward grieves the loss of his crown, but not so much that he forgets his fears for his son:

Let not that Mortimer protect my son;
More safety is there in a tiger's jaws
Than his embracements.

(V,i,115-17)

Even in his most difficult moments, Edward shows a deep concern for his son's well-being.

And we are also given signs in the abdication scene that Edward is willing to endure the pain of losing his crown for

the sake of securing his son's right to succession. It is Leicester's advice and warning that the prince will lose his right should the king refuse (V,1,91-92) which are decisive in persuading Edward to relinquish the crown. Despite the agony of the decision, the king resigns himself to endure his loss and humbles himself to his son:

Commend me to my son, and bid him rule

Better than I.

(V,1,121-22)

Having proved his affection for his son by abdicating, Edward now reveals a more respectful regard for the prince who will be the new king--a gesture that reminds us of his earlier fatherly pride (III,11,72-73). At the same time, Edward expresses here his generous hope that his son's reign will be more successful and happier than his own. In his actions and remarks, Edward reveals a deeply affectionate and unselfish concern for his son's well-being.

In his every appearance in the play, Prince Edward displays his devotion to his father, the force of which overcomes his fear of Mortimer and controls his mother's power over his own affections. In France, the young prince shows both his enthusiastic faith in his father's love and his attachment to his mother; boyishly confident, he tries to persuade his mother that Edward's love for him will rid the court of favorites much more effectively than whatever support Isabella can muster in France:

I warrant you, I'll win his highness quickly;

'A loves me better than a thousand Spencers.

(IV,11,6-7)

At the same time, however, he expresses a loyalty to his mother that stresses his youthful dependence upon her:

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.

(IV,11,21-25)

But his unqualified declaration of support for his mother's enterprise is followed soon by a suspicion that her activities are taking a direction which will put him in direct opposition to his father. When Mortimer, who has just arrived in France after his escape from the Tower, declares allegiance to the prince and promises to fight in his name, the prince responds

How mean you, and the king, my father, lives?

No, my lord Mortimer, not I, I trow.

(IV,11,43-44)

Here Prince Edward expresses his awareness that such action would amount to treason. And at Sir John of Hainault's suggestion that the support he offers to Isabella, Mortimer, and their company is to be aimed at King Edward himself (IV, 11,64-66), the prince announces his doubt in the enterprise: "I think King Edward will outrun us all" (IV,11,68). His

respect for his father's authority as king is such that he is confident of his father's ability to prevail in a civil conflict. The scene illustrates both Prince Edward's loyalty to his father and his attachment to his mother, and the prince here has his first inkling that his loyalties are divided. But when he doubts the likelihood of the success of the growing campaign against his father, his mother's power over him is great enough at this point to silence him:

Nay, son, not so; and you must not discourage
Your friends that are so forward in your aid.

(IV,11,69-70)

As we will see later, the strength of the prince's devotion to his father is to be measured in part by the difficulty he has in controlling his affection for and his dependance on his mother.

In the swirl of events leading to his father's defeat, imprisonment, and death, Prince Edward becomes, as we have seen, more alienated from and fearful of Mortimer--a condition which contributes to Mortimer's downfall. In this way, the prince helps direct audience sympathy away from Mortimer. But Prince Edward also helps direct sympathy toward his father by his continued expressions of devotion.³¹ After Isabella and Mortimer's armies have defeated King Edward's, even as the victors celebrate their triumph and Isabella creates the prince Lord Warden, Prince Edward is more interested in news of his father. When Kent asks the queen how she intends to deal with

Edward now that he is defeated, the prince breaks in at the sound of his father's name: "Tell me, good uncle, what Edward do you mean?" (IV,v,41). A few moments later, after hearing that the king, Spencer, and Baldock have fled toward Ireland, the prince--perhaps too naively preoccupied with his own disappointment to comprehend the implications of Mortimer's remarks that "They shall be started thence, I doubt it not" (IV,v,69)--is somewhat frustrated at being denied a reunion with his father: "Shall I not see the king my father yet?" (IV,v,70). In a later scene, as Isabella tries to inveigle him into accepting the crown his father has surrendered, the prince shows not only an eagerness to be reunited with his father but also a strong reluctance to acquiesce in an act which he thinks may go against his father's wishes:

Queen Isabella. But be content, seeing it his highness' pleasure.

