When people talk about Marlowe’s dramatic characters, they usually mean Doctor Faustus, Tamburlaine, or Barabas the Jew. Indeed, these three are widely acknowledged as “Marlovian heroes,” dominating characters in the respective plays which have traditionally been regarded as Marlowe’s best-known ones. In comparison, Edward II is not a typical Marlovian hero—not portrayed as one with so much outer glory, intelligence, villainy, or ambition as has been bestowed to the other three. It might even be argued that, compared to the other three, Edward appears to be petty, pitiful, cowardly, and even pathetic. However, a careful investigation will reveal that this argument may only be the result of a false impression caused by the “power lines” with all those dazzling, flamboyant words in Tamburlaine, Doctor Faustus, and The Jew of Malta. In other words, Edward II is different from the typical Marlovian hero, a new one portrayed with a much more sophisticated insight: Marlowe tried a new style of character portrayal, and came up with no small success.

Tamburlaine is a “consistent” character: brave, arrogant, confident, courageous, and merciless throughout the two parts; there is very little growth in his character, aside from the great passion and tenderness shown to his beloved Zenocrate, and the final realization that he can defeat anybody but Death. Doctor Faustus, arguably the “greatest” of all Marlovian heroes, is intelligent, ambitious, curious, wicked, and absolutely disrespectful at the end when he begs for mercy like a coward more out of fear of death than true penitence. Barabas the Jew is greedy, ruthless, furious, vindictive, and unrepentant, and dies in anger and pride in his malicious attempts to get even with his Christian foes, with whom Marlowe shows no sympathy. But Edward is a completely different story.

In Edward II, there are no such things as “mighty lines” or “power poetry” or long speeches or monologues; instead, in the first two-thirds of the play, most of the speeches are short and angry-sounding, setting the “tone” for the play. And meanwhile, the action, or “pace,” moves on swiftly—one conflict following another—until the last part of the play, so swiftly that a reader of Marlowe’s plays cannot fail to notice the drastic change in the style of writing: actions, rather than words—powerful words, which are characteristic of the other plays—carry a great part of the plot of Edward II. Claude J. Summers has a fine observation of this: “It is precisely because the world of Edward II is so unstable that
the language of the play so frequently rings hollow” (Summers, 1988, p. 228). Robert E. Knoll suggests that the play can be divided into three sections: “The King’s Minion,” “The King’s War,” and “The King’s Death” (Knoll, 1969, p. 112-113). For the convenience of this study, the ideas in these sections might be borrowed and replaced by “The King’s Indulgence in His Desire,” “The King’s Struggle to Maintain His Indulgence,” and “The King’s Awakening and Growth,” respectively. However, if we view the play objectively, this division may be further simplified: the first two sections can be combined into “Edward the Child,” while the last section will be “Edward’s Awakening and Growth into Manhood”—for the purpose of this study, that is.

From the point of view of characterization, Edward is a “consistent” character in the first two-thirds of the play. Then, in the last part, after Edward’s downfall as a king, the “pace” and the “tone” slow down significantly, and Edward’s character begins to change, too. This cannot be naively dismissed as merely an accidental result of casual writing by the dramatist. For a playwright like Marlowe, there must have been a purpose in doing this. It is hereby suggested that Marlowe wants his audience to slow down to listen to, to watch out for, and to comprehend the signals, which he has so carefully inserted in the play, for a better or thorough understanding of the “awakening”—the “growth” of Edward’s character.

It is not the purpose of this study to identify this play as a chronicle play or a personal tragedy. History—historical truths, near-truths, or “distortions” —is not the major concern. The focus will be placed on the growth of the character of Edward II and the portrayal of this character by the playwright. Marlowe borrowed materials from history and used them, processing or altering some of them, to construct a play. Why he made all that processing can be anyone’s guess, and has created great controversy since the play was first produced. One reasonable deduction would be: he saw something in the history book that touched or impressed him, and he took it as the cornerstone of his story. In other words, he made the processing with a purpose: to write a play that he wanted. Therefore, to understand the play, we must take the play as it is. The facts in the play should be the only facts concerned, regardless of the fact that they might have been modified from history by the dramatist. That is to say, to understand what
Marlowe tried to express, we have no choice but to accept what Marlowe wrote, and examine the words in the text carefully in order to achieve a proper—if not absolutely correct—understanding of the play.

Owing to the complexity of the play itself, and the fact that the controversy it has aroused clearly seems never-ending, it has been decided, after long consideration, that no specific literary theory will be applied here. Generally, any one of the following approaches—social, historical, cultural, political, or psychological—would be a good one to take. But the approach taken in this study does not seem to fit into any of these categories. The closest category to which this study comes may be termed “textual study,” but even that does not seem completely fitting. The only purpose of this study, then, is to offer some suggestions and interpretations, following one of the existing texts, of what Marlowe possibly wanted to say through the portrayal of this particular tragic hero in one of the most controversial plays in the history of English literature.

As mentioned above, this play has aroused great controversy. Critics are divided in their opinions. Some of them—Steane, Poirier, for example—view it as a chronicle play, as it was the story of a monarch, written almost immediately after the three parts of Shakespeare’s *Henry VI* were produced. Others, such as Leech, argue that, despite the fact that the story of *Edward II* is based on history, it is nevertheless a personal tragedy, because throughout the play the focus is always on Edward as a person. Some other critics, like Summers, Ribner, and Cole, say that it is a combination of history and tragedy, as history is mixed with the fate of the monarch. Among these different points of view, there is, however, a consensus: the last part of the play—the abdication and the murder of the king—really depicts human suffering and humiliation almost to an unbearable degree.

Some critics, like Ribner, Knoll, Clemen, and Poirier, have noticed the change of style in the characterization of Edward. Ribner says, “the fixity of character is now gone” (Ribner, 1982, p. 141). Knoll comments, “The single pageant of heroic actions, which we see in Marlowe’s early plays, is replaced in *Edward II* by a relatively complex interaction among a variety of dramatis personae” (Knoll, 1969, p. 110). And Clemen says that “Marlowe made an appreciable advance towards what is commonly described as ‘character drama’” (Clemen, 1964, p. 139). Poirier notes that “Marlowe has achieved a
still greater success in the characterization than in the construction of the play” (Poirier, 1968, p. 178).

Curiously, most critics have failed to see the growth, or change, of Edward’s character; they see Edward as a pathetic failure who dies in suffering and humiliation. Steane says, “though his sufferings do not induce respect, they do inspire pity” (Steane, 1965, p. 221), while Knoll comments that “although we can pity him, we cannot respect him” (Knoll, 1969, p. 122). Forker, however, sees something in Edward that “commands a certain respect”:

Marlowe maximizes the pity and terror of Edward’s story and concentrates both in a uniquely powerful fashion. Psychological torment is wedded to physical suffering, and Edward’s capacity for sheer endurance commands a certain respect. Unspeakable misery elicits a surprising fortitude in its formerly self-indulgent victim. In his final moments he embodies all the extremities that cruelty and oppression are capable of inflicting upon the body, mind, and spirit. (Forker, 1994, p. 79)

Forker’s respect, according to this passage, is elicited by “Edward’s capacity for sheer endurance.” While this capacity is highly respectable, it is nevertheless a capacity for passive suffering. What makes Edward a real tragic hero is the fact that he really tries to “fight the unbeatable foe” in an absolutely hopeless situation, fully realizing that he is doomed to fail. It is therefore the intention of this study to follow the lines of the text to detect the “signals” in Edward’s speeches and behavior, which Marlowe has so carefully and subtly placed in the play, to show the “awakening” of Edward as a king and father, if not a husband.

To understand how this “awakening” is arranged in the play, it may be necessary to inspect how the “stage” is set, from the very beginning. The very first line of the whole play is a stage direction: A street in London. Gaveston enters, reading a letter; he is in London already. It is not related how quickly he left France after he got the letter. No matter how long the trip took, here he is, in London, and still ecstatic over the sweetness of the letter, which opens with: “My father is deceas’d. Come, Gaveston, / And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend” (I. i. 1-2). This message is not just “Come live with me and be my love.” It says, “Come share my kingdom.” Edward knows exactly
how to please Gaveston: he knows Gaveston likes power, and he would not mind sharing his kingdom with Gaveston. In fact, he knows that “sharing the kingdom” would please Gaveston most, and he is willing to do it.

Gaveston’s reaction to this offer deserves attention: “What greater bliss can hap to Gaveston / Than live and be the favourite of a king!” (I. i. 4-5). This “favourite” of a king can mean many things, but this king just happens to have a most intimate physical relationship with Gaveston, to the point that he is willing to share his kingdom. Gaveston knows that he is not going to be just a parasite or minion; he knows Edward is going to give him land and power and place him among the highest lords. Therefore he happily exclaims: “Farewell base stooping to the lordly peers! / My knees shall bow to none but to the king” (I. i. 18-19). The important words that are “lordly peers”; they explain everything. Gaveston knows Edward well enough, at least that much: he knows Edward is going to make him a lord in the court.

Gaveston’s opening soliloquy should be one of the most shocking opening speeches in Elizabethan plays, revealing his homoerotic relationship with Edward the king, and it also uncovers his own ambition, because he is immediately carried away by the “bliss” and spontaneously reveals his intentions to look down upon his own past—among the common people: “As for the multitude, that are but sparks, / Rak’d up in embers of their poverty” (I. i. 20-21). He wants to be just like the noblemen, the lords, and forget his own lowly birth. This consciousness of his own birth is forever hanging on his mind and accounts for many of his mischievous deeds. As soon as he is placed in a high position, he will turn his back upon “the multitude” among whom he was born. There is no nobility in his birth, and there is no nobility in his character, either. There is a strong sense of inferiority in his personality.

After savoring the “amorous lines,” he immediately begins to think of gathering men, his own men, for further use. The purpose of the “use” will later be seen clearly. Among the three poor men who come to him, he finds only the “traveller” to be of some use:

Let me see; thou wouldst do well
To wait at my trencher and tell me lies at dinnertime,
And as I like your discoursing, I’ll have you. (I. i. 30-32)
What “discoursing”? The only words that this poor man says are “A traveller” (I. i. 29)—in the whole play, indeed—in response to Gaveston’s question: “What are thou?” (I. i. 28). It must be the “sweetness” in the tone and manner of the traveller’s “discoursing” that Gaveston finds to be pleasant. Still unsophisticated in politics, Gaveston can only see the “face value” of the three men: at least one of them can talk sweetly. Or, maybe that is the “virtue” that he considers most important.