Prince Edward. Let me but see him first, and then I will.
(V,ii,94-95)

These expressions of concern and loyalty help direct sympathy toward Edward and further indicate a relationship between the king and the prince which is marked by a mutually unselfish loyalty and devotion. And Marlowe's use of Prince Edward, according to Marion Perret, redeems the king somewhat for his previous irresponsibility in indulging his affections: "[The prince] is used to direct our sympathy toward his father and to suggest a relationship between them which casts more favorable

light upon the king so susceptible to minions."³²

The deep affection and loyalty that King Edward inspires in Prince Edward accounts for the prince's ability finally both to overcome his fear of Mortimer and to control his dependence on his mother. In the final scene, Mortimer, speaking alone with Isabella, is at first confident that he can overrule the prince--now the new king--as he has done repeatedly, even though the new king has knowledge of Mortimer's hand in his father's murder: "What if he have? The king is yet a child" (V,vi,17). But the king's grief for his father has driven him to defy Mortimer and to plead his cause before the nobility, who now rally to his aid. Edward enters in the company of his lords, immediately accuses Mortimer, and responds to Mortimer's menacing reply by pressing home his charge:

Think not that I am frightened with thy words.
My father's murdered through thy treachery,
And thou shalt die, and on his mournful hearse
Thy hateful and accursèd head shall lie
To witness to the world that by thy means
His kingly body was too soon interred.

(V,vi,27-32)

The king, now in complete control, blocks Mortimer's stratagems. When Mortimer demands as proof of his own guilt that the king produce a witness to the crime, the younger King Edward's quick response reveals again the bond between the father and the son--the inspiration for the king's newly

asserted authority:

Traitor, in me my loving father speaks

And plainly saith, 'twas thou that murdered'st him.

(V,vi,41-42)

And when the king quickly produces as evidence the ambiguously worded letter by which Mortimer has planned to attach blame for the crime to Matrevis and Gurney, Mortimer's guilt is established; he is taken away to execution after his farewell to the queen and a parting expression of defiance (V,vi,59-66).

The king is also able in this scene to overcome the power that his mother exerts over his affections.³³ He weeps for his father as he accuses Mortimer, and Isabella seeks to quiet her son by offering her motherly consolation: "Weep not, sweet son" (V,vi,33). His decided response amounts to a declaration of his new independence:

Forbid me not to weep; he was my father;

And had you loved him half so well as I,

You could not bear his death thus patiently.

(V,vi,34-36)

Moreover, the source of this new assertiveness is clearly his grief--a testimony to his deep love for his father. After Mortimer is taken to be executed, Isabella protests to her son that rumors of her complicity in the murder are untrue:

for loving thee,

Is this report raised on poor Isabel.

(V,vi,74-75)

And such is the young king's weakness for his mother's love that her dissembling--clearly an indication that her instinct for self-preservation has become stronger than her maternal instinct--nearly causes him to relent in his accusations. He overcomes his weakness with difficulty, ordering her to be imprisoned to await trial and finally having to have her taken away so that her appeals will no longer influence him:

Away with her. Her words enforce these tears,
And I shall pity her if she speak again.

(V,vi,85-86)

The king's ability to assert authority in this scene is inspired by his love for his father, and it is the greatest measure of his devotion that he can control and overcome even his dependence upon his mother.

The play ends as the new king speaks over his father's body and makes good his promise to Mortimer that his "hateful and accursèd head shall lie" (V,vi,30) on his father's hearse:

Sweet father, here unto thy murdered ghost
I offer up this wicked traitor's head,
And let these tears, distilling from mine eyes,
Be witness of my grief and innocency.

(V,vi,99-102)

This last brief speech is a moving testimony to the young king's dedication to his father, for whose sake in the concluding scene he has asserted his right and overcome Mortimer and Isabella.

Clifford Leech attaches no great importance to this scene, claiming that what he believes is the play's chief aim--a dramatization of the relationship between power and suffering--is accomplished with conclusion of the scene in which the elder Edward is murdered.³⁴ But to neglect the final scene thus is to overlook the importance to the play of the bond of mutual affection that exists between the father and the son, and it is to overlook the most powerful and moving expressions of that bond. Moreover, it is to overlook the scene's main accomplishment: to present the outcome of the play's concern, namely the conflict between the totally selfish interests of Mortimer and Isabella and the ability of King Edward to offer an unselfish and devoted love.

Marlowe portrays in Edward II a struggle that represents a conflict between the strength of absolute selfishness and the strength of an ultimately selfless concern for the well-being of others. Marlowe measures the strength of each quality by its result in the play, suggesting that those characters in the play who act solely from self-interest can succeed initially in achieving their aims but create in the process a climate of distrust and fear that finally contributes to their downfall. On the other hand, a character acting even with thoughtless excess but on the basis of an unselfish love for and devotion to others exerts an influence that grows perceptibly and inspires reciprocal love and devotion; and it is this influence which accounts finally for the defeat of the

self-aggrandizers and which dispels the atmosphere of fear and distrust. Edward II illustrates the superior strength of uncompromising and self-denying love by displaying its ability to overcome even the most ruthlessly successful aspirants to absolute political power.

FOOTNOTES

1

Taking this view, such critics as F. P. Wilson, the editor William Dinsmore Briggs, and the joint editors H. B. Charlton and R. D. Waller argue that Marlowe has neglected to show consistent development in the dramatic portraits of Mortimer and Isabella. Later in the course of my discussion, these critics' views will be considered in detail.

2

"Isabella's Plea for Gaveston in Marlowe's Edward II," Philological Quarterly, 52 (1973), 308. Other critics, who have made contributions, usually narrowly focused, to our understanding of the consistency of the main characters' qualities, include Una Ellis-Fermor, Leonora Leet Brodwin, Marion Perret, and Roma Gill. Both the nature of each contribution and where my argument stands in relation to the critic's overall interpretation will be discussed passim.

3

Mortimer and Lancaster summarize these consequences (II,11,155-93).

4

This and all subsequent quotations from Edward II are taken from The Complete Plays of Christopher Marlowe, ed. Irving Ribner (New York: Odyssey Press, 1963), pp. 283-353.

5

Marlowe's Edward II (London: David Nutt, 1914), p. cvii.

6

Christopher Marlowe, Edward the Second (London: Ernest Benn, 1967), p. xvi.

7 Briggs, p. cvii.

8 The English Chronicle Play: A Study in the Popular Historical Literature Environing Shakespeare (New York: MacMillan, 1902), p. 72.

9 Briggs, p. cvii.

10 Christopher Marlowe, Edward II, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1955), p. 56.

11 Marlowe and the Early Shakespeare (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 95.

12 "Marlowe's 'Edward II': Power and Suffering," Critical Quarterly, 1 (1959), p. 189.

13 Christopher Marlowe's Tragic Vision: A Study in Damnation (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 93, 97.

14 Summers, pp. 308-10. Summers is concerned in this article primarily with establishing that "Marlowe is not guilty of implausibly transforming an innocent Isabella into a wicked schemer" (p. 310); my argument accepts the validity of Summers' conclusion and supporting analysis without reservation.

15 Marlowe: A Critical Study (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 229-30.

16 e.g., David M. Bevington, From Mankind to Marlowe

(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962), p. 243.

17 Ibid., p. 243.

18 "The Meaning of Edward II," Modern Philology, 32 (1934-35), p. 28.

19 These remarks come from Mills's belief that Marlowe uses "Elizabethan friendship ideas" (p. 31) in Edward II and that aspects of Edward's behavior meet some of the conventional requirements of a friend: the king uses terms of endearment when speaking to Gaveston; he shares his goods and honors with his friends; he offers to sacrifice himself to save Gaveston, Spencer, and Baldock; and, when a conflict arises between friendship (Gaveston) and love (Isabella), Edward chooses the former (p. 24). That Edward is sincere in these gestures, says Mills, is admirable, but that he unwisely pursues his passion for friendship to the point that he neglects a greater responsibility--his kingship--leads to a tragic downfall (p. 30). Thus, Mills sees in Edward's defeat a different lesson than the one, suggested by my discussion, that the king's unselfish devotion to his friends and to his son is the source of his ultimate power, even in physical defeat, over his conquerors. But this difference in no way reduces the importance to our thesis of Mills's recognition that Edward's loyalty to his intimates is genuine and unselfish.

20 "Edward II: Marlowe's Culminating Treatment of Love,"

ELH: A Journal of English Literary History, 31 (1964), p. 143. Adopting the chronology of Marlowe's works outlined in Una Ellis-Fermor's Christopher Marlowe (see note 25), Brodwin distinguishes a development in which Marlowe moves initially from a rejection of love in Dido, Queen of Carthage as an effeminating influence to a final wholehearted affirmation in Edward II of just such an influence. While my argument maintains that the issue of homosexuality is of no final consequence in evaluating the king's spirit of unselfishness, Brodwin argues that the very "saving value of love" (p. 155) resulting from Marlowe's acceptance of love as "a sufficiently inspirational tragic ideal" (p. 154) also coincides with his own "final acceptance of the validity of homosexual love" (p. 154). But Brodwin's analysis agrees with my argument to the extent that she sees Marlowe's treatment of self-sacrificing love in Edward II as both a thematic subordination and rejection of the Machiavellianism represented by Mortimer (p. 143).