The first poor man is someone who can ride, to whom Gaveston says, “But I have no horses” (I. i. 28)—at least a frank and straight response. And when the third one says that he is “A soldier, that hath serv’d against the Scot” (I. i. 34), Gaveston does not have the faintest idea of what possible use a veteran can be to him in the future. And he shows his contempt spontaneously: “Why, there are hospitals for such as you: / I have no war, and therefore, sir be gone” (I. i. 35-36). The soldier’s response to this remark is quite interesting: “Farewell, and perish by a soldier’s hand, / That wouldst reward them with an hospital!” (I. i. 37-38). What seems to be a hasty curse turns out to be a literal one: “perish by a soldier’s hand”—exactly how Gaveston will perish. As the play develops, it turns out that what can really be of the greatest use to Gaveston, and to Edward too, is soldiers.

After dismissing the three poor men, Gaveston immediately concludes: “These are not men for me” (I. i. 50). That is, they do not serve his purpose, which is to please the king, a very particular king. He goes on to sketch his plan on how to satiate Edward’s peculiar appetite: a series of erotic entertainments that would make a sailor blush. This shows not only Gaveston’s understanding of the king; it also shows Edward’s inclination toward sex and pleasure: “Such things as these best please his majesty” (I. i. 71).

The first part of this scene reveals the character of Gaveston, and also provides us with sufficient information of the character of Edward the king before he steps onto stage. We are now prepared to meet Edward, and we know what his inclinations are.

Edward appears, and his first words in the play are to Lancaster: “Will you not grant me this? [Aside] In spite of them / I’ll have my will” (I. i. 77-78). Notice that he can only say “I’ll have my will” in an “aside”; he does not have the courage to confront the lords, who speak to him with no due respect at all—he even uses the word “grant” to a
subject. The Younger Mortimer, most notably, speaks with nothing that resembles the slightest respect, threatening to hang up his sword and armour when Edward needs help. Edward is tempted to counter with a hollow threat:

Well, Mortimer, I’ll make thee rue these words.
Beseems it thee to contradict thy king?
Frown’st thou thereat, aspiring Lancaster?
The sword shall plane the furrows of thy brows,
And hew these knees that now are grown so stiff.
I will have Gaveston; and you shall know
What danger ‘tis to stand against your king. (I. i. 91-97)

Funnily, the only one impressed is Gaveston, who is hiding beside the king, applauding him with “Well done, Ned!” (I. i. 98). It does not require much imagination to know Gaveston’s relationship with Edward by hearing his using this familiar name—of a king. And besides showing no respect, the lords have shown no fear of the “danger,” either.

Then, Lancaster expresses the lords’ true opinions about Gaveston:

My lord, why do you thus incense your peers,
That naturally would love and honour you
But for that base and obscure Gaveston? (I. i. 99-101)

“Base” and “obscure” are the words he uses to describe Gaveston; it is Gaveston’s lowly birth and status that they despise, and they will do their best to prevent Gaveston from becoming their peer.

Historically, Gaveston was actually a French nobleman. It is an obvious intention on Marlowe’s part to degrade him in the play so that the conflict can be much more intensified. One thing that should be emphasized here is that with this careful arrangement, the importance of the issue of the king’s “immoral” or “unnatural” homoerotic affair is also degraded. It is now a more political than moral issue.

When Kent, the king’s brother, encourages Edward to revenge the disrespect of the lords, only Warwick seems to be affected by the threat, but he promptly interrupts Edward’s next speech, showing no respect at all to the king, leaving Edward no chance to finish his speech before the lords exit. Before departing, Lancaster leaves a clear
message behind: either ban Gaveston or there will be bloodshed. The lords are resolved on Gaveston’s exile. Edward is angry, and is determined to use force to confront the lords and “either die, or live with Gaveston” (I. i. 138).

When Gaveston comes forward, Edward’s first words on seeing him are:

*What, Gaveston! Welcome! Kiss not my hand:*

*Embrace me, Gaveston, as I do thee.*

*Why shouldst thou kneel? know’st thou not who I am?*

*Thy friend, thyself, another Gaveston!* (I. i. 140-143)

To be noticed is the absence of regard of the presence of Kent and the attendants: Edward does not really care what people feel about his relationship with Gaveston. He even claims himself to be “another Gaveston.” The irony of the situation, thanks to Marlowe’s genius, is in the words, “know’st thou not who I am?” Gaveston kisses Edward’s hand and kneels, showing due respect of a subject to the king. Whether he is sincere or just pretending, he tries to behave properly, at least in public, being conscious of the difference in classes—his position, which at this moment amounts to practically nothing, and Edward’s status as the king. But Edward, ecstatic at the sight of Gaveston in person, either forgetting where they are or just willing to ignore it, does not want Gaveston to treat him like a king; he acts like a lover, even in front of others, and he wants Gaveston to act like one, too. One can detect a note of passion and tenderness in this short question. On “common” occasions, when a king asks someone the question “know’st thou not who I am?” he means, “Don’t forget that I am the king!”—usually with harshness and anger in the voice too, as Edward himself constantly has to do whenever he addresses the lords. In fact, more often than not, he has to “shout” at them to remind them that he is the king, usually to no avail. But here, he just tells Gaveston softly and sweetly, “Forget that I am the king,” or “You know I am your lover.”