21

"This is no Aristotelian hero; his erring is palpable, his goodness far to seek. Nor does he ever become more admirable, but after his downfall, isolated in terrible suffering with no power to do more than storm and lament, he becomes an object of the most painful sympathy, of a pity which would be intolerable if any admiration for him had been aroused beforehand" (p. 60).

22

Suffering and Evil in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe

(Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), p. 173.

23

" . . . this is Marlowe's achievement--to give to the De Casibus convention a new psychological and dramatic validity, by making it a latent force behind the suffering of his fallen king, emerging time and again not in terms of the usual catalogue of past glories nor in terms of sententious warning, but rather in action, gesture, or outburst of emotion" (p. 174).

24

"Marlowe's inspired use of no less frightening a figure than the Devil himself to carry out this well-known murder, in a fashion that clearly symbolizes Edward's sexual deviation, is the perfect dramatic means for representing the King's downfall and damnation. The death scene is one of the most lurid spectacles in Elizabethan drama; few stage characters suffer for their errors as much as Edward does for his homosexuality. And no example of tragic retribution is more dramatically appropriate" (Masinton, p. 89).

25

This passage also functions to tone down the play's criticism of Edward's homosexuality. We find Mortimer's uncle citing mythological and historical precedents for Edward's behavior (I,iv,390-96); the examples of noble personages--among them Alexander, Hercules, Achilles, and Socrates--who have indulged appetites similar to Edward's, help to remove the stigma of the king's homosexuality. Moreover, Mortimer's admission that his outrage has little to do with Edward's "wanton humor" (I,iv,401) is a clue that Marlowe does not

intend to make the king's sexual conduct an issue. Rather, by reducing the significance of this element of the king and Gaveston's relationship, the passage helps prepare us to consider as more important other aspects of their relationship.

26

Douglas Cole, for example, argues that Edward's downfall is brought about largely by his own willfulness and irresponsibility and that the play judges him on this score frequently by making him the victim of its irony. So it is, for example, with the king's affection for a flattering opportunist:

"Marlowe has been careful to present the true worth of the king's favorite at once [in the first scene of the play]. In doing so, he prepares his audience not only for the basic irony of King Edward's extreme affection for Gaveston, but also for the subtler ironies of

Gaveston's protestations of love . . ." (Cole, p. 163).

But Roma Gill in her edition of Edward II (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967) calls attention to the chief weaknesses in Cole's argument that Gaveston is completely self-interested-- Cole's failure to take into account Gaveston's attitude shortly before he is killed:

"Such an interpretation [of Gaveston as Cole's] puts a heavy strain on the single line where Gaveston promises to employ poets and musicians whose entertainments 'May draw the pliant king which way I please' (I. i. 52), and ignores the joy that overcomes even the bitterness of captivity and the imminence of an ignoble death:

Sweet sovereign, yet I come
To see thee ere I die

II. v. 94-95"

(p. 30).

Gaveston is not a complete opportunist, and, rather than making Edward a victim of irony, it is evident that Marlowe wishes to portray a Gaveston who is influenced by Edward's affection to the point that he forgets his original purpose. [Although differing somewhat from the interpretation of Mortimer and Isabella put forward by this paper, Gill attributes both Gaveston's love for Edward and Spencer and Baldock's eventual attachment to the king to their continued intimacy with Edward (p. 30). Inasmuch as she views their devotion to the king as the result of Edward's affection for them, Gill contributes to our understanding of the power of Edward's self-denying love.⁷

²⁷

e.g., I, i, 146-47, 171-74; II, ii, 59-63.

²⁸

"De Casibus Theme and Machiavellism--In Connection with the Theme of Edward II," Shakespeare Studies (Japan) 7 (1968-69), p. 76.

²⁹

Christopher Marlowe (1927; rpt. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1967), p. 113.

³⁰

" . . . Edward has the power of inspiring undying affection in the men who come within the circle of his intimacy. Gaveston, Spenser and Baldock all begin their relations with

Edward with a touch of 'pollicie,' and all end by standing by him to their deaths" (p. 113). According to Ellis-Fermor, this process of conversion reflects Marlowe's final attitude toward Machiavellianism. In the course of her discussion of Marlowe's "plays of policy" (pp. 110 ff.), she sees evidence of Marlowe's abating enthusiasm for Machiavellian doctrines. Whereas in The Jew of Malta such doctrines are invested with a "certain poetic splendour" (p. 89), the aspiring Duke of Guise in the next play, The Massacre at Paris, has less imagination than Barabas and "lacks life" (p. 106). In Edward II, the last of the group, all the Machiavellian stratagems of Mortimer, Gaveston, Spencer, and Baldock are overcome: "The power of the weak Edward is set in all these characters over against the self-seeking and 'politic' instincts. In every case, directly or indirectly, the affection which the helpless king inspired, destroyed either the Machiavellianism or the Machiavellian. This, I think, is Marlowe's final comment upon the doctrine of 'pollicie'" (p. 121). While not dealing with Machiavellianism per se in Edward II, my argument is nevertheless indebted to Ellis-Fermor for identifying those qualities of Machiavellianism -- "the self-seeking and 'politic' instincts" -- that Edward's love is so instrumental in overcoming.

31

For a discussion of some of the uses to which Marlowe puts the figure of Prince Edward, see Marion Perret's "'Edward III': Marlowe's Dramatic Technique" (Review of English Literature, 7, No. 4: 1966, pp. 87-91).

32

Ibid., pp. 90-91. In this article, Perret explains Marlowe's handling of Prince Edward as an example of "the skill with which Marlowe in all his dramas has made dramatic capital out of figures not highly characterized whose share in the action is small" (p. 87). According to Perret, the prince, among his other functions, serves as "an important factor in the political decisions made by his parents" (p. 87). Thus, Perret attributes to parental affection both the king's abdication and elements of Isabella's antipathy for her husband (p. 88). Believing this to be more true of the king than the queen, my argument finds Perret's interpretation of Edward's abdication to be indispensable to the idea that the king is thoroughly unselfish in his devotion to his son.

33

Perret comments upon the significance in this scene of younger Edward's entering in the company of his nobles: " . . . the simple fact that until the last scene the prince is always accompanied by his mother economically impresses upon us both the boy's helplessness and the love of Isabel for her son which is an important motive for her action as she claims to Mortimer earlier when she suggests of the elder King Edward "But, Mortimer, as long as he survives, / What safety rest for us or for my son?" (V,ii,42-43)7. There is no need in the final scene to describe his independence at length: it bursts upon us as he enters for the first time without Isabel" (Perret, p. 87).

34

"In the last scene of the play Fortune's wheel turns for

Mortimer and Isabella, and the young king mourns for his father. This is briefly and almost casually done. It was necessary that the story of Edward's reign should be rounded off, and that Mortimer's stratagems should entrap him. But Marlowe's interest in this was not profound" (Leech, p. 195).

MARLOWE'S EDWARD II: A CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

by

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Abstract

Isabella's and Mortimer's early predicaments in Marlowe's Edward II have so impressed various critics that they have overlooked signs provided by the playwright marking these characters' self-serving interests. This error has led them to fault Marlowe for creating in the beginning of the play what they take to be sympathetic portraits of the queen and the baron that are at odds with the unsympathetic representations of the two as cruel manipulators in the final scenes. But recently, a number of critics more alert to the play's evidence have recognized in Mortimer's and Isabella's early appearances the selfishness which rationalizes their actions throughout the play. At the same time, other critics have identified even in Edward's most irresponsible behavior qualities that are related to the selfless loyalty and devotion to his intimates that he displays more and more markedly as the play progresses. Responding to these revaluations of the major characters in Edward II, I examine the play more comprehensively than have others for signs of consistent character portrayal and have found that with considerable regularity the play shows in Edward a strong strain of selflessness that Marlowe balances off against Mortimer's and Isabella's Machiavellian selfishness. Not only are these opposing qualities consistently presented, but they are made to interact until one proves more powerful than the other. Marlowe does not let us forget that Edward is flawed; the very manner of the king's death is a symbolic

reminder of the ignominy and corrupting influence of his homosexuality. Nevertheless, Marlowe places even greater emphasis on Edward's more attractive qualities by clearly demonstrating their strength: Mortimer and Isabella's downfall is the result both of Prince Edward's response to his father's love and the nobles' sympathy for the self-sacrificing king. Edward is dead, but the superior power of the unselfish love that Edward comes finally to represent has been made clear.