When Edward goes on to give Gaveston a series of titles, even Kent cannot refrain from commenting: “Brother, the least of these may well suffice / For one of greater birth than Gaveston” (I. i. 158-159). Thus everybody is conscious of birth and class, including Gaveston himself. So is Edward, but he does not care; he just
wants to please Gaveston in the best way he knows. On the other hand, Gaveston gets carried away immediately and compares himself to Caesar: these titles make him feel “great.”

Later, when the Bishop of Coventry comes, Gaveston lays hands on him before even asking for Edward’s permission: he can judge from Edward’s attitude that he is free to do so, even in the presence of the king. And his judgment is correct: Edward not only delightedly allows it, but he also takes part in Gaveston’s “revenge.” The sequence of this episode deserves some notice:

(Gaveston laying hands on the Bishop)

Edward: Throw off his golden mitre, rend his stole,
And in the channel christen him anew!

Kent: Ah, brother, lay not violent hands on him!
For he’ll complain unto the see of Rome.

Gaveston: Let him complain unto the see of hell:
I’ll be reveng’d on him for my exile.

Edward: 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 give him thee; here, use him as thou wilt.

Gaveston: He shall to prison, and the re die in bolts.

Edward: Ay, to the Tower, the Fleet, or where thou wilt. (I. i. 187-198)

It seems that Gaveston is the quarterback, and Edward only a cheerleader.

The very first scene of the play tells so much that it sets the whole table. It reveals Gaveston’s character, his ambition, his understanding of the king, his hatred and vindictiveness for those who were the cause of his exile, and most of all, his complacent and unseemly demeanor in the presence of the king toward the noblemen and the bishop. The play will later show his behavior to be the main cause of the whole conflict: a “basely” born common man who climbs to the top of society just by playing the king’s minion and who promptly proves himself mean and arrogant. And the king indulges him in doing so, and even takes part in it! One only needs to look at the story of Bussy
D’Ambois to understand how upstarts are hated. And this Gaveston has not even done anything to help the country. What’s more, he is a minion! At this point, the lords’ hatred and contempt for Gaveston are justifiable.

The scene also shows Edward’s obsession with Gaveston, and how he indulges Gaveston to do whatever he pleases, offending the civil and ecclesiastical polities at the same time. Edward’s childish conduct is unbecoming his kingship; just as Gregory W. Brebeck observes, Edward is ruling his country with his temporal body, not his body politic (Brebeck, 1995, p. 131-136). The result is obvious: resentment from the lords. Once they realize that Gaveston is climbing so high that the security and superiority of their positions are threatened, the only way for them to protect their benefits is to unite themselves in the political struggle. Edward is an absent-minded ruler; he does not realize this. If he does, he does not seem to care about the consequences. Even if he does care about the consequences, he tries to ignore them. He might have sensed the magnitude of the issue, but he simply wants—consciously or unconsciously—to evade it. Is he a king so arrogant as to think that he can do anything he pleases, or is he a frivolous, reckless juvenile who just does not care? The answer is simple enough, as can be seen in his short statement: “I will have Gaveston” (I. i. 96). Edward, at this stage, is really a willful child.

In the following scene, on hearing the imprisonment of the Bishop, the lords are enraged again. When they hear that Gaveston has been made not only an earl, but also Lord Chamberlain, Chief Secretary, and Lord of Man, they are all outraged. The Elder Mortimer sums up their fury: “We may not nor we will not suffer this” (I. ii. 15). One may argue that since Edward has not taken away any of the lords’ titles, why should they be angry? The reason is that, before this, they only “felt” the threat of the existence of Gaveston. Now they see it. They will not “suffer” to see a low-born minion with no merit at all rise to be their peer—actually, more than a peer for some of them already, for the titles of Lord Chamberlain and Chief Secretary to the state define great, great political power far exceeding theirs. Gaveston is a real enemy now, and it is time for action.

They try words, and they try swords. They now realize that they have failed to dissuade Edward from giving Gaveston the titles. So they will now appeal to their swords—that is, their political power—to force Edward to sign a warrant for Gaveston’s
exile. But shortly after this, they agree to a repeal. Why?

Before Gaveston sets out for Ireland in exile, he and Edward have a sentimental parting scene, and then Queen Isabella enters. This is the first time in the play that the king and the queen are seen together, and the occasion deserves attention:

Isabella: Whither goes my lord?

Edward: Fawn not on me, French strumpet; get thee gone!

Isabella: On whom but on my husband should I fawn?

Gaveston: On Mortimer; with whom, ungentle queen,------

I say no more——judge you the rest, my lord. (I. iv. 145-149)

Notice that Edward calls the queen “French strumpet” in his very first speech to the queen in the whole play. Marlowe’s intention of building up the tension between the couple is obvious. And at the same time, Gaveston shapes a model for an Iago: he is insinuating that the Queen is having an affair with Mortimer. Edward goes on to say to the queen:

Thou art too familiar with that Mortimer,

And by thy means is Gaveston exil’d.

But I would wish thee reconcile the lords;

Or thou shalt ne’er be reconcil’d to me. (I. iv. 155-158)

Edward’s attitude towards his wife is absolutely contemptible, and his “rationale” for projecting his hatred of the lords through Mortimer onto the queen shows that he is childish and immature. He blackmails the queen to “reconcile the lords”—something that he himself, as the king, has been unable to do. Edward leaves behind a cowardly but effective threat: “There weep; for, till my Gaveston be repeal’d, / Assure thyself thou com’st not in my sight” (I. iv. 169-170). It does not require very high intelligence to understand that in Edward’s mind there is no one else but Gaveston.

The subsequent scene seems to suggest that Edward’s “threat” works. But, what makes Edward II a distinctively more complicated and sophisticated play than the other famous ones is Marlowe’s wisdom in hiding the unpredictable psychological changes of the characters between the lines, or behind the words. By threatening the queen to “reconcile the lords,” Edward makes a fatal mistake: he underestimates a woman. Seeing his wife so desperately, and practically, begging for his love, he treats her, with
the comfortable assumption that she has no choice but to obey her husband’s command, only like someone whom he can manipulate to help satiate his wayward desire. It is his threat that ultimately shatters whatever is left in Isabella’s pitiful hope for regaining his favor. She has failed in words, and she starts thinking of swords:

Like frantic Juno will I fill the earth
With ghastly murmur of my sighs and cries;
For never doted Jove on Ganymede
So much as he on cursed Gaveston.
But that will more exasperate his wrath;
I must entreat him, I must speak him fair,
And be a means to call home Gaveston.
And yet he’ll ever dote on Gaveston;
And so am I for ever miserable.  (I. iv. 179-187)

It seems that she is in a dilemma of “to be or not to be.” But as a means to call home Gaveston, she knows clearly that, either way, she is “for ever miserable.” She does not have the power of Juno, but on the other hand, she does not need to: some people who hold swords seem willing to help her as well as themselves. But of course, she has to make sure first.

The lords come, and Isabella has a private talk with the Younger Mortimer, who then persuades the lords to agree to Gaveston’s repeal—only so that they can “greet his lordship with a poinard” (I. iv. 268). What goes on behind the stage direction “(Isabella) Talks to Younger Mortimer apart” will be revealed by the following bloody scenes, but something that deserves special attention is that when Lancaster questions the plan for killing Gaveston: “how chance this was not done before?” (I. iv. 274), Mortimer answers, “Because, my lords, it was not thought upon” (I. iv. 275). This shows that their previous threats to kill Gaveston were only words, that killing him had never been seriously “thought upon.” All they did was to flourish words and swords in order to force Gaveston’s exile. And right after talking to Isabella “apart,” Mortimer proposes to have Gaveston killed. Now, who is the first one to “think upon” killing Gaveston? The answer is clear enough: the queen. The forlorn wife, as Levin says, has now changed
“into the scheming adultress” (Levin, 1952, p. 98).

What has caused her to change? Gaveston? No, it is Edward. Isabella really hopes that Edward, even in his obsession with Gaveston, will still spare her some tenderness and love. But seeing that there is no space at all for her in Edward’s mind, she tries to change. Note that when she wants to have Gaveston killed, she does not want Edward to get hurt—physically, that is. She still has some hope that after Gaveston dies, Edward will turn back to her. However, she is further insulted, when she tells Edward that Gaveston is to be repealed:

Isabella: My gracious lord, I come to bring you news.

Edward: That you have parled with your Mortimer?

Isabella: That Gaveston, my lord, shall be repeal’d.

Edward: Repeal’d. The news is too sweet to be true.

Isabella: But will you love me, if you find it so?

Edward: If it be so, what will not Edward do?

Isabella: For Gaveston, but not for Isabel.

Edward: For thee, fair queen, if thou lov’st Gaveston,

I’ll hang a golden tongue about thy neck,

Seeing thou has pleaded with so good success. (I. iv. 322-331)

To be noticed is that Edward uses “your Mortimer”: he is still convinced that Isabella has been having an affair with Mortimer. It would be unwise to say, at this point, that there is nothing going on between Isabella and Mortimer. But it does appear that the affair is just beginning, thanks to Edward. To the very simple question, “Will you love me?” Edward answers, “What will not Edward do?” And suddenly, the “French strumpet” becomes “fair queen.” Yes, Edward will love Isabella—if she loves Gaveston! Does Isabella need any more proof? On the other hand, something that should not be neglected is Edward’s honesty—or, call it naivety. He does not know how to lie. Or, even if he does, he does not want to lie. Or, maybe he does not see any necessity in lying at all: this woman will do anything he says, will she not? Is this a virtue or a defect in character? Either way, it all comes back to his obsession with Gaveston. He will do anything for Gaveston, and he lets everybody know that. In fact, he goes on to
distribute all kinds of new titles to the lords, thanking them for the repeal of Gaveston, without knowing that a conspiracy has been going on. He is just like a happy child sharing his candies with his friends for a toy lost and found.

Edward’s love for Gaveston should be regarded as true and wholehearted. He is consistently “faithful” to Gaveston, and he never even tries to hide it. Before signing Gaveston’s exile, he tries to bargain with the lords, distributing titles to them, even offering them everything, as he so often does, in a desperate attempt to secure his subject’s “consent” to his love affair. From the innermost region of his eager heart, he pleads:

If this content you not,  
Make several kingdoms of this monarchy,  
And share it equally amongst you all,  
So I may have some nook or corner left,  
To frolic with my dearest Gaveston. (I. iv. 69-73)

His love, for a man, a minion—a kind of love or obsession that is traditionally regarded as “abnormal,” “unnatural,” or even “contemptible”—nevertheless deserves sympathy and respect. In answer to the Younger Mortimer’s question, “Why should you love him whom the world hates so?” (I. iv. 76), he straightforwardly responds, “Because he loves me more than all the world” (I. iv. 77). Perhaps that is why Harry Levin says that “Edward devotes to Gaveston an overt warmth which Marlowe never displays toward the female sex” (Levin, 1952, p. 93). The second half of this comment invites debate, but that is another topic and will not be discussed here. However, the first half states Edward’s mind. Although he is later forced to sign the exile warrant, he says that he will write it with his tears. All his words can be paraphrased into a very short, pitiful plea: “My kingdom for a lover!” Edward may not be the best king in history, but he certainly qualifies as one among the most faithful lovers, although Gaveston’s love for him is actually questionable. Does he love Edward the person, or does he just love the king?

Another important feature in Edward’s character that deserves special attention is that he never takes the initiative in hurting anybody, unless somebody tries to “hurt” him or Gaveston, or to break up their relationship in any way. There are suggestions in the
play that he is a misplaced person: he may not want to be a king in the first place. But if he does, there is certainly a serious defect in his education: he was born to be a ruler, but he did not grow up to be a good one. He does not know how to deal with his subjects, and he is clumsy, childish, and ignorant in political affairs. His temporal body keeps making decisions for him in politics, where his body politic is required. But, he does not know this until it is too late.

In the final part of the first act, the Elder Mortimer, the only one among the lords who seems to have some political wisdom and a milder nature, says to his nephew:

*Thou seest by nature he is mild and calm;*  
*And, seeing his mind so dotes on Gaveston,*  
*Let him without controlment have his will.* (I. iv. 390-392)

He goes on to list how “The greatest kings have had their minions” and advises his nephew:

*Then let his grace, whose youth is flexible,*  
*And promiseth as much as we can wish,*  
*Free enjoy that vain light-hearted earl,*  
*For riper years will wean him from such toys.* (I. iv. 400-403)

The Elder Mortimer’s speech shows an older man’s capacity of understanding and tolerance of a youngster’s ignorance and misdemeanors. It also conveys a very important message, one that is absolutely essential in understanding the whole play: Edward is still very young.

Unfortunately, the Younger Mortimer is young, too, and is obviously ambitious. What with his resentment against the rising of the upstart minion, and what with the encouragement—or promise?—by the queen, he intends to try his hand in the world of politics. In the following lines he lists a series of detestable behaviors on the part of Gaveston that seem to justify the lord’s hatred and resolution. The Younger Mortimer talks like a righteously angry young man, full of passion and confidence as to right the wrong. What remains to be seen is how far his righteous anger will carry him, before he has tasted power—something so sweet and so dangerous that any wrong maneuvering so often leads to the destruction of the holder himself.
In the first act of the play, the causes of the whole conflict are subtly presented. In the seemingly reconciled situation, something is stirring. The die is cast; there is no turning back.

During the subsequent process of the revolt, Edward keeps making political mistakes. When Kent, his own brother, tries to talk some sense into him to banish Gaveston, he directly calls Kent “traitor” and drives him away, not only weakening his own side but also further strengthening the other side that is already too strong for him. But he does not have the wisdom to see the real situation. In a sense, it is Edward who is finally responsible for Gaveston’s death: he has weakened himself to the point where he is unable to protect Gaveston.

When Gaveston is captured by the lords, Edward realizes that “he is mark’d to die” (III. ii. 4), and entreats to see him for the last time. When news comes that the lords have broken their promises and killed Gaveston, Edward is now truly enraged, and kneels to swear:

**By earth, the common mother of us all,**
**By heaven, and all the moving orbs thereof,**
**By this right hand, and by my father’s sword,**
**And all the honours ‘longing to my crown,**
**I will have heads and lives for him as many**
**I have manors, castles, towns, and towers!** (III. ii. 131-136)

He is talking like a king, referring to his crown, but it should be noticed that he is only determined to seek revenge “for him”—for Gaveston. He is still the same young Edward, although this time he begins to act more like a king.

While mourning Gaveston’s death, Edward almost immediately turns his favor to the Younger Spenser and, as usual, grants him some important titles. Like a child who has lost a favorite toy, Edward quickly seeks recompense and comfort in a new one—of the same type. This emphasizes his addiction to homoeortic pleasure as well as his innate inclination toward someone who can talk sweetly—in his own words, someone who loves him “more than the world.” He seems to understand what Spenser is after, too, but he does not care. Although more like a king now, Edward has not really matured as a man; he is still a child.
Edward rises “bravely” to battle and wins an important victory, with what is left on his side and the help of the Elder Spenser. All the rebellious lords are captured, and this shows that there might have been some miscalculation or underestimation on their part of the power of the king: the one in power will always have followers, whatever their respective motives. In his complacency over the victory, Edward proudly claims that he “hath crown’d him king anew” (III. iii. 78). But he makes another mistake: he orders Younger Mortimer, his chief enemy, jailed in the Tower, while all the other captured lords are to be executed. It might be reasonable to assume that Edward is saving Mortimer’s life for the return of the queen, whom he has sent to France to parley with her brother, the king of France. Edward is overwhelmed with the victory, and he thinks that everything is safe now and he can return to his pleasures. He might be thinking of adding to his pleasures by further humiliating the queen and Mortimer in person for his “personal” revenge.

What often easily gets overlooked is the key to every changing point of the play—the constantly changing Kent. Although he keeps shifting sides, it should be clearly noted that he is always on the side of what he thinks is the right—that is, the welfare of the realm. He supports Edward at first, but when he fails to persuade Edward to banish Gaveston, he joins the lords for the cause of the kingdom. When Gaveston is killed and then the lords fail, he pleads to Edward: “Brother, in regard to thee and of thy land, / Did they remove that flatterer from thy throne” (III. iii. 46-47). But Edward will not listen. And seeing that Edward has found a new toy of the same type in Spenser, Kent realizes that Edward is not going to change, and the future of the kingdom is still in danger. He goes to the Tower and frees Mortimer, and they flee to France to join the queen. They gain help, and return to England for the downfall of Edward. What Kent has underestimated or failed to see is both Mortimer’s ambition and the queen’s change of mind, which he discovers only too late, when Edward is losing the war:

**Edward, this Mortimer aims at thy life:**

O, fly him then! But, Edmund, calm this rage;

Dissemble, or thou diest; for Mortimer

And Isabell do kiss, while they conspire.

And yet she bears a face of love, forsooth! (IV. v. 19-23)
He tries to save Edward, but to no avail. When Edward is imprisoned, Kent tries to protect the prince, and loses his own life.

Kent seems to be the “busiest” character in the play, although not particularly conspicuous. Without him, many parts of the plot would not work. Wagging between the two sides, he seems to be ever looking for ways to do the right thing. His intentions are noble and respectable, but Marlowe seems to be saying through him that even a righteous man, in his endeavors to right the wrong, can also wrong the right, without being able to know it beforehand. However, Kent has a great capacity for introspection and self-correction, and under the guidance of his conscience he is finally able to do the right thing in trying to protect the two Edwards until his own brutal murder, which “enlightens” the younger Edward to grow strong very quickly as the new king and is finally able to right all wrongs.

Edward loses the war and flees to hide in the abbey of Neath. There, his character begins to change, or, to grow. He says to the Abbot:

Stately and proud in riches and in train,
Whilom I was, powerful and full of pomp.
But what is he whom rule and empery
Have not in life or death made miserable?
Come, Spenser, come, Baldock, come, sit down by me;
Make trial now of that philosophy
That in our famous nurseries of arts
Thou suck’’dst from Plato and from Aristotle.
Father, this life contemplative is heaven:
O, that I might this life in quiet lead! (IV. vi. 12-21)

Though this speech might be interpreted as a temporary lamentation of the lost glories caused by frustrating defeats, and cannot be deemed as any positive proof of true remorse or penitence, it is the first sign of an inner capacity that has never been found in the “two bodies” of Edward before: introspection. Whether he is serious or not when he says “this life contemplative is heaven” and “that I might this life in quiet lead!”, his mind is beginning to “contemplate” something that has never occurred to him: life.
When Leicester comes to the abbey to arrest Edward and his men, he cannot help quote a Latin proverb when he finds Edward sitting in extreme weariness and drowsiness: “Quem dies vidit veniens superbum, / Hunc dies vidit fugiens jacente” — in English, “The man whom the new day sees in his pride, is by the closing day seen prostrate” (IV. vi. 53-54). The situation could not be better described. Yet, at the arrest, there is still some residue of the past glory in Edward, “O my stars, / Why do you lour unkindly on a king?” (IV. vi. 62-63). He still sees himself as a king “full of pomp,” but he begins to feel that a king is just like an ordinary human being after all, not exempt from the angry stares of the stars. Then he makes a noble gesture of offering his own life for the rescue of his “friends,” but to no avail. When he is parting with Spenser, there is something noteworthy in their words:

Edward: Spenser, ah, sweet Spenser, thus, then, must we part.

Spenser: We must, my lord; so will the angry heavens.

Edward: Nay, so will hell and cruel Mortimer:

The gentle heavens have not to do in this. (IV. vi. 73-76)

Unlike most people who blame their defeats on the heavens, Edward surprisingly says that the gentle heavens have nothing to do with his downfall. He now understands that men rather than the heavens are the cause of all this, specifying the name of Mortimer, the target of his hatred. He has not yet come to the final, thorough understanding of the meaning of life, which is hidden in Baldock the scholar’s final speech to Spenser, after Edward has been taken away:

Reduce we all our lessons unto this:

To die, sweet Spenser, therefore live we all;

Spenser, all live to die, and rise to fall. (IV. vi. 110-112)

In Kenilworth Castle, where he is imprisoned, Edward is forced to resign and give up his crown—the symbol of his power and glory. He makes a long speech full of agony and anger, comparing himself to a wounded “imperial lion,” naming Mortimer and Isabella as the chief conspirators of all the “wrongs.” He also comes to the understanding of something: “But what are kings, when regiment is gone, / But perfect shadows in a sunshine day?” (V. i. 26-27). This is a great sign of awakening and
realization—of the fact that kings, after all, are mere mortals, just like all the ordinary
human beings. Then he points to the heart of the matter: “But tell me, must I now resign
my crown, / To make usurping Mortimer a king?” (V. i. 36-37). His chief concern is: is
Mortimer going to take the crown and become king? When the Bishop of Winchester
says that it is “for England’ s good / And Princely Edward’ s right” (V. i. 38-39) that they
crave the crown, Edward instinctively does not believe it at all:

   No, ‘tis for Mortimer, not Edward’ s head
   For he’ s a lamb, encompassed by wolves,
   Which a moment will abridge his life.
   But, if proud Mortimer do wear this crown,
   Heavens turn it to a blaze of quenchless fire!
   Or, like the snaky wreath of Tisiphon,
   Engirt the temples of his hateful head!
   So shall not England’ s vine be perished,
   But Edward’ s name survive, though Edward dies.  (V.i. 40-48)

He sees the whole conspiracy clearly: his son is a “lamb” surrounded by “wolves,” and
Mortimer the wolf-in-chief is going to take over everything. His son is in danger; his
sense as a father now awakens. But what causes his total awakening is his realization of
the fact that “England’ s vine” is in danger, and it is his responsibility to try to prevent that.
It is his body politic that is talking!

However, seeing that even the Bishop is on Mortimer’ s side, he says, “what the
heavens appoint I must obey” (V. i. 56), and takes off his crown, but immediately asks to
“be king till night” so that he may savor the power and glory. Like Doctor Faustus at
the moment of truth, he wishes that time would stop, so that he “may be still fair
England’ s king!” (V. i. 68). But seeing the “inhuman creatures” standing before him,
gaping at his “diadem,” he decides that he will not give the crown to the “traitors” and
puts it on again. The Bishop goes to “return the answer,” but Leicester stays and tells
Edward a very cruel truth: “if they go, the prince shall lose his right” (V. i. 92). There is
nothing he can do but give the crown into the hands of the Bishop, clinging to the last
faint hope that, with the help of the church, his son will be crowned, and “England’ s
“vein” will be saved. He gives a handkerchief and asks that it be sent to the queen. Poirier seems to think that here, Edward is begging mercy for his own life, and calls this incident “a grievous offence against taste” (Poirier, 1968, p. 183). But the context shows otherwise. The handkerchief is not a sign of love at all; rather, Edward intends it to be a reminder of Isabella’s duty as a queen, and a mother, so that she may be “mov’d to do her job and at least protect her son well—to save “England’s vein.” Whether or not the queen will be “mov’d” is not something he has control over, but that is the best he can do; it is the only straw there is for him to catch. It is his duty, to England, as a king.

Edward is not Tamburlaine, who dies realizing that, despite all the worldly glory, he is after all a common human being. Nor is he Barabas, who dies in hatred and pride. He is certainly no Doctor Faustus, who dies crying for mercy like a coward. Edward lives like a reckless, irresponsible juvenile, and grows up to be a man who finally realizes his duty. Although he knows it is too late, he tries, with the little he has left in a hopeless situation, to do what he thinks—and what he finally knows—is right. There is no sign of cowardice whatsoever in his mind before he dies; there is only a clear, awakened mind in a brutally-abused, weary body that peacefully welcomes the savage death for his final redemption and salvation. He dies as a real tragic hero, a man.

The play shows that Marlowe, in a transitional phase of his dramatic career, was on course to maturing into an all-round playwright not only able to write power poetry and present sensational scenes on stage but also able to probe into a much more complicated world—that of the human mind. Edward II is certainly different from the other great Marlovian plays, and in many respects—in characterization, especially—it is superior to them. Rowse, in his study of Edward II, says something that really invites us to think: “it cannot be said that while he (Marlowe) lived, Shakespeare surpassed him” (Rowse, 1964, p. 130). Here, Michel Poirier’s final comments in his study of Edward II will be borrowed as a concluding passage of this study. Poirier says that Edward II is “most valuable” of Marlowe’s plays, and that Marlowe is “a genius capable of renewing himself and who might still have disclosed still other aspects had he not met with such an untimely death” (Poirier, 1968, 192).
References


